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**“A Black Play Can Take You There”: The Question of
Embodiment in African American Women’s Drama**



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*For my beloved brothers, Murad and Ja'far. Your ever-present loving souls
kindle my sky, and the magnanimous life you both lived was and will
always be my guiding star*

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted,
either in the same or different form to this or any other
University for a degree.

Signature: Maria Khuzam

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Summary

This research is concerned with the question of embodiment and body representation in plays written by African American women playwrights during the twentieth century. It starts with the early 1920s and ends around the turn of the twenty-first century. This project negotiates issues of bodily manifestations and the evolvement of this manifestation from one decade to the next. My research is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion; each chapter is concerned with examining bodily representation in a certain era. Chronologically presented, the chapters attempt to answer how embodiment at the beginning and at the close of the twentieth century differs. Although the better-known playwrights Susan-Lori Parks, Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange and the lesser-known playwrights Alice Childress, Sonia Sanchez (better known as a poet), and Marita Bonner share a concern with what might be called the “raced body,” they also seem to share a certain type of maternal heritage passed from one playwright to another. Therefore, this research contributes to the existing scholarship by, firstly, establishing a literary genealogy between African American women playwrights through their shared interest in the utilisation of the body-in-the-world as a form of resistance. Secondly, I present these playwrights as phenomenologists; through using this political body as a way of experiencing the world and experimenting with it, as a way of being in the world, those playwrights—in both modern and postmodern eras—become interpreters of and experimenters with meaning. Their perpetual commitment to defining the position of African American subject, especially that of African American woman, is entwined with an experimental approach of a black body that lives, registers, interprets, and attempts to re-write the hyphenated body (body-in-the-world).

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Introduction

“It’s a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree.” Amy tells the agonised Sethe, “See, here’s the trunk, it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches, You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom.” (Toni Morrison, *Beloved* 93)

This research is concerned with the question of embodiment and body representation in plays written by African American women playwrights during the twentieth century. It starts with the early 1920s and ends around the turn of the twenty-first century. This project negotiates issues of bodily manifestations and the evolvment of this manifestation from one decade to the next. Although the better-known playwrights Susan-Lori Parks, Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange and the lesser-known playwrights Alice Childress, Sonia Sanchez (better known as a poet), and Marita Bonner share a concern with what might be called the “raced body,” they also seem to share a certain type of maternal heritage passed from one playwright to another. Therefore, this research attempts to establish a literary genealogy of African American women playwrights and their work.

Nevertheless, I start by using one of the most powerful images ever written in American literature, because of its grasp of the main argument of this research; namely, the chokecherry tree image in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. This image serves two functions: first, it dovetails two key concepts that prevail in this research, race and body. Second, it draws on the concept of literary genealogy which I seek to establish in this project. The corporeal dilemma of the raced body shows its historical manifestation in the drama of black women playwrights as it emanates from the direct experience of being a body-in-the-world. In his introduction to *African American Theatre*, Samuel Hay refers to the historical difficulties encountered by “theatre people” that “the major contribution to African American

theatre came from people whose backs have been spiked to the wall” (2). In addition to his attempt to restore to those people in theatre organisations their due credits, Hay dedicates most of his work to categorising African American theatre into many divisions on the basis of Du Bois’s “Outer Life/agitprop” against Locke’s “Inner Life/folk traditions” theatre. Avoiding any categorisation, and emphasising continuity in African American women’s drama, I show how both tropes, inner and outer, converge on the site of bodily experience.

In this research I show how black women playwrights utilize black bodies as texts in order to destabilize a hegemonic structure. Through using this political body as a way of experiencing the world and experimenting with it, a way of being in the world, these playwrights –in both modern and postmodern eras—became phenomenologists: their perpetual commitment to defining the position of African American subjects, especially that of African American women, is entwined with an experimental approach of a black body that lives, registers, interprets, and attempts to re-write the body politic.

These playwrights did not question only their contemporaneous status quo but also, and most importantly, they question history as a determinant factor in the construction of black bodies. In each play, there is a constant engagement with the weight of history on the black female body, and consequently, there is a constant attempt to revise and deconstruct history and question its power. Each play, therefore, exerts a great deal of imagination and the power of imagination to diminish the authoritative power of history. Although this research does not approach the plays from an historical point of view, I argue that these playwrights utilize the raced body to examine what is called the “silent inertia of history,” as I show here.

Phenomenology

Restoring to history a carnal dimension overlooked in Western thought, Jacob Rogozinski discusses in “Chiasmus in the Polis” the significance of such a restoration. One of the reasons that contributed to the supremacy of the “narrative” history is the supremacy of language over the carnal, of mind over body, a fact

consistent with totalitarianism and the supremacy of the “head” in *body* politics (7). Rogozinski extends Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s differentiation between the body and the flesh, arguing that “the meaning of being in a body, being an Other, and being in community, are constituted [corporeally] ‘in and by me’” (10).

More importantly, he elaborates on Merleau-Ponty’s definition of the “flesh of history”, which he, in turn, defines—and draws from his examination of the analogy between individual and historical corporeality—as “the silent inertia of history,” “hidden schemas taking roots in a “wild” dimension of the social, in a pre-linguistic, pre-expressive stratum” (7). So, this “silent inertia of history” is the same milieu which is referred to as a gap, or void, in historical discourses in postmodernism.

Merleau-Ponty called this stratum the “flesh of history” and he made it, Rogozinski explains, identifiable with the primordial experience each person has with his or her body (7). The crux of Rogozinski’s analysis is that in order to avoid further catastrophes (another holocaust, another fascism, etc.), and in line with the rise of individualism in postmodern eras against totalitarianism, the Total Body should be replaced with the “matrix of all communities,” the “anarchical and plural flesh,” the matrix of individuals who are not forgetful of their carnal truth, a “being with an intentional communion with being” (33). Taking into account this cultural necessity to replace the *head* in the *body*-politics, I show how those women playwrights do not replace the patriarchal figure with an opposing matriarchy; rather, they insist on the “matrix” within which the *intentional communion*, which means establishing a relationship with the Other based on understanding his/her historicity, is triggered, questioned, and emphasised through the living/experiencing female body. Therefore, I conclude my research with Breena Clarke and Glenda Dickerson’s *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* (1996) in which they deliberately present the mother figure, that of Aunt Jemima as a symbol of abhorred and abjected black femininity, as an ontological matrix.

Another theory which shapes my argument is Maxine Sheets Johnstone’s analysis in her interdisciplinary examination of bodily movement. Sheets-Johnstone argues that the slogan that captured feminist consciousness in the 1970s – “the personal is political”—is at heart corporeal. Both the personal and the political are

“distinctively concrete in a bodily sense” (*Roots* 2). The personal is thus derived from “an all-pervasive human bodily personal that has a history, which is to say that the political is at root a corporeal built-in, a dimension of our primate heritage that is expressed in that repertoire of can’s’ that define us both as creatures of natural history and as culturally and individually groomed bearers of meaning and agents of power” (2).

Drawing on both theories, I intend to show through my analysis of the dramatic works of African American women playwrights that the personal is historical as well as political; that in their questioning of history, and venturing into its inertia, those women playwrights bring into light what is missing from hegemonic discourse, the corporeal relationship between the personal and the historical that emanates from a deliberate and “intentional” communion with the “other.” The analysis, therefore, is not a critique of history per se, rather, it is an examination of the “silent inertia of history,” the wild stratum to which those women give their body to experience and register what it experiences through the body as a text; hence the meaning of embodiment.

The voices explored here are individualistic in the sense that each playwright attempts to register her own way of experiencing the world through a raced body. Still, each playwright is bound to a larger cause, one in which community, African American culture, and racial issues dictate a way of living, of experiencing the world, and consequently, of writing on the body and via it. The dramatic voice of Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks, and to a lesser extent, that of Ntozake Shange is an outcry towards establishing the “matrix of all individualities.” Alice Childress, and Sonia Sanchez are more prone to affirming the Total Body, an aesthetic derived from the defying spirit of the Civil Rights Movement and the militancy of the Black Power Movement. Marita Bonner and Lorraine Hansberry—although three decades separate them—stand in between these two trends as their ambivalent individual/communal dilemma informs a conflicted mode of playwriting. The last play discussed in this research by Clarke and Dickerson is an attempt to reconcile and celebrate the individualism of the black woman and her belonging to a wider community. Because the play traces maternal legacy from one generation to the next,

it serves as a concluding part by which I dovetail the thematic concern of the preceding chapters to the closing play's dramatic texture.

To claim that those black women playwrights are phenomenologists is to simply apprehend their grasp of their lived experience, and how and why they commit to delivering this experience, for phenomenology, as Sheets-Johnstone explains, is not the way of doing psychological, sociological, or historical research—maybe it is all three levels—but it is “*the* way of coming to grips with lived experience, our own, and in a hermeneutical sense, those of others [italics in the original]” (Sheets-Johnstone, “Phenomenology” 143). Moreover, the interest in phenomenology works in two ways: first it takes into consideration the audience through illustrating the significance of the theatrical gaze; this will be more apparent in plays written by Kennedy in the 1960s and on. Second, it draws the attention to the position of the subject, a point that intersects with the feminists’ preoccupation with defining the positionality/historicity of the female subject. In *Bodied Spaces*, Stanton B. Garner explains the relation between phenomenology and theatre. Phenomenology, he clarifies concerns itself with redirecting the gaze from the objective world of scientific consideration to the phenomenal world or the “world as it appears or discloses itself to the perceiving subject” (2). Theatre, on the other hand, engages the operations of “world-constitution” as individuals seek to position themselves in relation to the world, both actual and make-believe (2). Garner’s definition of the intersecting zone between phenomenology and theatre engages the audience as a central part in the process of perception and making of the lived experience. Theatrical space, according to him, is bodied not only in the sense of being positioned within a “perceptual field” or being an “object of perception,” but also as the originator of this perception, or its initiator. It is noteworthy how black women playwrights pay great attention to including the spectator in theatrical experiences. Although this is evident more in the eighties and nineties—in Parks’ and in Shange’s dramaturgy—it is similarly evident in earlier decades: in Hansberry’s use of the dual system of communication, in Childress’ prioritising of black audiences, and in Bonner’s imaginary audience.

Triple Jeopardy: Race, Gender, and Drama

In 1969, Frances M. Beale spoke about “double jeopardy,” explicating the dilemma of being both a woman and black. Many women did, before Beale, speak of the jeopardy of being black and woman, in addition to being young and gifted, like Marita Bonner in 1926, and Lorraine Hansberry in 1964. But what happens when these women playwrights step into a field already marginalised in terms of literariness? And how many forms of jeopardy are layered to claim the body and text of a black woman playwright? It is first necessary to situate drama among other literary genres to understand how this triple jeopardy is formed.

Until the dawn of the twentieth century, American drama had been written and valued on the margin of American literary canon. This contributed to what Susan Harris Smith calls, in her study of the reasons of neglect of American drama, a “generic hegemony” in which drama had been considered inferior to prose and poetry. This marginality of drama at the turn of the twentieth century was a result of a long tradition of literary reception and criticism that associated it with sentiments and viewed it as devoid of rational or substantial themes. Moreover, any successful production of plays was more valued when realised on Broadway, which was considered the main if not the only space for a successful theatrical production where journalists seeking profit rather than artistic vision were the main playwrights (11).

While the debate about American drama centred on the question whether it was a literary form or not, African-American women playwrights since the Harlem Renaissance, and even before, had been less occupied with the literariness of this genre and its established inferiority and more interested in finding the medium that would best suit a body in a phase of rebellion. Although they found in it the best mould for examining corporeal matters of fact, their effort was problematised by a long history of blackface minstrel association. Nonetheless, they saw in it the space that voices their social and political concerns; and also a space for liberating the corporeal; it was and remains the trope where bodies seek liberation and empowerment, no matter how marginal or central this medium is or was.

Bearing in mind the lack of financial support, most of these women were more oriented to write their plays to be read, rather than performed, especially in the early years. It is not with a lack of knowledge of this generic inferiority of drama to prose and poetry that black women playwrights stepped into a field which, according to Smith, was unsuitable to reflect modern complexity at the beginning of the twentieth century (11). The fact that American theatre started as a low genre, if at all literary, adds to other complexities of race, gender, and class for African-American women playwrights. It is no wonder then that between 1918 and 1929 only one full-length play and another six one-act plays written by African American women were produced (Hatch and Shine, *The Early Period* 131).

The Earliest Gardens

In addition to these complexities, there arose the dilemma of creating the new black characters on the stage in compliance with W. E. B. Du Bois' call for a genuine black theatre that speaks for, about and on black issues. This was further complicated by Alain Locke's call for a return to African American authenticity which brings about the artfulness of African American culture. In a contest to counteract the infamous D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation* (1915), the NAACP chose Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1920) as the official first Race Play; according to Carol Allen in *Peculiar Passages* the significance of this play is not only its womanist aspects which are being redeemed academically in the last twenty years, but also its stirring of the famous debate between Du Bois and Locke (58). The latter attributed Grimké's success to her father's membership in the NAACP's board. Nevertheless, Grimké, as well as Georgia Douglass Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Mary P. Burrill, May Miller, to mention only a few, wrote for the stage richly about all topics pertaining to African-American life.

They did not only write richly, but their theatrical styles were similarly varied. While Johnson adhered to Du Bois's propagandist manifesto, Hurston, in contrast, dedicated her theatrical work to depicting black life and folklore, focusing on everyday life, dance, and the oral tradition of storytelling. And while Bonner was prominent in her avant-garde approach to drama, May Miller, like Johnson, wrote in

accordance with the Genteel School that avoided race matters and focused on depicting blacks as counterparts to whites in everything but colour (P. A. Young 68).

Johnson is the most prolific of the Harlem renaissance with twenty-eight plays (Stephens 1)¹. Her topics include lynching (*A Sunday Morning in the South, Safe, Blue-Eyed Black Boy, And Yet They Paused*), African American historical figures (*Frederick Douglass* and *William and Ellen Craft*) and social concerns of everyday life which Johnson chose to name as “Primitive Life Plays” (*Blue Blood* and *Plumes*). According to Stephens, *Plumes* is the most frequently chosen play by contemporary editors to represent Johnson’s work; its first appearance was in Locke’s *Plays of Negro Life* (1927) (21). The play dramatizes a mother’s consciousness which is caught between paying the last of her money for her dying daughter’s funeral or to an uncertain Doctor who may be able to save the daughter’s life. *Blue Blood* deals with the hidden consequences of the slavery system; two upstart women boast about their children on their wedding day only to discover that the same white man fathers their offspring. They face the dilemma of either exposing the truth to the waiting congregation or remain silent about it. The use of the term “primitive life” to depict the thematic concern of these plays is used then ironically by Johnson; primitiveness should be attributed to white supremacy, not to African Americans suffering its devastating aftermath.

Among Johnson’s “Plays and Stories of Average Negro Life” is *Paupaulekejo*, one of the earliest plays about miscegenation, primitive Africa, and criticism of Christian faith. Johnson explores many themes in this play. At the centre is the redefinition of the word “primitive.” She relates the meaning to the everyday life of black people, the concept of love, social inequality, and the destructive effect of racism which goes in hand with a colonising Christianity.

¹ Johnson is mostly known as a poet. Perkins’ anthology (1989) and Elizabeth Brown-Gillory’s (1990) *Wine in the Wilderness* [the title of one of Alice Childress’s plays] are the first to discuss plays written by Johnson. Judith L. Stephens’ (2006) *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement* offers an informative reading of Johnson’s dramatic contribution to the Harlem Renaissance. Along with twelve plays, Stephens includes sections about Johnson’s S-Street Salon—a meeting place for Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, May Miller, Jean Toomer, Alain Locke and Du Bois among other Harlemite renowned writers—in addition to a critical reading of Johnson’s use of themes and artistic elements.

Johnson's dramatic concerns were the reflections of her daily experiences, for she was not only a prominent playwright, but also a literary matron. In his discussion of the significance of two salons—Douglas's S-Street (or Saturday Nighters) Salon and A'Lelia Walker's Dark Tower (named after Countée Cullen's column in *Opportunity*)—David Krasner divides African American literature produced during the Harlem Renaissance into two categories. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's two historical categories that embody past and future, "space of experience [past-present]" and "horizon of expectation [present-future]," Krasner analyses the spatial and temporal perspectives of Hurston, Cooper, Douglas, and other Harlemites literary figures. For example, Krasner explains that Zora Neale Hurston's understanding of the word "folklore" anticipates Koselleck's concept of "space of experience" or "present past" as it emphasises spatiality over temporality ("Dark" 83). "Folklore" for Hurston is not a "thing in the past" but an ongoing negotiation between the individual and his/her social space (83). However, this "immediacy of the present," Krasner notes, was characteristic of Walker's Salon (84)². Johnson's Salon, on the other hand, was influenced by Alain Locke's concept of "folk" which "was a neo-proletarian art challenging minstrel carnivalesque" (89).

Unlike Johnson, who adopted serious agitprop content in her plays, Hurston wrote vividly about ordinary lives from African American communities which first appeared in her *Eatonville Anthology* (1926). While Johnson used the domestic space in most of her plays as a socio-political statement, Hurston chose to write about peculiar places; the setting of most of her plays is transient; jooks, hotels, jungles and the roads of Florida and Alabama provide rich sources of diversity in Hurston's plays³. Significantly, Krasner considers Hurston's dramatic work as the strongest representative of the "space of experience" genre (86). In her essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston provides insight into a new black aesthetics that departs from Du Bois and Locke's theories of black expression. In fact, Hurston's

² Walker's salon was home to a bawdy young crowd represented in *Fire!!*; the only issue of this magazine, which was published before the burning down of the magazine's quarters in 1926, featured Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Arthur Fauset (Krasner, "Dark" 84).

³ From *Luababa To Polk Country: Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress* (2006) is the most complete collection of Hurston's dramatic writing to date. In his foreword to this collection, Charles Mitchell states that some of the pieces were rescued from obscurity only in 1997 (xi).

influence can be found in more recent eras; Ntozake Shange's plays in the 1970s and 1980s pay homage to Hurston's style. The "Negro's" greatest contributions to the English language, according to Hurston, are "metaphor and simile," "double descriptive terms, and verbs used as nouns," and Shange's style is founded on this linguistic experimentation (Hurston 1042).

Shirley Graham Du Bois is also a prominent playwright. A common factor in Graham's plays, other than the social protest they adhere to, is their form which is derived from classical tragedy. Her plays are examples of what Toni Morrison describes later in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" as a "communal structure" in African American literature. Morrison establishes a similarity between Greek tragedy and African American drama in terms of dramatic structure. This structure consists of song and chorus, the function they assume, religion and philosophy, and the individual hubris against the claims of community (2). An example of this similarity is Graham's *It's Morning* (1939). A slave mother (Cissie) finds herself compelled to kill her own daughter rather than see her being sold. The moment she kills her, the news of emancipation breaks. The significance of *It's Morning* lies in combining African heritage and an Aristotelian form of tragedy. It also anticipates Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* in presenting the violent act of motherly love, probably citing the same source on which Morrison based her novel: Cissie listens to the tale narrated by Grannie about the African American woman who killed her three sons with the intention of following her steps rather than allow her daughter to be sold and raped by a white master. Grannie who narrates the story is also a voodoo woman whose power is influential in her community, and her storytelling is a symbol of continuity from one generation to another. Women around her serve as a chorus whose African singing and dancing is combined with Christian tradition (symbolised in the title, Uncle Dave's arrival to save Cissie from committing murder, and singing spirituals) framed by the African heritage personified by Grannie and her narration.

Most of the early black women playwrights, except for Eulalie Spence, were connected to Du Bois and wrote in accordance with his propagandist agenda (Perkins, *Black* 12). Instead of making Harlem the focus of their theatrical interest,

they chose to write plays that cover a wider space and era. Their themes tackled spiritual, political, historical and social aspects of African-American life and were motivated basically by social protest. The fact that they were well acquainted with Du Bois stems from their adherence to his advocacy of a theatre that announced the black individual to be at the core of theatrical matter. His slogan “For us, about us, near us and by us” was the agenda from which these playwrights enunciate their topics.

However, the variety of the themes approached did not guarantee a popular reception, for only few plays were produced. So, most of these playwrights took into their consideration that their plays were likely only to be read rather than performed. The priority was given to the theme that related to African American life, not to the form or commercial production of plays. If the drama is to reflect genuinely what interests African Americans and their life, Du Bois asserts, it should not seek commercial success. Hence, the few plays that found their way to production were performed in black community theatres and, sometimes, black churches.

Outline of Chapters

The fact that those black women’s main concern was to present a content that would matter racially prevented them from giving priority to artistic form or commercial success. Of all the African-American women playwrights, Marita Bonner was able to give her plays an artistic form and present a content that uniquely brings into question a very crucial topic at that period, namely the repercussions of blackface minstrelsy on the construction of African American subjects. In the first chapter, I show how Bonner embodied the dilemma between being ghettoised in black culture on the one hand and subordinated by –and fascinated with—a white culture on the other (an experience which defines as well the dramatic work of Adrienne Kennedy in the 1960s and 1970s). Artistically, Bonner’s plays were a combination of realism/agitprop and a critique of minstrelsy’s heavy “legacy” on the hand, and an engagement of haute art in the form of expressionist style. In addition to displaying a preference for a free style of writing, Bonner’s feeling of abjection is apparent in her usage of images of horror and death. The use of the expressionist

form to substitute language indicates the undermining of pre-established meaning, a refusal of the raced body to adapt to the language of the oppressor.

The lack of recognition for those early women playwrights is the focus of chapter two. Through analysing two of Alice Childress' plays in comparison with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, I show how a playwright's success and/or invisibility is not only controlled by white supremacy, but also by the politics of production which uses and perpetuates sentimentality and sympathy on the part of white audience. Nonetheless, both playwrights provide examples of a raced body that can generate its own space.

Chapter three draws on the concept of motherhood where I use plays by Hansberry and Childress, along with two famous plays written by Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and *The Owl Answers*. The idealistic representation of Motherland-Africa created a gap during the Black Power Movement between black women and their immediate experiences in the US society. These plays question this idealism and emphasise the lived experience for the African American woman in the here-and-now of an American society. The idealistic image of Motherland Africa contributes to circulating cultural archetypes such as the male warrior. Consequently, aggression and violence cause fragmentation of the raced body. In chapter four, I continue my examination of the meaning of this cultural archetypes and how it spawned socio-political concepts related to aggression and violence. Plays by Kennedy, Sonia Sanchez, and Ntozake Shange address specifically the artistic rebellion of disciplined bodies against sexism and racism.

Chapter five examines the relationship between the black female body and historical discourse in plays written by Suzan-Lori Parks and Robbie McCauley. The return to history, and the desire to excavate the bones and skeletons of undefined subjects is a common point for both playwrights. Chapter six continues this exploration of historically abjected female characters in Parks' *Venus* and Clarke and Dickerson's *Re/membering Aunt Jemima*; both plays use the black female body as a counter-hegemonic tool of resistance, but more importantly, they centre the audience

in the process of redeeming and transforming those women from stereotypes to celebrated female subjects.

In conclusion, this research is an examination of questions of embodiment in plays written by African American women playwrights in the twentieth century. Through utilising the concept of maternal genealogy, I suggest that these plays offer a trope of signification. The plays written especially in the 1980s and the 1990s by Ntozake Shange, Robbie McCauley, and Suzan-Lori Parks are bound to those of the first half of the twentieth century, especially to plays written by Adrienne Kennedy. While each playwright brings about a quite individualistic and beautiful way of experiencing the world through the body, the *maternal* lineage between those playwrights is evident. The nine playwrights I examine use different styles, voices, aesthetics, and sensibilities; yet, they all re-imagine the black female body, its historicity and its potentiality. They therefore probe into the deepest latent ground of white supremacist culture and excavate the bones and skeletons of forgotten bodies reimagining history and reinventing subjectivity.

Textualised Bodies, Corporealised Texts: The Literary Work of Marita Bonner

But—"in Heaven's name, do not grow bitter. Be bigger than they are"—exhort white friends. Who have never had to draw breath in a Jim-Crow train, who have never had petty putrid insult dragged over them—drawing blood—like pebbled sand on your body where the skin is tenderest. On your body where the skin is thinnest and tenderest. You long to explode and hurt everything white; friendly; unfriendly. But you know you cannot live with a chip on your shoulder even if you can manage a smile around your eyes—without getting steely and brittle and losing the softness that makes you a woman.

(Bonner, "On Being" 233)

Marita Bonner's plays *The Purple Flower* (1928), *Exit: An Illusion* (1929), and her essay, "On Being Young, a Woman, and Colored," (1925) are examples in which the consciousness of African American women in the early twenties was caught. In line with, and sometimes in contrast to, Alain Locke's demands of the black dramatist to return to black authenticity, and W. E. B. Du Bois's call for black propaganda, Bonner was able to utilize an imaginative channel which provided a combination of both a psychological exploration of her characters and a political stand that addresses social concerns of her time. Bonner is an example of a black feminist who builds on the theories of her time, and emphasises the need to make, as she explains in her essay, an "acid testing" of these theories and experiences ("On Being" 230). This combination is moulded into gender and class consciousness, and to a critique of blackface minstrelsy which she imbedded in her work through the use of expressionist techniques.

Most importantly, Bonner's insights in regard to the politics that govern the black female body bear testimony to a feminist consciousness. What follows is an attempt to reveal this consciousness in Bonner's writing, and how her engagement with expressionism informs her insights in regard to the body as a tool of resistance. First I will approach the historical context which shapes Bonner's consciousness and writing. I examine the interrelationship between blackface minstrelsy and its ghostly

appearances in African American drama; then I position the debate between Booker T. Washington and Du Bois on one hand and that between Du Bois and Locke on the other hand in the context that informs the plays and their historical and socio-political environment.

Historical Antecedents

The task of writing, or producing, black theatre, especially at the turn of the twentieth century, had to face the persistent performative stereotype in American culture; namely, blackface minstrelsy. The early 1920s was a period shadowing minstrelsy where black professionals in theatre were trained in musical and comedies while serious theatre had to linger behind. According to Cathy A. Perkins' anthology of plays written by black women before the 1950s, the "Little Negro Theatre Movement," for example, which flourished during the Harlem Renaissance and was concerned with non-commercial drama, lacked both financial backing and technical knowledge for the production of sophisticated plays (16). This is one example of many where "show business" overshadows dramatic work of serious content. Hence, many limitations had been placed on African American playwrights and many challenges arose to hinder the artistic articulation, the first of which was this interrelationship between commerciality and theatrical success¹.

Unlike prose and poetry, drama for African Americans carried within itself, ironically, its own contradiction. It was adopted by Du Bois and Locke as a space of agitprop/ artistic expression; nonetheless, it had been for more than eight decades a trope of misrepresentation. In fact, American theatre's popularity and commercial success was linked to the production of blackface minstrel shows. Nowhere is this link—between American theatre and blackface minstrel shows—more evident than in the dramatisation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)².

¹ This is not to devalue early African American performances in the early twentieth century on the basis of commercial success, but to highlight the lack of attention serious drama suffered in its beginning. A rich source on the historical significance of early performances, such as the *Creole Show* (1890) and *Shuffle Along* (1921), and their contribution to the development of Jazz and modernity is Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls*. This study recognises black women performers as "agents of [. . .] new physical vocabularies" (Brown 3).

² For more information about the history of the many productions of the dramatic *Uncle Tom's Cabin* see Eric Lott's "Uncle Tomitudes: Racial Melodrama and Modes of Production" in *Love and Theft*.

The relationship between this play and its stereotypical connotation became directly proportional. According to Judith Williams, it was the most widely produced play in the history of the United States (19)³. With each production, minstrel-like stereotypes found larger and larger audiences. Williams observes how this particular play changed the landscape of American theatre, but the point most interesting in Williams' examination of Stowe's play is its reference to providing the images of the novel with the corporeality that entailed the persistence of minstrel performances (21). It is this corporeality, this translation of Stowe's novel into performing bodies that made the relationship between an African American dramatist and theatre a particular one. At the turn of the twentieth century, theatre was not a space for creativity so much as it was a courtroom for defending one's corporeal existence outside the minstrel box.

In fact, minstrelsy itself, according to Lott, is founded on a kind of performative act, a cultural invention to cope with a constricted world, and not as a performance of "some precious essence installed in black bodies" (40). In other words, blackface minstrel shows did not represent or expropriate what was "authentically" black, but poached a black body's performative act. For example, W. T. Lhamon in *Raising Cain* explains how some black people in New York's Catherine Market, in the early twenties of the nineteenth century, used to dance for eels or coins. Their dances were performative in the sense that they knew how to exaggerate their moves to increase their lot. Black dancers were then enacting a form of micro theatre in front of merchants, artisans, the underprivileged working class of European immigrants, and of course then-to-be blackface performers.

The first to examine this bodily manifestation of blackface minstrel shows is Constance Rourke in her most famous book *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*. As early as 1931, Rourke registers how minstrel shows hindered

218-241 . For information about women in the dramatised *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Judith Williams's "Uncle Tom's Women" in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*. 19-39.

³ The dramatic productions of Stowe's novel were multitudinous when, in January 1854, T. D. Rice, who had been performing in blackface since the 1830s made this transition from Jim Crow to Tom (Lott 218). Lott explains how the transformation for Rice from celebrated Jim Crow to sympathetic Uncle Tom highlights the "political geometry of blackface minstrelsy" in the sense that it confirms the pre-Civil War equivocal character of racial representation (218).

the revelation of the many-sided African-Americans of the plantation and presented them as objects of humour: “to be black is to be funny, and many minstrels made the most of the simple circumstance.”⁴ These shows enhanced the concept of “negro” primitiveness; minstrelsy, she observes, created a kind of ritual where primitiveness became fixed through songs, dances and patterns⁵. According to Rourke, “negro character” was permanently fixed into one of three types: Jim Crow with his plaintive songs, the “Zip Coon”—a “very learned skoler,” and Dan Tucker—always an outcast. All of these characters, she continues, were “outcast even beyond the obvious fate of the slave.” Not only was s/he an outcast, the “negro character” was also “a forced and unwilling wanderer.” These two traits, outcast and wanderer, speak of white America’s perspective during the 1930s and 1940s as much as it speaks of antebellum America. In his examination of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, Houston A. Baker notes that Rourke finds the “cult” of African American expressivity so wearying in the 1940s, the time of publishing *The Roots of American Culture* (*Modernism* 17). The reason of this “weariness” is that, for Rourke, minstrelsy is a tradition of a “negro literature” that preceded the Harlem Renaissance. Even after the Harlem Renaissance, it might be said, the African American artist was alienated from American culture and its expressive forms.

In contrast to Rourke who sees blackface minstrel shows as a continuous growth of the slave tales on the plantations, Lott argues that minstrelsy should be placed at the intersection of slave culture and earlier blackface stage characters (21). The minstrel show began as interplay between two traditions, and this doubleness is at the centre of blackface performances, Lott clarifies. First, there are the harlequins who are considered both lovable and devious producers of humour; and second there are the slave-tale tricksters who, in their cautionary tales, stand as protective “backdoor victors for the weak over the strong” (22). The early minstrel figures overlapped with each tradition and presented for the audience either self-mockery or subversion. Due to this overlap, the name Jim Crow was appended to all sorts of Punch-and-Judy figures, British Clowns, and in animal songs set to music by early

⁴ n. pag

⁵ In the early twenties, Georgia Douglas Johnson chose to name her social plays “Primitive Life Plays.” This act of naming can be seen as a criticism of an American culture which overlooks the bitter reality of most African Americans and adheres to concepts of primitiveness and exoticism.

blackface performance (23). The political significance of this momentary triumph of the weak over the strong lies in bringing to the stage, through an act of subversion, the marginalised voices of blacks and women through blackface and male-cross dressing (24).

Lhamon's reading of blackface minstrelsy and its origin is drastically different again. According to Lhamon, blackface performers, who were part of the working class and the underclass, championed the runaway slaves, the newly freed blacks and their tales. For these disenfranchised classes, blackface minstrelsy was a trope of identification against white supremacy of the upper classes. Dancing for eels in front of white and interracial audiences, black performers accentuated their physical space and generated a respect for their newly-formed identities, given that they were mainly escapees from the South (188). T.D. Rice employed these gestures, which came to be known as Jim Crow, in his blackface performance and was widely accepted, Lhamon observes, because audiences could identify with the jokes of the oppressed (188).

Whether it emerged as a dyad between love and dread, as Lott argues, or out of sympathy and identification, as Lhamon argues, blackface minstrelsy persisted in American culture as a trope of negative stereotyping and racist othering. According to Baker, the mask of minstrelsy hid a psychological truth that spoke for both the performers and the audience. It did not only provide a repository for repressed sexuality, or for wanton play, but most importantly, it displayed a dehumanisation of the descendants of slaves forcibly imported from the African continent (*Modernism*, 17). This minstrel mask is a mask of what Baker calls "selective memory"—elements from everyday black use and vernacular, a device that regulated the relationship between white America and Afro-American subjects. Consequently, it justified acts of lynching when black men and women did not perform accordingly. As a result, the black individual living within that period found him/herself confined within this designated image of blackness which meant for him/her nothing but survival.

Baker uses Booker T. Washington as an example of performing within the trope of minstrelsy as a strategy of survival. Washington's role as an orator is similar

to that of the minstrel interlocutor in his use of pompous language and exaggerated dignity. In his “Atlanta Compromise Speech” (1895), Washington addressed his white audience with humour:

Gentlemen of the Exposition, as we present to you our humble effort at an exhibition of our progress, you must not expect overmuch. Starting thirty years ago with ownership here and there in a few quilts and pumpkins and chickens (gathered from miscellaneous sources), remember the path that has led from these to the inventions and production of agricultural implements [. . .]. (108)

Washington did not only assure the white audience of his humble position, which is very clear in his ironic use of the word “progress,” but also used a stereotypical joke when he referred to the sources of chicken as “miscellaneous.” Baker describes this “chicken-thieving tonality” by a black leader as a scandal; however, he refers to Washington’s rhetorical strategy of using the minstrel voice as a “mastery of form” where Washington used minstrel nonsense for common black good (*Modernism* 32). This role of the interlocutor occupies a significant space in African American drama, it was later adapted, and signified on, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, for theatrical experimentation by Suzan-Lori Parks, Ntozake Shange, Glenda Dickerson and Breena Clarke⁶.

Baker detects an equation between being a black person in that period and performing within the contours of the minstrel mask; thus, wearing the minstrel mask becomes a rhetorical strategy: “To be a *Negro*, the mask mandates, to be a *Negro*, one must meld with minstrelsy’s contours” (*Modernism* 20). What this mask signifies is the necessity it creates among the African Americans of Booker T. Washington’s time to use it as a means of survival in a white supremacist society, a

⁶ It is important to note here that the role of the interlocutor was introduced after different phases in the history of the minstrel show. The infamous “coon song” was developed into a full-bore minstrel show, John Strausbaugh explains in *Black Like You*, when both Edwin P. Christy in Buffalo and Daniel Decatur Emmet in Lower Manhattan expanded the form from a solo act to a four-piece band in the years 1842 and 1843 (101). According to Strausbaugh, Emmet’s room overlooked Catherine Street where slaves and newly freed blacks used to dance for eels and coins; later, Emmet formed the Virginia Minstrels with three other local fellows; Strausbaugh observes that if T. D. Rice had been minstrelsy’s Elvis, Virginia Minstrels were its Beatles as their performances were “smash hits” (103). At this stage, According to Lhamon, these shows did not have a fixed format; they did not have an interlocutor, nor the endman convention (45).

concept captured in Bonner's *The Purple Flower* as she dramatizes the debate between Washington and Du Bois⁷.

This well-known debate can be traced, as Lott explains, to the history of minstrelsy and its equation of Africanity with femaleness. It is within the patriarchy of Anglo-Saxon culture that "Africanity," in contrast to being American, was feminised and consequently inferiorised. The attitude of black leaders like Martin Delany, for example, was consistent with this view. Lott explains how Delany's emphasis on the flourishing of black culture in music and oratory in contrast to "whites' excel in mathematics and commerce" is due to its feminisation in American culture; this attitude became responsible for the emphasis of black leaders from Fredrick Douglass to Booker T. Washington on specifically industrial training (34). Feminisation of a culture at large, and the defence against this feminisation, becomes the crux of the Washington-Du Bois debate. This emphasis on industrial training by Washington was also incorporated into Bonner's *The Purple Flower*.

Moreover, the two leaders adopted different philosophies in regard to freedom and self-realisation. While Washington formulated his concept of freedom in light of his comprehension of blacks' economic dependence on whites, Du Bois promoted the necessity of higher education: "I knew that without this the Negro would have to accept white leadership, and that such leadership could not always be trusted to guide this group into self-realisation and to its highest cultural possibilities" (*Autobiography* 236). On the other hand, Washington promoted the necessity of industrial training, as more masculine, "[n]o race can prosper till it learns that there is much dignity in tilling the field as in writing a poem," he explains, "[i]t is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top" (107). The act of writing a poem appears a feminising agent of black culture in Washington's response to Du Bois.

For all these reasons, a-) primitiveness conceived as the essence of African American expression, b-) feminisation of African American culture, c-) pre-construction of black identities within minstrelsy, and d-) an inextricable dyad

⁷ Because of his ability to master this form of "minstrelsy," to act knowingly according to what a white audience prefers to hear and watch, Booker Washington was considered by Baker as a the quintessential herald of modernism in black expressive culture instead of Paul Laurence Dunbar (*Modernism* 37)

between commerciality and success, theatre for the early African American dramatist had to encounter internal difficulties which pertained particularly to the history and psychology of African Americans. In 1924, Du Bois wrote in his article “The Negro and The American Stage” about “a series of concentric shells” that surrounded black drama, and consequently prevented this would-be drama from approaching its subject matter “sincerely and artistically” (22). The first was an established idea of what a “Negro” ought to be. Du Bois refers here to the representation of African Americans which was shaped by the minstrel mask as the first challenge for the African American playwright. It stands to reason that the attempt to destroy this shell, in which an African-American subject was presented as only comic material, was an immense task.

The second of these “shells” was the fear of inter-racial contact of groups and races not only in the United States but also throughout the world. This inter-racial fear is connected to the first shell Du Bois discussed. The minstrel shows were increasingly acquiring fascination from performers and audiences alike. Yet, it intensified simultaneously, as Lott explains, a racialised image of otherness which generated a dread of miscegenation (implicitly of rape) (25). The anxieties aroused by these shows had a two-fold effect; one was of fascination and the other was of fear.

The third and most important shell Du Bois discusses is the attitude of the “Negro world” itself (23). Being convinced of the ugly picture portrayed of him/her, the African American fears any artistic attempt to paint what is authentically a “negro life” according to Du Bois. They fear that their shortcomings will continue to be caricatured and maligned to serve the purpose of white supremacy (23).

Two years later, Alain Locke discussed the problem of black drama. In a diametrically opposing point of view, he considered that Du Bois was responsible for perpetuating this predicament. The “negro problem,” he mimics Du Bois’s argument in “The Drama of Negro Life,” “is too serious for either aesthetic interest or artistic detachment” (24). In spite of the richness of the black dramatic substance, the production of morally themed drama, broad farce and low comedy was inevitable, Locke laments. So, the propaganda which Du Bois invited black artists to adopt as a

resistant strategy to white propaganda was, consequently, one of the reasons that “scotched the dramatic potentialities of the subject” (25). Given this context, it is understandable that what Locke encountered was the spread of agitprop drama not because of the seriousness of its topics but because of the fear of feminisation which Delaney warned against. Locke clarified that the African American material is a rich source for dramatic expression. He called for adaptations of its folklore and symbols. Because of what Locke calls the “historical curiosity” that pervaded the experimental stage during the 1920s, black drama had a chance to surpass the social and political protest form it was entrapped in; this “authentic” drama will “herald very shortly a definite attempt to poetize the race origins and supply a fine imaginative background for a fresh cultural expression” (28).

It follows then that the black artists were left with only two choices: the first is the obvious agitprop drama of social reality in which race life is emphasised along with a clash with an opposing force. The plays of Georgia Douglass Johnson, May Miller, and Angelina Weld Grimke are good examples. The second choice is the representation of folk life and its less dramatic and panoramic race history and race tradition; consequently, the playwright in this case ran the risk of being accused of performing within the minstrel mask. An example of the second alternative is Zora Neale Hurston who wrote many plays that displayed folk life and its richness and shied away from confrontational matters. African American artists, for the aforementioned reasons, were caught in this dilemma. Should black drama be a discussion of their social reality, as Du Bois had declared in his slogan: “All Art is Propaganda and ever must be” (“Criteria” 296), or should it be an artistic interpretation which seeks truth and beauty in a balanced attitude towards art? The next section shows how Bonner’s expressionist plays display affinities with, and sometimes detachment from, both lines of thought, giving priority to her class and gender consciousness.

Expressionism and the Launching of the Experimental Body

In the first study of Expressionism in American theatre, *Accelerated Grimace*, Mardi Valgeame attributes Expressionist theatre in 1920s America to German Expressionism. Although Expressionism does not lend itself to precise definition,

and in spite of the many differences between Expressionist schools, Expressionism's main concern is the portraying of man's inner world and his/her interpretation of psychological truth. One of the prominent German expressionists, Ernst Toller (1893-1939), states that "[b]y skinning the human being, one hopes to find the soul under the skin" (Valgema 12). Although there had been a certain degree of indebtedness of American theatre to German Expressionism, the desire to express one's subjectivity predated Expressionism⁸. It is this desire to explore the inner self under the "skin" that is most problematic for an African American artist living at the beginning of the twentieth century, for the "skin" had always been as important as the soul underneath. In 1925, Marita Bonner, a young black woman, stated in her first article, ("On Being" 1925), that "things exist in flesh more often than in spirit" (231). The psychological reality and inner truth, Bonner suggests, resides in the skin and even informs the inner world of an African American living at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It seems that Bonner, whose plays were shaped by the Du Bois-Locke debate, did also respond to the modern aesthetics of her time. This conflicted desire to write on black matters and to use Euro-American aesthetics will re-emerge forty years later in the work of Adrienne Kennedy who, like Bonner, used Expressionism to reflect on double belonging. To write plays that resemble Elmer Rice's and Eugene O'Neill's plays - and to simultaneously rewrite those plays which depicted the black subject as a primitive being- was an attempt on the part of Bonner to emphasise the ability of a black woman to use what was considered high art then. However, her

⁸ Playwrights at the beginning of the twentieth century turned from writing plays that fit specific companies to writing plays that reflected modern concerns and utilised technologies invented at that time to mirror the human body under the threat of ambivalence and absurdity. In contrast to Valgeame, Julia Walker argues in *Expressionism and Modernism in American Theatre* that American Expressionism was not a branch of the better known German movement. It was one of the manifestations of the "expressive culture movement" that was familiar at the turn of the twentieth century. This movement tried to reconcile individuals who were alienated from their natural condition because of the new conditions of modernity and new technologies. S.S. Curry introduced his theory of expression (the three languages—body, voice, and word) as an attempt to "restore a sense of human integrity to the act of communication" (5). Expressionist dramatists, according to Walker, were influenced by this theory, and consequently, the hero they presented in their plays showed the struggle to create a sense of harmony with the industrial rhythm of the twentieth century. Expressionism in American drama, according to Walker, was a response to the cultural and historical changes in that period. The German influence on American Expressionist drama was not totally discarded, for it helped, as Walker explains, with the production and reception of American Expressionist plays as a new aesthetic shape of modernist concerns.

vision of applying high art to African American literature was bound to, and contradicted by, matters of “fleshiness,” as she states in her article “On Being.” Many critics classified Bonner’s work as expressionist, surrealist, and sometimes simply allegorical⁹. I argue that the work of Bonner is an example of a black female’s artistic engagement with the discourse of power and the visual and its relationship to the black female body through the lens of Expressionism.

It was presumed that Bonner read George Kaiser’s expressionist play *From Morn to Midnight* (1912), and might have seen O’Neill’s *Emperor John* (1920) and Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* (1923) (Hatch and Shine, *The Early Period* 207). This can be validated by her fluency in German language and music and the education she attained at Radcliffe. She might have found in the Expressionist plays of Rice and O’Neill the source of her modernist bitter sense of reality, and probably was inspired by their non-realistic techniques, especially pantomime where bodies rather than language are given power. Bonner’s first play *The Pot Maker* (1927), according to Perkins, was strongly influenced by Georgia Douglass Johnson’s use of rural and simple settings (189). Nonetheless, the play shows Bonner’s mistrust of religious dictation and its detachment from social realities. She abandoned the mainstream of social protest that was expressed in a realistic pattern, and saw in Expressionism the cryptograph that voiced her own feelings of social, racial, and gender marginalisation. However, none of Bonner’s three plays was produced in her lifetime¹⁰.

The Purple Flower and Exit Mann: Simple Allegories or Complex Drama?

The specificity of the historical experience for African Americans necessitates an understanding of *The Purple Flower* as a political allegory. What the Us-es strive

⁹ Kathy Perkins says in her anthology of early black women playwrights that Bonner was the first to use surrealism in her revolutionary play, *The Purple Flower*. This might be inaccurate as surrealism is governed by illogical juxtapositions, and the absence of reason (10). Rytch Barber uses Bonner’s *The Purple Flower*, along with Glaspell and Treadwell’s plays, to prove that American Expressionism was a vibrant movement and not a “pale reflection” of German expressionism (94). Katherine E. Kelly included Bonner’s play in *Modern Drama by Women, 1880s-1930s: An International Anthology* arguing in her introduction to the book that the power of this allegory stems from generalising the particular through heightened expressionist style (18). Esther Beth Sullivan’s “Bonner and The Harlem Renaissance” in the same anthology describes the play as “allegorical in all aspects,” and reminiscent of morality plays (365).

¹⁰ For more on Bonner’s life, and the summaries of her plays, see appendix A.

to do is to become *defined*, and to consequently own the definition of their identity. The flower shifts, consequently, from assuming the symbolic, and ambivalent, meaning of “freedom” to urging a process of “definition” or subjectivity formation. Nonetheless, Bonner’s play is immersed in modernist pessimism, especially when she refers to the main difference between the Sundry White Devils and the Us-es in terms of artfulness; the White Devils enjoy the luxury of artful singing and dancing: “their horns glow red all the time—now with blood—now with eternal fire—now with deceit—now with unholy desire” (191). Yet, the slightest thought can make one of the Us-es and the White Devils drop through “the thin Skin-of-Civilization” (191). The imaginary stage indicates fragmentation as white, brown, yellow and black hands are scattered on the lower stage.

Bonner’s play is obviously an allegorical tale when it speaks for racial struggle. Without mediation of the violent content, she presents a clear-cut division that refers directly to socio-political concerns of the time, especially to the problem of the colour-line which Du Bois described as the problem of the twentieth century. The division is set between action and thought, and Bonner explicitly shows that it is action, not simply work or education, which is demanded from the Us-es to reach the Flower:

Old Man. I want to tell you all something! The Us can’t get up the road unless we work! We want to hew and dig and toil!

A Young Us. You had better sit down before someone knocks you down! They told us that when your beard was sprouting.

Cornerstone. (*to Youth*). Do not be stupid! Speak as if you had respect for that beard!

Another Young Us. We have! But we get tired of hearing “You must work” when we know the old Us built practically every inch of that hill and are yet Nowhere. (194)

Thus, Bonner had established through dramatic conflict the ground for pinpointing one of the early debates that marked the beginning of African American discourse; namely, the debate between Washington and Du Bois. In 1895, Washington had emphasised the necessity to start at the bottom of life in his speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. His reassuring words for his white audience are ridiculed in Bonner’s text when she displays that the respect for old

wisdom is not genuine but courteous through the words of Cornerstone. In addition, The Young Us's words echo those of Du Bois in his 1903 *The Negro Problem* opposing Washington's accommodationist philosophy: "Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence" (*The Negro* 74). Yet, Bonner shows in her play the inadequacy of education alone in creating the New Man; she creates a formula effective through a ritual of conjure.

However, the very technique of universalising every item in the play makes it possible for the play to transcend the racial dispute and claim an expressionist stance. The universality of the topic approached is established when "the generalization of the particular," to use Katherine E. Kelly's words, makes the division made on the stage a signifier of class, gender, and racial struggle in addition to the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised (18).

Bonner's utilisation of expressionist techniques, especially the emphasis on psychological reality, is more evident in her 1929 one-act play *Exit, An Illusion*. Like *The Purple Flower*, it involves the reader by using the second person pronoun and by using a poetic language that emphasizes Bonner's intentions for her plays to be read rather than performed; thus she begins her play by addressing the reader: "[t]he room you are in is mixed/ It is mixed/ There are ragged chairs with sorry sagging ragged bottoms" (200). Establishing a familiar relationship with the reader becomes an operative strategy in Bonner's text. As a central characteristic of expressionism, the focus on the psychological reality behind appearance is consistent with Bonner's purpose to uncover the psychological reality behind a deterministic minstrel mask. This can be attained only through addressing the reader all the time with her words "you see," "you feel."

Bonner's texts—*The Purple Flower*, *Exit Mann*, and "On Being"—are then an amalgamation of modernist pessimism, allegory, expressionism, and more importantly, an early gender critique subdued by the racial question. Her familiarity with German language and exposure to expressionist plays by Kaiser and then O'Neill made her arguably acquainted with the belief in the possibility of "Utopia" prevalent in expressionist plays. However, she presents a sceptical perspective in

regard to the ideals presented by Locke and also Du Bois and his Talented Tenth. In “The Limits of Exemplarity,” Jennifer M. Wilks discusses alternative modernist landscapes in the short stories of Bonner by the 1930s. Most importantly, Wilks shows how Bonner problematizes “the Utopian spirit of the Talented Tenth” and “maps in its stead an alternative African American modernism, one that turns on, rather than away from, the tension between individual concerns and communal solidarity” (69). Bonner dramatizes and problematizes this attempt to reach for a Utopian society no matter how impossible it seems at the beginning. However, she places the Purple Flower at the top of the hill, making it unattainable for both the White Devils and the Us-es. The purpose of the play is to create the New Man whose designation will enable the Us-es to become closer to the flower, but never to attain it. The visual presence of the two stages will be a reminder of the impossibility of a classless and colour-blind society.

For expressionists, the means by which Utopian society could be attained is the revelation of a primitive and a natural world. Primitiveness is the “generator of a passionate communality” that would lead to this kind of an ideal society (Behr, Fanning and Jarman 4). Bonner problematizes not only the possibility of a utopian society, but also the “passionate communality” that emanates from primitiveness. In *Purple*, the search for self-identity is treated as a formula, through a ritual of conjure, where elements should be gathered and the final element (blood) is the axis of revolution:

Old Man: It's time! It's time! Bring me an iron pot!

Young Us: Aw don't try any conjuring!

Old Man: (*walking toward pot slowly*) Old Us! Do you hear me? Old Us that are here do u here me?

All The Old Us. (*Crying in chorus*) Yes, Lord! We hear you! We hear you!

Old Man. (*crying louder and louder*) Old Us! Old Us! Old Us that are gone, Old Us that are dust do you hear me?

(*His voice sounds strangely through the valley. Somewhere you think you hear – as if mouthed by ten million mouths through rocks and dust –*
"Yes- Lord!- We hear you! We hear You)

[. . .]

Old Man. He [God] told me take a handful of dust – dust from which all things came and put it in a hard iron pot [. . .] Things shape best in hard molds!! Put in books that Men learn by. Gold that Men live by. Blood that let Men live. (196)

This conjure, which symbolizes a return to folklore which Locke advocated in his theorisation of “the New Negro,” appears as a matter of dispute in Bonner’s text. A Young Us replies to this ritual of conjuring: “What’s the trouble! Choking on the dust?” (196) The aim of Bonner’s dependence on folk tradition of conjuring is not to create a nostalgic link with a “primitive” past. It is to organize a society in which everyone works with the legacy of the past along with the potential of the future; hence her emphasis on the collaboration between Young and Old Us-es. However, instead of harmony, she dramatizes interracial division.

Therefore, Bonner’s vision appears more revolutionary than conciliatory. What is needed is a radical understanding of a new black self-identity that surpasses the ideological conflicts of her time. “Dust from which all things come” becomes a signifier of rootedness, “things shape best in hard moulds” becomes a reference to the necessity of constantly challenging fixed forms of white supremacy, “books that men learn by” in reference to Du Bois’s emphasis on higher education and arts, and “gold that men live by” in reference to Washington’s emphasis on industrial education are all necessary for the designation of the “New Man,” but will never be enough without “Blood that let men live.” Bonner clearly then anticipates political and social activism of the more revolutionary eras of the 1950s and 1960s in her symbolising of blood as the only way to salvation. Her acquaintance with harsh social realities in the more unfortunate areas of Chicago enhances her belief in revolutionary forms of social change¹¹.

Salvation as an ultimate purpose in Expressionism is pre-conditioned by the presence of rule structure which needs distortion. This means the existence of a “generally accepted and understood set of conventions” upon which the artist acts and which s/he distorts in a way s/he feels can’t be expressed conventionally (Behr,

¹¹ In *Writing Red: Anthology of American Women Writers*, Paula Rabinowitz includes Bonner’s 1939 short story, “The Whipping,” among socially conscious literature. In “The Whipping,” Bonner shows the aftermath of racial and class oppression on black individuals in urban places (Nekola and Rabinowitz 22). Bonner exhibits her Leftist affiliation more in her short stories than in her abstract early writing and playwriting.

Fanning and Jarman 7). The necessity to distort an already accepted and established structure is an aesthetic means to present a psychological reality the expressionist artist wants to denote. For Bonner, the priority is to shake up and subvert the rule structure not only in terms of aesthetics, but also socio-politically. The revelation of a psychological reality is only a means to accentuate the outer reality, not a substitute for it. So, while the emphasis of Expressionism is giving voice to the internal world on the basis that the inner experience of the artist and the inner nature of the world itself were in essence the same, Bonner demonstrates a refusal of this kind of idealism. Her characters' inner world is not the ultimate purpose to be revealed; rather, it is the social and political context that dictates the movement of the inner world. The "salvation" sought cannot be fulfilled by changing the psychological reality of individuals, but by changing the structure that surrounds them. Accordingly, internal details that might present an aesthetically and artistically different play are forsaken in order to allow the external message of the socio-political drama to sound forth in line with racial concern. On this account, *The Purple Flower* appears more allegorical than expressionist. However, if characters are taken to be not as allegorical personification of real life persons but more as a dramatisation of the conflict taking place inside of the playwright, the play proves its expressionist form in its psychological exploration of an interiorised conflict. The conflict between characters becomes a representative of the existential dilemma occurring in the inner-world of the playwright¹².

Part of the "rule structure" which the play aims to change is the outlook towards materialism. While materialism is totally rejected in Expressionism on account of impairing a primitive and natural entity, and contributing to disharmony of modern man confined by industrialism, an attempt to reach a balanced view of materialism is manifested in Bonner's plays. While she alludes to the thought of Booker T. Washington as to the necessity of industrial learning for the advancement

¹² This existential conflict re-appears in Bonner's "The Young Blood Hungers" which was published in the *Crisis* (1928). The essay offers a new approach to religious thinking which should be re-introduced to the "Young Blood." The God Bonner re-thinks is "[n]ot God always offering a heavenly reward for an earthly Hell" (Frye 10). The essay might have anticipated, if it did not have a direct influence on, Zora Neale Hurston's title *Their Eyes were Watching God* when Bonner states "I speak not for myself alone, Lord. The Young Blood hungers for Eyes to watch—" (Frye 11). Both Bonner and Hurston might have crossed path as they were regulars at Georgia Douglas Johnson's S-Street Salon in Washington D.C.

of African Americans, she rejects it as the only means needed. It constitutes only one element of the big equation. The same balanced attitude is repeated in *Exit* when Buddy's failure to acknowledge his self-identity is linked to his disconnectedness from Dot in order to fulfil material success.

The main point from which Bonner has to deviate as an expressionist technique is the use of masks. While the expressionistic mask is an essential device by which transformation takes place, taking off the mask for African American artists becomes mandatory to achieve the same purpose. The mask exposes the internal world to the outside, and in consequence, it emphasizes the ultimate purpose of theatre that seeks transformation into a higher level of humanity through "Knowing oneself" and "purification" ((Behr, Fanning and Jarman 7). For African Americans, after a long tradition of wearing the mask as a form of entertainment in blackface minstrel shows, the double signification of masks appears. While in expressionist theatre it is a form in which the inner world appears in the outer one, in African American artistic representation, the use of masks is risky. It is not a representation of what an individual in essence is, but a reduction of the self into a mere mask that would be a reminder of vaudeville and minstrelsy.

Another characteristic of expressionist art, which is also distinctive of the atmosphere in both plays, is apocalyptic hope. Both Dot and *Finest Blood* are presented in a stage of martyrdom; their death is essential for change to occur. Thus, the pattern in both plays is that of destruction and a possible re-creation. At the end of both plays, an ambivalent possibility of change reigns in the form of characters screaming.

The "definition" of the "New Man," or more properly, of new black subjectivity, which Bonner seeks in her plays, fits well her perception of change; it entails a question by *Finest Blood* towards the end of *Purple*: is it time? And an anguished cry by Buddy at the end of *Exit*: I love you! The desire to reach for a particular definition of a new self-identity is symbolised by designating the "New Man," which is a symbol of Locke's "New Negro" whose formation captured the interest of African American writers at the turn of the twentieth century. In her examination of the significance of un-naming in African American culture,

Kimberley Benston equates social and economic freedom with a new self which remains incomplete unless it is authenticated by self-designation (153). In Bonner's search for new definition, the act of un-naming is intricate indeed. Bonner populates her play with characters that are un-named such as Young Us, Old Man, Finest Blood and Cornerstone. Whiteness in *Exit* is similarly equated with unnamed death – the unchallenged authority. In *Purple*, Bonner's choice of "Us" makes an "other" of the white devils, and un-names them. This tendency towards "unnaming," as Benston observes, is typical of almost all the African American writers, and it bears on the psycho-historical dimension of black selfhood (153)¹³. It is a counterpart authority which opposes the power of supremacist patriarchy. This abstract identification with unchallenged authority is a reflection of a self-identity in pursuit of social and political freedom which heralded the Black Power Movement in the 60s.

In the same way that salvation is the ultimate purpose of Expressionist plays, freedom, given social and political context, is the ultimate purpose in Bonner's plays. Although *Purple* is a play that calls for revolution, and *Exit* is a psychological exploration of the dilemma of a mulatto woman, the link that connects both plays, other than the expressionist form, is the emphasis on freedom and how its formation in the ideology of African Americans is framed by the historical context associated with blackface minstrelsy. During slavery, freedom was equated with death. This is best illustrated in Booker T. Washington's statement that only when they were free from slavery, black folk "began to see freedom of the body in this world" (Washington 15). For a long time, death had become the signifier of freedom; it becomes the exit from the life of suffering and enslavement. I will return to this point later when I examine how Bonner uses the word Exit ironically for it alludes to the predicament of the black family in the beginning of the twentieth century and how

¹³ This act of what Benston calls "namelessness" has its roots in the Greek and Hebraic traditions. As an example she quotes the inscriptions of King James in the Tetragrammaton (Yahweh): "I Am That I Am," and refers to the hero in Homer's *Odyssey* calling himself "no name" or "no man." In this case of un-naming, the unnamed seeks to transcend all categories that include "Eros, nature, and community" and relates him/herself to the "unchallenged authority" (153). In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the un-named protagonist changes this "I am that I am" to "I yam what I yam" in his attempt to locate his identity in a Southern sensory memory, approaching, in doing so, this act of un-naming from his individualised African American perspective.

the equation between freedom and death shifted later to the equation between freedom and achieving material success.

The expressionist form is intrinsic to the political content. The dream-like technique, along with mimicry, expels language and dis-empowers it as a supremacist means of oppression. The coupling of linguistic inadequacy and loss of selfhood is contextualised historically and socio-politically in textualised bodies. However, the desire of the artist to deconstruct and reconstruct her theatrical world is best suited in an expressionist form in order not only to reach for a definition of new black self-identity but also to problematize this process in the era of “New Negro” movement. Consequently, the playwright binds together class and gender consciousness. In a more recent phenomenological study of femininity and oppression, Sandra Lee Bartky demonstrates that gender oppression cannot be understood in isolation from class oppression (3). The rest of this chapter will approach Bonner’s work and her feminist consciousness from this particular point of view.

New Black Subjectivity and the Black Female Body

Bonner’s work dramatizes the complex relationship between embodiment and power, especially for a woman writing in an era shaped by blackface minstrelsy. Registering cultural manifestations of this relationship, Bonner aims to ground herself as a “visible” embodied subject in the written text of her plays. The irony emerges from her choice of writing plays to be read rather than performed. The text becomes then a critical commentary on the power of the visual stereotyping of blacks and demonstrates an enforcement of distance, or more properly, one absents oneself from a hegemonic discourse. Her drama becomes then a drama of invisibility as visibility becomes synonymous with a body confined to stereotypical connotations of blackface minstrelsy.

Nonetheless, the use of standard language is also problematic. The inclusion of black vernacular in plays, such as those written by May Miller, Eulalie Spence, and Zora Neale Hurston, and other literary genres was considered a strategic act of affirming black identity on one hand and a resistance to an imposed superiority of

language on the other. This did not come without risks, for the use of this same vernacular was speculative as it was still connected to stereotypical images of vaudeville and minstrelsy. Bonner found herself trapped once again in a white hegemonic system where her visibility is dependent on the language of the oppressor.

Although Bonner's plays did not emphasize the use of black vernacular, or adhere wholeheartedly to the issue of "racial uplift," her choice of expressionism is more a comment on the socio-political situation than an imitation of, or adherence to, Euro-American aesthetics. The same system of white supremacy that overshadowed the works of most women playwrights contributed to the marginality of Bonner. It was against this system that she used her theatrical techniques to undermine the hegemony of conventional language which oppressed her as a black person and as a woman, and to register the absence of black women from historical discourse. Like other women playwrights who understood the significance of using African American vernacular as a medium for political resistance, Bonner's attempt to use expressionist techniques as a means to utilize oppressed bodies, even though in theory, became a means of resistance against a hegemonic culture.

Bonner's experimental work then sets in motion a conflicted dialogue between language and the visual. She writes her plays because she avoids further stereotyping; yet, she emphasizes the power of the resistant body, in her texts, because she does not trust the language of white supremacy. This dualism of absence-presence that characterises Bonner's plays is balanced by her reliance on the power of imagination, based on a relationship with her reader, in order to trouble visual establishment of white supremacy. First, it is necessary to explore her first essay in order to highlight this body- language dyad.

"On Being Young- Woman- and Colored"

Previous to writing her plays, "On Being" was published in the *Crisis* in 1925¹⁴. In her essay is the foundation of the material which is central to her later

¹⁴ Bonner's title is echoed in Lorraine Hansberry's posthumous work *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* in a segment where she addresses young African American playwrights, and also used as the title of Nina Simone's song in memory of her late friend, Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965).

plays. It combines both revolutionary elements and the dream-like portrayal of her vision of an equal society where race and gender discrimination cease to exist. But most importantly, it exhibits the problem of inscribing her racial and gendered body into a socio-political experimental text. Bonner's choice of this experimental form is consistent with her attempted rebellion against an enforced regime of race and gender supremacy.

The beginning of her essay is quite deconstructive of an enforced hierarchy of language: "You start out after you have gone from kindergarten to sheepskin covered with sundry Latin phrases [. . .] Old ideas, old fundamentals seem worm-eaten, out-grown, worthless, bitter; fit for the scrap-heap of Wisdom" (230). It is clear here that the inadequacy of classical language to speak for the oppressed is linked to a white system of supremacy. But what is more acknowledged, consciously or subconsciously, is the persistence of the language of the body politic. In "Chiasmus in the Polis," Jacob Rogozinski offers a phenomenological examination of the relationship between totalitarian regimes and the formation of bodies and the-body-politic. Since the Greeks, he explains, human communities were represented as a collective body whose particular individuals are its members, whose government is the head (7). Bonner's essay illustrates such a relationship between the "head" and other members in the Body Politic and how a racialised hierarchy is regulated through the access of those members to "Latin phrases" and "old fundamentals" of the "scrap-heap of Wisdom." It is no wonder that Bonner refers to language in terms of corporeality that can be "worm-eaten, out-grown," and that she uses the same language to describe the "sundry white devils" later in *The Purple Flower*. She distances herself from this corporeal entity as she finds herself alienated from it as unwanted member.

Like a "kitten in a sunny catnip field," she continues in her essay, "a desire to dash three or four ways seizes you" (231). Bonner tries to ground herself in the immediate experience of the world only to find out that her experience as a woman and black person is excluded from historical discourse. Dashing three or four ways is a metaphor of the net of complexities that confines her as a black, a young person, and a woman.

Racism is not the only dilemma she faces as a black artist; she clarifies. As a woman, sexism is also a problem whose impact on black women should be given more attention; in addition to, as Lorraine Elena Roses observes, “the lesser, though not negligible element of class” (170). The sense of frustration she displays in her essay about the bond that confines her to a larger community with which she shares only the colour of skin is arguably a rebellion against another deterministic hegemonic system that ignores her as an individual and sacrifices her individuality for the sake of racial strife. Being a woman who was born into a middle-class family and lived out of, but not far from, the “ghetto,” she experiences the feeling of a “‘peculiar’ psychology and mannerism” that refers to the double bind that attaches her to a ghettoised black culture and a patronising white culture at the same time. Thus, she is caught between her individuality as an artist and her role as an artist aware of agitprop obligations and residues of minstrelsy that should be fought. Her debt to her community stems from guilt, not from identification, as it is triggered by having “the things that they have not largely had” (231). She believes that colour, after all, is not the real bond. This colour is binding her, pinioning her to a ghetto where the social reality of poverty and illiteracy becomes the basis for her later Leftist writing: “Some warm untouched current flows through them--through you--and drags you out into the deep waters of a new sea of human foibles and mannerisms; of a peculiar psychology and prejudices. And one day you find yourself entangled--enmeshed--pinioned in the seaweed of a Black Ghetto” (230).

These depictions illustrate Bonner’s awareness of the process constructing her subjectivity. The overshadowing of the woman question by the racial one is evident in her text. What is demonstrated also is a merger between the black female body and the text she produces. Bonner’s internal world is linked to her community by means of overshadowing and subjugation to the extent that her body experiences a sense of drowning, or in other words, annihilation. She captures this feeling of unavoidable bondage in this vivid image: “Milling around like fish in a basket. Those at the bottom crushed into a sort of stupid apathy by the weight of those on the top. Those at the top leaping, leaping, leaping to scale the sides to get out” (231).

It has been suggested that Bonner's greatest contribution to the Harlem Renaissance is not only her emphasis on racial identity but also gendered identity (Reuben). Her experimental project exemplifies an early engagement with the trope of embodiment alluding simultaneously to her text as a body, and her body as a text. Inside the patriarchal world, being a woman means suffering the double bind of subjugation. Being a "coloured" woman is displayed as a "gross collection of desires" (232). At the peak of suffering, Bonner's rebellion against a system of sexism is emphasised along with a depiction of the interior world of self-identity; that is where "every part of you becomes bitter" (232). The advice on not becoming a bitter cliché in her writing is proved pointless as this bitterness is rooted corporeally. Experience of inferiority, of marginalisation and suffering is also intensified: "You decide that something is wrong with a world that stifles and chokes; that cuts off and stunts; hedging in, pressing down on eyes, ears and throat. Somehow all wrong" (233). The significance of the essay Bonner wrote two years before beginning her playwriting is the link she creates between this impulse to "revolt" and the historical and socio-political context of the black subject's psychological dilemma of self-identity's loss and reconstruction exhibited through entrapped bodies.

On the other hand, it directly relates to the subject formation under the hegemony of blackface minstrelsy. This is where the wearing of the mask becomes mandatory for recognition, especially for women: "[w]hy unless you talk in staccato squawks--brittle as sea-shells--unless you 'champ' gum--unless you cover two yards square when you laugh--unless your taste runs to violent colors--Impossible perfumes and more impossible clothes--are you a feminine Caliban craving to pass for Ariel?" (232) As a woman and black person, Bonner illustrates, the black female at the beginning of the twentieth century is asked to accept the rhetorical power and economic status of the coloniser and to adhere to the wearing of the mask designated to her; to become an "Aunt Jemima," a "tragic mulatta," or a "Jezebel." Bonner's essay demonstrates that she herself "craves" to pass for Ariel without being stereotyped. Passing for Ariel becomes for Bonner a proof of her artistic ambition. Her refusal of the feminine Caliban reflects her internalised status as a colonised territory, and demonstrates a confinement within a trope of "double-belonging"

which Du Bois defined as a characteristic of African American consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century. Like Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Bonner's essay captures the consciousness of a middle class black woman who acts toward, but not theorizes, "racial uplift." Unlike Larsen, Bonner's consciousness shifts between individualist detachment and modernist alienation on the one hand and incomplete identification with her community on the other.

However Bonner's conflicted double belonging is not unjustified. This transformation from Caliban to Ariel that Bonner quotes from Shakespeare's *Tempest* is a symbol of a complicated sense that captured the consciousness of African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. To be a "Caliban" is to be imprisoned in the stereotype of a savage cannibal-like primitive. From a post-colonial point of view, the relationship between Caliban and his master Prospero is symbolic of the master-slave relation within the plantation economy in the South. Ariel, like Caliban, is a slave, but unlike him, is a "mullato" whose mixed blood makes his compromising attempts to gain freedom more "civilised" by white supremacists' standards (Otto 102). Thus, Caliban stands as a symbol for the enslaved and the oppressed. As early as 1925, Bonner made the comparison that exposes the politics that dominates white-black relationships and contributes to the establishment of a social, political and even artistic hierarchy. Furthermore, the savage status of Caliban gives the master/coloniser an ethical permission to enslave him. To be seen as a Caliban is to be constructed in the eyes of the other as inferior.

However, Bonner's use of the complex dynamic between Caliban and Ariel demonstrates a corporeal identification that alternates between the rebellious Caliban and the compromising Ariel. Bonner's approach to this relation preceded the feminist theories of the twentieth century. It is only in the 1960s that the reception of Caliban's image as a symbol of pride by the Caribbean writers took place (Otto 101). Bonner took the image a step further and linked it to gender sensibility to reflect the status of not only the African American individual but also black women.

Another code that Bonner is arguably aware of in regard to the relationship between Ariel and Caliban is language. The central igniter in the relation between Caliban and his master is language, for he is imprisoned in Prospero's language as a

first important achievement of the colonising process which ensures an enforced identification with the slave-master culture. However, Caliban's awareness of his culture empowers him with the ability to resist and subvert the counter power of Prospero by using his own native language. This consciousness of language as a double bind, and consequently of culture, that both imprisons and still is a means of articulation is consistent with what Du Bois describes as a double belonging of African Americans. Bonner's essay bears witness to a confined rebelliousness which later explodes in *Purple*.

The textualising of Bonner's body and the corporeality of her text inform the plays written afterwards in line with her lived experience of race, class, and gender. The impossibility of escaping this triangle dictates a revolution by the living body. Her self-conscious depiction of her embodied confinement accounts for her interest in expressionism. In both plays, Bonner used the expressionist technique of pantomime. In *The Purple Flower*, each action that takes place on the upper stage is duplicated on the lower one; in *Exit*, action is not dictated by words, as was the norm in plays written by other playwrights, but more highlighted by stage direction and characters' dream-like movement. This helped Bonner to take her characters outside the boundaries of the stereotypes designed for black characters on stage. Thus, the use of expressionist form becomes a substitute for the function of the African American vernacular as a means of protest. It becomes a tool used aesthetically to represent the unspeakable.

Embodiment of Fear and love in *Exit: An Illusion*

The racial dynamics which operate women's bodies, along with focusing on black self-identity for black males and females, are epitomised in Bonner's *Exit*. They are also related to the presence of the destructive power of death/whiteness. The triangle embodies the complex relationships between racial and gender experience. At the same time, the dream-like theatrical manifestation of these relations triggers and enacts condensed feelings of fear in the presence of white power/death. Buddy attacks Dot verbally when he feels threatened by Exit Mann:

I'm out of the city—working to keep you – you hanging around with some no count white trash! So no count to come in nigger places, to nigger parties and then when

he gets there – can’t even speak to none of them. Ain’t said a word to nobody the fellers say! Ain’t said a word! Just settin’ ‘round- settin’ ‘round- looking at you - hanging around you- dancing with you! He better not show hisself ‘round here while I’m here! (202)

This piece from *Exit* exemplifies how blackface minstrelsy informs interracial paradigms of body politics. Exit Mann is drawn into the world of Dot and lured by music and dance just as the “White Devil” in *Purple* is also lured into fight by music. Here, Exit Mann is interested not only in music but also in the corporeal presence of Dot, and consequently in the corporeal effacement of Buddy. Dot serves as a fleshy fetish in this game between Exit and Buddy. Lott explains that “[m]instrelsy’s focus on disruptions and infractions of the flesh enacts a theatrical dream work of condensed and displaced fears” (152). This is a fear experienced not only by Buddy but also by Exit Mann who, like the white subject in Lott’s analysis, turn these feelings of fear and sexual fantasies, to use Lott’s words, into “a harmless fun” from the white man’s perspective (152)¹⁵.

Dot is the body-object who is made silent, powerless, and almost dead from the beginning. Her identity, or self-realisation, cannot be fulfilled unless Buddy acknowledges his love for her; otherwise, she is erased by Exit as a signifier of white supremacy. Bonner comments here on a key concept in African American consciousness which used to equate freedom with death, and how this disposition disrupts familial relationships. In *Salvation*, where she examines the meaning of love in African American culture, bell hooks explains that the concept of freedom has changed from being equated with death to being fulfilled in material possession. This shift to the material quest leads to a false self that denies its feelings and commits to material survival. The consciousness of most black people, hooks explains, has been strongly affected by an “unequivocal belief that domination and subordination was a natural order” (24). This consciousness of the complex cause-effect relationship between the material quest and familial disturbance can be seen in Bonner’s text. Buddy justifies his absence on grounds of material achievement necessary for a complete sense of freedom; his self-identity, which is constructed in the eyes of Exit

¹⁵ In Lott’s argument, it is the black male body which is fetishised and fantasised. However, the absence of the black female body in the historical discourse of minstrelsy is due to its absorbance by a feminised black male body who was displaced as an object of what Laura Mulvey calls the “pale gaze” which both desires and inferiorises the bodies of black males (Lott 157).

within the minstrel trope of fear and love, impels that he surpass Exit materially. Preceding Lorraine Hansberry's characterisation of Walter Lee as a person driven by the materialistic quest, Bonner's Buddy complicates this relationship further by his existence within the minstrel trope. Exit who is symbolic of white supremacy appears here, to use hooks' terms, as a soul murderer (23). The metaphorical death of Buddy and the physical death of Dot are deaths of spirit which resulted from a racist society that imposed on the black subject the denial of the emotional side and a focus on the material one.

Bonner's appeal to overcome racial and gender prejudice demands the simple act of acknowledging love. "Loving blackness as a political resistance," hooks writes more than half a century after Bonner's last play, "transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the condition necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (*Salvation* 66). In *Exit*, it is death which triumphs over love because the latter is pre-conditioned by self-realisation - an impossible concept to materialize when the characters are obsessed with the prevalence of Exit/whiteness in their lives.

What is significantly embedded in Bonner's text is the existence of rape as a trope for the display of corporeal dynamics of interracial politics. At one point, Dot resents Buddy's friends, describing them as "niggers"; her light brown hair and pale thin face are indicators of her biracialism. Consequently, what is signified here is a history of rape. In her examination of Robbie McCauley's 1985 *Sally's Rape*, Deborah Thompson examines the proximity between rape and blackface minstrelsy as highly slippery signifiers "violent in their experienced realness" (126). Thompson observes how both those signifiers embody and shape current body-identity politics in the United States based on race, gender and sexuality (126). Blackface minstrelsy, Thompson argues, is not only a form of cultural rape but also a trope for the display of black bodies for the construction of white supremacy.

Most importantly, Thompson establishes a link between rape and theatre and describes rape as "inherently theatrical": "[L]ike theatre itself, rape is paradoxically one of the most physically symbolic of acts" (131). Both rape and blackface minstrelsy work by being absolutely present, real, and symbolic. The "love" triangle

in Bonner's play attests to this theatrical presence of rape and how it is layered by a display of black bodies and an attempt to usurp the body of the black female, Dot.

Usurpation of the black female body means more than an aggressive act of rape. It is a usurpation of agency. In her interdisciplinary study, *The Roots of Power*, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone gives a lengthy analysis of women's vulnerability in patriarchal societies. Sheets-Johnstone explains how Foucault's concept of docile bodies is also definitive of the view of females as just sex objects not only in the eyes of men but also in their own eyes. Therefore what matters in the world of "docile females" is their "visual bodies and how it measures up" (121). Viewed in this perspective, Dot might be seem to fit to the description of docile body as she sees, and consequently recognises, herself in the eyes of the males in her world. "Living in bad faith," Johnstone observes, "a docile female defines herself by the 'he' (or they) for whom I am" (122). The conflict arises when Dot sees herself in the eyes of both Buddy and Exit Mann; she is ambivalent about her belonging. When accused of passing for white and denying her blackness, Dot only gives an ambiguous answer: "I may not be – You'd never know!" (201) Dot's body responds to this ambivalence and attempts to revolt against her torn-apart consciousness as she brushes her hair: "she brushes rapidly with strokes that grow vigorous as if each one made new strength start up in her" (202). This being in the eyes of males, as Johnstone argues, is indeed an instance of compromising one's autonomy which is manifested corporeally.

Conclusion

Although her voice was subdued by the socio-political hegemony of her time, and although her consciousness is that of double belonging as her essay explicitly, and her plays implicitly, indicate, Bonner's consciousness is a feminist one. In her phenomenological examination of oppression in *Femininity and Domination*, Sandra Lee Bartky defines feminist consciousness as

[T]he consciousness of a being radically alienated from her world and often divided against herself, a being who sees herself as victim and whose victimization determines her being-in-the-world as resistance, wariness, and suspicion. Raw and exposed much of the time, she suffers from both ethical and ontological shock. Lacking a fully formed moral paradigm, sometimes unable to make sense of her own

reactions and emotions, she is immersed in a social reality which exhibits to her an aspect of malevolent ambiguity. (21)

Bartky locates the ontology of feminism in the experience of being alienated from “livedness”. This understanding of a being-in-the-world, Bartky explains, is the first step to replace what she calls “false consciousness” and acts towards change. The change which Bonner seeks in *Purple*, as in her other works, is hard to achieve because she acts within a racist sexist social reality with which she identifies as much as she works against. Bonner’s texts are written upon a dichotomy of visibility-invisibility, and they reflect a dialectic between double belonging and un-belonging, between self-representation and self-alienation; but they reflect as well a feminist consciousness of a black intellectual woman registering her lived experience. As an African American woman situated within a racist and sexist system and outside historical discourse, she exposes, through her texts, a body torn between contradictory identifications.

Her drive towards Expressionism- as an aesthetic form- is a way of writing on the body. Her attempt to define “how I want to exist” is stifled by “how I am seen,” thus what is signified in her corporeal texts is a limitedness and confinement. Therefore, she invests in her reader a tendency towards using imagination in order to compensate for a stolen space. Her use of the second person, the poetic language, symbols, surrealism (in *Exit*), and fantasy, even though mostly dark, extend the imaginary space for her written-to-be-read plays. The familiar relationship she establishes with the reader as she directs his/her gaze in the imaginary space creates a discursive ground on which her corporealised texts are read and re-read. Thus, she allows her embodiment of contradictions to be recognised and made visible in spite of the invisibility imposed on her as a black person, woman, and a young person. Most importantly, she uses Expressionism to channel through the black female body a corporeal commentary on the historical context of her time. Marita Bonner’s work registers feminist consciousness, the problematic of self-construction and double identification for a woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most importantly, it lays the ground for future women playwrights to build on their own ways of being in the world.

Revolutionary Space: The Embodiment of the Fifties in the Plays of Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry

One drew in all one's breath and tightened one's fist and pulled the small body against the heavens, stretching, straining all the muscles in the legs to make —one giant step.

(Hansberry, *To Be Young* 49)

People aren't ahead of their time, they are choked during their own time.

(Alice Childress, quoted in Perkins' *Selected Plays* xxxiii)

Oh the time that I crave—and the peace—and the *power*!

(Hansberry, *To Be Young* 107)

The well-known playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the first black woman to have a play produced on Broadway's stages in 1961, left the University of Wisconsin in 1950 to work in New York as a secretary-receptionist and later as a writer on the Pan-Africanist and Leftist magazine, *Freedom* (Washington, *The Other Blacklist* 193). There she shared an office with Paul Robeson, the editor of the magazine, W. Alphaeus Hunton, the executive director of the Council on African Affairs, and Alice Childress, another young playwright who was contributing to the magazine with her monologue-style short autobiographically-inspired vignettes (141). Both Childress and Hansberry, who became in 1951 an associate editor of *Freedom*, were prominent in shaping the black, Leftist, and feminist perspective of the magazine (145). But more importantly, they helped shape a dramatic tradition inspiring to and to be followed by black female playwrights to come.

Between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power Movement there seems to exist an infertile period in African American literature, especially in terms of theatrical production. However, it is best described as a period of invisibility, rather than a period of lack of literary production. Ralph Ellison's famous *Invisible Man* (1952) captures the spirit of those decades as much as it speaks of his

disillusionment with the Communist party. Regardless of this disillusionment, African American writers who belonged to the Left wrote richly but discreetly. In her discussion of the Leftist activities of many African American literary figures during the 1950s, Mary Helen Washington provides a link between the 1930s and the 1940s on the one hand, and the more militant decades of the 1960s and the 1970s on the other. According to Washington, many of the literary voices were obscured because of their communist affiliations. In her response to the claim that there was no consciously formulated black aesthetics between the 1930s and 1960s, Washington affirms that African American literary criticism and practice were greatly influenced by Marxist-Leninist formulas, and a significant part of the literary production of this era was “its focus on black folk culture as the basis for a national, oppositional culture” (36). The decline of the literary stamina of the Harlem Renaissance was not followed by a gap of unproductivity, or by what Rourke called in *The Roots of American Culture* (1942) a wearying “negro tradition” based on her understanding of African American expression within the contours of minstrelsy, as Baker noted (17). Rather, it was followed by a genuine engagement in cultural and socio-political matters¹.

This was the arena into which both Hansberry and Childress had stepped. The invisibility imposed on many literary figures in that era can be seen clearly in the politics of production that determined the success and reception of both playwrights. While the success of Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) secured popularity for the young playwright, Alice Childress, whose dramatic work spans a period of four decades, has only recently been brought to the attention of academic investigation. Four years before the success of *Raisin*, Childress’s 1955 *Trouble in Mind* was about to be transferred from off-Broadway to Broadway stages had the playwright agreed to changes suggested by white producers. Childress refused to compromise. Hansberry, on the other hand, agreed to changes suggested by Broadway producers so as to make her play more acceptable to white audiences. This is not to compare

¹ Washington’s *The Other Blacklist* offers a thorough investigation into the writing, painting, and activism of Lloyd Brown, an activist and a writer; Charles Whites, a painter; Alice Childress; Gwendolyn Brooks, a poet; and Frank London Brown, a novelist. They carried, according to Washington, the resistant traditions of the Black popular front of the 1930s and 1940s into the 1950s (12).

the two playwrights in order to establish hierarchies, or to elaborate on Washington's examination of Leftist and Communist literary voices; rather, it is to pinpoint the fact that the reception of a black female playwright's voice was conditioned by white supremacist criteria which prevents/ establishes popularity and hierarchizes receptions. In fact, even Hansberry was less remembered for her other dramatic works, such as the social drama of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964), the revolutionary drama, *Les Blancs* (date premiered 1970); the history-inspired play, *The Drinking Gourd* (1960); and her existential quest in *What Use are Flowers* (1962), than for *Raisin* which was considered "universal" in appeal by white critics and "assimilationist" in content by African Americans.

The wide reception of *Raisin* as the first successful drama of a black female playwright is illustrative of the neglect of a tremendous dramatic effort exerted for over fifty years by Hansberry's fore-mothers. Although my main focus in this chapter is to highlight the space which both playwrights created as a necessary means for the liberated bodies created by conditions of racial struggle during the Civil Rights Movement, my analysis of Childress's plays will be directed specifically by this relationship between black female playwrights and white producers. First, I will refer briefly to the two decades that separate Marita Bonner and Alice Childress in order to emphasise the continuity of dramatic contribution of African American women playwrights. Second, I will move to Childress's plays, focusing primarily on the significance of creating a space different from that found in the twenties. This space is generated by the black female's consciousness of the capacities, or in phenomenological terms, the "I can's'," of her body. Then, I will discuss *Raisin*'s dramatisation of the embodied space for the African American woman in the late 1950s.

Historical Antecedents

The period between the end of the Harlem Renaissance and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, as shown above, is not a gap in the history of African American playwrights. Two decades—the thirties (the Federal Theatre era) and the forties (with its most notable ensemble, the American Negro Theatre)—are mostly overlooked by scholars. The major African American dramatists of that time, such as

Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, for example, are little remembered for their dramatic contribution—except for Hughes’s controversial play *Mulatto* (written in the early 1930s, and first performed on Broadway in 1935), and *Don’t You Want to Be Free* (1937)—and better remembered for their non-dramatic works, and their dispute concerning *Mule Bone*, a play jointly written but never jointly completed.

The most significant feature in American drama of the 1930s was the inauguration of the short-lived Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939) as a part of the second New Deal launched by Roosevelt in 1935. In her examination of obscure African American dramatists under the sponsorship of the Federal Theatre Project, Evelyn Quinta Craig attributes the lack of production of black drama to the economic and political orientation of the US in that period (4). Craig uses Arthur Arent’s *Ethiopia* as an example of political censorship as the Federal government’s fear of antagonising the Italians and instigating a possible backlash against the US government prevented the show from happening (4)². This censorship proves that the government funding of the FTP did not go without limiting the freedom of dramatists, it also proves the impermanence of such policing of art that the FTP couldn’t last more than nine years.

Once again black dramatists found themselves confined to minstrelsy stereotypes as they were under attack from white critics for reasons of simplicity, naivety, and primitivism. To avoid condescension and derogation, the black dramatists were compelled to use what Craig calls a “dual communication system” that addressed a biracial, and predominantly white, audience, a strategy used by African American authors who write for a split public of black and white readers (5). As we shall see later on, Alice Childress’s plays are just examples of this specific relationship between a black artist and white producers and a rebellion against specifically what she considered white condescension.

² The play was the first experimental form of the Living Newspaper Theatre that began shortly after the establishment of FTP. This genre had originated in Russia and was later adopted by Hallie Flanagan, the National Director of the FTP and Elmer Rice, a regional director and the well-known expressionist playwright. The play depicted the dictatorship of Mussolini and his invasion of Ethiopia. A directive was sent by Jacob Baker, Harry Hopkins’ assistant in the Works Progress Administration, to the Federal Theatre people in New York “forbidding the impersonation of any foreign minister or head of state” (Craig 17).

It is within this context that black women playwrights found it impossible for their plays to fit the white criteria of a successful drama. However, their dramatic effort was tremendous and plenty of playwriting was going on. During this time, Georgia Douglas Johnson was still writing social protest plays such as *William and Ellen Craft* (1935), and *Fredrick Douglass* (1935), both plays dealing with historical figures as part of enlightening her black audience about the existence of heroic models and challenging white audiences' perception of blackness. Another four plays about lynching, which was of a vital significance for most African American playwrights at the time, were submitted for the FTP by Johnson, none of which was produced.

During the 1930s, Zora Neale Hurston wrote over twelve plays. She was one of nine authors of the Broadway Musical *Fast and Furious* which was later panned harshly by New York critics as "stupid and tiresome" (Perkins, *Black* 78). Nonetheless, Hurston had an ambition to build a "Negro" Theatre that reflected an "authentic work of Negro life and music" (78). In 1935, she wrote *The Fiery Chariot* for the FTP but, although she was hired by the FTP as a drama coach, her play was not produced either³.

In 1934, Eulalie Spence wrote her last play, *The Whipping*, which was chosen by Paramount Studios to be made into a movie, but the project was not actualised. This play is a dramatisation of a novel written by Roy Flannagan, a white journalist, in which the female protagonist antagonizes the Ku Klux Klan and gets away with it. Spence's ability to secure the rights from the author, his publisher and to secure an esteemed white agent, who also represented Tennessee Williams, was a particular achievement in that era, and she even managed to see her play staged in the Empress Theatre in Connecticut (Macki 90). However, *The Whipping* was cancelled before its opening and Spence sold the script to Paramount Studios (91). Preceding Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* and Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, Spence's play was close to being the first play made into a movie.

³ In 1950, Hurston wrote an article entitled "What White Publishers Won't Print," arguing that white publishers were more content with African American literature which is mainly focused on racial injustice as they can't accept literature that depicts ordinary problems about love and emotions within minorities. Her article might be seen as a critique of African American propagandist literature as much as of white publishers' endorsement of the African American literature of social protest.

During the thirties, May Miller wrote about the aftermath of World War One for both black and white Americans in *Stragglers in the Dust* (1930) and about the consequence of lynching for a white family that led to its moral deterioration in *Nails and Thorns* (1933). In collaboration with Willis Richardson, a renowned black playwright, Miller contributed to the anthology *Negro History in Thirteen Plays* which was published in 1933, where she included three entries of hers and two of Georgia Johnson's (Perkins, *Black* 144). Her plays are different from other women dramatists' in terms of utilising white characters instead of an all-black cast. For example, in *Stragglers in the Dust*, Miller emphasises the equal right for both war heroes, black and white, to be enshrined in the same tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Thus, she uses the "dual system of communication" by employing an inter-racial cast. Again, although Miller's plays were published, they were not produced.

In addition to agitprop drama, musicals were a familiar and successful form during the thirties and forties. Some playwrights understood the necessity to meet white expectations as to what could be a dramatic success. However, their contribution to black drama lies in celebrating black figures. Thus, they were able to break away from the derogatory stereotypes, and to accentuate a new image of blackness on the stage. In 1932, Mary Church Terrell wrote about the first published African American woman poet, *Phillis Wheatley: A Bicentennial Pageant*, a musical which was presented in Washington D.C (Perkins, *Black* 14). Another renowned musical was *The Last Concerto*, written and directed by Harriet Gibbs Marshall, based on the life of an African American musician, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (14).

Shirley Graham (1896-1977) composed her all-black opera *Tom-Tom: An Epic of Music and the Negro* (1932) that traced African music in the US. Graham, the wife of W. E. B. Du Bois, studied music at the Sorbonne in Paris and was a student of music conservatory at Oberlin College when her play was produced professionally in America (Perkins, *Black* 209). *Tom-Tom* brought Graham national recognition and mixed reviews; while some African American critics praised the effort in Graham's musical, others criticised the "exotic" and "stereotypical" representation of blacks as the main reason of the play's appeal to white audiences (Nelson 184). Graham headed the Chicago Negro Unit of FTP from 1936 to 1938. While holding a

Rosenwald Fellowship in creative writing at Yale University, she wrote three plays: *Dust to Earth*, *I Gotta Home*—both plays were produced at Yale—and an entertaining play, *It's Morning*. All are included in Perkins' anthology; however, during Graham's lifetime, none of these plays were published (186).

Addressing racial concerns and utilising social protest, most women dramatists faced the difficulty of promoting production of their plays. The contradiction between FTP's attempt at racial justice on the one hand, and its refusal to produce most of the plays written by black women playwrights on the other hand cannot be attributed to the need of a "dual system of communication," since most women playwrights were serious in addressing white audiences. Yet, even those plays written to a biracial audience, such as Miller's, also did not find their way to production. In fact, Georgia Johnson's anti-lynching plays are immersed in sentimentality as a strategy of appeal to white motherhood. So, it might be said that the plays of social protest written by African American women—since the literature of social protest was more appealing to white producers as Hurston explains—were an example of the "double jeopardy" which Frances M. Beale later discussed in her essay: "Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female" (1969). "The corrupt system of capitalism," as Beale observes, did not only exploit black women sexually, socially, and commercially, but also, assigned fixed roles to both males and females (91). The role of the black female should be a submissive and domestic one, so that she remains the "slave of a slave"; the position of the black man should also be perpetuated as a castrated subject both financially and culturally (92). It follows then that the politics of production, not only for the purpose of commercial exploitation, but also in order to perpetuate these assigned roles, did not allow the production of new role models. Cleansing the image of African American women from its stereotypical connotations, or negotiating its economic value, was a threat to a hegemonic system which was responsible for the lack of production opportunities.

Yet, the contribution of the FTP to African American theatre in general is not to be denied. According to Ronald Ross's essay on the role of blacks in the FTP, the major contribution of the democratic-oriented FTP to African American drama was its undermining of Broadway authority and its upper-class orientation; to a certain

extent, the stereotyped representation of blacks on the stage, Ross notes, was challenged by both playwrights and actors (43). However, the success of Langston Hughes' *Mulatto: A Play of the Deep South* on Broadway in 1935 attests to the contrast; the producer of the play, Martin Jones, added a rape scene that emphasised the negative stereotypes in line with the wide reception of the "tragic mulatto." Still, the play brought to Broadway's stages the troubles of racial tensions in the South for the first time. The FTP's effort to change the relation between the audience and theatre can be seen as limited as it was governed by the priority of financial success by white producers, and the reception of mainly white audiences; it is no wonder that it did not take the risk of producing the more agitprop plays, especially by African American women playwrights.

In fact, the main benefit for the African American dramatists from the project was full-time employment. Previously, playwrights used to be hired in part time jobs so that they had to find other jobs as porters, housepainters, dishwashers, and any other common labour (Ross 48). Theatre was among the sectors which heavily suffered from the Great Depression of the 1930s. Before the FTP, the rate of unemployment was much higher among black actors than it was among whites. The decision to establish the FTP as an attempt to employ hundreds of writers and actors contributed also to make the relationship between people and theatre a close one. The project also helped establish "Negro" theatre projects throughout the country as part of a larger contribution to the promotion of ethnic diversity (41). The director of the FTP, Hallie Flanagan, made sure that the call of the project for the prohibition of racial prejudice was fulfilled; thus theatre had less actual discrimination than other New Deal programs (42).

The project came to its end in 1939 when the Dies Committee Hearing about the investigation of Un-American propaganda activities endorsed racially segregated projects, proclaiming that racial equality was synonymous with Communist activity (43). When it faced Congressional termination, 150 black organisations signed an affidavit to Congress attesting to the equal treatment distributed within the project. Although it did not start with the Federal Theatre Project, Black Drama's development is credited to the Project's short-lived experience.

At the FTP's close, the American Negro Theatre was formed in Harlem, and the debt to FTP was acknowledged especially in training directors, technicians and actors (Craig 9). However, this was another short-lived project which lasted from 1940 till 1949 and managed to produce only 19 plays. Ironically, the play which secured the success of ANT, *Anna Lucasta* (1944), was written by Philip Yordan, a white author who first wrote the play about an Irish family, and it established a tradition for the ANT of producing plays written by white authors. The ANT became a gateway for actors and authors to Broadway. Among these actors was Alice Childress, whose role in *Anna Lucasta*, as Trudier Harris notes in her introduction to Childress' *Like one of the Family*, won her a nomination for a Tony award⁴.

The ANT then retreated to the place from which the FTP endeavoured to depart. The FTP had attempted to de-centre Broadway and undermine its authority. However, the ANT returned to Broadway with *Anna Lucasta* which was successfully performed 956 times in two years (1944-1946) (Thomas 353). When the commercial success of *Anna Lucasta* is juxtaposed with dramatic efforts by women playwrights, it becomes obvious why their plays were destined to oblivion. During the 1940s, most women playwrights who had already established their career in the Harlem Renaissance wrote their last plays: Graham's comedy of 1940, *Track Thirteen*, was produced by Yale for radio in New Haven (Perkins, *Black* 210). Anna J. Cooper's *From Servitude to Service* (1940) was a celebration of the contribution of blacks to America in the form of a pageant musical that consisted of three episodes and fourteen scenes (14). Hurston wrote her musical comedy *Polk County* (1940), which was planned as a premier show for Broadway, but remained a dream that was never realised. May Miller also wrote her last dramatic work before dedicating her literary career to poetry; *Freedom's Children on the March* (1943) was performed at Fredrick Douglass school in Baltimore (144).

The fact that most of these plays were rejected by the Federal Theatre Project—in contrast to the short-lived success of the ANT—indicates that the marginality of theatrical works written by black women in the first half of the twentieth century can be attributed to lack of recognition, not to lack of action on the

⁴ n. pag

part of these dramatists. When Alice Childress was the first African American woman to win an Obie award for her 1955 play *Trouble in Mind*, her reaction brings into focus recognition of her forerunners, for she stated that she would have been happy if she was the hundredth woman to win (Brown-Guillory, *Their Place* 29). The fact that she was only the first indicates the lack of opportunity for black women playwrights. Consequently, Childress dedicated her literary career to be the voice of marginalised subjects in the American society. Her plays create a space for otherwise invisible bodies to act and claim their agency. I will discuss specifically this act of creating a space in two of Childress's plays: *Florence* (1949) and *Trouble in Mind* (1955) as a first step to envision liberated bodies that will emerge later in the Black Arts Movement. I then will approach Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* from the same perspective, focusing on the space she creates for her black female character, Beneatha.

Alice Childress and the Dilemma of the African American Artist

While individualism for Bonner, as shown in chapter one, is a site of struggle with communal ties, Childress, on the contrary, used her individuality as a writer to voice the concerns of larger communities⁵. She gave priority to expressing herself rather than be restricted in thought or expression by the socio-political inferior state she struggled to improve: "a feeling of being somewhat alone in my ideas" Childress explained, "caused me to know I could more freely express myself as a writer" (quoted in Dugan 125). Like the characters in her plays, Childress worked many manual jobs to support herself and her daughter. Her works were about the dispossessed and disinherited in America, about the spirited struggle of black men and women to survive and transcend the reality of a racial world and most importantly, a reflection of lived experience and an innovative vision about liberated bodies.

Childress's, and also Hansberry's, plays that I analyse here are examples of a black woman's oppositional strategy against hegemonic discourses that aim at defining and designating her space. Both playwrights understood power in terms of

⁵ For more on the life of Childress and the summaries of her plays, see appendix B.

liberating the bodies they represent on stage from the hegemonic culture of white supremacy. I will introduce first Childress's two plays, *Florence*, and *Trouble in Mind* before I approach the plays from a phenomenological point of view, relying on Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's corporeal conceptualisation of the meaning of power.

Sheets-Johnstone uses an interdisciplinary approach to various concepts that dominate Western philosophy such as power, the body, and the gaze. Her first book, *The Phenomenology of Dance* (1966), is an analysis of movement, the nature of, and the structure of dance, applying psychology and philosophy to movement. She substitutes the classical definition of dance as force in space and time with dance as a "form-in-the-making," a point which I will return to in my analysis of Beneatha's African dance below and in chapter four where I discuss Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide* (1976). In *The Roots of Power* (1994), Sheets-Johnstone's main argument is that the Western concept of power is based mainly on the visual; alternatively, she offers a reading of the significance of the corporeal in understanding new grounds of power relationships. The problem with the "visual," she argues, is that it led to the creation of cultural archetypes—one may think of blackface minstrel stereotype as one example of these cultural archetypes. As a result, Western culture reworked these archetypes to oppress women—and of course other minorities. However, according to Sheets-Johnstone, our notion of power and power-relations should be derived from our corporeal form and its "I can's'," or in other words, the capabilities endowed to each body (8).

Sheets Johnstone's concept of the body and its "I can's'" is derived from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories of the lived body. It is derived primarily from his definition of the relation of the subject to her/his world as a one of orientation where the body moves, and because of this movement it creates its space, achieving, in doing so, its subjectivity. Consequently, consciousness, in Merleau-Ponty's theory, shifts from the Cartesian "I think that" to "I can." Sheets-Johnstone expands on Merleau-Ponty's theory and brings to the centre of her argument the body's "I can" as a first step to re-work cultural archetypes (11).

Furthermore, Sheets-Johnstone introduces a new theory of the power of gaze, claiming that Western culture has enshrined the visual. She does not negate its

validity, rather she argues, depending on theories of natural biology, that the corporeal precedes the visual in the ontology of power. She specifically criticises Michael Foucault's "Optics of Power" and replaces it with the "power of optics," and attempts to answer the question which Foucault left un-answered "how is it that power [of gaze] has an immediate hold upon the body?" and how is it that the body "is *accessible* to power relation? [Italics in the original]" (14) I will approach these two questions in my analysis of the plays below. Childress and Hansberry's plays are examples of the capacities that empower a black female woman and enable a different consciousness of her body's "I can's."

Confrontational Space in Alice Childress's *Florence*

If white supremacy is constructed on the basis of black submission and "inferiority," Childress envisions in this play, in the spirit of the frustration that preceded the Civil Rights Movement, the means of destabilising this very authority. The segregated station becomes an arena for a racial dance, one of domination and counteraction, through which the bodies of Mama and Mrs. Carter are displayed. Childress pays attention to what is represented on the stage as part of the visual interconnectedness with the audience in addition to establishing a physical realm for an intercorporeal connectedness between the two women. The play starts and ends with a brief silence followed by the main character, Mama, staring at the segregated station; this symmetrical structure reappears in *Trouble* too as an anticipatory sign of social activism. Between these two points of beginning and closure, characters undergo a transformation that enables them to read the context they are in differently and to see themselves differently. This potentiality is symbolised by silence which is no longer synonymous with submission.

Mama Whitney's first encounters with the doctrine of US Constitutional Law, specifically Plessy V. Ferguson, lays the ground for reclaiming authority over the space that contains her body. The segregating sign at the entrance divides the waiting rooms into "white" and "colored" and the restrooms into "ladies" and "gentlemen" on the white side and "black women/ black men" on the "coloured" side. The porter informs Mama that she should use the black men's restroom because the black women's is "out of order" (*Wine* 113). Brown- Guillory explains that this

pun of the words “restroom” and “out of order” is only symbolic of the historical burden of black women in America where “there is no room for rest,” and also an implication of what Hurston describes of the black woman as “the mule of the world” (101). However, “out of order” has also a spatial significance as it alludes to the disturbance of the Jim Crow laws and predicts militant actions yet to occur but implicit in Mama’s words to her daughter to keep trying. The connotation of Mrs Carter’s movement from North to South, full of condescension and empathy, is reversed by Mama’s directive letter to be carried on the same train moving north. Consequently, words are more than puns; they are signifiers of bodies empowered with potentialities, generating different space.

Mrs Carter’s ignorance is endorsed by segregationist law in the South. When Marge instructs her mother to have her lunch and buy some coffee, the mother replies that she should not talk to her as though she is a “northern greenhorn” (111). Childress’s use of this phrase is not descriptive of Mama but rather of Mrs. Carter as the latter is ignorant of the South and black culture and easily deceived by a “supremacist law” that nurtures her self-identity with superiority and legitimizes condescension.

Intercorporeal dialogue in the play indicates Mama’s moving away from her segregated space in society to morph into a woman who is provoked to designate her own place. This kind of movement revolves around the segregating railing, another symbol of white supremacist discriminatory laws. This railing symbolizes, Brown-Guillory argues, the “cross-cultural trip” which is paralleled by a cross-country trip that both women perform around the railing (102). In fact, Childress comments on the North’s ignorance of its own racism; the fact that segregationist laws do not exist in the north does not negate the existence of a racist mind-set disguised as condescension. The South, as Howard Zinn describes it in his introduction to the *Southern Mystique*, is “but a distorted mirror image of the North” (13). Mama, or Mrs Whitney, is able to cross cultures and to probe supremacist ideologies while Mrs Carter is content with her space, never crossing to the Other’s side. Mrs Carter’s genuine attempt to communicate with Mama is undermined by her ignorance of her own body language; when she later stands at the railing upstage to tell Mama that the

novel her brother wrote “is about your people,” and then leans on the railing to tell of the shame that the protagonist of the unacknowledged novel has—drawing similarities with the absent/present Florence—she hierarchizes spaces and cultures: “It’s obvious!” she observes, “This lovely creature . . . intelligent, ambitious, and well . . . she’s a Negro!” (115) Outraged by Mrs Carter’s misconception of female mulattos as tragic figures, Mama crosses over to the white side and confronts Mrs Carter face to face challenging her beliefs. However, when Mrs Carter crosses to the “colored” section saying, “it is really difficult to understand you people,” (115) her acting as a Northern greenhorn is brought to a climax for she frames Florence in the role of a maid, displaying how this lack of understanding is her own ignorance. Mama’s reaction to her is both defiant and cynical; she clutches Mrs. Carter’s wrist, almost pulling her off balance: “you better get over on the other side of that rail. It’s against the law for you to be over here with me” (120). Mama learns how to interpret and use the linguistic sign of “Whites/ Colored” to gain mastery over her space and body destabilising, in doing so, the hierarchy set by Mrs. Carter’s condescending manner.

Lost My Lonely Way, the novel written by Mrs. Carter’s brother, determines the one and only one way for movement, the loss of which leads Zelma, the mulatta protagonist, to commit suicide. According to both Mrs. Carter and her brother, the only space for a biracial woman has to be conditioned by white acceptance. The loss of this white-constructed space entails the effacement of Zelma. Like Marita Bonner, who drew a vivid image of a body caught by the desire to dash three or four ways, Childress shows that there are many ways which an African American woman can use and consequently position herself; that the writer did not receive good reviews for his novel is used by Childress figuratively to show that this myth of representation is an obsolete idea.

Zelma serves as a reference to the absent character, Florence, who, according to her mother, is also a “brownskin” woman. Florence exists in the play through the title, and through the dialogue between Mama and other characters. Marge explains that her sister “got notions a Negro woman don’t need” and “she thinks she is white!” (111) Her absence, along with the reference to her “lighter” skin, symbolizes

the rape of Florence's female ancestors in the past and interweaves with "lynching"—which is suggestive of alleged black men's rape of white women—to constitute the memory of African American women⁶. Mama's words at the end of the play to her daughter destroy this sentimentalised image of "the tragic mulatto" and suggest a better way to use memory as she insists that her daughter, who is still suffering the lynching of her husband, "keep[s] trying," and keeps moving in and generating her space and subjectivity.

Confrontational Space in Childress's *Trouble in Mind*

Like *Florence*, *Trouble in Mind* is also a journey towards awareness in which the protagonist is caught in a moment of realisation of her position within a "white" system that replaces racial oppression with condescension. Through capturing the protagonist's voice and entrapping her body within a sentimental image, white supremacy displays an access not only to spaces within which bodies perform, but also to personal memory. Childress shows this intercorporeally through a play about lynching within a play about how to best introduce this lynching to white audiences. The play opens with an Irish porter, Henry, whose appearance at the beginning and the end of each act is made to bear comparison with the role of Wiletta, the protagonist of the play, and the possibility of her returning to menial jobs in the future in order to survive. It also alludes to Childress's early career as a labourer; thus the fusion between the Irish immigrant, the black labourer, and black artist are made to stand for Childress's first critique of the social situation of the underprivileged.

Trouble is a meta-drama in which Childress translates her theatrical experience within a white supremacist culture into a play that reflects on African American drama and the many difficulties it encounters. Consequently, theatrical acting becomes a form of performativity imposed on Wiletta that mirrors another performativity within white supremacist culture. In a humorous exchange between Millie and Sheldon, they call each other "Tommish" and "Aunt Jemima"; throughout the play, both Millie and Sheldon enact "Tommish" attitudes to secure their place on

⁶ This ironic duality of rape of white and black women is given attention by most women playwrights, especially in Robbie McCauley's 1980's *Sally's Rape* which will be discussed in chapter five.

the stage. The arrival of John, a black character and another white young actress, Judy, shakes the ground for Wiletta as both of them studied art in college. Nonetheless, she finds it necessary to teach John from her life experience about “theatrical” performance for black actors, rebelling against this advice at the end of the play, “laugh at everything they say” Wiletta tells John, “makes ‘em feel superior [. . .] White folks can’t stand unhappy Negroes . . . so laugh, laugh when it ain’t funny at all” (213). Although not convinced by the “Tommish” attitude of Wiletta, John faces reality when his idealism is conquered as he steps into the role of a flat character, and consequently takes his first step in the process of self-effacement. Thus Childress pinpoints the contrast between the expectation of black characters/actors and their representation on stage.

The play within a play (*Chaos in Belleville*) is symbolic of the relations that govern the stage. It is also a microcosm of a larger drama being acted out within American society. The group is going to perform a play about the lynching of Job, (John) to whom Wiletta plays the role of the mother, Ruby. Job demands the right to vote and joins the army of Nat Turner, consequently he is under the threat of being lynched⁷. Ruby and her father Sam (Sheldon) and sister Petunia (Millie) are sharecroppers working for Renard (Bill O’Wary, a white actor) and his daughter Carrie (Judy). On the request of Carrie, Renard is going to save Job from being lynched by putting him in jail. Ruby is supposed to convince her son Job to plead innocent instead of running away so that he can be saved. However, the mob takes him away to his death. After his lynching, Job is found innocent of “voting.”

The tension which has already started between Wiletta and Manners because of his patronising attitude towards her escalates and reaches its apex when Wiletta objects to the reaction played by her character as Ruby. She questions the validity of Ruby’s behaviour, whose mother’s instinct entails that she save her son instead of giving him up to the mob. Manners accuses Wiletta of lacking artistic understanding of the anti-lynch theme. However, in his rage, he reveals the facts that determine the play and how it should be acted and even directed:

⁷ Nat Turner (1800-1831) was an African American slave and the leader of slaves and free African Americans in the rebellion of 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia.

The American public is not ready to see you the way you want to be seen because, one, they don't believe it, two, they don't want to believe it, and three, they are convinced they're superior- and that, my friend, is why Carrie and Renard have to carry the ball! Get it? Now you wise up and aim for the soft spot in that American heart, let'em pity you, make 'em weep buckets, be helpless, make 'em feel so damned sorry for you that they'll lend a hand in easing up the pressure. You've got a free ride. Coast, baby, coast. (264)

Manners, unlike Mrs Carter in *Florence*, is aware of the ideology that governs the mind-set of the theatregoers. For him, the audience is like Mrs. Carter in understanding the racial matter from a sympathetic, but sentimental, point of view. For Wiletta, this authority and performing power within a circle of pity and sympathy, has to be challenged. Jeopardising the fate of all the members of the group, Wiletta refuses to continue in the role ascribed to her, demanding its change. The play ends with an uncertain destiny for each character as Manners leaves the stage. His assistant appears later to tell the group that they should wait for a call for the next day's rehearsal. Wiletta, whose expectation of solidarity of the group is destroyed, and Henry are alone on the stage. She recites from the Bible as he turns the applause up loud for her.

The play registers the romanticisation of anti-lynch sentimentality—a strategy which did not guarantee the production of Johnstone's plays—alienation of the black actor from the representation of his/her historical memory, and the transformation a black female hero undergoes on the stage. Wiletta's grasp of agency is not intended by Manners, although it is being provoked by him, nor is it a sudden revelation; rather, it is the culmination of a long history of representations condensed into a short span of time through Wiletta's consecutive encounters with other characters. Childress portrays how her female characters use their bodies, which used to be sites of physical and emotional torture, as a reserve of power. When Al Manners drops his papers in fury while teaching Judy, the young white woman, he takes his anger out on Wiletta and asks her to pick the papers up. Taken aback by this prejudice, Wiletta angrily refuses, "well, hell! I ain't the damn janitor" (223). Although Sheldon and Millie rush to the task, Manners, who did not expect the response, is forced to pretend that his gesture was part of a theatrical technique to elicit a natural response from Wiletta. Later, Manners tries a game of word association with Wiletta to help her think of an appropriate song for her

performance. Wiletta's responses reflect on her relationship with Manners as a white producer:

Manners: Children, little Children.

Wiletta: Children . . . Children . . . "pick up that paper!" oh, my . . .

Manners: Lynching.

Wiletta: Killin'! Killin'!

Manners: Killing.

Wiletta: It's the man's theatre, the man's money, so what you gonna do? (233)

Wiletta's refusal to pick up the papers is not only a threat to Manners' patriarchal condescending behaviour, but also a verbal exposure of corporeal dynamics. The exchange between Wiletta and Manners, like that between Mama Whitney and Mrs. Carter in *Florence*, is a racial dance of domination and counteraction. Wiletta reveals how her bodily existence as a black theatrical actress is threatened by the same laws that used to govern Southern plantations. The "white man's theatre and money" are synonymous with the plantation economy to the extent that Wiletta equates lynching with the politics of production. What makes Wiletta, and Mama Whitney, different from other characters around them is their possession of the will—hence Wiletta's name—that works against hegemonic culture and makes them "act." Consequently, the use of "theatre" and "acting" as a common theme for Childress not only reflects a part of her personal life, but also symbolizes the dynamics of the existing power relations that dominate the American theatrical scene in the 1940s and 1950s. Childress dramatizes a black woman's ability to transform an act of performance—which Paul Laurence Dunbar once captured in the title "We Wear the Mask"—into a *wilful* act of taking off the mask.

The play then dramatizes, quite significantly, the difference between performance and act, and the transition from the first to the latter. Throughout the play, Wiletta is absent-minded as she tries hard to reconcile her thoughts with the performance required by Manners. Her consciousness is turned into a bodily act when Manners demands that she keeps her son, Job, on his knees. To the surprise of everyone on stage, Wiletta rebels against Manners and tries to raise Job exclaiming,

and using her own words rather than those of the script she rehearses from: “Aw, get up off the floor, wollowin’ around like that” (261). The locus of Wiletta’s subjectivity is re-oriented, in phenomenological terms, from consciousness to the living body as her body attempts to orient itself and use all its capacities to approach its surrounding with intention. This can be seen when Wiletta’s intention to ground her body firmly on the stage, and in social context, compels her in a bodily act to raise John from his kneeling position and defies Manners’s artistic and socio-political conventions.

At the end of the play, Wiletta’s transformation from a “Tommish” character into an “acting” agent who is more concerned with self-identity, or subjectivity, than with financial success, or even mere survival, is made in contrast to other characters like Sheldon who laments to Wiletta: “I know. I am the only man in the house and what am I doing? “Whittlin’ a doggone stick. But I whittled it. Didn’t I? I can’t write a play and I got no money to put one on . . . yes! I’m gonna whittle my stick! (*stamps his foot to emphasize the point*)” (265). The blending made between Sheldon and the role he plays, which is metaphorised in whittling the stick, is similar to that enacted by Marge in *Florence*. Even the act of stamping his foot illustrates his insistence on being fixed/ degenerated, rather than moving in, and generating his space. Sheldon and Marge are subjects who accept their “designated” place. However, Childress positions this “performativity” within a harsh economic situation for the working class: “I still owe the doctor money” Sheldon complains, “and I can’t lift no heavy boxes or be scrubbin’ no floors. If I was a drinkin’ man I’d get drunk” (267). The conflict between characters’ consciousness and implementing the capacities of their bodies to move in their world of their experience is accentuated.

One of the strong images Childress presents in *Trouble in Mind* is that of Sheldon whittling a sugarcane while the mob takes his grandson to lynching. Childress criticises the insistence of white supremacy on confiscating the bodies of African Americans and regulating their movement as the fixed role of Sheldon indicates. More important is the producer’s perpetual attempts to build a wall between characters’ understanding of their position and playing the roles assigned to

them. This is evident in the producer's statement to Wiletta: "Darling, don't think. You are great until you start thinking" (234). However, Wiletta dared to think, act, and transform her body from a servile into a capable body. This dynamism which Childress realises on the stage is at the heart of Sheets-Johnstone's argument when she notes that "[t]he more we ignore corporeal matter of fact, the less we understand ourselves. The less we understand ourselves, the more prone we are to perpetuating the very oppressions that constrict our movement, blinker our vistas, and *whittle away* at our possibilities in the world [*italics added*]" (327).

Wiletta's transformation is fulfilled as she finally takes off the mask; she turns to Manners and admits: "I told this boy [John] to laugh and grin at everything you said, well . . . I ain't laughing" (263). Wiletta refuses to keep her body ruled by racial prejudices. She enables her bodily "I can" to operate and take off the mask. Childress's use of the comic tone throughout the play to contrast with a stark reality running against the black actor during the 1940s undermines, and echoes, minstrel stereotypes as tropes of humour. Childress's Leftist, feminist and African American voice comes forward as she makes the line that separates being an actor from becoming a porter so thin that acting within a "Tommish" stereotype is a matter of survival, not a point of a free choice.

Manners' play within a play is a microcosm of a white supremacist society that forms black and white subjects. Its purpose, as he explains, is to arouse the sensibilities and sympathies of the white audience. However, it does fixate the position of Manners and the off-stage white playwright of *Chaos in Belleville* as not only superior but also as producers of the codes of politics through which the cast and the audience interact. Although Manners claims that the purpose of the play is to enlighten the audience about lynching, prejudice of the past system of slavery, and racial discrimination, it also indicates another prejudice: subjugation through condescension and the replacement of what is supposed to be co-operation with concession. It denies the existing and conditioning context of the black subject and presents it through a position of emotional sympathy. This is indicated when Manners asks Wiletta to look at the play as art, and not to question the validity of the character she is playing. She can only reach the audience by making them

sympathize with her, not by interrogating their awareness of her “cultural heritage” or shaking the ground of the white audience.

Had Childress agreed to the changes attempted by a Broadway producer “to sharpen and delineate so as not to offend sensibilities,” *Trouble in Mind* would have been the first play about blacks to be performed on a Broadway stage (Brown-Guillory, “Images” 231). Four years later, Lorraine Hansberry, who agreed to change the end of her *A Raisin in the Sun*, became the first African American woman whose play found its way to Broadway.

Florence and Trouble as Dramas of Empowerment

In the 1920s, Marita Bonner showed in her dramatic work an awareness of not only the gaze, or being seen by a de-constructive “look,” but also of a body that is entrapped and defined as “Other.” The only way out is to empower this body in an act of revolution which transforms this “outcast” body into an empowered one whose transformation is necessary for change. Like Bonner, Childress presents this body as an empowered and empowering agent. Unlike Bonner, Childress refuses to acknowledge the power of the “gaze”; rather, she emphasises instead on the body’s “I can’s” to use Sheets-Johnstone’s words, and reveals its manifestations in corporeal and inter-corporeal sense. Childress’ theatrical work, and also fiction introduces a drama of positivity, a theatrical vision of “Who-I-Am,” not agitprop drama or the drama of “what-I-am-not.”

Childress’s project resistantly affirms self-conscious subjectivity that refuses condescension and seeks, quite importantly, self-engendered power by creating corporeal resistance. Marion Young’s analysis of a female’s movement in her essay “Throwing like a Girl” is of interest here. In this essay, Young explains the meaning of “inhibited intentionality” as that of the feminine translation of her bodily existence in the world of experience in which the “I can” becomes “I cannot” (37). According to Young, whose essay is speaking of its own time (1980s), one of the reasons that created differences in bodily performances between men and women is that a woman “reaches toward a projected end with an I can’ and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed ‘I cannot’” (36). Young contextualizes her

essay in the politics that govern the 1980s from a perspective that overlooks racial differences. Taking her argument into consideration, and following Childress' many examples where a black woman is forced to cross the gender line, and reminding also of Zora Neale Hurston's metaphor of the black woman as the "mule of the world" in reference to the extra historical and social burden, it might be argued that a black female body was not governed by the same "inhabited intentionality" that used to govern the body of non-black female⁸.

Therefore, Childress insists in many of her interviews on the centrality of power in her theatrical vision and how that power should emanate from people and from the black dramatist. Childress places the African American dramatist at the centre of action: "our dramatists have not had a wider viewing because we, as a people, have not had the power to decisively determine the quality and quantity of our participation in Theatre, Television, Radio, and Film, which power would enable us to portray life as we see it" ("Why" 18). This power is derived from an economic status; black artists can establish "black aesthetics" only if "they can find a way to earn some minimum living within the white economy." What is significant, according to Childress, is living the experience, presenting the unusual, and replacing the drama of the "'other side of the coin' reaction to white action" with self-determinist theatre ("Writers" 36).

Childress's theory of self-determinism is best highlighted by Sheets-Johnson's examination of power in Western thought. Sheets-Johnstone offers a reading of the relationship between vision and power different from that presented by Foucault and his theories concerning power relationships expressed through the visual. She argues that Foucault overlooks the "flesh-and-bone body" and tends to focus on the body *simpliciter*, or the body in abstraction from any particular socio-political cultural heritage (*Roots* 14). Power, according to Sheets-Johnstone's interdisciplinary study, is rooted in "the very facts of being a body" (13). The visual

⁸ In Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*, the difference between black and white women's comportment and movement is given a theatrical form as Jeannie, the white actress reminisces about being taught to walk gracefully with a book on her head in Charm school, while Robbie, the black actress, reminds her, that as a black woman, she didn't have to learn how to walk, "we already have this *up* thing" (220).

body does not draw its force from the power of vision itself; on the contrary, the visual is already charged with power (15).

Very importantly, Sheets-Johnstone emphasises the significance of understanding this transformation of power from an ability to control to the power of “I can’s.” This emphasis on the body, as a natural body not a cultural artefact, enables Sheets-Johnstone to give a deeper meaning to the phrase that captured the consciousness of feminists during the seventies: “the personal is political and the political is personal”⁹. Sheets-Johnstone does not negate the cultural factor as a constituent of subjectivity; rather, she prioritizes “being a lived body.” The personal is thus derived from “an all-pervasive human bodily personal that has a history, which is to say that the political is at root a corporeal built-in, a dimension of our primate heritage that is expressed in that repertoire of can’s’ that define us both as creatures of natural history and as culturally and individually groomed bearers of meaning and agents of power” (2).

The body as a repertoire of “can’s” is Childress’s contribution to African American drama, for each of her plays is a dramatisation of the body as an agent of power. Bodies, in Sheets-Johnstone’s theory, are different because each body has a particular history and Childress emphasises this particularity when she explains in an interview with Shirley Jordan the problem of the Women’s Movement and its detachment from black struggle: “they figure we can all join hands on things that are not particularly black; it’s for anybody. But we are all particularly somebody with very particular needs” (35). Childress here anticipates the feminist’s claim of the 1970s that the political is personal. Although it is a struggle to gain socio-political rights for a whole race, it is also a struggle that emanates from particular needs for individuals. Both Mama in *Florence* and Wileta in *Trouble* are propelled into action when their own individuality is threatened; their involvement with racial question emanates from the particular.

⁹ The “personal is political” as a slogan first appeared in 1970 in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*. It sprang from the concerns of the Women’s Liberation Movement, and specifically from New York Radical Women. Carol Hanisch’s “The Personal is Political” was published and given its title by the editors Shulie Firestone and Anne Koedt. Ever since, the term has become popularised and representative of feminist movements of the 1970s (Hanisch 1).

However, the link between individual and community for Childress is inseparable. Unlike Bonner, Childress acknowledges her ties with the community which she sees as necessary for affirmation of self-identity. The South becomes a place where identity is rooted. In both *Florence* and *Trouble*, characters' feeling of rootedness in the South is emphasised, thus it establishes a link with the past on the plantations, especially in *Trouble* where the play within the play speaks about lynching.

How far the white theatregoers and critics understood and reflected on the black experience generally and the black artist specifically is a question that Childress embedded in her two plays *Florence* and *Trouble in Mind*. However, Childress does not make of this question a primary concern; rather, she refers to the inadequacy of reflecting a black experience when it is handled through the perspective of a white directors or producers. Her plays are a comment on the black experience in the theatre at a time when the progress of theatre was conditioned by the standards of a dominant white culture. It was not the aesthetic, linguistic, or technical issues which hindered the progress of this revolutionary drama; the point Childress tries to assert is that this progress was linked to the social discrimination against black artists, especially women, in a white-dominated sphere.

***Raisin* and the Creation of Black Female Embodied Space**

Both Childress and Hansberry presented images of black women whose depiction in stereotypes of strong matriarchs, Jezebels, tragic mulattos are questioned and rejected, especially when a black woman's agency is mistaken for "matriarchy." Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* dramatizes the complex relationship between achieving economic success in compliance with the material values of the American dream and retaining one's self-identity in the face of racial injustice. The Younger family, a black family living in a cramped space, aspires to move into a white neighbourhood regardless of Lindner's ample offer to buy the house in order to keep the neighbourhood white, and regardless of Walter Lee Younger's ambition to buy a liquor store in order to give up his menial job as a driver.

The story of the success of Hansberry's play attests to Childress's thematic concern. The play was widely received because of its appeal to both white and black audiences. The use of the term "dual system of communication" is neutral in specifying what audience primarily authors address; however, it is only during the process of production that this duality gives priority to white audiences. An interdependent relationship between economic demands of production and the perpetuation of white supremacy is evident. Although it is agreed that Broadway is targeted at an middle and upper-middle class audience of whites, this orientation is more political than economical. In her study of *Raisin*, Hansberry's screenplay submitted to Columbia pictures, Lizbeth Lipari argues that the reason for the marginalisation of black audiences is the "rhetorical silence" of whiteness which necessitates an "endless circulation of white innocence, invisibility, and moral goodness" (22). For this reason, the last scene of the original play which was produced on an off-Broadway stage depicting the Younger family awaiting a mob action against them in their newly-bought house, was deleted from the play that reached Broadway stages. This intricate relationship between economic and political institutionalised racism is already dramatised brilliantly in Childress's texts. For example, according to Brown-Gillory, Childress refused productions of her plays if her intentions were to be altered by changes made by producers; so, although *Trouble* was optioned for Broadway, the producers' attempt to "sharpen and delineate" the play so as not to "offend sensibilities" hindered a possible production of *Trouble* (Brown-Gillory, "Images" 231). Ironically, the play presents the politics that govern markets of production through Al Manners' words to Wiletta: "Do you think I can stick my neck out by telling the truth about you? There are billions of things that *can't be said* . . . do you follow me, billions! Where the hell do you think that I can raise a hundred thousand dollars to tell the unvarnished truth?" (265)

It is this "unvarnished truth" that differentiates Childress's play from Hansberry's. Hansberry's play did not hide the truth; rather, it presented this truth "varnished" or embedded in a text censored to fit a white cultural structure. Hansberry depends on what Gordon, in his analysis of humour in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, calls an "ironic awareness"; an awareness of the joke that lies between reality and appearance (Gordon 263). Moving to the white neighbourhood is not a

solution to the Younger's family problems but the beginning of a different type of racial struggle recognised in the spirit of the 1950's sits-in and boycotts. The untold reality is discernible to the black audience and this is the reason why the majority of black people felt that the play was about them. Hansberry depended on this awareness when she emphasised how only from the specific, the universal emerges (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 128). This has been later asserted by the more revolutionary activists of the Black Power Movement. For example, Amiri Baraka, who accused Hansberry of an "assimilationist embrace of integration," changed his opinion of the play in 1986, "[w]hat is telling about our ignorance is that Hansberry's play still remains overwhelmingly popular and evocative of black and white reality, and the masses of black people dug it true" (Graham 685).

Deletions did not occur to the play only. Hansberry's screenplay of *Raisin* which was submitted to Columbia pictures in 1960 underwent a substantial cut. Mark A. Reid referred to the omissions in the film industry about blacks as "neocolonization" (87). *Raisin*, along with Louis Peterson's *Take A Giant Step* (1959), according to Reid, are examples of "neocolonized" "black-oriented" studio productions that are either written or directed by black people. Major Hollywood producers, in contrast to independent Hollywood producers, he notes, "tended to finance works that used popular genres to soften most serious treatments of black socio-cultural experiences which might alienate a white audience" (88). This "neocolonization" is exemplified by the fact that the original script of the play, *Raisin*, is different from the one that reached Broadway, and the original screenplay is different again from the one that reached the studios of Hollywood. Columbia pictures—later to be signified on in Kennedy's *A Movie Star*—did not allow Hansberry any addition of "race issue material" which might threaten a mass audience. For example, Hansberry has Beneatha make remarks about the Africans needing salvation from the British and French, but those remarks were deleted (Reid 86). In a letter to David Susskind, the co-producer of the film, Arthur Kramer, a Columbia production executive, proclaimed that "the introduction of further race issues may lessen the sympathy of the audience, give the effect of propagandistic writing, and so weaken the story, not only as dramatic entertainment, but as propaganda" (Reid 85). In spite of this claim about the screenplay, the play which

underwent similar deletions did not lose its “propagandist” appeal, and Hansberry’s “conformity” to studio and stage production politics did not risk the truth, or the authenticity, of the play.

Whether this deletion affects the appeal of the play is answered by Hansberry herself through her focus on the context of the Younger family. The drama of the play does not hang on its last moment; rather, it hangs, as Hansberry explains, on the aspects of this society that brought Walter to this point (quoted in Lester 10). The lesson he announces in front of his son restores his “wholeness” and might be read as the real resolution of the play, which is mistaken for the act of moving. The play however draws attention to the economic and social condition of South Side Chicago’s ghettos. More importantly, it focuses on the impact of racism on the change in the black community’s aspirations.

Hansberry does not denounce material aspiration; rather she explains that she is “materialist” in the sense of highlighting the need for a “more comfortable material base,” however, she also emphasizes that the need of blacks for material acquisition had distorted their aspiration and “absorbed the national mentality” (quoted in Lester 9). Recently, bell hooks has explained that for black families, “material status is offered as a balm to wounded spirits” (28). Had Walter accepted the offer made by Lindner, his acknowledgement of the impact of what hooks calls “emotional woundedness” would have also been abandoned. Consequently, Walter serves as a symbol of a “younger” generation whose “distorted” desire for material acquisition is the outcome of racism, and his refusal of the offer is the lesson that Hansberry might have wanted to deliver.

This act of deletion emphasizes how safety for African American writers before the Civil Rights Movement lies in conformity as a consequence of psychological oppression. In *Femininity and Domination*, Sandra Lee Bartky refers to economic and political domination as a “concrete powerlessness” which threatens self-autonomy (24). Childress’s plays, to a larger extent than Hansberry’s *Raisin*, offer a dramatisation of this concrete powerlessness and its psychological effect when she makes Wiletta give her Tommish advice to John self-consciously “You either do it [Tommish performance] and stay or don’t do it and get out” (213). Prior to

Childress, Ralph Ellison made a similar statement in regard to the unwillingness of white Americans to hear what African Americans wanted to say unless it conformed to white supremacy. The veteran's advice to the protagonist in *Invisible Man* is an example of the necessity of conformity for the purpose of acceptability: "You don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe in it" (Ellison 153). Hansberry's success and Childress' "invisibility" are produced according to their willingness to play the game. The success of *Raisin*, mainly because of the white audience's sympathising with the family's plight, the cuts made in Hansberry's script, both for theatrical and film production, reduced her play to the very sentimental effects that Childress foresaw and wanted to avoid.

Beneatha's Solo Dance

Beneatha's name is Hansberry's critique of the space a black woman occupies, even though this black woman belongs to the middle class. It signifies on the hierarchies that govern an African American woman's body. Beneatha's relation to the men and to the women in her family is both marginal and inferior—as her name indicates—and she tries hard to bring her position to the centre, through her constant confrontations with the rest of the characters around her. Through the representation of these turbulent relationships, Hansberry captures the contradictions that caught a black woman's consciousness in regard to the political movements surrounding her (pan-Africanism, the Civil Rights Movement) and their intersection with women's rights and black women's feminist and racial struggle. Of course Beneatha is not the activist-prototype that represents the rigor of the Civil Rights Movement—best exemplified by Rosa Parks' 1955 act of defiance, refusing to give up her seat for a white rider—nor does she, like Childress' female protagonists, undergo a remarkable transformation that enables her agency. Rather, she is entrapped in her own un-decidedness. Although energetic and ever-moving, her space, and her movement within this space, are inhibited by this un-decidedness, or by what Young calls in a different context, a "double spatiality" (40).

Young proposes a theoretical re-reading of Merleau Ponty's description of the "here and yonder" in which the body is energised generally by an instantaneous, un-interruptive drive that carries the body from a certain point to its destination

without hesitation. However, Young argues that the feminine existence, because of socio-political and cultural impairments, is marked with a “double spatiality,” because the space of “here” is distinct from the space of “yonder,” or in other words, because of the discontinuity between “the aim and the capacity to realize the aim” (40). Therefore, for a feminine existence, explicitly not feminist existence, the space of the “yonder” is the space where a woman is looking into, rather than moving in (40). In *Raisin*, Beneatha’s space is double not in the sense of discontinuity between the “here” and “yonder” as Young observes in her essay. Rather, it is double in its simultaneous belonging to many places in an attempt to absorb all the social and political trends that prevailed the 1950s.

This is clearly seen in Hansberry’s description of Beneatha’s speech as a “mixture of many things, it is different from the rest of the family’s insofar as education has permeated her sense of English—and perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally—at last—won out in her inflection; but not altogether” (*Raisin* 111). Beneatha’s space is best defined by this “not altogether” that separates her from the places she yearns to belong to; she belongs to both Chicago’s Southside where the events take place and to the South, arguably through her mother’s speech and memories. Yet, she aspires to transcend these places. She embodies this contradiction and complicates it further by her attempt to inhabit African consciousness through a new name, dress, and dance, although she exhibits foppishness in living her American consciousness; her horse-riding, and her insistence to play guitar in spite of the financial difficulties the family goes through, along with her African appearance later, are examples of the ambivalence that characterises Beneatha’s embodied space. Although she is not the main character in Hansberry’s *Raisin*, she becomes the pivot around whom various isms (feminism, Africanism, individualism) are presented and lived as she aims to position herself, unsuccessfully, as an autonomous body.

Beneatha is a representative of a “younger” generation because she takes on the confrontation with her mother, although she fails in the process. Being caught between the space of old traditions and a new, and younger, spirit, Beneatha is unable to move in the direction she aspires to. Her words to her mother, in regard to

her belief in God, are punished by her mother slapping her in the face, and forcing her to repeat: “In my mother’s house there is still God” (116). Hansberry’s own voice, and dilemma of being young, just like Marita Bonner reveals in her essay “On Being Young- A Woman- and Colored”, are echoed in Beneatha’s words: “It is just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort” (116). However, while she dramatizes the various difficulties that hinder Beneatha from specifying a “yonder” towards which she can take a step, Hansberry expresses the tremendous effort that she, as a young black woman artist, had to exert to take a step forward; she contemplates in one of her memoirs: “One drew in all one’s breath and tightened one’s fist and pulled the small body against the heavens, stretching, straining all the muscles in the legs to make –one giant step (*To be Young* 49). The long history of burden on the body of African American women, and the concurrent socio-political situations, inscribe the body’s comportment and make the space between the “here” and the “yonder” a one giant step¹⁰.

Beneatha finds herself entrapped in a drama of negativity where she has to confront the sexism of the men in her life and her mother and sister-in-law’s internalisation of this sexism. In her attempt to re-claim her subjectivity from racial and sexist confiscation, she discovers that she can’t break away from one chain without getting restrained by another. For example, she leaves George Murchison, a rich educated black man, when she discovers that he, just like her un-educated brother, objects to her learning medicine, and to her outspoken personality: “I want you to cut it out, see—The moody stuff, I mean. I don’t like it. You’re a nice looking girl . . . all over. That’s all you need” (130). Fascinated by the “heritage” Asagai, a Nigerian student, brings to her life, Beneatha jumps, physically and metaphorically, into an African dress, assuming a different identity and name, Alaiyo, though she is doubtful of its meaning: “You didn’t tell us what Alaiyo means . . . for all I know,

¹⁰ At the time of its production on Broadway, *Raisin* was reminiscent of Louis S. Peterson’s play, *Take a Giant Step* (1953), as the white audience recognised similarities between themselves and the protagonists of both plays (Hatch and Shine, *The recent period* 104). *Take a Giant Step* registers the huge distance between an African American subject’s expectation of his place and the realistic, but racist, facts that designate his place. On another level, the play registers the social and sexual frustration of a 17 year old young man as he tries to come to terms with his surroundings; this might be the point of identification for the white audience with the protagonist whose dilemma, like that of Walter Lee, can be excavated from its racial dimension and read on a “universal” level.

you might be calling me Little Idiot or something . . .” (120). At the end of the play, Beneatha’s fate is left undecided between either accepting Asagai’s idealistic offer to “return” to Africa or subduing her flamboyant identity to the wishes of her family by getting married to George Murchison.

The unfulfilled search for Africa in Hansberry’s play fits well Beneatha’s ambivalence in regard to her identity and her persistent search for unredeemed “heritage” as she repeatedly emphasizes. After being granted an Asante dress, she performs what she assumes is an African dance in which Walter Lee also becomes entangled. Arguably, Beneatha and her brother are both estranged from Africa, in spite of their attempt to live this Africanness and claim it as part of their subjectivities through a tribal dance.

African dance for African Americans is not a distant, exotic orbit as the play shows. Its meaning had been integrated into their daily lives and culture since the arrivals of the first slave ship to America. The many forms and different meanings of African dances are inexhaustibly varied as the African slaves were brought to North America from different areas where dances were integral parts of their various religions¹¹. However, there are some characteristics that speak for African dance in diaspora. The most prominent feature is circularity. In *Slave Culture*, Sterling Stukey explains how dancing in a circle—the clockwise dance ceremony, or what is referred to in North America as the ring shout—is related to many cultural concepts such as death, burial, marriage, war, and, story-telling ceremonies (12). This circle, which has many cultural meanings, is the first element that disappears from *Raisin*’s African dance. Although joined by her brother, both Beneatha and Walter Lee seem to be dancing to different rhythms and different meanings. Unlike Ntozake Shange’s emphasis on the circle, discussed in chapter four, Hansberry makes Beneatha’s individualistic dance a symbol of her separateness from her family, and a marker of her being at a loss about apprehending the context she experiences.

¹¹ For more on the chronological development of African dance in America, see Barbara Glass’ *African American Dance: An Illustrated History* (2007) where she traces the development of African American dances from its African origin, through the plantation dance, minstrelsy, and fad dances to the more recent hip hop dance of the 1980s. Brenda Dixon Gottschild’ *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance Dance and Other Contexts* (1996) investigates the presence of Africanist aesthetics in in European classical dances and American dance performances, arguing that Africanist aesthetics is embedded in Euro-American artistic performances.

Beneatha's act of conjuring African consciousness is presumptuous because Africa for her is a flight of imagination, not a reality that informs her experience-in-the-world. The basis for the conception of an individual's relationship to the world, Sheets-Johnstone explains in *The Phenomenology of Dance*, is the knowledge of his/her "consciousness-body in a *living* context with the world [emphasis in the original]" (12). In other words, the dancing body formulates its movement as an extension of its own being¹². Beneatha's movement is informed by her Americanness as much as by her Africanness. Beneatha presumes that the knowledge she has about Africa enables her African identity. However, the dance she performs exposes her romantic naivety and questions her knowledge of Africa and consequently, her African roots. The meaning of the tribal dance for Beneatha is missed as she comes to the dance with misconceptions and idealised misinformation. When asked by Ruth, her sister-in-law, about what kind of dance she performs, Beneatha answers that it is a dance welcoming men; but when asked again where those men have been, she extemporaneously answers: "How should I know—out hunting or something, Anyway, they are coming back now" (124). Beneatha attempts to access through her body an African consciousness which is not grounded in her world of experience; so, she becomes estranged from the dance she performs.

Beneatha's exoticism has to be challenged; when Asagai later confronts Beneatha, he complicates further her unsettling predicament by questioning her knowledge: "Don't you see that there will be young men and women, not British soldiers then, but my own Black countrymen . . . to step out of the shadows some evening and slit my then useless throat? Don't you see they have always been there . . . that they always will be" (141). Asagai's words offer no compensation for Beneatha's unquenched quest for her historical ancestry. Perplexingly, he instead offers her a "return" with him to Nigeria to show her "our mountains and our stars" and give her "cool drinks from gourds" and teach her "the old songs and the way of our people—and, in time, we will pretend that—(*very softly*)—you have only been

¹² Sheets-Johnstone explains in her philosophical study of dance that the meaning of any dance does not come alive as a result of prior knowledge of dance, nor does it come as a result of later reflective efforts; the meaning comes alive only "as we ourselves have a lived experience of the dance." In other words, the lived experience in the world determine the form of dance and its meaning. Nonetheless, subsequent reflections are important as they "rid us of our preconceptions of dance so that our subsequent encounters are immediately and directly meaningful" (*Phenomenology* 4)

away for a day” (141). As Asagai swings her around, Beneatha confesses, “you’re getting me all mixed up” (141). The bodily autonomy she assumes in her African dress and dance become an illusion, or a symbol of the gap that separates her from apprehending her relation to African space, and her rootedness in the American one. In chapter three, I analyse specifically the meaning of motherland Africa for black women playwrights in the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that they endeavoured to de-romanticize this cultural space in order to situate their existence in the here-and-now within American society.

Beneatha is Hansberry’s surrogate character. In “Of Vikings and Congo Drums”, part of a posthumous play compiled by Hansberry’s husband Robert Nemiroff, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, Beneatha reappears as Candace who, like Hansberry herself, is studying at Wisconsin and is in a relationship with Monasse, an Ethiopian student. “One thing was certain” Hansberry speaks of Candace as much as she speaks of herself, “she was at one, texture, blood, follicles of hair, nerve ends, all with the sound of a mighty Congo drum” (75). The sound of the African drum seems to bring Candace into consciousness of her body. Hansberry shows in her letters and memoirs, integrated into the text of *To Be Young*, a similar feeling of being captivated by Africa as a dreamland and as an escape from the harsh realities of American society. In a letter to her husband dated 1955, she reveals that “peace in symphonies, and grass, and light, and mountains” is not to be found in this life (106). Although a fierce social activist herself, Hansberry substitutes Africa in her literary imagination for better realities she is fighting for.

Like Beneatha who appears at the beginning of the play wearing fashionable short dress and black stockings and informing her family that she wants to play guitar, Candace’s body is claimed by European and African heritage: “Scandinavian lore had once captivated her; indeed she had been obsessed with images of tall grunting blonde folk in fur capes and horns and belted leggings moving through dark forests grunting Beowulf and building funny churches with turned-up edges and having sex in hay lofts” (75). Both of these excerpts reimagining Africa and Europe attest to an attempt to understand the historically-embedded body in order to root this very body in the present. This sense of double belonging, of claiming two cultures as

an enriching literary source, reappears in Adrienne Kennedy's expressionist plays too as will be discussed in chapter three¹³. *Raisin's* Beneatha, unlike Childress' female protagonists, is the embodiment of a black female consciousness at a loss about the complexity of the 1950s with its Civil Rights activism, Pan-Africanism, anticipating both Black feminism and the militant Black power Movement.

Conclusion

I showed above how both Childress and Hansberry used bodies in space, the socio-political, and historically informed space, to reflect on the power relationships that govern African American women's bodies. I also used Beneatha in *Raisin*, not in autobiographical sense, but in comparison with Hansberry to illustrate the playwright's reflection on the confiscation of her body as a young, African American woman. I focused mainly on Childress' attempt to accentuate a black female body's "I can's'," and Hansberry's dramatisation of the "inhibited space" after my analysis of the socio-political factors that caused this confiscation of bodies in the example of the politics of production that Childress dramatised and Hansberry implicitly referred to.

The plays of Childress and Hansberry testify to the need for American society during the 1950s to question sexist and racial social constructs which were dominant for a long time for both blacks and whites. This necessity was translated into the activism of the Civil Rights Movement. The choice of realist representation, with an emphasis on individual transformation, was targeted, primarily, at a black audience to develop communal resistance; and also to ground this audience in the racial and social politics of its own time. Both playwrights were shaped by the political and psychological conditions of that era, and both were keen to present characters that were shaped by the same conditions. But most importantly, they were landmarks in their deconstruction, or at least the beginning of deconstruction, of concepts such as docile, or servile, bodies.

¹³ In *People Who Led to My Plays* (1987), an autobiographical memoir, Adrienne Kennedy credits the success of Hansberry's play as the biggest influence on her decision to continue writing plays: "I had abandoned playwrighting by the time Lorraine Hansberry made her sensational entrance into Broadway theater with the classic *A Raisin in the Sun*, because I thought there was no hope; but with Lorraine Hansberry's success, I felt reawakened, I read every word about her triumph and took heart" (109).

Disclaiming Motherland Africa in the 1960's: Plays by Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, and Adrienne Kennedy

In this chapter I argue that African American women playwrights during the sixties sought liberation for their cultural identity from an abstract identification with Mother Africa. The socio-political context, in spite of the strength of the Black Power Movement, and previously the Civil Rights Movement, did not provide for feminist playwrights a space for the examination of cultural identity except in opposition to white supremacy. In *Raisin*, for example, Hansberry tried to present Africa as a flight of imagination. Walter's African dance, as shown in chapter two, utilised the image of the African Warrior, but in a moment of drunkenness which distanced Walter from his real financial and social problems. On the other hand, Beneatha's sense of belonging to many places is illustrative of the oppressive politics of the Black Power Movement for women. This was overlooked in the literary criticism that dealt primarily with the "universality" of the play, or the heroic transformation of the main male character. Hansberry voiced her criticism of the spatial duplicity of oppression for women when she observed in a radio interview in 1959 that "obviously the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women" and it is only natural that when they are "twice oppressed," they become "twice militant" (quoted in Carter 160). The desire, which dominated Black Arts thought, to "connect" with African roots seems to impose an estranging identity on African American women against which they had to be militant.

The reason for focusing on the "African Mother" figure in this chapter stems from its domineering presence in texts written by three black women playwrights during the sixties. While Hansberry's *Raisin* depicts the social reality of a middle class black family residing in Chicago, her 1960 play, *Les Blancs*, blends elements of militancy and revolution to depict colonised African subjects in Kenya. Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind* uses the turmoil of militant activities as a background for her dramatisation of an African American artist's idealisation of Africa and devaluation of African American women. On the other hand, Kennedy's

expressionistic plays, *Funnyhouse of A Negro* (1964) and *The Owl Answer* (1965) depend heavily on fragmentation and repetition—showing an approach close to avant-garde theatre—to dramatize the dilemma of double un-belonging for a young African American female through shattering maternal lineage. My approach uses Sheets-Johnstone’s examination of female vulnerability as a cultural construct and Laura Doyle’s phenomenological concept of racialised maternal ontology.

I partially pay attention to the form used by those playwrights as it comments on the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement and stands as a statement on the impossibility of separating artistic form from the feminist aspiration to change the body politics. Through using “Western” forms of expression, those women accentuated their rootedness in the American experience. Kennedy’s theatrical work, for example, shed light on the problem of estranged characters and alienated bodies. Yet, it was under attack by black activists for its derivation from Euro-American aesthetics at a time when Black Nationalism dictated that the only acceptable form should be at heart Afrocentric. It is therefore important to introduce two concepts: Afrocentricity and what came to be known later as the drama of Nommo. Although these two concepts were made popular in the 1970s, their meaning was retrospective in the sense that they provided a commentary on the Black Arts theatre and thought. First, I will start with introducing the masculine mind-set of the 1960s as it explains the spirit of an age within which, and sometimes against which, those women worked.

The Black Power Movement: A Masculinised Historical Context

A contextualisation of African American theatre during the sixties in America seems to indicate the dominance of a militant political activism. It is a theatre which does not only reflect upon racial tension in America in a phase of social change, but it also dramatizes the complexities of shaping a black identity undergoing this socio-political change. Thus, it marks the transformation of African Americans from “Negroes” to “Black Americans” due to the socio-political activism during the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement. This actualisation, and previously the aspiration towards this actualisation—not to be confused with the activism of the Civil Rights Movement which was emphatically concerned with

rootedness in the American society—was enabled by a long-held trend of social, historical, and political thought that has come to be known as Pan-Africanism¹. Consequently, the concept of African roots, more than before, was transformed from a stigma of slavery to a sign of a cultural identity to be redeemed and celebrated. As an aesthetic, the deconstruction of whiteness as a way of looking at the world was no longer the central motive of black scholars; African American identity, with its African roots, triggered a school of “Black Aesthetics” by activists such as Hoyt Fuller, Addison Gayle Jr, Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka—who embodied the Afrocentric aesthetics and abandoned his “slave” name LeRoi Jones.

This newly accentuated black pride greatly influenced the African American theatre. In the 1960s and 1970s, African American dramatists played a role similar to Du Bois’s advocacy of propagandistic drama in the early 1920s. Like Du Bois, Baraka demanded a theatre about, for, and with *only* black people, a reason for accusing him of “reverse racism” by New York white critics (Hatch and Shine, *The Recent Period* 380)². The concept of “double consciousness” which Du Bois introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century was replaced in the 1960s with black pride and abandonment of Western culture. In its socio-political context, it sought independence from economic and political white supremacy; in literature, it demanded a re-evaluation of Western aesthetics which was seen as inadequate tool for African American expression. This can be seen in Larry Neal’s search for an alternative aesthetics; Neal explained in his article, “The Black Arts Movement,” that “Western aesthetics has run its course,” and that “it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure” (2039).

¹ According to Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, Pan-African movement can be traced back to 1897 when the African Association in London was founded and followed by the first Pan-African conference in 1900, also in London (viii). During the 1930s, Pan-African movements were strongly influenced by socialist, communist and anti-imperialist perspectives (ix). As a concept, it is concerned with the unity of all Africa and Africans in diaspora; however, it also defies definition as there has never been “one universally accepted definition of what constitutes Pan-Africanism” (i). In the USA, the emergent African American identity politics of the CRM and BPM gave rise to Afrocentrism, which had been rooted in African American communities through the pageantry of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association during the 1920s, in opposition to white supremacy, and as a part of the larger Pan-Africanism.

² What distinguishes Baraka’s call for all-black theatre is his insistence that even the roles of white actors should be played by black actors wearing makeup, replacing, in doing so, the burnt-cork white minstrel with the “chalk-faced black minstrel” (Fabre 19). Baraka’s objective, according to Fabre, was to prevent whites from storming Harlem and repeating the situation of the twenties (20).

Equating political activism with artistic expression, Neal provides the black aesthetic with an ethics that is derived from the Black Power Movement: “your ethics and your aesthetics are one,” and it is the contradiction between the ethics and aesthetics which makes Western Culture, for Neal, an inadequate mould for black expression (2041). Neal’s ethics don’t exclude violence, whether it is an “actual blood revolution” or one that “physically redirects the energy of the oppressed” (2049). In so doing, he sets an oppositional model: Old Spirituality (which Du Bois calls the Faith of the Fathers) that lives with the oppressors and ascribes to them an innate goodness, and a New Spirituality which demands a radical shift in point of view (2049). The contrast made between the two *Spiritualities* is an explicit reference to the contrast between the ideologies of the integrationist Civil Rights Movement, as seen by Black Power movement activists, and the more militant Black Power Movement.

To raise socio-political consciousness among African Americans, and to stir a cultural revolution in arts as in everyday life were the objectives of the cooperation between Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka to publish in 1968 *Black Fire! An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. The anthology criticised the “passivity” of previous generations to question the aesthetics of Western forms of expression and made popular “Black Aesthetics.” Not separate from the socio-political context, the Black Arts Movement echoed the Black Power Movement’s resentment of the Civil Rights Movement’s concepts of nonviolence and integration³.

The interconnectedness between the socio-political arena and the literary one marked the end of the Civil Rights era. The Civil Rights Movement’s ideology of peaceful resistance held an obvious allure for most Americans, but was criticised by the Black Power Movement and practically radicalised by the Black Panther Party. In her examination of post-war African American popular culture as a merger between the cultural politics of the Black Power Movement and the aesthetics of the

³ Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* was severely criticised by Black Power Arts advocates for its “assimilationist” perspective. In 1961, James Baldwin wrote an article titled “Is *A Raisin in the Sun* a Lemon in the Dark” criticising the play as a flawed piece of work because of its characters’ “stock” representations, especially the matriarchal figure of Lena Younger (Baldwin 31). Similarly, Baraka considered the play a part of the “passive resistance phase” of the Civil Rights Movement criticising it for lacking touch with the lives of ordinary blacks (Halliwell 132).

Black Arts Movement, Amy Abugo Ongiri notes that the Black Panther Party had a widespread effect on African American popular culture (19). Ongiri shows how the Black Panther Party justified its struggle by the failure of the Civil Rights Movement and its acceptance by white majority because of its “negative moral suasion” (87). The Black Panther party challenged the rhetoric of integration and offered instead a radicalised vision of racial resistance; more importantly, it helped create a militant image to be later prevalent in propagandist literature and exaggerated in media.

The Civil Rights Movement was severely criticised by Black Power activists and Black Panthers, Ongiri argues, as “undecidedly Southern, rural, and clerical” (73). Thus, the rhetoric of non-ghetto and non-urban Civil Rights Movement did not fit the ghettoised and urban experiences. Furthermore, the failure of the Civil Rights act of 1964 to be materially actualised on a widespread scale led African Americans to doubt the Civil Rights leadership and the ability of its organisations to achieve future victories (73). This withdrawal from the non-violent acts of Civil Rights era was further deepened by a series of assassinations which started with Malcolm X in 1965. Malcolm’s death led not only to a radical culture on a socio-political level, but was an inspiration to Baraka to return to Harlem and establish the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School of Harlem in 1965; his return to Harlem was seen as a symbolic birth of the Black Arts Movement (Jennings 15).

Baraka’s black aesthetics created and circulated a masculinised image constructed on misogyny and an accentuated black masculinity, according to bell hooks in *We Real Cool* (13). For example, in *Dutchman* (1964), Baraka represents the white woman as a death-trap to young black men, a symbolic dramatisation of the atrocities of lynching, and a “cautionary” play about the whites’ manipulative acts of sympathy. Diana Rosenhagen’s examination of violence in Baraka’s plays detects violence not only as a supremacist tactic which Baraka warns against, but also as an explicit means of counteraction on his part. She argues that Baraka’s plays, particularly *Slave Ship* (1970), include the audience in the production of violence through committing acts of violence not only in, but also through the play; for example, the audience of *Slave Ship*, the stage direction indicates, is encouraged to participate in the last dance which celebrates the death of the white voice and the

black preacher in the play (153). Neal in his review of the play had commented on the inclusion of audience in Baraka's play as a means that serves "digging ritualized history," specifically, a history that "allows emotional and religious participation on the part of the audience," a product of "the new Afro-American sensibility" (Neal 2048). The emotional and religious participation which Neal spoke of sought to provoke militancy within black audiences. Whether it found large audiences or small ones, the play is a proof of circulating militant images through the Black Arts Movement which Neal had already described as "an aesthetic and spiritual" sister of the Black Power Movement⁴.

Baraka had a great influence on other playwrights like Ed Bullins and August Wilson. His drama, and definitely his poems, as well as the work of other Black Arts activists, created, according to James Smethurst's study of literary nationalism of the Black Arts Movement, the image of the "Black Arts warrior" (81). African heroic figures like Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah were seen as idols, and a sense of positive identification was encouraged to use the image of the African warrior as an embodiment of African identity to which African Americans should aspire (81). While the heroic representation of African American masculinity found its model in real historical figures, African American female identity was abstracted from its historical context into ahistorical image of "Mother Africa." As an idealised concept, Mother Africa in actuality meant estrangement from the real socio-political context.

The image of "Mother Africa" was rooted in the writings of African Americans from the beginning of the twentieth century. It was perpetuated and given more accentuation later as a new aesthetic that symbolised the rupture with Western ideology during the Black Power Movement. "Mother Africa" became the abstract unifying concept as it cherished the myth of a common culture and common origin at a time when the real geographical Africa was undergoing a transformation from colonialism to independence, providing a model of resistance for the Black Power Movement's activists. The feminist approach to theatre, especially in plays written

⁴ Another experience which created panic for both black and white audiences happened in the summer of 1965 when Baraka organised five weeks of performances through the streets of Harlem down to the northern tip of Central Park where he staged revolutionary performances in order to call for immediate action (Fabre 20).

by Childress and Hansberry during the fifties, and later in the sixties, criticizes, implicitly, this dominant presence of the African Mother figure in African American writings as an abstraction that overlooks the real status and marginalisation of African American women in black communities. Their dramaturgy offer a criticism of both black men's chauvinism and their masculinised abstraction and idealisation of "Motherland Africa." The dilemma of the black persona was then emphasised by black women playwrights in light of its linkage to the present and its real socio-political complications at a time when African countries were similarly facing colonisation and creating independence revolutions.

Afrocentricity and the Drama of Nommo

The dramatic works of the sixties were shaped by emphasis on a collective consciousness of African roots, and they contributed to the ideology of what has come to be known a decade later as "Afrocentricity."⁵ In more recent times, Molefi Kete Asante has defined this concept; his *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980) epitomizes the general aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s. He denounced the attempt of black thinkers to reach for political and economic unity that pervaded African American communities since the eighteenth century. Echoing Malcolm X, he saw that the danger of unity, similar to the danger of integration, resided in dissolving African American culture into a white one (25). Asante emphasizes that the collective consciousness of black communities (which he defines as an awareness of collective history and future) means a deep commitment to Africa itself (25). Although the Black Arts Movement builds upon different approaches to Africa, it, primarily, stresses the significance of collective consciousness of belonging that encompasses the black masses. The form of any literary work, Asante argues, should follow this particular aesthetic. The attack on integration was as much directed at Western literary forms of expression as it was on socio-political hegemony.

⁵ Afrocentricity as an abstract noun dates to the 1970s; it was popularised by Molefi Asante's *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980). However, as a concept and actual sentiment, it traces back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century coming into fruition during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

The integration between the stage and the audience, as shown in Baraka's plays, is crucial to the aesthetic of African American theatre during the 1960s as it seeks to raise consciousness of larger communities and empower them through the force of theatrical word and experience. Later, Paul Carter Harrison emphasised this force in African American drama, using the African term, "Nommo" in his 1973 *Drama of Nommo*⁶. The word is derived from the Dogon tribe in Mali; it means "the vital force of the earth," and that man can direct the life force because he has power over the word; in Dogon legends, Nommo is a celestial figure who divided his body among men to feed them so he gave all his principals to human beings (Fabre 204). Again, the racial collective experience of larger communities is at the heart of choosing "Nommo" as a descriptive word of the African American theatrical experience during the 1960s and 1970s.

The objective of this Afrocentric philosophy is the reach for collective change in the audience. Although this objective has already been coupled with the development of black theatre since its inception, the "change" had been given an "Afrocentric" emphasis during the militant sixties. The use of African terminology, in a way similar to African naming—and costume—of blacks in America, offers a redefinition of black theatre. In her study of ethnic and militant theatre of African American experience from 1945 to the late 1970s, G  nevi   Fabre explains the significance of African terminology in the African American canon in establishing unbreakable links with Africa; for example, she observes that Harrison borrows from African philosophy to present Africa itself as an "indissoluble tie" with African American communities (204). Because Nommo becomes the "Word," and the individual is the "force" that masters the word, she argues, the dramatic character, consequently, follows the hero prototype. Fabre observes that such a conception "eliminates [individual] psychology and challenges the basic tenets of Western drama" because it represents the world as a "play of forces embodied in human beings" (204). However, the socio-political context of the 1960s is evidence that one

⁶ Harrison met Amiri Baraka in 1951 while he was living in New York. He taught at Howard University between 1968 and 1970. The first to use the word "Nommo" was the German scholar Janheinz Jahn in his 1961 comparative study of African culture, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*. Harrison worked in Europe (Spain and Netherland) between 1962 and 1968, and Jahn worked in France and published in English, Harrison's book was a response to Jahn's comparative study.

can't be a "master" of the word within a hegemonic culture—white patronage and Government funding of Baraka's project is an example—and psychological dimensions, as will be shown in Kennedy's plays, can't be eliminated or substituted. Africa indeed, as Fabre observes, is a memory anchored in the collective consciousness more than in actual reality (201).

Jacqueline Wood also offers a reading of *Nommo* which is based on the socio-political experience of African Americans. She defines *Nommo* as an organic agent of black communal resistance and describes it as an approach to "protest literature" which encompasses all African American drama and defines it ("Enacting" 105). *Nommo*, Wood explains, engages African philosophy and it is important to understand the form of African American drama because of its engagement of three principles found in black protest literature: securing justice and equal rights for all human beings, attaining communal unity, and ensuring cultural integrity (106). Consequently, the positioning of the audience, in particular, and the community, in general, at the heart of protest drama is "what makes Black drama black," and is the turning point from the western canonical drama (103).

Wood's argument indicates that if African American theatre is not about protest, even when it is not self-conscious of employing these elements, then it is not black theatre. The early plays of Zora Neale Hurston and Eulalie Spence, for example, are not propagandistic but they aim at raising consciousness about everyday life and emotions. Marita Bonner, as shown in chapter one, endeavoured in *Exit: An Illusion*, to shed light on, and re-value, love between a black couple. And finally, Hurston's article "What White Publishers Won't Print" laments the de-valuing of the depiction of emotions and feelings in African American daily-life in favour of protest theatre⁷. The plays analysed below show that a "black" play, even

⁷ As a form of resistant literature, African Americans' use of black aesthetics (of protest mainly) did not measure up to "universal" criteria of western art. This means that if black literature is not about protest, then it is not "black," and if it is about protest, then, it is not "universal." Roughly about twenty years after the inception of Black Arts Movement, Toni Morrison addressed what was still pertinent to African American literature; namely, racially institutionalised hierarchy. In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison re-emphasizes the necessity to overthrow the "Ancient Model" (7). African American literature, she argues, is not inferior to an elite, western mood of expression; it is the latter that needs re-examination and re-interpretation (11). This re-examination aspires to relocate the African American subject in the language, the structure, and the meaning of African American literature. More recently, Kenneth Warren in *What Was African American Literature?* argues that

when engaged in the racial question, is an artistic embodiment of being-in-the-world, for it is, as Robbie McCauley explains, in the tradition of black poets, a tradition which “looms long and large in black life and art” (“The Struggle” 584).

Afrocentrism, before being given a name, was then the socio-political commentary rooted in the politics of Civil Rights and Black Power Movements against Western ideology and arts. Harrison, like Black Arts writers of the 1960s, rejects western, Euro-American, aesthetics in favour of a new black theatre which is specifically Afrocentric. Social realism becomes the problem for the black artist because, according to Harrison, it “deters the excavation of hidden meanings by locking images into fixed relations with the surface of social life” (quoted in Fabre 203). Characters’ actions, he explains, are only reactions to “oppressed social reality” and their resolutions are individualised. Childress’s *Wine in the Wilderness* addresses particularly the problematic of this new “Afrocentric” role of the black artist and the necessity to address individualised problems and resolutions. Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* and Kennedy’s *The Funnyhouse of A Negro* and *The Owl Answers*, as the rest of this chapter will show, present Mother Africa as a memory and abstraction rather than an aspiration and actual reality.

Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*

Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* was produced posthumously on Broadway in 1970; however, she started writing it in 1960 as a response to Jean Genet’s *Les Nègres* (1958). The play is a merger of Western aesthetics (the sporadic use of Expressionism as a means for exploring the psychology of characters undergoing transformation) and the Afrocentric philosophy where forces of “good” and “evil,” very characteristic of the drama of Nomo, collide. The play starts with a European boat on an African river to give an image of invasion and estrangement that endorses the protagonist’s state of mind, and it ends with the flames of fire burning the “Mission Hospital” and prophesying an end to a colonising era epitomised in the word “mission.”

African American literature has come to an end, because its historical context, the Jim Crow era, had ended. Thus, he, unlike Morrison, identifies it as literature of protest, or literature which is sometimes shaped by its relation to protest such as the literary work of Zora Neale Hurston.

Throughout the play, Mother Africa appears, and re-appears, as an enshrined deity for the men-warriors. Her first appearance as a woman warrior accentuates the absence of black female characters—the only female characters are an elderly white missionary, Mme Nielsen, and a white doctor, Marta Gotterling—and emphasises a metaphysical dominance through which she controls men's consciousness and destiny:

A Woman dancer is seen suspended in the sky in a characteristic African dance pose. Black-skinned and imposing, cheeks painted for war, her wiry hair rounded by a colorful band, she wears only a leather skirt and, about her waist, a girdle of hammered silver. From her wrists and ankles hang bangles of feathers and silver. (*Les Blancs* 53)

Although the depiction of the woman warrior is immersed in primitiveness (painted cheeks, leather skirt), which might be easily mistaken as an over-sexualised image, it nonetheless accentuates the only function of the woman warrior as that of an agile leader (wiry hair, hammered silver). At the end of her dance, she raises a spear in a “symbolic appeal to resistance” when she hears the laughter of hyenas (54). She also comes to the rescue of Tshembe's African consciousness whenever he experiences an identity crisis: “I have known her to gaze upon me,” Tshembe informs Charles, “from puddles in the streets of London, from vending machines in the New York subways” (105). After the death of his friend Peter, in an act of rebellion against British colonisers, Tshembe accepts the spear offered by the woman warrior as a symbol of his re-birth into militant resistance and his initiation to armed rebellion.

Although characterised as a victorious and domineering female archetype, this woman warrior leads the men in the play to their death and to unrestrained violence. The woman warrior/dancer is presented as a creation of male imagination. In controlling men's destiny, she serves as a foil to women whose destinies, subjectivities, and spaces are controlled by men, as the analysis of *Wine in Wilderness* below will demonstrate. Most importantly, the kinship between this cultural archetype and her “descendants” exists only on a metaphysical level. Her body is made ephemeral as it is “suspended in the sky,” and in spite of her grotesque sexual appearance, her motherhood is questioned as she invites the men to war and destruction.

Even in her absence, the woman warrior is at the centre of *Les Blancs*. Her opening image is re-invoked, and repudiated, when Tshembe tries to talk Eric out of joining the militants: “It takes more than a spear to make a man,” Tshembe tells his enraged brother, Eric (144). Abioseh also uses his religious teaching to convince both his brothers of the futility of fight against the coloniser: “Men do not move from lizard powder to legislatures, from sweeping floors to ruling nations” to which Tshembe, half caught in Eric’s cause, and half way to accepting the woman warrior’s spear, replies: “Here men do not move from sweeping floors to anything” (147). The dialogue stresses that the woman warrior’s relationship to the brothers’ consciousness is at the heart of the conversation. Abioseh’s dedication to his Christian mission to save Africa, as he claims, breaks away from acknowledging the existence of the woman warrior and the spear she raises. Eric on the other hand, renounces his European name and reclaims his African name, Ngedi, the name given to him by his African mother. Not only does he accept the spear, but also he “*crashes the length of [it] against Tshembe’s chest*” (144). The men in the play orient themselves towards the woman warrior, and this orientation informs their different understandings of the colonised-coloniser struggle. The dynamic of this “maternal” relationship determines the relationships between the brothers. In this way, the woman warrior becomes the motherless mother, an embodiment of war and disruptive relationships.

It is true that the image of the woman warrior persists in the symbolic act of resistance, and as a counter-image of a colonising force, however, Hansberry seems to resist the clear-cut division between good and evil, making these two forces constituent of each character. The catastrophic end is not the result of the existence of the woman warrior in the play, but of the dynamics of power, of subjugation and resistance that led to the inevitable creation of an idol of war and violence. The last scene of the play highlights this disruptive relationships as Tshembe kills his brother Abioseh for his treason, and Eric throws a bomb at the Mission Hospital, killing the white matron Mme. Nielsen who falls into the arms of the anguished Tshembe; the latter bewails the many deaths around him and utters his animal-like scream.

Mme Nielsen serves as a European mother figure for Tshembe. She was Tshembe's tutor before he left for Europe. She delivered his half-white brother Eric in spite of the objection of her husband, the Reverend Nielsen, to this sinful act; not that of the rape of Tshembe's mother, but the act of mixing the races: "to him it was clear," Mme Nielsen reveals to Tshembe, "the child was a product of an evil act, a sin against God's order, the natural separation of the races" (*Les Blancs* 167). Mme Nielsen distances herself from her husband's mission, and assumes a motherly bond with Tshembe and his brothers. Eric reminisces at the beginning of act two how the blanket given by Mme Nielsen to Tshembe brought the brothers together: "The blanket Madame gave you. Remember how we used to sit by the fire and talk . . . you and me and Abioseh. When the fire went out you would wrap me in it and I'd fall asleep. Remember, Tshembe?" (115) When Tshembe unveils his double consciousness, and tells Mme Nielsen that her European mountains became his, she instructively guides him to his African consciousness: "You have forgotten your geometry if you are despairing [. . .] Our country needs *warriors*, Tshembe Matoseh. Africa needs warriors" (169). Therefore, it is Mme Nielsen who delivers Tshembe to his African Mother and the first to die as a consequence. Hansberry's play then evades the clear-cut division between right and wrong, good, and evil, or even any antagonism between African and European mothers.

The play itself becomes a signifier of the politics that govern American society during the 1960s. In his 1970 review of the play, Clive Barnes refers to "Africa" as a major flaw in the play because, according to him, the play specifically talks about the United States: "I wonder how much Miss Hansberry knew or Mr. Nemiroff really knows about Africa? . . . it is obvious that they are trying to tell us something about America – and I think they would have done better to have told it to us straight" (quoted in Nemiroff 182). Although the use of Africa as a de-romanticised motherland is functional, the play does signify back to America. However, Hansberry's reference to structural racism transcends the boundary of a specific location and seeks the denouncement of racism everywhere. It is not to say that Hansberry, though revolutionary in spirit, did present simply a propagandistic play about a just act of rebellion, or a cautionary tale about its destructive force. Rather, she shows the apocalyptic end of racism. Reason, and the ability to reason, is

the sublime ethic in all of Hansberry's plays, and the play in its most parts dramatizes this act of reasoning through the many dialogues between Charlie and Tshembe. In a different place Hansberry emphasises the necessity to reason: "[. . .] man is unique in the universe, the only creature who has in fact the power to transform the universe. Therefore, it did not seem unthinkable to me that man might just do what the apes never will – *impose the reason for life on life* [italics added]" (*To be Young* 319).

Barnes was right in claiming that Hansberry wanted to tell something about America, because she wanted to tell something about America's lack of reasoning, about its racism and sexism, and also about African American ahistorical idealisation and romanticisation of a continent struggling with Western colonisers. The "Africa" that Walter's imagination constructs in *Raisin* is not the same colonised territory in *Les Blancs*. This tendency to romanticise nature is not specific to African Americans in their idealisation of Motherland Africa. Western society's view of nature, particularly in the twentieth century, according to Sheets-Johnstone, is so sentimentalised "that it appears a heaven for righting all that is wrong" (*Roots* 62). Africa was another romanticised geography to right what was going wrong in America. Unlike Black Arts writers who sought beauty and purity in a distant geography, Hansberry insists that beauty can be found around her "walking down Southside Street," stopping in front of a "Harlem window," and turning pages from books from the South (*To Be Young* 106).

Hansberry's appeal to a dual audience in *Les Blancs* brought a great division among critics and audiences⁸. The reception ranged from classifying it as the worst new play on Broadway to a rare moment in American theatre. Critics in their reviews of the play in the first week of its production, Nemiroff explains, seemed to have attended different plays, or "[h]ad come out marching to the sound of quite different (Congo) drummers" (167). Critic Arthur Sainer in *The Village Voice* described "much feeling" and a "sense of emotional investment throughout the audience – black, white audience"; while Rex Reed in *The Sunday News* depicted how the audience responded to the play so violently that a black militant screamed:

⁸ For more on the many critical reviews and the reaction of the audiences stirred by the play's premier, see Nemiroff's postscript to "Les Blancs." 173-185.

“*Les Blancs*, is, if you’ll forgive me, too black and white” (Nemiroff 174). Most pertinent of these reviews is Richard Watt’s in the *New York Post*: “I happen to be very fond of Africa and have never felt rejected by it, and I know *Les Blancs* is truthful as well as deeply haunting” (177). Watt’s review is resonant with Hansberry’s objective of the deconstruction of a long-romanticised, and colonised, geography and drawing more attention to real problems occurring in both African and American landscapes.

This appeal to a dual audience, in spite of Hansberry’s avid activism, is part of her perspective that both races should aspire to addressing problems beyond racial struggle on the basis of common humanity⁹. Therefore, her use of characterisation is not simply allegorical; rather, she dramatizes the conflict between ideologies, not between characters. The conflict is not between black and white, colonisers and colonised, good and evil as the boundaries between these categories are blurred; it is a conflict between civilisation and primitiveness as it appears, and is experienced, by each character. The first achievement of the play is that it eliminates the concept of “primitiveness” as a constituent of a Western fascination with Africa and African subjects.

After the premiere of Genet’s *Les Nègres: Clownerie* in New York 1961, Hansberry along with other black artists like Langston Hughes and Ossie Davis, show their resentment at the play not only because of black representation in primitive stereotypes, but also because it is “predicated on violent reprisal” (Warrick 132). Therefore, Hansberry did not present violence in the same way that Baraka later utilised it as aesthetics of resistance. In fact, Hansberry dramatizes how her characters are cornered into a place where violence becomes inevitable, not a free choice: “We have been saying that for generations” Tshembe declares in a moment of truth with Charlie, “They only listen now because they are forced to. Take away the violence and who will hear the man of peace?” (120). Hansberry shows how

⁹ In her 1962 *What Use are Flowers?* Hansberry renders an apocalyptic vision of a world destroyed by human machinery. The only people left are a hermit and a group of savage children he hopelessly tries to “humanize.” The existential voice in the play is registered not only through the thematic content but also in the de-racialisation of the survivals.

violence is created by the coloniser's means of oppression, and not as a consequence of an innate nature of Africans, or African Americans, as Genet's play suggested.

The play was not only a counter-action to Genet's predication on "violent reprisal"; it also reversed Genet's stand on the relationship between performance and audience. In his introduction to *Les Nègres*, Genet explains that his political art should find a way of catching the audience off guard, and that his play will be a trap for the spectators (Lavery 69). Hansberry, by contrast, depends on including the audience in the lived theatrical experience. For her, Genet's *Les Nègres* is unsuccessful because it prevented communion between actors and spectators (Warrick 136). Therefore she emphasised visual and acoustic elements to create a bond with the audience of her play.

This desire to include the audience in the *lived* experience of the play [in contrast to the actual participation of audiences in Baraka's *Slave Ship* for example] is quite phenomenological. In *Bodied Spaces*, Stanton A. Garner explains that bodies are not in space but also of it; in other words, the body is not separate from the space that surrounds it. The theatrical audience, he argues, is also included in the space of actors or what he calls "the phenomenological continuum of space" through physical proximity and linguistic inclusions, and through "the uniquely theatrical mirroring that links audience with performance in a kind of corporeal mimetic identification" (4). Hansberry's stage directions aim at creating exactly this corporeal identification through physical proximity. The image of Mother Africa is preceded by five minutes of acoustic effect of "sounds of African bush" that are intended, Hansberry insists, to surround the audience "stereophonically from the sides and rear" (*Les Blancs* 53). The plot of the play is energised by the rhythmic use of chanting, ritual dancing, the laughter of hyenas, and drumming. The drumming accentuates the intensity of the plot and it increases in volume and intensity as the plot develops. The sound endorses a sense of anticipation and creates an atmosphere of dread; more importantly, it re-writes the meaning of drums used in expressionistic plays like Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* (1920). While the acoustic function of the drums in O'Neil's play is to create an atmosphere that parallels the "primitive" psyche of the protagonist, in *Les Blancs*, it assumes a different function to the extent that it

becomes a catalyst: “They [drums] get louder and just before curtain, as the houselights go to black, they reach a crescendo which moves up through the audience with a rush to the speakers on stage” (*Les Blancs* 53). Drums for Hansberry abandon their “primitive” appeal and their expressionistic parallel to psychological dilemmas. They engulf the audience prior to the appearance of any character because they become, as Fabre explains in her analysis of Harrison’s drama of *Nommo*, a language, “an acoustical writing” and a vehicle of communication” (207)

Another significant acoustic element is the “unearthly laughter of the Hyena.” The sound of the terrifying laughter binds with the oral tradition of storytelling to narrate the symbolic tale of the mighty elephants. These animal tales are part of the African myths, and they are used as a means that reflects upon the psychology of the coloniser and the colonised. Hansberry emphasises that the tale is not merely told, but acted in the form of oral folk tradition (*Les Blancs* 126). Peter informs Tshembe of tales he is either unaware of or had totally forgotten, thus he helps him restore his African consciousness and redeem his memories through the oral tradition of narration. Although allegorical in form, the tale is highly political: The hyenas were driven out of their lands because they were “reasoning” about their rights in coexisting with the mighty elephants: “That is why the hyena laughs until this day and why it is such a terrible laugh: because it was such a bitter joke that was played upon them while they ‘reasoned’” (126). The hyena image is important in reflecting on the negative representation of Africans as primitives. Its laughter does not match the pain; so the image does not represent reality, rather it reverses it. Elephants on the other hand represent white power. The story is told by Peter to symbolize the confrontation between white power and African rebellion. Using the hyena’s laughter as agony is not only understood by Africans alone, but also becomes a signifier of the cultural gap that separates the coloniser and the colonised as the coloniser is excluded from its meaning.

In his introduction to *Les Blancs*, Lester clarifies that Hansberry could never have “committed the sin of ‘social realism’ or its contemporary counterpart, ‘black nationalist realism’” because she believes in a more humanistic concept of individuals as more than the “summation of their political beliefs” (Lester 25). Yet,

key folkloric practices and the ceremonious maturation and transformation of the principal characters (elements that can be found later in Harrison's Nommo theatre) underline Hansberry's ability to use aesthetic structures of both African and Western constructs, and to juxtapose political history with myth, drama, and folklore. Thus, Hansberry's profound humanity emerges in her belonging to different places and adopting different forms, Western and African. Her pursuit of common humanity transcends in *Les Blancs*, which developed from her racial and social concern in *Raisin*, the politics the 1960s Black Arts Movement in its appeal to larger communities than black and white. She voices her comprehension of a dilemma more profound than the colour-line: "I don't think we can decide ultimately on the basis of color [. . .] It's not a question of reading anybody out; it's a merger [. . .] but it has to be a merger on the basis of true and genuine equality" (quoted in Lester, 17). The aesthetic and ethics in Hansberry's vision, unlike that which emerged in Neal's theorisation later, is aesthetics of merging. Hansberry, in a nutshell, belongs to a merger of Civil Rights and Black Power ideologies.

Alice Childress and *Wine in the Wilderness*

The manifestation of the Black Arts aesthetic as an oppressive mechanism for black female identity is evident in Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969). Childress questions the ideology employed by the producers of this aesthetic rather than the texts they produce. The play traces the black artist's dilemma in his idealisation of Africa, or "Mother Africa," instead of establishing his aesthetic in the real ground or real context s/he is experiencing. What emerges in the world of the play is a drama of male malevolence/ female subservience, and the ability of the female protagonist, through self-empowerment, to deconstruct this equation. Self-determination enables the black female protagonist in Childress's play to transform ways of seeing, from "being in the eyes of males" to "being in her own eyes" after discovering that what is in the eyes of black males is an idealised picture of Motherland Africa.

According to Elizabeth Brown-Guillory in her anthology of the same title, *Wine in the Wilderness*, Childress's heroines embrace a "tripartite spirituality": God, the Mother, and Mother Africa, who are often synonymous in Childress's plays

(106). In *Their Place on Stage*, Brown-Guillory also illustrates the militant side of female characters in Childress' plays as "atypically assertive, brutally caustic, and unyielding to the demands of whites" (27). Female protagonists in Childress's plays create, through accusation, and angry verbal confrontation, according to Soyica Diggs in "Dialectical Dialogues," identities and identifications in the sense that they "participate in creating performative categories" of blackness, whiteness, and femaleness (30). I extend, and oppose, Brown-Guillory's and Diggs' analysis by employing Sheets-Johnson's reading of male aggression/ female vulnerability in her phenomenological study of *The Roots of Power* to argue that Childress does not only affirm the defiant spirit of her self-determinist female characters in the here-and-now space which is triumphant over the idealistic representation of "Mother Africa," but also continues to counter male modes of "seeing."

In "Corporeal Archetypes: Sex and Aggression," Sheets-Johnson explains that the human repertoire of "I can's"—referred to in chapter two—is intensified by a relationship between sex and aggression; i.e. by rape (this will be elaborated in chapter four and five where the plays analysed are concerned primarily with the question of rape). In this section, I use Sheets-Johnson's concept of female vulnerability as a cultural construct. The mechanism of turning female bodies into docile bodies, she observes, is being executed by keeping them at risk of exposure; i.e. by keeping them subservient to the idea of themselves as "being in the eyes of males" (121). What is compromised, consequently, is their autonomy, and even their lived-experience, or being-in-the-world, for they "manipulate their bodies and give up living in them" (123). At first glance, this seems another feminist critique of patriarchal modes of "seeing." However, Sheets-Johnson explores here what she calls an "intercorporeal structure": "'being in the eyes of males' is thus understandably an intercorporeal structure held in place as much by desiring eyes as by the docile bodies to which the eyes attach like leeches" (121). Instead of having two subjects coming together and incarnating each other—reciprocal incarnation—another structure is built: "a reciprocal instantiation of power" (122). The dynamic of power relationships is built on female "docility," and male's possession of power. This compromise of one's autonomy is not momentary; rather, it becomes a way of

life, a lived experience. It is at this particular stage that corporeal archetypes are created and culturally spawned (123).

Given such analysis, the archetype of male warrior—discussed above in Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*, and apparent in Childress’s characterisation of Bill in the spirit of the Black Power Movement—can’t exist without creating the female docile body (as diametrically opposed to the African Woman-Warrior or Motherland). When Tommy asks Cynthia to help her identify a way to win Bill’s heart, the latter provides a long list of instructions for docility: “You have to let the black man have his manhood again,” “let him have the talking. Learn to listen. Stay in the background a little” (134). Moreover, Cynthia defines to the un-educated Tommy the word “matriarchy” by referring to a “woman [who] head the house,” only to be contradicted by Tommy’s realistic apprehension of her social status: “we didn’t have nothin’ to rule over, not a pot nor a window” (134). Cynthia’s words seem to echo those of the men in her life. When Bill tells Tommy that “[m]atriarchy gotta go. Yall throw them suppers together, keep your husband happy. [R]aise the kids,” a visual statement is being made that attests to the relationship between the power of the male’s vision—as he constructs Tommy’s identity (image) while painting her—and the construction of female docility within the socio-political structure that nurtures this power (139).

The image which Bill wants to capture as the essence of African womanhood in his painting is not different from the African woman warrior Tshembe idealizes in Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*. Bill explains to Oldtimer: “once, a long time ago, a poet named Omar told us what a paradise life could be if a man had a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and . . . a woman singing to him in the wilderness. She is the woman; she is the wine; she is the singing. The Abyssinian maiden is paradise, . . . perfect black womanhood” (125). Tommy on the other hand, the representative of the “realistic” image of black womanhood which Bill tries to register in his art, is the direct opposite. This lengthy quotation is necessary to illustrate Childress’ capturing of male ideology in the Black Arts era:

She’s gonna be the kinda chick that is grass roots, . . . no, not grass roots, . . . I mean she’s underneath the grass roots. The lost woman, . . . what the society has made out of our women. She’s as far from

my African queen as a woman can get and still be female; she's as close to the bottom as you can get without crackin' up . . . She's ignorant, unfeminine, coarse, rude . . . vulgar . . . a poor, dumb chick that's had her behind kicked until it's numb . . . and the sad part is . . . she ain't together, you know, . . . there is no hope for her. (126)

The difference between “Mother Africa” and Tommy is made more evident in the latter’s name and is related directly to the aesthetics of the Black Power Movement. Bill informs Tommy that because she refuses to live up to what Langston Hughes once described of beautiful women—possibly referring to Hughes’ poem “Harlem Sweeties” where women are depicted as edible objects—she is Tommy not Tomorrow Marie (139). What is lost for Tommy is not only a name, but even a spatial and temporal existence, especially when Bill later describes “Mother Africa” in his phone call as “The now of things . . . but best of all and more important . . . She’s tomorrow. . . she’s my Tomorrow” (141). “Mother Africa” is not seen only as an enabling agent of African American manhood, but also as an absolute future that negates what Bill calls “the now of things” in his, and Tomorrow Marie’s, socio-political mould.

The difference between Tomorrow’s Marie and Bill is evident in their lived experience of history. Tommy embodies the history of African American subject-hood in its “liveness,” or first-hand experience, and enlightens Bill about it before even her discovery of his sexist painting. When Bill shows off his scholarly knowledge of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Elijah Lovejoy and John Brown, the un-educated Tommy explains her knowledge of John Brown, for example, from her personal history. She informs Bill that her family were members of The Improved Benevolent Order of Elks of the World, and that she heard of John Brown because the organisation bought his farmhouse where he trained his troops in order to build an open outdoor theatre in his memory. The “black Elks” helped her cousin get a scholarship and Tommy was taught by her cousin about these particular details. Tommy’s “little” knowledge is rooted in her lived experience and is opposed to Bill’s idealist and elitist education. Tommy does not appear as fragmented or “ain’t together” as Bill thinks; rather she reveals his own *fragmentation* through showing the gap between his knowledge and the everyday experience as an African American. Africa, Smethurst argues, serves as an alternative to history, “a return to

cultural wholeness before the fall” (82). That Bill searches for his cultural wholeness in the more abstract idealisation of African womanhood is revealed through Tommy’s grasp of her personal history.

The gap between Bill and Tommy is widened by class identification. Tommy, like the sixty year old friend of Bill, Oldtimer—Childress is making a connection here with Sheldon in *Trouble in Mind* and exposing the difficulties of coming into age in a racist society—is a factory worker. When she complains that “Niggers” burnt her house, her predicament was overlooked and all she receives from her new acquaintances is the correct word to use instead of “niggers”; “Well,” she replies, “the Afro Americans burnt down my house” (129). Tommy stands corrected by her bourgeois friends but when she confronts them at the end of the play, she corrects their perception of “negrohood”: “When they say ‘nigger,’ just dry-long-so, they mean educated you and uneducated me” (148).

Childress criticises how some black artists were entrapped in their elitism during the 1960s. In her play, the middle class artist’s ideology and elitism is contrasted with the working woman’s everyday life and experience. The problem of elitism in black literature and theory is discussed by Joyce A. Joyce more recently in her essay “The Black Canon” (1987). According to Joyce, the attenuation of the race issue that started in Alain Locke’s 1925 *The New Negro* served as a prototype for literary scholars—Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s poststructuralist rejection of race is an example Joyce uses to make her point. Later, intense periods of critical change for black Americans reflected, she notes, a class orientation which was a result of social changes caused by racial issues (337). Joyce emphasizes that the task of the literary scholar was to guide black people in explaining the oppressive environmental, intellectual phenomena (339). Instead, he was detached from black communities because of his elitism; yet, the majority of African Americans found in the middle-class black man’s ideology and lifestyle a model to follow (338). The black painter in Childress’s play stands for the literary artists and scholars of the 1960s who alienated themselves from the black masses through cherishing abstract concepts, although endeavouring at the same time to address the racial question from a detached artistic perspective, instead of real involvement in socio-political problems.

Furthermore, class difference informs gender politics. Cynthia attempts to domesticate Tommy, to accept the middle class black man's ideology, or to use Sheet-Johnstone's words in their theoretical context, to live in what Sartre had already described as "bad faith." Sheets-Johnstone applies Sartre's concept to her phenomenological feminist critique, explaining that, "[l]iving in bad faith, a docile female defines herself by the 'he (or they) for whom I am'" (*Roots* 122). Tommy, unlike Cynthia, refuses to define herself according to a male perspective. She awakens Bill to the fact that, in opposition to the "very pretty lady [Mother Africa] who can't talk back," she is the real, corporeally empowered, "'Wine in the Wilderness.' . . . alive and kicking', me . . . Tomorrow Marie, cussin' and fightin' and lookin' out for my damn self" (148). Childress's statement is not merely a representation of what she perceives as true black womanhood, it is also a critique of floating idealised, and romanticised, aesthetic derivative of African belonging but not rooted in social and political histories in America. Such a reconciliation is not easy to achieve in a context where women need to be doubly militant so as to survive the psychological impairments of alienation as Hansberry already observed; the consequences of forsaking this reconciliation are the focus of Kennedy's drama in the 1960s.

White head/Black Body: Adrienne Kennedy's *A Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*

Kennedy is a major figure in the development of experimental African American theatre. She uses an unconventional form that blends expressionism and surrealism, and populates her plays with fragmented characters, relying primarily on repetition and fragmentation as a distinguishing trait of her aesthetics. Kennedy's plays are a link between Marita Bonner's early experimental plays and the later works of Suzan-Lori Parks, Ntozake Shange, and Anna Deavere Smith, on all of whom she had a great influence¹⁰. Therefore, it might be said that Adrienne Kennedy is the fulcrum of African American women's drama.

¹⁰ There are no sources that show a direct influence of Bonner on Kennedy; however, Kennedy states in her autobiographical *People Who Led to My Plays* that she was an avid reader of the *Crisis* which her father kept on his desk to use Du Bois's articles in his "stirring speeches on the Negro cause"

While Childress and Hansberry's dramatic texts reach for "rootedness" in American society through asserting "Africanness" as a medium or a means of expression that counters white supremacy, but never replaces American consciousness, Kennedy's plays, on the other hand, answer the questions: what if black consciousness has already been sacrificed in America? Or what if the desire to rid consciousness of its "blackness" did not succeed? While the struggle between blackness and whiteness in the drama written by Childress and Hansberry takes place between black and white characters on stage, this struggle is internalised by the protagonists in Kennedy's plays of the 1960s. It is a struggle that aims at the annihilation of the other consciousness and its bodily presence (blackness) that leads to the tragic end of Kennedy's female protagonists. In Kennedy's plays, the presence of a Mother-figure is camouflaged in a psychosis of separation from and annihilation of these bodily manifestations. The result is characters suffering, not double consciousness, but double alienation.

Kennedy's plays were, and still are, under scholarly attention; they are studied from many perspectives. In her feminist theorisation of mimesis in *Unmaking Mimesis*, Elin Diamond uses Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* as an example of a postmodern play involved in social, historical and political questions of identity and its disturbances. Philip C. Kolin's *Understanding Adrienne Kennedy* offers a biographical level of approaching Kennedy's plays. Both Rosemary K. Curb and Claudia Barnett study Kennedy's plays from a psychoanalytic point of view, emphasising women-centeredness in tropes of pregnancy and blood imagery. In what follows I study the significance of African American maternal kinship from a phenomenological point of view, arguing that Kennedy's plays dramatize the hierarchy set between cultures, and legitimize the playwright's entitlement to Euro-American literary heritage at a time when "blackness/authenticity" of African American expression was measured by its repudiation of Western aesthetics.

According to Alisa Solomon in her foreword to Kennedy's *Alexander Plays*, activists of the black Arts Movement criticised Kennedy as an "irrelevant black writer," and attacked her characters for lacking black pride (xii). Truly,

(119). This magazine most probably have acquainted Kennedy with Bonner's published articles and plays.

Kennedy's characters are not representative of race and racial struggle like those of Childress' and Hansberry's; rather, they complicate racial identity through sometimes unwanted, sometimes forced relationships with polarised tropes of whiteness and blackness, Africanness and Euro-American cultures. Nonetheless, Kennedy's work is concerned with race and racism, although her plays are not propagandistic nor do they use social realism or agitprop content.

This polarised relationship is most evident in Kennedy's female characters who are bearers of two cultures. In *A Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), Sarah, an English teacher, who graduated from a city college in New York and worked in its libraries, is anticipating the return of her dead black father in a room condensed with her other "selves." She undergoes a tormenting search for identity, overshadowed by a memory of the rape of her white mother, until she commits suicide at the end.

Funnyhouse is a dramatisation of the protagonist's state of mind where her split consciousness pervades the theatrical space. The setting of the play and its props attest to this exteriorisation. *Funnyhouse* opens with a wild-looking mother carrying a bald head in front of a white frayed closed curtain which looks as if it has been gnawed by rats (2). The shabby look of the curtain refers to the persistence of the protagonist's deteriorating psychological state. The material of the curtain, Kennedy emphasizes, "brings to mind the interior of a cheap casket" (2). The resemblance to a casket illustrates Sarah's self-imposed confinement; as the play progresses, it becomes Sarah's internalisation of the cheap "material" of the Western world: racism. This is even more intensified when the curtain rises and reveals the setting of the play, Sarah's mental space. The centre of the stage is Sarah's room with her bed, table, mirror and the Statue of Queen Victoria next to her bed. The rest of the stage is the place for Sarah's other "selves," thus the stage also emphasizes that Sarah's casket-like room is a symbol of her monotonous life that makes a lifeless doll out of her. Everything on the stage is an extension of Sarah's self; the white royal gowns worn by Sarah's other selves—Victoria Regina, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Patrice Lumumba and Jesus—are made of the same white material as the curtain.

The dream-like play begins with two of Sarah's four selves: Queen Victoria and The Duchess, discussing the return of their black father; the return is marked with the sound of knocking which is heard throughout the play. The Duchess informs Victoria that the black man should be killed so they get rid of the bond that ties them to "he who is the darkest of them all" (3). However, the black man is already dead, and he keeps returning; the sound of knocking throughout the play marks his approach in a way similar to the sound of drums in O'Neill's expressionist plays. The mother appears again on the stage saying that she never should have let a black man rape her. The stage is now for Sarah, the "NEGRO" with kinky hair and a hangman's rope around her neck.

NEGRO-Sarah speaks the longest monologue holding in her hands a patch of hair which is missing from her crown. This monologue will be repeated by other characters with different variations; the significance of this repetition, as will be shown below, is central to the form and content of the play. Sarah's monologue does not seem to be part of the dream-like atmosphere as she consciously analyses her relation and awareness of her other "selves": "When I am the Duchess of Hapsburg I sit opposite Victoria in my headpiece and we talk" (5).

Sarah makes it clear that she identifies with her white mother, rejects her black father, surrounds herself with antiques that symbolize whiteness, and ignores any black heritage. Whiteness for Sarah is a distraction keeping her from concentrating on her own blackness: "For, like all educated Negroes—out of life and death essential—I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself" (6). Sarah, however, admits that she does not trust her own opinion, that she is well aware of the contradictions that possess her mind, and that this self-recognition is the reason for losing her hair until she becomes bald towards the end of the play.

Throughout her monologue, two male characters of her four selves appear: Jesus and Patrice Lumumba. Like race, gender lines are blurred and identification becomes also more complicated. All characters now walk and disappear in varying directions indicating the co-existence of different places and different ethnicities in Sarah's "casket"-mind.

A similar search for identity is re-approached by Kennedy in *The Owl Answers* where Clara is striving to attend the funeral of her white father, repudiating, at the same time, her black mother who worked as a cook in the kitchen of “Goddam Father who is the Richest White Man In The Town who is the White Father who is Reverend Passmore.” The title of the play is an iconoclastic statement that opposes the divine image of the Dove; the black mother insists that Clara’s beginning is an “Owl,” and the play ends with Clara, transforming into an owl, and jumping from the Tower of London into the burning altar of St. Peter’s chapel to her possible death¹¹. In both plays, the mother figure plays an important role in signifying cultural identifications most evident in Kennedy’s choice of black and white historical figures and places.

In the subsequent play, the same intensity of Sarah’s madness is re-enacted by the protagonist, Clara¹². The main character’s schism is evident in her long name: She who is Clara Passmore who is Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl. The scene is given the setting of multiple spaces; it is made to resemble London Underground, the walls of the Tower of London, and the New York subway. Again, Kennedy deconstructs the unity of place, time, and also the logical relationship between characters.

Clara’s white father dies and she is prevented from attending his funeral. She, instead, retreats to her world of imagination where her father joins her in a trip to England outside the spatio-temporal logic. Four historical characters: Shakespeare, William the Conqueror, Chaucer and Anne Boleyn enter from the gates of a castle (London Tower/ St. Peter’s Church) as if they are strangers in a New York subway. THEY function as guards to prevent Clara from entering the castle to see the body of her dead white father, and repeatedly ask her: “If you are his ancestor why are you a Negro? Bastard” (35). The Bastard’s Black Mother repeatedly affirms to Clara her illegitimate existence, “[t]he Owl was your beginning, Mary” (35).

¹¹ In her 1976 play, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, Clara re-emerges as the protagonist of the play and the surrogate character of Kennedy herself as her life intersects with that of Kennedy. After this play, Kennedy’s surrogate character takes another name, Suzanne Alexandre.

¹² Kennedy states that *Owl* (1965) was her favourite play; although it has been overshadowed by *Funnyhouse* (1964), it similarly addresses issues of gender, race and identity. However, it is more provocative than her previous play because of the examination of religion’s effect on Kennedy’s female characters (McDonough 385).

One of the reasons for alienating Kennedy from the Black Arts literary canon is her dramatisation of the frowned-upon “tragic mulatto”; however, as I will show, Kennedy creates through this figure an aesthetic space for a negotiation between polarised cultures. Kennedy’s plays do not approach the dilemma of the mulatto per se, but they present the body as a site for the struggle between the hierarchy of whiteness and blackness, America and Africa, patriarchy and womanhood.

In his essay on repetition and its culturally signifying meaning, James A. Snead discusses repetition in American and African cultures and concludes that the separation between cultures is not a matter of nature but one of force (153). The dynamics of force that imposes separation between cultures, Euro-American and African ones in Snead’s essay, can be seen clearly in Kennedy’s plays. These dynamics of force lead to individuals and cultures’ self-destruction. Like Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*, *Funnyhouse* and *Owl* dramatize, although psychologically, this destructive force. However, Kennedy uses tropes of parenthood and kinship; consequently, the mother figure emerges as a pivotal leitmotif that frames the dramatic narrative of *Funnyhouse* and serves, in *Owl*, as a reminder for Clara of the distinction between illegitimate progeny and legitimate posterity.

The significance of the mother figure in constructing race and racial concepts is examined in Laura Doyle’s *Bordering on the Body*. Doyle uses phenomenology to read intercorporeality in twentieth century narratives from a racially-maternalised perspective. She uses eugenics as a theory that highlights the inextricability of racial and sexual practices. Co-dependent structures of race and sex, she observes, converge especially on the mother, and she investigates this trope in literature not only in order to understand gender as a category constitutive of racism, but also to understand race as a category constitutive of sexism (21).

Doyle defines “kinship patriarchy” as a social formation that rests on the metaphysical distinction between a ruling head and a labouring body and a one that genders and racializes or ethnicises this distinction (21). In the race-bounded economy, the mother is a maker and a marker of boundaries; her function is to reproduce, through offspring, the life of that border (27). Paradoxically, she remains

a borderline figure, both central and marginal. Her doubleness both secures and vexes cultural boundaries (because, in Hegelian terms, she is a hand-worker that guard the brainworker,” and because of this paradox, she is a re-producer of vertical and metaphysical distinctions between ruling “heads” and serving “bodies” (27). Superior groups are associated, consequently, with brain, mind, and spirit; inferior groups are associated with body and matter. Thus, division of power and labour is set as “handworkers” serve “brainworkers” on a racialised maternal border (28).

Doyle elaborates Orlando Patterson’s concept—in *Slavery and Social Death*—of “natal alienation” as not only one of the key principles underlying slavery but also as a principle engendering “social death” of slaves. The metaphysical vocabularies of eugenics helped to enforce labour hierarchies not only of race but also of gender, while gender roles in turn served to reproduce racial hierarchies (33). Drawing on this analysis, it becomes obvious why the first reaction after emancipation is an act of reversing this social death, an act of reclaiming an ahistorical “African-Motherhood” as a way of restoring “natal relationship” in an attempt to undo the aftermaths of natal alienation.

The deconstruction of racialised mother-image in Kennedy’s plays aims at eliminating the boundaries that set hierarchies between cultures and civilisations; therefore, the mother appears as a border towards whom the protagonist seeks movement (either towards the mother-figure as in *Funnyhouse*, or away from in *Owl Answers*); but gets destroyed as a consequence of forcing the separation between cultures in Snead’s words. It might be useful here to rely on the playwright’s autobiography to support this point, for it is during her pregnancy that Kennedy worked on the scripts of both *Funnyhouse* and *Owl Answers*. Unlike her characters, Kennedy voices her fascination with and belonging to cosmopolitanism. At the time of writing both her plays, Kennedy was on an 18 months trip to London, Rome, and Ghana: “More than anything I remember the days surrounding the writing of each of these plays . . . the places . . . Accra Ghana and Rome for *Funnyhouse of a Negro* [. . .] in Rome the sunny roof of the apartment on Via Reno . . . the beginning of *The Owl Answer*, also in Ghana” (*Alexander* ix). Places for Kennedy are spaces for history and memories; contemplating cultures and literary production, she asks

herself “Hadn’t Sylvia Plath lived across the way in Chalcot Crescent?” “Hadn’t Karl Marx walked there [in London, Primrose Hill]?” (ix). Kennedy refuses to separate herself, because she is an African American artist, from Euro-American cultural heritage at the apex of Black Nationalism, and she dramatizes the destructive force that imposes on her characters such a separation. Simultaneously, she does not separate herself from African heritage, in contrast to the claims of the Black Arts Movement activists, as she proudly includes African figures like Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah in her dramaturgy. Therefore, she alternately uses the tropes of black and white motherhood, showing the same destructive force of separatism, or in the terminology of the Black Power Movement era, of dis-integration.

However, Kennedy’s female protagonists are tormented by their relationship to their racialised mother-figure. Sarah and Clara are both products of rape, and they suffer the consequences of their existence as mulattos. Sarah believes that her whiteness is tainted with the blackness of her father, whom she considers a rapist of her white mother. Clara, however, refuses to admit the white man’s rape of the black cook who used to work for him, and repudiates her mother instead. The imagery of “rape” in *Funnyhouse* is extended so as to include “Euro-American cultural heritage” which Sarah adores and feels that she is scorned by. The return of the black father threatens the “purity” of white heritage; Victoria complains to the Duchess: “[h]e comes through the jungles to find me. He never tires of his journey” (3). The Duchess’ answer is a politico-cultural commentary made on the part of Kennedy against the separatism between cultures, “How dare he enter the castle of Queen Victoria Regina, Monarch of England? It is because of him that my mother died” (3). Though she is a victim of this colonising white culture, Sarah reverses “the direction of colonial dominance,” Kolin observes, through the image of the returning black father to “accommodate her own psychic history” (*Understanding* 41). However, Sarah’s predicament might be more than a simple psychic history. It is not randomly that Kennedy chose for Sarah the career of librarian; an articulate self-aware “negro-intellectual,” Sarah refuses to abandon her “heritage.” The mirror in her room, along with the statue, is not a means of access for Sarah to understand her dilemma; rather it obstructs her reconciliation with her blackness as a complementary “heritage.” Her sense of inferiority to white culture stems from her

acceptance of the hierarchy imposed on her which results in internalising white racism against her black culture.

In contrast to rape in *Funnyhouse*, that in *Owl Answers* is denied by Clara so she can establish a kinship with her white father as his legitimate descendant. However, THEY (Chaucer, Shakespeare, and William the Conqueror) imprison her insisting, “You are not his ancestor/ Keep her locked there, guard/ Bastard” (27). In her self-imposed confinement, Clara envisions a space where she joins her father on a trip to London, “[we] took a taxi past Hyde Park through the Marble Arch to Buckingham Palace [. . .] my father leaning on my arm, speaking of you, William the Conqueror. My father loved you, William . . .” (28). Clara’s father, ironically, seems to cherish William the Conqueror, known also as William the Bastard, although he denies Clara his parentage.

Through the parent-offspring relation between characters, Kennedy dramatizes the ideologies of structured racism. Kennedy brilliantly draws on the image of William the Conqueror to remind of the similar experiences in world history against racial oppression. According to Doyle, this figure represents in English history and ideology, the “Norman Yoke” (39). Doyle clarifies that in England, during the Norman Yoke, as in revolutionary France, the confrontation between the ruling class and the masses was also racial and cultural as it was perceived as a conflict between different bloods (39). The idealised mother figure emerged as an aesthetic and cultural form of political resistance. Literary figures from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Wordsworth built upon this cultural experience, Doyle continues, to portray England as a mother figure. Doyle’s analysis of romantic English poetics shows that behind the attention to national/Mother land “lies racial politics and history” which feeds this rhetoric (37). Likewise, Kennedy dramatizes how the mother figure is either repudiated or redeemed in line with hegemonic rhetoric that feeds on racism and sexism. In order to identify with European figures, and legitimize this identification, Clara repudiates her black mother, and like her white father, she internalizes racism, and even sexism as she overlooks her father’s contempt of her. Rather than deliver an explicit criticism of patriarchal/racial oppression, Kennedy compounds layers of history and psychoanalysis to present a

condensed visual experience which enables the spectators to experience confinement within the casket of white supremacist ideologies which is much intensified in the condensed spaces of both plays.

Kennedy exposes racism as an ideology constitutive of sexism. In *Owl*, Anne Boleyn serves as an alternative mother figure, and a foil to the real Bastard's Black Mother. The presence of Boleyn, Miegs argues, symbolizes white oppression and subjugation of white women (178). This verifies Doyle's argument about race as a category constitutive of sexism especially that Anne Boleyn appears as a silent sacrificial offering who is unable to offer any help for Clara throughout the play. When Clara calls for her, Anne throws rice at Clara; a symbol, ironically, of fertility for newly wedded couples, mocking, in doing so, paternal kinship. Clara beseeches naively: "Anne, you know so much of love, won't you help me?" (29). However, Anne transforms into the Bastard's Black Mother, an act to which Clara reacts by running away and imploring Anne to come back. Clara fails to understand that it is her own heritage and struggle against patriarchal racism with which she should identify. While Kennedy borrows from European history to address gender struggle, she shows that black women's struggle is part of, but not excluded from, it; yet, it should be recognised first by black women themselves.

Kennedy complicates "patriarchal kinship" especially in *Owl* where it assumes a religious level of authority. While Sarah's recognition of herself—or submission to the fact of her inevitable blackness—is marked visually and corporeally with losing her hair, that of Clara is similar as she accepts her "owl-beginning," and transforms into an owl herself. The transformation is done while a White Bird is laughing from the Dome, mocking her transformation. She recognizes that she will ever be an Owl, in contrast to God's bird, the Dove. Kennedy uses religion as another category constitutive of racism through the Owl-Dove binary image. In *Funnyhouse*, she refers to this fact directly; Sarah's father was sent to Africa by his mother to "be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race" (14). Sarah's father wanted "the black man to raise from colonialism," but he was searching for a "white dove" in the midst of "golden savannahs, nim and white frankopenny trees and white stallions roaming under a blue sky" (15). According to

Curb, the black father aids in the cultural rape of his own black people in Africa (183). His betrayal of his people, and himself—a character reminiscent of Aboiseh in Hansberry's *Les Blancs*—is evident in his search for whiteness (white Dove) as a symbol of purity and power.

Masks, Hair, and Tropes of Repetition

Although Kennedy uses the mother-daughter relationship as a signifier of hierarchal cultures, she simultaneously presents race as an ambiguous trope. This might seem at first glance a contradictory concept, especially that characters are caught in white-black polarisation. However, this polarisation occurs in the protagonists' minds, and Kennedy as early as 1964 insists on eliminating the border between races through deconstructing the racialised mother figure. Kennedy's explanation of the characters' appearances aims at blurring racial boundaries. In *Funnyhouse*, "[i]f the characters do not wear a mask then the face must be highly powdered and possess a hard expressionless quality and a stillness as in the face of death" (3). In *Owl*, characters perform many racial identities; thus, the White Father is also the Reverend Passmore—in reference to his "yellow" skin—and the Bastard Black Mother is also Anne Boleyn, and the Reverend's Wife.

The description arguably implies not only the struggle between black skin and the mask of whiteness, but also the desire to impose whiteness on black skin, an act which parallels a psychological state of internalising racism¹³. On the other hand, it might be read as an act that reverses the mask of minstrelsy, consequently, internalising the white-black strife. Thompson explains that Kennedy's use of racism's master trope of minstrelsy puts into question the "fundamental social, philosophical, and ontological questions about what 'race' 'is'" ("Reversing" 14). The reversal of minstrelsy, which is most apparent in *Funnyhouse*, is performed through a mask of whiteness that subjugates Sarah's black self and imposes on her the adherence and consequently the performance according to sexual/racial codes of whiteness. However, the complexion of Victoria and Duchess appears whitish yellow to enhance the morbidity of Sarah that stems from her irreconcilable ancestries mixing her blood; she repudiates her blackness and this is translated

¹³ Frantz Fanon was among the prominent influences on Kennedy in both literary and personal levels.

corporeally in a morbid yellowness. Aesthetically, Kennedy's use of white masks, as Thompson suggests, aims at the destruction of the black-white barrier (35). Thompson's argument emphasizes the ambivalent nature of race. The undecidability of race and failure to acknowledge the contradiction is most evident in the reversed masks. The white mask, or the powdered faces, is juxtaposed with the kinky hair to indicate a reversal of minstrelsy, an act of performance in which Sarah's black self is performing in front of her white one: "For as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning" (5). Wearing the white mask for Sarah speaks for her self-delusion. However, Kennedy uses white masks as a theatrical technique to deconstruct white hegemony and racial oppression symbolised by Sarah's selves: Victoria and the duchess of Hapsburg.

Characters in *Owl* change fluidly from one racial category into another. Anne Boleyn, for example, takes off part of her own long dress and puts on a "rose-coloured, cheap lace dress" and becomes the Bastard's Black Mother (29). Kennedy emphasises racial ambiguity when she states in her notes on the play that "characters change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves, leaving some garment from their previous selves upon them always to remind us of the nature of She who is [. . .]" (25). The nature of She who is complies with the many "cultural" garments she slips into and out of.

The images of "losing hair" and "kinky hair" are the most important motif in the play. It is also used in juxtaposition with the "wild, straight, and black" hair of the mother-figure which is "falling to her Waist" (2). Sarah's loss of hair is a signifier of her recognition of herself, and her becoming bald towards the end, along with her hanging body as a visual signifier of lynching, indicates that she reached this recognition of herself as a "sacrificial offering," to use Kolin's words, for white supremacy and black militancy: "if I have not wavered in my opinion of myself, then my hair would never have fallen out" (6). She reached the conclusion that, for her black skin, she will never be accepted by the culture which she adores; her refusal of African heritage and awareness of never-belonging to a European one makes of her an outcast, and condemns her as a position-less, or un-situated- subject: "I know no places. That is, I can't believe in places" (5). The suicide at the end is a fulfilment of

a desire to cut the consciousness of Sarah from the world that constitutes her “recognition” of her racial identity; therefore the hangman rope, which Kolin interprets as a symbol of lynching, might also be read as an umbilical rope that cuts Sarah from life, and reverses, as a symbol, the racialised mother-figure as a provider of posterity.

Repetition and Time

Repetition and time are two tropes that inter-relate with motherhood. The circularity of time in “woman-conscious drama” functions, according to Curb, as a means for re/cognition and re-seeing of the self through mirrors, and “knowing again with each revolution of the endless spiralling of our lives” (305). Mirrors, in *Funnyhouse*, not only reflect distorted subjectivity, but also provide the protagonist with her own sense of non-linear time, and confined space; consequently, Sarah becomes confined within the womb. In *Owl*, characters shift into one another; each character assumes the other’s role wearing parts of its costumes; therefore, the play progresses but in repetition and re-iteration, making this progress only an illusion. In relation to time, the stage direction is important: the scene revolves one and one-quarter turn when the Dead body of the father transforms into Reverend Passmore, then one turn when Clara talks to Anne Boleyn who transforms into the Bastard’s Black Mother, the scene revolves one turn as BBM turns into the Reverend’s wife. As Clara talks to Dead Father, the scene revolves one-half turn clockwise. Then, the scene revolves counter clockwise one and one-quarter turns as Clara runs away from the Dead father to the Black Man. It turns one turn counter clockwise as the Mother stabs herself with a knife. Clara, it seems, falls into a labyrinth of time in which time is neither linear nor circular, but like Sarah, she experiences time as a foetus moving in a womb. Time is swinging forward and backward between two points, leaving Clara in her definite spot in terms of time and place although everything around her moves. As the stage revolves between Clara’s many fathers and mothers, it becomes clear that she is entrapped in a womb and that she, like Sarah, seeks “cutting of the umbilical rope” through jumping into the burning altar of St. Peter’s chapel.

The plot in Kennedy’s plays is not presented in a traditional form; the events are not triggered by action, but they are remembered and repeated. Barnett

explains that although Kennedy uses narratives in her plays, she deconstructs the authority of these narratives through prioritising characters' state of mind (150). Thus, with each state of mind, a new version of the same narrative emerges, casting all versions into doubt. Sarah's repetitious recitation of her black father's death is contradicted, for example, by the landlady's version in which the father kills himself in a hotel room in Harlem; the same story is contradicted by Raymond, Sarah's white lover, who asserts to the landlady after Sarah's death that the black father is still alive, and he is "married to a white whore [. . .] a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table" (23). Raymond's love towards Sarah is questionable as his statement about her father endorses Sarah's experience of forced separatism.

In Doyle's theory, white motherhood is valued and her sexuality is policed as a progenitor of a higher race; non-white women, in contrast, are devalued, her sexuality is violated as a producer of "handworker races." Nowhere is this more apparent than in Kennedy's dramatisation of racialised mother-figures and her deconstructive force in two of her most renowned plays.

Conclusion

The common ground for these three playwrights, Childress, Hansberry, and Kennedy, is the periphery in which the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement's ideologies overlap. Their characters are a result of the negotiation between western ideologies and Black pride, on the one hand, and African consciousness on the other hand. Characters' success or failure are determined by their ability to grasp the inherent contradiction between two consciousnesses. In this chapter, emphasis has been given primarily to the impact of irreconcilable dichotomies on black bodies and their fragmentation. Consequently, the visual atmosphere of Kennedy's play, which is "vivid" with beheaded bodies, characters losing their hair until they become bald, and characters committing suicide, is similar to Hansberry's apocalyptic vision in *Les Blancs*; to a limited extent it is also similar to Childress' play where the black artist attempts the painting of a fragmented, defeated African American woman against a background of chaotic mobs. These

playwrights offer a glimpse of the psychological, social, and historical dilemma of African American artists' struggle with the trope of motherhood. In doing so, they declare the body a medium of social, psychological and political commentary.

During the sixties, Childress continued her militant drama of protest presenting more powerful female characters with what Diggs calls "angry verbal confrontations"; these characters serve as models for more feminist roles to emerge in recent theatre (30). Like *Wine*, Childress's other two plays of the sixties, *String* and *Wedding Band* (1969), investigate a new code of behaviour and the way it functions to create "an idealized category of blackness" (31). This idealised category is influenced mostly by African culture.

Hansberry's drama is classified by many critics as social realism. However, *Les Blancs*, along with many scenes in *Raisin* and the allegorical plays such as *What Use Are Flowers*, exhibit a socio-politically negotiated Afrocentric approach on the one hand, and a contemporary concern on the part of the dramatist with the social, economic and political change of African American community in America on the other.

Kennedy's drama, along with the drama of Hansberry, and Childress, becomes a means for "inter-textual communication," to use Elam's term in a different context, with the drama of African Americans in the seventies (293). Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*, as chapter four will show, borrows from Kennedy's plays a pattern of repetition, fragmentation, and experimenting with the theatrical form, and so do other playwrights of more concurrent drama. The pattern dominant in Kennedy's plays will be found, questioned and experimented on in later works of the seventies and on: the exclusion of marginalised characters from a higher white culture, the death-like penalty towards the end of the play, and masks confusing the racial identities for characters facing their inevitable end all recur in the decades to come in plays by Suzan-Lori Parks to whom Kennedy is a mentor as chapter five will show.

Choreo-poetic Movement against Discipline: The 1970s' Plays of Sonia Sanchez, Adrienne Kennedy, and Ntozake Shange

Lost my name when I was eleven year old. I became just a body then so I forgot my name. Don't nobody want to know a Black Woman's name [. . .]
All ya need to know is on my face and body. If you can read a map you can read me.

(Sanchez, *Uh, Huh* 69)

This chapter explores theatrical amalgamation of different literary and artistic forms, a new experimental aesthetics which pervaded the dramaturgy of African American women in the 1970s. Sonia Sanchez' *Uh, Huh; But How Do It Free Us?* (1975) integrates poetry and pantomime into drama, Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976) is an adaptation of three Hollywood movies, Shange's most celebrated play, *For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976), is best described as a "choreopoem" as it involves both dance and poetry. What is interesting about this cinematic, poetic, and corporeally creative and provocative theatrical vision is that it followed the most militant period in African American history, the Black Power Movement and its "sister," the Black Arts Movement¹.

My analysis engages, at the same time, a phenomenological examination of aggression against women. Challenging the male-centred discourse became the counterpart to challenging racial injustice for black women playwrights more than before². The tendency to utilize innovative forms of expression is not separable from

¹ In her study of African American theatre, *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor*, Geneviève Fabre investigates the difference between militant theatre and the theatre of experience. She notes that these two categories should not be seen as successive stages in the development of African American drama, and that they are not mutually exclusive, but complementary (107). My argument differs from that of Fabre in that I trace the continuity of black women's tendency to experimentation with form and content way back to the early twentieth century, and I link it to the more recent experimental theatre of the 1980s and 1990s.

² Many African American women discussed elaborately this point as part of an emerging black feminist theory. Gloria T. Hull's *But Some of Us are Brave*, and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* offer a wide variety of articles on black feminism which started with setting

those playwrights' outcry against aggression; not simply because content dictates form, but because the movement against racial and patriarchal supremacy and sexism was revolutionised by a parallel rebellion against traditional forms of expression. Thus, this chapter builds on the previous chapter's argument in regard to black women's commitment to using both Afrocentric and Euro-American aesthetics without idolising the first or repudiating the latter.

Starting with Sanchez, I compare her first play, *The Bronx is Next*, in which she envisions a rebellious act of burning down all apartments in the Bronx in protest against social destitution in urban areas, to *Uh, Huh*, a play about the social effects of racism, sexism, and chauvinism within the Black Power Movement. While *The Bronx* registers the playwright's commitment to the ideals of the movement, *Uh, Huh* criticises and satirises male acts of aggression. From an aesthetic point of view, Sanchez's use of pantomime, which is used to both reiterate and question the three narratives she presents, illustrates the centrality of the corporeal in troubling the hegemony of supremacist discourses. I then approach Kennedy's *A Movie Star* from the same perspective, arguing that her engagement in showing the carnal effect of Hollywood pictures on black female bodies goes hand in hand with her innovative style of playwriting that utilizes white Hollywood female stars to play roles in the life of the black protagonist of the play. I examine the intertwined avenues of artistic expression and social denouncement of aggression in Shange's *For Colored Girls* and *Spell #7* (1979), comparing the dancing bodies in the first with the pregnant body of the latter, and showing how expressive dancing bodies offer not only healing from socio-political oppression, but also antagonism to racialised and masculinised discourse of female sensuality. The collective voice of these playwrights during the 1970s shows that the corporeal expression becomes a gestural language used in the face of corporeal violence. However, I start with delineating the image of the black male warrior as a cultural archetype in order to set the oppositional mode as a background for black women's dramaturgy in this era.

itself in opposition to the racism of white women in the Women's Movement and the sexism of black men in Black Nationalism.

Writing Black, Creating Warriors

This intersection between literary aesthetics and socio-political statement—as revealed to each gender—can be seen clearly in Ed Bullins’ words describing the objective of writing for a black male artist during the Black Arts Movement: “it is to do the best he can at his job of writing and presenting his vision and not become prematurely *emasculated* by the prospect of not being produced because of his race [italics added]” (“Theatre of Reality” 61). Bullins sees writing as a gendered category where black manhood is asserted in production, the lack of which threatens of emasculation; literary productivity was seen then by the Black Arts writers as synonymous with masculinity in an era where production was ironically still governed by white supremacy³.

Bullins’ statement is rooted in everyday experience where the politics governing the relationship between black authors and white producers are translated into not only literary, but also socio-political control of productivity. Investigating the relationship between black authors and white publishers, John K. Young observes that the economic power of mainstream publishers created aesthetic limits for African American writers (17). Concentration of economic power and cultural authority, he argues, work to produce and perpetuate exotic images of blackness, and create an implicit connection between whiteness and aesthetic values (18). Examining varied examples of cuts and deletions in literary texts of renowned authors like Nella Larsen, Richard Wright, Ishmael Reed, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison, Young shows how blackness has been measured and marked by “reifying cultural mis(conceptions) of race” (7). I use Young’s argument not to further expound on the relationship between white publishers and black authors, but to indicate that these cuts and deletions were experienced, especially by male writers of the Black Arts era, as Bullin’s words show, as an act of physical aggression

³ According to Jerry Gafio Watts, black presses could not compete with white-owned publishing firms. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, although aware of the contradiction between their written words and their choice of publishers, had their works published by white-owned publishing houses (216). Only Gwendolyn Brooks took a stand with black publishers in 1969 and remained faithful to her decision until her death in 2000 (217)

against their texts⁴.

As a consequence, the image of the male warrior, discussed in chapter three, is produced both literarily and culturally not only because black authors, like Baraka, wanted to create revolutionary idols, but also because white publishers and producers wanted to circulate misconceptions of the black race, as Young notes. These misconceptions were not perpetuated in literary genres only, but in official documents like the Moynihan Report, published in 1965. In the light of this report, black women were seen as one of the main reasons of economic and social emasculation for black men, and black men echoed this report. In her article that aims at restoring the father-daughter relationships socially and culturally, Hortense Spillers speaks of the reversal in the Moynihan Report of “the castration thematic [. . .], displacing the Name and the Law of the Father to the territory of the Mother and Daughter” (66). That is, instead of investigating and finding solutions to men’s aggression against women, black women were seen as the assaulters. What is of interest here is Spillers’ emphasis on the power of a writer to use the body, specifically an ethnic body, as a metaphor against which he can commit violation: “[u]nder its hegemony [ethnicity], the human body becomes a defenceless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor” (66). Spillers registers, as most black feminists did, a critique of this research and equates it with an aggressive act which violates the African American female body and uses it as a metaphor of a *castrating* patriarchy, although both male and female bodies, Spillers observes, share the same historical alienation and reduction to objects (67). Spillers alludes in her analysis not only to rape in its physical sense, but also to the role the writer assumes, in this case the white writer of the report, as an assaulter.

If lack of literary production in the militant period of the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to its intersecting relationship with the question of race, is seen as an

⁴ Jaquelin Wood explains that Baraka situates oppression of black men as the overarching concern of the revolutionary movement (“The Power” xiii). Thus he reveals a similar perspective to that of Bullins when he says that: “the first thing a writer wants to do is write . . . (though this is not at all true, finally, when you look up and find yourself straddling a lady, or foot up on a bar rail. But ideally the writing would be the thing for writers” (quoted in Wood, xii). The sexual image in Baraka’s words is equated with writing, an act of production that clearly excluded women from the theoretical foundation of the movement.

emasculating act, then its opposite, literary and cultural production, in its extreme militant form, is an assertion of manhood in its sexual form; i.e. an act of *cultural* penetration/rape⁵. This is not to simply liken literary productivity to a sexual act, but to argue that it is based on asserting Black Arts men writer's power against a hegemonic white culture, on the basis of subduing the black "matriarchal" subculture. In her study of the relationship between sex and aggression, Sheets-Johnstone argues that the act of penetration, specifically rape, is not only life-threatening in its physical sense but also an "act of unconditioned male power" (*Roots* 119). This "unconditioned male power" is the crux of the Black Power Movement which Michelle Wallace, under severe criticism by black men, attacked in *The Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978). In *Funnyhouse of A Negro*, as shown in the previous chapter, we see how Kennedy already gave shape to this rhetoric through the image of the returning black father who re-kindles Sarah's fear of invasion and reminds her of rape. Rosemary K. Curb focuses in her article "Fragmented Selves" specifically on sexual power relationships in Kennedy's play; Sarah's father is forced to commit a dual sexual and religious act in Africa, "dedicating his life to the erection of a Christian mission in the middle of the jungle" (9). The word "erection," Curbs maintains, must be read as a double entendre; his preaching of Christianity is a symbolic act of the cultural rape of his own Black people in Africa, as did Hansberry's Abioseh in *Les Blancs*, as much as it is an actual rape of Sarah's mother (183). It might be argued in this context that Kennedy, as a black woman whose personal life surfaces in each of her plays, did also experience the sweeping rhetoric of the revolutionary movement as an aggressive act against her Western-affiliated aesthetic. In *A Movie Star*, the protagonist of Kennedy's play shows through her cinematic identification with Hollywood icons the invasion of her body by whiteness. Also, both Sanchez and Shange shed light on the black female body as a site for physical and cultural assault, and how to heal this body

⁵ This is not to imply, at all, that the negative stereotyping of the black male as rapist is valid in any way. Rather, I build on Eldridge Cleaver's infamous call for what he names as an insurrectionary act—raping white women and practising first on black woman—to pinpoint the rhetoric of power that manifested itself during the Black Power Movement. In her analysis of *Meridian* and "Advancing Luna" in *Alice Walker*, Maria Lauret observes in the case of interracial rape a "kind of microcosm of personal/ political tensions" where a white woman's guilty consciousness hinders her from identifying acts of rape (86). The microcosm which Lauret speaks of is a signifier of a macrocosm in which these tensions that are built on male dominance/ female vulnerability are experienced culturally.

aesthetically as this chapter will show.

Sonia Sanchez' *The Bronx is Next*

I start with the well-known poet Sonia Sanchez because she is associated with the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, and more importantly, because she is the only woman whose play, *The Bronx is Next* (1968), is included in the first edition of Ed Bullins' anthology, *New Plays from the Black Theatre* (1969). According to Jacqueline Wood in her introduction to Sanchez' *I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't*, Sanchez was embraced by militant male authors and included in the dramatic circle of Baraka, Bullins, and Neal (xiv). Interestingly, Sanchez attributes her inclusion in this circle to the fact that she is a playwright: "it was the playwriting that I think made me different from the other women writers and linked me with the men" (quoted in Wood, xiv). Sanchez' words testify to the fact that theatre and theatrical production was a male-dominated sphere; Sanchez' contemporaries like Kennedy and Childress, and previously Hansberry, were not embraced by Black Arts writers as she was. In fact, Sanchez was included in the dramatic circle of the Black Arts Movement's activists because of her male-identified ideas, especially in the early years of the movement—best evidenced by her joining the Nation of Islam (1971-1976).

It is relevant here to discuss Sanchez' theorisation of her role as a poet and a playwright before moving to her play *Uh Huh* in which she registers a transformation and positions herself on the side of black women, criticising the chauvinism of the movement, and demanding an answer of its activists: *But How Do It Free Us?* Sanchez, a leading poet in the Black Arts Movement, considers that the objective of her long poetic and theatrical career is the creation of new social values, and the role of the poet is that of "a manipulator of symbols and language and images" (*I'm Black* 15). Like Childress, who considers that her drama, which aims at self-determination, has a transformational role, Sanchez emphasizes the priority of the black community for the purpose of achieving social change. To get a clear view of the world, Sanchez states, "I had to wash my ego in the needs/ aspiration of my people" (15). Sanchez's statement is not an act of self-effacement; rather, she insists that it is a dialogue with the collective subconscious of black people in order to reach

for the “truth” from a black woman’s point of view. In “Ruminations/ Reflections,” she writes that part of this truth is “how” to tell it using the “...language, dialect, idioms, of the folks we believed our audience to be” (*I’m Black* 16). Sanchez’ vision of what she calls “functionary poetry” stems from a rigorous affiliation to the aesthetics of the movement. Like Childress’s theatre, which is steeped in aggressive verbal confrontations, poetry and poetic theatre for Sanchez is a glorification of “a sister struggler.” However, this sister struggle, in Sanchez’ theory, is where black consciousness “needs to understand how to appropriate women as beautiful human beings” (17). It is only as a tool to assert “unconditioned male power,” to use Johnstone’s words, that “sister struggle” manifests itself in Sanchez’s first play *The Bronx*.

One might argue that Sanchez’ association with the movement secures for her “social visibility” which enables her, as she explains in “Ruminations,” “to create, preserve, or destroy social values (15). Sanchez’ close relationship to Black Arts writers provides her with the power of “the priest and the prophet” with whom “he/she [the poet] was often *synonymous*,” thus, the poet can have “infinite power to interpret life [*italics in the original*]” (15). These two words, “infinite power,” could have not been descriptive of black women in the 1960s and the early 1970s unless it is a second-hand power⁶.

In *The Bronx*, Sanchez dramatizes racism and expresses enthusiastically the desire to burn down tenements in both Harlem and the Bronx. “It was my opinion at the time,” Sanchez says in her introduction to *Uh Huh*—which is originally a conversation with Ed Bullins—“and it still is that those tenements need to be burned down” (*I’m Black* 146). Sanchez’ desire to blow away any residues of the Civil Rights Movement is decisive and unapologetic, but also understandable in the light of the deteriorating economic situation in ghettoised areas. As Sanchez explains in one of her interviews, Harlem was becoming a destructive place where drugs and decimation exist (Kelly 686). In the socially-disturbing sphere of poverty and

⁶ In “Poetry Run Loose,” Sanchez praises Baraka and Bullins, acknowledging their literary influence: “I read Baraka’s plays and poems and saw his genius, and I and others followed in his gargantuan footsteps, awed by his brilliance and vision. I read Ed Bullins and discerned sites and places and forces that were crucial to our understanding of the Black world” (*I’m Black* 9).

oppression, Sanchez reflects on how these impoverished cities had negatively affected intra-racial relationships⁷.

The male-identified approach to “sister struggle” in the play is most apparent in Sanchez’ use of naming. She explains that she wanted her female characters to be representative, while she assigned names to male characters: “[. . .] I have an Old Sister because it is unimportant what her name is. I have a Black Bitch, it’s unimportant what her name is, and I have a White Cop. Then I gave the others names. They are the key players, the revolutionaries” (*I’m Black* 3). In chapter one I showed how Bonner used “un-naming” as an act of insisting on gaining absolute power; and how this was later reflected, as Kimberly Benston discusses in “I Yam What I am,” in the spirit of the Black Power Movement where revolutionaries chose undefined names to indicate their possession of power, such as the X in Malcom X’s name. However, in Sanchez’s *The Bronx*, the case is different. Women are not only trivialised in assigning them no-names, but also even inferiorised by giving them adjectives derivative of the sexist ideology of the movement. Spillers’ response to the Moynihan report is of use here; she refers to this act of “un-naming” as illustrative of “confounded identities” in the mentality of the black male: “Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. ‘Peaches’ and ‘Brown Sugar,’ ‘Sapphire’ and ‘Earth Mother,’ ‘Aunty,’ ‘Granny,’ God’s ‘Holy Fool,’ a ‘Miss Ebony First,’ or ‘Black Woman at the Podium’” (“Mama’s Baby” 65). Thus, Spillers points to the intersection between this trend to deprive women of their individual names/ identities and what she sarcastically calls “the national treasury of rhetorical wealth,” a euphemism for racist and sexist ideology.

Another point which indicates Sanchez’ internalisation of the Black Power Movement’s ideology is that she sacrificed “Old Woman” in her first play for the cause of the revolution in a symbolic act of “killing of the past in order for one to have a future” (*I’m Black* 4). The three militants force an elderly black woman to abandon her personal belongings as a metaphorical statement against the older

⁷ Deborah Wallace, in “Life and death in Upper Manhattan,” analyses social morbidity in such impoverished areas where low-weight birth rate and homicide rate escalates. She contextualizes these health outcomes and the socio-economic factors such as housing, demographics, and employment in the southwest Bronx and in Upper Manhattan.

generation's ideology of civil activism. The revolutionaries are not supposed to make the elderly a wheelchair to travel in, Sanchez continues; they are "not to be detoured," so they send the old woman to her death (4). Sanchez was not criticising the movement at this stage but rather condoning it and voicing her twinned revolutionary ideas.

The play then does not criticize, as Wood argues, "the intra-chauvinism" in black community (xxix). In many places, Sanchez' ideology and that of the militants is one; for example, the three militants fiercely encounter Black Bitch whose relationship with a white cop in order to support her children lead them to humiliate her. When asked how she is going to explain her relationship with a white man to her kids, "Black Bitch" answers defiantly: "They know more than me already, but they still love me [. . .] I'll teach them. I'll say I am a black woman and I cry in the night. But when you are men, you will never make a black woman cry in the night" to which one militant answers: "Another black matriarch on our hands" (32). However, the ideal future the "Black Bitch" envisions for her sons is jettisoned along with the apartments to which the revolutionaries set fire; like the old woman, she needs to be sacrificed, for there is no room, it seems Sanchez wants to say, for "matriarchy" to detour the movement.

The Black Bitch in Sanchez's play presents three readings of her body according to three different points of view; her reading of her body as a *scapegoat* clashes with that of the militant who perceives her once as a *matriarch* and once as a *whore*. Thus, she appears truly as a site for what Spillers calls "confounded identities" as she perceives herself in the eye of the male. In all three readings, women are exposed as sexually vulnerable, even in the case of the "matriarch" whose sexuality is measured up by her commitment to her family. Yet, Sanchez leaves room for the Black Woman to negotiate her identity. The third reading—the Black Bitch as a whore—is susceptible to negotiation as it looms in the future of her two sons; the map/body of black women becomes, because of this third reading, equally susceptible to negotiation and re-negotiation. What is significant for Sanchez is the present and immediate action; the future might as well correct the wrongdoings of the present, but this can wait in *The Bronx*. Sanchez re-negotiates the image of the

black woman in *Uh Huh* before she officially fell out with the Nation of Islam as I show below.

Uh Huh, But How Do it Free Us?

I want to start by emphasising that Sanchez's choice of form (poetic theatre) on the one hand, and her emphasis on corporeal performance are two complementary levels of expression. In her preface to *Uh, Huh*, Sanchez states that she incorporates theatrical space as an additional element to what she essentially intends as poems; the reason for playwriting is explained in terms of providing the poem with an additional space in which bodies can perform, and consequently, best represent socio-political power relationships: "I write plays, I guess, because I can't say what I want to say in a poem. I have to stretch it out into a play" (19). She also explains that she uses the theatre to say in dialogue what poetry can't say. So, for Sanchez, poems are theatricised, because to speak about power relationships is to bring into conflict all the forces concerned. It is here where Sanchez's aesthetics differs from Shange's. Shange, as will be shown later, tends to poeticize theatre, to orient her characters towards abstraction through using the dancing body. I want to elaborate on this point before I introduce the play as it sheds light on the role of the poet/dramatist in his/her community and link it to the significance of the body on stage.

Plays by both Sanchez and Shange are included in *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theatre*. In their introduction to the anthology, Killian and Brazil explain that one way of approaching the definition of "poets theatre" is to try and catch its social function. Poem-plays occupy a "charged space between the disputed territories of performativity, theatricality, and the textual," and to best define "the social function" is to think of the function of Greek theatre (xiii). Thinking of the Greek theatre also triggers the concept of "body politics," or to use Killian and Brazil's words, "the body of the citizens" who now "could see and experience itself" (xiii). The social function of the poets theatre, like that of the Greek theatre, appears then as reaching for a Total Body. According to Rogozinski in his reflection on Greek legacy, reference to "the-body-politic" seems to thwart political division, and consequently, it becomes the "only tenable representation of the national community," and is asserted as establishing "the organico-political schema" (8). One way of addressing

this illusory concept of unity, or community, of imposing connection on society members is the social function drama assumes, starting with the Greek drama and not ending with the militant theatre of the 1960s-1970s.

Sanchez points to the morbid body, to the element that threatens social discordance, and that should be eliminated in order to protect the integrity of the Total Body; the infected member that hinders the progress of black “community” for both black men and women should be eliminated. Shange, on the other hand, emphasises a different community; the solidarity between women “of color,” black, Chicano, and Hispanic women, in the context of the emerging social organisations such as the ones sponsoring rape crisis centres in the 1970s. However, the body in Kennedy’s theatre does not stand for community, but for itself as a being who, to use Rogozinski’s words, “enter[s] into the intentional communion with being” (33). This repudiation of the Total Body, as is the case in Kennedy’s plays, does not threaten the disintegration of community, he observes, but emphasises plural individualities (33). Kennedy’s drama then stands in opposition to Sanchez’ in its emphasis on the individual, one of the reasons for excluding Kennedy from Black Nationalism and feminist movements. Shange, on the other hand, stands between Kennedy and Sanchez in creating a space for both the communal and the individual.

As explained above, Sanchez, in compliance with the ethics and aesthetics of the Movement, seems to work towards the Total (black) Body by effacing her subjectivity as a poet washing her ego in the needs of the community⁸. The play then does not register a break with the aesthetics and ethics of the Black Power Movement, but rather indicates the infected body that should be erased to preserve it.

The play is based on parallel performances of three groups; each group presents a dramatisation of an idea pertinent to the sexual politics of the black

⁸ In her interview with Jaqueline Wood, Sanchez expresses that she refuses to be still labelled a “black militant voice,” and that the continuity of this label means that people stopped reading her, and that art stays alive only because the artist grows and changes his/her ideas (“This Thing” 134). In her more recent play, *I’m Black when I’m Singing, I’m Blue When I Ain’t* (1982), Sanchez might have followed Kennedy’s trope of fragmentation when she dramatizes the split personality of Breena, a gifted black female performer, whose entrapment in an asylum allows her to re-live the success and disappointment in the lives of four renowned black singers: Nina Simone, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Diane Reeves. Sanchez explains that this play was a different kind of challenge, especially that she wrote a play in lyrics about multiple personalities (Wood, “This Thing” 128).

experience in America⁹. The ignorance of this politics, in addition to the impact of racism, as Wallace argues in *Black Macho*, was the reason for the growing mistrust between black men and women (13). Sanchez dramatizes the dynamic of power that led to this mistrust in three scenes; each scene ends with a mimetic dance that repeats and reiterates the narrative and provides an artistic commentary that engages the body in movement on stage. Structuring the play on a model of dialogue followed by interpretive dance, Sanchez uses dance/music in order to tell in corporeality what she cannot say in words.

These dynamics of power relationships, especially those involving white women activists, were the focus of Wallace's study in *The Black Macho*. During the movement, Wallace explains, black women felt that it was their duty to condone relationships between black men and white women to prove they were not racists; black men, on the other hand, argued that white women provided them with money while simultaneously showing their hostility to black women because of their availability to white men throughout many centuries. Black women, in turn, voiced their accusation of white women of racism, but remained silent to black men's oppression (15). The silence forced on black women, according to Wallace, created with the black woman "an inestimable emotional devastation" which Sanchez captures in the first and second scene. In the third scene, Sanchez' approach to "sister Struggle" resembles Childress's aesthetic of self-determination as it presents the black female who is capable of confrontation and triumph.

The deteriorating social situations in Harlem, the Bronx, and other impoverished locations of minorities during the mid-twentieth century captured Sanchez's consciousness. The second scene of *Uh, Huh* is reminiscent of the *Bronx Is Next*, but it shows a different attitude in regard to the devastating influence of social deterioration on the relationships between men and women. The Bronx, which was a "symbol of systematic catastrophe in American cities" according to Rodrick and Wallace's several studies of the Bronx and the adjacent cities, should be totally destroyed in Sanchez's first play, and nothing should stand in the way of this demolition whether it is the elderly, the disabled, or the children. The social

⁹ See appendix D for summaries of plays.

destitution in the second scene of *Uh, Huh*, leads to sado-masochistic behaviours on the part of men towards women, and Sanchez presents these images unequivocally. For example, the White Dude asks the White Whore to hit him so as to trigger his anger against his mother; he suffers the whip and takes his anger out on the White Whore: “What you doin’ beating me, Momma?” Brother Man, who is dressed in dashiki with tiki and African hat, puts a collar on the Black Whore’s neck and climbs on her back instead of the wooden horse and whenever she disagrees with him, he pulls the collar hard till she screams (69).

The social destitution in the Bronx and Harlem is certainly responsible for social problems like addiction, aggression, and self-destructive and abusive behaviour. Sanchez anticipates and shares with Wallace her perspective in regard to the effect of this social morbidity and poverty on sexual relationships, and how black men and women were manipulated against each other. In *phenomenology of oppression*, Bartkey refers to a psychological oppression that results from fragmentation and mystification (23). While fragmentation is clear in Sanchez’ play through acts of sexual objectification and stereotyping, mystification needs a further elaboration. Bartkey defines mystification as a “systematic obscuring of both the reality and agencies of psychological oppression so that its intended effect, the depreciated self, is lived out as destiny, guilt, or neurosis” (23). Both men and women in the play ignore the real oppressor, which is the socio-economic destitution, and direct their angst against each other. Accordingly, the black woman’s reading of her body in terms of being a “whore/ saint/ or matriarch” is the result of living out these mystifications as destiny (whore), guilt (saint, scapegoat/ victim), and neurosis (the tragic mulatto/ Kennedy’s female characters in *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers*).

It is important to note that Sanchez uses three linear narratives in which the female body is used as an object of voyeurism; therefore, her play is susceptible to the rendition of female bodies as “erotic” bodies, especially that they are explicitly used as objects of pleasure. To demonstrate how she avoids this eroticisation, it is relevant here to use Laura Mulvey’s investigation of voyeurism and scopophilic fetishism as Sanchez’ female characters run the risk of falling into one of or both

these categories. Although Mulvey's essay is concerned primarily with cinematic narrative, her take on the difference between voyeurism and scopophilic fetishism is of use here, because Sanchez's play uses pantomime and builds a relationship with the spectator based on the visual.

Voyeurism has associations with sadism; it needs a narrative in a linear time with a beginning and end because it "depends on making something happen" (Mulvey 17). On the other hand, fetishistic scopophilia exists outside linear time; it depends on the camera focus on body parts through cuts and focus. It uses idealisation of female figures as over-valued fetishes; obviously, the play does not utilize this second avenue. However, for the men of the play, women are voyeuristic objects. They are objects of pleasure onto which the male gaze, to use Mulvey's terms, projects its fantasy and reduces women's body into the position of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (19). In cinema, the woman figure traditionally serves as an erotic body for both the male actor and male spectator; the gaze of both the spectator and the male characters are "neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude" (Mulvey 19). The question is whether the women in the play serve as voyeuristic objects for the audience as well.

In fact, the mimetic dance scenes function as barriers between the spectator of the play and any possible act of fetishistic voyeurism as Sanchez utilizes the dancing body to deconstruct gender ideology. For example, we can see her depiction of the militant ideology in the first scene where two wives are introduced; only one of them is made pregnant while the other wife is infertile, or "castrated." The image of "castrated" woman gives order and meaning to the world of phallocentrism (Mulvey 14). And Sanchez seems to deconstruct this phallocentric avenue in the first mimetic dance which focuses on the manipulative nature of the male dancer, how he aligns the two sisters and how he keeps looking in the mirror as a gesture of his unquestionable ego. The patriarchal atmosphere of the scene is set and emphasised as both women rival for delivering a new born, a "militant" as an heir to the symbolic position of power within the Movement, consequently, doubly marginalising themselves. However, the dance destabilizes through ridicule what the narrative sets. So while cinema, to use Mulvey words, uses the structure of

fascination to reinforce ego, the stage theatre in Sanchez' play helps to partially disrupt this ego.

However, the second mimetic dance shows how Sanchez' critique of gender ideology is not fully implemented as her affiliation with the Movement still informs her work. Sanchez presents the black woman "matriarch" as the one responsible for homosexuality as a disruptive social factor. "Mamma," the female dancer, abuses her Little Boy; when he runs towards her, she knocks him down, and this is repeated many times (75). She reacts to his sexual attraction to the Little Girl harshly, beating him, and leaving him feeling rejected. The abandonment of the Little Boy by his mother seems to be the reason behind him growing up into a rapist, and later into a homosexual (implicitly castrated) person.

Nonetheless, Sanchez' play is a significant examination of corporeal matters of fact, her attempt to fathom the meaning of being a raced body amid destitution and oppression exemplifies the danger of perpetuating aggressive cultural archetypes such as the black male warrior. In what follows, I show how violence is approached differently in Kennedy's plays, and how a black woman's internalisation of violence causes a corporeal uprise.

Adrienne Kennedy and the Upheaval of the "Hole"

The intersection between the political and the personal on the border of violence can be persistently found in the incident of Malcolm X's death; an image which is engraved in the consciousness of African Americans. I open the section on Kennedy with this image because her 1968-play *Sun: A Poem for Malcolm X Inspired by His Murder* marks the transformation of Kennedy's drama from surrealism to another form of visual, non-verbal means of representation that characterises her work during the 1970s. Critic Elinor Fuchs detects in this play a transition from symbolism into activism which is best described in a form she calls a "multimedia/ performance art documentary" (77). In her discussion of symbolism in Kennedy's 1960s plays, Fuchs, very importantly, refers to a point that differentiates Kennedy's drama from that of the symbolists and early avant-gardes; namely, violence.

While symbolists detest violence and tend to capture the metaphysical and the timeless, best illustrated by the persisting image of unexplained death, Kennedy's symbolism is not quite symbolism, for the metaphysical in her plays is at heart political, cultural and historical, or as Fuchs observes: "the signs may be historical, but their power is eternal" (79). While the signs in *Sun* are historical and political, their power also stems from the personal. The violent image of Malcolm's death in Kennedy's *Sun*, as it is in the consciousness of many African Americans, is one of those examples where the political/communal and the personal are one.

This very short one-act play is indeed all these genres that Fuchs clustered into the term "multimedia/ performance art documentary." Although the play is highly experimental, and closer to a form of painting than it is to poetry, it registers the playwright's personalised artistic engagement with African American struggle and activism. Kennedy translates politics into art, for she, interestingly, wrote *Sun* while working on some materials from the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci (Bryant-Jackson and Overbeck 6). Thus the Man in his constant reaching for celestial objects in *Sun* resembles the Vitruvian Man that Da Vinci relates to nature. However, the "proportion" of Kennedy's Man is not unified; it explodes into the cosmos in Kennedy's metaphysical play, into the world-of-experience in its socio-political and historical sense for African Americans.

Again, the theatre of the black woman dramatist appears as a merger of different performative artistic and literary genres, but at heart it is based on interiorisation and artistic interpretation of violence. Instead of characters, the play is introduced by an alternative element which is "Movement"; thus, "Movement of the Man/ His orbiting/ Sun's orbiting/ Movement of the Moon/ Wire/ Revolving of the head" replace narrative (67). The play is about the orbiting of celestial elements constantly changing their colours around Man who is, at the same time, surrounded with wires; the play ends with his fragmentation and turning into smaller parts, into a red sun, and then to a black sun. There are no sources that show the play was ever produced; the complexity of these fluid images and the transformation of bodies into celestial objects do not only indicate a difficulty in staging, but also makes of Kennedy's text, just like those texts Bonner wrote at the beginning of the twentieth

century, plays to be read. Nonetheless, Kennedy puts great emphasis on music, lighting, and movement in her text, the reason that made Kolin classify the play, because of this specific “fluidity of performance,” as a “choreographed political requiem for the fallen black leader” (*Understanding* 149).

Kennedy uses fragmentation in a way different from its use in *Funnyhouse* and *Owl*. Fragmentation in both those plays seems to be the result of self-centeredness and morbid obsession with whiteness; it starts with characters’ isolation from their communities and ends with their self-effacement. In contrast, fragmentation in *Sun* serves a completely different purpose; it stems from the main character’s [Malcolm X] desire to be at one with his cause/ community and ends up with his dissolving into their, not only consciousness, but also living worldliness as he bursts and turns into celestial entities. In her study of the theatre of experience in *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphors*, Fabre gives a pessimistic reading of fragmentation in *Sun*: the world explodes after a momentary acknowledgment of Malcolm’s triumph, and is scattered among his remains until everything, even Malcolm’s voice, is silenced (122). However, Kennedy uses the Man’s body, and in doing so she signifies again on the Vitruvian Man, to build on its remains a new renaissance: the “Vanished Man’s voice” last words intersect with the act of his dismemberment to reveal that “The Arno [. . .] a river with a canal alongside./And a castle on a hill/ flowering rushes./ I still” (77). The body of Man becomes the river of Arno that runs through Florence, once the centre of Italian Renaissance. The Man, in his turning into a black sun and becoming the Arno River, is Kennedy’s translation of death into a positive energy on which a new black renaissance should be built. Instead of the psychological exteriorisation prevalent in earlier plays, a political statement is made in reference to the restless struggle of black individuals. Kolin suggests that the play is built on the sun imagery derived from the speeches of Malcolm X: “Fighting for our place in the sun, we will not rest until that place has been secured” (*Understanding* 151). The fragmentation of the body on the stage, and the “restless” orbiting of its parts, alludes to the continuity of racial struggle in racist America.

Kennedy is then among the first to predict a second Black Renaissance. The relationship between Malcolm's death and the establishment of the Black Arts Repertory by Baraka, as shown in the previous chapter, was causal not coincidental. But the 1970s also witnessed another renaissance: the black women's literary renaissance that flourished in the works of Morrison, Walker, Giovanni, Brooks and many others. Sanchez also contributed to this renaissance and to the literary field that focused on Malcolm's death in her play *Malcolm/Man Don't Live Here No Mo* [a children's play] (1972). The play narrates the story of Malcolm's life through a Brotha (Malcolm as a kid, a "baddDD niggah from the mid-west, a Muslim prisoner, and a black leader) and a Sistuh (Malcolm's mother, "wite/woman/amurica," and Malcolm's wife) and a chorus of another (3 Sistuhs) forming in total an X letter (53).

Sanchez' play warns [future generations] against worshipping the dead "cuz the dead cannot lead/ but we'll remember him/ [. . .]/ he showed us the score/ & we'll make it for him" (58). It is a call for integrating Malcolm's legacy into action and deeds, and translating the revolutionary symbol into a militant act. Moreover, Sanchez presents counter-violence in reprisal for the racism of white America to the extent that "wite/amurica regrets, Malcolm/man/ don't live here no more" (57). The message is simple and in line with the ethics of Black Power Movement: "but hear my sound/ u must not hate you must be bound/ to nationalism. to freedom. to yo/blk/land/ let us move together and expand" (57). Lyricism of this poem-play is translated corporeally as dancing children slowly rotate the X formation. This play, as Woods explains in her introduction to *I am Black* is a transitional work in Sanchez' dramatic oeuvre, just like *Sun* is in the case of Kennedy, as it introduces ritual elements and choral expressions to be characteristic of her later drama, such as *Uh, Huh* discussed above (xxxiii). The assassination of black leaders was a violent act targeted at black communities and was experienced corporeally, as well as individually, to the extent that it becomes a visceral turning point in the aesthetics of many African American dramatists.

Violence and aggression then in the texts of black women playwrights of the 1970s is inter-related with a new experimentation with the performing body on the stage poetically, cinematically, and choreographically. However, violence was also a

theme that co-existed with and informed African American experience in America since the arrival of the first slave ship to the New World. One only wonders why in the 1970s it took, on a large scale, this experimental form of representation that surpassed linearity and realism.

Like the decade before, the 1970s was a turbulent era that witnessed, and continued, the anti-war movement; the Women's Liberation Movement that aspired to get control over woman's body, its reproduction and birth control; the Environmental Movement; the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. These events created a link between authoritative presence, supported by media, and a growing mistrust on the part of the public of such state authority. In his study of contemporary theatre, *From Acting to Performance*, Philip Auslander explains how the manipulation of presence performed by charismatic figures of opposite cultures such as the American president, Richard Nixon (serving from 1969 to 1974), and Abbie Hoffman, an American social and political anarchist who became a symbol of the youth rebellion of the counterculture era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, led to an increasing uncertainty in regard to the power of presence that it becomes synonymous with "a repressive status quo" (63). One of the cultural consequences of this sceptical general sense is that it led to blurring the line between theatre and reality, and consequently, to "the discrediting of theatre as a potentially radical art form" (63). It was no surprise then that theatre, especially feminist theatre, utilised Brechtian elements that highlight the distance between the actor and his/her persona, and establishes a relationship with spectators built on reasoning and negotiation¹⁰.

Feminism also contributed to the mistrust of "the power of presence" to use Auslander's term; it did not only struggle for the liberation of the female body but also endeavoured to re-structure the subconscious of society by deconstructing the male gaze. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), for example, is expressive of the politics of its time where the cultural activism of Women's Movements influenced ways of seeing, questioned womanhood as a male-

¹⁰ In 1980, Shange re-wrote Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941) to dramatize the post-civil war America. Parks' later plays, such as *In the Blood* (1999), and *Fucking A* (2000) are also built on Brechtian epic theatre; Parks made the transition to this form in *Venus* (1996), which will be discussed in chapter six.

constructed image, and consequently de-constructed, or at least was partially successful in de-constructing, patriarchal ideologies.

In the section on Sanchez above I showed how she utilizes the “erotic” female body, and how she depends on voyeurism only to empty it of its meaning, and to expose sexism in its ugliest forms. Kennedy, on the other hand, shows how Western media in its most glorious form, Hollywood, consume African American identities. In *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, the identity of the protagonist is overtaken by three Hollywood movie stars who perform segments of her life. The dichotomy of white/ black bodies surfaces again to cast light on the significance of the performing black body within a culture whose accepted image is manufactured by Hollywood. Kennedy complicates the protagonist’s understanding of her identity by employing her family crises (parents’ separation, brother in coma, miscarriage and divorce) as a story of familial violence in a white-and-black movie; the play rethinks what it means to be a black self, a historically positioned black self, in a white world.

A Movie Star: My Diaries Consume Me

A Movie Star is a play in which Kennedy signifies on her earlier works *Funnyhouse*, *A Lesson in a Dead Language* (1968) and *Owl*. Clara, the main character in *Owl*, re-appears to enact segments of Kennedy’s life and to voice her fears of and fascination with themes like psychosis, pregnancy, bleeding, and death. The play is based on an intermingling of the collective (American as well as African American) with the personal through introducing the stars of Hollywood movies to play roles in the protagonist’s life, while her family members play secondary roles; thus Clara’s life, and key characters in her life, are subdued and marginalised by the charm of Hollywood.

Clara’s black and white movie is enacted by Bette Davis, Jean Peters, and Shelley Winters (leading roles are played by characters who look exactly like the Hollywood movie stars as the playwright states in her notes on the play), while their male counterparts, Paul Henreid, Marlon Brando, and Montgomery Clift are silently listening to Clara’s voice coming out of the mouths of Davis, Peters, and Winters.

Clara does not escape to the imaginary realm of the stars as her husband accuses her of doing; it is the stars who invade Clara's life: "Eddie says I've become shy and secretive and I can't accept the passage of time, and that my diaries consume me and that my diaries make me a spectator watching my life like watching a black and white movie" (99). The playwright warns the spectator/reader against adopting Eddie's perspective; Clara is not drawn into the glamorous world of Hollywood movies to escape her everyday problems. Rather, the gradual erasure of Clara's identity is caused by white America's entertainment industry, and it is presented in an image of consumption. When Bette Davis, for example, talks to Paul Henreid in a scene from *Now Voyager* (1942), embodying Clara's persona, releasing her fear of pregnancy and death, and reminiscing about past events of her mother attempting to kill her father, Kennedy juxtaposes the historicised black female body and the ideal image of white womanhood, a tormenting contrast to the protagonist to the extent that her body is susceptible to erasure by blood and bleeding. Shelley Winters, before getting drowned in the last scene, screams along with Clara that her brother Wellie might die in the hospital while Jean Peters cries "I am bleeding" (103). Marlon Brando in the scene of *Viva Zapata*/Brother's hospital bedroom keeps pulling the stained black sheets from under Jean Peters/Clara as she continuously bleeds.

It is this position of Clara that I examine, Clara as a spectator, whose act of voyeurism of her own life is translated corporeally into erasure, or consumption by White America, through a constant act of bleeding. Instead of the scopophilic pleasure that Mulvey analyses in her influential essay, the protagonist's body is ransomed and consumed by the big illusion Hollywood is. This recurrent image of bleeding is analysed by many critics from an autobiographical point of view, and truly, Clara is Kennedy's alter-ego as she always turns to her husband Eddie revealing her incapability of resuming writing her plays about owls [Clara in *Owl Answers*], about losing herself in books [Sarah in *A Funnyhouse of Negro*], and about dreams and nightmares. In "A Spectator Watching My Life," Deborah Geis explains how the traditional association of writing and pregnancy or reproduction develops into disturbing images in which Clara/Kennedy uses blood/ink to write her wounds (177). Like Geis, Kolin argues that the process of writing for Kennedy is an

act of “writing the wound,” explaining that, using female characters as her alter-ego, Kennedy “notates her work with comparisons between bloody bodies and scripts” (*Understanding* 114). What emerges through Kennedy’s use of blood imagery within this condensed zone, where whiteness and blackness intersect with the protagonist’s narrative, is a rebellion against establishment, against established roles and assigned positions. Clara’s body refuses its biological nature and reacts by excessive bleeding that Brando keeps pulling the sheets filled with black blood.

It is relevant here to bring into this context an examination of the position of the female subject in Western media and society as it sheds light on Kennedy’s artistic rebellion that takes the form of corporeal reprisal against Western modes of identity construction. One of the key concepts which feminists severely criticised as reductive is the patriarchal image of woman “in the form of a hole.” This phrase is Sartre’s words in his analysis of the human condition; no doubt, he was not the first or the only to reduce the female body to a “hole-object”; his words that a woman’s sex “is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis- a fact which can easily lead to the idea of castration” is the focus of many feminist studies¹¹. That the Moynihan Report spoke of the African American woman’s castration of the male in her family was not a novelty, but a part of patriarchal ideology, and Sartre had only given words to what is lived, experienced, and established in terms of male dominance/female docility.

The crux of Sartre’s philosophy is that everything in this world has an intrinsic nature, which is at the same time its ontological meaning. According to Sheets-Johnstone, the woman in Sartre’s ontology becomes an “In-Itself” as opposed to a “For-Itself” (164). Consequently, the quality stands for the subject, and the quality here that stands for the intrinsic nature of the female body is the “slimy,” the soft, dull, “leech-like” object that is the “hole” (164). This “intrinsic nature,” Sheets-Johnstone explains, speaks for and affirms female docility in patriarchal discourse.

¹¹ Margery Collins and Christine Pierce’s “Holes and Slime: sexism in Sartre’s Psychoanalysis” attacks the persistence in Sartre’s philosophy to associate the feminine with abject modes of existence. In “Sartre on Objectification: A Feminist Perspective,” Phyllis Sutton Morris’ argument negates such sexist interpretation on the part of Sartre, showing that he also talked of the mouth in the form of the hole, and that even when he talked of the slimy as disgusting, he also admitted that “the slimy is myself” (70).

Nowhere is the embodiment of this intrinsic nature more apparent than in Hollywood's golden age from which Kennedy chose her three movies to build on the plot of her play.

I bring out Sheets-Johnstone's phenomenological examination of Sartre's account of the female body because it explains, as she notes, "sexual modes of threat and vulnerability in which males and females respectively commonly exist in Western societies" (165). Mulvey addressed this fear of castration in her study of visual pleasure in Hollywood's cinema. She explains that in order to overcome fear of castration, the film industry created the cult of female star in which the female figure is transformed into an over-valued fetish; the pleasure of watching these cinematic images is the fetishistic scopophilia mentioned above (21)¹². No doubt media is different today in reflecting these sexual modes. However, at the time Kennedy wrote her plays of the 1960s and 1970s, the image of the woman as the slimy (dependent, irrational, inconsistent) [in Sartre's account as in patriarchal ideology] was still part of the mode of thinking that prevailed in American society and its mass media, and triggered feminist critique and activism best exemplified in Miss America protests of the late 1960s¹³.

In patriarchal ideology, knowing—in these plays I analyse, mass media is criticised as a gendered type of Knowing—is "a form of appropriation"; the act of knowing reveals itself as a male act when it shows a desire to appropriate and consequently, dominate. As a result, female bodies become docile bodies awaiting male appropriation and validation (Sheets-Johnstone, *Roots* 165). We see this tendency to validation, to a certain extent, in Sanchez' conceptualisation of sister struggle. Furthermore, knowing, even scientific knowledge in terms of discovery and conquest [this point is the focus of Suzan-Lori Parks in her play *Venus* (1996) as will

¹² The second avenue for overcoming the fear of castration is the cult of film noir where, according to Mulvey, the male protagonist is preoccupied with re-enacting the original trauma through investigating the woman and de-mystifying her mystery, an act which is counter-balanced by devaluation, punishment, or "saving of the guilty" (21). Hitchcock's movies fall into this category, Mulvey observes. Interestingly, Hitchcock's movies are among the artistic avenues which influenced Kennedy's drama as she sates in *People who Led*. "I sensed there were elements in Hitchcock's use of the change of identities that, though still then closed off in my mind, might one day open up in my work," Kennedy explains her choice of shifting identities in her plays (*People* 109).

¹³ Examples of these protests are the crowning of a sheep in the 1969 Miss America contest and the Burial of Traditional Womanhood at a 1968 peace demonstration (Lauret, *Liberating* 56)

be shown in chapter 6], in the form of male dominance “express[es] itself sexually in essentially nonsexual endeavours” (167). The flaw in this patriarchal ideology, as Sheet-Johnstone observes, is that by jeopardising female existence—and it does because it reduces females to the position of nonhuman—the male’s ontology is equally jeopardised (167).

Autobiography aside, Kennedy’s play is quite the representation of this jeopardy in the form of a “hole” rebelling against its construed role to the extent that it floods the scenes of the play with miscarriage blood. The drowning scene that ends the play complements this image, intersects with the previous scene where Jean Peters/ Clara bleeds and is surrounded with black sheets, and co-relates with the opening scene where Bette Davis is standing on the deck surrounded with water. I will take the three Hollywood movies in their entirety to represent Hollywood’s masculine consciousness which Clara’s body rebels against.

Kennedy’s play opens with Columbia Pictures Lady, a male-constructed image of white womanhood. It is the CPL who opens the play and assigns leading roles to white stars/characters and supporting roles to Clara’s black family members. CPL is the female personification of America. In an early essay titled “From Indian Princess to Greek Goddess,” E. McClung Fleming explains how “Columbia,” among many Indian and Greek deities, became representative of the United States of America. The poetic personification of the name of Christopher Columbus [exploration and conquest] became a new deity for Americans to stand for the New World (59). Kennedy’s choice of Columbia studios as an opening statement is not random; it shows the detrimental effect of the supremacist ideology of white America upon the collective and personal consciousness of Americans, African Americans, and other ethnicities.

Like the movie stars, CPL also speaks for Clara; her opening lines cluster into one paragraph the difference between reality and truth, Hollywood’s male consciousness, and the dominance of this consciousness in books, photography, movies and magazines:

My producer is Joel Steinberg. He looks different from what I once thought, not at all like that picture in *Vogue*. He was in *Vogue* with a group of people who were

going to do a musical about Socrates. In the photograph Joel's hair looked dark and his skin smooth. In real life his skin is blotched. Everyone says he drinks a lot. (81)

This paragraph taken from the opening page of the play would seem to lend support to the many theories about creating a sense of identification between Hollywood's glamorised heroes and heroines and their spectators, sometimes to the extent of pathological identification of which Eddie accuses Clara. However, Clara is not a passive spectator who identifies and enacts the lives and personhood of the object of her spectatorship. The next sentence CPL/Clara utters is sudden and strikingly unexpected: "Lately I think often of killing myself" (81). Clearly, from the beginning of the play, it is Clara the African American woman who is speaking, Clara whose purpose and meaning of *living* have deserted her. She is not oblivious to the difference between the idolised image Hollywood creates and her own reflection in the mirror of a racist society. This becomes clearer as she continues: "My father once said his life has been nothing but a life of hypocrisy and that's why his photograph smiled" (81).

Clara is an educated woman who is working on raising her son and her own consciousness: "While Eddie Jr. plays outside I read Edith Wharton, a book on Egypt and Chinua Achebe. Leroi Jones, Ted Joans and Allen Ginsburg are reading in the Village" (82). Clara in *A Movie Star* seems to forsake the stark fortress which Sarah maintains against the recognition of herself like "all educated Negroes—out of life and death essential" in *A Funnyhouse* (6). And like Sarah, who loses her hair and starts to bleed towards the end of *Funnyhouse* as a consequence of this recognition, Clara starts *A Movie Star* with the recognition of her historicised *bleeding* body. After establishing this life-threatening essential she is immediately confronted with memories of her past when she was pregnant and her brother is in a coma. It is at this moment that Clara reveals her innermost worries and raises the question that precedes all the movies-scenes, as if she is experimenting with the lives of the stars from these movies to answer her question: "Each day I wonder with what or with whom can I co-exist in a true union?" (82) Clara is searching for what is wanting in her life, what it is that might transform her life into a "lived experience," or what is the thing or who is the subject that can complete her sense of self-identity.

At this stage, she turns into the life she will never experience, the life of an idolised white woman star. Immediately, Bette Davis takes her persona and reveals to Paul Henreid: “when I have the baby I wonder will I turn into a river of blood and die?” (83) Clara’s fears are not invalid, for they are part of a disturbed childhood and familial violence; she reminisces about her mother’s attempt to kill her father, her father’s attempt to desert his family and run away with another woman, and her sense of guilt as she fails to reconcile her parents. The movie star functions here as a socio-political commentary on the politics of white supremacist America. Clara quite simply asks: How valid and legitimate my problems would have been if they were the problems of a beautiful white woman? As Clara is silently facing both Davis and Henreid, her mother narrates many prejudices she experienced in the Jim-Crow South; thus Clara faces white America, judging its socio-political ethics, and demanding an answer to her question.

Like the black feminists of the 1980s, Kennedy does not forget to connect racism and imperialism, and how they inform her personal life; as Bette Davis, Clara reminisces: “Yet I was a virgin when we married. A virgin who was to bleed and bleed . . . when I was in the hospital all I had was a photograph of Eddie in GI clothes standing in a woods in Korea” (87). The production of docile bodies, enabled by discipline, whether in the army, inside family, or in intra-sexual relationships, requires, according to Bartkey, an uninterrupted coercion, a state of “conscious and permanent visibility” (65). Clara’s body demonstrates this constant visibility marked all the time with blood and bleeding especially when she brings forward her remote memories. Images of disciplinary—and disciplined—men haunt her memories in the same way their domineering presence haunts her body. Her constant talk about her father, husband, dying brother, miscarried baby, and growing son is accompanied with the image of a coerced body being consumed through bleeding. Men in her life become “the panoptical male connoisseur” who always resides, as Bartkey notes, in patriarchal society within the consciousness of most women: “Woman lives her body as seen by another, an anonymous patriarchal other” (72). The “anonymous patriarchal other” here is not Clara’s male members of her family as much as it is Hollywood’s masculine consciousness.

Through this juxtaposition of white Hollywood actresses and the black protagonist, Kennedy exposes arenas of (mis)recognition. When Eddie accuses Clara of taking pleasure in her identification with white stars and watching her own life in black and white, he accuses her of what Mulvey calls “scopophilia” in its narcissistic aspect, a looking that intermingles with “a fascination with likeness and recognition” (17). However, Clara does not identify or recognize herself as much as she pinpoints the disparity between different experiences for different bodies, and as a consequence for living this disparity, her body is eroded. Although the play ends with the image of Clara in her mother’s arms, she sinks into an overwhelming feeling of loss and abandonment as Peters drowns and Davis screams: “I am bleeding” (103).

The three movies then are not experienced successively; their effect accumulates throughout the play into a synchronisation that sweeps Clara’s body in the last scene. While Kennedy states that *Sun* emerges from the drawings of Da Vinci, *A Movie Star* resembles “Picasso-esque” paintings of endless doors within doors; each character in the play shifts into another cinematic/autobiographical character in a way similar to the mise-en-abyme effect in Picasso’s drawing¹⁴. Each character shifts into a deeper level of characterisation leading to another level or side of Clara/ Kennedy. Thus, Clara becomes Bette Davis, becomes Jean Peters, becomes Shelley Winters, but remains Clara, the African American woman who recognizes herself in the distorted mirror. Geis notes that the mirror in *Funnyhouse* entraps within “an infinite series of replications” (173). In *A Movie Star*, the “eye” of the camera as seen by the “I” of Clara/ Kennedy, to borrow from Geis, is a similar mirror, and Kennedy attempts at making the distorted mirror, not the distorted reflection of the female character, recognised by the spectator through the “I” of Clara.

The mise-en-abyme effect also relates to the time of the play. Shifting between three time periods of Clara’s family history and three classic movies, it is neither

¹⁴ Kennedy shows in her autobiography how Cubism had an effect on her drama, she states: “Picasso-After I saw *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art, the concept of placing my characters in a dream domain seemed more and more real to me” (*People* 100). It is apparent in Kennedy’s plays how she uses many dreams to intersect with her dramatic form.

linear nor circular. Periodisation transforms into synchronisation, so that Clara does not place herself outside of history as Geis explains, but she becomes involved with different times and different places like the female protagonists of *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers*. In this way, Kennedy deconstructs the controlling gaze of what Bartkey calls “the patriarchal other.” The “erotic” presence of the movie stars is undermined by past memories interrupting the scenes. Although impersonating glamorous white females in originally linear narratives, Kennedy’s play does not trigger pleasure or identification; rather, it raises questions and demands that the spectator is always on guard to understand the significance of shifting identities. And the feeling of security which Mulvey ascribes to the spectator in the auditorium is replaced in Kennedy’s play with uncertainty and ambiguity. Far from being simply a play about a black woman’s identification with Hollywood’s movie stars, *A Movie Star* interrogates sexual modes as channelled by Hollywood’s pictures and dramatizes the violence directed at the black female body.

Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who and Spell* #7: “with intentions of outdo in the white man in the acrobatic distortions of English”

Although this section does not focus on linguistic deconstruction of standard English which Shange repeatedly uses, I open with this quotation because it shows another form of distortion, a corporeal acrobatic distortion of the linear form that stems from black women’s agony and their attempt to heal their raced bodies¹⁵. In her foreword to *Three Pieces* (1981), Shange agrees to what a white critic said about her involvement in the destruction of the English language and “outdoing the white man” in his linguistic domain. Her reply displays a corporeal rebellion against the hegemony of not only language, but also the restricting space of a domineering whiteness: “i can’t count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim *the language that i was taught to hate myself in*/ [. . .] i have to take it apart to the bone/so that the malignancies/fall away/leaving us space to literally

¹⁵ For more on the deviation from the standard written form, see Gabriele Griffin’s “Writing the Body” in *Black Women’s Writing* (1993). 19-42. Some of these deviations are dictated by the body; for example, “usedta,” and similar words that connote contractions, resonate with female body and its menstrual/reproductive/creative cycle (35). Other deviations stand for Shange’s desire for “visual stimulation” (36). Griffin discusses both the semiotic and the symbolic order in Shange’s choreopoem, arguing that four elements (music, song, dance, and poetry) form a system of signification that foregrounds Kristeva’s semiotic disposition (36)

create our own image [*italics added*]" (xii). Shange counters white hegemony in writing with deconstructing its standard language. Her utilisation of dance in *For Colored Girls* and the minstrel performance in *Spell*, like her "acrobatic" experimentation with language, is a corporeal "attack deform n main" against structural ideology that sets hierarchy between bodies on the basis of race and colour.

In this section, I show again the intersection between violence directed against female bodies and an aesthetic rebellion that takes the form of dance. In *For Colored Girls*, I focus on the dancing body; in *Spell* #7, it is the pregnant body that becomes the site for such an intersection. Nevertheless, there are more similarities between the dancing and the pregnant body than there are differences. Both avenues shed light on the meaning of being a lived black body in movement, and how this movement informs subjectivity formation.

In a poetic revelation that is both telling and reverberating, the women performers in *For Colored Girls* gather to share their pain, stories, experiences, and more than anything, to dance their agony away. The women performers are restless and uprooted; it is then the function of the lady in brown, the colour that does not fit the rainbow in Shange's title and text, to open the play in an attempt to pull characters to the ground, to affirm their position in a marginalising discourse. Thus, "dark phases of womanhood/ of never havin been a girl" stand for their floating identities, an image which is continued in the subsequent lines, "half-notes scattered/ without rhythms" (17). The choreo-poem reveals identities broken, growing up interrupted, subjectivity incomplete; at the beginning of the play, even dance is fractional as it appears in: "the melody-less-ness of her [lady in brown's] dance (17), "she doesn't know the sound/ of her own voice" (18), and then the functional return to and emphasis on that "she's half-notes scattered" (19).

Lady in brown's words reverberate in the voice of each woman. So, although lady in yellow, for example, indulges at the beginning of the play in a humorous narration about the story of losing her virginity in a Buick, she later lets out her true feelings: "we gotta dance to keep from crying," a phrase which is re-iterated in the utterance of lady in brown: "we gotta dance to keep from dying" (29). The women

performers define themselves not only by unquenched desire to dance, but also by an outward movement that signals them out of their communities; so, instead of “I am from Houston,” for example, lady in purple steps out and says, “i’m outside houston”; and so do other women, stepping outside Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, and so on. The prevailing atmosphere is this sense of alienation and women coming together because of alienation and violence.

Thus, each lady carries with her a scar from the past; the lady in red is suffering because of a “latent rapist bravado” coming from the “closest circle of companionship” (33). Lady in blue reminisces about her pregnancy and a humiliating abortion because of her fear of the “eyes of others” (36). Lady in green, “a goddess of creativity/ Egyptian,” is a performer who is aware of her objectification as her audiences “were aimin coins tween her/ thighs” (39). Dance becomes a healing activity that restores to these women their being-in-the-world, their lived experience in the body that used to be a site of pain as the lady in orange contemplates: “when/ i can dance like that/ there nothing cd hurt me/ [. . .]/ coz i/ have died in a real way” (57). The most powerful image in the play, and the one responsible for the severe criticism Shange was subjected to by black male artists, is when lady in red narrates her story with Beau Willie. Willie, a victim himself, suffers post-traumatic stress syndrome after his return from war, and because of unrequited love, he throws his and lady in red’s children from the window, an act which Shange witnessed herself in California (*For* 6).

Although I focus mainly on dance in Shange’s performative text, I analyse briefly here two excerpts from Shange’s choreopoem. The first is the story of the lady in blue as I connect it to Sanchez’ *The Bronx is Next*, and the lady in red’s description of her self-deprecation as I relate it to Sue-Jean’s story in *Spell* 7 and to the trope of pregnancy.

Before moving to Harlem, lady in blue’s lived experience was different and rich: “i usedta live in the world/ *really* be in the world/ free & sweet talkin” (italics added 52). However, she undergoes a drastic transformation when she moved to the “harlem” that she defines now as “six blocks of cruelty/ piled up on itself/ a tunnel/ closing” (53). She experiences death in the concrete blocks of Harlem, a feeling

intensified by her use of the word *really*. In order to survive, she becomes herself a cruel person, because niceness is “such a rip-off” (53). The aggressor here, as Sanchez shows in the *Bronx is Next*, is not a person, but a systematic and institutionalised economic situation. This kind of oppression, according to Bartkey, is not easy to break because its victims are dominated in such a way that they are “incapable of understanding the nature of these agencies responsible for their subjugation” (23). Therefore, their acts of cruelty are intended to hurt the people in their closest circles. In Sanchez’ play, men and women are manipulated against each other; here, the lady in blue, similarly, becomes cruel because to be nice is to be at the mercy of an already subjugated city. The black woman in a destitute location is transformed from a woman-in-the world into a woman-in-“harlem,” a confining “tunnel/ closin” (53).

Niceness is a rip-off also for the lady in red as she got raped “by invitation” by the friend, not by the stranger, lady in purple and lady in blue join, “we always thot it wd be” (34). She also undergoes a transformation and becomes vengeful: “she wanted to be a memory/ a wound to every man/ arrogant enough to want her” (46). She took revenge for those women standing in the windows “camoflagin despair/ & stretch marks,” becoming herself “delighted she was desired” (47). Women here are under the tyranny of the perfect image. So, lady in red lives in “false consciousness” to use Bartkey’s words; she recognises herself as an object of voyeurism, a docile body who does not exist anymore for herself, but in the eyes of the males. Nonetheless, she becomes aware of her detachment from her body; trying to heal herself, she takes a lover every night and then a bath to “remove his smell” (47).

Dance comes to the rescue of women’s bodies-in-pain; it assumes not only a healing property, but also a liberating and transforming function that restores to those women their livedness-in-the-world. Yet, if the dancing body functions in its fluidity as a liberating site; it also runs the risk of being misread as a voyeuristic object that undermines the strength of the message in Shange’s play. To show how Shange, like Sanchez and Kennedy, avoids such eroticisation, I return to Sheets-Johnston’s early study of dance.

Like any other kinetic phenomenon, dance has an inherent temporal and spatial structure; when we look at this phenomenon as an object, it appears for us *ekstatic*, i.e. a force which moves within a given space and time; the dancer becomes the symbol, the creator of the “illusion of force” (Sheets-Johnstone, *Phenomenology* 28). However, dance is intrinsically diasporatic, a “perpetually moving form” whose moments—the spatial temporal before, now, and after—are not exactly related (29). In other words, it is composed of separate moments which negates the fluidity of this activity.

Dance *appears* as a form-in-the-making because the body in movement is continuously projecting itself toward a spatial-temporal future (36). The ekstatic relationship between the dancer and the dance means that the form-in-the-making which the dancer creates is continuous, it does not “exist totally at any one point in space or any single instant in time” (36). Both the dancer and the dance become their own past, present, and future, spatially and temporally, “in the mode of not being any one of these at any moment or point,” always in flight, always both “ahead and behind themselves” (37). Yet, this “force” remains illusory.

Shange’s choreopoem depends on deconstructing this ekstatic relationship. The dancing body in her play is not exactly a body-in-movement, but rather, a “body-in-conceptual-movement,” to use Sheets-Johnstone’s words in their theoretical context. First, the human body, existentially, appears unified in space, both a subject and an object when it experiences a feeling of being abstracted from everyday life and its exigencies (72). It only becomes conscious of itself as a body-object in the case of illness and intense physical activity. In this case, the spatio-temporal unity is broken. Second, in the case of dance, it is only after it is performed that it is transformed into a conceptual form i.e. it is transformed into the afterthoughts of the people viewing dance, which means that it has stopped as a force in time and space (72). In Shange’s choreopoem, the conceptual form is intrinsic to the performance of lady in colours; their performance depends on alluding to the body in pain whose spatial-temporal unity is not unified anymore, and on disrupting the ekstatic relationship by bringing consciousness to the raced historicised body in its temporal structures of “nows, before, and after.”

To avoid fetishisation, Shange depends sometimes on alienating the dancers from their dance. Not all the subjects in Shange's choreopoem "impersonate" their own characters; some alienate themselves from the dance they perform in the sense of demonstrating the behaviour of the impersonated instead of identifying with it. For example, when the lady in blue recites about her moving to Harlem, her "universe of six blocks," where "women hangin outta windows/ like ol silk stockings," the lady in orange enters, "she is being followed by a man, the lady in blue becomes that man" (52). Suddenly, the lady in blue leaves her character and becomes the "man" of her own narration. The lady in blue had already introduced verbally her sense of confinement in Harlem. In her corporeal performance she gives this confinement a gender as she transforms into the man who voices loudly his outrage:

‘I SPENT MORE MONEY YESTERDAY
THAN THE DAY BEFORE & ALL THAT’S MORE N YOU
NIGGAH EVER GOTTA HOLD TO
COME OVER HERE BITCH
CANT YA SEE THIS IS \$5’

(For 51)

The effect of revealing the violence directed at the lady in blue could have been presented through making the lady in orange perform the male's role without disrupting the narrative of the lady in blue. However, the alienation effect performed by lady in blue reflects a desire in which the gesture (words/ body movement) utilizes more than one gender identity. Such an alienating effect, at heart it is a Brechtian A-effect, is explained by Diamond in *Unmaking Mimesis*; this feminist practice exposes or mocks the strictures of gender (46). "By foregrounding the expectation of resemblance," and alienating iconicity-conventional identification between the performer's body and the object of his performance- Diamond explains, "the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator" who is able now to see "the sign system as a sign system" and gender as ideology (46). In the gender structure Shange presents, the masculine verbalisation of the lady in blue serves to reinforce not an opposite gender identity but what that gender identity

signifies, namely, a superior socio-political status legitimised by a dominant culture built on male aggression/female vulnerability. The dance liberates the women performers from their vulnerability and empowers them; it translates their historicity into a corporeal act.

***Spell* #7: Dancing body, Pregnant body and the Strife of “Myself”**

Spell, like *For Colored Girls*, is another “choreopoem” where characters perform, sing, and dance; but more importantly, they leave out their minstrel masks they use in their daily entertaining performances to share with the audience their pain and their stories. Shange populates the play with both black male and female characters and builds on the psychological revelation by them to create a space of identification between the spectator and the performer. The mirror in which the audience reflects on black subjectivity is the minstrel mask; one of the performers/minstrel company members warns the audience of the danger of such an act of disruptive mirroring as he warns that there are “no insurance policies/ for dislocation of the psyche” (*Three* 76). This expository mechanism goes hand-in-hand with the role Shange assigns to the black artist. In her introduction to the play, she contends that black artists, whether musicians, actors, or dancers have set the example for the black community to conquer pain; their “non-verbal activity” triggered her choice of choreopoem as a form more historically pertinent and suggestive of the oral tradition of storytelling. As she did in her previous play, Shange pinpoints the sites of these psychological dis-locations only to be danced away.

The “female landscape” in *Spell*, to use Shange’s words in her introduction to *Three Pieces*, is another complex and inter-textual space. On the one hand, she utilizes the minstrelsy trope, not for parody, but for redemption of an authentic black performance which was historically ridiculed via white appropriation (67). She found in this form of expression a style difficult to be appropriated by white supremacy: “they [black artists] did something white people are still having a hard time duplicating” (67). The process of creating or discovering black aesthetics, she argues, is done backwards by “isolating the art forms and assuming a very narrow perspective vis-a-vis our own history” (67). Shange criticizes here, as Zora Neale

Hurston did before, the absolute focus on propaganda and the detachment from performance arts because of its association with the history of the infamous minstrel show. Although I will not be focusing on this dramatic shift in Shange's art or her use of the minstrel trope, it is worth saying that she was quite innovative in her positive utilisation of minstrelsy as an artistic form. On the other hand, Shange represents the body in pain as a tortured site that reaches for healing; thus her characters narrate, rather than stage, their stories of suffering at the time their bodies indulge in dance. In such a way, Shange re-visits Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" in which he hides his pain from the world to show only his smile: "We wear the mask that grins and lies/ [. . .] With torn and bleeding hearts we smile" (Coleman 3). Shange's *Spell* dramatizes how the performers take off their mask and expose their pain.

Like the poems in *For Colored Girls*, the story of Sue-Jean circles around the site of the body in pain, when the untold stories of unspeakable violence claim the body and render it undecipherable. Sue-Jean's recurrent references to her pregnant body and her desire and act of naming her born baby "myself" reflects her internal and eternal entrapment within the trope of not motherhood, but pregnancy. In his analysis of this particular trope in *Spell*, Stanton A. Garner notes that the story of "myself" comments and develops ways of understanding subjectivity and its modes of embodiment (224). Sue-Jean appears in his analysis as a pathological case where, depending on Kristeva's account of double identity during pregnancy, the lines between selfhood and otherness are blurred for the protagonist (222). I use the trope of pregnancy to show how Shange uses the story of Sue-Jean to comment on the patriarchal "construction" of incomplete subjectivity. Sue-Jean lives and continues to live what Iris Marion Young calls "splitting focus" as will be shown below.

Iris M. Young, in "Pregnant Embodiment," utilizes the Kristevan account of pregnant embodiment to show how the pregnant body is decentred, split, and doubled; a woman, thus, "experiences her body as herself and not herself" (49). However, this doubleness is not restricted to pregnancy; the human body assumes this doubleness through a balance between transcendence and immanence (50). Usually, the human body experiences itself as always in transcendence in the sense

of never being aware of itself; only when it suffers illness, intense activity, or fatigue, the body shifts into immanence; as Young observes, in reaching for accomplishing a goal; i.e. when it is instrumental, the body is experienced as an object. In this way, the body alters in its conception of itself between subjectivity and objecthood.

For a pregnant woman; the way the body experiences itself is a *simultaneous* state of transcendence and immanence, a state which Young calls the “splitting focus” (52). While illness reminds the body of its objecthood, and makes it experience a feeling of alienation, pregnancy, unless it is a forced pregnancy, is different in the sense of reconciling the body with its doubleness. In the case of transcendence, Young notes, the “I” is located in the “head”; in certain activities, such as dancing, the “I” is shifted to that part of the body that moves in a sensory fluidity with its surroundings (165). Young suggests that pregnancy makes the subject experience her “I” as located in both the head and the trunk (165). Based on both arguments, I argue that the pregnant body and the dancing body share this simultaneous state of the splitting focus where both the subjectivity and objecthood of the body are at work. So both bodies “glide through space in an immediate openness” (165).

We can see immediate openness in the story of Sue-Jean who, after getting pregnant, experiences the gliding movement in her immediate space; she “planted five okras/ five collards/ & five tomatoes,” she went to hospital to learn parental care and kept herself clean, and she “even goin to church wit the late nite radio evangelist” (29). She begins to cherish the roundness of her body and experience her “I” in both the head and the trunk.

However, Sue-Jean’s coming to herself—“myself” as she prefers to name her new born—is interrupted by childbirth. It is during childbirth, Young explains, that the splitting focus ends; the integrity of the body is undermined because the interior space is on the verge of becoming exteriorised as the boundaries of the body are in flux (50). The desire to live permanently in the state of splitting focus for Sue-Jean starts with giving birth to “myself”: “i pushed & pushed & there waz a earthquake up in my womb/ i wanted to sit up & pull the tons of logs trapped in my crotch out/ so i

cd sleep/ but it wdnt go away/ i pushed & thot i saw 19 horses runin in” (30). Sue-Jean is not afraid that her interior space is becoming exteriorised; rather it is she who wants to pull out the “logs”; she does not experience birth giving as exteriorisation; on the contrary, she experiences it as an invasion taking form in the image of horses running into her womb. Sue-Jean feels that birth-giving is a threat of her body, her womb, and her new identity she claimed during pregnancy.

Giving birth, Young continues, is not only a beginning for the baby, but a conclusion for the mother; she fears a loss of identity in the sense of “never the same again” (55). But, in the case of Sue-Jean, her identity is already lost, her identity is formed in the eyes of others; she is the sex object who is “the town’s no one,” both owned by everyone’s gaze and denied. Pregnancy, as Young observes, is the period where the subject, in the eyes of society and masculinist culture, is no more the “sex object” she has always been—this explains why the pregnant body sometimes experiences itself as ugly and alienated (53). However, Sue-Jean becomes the complete subject who no longer sits in the bar to be seen and recognised. For the first time, she experiences herself in terms of personhood; in her own eyes, she becomes “myself.”

Giving birth threatens Sue-Jean’s pregnant body of returning to the patriarchal order. It is the same order which accused her of bringing death to her mother and the whole town. The image of flood is then functional in setting the atmosphere she tries to escape where her gender is assigned a destructive function, for she was born, as Alec says: “the year of the flood/ the night the river raised her skirts & sat over alla the towns & settlements for 30 miles in each direction” (30). In the consciousness of her community, Sue-Jean is the embodiment of destruction; it is only during pregnancy that her mind is forced back to her body. Like other female protagonists discussed so far, Sue-Jean’s complex relationship with her “myself” is situated at the intersection of racism and sexism on the one hand and violence manifested corporeally/historically on the other.

Conclusion

The five plays analysed, *The Bronx*, *Uh Huh*, *A Movie Star*, *For Colored Girls*, and *Spell*, all share a black woman's bodily rebellion against a white racist, and black sexist culture. They all—even *The Bronx* and *Uh Huh* where the gender structure is referred to but not completely deconstructed—focus on violence and aggression directed at the black female body. However, even when it is constructed as a site for physical abuse and sexual exploitation, this body signifies a new relationship between the black woman and her body built on reconciliation. We don't see the full potentiality and the mature bodily "I can" which was discussed in previous chapters, especially in plays by Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry, where the future was ahead of them. In this period, it might be argued, black women were more occupied in analysing the mechanism of racial and sexual oppression and its psychological and even physiological materialisation in the light of the Black Power Movement. Although there is an emphasis on the victimisation of the black female body, it is balanced with the ability of this body to heal and rebel.

The more these plays are rebellious in content, the more radical and experimental the form is too. We can say that this period registers a transition to an even more experimental era to follow. The black women's drama in the 1980s continues its engagement with the question of the bodily manifestation that results from the intersection between racism and sexism, but it becomes even more innovative in building new relationships with the spectator, it begins a dialectical conversation with history as another oppressive factor, and most importantly, it releases the black female body from the trope of victimisation through presenting it as a culpable and capable body, as chapter five will show.

“A Black Play Knows All about the Great Hole of History”: Suzan-Lori Parks’ “Third Kingdom” and Robbie McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape*

“We carry in our bodies unspoken sadness and anger and resentment”

“I I I become others inside me”

Robbie McCauley, *Sally’s Rape*

“me waving at me waving at I waving at my Self”

Susan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities*

In “New Black Math”, Suzan-Lori Parks gives a long list of definitions of “the black play.” This list seeks an answer to the question: What is then not a black play? According to Parks, a black play is both black and white because everyone in the United States “exists in the shadows of slavery” (580). It is simple but, nonetheless, “COMPLICATED”; it is not political, but it is “free/ PEACE/ And POWER/ To the PEOPLE” (583). There is one persistent element in all Parks’ plays and that is the dialectical relationship between the theatrical present and history, and her list seems to lead away from defining this relationship. It is only one line which touches upon this intriguing dialogue, and it, simultaneously, explains the black feminist approach to theatre in the eighties. “A black play,” Parks explains, “knows all about the black hole and the great hole of history and aint afraid of going there” (578).

This line is more than a metaphor for what has been long defined in postmodernism as a “gap” in history, which stands for the unspoken/ unexplained void in the linear narrative construction, a result of the overlapping of past, present, and future temporalities “along potentially infinite chains of causality, with any final stopping-place only arbitrarily selected” (Southgate 113). Black women playwrights take this formula a step further; the historical gap becomes a “space” into which the characters, along with the audience, are taken into its interiors, into what Rogozinski described in “Chiasmus in the Polis” as the “silent inertia of history” (7). It has been explained, in previous chapters, as a “lived experience,” an experience of the

“complex signs of a woman’s life” that Diamond calls “a woman’s historicity” (52). But the story here goes deeper: the interiors of history and the exterior of the “experiencing body” are in a struggle now to define a new space: where does it begin and where does it end? To emphasize the body in this process of reclaiming the “gap/space” is not a coincidence on the part of Parks; history in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (1989) becomes corporeally embodied, its inertia is the milieu of what Parks calls, the “third kingdom.”

In this chapter, I argue through the analysis of these two plays that both Parks and McCauley use the female body to expose the interior space of history, I argue that this space is the space which Merleau-Ponty refers to as “the flesh of history.” I will attempt in what follows to use a phenomenological approach to the first play and conclude that Parks’ search for “subjectivity” lies at the heart of phenomenology.

To define the “flesh of history,” it is essential first to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by the word “flesh” as distinct from “body.” In the experience of touching a cloth, the hand itself becomes part of the tangible world as it becomes aware of the material it touches; similarly, in the experience of the hand touching the other hand, it becomes aware of itself touching and being touched simultaneously. This doubleness in the process of perception is responsible for the chiasm, the two poles of the “self,” and the element responsible for, according to Rogozinski, initiating every individual into “the very ambiguity of being” (12).

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty explains: “its [the hand’s] own movements incorporate themselves in the universe that they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it” (133). In a similar process, the seer also becomes aware of his/her gaze in the process of seeing, “the visible and the tangible belong to the same world” (134). The seer is part of the phenomenon s/he sees; thus, “he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it” (134). Furthermore, the distance, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the thickness, between the experiencer and the object of her/his experience is not an obstacle; rather, it is a means of communication, a result of an individual flesh attempting to constitute and become part of the flesh of the world. The flesh, then, is not an abstract notion, nor is it the very living material, but the crisscrossing of two worlds. It is a concrete “element” in

the sense the word “element” is used to describe water, earth, air, and fire, a “midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea”, “an element of Being” (139).

Merleau-Ponty extends his analysis of history and records a parallel between the flesh of the body and the flesh of history, explaining that the perception of other bodies is necessary for the subject’s own completion of her/his flesh: “movement, touch, vision applying themselves to the other and to themselves, return to their source and, in the patient and silent labor of desire, begins the paradox of expression” (144). The flesh of the individual and the flesh of history are then reciprocal. The true milieu of history resides where traces are erased and converted into each other, and the “flesh of history” are those erasures which are essentials as everything in our bodies, even when invisible, is similarly essential. This corollary between “history” and “body” on the one hand, and the construction of “subjectivity” through defining this relationship, on the other hand, can be seen in Parks’ first play, especially in the scenes of “Third Kingdom.” This necessitates a further explanation of the process of subjectivity construction as it highlights the difference between the “knowing gaze,” and the “inferiorising gaze.”

A common concept between phenomenologist philosophers like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is that the constitution of any given physical body situated in the space among other bodies is done through an intersubjective relation under the other’s gaze. The only possible way to constitute other bodies is to “transfer” to these other bodies “the sense of being flesh which I first perceive in mine,” a fleshness and egoness analogous to mine (Rogozinski’s 11). This occurs only when I am able to “know my body” that my flesh has already begun to constitute itself corporeally. A first community with others begins through “transference,” and then, a counter-transference from the other body to mine “helps complete my incorporation” (11). In other words, my subjectivity depends on my awareness of a unique different subjectivity which belongs to the “other.” However, when a sexual or racial difference is perceived, the double-crossed transference is interrupted, and it may result in rejecting the other body (11).

At the initial stage of this circle, before the “transference” occurs, where my flesh is still incompletely constituted, where it is still in need of the “other’s” gaze to draw the outline of my body, my flesh is in a “nonspatial origin of space” in Husserl’s words, a “zero-point of space” in Merleau-Ponty’s words, or, in Rogozinski’s words, is “like the hole without bottom and edges, a non-body, non-constituted, not intuited and unable to be intuited” (10). It needs the gaze of the other to construct the corporeality of the flesh. This is why, arguably, the deprivation of self-esteem is referred to in terms of becoming “no-body.”

Moreover, this mutual construction of subjectivity is the main reason why community, according to Rogozinski, is represented as an “immense body” whose members are “my body” and others’ bodies (21). The transference from “my flesh to the body of others” and from “my flesh to the flesh of the others” is done through the chiasm; it “frames the precarious unity of my body, claps me to the body of others and gives our community flesh” (19). When my body is incompletely constructed (due to the disruption of racial and sexual differences), the social body is unstable. What results is an oscillation of primitive residues: “the fear of relapsing into chaos, the distress of the fragmented body, the hatred of the stranger,” and, to a large extent, transforming the other into an “abject” (21).

A Journey to the Chiasm in the “Third Kingdom” of *Imperceptible Mutabilities*

As the title of the play suggests, Parks plays on visibility/ invisibility of an “imperceptible” change that occurs in an imaginary space she calls a “third kingdom.” In her analysis of Realism in women’s drama depending on feminist and Brechtian theory, Elin Diamond refers to the combination of signs which define the body of the female performer as “historicity”; they are as, she explains, the multiple and complex signs of a woman’s life- her desires and politics, her class, ethnicity, or race. This historicity emerges, she continues, due to the contradiction between documented histories and the gaps that re-invoke those very signs (Diamond 52). It is apparent here that what Diamond refers to is the same “Inertia” Rogozinski defines in terms of diversions from the “historical sign.” The form in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* consists of narratives and gaps that evoke the questionable historicity of

not only the characters but also that of the audience/readers. In the scenes of the “Third Kingdom” where characters float on the body of watery passage, the historicised body is represented as a body “en route” of recognition of itself and its own positionality.

The central focus of Parks in “Snails” is the duality of perception¹. This point is ironically brought into light by the Naturalist’s quest, during the observation of Mona and Charlene, for an answer to his question: “How should we best accommodate the presence of such subjects in our modern day” (29). The audience involved is not only seeing Mona and Charlene as objects of observation; the audience becomes, itself, in its awareness of the Naturalist’s position, aware of itself, the object of its own perception. Does this realisation on the part of the audience change the location/centrality of the performing body on stage? In other words, does it render the bodies of Mona and Charlene mere objects of the audiences’ perception? Stanton B. Garner clarifies the dynamics that operate in the theatrical space to transform the body from a performing object into a “sign that looks back” (*Bodied Space* 49). The audience’s spectatorship, according to Garner, does not eliminate “the disruptive potential of the performer’s own gaze” (47). It becomes aware of the possibility of being seen in turn; what results is a dimension of livedness in which both the observer and the observed are involved in a “relation of mutual inherence” (50). A corporeal communion is then established, and the bodies of Mona and Charlene don’t signify objects of perception anymore; they become a polarised entity of the spectator’s self through which the audience lives the experiment of observation/ voyeurism.

Does this realisation, on the other hand, alter the space of performance and its historical connotations? The opening of the play refers to the difference between the scientific gaze and the phenomenological one. This differentiates between two spaces: the micro-space that includes the Naturalist and his “objects of observation,” and the macro-space which includes the characters, the audience, and the variables that governs the spectatorship². With the scientific gaze, the Naturalist’s in this case,

¹ For the summary of the play, see appendix E.

² Those variables which govern the stage and its elements, as explained in Garner’s investigation of phenomenological space in theatre, are frontality, angle, and depth which allows the spectator to

the object discloses itself as it might appear to, using Garner's words, an "abstract subject"; the irony emerges as the subject itself is an object of observation. Unlike the scientific analysis of "objectified subjects," phenomenological space, according to Garner, is an oriented space in the sense that the stage is defined not only in relation to the gaze, but in relation to the bodies that inhabit its boundaries (46). The Naturalist's gaze is restricted to the bodies he is studying and, simultaneously, marginalising or dislocating them from their position in the world of perception (sociopolitical/ historical context). However, Mona and Chona are similar, in their "blindness," to the Naturalist; they are living their daily life normally unaware of their centrality not only in the "scientific experimentation," but also in any historical discourse that accounts for their presence.

This inclusion of the audience in the historical perception of the performer's position in any given historical discourse is the crux of the Brechtian theory which captured the interest of most African American women playwrights in the 1980s and the 1990s³. The elements of alienation create a phenomenological space because it provides the spectators with a unique perception or enables them to distantly observe and be the object of this observation simultaneously, a milieu for the chiasm that results from the crisscrossing of two worlds. Thus, the audience, here, is made culpable for the process of objectification performed on the two black women without rendering these women as victims. This specific relationship between the audience and the theatrical space will re-emerge again in Parks' *Venus* as will be discussed in chapter six.

Not only the bodies of the characters, but also their language, occupy the space of observation by the Naturalist, the audience, and themselves. This is a relevant element when compared to the corporeal dimension to which it is held superior to in Western thought and philosophy. From the beginning, Molly refers to the "nonsensical" nature of institutionalised language: "'S-K' is /sk/ as in 'ask.' The-little-lamb-follows-closely-behind-at-Mary's-heels-as-Mary-boards-the-train[. . .

"inhabit the point of actual perception." They enable theatrical vision through their engagement of the laws of visual dynamics while interacting with, and deriving from, the spectator's embodiedness (46).

³ For more on the influence of Brechtian theory on Feminist theory in performance, see Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis*.

]He makes me recite my mind goes blank [. . .] ain't never seen no woman on train with no lamb. I tell him so. He throws me out" (25). The use of the vernacular contributes to the process of inferiorisation regardless of the utility of the standard language to the characters. What is particular about this linguistic inferiorisation is its inclusion of "inferiorised bodies." The nonsensical standard language and *senselessness* of the vernacular are made correspondent as well as diametrically opposed to the hierarchised bodies that produce them⁴.

In "element of Style," which serves as an introduction to *The America Play*, Parks presents language as inseparable from the politics of embodiment: "Language is a physical act-something that/ involves yr whole bod./ Write with yr whole bod./ Read with yr whole bod. / Wake up" (18). Like Shange, Parks disrupts here the supremacy of language over body; and her approach to this equation is at the heart of phenomenology. The supremacy of narrative history, Rogozinski clarifies, is the result of overvaluing the narrative diachrony and underestimating the carnal dimension. This leads to the reiterating of the "obsolete philosophy of Progress" and an irreversible process from modernity to post-modernity (7). Many women playwrights deconstructed this hierarchy, like Shange who once explained, "I am not bogged down with the implications of language. I am only involved in the implications of movement which later on, when I do start to write, become manifest in the rhythms of my poetry (Betsko and Koeing 365).

Parks also deconstructs this linear progress, [and arguably, blurs the lines between modernity and postmodernity as Kennedy and Shange already did]. Consequently, the utilisation of the "Rep and Rev" technique can be interpreted as not only an aesthetic tools which brings to the mind the oral tradition and folk-lore, but also the disruption of the totalitarianism of historical linearity. It is not only repetition, Parks explains, but "it is a repetition with 'revision'" in which characters refigure their words, and through this refiguring show that they are "*experiencing* their situation anew [*italics added*]" (9). James A. Snead, as shown in chapter three, has already examined "repetition" as a trope that exists in European culture in spite of the insistence of all "occidental" cultures on the primitiveness of "repetition," and

⁴ Parks' concern here anticipates the Ebonics debate of 1996, but might be influenced by William Labov's study of "black English language" in *Language in the Inner City* (1972).

he noted that because it is considered particularly African, black culture and literature are disallowed the possibility of “haute culture” (150). But the “repetition” in the play is not merely “repetition”; as the characters repeat their experiences, their historicity emerges, and it negates their victimisation. The female characters in “Snails” are not victims of mere observation, they are presented with responsibility of their own passivity and ignorance of their position in the history that seeks to analyse, classify, or merely include them. Towards the end of “Snails” a pessimistic statement is uttered by Verona, the third female subject/object: “Nothing different! Everything in its place. Do you know what that means? Everything in its place. That’s all” (37). We already encountered this sense of “stillness” in the face of linear progress in Kennedy’s three plays.

In “Third Kingdom,” Parks’ theatricalised self is reminiscent of Du Bois’s concept of double belonging; she presents a third self created in the space between two worlds where her characters, who physically belong to two worlds, don’t seem to belong to either. Parks’ punctuation of her phrases with hyphens signifies the connection sought between the two worlds, but also highlights the interruption created as the places and characters hyphenated (Kin-seer, Us-seer, in-to-the-sea) are deprived of the breath in the spaces between words. Their bodies become the hyphens that seek the connection between the two worlds, and consequently, they have to suffer the possibility of double-alienation, erasure, or what they call, “being jettisoned” (38). The black subject in this scene finds that his/her subjectivity is cut off from the corporeal communion that renders this subjectivity incomplete. This is evident in his name which is inscribed in his/her skin and consequently, the psyche [the seers are performed by the female characters in the first scene, blurring the gender-line emphasis the process of corporeal construction of subjectivity by ego-community]. When Soul-Seer wonders why no one knows that his/her name is black, the Over-Seer replies: “That’s your *self* you’re looking at!” (38)

Kennedy’s influence in regard to the use of fragmentary style (and similarly fragmented bodies/ psyches) can be seen clearly in the reprise of “Third Kingdom”; Shark-Seer’s words: “me waving at me waving at I waving at my Self” is reminiscent of Sarah and Clara in Kennedy’s plays (55). Layers of psyches seem to

occupy the bodies in the space of the third kingdom's inhabitants where the subject suffers double consciousness, but similarly, suffers double alienation. The search for integrity is re-emphasised and traced in the Seers' search for a land as a space to ground one's "self." The spatial seems to precondition the subjectivity of the Seers. Ironically, the Seers are blind to their position; Parks reiterates this absence of the "knowing gaze" at the end of the play where the sergeant's wife, in the last part, goes literally blind.

The absence of the knowing gaze in "Third Kingdom" explains the dislocation of the "Seers," and accounts for the incomplete construction of their historicity. "The meaning of being in a body," Rogozinski explains, "being an other, and being in community, are constituted 'in and by me' (10)" The chiasm that results when the hand touching the other hand (as an example of the self-touching self in its formation of the "other") becomes aware of its "primordial duality," of being affected and affecting (12). However, this experience of the chiasm seems to be missing in the third kingdom, and characters are permanently lost in their attempt at self-recognition and the recognition of the "other."

Possibly, this phenomenological analysis explains in details the process of what postcolonial studies summarize as the inferiorisation of the "Other." The obvious metaphor in the names of the four travellers is a reference Parks makes about the politics that governs black and white subjects: the "white" Over-Seer versus the "black" US-Seer, Kin-Seer, Soul-Seer and Shark-Seer. It is important to emphasize the word *Seer* which becomes a common factor among the four characters, and how Parks plays, throughout *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, on the element of "sight" and "seeing," and even blindness towards the end of the play.

I want through this analysis to give a description not of the body politics that governs the "community" of the "Seers" as a metaphor for the American society as Parks presents it, but as a description of the form which frames this body politics. It is only "a very unsophisticated literary criticism," Maria Lauret notes in her introduction to *Liberating Literature*, which "could conceive of form and content as distinct entities" (5). In fact, Parks presents one entity of form and content in

Imperceptible Mutabilities. The sketch she draws in the introduction to *The America Play* serves more than a whimsical drawing:

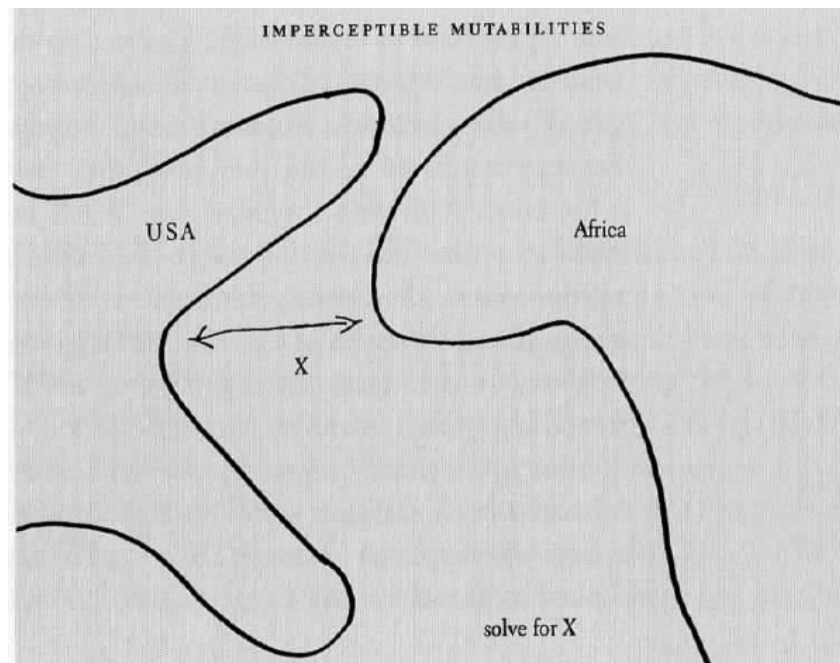


Figure 1. *The America Play*, 12

As the drawing shows, x (all the seers, black and white) is lost between two worlds, USA and Africa; it seems that the racial identity of x connotes both blackness and whiteness, and the dilemma for x (which inscribed as “solve for x”) will always persist as s/he inhabits the “third kingdom” where perception is cut short. But the “third kingdom” is also the Atlantic Ocean which separates the two continents, and the historical trauma of the Middle Passage has its weight on the seers-citizens of the USA. Parks explains this specific relationship between the historical residues of the Middle Passage and American citizenship on the one hand, and the Middle Passage and the “black play” on the other hand when she explains: “Every play that is born of the united states of america is a black play because we all exist in the shadow of slavery” (“New” 580).

Parks makes a statement that both black and white characters are “dislocated” because they are unable to locate the “subjectivity” in the other, and consequently, they are unable to construe their own subjectivity. Their space is still hanging between two worlds, and this space is the zero-point which both Husserl and

Merleau-Ponty define in their explanation of how the phenomenon of the Other is constituted. They are bodies without flesh, transcendental bodies deprived of their “historicities” to use Diamond’s word in a space where the pre-symbolic dominate and compel a Seer to define him/herself by the “I looking at me looking at myself.” The “Seers” reappear, their dialogues are “repeated” and “revised,” after “Open House” in the same watery passage; they are the re-incorporation of the past (slavery) which within its shadow, as Parks tells, everyone in the USA lives. The Kin-seer’s words invoke again the trauma of the Middle Passage as he contemplates, “my Self that rose between us went back down in-to-the-sea” (39). Unless the, historical sign, the Middle Passage, is understood and acknowledged as the reason for the birth of America, characters will never incarnate each other. “‘How does this Rep & Rev’ – a literal incorporation of the past,” Parks asks in “Elements of Style,” impact on the creation of a theatrical experience?” (10) They are the tools through which the inertia of history is accessed and dissected.

Open House and Photographic Diversions

Parks’ statement in regard to the definition of the “black play” as both black and white, simple and complicated, political and non-political becomes clearer when these tropes are investigated in “Open House,” the central scene in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*. The “photographic” image as a means of documentation dominates the scene where Aretha Saxon insists on taking photographs of the family she is enslaved to, and in the form of the play where slides of the smiling Anglor, Blanca (the children of Charles and Mrs. Faith, the owners of Aretha), and Aretha are displayed constantly in the background of the semi-dark stage. The names in this scene become more than symbolic references to Anglo (Anglor), Saxons, Europeans (Blanca) and their control of history and religion (Charles, and Mrs. Faith). It is at the heart of the process of the corporeal formation of the abject-other that the visual representation (through photographic image in the play as an example) of both black and white subjects is located. For this purpose, I intend to use Aretha’s name as a reference to Aretha Franklin, the Soul Sister of jazz, blues, gospel, and R&B music, not as a symbol of feminist resistance and insistence on respect, which she is, but as

a symbol of the infrastructure which underlines the visual representation of black subjects.

In “Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture,” Michele Wallace analyses how African Americans contribute to popular culture, and how this contribution is categorised under the heading of “primitivism”⁵. Wallace’s main argument is that while African Americans admit indebtedness to western culture, Euro-American culture is unwilling to admit any debt, or even a relationship, to African or African American culture. This, according to Wallace, “lies at the heart of the visual in African American culture” (43). Ralph Ellison has already captured this visual dilemma in *Invisible Man*; Wallace illustrates that this “invisibility” is built on a “structural binary opposition,” on unnoticeable sameness and indescribable difference (43). The self touching/forming its “self” in the “knowing” gaze of the other is cut short because the “knowing” gaze is not “knowing,” but rather depriving the other from his/her historicity.

The problem of the “visual,” as Wallace notes, is that American culture is not as receptive of the visual African American culture as it is of the audible: “there is the problem of translating a musical/ oral Afro-American tradition into a written history” (44). To say that Parks uses Rep & Rev as the main technique in her playwriting is to add nothing to the literary criticism which dealt with Parks’ theatrical works. I argue that in addition to translating the musical/oral tradition into a written history, to use Wallace’s words, Parks utilizes the visual/corporeal, Aretha’s widening smile as an example, to dramatize the counter-hegemonic discourse in the face of a domineering history. The R&V is not only a repetition with revision; it is the engagement of the subject’s memory and body in questioning his/her historicity.

Aretha tries to gather photos before she leaves the family that owns her. Her lease expires, or rather, it is she who has an expiry date which does not only refer to

⁵ Wallace argues, borrowing from the debates of the black middle-class intelligentsia in the 1950s and 1960s, that Modernism has not only borrowed heavily from African Art, but also described this later, in its literary criticism, as a discovery of similarities rather than indebtedness. The irony that Wallace most emphasises is that black criticism was blocked from both Modernism and “Primitivism” as it was dominated by white scholars in art galleries, history, and museums (43).

her objectification, but also to her erasure as a subject from a historical discourse that should give her a position/definition. Aretha's memory keeps moving backward and forward to give glimpses of her slavery time. This movement of the "memory" in the theatrical space helps Aretha's subjectivity to be reclaimed. Through this memory, her body demands its liberation. For example, she reminisces how her "Lord" used to call her "Charles" because she works for a Charles; when this particular moment re-appears, Aretha asks Mrs. Faith: "Havin uh master named Charles aint no reason for her tuh be called-" before getting interrupted by Mrs. Faith (47).

The movement of memory, thus, triumphs over the effacement inscribed on her body and psyche. Challenging this physical and psychological erasure, Parks helps to visualize, through space and specific description, an equation between religious authority and historical documents when Faith informs Aretha that "The power of the book lies in its contents. Its contents are Facts" (47). The deprivation of place, and space, is authenticated with historical documents that states that Aretha expires on 19th June 1865: "(Footnote #5: 'Juneteenth,' June 19th in 1865, was when, a good many months after the Emancipation Proclamation, the slaves in Texas heard they were free.) You expire. Along with your lease. Expiration 19-6-1865 with no option to renew" (*The America* 47). The mis-en-scène, although disjointed, engages the physical limitation imposed on Aretha. In the next tableau, she goes back in time and conjures the scene that seems to precede the photo session. Charles is, here, keen to signify the importance of "memory" that negates "chaos" from his point of view; without this memory, he will never be able to remember himself as a "Master" and Aretha would only be a "regular street and alley heathen" (48). Memory serves here as an empowering element which hierarchizes the positions between the master and the slave. Aretha needs this possession of her own memory to assert her subjectivity, and she does. This external struggle between Aretha and her master parallels an interior one where, in Hegelian terms, her master and servant consciousnesses become aware of, and sublate, each other. However, while Aretha's internal struggle sublates her two consciousnesses, her relationship with her master remains unchanged, especially that master Charles dies, a symbol of the failure of reconciliation with his slave, Aretha.

Such a struggle is evident in Aretha's re-examination of historical facts such as: "Footnote #3: The average ratio of slaves per ship male to female was 2:1" (44). When Miss Faith tells Aretha "Think of it as getting yourself chronicled," the irony emerges as the "identity" of Aretha is being erased in this process of "chroniclisatation". The process of marginalising a subject historically does not end with him/her being subsumed into a collective narrative, but it is re-enacted when this narrative is brought for analysis and examination; the subject is being re-erased every time his/her history is re-invoked through archived documents. The final words of Miss Faith validate this erasure: "you expire – yes, Maam!" (47)

In her examination of stereotypes of black women as sexual objects, Lisa M. Anderson clarifies how "a pathological desire on the part of the blacks to erase their blackness" was due to living in a racist society (56). The problem of the visual escalates; the subjects are "invisible" not only to others, but also to themselves. Parks dramatizes how this mechanism of erasure operates within the trope of history. Being deprived of the tools of representation, black characters re-enact erasure through, for example, Aretha's act of preparing the family for photo-shoot sessions, and sometimes shooting the photos herself. However, towards the end of "Open House," Parks empowers Aretha historically and provides her with a means of representation. Furthermore, the confining space around Aretha is equally emphasised, and it is measured along with the historical facts of "the human cargo capacity of the English slaver, the Brooks" which Faith examines. Parks, like Toni Morrison who repeatedly refers to the Middle Passage in *Beloved* (1987), returns, with revision, to this historical sign. Aretha has six hundred visitors to welcome and "pack tight," with the help of Miss Faith, into "32 ½ feet". Aretha thus becomes a specimen (another specimen when compared to Mona and Chona in "Snails"); she is erased from the pages of history and recalled for historical and psychological consideration. Parks, here, erases the role of the "Naturalist" and highlights that of the "dramatist" through creating imagined histories to fill in the gaps of "chronicled" histories. She, then, moves from erasure to a reconstructive desire to affirm subjectivity.

History's main channel, memory, is also layered in this dramatisation of the female black body's confinement/ erasure. Charles's words: "Memory is a very important thing [. . .] It keeps us in line. Without it we could be anybody [. . .] I could not remember myself to be a master. There would be chaos" (48). Therefore, Aretha's ignorance of her "body existence" and passivity in regard to forming her memory is an essential part of asserting Charles's concept of his superiority, subjectivity, and dominance. Parks' dramatisation of the black female body, through Aretha, becomes itself a "cultural and political manoeuvre," for in the last scene of "Open House"; she subverts the roles and redeems a lost identity. Charles tells Aretha that when she gave up her teeth willingly, she gave up the last of the "verifying evidence" of her existence: "All'll be obliterated [. . .] we won't be able to tell you apart from others. We won't even know your name" (53). The photographic image of Aretha is then distorted and controlled by Charles. Nonetheless, she deprives Charles of his power; she is now the one who asks him the question he already asked and gives her own answer:

Aretha: You know what they say about thuh hand that rocks thuh cradle"

Charles: I didn't rock their cradles.

. . .

Aretha: "Rocks the cradle – rules the world"

Charles: I can't get the children to smile, Ma'am

Aretha: [. . .] These photographics is for my scrapbook. Scraps uh graphy for my book. Smile or no smile mm gonna remember you. Mm gonna remember you grinning. (54)

Aretha's last words are deconstructive of the stereotypes assigned to her as it is she now who is re-controlling the smile, and the documentation of it, although her own smile is impaired because of Charles' plucking her teeth. In her investigation of the operation of womanist body politics under the hegemony of "mutilated" African American history in Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Lauret explains how the black female subject's body, Meridian's, "disintegrates under the pressure of a coming-to-consciousness of this history," and how it is redeemed through a conscious engagement in the process of making history through her activism in the Civil Rights Movement (127). Aretha's body, like that of Meridian, disintegrates, (this is symbolised in Charles and Faith's plucking of her teeth); however, Parks insists that

this body is re-integrated through conscious implementation of memory and a wilful act of chronicling the life of the Charles and Faith.

It seems initially surreal, and to a certain extent a pessimistic comment on the “progress” of history, that Parks chooses for the last chapter an undecided title: “Greeks,” or “Slugs” (*The America Play* 57). The title suggests a return in history to the “Greek” era, and her definition of history as “time that won’t quit” serves this purpose (*Elements of Style*, 15). I argue, through an analysis of this scene, “Greeks/ Slugs,” that Parks deplores, as Bonner did in “On Being,” the loss of individuality in favour of a communal welfare.

“Greeks/ Slugs”

In this scene the absent father, Mr. Sergeant Smith, as his letters to his family show, is waiting for his “Distinction.” The family is also waiting for the “Distinction” and for the return of the long-awaited father. When Mr. Smith loses his legs after he steps on a mine, he is awarded the “Distinction” and allowed a homecoming. In his encounter with his daughter Muffy, Mr. Smith is unable to recognize her: “Muffy: You stepped on a mine. I read it in the paper. A mine is a thing that remembers. Too many mines lose the war. Remember the Effort. The mine blew his legs off.” Mr Sergeant Smith replies: “You one uh mines?” (70) Mr. Smith looks through the “Distinction” for an acknowledgement of his existence, and this acknowledgement is granted only when he becomes dismembered. Muffy is able to detect his dismemberment as one which is related to memory when she defines the mine as a thing that remembers. However, the irony emerges when he is unable to recognize his own daughter, thus his recognition of himself as an individual is incomplete. Between the “mine” as a dis-membering force and the “mine” as a possessive pronoun, Mr. Smith’s identity is lost: “no, we ain’t even turtles, Huh, we’s slugs, slugs, slugs” (71).

In order to account for this lost identity, Parks positions Mr. Smith against not only his modern black family, but against a vague larger community without which the “Distinction” is not readable/seen. The image of community has always been

referred to as a “total body.” This also emerges in the choice of the word “*body politics*” to explain the power relationships which govern a certain community. The word does not stand as a mere similitude between the “body” and “community,” but to the ability of the community to dispense of any of its individuals without being affected, like the body whose affected member can be mutilated. The privileges of “solidarity” (in other words, community) over any separated part (individual/individuality) is authenticated. What results is the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of community. The easiness of the sacrifice of the individual, Rogozinski explains, is due to the persistence of this concept from antiquity till the present: “Since the Greeks, the masters of the City have been represented as doctors of the political body” (19). The doctors/masters decide when to rid the Total Body from its infected member. Thus, the mutilation Mr. Smith undergoes renders him unfit for the military institution he serves; the irony emerges when the “Distinction” which Mr. Smith waits for is the reason for his erasure, like other characters in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*. “We’s slugs,” as final words in the play, brings into attention the erasure of the rest of characters.

Parks insists on de-victimising her subjects. The characters are only victimised by their inability to understand the mechanism of power structures. The faith characters display first in the Naturalist in “Snails,” then in the historian Faith and Charles’ presumed willingness to grant a space for Aretha, and the faith in the military institution to give Mr. Smith a distinction for his heroic “position,” illustrate the necessity for understanding the power of body politics and its relation to history. The characters’ acting of different roles through the progress of time serves as a reiteration rather than a psychological development. Their evolution is a slow progress that does not entail development unless it is combined with epistemological apprehension of their, to use Diamond’s term, “historicity.”

Robbie McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape*

In the footsteps of Adrienne Kennedy, Parks premiered experimental theatre and wrote especially historically imagined plays. McCauley, similarly, epitomizes in *Sally’s Rape* (1989) the attempt to re-invoke history and re-validate the existence of

missing subjects⁶. Playing on concepts such as ownership and possession, McCauley connects the imaginary Sally with the historical figure, Sally Hemings; through her descendants, the body of the ancestor is historically reclaimed. From the very beginning, Sally is presumed absent, and is sought for during the progress of the play. Through the attempt to locate the maternal ancestry, *Sally's Rape* can be seen as an examination of the inertia of history play. McCauley utilizes the spectatorship of the audience, to historicize and re-locate Sally's body, but most importantly, to re-appropriate it. Like the body of Aretha in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, that of Sally is staged and re-appropriated by Robbie, the protagonist of the play, and the actress/composer/and director Robbie McCauley herself.

The thematic concern of the play is multi-layered. It engages one of the important debates since the eighties till the recent day, which is the relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. It also emphasises the weight of this history on the bodies of black women, and the relationship between black and white women in light of this questionable Hemings-Jeffersonian liaison. On an aesthetic level, it highlights a new form which McCauley calls a "play in progress."⁷ It forces into absence the Jeffersonian historical figure but brings forward his note that "[N]ever yet could I find a black that had uttered a thought over the level of plain narration, never seen even an elementary trait of painting and sculpture"⁸. McCauley, the performer, makes of her body a sculpture, and forcibly engages the audience in the process of the making of the play. All these layers are made visible in the scene of the rape where Sally's body becomes this "sculpture" that negotiates the historicity of both the characters and the audience.

⁶ The Jefferson-Hemings relationship entered public culture when Philadelphia court ruled that Barbara Chase-Riboud's novel *Sally Hemings* (1979) was the source of Granville Burgess's play *Dusky Sally* (1982) and that the play wouldn't be staged without the permission of the author. The novel itself triggered Jefferson descendant and historian Virginius Dabney to write a chapter in his book *The Jefferson Scandal: A Rebuttal* (1981) on misleading the public in that novel (Monteith 234). The image of Sally Hemings in visual culture, Monteith notes, provokes more differences of opinions than does debate-specific art. However, what is important for McCauley is to define the relationship between Sally and Jefferson as that of rape and that "sometimes it was actual, brutal rape; sometimes it might have been romantic." (215)

⁷ In her note on the play, McCauley makes clear that a significant part of the dialogue is improvisational, that it is subject to changes, and that those changes "grew out of work between actors and director on the subject of the piece"; the stage direction is, likewise, changeable and governed by the relation between the performers, director, and audience (*Moon* 218).

⁸ In Query XIV, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

Furthermore, it is not possible to choose one theme to investigate in *Sally's Rape* without engaging the other elements. Perhaps McCauley is the only dramatist to define her aesthetics as "content as aesthetics" (214). Indeed, it is the content, the dialogue between black and white women around sexual politics—symbolised in "Sally's Rape" as the main motif—that determines the progress of the play. To return to the point of the inter-relationship between form and content, McCauley's play is one of these examples that attest to women's—African American women playwrights' here—experimentation (to use Lauret's definition of feminist fiction) "as a set of diverse cultural practices which contest both dominant meanings of gender and established standards of 'literariness'" (*Liberating* 4). On the one hand, this "experiment" is a corporeal response to a historical sign we encounter in Jefferson's speech; thus, she brings into question the "literariness" of a black woman's expression in the light of an inferiorising white supremacist culture. On the other hand, her experiment serves a different purpose other than *enlightening* the audience about racial prejudices. Rather, she manipulates the audience and then leaves them to their own conclusions when she explains that she uses "thematic thread" not to "make a connection," but to "find the connections that are there" (214).

Nonetheless, there is an implication in McCauley's statement that the "content" depends on the missing parts which she dramatizes through Sally's body, and in her relation to Jeannie, the white woman. In order to analyse both the thematic and aesthetic levels of the play, I want to, first, draw the outlines which formulate the body of this "play in progress." Doing this, I argue that both Robbie and Jeannie *imprison* the audience. The audience who becomes part of the theatrical space is captivated and controlled by Robbie; it is no longer a passive spectator, rather, the theatrical experiment renders the stage a prison, the audience a prisoner. Second, I argue that Sally's body, itself imprisoned within the historical stereotype of mistress/lover, is liberated in McCauley's play from the constraints of history and relocated to maternal ancestry. The significance of this liberation is to re-define the relationship between black and white women through dialogue which McCauley, as does Parks in her definition of language, defines as a physical "act" (213). However, I will begin with Laura Doyle's phenomenological reading of rape in general

because it explains the relationship between the victim and space, both interior and exterior. This relationship will appear in the theatrical space which McCauley creates in *Sally's Rape*.

In "Bodies Inside/ Out," Doyle elaborates on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the chiasm which she defines as "at once the vulnerability and the promise of embodiment in a world in which I come to myself from outside myself" (81). Doyle investigates the working of this chiasm in the case of political prisoners in fascist prisons as it appears in their narratives⁹. The body of the prisoner, she notes, is made abject by the torturer; consequently, his/her chiasmic self-relation collapses. It is a collapse that results from the torturer's invasion of the prisoners' inner space, and the terrorising of what Doyle calls the "joined-separateness," the "effable site" which Merleau-Ponty illustrates in the example of the hand touching the other where "the body's two parts touched-and-in-touching-manifest-their-joined-separateness" (Doyle 81). Because of this chiasmus or "joined-separateness", the body is both "at once in its doubleness"; furthermore, this ontological space, according to Doyle, is the location of survival, of "defiance and duplicity," of "evasion of invasion" (81). Consequently, rape does not only mean a violation of the body, or a displaying of mastery over it. It means that the victim's embodiment of the world is destabilised, that "mastery" is displayed over the body and over "the space contained, and occupied by the body" (80). The rapist forces a "violent touch from without on the ontology of constant benevolent touching, interconnecting tissues within" (81). So, in addition to inflicting pain, the victim is divided from his/her own possibilities; his/her "primal condition of possibility"—the "I Can's's" referred to in previous chapters—is-seised (81). Similarly, Sheets-Johnstone refers to the corporeal implication of rape as a "loss of equilibrium," a very intense sense of losing one's beliefs about oneself; but more dangerously, the life of the subject-turned-object is perpetually on the line, and that "one in consequence from now on, [is] on guard" (*Roots* 132).

⁹ Doyle depends for her study on *The Silent Escape* (1995) by the Romanian artist and political prisoner, Lena Constante; and on *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* (1981) by Jacob Timerman, the Argentinean journalist and also political prisoner during Argentina's Dirty War (1974-1983).

In this connection, McCauley's dramatisation of rape could be read within the contours of a totalitarian history invading the space of, not only Sally Hemings, but also that of her descendents; Robbie and Jeannie are representatives of black and white female subjects whose relationship is defined by their "lost equilibrium": Robbie, whose life is on guard, against Jeannie, whose consciousness plays guilty tricks. In order to show the weight of history over subjects, this weight should be transmitted to the audience who is invited as a witness, then entrapped in the space of the victim, Sally Hemings/ Sally the real grandmother of Robbie/ Robbie McCauley herself as a performer and as a black woman. From now on, any reference to Sally will implicate this triangle.

The physical imprisonment is evident in the division imposed on the audience into three groups: agreeable, the bass line, and the argumentative group¹⁰. The verbal one is clear when Robbie and Jeannie address the audience: "don't worry I won't jump in your face or down your throat. We'll feed you" (222). The dark stage with a bench, a square table, and two chairs adds to the sense of confinement. History's imprisonment of the audience is channelled through the bodies of the performers as they display control over the stage props; throughout the play they shift the place of the chairs, the bench, and the table. Their entrance with cups of tea on saucers show their privilege over the waiting audience. Their hand signals dictate the way the audience respond. Robbie even directs the light board operator when and where to use the lights. The fact that they offer food and drink "to ease the tension" highlights this very tension and display their manipulation of the space of the audience who become prepared for the scene of rape where the victim's interior space is at one with the audience's space. I will return to this specific relation between the invaded space of Sally and that of the audience below when discussing the rape scene. However, it is important at this stage to establish the general atmosphere/ space.

Clearly, the objective of the play is not to re-stage the rape of Sally whether a historical figure or a symbol of maternal ancestry. More important than displaying the Jefferson-Hemings liaison for McCauley is the "historicisation" of rape. McCauley states that "the particular story of Sally is not the rape. It is her

¹⁰ See Appendix E.

understanding it [italics added]" (214). It is essential then to McCauley to position "rape" within a complex framework where points rather than scenes are at work. She moves from "1-Confessing about Family and Religion" and why this play is a "Work at Progress" to "2-Stating the Context"; from "3-Trying to Transform" to "4-confessions in "Moment in Chairs" until she reaches "5-Sally's Rape" to be followed by "6-A Rape Crisis Center," "7-Talking about Different Schools" and finally, and most important to the understanding of rape is "8-The Language Lesson." In placing Sally within this "multiple and complex signs of a woman's life- her desires and politics, her class, ethnicity, or race" to use Diamond's definition of historicity, McCauley creates a "space" for Sally which was historically invaded and usurped.

It is essential then that Jeannie comes to conflict with Robbie, that they both reveal the points of differences, not the points in common. This is why Robbie reveals that half of her family is white, that from her point of view, it is not a point that connects her with Jeannie, rather it disconnects because she considers that this whiteness is caused by rape: "These confessions are like a mourning for the lost connections" (220). When they first enter the stage and start talking about the difference between cups and mugs and about other distinctions of social etiquettes adopted especially by "Southern belles," they present the first point of conflict and difference between black and white women. The discussion escalates as the objective of the first part of the performance is to reveal the tension points that dominate the small details of life while simultaneously illustrating racial, social, and sexual politics. The body's movement becomes the medium for illustrating the racial tension between the two characters. For example, Jeanie reminisces about a girl in her school who was "groomed to be a Southern Belle," she was sent to "charm school" and learned to walk with a book on her head; Robbie answers by performing the walk while Jeannie is following her: "We didn't worry about books on our head. We already had this up thing. I guess that was the African in us before I even knew it" (220). Robbie thus uses her body as an embodied image of defiance and resistance, reminding the audience of the weight of history, and reminding black women especially of carrying the burden while remaining upright in doing so.

The most evident of these techniques is the utilisation of memory, both personal and collective. Relevant to the nature of this memory, a question arises: Does Sally stand for a collective memory or a personal one pertinent to Robbie as a black woman? Does she occupy and contain the space of Robbie, the performer, or also that of the audience including Jeannie? In this connection, Diana Taylor's take on social memory is useful. In "Staging Social Memory," she examines how this staging addresses a collective trauma in order to understand and reaffirm "communal memory" and "collective subjectivity" (233)¹¹. However, in addressing a multiracial audience in *Sally's Rape*, the collective memory is rendered questionable.

Taylor differentiates between "embodied memory" and "archived history." The first she calls the repertoire, and it consists of ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge like performances, gestures, orature, movement, dance, singing, traumatic flashbacks, repeats, and hallucinations; although it takes many forms and changes over time, its meaning remains the same. For example, traditional dances, she continues, connote the same meaning even though they might be modified with new moves over time. The repertoire then carries an "embodied knowledge" made inferior or invisible, due to a dominant patriarchal supremacy, to archived history/memory. Archived history, on the other hand, maintains a material core such as archaeological remains, records, and documents; its "value, relevance, meaning, how it gets interpreted even embodied" changes over time (220). This reminds of Diamond's historicity which emerges in the gaps between history and the complex signs of race, politics, culture, and gender. On the other hand, "embodied memory" is the tool to express "the silent inertia of History." In other words, this historicity is a re-claimed space that emerges in the conflicting dialogue between "archived history" and "embodied memory."

Such dialogue is dramatised in the play, and even becomes suggestive of a divided space that separates Robbie from Jeannie. McCauley attempts to change the meaning of the Hemings- Jefferson story. The story of Hemings has never entered any historical document (in contrast to embodied memory) until the DNA tests

¹¹ Taylor investigates specifically the impact of traumatic history on the Peruvian culture through the struggle of a theatrical group, Yuyachkani, in the face of political, economic and personal crisis added to many centuries of civil conflict (1980-ongoing).

emerged in 1998. Even then, its meaning is cast into doubt; is it a romance? Rape? Or does it exist at all? However, its meaning that emanates from “embodied memory,” to African American women in general, and to Robbie, in particular, does not change but resides in expressive forms which are represented in what Taylor calls the repertoire. In McCauley’s play, this difference between an authoritative history represented in the use of the historical story of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, and the imagined history is embodied in Sally’s performance. McCauley has to illustrate the difference between the two types of “knowledge” (embodied and archived) in terms of Robbie and Jeannie’s access to archived history, and even the history’s access to their bodies. Robbie, for example, got a rejection letter from Barnard University, but she recalls how her grandmother used to teach her lessons about history. Jeannie, on the other hand, is historicised differently. Her ancestors might have been slaves “because they did have white slaves,” Robbie confesses to Jeannie, but “history has given you the ability to forget your shame about being oppressed by being ignorant, mean or idealistic . . . which makes it dangerous to me” (228). So while Jeannie’s memory is archival, that of Robbie is *embodied* and re-enacted by women in her family. More dangerous to Robbie than being denied education is the ignorance of white women of their history, or assuming a superior stand because they are historically privileged. In a conversation with Bill Rauch, McCauley asks: “Is there something learned about power and privilege that can be transformed? In my dealings with white people, in general, there is a place I wish they could get to, that I may be imagining, which is a kind of “I’m ordinary,” and I don’t mean, you know, cute, fuzzy, “I’m ordinary,” but really recognising that “I’m not better” (114). The quote I use here indicates that McCauley perceives history on the side of white subjects, that it enables them with “power and privilege” to presume a higher status, which when translated into “I’m ordinary,” it becomes a matter of sheer condescension; Alice Childress had already, like McCauley did here, seen it more dangerous than racism because it is, after all, disguised racism.

In the section entitled “Moments in the Chair,” Jeanie and Robbie hold hands moving their arms to and fro “as if giving and receiving dialogue” (227). They are angry at each other but they have to improvise while analysing the reasons for their anger and the differences that lie ahead of them when suddenly both agree that both

of them are idealistic and that their idealism is similar. While Jeannie expresses that she wants to be a Billie Holiday, Robbie finds in Rosa Luxemburg an ideal example. This idealism keeps them walled off from the reality of their conflict. Jeannie considers that there is an idealism which is greater than spotting the difference between them, while Robbie thinks that this idealism is only a whim because it attempts to cover over a part of her history she is not proud of. The trauma of rape might just as well be re-enacted to restore not only the absent subject, but also the share of guilt that Jeannie pretends she is oblivious of. In her examination of Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Lauret asks: "[c]an black and white women unite as victims of sexual violence no matter who perpetrates it?" and suggests that such a question has to be examined in its present setting and historical background (*Alice* 86). This is exactly what McCauley achieves in structuring her play on the ground of points that contextualize the question of rape, and its historical background, astutely suggesting that "understanding" rape by both black and white women is the key to find connections which are already there, as she notes.

Before the performance of the central scene, another present impact should be questioned before the memory of Robbie and Jeannie erupts: language, and it should, as well, be contrasted with what follows the rape scene. Robbie confesses: "what upsets me is language. I can't win in your language." Jeannie, similarly, interacts: "what upsets me is there's an underlying implication that you're gonna unmask me" (228). Robbie is aware that the language in which history is written is not on her side; Jeannie, on the other hand, exhibits a similar distrust which both performers negotiate after enacting the rape scene. In "Rape Crisis Center," which follows "Sally's Rape," language remarkably shifts from a means of unmasking to one of communication. Jeannie, curling up on the bench, speaks of "closing in the thighs/ between the legs locking up everything/ biting lips, the teeth bleed"; the image she draws is caught in Robbie's line: "On the plantation you hafta stay tough and tight/ no matter how many times they come down there" (232). When Jeannie crosses to chairs and Robbie crosses to the bench, they exchange a "bodily" understanding. They cross to each other's ground, and simultaneously, they cross to the ground of the audience. When in a rape crisis centre, Jeannie continues: "Someone would give you a cup of tea. Hot chocolate. Warm milk" (232). The drink which was offered to

the audience at the beginning of the play enables an invasion of the interior space of the audience. It signifies the holding of this interior by a long history of rape for both black and white women. "Things and bodies, and the promise they hold," Doyle explains the prisoner's disintegrating spatial and temporal structure, "can be confiscated, and in the process steal away from our selves" (85). The act of sharing food and drink with the audience might as well be a means to referring the audience to the confiscation of their bodies and stealing away from themselves.

Jeannie and Robbie's idealism, and then communication, is grounded in the politics of the feminist movements that pervaded the American arena during the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to the racism of white men, and the sexism of black men, black women confronted the racism of white women. Even if there is awareness on the part of the white woman of the oppression of black women, Michelle Wallace notes in *Black Macho*, "she has done very little of a positive nature about that awareness" (118). Black and white women within the Women's Movement were destined to division by the very "sisterhood" which they were working for. In fact, this division was triggered by the very act of trying to find answers to questions of violence, both racial and sexual. It is in "the process of consciousness-raising," Lauret clarifies, that these questions were contested against different experiences and different meanings; consequently, these divisions cast into doubt a "homogeneity of sisterhood" (59). Nonetheless, there were examples where this homogeneity, to a certain extent, occurred. Women's Liberation succeeded in creating "the *ideal* of sisterhood" [italics in the original] with acknowledgeable political results such as the Rape Crisis and Women's Refuge movements (60).

So the process of raising consciousness made each group, or individual, more aware of their position. It is no coincidence then that McCauley sets the conflict with Jeannie prior to "Sally's Rape," and then sets the communication in a "Rape Crisis Centre," that she insists on Sally's *understanding* of rape more than rape itself. When Robbie mocks the "southern belle" posture and counters it with her upright movement, she displays the distrust between black and white women within the Women's Movement. Jeannie wishes she is Billie Hoilday, probably oblivious that the other was a victim of rape. Robbie, likewise, wants to be Rosa Luxemburg, the

Marxist activist who was also a victim in the Russian Revolution. McCauley alludes that women's struggle is more fundamental than it appears in any slogan of any movement. That rape, after all, is "a part of domination," is "the everyday rape that happens in those power situations; and so it's 'haha,' a small thing" (215).

Robbie interweaves her personal narrative with that of Sally Hemings. Her real grandmother name was also Sally and she had two children by the master she worked for in a Georgia plantation. While she narrates this, Jeannie performs the dance of the white frail lady. Robbie's narrative is then presented in antagonism with a totalitarian force, a long history of racism and oppression. It becomes more emphasised when Robbie stands naked on the auction block after she takes off her sack dress. Jeannie starts to chant "Bid em in," "coaxing the audience, taking time to thank them for joining in. It should be a moment of communion" (230)¹². In addition to the obvious symbolism of racial and sexual violence enacted by both performers, what is at stake here is defining the position of the audience, and questioning how much of "communion" this moment is. It might be argued that the act of watching a play is different from witnessing. In *Sally's Rape* case, the audience's agency is voluntary in choosing to attend the performance; however, it is "involuntary" in getting divided into groups, in being offered food and drink, and driven into a dialogue with the performers.

McCauley explains that the audience is the one who is there to witness. However, witnessing is different from communion; while the first connotes a sense of imposing on and interruption of one's activity, the latter signifies communication and willingness. Doyle defines "witnessing" as an intercorporeal relation structured by a disparity and yet a tenderness (96). She explains that the ethics of witnessing are always in doubt because the witness does not share the victim his/ her experience of violence. Vision and proximity impose on the witness an act of seeing and being, creating a condition called "involuntary agency" which entails that the witness carries the event regardless of his passivity towards it. Doyle connects this "carrying" to Heidegger's concept of "thrownness." According to Heidegger, one arrives in space and time not abstractly, but in place with history. Doyle argues that

¹² "Bid em in" is an early song by Oscar Brown Jr where he assumes a voice of an auctioneer.

“carrying” becomes an outcome of “thrownnnes,” a historical and inter-corporeal act. (97)

In order to extend the image of the stage as a prison, and the audience as prisoner, I want to show that (borrowing from Doyle’s theorisation about imprisonment) both the audience and performers are compelled to perform a process of “making and unmaking of the world,” a process similar to what a prisoner undergoes in order to sustain meaning. Even though the stage direction reads that the moment should be one of communion, the aggression of being forced into the space of Sally’s naked body, and being thanked for doing so while listening to Jeannie singing “bid em in” make the audience aware of itself witnessing. Here, tension is not the only prevalent element. Intimacy between the audience and the performer’s body is constructed; nonetheless, it is simultaneously threatened by Jeannie’s voice channelling through history’s invasion: “Robbie: (*still naked*) Aunt Jessie said that’s how they got their manhood on the plantations. They’d come down to the quarters and do it to us and the chickens” (230).

The image transcends a sense of de-humanisation and establishes a sense of impotence. Regardless of the economics of the plantation which maintains that more “productivity” is guaranteed by rape, that “products” are tantamount to “chickens,” *impotence* here defines the space of the audience as it defines the interior space of Sally¹³. Impotence results when “intimacy” becomes itself a threat; it arises, Doyle quotes Timerman, “from one’s inability to extend a tender gesture” (94). The audience is incited into an experience of witnessing, carrying the weight of witnessing, and impotence as they are unable to change the course of history. However, when Robbie appeals to the audience to free her body by freeing itself, she asks them to “unmake” history: “it could help us free us from this. (*Refer to her naked body*) Any old socialist knows, one can’t be free till all are free” (231). Freeing Sally’s body depends on freeing that of the audience from a totalitarian history. “In *Sally’s Rape*,” she notes in her introduction “it releases me physically to write it,” an act which enables her “I can’s” (213). Likewise, “the unmaking and

¹³ In Sheets-Johnstone’s investigation of rape, she uses an evolutionary approach to prove that rape is not a reproductive strategy, nor does it ensure progeny, and such a claim assumes that rape has a positive value, and that the rapist is just doing his job (143).

remaking of a person”, to use Doyle’s words, as it is for the audience “is the making of history – a history that might be resisted and made differently” (96).

This process of un-making and re-making of history is sustained by McCauley’s aesthetics, summarised as a “work in progress”:

Robbie: [...] if oppression, is at the core, then this work will never end. It’s a work in progress . . .

Jeannie: Well, if you can dialogue, you can get rid of some of that.

Robbie: Well, *if* you can weed it out. *If* it’s about something else, then-

Jeannie: *Then* it’s a work in progress . . .

Robbie: . . . a dialogue . . .

Jeannie: Otherwise, there is no progress. (221)

The “progress” in McCauley’s text is possible as it is preceded—and conditioned—by dialogue, by “transference,” to use Rogozinski’s words. Unlike “progress” in Parks’ text, that in McCauley’s enables a corporeal communion and complete the construction of subjectivity. Wittingly, McCauley conditions her presence as a performer by the presence/intervention of the audience. The mechanism on which the play is built is one of an overlapping space construed by the “dialogue” between the audience and the performers. When McCauley steps out of her character to comment on it, she displays a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. However, it is not merely a distancing effect; she allows then a release of her authority as a performer while signifying simultaneously on the authority of a totalitarian history which erases and manipulates subjects. This mechanism is re-iterated and improvised each time the play “in progress” is staged leaving the audience, without releasing it from the power of history, to intervene in the theatrical space. It is precisely at this moment of intersection of “witnessing” and “imprisonment” that the dialogue becomes progressive, and that “progress” becomes historicised through “corporeal” *mutabilities*.

Conclusion

McCauley is primarily concerned with the impact of rape as an embodiment of historicity made difficult, or in her words, the understanding of it, not the physical

act per se on the politics that determine her relationship with other white women, with her own history as a performer, and with the collective history as a black woman. Robbie, the performer, is not separate here from Robbie McCauley, the playwright. Illustrating the relationship between performance and political efficacy, Diamond explains the functionality of the body as a mediator. “Refusing the conventions of role-playing,” she notes, “the performer presents herself/himself as a sexual, permeable, tactile body” (*Unmaking* 6). This permeability of the body provides a space for the audience to reciprocally share the experience of the performer. More importantly, McCauley uses the “permeable body” as an instrument that enables the audience/spectator to absorb the “embodied knowledge” which the performers (Robbie and Jeanie) attempt to channel through innovative techniques of theatrical experimentation that primarily involves the audience.

I questioned in this chapter the meaning of history for two recent black women playwrights, once as an authoritative entity whose “inertia” needs to be visited, and once as an oppressive tool which resembles the act of rape in its invasion of the ontology of constant benevolent, interconnecting tissues within, to use Doyle’s words. Both Parks and McCauley wrote about how they *experience* history, not in an oppositional way, but from their own lived experience as historicised black female playwrights. McCauley played the roles of Clara in Adrienne Kennedy’s *A Movie Star*, and one of the ladies in Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who*. The lived experience and historicity she gathered from those roles are further developed into this dialectical form we see in *Sally’s Rape*. She continued this questioning of history and the personal/corporal in her *Confessions of a Working Class Black Woman* (1983), a collection which includes more recent performances including *Sally’s Rape*. Suzan-Lori Parks continues her questioning of history, its meaning for black women, for Americans, its form, and its legacy in many plays to come. In chapter six, I particularly approach the form she utilizes in *Venus*, how it informs the historical understanding of sexual politics in America, and how these structures are satirised in the image of the Hottentot Venus’s buttocks.

Circles and Patches: Movement of the Female Body in *Venus* and *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*

In her study of the development of visual representations of the female body from the 1970s onwards, Alexandra Howson pinpoints a central contradiction that underlines the modern Western culture, namely women's corporeality. According to Howson, this culture imposes corporeality on women as the basis of their subjectivity while it simultaneously denies the function of this corporeality as a basis for knowledge and understanding (53). In other words, Howson emphasizes the significance of reading the female body as a historically and socio-politically constituted body. More importantly, Howson marks the shift in women's art in the 1990s from "normative questions about whether or how the female body should be represented to phenomenological questions concerning meaning and experience (50). She notes that Women's art in the 1990s was closer to women's art of 1970s in its focus on the politics of the female body than it is to that of the 1980s which was preoccupied with "the deconstruction of meanings and the interrogation of signs," two characteristics of postmodern aesthetics (48).

Howson's remarks apply to women's art is general, yet it seems that the playwriting of African American women, though a part and parcel of women's art, is still an exception. The relationship between the personal and the political as a characteristic of women's writing in 1970s might justify why black women's writing, likewise, focused on its own lived experience and meaning. Thus the phenomenological questions of the body and experience for *black* women writing is more of a continuum than a shift. For example, Suzan-Lori Parks' style that follows a phenomenological trope of representation evident in her definition of the black play as a play that "employs the black not just as a subject, but as a platform, eye and telescope through which it intercourses with the cosmos" echoes Adrienne Kennedy's drama of the sixties and seventies ("New" 582), also Ntozake Shange's experimentation with the body and dance during the seventies and also eighties, and

even reminds of Bonner's, Childress's, and Hansberry's utilisation of the body as a medium of expression.

In this chapter I argue that black women playwriting at the end of the twentieth century, in spite of its experimentation with form and the postmodern affinities it sometimes adopts, is a form of protest writing against the hegemonic socio-political and historical status quo. In the first part of this chapter, I analyse Suzan-Lori Parks' play, *Venus*, and her choice of Saartje Baartman as a heroine. The significance of this play is that it claims disengagement from racial question. Truly, Parks claims that she is not a spokesperson of the race; yet, her play questions the position of the black body in history under a cover of absurdity and postmodern spirit. The second part of this chapter continues uncovering the absurd and comic cloak in Breena Clarke and Glenda Dickerson's *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*. Likewise, the play controversially invokes the character of Aunt Jemima and redeems her in a controversial position as a heroic ancestor for African American women.

In Parks' play, it is principally movement (of characters, time, and Venus herself) that determines the form of the play and its intended purpose; i.e. that of positioning the audience as a "platform, eye, and telescope" to live an experience similar to that lived by Venus, or the Venus Hottentot. Therefore, I will focus primarily on the movement of the play or what Parks calls an "architectural look." In Clarke and Dickerson's play, movement becomes a kind of a "knitting" activity through which historical characters are interrogated. The protagonist moves from one point in history to another in an attempt to impose a trace or a position that grounds her in the present. In both plays, corporeally historicised theatrical space is the outcome of these two movements. This relation between movement and the actor's body is referred to by Garner as a habitational field in his introduction to *Bodied Spaces*. The significance of the phenomenological perspective, according to Garner, is transforming the performing body from a signifying body, or the body as a sign, to the body as it is lived (45). Moreover, this habitational field affects another field of visibility because the stage is after all, Garner clarifies, a "specular field" (45). In other words, Garner includes the spectator in this habitational field. Both

plays demand that the spectator's view becomes determinant of the movement of the plays. Therefore, it is essential that I discuss the spectator's gaze in relationship to movement. By so doing so, I argue against apolitical content, as a characteristic of postmodern approach that both plays might claim.

Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* and the Architectural Look

In one of the interviews that followed her unconventional and controversial play, *Venus*, Suzan-Lori Parks highlights the difficulty of not being a black playwright, but of being a playwright of any race; while writing the screenplay of "Girl 6" took her eight months to finish—a movie later directed by Spike Lee (1996)—*Venus* took Parks five years to write; she explains to her interviewer (M. Williams 1996). However, the difficulty Parks speaks of is not related to that demanding act of playwriting or to the form, language, or performance chosen; it is directly connected to the position a playwright takes up in regard to the community she is "supposed" to represent, and to an imposed sense of delicacy when it comes to the race issue. Thus, playwriting, in her words, "gets more difficult the further you get from the middle of the road" (M. Williams). Thus, Parks positions herself, as a playwright, in relational space determined by the gaze of undefined community, or a collective of communities.

Parks' statement refers to the extent to which an African American writer finds him/herself committed to any kind of socio/political writing. The statement claims for Parks a postmodern position. Yet, it also echoes Marita Bonner's main concern in her essay, "On Being Young - A Woman - and Colored," how it is always controversial for a black artist to choose topics which are not part of agitprop literature. Bonner's indication of what might be called denied individualism for a black woman artist during the Harlem Renaissance meets the postmodern definition Parks provides in her "New Black Math": "A black play is not political, that term don't even begin to approach its complexity, especially these days" ("New" 578). In spite of Parks' statement that she does not intend to be a spokesperson of the race, she shares black feminists' resentment of the stereotypical representation of black women in the media. For example, "black play," in her words, "don't forget that in the 1980s mtv didnt want colored faces on its airwaves" (579). Thus, Parks provides

her “black play” with memory and with what Bonner had earlier called in her article an “acid testing” of the present.

Unlike any of her predecessors, Parks clarifies that she never wanted to be “a spokesperson of the race” (M. Williams). In all her plays, Parks is mostly involved in the engagement of history with the present of black subjects. The impact of history, its clash with personal memory, and the innovative styles of modifying and re-modifying it have always been the main concern in the playwriting of African American women dramatists. However, Parks’ experimentation with theatrical performance, which is most evident in *Venus*, depends on visually questioning and re-questioning the movement of history to bring about the agency of black subjects rather than condemning history as one of the factors that contributes to the process of subjugating her black characters. In *Venus*, Parks invokes the historical character, Saartje Baartman, who has come to be known as the Venus Hottentot, and controversially makes her an accomplice in the process of her own victimisation.

While *Venus* is a very difficult play to summarise, it might initially be said that it traces, caricatures and chronologically presents the real events in Baartman’s life¹. The play consists of thirty one scenes and an Overture. While the narrative resembles the model of a Brechtian epic, the Overture is reminiscent of the minstrel show; Parks assigns the task of leading the audience to The Negro Resurrectionist, a role similar to that of the interlocutor. Throughout the play, The Negro Resurrectionist and The Chorus call for “order”; an important role of the interlocutor in blackface minstrel show was to keep order. Venus is announced to be dead from the very beginning of the play. The play starts with scene thirty one and “proceeds” to scene one, opposing the direction of the linear movement of the action; Venus is restored to life in the process, and pronounced dead again at the end. The circularity of the play is evident in scene one which is only a repetition, with a small degree of variation, of the Overture.

In her study of the performances of African American women prior to the second half of the twentieth century, Jayna Brown explains that Saartje Baartman was studied by natural scientists of the nineteenth century “in order to draw a line

¹ For more on the real life of Baartman and the summary of the play, see appendix F.

between apes and Negroes” (223). This scientific racism placed Africans at the level of “the least evolved type of the human species” (224). However, the Hottentot’s body on Parks’ stage is more than a semiotic sign that refers to a low status and to scientific racism. The words describe her physical appearance, and directs the spectator’s gaze to her “bottom.” It is this moment of voyeurism which transforms The Girl into The Venus Hottentot, the star of the “freak” show whose first words after transformation is “what you looking at?” (35) The stage direction reads that she “is now The Venus Hottentot. The wonders becomes The Chorus of the Spectators and gather around” (35).

The Venus Hottentot in the play is aware that she exists because of the gaze of her spectator, she does not want to exist only vaguely, as invisible as Ralph Ellison’s protagonist. The theatrical Venus aspires to transcend historical victimisation for the sake of a material presence. In her request for the spectator to kiss her, she demands that her body is seen, not a see-through body. Thus she affirms her agency and negates her victimisation.

Between presenting Venus as a victim of scientific racism and white colonialism and presenting her as an accomplice in her own victimisation, lies the controversy over Parks’ play. Ben Brantley, in his review of the performance that was presented in The Public Theatre, New York 1996, praised the play for dropping “the sweeping, condemning historical perspective and narrow[ing] its focus to the personal”. Robert Brustein, likewise, approved the “wise avoidance” of “pushing sympathy buttons.” These reviews are reminiscent of the successful reception of Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* on the basis of focusing on the social not the racial indictment of the play. Jean Young, on the other hand, attacks both Parks’ play and the reviews written by “the chorus of critics” for reifying a “perverse imperialist mind set” and subverting the voice of Saartje Baartman (700). Parks depends on the spectator’s indeterminacy in regard to Saartje’s agency and/or victimisation to accentuate the ambivalence of the play. It is this agency which determines that the play is a postmodern political play as the rest of this chapter will show.

Parks’ aesthetic depends on her world of experience and the meaning she associates with The Venus’ body. Parks, again, claims a postmodern apolitical

position as she describes Venus as “multi-faceted,” “vain, beautiful, intelligent, and yes, complicit” (M. Williams). While Parks claims detachment from the race issue, her positioning of the Venus Hottentot in a context closer to postmodern culture than it is to the historical narrative is itself a counter-hegemonic strategy by which she exposes the dominant discourse. “As black people,” she insists in her interview, “we’re encouraged to be narrow and simply address the race issue. We deserve so much more” (M. Williams). In other words, Parks deserts the agitprop drama of the 1960s and 1970s and adopts a more postmodern resistant stance. Therefore, she uses the present point of view to historicize the Venus Hottentot and redeems an agency which was denied to Baartman during her lifetime; this necessitates that she de-victimizes the Venus Hottentot by making her culpable in the process of her own historical victimisation; thus, Parks’ signifies on her earlier play, *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, in questioning the agency of characters.

Parks’ dramatisation of the Venus Hottentot’s movement meets Garner’s theorisation about the habitational field in its inclusion of the spectator, to use Garner’s words, inside the conditions of spectacle (46). Part and parcel of the spectacle for Parks is the audience, and in her allusion to the agency of her protagonist, she explicitly points to a similar agency on the part of the spectator. Her controversial staging of Venus is a provocative questioning not only of the agency or culpability of black female subjects in their own objectification, but also of the involvement of the audience in the process of spectatorship and their part in perpetuating these stereotypes.

The play starts with an “Overture” in which characters introduce themselves and others in a repetitious style. This, as Parks explains in her introduction to the play—or what she names as a “road map”—works as a “spell” where the figures “experience their pure true simple state” (16)². Furthermore, this spell has an “architectural look,” Parks remarks. The function of this repetition becomes more obvious as the play progresses; after the trial of The Venus, for example, the Baron Docteur encounters her for the first time. Characters present themselves:

The Venus

² Author’s Notes: From “The Elements of Style”. 6-18.

The Baron Docteur

The Venus

The Baron Docteur

When *The Girl* becomes the Venus, she undergoes a similar introduction: (The Venus/ The Negro Resurrectionist/ The Venus/ The Negro Resurrectionist). The locus of this style of stillness and repetition, as Parks illustrates, is an architectural construction of characters. The narrative is apparently “linear,” but characters grow vertically to assert their physicality, and to alienate themselves from the sweeping linearity of dominant history inviting the spectator to fixate on their physical presence, on the very moment of their lived experience. The human body is read here not as a sign through which history is questioned visually; rather, it is re-iterated and re-embodied by means of the visual, the acoustic and the spatial elements that engulf the spectator. When Parks claims that this repetition has “an architectural look” she includes the spectator in this process of architecture/construction. Characters are not created only by the playwright or the actors involved, but also by the spectator who indeed questions the ambiguity of this repetition, acoustically as well as visually, and consequently becomes involved in the theatrical space of performance. Self-articulation on the part of characters then becomes a means for directing the gaze of the spectator to the performing body and to itself.

As well as emphasising the obsession of the spectators with Venus Hottentot’s body, the movement stresses the circularity of the play’s form. From the beginning, *The Negro Resurrectionist* announces the death of Venus, affirming that she has been immortalised as a corpse due to the scientific exploration of The Docteur: “her flesh has been pickled in Science Hall” (9). The Venus at the beginning embodies the biological materialism with which her observer is obsessed. Her onstage movement testifies to that: the first thing the audience sees is Venus facing stage right; she revolves 270 degrees clockwise to face upstage; then she revolves 90 degrees to face stage right; another 180 degrees to face stage left (*Venus* 1). This is also reminiscent of Kennedy’s *The Owl Answer* where Clara’s body experiences a similar “whirl.” The movement imposes on the spectator an objectifying voyeurism intertwined with the circular movement. Garner explains that one of the issues which phenomenology of the theatrical space raises is the

“perceptual dynamism of the theatrical image as it reflects and (dis)embodies the seeing eye” (63). Indeed, the seeing eye of the spectator exposes and questions his/her position in regard to Saartje’s subjectivity as it calls into play their share in the process of objectifying her.

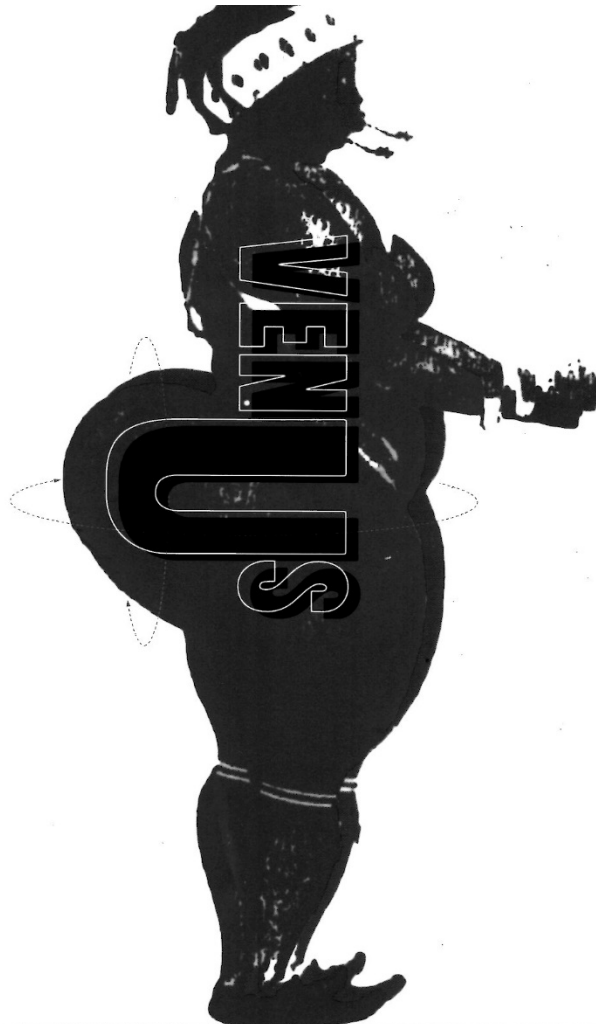


Figure 2, the cover of Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus* where the artistic comment on the intersection between scientific racism, as well as imperialism, and objectifying black bodies is clear.

Venus is defined in dual perception of her body as a physical sensational spectacle on the one hand, and as an abstract object of historical victimisation (taking into account her invisibility as a subject/agent). Unlike Shange’s celebratory presentation of the black female body, Parks’ is persistent in its indeterminacy. Shange’s trope of presenting the female body is defiant of the Western standards of beautiful images. In both *Spell* and *For Colored Girls who Considered Suicide*,

Shange explores “the expressive possibilities of the female body in space” (Garner 208). She states: “With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs & backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman & as a poet” (quoted in Garner 208). According to Garner, the movement enables Shange on stage to reclaim the body for self-possession “ellipsing the abstraction of thought and the physicality of sensation” (208). It is these two tropes of historical abstraction and physical sensation that define who Sarah Baartman is; the body which Parks introduces as *The Venus* revolves between these two points, and questions the dialectical relationship between them unlike what appears as a reconciliation between abstraction and sensation in Shange’s plays.

In scene 31, the journey of *The Venus* begins. Her first encounter is with “The Mans Brother, later The Mother-Showman, later The Grade School Chum.” Parks’ use of one character to embody more than a subject is reminiscent of Kennedy’s method of characterisation (shown in chapter 4). In this scene, *The Venus* is promised by The Brother of the Man for whom she works as a servant that she will have a promising future as an African dancing queen; she is left to consider the offer after she is told “Yd be a sensation!” (16) The irony which the audience is aware of is that *The Venus* is denied any free choice as a slave³. The free movement implied by the profession ascribed to her affirms *The Venus*’s position or confinement between abstraction (historical effacement) and sensation (objective racism).

Scene 30 depicts *The Venus*’s arrival in England and the immediate contrast to her expectation as she sits in her dark cell. The “amorous” behaviour of The Brother convinces Venus of showing her “grotesqueness.” The scene ends with a historical extract read by The Negro Resurrectionist narrating the real life event and introducing a play within a play: “For The Love of The Venus” which is also scene 29. This play is presented intermittingly within the main play. It intersects at some parts with the original play because it is watched by The Baron Docteur and narrates

³ The Dutch in the Cape, according to Crais and Scully, would not allow people who are indigenous to an area to be enslaved, but Saartje was sold to a wealthy cape merchant as chattel; “She was a slave in all but name” (24). Later, she would live on the intersection of slavery and freedom, more a servant than a slave, sometimes both, but never a free person (40)

a story of The Young Man, who is seen as an exalted model by the Baron Docteur, and his white Bride-To-Be (a direct contrast to the Venus Hottentot). The young man is in love with the black Venus who appears in journals and he wants to explore the unknown in order to ascertain his “manhood”; in a Don-Quixotian style, he raves: “When a Man takes his journey beyond all that to him was hitherto the Known [. . .] then sees he his true I; not in the eyes of the Known but in the eyes of the Known-Not” (23). His bride feels that she has become invisible to her man to the extent that she disguises herself as the “grotesque” Venus in order to be seen by him; therefore, she wears blackface and proves to her man that what he loves is at the core, an ability to discard the physical which is denied to the Venus Hottentot. The play-within-play ends at scene number 4 with the young man giving the bride a box of chocolates, the anatomist applauding, and The Venus Hottentot presenting a brief history of chocolate in scene 3.

Scene 28 is footnote #2. The Negro Resurrectionist holds the arm of the Venus while reading from The Docteur’s notebook the anatomical report in which the internal organs of The Venus are weighed, described and “pickled.” When he releases her arm, she flees to The Mother-Showman. The movement again describes The Venus’s entrapment between what Shange calls “sensation and abstraction” or between her perception as a sensational phenomenon or a victim of racial and historical subjugation. The circularity, or rather ellipses to use Garner’s words, of movement and dramatic action is emphasised in the form of the play as the scenes follow one pattern: Scene 27 presents The Venus joining the 8 wonders, it ends with a historical extract and is followed by a scene from the “play within the play,” thus closing a circle within the narrative.

In scene 21 where Venus wanders the world, time is prolonged to the extent of giving a sense of eternity. The Venus Hottentot’s crime, according to the Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders, is that she “wanted to go away once” but she wandered the whole earth, visiting 12 hundred thousand cities in “9 hundred 99 of the years” and circling the globe twice (57). Significantly, this passage is repeated by the Chorus of the Spectators. Seemingly, Parks here uses a Brechtian method which is reminiscent of *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The trial of The Venus that follows brings to

mind Mother Courage's encounter with authority and her constant attempt to profit from war.

According to Julia Kristeva's essay on women's time, two elements define women's time and female subjectivity: "repetition and eternity" (16). These two elements are also fundamental to myths of resurrection (including Christianity) and to many civilisations, especially the mystic ones (17). Saartje Baartman was born into one of these cultures, the Khoekhoe, and one of its stories concerns time, death, and eternity. According to Crais and Scully, the Khoekhoe said that the Moon carries the soul of the dead away: "Moon promised that we would rise from the places where we fell, to live and to walk with the animals on the veld. But Hare, Moon's messenger, lied. Moon became mad, and in his anger we lost our immortality" (11). The Khoekhoe's story of the moon sheds light not only on eternity and repetition linked to the movement of the moon, but also on Parks' narrative which depends on circularity and resurrection of Venus, in contrast to the rest of the humankind as the myth tells it, from each place where she falls during the progress of the play. The play becomes then an epic of historical gaps into which the Venus Hottentot falls; the form of the play is, consequently, antagonistic to the Brechtian linearity.

The motif of cultural consumption determines the image of The Venus as she is put on trial in scene 21. "Women's experience," Diamond explains in her study of McCauley's performance in a different context, "exists not just in 'space of time,' but in colliding temporalities where the body's emphatic presence, or live presence, becomes the "momentary habitus" of the absent historical experience (150). In Parks' play, the past and present collide, engulfing the audience with "women's time." However, the Venus's body escapes what Diamond calls "the momentary habitus" in its repetitious resurrection. It is denied momentary habitus and is cast into eternal livedness as it is evidenced in the trial scene below, and consequently, to perpetual voyeurism.

The trial takes place in the middle of the play. The Negro Resurrectionist warns that looking critically at the Hottentot might spoil the pleasure of voyeurism: "Lets not be critical of what Loves got/ cause looking at her past-tense end/ delights so much The Hottentot" (63). Venus sits in her jail cell as the court decides to begin

with a writ of “Habeas Corpus” (64). The Venus recites from Webster’s Dictionary: “Habeas Corpus. Literally: ‘You should have the body’ for submitting” (65). Parks makes The Venus, rather than The Negro Resurrectionist or any member of the court, recite the definition to highlight the irony that The Venus does not possess her own “corpus.” The Venus’s live presence or physicality is contrasted with an ethereal status which emphasises her invisibility. That which is not present in the body of the Venus and makes her invisible is whiteness: In her own defence, The Venus tells the court that she serves as a cautionary example: “I came here black. / Give me the chance to leave here white” (76). The Chorus of the Court finds that “Her words strike a deep chord” (76). Parks makes The Venus turn the joke on the court as the audience is aware of the historical fact that Baartman’s display, both in her life and after death, was used as evidence of racial inferiority and hypersexuality of black female bodies (Brown 226).

After the trial, Venus is purchased by The Baron Docteur; he gives her a box of chocolates saying: “Well./ Lets have a look./ Stand still stand still, sweetheart/ I’ll orbit” (86). On the cover of her play (figure 2), Parks mocks the scientific racism that built its theories around the protrusive buttocks of the Venus Hottentot as the equator and the axis are made to orbit around it. The scientific essays published by Henri De Blainville and George Cuvier in *Dictionnaire de Sciences Médicales* about Saartje Baartman’s dissected body, according to Brown, spread waves of racist thinking (223). It is not redundant then that Parks concludes her play with a glossary of medical terms along with the glossary of chocolates as she equates racism with colonialism.

With scene 16 starts the “intermission.” The place is the Anatomical Theatre of Tübingen; it is about the “Dismemberment of the Venus Hottentot.” The stage direction indicates that the lights should come up and that the audience are encouraged to take their intermission break as scene 16 runs. The intersection between food consumption on the part of the audience and the pleasure/culpability of voyeurism, as it is in McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape*, is a central motif. Two plays intersect here as the Baron Docteur is standing at a podium (reading from his notebook) and The Bride-To-Be, the protagonist of the play-within-play, is also

reading from her love letters. The scene signifies here on Parks' earlier play where Aretha is examined by her master, and also on Morrison's *Beloved* where Sethe is measured like a biological specimen by the schoolteacher whose definitions which "belonged to the definers—not to the defined" reverberate in Parks' *Venus (Beloved* 225). The Baron Docteur delivers his detailed description of the autopsy while the love letter reads: "My love for you, My love, is artificial/ Fabricated much like this epistle" (92).

This is followed by a scene of love where The Venus and The Baron Docteur are in bed. To prove his love, The Baron Docteur recites the love letter from the play he was watching and the one which backgrounds his scientific exploration on the podium. After two pregnancies and two abortions, The Venus is tricked into jail by The Baron Docteur and his Grade-School Chum. After the last intersection with the play: "For the Love of Venus," she delivers in scene 3 "a brief history of chocolate": "While chocolate was once used as a stimulant and a source of/ nutrition/ it is primarily today a great source of fat/ and of course, pleasure" in a reference to the consumption of The Hottentot Venus's image as will be shown below (156). In scene 2, The Venus is murdered by The Negro Resurrectionist. The Grade-School Chum warns him that if he does not perform the murder, his criminal act of digging the graves will be exposed [Park's *The America Play* (1994) and *The Death of The Last Black Man* (1990) are two examples of her role as a hole-digger in history]. The last scene in the play, scene 1, is a repetition of the overture in which the death of The Venus is announced again. Parks concludes her play with a glossary of medical terms and another glossary of chocolates.

The circular movement in the play is contained within characters and is produced by them. Parks depends on the minimum of theatrical props (the bed, the notebook, and the boxes of chocolate, in addition to some placards). Most importantly, she depends on the bodies of the actors who assume more than one character, except for The Venus. The play shares with "absurdist play" what Garner calls "physicalised mise-en-scene" where the bodied performance produces and constrains the "the action conducted within it" (105). The space does not illustrate any material/ realistic existence which can be found in Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in*

the Sun, for example, or even Adrienne Kennedy's "surreal/expressionist" plays, making the space void of any item of human accommodation. The mirrors, walls, and beds in *Kennedy's Funnyhouse of A Negro* suggest a dehumanising setting in which the character is cut away from her world and is alienated to a self-contained world and meaning. In *Venus*, these props are erased to cast all the characters into a historical void.

The space is abstracted to indefinite time; scenes are counted down but they reach the starting point again i.e. that of Venus's death. As the scenes are "running out" of time, characters' names are deliberately repeated, promising a spatial field that defies the logic of "linearity" and promises self-possession through a constant call for "order" [coherent sense of time]. When The Venus asks The Mother-Showman to set her free, she faces the absurdity of being dislocated as she insists she wants to escape to "innywhere." The Mother-Showman replies: "the Law wants to shut us down/ we create too many "disturbances" so/ we gotta move about go hopping you know town to town/ a Whirlwind Tour!" (57). Parks refers to the irony that The Venus's existence does not only disturb the harmony of the world she is going to tour, rather, it highlights the "disturbance" which already exist, namely racial and historical subjugation.

The Venus Hottentot is similar to the Brechtian Mother Courage only in her constant wandering for material gain. The Venus's epic journey, however, is one that seeks metamorphosis from the ephemeral to the material, or to subjectivity. Her longing for material gain, and any form of possession, is an attempt to materialize her existence and affirm her "personal identity." The only prop which Parks applies to the stage is the love bed which brings her to the many encounters with the Baron Docteur. Although it is evident that the subject/object relationship in the play is symbolised by the "bed," it still represents more than the "objectification" of the Venus. The Venus keeps asking the Baron Docteur whether he loves her; at the end of the play she asks the audience to "kiss me"; her performance seeks recognition and a materialisation in the space in the sense of being given a body/subject not a body/object. The answer she is given is ambivalent; she is pushed again to the ephemeral space. The bed for The Baron Docteur is an anatomist table on which her

body is investigated. Her “objectification” is diametrically opposed to her quest for agency.

Apparently linear, the scenes (which form circular clusters within the linear narrative) are signifying on each other. When The Negro Resurrectionist murders The Venus, The Grade-School Chum rewards him with a “single gold coin.” This scene causes other scenes, like the ones where The Venus is promised gold by The Brother, The Mother-Showman, and The Baron Docteur, to appear. The numbered scenes escape “counting down” emphasising the tension between circularity of the play/personalised memory and the linear history. The gold coin becomes a motif; in value it equates to the remains of The Venus which are exhibited in the museum. The Venus as a “phenomenal” body is experienced visually; because of this visual experience, she exists, and because of the gold coin she is resurrected.

The gold coin still has a third meaning: The spectators of the museum in scene 16 are the actual audience who are free to move and “enjoy” their presence as spectator because of this gold coin. Audiences usually, especially in realist plays, assume, according to Garner, invisibility through the self-effacement of theatrical watching. The audience in Parks’ play becomes the object of its own gaze. Its presence is caused by the gold coin and thus it is conditioned by the erasure of the physical body of The Venus.

Movement in the play is also defined by chocolate as an object. The Baron Docteur provides The Venus with chocolate as a means of accessing her physical world for pleasure and for scientific exploitation/ colonisation. For him, they are means of humanising and domesticating The Venus so she can be scientifically measured. In the process, she becomes dehumanised; love (The Venus Hottentot) is juxtaposed with measurement. The dissonance their presence connotes further highlights the “chaos” previously illustrated in the speech of The Mother-Showman where she tells the Venus Hottentot that she creates “disturbances.” Chocolate here is more than a sign of pleasure and consumerism. It vigorously invokes the image of European imperial expansion towards the end of the nineteenth century. Brown clarifies that this period of European imperial expansion was crucial in forming disturbing racio-sexual pathologies, ideas of race and its sexual transmission were

part of the erotic complex of colonial access (222). Historically, the existence of Venus Hottentot (among other performances of the period) as part of this erotic complex threatened racial purity. In the play, Parks shows how chocolate works ironically as a means for keeping racial purity intact as after each abortion the Hottentot undergoes she is given a box of chocolate by the Baron Docteur. As chocolate becomes a sign of racial and sexual subjugation, in addition to colonialism, Parks' Venus literally devours what erases her materiality.

Parks' desire to avoid staging the obvious, or the white victimisation of black subjects, is strongly voiced and dramatised in *Venus*. In his examination of the projection made from the "Hottentot" to "prostitutes" on the basis of bodily images, Sander L. Gilman explains that "more than not the specimen was seen as a pathological summary of the entire individual" (88). A bodily deficiency stands, according to Gilman, as a sign of those "individuals" in the freak shows that toured America and Europe in the past. In Saartje Baartman's case, her unusual appearance was a representative of a whole race upon which the racist iconography, as Jean Young explains, of the sexuality of black women's bodies was built (706). Parks, in her portrayal of Venus as "complicit," avoids not only victimisation, but also another possible re-objectification, had she presented Venus as a specimen, or an embodiment of the pathological practices of racism and colonialism. Nonetheless, Parks' dramatisation of Venus is still connected to race issues. The contemporisation of the past is a social and racial indictment of the objectification of the female body in the present. This would allow Parks to make the audience critical of their own voyeurism instead of fixing institutionalised racism in the past and raise the question whether or not this portrayal is still pertinent to the present day.

This idea of the contemporisation of the past to "encompass" the audience is most evident in the connection made between voyeurism and consumption. For this, Parks uses "chocolate" as an example of the blend between consumption and pleasure/voyeurism. Before providing a long history of chocolate and its introduction to the human world by gods to spread love towards the end of the play, the Venus asks, "Do you think I look like / one of these little chocolate brussels infants?" (105) The use of the interplay between the visual sign, The Venus, and a more recent

object of pleasure/consumption demonstrates obviously the objectification of the female body. However this flow from the body to the object is hindered by The Venus's question to the audience: "Do you think?" The significance of such a technique can be explained by what Philip Auslander ascribes to the role of the postmodern political artist in *From Acting to Performance*. According to Auslander, the postmodern condition has not rendered political theatre impossible (58). Rather, it has given the political artist a new formulation in which she/he:

incorporates the functions of positioning the subject within dominant discourses and of offering strategies of counterhegemonic resistance by exposing processes of cultural control and emphasising the traces of nonhegemonic discourses within the dominant without claiming to transcend its terms. (59)

The constant questioning of the spectator by the Venus Hottentot is a means of counterhegemonic resistance of dominant discourses. Yet, the problem persists as Venus is an object of voyeurism. Howson explains that postmodern strategies were used for representations of female embodiment without reducing the female body to an object (49). For Parks, the key challenge is to represent a female body whose objectification is firmly rooted in history and to present without framing it as quite an object. So many times Venus asks: "Do I have a choice?" Venus's agency or even complicity is then relevant and connected to the audience's awareness of the fact that, as Basting puts it, history is not behind us, "[. . .] the past is, quite literally, Venus's and our own individual and collective behinds" (225). It is essential then that Parks makes Venus an accomplice in the process of objectification. She is an agent who can question the spectator and comment on her-story.

The connection between the colonising past and the present, Parks warns in her play, is not fictional but still pertinent. For example, Sweden was overwhelmed recently by a provocative installation about female genital circumcision performed by artist Makode Linde. The installation, performed for World Art Day at Stockholm's Moderna Muséet on April 15, 2012 is called "Painful Cake" and it utilizes blackface to allegorize a black female being mutilated. The body of the cake is made of chocolate while the red interiors are shown. Each time a visitor cuts a slice, the head of the artist screams in pain. The show was denounced worldwide as sexist and racist, but the startling effect lies in its immediate spectatorship. The

significance of the show lies in its symbolic consumption which serves as a sensational/ “nutritional” spectacle for the onlookers. The “racist” minstrel installation equates to the delighted reception of it by the spectators. The Venus in the play, through the indulging of her audience in the pleasure of voyeurism, transforms a history of objectification into an investigative performance turned back on the audience. The visual image of Linde’s installation fits Parks’ dramatisation of *The Venus*: “Behind that curtain just yesterday awaited:/ Wild Female Jungle Creature. Of singular anatomy. Physiqued/ in such a backward rounded way that she out shapes/all others” (5).

The form of the play serves the objective; the action of the play moves forwards while the numbers of the scenes goes backwards reversing the position of future and the past. The responsibility of carrying the residues of racism and the images of racially and sexually marked bodies to the future lies in the hands of the audience. The Venus suggests to her coloniser, The Baron Docteur, “You could discover me” (108). The dissoluble body that is going to be analysed and dissected becomes more than a visible sign of racism or sexism; it becomes an embodiment, a living experience of embodied history, of a colonising, objectifying gaze of the spectator.

Clarke and Dickerson’s *Crazy Quilt: Re/ Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*⁴

Breena Clarke and Glenda Dickerson depend on the anarchy brought to the stage and the disruption of “linear” movement of history when both playwrights stage not only the character of Aunt Jemima but also the thirteen characters whom they make her descendants. These characters are Aunt Jemima’s daughters, or what Clarke and Dickerson prefer to name “Menstruals.” Each “Menstrual” stands for either a real historical figure like Harriet Tubman, or a metaphorical persona who

⁴ I am indebted for this idea, the crazy quilt, to Maria Lauret’s analysis of Alice Walker’s *Meridian*. Quoting Walker’s definition of the crazy quilt whose story, “can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels, and one that can include myth,” she traces its pattern in the novel as aesthetics means to political, artistic, and didactic gain (*Alice* 64). Also I am indebted to Michelle Wallace’s *The Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman Revisited*—one of the literary signs that Clarke and Dickerson signify on in their play—where she analyses her re-connection with her mother’s quilt, Faith Ringgold’s “Whose Afraid of Aunt Jemima?” (1983)

symbolizes a particular female image, such as the tragic mulatta or the Jezebel. Their show is introduced by a peculiarly named figure: La Madama Interlock-It-Together, who might be called the “knitter” of the play’s narrative. The play thus renders a feminised version of the infamous minstrel show and comments on the erasure of the black female minstrel persona from the critique whose topic is black-face minstrelsy as will be shown below.

The play also chronicles a long history of misrepresentation by re-visiting the minstrel show. The return to this specific trope is so strong that it stands in stark contrast to the playwriting of African American women during the first half of the twentieth century. Following in the footsteps of Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy, and Susan-Lori Parks, Clarke and Dickerson use the minstrelsy trope as a liberating site for their archetypes.

I depend also on the concept of “progeny” and the restoration of Aunt Jemima as a mother figure in my discussion of what Garner calls an “habitational field” i.e. the relationship between characters and the space they move in. In so doing, I argue that Clarke and Dickerson attempt to free the image of Aunt Jemima from its historical connotation as a servile mammy through enabling her with the movement that brings this historically-exiled character into encounter with her black female “inheritors.”

Aunt Jemima as a historical trademark for pancake products emerged from within the economy of U.S plantation slavery⁵. At the same time when this supremacist system romanticised family ties, it disrupted those of African American families reducing them, as Spillers explains in “Changing the Letter,” into a marketplace economy in which the boundaries between home and marketplace are erased (27). On the plantation, parent-child relationships became equivalent to master-slave or owner-commodity. I intend to show that establishing a maternal link between historically celebrated female figures for African Americans and the abhorred mammy figure of Aunt Jemima disrupts the very system which produced her as a stereotype of submissiveness in the first place.

⁵ In order to situate Aunt Jemima in relation to her historical context so as to draw lines between the historical archetype and the trademark that perpetuated this archetype, see appendix F.

However, Aunt Jemima is not the only mammy archetype. In his examination of blackness as a performing trope in different sites of everyday life, E. Patrick Johnson differentiates between two types of “Mammies”: “uncle Tom” mammy and Aunt Jemima. The “Uncle Tom” mammy draws on Christian-based belief in a better life in the hereafter, and she “acts out” her understanding that things aren’t fair in an unaggressive way, so the master/mistress don’t feel threatened. Aunt Jemima, on the other hand, is a counterpart to Stepin Fetchit who is characterised by a broad grin and a shuffle and enjoys cooking for the master. African American housemaids, according to Johnson, performed their roles in accordance with either of those two stereotypes. This site of domesticity, nonetheless, was also a site of performance; those maids had to put on the mask of the mammy and play their difference to the employer’s authority by separating the circumstances of their existence in a white woman’s house from their conception of themselves (107). The significance of Johnson’s argument is its reference to a split in the act of performing the “mammy” stereotype. Aunt Jemima, like the more recent domestics, puts on the mask and consequently her signification becomes doubled: for the whites, Jemima was a nurturing “mammy”; for African Americans, she was, and still is, the impersonation of the notorious minstrel stereotype.

Johnson’s examination is close to Diane Roberts’ in *The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Gender*. Roberts explains the racial and sexual implications of perpetuating the figure of Aunt Jemima from the perspective of white women novelists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like Johnson, Roberts explains that Jemima represents the nurturing function in her enormous body; she is directly opposed to the Jezebel, but is still different from the mammy figure who is more strict in her role as the white family’s “mamma” (2).

A third mammy figure was dropped out of circulation, and its disappearance sheds light on the durability of Aunt Jemima’s stereotype. The minstrel show was the source of many prototypes such as the Picaninnies and Mammies. These images found their way to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and in turn, were circulated widely. Topsy, little Sambo, and Uncle Tom were among those widely circulated stereotypes. The one character which was dropped out of circulation is

Dinah of St. Clare's kitchen. According to Jayna Brown, this figure suggests the potential for sedition and for creative improvisation (91). Dinah's kitchen is chaotic and disorderly; she sits on the kitchen floor with a pipe in her mouth, creating "genius out of chaos" (91). Her characteristics were not compatible with the loving, nurturing mammy, unlike those of Aunt Jemima.

Aunt Jemima can therefore be defined by what she is not. She is not the domineering spiritual "Uncle Tom" mammy, to use Johnson's words, and unlike her, she is not sexless. She is also not the static Dinah who threatens authority with her lethargy. Yet, she is directly opposing the sexy, usable, penetrable "Jezebel," Roberts explains (2). She is only an enormous silent woman with a wide smile on her face, a bandana on her head, and some pancakes in her hands, and for these qualities she has long been denigrated. In her introduction to the play, Breena Clarke explains that she, along with Glenda Dickerson, does not condone the stereotype; rather "we acknowledge her as the symbol and the repository of the shame, disease and self-hatred from which we wish to free ourselves. She keeps our shame in her cookie jar" (34). Therefore, the use of the name "Aunt Jemima" in the rest of this chapter will imply both the theatrical character and the mammy *archetype* whom Clarke and Dickerson aim to cleanse from stereotypical connotations.

Aunt Jemima: Dis/ remembered and Re/ membered

Clarke and Dickerson situate their play at the juncture of questioning the corporeal presence of what they call "Menstruals" and the space they provide these Menstruals to move in. The play thus presents the problematic of the black female body, but it also tinkers with an established progressive line of history. Aunt Jemima emerges here as a site to which the access is enabled through an act of remembering, an act that resembles the stitching of many narratives together.

In "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison speaks of imagination as a means to access the interior life of her characters in order to reveal the "memories within" (92). She describes her writing as a journey to a site "to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (92). In line with this act of resurrecting, Clarke and Dickerson attempt to reconstruct the image of Aunt

Jemima. Their work, however, is challenged with a negatively pre-conceived image abhorred and detested. The name, Jemima, cannot be mentioned without triggering hostility and contempt. While “memory” in Morrison’s novels is an act of entwining imagination and recollection, “memory” in Clarke and Dickerson’s play is intertwined with the body in need of an act of dismembering and remembering so that Aunt Jemima can be restored as a “member” of African American culture.

My analysis of the play takes Aunt Jemima in two directions: first, taking into account her minstrel origin I discuss the significance of the maternal linkage brought to the theatrical stage. I take up questions of contextualisation where she is placed along with more contemporary female figures who were the focus of media, like Anita Hill in 1991, and Vanessa Williams in 1983. This necessitates an examination of the racially perceived black female body. Second, considering the significance of concepts of movement and confinement in African American history, and taking into account that quilting in American culture is a form of knowledge passed from mothers to daughters, I read Aunt Jemima as a liberating trope whose movement up and down the chronological narrative of history in the play, just like crazy quilting, unchains her from her advertising connotations and stereotypical associations.

The play is an amalgamation of mis-representations and stereotypes of female characters made to be Aunt Jemima’s daughters. Through her narrative, they dramatise their long history of association with minstrel stereotypes. The title image of the play, “Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show,” signifies both a bodily movement and what might be called a “her-storical” movement; these two types of movement are bound to each other. The negative stereotypical representation is established in the title and reinforced throughout Clarke and Dickerson’s play by recurrent images embodied by the “Menstruals.” On one level, the name chosen, “Menstrual,” can be seen as a comment on the linear movement of history and its entrapment within the cyclical feminine form of the play. On another level, the “menstrual”-representation emerges as a margin of the margin: the menstrual—from menstruation—of the minstrel show, an abject cast-away of historical discourse where the bodies of black women are pushed into the margin, or,

more often, to the void which has been dramatised in Parks' plays, and also described by Morrison as "may be empty, but is not a vacuum" (11). Thus, the menstrual show becomes the feminist version of critiquing blackface minstrelsy and linear narrative, as one of the Menstruals puts it, "[w]e're going to wear the mask/ Of the jolly Mammy" (35).

Aunt Jemima is born to a system of slavery and rape. She begins as a ghostlike figure, springing up from nowhere, reminiscent of Toni Morrison's protagonist in *Beloved*. Moreover, she is reminiscent of many marginalised female figures like Sally Hemings. Brown's description of Hemings' movement on Thomas Jefferson's plantation fits the metaphysical description of Aunt Jemima at the beginning of the play: the movements of Sally "through this 'domestic democracy,' as her mother had moved through her own master's plantation house, are the ghostlike imprints on the historical record, remaining profoundly unrecognised" (25). Likewise, the image used by Clarke and Dickerson draws a trail of unnumbered women whose stories are made invisible within the system of slavery, but reclaimed to visibility through the "Menstruals" on the stage.

The emphasis on plantation slavery as a starting point in the play is significant as it sets the black female body in motion. Brown emphasises that racist regimes, the white supremacist ideology in this case, need bodies, actual flesh and bones, for its perpetuation; she points out that the slavery system was written in the language of body, "[i]t was designed as spectacle. Rituals of control were choreographed for audiences and audience participation" (61). Brown refers here to the fact that violence practiced on the black body is constitutive of white supremacy, therefore it had to be "spectacularly gruesome" to use her words (61). Racialised bodies are needed to create spectacles so that authority can be established and affirmed either by direct involvement of the audience in inflicting pain, such as white mobs, or by imposing silence sometimes, and sometimes storytelling. Clarke and Dickerson define the ontology of supremacist ideology when they make different Menstruals narrate the starting point of Aunt Jemima's story: "Aunt Jemima is the Grand Mammy of American Myth/ Aunt Jemima was born in a box/ she was discovered covered with feces/ And branded with the letters KKK" (35). It is into

this multi-dimensional space of hegemony, constructing whiteness, blackness and hierarchies, that Aunt Jemima and her daughters are born. More specifically, this cast-away status is affirmed as a basis for the construction of gender and race; abjectness emerges as a social construct that involves the embodiment of the daughters as “Menstruals.”

The first set of Menstruals raises the question of bodily perception when constructed by the white gaze. The play presents them as psychologically and physically damaged subjects as a consequence of an oppressive white supremacist system. In addition, it traces the reasons behind this psychological impairment through layers of contextualisations with Aunt Jemima. The play’s tragic mulatta, Dorothy, is a dramatisation of Dorothy Dandridge, the black star who was always cast in roles of tragic mulatta (Anderson 41). Dorothy represents not only the tragic mulatta, but also the Jezebel. “My sex symbolism” Dorothy Dandridge says, “was as a wanton, a prostitute, not as a woman seeking love and a husband, the same as other women” (quoted in Anderson 42). Like Kennedy, who re-humanizes and legitimizes the suffering of the tragic mulatta, which has long been detested as irrelevant to racial struggle, Clarke and Dickerson stand up for the light-skinned black woman. Dorothy’s body is mediated by the market value of her sexuality. She suffers, consequently, not undetermined identity of whiteness or blackness, but double negative perception: she is both the promiscuous black diva for the white audience and the whitened uprooted female for African Americans. Dorothy reveals the inevitability of estrangement from self and community, and double unbelonging.

However, Dorothy’s psychological impairment is directly opposed to that of Marie. That the latter is born with a rattlesnake in her hand is a cultural reference to another real life character. In 1830, Marie Laveau, a free mulatta born in New Orleans, was recognised as the head of the New Orleans Voodooos (Mulira 51). Through her show(wo)manship, Marie exhibited her strong and self-confident character; she exerted her control over black and white citizens for forty years (52). Nonetheless, Marie is the other side of the Jezebel-coin. She is a person “to be dreaded and avoided,” that kind of person “in that particular state of society in which there was no marrying or giving in marriage” according to an obituary published in

The New York Times in 1881, “No wonder that she possessed a large influence in her youth and attracted the attention of Louisiana’s greatest men and most distinguished visitors.”

Marie, the “Menstrual,” seems to find her way out of white supremacist control at this point of the play, but towards the end she puts her rapist on trial only to find that the jury brings in a not-guilty verdict. This is to prove that racist hegemonies maintain control in the past and in the present, as the story of Marie later intersects with that of Anita Hill whose case of sexual harassment by the US Supreme Court Nominee in 1991, Clarence Thomas, angered many women activists and politicians then.

The Menstruals are subject to this hegemony as much as their mother is. However, Aunt Jemima is able to “feed” her daughters a healthy perspective of their bodily images. The play shows how Jemima is reconciled with her blackness at the same time as her daughters are suffering their “deformity,” and how she serves as a buffer against supremacy. For example, Pecola tells her mother that she is so ugly that her lips look “lak bees been stingin’ you” (37). Her obsession with the standards of beauty imposed by white culture signifies that she is a replica of Toni Morrison’s 1970- *The Bluest Eye*’s Pecola. Like her sister Pecola, Dysmorphia asks Jemima why she keeps smiling, when she is supposed to feel ashamed of the way she looks, to which Jemima replies: “Ain’t got nothing to be ashamed ‘bout. I got pretty black skin, I got a beautiful, long neck, I got a fine, rounded shape. I got a plenty to smile about” (37). Jemima’s statement is reminiscent of the 1970s’ slogan: Black is Beautiful. Her words are similar to those of Nina Simone, who becomes a symbol of political resistance, in “Ain’t got No, I Got Life” during the sixties.

This song triggered by Aunt Jemima’s words is one of the many examples where intertextual references, or knitted patches, are used by Clarke and Dickerson to enhance a sense of familiarity with the black audience. Because of this familiarity, Jemima’s body here, like Parks’ Venus, becomes more than a sign of racial pride. It becomes a living body which possesses and exerts power in its relation with different female bodies, the Menstruals, around it, quiet similar to Aunt Jemima in Faith Ringgold’s quilt (figure 3).



Figure 3. Faith Ringgold's *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* (1983)

Aunt Jemima's body is established here as an ontological site. This body registers a phenomenological mode of being as the world of Aunt Jemima and her daughters is an intercorporeal one, each is coming to the incarnation of the other. Aunt Jemima's bodily gaiety and acceptance of her blackness as a source of happiness is contrasted with her daughter's contempt of their own bodies at the beginning of the play. The first set of daughters who see themselves as "deformed" are unable to re-orient themselves towards the maternal link because accepting this link means accepting unwanted blackness. Thus, the name *Dysmorphia* signifies a disruption in the maternal link rather than a pathological disorder. Although the mother-daughter relationship seems disrupted at the beginning of the play, it works towards reconciliation. However, this reconciliation can never be achieved without affirming the position of Aunt Jemima in African American culture as a living body, or as a mother figure.

This idea of becoming a living body is discussed by Johnson as he clarifies the difference between "being" and "becoming" as two types of performance and performativity. Being is a site of "infinite signification as well as bodily and material presence. 'Being' calls the viewer's attention not only to blackness as discourse, but

also to embodied blackness in that moment where *discourse and flesh* conjoin in performance [italics added]" (42). In the play, Aunt Jemima's body is also a site of infinite significations, one of which is the inferiorisation of black women as a result of westernised standards of beauty. This leads to another signification in which Jemima's body appears as a site of trauma of exclusion which, in turn, incites a collective memory of oppression, another signification.

However, Aunt Jemima's body is also a site of "becoming." Aunt Jemima, the historical figure, once lived as a Nancy Green (and the other women who advertised the cake box brand after Green). Her figure has always been a site of revision when it comes to negative formulation of blackness. Clarke and Dickerson show in the play that their Jemima is a different site of "becoming"; she is able to stand up in contrast to her daughters, to accept her blackness, and to outwit her daughters. Changing this site of "becoming" will lead to changing Aunt Jemima as a site of "being," or in other words, changing her from a stereotype of submissiveness into an archetype of what Clarke and Dickerson call "the household Orisha."

Moving Towards "Becoming"

This "becoming" is negotiated with each set of the daughters-Menstruals. In the second set, three historical women figures—Bondswoman, symbolically referring to Harriet Tubman; Rebecca, a Christian preacher; and Anna Julia [Cooper]—represent the captive body and its ability to unchain its shackles. However, this transformation from enslavement to freedom is made problematic rather than liberating.

It is noteworthy that Clarke and Dickerson erase those women by incorporating them into a masculine discourse. They are "hammers" to remember Two Tons by. In her examination of what she calls "pained bodies" within the slavery system, Hartman examines this connection between the slave body and racist hegemony: "the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as a sign of his power and dominion" (21). In their journey from bondage to liberation, black women during the nineteenth century were working towards attaining their freedom with a

mind-set that perpetuates white supremacy. This is not to deny the great influence of those activist women at the turn of the twentieth century. Rather, it is to illustrate a replacement of one form of hegemony with another that occurred during their lives.

For example, Rebecca Protten was a mulatto slave born in St. Thomas, part of the Caribbean islands; she gained her freedom and converted to Christianity. According to Jon. F. Sensbach, she played a critical role in the mass conversion of slaves on St. Thomas in the mid-eighteenth century. Sensbach argues that Rebecca was one of the earliest harbingers of what would become an international evangelicalism spanning the Atlantic in different directions (193). Like Tubman, who also became heavily involved in the Methodist church, Protten played a critical role in religious conversion.

My argument here is that the liberated bodies of these historical figures, in spite of their movement to freedom, were “fixed” by what Brown calls in her description of slavery “the discursive processes of legal languages” (84). The ex-slave female leaders struggled to attain their freedom. Then they re-oriented themselves towards incorporating religious doctrine as a legal language. Their interpretation of freedom was still governed by the teachings of their masters on the plantations in which they were enslaved. Doyle’s reading of the concept of freedom in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* offers a phenomenological approach to this bodily shift from slavery to post-slavery freedom. Quoting Paul D, “to get to a place where you could love anything you chose . . . well, now that was a freedom,” Doyle illustrates that freedom starts with a form of voluntary situatedness in the world where the freed body can choose, and gaze, and touch objects, or specifically, to inhabit the world (210). In other words, it is the ability to claim a space and move willingly within this space which is Doyle’s phenomenological understanding of freedom. The dramatisation of these characters through their surrogate “Menstruals” signifies that their freedom was not attained completely. Contextualising these characters along with Aunt Jemima points to an enduring system of oppression and a perpetual striving for freedom that was not quite fully attained when the liberated body gained its physical liberty. Furthermore, this contextualisation affirms the ontological space. These women, the second set of Aunt Jemima’s Menstruals, are no longer seen as

mother figures of black women in Clarke and Dickerson's play; rather, it is Aunt Jemima who is situated as a point of origin, or as an ontological space.

It is not only the contextualisation of Aunt Jemima and her daughters/Menstruals which makes the play a socio-political commentary on the relevance of negative stereotypes to more contemporary audiences. The contextualisation of the Menstruals as sisters has the same effect. In the play, Anna Julia Cooper, along with the Bondswoman and Rebecca, is made a sister to the younger generation of tragic mulattoes, Pecola, Dysmorphia, and Dorothy. The discursive process of legal language as a mechanism of confinement takes another form here. Anna Julia Cooper, the historical figure, is a middle class woman who, like Pauline Hopkins and Frances W. Harper, shouldered a mission of "uplifting the race" in the language of the time. In their fiction they presented a different type of the tragic mulatta; the sacrificing, conservative, and the morally-elevated and elevating persona. Brown indicates that these middle class women, who produce uplifting literature, were often rendered ethereal by their denial of their sexuality (105). The indoctrinated body is a fixed body, and Clarke and Dickerson dramatize this immobility. In this play the second set of asexual Menstruals are juxtaposed with their sisters whose bodies are defined in terms of hyper-sexuality.

The struggle for reclaiming sites of the body can be seen when the play gets more involved in demonstrating the feminist engagement with social justice, abortion, "welfare" of black family and other social problems at the heart of African American life. This image is most evident in the political statements one Menstrual of the third set voices when she is "seasoning" babies in order to get "picaninnies" so they can be "fit for the hog meat gang":

La Madama Interlock-It-Together: But you don't season them up by putting salt on them

[. . .]

You're supposed to fatten them up with choice victual and give them only light tasks until their bodies are strong and fit for hard labor.

[. . .]

A smart master like Col. Higbee knows you get your money's worth out a slave if you season them up right from the start

[. . .]

Menstrual: o-REG-a-no Rosemary bay garlic and thyme. (38)

The pun on the word “o-REG-a-no” (o-Regan-no) implicates both the American president Ronald Reagan and his opposition to the reproductive rights of women. The image is made even more visually violent in Clarke and Dickerson’s choice of the word “Picaninny” and the image of the chained labourers. Robin Bernstein explains that there are three basic characteristics of what used to be called a “picaninny”: “the figure is always juvenile, always of color, and always resistant if not immune to pain” (“Racial” 35). The play indicates that the ignorance of the economic needs of black women and children stems from the stereotype that black children are always happy and in no need of a better economic or social environment.

The “seasoning,” a symbolic word of nurturing, of Picaninnies until they serve as a “hog meat gang” is a strong image that draws a pessimistic parallel between the situation of slaves in the slavery era and the more recent social predicament in the ghetto, a space dramatised in many works by Suzan-Lori Parks, Ntozage Shange and Sonia Sanchez. Black children, Clarke and Dickerson seem to argue, serve as “cannon fodder” for American economic policies. Clarke and Dickerson utilize this image and contemporize it so it highlights the similarities between the slavery era and the more recent image of the ghetto.

A Unified Struggle, Another Patch

Clarke and Dickerson see, like many women activists, that the struggle of the black woman is inseparable from the struggle of women all over the world. Therefore they make African and African American women sisters in their “Menstrual” show. This appears when the fourth generation of Aunt Jemima’s daughters is the two little twin sisters “Aminata, a head-strong girl full of determination. And Anita, a tall, beautiful serious scholar” (38). Aminata “fled Africa and throw herself on the mercy of World Court. She says she ain’t having no clitoridectomy” (41). Like Shange in *For Colored Girls who Considered Suicide and Spell #7*, both Clarke and Dickerson reflect upon the feminist interest in the social problems of women of the developing countries; and most importantly, in problems that have direct effects on female bodies such as rape and clitoridectomy. On an

intertextual level, Clarke and Dickerson link their show not only to other women playwrights, like Shange and Sanchez (discussed in chapter 4), but also to women scholars, novelists, and activists, like Alice Walker who strongly spoke of Female Genital Mutilation (Lauret 151).

Aminata the Menstrual is a surrogate character for Aminata Diop who fled Mali in 1993 to avoid “female circumcision.” Clarke and Dickerson criticise the media for its focus on the black female body while simultaneously overlooking an essential predicament that is befalling more than a 125 million women around the world, according to UNICEF. The humorous approach in the play exposes to ridicule the lack of genuineness and action on the part of developed countries towards the need of women for protection in underdeveloped African countries. Therefore, clitoridectomy is depicted in the play as a “place” to stage a contrast with the romanticised image of Africa as the motherland:

Aunt Jemima: Clitoridectomy? What sat?

Menstrual: Dat’s when dey cuts off your whosit

Aunt Jemima: Who sit? What sat?

Menstrual: Whosit is the whatsit what sits where Au Set sat

Aunt Jemima: where das at? (42)

The repetition of the word “whosit” here is not a euphemism for what is embarrassing to be mentioned, but a critique of overlooking a critical social morbidity such as FGM. In depicting this mutilated part of the body as a place sought for in the answer to the spatial question, “where?”, Clarke and Dickerson dovetail the bodily loss with the space around it, the land which is no longer a motherland because it is up to “Uncle Ben”—a signifier of African patriarchal figures, and also a signifier on Clarence Thomas’ sexual harassment of Anita Hill, in general Wallace’s Black Macho—to decide that his daughter “got to have clitoridectomy before she gets married” (41). This cannot be done without the complicity of older women through either their ignorance or silence. “If youse a female you don’t suppose to mention it,” a Menstrual informs Aunt Jemima whose response mocks the patriarchal traditions that mutilate the spirit as well as the body of the victims: “Aunt Jemima: Oh, lord! Don’t tell me my chil’s been masturbatin’!

(*Falls out in dead faint*)” (42). The triviality of Aunt Jemima’s allegation does not match the many severe consequences of FGM. The humour is intended here as a strategy of both resistance and ridicule. In *Babylon Girls*, Brown makes clear the significance of not underestimating the power of farce. In addition to disrobing authority, farce “render[s] racist hegemonic claims as a theatre of the absurd” (97). It becomes necessary then to counter this theatre of the absurd with what might be described, in regard to Clarke and Dickerson’s play, as an epic farce.

Aminata’s bodily pain is not unfamiliar for her sister Anita. Anita refers here to Anita Hill whose public testimony about her sexual harassment in 1991 against then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas stirred wide controversy in the US. Nonetheless, the focus in media on both Thomas and Hill was on the body, not on the mind. In her introduction to *Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power*, Toni Morrison notes that Thomas’s body came violently into view through *The New York Times* inclusion of his weight lifting as an accomplishment (xiii). Hill, on the other, was “irrationality in the *flesh* [italics added],” a “contradiction itself,” because she is a black woman; she was seen as both a “lesbian hated by men” and a vamp “ensnared and rejected by them” (xvi).

In the play, her body, like that of the Menstrual Aminata, becomes a site of inflicted pain. Similar to a mutilating patriarchy in Africa, the system which oppresses Anita imposes silence even if the victim is trying to defend herself: “Menstrual (As Anita): Let’s face it. I am a marked woman. I don’t have a patron and I don’t have a pass. The senators fear that affirmative action now means that Americans will have to hear edumacated colored folks talk about pubic hair, long dongs, big breasts, and bestiality in Senate Chambers” (42). Anita’s words in the play are connected to those of Anita Hill in her attempt to prove sexual harassment and the attack she received in the media for her attempt, on the other hand, they signify on Hortense Spillers’ theorisation of African American subjectivity in “Mama’s Baby”:

Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. (65)

Thus the “edumacated colored” in reference to poor education stands in stark contrast to the female scholar, who regardless of her education, is still governed by a “rhetorical [patriarchal] wealth” of misnomers. Sexism appears here as a system similar to slavery in its mechanism of torture and perpetuating pain. Both women, African and African American, are made sisters in the play in their joint effort to stand against sexism.

The next woman whom Clarke and Dickerson bring to the stage is Hattie McDaniel, the first African American woman to be awarded an Oscar for playing the role of mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Like McDaniel, Jemima attributes her success to Col. Higbee; in fact, her words are reminiscent of McDaniel’s acceptance speech of the Oscar: “his appreciation for my loyalty and cheerful service, mean more to me than my present fame” (39). Anderson explains that McDaniel lived her American dream and thought that she set the example for her race. Her naiveté which was endorsed by her success made her believe that Hollywood can change its discriminating racial policies. For this she was described as politically incorrect, and was severely criticised for impersonating and endorsing the role of “mammy.” McDaniel, like Aunt Jemima, is a victim of a system whose policy endorsed the stereotype and abundantly rewarded this endorsement.

As Aunt Jemima keeps on baking her pancakes, three “True Women” are heard talking in the next room “Lifting As They Climb” (39). Clarke/Dickerson uses the title of an anthology that documents the work of The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) from the first national conference in 1895 to 1933. Written by Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, an activist who worked as chair of the History Committee of the NACW in the 1930s, the volume stands for not only the organisation involved with social problems, but also for the activism of black women who lived in the same period when Aunt Jemima became a symbol recognised in all the houses of America as a domestic. On the stage, Aunt Jemima and the “true women” co-exist in neighbouring rooms; their lines intersect. One of the Menstruals recites the speech of Anna Julia Cooper: “The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain a free simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight, as of an entrapped tigress, to keep hallowed their own persons, would furnish

material for epics” (39). However, it is preceded by a cynical statement by Jemima: “Here is a veri-paramour of genuine ass-ets” (39). Jemima’s ignorance of the experience of other women’s act of lifting the burden and the physical constraint indicates also her ignorance of her own act of “lifting.” She is juxtaposed again with the second group of her daughters, while the image of flipping pancakes yields a farcical commentary on the separation between working-class women and middle-class women.

Cooper’s lines are not meant to set an example of contrast between the active black women and the stereotype that disgraces them. Clarke and Dickerson juxtapose, or stitch in, the two subjects and the two languages to restore to Aunt Jemima what was stolen from her in the first place. She is the “entrapped tigress” whose silence enabled her “daughters/Menstruals” to be the subjects of many epics. On the other hand, these lines show that Jemima’s ignorance does not negate the fact that she was, like women activists, a victim of supremacist ideology. In 1902, Cooper was the principal of the M Street School. In an act of defiance of her white supervisor, and contrary to Booker T. Washington’s call for industrial training, Cooper sent her students to prestigious universities. Allegedly accused of moral misbehaviour and a romantic involvement with one of the faculty members, Cooper was forced to resign in 1906 (Tougas 17). Both Cooper and Jemima, in spite of their diverse ways, were victims of white supremacy. When Aunt Jemima recognizes that the Menstrual talking in the next room is her daughter Anna Julia, they both embrace each other joining other women to sing: “No more auction block for me” (40). Clarke and Dickerson attempt to underline the ideology that presents both women as though they were on an auction block. Cooper’s value as an activist is read according to her endorsement of the role of black students in industrial training, a method that resembles the commercial exploitation of Aunt Jemima. This is an image which is linked directly to the aforementioned image of one of the Menstruals seasoning a baby. It is also reminiscent of Marita Bonner’s dramatisation of the ideological conflict between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Historically, endorsing industrial teaching in post-civil war America, similar to the productive value of Aunt Jemima, and also similar to the more recent consumerism of images of the black body, is well-

established in Clarke and Dickerson's play as a statement that only economic profit determines the social value of African American subjects.

This intertwining of past and present exploitation of black bodies is strongly dramatised in the play when Clarke and Dickerson contextualise the images of both the Jezebel and the "superwoman," to use Michelle Wallace term for the description of the strong black woman stereotype. When Aunt Jemima is left alone to rest, she watches the "Amos and Andy" show because her daughter Sapphire had a starring role (40). Sapphire, because of her strength, comes to represent the stereotype of activist black women on TV. Clarke and Dickerson evoke Michelle Wallace's controversial book during the seventies, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, through Sapphire's angry words: "The white woman is the white man's dog, and the black woman is his mule we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do well or not" (43). Intertextually, Sapphire's words have a strong resonance in Wallace's book, and also in the words of Alice Childress's female protagonists. In addition to their comprehensive and inclusive effort to gather as many women stereotypes as possible, Clarke and Dickerson remind their audience that their "Menstruals" are living bodies that exist among them in real life situations, making the show-quilt more real than imaginary.

Although Aunt Jemima is described as "politically incorrect" in the play, she possesses a critical understanding of the visual representation of black women. When one of the Menstruals is staged as Miss America, Jemima recognizes her as her daughter Dysmorfia and she exclaims, "Ah don't see why ya'll don't just bring in the auction block and sell 'em all together" (41). According to Anderson, Dysmorfia refers to Vanessa Williams, the first African American woman to be crowned Miss America; but she also stands in her representation in the media as a "sexually promiscuous black woman" (44). Dysmorfia, like the Venus Hottentot in Parks' play, carries the legacy of voyeurism. What is peculiar in Jemima's words is her inclusion of all of her daughters for display on the auction block; thus questioning, in doing so, different levels of commercial exploitation of black women.

The Last Phase

After winning the Oscar for the best actress in a supporting role, bringing again to the stage the presence of Hattie McDaniel, Jemima swallows a watermelon seed, leading to the birth of her thirteenth daughter, Tiny Desiree. In 1989, Aunt Jemima, the trademark figure, underwent her last makeover where she slimmed down, lost her bandana and wore a pearl earring; what remained of her was “her effervescent alluring smile” (Kern-Foxworth 99). This transformation was made not only because of the objection of black activists to this minstrel representation of black women, but also to appeal to black consumers (97). The image of giving birth to Tiny Desiree, the modified more-appealing trademark, after swallowing a watermelon seed, signifies that the legacy of minstrelsy is never finished. The linkage here indicates that minstrelsy did not disappear; rather, it develops and uses disguise.

The black woman’s body as a site of health problems is the conclusive part of the play. The final image reminds the audience of Eleanor Bumpers, who was killed by the police in her apartment in 1983 for rent arrears. In the play, Uncle Sam decides to evict Jemima from the pancake box. At that time, like Bumpers, Jemima weighs three hundred pounds and has arthritis, diabetes, and high blood pressure. The case of Bumpers is dramatised here to illustrate the racism of the police force, and also to indicate the higher rates of cancer and diabetes among black women (Anderson 47). Moreover, the image of the pancake box brings again the image of seasoning babies and the poor conditions of the ghettos. When her economic value expires, Jemima is shot dead by the cops and is replaced by her daughter, Tiny Desiree, who has no problem peeling her skin and wearing pearl earrings and is implementing “well” the standards of American beauty. Tiny Desiree describes herself as the “Anita-thesis of Sapphire,” the opposite of the educated Anita and the opinionated Sapphire [reminding the audience of Angela Davis] (41).

According to the Menstruals, Jemima is not dead, but she “hurled herself, naked, a black bombshell into the centre of the battle” (45). As the Menstrual show continues, Clarke and Dickerson ignite the imagination of black women to see the lights under which they might be daughters of Aunt Jemima and to continue the fight

against racism and sexism. “Carry they burdens on my back and work too. Ah been visited by the jumper” Aunt Jemima closes the show. “Look here what he done. Ah got stripes over the face, the body, and my missing breast. Though we are looked upon as things, we sprang from scientific people. Ah bore thirteen children. Aint’s Ah a woman?” (45) Echoing Sojourner Truth, Aunt Jemima insists on her agency. She strips off minstrel clothes and claims her maternal status as a mother and a woman when establishing a relationship with different sites of the black female body.

Movement in *Aunt Jemima*

Clarke and Dickerson try to define where the location of minstrelsy is. They transfer the location from the historical zone to a socio-political and psychological one that should remind contemporary audiences of the similarities that exist between the historical Jemima and black women’s plight today. So, they stress in their stage direction that the space in which the company stands should resemble that of a circus, and the lighting should be reminiscent of the minstrel show. However, in contrast to the original show, the stereotypes are introduced by a female figure: La Madama Interlock-It-Together. She describes the “Menstrual Show” as “the circus of our minds/ the carnival of our intentions/ the menstruation of our bodies/ the minstrelsy of our souls” (35). Staging black female bodies intersects here with the social residues of the minstrel show and its cultural disguise. More importantly, it centralizes the female body in this investigation of the relevance of the minstrel show to modern day America.

Therefore, the interlocutor becomes an interlocutress, a role that historically never existed in the blackface minstrel show. The significance of choosing La Madama- Interlock-It-Together lies in the cultural roots of this peculiarly named figure. She is the conjure woman, the spirit of a slave who carried the wisdom of all the rootworkers in the past from the African continent. La Madama thus connects/knits slavery, African American cultural tradition, and African legacy with current American cultural aspects. By reclaiming her as a maternal ancestor, Clarke and Dickerson dovetail black women’s historicity with their heritage without

excluding the cultural archetypes which are defined negatively by supremacist white culture.

It seems that Clarke and Dickerson use La Madama as a surrogate character for Aunt Jemima. In her introduction to the play, Clarke describes Aunt Jemima as an Orisha whose qualities were revered by African people and are now detested by African Americans: “We liken her to the Santeria figure, La Madama, the orisha who fearlessly guards the peace of our homes as she presides over our bread-baking and *cloth-making* [italics added]” (34). In fact, Aunt Jemima’s figure which appeared on the jars is an image often used to represent La Madama (or the Orisha) on the altar. The similarity which Clarke and Dickerson want to establish is that Aunt Jemima, just as the Orisha did, enabled her own and her offspring’s survival. The “trivia” of everyday life over which this figure resides were, during slavery, a means of survival. More importantly, La Madama of the play provides a sense of togetherness and communication as her hyphenated name, “Interlock-It-Together,” suggests.

The interlocutress begins the play with a humorous request for her female companions: “Stereotypes, be seated” (C&D 35). This enunciation of authority exerted on other female characters mocks invisible institutions of power. The Menstruals react to La Madama’s show abusively as they attack Aunt Jemima verbally and accuse her of being a “creature of white imagination” (C&D 35). La Madama understands that this anger is created by white institutions of supremacy and is transformed into self-hatred. She retorts, “Mistresses, I will not put up with this ingenious vituperation by proxy. Go back to your seats” (35). The joke stands in comic contrast to an invisible hegemony whose war is waged by proxy, i.e. by black women’s interiorisation of negative images.

Another function of La Madama’s presence is her attempt to re-situate the space around her and to correct the way history occupied the space. Historically, the Interlocutor started as a middleman whose job it is to stabilize the chaotic energy surrounding the minstrel show. According to Lhamon, the Interlocutor began his show by pleading for the endmen (or the other performers) to be seated. Lhamon argues that because young people of the working class recognised themselves as disenfranchised, they projected themselves as blacks. “It is no accident that the

middleman, who came later to be called the Interlocutor, began every show addressing the endmen, ‘Gentlemen: Be seated’ [. . .] the minstrel show has displayed struggle over the seating of chaotic energy” (45). What is exceptional about La Madama’s joke “Stereotypes, be seated” is its awareness of the contextual socio-political and historical background. The interlocutress in this play pleads for a similar seating/ positioning of the chaotic dis-locating undergone by a long history of misrepresentation.

More importantly, the feminised version of the interlocutor signifies a critique of what Brown, in a different context, calls a “masculinist blind of minstrelsy studies” to the existence of female minstrelsy (57). Clarke and Dickerson show an awareness of this erasure as they make La Madama welcome the “Contrary women and sympathetic gents” to the show. The playwrights start with a joke and it becomes bigger as the play progresses. They are aware from the beginning that their audience is antagonistic to the representation of Aunt Jemima. The play self-consciously stands in opposition to institutionalised norms of interpretation. The audience’s opinion of Aunt Jemima is deeply rooted as a negative stereotype; by reversing the gender of the Interlocutor, Clarke and Dickerson rethink and reverse dominant institutions of supremacy.

It is necessary to posit La Madama, Aunt Jemima’s surrogate character, as a point of closure in discussing the movement of the protagonists in the play. Stanton Garner has already defined the habitational field as a field in which the dynamic that occurs on stage shifts the body from a signifying one into the body as it is lived. When this shift is made, the disembodied field of visibility (the actual bodies of actors) re-enters the dynamic of perception and habitation of the audience in the “seeing place” where “even the eye is living” (45). In other words, the entrance of La Madama determines the dynamic of perception on the part of the audience. What is particular about this entrance is the preconceived perception, i.e. the audience enjoys a privileged perspective of their superiority to the protagonist of the play, hence La Madama’s appeal to “contrary women and sympathetic gents.” However, La Madama knows otherwise, she watches the audience, interferes with characters when

she wants and closes her show triumphantly announcing that, “the greatest show on earth” will be coming to every town (43).

Clarke and Dickerson make Aunt Jemima free of any historical confinement; she interconnects with all of her daughters from slavery till the present day. Through this intercorporeal relationship, Aunt Jemima is able to reveal pain and joy when she moves, or is being moved, by her daughters/ Menstruals. Aunt Jemima in the cultural memory of America is, in actuality, a figurative persona. All the Menstruals, along with Aunt Jemima, are transformed into living bodies that are not only able to move up and down the progressive line of history, making their own crazy quilt, but also to disremember it and reclaim many stereotypes from the margins of history to the centre as cultural icons. This is enabled through an intercorporeal dialogue with history and transforming the space around characters.

Such a space was scattered, messed up by a long history of visual and cultural misrepresentations. “Interlocuting-it-Together,” La-Madama rearranges the space and provides a sense of order by means of connecting—stitching—present and past. However, the work is not finished, and just like Venus in Parks’ play, Aunt Jemima is doomed to circle and leap off the pancake box over and over again, thus she determines the cyclical nature of the show, even though she is shot dead.

The death of Aunt Jemima in the play is the strongest socio-political commentary on the situation of African American women of the modern day. The diseases that plague Aunt Jemima’s body, diabetes, high blood pressure, and arthritis, are among the top health problems facing African American women today. At this point in the play, all the threads of past predicaments, (slavery, rape, misrepresentation) are tethered into this moment where the body becomes fragmented, as if to show that modern health concerns are directly connected to this long history of oppression. In Clarke and Dickerson’s play, the cumulative effect of history inflicts on Aunt Jemima the eruption of all kinds of pain. The possession of this traumatic past entails Aunt Jemima’s susceptibility to disease and it amounts to dismemberment. In depicting this pain as a result of history, Clarke and Dickerson have to reclaim Aunt Jemima’s body as triumphant in her battle with history. They epitomise this as follows: “They say she is dead, but we know she hurled herself,

naked, a black bombshell into the centre of the battle” (45). The loss of body, and its repossession, ushers in a new future where the distance between Aunt Jemima and her daughters is shortened and reconciled.

In short, the distance between the mother figure and her daughters is shortened by this act of juxtaposition/stitching. In a moment of reconciliation with her daughters, Aunt Jemima is restored as an ontological site when the Menstruals sing: “Have you heard of Mother Earth?/ She wandered in the great gulf./ to give us law/ and search for her child./ her lap is where we sit./her lap is where we’re at./ [. . .]/ lap of the earth/ Labia/lip/mouth of the womb./ Mouth of the river/ Mouth of the vessel/ Mouth of the womb” (42). To this inclusive image that defines black womanhood as the matrix of all individualities, I bring in, not only Aunt Jemima and her daughters, but also the African American women playwrights discussed so far. Clarke and Dickerson’s use of the historical void, like their fore-mothers, is a corporeal critique of dominant socio-political and historical discourses.

Conclusion: The Bridge across the Chasm

In “*To Be Young, Gifted and Black*,” Robert Nemiroff includes what appears to be one of the unknown plays by Lorraine Hansberry. The play is a conversation between two characters; a middle class intellectual black woman called She, and a middle class intellectual white man called He, who is patronising and accusing She of using the street idiom in order to identify with what he calls the black masses, like “other middle class black intellectuals,” out of a sense of guilt. He calls her a megalomaniac, a certain case that “happens to most Negro intellectuals and artists,” of not finding “transcendence to more universal human agonies” (215). “I could see his lips moving and knew he was talking, saying something,” She contemplates, “[b]ut I couldn’t hear him anymore. I was patting my foot and singing my song. I was happy. I could see the bridge across the chasm. It was made up of angels of art, hurling off the souls of twenty million” (218).

Fifty years later, Anna Deavere Smith compared Hansberry’s “Bridge across the Chasm,” the speech from which this excerpt is taken, to Oprah Winfrey’s three day event called “A Bridge to Now” in which Ruby Dee (Ruth Younger in Hansberry’s *Raisin*, Julia in Alice Childress’ *Wedding Band* (1966), and Suzanne Alexandre in Adrienne Kennedy’s 1992 play, *The Ohio State Murder*), who recited this speech in the filmed version of Hansberry’s play, is celebrated among other legendary black women such as Maya Angelou and Pearle Cleage. Smith concludes her article by emphasising that there is no “black play” in the sense that there is no “one black play” for the black community anymore, but there are many unspoken plays, many gestures and hints yet to be seen (576). More importantly, Smith explains that the bridge which Hansberry envisioned is this art which is able to “make a difference and make a change” (574).

The implication of such an image, the bridge across the chasm, and the power it envisions, change, is a deeper awareness of the effort exerted by those playwrights and an acknowledgement of their artistry. This artistry brings into the theatrical stage a constant examination of the body, its gendered identity, and its racialisation against

discursive hegemonies. But it also traces routes for an intentional communion with the other, based on understanding and *experiencing*. Thus, when Hansberry expresses a desire to “[. . .] reach a little closer to the world, which is to say to people and see if we can share some illuminations together about each other” (*To be Young* 34), her request is best answered by McCauley’s statement regarding her performance-in-progress which “has to do with talking to people, even if you already know ‘em, and especially if you don’t, how a lot of people in different cultures greet each other, I know some Native American cultures do: ‘Who are you and who are your people?’ And where I come from, African American folk be like, ‘Who children you?’” (*Sally’s Rape* 237).

“Who children you” is a question answered in this research in a form of maternal legacy, for in each playwright’s search for a lost history, there is so much of tracking down and passing on. This way of thinking about the corporeal relationship with history and historicity liberates us from the dominance of historical narratives, and motivates us to keep the body, raced and/or gendered, on alert when discourses of power formulate new techniques of domination. But more important is to retain what is marginalised in literary studies, the stamina of the corporeal. I argue for what Sheets-Johnstone describes as the “radical sense of letting Being speak to us in the authentic voice of animate form” to affirm that what started as a rebellion against social, political, cultural and historical hegemonies is at heart a bodily “I can’s” (327). Shange reminds us that she is not “bogged down with the implications of language. I am only involved in the implications of movement which later on, when I do start to write, become manifest in the rhythms of my poetry” (*Interviews* 365), and so does Robbie McCauley, “[m]y characters and the stories are mainly true, partly powered by language and body play, and wrapped in social commentary” (“The Struggle” 584).

Those women playwrights endow us with the power to explore the creative dimension of corporeal expression, and affirm that their art has the power to change and challenge ways of thinking and being-in-the-world. By consistently emphasising their unique ways of being a particular body, they set examples to follow; to have seen/experienced this is to have seen that the body has always been there, the object

of dominance and the subject of rebellion. And through giving their bodies to the historical void, the silent inertia of history, they prove that the personal is not only political but also historical.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Marita Bonner's obscurity from the literary canon is due to many reasons. One of them is using many names. She wrote under the name Joseph Maree Andrew, and later wrote with her married name Marita Occomy; she is also known as Marieta Odette Bonner Occomy. Born in Boston 1898 to a middle class family, Bonner started her literary career away from Harlem, the black metropolis. While still at Brookline High School, she contributed to its student magazine, *The Sagamore*. Bonner attended Radcliffe College where she had to commute as blacks were prevented from living on campus (Roses 167). At Radcliffe, she majored in English and comparative literature in addition to German and music composition. There, she was accepted into a writing class limited only to sixteen students where she was instructed by her tutor to write "but not to be 'bitter'—a cliché to colored people who write" (Reuben 2009). She was also a founder of the Radcliffe chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, one of the largest-to-be African American Greek-lettered sororities in the world (Curtright 2004). She participated in Georgia Douglass Johnson's S-Street salon, contributed to the premier magazines of the Harlem Renaissance—*Crisis* and *Opportunity*—from 1925 until 1941, and taught in Virginia and Washington D.C (Wilks 69).

Although Bonner enjoyed a privileged childhood and education, she did not identify herself with Du Bois's Talented Tenth. Rather, she shows in her essays and plays, and later her short stories, an interest in gender questions and social problems of the present as much as she shows interest in the race problem. Her experience of "uplifting" the race was practically applied throughout her career as a teacher in three urban places, not through producing "genteel" literature. Bonner's father, who attended Boston's Latin School for boys, was not able to finish his high school, and he had to work as a labourer and a machinist to support his growing family (Witalec 35). Therefore, Bonner had to face the effect of bitter social reality on education first-hand and became sceptical of Du Bois's ideals. Highly-educated herself,

Bonner's ambivalence in regard to the primary debates of her time is dramatised in her plays. The movement between three urban centres helped Bonner to deal with problems that pertained mostly to the urban environment generally instead of Harlem specifically. The focus on urban environment is most reflected in her ten short stories, mostly unpublished, and mainly concerned with the negative influence of urban environment on multi-ethnic communities. She published her short stories in *Opportunity* and *Crisis* until 1941 when she quit writing (Wilks 70). The first comprehensive anthology is *Frye Street and Environs: The Collected Works of Marita Bonner* (1987).

The Purple Flower was the prize-winner in *The Crisis* in 1928. It stages two conflicting forces: the Sundry White Devils whose movement is described as artful and tricky and the Us-es who struggle to come closer to them. The main aim of the Us-es is to share the possession of the Purple Flower. To do that, they should move from Nowhere, where they are segregated, to Somewhere where they are prohibited to approach except to work for the White Devils. The action is taking place on a stage divided horizontally by the thin skin of civilisation into upper and lower sections. Most of the action which happens on the upper stage is duplicated on the lower one. The two sections are separated by the Thin-Skin-of-Civilisation. While the Us-es discuss the means to attain the flower, drumbeats (in a way reminiscent of O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*) are heard in the distance turning some of them into dance.

The action reveals to the Us-es that all the means seem to slip through their fingers: the books which young men study don't give directions as to how to get Somewhere because they are written by the White Devils, three scores and ten years of talking to God (in reference to the duration of African Americans existence in America) does not help them, and a spoonful of Somewhere's dust wouldn't be traded for the Us-es gold. Only sacrifice can give birth to the New Man whose coming is essential for achieving their purpose. The aforementioned means should all be mixed with the blood of a black character called Finest Blood so the Flower-of-Life-At-Its-Fullest sheds its perfume. The play ends with everyone in Somewhere and Nowhere listening to Finest Blood calling a White Devil to fight and an abiding question lingers in the silence: Is it time?

Exit Mann: An Illusion

Exit starts with two black lovers, Buddy and Dot, lying asleep, and develops as a story of a love triangle. Dot is a fragile character who seems lacking in life: “you see she is flat where she should curve [...] You wish she would lie down again but she gets up” (201). Dot wakes up and tries to awaken Buddy to tell him about her date with an unidentified character whom she has known all her life, Buddy refuses to let her go until she reveals the name of this mysterious man; she answers after a long pause: Exit Mann. The presence of Exit Mann is mysterious. Half in the shadow, all that can be seen of him is his coat and a hat, his face can’t be seen as his back is turned. Bonner mystifies his presence further: “you wonder how he came there. You wonder if perhaps he has not been there all the while” (204). Death is impersonated as a white man whose face is invisible and whose temporal boundary is distorted. The subjective reality and the inner emotions of the playwright are exposed through her picturesque “drawing” of the invisible, and invincible Exit Mann.

Buddy threatens both Dot and Exit, who is now revealed as a white man, with his pistol. When Dot insists that Buddy acknowledge his love for her in return for deserting Exit, he shoots at them both but the shot hits only the lamp causing the light to slowly go out. Exit begins to turn around slowly and in his arms is Dot, dead. Exit Mann is apparently the death that triumphs over Buddy. When the light is back on, both Dot and Buddy appear in their first position as though it was only a dream. Dot wakes up and with her struggling voice asks Buddy if he loves her, but he remains asleep shouting the name of Exit Mann. When he wakes up, he dashes towards Dot telling her about his love only to find that she is already dead.

Appendix B

Alice Childress (1920-1994) was born in South Carolina as Louise Herndon. She was only five when she headed to Harlem to live with her maternal grandmother

after her parents' separation. She joined American Negro Theatre, ANT, when she was 19; in 1934 she was married to Alvin Childress, who became well-known for his role as Amos in the *Amos 'n' Andy* TV show. Because of Alvin's agreement to the portrayal of African Americans in stereotypical roles, the marriage lasted only till 1957. According to Kathy A. Perkins in her introduction to *Selected Plays*, Childress was born in 1916 not in 1920 as most resources show (xii). Many conflicting sources in regard to her age exist because she was protective of the details of her personal life, being aware of the FBI's surveillance of her activities. Another reason is her awareness of the fact that a woman's age, whether young—like Marita Bonner and Lorraine Hansberry—or old, is used against her, "I think age is used against women in particular [. . .] and to be black in this society, and to be a woman in this society, you will find too much of society pitched against you, you know, pitted against you" (quoted in Perkins, *Selected Plays* xii).

Childress was born into social activism. When she was a child, she was introduced by her grandmother to galleries, theatres, museums, and libraries (Brown-Guillory *Wine* 97). What helped shape her perspective in regard to race, class and gender is Salem Church in Harlem where she used to join her grandmother; there, she became acquainted with the power of the spoken word: "I remember how people . . . used to get up and tell their troubles to everybody" (quoted in Brown-Gillory, *Wine* 97). The spoken word was more effective when it was accompanied by action, by standing up to speak, and Childress's drama is about this dyad of the verbal and corporeal. Examining Childress's dramatist theories of self-determination, Olga Dugan includes the Bible as the first of Childress's resources (126). In fact, Childress's use of the Bible is not based on religious affinity, for she was always critical of the submissive message sent by most churches to their congregations. Interestingly, Childress envisioned Jesus Christ as a liberator and a leading rebel, not as a "meek" and "mild" character. In "I Go to Church," Childress's surrogate character, Mildred, tells the reverend that Christ raised his voice and spoke to crowds teaching them that "The Kingdom is on Earth as it is in Heaven," but his message was lost in mournful songs. Childress attacks the long-held idea that freedom was seen in death, and that life is about tolerance (Childress, *Like one of the Family*). Although there are no sources that illustrate any relationship between Alice

Childress and Marita Bonner, Childress' conviction echoes Bonner's concept of God in her essay "The Young Blood Hungers," which was published in the *Crisis* (1928). Her Biblical identification then is a revolutionary one in that she calls herself a "liberation writer" (Perkins, *Selected Plays* xi).

Childress' life-long activism becomes the crux of her dramatic aesthetics; although she did not incorporate her personal life into theatre, as Kennedy did later, Childress' plays, and other literary works, reflected first-hand experience with discrimination, condescension, and poverty. These experiences made Childress state that the reason of being ahead of her time is the suffocating conditions for African Americans in general, and African American women in particular. In New York, she became an active member, but never a co-founder as most recent studies have claimed, of the American Negro Theatre (Perkins, *Selected Plays* xviii). At the ANT, she worked as an actress during the 1940s and had a successful role in *Anna Lucasta*, the ANT's most successful play. She wrote and directed her first play *Gold Through the Trees* in 1952. Because of this play, she is considered the first African American woman whose dramatic work received a professional production in the sense that it was performed by unionised actors (Brown-Gillory, *Wine* 99). Then she wrote, starred, and directed her second play *Florence* on off-Broadway stages in 1955. In 1966, she wrote a controversial play, *Wedding Band*, about anti-miscegenation laws in South Carolina and interracial marriage; consequently, the play was banned in Atlanta and Georgia theatres. During her literary career, Childress wrote fourteen plays and six novels into which she incorporated a liturgy of African American church, African mythology, folklore, fantasy, and traditional music. However, her themes were always in favour of the downtrodden, the oppressed, and the objectified. For example, Childress' novel *A Hero Ain't Nothing but a Sandwich* was the first to tackle the issue of young adult addiction to heroin. It won her the Best Young Adult Book in 1975, the Lewes Carroll Shelf Award, and the James Adams Award for a young adult novel. Later, the novel was banned as obscene by the Long Island school district (Brown-Gillory, *Wine* 99). Her plays always emphasised the significance of the transformation of these "objectified" characters into subjects with empowering agency.

Childress's controversial work won her, in addition to awards, different critical responses. Like Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), Childress's novels and plays, exposed themes of violence, homosexuality, sexual molestation and racism. Her works were both praised for their realist approach to topics of high sensitivity and banned on account of inappropriateness for young readers. In regard to her early plays during the fifties, Childress emphasised a "self-determinist" theatre and persona; her heroes are always triumphant because of the support they get from their community or family and because of their own will and inner strength (Childress names her character in *Trouble Wiletta*) a theme she emphasised in *Florence* and *Trouble in Mind*. She envisioned this "self-determinism" in contrast to white "patronage," or what she criticised as charity support for blacks. A recurrent tone in her works is making fun of bourgeois mentality and patronising affection. As did Zora Neale Hurston in exposing the economic hardships during the 1930s and 40s for black artists, Childress reflected on the continuity of this situation in the 50s. However, while Hurston was keen not to lose either white patronage or white readership, Childress was more revolutionary in voicing her theories about self-determinist theatre, regardless of white support.

Alice Childress's *Florence*

Florence was written in 1949 in response to an argument with male colleagues from the Harlem Left who claimed that racial struggle can be presented only in themes involving black men (Washington, *Other* 295). The play was produced in 1950 in left-wing venues where Childress' musical *Gold through the Trees* (1951), and *Trouble in Mind* (1955) were also produced (27). The play is set in a railway station where Mama Whitney is waiting for the train to take her to New York City. There she is supposed to see her daughter Florence whom she is to bring back home, in order to take care of the son she left behind and to give up the "illusion" she is pursuing of becoming a theatre actress. Mama is persuaded to take this journey by her other daughter Marge, who lectures her mother at the beginning of the play about how not to act as a "Northern greenhorn" (111). Marge is not only burdened with raising her sister's son, but also troubled by her sister's "foolishness and unrealistic" attempt to find a career among whites (112). Florence has moved to

New York and left her son with her mother and sister Marge after the lynching of her husband, whose activism for voter registration has brought about his death. This interrelation between voting and lynching will crystalize again in *Trouble in Mind*.

Childress depicts the dark but realistic effectuation of the Jim Crow laws in the South. She emphasizes the socio-political meaning of “space” for a black woman who is denied entrance to the white women’s restroom and offered instead the “colored” men’s bathroom. White supremacy denies black women their gender space in order to keep the racially segregated space intact. At the station, Mama Whitney waits for the train in a segregated waiting room where she is told by the porter to use the men’s bathroom because the women’s is out of order. With the railing separating her from her antagonist, Mama meets on the other side Mrs Carter, a white lady who confides in her about her worries; she is on a visit to the South to comfort her brother, a novelist, whose novel about a mulatto girl, *Lost My Lonely Way*, did not receive good reviews. However, the tragic destiny of this heroine is resented by Mama Whitney who gives Mrs Carter examples from real life experience about successful mulattos.

The most powerful moment in the play occurs when Mama finds out that Mrs Carter is a dramatic actress herself and asks her to help her daughter. Mrs Carter eagerly offers the absent Florence a job with one of her acquaintances who is a writer and a director, but as a maid not as an actress. Disappointed with the low estimation of her daughter’s position in the white women’s consciousness, Mama remains silent as Mrs Carter goes to the white women’s bathroom to “powder her nose,” a symbolic act of accentuating racial hierarchies. When the porter returns, Mama tells him that she has decided to cancel her trip to New York and that she is sending her daughter a letter with money inside telling her to “Keep trying” (121).

Alice Childress’ *Trouble in Mind*

Wiletta, who is in her fifties, arrives on stage in order to perform a rehearsal with a group of actors. Each encounter she goes through reveals a side of her personality. Her encounter with the new black actor, John, reminds her of getting into old age as he turns out to be the son of her old friend in the South; his

appearance becomes a reminder of the uncertainty looming in her future in regard to her job. Her encounter with Sheldon, an old black actor, reveals the fixed role she is supposed to play as a servile mammy on the stage and in real life to keep her job; so does the encounter with the well-named Al Manners, the white director of the play to be performed; the choice of his name is a pun Childress uses on the cultural structure of white supremacy which defines roles and sets standards of performance. Millie is a black female character whose lavish style of dressing contrasts with Wiletta's poverty, and also serves as a reminder of Hattie McDaniel, whose enactment of the servile mama stereotype guaranteed her a financially successful career. Although both of them are dramatic actresses, "acting" for Wiletta is a matter of survival or, as she tells John, it is only "show business" (213).

Appendix C

Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs*

Two Kenyan brothers return to their African hut in Zatembe where they grew up, to attend the funeral of their father. The younger brother, Tshembe, has been living in Europe and has continually faced the problem of double alienation; partly because of a feeling of inferiority he internalised in England where he raised a family with a white woman, and partly because of his belief in the need for African independence through peaceful resistance. He criticizes his brother, Abioseh, who is so involved in becoming a Roman Catholic priest that he avoids problems concerning race or nationalism. Although he offers him his friendship, Tshembe feels antagonistic towards Charlie Morris, an American journalist he met in his home, Kenya. Tshembe is convinced that Charlie is all white men and that his journalism is only a means to justify institutionalised racism. Other characters also embody the good-evil dyad: Eric, half-brother of Tshembe, and half-white, fights against the imperialist invaders. Peter, an African friend of Tshembe, leads the rebellion and dies in the process as a result of Abioseh's treason. Towards the end, Tshembe decides to lead the rebellion, and the play ends with his animal-like scream after the destruction of a white institution: The Mission Hospital.

Alice Childress' *Wine in the Wilderness*

The play is set in New York, Harlem on one night of the 1964 riots. Tommy, or Tomorrow Marie, is brought to the apartment of Bill Jameson, an African American painter, who is looking for a model for the third part of a triptych he calls “Wine in Wilderness”. Because of the riots, Tommy’s place has been set on fire and her money is gone. Cynthia and Sonny-Man, bourgeois friends of Bill’s, meet Tommy in a bar on the night of her predicament and bring her to Bill’s apartment to pose as a model for the last part of the triptych—unknowingly—as the defeated, negative image of black women. Cynthia tells Tommy that she should not expect from Bill more than painting her while the latter mistakes Bill’s interest in painting her for affection. While sitting for modelling, Tommy becomes more attracted to Bill although he criticizes black women’s “matriarchy”. When the latter answers the phone talking about his second half of the triptych, Mother Africa, and praising its magnificence, Tommy thinks that he is talking about her, and she awakens to the feeling of being “falsely” loved and admired. Later, Bill discovers the transformation Tommy undergoes because of his words as she rejects the artificial accessories she wears and slips into an African dress. This hinders Bill from continuing the painting of Tommy as she no longer represents defeated black women. Although Bill falls in love with her, Tommy rejects him when she learns the truth from Oldtimer, a friend of Bill, and confronts, verbally, Cynthia, Sonny man, Oldtimer and Bill in the last scene. She is able at the end to pinpoint the faults of the characters around her, and the play ends with her becoming, according to her own perspective, a “Wine in the Wilderness.”

Appendix D**Sonia Sanchez's *Uh Huh***

The first group exposes the effect of polygamy on the black community through Malik, a black Muslim activist and his two young wives. Polygamy is dramatised not for its social relevance, but because it becomes a signifier of the ideology of the Nation of Islam that legitimised chauvinism inside of the Movement.

Through the relationship between the two wives, Sanchez refers as well to the effect of the movement's ideology on homo-social relationships among black women. The two women have to confront each other, debase, and negate their subjectivity in their fight for the attention of their shared husband. When the dialogue ends, the narrative continues in a succeeding mimetic dance. The light of the stage fades and moves to the male dancer and his two companions: the Knitting Sister and the Reading Sister, suggesting the devaluation of black women within the Movement is persistent whether the woman's effort is menial or ideological. The dance focuses on the manipulative nature of the male dancer, how he aligns the two sisters and how he keeps looking in the mirror as a gesture of his unquestionable ego; at the end he beckons to other "sisters." The dance ends with Second Male dancer rolling over the floor in a fit of laughter, an act which ridicules women's effort and refers to the complicity of men with the movement's reduction of black women's activism into a form of submission.

In the second scene, Sanchez presents another group to a more disturbing visual effect. The group consists of horse riders (four black men: Brother Man, First Brother, Second Brother, Third brother, and a white man: White Dude) and two women (Black Whore and White Whore). The men of the play engage in robbery, sexual abuse, and drug addiction although they describe themselves as heroes. Women are used literally in this scene as sex objects as they are tied up with robes to the "horse riders." The body of both women, black and white, become a mere bearer, not of name/meaning, but of colour/sexual "value." For example, when the Black Whore is asked what her name is, she answers: "Lost my name when I was eleven year old. I became just a body then so I forgot my name. Don't nobody want to know a Black Woman's name" (69). The dance that follows is interpretive in terms of restoring the social and historical context of the scene, staging the transformation of a young girl into a woman due to rape, and her abandonment by the rapist who turns into another man for pleasure. Both male and female dancers end up in homosexual relationships which the playwright herself seems to decry. The dance ends with discordant music in reference to the disturbing effect of social context on black subjectivity and sexual identity from the viewpoint of Sanchez.

In the third scene, Sanchez links the intra-racial and homo-social relationships of the BPM to Women's Movements of the 1970s. Here, Sanchez problematizes the conflict between black and white women, making a reference to the social, political, and economic higher status of white women, and the antagonism between black and white women. In this group, Brother is in a relationship with White Woman, who provides him with economic power and enables him to acquire a higher position in the movement; at the same time, he is married to Sister, a black woman whom he beats and possessively calls "My Black Woman." Towards the end he is abandoned by White Woman, and defeated by his wife's success as a speaker in the movement. The mimetic dance which follows is visually and unapologetically violent; first, female dancers wear masks of black and white to signify their racial identity; second, Sanchez visualizes the male dancer as a doll being played by the woman wearing the white mask; third, the White Woman is portrayed as a destructive force of black manhood: "She twists her body snakelike and slides up to him and curls herself around him"; the male dancer is the source of life for the white woman as he brings her back to life, but returns to the black one powerlessly. The latter laughs, straightens her black mask and marches first in a tired manner, and then "she becomes upright in her Blackness and she smiles, Slightly" (Sanchez, 98).

Kennedy's *A movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*

The time of the play shifts between three periods; each period represents a key incident in Clara's narrative and correlates with certain cinematic narratives. The play opens with scene one in 1963 with characters from *Now Voyager* enacting Clara's life in a hospital lobby where her brother is suffering a coma, it "proceeds" to 1955 when Clara expresses her fear of pregnancy, and "proceeds" again to 1929 where Clara's parents narrate Jim Crow incidents. Scene two takes place in the brother's bedroom in hospital while the wedding night scene of *Viva Zapata* is being performed, "yet it is still the stateroom of the ship" (90). Clara has a miscarriage, she is divorced and her parents seem also to have been long separated. Scene three shifts to her old room where characters from *A place in the Sun* take over the story. The events overlap towards the end of the play, leading to a synchronisation where the three movies and three storylines collide. The play ends with the drowning scene

from *A Place in the Sun* as Clara is informed that her brother will live, but only with brain damage and paralysis; Clara, like the drowning Shelly Winters, feels that she is “going to fall headlong down the steps” (103).

Shange’s *Spell* and the Story of sue-jean

One of the stories the company of minstrels narrate is the story of Sue-Jean. Lou, the magician/ interlocutor, reminds the audience that none of the company members is safe from what they remember due to his magic (27). Under his spell, Ross plays softly the acoustic guitar, Alec narrates the story and Natalie becomes Sue-Jean, the protagonist of the story. Sue-Jean had always wanted a baby, not a family nor a man. She used to sit in bars, drinking bourbon, and oozing off enough sexuality to tease the men who “never imagined her as someone’s mother” (28). She reveals that she has no claims to anything or anyone, all she wants is “a lil boy/ named myself”; so she copulates with the only friend she has, Ray, and because she knows herself to be “low-down thing/ laying in sawdust & whiskey stains,” she becomes happy that no one is going to claim the baby “myself” (28).

As her stomach becomes “taut & round/ high in her chest,” Sue-Jean becomes a different woman; she stops going to the bar, and starts knitting “lil booties,” going to church, and preparing prayer clothes for the baby “boy/ myself” who is going to be “safe from all that his mama/ was prey to” (29). After that point, Sue-Jean avoids men because she is afraid of the omen associated with her birth. She was born on a full moon during a flood, and her mother died while giving birth “holdin [her] up over the mud crawlin in her mouth” (30). Since that time, she becomes “the town’s no one” (31). Sue-Jean gives birth to her son and everything goes all right until “myself wanted to crawl” and “discover a world” of his own. She also “became despondent/ & [her] tits began to dry & she lost the fullness of [her] womb,” so that she wanted Myself back to her womb (30). While her son is asleep, Sue-Jean slits his wrist and drinks his blood to become pregnant again, and “she forgot abt the child bein born/ & waz heavy & full all her life/ with ‘myself’” who eternally, according to her, “‘Il be out/ any day now” (32).

Appendix E

Parks' *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*

The play is divided into three seemingly unrelated scenes entitled: “Snails,” “Open House,” and “Greeks” (or “Slugs”); and another two scenes that together serve as a recurrent motif that dovetails the divided scenes: “Third Kingdom.” Each of these scenes presents a separate story with a different time and place, except for the “Third Kingdom.” Each scene is played by five characters who reappear, providing the play with momentary coherence and a sense of causality and a questionable, but slow to the extent of imperceptible, “progress.” The distance measured between the first and last act is referred to in the choice of the titles of the acts: “Snails” and “Slugs.” The first act, “Snails” revolves around the observation of three female characters by a scientist; “Open House” uses photographs to “narrate” the story of a female subject’s relation to a white household before and after Emancipation; “Slugs” dramatizes the daily life of a black family where the father works as a mariner but is always away from his growing family until his wife goes blind. “Third Kingdom” stages four “Seers” in a dream-like atmosphere looking for their lost “selves.” The play, explicitly, seeks the rearrangement of spaces and the reconstitution of subjects through redirecting the gaze of the audience towards itself. Parks plays on concepts such as perception/blindness, embodiments/ fragmentation, and location/dislocation to illustrate that the difference between these “mutabilities” is imperceptible for her stage characters, and that it is her task as a black female dramatist, not to make them visible, but to refer to their imperceptibility.

In “Snails,” three characters, Molly, Verona, and Charlene, are subject to the scrutiny of a Naturalist who designed a fly with a camera so as to observe his subjects “unobserved.” Through his “ex-per-i-men-tation,” the Naturalist aims at finding an answer to his question: “How should we best accommodate the presence of such subjects in our modern day” (Parks 29). The Naturalist implements a human-size bug in the living room to study the behavior of the three characters in a natural

environment. He then disguises as Dr. Lutzky to convince the women that he is going to get rid of the roach by his weapon.

The scene is followed by the “Third Kingdom” where four characters: Kin-seer, Us-Seer, Shark-Seer, and Over-Seer (white character), seem to have their dialogue in a dream-like situation reminiscent of the Middle Passage as they ride in a glass boat talking about the possibility of them being “Jettisoned” to “the-middle-of-the-bottom-of-the-big-black-sea.”

“Open House” consists of different scenes where no plot seems to unite the “diasporic” story. The plot is randomly presented. For example, in the first scene, Aretha is leaving the house she worked in as a mammy, and she is getting the children to smile for the camera that historicizes the three of them. In the next scene, her encounter with Miss Faith is marked with an attempt to get proper measurements to provide a place for her visitors along with Faith’s illustrations to footnotes and references to the allowance of the cargo for more slaves.

The last scene is the Greeks or the Slugs, referring to the slow movement of the play. Mr. Smith is a sergeant who in his pursuit of a distinction forgets that he has a family and a wife who goes blind both literally and metaphorically. Ironically, Mr. Smith works as a mariner who loses his legs towards the end of the play. His dismemberment, along with Mrs. Smith’s loss of sight, serves as a commentary on the four Seers’ search for integrity. Like them, they are imprisoned in the “middle passage” of their own inability to find their location in history

McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape*

The play is a dialogue between two female characters, Robbie (a black woman) and Jeannie (a white woman), who invite the audience to share with them the diverse topics they discuss. When they enter the stage (a space down among the audience) with cups of tea on saucers, it seems that they are already in the middle of their conversation about some social etiquettes. The play is divided into “points” not scenes. For example, it starts with a prologue “Talking About What It Is About” and ends with an epilogue: “Leaving the Audience talking.” It moves from “1-Confessing About family and religion and Work in Progress,” “2- Stating the

Context,” “3-Trying to Transform,” “4-Moments in the Chair” to the central moment in the play, “5-Sally’s Rape.” The rape scene is followed by “6-in a Rape Center,” “7-Talking About Different Schools, and How to Do,” and finally “8-the Language Lesson.”

The audience is divided into three groups and controlled by hand signals by the main characters. Group one is the agreeable ones. When one of the characters signals two fingers up, they say “That’s right!” “yes indeed!” or “I’m telling you.” Group two is the bass line, which only goes “uh huh,” “umm hum,” or “yeah, yeah,” when Robbie or Jeannie signals one finger pointed out. Group three is the dialogue group, “people who have something to add, to disagree with, who like to talk” (Moon 222).

The central scene is the scene of rape where the black female, Robbie, stands naked on an auction block while the white female character, Jeannie, asks the audience to bid on her body.

Appendix F

The Life of Saratji Bartman

The factual story of Baartman is a journey of over two hundred years of public exhibition. According to Crais and Scully, Saartje Baartman’s name means the savage servant. Saartje is the diminutive name of the Cape Dutch form for “Sara”; Baartman literally means the “bearded man,” and refers to the barbarous, uncivilised savage (9). The name “Venus Hottentot” was given to Saartje by the British and French natural scientists. A quick summary is necessary for comparison with the fictional Venus in Parks’ play. Before 1810, the real Venus Hottentot, Saartje Baartman, was taken from her homeland in South Africa and placed, due to her “grotesque” physical appearance, on public display in Piccadilly, London (Altic 296). Her exhibition was condemned by an abolitionist group known as the African Association who took the matter to court. Baartman was asked in Dutch – she was reported to be fluent in Dutch language, with some familiarity with English and French – whether she was aware of her degraded situation to which she affirmed her awareness and even her share of the profit (Strother 47). Later, she was sold to a

French animal trainer and her display continued in France. She became a victim of heavy drinking and prostitution and some suggested that her death was a result of this new life, while others attributed her death to either smallpox, syphilis or pneumonia (Crais and Scully 138). After her death, she was anatomised by French naturalist, Georges Cuvier; her brain, skeleton and genitals were exhibited in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1974. In 2002, her remains were repatriated to her homeland in Hankey, South Africa (138).

In the play, Venus, who is called The Girl at the beginning, accepts willingly an “invitation” from The Brother, who takes her to London and promises a life of prosperity and love. However, she is forsaken by him and is sold to a showman. Then she meets The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders (later on the chorus of the 8 chorus, and the 8 anatomists) and the Mother-Showman introduces The Venus Hottentot to her cage. In this location, Venus “bottoms out at the bottom of the ladder” (35); this is a reference to her lowest status among the other exhibits and to her representation as the “lowest link in God’s Great Chain of Being” (31).

Standing in her cage amid excrement, Venus aspires to material gains, but also to acceptance and love. Another promise of a better life is made in the second part by The Baron Docteur. She is to be transported to Paris and is promised love and material gains again but ends a dissected body on the table of the Docteur. At the end of the play, Scene one, Parks summarizes this journey as a romanticised clash between death and love: “When Death met Love Death deathd Love / and left Love tuh rot / au naturel end for the Miss Hottentot” (161). In the last scene, an unnumbered “Scene of Love,” Venus asks the audience for not only recognition but also for love as her words resonate, “Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss” (162).

Clarke and Dickerson’s *Menstrual Show*

Historical Background

In 1893, R. T. Davis, a milling company, signed a contract with an African American woman called Nancy Green to impersonate Aunt Jemima for the rest of her life (Kern-Foxworth 67). Apparently the Southern look of Green was a reminder for the consumers of the mammy figure, the caretaker, and the humble servant. In the

same year, the new Jemima was exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and by the time the exhibition finished, she had served more than a million pancakes. From that point on, the journey of affirming the position of Aunt Jemima in the consciousness of American popular culture began. Legends were associated with this figure in order to help market new products; they emphasised the extraordinary hospitality of the southern plantation and the docility of the restored maid. The legends which entered American folklore were, in the first place, advertising strategies (73). Because of her durability as a living trademark, Aunt Jemima has become an enduring symbol of a paternalist institution in which advertising endorsed the stereotype in the collective memory of Americans. However, Jemima becomes herself an "institution" because her endorsed stereotype has been the paradigm against which many representations of black women have been measured as a mechanism of inferiorisation.

Before it became an advertising trademark, Aunt Jemima was a segment (as a song) of performance in blackface minstrel shows. A song called "old Aunt Jemima" was performed by minstrel comedians called Baker and Farrell in Missouri, the place where the experiment with the pancake batter first began. When Chris L. Rutt and Charles G. Underwood came up with the mixture, they began their search for a symbol that would help sell their product. Rutt found the symbol when he watched Baker and Farrell's minstrel show and realised that the aprons and bandanas used in the performance while singing "Old Aunt Jemima" were reminiscent of old Southern lifestyle. By 1877, the song was performed by a better-known minstrel performer called Billy Kersands more than 3,000 times and was developed into different improvisational texts (Kern-Foxworth 80). Therefore, the figure of Aunt Jemima was already endorsed in the consciousness of Americans as an archetype of the servile mammy. The pancake product carried this fabricated archetype from the minstrel show into millions of American houses to be consumed as an icon of domesticity along with breakfast.

Aunt Jemima of the play gets married to many men, white and black. With each man she parents a group of daughters/ Menstruals; each group of them represents a generation or refers explicitly to historical black women. Jemima's first

words in the play introduce her as a rootless character: “I was naked as a jaybird until I was 12” (35). A Menstrual prepares this introduction, anticipating this uprootedness: “her parents are unknown and she just sprung up on Col. Uncle Sam Higbee’s plantation” (C&D 35). An indication is made here of the fact that the process of adjusting Jemima to her assigned minstrel stereotype took place culturally and within the economy of plantation slavery; she was raised by an “uncle Tom,” taught to cook by a “Nanny” who decided to fly back to Africa, leaving Jemima to lead in the kitchen, and then she was made a mistress to Uncle Sam’s Col. Higbee, who fathered the first four of her 13 daughters/ Menstruals.

The first of Aunt Jemima and Higbee’s daughters, Dorothy, is a tragic mulatta who “does not know whether she is black or white,” but knows how to sing “the blues of a tragic mulatta”; she is sold to Paramount pictures but then commits suicide. The second one, Marie, was born with a rattlesnake in her hand, and then she was sold to John de Conquerer, a hero from African American folklore and a trickster; the third is Pecola who “howled melodramatically all the time” (36), she passed for white when she moved North, and fourth, Dysmorphia, whose blackness would not appear if she kept her clothes on (36).

The second phase in Jemima’s life begins with her marriage to Two Tons, another metaphor of an epic hero; namely, John Henry. A Menstrual recites the story: “Two Ton died with his hammer in his hand. But he left Aunt Jemima with three little hammers to remember him by” (37). These three daughters represent the strength and endurance of African American women at the turn of the twentieth century: Bondswoman, symbolically referring to Harriet Tubman, Rebecca, a Christian preacher, and Anna Julia who “risqued [sic] all to learn to read”; which refers to Anna Julia Cooper.

In the next phase of her journey, Jemima remarries a Dominican man. With him she parents the third set of daughters, who represent the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement: “Sapphire: a girl who couldn’t be tamed by any man; Susie-Faye, who became president of the Planned Parenthood ConFederation of America, and the newborn baby, Freedom Fighter” (38). Angela Davis can be seen as both a Sapphire and Freedom Fighter. Susie- Faye refers here to Faye

Wattleton who became the first black woman to preside over Planned Parenthood. Faye had strong opinions in regard to abortion and the control of women over their bodies, opposing, by doing so, the black nationalists and the religious leaders of the Reagan era (45).

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