Journal of American Studies of Turkey
18 (2003) : 49-64

Transformations of the African-American Self in Adrienne Kennedy's "Funnyhouse" and "Owl"dom

Özge Özbek

Presenting an oeuvre that reflects a variety of genres and an unyielding innovativeness, Adrienne Kennedy paved the way for many black dramatists, Ntozake Shange among them. Furthermore, she has contributed to the debates on identity that form the postmodern notion of self, which remains multiple, transformational and therefore resists definition. She has been awarded various fellowships and three Obie awards. Despite this success she is not a popular playwright; the interest in her work remains limited solely to academic studies. This is because her plays are not easily accessible and they do not in any way present easy solutions or role models. Additionally, due to the lack of propaganda in her works, Kennedy was welcomed neither by feminists nor by black Americans especially in the 1960s. Today, with respect to their presenting the subject in its plurality, her plays are evaluated as introducing a new mode of representation as well as a contemporary notion of cultural identity that brings together the fragments of multiple cultures. The notion of self she introduces is both cultural and gendered, and also is in the process of becoming—self at the "intersecting boundaries."[1] Kennedy's staging the subject through theatrical transformation belongs within the current cultural theories and the critical conception of representation. Contemporary feminist scholars and culture critics recognize conventional (Aristotelian) representation as an ideological strategy which locates the audience within the dominant ideology. In Kennedy's transformational stage, however, the contemporary audiences are offered ambiguities, multiple subject positions by which they will contemplate the ranges of their own subjectivities.

The politics of representation lies hidden in the strategies of staging the subject. The theatrical subject has almost always been associated with only one gender (male) and with only one cultural background (that of Western).

[1] *Intersecting Boundaries* is the title of the book in which critical essays on Kennedy's work are compiled.

Aristotle, in *Poetics*, sets up the qualities of the subject: he should be ethically good, appropriate, and consistent. Through his centralized point of view, the audience is expected to comprehend the action in a cause-and-effect relationship. In relation to the issue of the subject's goodness, Aristotle literally asserts that "there can be a good woman and a good slave, even though perhaps the former is an inferior type, and the latter a wholly base one" (47). He also comments on the intelligence of the social, sexual and cultural others by claiming that "it is *possible to* have a woman manly in character, but it is not appropriate for a woman to be so manly or clever" (47).

Representation in classical Western drama determines the cultural background and the gender of the subject, excluding and deeming the others as marginal. In Aristotle's formulation, "Since tragedy is a mimesis of men better than ourselves, the example set by good portrait-painters should be followed: they, while rendering the individual's physique realistically, improve on their subject's beauty" (48). The more the male subject's "beauty" (heroism, intelligence, strength, etc.) is accentuated, the more the opposite traits are defined and attributed to the excluded ones. Drama critic Linda Kintz comments on the influence of the ideology of classical representation, bringing the discussion into the contemporary context:

> […] the specific *generic* requirements of Greek tragedy continue to function as the hidden structural model for theories of subjectivity as well as for theories of drama in general. […] The generic features of tragedy produce a dramatic and theoretical discourse that in many ways requires that there be no female agency as it guarantees the masculinity of both the protagonist and the theorist. (1)

According to Kintz, conventional representation gives away its bias through the agent it chooses: "[t]ragedy enforces its own privilege in a way made obvious by the gendered hierarchy […]" (6). It associates man with subjectivity (the grammatical "I," the first person), universality, rationality, intellectuality, civilization, activity and authority, while associating woman with objectivity (the third person, a means to confirm the subjectivity of man), specificity, emotionality, sensuality and passivity. These associations, in return, form the binary oppositions. Binary logic, Kintz suggests, privileges wholeness and thus inscribes (cultural) mixtures as degraded (144). It does not allow for a notion of self that is heterogeneous and fragmented. Aristotelian representation is in an interdependent relationship

with binary logic, which, apart from creating discrepancies, produces an authorial position associating this position with wholeness, perfection, completeness, and coherence. These ideas that stand at the core of the system of Western thinking go hand in hand with Christian logic, which is obsessed with the binary concepts of sin/guilt and purity. When binary logic mingles with the symbols of Christianity, 'black' comes to symbolize evil, disease, filth, sin, and carnality in opposition to 'white,' which comes to symbolize purity, goodness and innocence.[2]

Feminist and African-American scholars of theater and drama recognize representation and/or mimesis as the crux of the problem. Aristotelian representation defines the subject as universal and objective, which marginalizes other viewpoints— racial and sexual. Representation is ideological in that it erases the diversity of cultural experience from the stage, and thus from the public sphere, confirming the priority and universality of the white male instead. This "universal" and "neutral" image of man deters "other" subjects from entering into the staged experience. The subjects in the two Kennedy plays, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962) and *The*

---

[2] In *Ain't I A Woman*, bell hooks explores the "myths of blackness." The stereotypes that these myths fabricate, on the one hand, devalue the African-American man and woman, and on the other hand, obscure the "constitutionalized" rape of the woman slave by white man. The two of the most common stereotypes are born from the myth of the slave woman as sexually loose, and the myth of the slave man as rapist. These myths operate in the psyches not only of white women and men, but of African-American women and men as well.

The rapist stereotype deterred the white woman's relationship to the black man: "By brainwashing white women to see black men as savage beasts, white supremacists were able to implant enough fear in the white female's psyche so that she would avoid any contact with black men" (hooks *Woman* 61). Supporting this insight, Craig Hansen Werner argues that these stereotypes serve "to obscure uncomfortable truths. The stereotype of the black beast obscures the historical reality that 'miscegenation' originated primarily in the rape of the black women by white men, especially slave owners" (115). According to these myths, the mulatto is the child of either the corrupt woman slave who had intercourse with her white master, or the black man who raped a white woman. As Winona L. Fletcher ironically points out in her article, "[…] no consensus can reveal an accurate account of mulattoes, since the process of tracking down racial mixture is about as nebulous as the genetic phenomenon that permits one drop of Black blood to make a person 'colored' " (263). This brief historical background reveals how these myths are at work in the collective unconscious of Sarah in *Funnyhouse*, and Clara in *The Owl Answers*.

Owl Answers (1963), are of mixed heritage, African-American and Euro-American, torn between binary oppositions of black and white, African and European. Their dramatic composition, organized by theatrical transformations, disrupts the myths of objectivity and universality, along with binary logic that is intrinsic to the Western culture.

Theatrical representation of Kennedy's other (as the non-Western woman) calls for a different consciousness and concept of subjectivity, whose staging is determined by an act of re-framing the established and/or Aristotelian modes. This act of redeployment determines the transformations in the staging of the subject. Characterization necessitates the transformation device in order to render the complexity of identity for the African-American woman. Since her culture is a hybrid one, her search for a frame of reference is problematic. This search rejects the Aristotelian model because it needs theatrical forms that go beyond mimetic representation. It is the act of presenting gender and cultural identity as a "state of mind" that dismantles the conventional dramatic structure.

Recognizing that there is a close affinity between conventional representation, its binary logic and the limiting, coercive definitions of the self, contemporary scholars of culture argue against racial origin as the substance of cultural identity. One of those scholars, bell hooks improvises on a concept of cultural identity that is liberating:

> We turn to "identity" and "culture" for relocation, linked to political practice—identity that is not informed by a narrow cultural nationalism masking continued fascination with the power of the white hegemonic other. Instead identity is evoked as a stage in process wherein one constructs radical black subjectivity. Recent radical reflections on static notions of black identity urge transformation of our sense of who we can be and still be black. Assimilation, imitation, or assuming the role of rebellious exotic other are not the only available options and never have been. This is why it is crucial to radically revise notions of identity politics, to explore marginal locations as spaces where we can best become whatever we want to be while remaining committed to liberatory black liberation struggle. (Yearning 20)

Contemporary theater is concerned with providing the audiences with a re-framed, re-formed notion of subjectivity. On a very general level, the basic design is to construct the critical consciousness of the audience against the dominant ideology's operations of assimilation. Theater provides its spectators with the subject positions through which they can be aware of the "invisible" underpinnings of Aristotelian representation. In Adrienne Kennedy's drama, subjectivity is formed through multiplicity. This strategy, eliminating the formation of a definite subject position, urges the formation of critical consciousness, as well as a subjectivity exclusively belonging to the spectator, independent from the authoritarian voice of the playwright.

The formation of subjectivity is even more crucial for the doubly discriminated because they belong to several cultures while at the same time they are deliberately being erased from the representative spheres of the dominant culture. Helene Keyssar acknowledges the significance of being multicultural in the formation of a subjective consciousness, and points to the American experience in which several cultures interact: "[T]he doubleness of the consciousness of most Americans, including and perhaps especially the doubleness of being black and American and the bilingual experience of American culture is constitutive of the American experience" ("Dialogic Imagination" 122). Attributing this theatrical strategy generally to the plays of multicultural women playwrights, Keyssar asserts that she hears in these plays "voices that are both in conflict with dominant ideological positions and resistant among themselves to the reductions of uniformity" ("Dialogic Imagination" 122), recognizing the heterogeneity among this group.

Funnyhouse of a Negro is about Sarah, an African-American woman in her late twenties, living in a brownstone in New York. She has a Jewish poet lover, Raymond Mann—the funnyman of the funnyhouse, who "is very interested in Negroes" (257). The other white character of the play is the landlady, Mrs. Conrad, who functions as the funnylady of Sarah's funnyhouse. All of Sarah's friends are white, with whom she longs to be: "My friends will be white. I need them as an embankment from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro" (257). As she tells in her monologue, Sarah's dream is to live in rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets, and to eat her meals on a white glass table, just as her white friends do. Linda Kintz argues that the lifestyle Sarah refers to is that of the "petit bourgeoisie." But Kintz's implication is that she will never become one: "[The petit bourgeoisie] is a

cultural construction that can only be mimicked by a mimicry that marks its actor as always already outside the charmed circle of those who were born with taste" (152).

The myths of blackness fuse into Sarah's monologues that are usually uttered by her other selves. Following the cultural stereotypes, the mother is light skinned and her father is very dark. Although the mother is not portrayed through any stories of the past, the father has a story. When he was young, his mother tells her son: "I want you to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race. You must return to Africa, find revelation […] and heal the race, heal the misery, take us off the cross" (264). However, against his mother's wish, he marries the light-skinned woman, before going to Africa to "erect a Christian mission." Marrying the woman who is going to give birth to Sarah, he takes her to Africa with him. Then, it is narrated that the light skinned woman's hair starts to fall out.

According to Sarah's statements, her father rapes her mother, and the child from that union happens to be herself. After bearing Sarah, mother loses all her hair, along with her sanity, and is sent to an asylum. Sarah hates her father because he "haunted her conception, diseased her birth." She tells that she has killed her father by bludgeoning him with an ebony mask so that the racial/ancestral tie can be broken. Another implication is that he has committed suicide. The play ends with Sarah's suicide. The dialogue between the funnyman and the funnylady, which closes the play, belies Sarah's statements about her father: "Her father never hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered. I know the man. He is a doctor, married to a white whore. He lives in the city in a room with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books and oriental carpets. Her father is a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table" (272).

Kennedy applies the transformation technique in the manner that four characters, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba all represent the "main" character Sarah, who is physically absent in the second half of the play. Kintz comments that Sarah "is a proper name that, with great difficulty, must hold past and present together in a space of character which finds its organization to be circular and repeating, rather than linear and distributing" (152-153). Kintz also interprets this multiplicity of selves in terms of linguistics: "Here the signifieds [the selves] of the word Sarah only have in common the word Sarah, their 'Sarahness,' its function only to provide a space of overlapping

and crisscrossing" (153). Sarah's selves speak as the mouthpiece of Sarah. Ironically, the predominant mode of speech is the monologue, asserting the authority of the speaker. However, Sarah's authority is decentered since she physically consists of four persons, each of whom moves in a direction away from the center that is Sarah. As to this theatrical persona, Kennedy-as-Sarah warns the audience beforehand:

> The characters are myself […] I try to give myselves a logical relationship but that […] is a lie. For relationships was one of my last religions. I clung loyally to the lie of relationships, again and again seeking to establish a connection between my characters […] but they are lies. You will assume I am trifling with you, teasing your intellect […] You are wrong. For the days are passed when there are places and characters with connections with themes as in stories […] Too, there is no theme. No statements […] the statement is the characters and the characters are myself. (257-258)

Constituting almost the elementary part as to the meaning of the entire play, this monologue is an anticipation of the subject's dramatic composition. Evaluating the subject's representation, Deborah R. Geis comments that "Kennedy's works literalize the 'splitting' of female subjectivity as her monologue speakers divide and subdivide their fractured utterances […] such that character, like voice, is not a fixed construct" (170)—rather, the " 'Character' is a series of poses or identities […] The performing subject is split, like the endless series of mirrors in a funhouse, into multiple fictions" (50). The impossibility of a coherent and unified sense of identity for Sarah is all the more emphasized by her other selves' constantly examining themselves in the mirror, an act of recognizing one's own self. However, recognition—visual or spiritual—does not and cannot take place because Sarah (and each of her selves/alter egos) is in search of an image that does not belong to her. In this sense, the reflections on these mirrors work in quite a different way than self-recognition, as Geis explains: "In this case the 'funnyhouse' suggests the ability of the funhouse mirror to distort, to reshape, and […] to entrap within an infinite series of replications" (173).

Sarah suffers from the excess of her masks. Under these masks, much too weighty upon her, there is not much space to be herself: "As for myself, I long to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now, pallid like

Negroes on the covers of American Negro magazines; soulless, educated and irreligious" (184). She, who wants not to be and asks nothing except anonymity, knows unconsciously that: "[…] if I had not wavered in my opinion of myself then my hair would never have fallen out" (185). While she desires to identify with some of these masks, namely Jesus, Queen Victoria, and the Duchess of Hapsburg, she seeks flight from Patrice Lumumba, who signifies her patrilineal ancestry. The more she attempts "to dye"[3] her black skin into white and erase her African features, the more she gets closer to death and insanity. She identifies with these white masks only superficially. On the unconscious level, where the play takes place, she is keenly "aware" of the hostility that these masks carry within. These images/masks are not neutral—they are charged with "culture," with ideology. The stronger she yearns to identify with her masks self-recognition/ self-knowledge becomes less possible.

Transformation in *Funnyhouse* is not liberating at all. Nevertheless, it does signify, at least, the need for a nonessential notion of cultural self. The masks entrap or enslave rather than liberate Sarah. Her conscious is on the one hand effaced because of strong identification with her white masks, but on the other hand, it is still heard through the web of monologues that fabricate Sarah's story/her consciousness/the collective unconscious. The final collapse signifies the impossibility of a double origin within the dominant culture. The Owl Answers presents transformation in a similar tone; that is, it, too, leads Clara to suffocation rather than autonomy. The primary stylistic difference between the ways in which the two plays make use of transformation is that in *Funnyhouse* transformation is distributed to four bodies/spaces, whereas in *The Owl Answers* it is centered on one body/space: She who is Clara Passmore who is Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl; Bastard's Black Mother who is the Reverend's Wife who is Anne Boleyn; Goddam Father who is the Richest White Man in the Town who is the Dead White Father who is Reverend Passmore.

The Owl Answers opens in the New York subway. Like Sarah in *Funnyhouse*, Clara is of mixed heritage, being the child of the Bastard's Black Mother "who cooked for somebody" and the Richest White Man in the Town. She is a schoolteacher from Savannah, adopted by Reverend Passmore and his wife, and engaged to the principal of the school. Clara's real mother reminds us of the mother in *Funnyhouse* in her closeness to insanity.

[3] The pun on the word, dye (to dye and to die), is borrowed from Herbert Blau (61).

Bastard's Black Mother acknowledges herself as the stereotype of the prostitute, but Reverend Passmore's Wife cannot accept that she has lost her virginity and become an owl by marrying the reverend who preached in the church at the top of the Holy Hill. The third component of the mother figure, Anne Boleyn whom Clara turns for help, only accentuates Clara's "owl-ness" by throwing her red rice.

It is narrated that when Clara is young, her mother takes her to her father's (the Richest White Man in the Town) house in Jacksonville, Georgia. They enter the house from the back door. Clara learns from her "Black" mother "who cooked for somebody" that her father's family comes from England. Clara later finds out that England was the home of the Brontës, as well as Chaucer, Dickens and Shakespeare, and she falls in love with the landmarks of London, such as the Buckingham Palace, the Thames, Big Ben, Hyde Park and St. Paul's. When the White Father dies, Clara leaves Savannah to attend the funeral, against her colleagues', her fiancé's and her step mother's objections: "[…] who in the hell ever heard of anybody going to London?" (38). Clara is not satisfied with the conformity of her life, secured by the position as a teacher and as the fiancé of the principal, and she seeks to belong in the white (royal) heritage. The more she tries to belong, the louder the voice of her "black" past is heard. Not capable of converging these voices within, she collapses. As she finds herself calling for god, which comes to be a "wrong god" (44), her cries turn into the screech of an owl.

The characters are transformational—one actor represents a multiplicity of characters. They merge within themselves in Clara's nightmarish experience, where the walls between reality and psychic world collapse, and ultimately destroy Clara. The "main" character "She who is" is another variation of Sarah of *Funnyhouse.* As the body is literally or physically divided into four alter egos in *Funnyhouse*, the cast of *The Owl Answers* consists of fourteen characters (except for the Negro Man, Shakespeare, Chaucer and William the Conqueror), presented by four actors. The primary contrast in the mode of transformational acting is that in the former it is centrifugal, while in the latter, it is centripetal. For The Owl *Answers*, Kennedy's instruction for the actors reads: "The characters change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves, leaving some garment from their previous selves upon them always to remind us of the nature of She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl's world" (25).

No aspect of the white culture would confirm Kennedy's pairing up Virgin Mary with the Bastard, or the Goddam Father with the Richest White Man in the Town. While Virgin Mary stands for innocence, Bastard is considered as the embodiment of sin and guilt. Both of the images are shaped around sexual intercourse: Mary, with her archaic association with virginity, symbolizes immaculate birth, while the bastard, according to the myths of blackness, is the child of either a black rapist father or a black promiscuous mother. The link between Goddam Father and the Richest White Man in the Town is not acceptable, since their identification suggests the rape of the woman slave by the white landowner. The starting point in the transformation of the mother and father figures, as Kennedy organizes them, signifies the biological beginning of Clara Passmore: Bastard's Black Mother unites with (or rather, is raped by) Goddam Father who is the Richest White Man in the Town. Then each, i.e. the mother and father, evolves into a socially acceptable figure—mask or personae. Interestingly, it is Christianity that allows them to "pass" as "good" people, respected by the society. As the characterization of the mother and father figures progress from taboo to social acceptance, the Clara Passmore characterization moves in the counter direction. From a socially acceptable person, Clara Passmore, a 34-year-old school teacher from Savannah, engaged to the principal, regresses to her "cursed" biological origin/birth; to her "bastard"ness—and ultimately to a nonhuman state: the form of a bird, the owl, associated with Africa.[4]

The act of erasing the subject by fragmenting it into (or burying it under) several identities, and thus accentuating its presence is paradoxical. However, it is an effective strategy to urge the audience to contemplate on the operations of the dominant culture which ignores the cultural self. In Kimberly Benston's words, Kennedy, with her particular method of treating the African-American female subject, "explores a new mode of self-representation by discrediting the available models for staging the marginalized self seeking position in public discourse" (232). Kennedy's representing the self is the manifestation of her claim to be included in the public sphere. She ignores neither the African nor the Euro-American

[3] Interpreted in psychoanalytical terms, transformation of the parental figures, mother and father, moves from id, that is, pure sexual drives/copulation, to superego—institutions of marriage and religion. Contrastingly, Clara moves in a counter direction. She deteriorates from a socially accepted position—associated with the institutions of education and marriage, giving in to libidinal forces, and finally retreating into a non-human form (the owl).

heritage by "always juxtaposing [her] obsessive interest in white culture with her keen awareness of imperialisms of racism." (hooks, "Critical Reflections" 183).

Kennedy's presentation of the subject requires that the reader or the spectator return to the notion of a nonessentialized identity, as bell hooks and the other feminist critics discuss. March Robinson's comment is complementary in this sense where she argues that Kennedy, in her writer's persona, has managed to converge the discrepant fragments of her two ideologically opposite ancestries: "By writing *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy […] learned she didn't have to choose one aspect of her identity over another—the student enthralled by *Jane Eyre* or the woman transfixed by the mysteries of African masks. Ambivalence was not just an option; it would become a necessity if Kennedy was to mature as a playwright" (132). Because the authoritarian tone in the Kennedy plays is disrupted, the conflicts are not meant "to be resolved and unified but to be acknowledged and exploited as a source for personal and cultural transformation" (Keyssar, "Rites and Responsibilities" 234).

Gender subjectivity is considered as being relational, contextual and subject to change. Since it does not conform to a definitive shape and maintains only its amorphous state, recognition of self in the Aristotelian sense is not possible. Instead, this theater provides the field of exploring the multiplicity of meaning by presenting several points of view. Making use of theater's transformational device characters become other characters, places become other places—the performance of transformation helps the actor present the possibilities of a character as well as manipulating the context in which the character is presented. Helene Keyssar reveals that the plays of feminist and African-American theaters inspired her to change her mind as to the central characteristic of drama, which she hitherto thought was the kind of change represented in the recognition scenes:

> […] drama offers another possibility, that of presenting and urging the transformation of persons and our images of each other. This […] requires […] that we imagine men and women in a continual process of becoming other […] it is becoming other, not finding oneself, that is the crux of drama; the performance of transformation of persons, not the revelation of a core identity, focuses the drama. ("Dialogic Imagination" 119)

Although, in this quotation, Keyssar refers only to the transformation of characters, this theatrical technique is also applicable to the other elements of the plot, such as time, place and the relationship between the characters. Theatrical transformation is by definition the act of changing one set of circumstances into another. Therefore, besides identity (the who), the place of action (the where), time (the when), and the relationships between the characters (the what) are also subject to change (Passoli 20-21). Theatrical transformation functions to disrupt the authority of the character and/or the predominant point of view of the text. This disruption of authority is directly connected with undermining the plot structure of representational theater.

Funnyhouse presents a transformational space, resembling its transformational mode of characterization. Just as four different actors/ bodies mask one character, Sarah's world is signified by four different rooms/spaces: "Part of the time I live with Raymond, part of the time with God, Prince Charles and Albert Saxe Coburg. […] The rooms are my rooms; a Hapsburg chamber, a chamber in a Victorian castle, the hotel where I killed my father, the jungle. These are the places myselves exist in" (255-257). The presentation of this transformational space is achieved through the use of different corners of the stage, accentuating the scene-in-action with the spotlight, leaving the others in darkness. The center of the stage serves as Sarah's room, "allowing the rest of the stage as the place for herselves" (245). To the right of the stage is a suspended ladder that climbs to the landlady's place. The funnyman Raymond's room is suggested as being above Sarah's room. During the scene that takes place in Raymond's room, he constantly opens and closes the blinds, behind which are the mirrors, evocative of the ones in the funhouses. The free spaces of the stage are used as the Queen's chamber, the Hapsburg chamber, and the nonidentified spaces are spared for the monologue scenes in which the characters speak before a suspended wall, their faces to the audience.

The stage of *The Owl Answers*, too, is transformational; again, corresponding to its mode of characterization. Just as the characters change back and forth into and out of themselves always leaving some garment to remind the previous self, the stage metamorphoses into scenes, preserving their suggestive props:

> The scene is a New York subway is the Tower of London is a Harlem hotel room is St. Peter's. […] The sounds are subway sounds and the main props of a

> subway are visible—poles […] The gates, the High Altar, the ceiling and the Dome are like St. Peter's, the walls are like the Tower of London […] The Tower Gate should be black, yet slam like a subway door. (26-27)

Herbert Blau argues that Kennedy's transformations ultimately lead to a point where the black and white images/scenes melt into each other, never to dissolve again: "[W]hen [Kennedy] says […] that the Tower Gate should be black, yet slam like a subway door, there is an animism in the Tower, an aboriginal impulse in the stagecraft, black magic, that causes us to wonder whether even subways, built by whites in an industrial world, came out of the jungle, too […]" (60). Kennedy's transformational presentation requires the stage to transcend its limitations, to move, to revolve around its axis. For unlike the staging of *Funnyhouse, The Owl Answers* does not allow for the dispersal of scenes; they—like the characters SHE who is CLARA PASSMORE who is VIRGIN MARY who is the BASTARD who is the OWL, personified in one body—should be compressed into a single locale. In this single locale, intersect the multiple personae of Clara—the bastard, the adopted daughter, the black schoolteacher from Savannah tracing her heritage in England.

The analysis of the technical presentation is significant in that it clarifies the understanding of how the stories relate to the plot structures. Each of the plays, somehow, has a story that naturally follows a chronological order. However, it is through the presentation of their aftereffects that they become complex clusters of suggestions, states of mind, recollections, never to be revealed whether they take place in the 'actual' reality or in Sarah/Clara-as-Kennedy's imagination. Although Scanlan emphasizes the necessity to retain a strict distinction between the plot structure and the story, he argues that in Kennedy's plays the plot structure is almost a natural extension of the story and the theme: "The material is so potent—especially in the overall historical context in which it emerged—that it is often difficult to keep a strict attention to form alone […] her themes are embedded in a 'background' story, and a theatrical plot is created as a formal structure rising out of this matrix of story and theme" (94).

The carrying-out of this "matrix of story and theme" on the stage is enabled by transformations. Transformation, to an extent, enables a concurrence of events; however, this simultaneity can only be grasped in the mind of the spectator, in an abstract manner. The perfect embodiment of

such transformation is exercised in *The Owl Answers* where the characters change into and out of themselves before the eyes of the audience. On the other hand, it can be argued that Kennedy has "dissected" the theatrical device of transformation in *Funnyhouse*: several actors simultaneously play a single character, and several scenes are simultaneously enacted on separate spaces on the same stage.

By means of such improvisations on theatrical possibilities Kennedy is able to stage her memories, the acts of her psyche. The audience does not "witness" the mimesis of action; rather, a background story is implied throughout the play, from the viewpoints of different characters. The most immediate concern of Kennedy's presentation is to stage "the unstagable," to capture the feeling, the consciousness, the state of mind. Scanlan's suggestion is that "[w]hat is dramatized in the performance is something that is done *as a result of the story*" (95). This presentation resists theorization because it lacks a regular form, an order, hierarchy, causality and authority. Transformational technique is crucial since it provides the presentation of the time, the place and the characters in a state of flux. Referring to Kennedy's narrative and/or composition of the plot, Jeanie Forte comments that "ambiguity and near incomprehensibility articulate the impossibility of identification with a narrative position, least of all one which might provide closure, or the fiction of a coherent self"; Kennedy's character "traverses narrative, zig-zagging across various systems of signification, seeking herself in the gaps, the spaces of unnarrated silence wherein her persistently elusive subjectivity might be found" (26). The form of narrative Forte points at is also related to the political stance which rejects the socially constructed gender and cultural identities. This construction is continually redefined in order to free the minds of the authority of meaning, hierarchies, binary oppositions, categorizations, conservatism and oppressive ideologies. The reflection of this stance on the stage is the playwright's impulse to re-define, re-shape, and re-form the conventions of representational drama.

Cultural identity is manifested, or "performed" as a terrain of deadly confrontations. In this sense, the term "origin" should be used in quotation marks. The Queen, the Duchess, Jesus and Lumumba may signify a certain "origin," but Negro-Sarah embodies these personalities within her character simultaneously. In other words, the meaning of the word is disseminated because all of these are "origins." This hybridity is theatricalized by means of the transformation technique, through the use of masks—or rather,

characters-as-masks, the personae. The character or the body becomes the terrain where many frames of reference intersect—precisely the reason for transformation. Through transformation the substantiality of the self is decentered; the unity is disseminated. This is the moment when binary oppositions lose their "origin," their "essence," their "substance." Theatrical transformation confuses rather than juxtaposes, so that "origin" is problematized. The cultural self is transformed into a protean and situational term, signifying the possible connections and associations at once, and obfuscating the borders between what is traditionally signified by "blackness" and "whiteness."

Works Cited

Aristotle. *The* Poetics *of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary*. Stephen Halliwell. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1987.

Benston, Kimberly. *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism.* London: Routledge, 2000.

Blau, Herbert. "The American Dream in American Gothic: The Plays of Sam Shepard and Adrienne Kennedy." *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern.* Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987. 42-64.

Fletcher, Winona L. "Who Put the 'Tragic' in the Tragic Mulatto?" *Women in American Theatre*. Eds. Helen K. Chinoy and Linda W. Jenkins. New York: TCG, 1981. 262-268.

Forte, Jeanie. "Realism, Narrative and the Feminist Playwright—A Problem of Perception." *Feminist Theatre and Theory*. Ed. Helene Keyssar. London: Macmillan, 1996. 19-34.

Geis, Deborah. *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama.* Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996.

hooks, bell. Ain't I *A Woman*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.

———. *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990.

———. "Critical Reflections: Adrienne Kennedy, the Writer, the Work." *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*. Eds. Paul Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992. 179-185.

Kennedy, Adrienne. *Funnyhouse of A Negro. Black Drama: An Anthology*. Eds. William Brasmer and Dominick Consolo. Ohio: CE Merrill, 1970. 245-273.

———. *The Owl Answers. In One Act.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. 25-45.

Keyssar, Helene. "Rites and Responsibilities: The Drama of Black American Women." *Feminine Focus.* Ed. Enoch Brater. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989. 226-240.

———. "Drama and the Dialogic Imagination." *Feminist Theatre and Theory*. Ed. Helene Keyssar. London: Macmillan, 1996. 109-136.

Kintz, Linda. *The Subject's Tragedy: The Political Poetics, Feminist Theory and Drama*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992.

Passoli, Robert. "Transformation." *A Book on Open Theatre*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill, 1970. 20-22.

Robinson, March. "Adrienne Kennedy." *The Other American Drama*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994. 115-149.

Scanlan, Robert. "Surrealism As Mimesis: A Director's Guide to *Funnyhouse of a Negro*." *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*. Eds. Paul Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992. 93-109.

Werner, Craig Hansen. *Playing the Changes*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1994.