

(Dis)Embodied Voices and (Dis)Appearing Dialects: Staging a Living Historiography of Early African American Women

Valerie JOYCE

Villanova University
Department of Theater
valerie.joyce@villanova.edu

ABSTRACT

The performance project *(Dis)Embodied Voices* documented and vivified long-forgotten Early American black women's experiences by devising a living historiography from personal letters, memoirs, diaries, court records, poems, and newspapers. The nine original monologues became the play *I Will Speak for Myself*, which recovers sixteen women who lived between 1649 and 1865 from Vermont to New Orleans. By crafting performance through a rigorous investment in the historical evidence and a commitment to accurate depiction in every word and sound, the play enacts life as a free woman, as an indentured servant, and as a former slave. This article explores the transformation of written texts into the *(Dis)Embodied Voices* performance script and, specifically, the development of each woman's distinctive sound. In many ways, these women exemplify the origination of the American sound and each case posed unique issues of evidence, language construction, and dialect choices. Crafting credible identities required striking a delicate balance between scholarly rigor and artistic license, bringing historical research and performance together so that what begin as disembodied voices become distinctive characters that more accurately shape our understanding of the abolitionist movement, life after slavery, and the fight for women's education and equality.

Keywords: Living Historiography, Slavery, Performance Studies, American Dialect, African-American Women

1. INTRODUCTION

Recuperating the lives of seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth-century African American women presents a particular challenge for both the historian and the theatre artist: the traces that remain of their stories are often buried deep in records left by others. When historical documents fail to record or, worse, deliberately silence some voices, the medium of performance offers a unique means to access, embody, and recuperate these lost histories. Performance invites modern audiences to not simply ingest history, but to live with it in the same room while hearing the voices that have been marginalized and seeing the bodies that have been erased. The theatre offers an optimal place to create a "living historiography."

My research, both in the archive and rehearsal studio, works to resuscitate early African American women and to model a methodology that envisions the performance of a woman's life based on the impressions left from her presence in history. As an American theater scholar/artist, I play many roles. When acting the part of theatre historian, I study and teach the history of theatre. When practicing my craft, I direct, design, dramaturg and, most recently, write for the stage. I never intended or imagined myself as a playwright but, in tracing out the historical, social, and cultural moment of an eighteenth-century Philadelphia theatre, I tripped over an indentured servant named Mary and fell into playwriting.

Mary stood trial in Virginia in 1649, and the *Lower Norfolk County Court Record* is the single extant reference to her entire life. Upon reading the record sentencing this "negro woman," I immediately envisioned Mary enacting her punishment, despite the fact that there was no personal memoir, no secondary recollections, really no trace of her at all. For months, the image of the penitent Mary would not leave my consciousness. I could vividly picture her body enacting the scene of subjection but, curiously, I could not ever hear her voice. Without historical records to provide a model against which to construct this woman's lived experience, she had been effectively silenced. And thus, I began to utilize the theatre as a way to explore, teach, and ultimately *hear* history through performance.

My fascination with Mary's experience ignited a desire to hear other oppressed voices speak again and led me to research, develop, and direct *(Dis)Embodied Voices*, a series of performance monologues that traverses two hundred years of African American women's history before Emancipation.¹ The important aspect of this historical study is that I was not called to write a biography or a history of these women. I was called to write a play. More specifically, I was called to craft a theatrical performance that offers a composite of many characters in order *to hear these women out loud*—to stage their uniquely American sounds. The medium of performance enabled me to hear a part of the American past, a part of the nation that is as yet undocumented.

The process of developing a performance that conjures the voices of the past—particularly those voices that have been deliberately erased or marginalized in traditional historical narratives—is fraught with perils of authentication. In developing the *(Dis)Embodied Voices* script, I researched real women and, whenever possible, utilized their own words. The monologues recovered or re-examined nine women who lived between 1649 and 1865 from Vermont to North Carolina. Some of the women told their own story in slave narratives, personal letters, diary entries, poems, some are referenced vaguely in histories, court records, and newspaper

¹ Since this first incarnation of *(Dis)Embodied Voices* in May 2012, the monologues have now metamorphosed into *I Will Speak for Myself*, a full length play that weaves the narratives together across time. I am indebted to Megan Winch for comments on this draft.

advertisements, and some are lost completely. Each character is a case study of potentials and probabilities of what a black woman's life might have been like in early America. However, in creating a catalyzing, crystalizing, singular moment that reflects each woman's broader historical context as it breathes life into her story, my particular journey encountered challenges while attempting to authenticate character voice.

This article traces the transformation of archival texts into the *(Dis)Embodied Voices* performance script through a close examination of the development of the dialects and language for three of the characters from the southern American states, "Sarah," "Lucinda," and "Mary." Crafting tangible and credible identities required striking a delicate balance between scholarly rigor and artistic license by investing in the historical evidence and committing to a truthful depiction in every word and sound, while vigilantly interrogating the standardization of black speech from the 1600s to the 1900s. Each case posed unique issues of authentication in evidence, interpretation, language construction, and performance choices but, in many ways, these individual voices begin to illuminate the origins of American southern dialects and the historical linguistic richness of the United States. Ultimately, conjuring these three women's distinctly American sounds foregrounded the notion that the ways in which dialects have developed have impacted American formations of race and gender across the centuries by supporting racial stereotypes, emphasizing access to education, and revealing a deeply interpersonal colonization process.

2. SARAH: AUTHENTICATING VOICE IN ARCHIVAL EVIDENCE

When I ask audiences to picture a black woman in America before the Civil War, to play out a scene about this woman's daily experiences, what inevitably becomes clear is that there are few concrete models available for this exercise. One option is to envision life in slavery, but the extremes of this reality are obscured both by temporal distance and by an instinctive emotional distancing. Another possibility is to imagine the life of renegade heroines like Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth, who were very real, but in the smallest of minorities. The third and most accessible model for the imagined black woman is the "Mammy" figure from 1930s films like the classic, *Gone With the Wind*. The fictional Mammy figure, with her garrulous content and distinctively broken dialect, emerged during the slavery era to contest the abolitionist notion that blacks were not content as slaves. Mammy, with her wide grin, coarse humor, and hearty laughter, began as a racial stereotype on the minstrel stage in the early 1800s and, although she has evolved since the slavery era, she still persists in

the American consciousness through consumer and popular culture and continues to influence contemporary America's engagement with the antebellum period.²

As with any stereotype, the dark skinned and usually obese Mammy figure has undeniably limited the modern understanding of American black women before 1865. The iconic Mammy images in films throughout the 1930s presented a desexualized middle-aged maternal woman with her nappy hair covered by a kerchief who induced a sense of security by linking together loyal servitude and family life. The consistent replication of these broad characteristics has served to reinforce the notion that prior to Emancipation, black women in America were one monolithic enslaved, uneducated, and passive demographic.

The Mammy stereotype also infiltrated the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) archives, an invaluable repository housing primary evidence of African American women who lived in the nineteenth century. As a part of the Works Progress Administration in the late 1930s, FWP agents collected audio and written material derived from oral interviews that were intended to yield "a comprehensive and panoramic American Guide, a geographical-social-historical portrait of the states, cities, and localities of the entire United States" (Kautzsch 2002: 13). The resulting Slave Narrative Collection, available online from the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress (LOC), is part of the most widely accessible evidence attesting to black women's lives in America before Emancipation.

Naturally, the FWP archive was one of my first stops in my research project seeking out the voices of African American women who had lived through the antebellum period while developing *(Dis)Embodied Voices*. The archive produced a wonderful woman named Sarah Gudger who had left her master's farm in North Carolina to begin life as a free black woman in 1865. "Aunt Sarah," as the locals called her, had seen fifty years of slavery and watched from her porch in Asheville as America transformed into an emancipated nation and, in 1937, at the age of one hundred and twenty-one, Gudger recounted her slave experience for FWP interviewers.³ Her riveting narrative describes nightmarish conditions, cruel masters, violent lashings, and watching her mother be taken away.

At first, the Sarah Gudger file seemed like a gold mine of authenticity for my project. Throughout the narrative text, the FWP transcriber attempted to accurately

² For more on the Mammy figure, see: Anderson, *Mammies No More* and Pilgrim, "The Mammy Caricature" as part of the Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia available at <<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies/>>

³ Without the benefit of birth records, many slaves were unable to document the year of their birth and in turn their exact age. The FWP interviewer begins Sarah Gudger's Slave Narrative by acknowledging that this interview was an "investigation of the almost incredible claim...that she was born September 15, 1816." The first three pages of the document provide corroborating statements from family and community members that validate Aunt Sarah's "claim" of being one hundred and twenty-one.

capture her southern dialect and reproduce it in writing through detailed phonetic spellings. At one point Gudger counseled the interviewer, “Law, chile, nobuddy knows how mean da’kies wah treated.”⁴ However, what I didn’t realize in those initial moments was that the FWP recordings and texts underwent a standardization process that elides difference within the range of narratives and ultimately re-enacts and reinforces prevailing stereotypes for the modern listener.

In translating Sarah’s narrative to the stage, I found that the FWP phonetic writing dictates the character’s “sound.” By simply reading the narrative aloud, the tempo and weight of Sarah’s aural presence are concretely established. Interestingly, her written dialect also evoked very specific characteristics that helped construct this woman’s corporeal presence on stage. In rehearsal, this slippery evidentiary slope emerged, slowly but substantially, challenging Sarah’s validity and veracity.

In performance, the lights rise and Sarah’s smile reveals a jovial but well-worn demeanor as she recalls, “I ‘membahs de time when mah mammy wah alive, I wah a small chile, afoah dey tuck huh ‘t Rims Crick. All us chillens wah playin’ in de ya’d one night. Jes’ a runnin’ an’ aplayin’ lak chillin will.” As noted above, Gudger was well over one hundred years old at the time of the FWP interview in 1937. In rehearsal for *(Dis)Embodied Voices*, the performer interpreted Sarah’s extreme age with a stooped and withered physical presence that also produced a labored vocal quality. She doesn’t directly reference her enslavement here and her softly rolling southern drawl eases the audience into her family’s history and a reminiscence of the distant American past as she gently rocks on her porch.

The *(Dis)Embodied Voices* performance began with Sarah as a “way in” for the audience because her content, vocal quality, and physical presence closely mimic many stereotypical Mammy characteristics. The actress sits heavily and moves slowly, evoking Mammy’s large, unwieldy physical presence, and her pleasant smile comforts and invites the audience to share her journey. As Sarah leans forward, she exclaims, “All a sudden mammy cum to de do’ all a’sited.” Her vocal pitch and tempo rise swiftly as she adopts her own Mammy’s curt voice, “‘Cum in heah dis minnit,’ she say. ‘Jes look up at what is ahappenin’ and bless yo’ life, honey, da sta’s wah fallin’ jes’ lak rain. Mammy wah tebble skeered, but we chillen wa’nt afeared, no, we wa’nt afeared.” Sarah’s calming maternal assurances soothe the audience as her voice returns to a mix of raspy recollection and syrupy drawl. In rehearsal and in production, as the actress embodied the character, Sarah’s dialect reinscribed the Mammy stereotype onto the actresses’ body and voice.

Given the textual dialect’s influential nature and its reification of the Mammy stereotype, I found it noteworthy that Jack Lomax, the National Advisor on Folklore

⁴ This and all other quotes from this monologue are from “Sarah Gudger,” *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938*, available from the Library of Congress at <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>>

and Folkways for the FWP, had required a “unified geographical representation of dialect” that interviewers were to standardize throughout the slave narrative transcriptions. In 1937, Lomax instructed his primarily white and often southern staff to allow “truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation secondary” (Kautzsch 2002:15). Modern archivists at the Library of Congress provide “A Note on the Language of the Narratives” that attempts to de-mythologize the transcription process by acknowledging that “what most interviewers assumed to be ‘the usual’ patterns of their informants’ speech was unavoidably influenced by preconceptions and stereotypes”.⁵ Although Lomax’s directive intended “to make this volume of slave narratives more appealing and less difficult for the average reader,” these instructions ultimately skewed the project’s resulting narratives toward stereotypical white representations of black speech that had roots in early nineteenth-century minstrelsy (Kautzsch 2002:15).

The LOC “Note” rightly asserts, “whatever else they may be, the representations of speech in the narratives are a pervasive and forceful reminder that these documents are not only a record of a time that was already history when they were created: they are themselves irreducibly historical, the products of a particular time and particular places in the long and troubled mediation of African American culture by other Americans.” Evidence exists that some dissatisfied FWP writers dissented against the required standardization, asserting that changing, omitting, and filling in material after the interview created “nothing approaching verbatim records of natural speech” (Kautzsch 2002: 15-16). One Mississippi writer, Marjorie Woods Austin, elaborated, “Never in my life have I ever heard a negro say ‘de’ for ‘the.’ To spell it so gives the wrong eye-sound. If they drop the t, they say ‘der’ (deh). However, since ‘de’ seems to be part of Washington’s idea, fine, I’m using it--under protest” (Kautzsch 2002: 18). Although there are audio recordings of a few of the narratives which substantiate the presence of a strong dialect and broken or bastardized English, the standardized phonetic structuring of the records effectively erased the subtle nuances that might have resulted from educational, cultural, and regional distinctions, thereby rendering one monolithic “African American Woman.”

By beginning with the Mammy racial stereotype as a point of reference, *(Dis)Embodied Voices* intentionally opened a space for contemplation, inviting the audience to identify with Sarah’s comforting presence so that they might then also challenge long-held cultural assumptions when encountering the educated, eloquent women that would come later in the play. The evidence challenging the dialect authenticity in the FWP records from the late 1930s, particularly when historically

⁵ Library of Congress, “A Note on the Language of the Narratives.” Historian Lawrence W. Levine (2007) has called the dialect transcription “a mélange of accuracy and fantasy, of sensitivity and stereotype, of empathy and racism.” (Preface).

aligned with the popular cultural phenomenon of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone With the Wind* and the enormously popular 1939 filmic depiction, compelled me, as playwright, dramaturg, and director, to re-examine our choices around Sarah Gudger's vocal embodiment so that our production might not reinforce the troubled mediation of African American lives. This challenge renewed my vigilance and mindfulness in resisting preconceptions and stereotypical depictions of African American women, as they certainly do not define the entire range of the actual experience.

The comparatively unexamined reality is that black women, from colonial times through the early nineteenth century, found ways to make bold choices within the confines of their situations at a time when much of society questioned whether they had the intelligence to even understand their circumstances. The character Lucinda most clearly exemplifies both a deep and complex comprehension of her circumstances as well as a bold and painful choice.

3. LUCINDA: INTERPRETING VOICE FROM ARCHIVAL EVIDENCE

The *Petition of Lucinda to the Legislature of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Nov. 27, 1813, King George County, Virginia* inspired the creation of the character Lucinda. Now a free black woman in Virginia, Lucinda had been Mary Matthew's slave until she gained her emancipation from Matthew's last will and testament in 1812. For a year she worked and saved money to purchase her husband's freedom from Captain William H. Hooe, a neighboring plantation owner. However, the 1806 Virginia General Assembly Law stating that "any slave emancipated after May 1, 1806 who remains in the Commonwealth for more than one year forfeits his freedom and will be sold by the Overseer of the Poor" forced Lucinda into hiding, for fear of being captured and sold away from her husband. In this monologue, Lucinda has emerged from hiding to seek out assistance in her quest to become *re-enslaved* so that she might be allowed to remain with her husband.

In crafting Lucinda's monologue, I constructed her text by interpreting the language in the historical document, but this interpretation process complicated finding Lucinda's authentic character voice, as the stilted legal language of the original petition supplied specific plot details but obfuscated the intense emotions of her high-stakes situation. Fully fleshing out Lucinda's character required sifting through contextual evidence that illuminated her given circumstances and careful language choices that navigated the choppy waters between the concrete and the stereotypical.

The legal petition's authorial voice swiftly emerged as the primary challenge in authentically interpreting Lucinda's request. The Virginia legislature considered many similar proceedings throughout this period until Emancipation, all of which must have been drafted by white, male attorneys in the commonwealth. As he set out

the context for her petition, Lucinda's lawyer used archaic and hyper-formal language stating, "That all the slaves so emancipated (except your petitioner) were removed this year to the State of Tennessee; but your petitioner declined going with them".⁶ His language choices remained formal throughout, referencing "said Mary Matthews," acknowledging Lucinda's "forfeiture," and finally "hereby declar[ing]" her consent to re-enslavement. Although the formal language in the petition established legal authority and displayed proper respect for the court, it ultimately distanced the author from Lucinda and consequently Lucinda from the modern reader and listener.

Virginia courts eventually formalized the re-enslavement process so that by 1856 petitions included very little personal information and followed a strict format.⁷ Lucinda's 1813 petition, however, included a good deal of background detail and even sympathetic rhetoric within the requisite legal structure and formal language. The author advocated for Lucinda by describing her as "still anxious" despite coming forward and "apprehensive" that she might lose contact with her husband "for whom she has relinquished all the advantages of freedom." He described her circumstance as "heart rending" before pleading, "she prays that you will pass a law vesting the title to her in the said William H. Hooe and directing that all proceedings on the part of the Overseers of the Poor for King George county to effect the sale of her may be perpetually staid." Although a written request cannot convey the life-or-death stakes and her unimaginable anguish, the unusually persuasive and compassionate language in Lucinda's petition convinced me that Lucinda must have articulated her concerns clearly and with great fervor when meeting the man who drafted this document for the legislature.

Without primary evidence, I will never know what occurred during that initial consultation, and yet, Lucinda's voice in this meeting clearly rings out across time through her petition. Therefore, I set the monologue in a private office, allowing for a relatively open and honest exchange between two characters of tremendously disparate social statuses. Given her fugitive status, Lucinda must have approached a white lawyer for help with great caution and trepidation. As a powerless black woman alone with a white man, she must also have been aware of and concerned about the potential for sexual violence. Despite her striking lack of agency and lower status position, Lucinda works hard in this setting to remain professional and unemotional in this high stakes situation.

⁶ This and all other quotations unless noted are from "Petition of Lucinda to the Legislature of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Nov. 27, 1813, King George County, Virginia." The full petition can be found in Gaspar, David Barry and Darlene Clark Hine (2004). *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*, pp.106-117.

⁷ For excellent examples see: J. E. Goode. (1856). *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Virginia*.

Lucinda wants to be with her husband at all costs and I imagined that she compelled the lawyer to argue so persuasively through her own articulate and passionate plea. While driven by the desire to hear this woman speak and bring her to modern audiences so that she might be recognized, the dangers inherent in inventing a colloquial African American voice for this plea challenged my playwriting skills. One of the great benefits of the practical applications of my research is the retrospective analysis of the studio process. In twenty years of staging American sounds in musicals and plays on stage and in the classroom, I can clearly identify the two hours of interpreting and transcribing Lucinda's dialogue and dialect as the most awkward and artistically stimulating moments of my career. With literally every word and punctuation choice, I contemplated how to avoid recreating the FWP mistakes and reinscribing the mammy stereotype while validating her potential experiences and accentuating a Virginia drawl.

Therefore, Lucinda's level of self-sufficiency and education played into the choices I made in creating her dialogue and crafting her physical presence. Given her ability to earn money for the past year, I decided Lucinda must have been a domestic servant in her former mistress' household and possess an industrious and earnest nature. With the lawyer's private office evoked in performance by a single chair, Lucinda enters and stands behind the chair, gripping the chair back for both support and protection. I also decided Lucinda might have received some education in the Matthews house, though this practice varied widely throughout the country. Bolstered by desperation, she utilizes her education and carefully enunciates as she quotes Matthews' will emancipating her for "long and faithful service." She employs a deferential strategy she learned while in service, widening her eyes she smiles brightly with child-like hope saying, "Sir, I so thanks ya fo' your time and I hopes you can help me," remaining completely focused on achieving her objective before he loses interest.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the way Lucinda's dialect sounds in performance is that her written text is very similar to Sarah Gudger's transcribed narrative. She drops consonants, improperly contracts words, and has a drawl that softens the vowels, replacing "I" with "Ah" in statements like, "I ain't been able to make 'nough money to buy my husband's freedom from Cap'n Hooe." However, in this case the actresses' dignified and emotionally wrought performance of the dialect and physical persona actively resists a stereotypical depiction of Lucinda. Her connection to the context and the emotional core of the character's request resounds in a soft, vibratory vocal quality that matches her nervous but gentle rocking. These vibrations seemed to emanate from within Lucinda as she dammed the emotional flood, struggling to maintain her poise while confessing, "I so wanted to go; but my husband....He here. And even the sweet dream of freedom could not make me leave, so I stay in Virginia." As Lucinda loses the battle to remain stoic, she whispers hoarsely,

If dem Overseers of the Poor catch me they gone sell me. That's they business, sellin' slaves to make money to help the poor white folks. I's so anxious to be with my husband. And if I's sold who know where I go? [*Her breath catches*] I can end up far away from him and my heart would break and I knows I'd die. [*Crying in earnest but fighting to remain poised*] So if'n I gone be a slave, I pray that I can be given to my husband's owner Cap'n Hooe. Can you help me with that? Can you ask them for me? To do that?

Whether or not this persuasive plea ever occurred, the legal document testifies to the fact that Lucinda existed and requested re-enslavement. Despite the attorney's compassionate petition, the Virginia legislature tabled her request. Though the records do not indicate what became of Lucinda, her monologue aims to render a grounded and compelling character so that audiences might hear her distinctively American voice make an unfathomable American request, so that we do not forget that thousands of Lucindas had no alternative.

4. MARY: INVENTING VOICE FROM SUPPLEMENTARY ARCHIVAL EVIDENCE

One of the most exciting challenges presented by a research agenda aimed at piecing together a woman's life when the remaining absence is greater than the remaining presence is defining credible evidence that testifies to her existence. As with Lucinda, the only trace that remains of Mary, a woman pilloried for an affair with a white man in Virginia in 1649, is the following sentence in the *Lower Norfolk County Order Book*: "It hath appeared to the Lower Norfolk Court that William Watts hath Comitted the filth sin of fornication with Mary, a Negro belonging to Mr. Cornelius Lloyds" (Billings 1975: 161).

As noted above, Mary instigated the entire *(Dis)Embodied Voices* journey and has been my greatest challenge in the pursuit of authentic character voice. I have struggled mightily to develop her voice by fitting together the pieces of Mary's puzzle: from birth in an African village, to life in a burgeoning British colony in America, and a ritualized education from the Church of England. At first, the complexities involved in making Mary speak actually resulted in an entirely interior monologue devoid of dialect, because I could not envision a reality in which she could possibly speak her mind. In time, I recognized that each aspect of her experience offers multiple layers of evidence that support her invented voice and significantly shape the resulting sound that emerges on stage from Mary's lips.

To place Mary's given circumstances in perspective, the first Africans were brought to North America on a Dutch ship that landed in Virginia in 1619. Thirty years later, during Mary's episode in Virginia, there were only 300 black people and 15,000 British subjects in the entire colony. People, in general, were few and far

between and much contact with other African natives was unlikely for Mary, an indentured servant to wealthy British landowner Mr. Cornelius Lloyd. I chose to make Mary an indentured servant because this type of time-bound contractual relationship was most common until the late 1600s when the term “slave” begins to appear more regularly in legal and archival documents. The time-bound nature of her position and the anticipation of release are crucial for the plot of the monologue and plausible as, for the first fifty years or more, Africans brought and sold as workers were handled in much the same way as European indentured servants (Banks 2008: 799).

Early slavery records indicate that Dutch or Portuguese traders likely brought Mary against her will from Africa. These records illuminate the first portion of the Mary dialect puzzle —making her a native of West Africa, possibly Yorubaland or Igboland (which would become Ghana). Mary’s first language, likely Yoruba, Igbo, or Twi, required distinctive vocal sounds and oral placements. I selected Twi for Mary and reasoned that the way her mouth physically shaped those first words would remain an intrinsic part of her long after slavery ripped her away from her home. The fact that West African languages were pidginized with Portuguese by the mid-fifteenth century complicated this first clue to Mary’s vocal sounds, as well as the fact that she likely also heard Portuguese when they sailed to America.

After arriving in Virginia, Mary encountered English speakers, but naturally the Lloyds’ dialect did not resemble a modern day Virginia dialect. Mary lived in Virginia more than one hundred and fifty years before Lucinda, long before generations of slaves were born in America and became native African American speakers. Mary stood at the precipice of the era in which southern slaves of African descent and southern whites of European descent would begin to verbally co-mingle, integrating pronunciations and colloquialisms which eventually formulated the distinctive southern American drawl and characteristic manner of speaking.

Unlike Sarah and Lucinda’s monologues which are complete in one sitting, I split Mary’s journey into several vignettes. The audience slowly experiences Mary’s transition from Twi speaker to English speaker as Mary encounters new American sounds during Church of England services and in her domestic life with the Lloyds. In the opening vignettes, the scars from losing her first language are exposed as Mary learns to restructure the way she produces sound and deciphers the meanings of the words in the Bible. First, the congregation intones the Penitential Psalm together as she struggles with the inscrutable prayer book.

Cornelius Lloyd, Mary’s master, served as a vestryman of the Elizabeth River parish. Parishioners gathered at the Elizabeth River chapel on selected Sundays throughout the year to hear their local minister preach, at which time English law required the minister to “examine, catechise, and instruct the youth and ignorant of the parish based on the Book of Common Prayer, a collection of prayers for use in

Anglican ceremonies.”⁸ The law also dictated that the adults of the colony, particularly men like Lloyd, were required to enforce attendance and supplement catechism education at home. Since Mary’s sentence required her to “do penance in front of the congregation in the Chapel at Elizabeth River for having Comitted the filth sin of fornication,” I thought it probable that Mary had attended, if not participated in, services in the parish and that Mrs. Lloyd had likely taught her to pray at home.

In the second vignette, Mary slowly learns to mimic the sounds Mrs. Lloyd makes while reinforcing the Psalm’s text. Time passes and the third vignette finds Mary a more confident reader and speaker. She combines an abbreviated version of the Penitential Psalm with prayers in her own native language as she prepares for bed. After snuffing the candle, she is terrified as a drunken man enters, muttering parts of the psalm in anticipation of the rape he is about to commit. As he approaches, Mary panics in her native language, eventually crying out in clear English, “NO!” as the lights blackout.

In the final scene, the Lower Norfolk County Court forces Mary to speak by ordering her to “doe penance by standing in a white sheet with a white Rodd in their hands in the Chappell of Elizabeth River in the face of the Congregation on the next Sabbath day that the minister shall make penance service.” This indelible image, Mary standing in the traditional penitential white sheet with a white Rodd in her hand facing the Congregation on the Sabbath day, ignited my passion for these women. I could not imagine that Mary, an unlikely Christian and a non-native English speaker who had almost assuredly been raped, could stand under the condemning gaze of a congregation of white faces and recite the Church of England’s Penitential Psalm without raging internally at the relentless injustices heaped upon her. The juxtaposition of Mary’s many voices fascinated me. What did her English sound like, with its mixed background of Twi, Portuguese, and British dialects? And what did her silenced, internal voice sound like – fully divested of her oppression and fully engulfed in rage?

I explored this dichotomy in Mary’s final *(Dis)Embodied Voices* monologue, as she stands in the chapel and finally recites the Penitential Psalm she has been taught throughout the vignettes. In a cool, narrow shaft of light she begins, “Have mercy upon me, o God, according to thy loving kindness: according to the multitude of thy compassions put away mine iniquities. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” As the lights shift radically to a full stage flooded with red Mary finally voices her internal thoughts —careening from a rejection of this enforced religion to accusations against her rapist— and then, in an instant, she flashes back to the world of the chapel and the chaste and hollow psalm proclaiming,

⁸ Hening, I, 157 as quoted in *Virtual Jamestown* at <<http://www.virtualjamestown.org/rlaws.html>>. See also William H. Seiler (1949: 478-508).

“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

Mary’s complex linguistic development resulted from exploring the multiple layers of period-specific racial, gender, and religious activity that supported her invented voice. Without a biography or evidence of Mary’s reactions to her sentence, I cannot know if Mary understood the words “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” as she said them or if she could appreciate the irony at their core. However, as I return to the notion of staging American sounds, I do know that the journey to finding Mary’s voice has been one of the most satisfying unions of artistry and scholarship of my career.

With only the traces that remain of Sarah, Lucinda, and Mary’s presence in the world, the *(Dis)Embodied Voices* monologues illustrate the ways in which historical research and performance might collaborate in a living historiography that strives to shape a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the complexities of African American women’s lives before Emancipation. In examining the evidence and imagining the possibilities inherent in each of their social, cultural, religious, educational, regional, and economic realities, an outline of the human who inhabited that temporal space began to emerge. By tracing this outline and mapping these experiences onto the performer’s body, these women’s voices ring out loud and clear.

In creating this living historiography, I invite contemporary audiences to *hear* these women so that they might imagine their experiences and come to a deeper, more nuanced understanding the lives of a long-silenced community. What began as distant and *(Dis)Embodied Voices* eventually developed into vibrant and distinctive characters who allow modern audiences to directly engage with the cultural, religious, sexual, and gender constructs of early America. Their stories are as compelling and urgent today as they were centuries ago.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Lisa M (1997). *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P.
- Banks, Taunya Lovell (2008). Dangerous Woman: Elizabeth Key’s Freedom Suit – Subjecthood and Racialized Identity in Seventeenth Century Colonial Virginia. *Akron Law Review* 41: 799-837.
- Billings, Warren M. ed., (1975). “Lower Norfolk County Court Record.” *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606-1689*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P.
- Gaspar, David Barry and Darlene Clark Hine (2004). *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*. Chicago: U of Illinois P.

- Henning, William Waller (1998). *Hening's Statutes at Large*. In Shifflett, Crandall. *Virtual Jamestown Website*. <<http://www.virtualjamestown.org/rlaws.html>> (Accessed 22 March 2010).
- Joyce, Valerie (2012). *(Dis)Embodied Voices*. Unpublished playscript.
- Kautzsch, Alexander (2002). *The Historical Evolution of Earlier African American English: An Empirical Comparison of Early Sources*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Levine, Lawrence W. (2007, 30th Anniversary Edition). *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford; New York: Oxford UP.
- Pilgrim, David. The Mammy Caricature. *The Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. <<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies/>> (Accessed 20 March 2010).
- Sarah Gudger. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*. *Library of Congress*. <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>> (Accessed 4 April 2010).
- Seiler, William (1949). The Church of England as the Established Church in Seventeenth-Century Virginia. *The Journal of Southern History* 15.4: 478-508.