

Soyica Colbert, Georgetown University

"Two Branches of a Miscegenated Tree: Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*"

Abstract: The talk will examine how Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* complicates what Daphne Brooks calls "America's miscegenated history" by depicting how racial transfer functions not only between generations but also among individuals in the same generation. The play offers an insight into the life of Vera Stark (Sanaa Lathan), an African American woman striving to become a Hollywood actress while working as the maid of a famous purportedly white actress Gloria Mitchell (Stephanie J. Block). By the end of a play, we learn that Gloria is Vera's cousin and that Gloria is passing for white. Fittingly a comedy, Nottage's play calls to mind the ongoing melodrama that is race relations in the United States. From the saga of Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings to the offensive questions regarding President Obama's citizenship, the popular conversation about race seems to leap in the blink of an eye from the postracial world of the twenty-first century to biological notions of race in the nineteenth century. Nottage's play reveals the way that U.S. racial mixtries— a term used in Langston Hughes' Broadway play *Mulatto* (1935) that communicates mixtures that are mysteries—create lines of contentious affiliation among women. The talk will explore how the concept of consanguinity applies to cousins to reveal the implications of America's miscegenated history for relationships between women. It will also complicate the notion of biological transfer as singularly a heteronormative intergenerational process, offering an argument for how biological transfer works among women and intragenerationally.