

## INVESTIGATING THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NEW BLACK AMERICAN DRAMA AND AMERICAN SOCIOPOLITICS

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**Abstract.** The new black American drama (NBAD) has marked a turning point in African American literature, though it has emerged and come of age in the most politically turbulent era of the twentieth century. Without focusing on any specific book, this work aims at exploring the link between this dramatic form and American sociopolitics (ASP) from 1950 to 1975. It examines how NBAD and ASP interconnection operated within that time. In light of New Historicist theory, this paper posits that there is a form of reciprocity, where black drama, shaped by American politics, becomes a mule for sociopolitical reforms.

**Keywords:** the new black American drama, politics, black arts, revolt, racism

**Résumé.** La nouvelle forme du théâtre noir américain a marqué un tournant dans la littérature noire américaine, bien qu'elle ait émergé et atteint sa maturité lors des plus grands troubles socio-politiques du vingtième siècle aux États-Unis. Sans se limiter à des pièces de théâtre sélectionnées, cette étude se propose d'explorer la relation entre cette nouvelle forme théâtrale et l'espace sociopolitique aux États-Unis de 1950 à 1975. Elle examine le fonctionnement de cette relation, en se basant sur la vision néo-historiciste. Cette étude découvre une réciprocité, où la nouvelle forme théâtrale, forgée par la situation sociopolitique, redevient une source d'inspiration pour les réformes politiques.

**Mots clé :** théâtre noir américain, politique, arts noirs, révolte, racisme

### Introduction

The new black American drama, in this very study, spans the fifties to the mid-seventies, when racism became a less serious matter (Amiri Baraka, 1969, 1979, p. 251). This period has been, for black theatre practitioners, an outstandingly prolific, but also the most sociopolitically turbulent era in the twentieth century. Consequently, whereas several thinkers posit that the political change had its roots in the previous decade (Strain, 2017, p. 16) celebrated scholars, such as Amiri Baraka, draw a conclusion that it rather has swelled from the artistic prolificacy. He made the point that art is politics (Watts, 2001, p.196). Meaning, art is meant to change (LeRoi Jones, 1966, p. 212) sociopolitical dispositions. In the same vein, August Wilson observes that all art is political,

because it serves the politics of someone (Bonnie Lyons and August Wilson, 1999, p.2). I take up this thought to assert that a close examination shows the art-politics link is not unilateral, but reciprocal. For, artworks mostly are prior offshoots of politics, but also inspire politics. Wilson confesses that in America, Whites have a particular view of Blacks, therefore his plays offer them a new different way to look at black Americans (ibid.). The fact that white Americans have a particular view of Blacks is political. The subjugation on the basis of complexion projects a disdainful way of seeing Blacks. This racist policy shocks the heedful artist who addresses it through arts. So, Wilson's plays spring from politics, or reality, and aim at reforming that politics.

This article explores the forms and the roles of the NBAD focusing on the reciprocity between dramatic art and American sociopolitical changes from 1950 to 1975. It shows, on the one hand, how politics has influenced the emergence of the new black drama, and, on the other hand, how this dramatic form has reshaped American politics. The applied literary tool encompasses thematic, autobiographic, individual and collective works, focusing on a series of striking historical events, and the New Historicist approaches. Knowing that the latter is not monolithic, I consider Stephen Greenblatt's definition that any literary work is a framework of non-literary texts (Peter Barry 1995, p.173). The literary and the non-literary texts are interconnected, for, both are given equal importance and allowed to work as sources of information and interrogation with each other (Rajani Sharma, 2014, p.3). In this context, it is used to reexamine this reciprocity by considering each field (politics/drama) a source of inspiration.

## **1. The Offshoots of American Politics**

### ***1.1 The 1950s Protest Drama***

At the beginning of the fifties, the political deadlocks pertained to the sequels of World War II atrocities, the Jim Crow laws, the Anticommunism fever, the Korean war, and the specter of atomic bomb, to name but a few, were overwhelmed by the cold war tension. Martin Halliwell observes that the cold war ideology is central to understand 1950s culture (Martin Halliwell, 2007, p.2). For, it has greatly influenced American culture by putting a bridle on the keenness of their ardor. The art critic Fred Orton reasserts, the cold war is a constraining notion, a closure, which conditions us not to probe deeper the real determinations of foreign and domestic policy and to ask harder questions about the relationship between art and politics. (ibid. p.3) The cold war has created a crippling mood making it difficult to address sociopolitical issues. Likewise, Douglas Field thinks, on closer inspection of the cold war era, the decade reveals a number of political, social and cultural currents that cannot easily be expressed (ibid. p.5). This is what characterizes the protest drama in the 1950s. In light of character craft, plots, themes, symbols and language styles, it appears a kind of weakness and timidity compared to the 1960s drama. Yet, in spite of the

constraining sociopolitical atmosphere, the idea of protesting against the Jim Crow laws, and the endeavor to distance from the minstrelsy, still haunted black playwrights. Advocated by several theatre practitioners and critics mainly Alain LeRoy Locke, this dramatic form is intended to unrelentingly get rid of “the dust spectacles of past controversy [like] mammies...Uncle Tom and Sambo” (Samuel A. Hay, 1999, p.11) for a realistic representation, because the time was ripe to settle down to a realistic facing facts (ibid.) impelled by the current politics. The main characters of the protest drama of the 1950s are built to nonviolently defy the oppressive political powers.

In William Blackwell Branch’s *A Medal for Willie* (1951), the sorrows of Mrs. Jackson, whose son Willie Jackson was killed in a battle, rejected the medal<sup>1</sup>, as depicted in the following extract.

[...] with all eyes on her, she turns again in the direction of the officials, defiance in her gaze. Her hand comes up to finger the medal on her lapel. Then, looking down at it, she hastily unpins the medal and comes forward, extending it in her hand. Here... Yes, here! You take it – General. Take it back! There are ad-libs amazement...Yes, Willie’s dead and gone now, and I’m proud he was brave and helped save somebody else ‘fore he got killed. But I can’t help thinkin’ Willie died fighting’ in the wrong place. (*Quietly intense*) Willie should had that machine gun over here! So you can take this medal back on up to Washington and tell ‘em I don’t want it!

Woodie King and Ron Milner (1986, pp.469-471)

Mrs. Jackson’s refusal marked a new starting point in black drama. She does not comply with General. Rather, she stubbornly defies the racist and oppressive powers. At this very juncture, the critic Hay stresses that the image shocked the audience ...What made Mrs. Jackson’s truth spilling so painful was its complementing theme: Eliminate racism by eliminating racists (op. cit., p.88). This recurring conflicting mood, without compliancy, penetrates Alice Childress’s *Trouble in Mind* (2001), which portrays a friction between Manner, a white patronizing stage director and Mayer Wiletta, a black actress. Her audacious stand against Manners’s disdainfulness is a relatively unprecedented attack. Commenting on Wiletta’s activism, Hay thinks she unveils the hidden toughness of African American actresses in that time. She demands African American theatre practitioners to boycott foolish characterizations shaped by public perception and policies (op. cit., p.89). That defiance filters through Lofton Mitchell’s *A Land Beyond the River* (1975), another famous landmark play which tackles, in the same perspective, racism through the protest of some characters. Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1987) the best play in its time, is hailed as the epitome of modern black drama. For, the playwright has produced on

<sup>1</sup> [This medal is] offered to the dead Willie Jackson, an African American soldier killed in battle overseas, as his posthumous award for bravery.

Broadway, before a mixed-race audience, the most realistic depictions of African American life. The play is a fertile crucible where the real African American life experiences, traditions, cultures, heritages and dreams are put together and displayed on a stage. These realistic aspects in the characterization have drawn the attention of many critics. The most striking fact is the determination of Mama to move into their new house at the Clybourne Park, the white residential neighborhood, and mainly her flat refusal of the racist Karl Lindner's tentative to keep her out. Mama's step in the current political mood, can be considered a brave defiance of the American politics that time. These policies, in light of the new historicist theory, have shaped the protestant characters. They constitute the ground on which the protesters, including Lena Younger, acquire and grow such repelling attitudes. In other words, the characters' noncompliant stance swells from the 1950s sociopolitical mood where racial segregation and other social injustices undermine American society.

Another illuminating remark is that mostly the protesters, in this dramatic form, are female characters. Though nonviolent, they embody the resilience to frustrations and grievances laid on Blacks. Mance Williams argues that the plays during the 1950s expressed a new form of protest, one that not only exhorted black people to stand up for their rights but warned whites that Blacks would settle for nothing less than their full share of the American Dream (Mance Williams, 1985, p.112) they have been deprived of. Therefore, despite its willful attempts, the 1950s dramatic form, contrary to the 1960s revolutionary drama, remains shy, nonviolent as an outgrowth of the cold war.

### ***1.2 The 1960s Attack Drama***

The black attack dramatic form covers the sixties and the early seventies. It mirrors the sociopolitical battles for equal justice in that era. Indeed, the rise of the New Liberals in the 1960s has brought profound transformations to black drama. The general shyness and the reluctance to speak out on controversial issues (Martin Halliwell, 2007, p.18) in the past years faded away, and the tongues have been loosened up. The 1960s attack drama emerged in lieu of the protest drama. It represents a solid springboard where black artists slackly address any sociopolitical issues, galvanizing for prompt revolt. Several theatrical movements, and groups mushroomed. Baraka founded Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (1965), and Black Arts Movement (1965). In addition, he published Black Revolutionary Theater (1968) to adumbrate the criteria of the new black drama. In the same vein, Larry Neal launched Black Aesthetic (1968). Whereas, many theatre companies such as The Free Southern Theater (1964), The New Lafayette Theater (1967), National Black Theater (1968), The Negro Ensemble Company (1966) to name but a few, emerged and operated in line with the new policies. Theodora Tsimpouki explains:

The sixties was an era of great social and cultural upheaval. It was a period of mass mobilization that attempted to redefine “America” by addressing issues of racial exclusion, sexual subordination and national identity. [...] Rock music, radical activism that included civil rights and anti-war demonstrations, consciousness-raising groups, anti-disciplinary politics as well as alternative lifestyles that adopted willed poverty, communal living, drug experimentation and non-Western, non-Christian practices and beliefs created a powerful yet loosely organized cultural movement.

Theodora Tsimpouki (2009, p.45)

The new liberal policies have given rise to unprecedented freedom of speech which resulted in the growth of several free cultural movements. A growing slogan was “Free your mind and the rest will follow” (ibid. 47). Freeing one’s mind, according to Baraka, is the ability to express or translate through art the political trends in a country. (Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich and Amiri Bakara, 2010, p.2) As a result, the endless sociopolitical upheavals, riots, and violent repressions inspire many adamant playwrights who pig-headedly engage in human sacrifice performances, by exposing bloody exactions against Blacks. Consequently, the 1960s attack dramatic form realistically addresses the sociopolitical issues through many devices include language styles, themes, plots, symbols, and characterizations.

The themes are mostly centered on violence. Both, the titles and the contents are peppered with provocative styles, exposing killings of any sorts in America, especially in South and at the same time, calling for an immediate retaliation. Kalamu Ya Salaam titled his play, *The Destruction of the American Stage* (1972), Philip Hayes Dean called his own, *The Owl Killer*, (1971) whereas Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) published *Junkies Are Full of (SHHH...)* (1971), *Bloodrites* (1971), and *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*, (1969) which comprises: *Experimental Death Unit #1*, *A Black Mass*, *Great Goodness of Life*, *Madheart*, and *Why No J-E-L-L-O?* In the introduction to this very collection, LeRoi Jones warned that: “Unless you killing white people, killing the shit they’ve built, dont read this shit, you wont like it, and it sure wont like you.” (op. cit. 1969, p. vii) Violence is tangible through the titles. It alludes to rebellion, destruction, death. In this extensive euphoria, Shelby Steele, in “Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theatre”, opines that one of the salient characteristics of the New Black Theatre that maintains its separation from the mainstream American drama is its ritualistic aspect (Errol Hill, 1987, p.30). Ritualistic, Steele explains, means the strong presence of *symbols, characterizations, themes, and language styles* which are frequently repeated from play to play and over a period of time (ibid.). The repeat refers to the hidden idea of violence against Blacks, which permeates not only the titles, but also the contents.

Likewise, the content of the black attack drama is peppered with inner frustrations, anger, protest, and violence. It becomes a battle field where the exactions against Blacks are loosely exposed to serve as severe frontal attacks on Whites. William Wellington Mackey explains that his play is

[a] dramatic dialogue about black people trapped in the ghetto. It is an expression of repressed feelings of anxiety and deep inner frustrations. It is a shout, a cry of mercy, a lamentation for understanding. It is a spit at the black middle class for turning their back on the black [...] in bondage. It triggered anger and hostility toward the white masses [...]. It is a requiem for the dead black people buried in the stone jungles of this country.

William Wellington Mackey (1986, p. 325)

This excerpt illustrates the objective of the new black drama that it should not only express “repressed feelings of anxiety and deep inner frustrations”, but it should trigger “anger and hostility toward the white masses”. Mackey’s vision matches with Joseph A. Walker’s in *Ododo*, where he chronicles in a persistence emotional style the plight of black Americans from their enslavement. He stresses on how Blacks are murdered, hung and humiliated. (Joseph A. Walker, 1986, pp.363-364) Actor G is endeavoring to give the statistic of Blacks killed by Whites.

ACTOR A: Dig it.

WOMEN (*sing*): Six million people

ACTOR A: Yeah, that’s a lot.

ACTOR G: How many millions of blacks died by lynchings, rapings, murderings, torturings, starvings, and diseasings?

ACTOR A: Before and after slavery.

ACTOR G: Dig it

(*ibid.* p. 378)

Beside these exactions against Blacks which littered the attack drama, the playwrights also propel for violent actions. Walker claims that when a man tries to put his hands on you, insults your dignity, plays around with your humanity, messes with your manhood, you better kill him, kill him, kill him, and kill him good! I say kill that man! (*ibid.* pp. 381-382) The black attack drama, contrary to protest drama, eschews resignation. It is a form of drama that preaches assault on the oppressor. In *Gabriel*, Clifford Mason, through the character of Gabriel, appeals for resistance and frontal attack: Get up, shoot, kill, change, (Amiri Baraka 1969, p.218) for, black drama must accuse and attack anything that can be accused and attacked (*ibid.* p.211). Archie Shepp, in *Junebug Graduates Tonight*, through the character of Junebug suggests: kill him (white) back when he murders you! (Archie Shepp, 1986, p.58)

The new black drama must attack the oppressive American politics embodied by Whites who are dehumanized. They are referred to as beast, savage, bitch, devil, hell. In Baraka’s *A Black Mass*, the white character claims to be the beast as follow:

BEAST: I White. White. White. White. (*Leaps, coming to stiffness, then screams stupidly*) White! White! White! (*Hops like beast goon, making horrible farting sounds with his mouth*) White! White! White! (*Hops back toward stage, and up*) White! White! (...)

TIILA: White! White! (*Her humanity breaks through the dead animal language briefly.*) OH LORDS HELP ME I AM TURNED INTO A MONSTER. OH LORDS... (LeRoi Jones, 1969, pp.30-35)

The white inhumanity is artistically portrayed in the beastliness of the characters. In Marvin X's *Take Care of Business*, black character bears a name, whereas the white character is called 'Devil' (Shelby Steele, 1987, p.37). Shelby emphasizes, 'Devil', in Herbert Stokes's *The Man Who Trusted the Devil Twice*, stands for the white man (ibid.) McKay and GA underscore that it [the attack drama era] is a period frequently characterized by extraordinarily persistent and powerful manifestations of violence at all levels of society throughout the 1960s (McKay, 2005, p.10). That extreme violence issued from the dominating liberalist ideology which penetrates the character craft as well.

In Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), *The Slave* (1964), and *The Toilet* (1963), the main characters respectively Clay, Walker and Ray have been sacrificed on the altar of racism. He explains that they are all victims (LeRoi Jones, 1966, p. 212) and their role is to report on the cold-blooded politics of America. It must show horrible coming attractions of *The Crumbling of the West*. ...and show the missionaries and wiggly Liberals dying under blasts of concrete. (ibid. p.211) Baraka recalls that recently four Negro children were blown to bits while they were learning to pray [...] and Police dogs, fire hoses, blackjacks, have been used on Negroes, trying to reinforce a simple and brutal social repression. And all these terroristic tactics are used, finally toward the same end. Yet in spite of this brutality, certain elements in America ask the Negro to be nonviolent, (ibid., pp. 133-134) which he thinks unfair.

Therefore, the black attack drama flatly avoided nonviolence, because American politics was not nonviolent. As an art form, it reflects the sociopolitical facts, it is an offshoot of American politics. Wole Soyinka highlights that art is unavoidably linked to its formative – or at the least, inspirational – reality (Wole Soyinka, 1993, p.197). Meaning that art always refers to “experiences outside the artistic object” (ibid., p.191). These experiences constitute the mold that shapes the new black drama.

## 2. The Mold of American Sociopolitical Reforms

Art is not only a reflection of politics, it is essentially politics, because it is meant to reshape politics. New historicists give literary and non-literary texts equal weight, for they constantly inform and interrogate each other. In the same vein, the new black American dramatic form is referred to a literary text employed to review reality, the non-literary text. It questions the reality and suggests reforms through political militancy.

## 2.1. The Revolutionary Drama

The fight for equal justice seriously started when the dramatists published and staged plays to awake Blacks' consciousness and incite them to public manifestation against many social injustices. Topical social issues, like the right of vote, the segregation of public facilities, services and unequal opportunities, permeate the plays. However, two different ideologies, the integrationist and the separatist visions, have divided the dramatists.

The integrationist playwrights believe, to resolve the problems of Blacks, they must integrate the white mainstream. Championed by W.B.B Dubois, this vision is carried on by other celebrated playwrights like Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, Sonia Sanchez, Steve Carter, to name but a few. Baldwin, in *The Amen Corner*, (1968) has subtly expressed his position through the character of Alexander Margaret. When because of racism, and hate, she lost her husband, child and church, she realizes that love, compassion and forgiveness constitute the solid soil she can build her family and congregation on. This metaphorical description illustrates the playwright's vision of American community. For Baldwin, love and compassion have nothing to do with the color of anybody's skin (ibid. v). This is a plea for racial integration which Hansberry in her pioneering play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, sees not only as the suitable response to racism, but also, as Blacks' right to claim for. Commenting on Mama's choice in this play, Silvia Castro Borrego thinks, considering the sociopolitical atmosphere, integration becomes a well-deserved reward for the moral choices the members of the Younger family have made with great effort on their part (Borrego, 2015, 124). It calms down people who feared violent uprisings, and contributes to demonstrating that life in the ghetto does not always lead to crime or disgrace (ibid). Sonia Sanchez takes it up stressing on the need to reclaim the right to assimilate into the white mainstream. In her one-act play, *The Bronx is Next* (Sonia Sanchez, 1971), she provides a revolting depiction of black ghetto in Harlem. The burning of the buildings, the death of White Cop, and the humiliation of Black Bitch, the white cop's mistress convey a message that propels to uprising. Dr Hasan Mohammed Saleh and Shatha Amanallah Aziz observe that:

It is quintessentially a black militant play, focusing on the impact of American racism and the radical response of the black community to that oppression. The central focus of this play is an examination of the frustrated anger brewing in isolated and impoverished black communities and the militant vision that recognizes these communities as prime places for fostering revolutionary change.

Dr Hasan Mohammed Saleh and Shatha Amanallah Aziz (2017, p.5)

This quotation underscores that the new black American drama has been essentially a political and a catalyst agent in the fight for sociopolitical reforms.

Unlike the integrationists, the separatists flatly reject any form of subordination to white supremacy and seeks for total independence. This stance leads to the emergence of a new form of nationalism to quest for black political and cultural freedom. It is led up by several celebrated playwrights and political activists such as Douglas Turner Ward, Ed. Bullins, Marvin X, Archie Shepp, and Amiri Baraka at the forefront. Advocating for separation, the latter asserts that the struggle is not simply for “equality”, or “better jobs” or “better schools” and the rest, it is to completely *free* the black man from the domination of the white man...The black man has been separated and made to live in his own country (LeRoi Jones, 1966, pp.84-85). The envisioned black country refers to an enclosed arena to celebrate black history, culture, and politics. Thus, he proposed, as quoted by Komozi Woodard, that "Harlem secede from the United States" (Komozi Woodard, 1999, p.66), and pleaded for black unity as follow: “If you want a new world, Brothers and Sisters, if you want a world where you can all be beautiful human beings, we must throw down our differences and come together as black people. We are asking for a unity so strong that it will shake up the world” (ibid.). These ideas permeate many of Baraka’s plays. *Bloodrites*, for example, is a provocative, violent, and highly revolting play which insistently calls for unity of action. The character of Loudspeaker asserts: “We all need each other. If we are to survive. We all need to love each other [...] Brother, sister, seeing this, react, move...” (Amiri Baraka, 1971, pp.28-29). He believes that unity of black people is a key in the achievement of their goals. Therefore he suggests that “black [...] theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of the victims, and that they themselves are victims if they are the blood brother.” (LeRoi Jones, 1966, p.213)

Thus, the new black American playwright’s role is to draw from the daily realities and to cast on the stage through characterization shocking conditions of black American citizens. He has to shape them as victims, so that it strikes the audience, awakes its consciousness and incites to revolt.

## 2.2 *The Committed Political Militancy*

In quest for radical changes, the new black American playwrights, integrationists and separatists, are altogether converted into political activists. They array to eradicate any racial barrier erected against Blacks in America.

Between 1965 and 1970, more than 500 urban uprisings galvanized a new generation in the struggle for black liberation. The massive tumult of the ghetto revolts set the stage for the fusion between the nationalism of small circles of radical artists and intellectuals and the grassroots nationalism of the broad urban masses; out of that explosive mix came a new generation of militant Black Power organizations, demanding self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense. In the midst of the uprisings the politics of black cultural nationalism and the Modern Black Convention Movement took

form, unleashing the dynamics of nationality formation. During those turbulent years, Amiri Baraka's poetry raised the slogan, "It's Nation Time!"

Komozi Woodard (1999, pp. xiii-xiv)

The quotation above delineates the broad scope of the riots around America. At the forefront, there are artists and intellectuals notably the new black American dramatists. Abney Louis Henderso refers to women artists and activists like Lorraine Hansberry, a playwright and activist, and Sonia Sanchez, poet, Audre Lorde, poet, activist, and feminist, all took part in the liberation of Blacks during the civil rights movement in 1950s-1970s. They attended rallies, and were fully involved in political movements that changed the lives of black people in America. (Abney Louis Henderson, 2014, p.13) In addition to this, a good deal of theatrical movements, groups, and companies altogether joined the rallies. In the limelight, the Black Arts Movement, co-fathered by Baraka in 1965. It is a broad association of radical visual artists, playwrights, poets, novelists, and musicians whose common target is black liberation. It is a form of cultural and political separation from white dominating concepts through black arts. The director of the FST (the Free Southern Theatre) then, John O'Neal, argued that, politics is to art as content is to form, one cannot exist without the other. Art is dominated by and is an expression of politics. Thus, the FST believes that political actions can be stimulated by art (Errol Hill, 1987, p. 294)

Consequently, within this period (1950 to 1975), a new generation of committed black dramatists and political activists has emerged and influenced many political reforms such as: the Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 which aims to end segregation in school in America, the Voting Rights Act in 1965, allows African American voters who have been disenfranchised to vote, the 1968 Fair Housing Act proscribes the sale of housing based on race, sex, or religion<sup>2</sup>.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the reciprocal relationship between the new black American drama and American politics from 1950 to 1975. It has highlighted, on the one hand, how American sociopolitical ideologies have given birth to a new dramatic form, and, on the other hand, how this new black drama has triggered sociopolitical reforms. The result reveals that the new black drama which emerged in the 1950s and died at the mid-1970s was fundamentally a product of American politics. For, its three waves: the protest drama, the struggle drama and the revolutionary drama, are influenced by the political tendencies mainly: the cold war, the liberalist ideology, and the Jim Crow. Besides, the new black drama is seen as a political tool employed to raise black consciousness, promote black revolution, black aesthetic and nationalism, by reforming American politics. It is seen as the stimulus of many political reforms until mid-seventies, the milestone of a new dramatic form.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thefilmSPACE.org/selma> visited on 03/2019

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