

**The Transmediality of the Self:  
Desubstantiation, Fantasy and Terror  
in and through Adrienne Kennedy's Characters**

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“I try to create a space for myself in cities.”

Negro-Sarah in *The Owl Answers*

Adrienne Kennedy, the African-American playwright revolutionized the representation of the theatrical character and the socially positioned subject in her experimental plays in the 1960s - 70s, foregrounding the heterogeneity of the postmodern self and the questions of the social and performative constitution of subjectivity. One of the considerations in this constructivist paradigm pertains to the *multimedial fabrication of the social self*, which is performed at the meeting points of socially and historically specific discourses. I will examine the working of various *representational channels* in the positing of social identity in Kennedy's early plays. I will contend that the representational techniques she tends to employ thematize the realization that subjectivity is articulated not only through narrative patterns but through the *specific visual imagery and memory* of culture as well. Adrienne Kennedy problematizes this cultural memory by constructing postmodern *memory theaters* through her dramas where multimedial agencies of fantasy and terror foreground the composite constitution of the self. An analysis of the mediality of these representations of subjectivity will reveal that visuality in general, and the visual cultural imagery of American society in particular play an important role in the constitution of social identity.

Fantasy and terror, distant as they might seem from one another, frequently appear in the history of literature in a pair that functions as a contrariety that can simultaneously represent ambivalent, ambiguous, contradictory elements, similarly to the agency of abjection and the sublime. The abject and the sublime, in a semiotic perspective, turn out to be the two sides of the same operational platform, since they both dislocate the subject and throw it into an identity crisis in the face of something which is unnamable, impossible to categorize, something which resists linguistic patterns and fixation. This explains why the abject and the sublime are so systematically used in literature and the arts as representational techniques that

exert an effect on the psychosomatic complexity of the reading or viewing subject (Kristeva, 12). In a very similar fashion, fantasy and terror inform several textual worlds that exert a specific unsettling effect on the reader or the spectator. Fantasy and terror emerge as powerful constituents in the representational logic of postmodern drama, and they are also constitutive of what I call the *memory theater* of the American playwright Adrienne Kennedy.

A sizeable inventory would emerge if one was to take stock of the strategies of *fantastication* that have characterized postmodern drama from the time of its emergence to the most recent experimentations of performance art. Much critical attention has been paid to the reasons of this pervasive presence of fantasy. Several interpretive approaches tried to locate an emancipatory force of resistance and subversion in the realm of the fantastic, which is often presented as the opposite of the rational and dominant, the ideologically contained and the culturally calculable. In many postmodern plays, the fantastic becomes the site of a twofold epistemological experimentation. On the one hand, the thematization of the imaginary or the fantasized aims at problematizing and dissolving the socially established demarcation lines between various ideologically fabricated versions of the Real, foregrounding that the values we tend to take for granted are collectively produced and individually internalized. On the other hand, the elements of fantasy, dream, hallucinatory delusion or phantasm on the stage work as artistic representations of the heterogeneous constitution of the subject, a de-centered and hollowed out structure that is simultaneously articulated in several modalities of signification. The representational techniques that perform this heterogeneity can be understood as *strategies of involvement* that exert a special semiotic effect on the spectator in the live context of theatrical reception. It is not only the great Cartesian divide between body and soul, rational and passionate, empirical and intuitive that begins to collapse as a result of this employment of fantasy, but the categorically structured matrix of reality as well. Fragmentation and desubstantiation, anti-essentialism and character liquidization (but not liquidation) have long been held characteristic of postmodernism in general and postmodern drama in particular. As Jeanette R. Malkin argues,

Certain characteristics distinguish postmodern literature: fragmentation, indeterminacy, reflexivity, intertextuality, montage techniques, temporal conflation, randomness. Postmodern theater is additionally characterized through its emphasis on voice and image, rather than on narrative or character, emphasizing the collective and interactive over the individual and self-sufficient text. (Malkin 17)

One of the strategies through which postmodern drama and theater reach out to the spectator and intrude his or her privacy is the *unsettling of identity positions* by the techniques of abjection, fragmentation, ellipsis, pluralization of characters and the indeterminacy of meaning. Malkin contends that the different techniques of fragmentation indicate a difference between modernism and postmodernism:

The tendency to splinter in order to form a better whole characterizes modernism. On the other hand, the idea of the splinter as a reflection of the available reality is found in postmodernism. The multiple perspectivism and relativism of modernism – in surrealism, for example – is an epistemology through which “the true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality” was to be revealed. In postmodernism, equally complex and split, no such underlying assumption exists. (Malkin 18)

Relying on Malkin's contention, I argue that Kennedy's plays are characteristically postmodern in showing that there is no underlying truth or core identity that could serve as a foundation of the socially composite subjectivity. In what follows, I will focus on the early writings of the American playwright in order to map out how these techniques, which have long been responsible for the agency of terror in the history of the theater, become operational within a fantasy or a fantasized world which is based, to a large extent, on the visual power of cultural emblems. Kennedy's characters dwell in spaces that engulf them as haunted castles, where nonlinear memories, fragmented remnants of the past and violent traces of traditions haunt them and keep them captive and victim to the general failure to tell fantasy from reality, phantasm from history, identity from mask or memory from the catastrophe of remembering. Kennedy's protagonists, as Claudia Barnett also puts it, are schizoid-paranoid, split subjects who are stuck at the level of object-relations and are unable to establish integrity of the self. (Barnett 374)

Kennedy's plays in the 1960s and 1970s signaled the emergence of a new powerful postmodern American drama which thematized, with a strong feminist tone, the problematics of hegemony, race, segregation, colonization, gender and subjectivity, and the quest for identity in the fire lane zone of conflicting traditions. Herbert Blau calls Kennedy “surely the most original black writer of her generation,” (Kolin 1) and her monographer Philip C. Kolin notes that her plays “offer immense insight into the idea of cultural identity. Kennedy's canon vibrates with the tension and tragedy of what it means to be black in a white world.” (Kolin 2) Her black Afro-American heroines are subjects-in-process between the radically opposite alternatives of metropolitan white consumerist culture and black African tribal origins, between genetic memory and cultural remembering, between their biological markers that

provoke the culturally specific meanings and their search for a sovereign self-definition. These plays have since been repeatedly interpreted as emblematic of the heterogeneity of the postmodern subject whose identity and subjectivity are constituted under the pressure and surveillance of specific technologies of power. The figure of the black woman in the dramas of Kennedy stands for the multiple suppression of the subject by the powers of colonialism and cultural imperialism.

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*, the mental disintegration and the pluralization of the protagonists foreground the typical realization of postmodern drama that the *category of the (dramatic) character* is no longer sufficient to stand for the human being as socially positioned subject. As Caroline Jackson Smith very validly contends, Kennedy's theatrical achievement is especially noteworthy since she was one of "the first playwrights to represent the self in multiple characters, an apt metaphor for her experiences as both an African American and a woman in society" (15). These plays definitely lend themselves to the concept of the *drama of consciousness* as far as they stage the mental disintegration of human beings who struggle to discern their identity at the momentary juncture of various discourses. The List of Characters already introduces the pluralization that informs the cosmos of both plays. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the central character is Negro-Sarah, but four other characters are also defined as "One of herselfes:" Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba are emblematic figures in the pool of cultural values, racial and gender markers and historical traditions in relation to which Sarah endlessly tries to piece together an identity for herself. Kolin emphasizes the importance of the idea of heritage in Kennedy's plays:

In no other Kennedy play is a heroine more obsessed with finding her father and claiming her heritage as her own. She's identity is bound to her father's. Sarah, on the other hand, flees from her father, a Negro who haunts her. (Kolin 58)

Kennedy's stage directions specify a claustrophobic self-enclosed space where Sarah's psyche is being colonized by the haunting memories of ancestral origins and the desired commodities and emblems of white consumerist culture.

The center of the stage works well as her room, allowing the rest of the stage as the place for herselfes. [...] When she is placed in her room with her belongings, then the director is free to let the rest of the play happen around her. (Kennedy 11)

The room as a metaphor of the protagonist's consciousness is a recurring motif in postwar British and American drama, but here this room also accommodates the projections of Sarah's

consciousness, the various figures she has been working to identify with. In this respect, the entire play can be understood as the projection of Sarah's mind in an agonizing process of remembering and forgetting.

In *The Owl Answers*, the main figure is "She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl" (Kennedy 29). Kennedy is not the first playwright to represent the composite nature of human subjectivity, but, as has been mentioned earlier, perhaps she is the first postmodern dramatist who purposefully pluralizes the protagonist already on the level of the *dramatis personae*. The authorial instruction after the list of Characters says:

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. (Kennedy 29)

The splitting up of characters into various simultaneously operational selves is accompanied by the overlapping of narrative time levels and the fusion of historical horizons and places. Memories and the commandments of the tribal traditions also haunt Clara, just like Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and both plays appear to find a center of gravity in the process of *remembering*: Kennedy stages a *postmodern memory theater* in which the fantasy work of the protagonist gradually turns into catastrophe and terror. I employ the term terror instead of horror because this critical concept embodies the idea of movement, motion, an opening up of the space onto the reality of the spectator in the actual auditorium which metaphorically stands for the theatricalized public spaces of our social reality.

The thematization of cultural and personal memory is one of the most frequently recurring elements of postmodern drama. Jeanette Malkin argues that

Within postmodernism, I contend, there has occurred a shift in *the way we remember*, and hence the way culture, and for our purposes, the theater, represents and reenacts remembering. Where once memory called up coherent, progressing narratives of experienced life, or at least unlocked the significance of hidden memory *for* the progressions of the present, this kind of enlightenment organization has broken down in postmodernism and given way to the nonnarrative reproduction of conflated, disrupted, repetitive, and moreover collectively retained and articulated fragments. (Malkin 4)

Remembering turns into a memory catastrophe, the classical and renaissance tradition of *ars memoriae* and the memory theater is transformed into a *postmodern anti-memory theater*.

Critical literature on Kennedy's plays keeps recurring to the problematic nature of remembering. Georgie Boucher says that "[Kennedy] resorts to form that is fluid, one that blurs and shifts the distinctions among history, memory, space and time" (85). Rosemary K. Curb compares the plays to the act of remembering just before death:

The plays, set in the central character's mind, portray the elusive, almost timeless moment just before death, when horrifying images and past events replete with monotonous conversations kaleidoscopically flash through the memory and imagination of the protagonist. (Curb 180)

Carla J. McDonough contends that both *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers* are based on the realization that the past never disappears completely, we keep re-living and repeating our history and our repressions endlessly:

References to and images of cultural and familial inheritance abound in this play but are complicated by the taint of disgrace or sin that is also part of this inheritance and that melds these issues with spiritual or religious issues. Clara is the disgrace that the English culture and her father's white culture would deny, but their acceptance is the one thing that would wipe clean that sense of disgrace. (McDonough 387)

The constitutive force of memory in these early plays is also noted by Elinor Fuchs, who explains the memory-based and highly stylized theatre of Kennedy:

The early Kennedy plays of the 1960s, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *The Owl Answers*, and *A Rat's Mass* are mystery or passion plays. They take the form of ritual reenactments, enclose ceremonies and processions, and culminate in dark sacrificial events. [...] For all their intensity, Kennedy's plays are in this tradition of a static theatre. Something has happened in the past – one is not sure what – that hangs like a shroud over the fraught, yet actionless, stage." (Fuchs 76, 78)

Within this catastrophic theater of memory, special emphasis is laid continuously on the *mediality* of the elements of cultural memory and heritage, powerful visual markers that haunt and force themselves on the pluralized protagonist.

Figure 1.

From left, Monica Stith, Suzette Azariah Gunn and Trish McCall in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. (Genzlinger 2006, <http://theater.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/theater/reviews/25funn.html>)

Figure 2.

Willie E. Teacher and Suzette Azariah Gunn in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

(Genzlinger 2006, <http://theater.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/theater/reviews/25funn.html>)

We find an elaborate set of these powerful visual markers already in the first two pages of stage directions that precede the “action” in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*: white nightgown, black hair, ghastly white curtain, unreal and ugly white light on center stage, unnatural blackness on back stage, dark monumental bed, wine-colored walls, great black ravens, white pillow, dark undistinguishable object, royal gowns of cheap white satin, white headpieces, wild kinky black hair, whitish yellow masks, dark eyes, red mouth, powered faces. These visual images carry pre-calculated social value and divide the visionary or hallucinatory world of Negro-Sarah into seemingly irreconcilable opposites – yet, something does become of the tension between black and white, and in the highly stylized world of the plays, this product is the in-between subject, Sarah, who happens to be YELLOW, and her yellowness is foregrounded in the visuality of the play as something that is neither black nor white, as a failure, an abject in-betweenness that does not fulfill the culturally determined function of either of the two other colours.

Negro-Sarah becomes a representation of the typical postmodern realization that the classical concept of the unified and sovereign dramatic character is no longer sufficient to represent the composite subjectivity of the human being. Sarah is presented by Kennedy as a pluralized non-character who is torn apart, *put in process* between her various selves, the cultural emblems that she is unable to completely separate from or totally identify with. The *visual and auditory loadedness of the plays* exemplify what theater semiotics defines as an attempt at *total semiosis*, and this *semiotic density* is coupled by a cultural heterogeneity of the locations as well, a special amalgamation of historically emblematic places. In *The Owl Answers* “The scene is a New York subway is the Tower of London is a Harlem hotel room is St. Peter’s [Cathedral]...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.” (30)

Figure 3.

The 1969 New York Shakespeare Festival production of *The Owl Answers*. (Sollors 2000, <http://www.americanrepertorytheater.org/inside/articles/theater-adrienne-kennedy>)

Negro-Sarah and She-Who-Is are in an incessant process of trying to hang on to some identity that can only be a momentary freezing of historical, ideological, cultural discourses, a temporary meeting point of the various *mediums* that carry as channels the cultural memory which functions as a repertoire for the fabrication of identity. As has been mentioned, several poststructuralist critical orientations have pointed out that the idea of character can no longer hold in the postmodern as a category for the representation of the subject (Fuchs 21-35), and Kennedy's early plays definitely appear to be demonstrative of this critical insight. Subjectivity is presented by Kennedy as a product of this transmedial encounter, and her dramas demonstrate how the cultural and dramatic or theatrical category of *character is a performative ideological device*, a *medium* among the several other channels through which the constitution of the subject is performed. Kennedy's plays have become canonized as belonging to the earliest examples of postmodern theatrical and dramatic techniques, but of course we also have to appreciate them in their original socio-historical context. Written in the sixties, these plays were not only theatrically experimental but politically provocative and challenging as well, since they provided a radical criticism of the prefabricated identity patterns and emblematic cultural values through which the white supremacy of American society attempted to discipline possible black identities.

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