

Reconstructing the American Negro into a Black African

“The motive of the black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world.” – Larry Neal, Black Arts Movement theater practitioner and scholar¹

“We were very much committed to African ideas and to African liberation and to African culture and African perceptions... We were looking for a big feeling; we were really trying to connect.” – Larry Neal²

A contextualization of black theater in America always seems to surface an ugly canvas of hatred and violence by whites against blacks. However, it also unveils remarkable instances of resistance and perseverance in the quest for social change. So the history of black oppression is also the history of black actualization. It is a history of fighting to overcome enslavement, four hundred years of subjugation and trying to shed “the shackles of cultural colonialism.”³ Consequently, a critical analysis of African American drama is inextricable from the drama of race relations in America.⁴

The socio-political climate at the time was such that black artists in America were inundated with ideologies and activism that heavily influenced their work. Scholars of the Black Arts Movement such as James Smethurst and

¹ Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” in *Visions of a Liberated Future*, ed. Michael Schwartz (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1989), 62.

² Nilgun Anadolu-Okur, *Contemporary African American Theater: Afrocentricity in the Works of Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, and Charles Fuller* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc.), 29.

³ *Malcolm X*, DVD, directed by Spike Lee, Performed by Denzel Washington (1992) quoted in *American Rhetoric*,

<www.americanrhetoric.com/MovieSpeeches/moviespeechmalcolmxpostmecca.html>.

⁴ Anadolu-Okur, *Contemporary African American Theater*, xi.

Larry Neal dispute the success of the theatrical manifestations of resistance. In the 1960s, several African American movements and important historical figures, in an attempt to be rid of European influence, turned to Africa. Though generations of absence and disconnection served as an obstacle to reconnection, Africa was an obvious candidate in the search for a motherland. And “Mother” was the primary role Black male playwrights allowed the motherland’s female progeny to play in re-conceptualizing blackness and liberating the lost off-spring.

The 1960s and 1970s were transformative years for Americans of African descent in innumerable ways. One of the most profound changes that took place was the politicizing of the label “black,” which resulted from rethinking liberation ideology around the notion of a perceived, socio-historic black essence and, consequently, African-ness. The roots of the twenty-plus Black Power activist organizations could be found in the Nation of Islam and the many African liberation movements that fought for independence from European colonial domination.⁵ Through these major influences, the organizations that were born during this period broke away from the integrationist thinking of the Civil Rights Movement and adopted a Black Nationalist ideology.

“Black Nationalism” emerged in several different forms with tweaked definitions and applications of the term. In the introduction to Black Nationalism in America (1970), it was defined as “a body of social thought, attitudes, and actions ranging from the simplest expressions of ethnocentrism and racial

⁵Algeron Austin, Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 73.

solidarity to Pan-Negroism or Pan-Africanism.”⁶ Floyd McKissick, a civil rights activist turned Black Power activist, stated, “1966 shall be remembered as the year we left our imposed status of Negroes and became Black Men.”⁷ McKissick implies that to be a “negro” took on a pejorative connotation, while being “black” was something to aspire toward. The through-line for most of the organizations was a frustration and rejection of non-violent civil disobedience (“negro”-like behavior) as practiced by Martin Luther King, Jr. and a desire to lead their race towards authentic “black” behavior.

In Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century (2006), Algernon Austin highlights the fact that one must not dismiss the significance of race simply because it is a social construction. Instead, one must acknowledge the very real repercussions that a society’s conviction in the illusion of race has on the reality of the lives of those they categorize and stereotype. Though race is not a biological fact, but a product of a society’s imagination, once a society categorizes a group of people based on arbitrary assignments (rarely related to a consistent skin tone), the “race” becomes valid.⁸

Groups such as Maulana Karenga’s US Organization and Malcolm X’s Organization of Afro-American Unity borrowed heavily from the Nation of Islam.⁹ However, as Austin points out, the popular perception of the Nation of

⁶ John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, eds., Black Nationalism in America (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), xxvi.

⁷ Austin, Achieving Blackness, 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-16.

⁹ Maulana Karenga is a former Black Nationalist, and the founder of the African American holiday “Kwanzaa”; Malcolm X founded Organization of Afro-American Unity after leaving the Nation of

Islam as a black activist organization is false. In several ways, the Nation of Islam's beliefs countered popular Black Nationalism, particularly in the Nation of Islam's rejection of afrocentricity. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, supreme minister of the Nation of Islam from 1934 until his death in 1975, stated: "The Black Man in America accepts the jungle life, thinking that they would get the love of Black Africa. Black Brother and Black Sister, wearing savage dress and hairstyles will not get you the love of Africa."¹⁰ While Black Nationalist organizations began to look up to Africa, gaining inspiration from African independence movements, the Nation of Islam looked down upon Africa, believing it had allowed itself to be colonized, and that African Americans had to "first get [themselves] civilized and go there and civilize Africa."¹¹

Austin argues that race is "achieved by one's proper performance of the normative expectations for the racial category."¹² Performance is the operative word in the above phrase. Though ideologies of blackness and nationalism were theorized and debated, the hermeneutics of the black dialectic had to move beyond rhetoric to become a lived experience. The politics of identity only came to life in people's performances of themselves in everyday life and on stage.¹³

Islam (Organization of Afro-American Unity was an African American version of Organization of African Unity); Austin, *Achieving Blackness*, 54.

¹⁰ Elijah Muhammad, *The Fall of America* (Atlanta: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 1973), 150.

¹¹ Elijah Muhammad, *The Theology of Time*, transcribed by Abass Rassoull (Hampton, VA: UBUS Communications Systems, 1992), 54.

¹² Austin, *Achieving Blackness*, 48.

¹³ Richard Schechner explains how "the long infancy and childhood specific to the human species is an extended training and rehearsal period for the successful performance of everyday life." He adds, "The everydayness of everyday life is precisely its familiarity, its being built from known

Black Nationalism found its way into the Arts around the same time its prominence in the American Northeast grew. Drama critic Larry Neal described the Black Arts Movement as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.”¹⁴ Speeches and ideology were dramatized on stage, and, similarly, dramatic enactments of political, race-related issues sparked conversations and heated political debates. Smethurst notes that a familiar perception of the Black Art Movement is as “the cultural wing of the Black Power Movement,” however, he contends that “one could just as easily say that Black Power was the political wing of the Black Arts Movement.”¹⁵ The Black Arts Movement was a movement that “aggressively asserted a black identity founded upon an African American-centered consciousness, political activism and a dynamic philosophy.”¹⁶

Subversive theater during the Black Arts Movement often meant non-apologetic, anti-assimilation, intense, uncompromising drama. Some of the major voices out of the Black Arts Movement were Larry Neal, poet and dramatist Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), and “militant dramatist” Ed Bullins.¹⁷ Amiri Baraka published an essay entitled “The Revolutionary Theater” (1964) in an attempt to define or inspire a new black drama:

bits of behavior rearranged and shaped in order to suit specific circumstances.” See Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 32.

¹⁴ Anadolu-Okur, *Contemporary African American Theater*, 27.

¹⁵ James Edward Smethurst, *the black arts movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 14.

¹⁶ Anadolu-Okur, *Contemporary African American Theater*, 11.

¹⁷ Daphne Brooks, “Dreams Deferred: From Civil Rights Theater to the Drama of Black Power,” *Black Theater and Performance Studies* (2002), subject search: Schomburg Studies on the Black Experience. The New York Public Library: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York (accessed 17 June 2006).

The revolutionary theater, even if it is western must be anti-western. It must show horrible coming attractions of The Crumbling of the West. Even as Artaud designed The Conquest of Mexico, so we must design The Conquest of the White Eye, and show the missionaries and wiggly liberals dying under blasts of concrete. For sound effects, wild screams of joy, from all the people of the world... it is a political theater, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dim-witted, fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.¹⁸

Baraka's essay, though extremely controversial due to its potential to incite violence, was in tow with a lot of the theater that accompanied it. In the above quote Baraka emphasizes the need to reject western culture and western theater. In keeping with his own philosophies, Baraka founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater and School in 1965 in Harlem--a theater that refused white patrons, and was forced to close after seven months.¹⁹ There is no exact start date for the Black Arts Movement, however, the opening of the school in 1965 served as a foundation.

Though the term did not come into use until the end of the Black Arts Movement, "afrocentricity" played a significant role in determining the cultural politics of the times and hence in the theater that was produced during the '60s and '70s. Black Studies scholar Molefi Kete Asante believes all Black people across the African Diaspora to be Africans.²⁰ He argues for the existence of "an emotional, cultural, psychological connection between [Africans and African-

¹⁸ LeRoi Jones, "The Revolutionary Theater," Black Arts Movement, Virginia Hiltz and Dr. Mike Sell, <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/documents/baraka1.html>.

¹⁹ Oliver Clinton, Contemporary Black Drama: From: "A Raisin in the Sun" to "No Place to Be Somebody" (New York: Scribners, 1971), 210.

²⁰ Molefi Kete Asante, Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change, 2nd ed. (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 79.

Americans] that spans the oceans and separate existence.”²¹ In 1988, Asante coined the term “Afrocentricity” to describe what he hoped would be a movement that gave agency to Africans from the Diaspora, particularly those from the Americas and the Caribbean. Asante describes Afrocentricity as:

...A mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate. In regards to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of an analysis of African phenomenon... In terms of action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. Finally, Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself is a trope of ethics.²²

Afrocentricity as conceptualized by Asante is a multi-faceted experience with a mission to “humanize the universe.”²³

Afrocentricity suggests an undoing of the internalized oppression of dislocated Africans, as well as Africans within Africa. With the theory, a black person no longer blindly prefaces white cultural products or values over African ones. Asante suggests the “existence of an African Cultural System with numerous aspects in a transcontinental and trans-generational manner.”²⁴ He declares different African cultures to be variations on a larger African tradition. Each African culture stems from a shared background and ancestral heritage that unifies them. He believes in the power of Blacks to reach a “collective cognitive imperative” which he defines as “the overwhelming power of a group of people

²¹ Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 86, 87.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

thinking in the same direction.”²⁵ This can be seen as an inspiration for the word “movement” when considering the Black Arts Movement. Black artists (poets, musicians, theater practitioners), though not always in agreement with each other, were trying to move black art in a new direction.

Asante denounces the Nation of Islam as an African cultural deviation that he feels contradicts the practices of African ancestors. He believes Islam to be as ill-suited for Africans as he does Christianity. His reason for this is because neither stems from an African origin. He cites the fact that African women have historically been leaders and Queens, yet under the nation of Islam their place in society was greatly diminished. Malcolm X, a long-time spokesperson for the Nation of Islam, declared: “The true nature of man is to be strong, and a woman’s true nature is to be weak, and while a man must at all times respect his woman, at the same time he needs to understand that he must control her if he expects to get his respect.”²⁶ Male playwrights during the 1960s and 1970s more commonly held Malcolm X’s perspective rather than Asante’s.

Objectivism is the term used to describe the visual indicators of Afrocentricity or Black Nationalism. Asante describes objectivism as “the use of cultural artifacts as symbols in all reproductive and creative work. Its elemental basis [being] in mental attitude; its expressive mode [in] symbolic.”²⁷ Given this definition, West African print shirts, dashikis, could be an example of objectivism

²⁵ Ibid., 67.

²⁶ Malcolm X, Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 225-26.

²⁷ Asante, Afrocentricity, 67.

in practice. The Afro hairstyle that became very popular in the sixties as an alternative to chemically relaxed hair was another method of objectivism.

However, Asante misunderstands the Nation of Islam because it did not advocate an African cultural aesthetic. Austin explains that the Nation of Islam rooted their racial ideology in Asia and proselytized the notion of African Americans as descendants of a race of “Asiatic god-scientists.” He illustrates how the Nation of Islam took on an Asiatic culture and identity, and how it was not a Pan-Africanist organization, contrary to many scholars’ beliefs.²⁸ The problem with objectivism, for Asante, was a frequent outward appearance of being Afrocentric without the inward acceptance of the theory. This dilemma is evident in several Black Nationalist plays.

An Afrocentric, black writer would “isolate, define and promote those values, symbols and experiences which affirm [Blacks].”²⁹ “Objectivism” became apparent in a playwright’s choice of African clothing styles or set designs explained in stage directions. Musical direction often incorporated drums, particularly, those meant to invoke a sense of African tribal rituals. These aesthetic choices ran the danger of invoking stereotypes. Scholar Phillip Effiong notes, “Exploiting an African-oriented repertoire, in spite of rich cultural and creative implications, is also subject to romanticization, inaccuracies,

²⁸ Austin, *Achieving Blackness*, 24-46.

²⁹ Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 54.

uncertainties, debate, hypocrisy and therefore controversy.”³⁰ The plays I shall analyze are not exempt from Effiong’s observation.

Another way playwrights attempted to establish Black Nationalist leanings in their characters was through African names. Asante argues for the importance of names to the Afrocentrist. In a section entitled “The Names Crisis,” Asante explains that in order for the African American to free himself from mental bondage through slave names, he must adopt an African name. He believes that African Americans will be confronting their history and making white people do the same.³¹

For playwrights in the Black Arts Movement, language was fundamental in creating accessible art. Asante calls for a “systematic nationalism” in which a new language that is not that of the oppressors serves as a tool for communicating with the masses. Many of the plays that came out of the Black Arts Movement were written in what was a contemporary African-American dialect, unafraid to isolate any potential white viewers. This was a new approach to black theater as previously many black playwrights wrote in what is often termed “Standard American English.” An Afrocentric, African American writer during the Black Arts Movement would “restructure the language to tell the truth.”³² It would be the task of the Afrocentric writer to “endarken the people.”³³

³⁰ Philip U Effiong, In Search of a Model for Africa-American Drama (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000), 15.

³¹ Asante, Afrocentricity, 38-40.

³² *Ibid.*, 47.

³³ *Ibid.*, 48.

Asante's Afrocentricity is useful in trying to locate dramatists and dramatic work from the 1960s that contain African influence, a large component of Black Nationalism. Although one might assume a piece of work by an African American that references African history and culture contains African influence, defining African culture is problematic. It might be easier to observe what has been influenced by one's perception of African history. But like every culture, African cultures and nations and people have been continuously evolving. Like African Americans, African cultures and traditional practices have been affected by contact with white colonizers and the passing of time. Finding the untouched, pre-colonial essence within Africans is impossible.

Asante allows for the fact that cultures grow and morph, but the way in which he chooses what adaptation of African culture and traditions is valid or invalid is somewhat random, with the exception of the obvious cases in which Western historical beliefs and practices, such as Christianity, were taught to Africans. Asante claims Afrocentricity does not advocate stagnancy and in fact it "seeks to modify even African traditions where necessary to meet the demands of the modern culture."³⁴ However, Asante takes it upon himself to determine the legitimacy of adapted African cultural practices, randomly favoring certain traditions over others.

Asante would propose guidance from the ancestors as to the right direction; however, this has the potential for conflict. Black artists during the

³⁴ Ibid., 52.

Black Arts Movement produced work that they believed to be in the best interest of black people but even amongst them there was contention.³⁵ It is hard to measure whether or not a play or a playwright betters the race through their work; what it comes down to are opinions as opposed to statistics. It seems deviating from African traditional practices leads one into murky ideological ground, though deviation is necessary because of the evolution of all cultures. Even when one chooses to evaluate African influence based on historical African traditions the work has incorporated, it is still difficult to attain the authenticity to which Asante aspires. Knowledge of pre-colonial African cultures is derived mainly from pre-colonial, White anthropologists or oral sources often labeled as myths. Oral tradition or Orality is comprised of “everyday conversation ...proverbs, tales, riddles, praises and other oral genres” that collectively form the African oral tradition.³⁶

In European cultures, oral sources are not given as much weight as written sources. However, this is not the case in many African societies, particularly when dealing with the colonial and pre-colonial era. One must choose whether to trust White anthropologists from racist regimes more than African oral historians. Even when one does choose to utilize oral history as a primary source for traditional African dramatic styles and practices, the risks remain high. There is the risk of false information, which makes any authenticity questionable.

³⁵ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 57.

³⁶ Eileen Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), 26.

In African Novels and the Question of Orality (1992), Eileen Julien outlines three primary perspectives on oral traditions: the Eurocentric perspective, the Nativist approach, and the Revisionist paradigm. The Eurocentric perspective regards orality as primitive and it “presumes [the] superiority of writing [and] its presumed correlation to civilization, learning and intelligence.”³⁷ The Nativist approach views orality as a sign of authenticity. Rather than taking the dominance of oral language in Africa as a coincidence, it sees “something ontologically oral about Africa, [making] the act of writing...disjunctive and alien for Africans.”³⁸ This perspective is problematic because writing existed in parts of Africa before the advent of colonialism. The Revisionist paradigm rejects both perspectives and argues that modern revisions of African oral tradition are conscious decisions on the part of the author to go beyond mimicking African art conventions.³⁹ A successful African American dramatic work would utilize African performance techniques to express an African American vision.

Another problem arises when we choose to judge the degree of African influence by a work’s homage to traditional African aesthetics. There are a vast number of communities within tribes within villages within nations within Africa. One particular practice might be contradictory to a great many communities’ practices such that it does not merit the label African according to Asante’s criteria. This warrants the question: what exactly is “African”? It used to be

³⁷ Ibid., 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 8.

³⁹ Ibid., 46.

enough that something originating from the continent of Africa was African by definition. But this is not the case for Asante, who believes it is possible for anti-African African practices to exist. In his definition of blackness as “a trope of ethics,” he explains, “To be black is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia and white racial dominations.”⁴⁰ However, there are as many black ethical standpoints as there are black people. Traditional African cultures were not void of prejudices and oppression; they just took different forms. To qualify blackness would be to negate the valid different and similar experiences that black people with different beliefs have had.

Nevertheless, blackness was and continues to be qualified. Its qualification during the Black Arts Movement was a necessary move in the evolution of how popular (white) culture imagined African Americans and consequently how they imagined themselves.

The integration of community and theater was crucial to theater practitioners of the time. Theater was produced on Harlem street corners and free tickets were distributed to Harlem residents by The New Lafayette Theater.⁴¹ There was a strong desire to create theater that was accessible to black people--thematically, geographically, and economically. However, a lack of funding was the primary cause for the closing of the very short-lived Black Arts Repertory

⁴⁰ Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 2.

⁴¹ Larry Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 67; Virginia Hiltz and Dr. Mike Sell, *The Black Arts Movement*, University of Michigan English Department, <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/orgs/nlt.html>.

Theater/School. A lack of funding was also the reason Black Theater, a Black Arts journal edited by Ed Bullins and Amiri Baraka, was forced to close in the 1970s.⁴² Internal politics and disputes brought about the closure of Black House, which was the “headquarters for the Black Panther Party for Self Defense [as well as]...a center for community performances of community-created theatre, poetry and music.”⁴³ Baraka opened Spirithouse in Newark, New Jersey after the closing of the Black Arts Repertory Theater. Spirithouse “emphasized [sic] the theatre, music, art, and poetry of the Black urban community of Newark. The streets in the area surrounding Spirithouse were filled with African music and song at least three nights a week and people of all ages were welcome to attend Spirithouse functions.”⁴⁴

With the exception of Barbara Ann Teer’s National Black Theater, black men owned all the institutions/infrastructures producing Black Nationalist Theater. Robert Macbeth was the man behind Harlem’s New Lafayette Theater.⁴⁵ Robert Hooks and Douglas Turner Ward ran the Negro Ensemble Company, while Woodie King Jr. founded the New Federal Theater on the Lower East Side.⁴⁶ The majority of plays produced in these institutions were by black men. As a result, the predominant ideas disseminated by the theater practitioners were male in perspective.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/orgs/blackhouse.html>.

⁴⁴ Ibid., <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/orgs/spirit.html>.

⁴⁵ Smethurst, Black Arts Movement, 103.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 104-105.

The black male playwright who subscribed to a Black Nationalist ideology during the 1960s and 1970s produced plays that limited and disempowered black women. However, poet and playwright Sonia Sanchez was able to interrogate the popular representation of black women from inside the Black Arts Movement. Adrienne Kennedy was located outside the Movement, as a non-subscriber to a Black Nationalist ideology. However, despite this detachment from the Black Arts Movement, Kennedy was able to challenge the social constructions of gender and blackness, forcing her audiences to question and entertain the idea of a more complex Black Woman than that of Baraka and Bullins.

The Men Who Marked the Movement

Amiri Baraka was one of the loudest voices from the Black Arts Movement. However, he was not alone. Ed Bullins is also frequently mentioned alongside Baraka, and Larry Neal is acknowledged as the leading arts and literature scholar of the Movement. In 1968, in an essay entitled “The Black Arts Movement,” Larry Neal cited “Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, Jimmy Stewart, Joe White, Charles Patterson, Charles Fuller, Aisha Hughes, Carol Freeman, and Jimmy Garrett” as the playwrights whose works, along with LeRoi Jones’s, best embodied the spirit and philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. Of the ten names Neal mentioned, it is no coincidence that eight were male.⁴⁷

Themes emerge and re-emerge in plays written by these men. It seems a necessary element of Black Arts ideology included re-imagining/imagining the Black man. The representation of this new black man was in direct opposition to previous white-generated portrayals of black men as either a white-people/Jim-Crow-loving Uncle Tom, the “lazy, easily frightened, chronically idle,

⁴⁷Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 74. In 1965, after Malcolm X’s death, LeRoi Jones, whose original name was LeRoy Jones, changed his name to Imamu Ameer Baraka and later just Amiri Baraka; there is no information on Aisha Hughes. I am assuming the feminine first name is a sign her gender is female.

inarticulate, buffoon” (or “coon”) or as the predatory Brute in search of a white woman to rape.⁴⁸

The stereotypes of black men had implications for how the white world potentially perceived the dynamic of the black man and the black woman. As a “perpetual child,” the black man was never a husband or a partner to the black woman but a burden for her to support financially and emotionally.⁴⁹ This notion was re-inscribed through the stereotype of the Mammy—the Black matriarch who was a loving caretaker of white children and an abusive, neglecting mother to her black children. The Mammy served as both parents because the black father was either absent or useless. It seems black women were laden with the masculine social constructions that black men were denied. In order to reclaim these constructions the male playwrights of the Black Arts Movements stripped the women of any hints of power these former stereotypes may have connoted, and constructed a female companion that suited the new Brother (Black Man), the Sister (or Black Woman).

The ideal Sister would affirm and bolster her man’s creativity, intellectualism, and actions. While the Brother was inspiring black people in a campaign to create a nation of black brotherhood, Sister was creating a home environment that allowed her man to fulfill his mission. This environment could mean staying at home to look after the children and being a homemaker, or it

⁴⁸ Dr. David Pilgrim, The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, <<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/>>. “Uncle Tom” was a term that referenced Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), inferring docility.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

could mean working hard at a job to bring home money, thereby allowing her man to focus on economically unfruitful but infinitely more important endeavors—such as mobilizing the masses towards revolutionary action—political activism, lifestyle changes and social protest.

Eldridge Cleaver, a seminal figure in the Black Nationalist movement in the sixties, ends his prison book Soul on Ice (1968) with a letter “To All Black Women, From All Black Men”:

Queen-Mother-Daughter of Africa
Sister of My Soul
Black Bride of My Passion
My Eternal Love

I greet you, my Queen, not in the obvious whine of a cringing Slave to which you have become accustomed, neither do I greet you in the new voice, the unctuous supplications of the sleek Black Bourgeoise [sic], nor the bullying bellow of the rude Free Slave—but in my own voice do I greet you, the voice of the Black Man.⁵⁰

In this passage, the Black woman is deified and loved for the first time because her Black man is able to be a “man.” He addresses all black women and takes it upon himself to speak for all black men. However, his definition of all Black Men excludes the black upper-middle class (bourgeoisie), obsequious men, or obnoxious men. He defines what it means to be a Black Man. All those men whose personality traits do not fit within his construction, but happen to have black skin, lose their male status and potentially their Black status.

For Cleaver, not only is Black Woman a beautiful queen because Black Man finally appreciates her, but Black Man can only warrant that name if Black

⁵⁰ Eldridge Cleaver, Soul on Ice (New York: Random House Inc, 1968), 205.

Woman reciprocates by loving him, too. Later in the letter, Black Man asks, “let my convex exile end its haunted odyssey in your concave essence which receives that it may give. Flower of Africa it is only through the liberating power of your re-love that my manhood can be redeemed.”⁵¹ He creates a codependant relationship between Black Man and Black Woman. To say that the two are essentialized would be an understatement. Cleaver’s language endorses the notion that Black manhood is something that needs to be reclaimed at that moment in history and Black woman must play a role in achieving this.

Cleaver refers to the former Black man as a “Black Eunuch, divested of [his] balls.”⁵² Black Male [hetero] sexuality is at risk if the new black man is not able to prevail. This explains why many of the deeply nationalist plays, written by black men, include angry accusations of “faggot”-like behavior. The new Black Man and Woman are also pan-Africanists. Cleaver speaks of “the black and tender flesh of African motherhood... cradl[ing] primal man,”⁵³ and goes on to list several of the different African and African American revolutionaries, and rebels against white hegemony, that Black Woman has harbored in her womb.

It is important to note that though Cleaver references white oppressors as the cause of black emasculation/castration/dehumanization, the onus and agency to change this is placed on black men and women. The essentialization of black men and women is crucial to Black Arts ideology, as there was a specific

⁵¹ Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 207.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 209.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 208.

prototypical black man and woman that members of the Black Arts Movement hoped African Americans would aspire toward. There was also a definite idea of who failed to qualify as a Black Man or a Black Woman. Language and character descriptions in several plays elucidate this point.

In 1965, Baraka wrote the one act play A Black Mass, which he dedicated to “the brothers and sisters of The Black Arts.”⁵⁴ It was first performed in Newark, New Jersey in May 1966 at Proctor’s Theater.⁵⁵ The play stages the story of Yacub from the Nation of Islam, in which the existence of the white man is explained. In the story, the only people who exist on earth are Black Muslims. The men are in a laboratory experimenting, while the women are somewhere outside in the garden. Yacub, or, in Baraka’s play, Jacoub, a misguided black scientist who was responsible for inventing “time,” an unnatural creation, creates an evil white animal. The white animal is aggressive and threatens the black men causing the black women to run inside the laboratory because they sense danger in the cosmos.

Once created, the evil white beast can only coherently spew out the word “WHITE.” After destroying the Black scientists’ laboratory and attacking one of the black women, thereby turning her white, the beast and newly formed white woman are cast off to cold, Northern caves where their cold hearts will thrive. In his book on Amiri Baraka, Jerry Watts summarizes the play saying, “its primary

⁵⁴ LeRoi Jones, A Black Mass, in Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black Man (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 17.

⁵⁵ Jerry Gafio Watts, Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 262.

message is that whites and blacks constitute morally antagonistic groups owing to their racial differences. Thus by depicting whites as demonic and blacks as divine, A Black Mass celebrates the most banal form of racial essentialism.”⁵⁶

Though Baraka was not a member of the Nation of Islam, he was a passionate proponent of cultural nationalism, and as such there was an overlap of philosophical ideas about how to act and be black. Larry Neal understood A Black Mass differently from Watts. For Neal, the message was that dire consequences arise and have arisen when scientific knowledge prefaces spiritual knowledge. He considers it Jones’s most important play because “it is informed by a mythology that is wholly the creation of the African-American sensibility.”⁵⁷ However, as Watts points out, an African American sensibility does not necessarily augment the meaning and depth of the play.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the play is important in analyzing how black male playwrights constructed the “Sister/Black Woman” as Baraka paints a picture of original Black woman. The three black women in A Black Mass (Eulalie, Olabumi, and Tiila) are initially not part of this scientific and philosophical laboratory that the three men (Jacoub, Nasafi, and Tanzil) inhabit. This environment has Swahili and Arabic signs on the wall, and their Muslim and African names immediately establish them as Black Muslims. The men are in a heated debate about Jacoub’s experiment, the white being, when the “women run

⁵⁶ Ibid., 264.

⁵⁷ Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 73.

⁵⁸ Watts, Amiri Baraka, 264.

in, screaming, Writhing. Twisting in their thin garments” because they have noticed the elements (sky, soil, etc.) have gone awry.⁵⁹ The first words uttered by the men in response to the intrusion of the women are: “What? What is this? What are you women doing running into this sanctuary?”⁶⁰

The helpless women have run there to be rescued by the men. By doing so, they have violated the sacred “sanctuary” of the men. One must ask the question, if this is a world pre-“evil-whites” and an original, natural, blissful existence, then why is an exclusive sanctuary necessary? The only people excluded from this pure and sacred haven (the sanctuary) are black women. In this world, only Black men can have a higher spiritual connection with God, as well as an engagement in the intellectual exchange of knowledge. Only Black men can control creation and the universe, and therefore, essentially, they have the powers of gods. This explains why Baraka’s addendum to the title of his book, Four Black Revolutionary Plays, is “All Praises to the Black Man” as opposed to black people or the black woman. The women lack the intellectual ability and emotional strength to handle the world the men dwell in. The helplessness of the women is illuminated in Baraka’s stage directions indicating the multiple places for the women to “scream uncontrollably” as the chaos ensues.

When the White Beast attacks and converts a black woman into a white woman, the scientists note that it recognized woman, “not as the black beautiful

⁵⁹ Jones, A Black Mass, 28.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

lady of our universe, but pure female spoor and meat.”⁶¹ Baraka implies that white men inherently objectify the black female form, whereas original black man recognizes the beauty and regal status of the black female. The adjectives that Baraka uses to refer to the Black women in A Black Mass only reference their external qualities (physical features). Simply by being black, and a woman, Black woman attains the title “lady of our universe.” In fact no responsibility is put on her to demonstrate any character traits or intellectual ability. This is original Black woman—a beautiful empty package.

“Black Woman” is the name given to Baraka’s female characters in many of his plays—a generic title describing the most important feature about the character: her race and her gender. Baraka’s Madheart (A Morality Play) (1966), is dedicated to the “brothers and sisters of the Black Arts Alliance, San Francisco.” In this play, Baraka expresses the weakness of black women, both old and young, and juxtaposes them with the young, physically and mentally strong Black Man, their antithesis.

Black Man and Devil Lady (White woman) are verbally at war with each other. Black Man concludes that he must annihilate Devil Lady, even though she proclaims, “I am already dead and can never die.”⁶² Baraka alludes to a perception of whiteness and white people as soulless and death-like—a reference Adrienne Kennedy also makes in Funnyhouse of a Negro (1964). Baraka vividly

⁶¹ Ibid., 35.

⁶² LeRoi Jones, Madheart- A Morality Play, in Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black Man (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 70.

describes the different sounds and images on stage during their interaction. For instance, in one moment Devil Lady “rolls on her back with skirt raised, to show a cardboard image of Christ pasted over her pussy space,” and in another moment the music we hear is “the high beautiful falsetto of a fag.”⁶³ The image of Christ located on a white woman’s vagina debases Christianity by suggesting the religion is a tool connected to manipulative white women and therefore unworthy of respect. Baraka uses images and language that demonstrate a disgust and disrespect of white women, and white people in general. In fact, in the character list for Experimental Death Unit #1 (1964), Baraka lists the original cast, and instead of putting one of the white actor’s names, he simply writes, “Dude looked like Steve McQueen.”⁶⁴ It should come as no coincidence that the timing of these plays coincided with his divorce from his first wife—white, Jewish Hettie Jones (formerly Hettie Cohen).⁶⁵

Once Devil Lady is (and yet is not) dead, three black women come on stage—Mother, Sister, and Woman. Black Woman is the deified character in this play. Sister and Mother exemplify weak Black women who worship and aspire towards the whiteness of Devil Lady. When Black Man re-kills Devil Lady, Devil Lady “writhes and stiffens in death. The MOTHER whimpers, the SISTER gags and weeps and whines.”⁶⁶ Sister harps on about being connected to Devil Lady in

⁶³ Ibid., 70 and 71.

⁶⁴ Jones, Experimental Death Unit #1, 3.

⁶⁵ Watts, Amiri Baraka, 44.

⁶⁶ Jones, Madheart, 75.

such a way that when Devil Lady dies so does she. Sister and Mother end up fighting on the floor over Devil Lady.

Black Woman, in a fashion illustrating her true loyalty to—and allegiance with—the Black Man, attempts to explain to the women that they ought to listen to Black Man—“the soulforce of our day-to-day happening universe.”⁶⁷ Sister turns down the offer saying, “if I have to have a niggerman, give me a faggot anyday [sic].”⁶⁸ Mother endorses Sister adding, “a white boy’s better, daughter.”⁶⁹ Brother cannot understand the behavior and language of Mother and Sister: “Why don’t they act like women should? Why don’t they act like Black Women?” His questions echo Cleaver’s stance in which behaving in a manner not deemed that of the “Black Woman” revokes one’s Black Woman status. Black Man suggests perhaps he ought to “turn them over to the Black Arts and get their head relined.”⁷⁰ This statement reveals Baraka’s confidence in the proselytizing powers of the Black Arts Movement.

Baraka uses a speech by Black Woman as a platform to express who black women ought to be and their relationship to black men:

I’m the black woman. The one who disappeared. The sleepwalker. The one who runs through your dreams with your life and your seed. I am the Black woman. The one you need. You know this. Now you must discover a way to get me back, Black Man. You and you alone, must get me. Or you’ll never...lord...be a man. My man. Never know your own life needs. You’ll walk around white ladies breathing their stink, and lose your seed, your future to them.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 81.

This speech echoes Cleaver's premise that the black man cannot be a Black Man without the Black Woman, with Baraka's addendum--she must be the bearer of his progeny. In Baraka's Madheart (1966), Black Woman explains to Black Man that he needs her. However, he has a very violent reaction to her presumptuousness and he slaps her repeatedly. She begs him to cease and he continues to slap her as she weeps and they talk about the hardships they've experienced historically. Finally, he slaps her one last time, drags her towards him, passionately kisses her and says, "That shit is ended woman, you with me and the world is mine."⁷² The bizarre and abusive exchange ends with Black Woman agreeing to "submit for love" and weeping and kneeling before Black Man. The two "cry and then laugh, laugh wildly at everything and themselves."⁷³

Baraka may have been reflecting on what he perceived to be the status quo in intra-racial black relationships. On the contrary, he may have been ridiculing the machismo of Black Men. The ludicrousness of the action makes it hard to believe Baraka wanted his audience to take that exchange seriously. Supporting this notion is the fact that during a production of Experimental Death Unit #1, a black male director slapped the black female actress (Barbara Ann Teer) forcing Baraka to replace him as the director.⁷⁴ The fact that the man's abusive actions were not accommodated supports an argument for the fiction of the violence Baraka sanctioned within his plays.

⁷² Ibid., 82.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Amiri Baraka, interview by Sandra G. Shannon, Conversations with Amiri Baraka, ed. Charlie Reilly (Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 236.

Experimental Death Unit #1, the first of Baraka's black revolutionary plays, premiered at the St. Mark's Playhouse in New York City, on March 1, 1965. In this play, the Black Men take it upon themselves to physically rectify the mistakes of the Black woman.

In this brief one act, two white men are standing on a street in New York talking about the value of art and existence, when a black woman "staggering a little, wined up, with one stocking drooping" walks into the space and begins to seductively taunt their masculinity.⁷⁵ The men are both dying to "sink into that filthy pussy."⁷⁶ Once the woman convinces the men to have sex with her round a corner, they begin to fight about who will go first. The fight escalates to the point where one white man beats the other into unconsciousness. Woman (which is what Baraka calls her, as opposed to Black Woman) enjoys the fight and begins to root for one of the men to kill the other. The successful white man and Woman get ready to have sex when militant Black men arrive at the scene:

...a group of long-haired bearded Negro youths marches out with drums and marching cadence, though they look weary and full of combat. At the front of the group one boy marches with a pike on the top of which is a white man's head still dripping blood. They stop in front of the dead boy's body.⁷⁷

The Black Men make a bold entrance. Their marching and drumming may have been recognizable to a Harlem audience who at this time would have seen members of the Black Panther Party march in a similar fashion. What would not

⁷⁵ Baraka, Experimental Death Unit #1, 6.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

have been a common sight, and where I believe the author took liberties, is the decapitated white head on a pike. Baraka may have been expressing a desire to see an American world where black men have this measure of power and control and their violent acts go unchecked.

When Woman notices the black men, she tries to manage the situation by using language she hopes will frame her as a black cultural nationalist, such as “baby,” “soulbrother,” and “cats.” The men do not buy it and with the instructions of their Leader, the Soldiers shoot several rounds of ammunition at the black woman and the white man she was having sex with, killing them. The last words of this white man are: “Niggers! Niggers! Niggers! Niggers! Niggers!”⁷⁸ By displaying further racism towards black people (other than the disrespect of the black woman, which could be interpreted as the white men’s indiscriminate objectification of all women), Baraka attempts to justify the violent actions of the black men. The white man’s hatred of black people shines through in his final moments in which he screams racial profanities. It is as though the black men had this insight all along, by virtue of knowing the true character of all white people. The hatred of white men/white people is very apparent and the message of the play seems to be, white or black, if you bring down the values and morals of black people, you shall be destroyed.

The play also dramatizes an extract from a speech given by Malcolm X:

And if you go to jail for taking his head, you went to jail for a good cause. You can go to prison and say, I came here because I defended our

⁷⁸ Ibid., 15.

black women from the filthy paws of that blue-eyed white man. Yes I'm sayin' it and I mean it. You can go in hotels around here and find these white men layin' it up with black women why you can snatch off their heads. I mean snatch off their heads. You and I will never be respected until we get some respect for this black woman. Make her straighten up, and then straighten out that white man. And there's nothing wrong with that. No, what I'm telling you is not wrong; I'm telling you what is right. If he respects his women, he must respect ours. And if he can hang you for molesting his woman, you've got the right to hang him, for molesting your woman.⁷⁹

Malcolm X, a major source of inspiration for playwrights in the Black Arts Movement, suggests that black women who sleep with white men need to be corrected and restored to optimum Black Woman status because they are defective. As for the white men, they are stealing black men's property, black women, so they ought to be killed. Not only is violence against these white men sanctioned, but it is, in fact, lauded.

Ed Bullins's The Fabulous Miss Marie⁸⁰ offers a much more complex look at Black women and Black life in general. Compared to Baraka's X-influenced, agitprop plays, The revolutionary, Black Nationalist messages are integrated more subtly and the focus is on the experience of a specific family and group of friends who are black, as opposed to attempting to represent a singular black experience. This is made apparent by the fact that Bullins' characters have personal names and are not tagged by their race or gender. If anything, the character list tells us how old they are. The nature of their character is revealed through the drama of the play.

⁷⁹ Malcolm X, Malcolm X Audio and Video Clips, http://www.africawithin.com/malcolm/malcolm_clips.htm.

⁸⁰Ed Bullins, The Fabulous Miss Marie, in The New Lafayette Theater Presents (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974).

Stylistically, this play uses many unorthodox devices. It has the skeleton of a somewhat conventional narrative, with the plot unfolding over an unclearly defined number of days. However, the action is intermittently interrupted by soliloquies in which the characters explain their backgrounds or their feelings about different situations. The play also uses various media—projections, phonographs, and video—to construct a 1960s context.

The Fabulous Miss Marie is set in California in 1961, and takes place in the home of Miss Marie and her husband, Bill. The events begin a few days before Christmas and end a few days after New Years Day, 1962. Miss Marie has middle class aspirations; she often mentions the fact that her lack of a fur coat may reflect poorly amongst the women of the multiple Negro Women's clubs to which she belongs. Eleven Black characters, with ages ranging from their early twenties to mid-forties, are drunkenly partying over the course of the play. Although half of them are married, and are each having affairs with younger, older, or related people in the house.

The play begins with everybody watching pornography. Miss Marie seems to be the inspiration for a lot of the debauchery that takes place in her house. Marie knows her husband has been having an affair with a white woman (who is not present), and she suspects that he has also been having an affair with her niece, Wanda. She and her husband have an arrangement of turning a blind eye to each other's affairs, so long as her husband financially supports her.

During some of her soliloquies, her husband “does the dance of a 1930s negro showman, the Black Bottom, the Soft-shoe, the Buck ‘n Wing,”⁸¹ and together they say:

Bill brings home two hundred stone cold dollars a week...to me, Miss Marie...and puts it in my hand. And the tips he makes parkin’ cars out to the studio in Beverly Hills is more than that. We make almost as much as some colored doctors make...’n we spend it too. ’Cause it’s party time every day at Miss Marie’s house.⁸²

Their routine signifies the stereotypical black minstrels from the beginning of the twentieth century. Bill, in particular, is being commented upon as a weak, sellout of a Black man. However, his relationship to Miss Marie is portrayed more complexly than one solely constituted by a servant-master dynamic. In a soliloquy, he explains how he was released from prison before he had completed his sentence, came home and saw Marie sneaking a male visitor out of the back door. She denied it, and he almost hit her. He wanted to beat her, but he knew that would mean the end of their relationship, even if they stayed together, so he did not. His relationship to her is one of censored cruelty.

On the contrary, other characters tell the story of how Bill beat his white, pregnant mistress in front of them. It seems that Bill understands the upper hand he holds with his physical power, but has more respect for Miss Marie than his white girlfriend, and so will not hit her. However, several characters discuss the disrespect he indirectly displays towards Miss Marie, as he parades his white

⁸¹ Ibid., 16.

⁸² Ibid., 17.

girlfriend and their child in all Marie's favorite spots. Every time she confronts him about disrespecting her, he apologizes profusely and cites his drunkenness as the cause.

Bullins's approach is less aggressive than Baraka's, but by no means is this former Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party less politically fueled.⁸³ Part of this has to do with the fact that The Fabulous Miss Marie was written in the early seventies when, according to Bullins, there had been a shift in dramatic approaches used amongst Black Arts dramatists:

The literature has changed from a social-protest oriented form to one of a dialectical nature among black people—Black dialectics—and this new thrust has two main branches—the dialectic of change and the dialectic of experience. The writers are attempting to answer questions concerning Black survival and future, one group through confronting the Black/white reality of America, the other, by heightening the dreadful white reality of being a modern black captive and victim.⁸⁴

Bullins suggests theater had shifted away from trying to gain acceptance and human rights by targeting white viewer-ship/readership, and towards debating how to empower black people (the dialectic of change), or contemplating the metaphysics of blackness (the dialectic of experience) with a black audience.

The Fabulous Miss Marie fits into the dialectic of experience category, as it does not didactically attempt to change black people's thoughts. Rather, it exposes potential realities and controversies within the black community, such as classism, alcohol abuse and, arguably, decadent sexual behavior. However,

⁸³ Ed Bullins, The Official Website of the Playwright and Producer, <http://www.edbullins.com/>.

⁸⁴ Ed Bullins, The New Lafayette Theater Presents (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974), 4.

Bullins uses one character, Gafney, a young black man, to be the voice of Black Nationalism. Gafney accuses another character, Art, of having “niggerish ways,” because Art tries to get Wanda a job laundering money:

(Preaching) There are a lot more things...yes, a lot more things that you could be doin'...doin' in the service of the Black man...than dragging down your brothers and sisters...leading them down the crooked path in this “vile wilderness of North America.”...Yes, there are a lot more things you could be doin' than draggin' down your brothers and sisters for your own advantage.⁸⁵

As Gafney references a speech given by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in 1960, it can be deduced that he is a black nationalist.⁸⁶ However, Bullins still complicates our acceptance of Gafney's speeches. Gafney feels the need to justify his class background to Art, explaining how he was not brought up in a well-to-do black neighborhood, and so he's “a Soul Brother, too.”⁸⁷ Art responds by taunting Gafney for claiming to be a “street nigger!”⁸⁸ The two are constantly contending with each other as Art feels that Gafney has a superior attitude because he is a Black Nationalist. This superior attitude often served to isolate Black Nationalists from the larger Black Community. One of Watts's criticisms of Baraka was that he “imagined the black mass populace as less sophisticated than they actually were, and many of Baraka's agitprop plays were downright condescending to black audiences.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁶ Claude A. Clegg, III, Journal of a Multimedia History, <http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol1no1/elijahmuhammad.html>.

⁸⁷ Bullins, The Fabulous Miss Marie, 27.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Watts, Amiri Baraka, 290.

Through Gafney and Art's exchanges, Bullins connects the struggle for black liberation with afrocentricity and masculinity:

Art

...I don't see how It's gonna get me some money...and that's my problem right now.

Gafney

That is the least of your problems, brother... You're an African and...

Art

I'm a what?

Gafney

African, my brother... In these days of the early sixties with so many newly emerged African states coming to the fore in world influence... the fact of your Black birth, even in this spiritually desolate place known as North America...

Art

Look, man... I got a lot of things to do... why don't you save that...

Gafney

You can't continue avoiding the truth, Art.

Art

Well, man... my truth right now is that I need some dough. Big dough would be best... then I'd feel more like a man, African or not.

Gafney

We Black people are in a fight for liberation, brother. That is our manhood! And Africa is at the center of our struggle.

Art

Look, Gafney... I say let the Africans struggle for what they want... and I'll liberate some green here... My fight is right here... and this is where I stand or fall. ... Give me a gun, Freedom Fighter and I'll liberate some dough-ray-mee... dig?⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Bullins, The Fabulous Miss Marie, 55-56.

Art feels his biggest endeavor needs to be making money for himself in America. He feels he cannot be a man, by any definition, without money. Gafney feels Art will only be a man if he recognizes and embraces his African heritage. Manhood and Personhood are conflated in Gafney's explanation, with the word "man" connoting both masculinity and humanity. This conflation is not unique to Black men in the Black Arts. The etymology of the word "man" reveals its genderless roots and universal application, as the Proto-Germanic "mannaz" meant human.⁹¹ However, there is a possibility Bullins could be suggesting Art wants to be a "man" in the two ways the word was used in 1960s popular culture— as a drug dealer or as "the man": "person or group asserting authority or power over another" --- usually white.⁹² Either way, Gafney and Art fail to reach an agreement on what these/all black men need to do in order to be a man. By passionately presenting both side of the argument, and failing to indicate a winner, Bullins leaves the decision of what makes a black man to the audience members.

Generosity with his audience is not a quality Bullins exhibited in a play produced a year earlier. It Bees Dat Way was first performed at the Ambiance Lunch-Hour Theater Club in London in 1970.⁹³ Though all the characters are

⁹¹ Man. Reference.com. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Man> (accessed: March 27, 2007).

⁹² man. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/man> (accessed: March 27, 2007).

⁹³ Ed Bullins, It Bees Dat Way, in Four Dynamite Plays, ed. Ed Bullins (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc, 1972), 4.

black, Bullins insists that the play should be performed to a predominantly white audience.⁹⁴ The play is anything but conventional, relying heavily upon the audience for most of the dialogue and action that ensues. Six characters enter the performance space amongst an unsuspecting twenty-five-person audience. Among the six are two women: Jackie--a forty-five year old “bleary-eyed, nappy-headed” drunk, and Sister--a black woman in her early twenties.⁹⁵

The six characters talk amongst the audience and each other pursuing their respective vices—sex, drugs, money, or violence. The conversations range in pitch, from private one-on-one exchanges to obnoxiously loud arguments that engage the whole room. Bullins instructs the actors to take any conversation to its most extreme and ludicrous conclusion: “whichever way the audience goes, the ACTORS go counter to it or with it, whatever is most unlikely and threatening, even into physical abuse: scuffling, rape, strong-arming and beating the audience.”⁹⁶

Two characters, Outlaw and Trigger, escalate the action, mugging several of the white audience members and thereby skyrocketing the physical and psychological violence. Throughout the play Jackie is drunkenly participating by shouting her opinion: “PLEASE, GOD IN HEAVEN DON’T LET ME WITNESS NO NOTHIN’ LIKE DIS...OH LORD DON’T LET ME SEE DIS

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 6.

MAN GET KILLED.”⁹⁷ Jackie embodies the stereotypes of the lazy, black, alcoholic, as well as religious, black woman.

Sister represents different black stereotypes: the sexually aggressive, money-hungry whore, and the wild and uncouth black girl: “I just want to give somebody a good time. Just step right up and have your wallets ready.”⁹⁸ The stereotyping of the Black women is in line with the stereotyping of all the black characters in the play. The characters seem to be a white person’s worst “black people” nightmare. Bullins does this intentionally. Towards the end, the audience members are given permission to leave in small clusters. By the time the last white person is allowed to leave, “sirens, crowd sounds, gunfire, riot, revolution sounds”⁹⁹ are blaring.

It seems Bullins’s goal was to create an extremely threatening environment for white people who may have been interested in coming to watch a black play, and consequently, have them never desire to see a black play again in their lives. The play would serve to reaffirm their stereotypes of black people and instill a fear in them that would turn them away from black theater and let them know that it is no longer safe to participate in the black liberation struggle. His play discriminatorily attacks white liberals, hoping to expurgate their deep seeded racism.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 16.

Both Bullins and Baraka demonstrate an exclusive idea of theater, black theater, women and the Black Woman. They are fearless and aggressive in their exposition of these ideas, almost always incorporating violence and creating very dangerous atmospheres on stage, off stage, in the audience and in the world. They are steadfast in proselytizing notions of Sister/Black Woman, and quick to convict and inflict violence and abuse upon any black person attempting to complicate their definitions of black womanhood. Nevertheless, alternative voices found their way into the dialectics within the Black Arts Movement. One such voice was that of Sonia Sanchez.

Female Voice in a Male Movement: Sonia Sanchez

...a commonplace about the Black Arts Movement is that it was characterized, almost defined, by an extremely misogynist and homophobic masculinism. In fact, one might say that certain branches of Black Arts (and post-Black Arts) thought are locked in a death embrace with some schools of feminist criticism....¹⁰⁰

At a time when the African American woman was being relegated to domestic work and bolstering her man, Sonia Sanchez spoke out in criticism of the misogyny of the Black Arts Movement and sought to empower black women. She did this in two ways: by illuminating black men's imposed definition of blackness, particularly black womanhood, and by portraying women with the strength to break free from oppression from white people, black men and themselves.

Sonia Sanchez was born Wilsonia Benita Driver in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1934. She was a resident of Harlem, New York through out the 1950s and 1960s before moving to San Francisco. During the early sixties she was a member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an interracial organization with principles of non-violent civil disobedience.¹⁰¹ During this time she was an integrationist; however, in 1971 she left CORE and joined the Nation of Islam,

¹⁰⁰ Smethurst, the black arts movement, 84.

¹⁰¹ Congress of Racial Equality, "The History of CORE," The Congress of Racial Equality, <http://www.core-online.org/History/history%20opening.htm>.

leaving just four years later in 1975—primarily because the group felt she was “a PanAfricanist, a revolutionary PanAfricanist and socialist.”¹⁰²

Sanchez is principally a poet. She began writing plays because of a phone conversation with Bullins in 1968:

I was asked, “Are you a playwright?” And I said, “Yes, I am,” although at that time, I had not written a play. . . . So of course, you know, I said, “Yeah, I write plays.” I’m a poet; why not say that? And I was asked then to give a play.¹⁰³

The Bronx is Next was published in both Black Revolutionary Theater and The Drama Review in 1968, and was first produced at Theater Black in New York in 1970.¹⁰⁴ Because Bullins had invited Sanchez into a circle of predominantly male, Black Nationalist theater practitioners, she wrote a play that simultaneously paid homage to—and deeply criticized—the men within this circle.

The Bronx is Next is the story of a night when four black men, disgusted by the living conditions of black people in New York City, clear Harlem tenements in order to burn them to the ground. While removing the inhabitants of the tenements, the black men interact with and murder three characters: Old

¹⁰² Sonia Sanchez, interview by Susan Nelly, “Discipline and Craft: An Interview with Sonia Sanchez,” African American Review (Winter, 2000), 8:

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_1-2_39/ai_n15675153/pg_8.

¹⁰³ Sonia Sanchez, interview by Jacqueline Wood, “‘This thing called playwrighting’: an interview with Sonia Sanchez on the art of her drama.” African American Review (Spring-Summer, 2005), 4: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_1-2_39/ai_n15675153/pg_4.

¹⁰⁴ Sonia Sanchez, The Bronx is next [Electronic version], Black Drama (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2002).

<http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?BLDR:PL001310>;

Angela E. Weaver, Women of Color Women of Words, The School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies, at Rutgers University,

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~cybers/sanchez2.html>.

Sister, White Cop, and Black Bitch. The four black men are named Charles, Larry, Roland, and Jimmy, and “who most likely represent Charles Patterson, Larry Neal, Rolland Snellings [known now as Askia Toure] and Jimmy Garrett.”¹⁰⁵ Patterson and Garrett are two of the Black Nationalists whom Neal named in his declaration of playwrights who exemplify Black Arts ideology. Patterson was one of the people Baraka teamed up with to start the Black Arts Repertory Theater in 1964.¹⁰⁶ When Sanchez wrote The Bronx is Next, Garrett was best known for writing And We Own the Night (1968), a play in which Johny, a young, black, militant male, wounded trying to protect his black neighborhood from pigs (white police), kills his own mother, “a female Uncle Tom” guilty of “emasculating his father.”¹⁰⁷ After Baraka, Askia Toure is the revolutionary poet most associated with the Black Arts Movement. A former member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), he co-authored their “Black Power Position Paper,” proliferating the ideology of “Black Power,” as well as the use of the phrase.¹⁰⁸ This fact contextualizes his work during this period as particularly political and in direct correlation with the Black Power Movement.

These four black characters are ruthless to the occupants of the Harlem tenements: “C’mon you mothafuckers. Keep moving. Git your slow asses out of

¹⁰⁵ Hiltz and Sell, Black Arts Movement, <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/people/sanchez.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Neal, Visions of a Liberated Future, 66.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰⁸ Askia Toure, The Official Website of Askia Toure, <http://www.askiatoure.com/bio.html>.

here.”¹⁰⁹ They encounter Old Sister, an older African American woman who, having brought most of her belongings up from Birmingham forty years ago, cannot limit her packing to the bare essentials. Charles instructs Roland to take her back to her apartment and to give her “hot tea,” and tells her she can come another time when they have “room for [her] stuff.”¹¹⁰ The “hot tea” will most likely be poisoned, killing her before she can be burnt alive in the fire. Charles is unwilling to accommodate the old woman’s desire to hang on to her old way of life, symbolized by her desire to keep her old belongings. Sanchez has crafted Charles to mirror the behavior of Johnny in Garrett’s And We Own the Night. Both are willing to kill older black women because “there ain’t no time for anyone” other than themselves, and those willing to follow them.¹¹¹ Their selfishness is blatant; Sanchez illustrates and critiques the characters’ lack of humanity—a criticism simultaneously directed towards the men within the Black Arts Movement.

It is appropriate that Charles instigates all the violence in The Bronx is Next because Patterson after whom the character is modeled, had a reputation for violence. However, it is strange that Sanchez grouped together Patterson, Snellings, Garrett, and Neal, because the four had had a very violent falling out in 1965, when Patterson held Neal and Snellings at gunpoint.¹¹² This illustrates how

¹⁰⁹ Sonia Sanchez, The Bronx is Next (Electronic Edition by Alexander Street Press, L.L.C., 2005), 78.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Toure explains how Patterson and Johnny Moore staged a coup of Baraka’s Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BART/S) : “They got us in there, locked the doors and pulled guns on

the men in the Black Arts Movement trod a thin line between theater and life, a fact Sanchez illuminates through the black male character's interactions with White Cop.

While off duty, White Cop comes to have sex with his black mistress (Black Bitch) who lives in Harlem. Larry finds White Cop as he is clearing the buildings and brings him to Charles. The men are angry about White Cop's presence, but angrier yet with Black Bitch, who Charles then summons. While Larry goes to fetch Black Bitch, Charles, Jimmy, and Roland decide to play a role reversal game with White Cop, inspired by an incident Jimmy experienced the day before in which he was harassed by white police officers. The men persuade White Cop to play a black man running down a block in Harlem while they play white police officers. They harass White Cop saying he must have stolen something to be running. As White Cop protests the violation of his rights, they begin to hit him with the gun. Carried away by the game, Charles, Larry, and Jimmy continue to verbally abuse and beat White Cop:

WHITE COP

Look enough is enough. I'm ready to stop—I'm tired.

JIMMY

What's wrong nigger boy—can't you answer simple questions when you're asked them. Oh I know what's wrong. You need me to help you to remember. Hits WHITE COP with gun.

us. Johnny Moore & Charles Patterson announced themselves as "Captain Johnny Moore, and Captain Charles Patterson of the NOI [Nation of Islam]." Then announced, "we are going to execute a nigger before your eyes,—yeah, Rolland, m--f--r, we don't like you--and that nigga, Larry!" cited in "Askia Toure talks to Konch," Ishmael Reed's Konch Magazine, <http://www.ishmaelreedpub.com/articles/toure.html>.

WHITE COP

Have you gone crazy? Stop it now or there will be consequences.

ROLAND

What did you steal black boy—we can't find it on you but we know you got it hidden someplace. Hits him again.

WHITE COP

Oh my God. Stop it... This can't be happening to me. Look—I'm still me. It's only make-believe.

...

ROLAND

You ain't shit boy. You black. You a nigger we caught running down the street—running and stealing like all the niggers around him.¹¹³

Charles, Roland and Jimmy are unable to appreciate the “make-believe” aspect of the game because it mirrors the reality of their lives. Through the game, the men are able to attain the power to oppress that comes from being (if only for a moment) a white person and a police officer. Their language demonstrates the verbal abuse directed towards blacks (like “nigger”), however, one is forced to ask whether the men suffer from internalized oppression. Sanchez raises this question through Roland's comment before they begin playing the game: “I've always wanted to be a white dude—now's my chance.”¹¹⁴ However, internalized oppression is not Sanchez's primary message in the above extract. She allows the audience to see the source of the arguably extreme and violent behavior of Black Nationalists. The black men reclaim power and agency from white oppressors, as advocated by Malcolm X. Sanchez shows us how white people would be unable to handle the same cruel treatment they perform on blacks. And when White Cop

¹¹³ Sanchez, Bronx is Next, 81.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

protests saying, “Look—I’m still me,” he demonstrates a belief that his whiteness should exempt him from such an assault, which is reserved for blackness.

As angry as the black men are with White Cop, their feelings and consequent treatment of Black Bitch display a greater frustration and anger with her. They claim to be clearing the Harlem tenements and burning them down “for all the black bitches like her.”¹¹⁵ When the black men designate the label “bitch” to the black woman, however, she proudly reclaims it and challenges the labels they give themselves:

A smart-assed-black bitch—that’s me. Smart enough to stay clear of all black bastard men who jump from black pussy to black pussy like jumping jacks. ... Yeah. I know what I am. *Looks around*. But all you revolutionaries or nationalists or whatever you call yourselves—do you know where you at?¹¹⁶

Black Bitch’s bold question challenges the agency the men have given themselves to solve the problems of Black people, as well as the understanding the men have of the people they are trying to help. Fundamentally, Black Bitch’s question attacks the men’s understanding of themselves, implying the men’s actions do not have personal significance. Black Bitch’s assumption is supported at the end of the play when Roland asks, “You think this is the right strategy burning down the ghettos? Don’t make much sense to me man. But orders is orders.”¹¹⁷ None of the men respond, and Charles reveals that, although he appears to be in charge of the operation, he gets his orders from elsewhere. The

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 79.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 83.

mystery of the origin of their directives complicates the assumption that black men are in control. It suggests that they could be puppets acting on behalf of a faceless power, a power that does not necessarily have the best interests of black people at heart.

Charles sexually assaults Black Bitch by kissing, touching, and eventually hitting her, all the while verbally abusing her: “I could fuck you right here if I wanted to. You know what a Black man is don’t you bitch? Is that what happens when you fuck faggoty white men?”¹¹⁸ He feels that by degrading her, he shall remind her of his dominance and punish her for the unforgivable crime of sleeping with a white man. However, no matter how hard Charles tries, she maintains her pride. After Charles knocks her to the ground and Jimmy attempts to help her get up, she decries:

No. Watch this boy. You still young. Watch me. Don’t touch me. Watch me get up. It hurts. But I’ll get up. And when I’m up the tears will stop. I don’t cry, when I’m standing up. All right I’m up again. Who else? Here I am, a black bitch, up for grabs. Anyone here for me. Take your choice—your pick—slap me or fuck me—anyway you get the same charge.¹¹⁹

Sanchez makes a powerful statement in Black Bitch’s refusal to accept help from the people who are hurting her. The statement is: the same people who are bringing you down cannot and should not be the same people helping you up. This is applicable to the race problem in America—White people cannot and should not be the people liberating black people. Likewise, men cannot and should not be the people liberating women. She empowers Black Bitch, and

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

consequently, all black women, and shows them that they are strong enough to overcome abuse.

Sanchez followed The Bronx is Next with five other plays: Dirty Hearts (1971), Malcolm X/Don't Live Here No More (1972), Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us? (1973), Sister Son/Ji (1969), I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't (1982), and Black Cats and Uneasy Landings (1995). Of all the plays she has written, Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us (1973) is the most critical of the male values that were coming out of the Black Arts Movement. When interviewed by Jacqueline Wood about the art of her drama, she explains the impetus for writing that particular play:

...some of the young men were almost equating their life styles with the whole idea of changing the world. Or freedom. And so you saw things like, people would get up and announce that they were getting with polygamy. So I asked, "Uh huh, but how does that free us?" How does that lifestyle free us? I can't see any connection here at all.¹²⁰

Sanchez's play is a fierce critique of the abuse of black women by black men (and to a smaller degree all women by all men). The black men, of whom she asks "uh huh, but how do it free us?" are the young, revolutionary afrocentrists. She does, however, choose a variety of black men to interrogate. In her character list, she refers to all the black men as "Brothers," using terminology common to black nationalists at the time and immediately establishing a voice from within the

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Black Nationalist movement rather than in opposition to it.¹²¹ This makes her criticism less about the notion of empowered black men and more about the repercussions for the women by their side.

Uh huh, But how do it free us? is divided into three separate narratives: Group 1, Group 2, and Group 3. In between each of these scenes Sanchez inserts dancers who interpret the action that has just taken place. Group 1 has three characters: Malik, Waleesha, and Nefertia. Malik is a twenty-year-old brother whose first wife, Waleesha, is twenty-one years old, and extremely pregnant, and whose second wife, Nefertia, is eighteen-years old, and newly pregnant. The action takes place in their bedroom.

Malik is wearing “traditional clothes” and Nefertia a “traditional dress.” This vague stage direction may not provide much insight for a contemporary reader, however, within Sanchez’s circles at the time these were clear signifiers. In his essay “The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism,” Theodore Draper explains, “cultural nationalism manifested in dress—dashikis, bubas, natural heads, etc.”¹²² As evinced by their attire, these three characters are on board the Black Nationalist train.

The name Nefertia is a derivative of the name of the second most eminent Egyptian queen, Nefertiti (Cleopatra being the first). The name “Nefertiti”

¹²¹ Sonia Sanchez, Uh, Uh; But How Do It Free Us? in The New Lafayette Theater Presents, ed. Ed Bullins (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1974), 165.

¹²² Theodore Draper, "The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism," American Political Science Review 64 (1971): 1180-1182: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-0554%28197112%2965%3A4%3C1180%3ATROBN%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>.

translates to “a beautiful woman has arrived.”¹²³ Phrases commonly associated with Nefertiti include: “Ruler of the Nile,” “Daughter of Gods,” and “Empress of the Mediterranean.” By naming the second wife Nefertia, Sanchez highlights not only her physical grace and beauty, but also her power and afrocentric roots.

The name Waleesha has the Muslim root “wala” or “wala” which means loyalty, befitting her character.¹²⁴ As the first wife, she remains faithful and dedicated to her husband even though he meets and brings home another woman during her pregnancy. Her husband Malik’s name is Arabic and literally means “King.”¹²⁵ Given the Muslim heritage implicit within their names and the “traditional” dress code assigned to this Brother and the two Sisters, one can infer that these characters are black Muslims.

Initially, the dialogue in this scene suggests that the arrangement (one man and two wives) works well for all involved. The conversation surrounds a play that both Malik and Nefertia will act in. Both women bolster Malik’s ego by telling him of his brilliance in the role and as an actor. When Nefertia reveals to Waleesha that she, too, is performing in the play and hiding her three-month pregnancy to do so, Waleesha chastises her: “But, Sister, you should tell

¹²³ Egypt State Information Service, "Egypt State Information Service Famous Women," Egypt State Information Service- Your Gateway to Egypt, <http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Women/HOWomen/Famous/10010300000000001.htm> (accessed Mar 6, 2007).

¹²⁴ "Thousands of Muslim Baby Names with their meanings," The Best Place for Muslim Names and Meanings, <http://www.names4muslims.com/search.php?txtnum=100&GenderID=%25&nam=wal> (accessed Mar 6, 2007).

¹²⁵ Ibid.

everyone, after all, it is an occasion for rejoicing. Is it not so, my husband?"¹²⁶

The syntax of this last sentence, though uncommon in Western English dialects, is a familiar form when African languages translate into English. For instance, in Luganda, an East African language, "Si kyo?" literally "is it not so?" is a common coda when making a statement, similar to the American "right?" or the British "innit?" Waleesha's language choice frames her as an afrocentrist. Though she projects afrocentricity, her polygamous relationship contradicts her feelings of self worth. She is not a true afrocentrist by Asante's definition ("to be black is to be against all forms of oppression"), as she has not internalized an ideology that places the best interests of all African descendants at heart. She demonstrates a positioning of Malik's desires above her own or Nefertia's, and therefore a positioning of African men's desires above those of African women—internalized sexism.

Waleesha's statement, that Nefertia should not conceal her pregnancy, causes Malik to reminisce about the size of Waleesha's stomach when she was three months pregnant. Waleesha discloses that she was eating a lot during that period and as a postscript mentions that Nefertia moved in at the same time. There are two possible inferences that can be made from her comments. She may have eaten an amount that made her lose her figure and become unattractive to Malik, inspiring him to find another woman. Alternatively, the stress brought on by

¹²⁶ Sonia Sanchez, Uh, Uh; But How Do It Free Us?. 168.

Nefertia moving in with Waleesha and her husband made her resort to comfort food. Whatever the case, this is the first revelation of a not-so-happy picture.

Malik appears to be oblivious to Waleesha's sadness and decides to leave after their conversation. He declines Waleesha's offer to make him food, deciding to eat elsewhere. He asks Nefertia if she can give him money from her school check. She tells him she has not yet cashed it and all she has is two dollars. He decides to take that from her and leave. The interaction shows Malik's selfishness; he would be willing to take Nefertia's education funds, and when he cannot get that, he'll settle for all the money she has. Nefertia does not question his decision; it seems as though her school check is used to support Malik and, potentially, Waleesha. This implies that Malik is maintaining a lifestyle that he cannot support, and must resort to using Nefertia to fund it. Malik's use of Waleesha to further his financial needs, while displaying unloving behavior, can be read as Sanchez's criticism/skepticism of black male activists who are financially dependant upon black women.

As soon as Malik leaves, Waleesha brings up the conversation about her large body during the early stages of her pregnancy, stressing: "don't youuuu remember, Nefertia?"¹²⁷ Sanchez's roots in poetry are very visible in her writing style. She poetically indicates what words the actress ought to stress with the four "u"s. Sanchez employs this device often. Earlier Malik commented that Waleesha was "biggggg" and Nefertia described the play as "baddddd" (slang,

¹²⁷ Ibid., 169.

meaning good). Unlike Amiri Baraka who compromises his poetic aesthetics in favor of drilling a point home, Sanchez's dramatic writing and poetry assume an intelligent audience that appreciates creative aesthetical choices.

Waleesha emphasizes "youuuu," trying to surface the tension and provoke a contentious conversation. Nefertia ignores this continued provocation, saying that Waleesha is trying to start an argument. Waleesha responds:

Why should I be mad at you? Just tell me why, Nefertia. Malik brought you here—you were his choice. His decision. And since I love him I have to abide by his choice, no matter how unwise it may be.¹²⁸

Waleesha is hostile. Her words illustrate a lack of agency and demonstrate passive aggression. She seems to view her lot as determined by Malik, as she must forever have unconditional "wala," loyalty, to him, no matter how inconvenient it may be. Her loyalty and devotion is not reciprocated. Eventually Nefertia responds to Waleesha's provocation. The women argue about who will bear a "male/child" and whose child Malik will love the most. Their desire to have male children reveals internalized sexism as well as an acute understanding that Malik, and the world, shall be kinder to a black man. Rather than attempt to change the world's perception of black womanhood, the women are victims of the same indoctrination that both whites and men receive concerning black women, and will lack black female pride, thereby keeping themselves subjugated.

Nefertia tells Waleesha how Malik said she had rescued him from the boredom that was his marriage with Waleesha:

¹²⁸ Ibid., 170.

He used to tell me about you. You and yo/knitting and going to the movies. And hardly ever interested in him, he said. He said you never saw him, never. He said you never read anything, not even a newspaper. We love each other becuz we have everything in common. Theatre, school, poetry. Ours is not just a physical love, he says. It's mental too. So it's you who don't really stand a chance here.¹²⁹

The harsh reality-check that Nefertia gives Waleesha illustrates the development of the prototypical idea of what men (black men) find attractive in women.

Physical grace and beauty are to be supplemented by intellect and a shared intellectual philosophy. It seems Malik has been unhappy with Waleesha because she is not interested in educating herself on current affairs the way Nefertia is.

Sanchez suggests Malik was attracted to these two very different women in order to satisfy his desire to be with a homemaker as well as a Black Nationalist activist. Sanchez points out the contradiction male Black Nationalists had in their requirements for the ideal Black Woman/Sister. Though Malik thinks he has a permanent set-up with two wives, each woman seems sure she will be able to remove the other from the picture. In the final words of Group 1's scene, Waleesha predicts polygamy will not work for this unhappy family: "Just you wait and see, sister. Just you wait and see..."¹³⁰ Sanchez ends Group 1 by suggesting the women are going to take action to rectify their predicament.

Immediately following Group 1, Sanchez outlines an interpretive dance involving a "READING SISTER," a "KNITTING SISTER," and a "MALE

¹²⁹ Ibid., 171.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

DANCER.” It is during this dance that any uncertainty about Sanchez’s message in the previous action is clarified. Below is an extract from her instructions:

*HE lines them up behind him and begins to preen. HE returns to get the other two SISTERS, the KNITTING SISTER behind him and the READING SISTER behind the KNITTING SISTER. The READING SISTER keeps trying to move in front of the KNITTING SISTER but is blocked each time. And the MALE DANCER never looks around. As the MALE DANCER walks, HE keeps turning his head as HE sees other sisters, beckons, like as to “I’ll see you later” look, spruces up. Stops at mirror again and does a preening dance. The SECOND MALE DANCER on the floor laughs rolls over the floor and laughs. Laughs. Laughs.*¹³¹

The fact that the Male Dancer does not bother to turn around and look at the Sisters fighting to get closer to him is a metaphor for how Malik’s polygamy affects them. Male Dancer’s wandering eye is an indication that Malik is still looking for women to add to his collection, and that he was probably going to meet another woman when he took Nefertia’s dinner money. Male Dancer’s obsession with looking in the mirror and grooming himself points to Malik’s self-obsession, and disregard for the women. The second Male Dancer’s laughter implies camaraderie amongst the men; the women’s fight for the man’s love is humorous to them. It illustrates a lack of respect for the women and insinuates that Malik is not alone in his mistreatment of women.

Sanchez’s use of interpretive dance to separate the various acts fuses different types of art into this theatrical piece. By doing so, she creates

¹³¹ Ibid., 172.

opportunities for Black Artists with different specialties outside of theater to be a part of her political work. This is important as the Black Arts Movement involved more than just theater, but also poetry, visual art, music, and dance. The dance sequences, along with the non-traditional way in which the narrative unfolds (with three Groups of related action), places Uh Huh; But How Do It Free Us? in a genre that is neither realism—like most of the male playwrights in the Black Arts Movement—nor avant-garde—in a style allying it with white American experimental theater practitioners.

Group 2 involves four brothers (First Brother, Second Brother, Third Brother, and Brother Man), one Devil, a Sister/Whore and a White Whore.¹³² She ascribes the terms “Sister” to all the black women and “Brother” to the black men, which become antonyms for “white.” This is evidenced by the fact that the two characters in Group 2 who are prostitutes are described as “Sister Whore” and “White whore.”¹³³ The use of derogatory terms to describe the women in Sanchez’s plays, such as “bitch and “whore” suggest that Sanchez focuses more on how the world (particularly through the gaze of the black men) views these women, as opposed to who these women truly are.

The men are sitting on white rocking horses and the women are by their sides with whips. The men have just returned from prison where Brother Man feels he was rehabilitated into blackness (and cured of negro-ness as explicated in the introduction):

¹³² “Devil” is the term she uses to refer to a white man in the character list.

¹³³ Sanchez, Uh, Uh; But How Do It Free Us?, 172.

Yeah, mannnn. That place was a M.F Eight years there. Amid everything. But I'm out now. And the first thing I said I wuz gon' do wuz to get the biggest fix in the world. You digit. I would be the world. Cuz, man, I got the biggest hustle in the whole wide world today. I found blackness in the joint, you dig, and I wrote a book and everything I write is licked up by everyone. The Blk/prison/writer is a hero. All thanks is due to Malcolm/man, Eldridge/man for making this all so simple. Man, I got it made after all these thirty-eight years of little hustles, little busts. I got it made. All praise is due to the blackness.¹³⁴

Brother Man thinks he has found blackness akin to that of Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X—blackness centered on Black Nationalist ideology. However, he misunderstands the success and motive of these Black Nationalists. They expressed a desire to improve the lives of black people, and their fame was a result of efforts in that direction; however, Brother Man wants to manipulate people for his financial prosperity, with no agenda to improve the lives of Black people.

By dressing in a dashiki with tiki and an African hat, Brother Man is using his apparel to signify cultural nationalism, which the other three brothers are not doing. They are dressed in bellbottoms, cowboy hats, big ties, and jewelry—items that signify a white, American, 1960s, alternative culture. Brother Man uses phrases that were used by Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver when trying to instill a sense of black pride amongst African Americans. However, he expresses a desire to sell drugs to black people, which contradicts Black Nationalist ideology, as it is perceived to be harming the minds and bodies of black people.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 173.

Brother Man speaks of achieving fame and recognition as a simple feat because everybody loves the “Blk/prison/writer.” This comment is unfortunate because it infers that an educated, black man in prison is the type of black man America respects and wants to see. The statement re-incarcerates him and does not allow the freedom of self-definition that Black Nationalism aspired towards.

While riding horses, the three other Brothers begin to climax, getting off on a combination of riding their horses, having sex with their whores, snorting cocaine, and the idea of being a new type of black man— “the organized/gangster/Blk/man,” “new Blk/mafia,” “baddddddd” and “meannnnn.” They speak of “controlling an entire Blk/community” through dealing drugs and making money.¹³⁵

White Man has an interaction with White Whore in which he reveals his “mama complex” (an allusion to a Freudian Oedipus Complex).¹³⁶ He asks that she whip him, and at some point his movement turns into “a slow memory of death.”¹³⁷ Delusional, he mistakes White Whore for his mother and cries for his mother to stop whipping him because he was only playing house. He then begins to whip White Whore. During this moment he is very violent with White Whore and quite unaware of what he is uttering. The three brothers are annoyed because White Man is Brother Man’s friend, and while in prison he was somebody’s

¹³⁵ Ibid., 175.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 177.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 176.

“kid.”¹³⁸ Brother Man is indebted to White Man, through whom he was able to “get his thing straight.”¹³⁹ It seems that the White Man provided Brother Man with the initial connections necessary to begin his drug business. It can be inferred that Sanchez is alluding to the white man behind the corrupt black men. The fact that Brother Man decides to provide for himself financially through connections with a white man suggest that he is indebted to a white man, “the man.” Sanchez implies white men use black men to further their agenda of trying to bring down black people by making them addicted to drugs and therefore unproductive.

Brother Man attempts to engage Black Whore in a conversation by asking her what her name is. She responds:

Ain't got no name. Lost my name when I was eleven years old. I became just a body then so I forgot my name. Don't nobody want to know a Black woman's name anyway. You gon' take me home with ya to keep? Put me in your pocket to hold/touch when you need some warmth? No? Well, since you ain't, then there ain't no reason to tell ya my name. All ya need to know is on my face and body. If you can read a map you can read me.¹⁴⁰

Black Whore expresses a feeling of indifference and a strong sense of awareness of how others perceive her. She allies the fact that nobody wants to know who she is, or wants to treat her the way they treat other people, with being a black woman as opposed to a woman in her line of work. With an attitude of indifference, she credits her loss of identity with objectification at a young age and calls out Brother Man on a fraudulent interest in her. Black Whore refuses to accept that

¹³⁸ Sanchez switches between various names for all the characters—White Man is the same person as Devil; *Ibid.*, 177; From the passage one can infer that “kid” means sex slave.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

any interest in her is genuine, because in her experience all people have ever seen her for is her exterior.

Brother Man does not buy her explanation. He tells her not to give the tired explanation of child abuse and child prostitution as an explanation for her current profession. He says, “You a whore cuz you wants to be, now aint that so?”¹⁴¹ In doing so, he returns her agency and makes her the determiner of her life’s path. Though this could potentially empower her, he is also releasing himself of any responsibility he may hold for her self-perception or “whoring.” Her response to him is: “Uh huh. Amen. And yassuh, boss.”¹⁴² Here Sanchez conjures the black woman as historically represented in American popular culture— subservient, obedient, and religious (the mammy in minstrels). She inverts this perception by placing Black Whore in an unconventional picture of black women, no longer the mammy but still saying what is expected of the mammy (subservient affirmations such as “yassuh, boss”). Black Whore is using minstrel show language as a survival tool, since she suspects disagreeing with Brother Man will lead to violence, which it eventually does. Therefore, in the context of Sanchez’s play, minstrel language signifies self-awareness and an ability to manipulate the stereotype in her favor, as opposed to ignorance and obsequiousness.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 178.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Brother Man dismounts his wooden horse and mounts Black Whore's back, making her take him to the other Brothers and "White Dude."¹⁴³ All the men are snorting coke, exclaiming in their ecstasy: "I am god" and "Get me five women." White Dude proclaims:

I rule the universe. I am the universe. The universe revolves around me. I am the universe. I am a man. A man. A man. Can't no one surpass me. I am a man. The man. A man. The man.¹⁴⁴

The above passage is the first time that White Man positions himself as superior and speaks of his dominance and power. Sanchez does not give these characters names, making them prototypes of their descriptors instead of individuals. As White Man is the only white man in the play, he represents all white men. In his drug-induced unconsciousness he speaks his inner thoughts, which declare that he rules the universe. Sanchez plays with the 1960s politics surrounding the use of the term "the man."¹⁴⁵ She obscures the definition by which he uses it; "the man" references his whiteness, a potential allegiance with an oppressive government, how cool he thinks he is, or the fact that he is a drug dealer. Sanchez could be implying all of the above, which further highlights the likelihood that Brother Man is a puppet for a higher/invisible power trying to oppress black people, in a similar fashion to the invisible powers in The Bronx is Next.

¹⁴³ Sanchez uses different words to describe the white man throughout the play: "Man," "Dude," "Devil."

¹⁴⁴ Sanchez, Uh, Uh; But How Do It Free Us?, 180.

¹⁴⁵ "'The Man' is a moniker phrase used to describe higher authority, especially by intellectuals or a criminal/counterculture group... can also be a form of praise... a drug dealer... the government, leaders of large corporations, and other authority figures in general, such as the police." The_Man. Reference.com. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/The_Man (accessed: April 15, 2007).

Seeing the effects of cocaine on the other men, Brother Man decides to take a hit and offers some to Sister Whore, who is hesitant at first but then indulges. During her high, Black Whore makes a comment about Brother Man and her destiny being over. This angers Brother Man who feels she is just another ungrateful black woman. He begins to interrogate her violently about being a parent. He describes her life the way he imagines a typical black woman's to be: living with an old woman, prostituting herself while bringing her kids presents during the holidays. Black Whore confesses that that is her lifestyle, and First Brother remarks that the described woman sounds just like his momma. He tells the story of how he got his friends to "run her some good stuff," but she couldn't handle it and overdosed. In her death, she reminded him of "A beautiful queen."¹⁴⁶

Sanchez complicates our understanding of these black men's perception of Black women. First Brother is responsible for his mother's death, but does not seem to understand that. He glorifies her appearance during death because it reminds him of what she looked like as a child. Helplessness or inactivity is how he remembers his mother, which may suggest she did not nurture him or take an active role in raising him. Sanchez implies Black Women are responsible for having a negative influence on the way their children turn out, and therefore for how the black men in their lives treat black women. She does not, however, put

¹⁴⁶Sanchez, Uh, Uh: But How Do It Free Us?, 182.

all the blame on any one party, suggesting a cycle of destructive behavior that needs to be broken by black men as well as by black women.

Black Whore shares with Brother Man (and consequently the audience) how young black men try to stop her from prostituting, calling her “a queen, the mother of the universe. A beautiful Blk/woman/queen.”¹⁴⁷ When Brother Man insists she expound on the issue, she says:

They say– it ain’t me saying it, now, they say that we’re the way we are because the men, the dudes, the brothers our age couldn’t see us as anything else except whores, cuz they couldn’t see us as theyselves as anything else except pimps or numbers runners or junkies or pushers... or even the Blk/gansters who go round thinking they baddddd. All they doing is repeating themselves out loud. Cuz they still hurting, killing, selling dope to our people, and they don’t know that instead of having a little bit of the planet, that the planet earth is ours.¹⁴⁸

Here Black Whore explains the Black Nationalist rhetoric on gang mentality and the so-called “Blk/gangters.” According to this philosophy, the onus for Black Whore’s predicament is temporarily lifted off her and placed on the Brothers in the room. This leads Brother Man, in a mocking manner, to insist that Black Whore wear a fur coat and walk around the room like a queen in her kingdom. Everybody decides to play along, bowing and humbling themselves as she passes by. She eventually gets comfortable with this role, and, though nervous, she begins to look stately. Just as in The Bronx is Next, Sanchez uses a role reversal game to bring the tension to a climax.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 183.

White Dude is jealous of Black Whore and protests that he should be the queen of the universe. He dons jewelry, high-heel shoes, a coat, and a wig and demands that everyone pay attention to him, as he's white and therefore the real queen of the universe, eliciting much laughter and applause from his onlookers. He summons more coke from the "purple witch."¹⁴⁹ It seems Sanchez is destabilizing the sexuality or sexual expression of the men in the room by pitting the Black woman against the White Man. Brother Man takes this further by making the two compete for the prize of "queen of the universe." As they walk around, the Black Whore grows more regal as the White Dude performs an exaggerated femininity. Finally the White Dude is able to win by punching and kicking the Black Whore; he is the last queen standing. Brother Man declares the White Dude the winner:

You've proved the point, man. The only queens in the world are white. And probably men. It's a good lesson for sorry whores who listen to young dudes rapping 'bout nothing, cuz me and my men are the time. It's the 1970s and don't you forget that.¹⁵⁰

In this speech, Brother Man connects white men with queer sexuality, by playing on the word "queen," which in this context refers to royalty as well as drag queens. Brother Man is insinuating that drag queens are mostly white men. Such a statement is highly problematic, because a desire to disprove a queer sexuality can trigger hyper-masculine behavior (sexually aggressive and physically assertive), such as that demonstrated by the Black Arts Movement male playwrights. He

¹⁴⁹ White woman.

¹⁵⁰ Sanchez, *Uh, Uh; But How Do It Free Us?*, 185.

refers to the 1970s as a new age of empowerment for black men but leaves no space for black women in his explanation. The scene ends with the Brothers having one last hit before they go their respective ways to cities all over the United States, where they will bribe black cops to ignore their drug dealing.

The interpretive dance that follows provides Sanchez's view of the cycle of abuse that has led to drugs and prostitution in black communities. The dance involves children being mentored by older figures, insinuating that extremely dysfunctional childhoods have led these men and women to destabilized sexualities:

The OLDER MALE DANCER comes over to MALE DANCER [sitting down] and offers him YOUNG GIRL. The three DANCERS dance a new/orgiastic/blue-bird-blue-bird through my window¹⁵¹ dance and the LITTLE GIRL DANCER goes mad and becomes a WOMAN and we'll never know the exact moment her childhood ends. The three DANCERS move down the street and the two MALE DANCERS turn the YOUNG CHILD WOMAN DANCER over to another FEMALE DANCER who begins to console her caressingly. The two MALE DANCERS move off together and shyly begin to touch each other. Discordant music is heard!¹⁵²

The dance seems to clarify Sanchez's position that the abuse of a little girl will lead to a troubled adulthood, or, as is insinuated, a murky line between child and adult within a grown woman's psyche. The homosexual behavior of the male dancers at the end is accompanied by a cacophonous sound that implies the behavior is inappropriate. Sanchez allies homosexuality with a dysfunctional childhood and upbringing. In this instance, she shares the opinions of many Black

¹⁵¹ A children's nursery song.

¹⁵² Sanchez, Uh, Uh; But How Do It Free Us?, 186-187.

Arts Movement writers who placed black masculinity and homosexuality in opposition, such as Baraka, who stated, “The Revolutionary Theatre should flush the fags and murders out of Lincoln’s face,” implying that homosexuals were as dangerous to black people as murderers.¹⁵³ Sanchez fails to liberate black women or men with her homophobic stance because, again, it could provoke reactionary, hyper-masculine behavior from Black men.

Group 3 deals with the identity crisis of a young black revolutionary, Brother, and the resultant effects on White Woman (who is also referred to as Devil/Woman) and Sister, both of whom he claims to love. Group 3’s space is divided in two, with the Sister’s side furnished by African masks and an African stool, and Devil/Woman’s by pop art, a phonograph, and a butterfly chair. Sanchez establishes Sister as a Black Nationalist through her use of décor and by commenting that her hair is a “big natural.” Devil/Woman, on the other hand, is “plain-looking” and rich, and her décor suggests she is a modern, 1960s woman. In the middle of the floor space—limbo—Brother sits on pillows in front of a table with liquor. The two women’s stage props signify two distinct cultures, with the Sister’s being exclusively Black. Brother, caught in limbo, cannot merge these two worlds—a fact highlighted by his costume. He

...has on two/toned suit one side is brown suede with a big yellow flower in the center. One side is an orange dashiki with a brown/embroidered map of Africa, wears a talisman, tight/brown/suede/pants and sandals, shades and a floppy/suede hat.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ LeRoi Jones, “The Revolutionary Theater,” Black Arts Movement, Virginia Hiltz and Dr Mike Sell, <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/documents/baraka1.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Sanchez, Uh, Uh; But How Do It Free Us?, 166.

His suit represents his two personalities. The brown suede with big yellow sunflower references a white, hippy, youth culture, while the dashiki with a map of Africa references the Black Nationalist culture. The Black Nationalist culture is not a space in which the Brother can juggle this double identity. As a result, Sanchez instructs that whenever Brother is on the Sister side of the stage, he must always sit or stand with only the dashiki side of his suit visible. Sanchez illustrates that Brother conceals a large portion of his identity, literally only showing one side of it to Sister while allowing White Woman to see all of who he is. Sanchez suggests black men are not as honest to black women as they are to white women.

Brother and Sister are in the middle of a conversation in which Brother is explaining how bad he feels about having to take care of business tonight, when Sister just moved from New York to San Francisco to be with him. At the time Sanchez wrote this play, she had returned from two years in San Francisco pioneering an Africana Studies program at San Francisco State University with Amiri Baraka and Askia Toure. This, coupled with the fact that Sister is a Black Nationalist poet—Sanchez's primary identity at the time—suggests Sister's story in Group 3 may be autobiographical. Sister explains to Brother that she understands the movement comes before their personal needs. They discuss the drama that occurred when her parents found out she was going to move in with Brother. As Brother is in the process of getting his master's degree and therefore unable to support Sister, Sister's parents are upset. She explains:

I told them that the new/Blk/woman didn't worry about a man taking care of her. She and her man work together. If he had no job she worked and let him do the work of organizing the people. Since the money came from the oppressor, it didn't matter who made it.¹⁵⁵

Sister presents a progressive picture of what a Brother and Sister's relationship could entail if they wished to support each other in efforts to better the black race. Her picture is dependant upon the couple renouncing the social construction of man as provider/breadwinner and woman as homemaker. Her explanation imagines that money will be irrelevant for the happy couple. However, her mother is skeptical, and rightly so in hindsight. She warns that if a Blk/man thinks he does not have to take care of you, you will land yourself in trouble: "wasn't no revolutionary black man gon' hurt her one and only daughter with no foreign talk... we Blk/women been fighting a long time just to get Blk/men to take care of us now you and yo/kind gon' to take us back."¹⁵⁶ The mother expresses a concern that reveals the tension between the older Black female generation and the newer Black Nationalist women, such as this Sister. The mother feels as though black men were never interested in black women and that black women had to fight hard to gain their attention. Therefore, a decision like Sister's, to be independent of her Brother, could jeopardize the hard work of the previous generation of Black women. Sister's idea of progress represents her mother's idea of regress.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 188.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Brother and Sister have Black Nationalist education values similar to Malik and Nefertia, from Group 1. Sister mentions that the first book Brother sent her was Frantz Fanon's Studies in a Dying Colonialism (1967). His interests mark him as the black revolutionary he wants her to perceive him as. It is important she believes he is a Black Nationalist because she would not date him otherwise. Without a black woman by one's side, a male Black nationalist struggled to attain credibility.¹⁵⁷ When Brother visits Sister, he takes a red/blk/green pillow with him, colors that symbolize the liberation of Africans in the Diaspora.¹⁵⁸ Before Brother visits Devil/Woman, he drinks more alcohol and picks up a red velvet pillow. The fact that Brother drinks in his safe space (in the middle of the stage) further destabilizes his Black Nationalist identity, because drinking and drugs were another example of decaying black minds and hindering black prosperity.

Brother moves to the white woman's space/home. She is aware that he is trying to start a family with a black woman and tells him that she understands; as he's moving up in the movement, a black female counterpart is essential. Devil/Woman equates the Sister to an accessory necessary for "her man" to change the "diseased world." If Brother had his way, he would "get with polygamy," however, as the white woman explains, Sister would never tolerate that.¹⁵⁹ Brother thanks her for being so understanding and gives her accolades

¹⁵⁷ Baraka's politics radicalized after he divorced his white wife and married black, Amina Baraka.

¹⁵⁸ The flag was designed in 1920 by the United National Association and African Communities league. It is also known as the Afro-American flag or Black Liberation flag; Rick Wyatt, "Afro-American Flags (U.S)." Flags of The World: <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/us-afro.html> (accessed Mar 13, 2007).

¹⁵⁹ Sanchez, "This Thing Called Playwriting," 4.

about being a “rare woman,” but when he gets hungry he verbally abuses her saying, “Now go fix my food. RAT NOW! Y’all hear? This nigger is ready to grease out loud.”¹⁶⁰ Sanchez illustrates Brother’s (and black men’s) ability to manipulate white women. She suggests white women are so enamored by black men that they will ignore the disrespect shown them. As such, white women are guilty of fetishizing black men, since all they care about is the color of their skin and not the substance underneath it.

Once the white woman leaves the room to go cook food for Brother, he picks up the phone and dials Sister. The stage is split in such a way that we can see them in their respective spaces talking to each other. Brother explains that he will not make it home tonight because of the meeting. They exchange sweet words and he croons in her ear with words such as: “Don’t you forget that you my woman. My Black woman. The woman I’m gonna show to the world. My choice for the world to see.”¹⁶¹ He means this literally: Sister’s primary function is to be the educated black woman the Black Nationalists wanted to see. Sanchez reveals a pressure, or, perhaps more accurately, an insecurity that black men may feel and that black women often express. It is also the same insecurity that Sister’s mother alluded to—black men would rather be with white women than black women.

White Woman gives Black Man a check, a gesture that echoes Malik and Nefertia’s financial relationship in Group 1. Unlike Malik, Brother hesitates to

¹⁶⁰ Sanchez, *Uh, Uh; But How Do It Free Us?*, 191.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

take it; he shall live off of Sister's check instead of White Woman's and fend for all three of them. White Woman justifies giving Brother the check:

I mean the money is rightfully yours. I told you that a long time ago, it's the money that my father got by underpaying Black people for years. It's rightfully yours. It should go to a Black man twisting and turning to survive it all.¹⁶²

Her surprising words raise the issue of post-slavery reparations. White Woman presents herself as progressive in her thinking about race issues in America, and initially one is unable to see a hidden agenda. By redirecting money her family made through the exploitation of blacks, she is functioning as a powerful agent in the process of Brother's self-actualization. If he is a successful revolutionary he will inspire many other Black Brothers and Sisters. She recognizes her own power when she tells him how she enjoys watching him give a public speech on the issues they have discussed; she feels as though she is on stage. Sanchez shows us the white influence that is sometimes behind self-proclaimed Black revolutionaries.

In the next scene, Sister is pregnant. Brother refuses to go watch her poetry reading. The fact that Sister is a political, Black Nationalist poet means she is a member of the Black Arts Movement. As Brother is an activist through political rallies and speeches, Sanchez suggests Brother/Some Black Nationalists at the time disrespected the work of Black Nationalists in the Black Arts Movement. Instead of attending the poetry reading, Brother stays home and phones White Woman. White Woman ignores his phone call but finally calls him

¹⁶² Ibid., 193.

back. They have an argument in which she asks if “impregnating women is a criteria for revolution?” to which he retorts, “You think Black babies ain’t part of the change?”¹⁶³ Sanchez shows the recklessness of some black men, who would be willing to bring life into the world without concern for the child or her mother, but rather to further their own political careers. Brother and White Woman argue, and in tears, White Woman confesses her jealousy. Brother is unable to console her and she ceases to respond. Panicked, Brother leaves Sister’s house and crosses over to White Woman’s. While trying to reassure her that they will be together forever, he says:

Why, lady, you’ve made me all that I am. I’m almost finished with school because of you. I can travel whenever I want because of you. I never want for money because of you. I’m a man because you’ve allowed me to be a man.¹⁶⁴

He reassures her by telling her she is responsible for all his success. In saying so, he gives her power and agency over him. After this, she is able to recover from her sleeping pill and scotch overdose. She convinces him to stay the night, so he calls home and tells Sister to pack his bags for him as he will not be home. Sister packs three suitcases. On the other side of the stage, White Woman and Brother exchange vows. Though the exchange is unsanctioned by an institution, and witnessed only by the audience, their marriage symbolizes the extent to which White Woman/white women can manipulate and control Brother/black men.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 198.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 200.

Brother returns home to a confrontation with Sister. She knows he has been cheating on her and has packed her own bags to leave. They have a harsh verbal exchange in which he accuses her of being a “bourgie/black/bitch” who has just decided to turn on her blackness, unlike him, who has been black all his life. The argument escalates and Brother violently tells her who he thinks she is:

(slaps the right side of her face)
 You a black woman bitch.
 (slaps the left side of her face)
 You the same as every Black woman.
 (Slaps the right side of her face)
 You were born to cry in the night.
 (slaps the left side of her face)
 You ain't no different from any black woman.
 (Slaps the right side of her face)
 You're my mother, and my mother's mother every
 Blk/man's mother I've ever seen.
 (slaps the left side of her face)
 You like all Blk/women, ain't no difference.
 (Then he kisses her. Long and hard)
 Now pack my bag like I told you to...¹⁶⁵

During this episode Brother beats Sister into silence and submission. He verbalizes his feelings about her and all black women. He reveals the little respect he has for them as well as the power and control he can command over Sister. Sanchez makes it clear that there is no liberation for the black woman in a world such as Brother's. Since White Woman has demonstrated an ability to control Brother, Sanchez insinuates white women are behind many Black Nationalist men; these men are not liberated and their ideas about black women are in fact white-washed, oppressive notions.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 210.

Brother forgives Sister for her perceived wrongs, and leaves. Sister unpacks her bags, cries, prays, gives up, laughs, sings, and rocks herself “in the knowledge of womanly blackness.”¹⁶⁶ By this Sanchez means the stage is dark, a metaphor for the black woman’s consciousness. In realizing that she is alone in her blackness, a black woman must embrace her who she is, and accept that in the world, at that time, she is her only ally.

As the scene ends, the black dancers take over the stage. They re-enact the scene that has just taken place with one female dancer wearing a white mask and the other a black mask. When the black female dancer wearing a black mask is left alone on stage beaten and confused, Sanchez illustrates what she perceives the way forward to be for the black woman:

Finally SHE rises and straightens out her black mask. Her long dress, her natural. And SHE begins to march at first in a tired manner, but as SHE passes, SHE becomes upright in her blackness and SHE smiles, slightly.
Stage darkens
There is no beginning or end.¹⁶⁷

The lack of a beginning or an end points to the cyclical nature of the plight of the Black woman, the endlessness of their struggle—there is no black woman who does not have to fight against mistreatment from white people and black men. All three of Sanchez’s Groups involve women in different facets of life struggling against black men who subjugate them by projecting the type of person they want the black woman to be. The final dance sequence is the only one in which a black dancer dons a black mask. Through this gesture, Sanchez

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 213.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 215.

acknowledges the fact that blackness is not a biological fact, but a conscious performance of culturally designated behavior (such maintaining an Afro, using the words “Brother” and “Sister,” and other such signifiers of afrocentricity). Straightening out the black mask represents a resolve to continue to pursue blackness as prescribed by Black Nationalism. By marching though tired, Black Woman perseveres through abuse and neglect, and eventually is able to stand tall and proud in her Blackness. Sanchez’s final message is that the new black woman can and shall overcome.

Moving Outside the Movement: Adrienne Kennedy

Adrienne Kennedy is an African American playwright who is best known for her play Funnyhouse of a Negro (1964) for which she received an Obie award. Unlike the black playwrights writing during the 1960s and 1970s, her plays are outside the genres of naturalism or realism. Instead, they are abstracted, psychological nightmares that fixate on the black experience (specifically the black female experience) within white America. Kennedy's style is avant-garde. While playwrights such as Bullins and Baraka were didactically delivering messages that attempted to establish a prototypical black personality (drug-free, hard-working, Africa-affirming), Kennedy was daring to expose the psychosis of a young black woman consumed with blackness and whiteness. Although Funnyhouse of a Negro does not leave the audience with a clear, positive perspective on what it means to be a black woman in America, through unsettling images and poetic language Kennedy expands our thoughts and questions about black womanhood. As a result, she creates more possibilities for defining black women; she allows them to be flawed—humanizing, and therefore, liberating them from the pressure to fulfill a black male definition of black womanhood.

Though it was not produced until 1964, Kennedy finished writing Funnyhouse of a Negro in 1961, after “a thirteen month trip that started in London to Paris to Madrid to Africa—one month in Liberia, five months in Ghana, and

eight months in Rome.”¹⁶⁸ Kennedy completed the play a week before she gave birth to her son. When she returned to New York City, she joined acclaimed playwright Edward Albee’s Actors Studio and workshopped the two plays she had written: Funnyhouse of a Negro and The Owl Answers (1965). Funnyhouse of a Negro opened on January 14th, 1964 at the East End Theater, co-produced by Albee. Though Kennedy’s avant-garde style and alliance with experimental white theater practitioners, such as Albee, distanced her from the network of black playwrights in the Black Arts Movement (who predominantly produced work in Harlem), her travel to Africa and her African American heritage meant Funnyhouse of a Negro still reflected many of the same themes expressed in the works of Sanchez, Bullins, and Baraka—particularly, the question of the African American’s relationship to Africa when searching for a black identity.

Kennedy’s style makes it difficult for a reader or audience to fully understand the plot of the play or the playwright’s intentions. Funnyhouse hints at a narrative, however there is no clear beginning, middle, or end; there is no story or action that develops over the course of time. Instead, the entire play is a repeated exposition of a fragmented back story, delivered in the form of long monologues by either Negro-Sarah (the protagonist), or her four other selves: Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba. The

¹⁶⁸ Unpublished interview cited by Margaret B. Wilkinson, “Diverse Angles of Vision: Two Black Women Playwrights,” in Intersecting Boundaries: The Theater of Adrienne Kennedy, ed. Paul K. Bryant and Lois More Overbeck (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 71.

back story is as follows: a young woman, Negro-Sarah, has a black father and a biracial mother who looks white.

When [her parents] first married they lived in New York. Then they went to Africa where [her] mother fell out of love with [her] father. She didn't want him to save the black race and spent days combing her hair. She would not let him touch her in their wedding bed and called him black...then in Africa he started to drink and came home drunk one night and raped [Negro-Sarah's] mother. The child from that union is [Negro-Sarah].¹⁶⁹

Negro-Sarah's mother rejected Negro-Sarah and ended up in a mental institution. Negro-Sarah's father keeps visiting Negro-Sarah begging her for forgiveness. She thinks she has killed him, therefore, his ghost may be the visitor. Negro-Sarah and her alters spend the majority of the play repeating and expanding upon this story while fixating on combing their hair.

Hair was a political tool in the 1960s used to establish whether one had Black Nationalist leanings or not. Sanchez's protagonists wore a "big natural"/"afro," and the characters who were their moral opposites wore wigs in a color unnatural to those of African descent, such as Sister Whore in Uh Huh; But How Do it Free Us?, who wears "an expensive, red-colored wig."¹⁷⁰ By signifying political affiliations through her characters' hairstyles, Sanchez implies hair was an appropriate site to debate cultural politics, and an Afro was better than straightened hair because it made one blacker and connected to their roots.

¹⁶⁹ Adrienne Kennedy, Funnyhouse of a Negro in The Adrienne Kennedy Reader (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 20.

¹⁷⁰ Sanchez, Uh Huh; But How do it Free Us?, 165.

Kennedy complicates our understanding of blackness and black hair. While all her characters have the “kinky” hair that Sanchez’s Black Nationalist characters could only aspire for, these characters do not want their hair. It is falling out and causing them inner turmoil. Negro-Sarah explains, “My one defect is that I have a head of frizzy hair, unmistakably Negro kinky hair; and it is indistinguishable.”¹⁷¹ Negro-Sarah does not want to be an indistinguishable black woman. Though one might hope this alludes to a rejection of the stereotypes associated with blackness in favor of an individual identity, it is a rejection of blackness in favor of non-blackness. Kennedy shows how the black woman could have any type of hair but as long as society politicizes her hair, the black woman will have problems reconciling her individual style and her performance of racial identity.

Although the characters in Funnyhouse aspire towards whiteness and denigrate blackness, whiteness is not pitched as the positive antonym of negative blackness. Many of the adjectives used to talk about whiteness allude to death and present an unattractive image. A statue of Queen Victoria is described as being “*of repulsive whiteness*.”¹⁷² A curtain is “ghastly white” similar to “the interior of a cheap casket.”¹⁷³ The quality of the white lights used to light the stage is described as “unreal and ugly.”¹⁷⁴ Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg are dressed in “cheap satin” and the stage directions instruct that their faces be

¹⁷¹ Kennedy, Funnyhouse, 14.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

made up to appear whitish yellow.¹⁷⁵ Their features, which include “dark eyes that seem gouged out of the head.” imply that these characters will look as nightmarish as Negro-Sarah with her wild hair and facelessness. However, the yellowness of these white characters is also an implication that they are not entirely white. As they are a part of Negro-Sarah, her different selves, perhaps no matter how much Negro-Sarah conceives of their whiteness, she cannot remove the “stain” of her blackness. Alternatively, Kennedy may be claiming that there is no appeal in either blackness or whiteness for the black woman. As such, Negro-Sarah’s suicide at the end of the play is her opting for racelessness, death.

The play takes place in a convolution of historical locations, Negro-Sarah’s brownstone in the West Nineties in New York, and inside her head. Kennedy describes her plays as “states of mind” and Funnyhouse definitely warrants that label. Because Kennedy states “autobiographical work is the only thing that interests [her],” the character of Negro-Sarah, to a large degree, can be seen as a reflection of Kennedy’s own fears, insecurities, and confusion about her racial identity and her relationship to blackness and Africa’s independence struggle.¹⁷⁶

Funnyhouse gives the audience a look into the troubled psyche of Negro-Sarah personified by her four selves. Negro-Sarah is primarily preoccupied by her

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Adrienne Kennedy, The People Who Led to My Plays (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1987), 127; Annemarie Bean, Sourcebook on African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements (London: Routledge, 1999), 216.

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/mtholyoke/Doc?id=10054872&ppg=231>;

Kennedy’s mother was half white and half black while her father was black.

“yellow” complexion, aspiring for more whiteness (and therefore to be closer to her light-skinned black mother) and hoping to forget her black father and consequently her own blackness. The loathing of one’s blackness and its potential to drive one insane are themes Kennedy continues from her short story “Because of the King of France” (1963). Black Orpheus: A Journal of African and Afro-American Literature, based out of West Africa, agreed to publish it while Kennedy was living in Ghana in 1960. Like her plays, it was experimental, with large autobiographical elements. It is written from the perspective of a young, African American, middle class woman, who does not like “being cousins to poor people.”¹⁷⁷ The story is a young woman’s (the narrator’s) reflections on a male cousin who ran away to the Virgin Islands and went mad. The woman reminisces about being obsessed with her cashmere sweaters and laughing at the poverty within her family.¹⁷⁸

While in college, the woman receives a letter from her estranged cousin who explains why he ran away (because of the King of France). The woman remembers how her cousin, Sidney, was beaten and dismissed from a piano institution for being in love with—and impregnating—a Jewish girl, Sylvia Klein. In his letter, Sidney talks about a variety of people (Sylvia Klein, Louis XIV, Monsieur Philipe (an ugly, crippled, Corsican pianist). Sidney also mentions his parents’ religious explanations for his suffering, and how Monsieur Philipe played

¹⁷⁷ Adrienne Kennedy, “Because of the King of France” in The Adrienne Kennedy Reader (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4.

¹⁷⁸ In Kennedy’s autobiographical book, The People Who Led to my Plays (pg 55), she speaks of being obsessed with a yellow cashmere sweater she had in high school.

piano for King Louis XIV's court—who laughed at the ugliness of dark skin and difference. Through a sinuous explication of reality, history, and myth, Sidney reveals “the fierceness that comes from being convicted to disgrace and inequity by God's will...the rage, the annihilation, the grief of race and the unchangingness, the eternity of it all.”¹⁷⁹ Essentially, Funnyhouse of a Negro uses the same convolution of reality (Kennedy's autobiography), history, and myth to explicate the same rage, destructiveness, and grief produced by race.

Whereas in “Because of the King of France,” Sidney is able to see the world as flawed for denying him human rights based on his skin color, in Funnyhouse, Negro-Sarah never acknowledges her anger at White America for making her hate blackness. In Sidney's letter to his cousin, the narrator in “Because of the King of France,” he explains:

Of course Louis XIV was not a Negro. Neither was Chopin or Mr. Rosen my teacher at the Institute [where Sidney studied music]. But I am. And everyone at the Institute knows that Negroes are people who were brought to America from Africa and Africa is a black jungle where black pygmies with rings in their noses sit banging drums and distorting their pygmy bodies. Everyone at the Institute knows that Negroes are stupid people with woolen hair who shuffle and say Lawsy me and I gwine and black. Very black.¹⁸⁰

The tone of Sidney's letter is one of desolateness and it expresses an understanding for how his blackness is perceived. He relates his blackness to Africa implying that “Negroes” are looked down upon because of their origins. The final sentence suggests that despite a difference in Africans and African

¹⁷⁹ Kennedy, “Because of the King of France,” 6.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Americans, African Americans are still not respected because of the speech they have adopted (“lawsy,” “gwine”) and their African features (“woolen hair”). Sidney does not overtly state that he believes the stereotypes, however, his repetition of the phrase “everyone knows” suggests the magnitude of these impressions. There is a sense of his hopelessness or perhaps the futility of any desire he might have to be perceived alternatively. White America is guilty of brainwashing him to denigrate blackness. Kennedy shows the reader that Sidney’s mental illness is not born of his own preoccupation with race, instead, it stems from “Everyone,” and the stereotypes they live by. Similarly, “Everyone” has played a part in creating the character of Negro-Sarah and all her preoccupations with race.

Negro-Sarah refers to the attitudes surrounding blackness and whiteness as “given circumstances” in a fashion similar to Sidney in “Because of the King of France.” She states, “As we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning.”¹⁸¹ She references blackness in a manner that implies her opinions are commonly held beliefs, if not facts. Instantly, Kennedy diverges from playwrights in the Black Arts Movement who wrote plays primarily targeted at a black audience. The inclusion of “Everyone” suggests that, regardless of race, anybody and everybody can reflect on their role in creating the race problem in America. Furthermore, “everyone” makes up the psyche of a black woman. Negro-Sarah is comprised of two white women, a yellow man, and a black man.

¹⁸¹ Kennedy, Funnyhouse, 14.

Kennedy forces us to question the significance of a black woman being comprised of different types of people, with the exception, ironically, of black women. One reading is that black women are not the agents of their identity formation, but instead, a product of personalities and people who have no concept of what it is like to be a black woman in America.

Religion was a common theme in plays written by black playwrights in the 1960s and 1970s in America. In a speech Malcolm X delivered to Dr. Adam Clayton Powell's Abyssinian Baptist Church, he declared people were seeing "the end of the wicked white man's Western world of Christianity."¹⁸² Many playwrights in the Black Arts Movement favored The Nation of Islam as the religion of their protagonists when they tried to proselytize spirituality and blackness.¹⁸³ Kennedy does not shy away from revealing the strong connection between colonization, racial oppression and religion—specifically Christianity. One of Negro-Sarah's four alters is Jesus—"a hunchback, yellow-skinned dwarf, dressed in white rags and sandals."¹⁸⁴ This character bears little resemblance to the common depictions of Jesus in which he is not deformed. Like Negro-Sarah, Jesus is neither white nor black.

The character Jesus is conflated with that of Patrice Lumumba, as well as Negro-Sarah's father, all of whom have the burden of saving the black race. In a

¹⁸² Malcolm X, "The Black Revolution," The End of White World Supremacy: Four Speeches by Malcolm X, ed. Imam Benjamin Karim (New York: Arcade Publishing Inc., 1971), 71.

¹⁸³ See Amiri Baraka's A Black Mass and Sonia Sanchez's Uh Huh; But How Do It Free us?

¹⁸⁴ Kennedy, Funnyhouse, 15.

monologue, Patrice Lumumba explains how his/Negro-Sarah's father's mother always wanted his father to be Jesus:

...walk in Genesis and save the race. You must return to Africa, find revelation in the midst of golden savannas, nim and white frankopenny trees, white stallions roaming under a blue sky, you must walk with a white dove and heal the race, heal the misery, take us off the cross.¹⁸⁵

The imagery conjures up a fairytale-like picture of Africa. Western missionaries become gods in this picture as they are given the task to save the race, in a manner similar to Jesus in the bible. A dichotomy is set up that assumes the superiority of the Western world over Africa. Even though Negro-Sarah's father is black, because he is coming from the "civilized" world, he has the power to "save" Africans and consequently blacks all over the Diaspora. In this relationship, America, as a "civilized" country, is allied with the European colonizers, and becomes as guilty of the oppression of Africans as her European counterparts. Kennedy raises the question: what power dynamics are at play when African Americans use Africans to locate and establish their black identity? What relationship does an African American woman have with Africa? Is the juxtaposition of Africa and America in "African American" paradoxical? The dynamic of the savior and the saved distances African Americans from Africans and suggests they are closer to white Americans than they are to black Africans. Responsibility for subjugating Africa is explicated when the character Jesus

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 20.

proclaims: “I am going to Africa and kill this black man named Patrice Lumumba.”¹⁸⁶

Negro-Sarah’s alter, Jesus, makes the decision to move the action of the play to Africa. For the most part, the setting of Funnyhouse metamorphoses from Negro-Sarah’s bedroom to her apartment to the chambers of the Duchess and Queen Victoria Regina, all of which could easily be in Negro-Sarah’s head. Jesus initiating going to Africa alludes to the fact that it was under the guise of missionary work that colonization took place. A Tanzanian journalist, Jerome Kiwia reported, “The principal role of missionaries was to prepare Africans spiritually and mentally for physical domination.”¹⁸⁷ Jesus as colonizer implies that Negro-Sarah, and probably Kennedy, feel guilty for the implications of their religious affiliations: African Americans concur that Africans were “heathens” before the white man rescued them; Jesus and God prefer whiteness to blackness and support the notion of whites educating blacks out of darkness/ignorance; white is better than black.¹⁸⁸

Though Negro-Sarah and her alters speak about her father as though he is a devil, the imagery used to describe his life story resembles the story of Jesus, which hints at the possibility of the father as savior. The character Patrice

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁸⁷ Jerome Kiwia, The Sunday News (Dar-es-Salam, Tanzania), No. 1542 (September 19, 1982), 4, quoted in Clayton G. Mackenzie, “Demythologizing the Missionaries: A Reassessment of the Functions and Relationships of Christian Missionary Education under Colonialism,” Comparative Education, Volume 29, No. 1 (1993): 46, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0305-0068%281993%2929%3A1%3C45%3ADTMARO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H>

¹⁸⁸ While Kennedy’s religious affiliations are not specified, in The People Who Led to My Plays, she writes about being heavily influenced by a Christian upbringing. She also writes about reading Psalms every afternoon while living in Ghana; “Heathens” is a word with pejorative connotations used to reference Africans and their spirituality before missionaries brought Christianity to Africa.

Lumumba explains, “Sarah, Sarah, he would say to me, the soldiers are coming and a cross they are placing high on a tree and are dragging me through the grass and nailing me upon the cross.”¹⁸⁹ The father is a failed Jesus, who did not complete his mission before he was crucified: “the race’s hair fell out because he left Africa.”¹⁹⁰

Although the father is alluded to as a Jesus of sorts, in the end only the white characters can attain holy-status:

...all my life I believed my Holy Father to be God, but now I know that my father is a black man. I have no fear for whatever I do, I will do in the name of God, I will do in the name of Albert Saxe Coxburg, in the name of Victoria, Queen Victoria Regina, the monarch of England, I will.¹⁹¹

The above passage illustrates how Negro-Sarah conflates her Father with the Holy Father, and feels both have failed her. This notion echoes that of Sidney’s in “Because of the King of France.” Sidney felt God had been cruel to him by willing his blackness instead of whiteness, thereby denying him the woman he loved. The people Negro-Sarah will grant holy status to—European monarchs and dynasties—have no reservations about inflicting their wrath upon Africans. So when Negro-Sarah (through her Jesus alter) decides to go to Africa later on in the monologue, she is doing so on her own account, in the name of God, and in the name of white, colonial regimes.

Despite Negro-Sarah’s Father’s blackness, he, too, cannot make the connection with Africa that is desired of him. His “Christian center in the jungle”

¹⁸⁹ Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 20.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

is an attempt “not to desert the race.”¹⁹² It seems Negro-Sarah’s “race”/roots lie in Africa. However, the approach to connecting with Africa mirrors that of the white foreigners or colonialists. They all seek Africa to simultaneously change it and be changed by it, “find [ing] revelation in the midst of golden savannas.”¹⁹³ Once again, Kennedy makes questionable the African American search for identity in Africa.

To contrast the white and yellow thoughts Negro-Sarah has because of two white, female alters, and a yellow Jesus alter, Negro-Sarah has a black, male alter—Patrice Lumumba. Patrice Lumumba was the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The political party he formed was known as Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), and on June 30, 1960, at the age of 35, Lumumba led the DRC to independence. While he was not invited to deliver a speech, he did so anyway:

We have known ironies, insults, blows that we endured morning, noon, and evening, because we are Negroes... We have seen that the law was not the same for a white and for a black, accommodating for the first, cruel and inhuman for the other... We have witnessed atrocious sufferings of those condemned for their political opinions... We are going to rule not by the peace of guns and bayonets but by a peace of the heart and the will... Long live independence and African unity!¹⁹⁴

Ironically, a few days after his independence speech foreseeing an end to political unrest and fighting, some units of the Congolese army rebelled and Belgium (the former colonizers), the UN, the Soviet Union, and several other countries got

¹⁹² Ibid., 23.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ “Patrice Emory Lumumba,” *Africa Within*, http://www.africawithin.com/lumumba/independence_speech.htm (accessed February 7, 2007).

involved, bringing in troops and returning the DRC to a war zone. In September, Colonel Mobutu Sese Seko overthrew Lumumba. Six months after leading the DRC to independence, Lumumba was imprisoned and murdered.¹⁹⁵

In Funnyhouse, the character of Patrice Lumumba offers insight into Kennedy's relationship with Africa and African political thought during the time she wrote the play. In People Who Led to My Plays she reminisces, "Just when I had discovered the place of my ancestors, just when I had discovered this African hero, he had been murdered."¹⁹⁶ Kennedy writes of how "Africa had ignited a fire inside [her]" and had been a source of inspiration for her reflections on the conditions of African Americans. However, by the end of her visit, "the solitude under the African sun had brought out a darkness in [her]."¹⁹⁷ Lumumba's murder had a deep impact on Kennedy as evidenced by her inclusion of him as one of Negro-Sarah's four selves. Kennedy connects Lumumba to her father saying, "There was no doubt that Lumumba, this murdered hero, was merged in my mind with my father."¹⁹⁸ This connection is expressed in Funnyhouse through Lumumba's intertwined identity as both a loathed black man and as Negro-Sarah herself. He calls himself, "a nigger of two generations... the black shadow that haunted his mother's conception."¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Stephen R. Weissman, "Murder of Lumumba," Washington Post (July 21, 2002), http://www.africawithin.com/lumumba/murder_of_lumumba.htm (accessed February 6, 2007).

¹⁹⁶ Kennedy, People, 119.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 123.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 120.

¹⁹⁹ Kennedy, Funnyhouse, 19.

The violence within Kennedy's depiction of the character Lumumba mirrors that of the man's death. The manner in which Lumumba was killed was extremely brutal. He was beaten repeatedly throughout the day of his death, January 17th, 1961, before being taken to a tree where he was met by three firing squads and executed. Kennedy's stage directions instruct that Lumumba's head is split in two and that he has blood and tissue in his eyes.²⁰⁰ The very disturbing image has the potential to make the audience very uneasy with his presence in a manner similar to the other, lighter/whiter characters on stage (Jesus, Queen Victoria, the Duchess and Negro-Sarah). Kennedy forces an America audience to see the violence and ugliness of colonialism in a way they would not have seen or thought about because of their distance from the site of violent racial conflict that was Africa during the 1960s.

Lumumba is mentioned outside of his role as one of Negro-Sarah's selves. The Landlady explains that Negro-Sarah's father "hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered."²⁰¹ This comment, perhaps another illusion of Negro-Sarah's (it is contradicted by the end of the play) offers an explanation for how Lumumba had managed to become one of Negro-Sarah's selves. Though Negro-Sarah insists that she is the cause of her father's death, the Landlady is under the impression he committed suicide because of Lumumba's murder. By making Lumumba one of Negro-Sarah's alters, Kennedy suggests the African American psyche is composed of an African personality.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 17

²⁰¹ Ibid.

Suicides in plays can often be interpreted as the author's form of escaping the responsibility of resolving a character's problems. This is not the case in Funnyhouse. The suicide of the Negro-Sarah could be perceived as Kennedy's pessimistic outlook on race relations, or the African American experience. However, The People who led to My Plays, she explains how the character of Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman made her ask the question: "Was it possible that if a person felt cheated or miserable he could choose death?"²⁰² Perhaps Negro-Sarah's suicide is in defiance of the racial nightmare she is living. Kennedy's strong association of blackness with Africa in Funnyhouse, suggests that she could be exposing what the damage of internalized oppression and pejorative perceptions of Africa can have on a person torn between black and white worlds, or on the African American psyche (at a time when "one drop" of black blood cast one a "Negro").

Whereas Sanchez and Baraka relied heavily on names and costumes to invoke afrocentric characters, Kennedy uses hand props and make up to establish an African aesthetic. Her character Lumumba carries an ebony mask with him. He is the only alter who to a degree, embraces his blackness. The other characters walk around with "shining skulls" and are highly powdered or masked to have "hard faceless expression" in "white face" as Lorraine Brown observes.²⁰³ The

²⁰² Kennedy, People, 72.

²⁰³ Kennedy, Funnyhouse, 12; Lorraine A. Brown, "'For the Characters are Myself': Adrienne Kennedy's Funnyhouse of Negro," Negro American Literature Forum Vol. 9, No. 3 (1975): 86-88. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00282480%28197523%299%3A3%3C86%3A%22TCAMA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S> .

African mask juxtaposes the white face and illustrates Negro-Sarah's acknowledgement of the African within her.

Though it was Picasso who inspired Kennedy to give her characters exaggerated physical appearances, when she bought an African mask of a woman with a bird flying through her head, she conceived of a character with a bludgeoned head.²⁰⁴ Masks continue Kennedy's theme of unknown identity because of the ability for masks to conceal one's true identity and simultaneously project a very specific moment, character trait, or impression. Ironically, Negro-Sarah believes that she used an African mask to bludgeon her Father's head: "No, Mrs. Conrad, he did not hang himself, that is only the way they understand it, they do, but the truth is that I bludgeoned his head with an ebony skull that he carries with him. Wherever he goes, he carries black masks and heads."²⁰⁵ The gesture of hurling the African mask was one of attempting to distance herself from Africa and all things African. It is a harsh rejection of an African symbol that playwrights during the Black Arts Movement were embracing. As such, Kennedy's black female protagonist fails to exhibit cultural Black Nationalism or its symbols. Negro-Sarah fails to serve as a role model for black women, unlike a "Sister" character in Sanchez or Baraka's plays.

Negro-Sarah's relationship with the men in her life is confused and dangerous, mirroring Kennedy's relationships to the male revolutionaries who inspired her. The masculinity of Kennedy's African heroes—Kwame Nkrumah

²⁰⁴ Kennedy, *People*, 121.

²⁰⁵ Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 16.

(the man who led Ghana to independence, the President of Ghana, and a staunch pan-Africanist), and Patrice Lumumba provided a dilemma in Kennedy's full identification with them.²⁰⁶ This is expressed through Negro-Sarah's ambivalent relationship with her alter Lumumba. About that relationship, scholar Lorraine Brown writes:

That the role is a masculine one obviously complicates that problem. For [Negro-Sarah] must determine just what role an educated American Black woman has in the changing African world. Identification with this powerful male also reflects her desire to escape the powerlessness and passivity associated with being a woman.²⁰⁷

Brown highlights an important impediment in Negro-Sarah's, and consequently Kennedy's, relationship to African heroes: gender difference. While women helped in the struggle for independence in many African countries, it was predominantly the men who physically fought, and the governments that overthrew the colonizers were male-dominated. Similarly, in the Black Arts Movement, men such as Baraka and Bullins dominated the scene while black female playwrights did not have a strong voice. Race and gender are intertwined because Negro-Sarah cannot reconcile her experiences of black masculine sexuality. Negro-Sarah speaks of her Father saying, "Ever since I can remember he's been in a nigger pose of agony. He is the wilderness. He speaks niggerly groveling about wanting to touch me with his black hand."²⁰⁸ Her description of

²⁰⁶ Kennedy, *People*, 118-122.

²⁰⁷ Brown, "For the Characters are Myself," 86-88.

²⁰⁸ Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, 17.

her father is emasculated because he grovels in front of a young woman. There is also the hint of incestuous sexual abuse because she is not explicit about the manner in which her father is trying to touch her.

Negro-Sarah's father is also described as "a wild, black beast" that raped her mother.²⁰⁹ Historically, Black men have been stereotyped as sexually aggressive predators that threaten white female purity: "The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost demoniacal. A mad bull or tiger could scarcely be more brutal."²¹⁰ Negro-Sarah has internalized pop culture/media-produced stereotypes of black men and blackness to the point that she is not only afraid of black men, but also she is afraid of herself and the blackness within her. Consequently the black woman Kennedy depicts is not exempt from the psychological trauma racism in America has inflicted upon the black being; Negro-Sarah is not a hero, she is a human being. When Negro-Sarah and her selves metaphorically arrive in Africa, the stage directions indicate they gain "nimbuses atop their heads in a manner to suggest they are saviours." The Africa they arrive in has a "violence and a dark brightness, a grim yellowness."²¹¹ This Africa radiates the colors of Negro-Sarah and her white selves. It seems Africa, of all the places, reflects the reality of her non-whiteness in the most piercing way. This scene is the longest, and Kennedy

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 14.

²¹⁰ George T. Winston, "The Relations of the Whites to the Negroes," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. XVII (July 1901): 108-109, quoted in Dr. David Pilgrim, Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/>.

²¹¹ Kennedy, Funnyhouse, 24.

suggests it should be played the slowest, as in “the almost standstill stages of a dream” (24). All of Negro-Sarah’s selves rush around the grass and chant tensely. The laughing and chanting intensifies, as does the father’s persistent knocking on the door. Finally, skull in hand, Negro-Sarah’s father breaks into Negro-Sarah’s space, the lights go out, and when they come back up Negro-Sarah is hanging dead in the room. Kennedy concludes Funnyhouse in a manner consistent with her style throughout—without giving the audiences any answers, but instead, provoking a series of questions that they must answer for themselves. Was Negro-Sarah murdered? Did she commit suicide? Are we implicated? What does this say about the hope for race relations in America? Who and what killed Negro-Sarah?

Kennedy’s work departs from what Molefi Kete Asante would term afrocentric work. Kennedy uses symbols and images of Africans and African Americans in a way that disturbs the viewer or reader and provokes deep reflection upon the black female experience in America. Asante states a black writer should “isolate, define and promote those values, symbols and experiences which affirm [them].”²¹² Kennedy makes questionable the symbols and values that surround blackness and whiteness and her characters do everything but affirm them. She uses the black female psyche as a site to unmask and interrogate the controversies of black racial identity formation, navigating a terrain many Black Nationalist playwrights were unwilling to journey.

²¹² Molefi Kete Asante, Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change, 2nd ed. (Chicago: African American Images, 2003) 54.

Moving After the Movement

The Black Arts Movement drew to a close towards the middle of the 1970s. As explicated in the introduction, a lack of finances and performance spaces forced the closure of numerous theater spaces and black theater companies. The concentration of black theater practitioners in New York City diminished as black artists disseminated, primarily finding jobs in—or founding—Africana studies departments in colleges and universities all over America. Just as it had inspired the creation of the Black Arts Movement, the demise of the Black Power Movement coincided with the decline of the Black Arts Movement. Though black artists continued to produce work influenced by Black Nationalist ideology, or more accurately, the desire to liberate African Americans from the psychological ramifications of white, capitalist cultural productions of blackness (stereotypes born out of minstrelsy and sustained in television and film productions), the mass collaboration and mass production of such theater ceased. While Black studies scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. may term the movement “the most short-lived of all [renaissances],” and suggest it left black culture with “a profound identity crisis,” he fails to credit the movement for opening the doors for passionate, black theater-makers such as Ntozake Shange, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Anna Deavere Smith.²¹³

²¹³ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge,” TIME Magazine (October 10, 1994), 1: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981564-1,00.html>.

In the three decades that followed Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun (1963), Shange, Parks, and Smith were the only black, female playwrights to have plays on Broadway. The fact that Broadway was a site for their dramas is testament to their recognition and respect within the American theater-going society, and to the proliferation of their work. Shange, Parks, and Smith were able to create work with more complicated ideas and presentations of blackness, because they were producing theater after the urgency to “destroy the white thing” that had inspired the Black Arts Movement. Similarly, Bullins, Baraka, and Sanchez went on to create work that was less didactic in style, and less simple and conclusive in its ideas of how to remedy the oppression of black people.

The key male players of the Black Arts Movement shifted their politics, leaning more towards socialism. This change in political stance coincided with—and is perhaps responsible for—a change in the way these men conceptualized the role of the black woman in America. The turnaround was most significant for Baraka who went from “a vehemently sexist, crude black nationalist [to being] an antisexist, vulgar Marxist.”²¹⁴ In 1970, while Baraka still identified as a Black Nationalist, he stated: “We do not believe in ‘equality’ of men and women. We cannot understand what devils and the devilishly evil mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals...nature has not provided thus.”

²¹⁵ Thirteen years later, Baraka reconsidered the status of black women in

²¹⁴ Jerry Gafio Watts, Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 346.

²¹⁵ Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), “Black Woman,” Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965 (New York: Random House, 1965), 148; “devils” refers to white people.

America in the introduction to an anthology of creative writing (short stories, plays, and poetry) written by black women, which he co-edited with his wife

Amina Baraka:

Black Women in the United States are at the very bottom of the American social ladder—as someone has said, “slaves of slaves.” But even this bitter characterization hides the real nature of the evil we are confronting. Black working women are triple losers...they must face the violent attacks of class exploitations, as workers under monopoly capitalization; national oppression as African Americans...and as well the horrors of sexual oppression as women.²¹⁶

One could look skeptically at Baraka’s change of heart, viewing it as a convenient shift in gender politics in order to support his newly-found Marxist agenda. However, he is repentant for the psychological damage his former misogynistic attitude inflicted upon the women in his male-dominated, revolutionary art groups, and he acknowledges the ways in which it “disfigured” the movement.²¹⁷ In his autobiography, Baraka speaks of the “insufferable male chauvinism” that women in “militant black organizations” were forced to endure.²¹⁸ By publishing an anthology of Black women writers, Baraka acknowledged the need to give voice to black women, and acted upon it in a way that benefited them.

Sanchez and Kennedy continued to write plays but the newer plays have not had as much commercial success as those produced during the Black Arts Movement. Sanchez has published fourteen books of poetry, compared to seven

²¹⁶ Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, eds., Confirmations: An Anthology of African American Women (New York: Quills, 1983), 16, quoted in Watt, Amiri Baraka, 346.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 347.

²¹⁸ Amiri Baraka, The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), 276.

plays, the majority of which she wrote and published during the late 60s and early 70s. As a result, her primary artistic identity is poet, as opposed to playwright. In a recent interview, Sanchez expressed frustration at being labeled a militant black artist because she believes people should be allowed to grow. She explained, “[People] don't continue to read. When they read about you, what's been published about you in the past, that's how people label us. That's how they try to cripple us, that's what frightened people off.”²¹⁹ Sanchez's desire to be seen beyond the views expressed in her work from the 60s and 70s is a desire Baraka and Kennedy share.

Although Kennedy was not inside the circle of playwrights in the Black Arts Movement, like Sanchez, her most popular plays were written during the 60s and 70s. Kennedy's Funnyhouse of a Negro continues to be produced in theaters around America. She has published thirteen other plays since Funnyhouse, in which she continues to explore themes of race, gender, and identity. Kennedy's unique and experimental theatrical style has inspired the black female playwrights who followed her to embrace their own individual styles.

Ntozake Shange is an African American female playwright whose first play for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf (1975) was nominated for a Tony Award, a Grammy Award, and an Emmy Award, and won an Obie Award, an Outer Critics Circle Award, and an Audience Development Committee Award (AUDELCO). for colored girls is unique in style,

²¹⁹ Wood, "This thing called playwrighting," 4.

as it is a choreopoem. It is a conglomeration of twenty poems performed by anonymous women identified solely by a color (i.e., woman in blue, woman in red). “Women poets, women’s readings & a multilingual woman’s presence” inspired Shange’s style.²²⁰ Aside from her identity as a poet, Shange was a member of various dance companies that focused on “unearthing the mislaid, mothers, cowgirls & union leaders of our pasts.”²²¹ Shange’s feminism coupled with a background in poetry and dance meant her highly experimental theatrical writing style broke the conventions of naturalism and took on a novel form:

Lady in purple
 she held her head on her lap
 the lap of her sisters soakin up tears
 each understanding how much love stood between them
 how much love between them
 love between them
 love like sisters

Sharp music is heard, each lady
dances as if catching a disease from
the lady next to her, suddenly
they all freeze

lady in orange
 ever since I realized there waz someone callt
 a colored girl an evil woman a bitch or a nag
 i been trying not to be that & leave bitterness
 in somebody else’s cup/ come to somebody to love me
 without deep & nasty smellin scald from lye or bein
 left screamin in a street fulla lunatics/ whisperin
 slut bitch bitch niggah/ get out here wit alla that²²²

²²⁰ Ntozake Shange, for colored girl who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997), ix.

²²¹ Ibid., x.

²²² Ibid., 42.

The above extract illustrates Shange's distinguishing use of language and grammar: no capitalization, no full stops, writing in a black vernacular, and spelling words the way she hears them. Shange's use of the black vernacular is a device Sanchez employed in her plays less than a decade earlier. The extract also illustrates Shange's clear focus on empowering women of color. Sanchez and Kennedy often denounced the label of "feminist" in interviews and were not willing to embrace feminism to the same degree as Shange.

While Shange produced theater at the tail-end of the Black Arts Movement, Suzan-Lori Parks first gained recognition with Imperceptible Mutations of the Third Kingdom (1989), which won her an Obie Award. She won her second Obie Award for her play Venus (1995). Venus is the story of Saartjie Baartman, a black woman who was exported from colonial South Africa to Imperial England. Saartjie Baartman was exhibited (as part of a freak show), objectified, and exploited—all because of her large, black posterior. Eventually, Parks's Venus moves to France with The Baron Doctor, a French Doctor who is in love with her. The Baron Doctor experiments on her and when she eventually dies from a venereal disease he dissects her and gives her remains to a museum. Parks uses unconventional narrative techniques such as opening the play with an Overture, followed by scene 31 in which we learn: "Thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead!" She works her way backwards, down to Scene 1 by the end of the play. Stylistically, Venus combines minstrel shows, classical Greek chorus, song, dance, history, fiction, and politics to present an extremely complex, larger-than-

life, grotesque picture of the historical and current exploitation of the black female. Venus is a popular play and is still produced in theaters, colleges, and universities in America to this date.

Parks has had great success with her other plays, which include The America Play (1996), In the Blood (1999), Fucking A (2000), Topdog/Underdog (2001), and 365 Days/365 Plays which is being produced every day all over America, beginning November 13, 2006 until November 12, 2007, making it “the largest collaboration in the history of American theater.”²²³ She received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur “Genius” Grant, and was the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize, which she received in 2002 for Topdog/Underdog.

Parks’s style can be labeled “experimental” for several reasons. The most noticeable experimental element in her writing is her use of language and grammar. She gives a key at the beginning of her plays, explaining her grammatical nuances: (rest)—“take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition”; A spell—“an elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures’ names with no dialogue”; and, “(parentheses around dialogue indicate softly spoken passages ((asides; sotto voce)).”²²⁴ The extract below, taken from In the Blood, is a prototypical illustration of Parks’ unique style. In this scene, Hester, a welfare mother, talks to her son Jabber:

²²³ The Public Theater, 365 Days/365 Plays, <http://www.publictheater.org/365/> (accessed April 26, 2007).

²²⁴ Suzan-Lori Parks, “Author’s Elements of Style,” The Red Letter Plays (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2001), ix.

Hester
I said I don't wanna hear that word. How slow are you? Slomo.

Jabber
Slut.

Hester
You need to close your mouth, Jabber.

Jabber
I know what it means. Slut.

Hester
(Shut up.)

Jabber
Slut.

Hester
(I said shut up, now.)

Jabber
I know what it means.

Hester
(And I said shut up! Shut up.)

(Rest)
(Rest)

Jaber
Slut. Sorry.

The words just popped out, a child's joke.
He covers his mouth sheepishly. They look at each other.

Hester
Jabber
Hester
Jabber

Hester quickly raised her club and hits him once.

Brutally he cries out and falls down dead...Hester beats Jabbers
body again and again and again.²²⁵

The above extract not only illustrates Parks' employment of a writing technique filled with vocal direction for the actors, but is also an example of the fearless subject matter she tackles. In the Blood is a story about a black woman, Hester, who has five illegitimate children, and the various individuals, institutions, choices, and lack of choices that lead to her life as a stereotypical welfare queen. Parks's creation of the character Hester is in line with her tendency to give voice to black people (alive or dead) whose lives are rarely witnessed on stage. She states:

Theater, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theater and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.²²⁶

Parks can afford to locate and create unique black characters because, unlike Baraka, Bullins, and Sanchez, she does not have to take into consideration a dearth in the representation of self-affirming blacks on stage. Her writing is liberated from the constraints of battling negative representation of blacks (as *Mammies*, *Jezebels*, *Brutes*, or *Uncle Toms*) because of playwrights in the Black Arts Movement who ensured that positive—or at the very least, oppositional—images were presented.

²²⁵ Suzan-Lori Parks, "In the Blood," The Red Letter Plays (Theater Communications Group, 2001), 105-6.

²²⁶ Suzan-Lori Parks, "Elements of Style," The America Play and Other Works (Theater Communications Group, 1995), 4.

In the same vein as Suzan-Lori Parks, Anna Deavere Smith feels theater “must include new characters in our human drama that have not been portrayed on our stages.”²²⁷ Like Parks, Smith can afford to expose a complex range of characters because of the “Black Woman/Sister” characters her antecedents from the Black Arts Movement portrayed. Unlike Parks, whose plays are unconventionally abstract and a conglomeration of various theatrical styles, Smith creates her characters through the ethnographic study of real people in a geographical setting who are affected, directly or indirectly, by a racially charged incident (the 1991 Crown Heights riot, the 1992 Los Angeles riot). Smith writes and performs one-woman shows in which she portrays a variety of characters differing in age, race, gender, class, power, and background. She spends hours interviewing these characters and attempts to replicate their words and presence in an unbiased voice. Her work is groundbreaking because, while many African-American actresses are limited to roles that portray a stereotype of the black woman, Smith is able to play a host of real people (as opposed to fictional characters) in all their complexity.

Smith transcends the limitations of her blackness to convince her audiences, if only momentarily, that she is of a different ethnicity. Consequently, she shatters people’s notions of how the black woman on stage should look and act. Parks creates surreal worlds in which the audience is forced to question the relationships between history, patriarchy, politics, gender, and race. Shange

²²⁷ Anna Deavere Smith, Twilight Los Angeles, 1992 On the Road: A Search for American Character (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), xxi.

expressly tackles the internalized oppression of black women in a white America. These three women have received accolades for their innovative exploration of black women in America. The theatrical territory in which they venture would not have been possible without the women who came before them and broke new ground—playwrights like Sonia Sanchez and Adrienne Kennedy.