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IN THE BLOOD AND FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO

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TONYA S. BRADDOX

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COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FORMATION AND CULTURAL TRAUMA
IN BLACK FEMINIST DRAMA:
IN THE BLOOD AND FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO

By

Tonya S. Braddox

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ABSTRACT

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FORMATION AND CULTURAL TRAUMA IN BLACK FEMINIST DRAMA: *IN THE BLOOD AND FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO*

By

Tonya S. Braddox

Black feminist theatre establishes a collective identity for African American women affected by cultural trauma. Recent studies in the field of trauma theory and literary studies claim cultural trauma forms collective identities. The negative effects of cultural trauma are turned into positive memories by staging reenactments of traumatic events. The dramas of Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks stage collective identities for specific segments of women within the African American community. The cultural trauma experienced by these women is rejection based on colorism and economics.

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Collective Identity Formation and Cultural Trauma in Black Feminist Drama:
In the Blood and Funnyhouse of a Negro

According to Cathy Caruth, early work in the field of trauma and literary studies emphasized “learning to listen” and the need to recognize “what it means to remember traumatic experience and what it means to recognize trauma” (Caruth viii). Later scholars have focused instead on the broader category of “cultural trauma” and on public reenactments of cultural trauma. They seek to arrive at *a truth* that explains the collective trauma experienced during events such as the Holocaust and the Transatlantic slave trade. In this context, I want to posit black feminist theatre as an effort to establish a collective identity for African American women affected by cultural trauma. I explore how black feminist drama addresses and seeks to offer a chance at recovery to victims of racism and sexism. Lisa M. Andersen’s *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* sets a precedent for this view by etching a place in the American dramatic literary canon for black feminist drama. Within the black feminist literary framework, a collective voice is read, heard, and reenacted on behalf of black women. Andersen notes:

Although feminist theatre scholars have written critical works on plays by black women playwrights, the clear, cogent concept of a black feminist theatre remains elusive. That is not to say that there is not, or has not been, black feminist theatre; it means only that black feminist writing about black feminist theatre has been scarce.

(Andersen 1)

Andersen crafts a theoretical lens for a black feminist aesthetics that attends to “the context in which a work is situated, how its construction and production are shaped, and

how that shaping is informed by its politics” (2). The dramas of Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks are critical reflections of black feminist aesthetics. Both playwrights are recognized as part of the black feminist dramatic literary cannon alongside other noted black feminist authors, such as Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, and Ntozake Shange. Their works speak for those whose voices have been muted, and they place those voices front and center. Although Andersen paves the way for further development in this field, she does not identify any specific cultural trauma that contributes to the formation of a collective identity among African American women. African American women’s collective identity comprises diverse voices that are situated in black feminism. Hence, I posit that within this diversity can be found signs of cultural trauma that delineate the collective identities of various groups among African American women. In particular, these plays attend to the voices of poor black women and the so-called “tragic mulatto,” who struggle with the cultural trauma of rejection based on (respectively) economics and colorism.¹

My analysis of black feminist theatre will focus on how the *language of trauma* is articulated. In my analysis, the *language of trauma* refers to the nonverbal speech acts and dialogic text that describe a traumatic episode performed by the actor. In other words, when the *language of trauma* is performed, it provides a visual representation for the abstract concept of trauma. The abstract concept of trauma is often associated with

¹ Most critical analyses on theatre focus on performance to interpret the text, but this thesis will only examine the play’s text—its stage directions, the author’s notes, and key dialogue. I take the view that dramatic text is always in dialogue with the reader. Readers of the text are actors, directors, stage hands, and eventually, the public. Readers should attempt to fully understand the text before planning a production or seeing a performance. The text must live in their minds as a visual reference before reenactment for the stage.

several words, such as shock, pain, suffering, misery, grief, trouble and nightmare.²

Trauma is not limited to a reaction to one specific experience. It can also be a result of a series of repeated experiences. I argue that a response to these repeated experiences results in outbursts of self-hatred, sufferer of nightmares, speechless acts, and numbing pain. Although the protagonist in a drama is represented as an individual, moreover, her portrayal implies a cultural trauma experienced by many individuals simultaneously and perhaps at the same level of intensity. Thus, the individual experience is a voice for a collective identity. The individual voice speaks on behalf of the members associated with the collective identity. For instance, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays the reality of many African Americans living during the 1940s and 1950s: poverty, unemployment, and racism. By focusing on a specific family living in Southside Chicago, Hansberry exposes the conditions experienced by many Africans Americans living in similar urban settings, thus creating a collective identity for families that were affected by the same conditions. Hansberry has stated that when staging *A Raisin in the Sun*, "[one] must pay very great attention to the specific" to arrive at the universal or the collective (Nemiroff 114).

Before turning to the question of how the *language of trauma* operates in black feminist theatre, I want to frame it with a brief discussion of recent scholarship on

² Jeffrey Alexander claims trauma is "not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society" (Alexander 2). Alexander situates his claim against Caruth's psychoanalytic theory that trauma originates with "the power and objectivity of the originating traumatic event" and because the event is unconsciously reenacted, it is hard to leave behind (Alexander 6, 7). Thus, the individual is haunted by the event (Alexander 7). This notion is depicted in Adrienne Kennedy's drama, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

Several trauma theorists, including Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, and Laura S. Brown, use the following words to describe traumatic experiences: horror, nightmares, anxiety, and "marks of psychic numbing" (Caruth 73, 81, 100). Therefore, I have created a list of words often associated with trauma that are discussed in this thesis.

reenactments of cultural trauma. My investigation brings together two theories of trauma: one theory outlines the cultural trauma experienced by African Americans, and the other discusses how African Americans participate in reenactments that celebrate their history and create new ways of remembering history. In "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander argues that trauma "is not the result of a group experiencing pain"; rather, it is the result of the group's core members deciding collectively to react to that pain, thus creating the group's own identity (Alexander 10-24). He identifies "collective actions" and "institutional processes," and he theorizes the "speech acts" of social groups that exist in "historical, cultural, and institutional" situations. He also discusses "four critical representations" of a newly developed "master narrative" that explains the nature of pain, victimization, the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, and the "social construction" of responsibility for the experience (Alexander 15). Alexander identifies "power structures" and "social agents" that effect the representation of traumatic events placed in the public sphere as theatrical spectacles, such as the Colonial Williamsburg tourist attraction located in Virginia (Alexander 10). Where Alexander identifies and explains specific elements that comprise the notion of cultural trauma, the concept has been developed over time by several scholars that aim to address how various racial groups have formed collective identities through "collective memor[ies]" (Eyerman 60). Among those scholars is sociologist Ron Eyerman. In his essay, "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity," he explains the different stages of cultural trauma and trajects how African Americans have developed their collective identity over time, from

“the end of the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement” (Eyerman 60). Eyerman notes how African Americans have retained memories of the past and have created an “ongoing process” of “public commemoration” through, historical writings, narratives, music and dramatizations (65, 75, 82, 94). The notion that traumatic experiences are reenacted in the public sphere led me to investigate Lisa Woolfork’s research on how the African American community is seeking new ways to address a negative past and turn it into a positive memory (Eyerman 84-88).

Woolfork’s *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* has two chapters that further Eyerman’s assessment of the collective cultural trauma. She begins her analysis with a discussion of individual characters in African American literary works and films before discussing the collective experience. Woolfork examines the black spectatorship of slavery representation in ritual and historical reenactments (Woolfork 99). These spectators’ reactions are not predictable and often open up the dialogue on new ways to “re-remember” the collective experience. Woolfork believes both ritual and historical reenactments are in dialogue with one another. She documents present-day educational tools that place the collective traumatic experience on the theatrical stage. Her investigation reveals “the costs and consequences” of staging the re-embodiment of American slavery, thus addressing the problem with taking a highly sensitive subject from the academic arena and placing it outside of that arena (Woolfork 161). Depending on your audience, this position can have both positive and negative effects. Woolfork’s research is important and demonstrates how scholars can view reenactments of cultural traumas in a different arena: the theatre.

Articulating the Language of Trauma in Black Feminist Drama

From black feminist drama, a close reading of Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* add diverse voices for the collective traumatic experiences of contemporary black women. Both Kennedy and Parks construct dialogue incorporating speech acts and body language, to articulate traumatic experiences of black women in America between 1960s and 1990s. Their works focus on an individual's traumatic experiences can contribute to a collective identity. In *In the Blood* and *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, dialogic texts performed through nonverbal speech acts and body linguistics articulate a series of traumatic episodes. These reenactments, in text and speech acts, serve as the syntax for the *language of trauma* in black feminist theatre.

Therefore, *In the Blood* and *Funnyhouse* require more than a mere reading of the text and a broad visualization of their performance. The plays' themes are sensitive and require more than a sensationalistic approach. The reader must reread the plays several times before understanding their cultural significance in American history and literature. Perhaps, these plays provide a historical mapping of the black female experience. Therefore, I will unravel the *language of trauma* articulated in these dramatic pieces to understand how over time the black female subject has experienced a series of cultural trauma and have established a collective identity.

It is noteworthy that the two playwrights I consider here have expressed similar sentiments regarding their roles as writers for the theatre. For instance, during an interview with *BOMB* magazine, both admit to the joys and their love of being writers, but they are not necessarily fond of being "theater person[s]" (Parks, *BOMB* 2). Kennedy

and Parks do not affectionately embrace production work, nor do they work with the director, actors, or other theatre crew members. Hence, the initial purpose for writing their plays is to tell a story through dialogue--to articulate a thought in a dialogic format. Their intention for writing their plays did not always include the possibility of production and performance. The interview insinuates that Kennedy and Parks are comfortable with how their works are subjects of academic discourses (Parks, *BOMB* 2). This offers an invitation to further explore their texts and unpack their significance to the American literary canon.

Woolfork's discussion of reenactments of the past suggests that those who perform these reenactments "want to 'speak for [their] ancestors,'" but not necessarily to walk in their shoes (Woolfork 171). To walk in someone's shoes denotes empathy, to truly place oneself in the exact position to understand the circumstances that cause a specific effect. Yet, although Woolfork's scholarship reveals that Colonial Williamsburg's historical re-enactors³ are reluctant to fully embody the trauma of their ancestors, this is not the case in Kennedy's and Parks's plays. Here the actors have to fully embody the character (171). Embodying a character requires the actor to mentally, physically, and emotionally embrace the persona of a character. Actors seek to interpret and to provide an accurate representation of their characters. In relation to Woolfork's analysis, my research will reveal how embodying non-verbal speech acts and executing specific body linguistics articulate the cultural traumas experienced by black women today in doctor's offices and at the hands of governmental agencies.

³ Colonial Williamsburg's historical reenactments of slavery is a "celebration of European colonial history" that include employees who portray enslaved Africans and African Americans. These reenactments are not "memorialization[s]" (Woolfork 159). The aim is to provide a "living history."

When African American playwrights choose to write about the repercussions of an event or an experience, is it the same as presenting a reenactment of the past? If so, why would an author choose to illustrate an experience in this way? Both Kennedy's and Parks's reenactments allow the reader to see "living memories" that are crucial to our understanding the experience of black female subjects in America. Both playwrights contribute to an experimental theatre that presents reenactments of the black experience that go beyond the customary realism. Besides the use of imagery and allegory, the body and speakerly language⁴ in their plays are significant in capturing the trauma of the black female experience.

Adrienne Kennedy first emerged as a major African American dramatist during the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s, and she provided a different voice for the African American community. At the time, many mainstream critics failed to recognize her contributions to BAM because her works did not advocate hard-core black nationalism. However, the racial identity crisis existing during the 1960s is evident in Kennedy's surrealistic play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. The play reenacts a painful part of African American history: the struggle for acceptance into and recognition by the hegemonic cultural and political arenas. During the Black Power Movement (BPM), African Americans rallied for their civil rights in America alongside a desire to return to their roots in Africa. Kennedy radically addresses issues of identity in her plays, which defines her as a contributor to the BPM. *Funnyhouse* is not apologetic in its portrayal of the tragic biracial woman; Negro-Sarah portrays the consciousness of many black women

⁴ According to African American scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *speakerly text* is "designed 'to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech'" (Gates 181).

who have tried to pass for white during the twentieth century and have experienced rejection based on colorism. Although Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing* and films such as *Imitation of Life* treat similar issues, Kennedy's play more explicitly portrays the psychological effects of trying to pass.

Although Kennedy models her plays after her own family, this seemingly specific focus highlights complexities that existed in the larger society (Kolin 5-7). For example, Kennedy's earlier works bear the mark of Frantz Fanon's writing on the psychology of colonialism. The identity crisis that the black female protagonist, Negro-Sarah, experiences is summed up in the words of Hegel taken from *The Phenomenology of Mind*: "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized" (Fanon 216). Kennedy claims that she is "writing [...] days of images fiercely pounding in [her] head and days of walking [...] I am at the typewriter almost every waking moment and suddenly there is a play [...] Somehow under this spell they become written" (Kennedy *Kennedy Reader* 10). Kennedy's comments suggests that the subconscious is haunted with horrific images and the images of the subconscious are transcribed in a way that depicts the traumatic effects of racism and the pressure to conform to the United States of America's cultural standards and politics often experienced by African Americans. *Funnyhouse* is a reflection of the author's fourteen-month trip to Europe, Ghana, and Nigeria (Bryant-Jackson & Overbeck 23). During this trip, she "became aware of masks" and the "strength in being a black person and a connection to West Africa" (23). According to Kennedy, "almost every image in

Funnyhouse” was developed while visiting West Africa (Bryant-Jackson & Overbeck 23). Coincidentally, Kennedy’s a play echoes the sentiments of Fanon (Fanon 50).

In *Funnyhouse*, Negro-Sarah desires to be recognized by her white counterparts as an equal. Her African ancestry haunts her and she agonizes over why she is unable to embody her European ancestry. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon pinpoints the psychological effects of someone who is haunted and obsessed with occupying the identity of her oppressor (Fanon 60, Kolin 30). To emphasize the damage it has done to Negro-Sarah’s psyche, Kennedy divides her subconscious into four “selves”: the Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba. The subconscious “selves” articulate four trauma-laden issues: racial terrorism, culture, materialism, and politics. The first of the latter two will be discussed later in the essay. The former two are blatantly visible on stage. For example, the stage directions state, “QUEEN VICTORIA is standing before [Negro-Sarah’s] bed holding a small mirror in her hand [and] THE DUCHESS OF HAPSBURG is standing at the foot of the bed [...] Throughout the entire [first] scene, they do not move” (Kennedy *Funnyhouse* 5). Both selves are dressed in “royal gowns of white” and from beneath their white headpieces springs “wild kinky hair” (5, 6). Kennedy depicts the nightmare of the troubled “mulatta” in the stage directions and in the following dialogue,

Victoria

It is my father. He is arriving again for the night. (The Duchess makes no reply.) He comes through the jungle to find me. He never tires of his journey.

Duchess

How dare he enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one? My mother looked like a white man, hair as straight

as any white woman's. And at least I am yellow, but he is black, the blackest one of them all. I hope he was dead. Yet he still comes through the jungle to find me.

As the knocking from the father increases in volume, the **Mother** repeatedly says,

Black man, black man, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me and now my skull is shining.⁵

(Kennedy, 6-7)

Her father's haunting presence causes Negro-Sarah to yearn for something she may never achieve -- acceptance. The constant rejection she receives from the larger society leads to traumatic episodes. Somehow, Negro-Sarah believes that she will be accepted if she is "a more pallid Negro," "souless, educated and irreligious," lacking moral value. She dreams of living in rooms with "European antiques [...] walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and eat meals on the white glass table" (9). She associates all of these things with whiteness. Possessing Eurocentric material culture will grant her access to white society and essentially gain its approval and acknowledgment. Moreover, she wants to erase her African ancestry and any external features that remind her of it (9). For she says, "I need them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro [...] In appearance I am good-looking in a boring way; no glaring Negroid features" (Kennedy *Funnyhouse* 9). Because she cannot obliterate her blackness and the turmoil of being biracial in a society in which one race is more accepted over the other, she continues to have dark episodes of her hair falling out and cursing her Negro father. For instance,

⁵ The "skull is shining" refers the self-imposed baldness.

Duchess

No. (*She screams and opens her red paper bag and draws from it her fallen hair. It is a great mass of dark wild. She holds it up to him. He appears not understand. He stares at it.*). It is my hair. (*He continues to stare at her.*) When I awakened this morning it had fallen out, not all of it but a mass from the crown of my pillow. I arose and in the greyish winter morning light of my room I stood staring at my hair, dazed by my sleeplessness, still shaken by nightmares of my mother. Was it true, yes, it was my hair. In the mirror I saw that, although my hair remained on both sides, clearly on the crown and at my temples my scalp was bare. (*She removes her black crown and shows him the top of her head.*)

Funnyman

(*Staring at her.*) Why would your hair fall out? Is it because you are cruel? How could a black father haunt you so?

Duchess

He haunted my very conception. He was a wild black beast who raped my mother.

Funnyman

He is a black Negro. (*Laughing.*)

Duchess

Ever since I can remember he's been in a nigger pose of agony. He is the wilderness. He speaks niggerly groveling about wanting to touch me with his black hand.

Funnyman

How tormented and cruel you are.

(Kennedy, 12-13)

The dialogue between one of Negro-Sarah's "selves", Duchess of Hapsburg, and the Funnyman illustrates how self-hatred is manifested through someone else's traumatic episode. The scene reenacts how trauma is passed from one generation to the next. Negro-Sarah inherits her mulatto mother's hatred for her black father because consistently her mother accuses the father of raping her and leaving her with a reminder,

a black child. A black child who has European features with kinky hair. The mother was troubled about her identity and passed her identity crisis to her child. The trauma for Negro-Sarah is her mother's rejection of her African ancestry; Sarah is rejected because she is a reminder of the "ugly" episode that she let a black man touch her. Reenactment of the rape is through dialogue and it is not performed on the stage. Repeatedly, the protagonist states,

He keeps returning. How dare he enter the castle walls, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one? My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman's. And I am yellow but he, he is black, the blackest one of them all. I hoped he was dead. Yet he still comes through the jungle.

(Kennedy 10, 11)

This repetition consistently reminds the reader and the audience that Negro-Sarah's self-hatred has not been rectified by her parents. Negro-Sarah envisions the death of her father. However, in the last scene, the white Landlady of the boarding house brings clarity to Negro-Sarah's clouded world. The reader and the audience learn that the father is alive and has written Negro-Sarah: he tried to "save" the Mother and Negro-Sarah from their agony; he has begged for his daughter's forgiveness for his being black (Kennedy *Funnyhouse* 22). The father's pleas did not save Negro-Sarah; she hangs herself. Her Jewish boyfriend, Raymond, reveals Sarah's true story.

Raymond

(*Observing [Negro-Sarah's] hanging figure.*) She was a funny little liar.

Landlady

(Informing him.)

Her father hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba⁶ died.

Raymond

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 rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books and oriental carpets. Her father is a nigger who eat his meals on a white glass table.

(Kennedy Funnyhouse 22)

This revelation is essential to understanding Negro-Sarah's anxiety. Her father is a man who coveted the materials of Europe and its culture. He tried to gain social access to the "white world," but his marriage to a "white whore" does not qualify him. Sarah covets the same things her father possessed. Although this is not seen in the play, the assumption is that Sarah's black father may have contributed to her trauma. He exposed her to a world that had already rejected him and his wife. Being the offspring of an ostracized black male and an outcasted white mother, Sarah's social status will torment her (and has) until her death. The stigma attached to being a black woman during the 1960s is overwhelming and Sarah buckles under the pressure (*Kennedy Funnyhouse 24*). Sarah buckles under the pressure to conform to standards that seem impossible. The cultural trauma of rejection on the basis of colorism is not denied because many black women are placed in opposition using the litmus test of who is lighter and who is darker.

⁶ Patrice Lumumba was a Congolese independence leader and first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He wanted to make the Republic of the Congo to be the leader of the Pan-African Union during 1960s (Appiah & Gates 1208). He was murdered while Kennedy and her family were visiting Ghana and many of the people talked about his death (Bryant-Jackson & Overbeck 72).

The closer the individual is to appearing European, the better the chances of accessing systems of privilege in education, economics, and social life.

Kennedy uses imagism and repetitive words⁷ to reenact the trauma experienced by the black female protagonist. These are characteristics of Kennedy's works (Bryant-Jackson & Overbeck 70). The syntax articulated for the *language of trauma* in Kennedy's play is imagery and repetition. Kennedy's dramas are often difficult to comprehend because the works do not adhere to the realism often associated with African American literature of the 1960s. Kennedy narrates the black experience using a surrealistic approach. This is the reason for many mainstream critics having problems classifying Kennedy's work with BAM. Most works of BAM are overtly radical and explicit. Many of the works are poetic, but they rarely require a peeling away of several layers to reach the core of the story line. In addition, Kennedy's earlier plays are written as scenes or episodes and not as fully structured plays.

Suzan-Lori Parks's works are deeply influenced by Kennedy, but the work I want to consider here is a fully structured drama: *In the Blood*. Influenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Suzan-Lori Parks names her protagonist, Hester, La Negrita. In the American literary canon, this character, Hester, epitomizes the tainted, ostracized woman. Parks constructs the character Hester in *In the Blood* to represent a segment of women within the African American community that are labeled outcasts by their own as well as others outside of the racial community. Parks challenges the

⁷ Kennedy's use of repetition in both words and the protagonist's nightmares "represent the trauma [...] dreaded by [an] expected destiny." It can also be said that individuals who experience "psychic trauma" do manifest "signs of continuation of the trauma patterns, [...] anxiety dreams, sometimes a driven need to talk about" the event(s) of the traumatic episode (Caruth 81).

assumptions made about young black women who have several children with several different men and receive public assistance from governmental agencies. She complicates the black female protagonists' situation by allowing the reader/audience see the obvious stereotypes. Here, however, Hester is not drug-addicted. This is an image often associated with young black women collecting welfare benefits. The image of the "welfare queen" conceived by Daniel Moynihan in his 1965 report "was revived and invigorated in the debates for 'welfare reform' in the 1990s" (Andersen 65). The purpose of the reform was to assist persons like Hester with securing that "one leg up" (Parks *Red Letter Plays* 66). However, the crux of Hester's trauma is how she is sexually exploited by those who are able to help her and who thus perpetuate her problem and the image. Along with the sexual exploitation, the stigma of being a recipient of the United States welfare system is a part of the cultural trauma for many poor black women.

Hester's naiveté regarding her social identity keeps her illiterate and ignorant. She is a representation of many poor black women subject to this experience. A series of traumatic episodes eventually leads Hester to commit the violent act of murder. Parks provides a forum for the reader/audience to examine and discuss how others have experimented with different solutions to remedy this social issue. She is implying that the dialogue between the Doctor and Hester is regularly reenacted in doctors' offices across the United States.

[Doctor] steps even closer.

Hester

((somethin-somethin-A-somethin.))

(Rest)

I need glasses.

Doctor

You cant read this?

Hester

I gotta go.

Hester turns to go and he grabs her hand, holding her fast.

Doctor

When I removal of your “womanly parts” do you know what parts
Im talking about?

Hester

Yr gonna take my womans parts?

Doctor

My hands are tied. The Higher Ups are calling the shots now.
(Rest)
You have 5 healthy children, itll be for the best, considering.

Hester

My womans parts.

Doctor

Ive forwarded my recommendations to yr caseworker. Its out of
my hands. Im sorry.

Hester

I gotta go.

(Parks, *Red Letter Plays* 42-43)

During this scene, the stage direction states that she does not move, but “stands there numbly” (43). The numb stand is a body linguistic conveying a complex reaction to a traumatic episode. The trauma is the revelation that someone else is controlling her reproductive rights (Roberts 248). The fact that the Doctor is reporting his results from the medical examination to a governmental agency, Welfare, causes an indescribable reaction. Hester does not react with words; she is rendered speechless. According to

Evelynn Hamonds, black women's sexuality is usually "described in metaphors of speechlessness" (Collins 123). Therefore, this speechless act raises the question of black whether black women's silence on their sexuality contributes to their not receiving the help they need. The speechless act is a reaction to the Doctor's previous actions. Hester confuses sex with affection. During previous office visits, the play implies that Hester had a sexual encounter with the Doctor; however, as the play progresses the reader/ audience realizes that she naively believes that the Doctor had her best interests at heart. Hester is completely unaware of how the Doctor has exploited her and rejects her on basis of her social status.

In the first confession, he consciously describe the classism that exists within the African American community and how the "likes" of Hester could never be apart of his social economic class. In addition, he states that Hester is "one of [his] neediest cases" looking for affection (Parks *Red Letter Plays* 44). He admits his disdain for her; at first, he did not want to touch her, but he sexually exploits her in the alley (Parks *Red Letter Plays* 45). One of her "joys" she procreated with the Doctor is the son, Trouble (3, 12). Her trauma is learning that the very organ used to help bring life into the world will be taken away from her. This is a violation of her human rights to decide for herself and of her rights to mothering another "joy," another "treasure" (12). Of course, the Doctor and "The Higher Ups" do not agree and seek to remedy the problem of the mythically constructed "welfare mother" by controlling reproduction.

This segues to a word that explicitly describe how the government perceives all of those like Hester; the word is "spay." Welfare, a middle-class black woman, visits Hester

to collect an update on the family. During the visit, Welfare mentions Hester's doctor visit and his recommendation to remove her "womanly parts" (Parks *Red Letter Plays* 56). Welfare blatantly says the word "spay" (56). For humans, the word is 'sterilize.' For animals, the word is 'spay.' This distinction in itself suggests Hester is placed in the same category of a domesticated animal, a cat or a dog. Hester does react to this categorization, as I will discuss in just a moment.

Another possibility that explains Hester's reaction to the Doctor's recommendation is an expression of helplessness. Hester is unable to defend herself with words or comparable action. The non-movement and the unuttered words corporeally articulates a specific cultural trauma experienced by this group of black women. The cultural trauma identified here is the systemic regulation of the poor black female subject's social behavior and economic status in the United States. Historically, the fight for the reproductive rights of African American women receiving public assistance from governmental agencies culminated during the 1990s (Roberts 217). In her 1997 critically acclaimed book, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Dorothy Roberts explains: "This [is a] brand of welfare reform [that] does not simply exclude Black women; it penalizes their reproduction. The law not only cuts off Black children from benefits needed to survive but it blames their very birth for their disadvantaged status" (245). This is another aspect of cultural trauma experienced by poor black women in the United States.

Something far more disturbing is exploitation by someone who would seem to completely understand one's plight. This someone in Hester's life is Welfare. Although

the character Welfare represents a United States government agency, the representation appears to be someone close racially and of the same sex. This “someone” should be able to empathize with the struggles of another woman within the same racial group. However, this relationship is another traumatic episode in Hester’s life. Hester’s response is similar to an abused person who would like to end the abuse, but feels powerless in following through. The fact that Hester does not kill Welfare indicates she does not know how to do it without hurting herself. This episode provides a minuscule preview to the play’s violent ending. Violence as a reaction to a traumatic episode is mapped in this way,

Welfare

No need to raise your voice no need of that at all. You have to help me help you, Hester.

(Rest)

Run yr fingers through my hair. Go on. Feel it. Silky isn’t it?

Hester

Yes, Maam.

Welfare

Comes from a balanced diet. Three meals a day. Strict adherence to the food pyramid. Money in my pocket, clothes on my back, teeth in my mouth, womanly parts where they should be, hair on my head, husband in my bed.

Hester combs Welfares hair.

Welfare

Yr doctor recommends that you get a hysterectomy. Take out yr woman parts. A spay.

Hester

Spay.

Welfare

I hope things wont come to that. I will do what I can. But you have to help me, Hester.

Hester

((Dont *make* hurt you.))

Welfare

What?

Hester

I didnt mean it. Just slipped out.

(Parks, *Red Letter Plays* 55-59)

Hester does want to hurt Welfare. This is a response to the trauma inflicted upon her from Welfare. Welfare has promised to help her obtain that “one leg up” and has not delivered. She claims that help will come by “garnish[ing]” the wages of her children’s fathers (Parks *Red Letter Plays* 55). Hester has given the names of four of her children’s fathers, but Welfare states, “no luck as yet but we’re looking. Sometimes these searches take years” (55). This is frustrating for Hester because it has already been years and Welfare has not found one (55). The worst part of Hester’s ordeal is when Welfare confesses that her and her husband intend to include this young black mother in their sexual escapades. Their sexual abuse of Hester signifies their rejection of her. Like the Doctor, they feel she is beneath them and is not worthy to be considered a human, a woman, a mother (62).

Moreover, Welfare⁸ is willing to participate in a system that maintains “well-drawn boundary line[s]” between the haves and the have-nots (62). The fact that a person

⁸ According to Patricia H. Collins, “The general thinking among many middle-class reformers, [specifically within the African American community], ‘was that most uneducated, unskilled women were in need of social and moral uplift and, therefore, lacked the refinement...to join in the uplift process, at least as members of their organizations’” (*Black Feminist Thought* 214). Thus, Welfare’s refusal to help Hester reflects the internal conflicts that exist within the racial community.

of the same racial group is willing to take advantage of someone else's dire situation is an instigator in this traumatic episode. The major cause of trauma in this scenario is rejection on the basis of economic status and one value in the larger society. Rejection weighs heavily on the sufferer's subconscious. This scene appears just before the intermission illustrates the "push off the cliff." Hester's body language articulates an awakening that confirms her sentiments, "I don't think the world likes women much" (59). The stage directions at the end of the scene state that Hester receives another "painful stomach attack" that causes her to double over and is "recovering from her attack" (63). The words "pain" and "attack" are apart of the *language of trauma*; the body linguistics interpret these words and provide a visual for the audience. Reenacting this traumatic episode for the audience invites them to experience that pain of rejection she is experiencing. Thus the audience inadvertently experiences the same pain of many young black women who are in the same situation as Hester. This is a part of the collective identity of poor black women in the United State.

As mentioned earlier, the word "spay" is troubling to Hester and should be troubling to the reader/audience. She may not know how to read and write, but she does understand the impact of the word. How does the concept of the word affect Hester's state of being? She blames herself for not succeeding, but acknowledges that "the world don't help" (Parks *Red Letter Plays* 59). The Reverend D.'s avoidance of her reaffirms this notion. He promises to give Hester money to help her out. However, he does not follow through with his promise and in doing so, he avoids her by lying to her and pushing her away. This is another form of rejection. This last traumatic episode does

mark a significant climax in Hester's mental state. The Reverend D. calls her a "common slut"; the word 'slut' is written on the wall under the bridge at the beginning of the play (103). He uses this word as a threat for her not to tell Welfare about his status. He threatens to "crush [her] underfoot" (103). After all the other fathers have proven to be absent and reluctant to acknowledge their part in creating this situation for this young woman, the father of the last child sets the tone for the finale.

The amounting traumatic episodes lead to a deadly end. After the Reverend D. leaves, her eldest son, Jabber, repeats the word "slut." Even though Hester does not recognize the written form of the word, she understands the meaning of the word. When the word is repeatedly said, she "quickly raises her club and hits him once" and Jabber falls to his death (Parks *Red Letter Plays* 103). While her other children are watching, she continuously hits Jabber's body in a frenzy. With blood on her hands, she is "grief-stricken" (106).

The syntax articulated for the *language of trauma* in Parks's works are the words associated with trauma and the body linguistics written in the stage directions. Parks carefully selects the words that will carry weight and provide multiple meanings that cause the reader and audience to consider the subject matter on many different levels. One word or word image can open up dialogue among the audience that may not have existed until Parks suggests it for consideration, such as the word 'spay.' When you unpack the word 'spay', the first thing that comes to mind is to sterilize an animal. But, why would the same word be used on a human, on Hester? The character, Hester, is associated with an animal that is in heat and needs to be sterilized before a litter is

reproduced. This is a serious accusation placed on a helpless individual. Hence, the question remains, how can an individual's traumatic experience speak for the collective experience?

Collective Identity Formations and Black Feminist Theatre

The historical mapping of the black female subject and the collective cultural trauma that exist in post-American slavery and post-Civil Rights eras are featured in feminist dramas by African American women. By focusing on the principal characters of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *In the Blood*, an aim to be recognized and accepted by the hegemonic cultural and political arenas is at the center of their traumatic experiences.

Eyerman's essay argues that the formation of a collective identity among African Americans is a process that is linked to a cultural trauma and "the construction of collective memory" (Eyerman 60). Therefore, I suggest the collective identity among today's young African American women is their common experience with rejection and sexual exploitation. Both Kennedy and Parks illustrate how psychologically, emotionally, and physically black women consistently have been on the receiving end of injustice. In addition, African American women have received not so pleasant labels, such as jezebel, welfare queen, or mammy, etc. The worse part is the expectation to live up to these ideas that were inaccurate in their description of black women.

Although *Funnyhouse's* Negro-Sarah and *In the Blood's* Hester, La Negrita are from two different socioeconomic classes and historical periods, they share similar traumatic experiences based on their racial identity. As a collective, the women's problems converge forming a solidarity in addressing social issues that affect them.

Blaring examples of racial and gender-related discrimination include perpetuation of illiteracy, cultural and material exclusion, and sexual exploitation. Moreover, these discriminatory practices contribute to the group and individual's low self-esteem that leads them to make bad decisions in their lives. In both dramatic works, the notion of receiving and not receiving a decent education is associated with the hegemonic culture. White male hegemony is the presumed possessor of power and decides the curriculum taught in schools and who can gain access to higher levels of education.

Hester can barely read and does not receive any help from Welfare to help change this recoverable situation. The frustration of trying to learn her alphabet stifles any progress to move her family out of poverty. This stifling points to the United States' perpetuation of a controlling image known as *the welfare mother*. This controlling image was created for "poor, working-class Black women who use [...] social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law" (Collins 78). By the mid-1990s, this image flourished along with the "breeder image" stereotype, thus, creating the political debate about how to control Black women's fertility (79). Inherent of this image is the collective identity of being alone, a "bad mother," content with sitting around, collecting a welfare check and "passing on her bad values to her offspring" (79). This negative image perpetuates a cultural trauma experienced by those who are victims of the system. Scenarios of repeated rejection and neglect by a system that claims to assist its recipients has the potential of producing a series of traumatic effects. Because there is a subculture operating among Black women who are apart of the welfare system, they do possess a collective identity to this cultural trauma. This is the cultural trauma they experience at

the hands of both governmental agencies and those in and out of their racial community. Their cultural trauma is the experience with and the re-memory of an institution that consistently denies their human rights.

Negro-Sarah's character does not fall under any of the controlling images identified by Patricia H. Collins in her critically acclaimed analysis, *Black Feminist Thought*. However, the controlling image of the tragic mulatto is close to experiences and desires of the character. The collective voice for Sarah represents the sentiments of those who feel that they are misunderstood by both African and White Americans. They often cry that one racial identity is more evident than the other and often are distressed over this matter. Sarah keeps rejecting her black father's skin color and African culture. This collective voice experiences a culture in turmoil. Because they refuse to accept all of their multiracial identity, the trauma constructed for them is based on re-remembering painful experiences of rejection revolving around their identity. Perhaps, the remedy is to try and erase the race that lacks privilege and presents the most challenges.

Sarah's collective voice does not resemble the double-consciousness as theorized by W.E.B. DuBois; this collective voice echos the cultural theory of Fanon, a desire to be something one is not. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon discusses in detail the struggle with racial identity in the Antilles. Although his document focuses on the Caribbean, that collective voice is also spoken by American-born mulattos. For some who desired the lighter race, their African ancestry haunted them and tortured them. This collective nightmare experienced by individuals formed a group memory that reflected their traumatic experiences with racial identity (Eyerman 65, 66).

Hence, the two components of collective identity for African American women, the “welfare queen” and the “tragic mulatto,” are indicative of cultural traumas that helped shaped them. These cultural traumas are on display in the public sphere and are perpetuated by various forms of media. However, the purpose of black feminist theatre is to provide a forum to address and attack the issues that pose a threat to the continuing existence of the black female subject. Even though Andersen does not highlight cultural traumas as a factor in black women’s collective identity, she does provide an opening to continue this discourse.

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