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Contemporary (American) Drama / Theatre
About feminism and subjecthood

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Σκοπός ενότητας

- About feminism and subjecthood.

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Περιεχόμενο ενότητας

- Heterotopias of blackness: The (im)possibilities of the (black) female self.

Each day I wonder with what or with whom can I co-exist in a true union.

Adrienne Kennedy, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*.

It is always right

to name the place you move in.

to name...these people now.

wherever you are

they come upon you like an image. Jay Wright, “The Master of Names”

Black American culture is a very fragmented thing. We’re all trying to come up with some definition of what we are. My absolute definition of me is the schizophrenia, the contradiction. George Wolfe (1986).

1. Heterotopias, for Michel Foucault, are “real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real

sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." Because heterotopias are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible," Foucault likens these cultural counter-sites to an epistemological mirror where "I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent. ... From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: It makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" (Foucault 24, 25).

The existential dilemma of Hamlet ("To be or not to be"), Joseph Dubley observes in his study of Heiner Müller, speaks "directly to the conceptual problem of presence identified by the Other (race/gender) and heterotopias; indeed, the idea of 'being' itself in the postmodern world," the critic maintains, "constitutes a daily regimen of man's own presence or absence in his various spaces" (563-564). This sound statement couldn't be more true than in the case of Black women in America. Historically Black women have not fared well in American cultural life. Their existence has always been questioned spatially and temporally. As actress Cynthia Belgrave argues, Black females have lived "in a no-exit world." If "you're strong and stoical," she notes, "you're a matriarch, and if you're weak and sensual you're a whore. Of course there are no equitable gradations in between. The Black woman is at the mercy of everybody. When we finish kicking people, let us kick the Black woman again" (Qtd in Smith 267). "Black women have been the most powerless group in our entire society," Gerda Lerner concludes in her study of Black Women in White America (xxiii). And Maya Angelou eloquently summarizes the case as follows: "Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes sister, Pretty Baby. Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself" (Qtd in Harris 4). Being triply locked out by class, race and history, the Black woman had to struggle against multiple fronts, ranging from white racism to black sexism, Glenda Dickerson contends in her "Cult of True

Womanhood." "The depiction and perception of African-American woman in this country through stereotypes," Dickerson points out, "has garbled her voice and distorted her image. ... the ideals set up for true women were in actuality a fanatical method of sexual repression by white men to oppress and control women" (179). To do justice to her portrait, critics argue, Black women artists and scholars need to reclaim the Black woman's "other" image and identity through a reconstruction of the (mis)readings and (mis)representations of historical/cultural discourse (Dickerson 180). This new critical direction, described by many theorists in a variety of disciplines as "postmodernist," is indeed central to the African American re-visionary project.

What I would like to argue here is that plays like *Funnyhouse of a Negro (1964)* and the *Owl Answers (1965)* are part of Adrienne Kennedy's attempt to a) stage the (im)possibilities of racial "difference" (by locating the "trace"—that is the sum of all possible relations whether isolated or not, which inhabit and constitute the black cultural sign) and b) dramatize through this "difference" the crisis of the new age that is marked by a crisis of self-authenticating knowledge, authority, identity and ethics. It is my intention to show here that postmodern subjectivity, as it surfaces in these two plays, is not assigned to the apolitical agenda of essences and essentialism. It is rather multiple, layered and non-unitary; in brief, it is contradictory and "ex-centric" to itself, meaning that it does not function as a controlling origin of self-expression.

2. Despite the intensified interest in African American women's writing, Adrienne Kennedy's oeuvre is still waiting the wider recognition it so much deserves. Though Kennedy is neither "your ordinary feminist," as Herbert Blau claims—of the kind feminists like Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, Ellen-Case, de Lauretis and others describe—nor a miltant ideologue of the kind Baraka had defined some twenty five years ago (a writer with clear cut answers to questions related to the black literary past or the black heritage of struggle and survival), one cannot deny that she is a person who understands well the racial psychology involved, the twisted morbidity of self-contempt nurtured by a long and shameful history as much as she understands unconventional theatrics (Blau 531). As Kennedy herself tells us in one of her interviews, "It's important to remember that I grew up in an immigrant neighborhood, but was also a product of black middle class culture, and I always tried to make sense of that. Tried to balance that. To understand where I fit into that world. I mean I feel intensely that white American culture always ... is trying to diminish black Americans" (1989: 156). There is no doubt that Kennedy's vision and perspective are uniquely black, society-conscious and feminine. To exclude her as a source for examining black life is to omit a large piece of the human puzzle. Like

Childress, Hansberry and Shange, Kennedy is important because she supplies America with unique images of Black women and their struggle for survival and re-definition. Viewing (black) life from a special angle, Kennedy manages to carve new paths for the American stage that has traditionally been populated with stereotypes of Blacks. Kennedy is not a solipsistic writer as much as she is not a militant. If her stage world is difficult to order, the real world, as she has experienced it from her "other" position, is no less difficult to grasp. Kennedy sees and understands well the complex implications of the issues involved in her quest of ethnic identity, origins and security. She also seems to understand that the Marxist demystifying logic of her contemporaries, based upon the dichotomy of appearance versus reality, according to which black discourse claims a privileged ability to unmask ideologies and practices in the name of unveiling a truth or reality, is no longer applicable when reality itself has been thrown into question and when culture has entered the age of what Baudrillard calls "simulation," the society of the image (Simulations 1983). There is, as it were, no "material reality," an uncontestable reality nor is there any fetishized "origins" of self in Kennedy's epistemology. What one finds in her quest for the face behind and beyond the simulation is a limitless interplay of confusing narratives, a non-stop passing into mirrors, "alive here, there, and everywhere, at once present and absent in time," as Rosemarie Bank observes (237). It is not surprising, therefore, James Hatch and Ted Shine argue, that in her artistic creations she opts for contradiction and "paradoxes of spirit and flesh; Black and White; Past and Present" (756). As maintained by Gerald Freedman, artistic director of The Great Lakes Theatre Festival and a longtime friend of Kennedy's, "Kennedy is a poet of the theatre. She does not deal in story, character and event as a playwright. She deals in image, metaphor, essence and layers of consciousness" (Qtd in Sollors 518); her work, Freedman observes elsewhere, is "dark and mysterious and strangely innocent, like the vision of a soulful child" (Qtd in Kollin 85).

Kennedy's own words, in her revealing interview "A Growth of Images," seem to support the claims of these critics. "I think about things for many years," she has noted, "and keep loads of notebooks, with images, dreams, ideas I've jotted down. I see my writing as a growth of images. I think all my plays come out of dreams. ... It's very easy for me to fall into fantasy" (1977: 44, 47). And commenting elsewhere on her use of metaphor she has this to say: "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be [learnt from others] and it is also a sign of genious since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" (1987: 105). This is precisely her point of departure: the question of sameness and difference and the (im)possibilities of their co-existence. What one sees in her work is the stage version of her own personal conceptual

problem of "Otherness" and heterotopias. She starts with her immediate surroundings but her overall subjectmatter is an America created through a mixture of colors, dreams, simulations, anachronisms, contradictions and legendary traditions.

As we know in realistic dramatic representation the principle has always been that of the similarity between representation itself and its implied referent. The representation merely "figures" for us what we "always already" know: where the world can be "cognized," the stage representation consolidates such ideological "knowledge" by making it "re-cognizable." In other words, there is a kind of pseudo-harmony between actor/character/role/society/reality, as there is pseudo-harmony between one action and another. What we are presented with are insights into the "true nature" of human experience, a nature which, though more or less at odds with individual experience, is presented as everyone's reality (Hays 349). The spectators are enclosed in words and forms that, by laying claim to (the) reality, prevent them from recognizing the metacharacter of all the signs involved.

In Kennedy's postmodern world this mode is overturned. Kennedy is clearly not simply representing a present-day America, but is rather constructing stage narrative histories, where things and subjects are simultaneously in and out of their proper time and topos. In more sense than one her plays stand as precis of postmodern drama, embodying the indeterminancies—"ambiguity, discontinuity, heteroxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion"—and the deformations—"decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, de-definition"—that Ihab Hassan has identified as central to postmodernism (269).

According to Kennedy, representational linearity (based on cause and effect) does not characterize African American culture and experience; instead, ambivalence, deterritorialization, heterogeneity, plurality, eclecticism, discontinuity, parody and paradox reign supreme. Reading her plays we see that she systematically dis-places the traditional representational devices that construct a comprehensive view of (black) history and selfhood and retraces the past as a (dis)continuous development. By refusing to endorse the rules of the "concrete," Kennedy questions every manner of binding and acknowledges the multiple and shifting selves of Black people, the complexities of the signifying dynamic process toward the formation of the self. She uses the stage territory as a magician *bricoleur* who plays around with fragments of meaning which she has not created. Like a character in a Pynchon novel, Kennedy wanders about in a labyrinth of signs, endeavouring to piece together bits of dispersed narratives. As a result of her tactics the surface on which

her stage signs move is so slippery that no one can hold onto his/her position for long. Like magic her drama by-passes the normal circuitous routes of narrative and simply shifts instantly from one state to another. If narrative is answerable to the ideological norms of rationality which govern modern society, Kennedy's magic opens the door to an unanswerability, even an irresponsibility. In this manner her stage becomes the place for an historical analysis of the various social and gestural forms which have become the normative structure for describing and defining (black) reality. And this is the most fundamental transgression: the making of her plays not only coterminous with historical experience but also constitutive of such history. Mostly through anamnesis (the recollection of relationships deeply buried in her memory or in the race's memory) and the conflicts, analogies, agreements and disagreements that these relations betray on a syntagmatic and paradigmatic level, Kennedy turns her plays into a hieroglyphic tapestry, "confessional arias," as Philip Kolin coins the term (86), that, no matter how confusing at times, give to her dramatic microcosm its poetic force and generate its critical meaning.

In our world, Kennedy argues, no individual, male or female, is an autonomous or coherent, stable entity, constituted by a set of natural and pre-given elements such as biological sex. The pure entity, the uncontaminated thing, the unmediated presence and the undivided origin are simply fiction. Whatever subjectivity the individuals may have is the effect of a set of ideologically and culturally organized signifying practices through which the individuals are situated in the world and in terms of which the world and one's self are made intelligible (Ebert 22-23). This thesis leads to the postmodernist notion of the self that is radically split. Paul Ricouer described this fragmentation as follows: "I am lost, 'astray' amidst objects and separated from the center of my existence, as I am separated from others and am the enemy of all. Whatever may be the secret of this 'diaspora,' of this separation, it implies first of all that I am not in possession of what I am" (53). In like manner, Kennedy's subjects, are all produced through signifying practices which precede and shape them. They acquire specific subject (or subjected) positions through ideologically stuctured discursive acts that most of the times lie beyond their ability to determine. Their world is a kind of Baudrillardean "hyperreality,"[i] organized from the vantage point of an absent site, an alibi. Within the confines of this discourse presence and absence, chaos and indeterminancy, subjectivity and social formation, history and fantasy, twin hermeneutical beacons of postmodernism, become their reality. As Kennedy herself has noted: "I see my writing as being an outlet for inner, psychological confusion and questions stemming from childhood. ... You try to struggle with the material that is lodged in your unconscious, and try to bring it to the conscious level" (1977: 42). While her

contemporaries openly attacked the obstacles to black self-realization, Kennedy chooses to represent through a "playful" and "painful" pluralism the tortured moment of emergence and dis-covery as well as the limits imposed upon this quest by all prior objectivist thinking. "Each day I wonder with what or with whom can I co-exist in a true union?" she writes in her beautiful play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1988: 82). And this transparent statement seems to be the *aporia* and also the (dis)organizing principle of all her plays, and particularly the two under discussion.

3. In her "Growth of Images" Adrienne Kennedy has this to say about the Funnyhouse of a Negro: "Obviously there was always great confusion in my own mind of where I belonged, if anywhere. ... and I struggled to write plays—as typified by Funnyhouse—in which the person is in conflict with their inner forces, with the conflicting sides to their personality, which I found to be my own particular, greatest conflict" (47).ii It is clear from Kennedy's "conflict" that the idea of "being" itself in the postmodern world of the "funnyhouse" constitutes for Kennedy the playwright and Kennedy the citizen of the US a daily regimen of her and of Blacks' own experience. In this one-act play, divided as it is into roughly 12 sections of dialogue, monologue and chorus (Sollors 514), Kennedy deliberately doubles and triples and then redistributes her colored people both spatially and temporally to forcefully foreground her personal and racial agony and confusion. It is clear from the way she manipulates her dramatic material that Kennedy does not want to represent things, people and events for their own sake, since things, facts, places and people only acquire value (and/or meaning) as extentions of the associations they give way to, and in their collage with other associations. After all, this is the Negro experience, Kennedy seems to argue: a constant re-cycling of events, people and images. Thus through constant chronological and territorial displacement and self transformation Kennedy invites us to recognize the pitfalls of Sarah's (Blacks') odyssey toward the formation of the self. There are no relations in this play, syntagmatic or otherwise, that can be conceived of outside of this dramatic schema. The reader/viewer is called upon to decipher by making his/her own "painful" associations. For it goes without saying that the success of this dazzling game of identities and cultures depends not only on Kennedy's familiarity with her source and target texts (and ability to manipulate them) but also on the spectator's awareness of them as well. It is common knowledge that no utterance is ever fully explicit, completely free standing. As Reed Way Dasenbrock notes, "to be understood, any text must be read in the light of prior knowledge, expectations about genre and about sequence—all the aspects often considered together as 'context'" (10). To understand the Funnyhouse's deeper implications then, and thus cope with Sarah's confusion, the

audience need to have some prior knowledge of Edith Sitwell's poetry, for example, some basic knowledge of the workings of Greek tragedy that enter the play (Oedipus story, the theme of anagnorisis/recognition of self, the presence of the chorus, the use of masks with their "great dark eyes that seem gouged out of the head"[3]), and particularly information about historical personalities like the Duchess of Hapsurg, Lumumba, and Queen Victoria. These varied signs and structures are fragments of Sarah's mind and history; they make up her world and maintain its confusion/instability. It helps to know in advance that Lumumba, for example, was the first prime minister of independent Congo, assassinated in 1961 (while Kennedy was staying in Ghana).iii Being aware of this we can see more clearly hat the reason Kennedy brought him into her own story was to function mainly as a symbol of freedom, an emblem of decolonization, a connecting cultural force between Africa and Black America and perhaps as an intimidating political pressure, as Blau argues, "against her [Kennedy's] grain, like the surrounding Black Power, invading her privacy, her withdrawal, and calling her back to history, not in the hallowed literary past but in the crude, agitating and potentially violent present where the culture of the whites, however glorious, doesn't entirely seem to serve" (533). It also helps our better understanding of the play to know some things about crucial Western personalities like Queen Victoria, for example, "a sitting figure, one of astonishing repulsive whiteness, possessing the quality of nightmares and terror"iv who, apart from being an indication of Kennedy's interest in English descent,v comes into play to fuel antagonisms and contradictions. She is there to arrest play and deprive Sarah of her capacity to situate herself as an "I," a linguistic/cultural subject in a dialogical relation to a "you." Queen Victoria is Sarah's primary logos who, although not a part of the theatrical set, governs it from a distance.vi Jesus, on the other hand, stands for love, an important element Kennedy keeps bringing back into her plays to show how much she and her characters need it. As for the Duchess, in addition to her presence as an emblem of Western, white culture, she stands for lust (as opposed to Queen Victoria's symbolic role of the "proper woman"). These images, according to the stage directions, co-exist and their speeches "are mixed and repeated by one another." The most telling example is the section where all four speak at once about father: "He never tires of the journey, he who is the darkest one of them all. ... But he is dead. And keeps returning. Then he is not dead. Then he is not dead. Yet, he is dead, but dead he comes knocking at my door" (20-21). The aware reader/viewer is invited to put the pieces together and make his own collages in an unstable world where the fragment vies with the sentence, the image of black with the image of white and the narrative of history with the narrative of imagination.

What we gradually learn about Sarah, the protagonist of this labyrinthine world, is that she's beautiful, but in a boring way: "no glaring Negroid features, medium nose, medium mouth and pale yellow skin" (6). She has frizzy hair. She is an English major who occasionally works in libraries and writes poetry in the style of Edith Sitwell (6). She lives in the Upper West Side of New York City, in a room full of "dark old volumes," a narrow bed and old photographs of castles and the monarchs of England (5). The center of the stage works as her room and the rest operate as the place for her disseminating "selves": the Hapsburg Champer, the champer in a Victoria Castle, the hotel where Sarah thinks she kills her father and the jungle. "These are the places I exist in," she tells us in her strangely detached, Brechtian-like manner. "I know no places," she goes on to confess. " That is I cannot believe in places. To believe in places is to know hope and to know the emotion of hope is to know beauty. It links us across a horizon and connects us to the world. I find there are no places, only my funnyhouse" (7). In there lies her actual heterotopia: "to live in rooms with European antiques and [her] Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, [and] oriental carpets" (6). In this imaginary (hetero)topia Sarah wants the "Negro" to tell her of "a royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones. For as we of royal blood know, black is evil" (5). She wants her friends to be white: "My friends will be white," she says in a matter of fact tone (6). She needs them as her alibi to direct her performance, as a kind of "an embankment to keep [her] from reflecting too much upon the fact that [she is] a Negro" (6). "They are necessary for me to maintain recognition against myself," she repeatedly admits (6, 12). She dreams for her friends to "eat their meals on white glass tables," in the same room with her, full of antiquities (6,12). She feels so intensely uncomfortable with her split selfhood and the cultural identity that surrounds her, that she revels at the cleanliness of white people and things. She wants to be "somebody else, a Queen or something" (8). This is the postmodern condition in its most basic aspect: the orientation towards alterity. Seeking legitimation in multiple alibis, Sarah tries to counter all forms of "rootedness" (be they figured in terms of national cultural roots, traditions or heritages, personal, biographical or self-identifications). "I have tried to escape being black," she confesses (19). And clinging to the knees of the Funnyman she says: "Hide me here so the nigger [her father] will not find me" (10). As opposed to her "mother [who] looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman's," (3) her father is "the wilderness" who "speaks niggerly groveling about wanting to touch [her] with his black hand" (10). "My father is a nigger who drives me to misery," (11) she tells us. "How dare he [her father] enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one," Sarah, as the Duchess of Hapsburg, asks? Her

father, we learn, “always lived in the jungle” (9). He was a missionary teacher who dedicated his life to the erection of a Christian mission in the middle of the jungle; he got mixed up in politics and shot himself when Patrice Lumumba was assassinated. According to Sarah, her mother wanted her Father to be “Christ. From the very beginning in the lamp of their dark room she said—I want you to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race. You must return to Africa; find revelation in the midst of golden savannas, nim and white francopenny 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” (14). Growing up her father “wanted the black man to make a pure statement ... to rise from colonialism,” (15) to “find revelation in the black” (18). Contrary to her Father's beliefs, for Sarah the color of despair is black. She is not far from believing in the adage: “If you’re black stay back; if you’re brown stick around; if you’re white you’re right.” She prefers being “brown” to being all black: “at least I am yellow,” she confesses—as opposed to her father, who, by being black, draws all her anger: “I hoped he was dead,” she says (3). Because of him we learn that Sarah’s mother died. The “black beast put his hands on her. She died” (3). She is bothered by his presence in her life: “Why does he keep returning,” Sarah, as Queen Victoria, wonders (3)? Only to admit a bit later: “My father isn’t going to let us alone” (17). Like Jay Wright’s poem at the beginning of this essay, Sarah is doomed to be “haunted by his “image,” unless of course she manages to totally erase him through her performance(s). As in the history of the rituals of dance, from at least Salome onwards, it is not any final product which is of major concern but the seduction of the performance itself, its ability to seduce one into the loss of one's own identity or selfhood—a kind of immaterialization of the self. By adopting a series of aliases, personae from other times and places that produce a parodic simulation, Sarah tries to re-arrange at will the orders by which Western culture/society knows itself. Much more than this, she tries to subvert any claim to reality at all. Sarah by moving from one discursive reality to another (Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria, Patrice Lumumba and Jesus) deterritorializes her condition and immaterializes her own being. Each of her performance acts carries within it times past and present, transcending physical limitations and dispersing its singularity over a history without a specific beginning or end. Things have their own seductive logic. Sarah lives in an epistemological threshold between heterotopic spaces, an archaeological “site” where self-definition cannot exist strictly in the present. Behind the scenes of Kennedy’s play, we have the impression that someone is “always already” demanding reproduction of the codes and reiterating subjection. All her alibis occupy the space outside of the performance space, organizing it from afar, making it accessible through repetition. As Kennedy writes in her instructions, “when she is

placed in her room with her belongings," the rest of the play happens around her (2). Characters come through the wall, then disappear off into varying directions, leaving Sarah virtually in the middle of nowhere. There is a strong sense of enclosure, spatial and mental, that is overpowering and constantly checks upon Sarah's free-flowing vitality, devalorizing her *mise-en-scène* and speeding up the disintegration of her (Black) self.

For Sarah (and Kennedy) the encounter between the two cultures, the two (pre)texts not only precedes personal historiography/biography but also implies an unbreachable inter-cultural gap. Unlike Ntozake Shange's *colored girls* who simply *considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, and unlike Tobsy in George Wolfe's *Colored Museum*, who finds her power and subject position in her "colored contradictions"—by affirming the "schizophrenia" of African American culture—Kennedy's heroine, in her inability to find her text and topos in all this mirage of conflicting inter/intracultural images, decides to take her fate in her hands; in her inability to understand "difference" which, as Foucault maintains, requires first and foremost thought without contradiction, without dialectics, without negation; "thought that accepts divergence; affirmative thought whose instrument is disjunction; thought of the multiple" (1977: 185), Sarah finds suicide a viable solution. The rainbow for her is not "enuf." She writes herself off history. Like the Beckettian narrator who is being swallowed up by his endlessly self-multiplying narrators, Sarah is swallowed up by her pseudo-images and heterotopias. She is discovered hanging from the ceiling of her mad "heterotopic" funnyhouse, ironically reduced to a lifeless image of "astonishing repulsive whiteness." Her deep-seated drive toward legitimation in white standards, her yearn for a paradigmatic text that would delineate interetextuality, and her desire for a fixed *topos* in lieu of *(hetero)topos*, in combination with her mistrust of her colored ancestry, blind her to the fact that in her (anybody's) life there is no palimsest that would insure this kind of desired balance and coherence. Glaring from one center to another throughout (black/Western) history, Sarah is doomed to stumble into a chain of sometimes alien and sometimes familiar elements, metaphors or metonymies that will always serve a similar inter-cultural function: seduce her into further dis-placements and transgressions. If she does not come to grips with this fact, the "loss," presented in the *Funnyhouse* with the loss of hair, will continue.[vii] For the unaware onlookers of her internal drama, Sarah will always be "a funny little liar," a "poor bitch [that] has hung herself."

4. With the Owl Answers Kennedy is addressing most of her earlier concerns, aesthetic and ideological.viii As in the Funnyhouse, we have a Kennedy in relative

isolation, introspective and seemingly vulnerable, attentive to matters of race, gender and culture with an intensity that makes for emotionally rich performance. Once again Kennedy is drawn to shadings of postmodern ambiguity and ambivalence. "The characters," she writes in her Owl Answers, "change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves, leaving some garment from their previous selves upon them always to remind us of the nature of She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl's world."ix From the very beginning Kennedy wants to make it clear that the play is ostensibly about the construction and deconstruction of (Black) being, the splaying of the female (unitary) subject. To this end she gives us another stage patchwork in progress—a stage narrative as a process of making and unmaking figures that are produced by social institutions. Trapped between eras, ideologies, colors and "grand narratives," the main characters are (re)presented as mixtures playing more than one role. They all exist surrounded by and encrusted with inter-cultural heritages, local and international, traditional and modern—all of which establish the economic and ideological code of the play. Kennedy's ingenious strategy to deploy discontinuity and multiplicity, apart from being an alienative device, help her delineate heterotopic space in terms of what is real (Clara's remembrance of past events in the present, for example), juxtaposed against the imagined (the existence of the father in the past). Besides the mulatto who is She who is Clara who is the Bastard, who is Virgin Mary who is the Owl, we have the Mother who is also the Reverend's wife and Anne Boleyn; Clara's "Goddam Father" is the Richest White Man, her White Father and Reverend Passmore. There is also a Negro Man who, like Raymond and the Landlady in the Funnyhouse, is the only one with a single personality that serves as a link between the world of the mind on the stage with the more concrete world inhabited by the audience (Williams 143).

The protagonist, Clara, is a 34 year old educated person, the bastard product of an illicit relationship between the richest white man in town and his black cook. Kennedy tells us that her character lives and teaches in Savannah and, like Sarah, she loves to read "subjects like the history of London, the Life of Anne Boleyn, Mary Queen of Scots and Sonnets" (36).x She speaks in a soft voice as a Negro teacher would do. She was married once briefly. After her mother dies, we learn that Clara is adopted by Mr and Mrs Passmore. When her legitimate father dies she is barred from the funeral. Going to London to claim his white heritage, she is locked in the Tower of London with Chaucer and Shakepeare as her guards. What Clara wants is a way to come to terms with her mixed and confusing racial and intellectual background (she is "almost white" 29). The paradoxical situation to be both of a specific place and yet also uprooted, so typical of the postmodern heterotopic

condition, becomes the place of (re)action. Like Heiner Müller's Hamlet (of Hamletmachine), Clara lives in hetertopic spaces where self-definition cannot exist strictly in the present, but must constantly refer to the past. This divergence of present with past and history with personal develops in her space the reality of her own being as colored by the discourse of racial and gender history flowing into present time.

Kennedy deliberately plays with and foregrounds the multiple. She brings on stage a protean personality and a story of overlapping narratives and asks us to appreciate the complex and contradictory nature of black identity, particularly female. Of course it goes without saying that Kennedy's emphasis on character by no means implies a return to psychological and realistic portraiture. Although she herself tells us in "A Growth of Images" that "autobiographical work is the only thing that intertests [her], apparently because that is what [she] does best" (42), her story is far from being a biography of Clara's life; rather, it is a biography of her life's imaginative heterotopia, a life dreamed into existence (or nightmare);[xi] a kind of "bioscape,"—a possible analogy to G. M. Hopkins's poetic strategy of "insacape: a biography in and of a landscape inscribed with the history of the world" (Dasgupta 32). Kennedy wants Clara to be another inhabitant in a psychological and cultural vacuum whose maddening series of changes implicitly would more accurately reflect on the wide variety of African American experience.

Howsoever much Kennedy's characters assume other characters, the story is narrated in a rather Brechtian fashion. Characters are once singular and plural, a flock of protagonists, antagonists and deuteragonists that act and interact variously and at odds with each other. Heterogeneity (the modern tendency to be constituted on a principle of self-difference rather than as a self-identical whole) and eclecticism (drawing upon an extensive range of signifying and cultural practices) are very important here. Kennedy opens up her discourse, allowing the many to speak through the mouth and act through the body of one. Unlike Sarah's case, the characters here do not function as mouthpieces for a single character's state of mind; they are each composed of multiple personae with a common voice. In this way they transgress boundaries and create their own valid repertoire in a bricolage that assembles different types of cultural, philosophical and ideological reference points. In this way the play avoids the traps of simple biography (chronicle of the life of a subject) and becomes a curious amalgam of visions and dreams picked out of the Western and African American history to cohabit, interpenetrate and give (or take) substance to the character(s). Even on the level of spatial arrangement we encounter the same dissemination and deterritorialization: "The scene," Kennedy writes, "is a New York subway car is the Tower of London is a Harlem Hotel room is

St Peter's. The scene is shaped like a subway" (26). The actual performance space is one with the narrative space, which is also imaginary, fictional space involving the Old World and the New. Beards, wigs and faces are visible, underlying the play's theatricality.

To dramatize the dispersed life of her character and her personal agony, to understand the "schizophrenic" trajectory of her own history and selfhood, Kennedy once again avoids the demands of linear action or better, avoids historical memory devised as a linear process. By doing away with the one narrative and its representational chain, Kennedy de-anecdotalizes her theatre and allows it to give way to the struggle over questions of identity, place, and inter-cultural values. It is a kind of *obraz*—a succession of little touches, each one extending, modifying and occasionally negating the one before. By transferring a specific "quality" from one image to another, Kennedy makes us see how ideas (inter)relate with each other and with other things that they are not ordinarily associated with. The simultaneous presence of white historical figures like William the Conqueror, Ann Boleyn, artists like Shakespeare and Chaucer and common people, past and present, constitute for Clara an "always already" society that makes her appear as "only a prisoner" (27). They constitute her pseudo-discourse to which she constantly returns. These absent figures have the knowledge and thus the power to inscribe, "by grasp" or "by the hold," their grand narratives on Clara and thus determine her "other" status in the world:[xii] "Their lines," Kennedy writes, "are not spoken specifically by one person but by all or part of them" (27), thus "crowding" her (27) and by extension intensifying the total confusion of origins and self. As Blau says, "If characters speak alternately they are not so much communicating as communing in alterable visions of an incessantly divided and dividing consciousness." Their speeches are monologic, semichoral, autistic, with the effect of ritual and incantation (536). "You are not his ancestor," they warn her when she attempts to go to the Tower of London to see her white father. They do not pay heed to her pleading: "You must let me go down to the Chapel to see him. He is my father" (27). Instead they order the Guard to "Keep her locked there." For them she is a "bastard" of the West (27); "Daughter of somebody that cooked for me," (37) as her Father (who never acknowledged her as his child) informs us.

In her effort to acquire a specific subject position—that is to say, existence in meaning and in social relations—she is ready to do away with her own "otherness." Like Sarah, she feels so uncomfortable with her color that she refuses to see anything intrinsically positive and healthy in it. "I am almost white, am I not?" she asks, expecting others to confirm her "sameness" and thus let her into St Paul's

Chapel to see her Father with whom, after all, she visited the place of their ancestors, she had a lovely morning, she rose in darkness, took a taxi past Hyde Park to Buckingham Palace (27). She is not ready to accept the "other" perception of reality passed down in Black culture. To refuse, however, to accept that "other" reality, as Ralph Ellison has pointed out, is to be set adrift of one's Black self. And if one has no basis for trusting oneãs own perception of reality, external stimuli can mold one's personality into almost any shape (Ellison 173). And this is precisely what happens to the self-less Clara: she is objectified and claimed by those who determine the course of her life. "Yes, my Mary," her dead Father tells her, "you are coming into my world. You're filled with dreams of my world. I sense it all" (34). Conflicting legacies determine her subject position through their denial of her selfhood. She does not bear the name of her White Father (Mattheson) that would establish an ancestral entitlement (Sollors 520). "You are not his ancestor," (27) they tell her. "If you are the virgin, what are you doing with this Negro in a Harlem hotel room, Mary?" (41). But the Negro claims her: "At last you are coming to me" (35). And her foster parents: BBM: "The Reverend took my maiden head and I am not a Virgin anymore and that is why you must be Mary, always be Mary, Clara." And God: "the people in the town all say Bastard, but I—I belong to God and the owls" (35). By allowing all those around her to fix her, Clara lets them turn her into a repository of consciousness and creativity. Reminiscent of Ellison's earlier statement, Malcolm X's view of "Naming" is that: "As long as you allow them to call you what they wish you don't know who you really are. You can't claim to any name, any home, any identity" (14).

Clara is neither the maker nor the communicator of her images. Whatever she possesses are reproduced copies of images already there before her. Everything in her is a quote, a "playing upon." Clara's gestures, it seems, do not belong to any one given body, and nor do they belong to one continuous duration. That is why she never manages to be completely the mulatto bastard, or Clara, or the pure Virgin. She is an amalgam of everything she loves and/or hates. Like Handke's Kaspar or Marsha Norman's Arlene, Clara's self acquires an identity in relation to the forms to which it is attached. As she moves through history we observe an obvious gap between who she is (or could be) and how she persists in perceiving herself. She consistently views herself as an amorphous personality which takes on the traits required in particular situations (Virgin Mary, Whore etc). All these "ghosts" take her all the more toward the realms of the past, while simultaneously introducing the imagined heterotopic space of the spectral against the real space of the physical. "I am Clara Passmore," she cries out at one point in an attempt to make her individual presence felt. "I am not his ancestor. I ride, look for men to take to a Harlem hotel

room, to love, dress them as my father, beg them to take me" (37-38), she exhorts a bit later. Clara's yearning for love betrays her thirst for more being (now). "You must know how it is to be filled with yearning" (36). She feels an unrealized person, a site of subjugation. She wants to acquire a sense of continuity, to be called back to the word and to being. "From my Tower I keep calling and the only answer is the Owl. I am only yearning for your Kingdom, God." Yet instead of love and self-determination she collects contempt and indeterminancy. Responding to the world around her she imagines herself in other persons' skins, she sees things as if she were, momentarily at least, another, she tries to experience how the other half lives. The entrance of these alien figures, however, serves to continue the temporal and spatial doubling. She constantly views herself from both sides of the epistemological mirror—to the point where she becomes the ultimate transformation: an owl. "SHE WHO IS Clara Who is the Bastard who is the Virgin Mary suddenly looks like an owl, and lifts her bowed head, stares into space and speaks: Ow...oww" (45).

Clara's self-creation and reformation of a fragmented past are interwoven. To be herself she has to restore continuity to the ruptures imposed by the history of Black presence in America. She has to perform deconstruction which will disrupt the privileged stability of the white grand narratives and the unchallenged authority of their transparent univocal meaning. If in naming, one constitutes a social formatic which is eminently re-cognizable, by allowing those around her to name and uname her at will, Clara allows them to detach her from this desired continuous process; she allows them to give her boundaries and somehow project the shapes of their own minds against a potentially overwhelming flood of external reality. The namer is the one who creates and effaces history and who subscribes to a principle of identity, a code system in which there are frames. By calling her "Black" or a "Negro," the namers subsume the complexities of her experience into a tractable, homogeneous sign, while manifesting an essential inability to see the signified. "What is a Negro doing at the Tower of London, staying at the Queen's House?" By going there she poses a threat by virtue of her color and gender; she becomes a threat to the spatial and ideological security of the male (white) order. Thus, to overrun all the old borders, Clara has to rethink the texts and their disparate discourse which constitute historical experience, and dance to the music of the "madness" in her. She has to find power in the unresolved contradictions of her existence. As long as her identity emerges out of the old "imperialist" play of signifiers, she will always have to listen to her Father telling her: "You are a schoolteacher in Savannah who spends her summers in Teachers College. You are not my ancestor. You are my bastard" (as well as bastard of the West, bastard of her own culture). Clara is a "third" term unto herself; an "undecidable," as Roland

Barthes coins the term in his *Pleasure of the Text* (54-55). As in postmodernist terms, what it takes is a push beyond the limits of the "sane" paradigms, black and white, to produce not the known, as Lyotard says, "but the unknown" (60). After all postmodern knowledge is "changing the meaning of the word "knowledge" (Lyotard 60). Whether this is possible or just another utopia remains to be seen. Kennedy, without working towards answering fundamental questions of this nature, surely helps them surface.

5. The "continuous self," Krutch claims in his book on modern theatre, is the assumption upon which "all moral systems must rest, since obviously no one can be good or bad, guilty or innocent, unless he exists as some sort of continuous unity" (77-78). It is hopefully clear from our analysis of the two plays that Kennedy's world, like the world of many of her contemporaries (Shepard in Angel City and Mad Dog Blues, Terence McNally in Where has Tommy Flowers Gone and Michael Mclure in Beard, to name a few) is torn between the ravages and benefits of modernism and postmodernism. By disarticulating Krutch's unified subject as the ultimate source of meaning and action, Kennedy succeeds in foregrounding a world marked by a crisis of power, authority, identity and ethics. Both Sarah and Clara are deliberately placed within a complex socio-cultural context in order to show how race and gender are implicated in the production of the body as a site of domination and struggle. In both plays we watch the pitfalls and progress that these heroines experience as they undergo a personal odyssey. The various stages of growth that appear in these two plays reflect life for many African Americans: a life of confusion, displacement and unrest. Clara and Sarah strive to make themselves whole in spite of the forces that seek to negate their personhood. The very end of the plays shows that there are no easy resolutions for these people, only continual becoming. One thing seems to be certain, however: they cannot totally disconnect their voice from the originating voice(s) of the earlier texts. The image of their father(s) will keep returning, whether they like it or not. The ground of each of their gestures, of every word, will always be (an)other word and (an)other gesture. In short, what Kennedy seems to maintain in these two plays is that the African American text can only emerge out of this multiple reality and will always consist of differential traces where there can be no clear-cut, indisputable beginning, middle or end. Meaning can be carried out only as part of this painful process. And this is a fact, according to Kennedy, characters must come to grips with, otherwise they will be unable to take part in this game of joy.

Bank puts this peculiar meaning of the Self and the Other into perspective: "The heterotopic timespace that is theatre presents Self as Other, being the double, not merely recognizing it. In this sense, we are all parts of the same Self—black white, young old, rich poor, woman man, taste touch, bird fish, here there—and all

parts of the Other. Not even the boundaries of life and death can be fixed, for (the dead) are all more alive in the space of illusion than actual people are in the spectator's real space, accumulating time in the very act of dispersing it. If Self is 'completed' in the Other, that completion is temporary and temporal. Presence is always defined ... in terms of absence: an absent person, a past time, a lost part of the self, a shattered dream, a jettisoned relationship, a place that is no place and every place. The search for and confrontation with the Other is inevitable and endless because it is the search for and confrontation with the Self" (238).

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Notes

i "Hyperreal," according to Baudrillard, is a set of manufactured objects and experiences which attempt to be more real than reality itself. *Simulations*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) 131.

ii The play was first co-produced by Edward Albee at the East End Theatre in New York City on January 14, 1964 and won the Obie award for the best Off-Broadway plays.

iii This is what she writes in her *People* about Lumumba: "Just when I had discovered the place of my ancestors, just when I had discovered this African hero, he had been murdered. ... even though I had known of him so briefly, I felt I had been struck a blow. ...I remembered my father's fine stirring speeches on the Negro cause ... and Du Boi's articles in *Crisis* which my father had quoted. ... There was no doubt that Lumumba, this murdered hero, was merged in my mind with my father" 119-20.

iv Adrienne Kennedy, "Funnyhouse of a Negro," *In One Act* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 3. All in-text citations refer to this edition.

v Kennedy writes in her *People:* "The statue we saw of Victoria in front of Buckingham Palace was the single most dramatic, startling statue I'd seen. Here was a woman who had dominated an age. In my play I would soon have the heroine, Sarah, talk to a replica of this statue. ...The statue would reveal my character's secrets to herself" (118). As for the inclusion of the Duchess, Kennedy notes: "I bought many postcards of the palace and the

Duchess of Hapsburg and saved them. One day the Duchess of Hapsburg would become one of my characters' most sympathetic alter egos or selves. ... European royalty in an alien landscape. Soon my Duchess of Hapsburg would exist in an alien persona, that of the character of the Negro writer" (96-97).

vi This kind of theatre Derrida describes as "theological." See his "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978) 235.

vii The hair image, that becomes a basic motif of the play, foregrounds this sense of loss, personal loss and racial loss.As the Landlady says: "Her mother's hair fell out, the race's hair fell out because he left Africa, he said" (18). The same hair image also associates both the race and the individual with extreme feelings of guilt and fear, Mance Williams argues in his study of twentieth century African American drama (145). Sarah's mother, Williams writes, lost her hair because she felt fear and guilt at believing her near-white body and heritage had been defiled by Sarah's father's Black touch (145). Moreso, Black Americans lost their hair because they abandoned Lumumba, rejected their Blackness and disavowed collective responsibility.

viii That she makes clear in her "Growth of Images," where she states, among other things: "*Funny House* was a build-up of an idea I had been working on for over five years. Finally that idea just suddenly exploded. The subsequent plays were ideas that I had been trying to work on in my twenties, but then just suddenly came at the same time, because all those plays were written quite close together. ... Once I found a way to express [these ideas] in *Funny House*, I think that was when I found a technique. I employed that technique for the rest" 47-48.

ix Adrienne Kennedy, "The Owl Answers," *In One Act, 25.* All in-text citations refer to this edition.

x Clara's interest in English culture is not accidental; it reflects Kennedy's own interest. As she says in her essay "A Growth of Images," "I was always interested in English literature and I've traveled in England. There's always been a fascination with Queen Victoria. It always seemed to amaze me that one person could have a whole era named after them. I find the obsession with royalty fascinating. Not only Queen Victoria, but other great historical literary figures like Patrice Lumumba and, it's obvious, Jesus Christ. Well, I took these people, which became a pattern in *The Owl Answers* and used them to represent different points of view—metaphors really" 45-46.

xi "Autobiographical work is the only thing that interests me," Kennedy writes in her "A Growth of Images," "apparently because that is what I do best. I write about my family" 42. The character Clara, she writes in her *People*, was inspired by the Georgia neighboor Sarah Clara, her mother and her mother's half-sister Aunt Martha, 35, 102, 122.

xii As E. Levinas writes, "in history understood as the manifestation of reason, where violence reveals itself to be reason, philosophy presents itself as a realization of being, that is as {philosophy's} liberation by the suppression of multiplicity, knowledge would be the suppression of the other by grasp, by the hold, or by the vision that grasps before the grasp." E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, 1969) 302.