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Using the Master's Tools: Representations of Blackness and the Strategies of Stereotype

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By

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The Dissertation of Aimee Zygmonski is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

University of California, Irvine

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DEDICATION

To Stella and Scupper,
because of you, not in spite of you, this dissertation sees its end

And

To Steve
because without you, this dissertation would have languished
in the Great Hole of History,
for with you, I am whole

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California, San Diego, 2010

University of California, Irvine, 2010

Professor Frank B. Wilderson, III, Chair

Attending to Audre Lorde's speech where she famously said, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," this dissertation argues for the reformation of the master's tools and cites four plays and an oeuvre of visual art that speak to this radical re-envisioning. The playwrights Kia Corthron, Lynn Nottage, and Suzan-Lori Parks, and visual artist Kara Walker utilize the master's tools in order to expose the inadequate craftsmanship in the master's house. Here, the tools used by these women are stereotypes that American culture created in order to oppress African Americans: the historical stereotypes of Sambo, Mammy, Uncle Tom and contemporary stereotypes of the welfare queen and black criminal. As African American artists, these women deliberately deploy stereotypes in their work as a way to defuse their lingering power. These images have haunted America for centuries, and the artists' works surveyed here tap into collective memories that question how these memories may continue to haunt our future. The "dismantling" that occurs in the various artistic works varies in its aim and scope, and in

this dissertation I track the particular devices used in conjunction with the artists' works to uncover the intentional and conscious intervention implicit in the plays and visual art. By looking at the work of Walker, Parks, Corthron, and Nottage, I would like to consider the possibilities for alternative narratives and ruptured stereotypes and discuss how stereotypes and representations of blackness can be recalled, reviewed, and re-envisioned.

Introduction

In arguably one of her most famous speeches, poet, activist, and scholar Audre Lorde said, “For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” The larger message in her speech to a university humanities conference addresses the mostly white feminist movement that alienated African American women, and specifically black lesbians. The “master’s tools” Lorde references have been interpreted to mean many things over the years, sometimes far removed from the initial meaning of the master as the white, racist, homophobic patriarchy that use “tools” of oppression to exert power over others. I, too, see the possibilities in the symbolic nature of Lorde’s statement, interpreting for my own arguments what such “tools” may be. The notion of the “tool box” has been used in the theatrical world to describe a variety of amorphous items: the voice and body are part of the actor’s tool box; light and color offer designers implements with which to create alternative worlds; and for playwrights, language and images are the most accessible tools to portray characters and situations. As I intend to locate contemporary stereotypes in specific plays in the American theater, such “tools” are paramount to my discussion.

The word “dismantle” also proves an intriguing choice. Lorde did not use “destroy,” which would imply an annihilation of hegemonic control. “Dismantle” suggests the breaking down into parts, not the total destruction of those elements. Dismantling could also mean that, at some other time, those singular entities could

very well form again into a cohesive whole, although not necessarily modeling the previous form. I interrogate these various word choices because they offer a lens through which to analyze the tools used by the artists surveyed in this dissertation. In a fantasized conversation with Lorde, in the book *The Bridge We Call Home*, Mary Loving Blanchard "talks" to Lorde, telling her:

> In our hands, the master's tools have become ammunition in the dismantling of his house, as we set about adding an extra room or two. We have taken his tools and with them made tools that fit our individual hands, as each of us sets out to do the work we have to do. And we will use these tools to read in ways that include us…. [W]e'll realize that those tools didn't belong to the master, after all. Well, they didn't belong to him all by himself. And that is one way that we gain agency, by adapting the tools we have rather than by reinventing the wheel; although the wheel is reinvented along the way. (256-7)

Blanchard euphemistically encapsulates possible strategies of resistance to Lorde's decidedly bleak outlook concerning the dismantling of the master's house. I also argue for the reformation of the master's tools, and attend to four plays and an oeuvre of visual art that speak to this radical re-envisioning. The playwrights and visual artist explored in this work utilize the master's tools in order to expose the inadequate craftsmanship in the master's house.

The subsequent chapters analyze the work of visual artist Kara Walker and playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks, Kia Corthron, and Lynn Nottage. Here, the tools used by these women are stereotypes that American culture created in order to oppress African Americans: the historical stereotypes of Sambo, Mammy, Uncle Tom and contemporary stereotypes of the welfare queen and black criminal. As African American artists, these women are incorporating the very stereotypes used to oppress

their racial and cultural heritage. Stereotypes of African American were created initially as negotiations of power: power to oppress those whose likenesses were bastardized into grotesque (dis)embodiments of a person that never was. These images have haunted America for centuries, and the artists' works surveyed here tap into collective memories that question how these memories may continue to haunt our future. The "dismantling" that occurs in the various artistic works varies in its aim and scope, and in this dissertation I track the particular devices used in conjunction with the artists' works to uncover the intentional and conscious intervention implicit in the plays and visual art.

African American stereotypes have a sordid past. Certain stereotypical qualities were branded on Africans through the Middle Passage, solidified during slavery, and popularized by performances of blackface minstrelsy—America's first theatrical creation—situating even more deeply contested images of Africans and African Americans. Minstrelsy limited portrayals to a handful of particular "types" and qualities, and the transmutability of these stereotypes from one generation to another has equally shocked and fascinated me. How is it possible that centuries after the institution of slavery began (and a century and a half since it "ended") a handful of core images continue to circulate in contemporary culture? As my research is not able to encompass the entirety of American cultural trends and influences, I explore the work of three playwrights and one visual artist who deliberately deploy stereotypes in their work as a way to defuse their lingering power.

While blackface minstrelsy is no longer performed upon stages in its original form, Spike Lee's provocative film, *Bamboolzed*, spurred me to consider the legacy of

minstrelsy stereotypes in today's performance genres. The film considers the "What if" notion of a modern-day minstrel show on television, designed by the main character Pierre Delacroix as a way to get himself fired from the frustrating communication network to which he belongs. He would rather see sitcoms featuring intelligent, middle-class blacks, but his colleague feels that these would only be "Cosby Clones" (referencing the 1980s family sitcom created by comedian Bill Cosby). Instead of creating an audience uproar over the racist jokes and blatant stereotypes the show traffics in, the *New Millennium Minstrel Show* becomes a hit with audiences and Delacroix welcomes his new-found fame and stature. While this brief synopsis barely touches upon the ensuing (and increasingly complicated) plot twists of the film, Lee's biting satire fueled my questioning of the strategic use of stereotypes in artistic work. If, as Lee's film argues, dominant social narratives continue to employ stereotypes and such narratives are propagated through white, hierarchal, social structures, why do non-white artists address these concerns? Why not ignore the stereotypes completely? Put simply: it is impossible. Chapter One explores the connection between social structure and stereotype, and how modern sensibilities surrounding stereotype consider the usage of such volatile images actually as *intrinsic* to social interactions. As post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha notes, they are stories that must be told and re-told. I turned to contemporary theater to see how artists today tackle our haunted past. How might their work change how we view America's deeply divided history and its ambivalent future?

Utilizing stereotypes is not new to theater. William Wells Brown's *The Escape*, the first published play by an African American, utilizes a "coon" type in the

development of the main character, Cato, only to reverse audience expectations at the end of the play as Cato reveals his intelligence and determination to escape from slavery. Not playing the dimwitted, "yes Massa" minstrel coon, Cato shows himself to be industrious and effective at duping others (including the audience) to get what he needs to survive. Why would Wells Brown deliberately portray Cato as a coon, especially as the play was written and performed by Brown himself in late 1850s? Betye Saar (who, incidentally, is in fervent opposition of Kara Walker's work) used images of Aunt Jemima in many of her art pieces and installations produced in the 1970s. More recently, plays such as *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*, *I Ain't Yo Uncle*, and *The Colored Museum* have all incorporated African American stereotypes directly into the fabric of the text, using satire to call attention to the grotesque images and historical implications of their use.

The plays I work through here are not as overt as some of their forbearers, and the authors' utilizations of stereotypes reflect varying sensibilities of artistic expression and scope. This research does not seek to confirm whether or not particular African American stereotypes could be embodied by actual individuals, and this research also does not judge who may be right or wrong in estimating an individual's stereotypical traits. Rather, this research considers how stereotypes operate in particular artistic works and how these four artists negotiate and strategize by using stereotypes to uncover their inherent flaws. It is in the manipulation of the tools in which they use to process stereotypes that I am most intrigued. As Saidiya Hartman asks, "To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?" (*Lose Your Mother* 170). By looking at the work of Parks,

Corthron, and Nottage, I would like to consider the possibilities for alternative narratives and ruptured stereotypes and discuss how stereotypes and representations of blackness can be recalled, reviewed, and re-envisioned.

While Parks's and Walker's work provide a useful starting point, the main chapters of this work interrogate two contemporary African American playwrights, Kia Corthron and Lynn Nottage who, up to this point, have received little or no scholarly attention to their work. Current scholarship on the field of African American theater fails to identify both Corthron and Nottage as playwrights worthy of the attention that their artistic sister, Suzan-Lori Parks, receives. Since the early 1990s, both have received writing commissions from award-winning regional and Off-Broadway theaters and, and full-scale productions have been produced across the country. I endeavor not to compare their works, for they approach theatrical narrative differently, but rather to locate how their plays are uniquely positioned within contemporary theater today.

While I am deeply interested in how race and blackness are formed in each of their play texts—for that experience is inseparable from their work—I also investigate how the plays work on a theatrical level and to what dramatic purpose. For example, in Nottage's *Fabulation*, she manipulates the stereotypes through a deft sense of humor and satire, playing within ironic forms to produce the textual nuances. Corthron's *Cage Rhythm* carves out a space for freedom with the prison industrial complex through an innovative structural device that moves the play from extreme realism to mystical elusiveness. I do not suppose that these playwrights speak for the next generation of artists, nor can their work erase African American stereotypes so

deeply embedded within our culture. However, I do argue that their works ask audiences to re-envision an alternative future—a future that rejects singular stereotypical portrayals of African Americans for a future that favors expanded notions of blackness.

The plays on which I focus were written between 1992 and 2003, and the bulk of Kara Walker's oeuvre to date spans 1994-2001. The 1990s secured a time of positive economic growth for the country, where artists' grants and play commissions provided stability to fledgling artists. However, with the Civil Rights era not far in the past, issues of race, class, and gender continued to segregate the country. Supreme Court decisions reversed affirmative action procedures, as the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings riveted the media and OJ Simpson's Los Angeles flight riveted the tabloids. Most importantly, the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 brought the racial divide to the forefront, and, I would argue, mark race relations for the rest of the decade. Parks, Corthron, and Nottage grew up under the umbrella of two influential African American playwrights: Ntozake Shange and August Wilson. Shange's 1978 *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enough* gave voice to the next generation of African American women after Lorraine Hansberry's pivotal 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun,* and Wilson's successful Pittsburgh cycle plays captivated audiences, and were successful, not just in small theaters, but in major regional theaters and Broadway for over fifteen years. With Suzan-Lori Parks bursting onto the scene in the late 1980s and Anna Deavere Smith's influential *Fires in the Mirror* in 1991, the idea of working and surviving as an African American playwright seemed more plausible.

Art generated during this time reflects the upheavals of these pivotal moments, culminating in the theatrical world with August Wilson's infamous "The Ground on Which I Stand" speech at the 1996 Theatre Communications Group's national conference. More than ten years before President (then candidate) Obama's lecture on race to the American public, Wilson directly spoke about race, influenced not by political punditry, but unabashed honesty. "Race matters," he said. "It is the largest category of identification because it is the one that most influences your perception of yourself and it is the one to which others in the world of men most respond" (16). Wilson powerfully called for common ground through performance, asking for American theater to recognize not the similarities in work, but to praise the differences. This speech rocked the theater world for its temerity and tenacity, its candor and complaint. Wilson called upon theaters across the country to consider their best practices in hiring employees, casting actors, and choosing production seasons. His words vigorously empowered playwrights to write and theaters to produce their work. As Lynn Nottage said in an interview with a PBS affiliate producing one of her one-acts for television, "I think that the African-American woman's voice is important because it is part of the American voice. But you would not know that by looking at TV or films. You would think that we do not exist. And part of my mission as a writer is to say, 'I do exist. My mother existed, and my grandmother existed, and my great-grandmother existed, and they had stories that are rich, complicated, funny, that are beautiful and essential.'"

Much has been written about Parks, her style, her language, and I would argue it is because her plays upset many visions of what black theater is supposed to be, and

for that matter, why it even needs to be denoted as "black." As she writes, "There is no single 'Black Experience,' there is no single 'Black Aesthetic' and there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted" (*The America Play* 21). Or, as she ironically writes later in a 2007 *Theatre Journal* forum devoted to such a topic, "A black play does not exist. Every play is a black play. SAY WHAT?" ("A Forum On…" 577, emphasis in original). Parks's work challenges the spectator, the actor, and the director to read into, through, and beyond her dialogue, not to decipher what her work says about "the race" but rather what her work says about America. As Parks knowingly writes, "A black play is told that it is about race and a black play knows it's really about other shit" ("A Forum on…" 580). In comparison to Parks and Walker, Nottage's and Corthron's plays are quite different, not only in their language and style, but also in the strategies they use. The chapters that focus directly on their plays attempt to delineate these strategic moves and what implications their interventions upon stereotype offer.

While representations of blackness are at the core of this research, I also want to be clear that the strategies and artistic gestures offered by these artists are beyond just a question of blackness (or a question of their race). I consider this methodology influenced by Darby English's *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. English asks readers to look at the artists he writes about (painters, filmmakers, visual and performance artists) not because they are part of the larger conversation on black art or typify what "black art" is, but rather for what else their art may impart. English argues "It is now less convincing than ever to speak of black artists as if they share an enterprise" (11). The suggestion that all African American artists have the same goals

in the creation of their work is generalizing and false; however, as evidenced by the linking of work throughout this dissertation, the artistic offerings by black artists can indeed "share an enterprise" regarding the usage of and implications in stereotypically derived art. The naïve goal would be to assume that by these artists employing stereotypes to re-envision the images, the outcome would be for such stereotypes to disappear from everyday use. I know this is not the case: even if some historical stereotypes have fallen out of everyday favor, other images have been updated or replaced with new ones that continue to circulate. This is why I believe the word "strategy" very purposefully implies intent and forethought, as well as a calculated outcome. This is true for the plays and art surveyed here: these artists do not employ potent stereotypes lightly, rather they use them to intervene upon the very use of the stereotype itself. Each of their strategies is different, but I argue that all pick a particular strategy for working with, through, and around stereotype. Thus it is in the strategic moment where I believe real change can happen, although I recognize that change may occur in one individual at a time. Each of the chapters explores the art and plays to pinpoint these occurrences—Nottage amends the image of the welfare queen through satire; Corthron employs mystical theatrical elements to explore the deadening of the human body trapped in prison; Parks celebrates not the death, but rather the continual re-birth of the black male. By constantly reinterpreting representations of blackness, each artist begins the long and arduous process of releasing one-dimensional stereotypes from the black subject.

The first chapter situates my argument, tracking the etymology of the word "stereotype," as well as some of the major theoretical influences on how I have come

to understand the work that stereotypes are doing, not only in daily interaction, but also in contemporary arts. The modern notion of what a stereotype is can be tracked only a mere 90 years into America's past, its modern evocation explained by journalist Walter Lippmann. I also consider philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's theories on the reliability of stereotype and how such images can become building blocks of our own identity. I am interested in how individual and collective memory works in the dissemination of such types, and in what ways we file away particular images for use in the future. As the scope of this dissertation does not seek to trace the psychology of stereotypes, I utilize the writings of Homi Bhabha and Mirielle Rosello who turn to the effects of ethnic stereotypes and their use in literature. This chapter also seeks to understand the various definitions of blackness in relation to my work on how blackness is represented in each of the various artistic endeavors researched here. Here, theoretical explications become more complex, as there are many consideration of what "blackness" represents (as if it could be contained). I recognize that my own theoretical tendency is to employ various points of view depending on the artistic work surveyed. While this may seem unconnected at times, each of the artistic works in this dissertation is very different in scope and aim, and as such, requires a different theoretical lens.

The subsequent chapters delve deeper into the artistic creations of the visual art and plays. Chapter Two introduces the work of Kara Walker and an oft-overlooked play of Suzan-Lori Parks. The strategic devices used in Walker's work operate on a variety of levels, but the most effective device is the forced interaction between viewer and artwork that the silhouettes create. I contend that her work deliberately sets up a

conversation between audience and art, directing viewers to make choices about the images seen and the stereotypes employed. Utilizing a different strategy, Parks's play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* draws upon her signature structure of repetition, revision, and manipulation of language to complicate stereotypical images of black death.

Chapter Three and Four look at two of Kia Corthron's oeuvre, *Breath, Boom* and a long one-act play *Cage Rhythm.* In a way, two halves of the same whole, both plays manipulate images of the black criminal stereotype and its derivations with the aid of unrealistic theatrical devices within the context of a (mostly) realistic narrative framework. In *Breath, Boom* stereotypes of the welfare queen and the gang banger are unpacked to reveal the insidiousness of hegemonic power on the urban poor. Through the literal and figurative usage of an onstage "haunting" and more importantly, fireworks, the play's stereotypical images destruct, leaving fully formed characters bereft of stereotypical tendencies. In *Cage Rhythm,* Corthron also employs a structural device to disarm the power of black stereotypes, and more importantly the possibility of alternative representations of blackness. The main character of the play experiences "out-of-body" psychic moments which offer her a brief reprieve from the oppressive losses enacted on black bodies in prison. In this play, while Corthron does not implicate stereotypes directly, the strategy of using mystical leaps into the spiritual realm provides a disruption from how blackness becomes stereotyped through incarceration, and ultimately how these moments symbolically reflect the notion of redress for the pained body.

The final chapter locates yet another strategic device to upend stereotypes in the play *Fabulation* by Lynn Nottage. Through calculated use of satire and humor, Nottage's play attacks various contemporary African American stereotypes, including the welfare queen, the teenage unwed mother, and middle-class black bourgeois. These satirical leaps are possible through the development of a modern-day trickster tale, where not only the main character operates as a trickster, but also Nottage herself. Thus, the use of traditional trickster tales and traits becomes an effective strategic move towards complicating contemporary black stereotypes. This chapter also investigates the precarious position of humor in such instances where the laugh derives from racially charged moments, and how humor itself can be a very complex (and, at times, troubling) strategy. Comedian Dave Chappelle wrestled in the mire of race-based laughter during the short-lived run of his comedy variety show on television. Stepping sideways from theater to consider Chappelle's work more deeply illuminates what *Fabulation*'s satiric structure creates. Ultimately, as with other elements of this dissertation, I am most interested in how Nottage troubles and challenges stereotypical images through the various elements employed within the play's structure.

In 1993 the African American literary journal *Callaloo* interviewed writer and director George C. Wolfe. The interviewer asks Wolfe about the reactions to his controversial 1986 play *The Colored Museum*, which features many of the African American stereotypes outlined in this dissertation. Black and white audiences took Wolfe to task for "exposing" these stereotypes through such comedic situations however Wolfe considers his play to be "reclaiming silhouettes, or reexamining the

silhouette" (605). His use of the word silhouette as interchangeable with stereotype is very intriguing to me, as I would see Kara Walker's work (as discussed in Chapter Three) as playing with that subtle exchange upon gallery walls. Wolfe says his intent is "trying to appropriate or trying to reclaim certain of the silhouettes: the silhouette of the trickster, the silhouette which some people would call the 'coon,' the silhouette of the 'mammy.'" He asks of himself, "Where does that really come from, what does that bandanna on the head mean?" (605). For Wolfe, the images are silhouettes, but once fleshed out, lost their stereotypical nature. "So much of the imagery of the archetype has been co-opted by white culture and turned into a stereotype," Wolfe notes. Instead, he believes his play restores images back to African American culture with dignity and depth (605).

Wolfe's opinions highlight what Walker, Parks, Corthron, and Nottage consciously create in their work as well. While I do not believe we are in post-race era, as some claim for this twenty-first century, I also cannot eschew my enduring optimism that art can create real social change, and that the artists' works reviewed in the following chapters respond *with pointed stratagems* to alter societal views and to begin to break down the divide between white and black that has forever shaped this country. I am not suggesting that the tasks these artistic works undertake are easy. Using the tools of oppression (the visual stereotypes) to radically change enduring modes of thinking is not an easy negotiation, but I do believe such usage is intentional. By using derogatory images as focus within their works, these artists radically (re)envision the cultural currency these stereotypes hold; instead of de-centering race,

they complicate race using elements of oppression to renegotiate the power these images hold.

Chapter One:

Stereotypes and the Imagistic Constructions of Blackness

Stereotypes first formed on the ink-stained tables in printing houses in the 1800s. Intitally, a stereotype was used as printing plate: an original plate was set with type or images, and a mold was cast. From the mold emerged a secondary plate or copy, which was then used for the subsequent printings. Thus, the stereotype became a stand-in for the preserved original plate. Stereotypes provided an efficient method of duplicating mass quantities of printed materials on multiple presses without much error, and sections of type could also be reused in other printing functions or melted down to be cast again. It was not until the early 1900s that the word took a social turn in the hands of American journalist and commentator Walter Lippmann.

Looking closely at the word stereotype, its etymology offers an opening to understanding how the term may be deployed today. "Stereo" is New Latin, derived from the Greek *stereos* or solid. "Type" is *typus* in Latin, meaning "image," but holds a rather different derivation from the Greek, as it was used as a suffix: *typos,* meaning blow (as in strike), impression, molded or model.[1] "Solid" recalls notions of fixity and an inherent stasis (which is how others have defined stereotypes). *Typus*, as in "image" employs the primacy of the visual. The Greek meanings of *typos* offer further connotations. "Model" infers a more recent meaning of stereotype: a copy, not an original, which is why the word was used by printers to describe the molds used for

[1] Sourced from the online editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary.*

typefaces on old block printing presses. “Molded” also connects to ideas of malleability and how one’s image can be molded to fit a certain set of constraints.

There are also many ways to look at “impress.” One may impress upon something and/or leave a mark—as in the printing sense of the word and in today’s uses of “type” in compound words, such as “typewriter.” Beyond its literal meaning of impression, “impress” also connotes the feeling one gets from an exchange, a “lasting impression,” or how one can make an impact upon another. To be taken by the British Navy in the Golden Age of Sail and put to work on a ship for extended sea voyages without volunteering for the job was to be *impressed into* service; considering contemporary usage of the term, stereotypes were created without recipients’ consent. While stereotypes change over generations, the qualities inherent in many stereotypes, particularly racial stereotypes, solidify through impressions that last in the collective psyche, images that continually press and implant in the mind. Stereotypes adhere, fix, and strike upon groups and generations of people. Thus, putting each element of the word “stereotype” together, solid impressions literally mold on others: physically, mentally, and formidably.

While the use of “stereotype” today seems far-removed from the printing press, the concept of creating a new “type” and the mediation that occurs in moving away from the original loosely defines the process of stereotyping in its contemporary incarnation. In *Declining the Stereotype,* Mireille Rosello highlights the fact that in printing, once stereotypes were created, there was no use for the originals anymore. The stereotypes were much more effective in creating copies over and over again without the possibility of deterioration in the quality of the type (as originals had the

tendency to wear). Thus, stereotypes literally *replaced* the originals. This concept haunts me in its eerie relationship to how figurative stereotypes operate in social structures today.

In contemporary usage, the concept of stereotype links directly to representation politics including how gender, class, and race perform in the everyday. Stereotyping is two-fold: a stereotype is an image, but it is also a process. Stereotypes form from visual images, lodged in the mind, and an individual then layers those conceived images upon a body, where a particular body can represent an entire social or identity group. It is in the in-between moments—the space when the image leaves the mind and moves towards a physical manifestation—that I am most interested. This slippery space, this liminal void, this between-worlds is the place where the act of stereotyping gains power and foothold, enough, at times in America's history, to influence national consciousness. The stereotype itself may, in fact, be meaningless, but the signification of its meaning can endow the image with unbelievable efficacy and power. Returning to stereotype reflects the primacy of the visual and its currency in contemporary society.

Containing the Stereotype: Definitions and Declinations

Walter Lippmann introduced the present sense of the word "stereotype" in his book *Public Opinion*, originally published in 1922. His early twentieth century writings gained prominence in the 1950s and '60s, deeply influencing media and communication studies. In the book, Lippmann details a "self versus the world" approach on how stereotypes operate in the American public. He writes, "In the great

blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture" (81). Lippmann outlines stereotyping as a common, social phenomenon, a dialogue between individuals and their "culture" or identity group (although by today's scholarship his use of the word "culture" may be vague as well as loaded). The process of stereotyping, an interaction between the self and society, creates preconceived notions from and out of the legacy of social formations. For Lippmann, at its most simplistic state, the act of stereotyping helps people cope with unknowable social situations:

> The systems of stereotypes may be the core of our personal tradition, the defenses of our position in society… They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. … we feel at home here. We fit in. We are members. … no wonder then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. (95)

Stereotypes pervade the everyday, easing uncomfortable social interactions and affording membership in a larger group. In a way, Lippmann excuses the use of stereotypes, outlining that they are necessary for us to function, to make the unknowable known, and to remain at ease with our social positions. There is no judgment call: stereotypes are neither good nor bad; they are indispensable. "We are told about the world before we see it," he writes. "We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception" (90). Lippmann recognizes that to stereotype involves quick judgment and a reliance on what has come before, instead of educating the self to what may actually be. Stereotypes may "preserve us from all

the bewildering effects of trying to see the world steadily and see it whole" (114). His specific use of the word "preserve" considers stereotyping as a protective measure, as if stereotypes shelter the self, when in actuality the use of stereotypes exposes the self. The "us" that Lippmann intones throughout his book calls to mind a scared and docile creature, looking up at the world with wide eyes, hesitant to take a step into society for fear of what he/she may find. "Bewildered" by reality, this individual resorts to seeing everyone unknown as a mere two-dimensional picture, simplistic in elements that can be quickly comprehended. The act of self-preservation is a restorative, but also defensive gesture. For example, to look at this situation through the lens of African American stereotypes, this concept of "preserve" is the visual embodiment of a white person hightailing it across the street when a "suspicious looking" black man also happens to be approaching on the same sidewalk. By preserving ourselves from the world by using stereotypes, we effectively curtail the possibility of further interaction without being clouded by a pre-judgment.

Reflected in the title of his book, Lippmann's ultimate goal in explicating stereotype suggests how public opinion influences the media. Resorting to stereotype marked one not good or bad, but rather a necessary manifestation of the functioning dialectic between self and society, society and others. "I am arguing," he writes, "that the pattern of stereotypes at the center of our codes largely determines what group of facts we shall see, and in what light we shall see them" (125). Lippmann understood that stereotyping intrinsically affects how a society operates, that individuals and larger groups stereotype to provide stability and continuance, and that stereotyping definably resides "at the center" of our social character.

Lippman's explication of the modern definition of stereotype was expanded upon by different theorists as the twentieth century progressed. Research studies into the psychology of stereotypes and how individuals and groups use stereotypes (and why) is an exhaustive area of study, but one with which this dissertation does not have the scope for detailing. Instead, I have chosen to focus on a few modes of thinking that, for me, directly influence my analysis of the particular artistic creations here. I am most interested in how stereotypes perpetuate in popular culture, whether through repeated verbal use between identity groups or through visual culture (such as advertisements, art, and obviously theater). Theorists such as Sander Gilman and Kwame Appiah (outlined below), particularly, make these links between stereotypes and group identity creation, and, like myself, find great interest in the gray area between identity formation that is chosen by oneself and cultural identities that are placed upon oneself. Certainly, this slippery space is where I believe the artists' works pose an intervention. In using stereotypes that were created by others, they are reclaiming the right to utilize such images for their own designs, not for what the images were originally intended.

Identity, Self-Preservation, and the Other

Difference and Pathology, Sander Gilman's book on stereotypes of sexuality, madness and race, expands upon Lippmann's notions of the connection between stereotypes and the need for self preservation. He notes that "stereotypes are a crude set of mental representations of the world. They perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the 'self' and the 'object'" (17). While Lippmann considers the

relationships between an individual and the larger public, Gilman looks more specifically in the exchange between an individual and an amorphous "Other." In this interplay, the creation of a generalized and objectified image emerges. Instead of trying to find out about an individual, a fictive image provides a level of comfort and access to the unknown. As Gilman notes, "[stereotypes] are part of our way of dealing with the instabilities of our perception of the world" (17). Accessing a simple mental image of another satisfies such insecurities, providing the ability to continue with social interactions. However, stereotypes are not just unique and separate creations by individuals, but also inventions co-opted by larger societal groups over time, products "of history and of a culture that perpetuates them" (20). Groups share collective identities, identities that they can define and understand between each other, and may create stereotypes towards other identities foreign to them. How one group views another and how they perceive the characteristics of that group all contribute to the formulation of stereotypes.

Creating connections to elements of African American stereotypes and their formations in public arena seems most appropriate here. This act of creation that Gilman writes of seems analogous to the formation of theatrical characters. One of blackface minstrelsy's most famous characters was created by T.D. Rice, an errant performer who boasted he saw a stable hand or coach driver on the streets in Cincinnati, shuffling a little dance, singing a little song. So enthralled by this spectacle, Rice ran to the man, learned the song, and in some versions of the tale, even

offered to swap clothes. The character of Jim Crow was born.[2] However, what is not known is if the stable hand may also have been creating a stereotype. Could he have been making fun of the ways in which the black man had to "dance" for the whites? Maybe he was ridiculing the "auction shuffle"—the dances and jigs slaves were coerced into to show physical prowess on the auction block. Rice, certainly, was not aware of this, but the possibility definitely presents itself. However, Rice's co-opting and re-envisioning of the black man's song and dance into a stereotype that even Rice himself could not contain demonstrates how imagination plays an important role in the conception of stereotypes. Jim Crow was created not out of actions of the Other, but rather Rice's *own* fabrications by the way *he* interpreted the stableman on the street that day. In objectifying the stable hand into a sum of his parts—his gestures, his clothes, his skin color—Rice's anxiety surrounding the unknowability of the African American man created the beginning of a vicious stereotype, performed and re-performed by many others in the decades to come.

In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah looks at the "promiscuous use of the word 'stereotype'" to explicate a larger argument regarding the building blocks of identity (194). For him, stereotyping involves three categories: statistical, false, and normative. Statistical stereotypes rely on characteristics of social groups and differentiate on the basis of general assumptions, a factor which makes them prime for legal cases regarding discrimination. Appiah's example posits a female firefighter

[2] This tale concerning the conception of the character of Jim Crow is unsubstantiated, but still circulated. While some contemporary scholars still recount this version (for example, see Lott 1993), W.T. Lhamon argues that the story is completely fictitious; rather the character of Jim Crow had been building in the general imagination through gestures and oral histories long before Daddy Rice took to the stage, see Lhamon 1998.

being turned down for a job, where employers reason “women are not strong enough to be firemen” (195). While the case may be made that women may not be as physically strong as men, this invented job applicant may well be stronger than some of her male cohorts, yet the stereotype of women as weaker than men persists. “Simply false” stereotypes fall into Appiah’s second categorization, which, for the most part, encompass ethnic stereotypes and, like statistical stereotypes, involve “intellectual error” (196). Many of the stereotypes conceived in the height of blackface minstrelsy are simply false stereotypes, although the images have evolved over generations to become more than just a false statement that is “simply” erroneous.

Appiah’s third category of stereotype relies on notions of what is customary for a particular identity: the normative stereotype. This stereotype “is not a view about how members of the group behave *simpliciter*: it is grounded in a social consensus about they *ought* to behave in order to conform appropriately to the norms associated with membership in their group” (195, emphasis in original). Gender stereotypes dwell in the normative, especially in the workplace. America’s presidential race faced such normative stereotypes when a woman decided to run for president, unheard for such a high-ranking position in America, even if other countries have elected female presidents and prime ministers before. Normative stereotypes affect the identity-making of individuals and are “central to an understanding of the place of identity and individuality in moral and civic life” (198).

In addition to Appiah’s intervention, I am also interested in false stereotypes that *transform* the normative, where “a shift in normative stereotype changes who I am” (199). Stereotypes and the incarnations created out of their societal evolutions

haunt existing norms, causing identity shifts. Thus, when a false stereotype begins to change the way an entire community is judged (as with the history of African American stereotypes), the normativity those stereotypes are afforded becomes cause for concern. Richard Dyer writes, "The effectiveness of stereotypes resides in the way they invoke a consensus. Stereotypes proclaim, 'This is what everyone—you, me, and us—thinks members of a such-and such social group are like,' as if these concepts of these social groups were spontaneously arrived at by all members of society independently and in isolation. Yet for the most part it is *from* stereotype that we get our ideas about social groups" (14, emphasis original). I concede that people may very well utilize stereotype to their advantage or exhibit qualities that one could discern as emblematic of a stereotype. However, whatever stereotype they may be using was not created or based upon that individual, for it certainly had a long history before its current use and will have a longer history after. Stereotypes subsume the individual and rely on generalized and enforced identifications, for "in the realm of identity there is no bright line between recognition and imposition" (Appiah 110). It is not a question whether stereotypes may actually conform to individual identities, but rather that they are distributed through social interactions, through popular media, through literature, and refuse to go away.

Lippmann's inroads into defining the "new" concept of stereotype also present one of the two ways in which the contemporary usage of stereotype has been considered. In one way, sociologists and psychologists research stereotyping as a way to discern human nature and its ability to distinguish between various peoples. Large social studies are conducted with human test subjects, creating experiments and

situations to notate inclinations towards prejudice regarding class, gender, lifestyle, race, ethnicity, or any other area of social culture where stereotyping occurs, and such tests draw conclusions about the various theories related to brain functionality and emotionality. Another facet of research into stereotypes locates in humanities, where authors concern themselves with stereotypes and their usage in art, literature, and music. While scientists are concerned with fictive elements in social reality, other theorists and scholars are concerned with socially realistic elements in fiction. Thus my own research into the nature of stereotypes locates an affiliation with authors surveying the use of stereotypes in literature and art. As German writer Astrid Franke writes:

> The incipient discourse on stereotypes in the US marks the point when public opinion became aware of itself, and not only was the use of the concept widely spread and its purposes set beyond the borders of artistic production, it also touched upon such issues as the mechanism producing and manipulating public opinion, questions of ethnic identity, the role of art for the cultural and political self-esteem of a group, and the link between defamatory images and political discrimination. (25)

While Lippmann, Gilman, and Appiah consider stereotype in its operative generalities, other scholars identify particular facets of stereotyping that centralize race as modern characteristic of hegemonic power. Homi Bhabha argues that stereotypes produce an "ambivalent mode of knowledge and power" and an "'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision" (66-67). Feelings of anxiety and fear toward the unknown create desire to attach to something that can be known, something that is comfortable. Post-colonial discourse also reminds us that racial and ethnic stereotypes are more than just a preservation technique, but a mode of power and violence. The

ambivalence of which Bhabha addresses is at the heart of this power struggle, and the act of stereotyping can thrive in such a tenuous environment. The fear of the Other (the unknown) induces visions and images to bolster the Self while at the same time the power of curiosity desperately wants to know what the Other could be. To settle the debate, the Self resorts to stereotype and the cycle continues. As Rosello writes, "The paradoxical violence of stereotypes uttered in public is that they are often presented as a chance to make us prove our loyalty to the speaker but also as an opportunity to be accepted as part of group" (11). This violence situates particularly on racialized bodies due to the power inequity caused by stereotypical deployment.

Bhabha also meditates on the shelf life of stereotypes and the ability of stereotypes to last generations in seemingly the same form, writing that "the stereotype requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes" (77). Stereotypes literally *fixate on* visual attributes (faces, body shape), qualitative aspects of a person (intellect, language), or gestural movements (gait, body language) and therefore generalize persons that may encompass such types. The fixity within stereotype occurs at the level of the individual who accesses it, and then elements become fixed in the individual's memory. Those who employ stereotype believe in its fixity, its assurance that its use and subsequent connotations will stay the same. This problematic is a "site of both fixity and fantasy" (77). However I would add to this consideration that the belief that stereotypes stay consistent only occurs in mind of the user, when in actuality this belief belies a stereotype's continued use as the images evolve and change over time, over geography, over generations. This dichotomy results in the "same old stories" being told "again and afresh,"

(re)producing stereotypical constructions that are "differently gratifying and terrifying each time" (Bhabha 77). Bhabha juxtaposes here the individual connection to stereotype, defined by the consideration of stereotypes that must be "compulsively" told as the "same old stories," versus stereotypes in actuality: stories that are not the same, but rather different each time they are employed.

This is the in-between space I wish to understand through the work I present within these pages—the slippage inherent in the societal functioning of stereotype, the and the belief in stereotype's fixity which may offer stability for those who use them. Certainly this was the case in minstrelsy, as "whites needed these fixed images of blacks to reassure them about their own positions" (Toll 99). However this reassurance is all smoke and mirrors, for it is not the stereotype that is fixed: it is the power that the stereotype plays upon and strengthens which assumes rigidity, *fixing onto* bodies and groups. "Stereotypes are like weapons: left in a drawer they cannot kill," Rosello writes. "The trick is to realize that in that little parable the important element is the drawer, not the weapon" (26). In addition, I would argue that stereotypes may be fixed once the stereotype imbeds itself in cultural discourse, yet particular stereotypes fall out of favor (the closing of the drawer). Stereotypes must be continually circulated to establish a foothold in a collective consciousness and thus the drawer must be accessed again and again. As an example, at the turn of the century, black children were always depicted in various print media as wearing next to nothing or naked, inferring the inferiority and dereliction of African American parentage. Postcards, advertisements, and even picture books displayed black children in rural settings, complete with a gaping alligator, ready to devour the oblivious child. Yet the usage of

the image of naked black children and alligators is not found on souvenir postcards and the like today. Instead, the implication of absent black parents is transported to urban housing and the ghetto: now black children are no longer eaten by alligators but branded as unwed teenage mothers, drug users, or gang bangers. The power dynamic was never unfixed from black bodies, but rather from the initial visual image for now the stereotype of the unfit black parent fixes upon lower-income urban African Americans. The stereotype still encompasses the critique in the ability of blacks to successfully parent their children, but the images surrounding the stereotype changed. The "same old story" of which Bhabha returns to finds its way to the next generation, and these so-called "fixed" stereotypes radically unfix with each upcoming geographical and generational upheaval. The weapons have not been put back in the drawer.

Deposits in the Memory Bank

The power of the deployment of stereotypes derives from the cohesion and dissemination that another is inherently knowable, for if one always "knows" the subject there is no need to reach any further for specifics so the building (and subsequent sustainment) of a stereotype succeeds on the repetition of generalities, not newly gained knowledge. This lack of intimacy gives stereotyping power: it is easy to stereotype, and it requires little action, only a mere reliance on what the general populous has already created. In essence, stereotypes produce a form of cultural shorthand. The process requires only the act of calling to mind simple, accessible images from what I term a "stereotype memory bank." I do not believe stereotypes are

akin to Jung's archetypes, or that this concept of a memory bank brings us to Freud's deep-seated unconscious for this is not my project, but rather when triggered by a visual or aural cue, the memory bank provides a relationship to the trigger, offering an immediate and initial reaction to an encounter. Like memory itself, the memory bank is a very subjective and selective place, because "memory serves a presentist agenda" (Richards 617). In a way, the memory bank offers the subtext for any situation, feeding the present with emotions, feelings, and images.

Deposits in the memory bank can come from a variety of sources, however mass marketed advertising, popular media (including television and film), and generational knowledge passed down through families and communities provide the most palpable images. "Once uttered, a stereotype can be branded in an individual's mind and start an almost autonomous life as a repeatable unit of ideology…. [Stereotypes'] memorability is directly linked to their timelessness; a vicious circle develops whereby memorability leads to timelessness, which in turn, because human cultures hoard the past, increases memorability" (Rosello 35). This memory bank prospers in the repeated usage of stereotypes, thus stereotype memory banks are very economical. The bank requires little start-up, for once an image presents itself, it takes little to reverse its repeated use.

Commercial media relies on these stereotype memory banks, using stereotypes to market anything from pancake mix to sports drinks. In the early 1900s, the "comforting" image of the black female servant/mammy created a more than sustainable income for the Quaker Oats company. The fictitious Aunt Jemima began after entrepreneurs took her image from the covers of minstrelsy sheet music and

placed her on a pancake box. Even more disturbing, the stereotypical image, created by white milling manufacturer brothers, gained currency not only by the pancake boxes' visual image but by the *physical* embodiment of "Aunt Jemima" in the body of freed slave, Nancy Green, for the 1893 Chicago Exposition. Costumed in the now recognizable kerchief and apron, Green flipped and sold pancakes to promote the new "ready-made" mix to consumers at the fair. Here the stereotype melded with the body of a real person, confirming for many fairgoers that the mammy image was indeed "real." Green continued to play Aunt Jemima at promotional events across the country until she was killed in a car accident in 1923, and then the role was assumed by another African American woman well into the 1950s, (re)animating the mammy stereotype a full 100 years after it was created. As Maurice M. Manring argues in his intriguing book, *Slave in a Box*, no one wanted to "be" Aunt Jemima as one wished to "be" Betty Crocker, rather the premixed baking mix allowed white women to "be" the plantation mistress: with ready-made mixes, it is as if someone else had been in the kitchen working for them, prepping their meal, providing efficiency in the domestic realm—quite literally, a slave in a box.

As the success of Aunt Jemima illustrates, memory banks are also constructed out of and through collective memory. Paul Connerton enunciates the collectivity of social groups in *How Societies Remember*, arguing, "The kind of association that makes possible retention in the memory is not so much one of resemblance or contiguity as rather a community of interests and thoughts. It is not because thoughts are similar that we can evoke them; it is rather because the same group is interested in those memories, and is able to evoke them, that they are assembled together in our

minds" (37). Certainly minstrelsy's Uncle Toms were not "filed away" by only one person, but literally collected and "banked" by the masses through the widespread movement of minstrelsy and its infecting performance. In a way, the images that are the simplest, that offer ease of access are the memories that stick, the stereotypes that refuse to go away. Glenda Carpio, in her recent book *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, notates this trend as well, writing that:

> Pernicious stereotypes regarding black people's innate ability and intelligence may no longer be particularly relevant for the current political climate, yet they can resurface suddenly: thus stereotypes regarding the purported unwillingness of blacks to work have come to the forefront of the debate on welfare and the persistence of black poverty. Particular stereotypes are resuscitated and adjusted depending on the kind of politics they are made to serve, but the system of stereotypes remains. (13)

Here, Carpio addresses the cyclical nature of certain ethnic and cultural stereotypes, but I would also add, alludes to the power of these stereotypes in the current political and social climate of America. When they are useful, stereotypes are employed.

In a theatrical context, playwrights may use stereotypes as shorthand to create characters and situations, and this is not to pass judgment on the qualities of particular plays, rather that stereotypes offer playwrights inevitable shorthand for secondary characters or locations. The nosy, next-door neighbor, the doting grandma, the rambunctious little brother—they may not necessarily become "stereotypes" but they are "types" that writers rely upon so that excess exposition and extraneous dialogue

can be avoided. Such memory banks can also assist audiences to make connections between characters and even between actors' performances.[3]

The next line of questioning concerns how these initial types are implanted, or "deposited" in the memory bank. Is it possible that there is a time before? A "tabula rasa" moment when stereotypes did not exist? Possibly. But once used (and only once) and once subjected to (and only once) the stereotype is selectively sealed within the bank vault. Rosello argues that "stereotypes are impossible to eradicate. Stereotypes evolve but never disappear, and when we think we have identified them, they are already at work in our own innermost thoughts and narratives of ourselves and of others" (128). I would like to highlight (as Rosello implies), the act of stereotyping is not only directed at others; our memory banks are also highly aware of stereotypes of ourselves. In a way, the stereotypes placed upon our *own* identities are the ones we may know about the most, the qualities through which our various selves have been judged. In fact, just *understanding* the stereotype implicates us in its continued usage, regardless of whether we chose to employ it or not, for "knowing about the role is enough to appreciate the virulence of the image and for our own memory to become a host to systems of stereotypical inclusion and exclusion" (Rosello 15). Thus, the innate ability for us to understand most intrinsically stereotypes that are used to identify our own selves—and why we continue to employ them—is why I am most interested in the visual art and the plays analyzed here. As explained briefly in my introduction, the fact these African American artists use stereotypes identified with

[3] Joseph Roach's *Cites of the Dead* and Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage* explore this topic in great detail.

African Americans seems counter-intuitive in many ways. The continued questioning returns: Why dredge up the past? Why reinforce harmful images? Why use them at all? But I would argue that to understand the depth of the repeated use of stereotypes in today's society, on a generalized and individual level, we must directly engage *with* stereotypes, and access our memory banks. Only then can we begin to understand the rate of exchange, the ease in which stereotypes are traded, and the frequency of deposits and withdrawals.

"I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies": a brief history of African American stereotypes

While the focus of this dissertation is racial stereotypes, stereotypes do not always have to relate to race or reflect a white versus non-white debate. However, I would argue the most charged stereotypes in our society intensify as racial stereotypes because they attack what is most unchangeable about the self—physical attributes and skin color. While some can rely on aesthetic surgery to change body shape and size, eradicating the "Jewish hooked" or "Irish pug" nose, at the heart of such matters is the fact that stereotypes about those specific body parts created the market for such changes.[4] Racial stereotypes (re)write corporeally, continually enacting a "violent dismemberment that focuses attention on particular body parts and features … by highlighting or visually severing them from the rest of the body" (Lee 89). Entire bodies turn into one or two parts, disjointed and disjunctured from the whole.

[4] See Sander Gilman's 1999 book *Making the Body Beautiful* where he details connections between race and plastic surgery and nineteenth century ideas on physiology and race.

Perpetuated most efficiently by late nineteenth and early twentieth century advertising, typical African-American stereotypes focused on the face: bright-eyed faces sport wide-mouthed grins with shiny white teeth contrasted against abnormally dark skin and oversized red lips. Some images so grossly deformed the face that two large, white eye orbs were all that could be determined in the inky blackness of the printed page or in the shiny, ceramic patina on a figurine. These specific incarnations even had their own name: "golliwog."[5] Wide-eyed and wide-grinning parts assumed the entirety of the body, thus portraying African Americans as happy with their subservient position in society (see that broad smile?) and clueless to any possible alternative (look into those clueless, big eyes!). Thus, because stereotypes morphed into tangible objects (such as an Aunt Jemima cookie jar) or widely distributed advertisements, the images suddenly became commonplace and accepted. In a "chicken versus egg" debate, it could be argued that the materiality of the stereotype caused the negative widespread treatment of blacks or, on the other side, the negative widespread treatment of blacks encouraged the successful distribution of the stereotypical images. As Saidiya Hartman notes, empowered plantation masters forced their slaves to dance and sing in front of others, perpetuating the stereotype for all to see. These "innocent amusements" were products of slaveholders' fancies, designed as marketing tools, if you will, for whites, encouraging the creation of the "happy slave" stereotype. If slaves appeared to be happy, there was no reason for them to be anything

[5] Golliwogs have their own cultural history in Europe, and in England particularly, where they were mostly propagated in the form of dolls, as characters in children's books, and even more recently, chocolate candy in Spain. Poised between an "idle" children's toy and a racist slur, the Golliwog's controversial nature in early twentieth century England mirrors that of the rise and fall of the character of Sambo here in America.

else but slaves. While considered "innocent" by whites, these painful and forced performances solidified the power of the image through white control. Out of these manifestations of power, blackface minstrelsy took hold.

During minstrelsy's heyday, blackface stereotypes narrowed down to a few roles, including the shuffling and lazy fool (the coon), the plantation "yes massa" uncle tom and mammy, and the overly pompous, but completely ignorant dandy. Although it is clear that initial blackface characters were simply "false," the popularity of minstrelsy and its simplistic stereotypes overrode alternative narratives, providing the increasingly jittery low-class white population with justification for superiority. But over the course of America's sordid history, these supposed notions of blackness have become normative. Eric Lott (*Love and Theft* 1993) and W.T. Lhamon (*Raising Cain* 1998) explicate the nuances of minstrelsy's conflicted terrain, arguing that minstrelsy cannot be viewed as just simple performances of racial hatred and oppression, but rather as complex configurations of class struggle and the confusions over the structure of the rising capitalist market. Lott believes minstrel performers desired the ability to put on blackface, escape the everyday, and "become" black, if only through the mode of performance. As Lhamon contends:

> The blackface mask allowed young white callows to see themselves in the hounded image of the free/escaped black continually on the lam. The blackface performer enacted an identification of whites with blacks. But the performance also allowed working youths, using that same metaphor, simultaneously to engage and to understand the belittling of blacks. Performers could represent, and publics understand, blacks as childlike or stupid. And they might construct their own whiteness as the polar opposite of what they were rehearsing as blackness. Thus, while the minstrel mask encouraged identification, it also encouraged racialist differentiation. While both could go on

> simultaneously, they might also go on separately, as in these instances when publics saw only one of the mask's aspects. (*Raising Cain* 139)

Regardless of whether the white performers internalized desire for blackness or were intent on black oppression, minstrelsy's widespread popularity and enduring performative power was vital in creating stereotypes of African American subjecthood that carry on in various, multiplied forms today.

Since the plays I explore contain (for the most part) contemporary black stereotypes, an outline of a few of the various historical types is necessary to consider how and if they morphed into the various permutations at work today. After the Civil War, blackface minstrelsy narratives continued to redefine the larger American culture, and out of minstrelsy, such stereotypes were developed and refined in different media forms, from photographs and printed advertising to the advent of film and radio shows. The trope of blackness and its ensuing stereotypes expanded in various ways: D.W. Griffth's infamous 1915 *Birth of a Nation* solidified the black as savage and lusting after white women; postcards from the South featured "smiling darkies" encouraging visitors to join in frivolous laughter and eat watermelons; and on the other end of the spectrum, the haunting photographs of lynchings circulated as prized possessions, squirreled away by some as treasured souvenirs. The most successful distribution of African American stereotypes was in the late 1800s and early 1900s in advertising, where the key stereotypes were bought and sold to the American public. Later, as the Civil Rights struggle forged ahead, new stereotypes were created out of the ever-present urban ghettoes and the advent of welfare.

In his book, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films,* Donald Bogle succinctly defines five of the major historical African American stereotypes, and while his project focuses on their potency through the cinematic, his clarifications on the specific stereotypes provides a useful starting place. Bogle classifies the stereotypes as the tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy (and her tom derivative, Aunt Jemima), and the brutal, black buck. The tom derives from the many incarnations of Stowe's original in her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the qualities morphing and changing throughout the years as various toms appeared in stage versions of the novel, songs, and advertisements. Toms are characterized by their loyalty to the ol' massa and racist white regime, in whatever form that hierarchy might take—be it slave on a plantation, servant in a household, or worker in corporate America. Even in the face of beatings, coercions, and insults, toms "remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind" (4).

The coon typifies the most derogatory of the minstrel stereotypes contining long past minstrelsy's end. The coon "emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language" (8). Another character connected with the coon is "Sambo." Joseph Boskin defines Sambo as a vehicle for humor and jest, a cheerful entertainer, always ready to be a laugh for the whites. Sambo was "funny" because he never completely understood white culture, and his inadequacies were ripe for ridicule. Sambo graced the covers of

children's books[6], sheet music, and popular advertisements (including a chain of restaurants shockingly titled "The Coon Chicken Inn"), and then moved from static print images to radio in the form of the cab drivers in the popular radio show *Amos 'n' Andy*. Like the coon and his cousin, Sambo, the last historical male stereotype also divides into two: from the brutal black buck is found the black brute and the black buck. The brute is the typical savage, grossly misinterpreted from colonized Africans, primitive and scary, an overall terrorizing male figure, while "black bucks are always big, baadddd [sic] niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh" (13). These two stereotypes reached their heyday in the blaxploitation movies of the 1970s and lay the foundation for a variety of new stereotypes in the present day.

Basic, historical, female stereotypes consist of the tragic mulatto and the mammy. The tragic mulatto finds its way from minstrelsy's drag character of the "Yellow Gal" into many diverse literary incarnations—from Dion Boucicault's title character in his turn-of-the-century melodrama *The Octoroon* to Zora Neale Hurston's Harlem Renaissance play *Colorstruck*. For the most part, the mulatto lives up to her type as "tragic," for white audiences looked upon the light-skinned woman as likeable enough, but tragically flawed due to that "one drop" of black blood. The mammy, on the other hand, is the tom's other half—servant to the white masters, but with a bit more attitude. Hattie McDaniel's performance in the 1941 *Gone with the Wind* typifies

[6] Another possible stereotype of the "Sambo" comes from the 1899 children's book *Little Black Sambo* published in England by Scottish author Helen Bannerman, which tells the story of an Indian boy who fights tigers. However, the illustrations in the book make Sambo look like a golliwog (see note 5 above) and the confusion lies between reading Sambo as an Indian boy and Sambo as a slave stereotype. (Certainly, this does not even take into account the colonizing rhetoric in which the story of a "little savage Indian boy fighting tigers" was written.)

the mammy stereotype propagated by American popular culture; however I would argue that a mammy deriviative, Aunt Jemima, has had more staying power commercially, along with her tom sidekicks, Uncle Ben and Rastus (the Cream of Wheat chef).

Contemporary stereotypes have modernized the mammy and coon, creating new narratives and lineages that mark and generalize African Americans. While Boskin believes that Sambo is now "dead" because of the Civil Rights movement and Black Power struggles of the 1960s and '70s, I would argue these qualities continue on in black urban stereotypes today.[7] Many of these stereotypes focus around black women. As Hortense Spillers succinctly puts it:

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium:" I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. (203)

Referencing many of the colloquial names of current stereotypes (and even with sly irony inserting herself as "Black Woman at the Podium," as if that too is an oxymoron, Spillers calls attention to the naming bestowed upon black women due to the circulation of such types. Her rhetorical turn with "My country needs me" bluntly references the relations of ambivalence prevalent in the creation and use of these stereotypes, as well as the nod to the obvious inventiveness of their qualities depending on necessity.

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[7] See Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: the Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (1986).

Patricia Hill Collins defines in depth many of the stereotypes Spillers calls by name in *Black Feminist Thought*, arguing that these "controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" (68). Collins defines four controlling images, starting with the mammy as the dutiful, domestic servant of the 1950s, caring for her white family as if were her own. Typically rotund, jovial, and asexual, the mammy at once exudes motherhood, but also denies motherhood in that she is a surrogate "mother" to her employer's children, but not allowed the time nor the resources to be a mother to her own. Rather black motherhood pushes to the extreme in the form of another stereotype, the black matriarch. The matriarch represents the "failed mammy" (Collins 74) for she tends to her own brood instead of playing the compliant servant to others. Solidified in the years after Senator Daniel Moynihan's infamous 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, the creation of the matriarch stereotype ended up opening up an outlet to blame black women for the emasculation of young black men and eventually, the impossibility of a two-parent household (for obviously after being emasculated, black men became dead-beat dads and left) Between these two stereotypes, black mothers have no reprieve: either accommodate the whites as a domestic worker and sacrifice the family, or control the family and forfeit the positive image. African American writers have promoted this image as well: Mama Lena Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* may be the most well-known representation in dramatic literature. Reifying a stereotype was probably the farthest

thing from Hansberry's intent, but the character *does* typify the overbearing black mother who strips away black masculinity.[8]

However, what evolves from the earlier half of the twentieth century and the strong mother figure is another stereotype all together: the dependent welfare queen. As further detailed in Chapter Three, the welfare queen "is the agent of destruction, the creator of the pathological, black, urban, poor family from which all ills flow; a monster creating crack dealers, addicts, muggers and rapists—men who become those things because of being immersed in *her* culture of poverty" (Lubiano 339). Labeled a bad mother, this stereotype infers not necessarily the over-sexed nature of the black female (which is another stereotype in itself) but rather the overly fertile black woman, having more children than she can take care of (or afford), usually with multiple deadbeat fathers that rarely stay to raise the children. A modern day female version of the lazy coon, the welfare queen is "content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work, and passing her bad values to her offspring" (Collins 77). Trapped in the urban ghetto, the welfare queen has little hope of changing her status and moving out of her position. This stereotype also engenders many other contemporary urban stereotypes as Lubiano references, many derived from the black brute/buck lineage where black men are compulsive drug addicts and/or dealers, abusive black boyfriends, gangbangers, and ultimately black criminals.

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[8] Trudier Harris's intriguing study of this stereotypical turn in African American literature, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, argues that "the cultural immunity granted to the traditional strong black woman has at its core an ingrained appreciation and respect for the motives of these women, the results they are able to achieve, and the actions they inspire. I recognize that immunity. I argue, however, that there is a *problematic continuum* between intent and outcome, that the ends cannot always justify the means" (18).

The last female stereotype Collins outlines is the jezebel, the black buck's companion. Oversexed and underclothed, Jezebel seduces white men away from their loving families or streetwalks for cash, flaunting her sexuality. She is not the tragic mulatto that whites pity, but rather the woman white men fantasize about, harkening back images of plantation rapes and abuse, the exoticized Other waiting to be taken. In numerous blaxploitation films of the 1970s, Pam Grier typifies this Jezebel, with just a touch of the tragic mulatto to make her likable for wider audiences (see *Coffy* 1973). While there are not yet ceramic figurines of these present-day manifestations of African American stereotypes, they exist and circulate in the powerful visual machines of television, film, music videos, and celebrity performances. While the mammy and Uncle Tom may have been reinvented, their heirs to the throne soldier forth.

W.T. Lhamon sees this constant recycling of images as a "lore cycle." He defines lore as composed of "the basic gesture of all expressive behavior, from moans to narratives, signs to paintings, steps to dances" (*Raising Cain* 69). When these specific gestures separate and become new narratives, the cycle begins anew and refashions, just as the black buck can turn into Jezebel, the mammy into the welfare queen. "When lore has wider meaning, appealing beyond the initiating group and the condition it has registered, lore also circulates. It becomes available to others" (69). Lhamon's "lore cycle" begins with an identity group, the group conceiving of the particular gesture, not having one imposed upon them. Thus Lhamon argues that white performers in blackface minstrelsy were not just imagining blackness, but rather basing their performances off of other groups' lore cycles. However, I am uncomfortable with the argument that stereotypes or stereotypical gestures (and by

extension, stereotypical characters or performances) are just adapted lore as that admits the possibility of tacit acceptance of stereotypes. In this slippery performative when lore is adapted, when the lore cycle changes and warps to others needs, stereotypes gain currency and historical power.

Representing blackness

Stereotypes work so effectively as an inherent undergirding of social interaction because they offer the ability to define oneself through the power of the "not." This is not to say that our society feeds off of the negative, but identity always seems to be easy to define by process of elimination rather than affirmation. As this dissertation questions the usage of African American stereotypes, it must also take into account the larger contestations of the representation of blackness itself. Blackness and the power of the "not" have always had a strange symbiosis.[9] Blackness finds its locus on the body, as blackness and race are indelibly connected through the visual. Sharon Holland devotes much of her book *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* to the definitions of blackness, writing "blackness is the yardstick by which most people in this nation measure their worth—by something they are not" (16). This statement addresses the conceptions of many African American stereotypes—created by whites as a contrast to themselves for the purpose of separating out white from non-white by more than just the color of skin. Holland's declaration also echoes the same lines of thinking from the theorists outlined below.

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[9] As George Wolfe writes through a character in *The Colored Museum:* "Being black is too emotionally taxing. Therefore, I will only be black on weekends and holidays."

Various theorists' claims about the nature of blackness and how it is represented need to be explicated because stereotypes are examples of representations of blackness and the artists in this dissertation complicate the ways in which audiences read certain representations of blackness. However I will alert the reader that there are diverging lines of thought in the following theories regarding notions of blackness, and the polarity between some of the theories is irreconcilable. This is purposeful as the various works of art require different modes of thinking. I will also attend to my own theories of blackness and its signification in contemporary representation within the following chapters on the specific plays and artwork. For the purposes of this dissertation and in an effort to narrow the field, I concern myself with contemporary theories of blackness, how it is read on performing bodies, and how blackness links with performances of race, class and identity.

Historically, W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon both wrote on the reception of blackness, and many of the theorists I work with reference their influence on the study of blackness. DuBois speaks of the "double consciousness" of blackness and the veil that African Americans must look through, seeing themselves "through the eyes of others" (7). This "second sight" of which DuBois writes is a double-edged sword, at once a gift in duality, but also a severe hindrance towards the making of the self, and DuBois's pronouncement of the marking of the twentieth century by the "color line" still defines race relations in America. Like DuBois, Frantz Fanon recognized the location of blackness as a referent to others and worked through the concept of double consciousness, so much so that blackness is subsumed by the conditions of whiteness. His oft-quoted "Look, a Negro" from *Black Skins, White Masks*, typifies such

cognizance in one concise statement. “I found I was an object in the midst of other objects” he writes (109). It was in this objecthood that Fanon “discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetchims, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all: ‘Sho’good eatin’” (112). It is interesting to note that Fanon wrote of black stereotypes in his litany of the objectifying claims of blackness and through this, Fanon moves from a sense of DuBoisian double consciousness to defining self *through* the lens of whiteness, not blackness, for “consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity” (110). Because whites have begun objectification, the black, in turn, must question his own blackness and begins to objectify himself. Fanon writes, “A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a *black* man” (114). Fanon defined blackness and its relation to the individual, specifically in a psychoanalytical construct; however today scholars locate blackness after the era of post-structuralism, finding blackness not *on* a body but rather constructed *towards* the corporeal, blackness as *signifying* rather than physiologically marking the raced body. This consideration of blackness allies most with my interpretation of blackness and its connection to stereotype, as typified by the following scholars’ interventions.

E. Patrick Johnson’s argument in *Appropriating Blackness* relies on the notion that blackness and performance inexorably relate, suggesting that “‘blackness’ does not belong to any one individual or group. Rather, individuals or groups *appropriate* this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups” (3, emphasis in original). While blackness provides signification, it is only within specific performances that blackness is

referenced and read, and then individuals and communities re-envision performances of blackness depending on the situation, location, and audience. If, as Johnson believes, blackness is appropriated for use in a variety of situations, by a variety of peoples, then there can be no essential blackness, no authenticity to validate. Johnson questions rather how performance can "reproduce, enable, sustain, challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology" (161). Johnson clarifies his terms in his statement in *Theatre Journal*'s 2007 special issue on black performance when he writes: "'blackness' and 'performance' complement one another in a dialectic that becomes an ontology of racialized cultural production. 'Blackness' is a simulacrum until it is practiced or performed. The epistemological moment of race manifests itself in and through performance in that performance facilitates self and cultural reflexivity" (606). Johnson indelibly links the production of blackness with performance, in that blackness is only an image until it gains performative strength through being on the body. Otherwise, blackness becomes just a signifier without signification. The act of performance creates such significance through an interdependent loop, each practice informing the next performative moment.

W.T. Lhamon uses the term "optic blackness" in his contribution to the recent anthology *Black Cultural Traffic,* harkening Ralph Ellison's "optic white" from *Invisible Man,* in that there is a bit of black in the "right white." Conversely, optic blackness "is a contrapuntal cultural style that opposes whiteness, is available to participants who include, but certainly not limited to, blacks, and embodies a persistent countermemory of historical oppression" (111). Anyone can participate in the construction of optic blackness to continually "redefine what blackness is: every

contending group claims always to know the truth; every group leaves its thumbprints on the construct" (133). Thus, Lhamon's post-structuralist critique of the concept of blackness is non-racially delimited. In a way, Lhamon's "optic blackness" provides for the recognition of whiteness as a construction as well, and that the two twist together like the stripes on a zebra: we cannot tell whether it is a black animal with white stripes or a white animal with black stripes. Lhamon defines blackness in this article, as well in his full length book *Raising Cain* (which I address later), through the lens of performance, particularly rooted in the vernacular, in the everyday, and specifically in gesture. Although many "studies in cultural motion privilege texts… they ignore vernacular gesturation—the phrasings, melodies, and motions that precede" he writes (127). While I admire Lhamon's ability to track such gestural modes (which, limited to the archive of mostly textual research, seems problematic), I would argue that "gesture" can expand to include traditional theatrical performance as well; not only can we look towards playwrights' written words, but also in the exchange of many different "texts" between actor and spectator—dialogue, movement, and physical bodies. Visually and optically, audiences filter performances of blackness, and in their own subsequent performances, they add to the growing social narrative that "proves the white right wrong" (111). If blackness is inherently performative, then theater provides a useful medium in which to negotiate stereotype, blackness, and the bodies upon which it is enacted. What is unique to blackness *and* to stereotype is that America's involvement in theatrical endeavors created many of the African American stereotypes that continue to surface in our culture, within art, and on the stage.

While Johnson and Lhamon regard blackness as signifiers that anyone can represent or perform, Saidiya Hartman (and by default, Hortense Spillers and Frank Wilderson) project a theory of blackness that is specifically writ on black bodies. For them, blackness is not mere signification and the interchangeablilty that marks Johnson's argument only refers to the fungibilty of blacks as objects, not as signifiers with subjecthood. These theoretical arguments on the nature of blackness and its formations help elucidate the politics at work in Kia Corthron's play *Cage Rhythm*. For Hartman, blackness is a construction of oppositions, born of the Middle Passage and slavery's horrors, as "the value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves" (*Scenes of Subjection* 7). Blackness is predicated on more than just the Master/Slave dialectic: blackness is necessary for those who are non-black to be seen as human, for as Fanon writes, "when one has taken it into one's head to try to express existence, one runs the risk of finding only the nonexistent" (137) or, as I prefaced this section, Holland's definition of black as a consideration that everyone else believes they are not. Humanity is something for humans, sentient objecthood is something for blacks. As Wilderson succinctly explains, "*Blackness* refers to an individual who is by definition always already void of relationality. Thus modernity marks the emergence of a new ontology because it is an era in which an entire race appears, people who… stand socially dead in relation to the rest of the world" (18). The marking of blackness cannot be reversed, unless of course the enslavement of black bodies could be erased,

which is, of course, inconceivable for "there is no narrative moment [for blackness] prior to slavery" (Wilderson 27).

Formations of blackness are also deeply connected to performance for Hartman. One of her arguments in *Scenes of Subjection* details how the "innocent amusements" of not only performances on the minstrel stage, but singing at the auction block and dancing at parties organized by the white plantation master created forms of "symbolic violence" against the black (42). Thus the "constitution of blackness as abject and degraded condition and the fascination with the other's enjoyment went hand in hand" (22). For me, this recognition of blackness inexorably ties itself to theatrics, for in a way, these very public performances reinforce and solidify blackness as linked to the corporeal and performative.

Paul Gilroy's highly influential writing on race and blackness echoes in my work as well and, in small ways, I find parallels in Gilroy's arguments to Hartman. For Gilroy, blackness has also been constructed specifically through the leap into modernity, created by the Middle Passage, as detailed in his 1993 book *The Black Atlantic*. By tracking various examples of the permutations of double consciousness as "a definitive characteristic of the intellectual history of the black Atlantic," Gilroy finds a "historical relationship in which dependency and antagonism are intimately associated" which is the relationship between slavery and modernity (58). He is not necessarily offering a solution to the horrors of the Middle Passage, but rather explicating the importance of looking into and through its consequences in the creation of modern consciousness. Like Hartman, Gilroy cannot conceive of a time before the Middle Passage to which we can return. However, for Gilroy, inroads into

how blackness is constructed is dependent on what he defines as “black expressive cultures” or the cultural products of African Americans in the areas of literature, art, and music. Gilroy draws “attention to the vital work of enquiring into the terrors that exhaust the resources of language amidst the debris of a catastrophe which prohibits the existence of their art at the same time as demanding its continuance” (218). This is a paradox of which Kara Walker and Suzan-Lori Parks attend to in their artistic creations: the inexplicable terror of slavery and its aftermath and the impossibility of trying to comprehend its effects—and yet at the same time, the need and desire to communicate such terror through art. Artistic creation and blackness indelibly connect for Gilroy, but instead of charting its insidiousness as Hartman’s project does, Gilroy finds the place where the melding of the two erupt in the double consciousness of the black Diaspora, and the project towards simple freedom can begin.

Comparatively, Gilroy’s newer book *Against Race* interrogates the potency of visual propaganda, typified in use by the Nazi regime, in its present day incarnations in “stylistic” and visual culture (150). Particularly related to stereotype and notions of blackness, he explores the power of a wordless image, delivering “spectators immediately to a special place beyond the duplicity of words where fundamental historical and racial divisions could be immediately perceived” (164). While his example is the Nazi swastika, I would argue that the broad-smiling, red lipped “darkie” does the same thing, blackness and its constructions imbedded within multiple connotations of the image. Gilroy’s ultimate goal in this book offers possibilities for how thinking about blackness and race can be readjusted. He asks not to look for the “origin” of jazz or the ethnic “purity” in the black Diaspora because it

does not “help to place them or to assess their contemporary consequences” (251), arguing against essentialism and authenticity. Rather, he considers identity as a “noun of process,” in no way fixed or absolute.

Gilroy, Lhamon, and Johnson argue that contemporary representations of blackness are based on the instability of social groups and that although tied directly to the suffering faced by African Americans during and after the Middle Passage and chattel slavery, trying to define what “blackness” is may become a paradoxical endeavor. The Afro-pessimists (Hartman, Wilderson, Spillers), however, argue that delineations of race have nothing to do with these preconscious interests, but rather the racial divide rests upon the entire structure that has been built around the positions of whites who register as human, and Blacks who register as object, as slave. The assumptive logics of these two passages of thought differ at their very core, although outwardly they may seem to share similar traits, such as the inability to return to a world before the Middle Passage as we are forever changed by the first fateful sea crossing.

Yet in clarification of my own argument, I utilize both of these lines of thought to explicate the various strategies of use by the artists surveyed in this dissertation. Is this possible? Quite simply, my own connection to the material is cleaved in two. At its core, I see the argument made by the Afro-pessimists in having great validity on a structural level. The ways in which Hartman argues for the inability of the slave (and by extension, for Wilderson, the Black) to move through objecthood towards a possibly subjecthood correlates to what Parks and Corthron gesture toward in their work. Parks’s *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Entire World* and Corthron’s

Cage Rhythm and *Breath, Boom* explore the impossibility of black life.[10] For Parks, the Black Man is perpetually dead, either from violent episodes, such as lynching and electrocution, or socially dead, for he cannot connect to any kin or ancestors. In Corthron's mediations on contemporary black life, her main characters fall in and out of the prison system, and as Loïc Wacquant argues, prison is a mere extension of the bondage of slavery, creating the same system of social death. Thus, these three plays, as read through the lens of Hartman, Spillers, et al, make very convincing examples of artistic creation that subscribes to the same world view as the Afro-pessimists.

However, I cannot reconcile with my own politics in viewing the Black as socially dead in a *contemporary framework*. I understand that this theory operates at the level of ontological status and not the assumptive logic in which Gilroy (and others like him) operate, and yet, I fear my own positionality, that of a white female, cannot fully argue for the continuing death of the Black or "Black" as synonymous with "Slave." There is great anxiety in arguing for the continued interment of Black as object since I obviously hold the position of the white subject. Afro-pessimism's theoretical interest lies at the level of structure, and without severe structural change (i.e. a world revolution), the Black cannot return to what came before the Middle Passage. Thus, Black/Slave forever will be categorized as object, in relation to Human (white) which has subjectivity.

I concede that much of my own argument lies at the level of prescription and emotion, in that for many of the theorists I interact with, one's thoughts and feelings can be altered with radical re-thinking, with social upheaval, and in my estimation,

[10] Expansion of these arguments occurs in Chapter Two and Chapter Four, respectively.

with artistic responses such as these interrogated here. It is not that Gilroy or Johnson offer a successful suggestion for circumventing the power struggle between African Americans and other racial and cultural groups, but they do argue for the *possibility* of navigating such oppression. For example in *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy recognizes the loss and inexplicable suffering caused by the Middle Passage. While he is not necessarily offering a solution to the horror, he does explicate the importance of looking into and through its consequences on the creation of modern consciousness. In *Against Race*, he takes his argument a step further, working towards solutions to understand the grammar of suffering located in the literary narratives mentioned in *The Black Atlantic* (such as novels by Toni Morrison or historical accounts by Martin Delaney). Gilroy's "prescription" regarding the representation of blackness consists of desiring African Americans the "right to be future-oriented" (337). Redefining blackness must become the goal for post-modernity to transcend oppression, so that we may "hunger for a world that is undivided by the petty differences we retain and inflate by calling them racial" (356). In my own estimation, this prescription is not without its flaws; however, the essential optimistic nature of its end result motivates this dissertation. Through the four artists I consider, I argue that their work asks of audiences to re-envision an alternative future—a future that rejects stereotypical portrayals of African Americans.

So as it is possible to argue that Parks's Black Man is always already dead, I contend in Chapter Three that the Black Man continues to be reborn, defying each death and coming back to life. By utilizing a literary device Parks defines as "rep and rev," Black Man may die in repeated ways, but each time he is resurrected, his future

alters. Even though his wife, Black Woman, may try to give him a proper burial at the end of the play, the text alludes to the notion that Black Man will conquer his interment and return to life in another time, continuing to elude the finality of death. So here, rep and rev is Parks's particular *strategy* in meditating on black suffering and the possibilities of representing blackness in ways other than a one-dimensional stereotype.

Last year *The New York Times* ran an article on how a marketing company "updated" the look of Uncle Ben's rice. Just as Aunt Jemima recently received a new hairdo and a shiny string of pearls, Uncle Ben is no longer a servile, aging, "yes massa" African American but the "Chairman of the Board" of the Uncle Ben's company. Interested parties can visit the Uncle Ben's website, "walk" into his office, "read" his day planner, and check out his cookbooks. The advertisement campaign in print uses slogans like "Ben knows…" (as if all of a sudden, Uncle Ben has been allowed to have an all-knowing sensibility about rice?) But this begs the question: Would anyone really call a chairman "Uncle" Ben? Does his knowing smile and jaunty bowtie hide the fact that he was created as a derogatory stereotype, intended to keep African Americans servile to the white man? Does this "updating" really make in the initial stereotypical qualities go away? Hardly. Then again, titling one of her characters "Black Man with Watermelon," Parks also does not eradicate the stereotype. As I have argued above, eradicating the stereotype is not possible, and therefore the artists in the dissertation do not have an agenda, per say, to eradicate stereotypes. Rather, by tapping into the power that such stereotypes hold, by utilizing the short-cuts that stereotypes offer, these artists directly play with, mangle, reclaim,

appropriate, and at times, attack the stereotype itself. Rather by being *hyper*aware of their permutations, we can more deftly choose or not choose to employ them.

Let me be clear: I am not interested in debating whether stereotypes are good or bad, for as Rosello notes, 'there is a stereotype of the stereotype: the stereotype is always bad, simplistic, idiotic" (32). Certainly, African American stereotypes (and therefore *all* racial and ethnic stereotypical practices) are indeed *negative* and negating their existence for this would be a futile project. However, my thinking does account for the ways in which artists make use of such stereotypes, how they engage in current debates regarding racial representation, and what such engagement may body forth.

Chapter Two:

"Missus K.E.B. Walker" and "Black Man with Watermelon"

(Im)Politely Request Your Attendance

bell hooks contends, "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity is created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (qtd. in Collins 69). The process of objectification turns individuals into one-dimensional beings, flat cut-outs bereft of agency and intention. Visual artist Kara Walker's work initially could be viewed as one-dimensional: they are silhouettes, black cut-outs contrasted against a white wall, plastered in a gallery without linear depth or structure. These silhouettes of mostly people have been objectified in hooks' terms as their reality is defined by the viewer. Suzan-Lori Parks's plays also build upon the black subject as object—from the lurid gazes upon the posterior of the Venus Hottentot in *Venus* to the spectacle of repeated shootings of the Foundling Father, an Abraham Lincoln lookalike, in *The America Play*. Plastered upon the stage much in the way Walker's artwork is glued to the gallery wall, Parks's "figures" or characters inhabit equally fantastical worlds, defying logical character development and side-stepping linear narrative.

Their artistic output causes a stir each time it is produced, creating tensions in the artistic and African American communities at large. Both have been chastised by prominent scholars and artists in their fields for communing with, commenting on, and continuing to utilize stereotypical images. Criticizing the overt usage of oppressive

stereotypes does not make the initial stereotypes go away; in fact, as Carpio suggests, "the political correctness underwriting some of that protest ultimately prove too restrictive…. the idea of forever cleansing the American psyche of its racial fetishes may be not only a futile project but one that might fuel the power of the fetish all the more by making it taboo and therefore seductive" (22). Instead of likening their projects to "airing dirty laundry," Walker's and Parks's artistic endeavors challenge and interrogate the horrors of the Middle Passage, slavery, lynching, and other atrocities to which African Americans were subjected. By tactically manipulating overt stereotypical images through radically manipulated language and structural revisions (Parks) and distorted visual images (Walker), the two artists affectively and effectively offer inverted and deeply nuanced readings of American history. I argue that the inherent strategy in using stereotypical images in both of these works does more than just demonstrate the sustainability of African American stereotypes; rather, the work locates and exposes the flimsy foundation on which these stereotypes are formed. As I have argued earlier, it is not that this work suggests that stereotypes can magically disappear, but rather by forcing stock stereotypes into the realm of the ridiculous and grotesque, Parks and Walker reveal the absurdity of the stereotype and the pointless reliance on them in everyday social and cultural use.

Missus Interlocutor: Visual Art as Performance in the Work of Kara Walker

Kara Walker created a firestorm in the art world beginning in the late 1990s for her use of "racist" African American images in her work. She has been cited for re-inscribing minstrel stereotypes in her life-size black and white silhouettes of plantation

imagery in fantastical situations. However, Walker defends her work, citing that the use of such stereotypical images creates dialogue, fostering the inevitable discussion of re-inscription of racist ideology versus indictment of contemporary cultural politics. These "unhealed wounds of the present" (Cullum 18) fester at the forefront of her work, consuming other aesthetic considerations, and instead of considering her work as an interrogation of America's racially divided historical past, critics concentrate on the shock value of Walker's installations full of plantation mayhem.

It is primarily in Walker's powerful black and white installations and the controversy surrounding her artistic license as an African American artist that I am interested in connecting to the larger discussion of stereotypes in performance and the performance of blackness. Visual art introduces theater in a variety of ways: two dimensional art does not talk, move, or influence the viewer the way a body onstage can. From this perspective, the "dialogue" between the audience and the art object is typically personal, individualized, and one-sided. While an artist may have intended a certain statement with her work, the ultimate responsibility for meaning lies in its reception by the viewer. Certainly, this experience is much like theater: while the playwright has a choice in shaping the play, and the directors and actors then layer their own interpretation upon it, ultimately final reception and comprehension is in the hands of the audience. Kara Walker's silhouette work specifically challenges the viewer to look deep into the blackness for answers which may not always appear. Walker believes "the silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that's also what the stereotype does," (qtd. in Parks 123). While Walker's cutouts are more than

just evocations of stereotype, they do provide a focus for discussion on the power of stereotype and its enduring legacy in contemporary representation.

Walker's work moves beyond flat one-dimensionality and in its viewing, I argue that Walker's visual art performs theatrically on three different levels, and by utilizing elements from traditional theater, the work strategically skewers minstrel stereotypes and other harmful visual representations of African Americans. By looking at the work through the lens of theater, the power of stereotypes can be understood. Initially, the silhouettes demand the viewer to create a narrative from their placement on the gallery walls as audiences have to search into the black outline for meaning. This narrative literally enacts a "performance:" the silhouettes inhabits a storyline that requires the viewer to understand and interpret the plot. In essence, Walker's work forms theatricalized tableaux around the gallery walls, especially the work shown in galleries that mimic a cyclorama. It is as if viewers are staring at a dumb show or vaudevillian curtain raiser, waiting for the characters to jump out and begin a dialogue with each other. "If the tableaux make anything clear, it is that histories are also scripts, but fragmented ones whose breakage is reenacted in each instance of their performance. In order for them to persist unchanged, it's we actors who need to remain the same" writes Darby English (86). What English calls to attention, in his possibly unintentional choice of the word "script," provides yet another example of what is at the heart of Walker's work: the theatrical modality that operates within and through the silhouettes. Not only do they enact a script that can be read through their circular farces, but also manipulate the scripted history represented. However, "we

actors" do *not* remain the same, and the script changes with each viewing, with each viewer. The viewers write the script and in doing so, (re)write the histories.

Walker also chooses to play a role, an interlocutor of sorts, imbedding a "character" within the titles and text throughout the installations. She is not a mere name plate on the wall: Walker's presence is deeply felt when her work is viewed. She inserts herself into titles, as in the appendage of the title of the work *Slavery! Slavery!* which ends with "All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause."[11] Walker, a Negress? Is she possibly the same "negress" that appears in many of the silhouettes in varied forms? This characterization continually questions the audience. Gallery audiences also must consider the pages of her art "diary" in the piece, *Do You Like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* and wonder whether her somewhat inflammatory statements were actually her thoughts on that day of personal journaling or specific phrases purposefully written to provoke response, knowing they would be displayed in a gallery setting. Enough is also known about Walker at this point that she is never far away from the work.

The most important aspect of this artistic exchange is the viewer who creates the ultimate performance in acknowledging America's racist ideology in the developing narrative with the two-dimensional cutouts. I argue that Walker strategically uses the stark images to induce emotions through the audience's

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[11] The complete title of this work is *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol' Virginny's Hole' (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Instituion as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause.* (All formatting from original title). Obviously, Walker is not-so-subtly signifying on slave auction notices, nineteenth century handbills, and advertisements of the time.

confrontation of them. This move forces audiences to consider the insipid work of lingering stereotypes and America's reluctance to truly expose the shadows lingering in our proverbial closet. In the shadowed nuances of her silhouettes, within the blackness of these highly-charged figures, the anxiety around the living legacy of minstrelsy constantly re-performs.

"Funny how we pick & choose what can and can't be said, which stereotypes to be applied, which ones are 'IN' or out"[12]

Kara Walker burst onto the national art scene like a cannon shot, her installations immediately causing journalists and critics alike to question what she was doing, why she was doing it, and for whom was she doing it. Such fervor culminated in 1997 when she became the youngest recipient of the MacArthur "Genius" fellowship. Fourteen years since her first piece and three exhibition catalogues later, Walker is still turning heads and causing an artistic uproar. While she does create gouache and oil paintings (and more recently, shadow puppet short films), her work mainly consists of large silhouette installations. The silhouettes—drawn free hand on black paper, cut and attached to the wall with wax adhesive—are life-size and involve a veritable parade of southern belles, female slaves, indignant masters, and naked children all in constant motion: dancing, killing, excreting, eating, birthing, raping, and the list goes on. Her first installation interrogated her connection to Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and her own responses to moving to Atlanta as a high-

[12] The subtitles used in this part of the chapter come from writings in Kara Walker's watercolor series, *Do You Like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk*, 1997.

school teen. *Gone, A Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Negress and Her Heart* (1994) begins with a tree dripping with Spanish moss, under which a Southern belle leans to kiss her upstanding gentleman. However, the legs of another person peek out from under her skirts and the master's sharp sword reaches past his frame, practically impaling a naked child holding a dead swan that has been pulled from between the legs of another woman on the ground. A flurry of various characters follow each other around the wall, from a pickaninny in mid-dance step with newborns falling from under her skirts to masters/overseers with exaggerated phalluses and children flying up to the ceiling. While these silhouettes flirt with stereotypes from plantation nostalgia, they are clearly unusual, fantastical, and even pornographic exaggerations. Yet they are read by many as definitive portrayals of a racist mythology best left to the past. Mark Reinhardt writes in a 2003 exhibition book catalogue:

> By and large, American cultural products, including novels, films, paintings, performances, and even works of academic historical analysis, have responded to this still-living history either with amnesia or through sentimental reconstructions that explain how, over time, innocence was vindicated and injury repaired. Walker will not choose either response. She refuses to edit out the wounds of a violent past. (118)

Akin to Suzan-Lori Parks re-envisioning the life of Saartjie Baartman in *Venus*, Walker plays on dangerous ground. By not "editing" the wounds, Walker taps into the audience's anxiety surrounding the potent images of blackness. In this situation, the silhouettes, the viewer, and Walker each perform a narrative of "blackness."

In Walker's work, the simple form of the silhouette makes such reaction possible. Such a medium, once prized for its ability to impart likeness, became quickly

outdated and “second-rate” as anyone who could copy a shadow and transform it to paper could become an “artist.” Once photography took hold in the late 1800s through the twentieth century, silhouettes were best left to sideshow stalls and sidewalk artists. Walker toys with the notion of respectability even in her choice of the form she presents: it is as if she is asking viewers to comment that “anyone” can make silhouettes, but not anyone can conjure *these* silhouettes, at least not from their memory bank of stereotypes. As only profiles and body shapes give an idea of who and what they are, Walker forces the viewer to fill in the narrative gaps and recall the ingrained stereotypes and historical images we were supposed to forget. Walker makes the audience bear witness to these stereotypes. We *must* look, we *must* interpret them; we can do nothing but understand what we see.

“So I ask what is a positive black image (besides a contradiction in terms)”

The irony of the black-white binary of the silhouette provides a layer to discover the permutations within visual types. For the most part, the majority of Walker’s work features black cutouts on a white wall, although her more recent silhouette work has evolved to include a gray background with black and white cutouts or black cutouts within a projected background of swirling vivid colors. One could list the variety of implications of a black figure on a white gallery wall, the stark contrast playing with viewers’ minds. What is in the “blackness”? Is she playing with notions of blackness as a void? As an absence? Or rather blackness as the totality of color? As a fullness? Within each character’s profile and they are indeed characters, the viewer moves from passive museum-goer to active audience member, discerning,

creating and filling in the missing space with narrative. In the performance of these stereotypes, it is up to the viewer to flesh out the two-dimensional characters, filling the (w)hole. Through Walker's appropriation of "blackness" the silhouettes force the audience to detect the contradictions in locating blackness. As Kobena Mercer contends, "It all depends on the identity that different audiences and spectators bring to bear on the readings they produce" (325). Walker may use typically black and white antebellum stereotypes as inspiration, but misappropriates the stereotypes by putting them in such sexual and fantastical situations, causing audiences to question the images of blackness they are seeing. Because the silhouettes do not directly look like common stereotypical profiles (as used on advertisements or food and household packaging) used in the late nineteenth century, a *mis*appropriation, not a *re*appropriation occurs. This side-stepping is Walker's particular stereotypical strategy at re-envisioning images of blackness. Audiences' response to this (mis)appropriation of blackness is where Walker's controversy began: being an African American artist, how could she do such a thing? While Walker has offered the initial (mis)step, it is within the *act of exchange* between the silhouettes and their relationship to the viewer that "blackness" is invented, performed, and consumed by the audience, only to be re-invented with subsequent performances.

Walker's work leaves the viewer to negotiate the power struggle between image and interpretation. As Saidiya Hartman notes, "'performing blackness' captures the scope and magnitude of the performative as a strategy of power and tactic of resistance" (57). As Hartman's interrogation focuses on slave narratives and slave performances, this lens in which to view blackness is particularly apt. Walker's

silhouettes constantly flirt with who is "supposed" to have power and how that power is undercut. Actions on the part of the characters in the installation can be read as both/and in relation to power and resistance, dominance and abjection, not either/or. For example, in a detailed section of the 1997 work *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored,*[13] a little girl reaches for a object impaled on the back of an emaciated field hand holding a guitar, spittle dripping out of his mouth. The object looks like either a wind-up toy turnkey or a pair of imbedded scissors. Either reading offers a unique interpretation. If the object is a key, is the girl "winding up" the black man to perform for the white overseer, as slaves were forced to do, his hunched back and spittle signifying his exhaustion from always "performing" a particular blackness for the big house? Or, conversely, could it be a pair of scissors, implying that the black man is always "stabbed in the back," and the drips from his mouth are a trail of blood? Or maybe the little girl is removing the scissors, relieving the old hand of his labors and letting him go? Hartman questions, "If the dominant performances of blackness are about the spectacle of mastery and the enactment of a willed subjection, then can the instances in which the dominant is used, manipulated and challenged be read as disruptive or refigured articulations of blackness?"(58). In light of such intervention, is the little girl a permutation of Walker with *her* scissors, literally cutting into the stereotypical performance of the happy slave? Walker certainly is not offering up any

[13] I further explain the implications of this title later in this chapter with regard to Walker as a "character" in her work.

answers: it is the spectator that must read into the blackness to decide. Walker's silhouettes refuse to finish their performance; in their total blackness, they insist the viewer complete the picture, allowing one to conjure "blackness" to the extreme. The viewer must also remember that the images are mediated. They are fabricated as much as a sweeping Delacroix, a jumbled Picasso, or a patch-worked Ringgold quilt. Her silhouettes construct blackness as much as her audiences must construct the narrative of blackness to fill in the shadowy profiles. She writes, "Had positive imaging of the black body to date solved the problem of representing blackness and power, thereby ceasing the need for further discussion of the issue, the 'black' and 'white' bodies in my work would be virtually silent" (48). Walker herself recognizes that the work literally "speaks" to her viewers, and thus, *she* speaks to her viewers through her work. Yet while she may have given these images life, they carry on without her in their conversation with an audience.

Whether the silhouettes are supposed to represent literal black or white subjects, all of them are black, and all of them invade our sense of what "blackness" should look like. An ironic reading of this visual choice calls to mind Ralph Ellison's paint factory in *Invisible Man,* where the "Right White" paint, Optic White, has ten drops of black paint in it. Or conversely, as W.T. Lhamon argues, an "optic blackness" fuels cultural exchange, to which "whites have contributed all along… to prove the right white wrong" ("Optic Black" 111). Traditionally, all silhouettes are cut on black paper, so at its base level, Walker may not be making a larger statement with the choice of black paper for all her characters. In fact, some her later work (*The Emancipation Proclamation*, 2002) uses a gray background, and white and black

paper for the silhouettes, and the different colored paper does not correlate to a silhouette's specific race Interestingly enough, in a gallery, the white cutouts stand out more from the gray background than the black cutouts do, thus calling attention to themselves. However, because the black cutouts fade into the deep gray walls, the piece as a whole loses its impact, and thus its cohesive narrative.

I must consider what it means when all the figures are black and what the conceptual and political power of this claim is. The choice of the silhouette image and, by extension, the black paper, is a strategic move by Walker to make the audience recognize the "blackened" subject. Consider the idea of the word "black" and how it has become linguistically connoted in our culture. Scanning the dictionary, I find blackmail, blackball, black market, to blacken someone's name, blackguard, black Maria (a van that moves prisoners or a German euphemism for a particular type of shell used in WWI), black mass, and the list goes on.[14] Each use of the word "black" connotes negativity. Thus, to look back at the silhouettes, how have each of these stereotypes been blackened, whether white or black? While on the surface, our culture has shamed these stereotypes outright or "blackballed" them; however they are still in use. In a way, this cultural currency excels on the black market, so to speak.

In their blackness, Walker forces the viewer to recall racial images from their memory banks. For when looking at the profiles, the silhouettes demand the viewer to decide whether the figure is black or non-black, racially speaking. Looking into the profiles of the silhouettes, the viewer may recognize distinct elements of minstrelsy stereotypes: the short, spiked pigtails of a Topsy character, the overstated lips and

[14] I am indebted to Frank Wilderson for making me consider this sordid litany of words.

oversized posterior of a Venus Hottentot, the stalwart smugness in the angle of the coiffed head of the plantation master. For example, a little boy in *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995) stares at a girl in a pinafore dress and a bow in her curled hair (Eva?) as she runs (at him?) with a hatchet. The audience most likely read the little boy as black, due to the structure of his face and head, for Walker's cutline calls to mind the obvious exaggeration of Africans with ape-like cranial structures from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century "scientific" studies of physiognomy where the "African" facial dimensions were considered primitive in comparison to Caucasian facial features.[15] Walker's silhouettes play into this historical past as they give just enough information to identify the racial persuasion of each character on the wall, playing with the stereotypes well known to audience members: one silhouette with a particular nose, another with a certain hair and lips.

Walker's process of creating the silhouettes are also a tactile reminder of the history of stereotypes themselves, a history of printing presses and copy plates. As a reminder, the Greek derivation for the suffix "type" translates as "impress or strike" as in "to strike a blow." There are many avenues for etymological wordplay within these two meanings in relation to Walker's work. The silhouettes are not painted on the wall—they are hand-cut paper, literally impressed upon the wall by her hands, as

[15] Based on a Greco-Roman ideal of what "perfect" bodies should be (and initially based not on actual facial measurements, but rather on measurements of sculptured statues!), researchers deduced that the African nose and forehead were congruous to that of primates, and the white European face was superior. Her 2001 work *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress* goes even further with the "primitive" African look. Some of the silhouettes' faces resemble the outline of carved African masks, so even here, Walker plays with the duality of how African facial structure was defined by white (ape-like, primitive) or by Africans themselves (ceremonial masks and adornments).

stereotypes have been impressed upon generations of people. If visitors wanted to, without getting in trouble from the gallery guards, of course, they could touch the silhouettes or even peel them off the wall. Ridding memory banks of cultural stereotypes is not that easy. The silhouettes impress upon gallery viewers, striking deep into a collective memory of slavery and minstrelsy, of Jim Crow and Civil Rights. In *Slavery! Slavery!…*, there are actual chains made of black paper that stick out from the wall, like the handmade, looped, construction paper garland that a child would make for a Christmas tree. The chains stand out from the stark white wall, separate from the flatness of the smooth black silhouette paper, calling attention to their dimensionality against the lack of dimension of the other images. Walker does not use this idea again in her larger silhouette work, but it certainly makes an impact in this particular piece. It is as if the silhouette jumps from the outline of a form, to a physical being, a stereotype in actual chains.

"We might term Walker's repertoire of figures invented imitations," critic Anne Wagner writes (95). Imitations, because viewers certainly know these images, propagated by films such as *Gone With the Wind*, but invented, because plantation Scarletts were certainly not seen in such various states of scatological infatuation and sexual deviance. Rather, the silhouettes are inspired by a variety of historical and contemporary media: film, advertisements, minstrel shows, and literature. Walker herself has mentioned that she was fascinated by the master-slave narratives of the antebellum South and the slave diaries (i.e. Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent) that were quite descriptive in the details of sexual violence during slavery.

However, in her work, she manipulates traditional black stereotypes to such a degree that the viewer's memory bank of stereotypes contradicts and confuses. Manifest on the wall, the image is clear; yet manifest *in relation* to the individual viewer the stereotype is re-constructed *through* the consumption of the images. It is not that Walker recreates the complete image, but rather offers the inversion for audiences to fill in the gaps in the narrative. Because these stereotypical images play upon the premise of are/are not, they at once alienate the audience and at the same time force viewers towards recognition. Mercer writes, "Instead of falling back on the stabilizing and fixative function of the stereotype, what is experienced in the reception… betrays a radical *unfixing* that upsets and disrupts the spectator's horizon of expectations" (323, emphasis in original).[16] For example, one series in a larger piece juxtaposes various positions of suckling—slaves and masters, adults and children—each literally sucking the life out of each other. The overt sexuality causes the viewer to question the familiar stereotypes placed into shocking positions and situations—these are not the stereotypes viewers may have originally conjured in their mind. "Stereotypes carried to such an extreme reveal their origin in the obsessions of the one who does the stereotyping, but Walker's work also addresses how such caricatures are internalized to form the basis of a charged narrative of self," art editor Miles Unger writes (29). In essence, it is in the *lack* of detail where the performance of these arresting images is most affective.

[16] While Mercer is critiquing the black male nude photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, I feel his argument parallels many of my own conclusions about Walker's work concerning stereotype and the viewing spectator.

The silhouettes create a dual moment of "being" and "becoming" for the viewer. Taken from Paul Gilroy and subsequently through E. Patrick Johnson's intervention, the process that happens to a viewer of Walker's work is about becoming, rather than being. As Gilroy writes, the results of the African Diaspora accentuate becoming as identity is always a "noun of process" ("To Be Real" 24). Johnson filters Gilroy's theory through a theatrical lens noting that "being" and "becoming" are "sites of performance *and* performativity" (42, emphasis in original). "Being" is the process of calling to attention a particular blackness (the site of performance and how we might read it as such) and "becoming" is what such performances may offer in further interpretations; put another way, "becoming" stands in for the performative lineage that continues to permeate.

In relation to Walker's work, I would like to offer an alternative reading of this process: "being" attends to the rehearsed notions of stereotype internalized within the viewer; "being" is the site/sight of recognition in what the silhouettes may represent upon the wall. "Becoming" is the process in which viewers acknowledge the racist ideology within themselves and continue to question the effects of that recognition. A performance is created between the inanimate silhouettes and the viewers: at once passive spectators and participating audience members in the performance of and re-invention of America's racist past. By performance, I refer to the visceral embodiment between the work and viewer, an exchange, a transfer of energies. The museum-goer walks into the gallery with a notion of "being," sure in herself, knowing where she stands, wishing to "see some art" but not assume engagement with the art. However in the silhouette's reception, the viewer propels toward a "becoming" because of the

disparity between connection and repulsion that Walker's art elucidates. The viewer is willed into participation: there is no choice to sit back and stay uninvolved. The act of becoming is an act that is always in flux. As a static form, "being" is thrown into unrest, and the viewer is reformed by the theatrical act that is taking place; from this moment on, the viewer is in a constant state of "becoming": questions will not be assuaged, "being" will not be reached again, recognition is forever altered. The being/becoming duality works at different levels for multiple spectators, depending on race, class and gender, or age and demographics. A white middle class grandmother from Minneapolis may experience this act of becoming in a different way than an African American businessman from New York or an Arab American college student from UCLA.[17]

In attending the most recent retrospective of her work at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, I was struck by a number of the performative interventions of the space upon the viewer. While looking at *Gone…* as the figures scrolled their way across the cyclorama, the silhouettes reflected in the shiny, polished hardwood floor of the gallery. These fuzzy mirror images upon the floor gave the stark piece an eerie depth and an unforeseen doubling. In another gallery room two silhouette pieces incorporated overhead projectors, washing the wall in colors. In the two pieces the spectator actually joins the artwork in different ways. In *Mistress Demanded a Swift and Dramatic Empathetic Reaction Which We Obliged Her*, the silhouettes are not pasted to the wall, but projected from the overhead. As the projector is placed on the floor in the middle of the gallery, visitors can walk around it, their physical bodies

[17] Locations where Walker's recent exhibition has been shown.

slicing through the light. With this piece, as they walk through the projector's beam, viewers cover up the artwork. I find this intervention deeply ironic as the piece depicts a slave wrapped in chains and hooded with a facial torture device as a little girl, read as black by the nature of her stereotypical pickaninny braids, stabs a machete into the chest of a wide skirted belle strung up by her hands. The viewer is literally *hiding* the scene with her physical body, erasing the acts of brutality and revenge. In the other work requiring a projector in the gallery, *Darkytown Rebellion*, the silhouettes are already pasted to the wall, and the projector provides a colored background which also spills onto the gallery floor, giving the piece a literal performance space. Here, spectators become part of the work if they walk by the projector and into the colored space, their silhouette lit upon the wall along with the others, becoming members of the rebellion and the performance. These two works are newer in Walker's oeuvre than the vast cycloramas mentioned above (2000 and 2001 respectively) and highlight the ways in which she continues to reach toward her audience in unexpected ways, subtly recognizing the inherent performative qualities in her work. The layering of performance is endless as each interpreter (re)appropriates blackness in each level of mediation, each state of "becoming."

"What about when I become folklore? What about when 'Me' is assigned a body, an 'Archetype' beyond my control?"

Beyond the role that the stereotyped silhouettes play in this cut-paper collage of performances, Walker's own "character" as an artist clearly commands a role in this layered production, and, for me, this seems the most complex (and complicating)

strategic move in her work. First and foremost, her titles hint at such a performance. For a 1997 installation, Walker printed the title of the piece on handbills in the style of slave auction block posters, intoning the titles of historical slave narratives, as in the long title *Presenting Negro Scenes…* mentioned above. More prevalent, the character of the "Negress" appears in other titles, as versions of characters upon the wall, and even in a benefactor-commissioned pop-up book, entitled *Freedom: A Fable by Kara Elizabeth Walker— A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times with Illustrations*. Is the Negress, pictured on the book's pages in various cut-relief situations Walker's own performance of blackness? Walker has said she is "channeling" the Negress (English 153), so from whom is she "channeling?" A character out of slave narratives, out of a generic African American historical past? By overtly naming herself as "Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored" in the title of the piece mentioned earlier in this chapter or purporting to create her art through the character of the Negress, such channeling is no different than taking on a character as would an actress. In essence, she has written the character of a one-woman show titled "Kara Walker" and is playing all the parts.[18] Walker, the woman, cannot be confused with the silhouetted pickaninnies on the walls, although some have likened "the Negress" to them, but for Walker, the role of the "artist" can be found in scripting the "text" within the totality of the installation.

This act of Walker's, the part she plays, is part of the larger African American tradition of signifyin(g). Walker's signifyin' is text-book, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

[18] While this chapter does not touch on her new work in shadow puppet films, Walker even more overtly creates a solo piece in those films. By manipulating all the roles of the puppets, she is taking her non-speaking silhouettes from theatrical exchange between gallery viewer and art piece into direct theatrical exploration with puppet and audience member.

defines signifyin(g) as a "re-naming ritual" (47); black "double-voicedness" (51); epitomizing "all of the rhetorical play in the black vernacular" (53). It is a technique, a language game, intertextuality, repetition and revision, and "linguistic masking" (75). By her titles, she is signifyin' on slave narratives[19]; through the Negress, she signifies on a variety of African American literature from Sojourner Truth's memoir, to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved.* On top of all of this, the Negress signifies on minstrel stereotypes, as well as stereotypes that viewers may have stored in their memory banks and have used to describe Walker herself. By attaching this concept of "Negress" to her work in various ways, she deliberately confronts the historical signification of stereotypes the naming represents and turns it on its head.

Michael Harris writes in *Colored Pictures* that "recycling, inverting, and reconstructing racist images have some effect in dismantling that imagery, but those strategies visually root us in our oppression" (222). However, it seems that this is exactly what Walker is doing: by implicating herself as a character within her controversial work, she does not deny the work of these images, knowing full well they act as a catalyst for the rememory of slavery and the centuries of oppression to which Harris refers. By including the "Negress" as a character, even overtly calling that character the "Nigger Wench," Walker strategically places the stereotype in the mouths of her viewers, addressing directly the notion of stereotype that for Appiah, is the most dangerous: the "normative stereotype." Irrelevant to images of false stereotyping, normative stereotypes are viewed through how one "ought" to behave,

[19] For more on slave narratives, trauma, and (re)memory, see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's excellent survey of Walker, *Seeing the Unspeakable: the Art of Kara Walker* (2004), specifically Chapter Two.

and how one "ought" to comport oneself, which can be different indeed when compared to how one may *actually* behave. Because social identities constantly shift with each progressive generation, such stereotypes can change a person's individuality. Inherent in the construction of stereotype is also part of the construction of self. Who *should* we be? Stereotypes are created from stylized performances constituted and reconstituted as the nature of societal values and mores change. However, Walker's performance as Negress does not conform to a "normative stereotype." According to her critics, she does not do what she "ought" to do, as an artist, as an African American, and as a female. Many believe she should be "elevating the race" not disparaging it. Audiences certainly have experienced a variety of reactions to her work as Betye Saar's letter campaign can attest. Harris devotes a section of his book to her work, yet concludes that her "performance for white folk reflecting back to them their fantasies about, and fascination with, black people… has locked herself into the racial discourse she is attempting to subvert" (216). However, Walker could also be read as disparaging the white race as much as some African Americans think she is attacking them. The stereotypes she employs in her skewed silhouettes are images created by whites. In remembering and (re)inventing these identifiable images, the work symbolically pokes a finger in the white eye, saying "You made me, you recognize me, and you have refused to let me go away." As Philippe Vergne, curator of the 2007-2008 retrospective on her work echoes, "She is the bad seed who dares to expose what hurts and terrifies a culture that shies away from both its fears and its desires" (24).

All aspects of her work perform outside the normative, from her performance as "Artist" to "Negress" in a distinctive aesthetic way. Her silhouettes rebuke the normative, making audiences reevaluate how they ought to perform as viewers, as consumers of art, as purveyors of stereotype. Critic Ann Wagner writes, "Black paper changes, becomes animated and starts to carry a special rhetorical weight. Black skin turns to blackface, in other words: blackface as the hyperbolic performance of scripted identity. Walker, we might say, is 'corking up,'" (95). What Wagner refers to are black performers who layered black cork upon their own blackness for the minstrel performances. Certainly, they performed because there were few options for black performers in the white commercial market. Minstrel shows were in high demand post-Civil War, and black performers portrayed stereotypes of themselves created by whites. However, for the performers that did "black up," there was also a dual performance going on, much like Walker's Negress. Interpreted by white audiences, black minstrel performers confirmed the stereotypical characters, but for many African American audiences, the performer was actually undercutting the stereotypes, subtly and deftly through certain performance techniques and dialogue.[20]

While Walker is not performing blackface, is her work? Paul Gilroy notes, "signifyin(g) and shape-shifting can still be tactical as well as playful; contestatory as well as compensatory" ("To be Real" 16). It is in this slippage where Walker's work becomes powerful. "I don't want to create a full-on bamboozled minstrel show," she

[20] As Camille Forbes writes of turn of the twentieth century performer Bert Williams, "Caught between satisfying a white audience, which expected stereotypical performances in the racist discourse of minstrelsy, and a black audience, which desired political activism in the discourse of representation, Williams made strategic moves. He strove to satisfy and resist white audiences that expected his dancing 'racial feet' to testify to the truth of the 'darky' stereotype. At the same time, he sought to respond to black audiences that expected him to achieve racial feats on behalf of black America" (606).

said on NPR's *All Things Considered.* "I'd like to have it sit somewhere in between, where we all feel implicated in this continuing drama." Her use of the word "drama" is no idle sentiment. The diverse formations of each installation's narrative disable the viewer from witnessing this work like other traditional art. Museum-goers usually relish the complacency of passive viewership. Walker's train of black bodies rounding the cyclorama compels audiences to discover connections between the characters, creating the exposition for the work's narrative structure. Viewers become active participants in her theater, in which she plays no small part.

Walker's signifyin' goes deeper than intertextuality with slave narratives and minstrel stereotypes. I believe her role embodies Paul Gilroy's notion of "being in pain," his enunciation for the state expressed in black literature, art and/or music that provides a "distinctive rapport" between the knowledge of slavery and death and the ontological state of trauma. "Being in pain," writes Gilroy, "encompasses both a radical, personalized enregistration of time and a diachronic understanding of language whose most enduring effects are the games black people in all western culture play with names and naming" (*Black Atlantic* 203). In naming herself within he work, Walker locates "being in pain" within these roles as expressed through her art. This (re)memory of slavery is approached through a variety of ways. Overtly, Walker is being ironic with her titles while at the same time calling attention to the definable histories of slaves. "Being in pain" can be found in the pages of her art diary, which is not a titled work but upon the gallery wall page by page, where doodles and notes have been elevated to framed prints (*Do You Like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997). One wonders if they have been

specifically selected for their controversial statements and the particular character of Walker they present, or if they truly expose Walker's deep thoughts on her work and reception to her art[21] The narratives the silhouettes inhabit search for the historical markers of being in pain that dominant, white history has chosen to ignore. Yet what about non-black audiences? What type of "being in pain" do they experience in viewing these works? Is the "Negress" planting visceral reminders to instill "white guilt?" Or for others, might the stereotypes be completely unrecognizable? Vergne writes, "Instead of attempting to control negative representations of black people, or of the Other in general, Walker intensifies them, accelerates them, inflates them, and runs with them to narrate uncanny pictorial stories in which pleasure and pain meet" (16). Ultimately, I would argue Walker's "being in pain" transfers to the viewer, and such notions then replay in the perceptions of the viewer at varying levels.

Like the playwrights represented in this dissertation, Walker's strategic move as an artist uses the tools of hegemonic culture—in her work, overt minstrel stereotypes—to radically explore America's cultural relationship to its troubled historical past and its complicated racial future. Her particular tactics as an artist place Walker in the role of, what I term, a present-day interlocutor. Historically, the interlocutor appeared during the part of the minstrel show that formed a "minstrel line." Within the line, "Mr. Interlocutor" was a middle man who questioned the end men; Mr. Bones, who played the bones, a percussive instrument originally made of bones, not unlike clappers or spoons; and Mr. Tambo who played the tambourine. Mr.

[21] As stated in an earlier footnote, some of the writings from this work are used as subject headings in this chapter.

Interlocutor would begin a repartee with the end men consisting of jokes and skits, distinguished by the end men's lower class dialect or responses and the interlocutor's ridicule of higher class white sophistication. While spoofing white dominance, she offers her work as a dialogue between herself and the end men, played by the viewer of the artwork. "Do they reinforce or undermine racist stereotypes?" Mercer asks of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, and I am also questioning this here; Mercer believes that the answer is "strictly undecidable or unresolvable as such, because it is thrown back from the author into the field of the spectator, where it is experienced precisely as that ambiguity which lures the eye and sets a trap for the gaze" (323). While I do not think that Walker is being at all ambiguous, for her work is overtly fantastical, she does "lure" the spectator into ways of looking that are uncomfortable, possibly unknowable, but always leaving the final line of dialogue up to the viewer. While not exactly racial satire, the work employs the use of irony in its deepest and darkest sense. Viewers who contend her work is re-inscribing racism do not recognize the ironic nature inherent in this work: by refusing to play the end men to her Missus Interlocutor, audiences ignore this important dialogic performance.

Walker's controversial work directly confronts the color line W.E.B. DuBois believed would mark the twentieth century through her very obvious black and white lines upon the wall. The stereotypes she brings to the surface create raw and visceral reactions across diversely racial audiences. Within the delusionary deformations of Tara, Kara Walker's work continues to challenge audiences to face this racist iconography head on. For in the performance that is created between silhouette and witness, she reminds us that the power of stereotype is palpable and present.

Suzan-Lori Parks: Signifyin' on Soul Food, Slavery, and Stereotypes

I cannot think of a theatre artist whose work compliments Kara Walker's art more than Suzan-Lori Parks. Both are unafraid to rewrite, reform, and reclaim American history through the images in their artistic output. Parks's oeuvre ranges from her earliest published play (and arguably the most "thick") *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989) to the cross-country celebration of *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006) and her most recent work *The Book of Grace*, just produced at the Public Theater in 2010. Parks has seen critical success, received a MacArthur "Genius" grant, and the first Pulitzer Prize in drama to an African American female, and many scholars interrogate her plays, searching for meaning in their varied layers. Most of the writing on Parks's work addresses her manipulation of language and its effect on the (re)writing of history, specifically in *The America Play*, an elliptical tale concerning a singular family and its erstwhile connection to Abraham Lincoln, and *Venus*, Parks's interpretation and fantastical meditation on the Venus Hottentot,.

In her 1990 play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (*DLBM*), historical stereotypes are at the forefront of the script, so much so that the characters (although Parks titles them "figures") serves as archetypal figureheads rather than embodied individuals. Parks's ability to explode traditional theatrical structure, her varied dramaturgical sensibility, and each play's unique relationship to language through her non-standard English dialogue provide multi-layered levels of signification and meaning. I am particularly interested in Parks's manipulation of stereotypes and how the strategic use of stereotypes indelibly connects with the

historical moments the play presents. Parks loves to play with words and rearrange, re-envision, re-tell, and revise history and language. Thus, through such language, I question what stage images the words (re)present and what signification the language conjures in terms of stereotype. Should audiences already know what she is signifying to "get" her work, and how does such signification rely upon known cultural knowledge? Like Walker's endless cyclical silhouettes, Parks's play returns again and again to meditate and expand upon a single theme through her particular device of "rep and rev" (repetition and revision). By constantly repeating phrases of dialogue, either through different characters or situated in alternative patterns, her plays slowly work toward expanding audience understanding on a particular theme. In *DLBM* in particular, the play returns to the historical past to elucidate a possible future. By strategically using African American stereotypes, Parks revisits two horrific narratives—slavery and lynching—and through Black Woman's love, nurturing, and ministrations, puts the images to rest (at least within the play). Only by resurrecting these past stories with the help of the chorus of ancestors can Black Man have his proper death. Through the continued deaths of the "Last" Black Man the play does not imagine that this will be the last time we will see black death, but rather affirms the nature of black existence *in spite of* black death.

Put simply, the play concerns Black Man with Watermelon, Black Woman with Drumstick, and other-worldly ancestors—literary and figurative allusions who have come to participate in the funeral rites and ceremonial "putting to rest" of Black Man, although the play itself is not as cut and dry as this brief synopsis presents. Black Woman, the only one seemingly "alive," and the rest of the symbolic dead prepare

Black Man for a proper burial as elements of his life (and death) are witnessed and processed through "Voice on Thuh Tee V," another figure in the play representing the media presence. The play's structure breaks down into seven sections, bookended by an "Overture" and "Final Chorus" with five "Panels" in between. Alluding to the Catholic rendering of the death of Jesus in the fourteen Stations of the Cross, these particular panels follow the various "deaths" of Black Man (as the Stations of the Cross indeed follow the many "deaths" of Jesus). The characters state that Black Man died in 1317, died by falling twenty-three floors to his death "from a passin ship from space," from the electric chair, and a lynching. This litany of his specific deaths offers a larger meditation not only on black death, but the act of readying Black Man for burial, and in that preparation, memorializing of his life. "Miss Me. Re-member me" he keeps telling Black Woman, and he cannot fully "leave" until such re-membering (both sentimental and corporeal) is finished. As Elam and Rayner state, "Because of this 'unfinished business,' Black Man exists in a liminal space between the living and the dead. He is dislocated, caught in a continual 'Middle Passage'" (451). The play is in constant motion, a veritable passage/Passion play: from life to death, from Africa to the New World, from slavery to escape, from ghost to memory—with Parks playing the obtuse diviner leaving the audience to interpret the signs.

Parks's "rep and rev" writing style and her inventive dialogue offer a unique, theatrical strategy for de-centering the many stereotypes which the play explores. "Rep and rev" is elusive in its varied meanings and "keeps the spectator/reader ever-vigilant, looking for something missed in the last repetition while scrutinizing the upcoming revision. Closure seems just on the horizon… where it remains," (Drukman

353). As repetition and revision is so central to Parks's work, she herself offers a definition on how she employs the technique in her pseudo-glossary in the essay "Elements of Style:"

> A central element in my work; through its use I'm working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score… a structure which creates a drama of accumulation…. Characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew. (9)

Rep and rev offer the play a forward momentum, but again, contrary to what repetition would connote (as if repetition would counteract the idea of moving towards something), here rep and rev does forward the play toward an outcome, but not necessarily through a linear plotline. Rep and rev work in tandem with each other, and the play itself cannot progress with only repetition or only revision.

Particularly for *DLBM*, rep and rev offers the play the ability to meditate on the continued and repeated "deaths" of Black Man: each time he "dies" the play can explicate, return to, and revise the historical record of black death by encapsulating the entirety of black death as well as re-writing this one particular black man's singular experiences. The repetition creates a rhythm in the delivery of the actor and in the way each scene mediates on the constant repetitions. In a way this structure seems counter intuitive toward the effort of re-envisioning stereotypes, but in each revised repetition of various stereotypes, the stereotype loses its power. Put another way, the stereotype becomes malleable in the writing and performing instead of fixed and rigid—so malleable in fact that it loses shape altogether. She is "putting the body back together"

as she writes in her essay "Possession," and in *DLBM* in particular, the play signifies on body parts, parts of history, historical records, and the recording of cultural history.

Parks's dialogue also offers multiple layers of meaning. In an oft-quoted interview with Alisa Solomon, Parks mentions that her inventive dialogue is not written in a particular black vernacular as it is considered by some, nor is it trying to satire such ways of speaking. Parks asks herself:

> So how do I adequately represent not merely the speech patterns of a people oppressed by language… but the patterns of a people whose language use is so complex and varied and ephemeral that its daily use not only Signifies on the non-vernacular language forms, but on the construct of writing as well. If language is a construct and writing is a construct and Signifyin(g) on the double construct is the daily use, then I have chosen to Signfy on the Signifyin(g). (75-76)

Like Walker's silhouettes, Parks uses signifying as a technique, a language game, intertextuality, repetition and revision, "linguistic masking" (Gates 75), a "metaphor for textual revision" (88). So if Parks's work signifies on signification, characters, dialogue, plot, and other usually straightforward theatrical devices cannot be taken at face value. Thus, images and dialogue in the play offer multiple interpretations and ways of connecting.

In an effort to track the various narratives that the play explicates, my argument will follow the play as it weaves its stories from beginning to end, although this method can be a bit contrived as Parks's works do not conform to any timeline or chronology. The play's "Overture" interrogates the historical implications of slavery, "Panel One: Thuh Holy Ghost" recounts Black Man's death by electric chair, "Panel Three: Thuh Lonesome 3Some" revisits the terror of lynching spectacles, and "Panel Five: In the Garden of Hoodoo It" sees Black Woman preparing Black Man for his

final burial. Each of these historical markers in American history reference the very public nature in the history of black death as the figure of the "Voice on Thuh Tee V" occasionally broadcasts, and the constant repetition by the rest of the figures in the Choral interludes that come between each of the "Panel" scenes. These middle panels serve as bridges between each part of the Black Man and Woman's story, or as Parks states "the Choruses are figuring the blank space between. That's why the Choruses are so weird. They're coming out of that blank, unspoken, unfigured space…" (qtd in Elam and Rayner 452-53). Throughout each "Panel," the characters remind each other to "write that down and you should hide it under a rock." Here is Parks's strategic move: through the utilization of stereotypes through her unique rep and rev structure—through the act of Parks's writing it down—Parks calls attention to the absurdity of stereotypes. By writing this play and re-writing Black Man's continued existence through each subsequent "death," Parks asks audiences to bear witness, to sift through the various stereotypes exposed, and to learn an alternate history in the repetition and retelling of a(ny) Black Man's story.

"I remember all my lookuhlikes"

The key to understanding Parks's multidimensional plays lies in the myriad of references she makes through the naming of her characters. As mentioned, the main characters are "Black Man with Watermelon" and "Black Woman with Drumstick," making obvious connotations to the historical stereotypical connection to blacks and

watermelon and a later but pervasive stereotype of blacks only eating fried chicken.[22] However, Parks pushes stereotypes to the absurd, signfiyin(g) with the other characters' names "Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork" and "Yes and Greens Black-eyed Peas Cornbread." It is as if Parks's recognizes that readers and audience members may be surprised that she liberally uses stereotypical imagery with the characters names and instead of shying away, takes it one step further and uses *all* available stereotypes relating to blacks and food. Parks overtly plays with this notion as she includes "Yes And" as part of the character's name, as if she were deliberately answering critics who questioned her willingness to reference soul food as stereotypes.

Beyond the more obvious character names in *DLBM*, Parks also references historical and cultural figures, which offer more obscure levels of signification. Two characters symbolically allude to African history: "Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut" and "Before Columbus." Hatshepsut is considered one of the longest reigning and successful pharaohs of Egypt, having ruled over the kingdom through one of its most peaceful periods, as well as most architecturally prolific. However, rulers after her death tried to cover up that she was even queen by destroying statues, hieroglyphs, and other materials, so much so that nineteenth century Egyptologists were confounded over the materials that did indicate her tenure as queen. Before Columbus also suggests a symbolic move, for according to Elam and Rayner:

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[22] Scholars are quite unclear on how exactly such stereotypes took hold, but some deduce its history from Southern stories concerning slaves stealing plantation vegetables and chickens for food. A survey of newspaper articles from the late 1880s and early 1890s reveals stories of masters recounting blacks stealing from melon patches and even a Florida variety of watermelon called a "Niggerhead." Postcards, political cartoons, and other printed media seized on the image potential and thus the proliferation of blacks and watermelons. The watermelon images also mirrors the wide, toothy grin used in African American stereotypes, and in many printed images, the stereotype would be grinning (with the distorted, unnaturally red lips) holding a watermelon.

> African American historian Ivan Van Sertima's important and controversial study, *They Came Before Columbus*, provides the source … Van Sertima documents the travels during the Mandingo Empire, around 1310, from Mali to North America. These expeditions from Africa occurred before the voyage of Columbus, but despite Van Sertima's evidence, the history of African travel to and trade in the Americas is neither widely accepted nor disseminated. (454)

In light of this history, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut and Before Columbus symbolically stand-in for the erasure of African American history during the fateful Middle Passage as well as continual erasure here in America, where realistic stories of African Americans were replaced by stereotypical ones. Connected to the slave trade, "Ham" refers to the Biblical story, the son of Noah whose "cursed" child Canaan was forced to live as a slave. In the nineteenth century this story was used as an excuse for slavery, as Africans were the supposed inhabitants from the Land of Canaan (and discussed later, Parks's Ham recounts in Old Testament fashion his ancestral family tree). Ham's name also alludes to "hambone" or Juba dance, a style of dancing brought to the Americas by West African slaves and danced on plantations and publicly popularized in the mid-1800s by performer William Lane, or Master Juba.

The last three characters offer varied cultural references, also at increasing levels of signification. "Old Man River Jordan" is a mash-up of two songs: "Old Man River," the most popular song from the musical *Show Boat* and African American spirituals that have varying titles containing references to the River Jordan. The version of "Old Man River," the song telling the story of blacks working on the Mississippi River, is most recognizable as sung by African American actor Paul Robeson, who performed it on stage as well as in the film version of *Show Boat*. The Jordan River usually symbolizes the last crossing to freedom, popularized in many

African American spirituals during slavery and Jim Crow. “And Bigger and Bigger and Bigger” directly connects to Richard Wright’s main character Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, a complex character who unfortunately became distorted by the dominant culture into the stereotype of the black brute, and Parks’s not so subtle reference in the character name reflects that progression. As And Bigger says, “Rise up out of uh made-up story in grown Bigger and Bigger. Too big for my own name” (115). The last character whose name encapsulates signification is “Prunes and Prisms.” The first use of the phrase was in Charles Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* where the haughty character of Mrs. General tells her charges “Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism are all very good words for the lips.” Parks’s character’s actual line “Say ‘prunes and prisms’ 40 times each day and youll cure your big lips,” (113) signifies on a direct quote from James Joyce’s *Ulysses,* but also signifies on the so-called reform movement of African American speech patterns and vernacular through Standard English speech training.

Certainly, this long list of explications of each character may not be accessible to each reader or audience member without a director’s note in a program or the review of various articles and historical sources, and as such, like Kara Walker’s silhouettes, audiences will be able to access her “signify on the signifyin(g)” on a variety of levels depending on whether they are “in the know.” As Parks notes, “these characters I reference are not really *characters*. To call them so would be an injustice. They are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers* maybe, *speakers* maybe, *shadows, slips, players* maybe, maybe *someone else’s pulse*” (12, emphasis Parks). In her glossary, she does not delineate the specific characters of *DLBM* (and rather like all of her works, should one take the glossary at face value) however Parks’s choice of

words can be particularly telling in relation to this play. The characters in *DLBM* are figureheads, signifying and symbolically standing in as cultural markers; they are ghosts of the past and foreboding figments of the future.

To riff on Parks's glossary list, they are *stand-ins*—a term that I use in conjunction with stereotype. Stereotypes are stand-ins for generalized composites of a particular group of people, and with only that definition, one could argue the characters in *DLBM* also "stand-in" as an amalgamation of a specific group. Parks even plays into such consideration by directly naming her characters with elements of African American stereotypes. Yet Black Man is not a plantation darkie nor a lazy field hand nor a black brute, and Black Woman is not an oppressive matriarch nor a Jezebel nor a Topsy. Yet true to Parks's style, the play complicates the ability for the characters to function *only* as stereotypes for even through the layers of signification and the symbolic nature of such "figures," the play is really only a story about a husband and his nurturing wife, albeit a vast oversimplification. Parks herself explains the play as "12 figures with strange names all telling this jazz poetic story about a man who died and doesn't know where he's going to go now that he's dead" (qtd. in Wetmore, *A Casebook*, 128). While their names may conjure such images, the characters' actions and dialogue refute the actuality of them becoming or embodying stereotypical characters on stage. At the outset of the play, the stereotype is employed in the *name* of the characters, but as dialogue begins and the circuitous plot moves forward, stereotypes are confounded and warped to such degree that Black Man and Black Woman end up being completely deconstructed. Andrea Goto sees the characters as "the exact image of the two-dimensional stereotype" (111) but I would

not consider these characters "exact" images of the stereotype: Black Man is at once a stand-in for all black men and yet at the same time, only one particular black man of Parks's creation. Likewise, Black Woman is all black females, and yet, only one particular black woman, Black Man's loving wife, wishing only to nourish him and put him to rest. These two figures exhibit the characteristics of the everyman as well as the specifically drawn portrait. While the figures do not have traditional theatrical tendencies to provide actors with Stanislavski-like emotional lives, or as Goto writes, "deep psyche[s]", they are far from two-dimensional. Careful analysis of the play and its circuitous patterns reveals deep desires on both the part of Black Man and Black Woman: his desire for peace/rest fuels his actions and Black Woman's need to nourish and comfort helps him reach his final resting place.

The dialogue in the play also represents varying degrees of signification, and as much as she uses history as a jumping off point, the play (and stereotypical references) are not imbedded in any particular historical moment. Many of the plays-on-words that she employs ("history" becomes "his tree" becomes "his story" as the play unfolds) are not even available to audience members as all three word combinations are homophones and would sound the same in performance. Regardless, if audiences place the myriad connections with the characters' names, the themes that circulate around and around within the play's structure offer a deep connection between language and stereotype, for sometimes it is not even about *what* the characters are saying, but rather the rhythm and musicality of the words and the images created and put forth.

When the worl(d) was roun(d)

The "Overture" features all of the figures explaining the world before slavery, when "thuh worl usta be roun. Thuh worl usta be *roun*" (102, emphasis Parks). Black Woman cannot even comprehend such a place. "Uh roun worl. Uh roun? Thuh worl? When was this?" (102). Other characters explain to her (and the audience) how before Columbus's voyage to the New World "thuh worl usta be *roun* they put uh /d/ on thuh end of roun making roun*d*" (102, emphasis Parks). Much is contained in this symbolic addition of the letter "d." The progress of exploration by Europeans and the subsequent devastation by colonialism is the difference between the "worl" and "world," or as Before Columbus declares, "Them thinking the world was flat kept it roun… Figuring out the truth put them in their place and they scurried out to put us in ours" (103). This prompts Yes And Greens to consistently intone "You should write it down" referring to the erasure of Africans and African Americans in dominant historical narrative, reminding the chorus of voices that regardless of the permutations of oral history, written history is what solidifies historical markers in hegemonic discourse, "because if you don't write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist" (104).

Black Man's slavery narrative continues in "Panel Two: The First Chorus" where Old Man River Jordan recounts his escape narrative across rivers, leading Black Man to once again signify on ancestry and the alienation of familial connection through slavery. "You all kin," he says. "Kin gave thuh first permission kin be given it now still" and later "I jumped in the thuh river without uh word. My kin are soppin wet" (112-13). Here, the dialogue reflects a reoccurring device: playing with

homophones, Suzan-Lori Parks style. “You all kin” can refer to family, as in “you are all kin,” but also aurally the word could be the verb “can” as in “you all can do it.” Depending on the actor’s delivery, audience members might hear the line a variety of ways, just as “Kin gave thuh first permission” as in “my ancestors let me know what to do,” and then “kin be given it now still” would either be read as “kin” or “and they *can* be giving it now still.” This word play is subtle, but can speak volumes depending on its interpretation. Black Man’s “sopping wet kin” can also refer to the slaves transported across the Atlantic (or even the ones jumped or pushed overboard in transit), as Old Man River Jordan says “Back tuh that. Yes” (114). No matter which way it may be interpreted, ancestry (kin) and ability to do something (can) are equally important in this exchange. Parks’s rep and rev style also gives her the ease to go back and forth between time periods, utilizing the totality of language and its linguistic multiplicities to create layered images. “That” and “this” become loaded signifiers of white patriarchy, colonialism, slavery, and everything else in between. Depending on the figure saying the particular line of dialogue or the moment exposed, “that” or “this” holds in its meaning a particular depth that actors must imbue with rich subtext.

In addition to the countless multitudes of black deaths through slavery and colonialism, which are referenced in the Overture and subsequent Choruses, the play ruminates on *this* black man in particular. In “Panel One: Thuh Holy Ghost” Black Man and particular food references are strategically linked. He keeps saying “Saint mines” and tells Black Woman “This does not belong tuh me. Somebody *planted* this on me. On me in my hands” (105, emphasis mine). “This” of which Black Man speaks refers to a watermelon, the incongruous fruit that has been literally “planted” in the

hands of so many African Americans in countless images. “Who gived birth tuh this I wonder who?” he questions repeatedly, wondering the origins of the inexplicable connection between watermelons and blacks, but then revises the question into “Who gived birth tuh me I wonder” referencing the natal alienation caused by the institution of slavery (106). Trying a different tactic, Black Man tries to go through each of his body parts, but finds that “Melon mines? —Don’t look like me” and then asks Black Woman almost comically “Was we green and stripey when we first comed out?” (107). Parks then satirically plays with the ridiculousness of the watermelon-black man connection as the story of Black Man’s death by electric chair is told by Black Woman using food-related imagery. She tells Black Man, “They juiced you some, huh?” (107) and Black Man replies later “Jump-juice meets me-mine juices I do uh slow softshoe like on water” (108). Electric current mingles with melon juice merges with black man as entertainer all in one single line. Then watermelons turn quickly into the food stereotype of fried chicken as Black Woman uses the word “fry” to describe his death. “Woulda fried you right here on thuh front porch but we don’t got enough electric” Black Woman tells Black Man, (also implicating the discrepancies of public utilities between black and white parts of town). Thus, Black Man’s death becomes a death in “thuh middle of thuh City” much like a public hanging where yet another black man’s death becomes a public spectacle where “folks come tuh watch with picnic baskets” (107).

Yet through Black Woman, Parks reclaims relationships to food as chicken becomes a method of healing throughout this scene as Black Woman tries to get Black Man to eat. She constantly asks “Hen?” of Black Man, knowing that when he came

home, Black Man would want a “good big hen dinner” (106). In an effort to show her love, she kills every chicken in the neighborhood (ninety-three) and then breaks the necks of twenty-three more. Although subtle, the continual nurturing instinct that Black Woman possesses highlights qualities of the overbearing black matriarch stereotype, but as Yvette Louis argues, Parks’s continued counter-narratives by Black Woman offer up her body as “the discursive site of restoration for black subjectivity” (141). Not only does she resurrect his personal history by prompting Black Man to remember his continual deaths, but she also resurrects his subject position through food and storytelling.

The spectacle of black death repeats again in the panel “Thuh Lonesome 3some” which recounts elements from a lynching. At the start of the scene, Black Man asks Black Woman to loosen his collar—“no air in here” (118). Once again the word play in the dialogue has multiple meanings. As Black Woman says “let me loosen your collar for you you comed home after uh hard days work,” the initial connotation reflects the image of the suburban housewife helping her husband take off his tie after a day at the office, and yet Black Man’s “hard days work” was “runnin from them,” escaping the lynch mob not the guys standing around the water cooler (118). As Black Woman notes, “your days work aint like any other day work: you bring your tree branch home” signifying on lynching and bringing home office work at the same time. Her litany of images continues, asking to loosen his tie, “neck-lace,” noose, and tree branch, all deeply affective symbols of lynching. Now, instead of the electric chair in the middle of town, Black Man’s death calls to mind the myriad of lynching photos with townspeople surrounding the desecrated body of a man, as he achingly notes

"some of them pointed they summoned uh laughed they some looked quick in an then they looked uhway… I hung on out tuh dry" (119). Akin to the "souvenir" body parts of the lynched, squirreled away by onlookers, here Black Man takes home his *own* souvenir—the tree branch and the instrument of his death.[23] In this panel as well, Black Woman continues to nourish Black Man, although here, she keeps cracking eggs throughout the scene. To me, the counting of the eggs and their audible cracking open hauntingly echoes, through sound, the crack of a tree branch or the crack of bones; not only does the scene recount lynching's horrors in dialogue but also in sound cues. Strange fruit indeed.

Parks does not dwell in lynching's distressing images for too long. Parks's aim is not to dwell, for it lessens the impact of the symbols. "Her disruption of logical structure and discontinuity of language seem to free up the emotive potential of the words," writes Louis as "this strategy makes the pressures easier to read" (143). The tree branch of Black Man's death turns quickly into the second Chorus of a twisted "family tree" supplied by Ham. Signifying and stereotyping on black vernacular slang by using particular pronouns, Ham recounts his ancestry, and his circuitous story implies the rape of female slaves, incest, miscegenation, and single motherhood:

> Now very simply: Wassername she finally gave intuh It and together they broughted forth uh wildish one called simply Yo. Yo gone be wentin much too long without hisself uh comb in from thuh frizzly that resulted comed one called You…. those strange relations between That thuh mother and Yuh Fathuh thuh son brought forth uh odd lot: called: Yes Massuh, Yes Missy, Yes maam n Yes Suh Mstish Suh whuch

[23] Harvey Young's 2005 article, "The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching" (*Theatre Journal* 57.4, 639-58) explicates this unimaginable practice of saving body parts from the lynched body in acute detail, and David Marriott's chapter "I'm gonna borer me a Kodak: Photography and Lynching" in *On Black Men* argues that the lynching photograph replaces the body part and stands-in as souvenir.

> goes tuh show that relations with your relations produces complications… Themuhns married outside thuh tribe joinin herself with uh man they called WhoDat. Themuhns in WhoDat brought forth only one child called WhoDatDere. (Parks 121-22)

Theatrical reviews of productions of this play have accounted for this scene as being one of the most comical in the play, and clearly from reading the above truncation, the complicated nature of his story would seemingly work better performed than read on the page. Again, subtextual staging of lines such as "Wassername finally *gave intuh* It" and "those *strange relations*" readily imply Parks's signifying more clearly than a cursory read of the monologue. Giving into "It" signifies not only "It" as either the slave master (or dehumanized slave) or "it" as the act of rape upon the slave, just as "strange relations" could infer historical viewpoints on miscegenation or incest.

As Carpio suggests "the speech exemplifies Parks's bountiful creativity at the same time that it evokes a past in which such creativity would have been ruthlessly denied" (212). I also add that the use of pronouns signifies on the difficulty in mapping African American ancestry—usually such forays into family lineages end with a property register from a plantation, but certainly nothing before that. Ham ends his family history with the birth of "Uncle (who from birth was gifted with great singin and dancing capabilities which helped him make his way in life but tended tuh bring shame on his family)" which is one of Parks's most obvious references to minstrel sterotypes, that of Uncle Tom (Parks 122). The rest of the figures repeat "Shame on his family" and Yes And Greens commands "Write *that* down" (122, emphasis Parks). Again the elusive "that" could signify on a variety of things, inferring that the stereotypical Uncle Tom/black entertainer is one of the only images

that has been written down, creating a legacy placed *upon* African Americans, instead of a true legacy of ancestral history. In fact, the bulk of Ham's speech does not place blame on anyone in particular save for Uncle. "Whose fault is it" is a reoccurring question that the Chorus asks various characters, with Black Man usually responding "Saint mines" implying that fault is practically impossible to pin on one person alone, Black Man and his watermelon notwithstanding.

This Choral moment also repeats (from the first Chorus panel) the African American folk song and schoolyard song line "Hambone, Hambone where you been? Round the world and back again" although, of course, it is spelled "roun" and "worl" (123). Ham answers, "I was there" and again with more emphasis "I WAS THERE" (123). This declamation is two-fold: it is an admission of witnessing, a recognition, and a reminder that African American history cannot be erased. But it also leads the reader into the next "family tree" that Ham recounts—a family tree in absentia, or rather, a family tree cleaved in two—that of a slave auction. "Ham. Is. Not. Tuh. BLAME!" the character screams, and launches into:

> "SOLD! Allyall[9] not tuh be confused w/allus[12] joined w/allthem[3] in from that union comed forth wasshisname[21] SOLD wassername[19] still but huh reputation uh thistree one uh thuh 2 twins loses her sign through fiddling n falls w/ugly old yuh-fathuh[4] given she[8] SOLD…." (124)

And the monologue continues without any punctuation until Black Man stops Ham with "And the list goes on and on. Dont it" (124). The curious superscript numbers do not translate into performance (unless actors and director choose to recount them within the speech) yet Parks's "new math" only reinforces the slave auctioning nature of this speech. *This* family tree cannot be confused with the previous one, as Ham

intones “let us not forgetyessuhmassuhsuh” and “jessgrew” directly referencing the stereotypical slave or servant with “jessgrew” signifying on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* Topsy character (124). None of the fantastical pronouns are capitalized in this speech like they were in Ham’s previous one (a subtle but intentional usage I am sure), leading one to believe that in this particular “family tree” the names are mere markers for bodies as object. Paradoxically, even though the numbers do not translate into performance, they mark the bodies with more emphasis. Elam and Rayner write that Ham’s speeches parody the stump speeches from the olio portion of the nineteenth century minstrel shows, but through Parks’s able hand, these two passages signify on many more levels than just minstrelsy.

In the final scene between Black Man and Black Woman, “Panel Five: In the Garden of Hoodoo It” Black Man finally prepares for his burial. Black Woman has fed him hens, offered him eggs, and how she makes him eat feathers, for “stuffin” (125). Not only is the Black Man made whole (arguably a thematic that runs through almost all of Parks’s play) through Black Woman’s food, but now she stuffs him like a taxidermy animal, making sure that he looks like he should for burial. Black Man tries to refuse the feathers, going off on a litany of food that he prefers, which continues with soul food references, including greens and yams.[24]

Black Woman also alludes to the cycle of seasons and the comfort in the repetition, for as the panel title attests, they are in a “garden of hoodoo,” or rather a garden of voodoo and conjure where Black Man can come back after death by falling

[24] He even remembers “BRACH-A-LEE” or broccoli, but I would argue the choice of this Parksian alternative phonetical spelling signifies on the African American folk hero Stagger Lee, which can also be spelled Stack-o-lee, Stag-a-lee, and the like.

twenty-three floors, electric chair and lynching and return to the Biblical garden of Eden from where they were once expelled. “Somethins turnin. Huh. Whatizit.—Mercy. Mercy. Huh…. Whensit gonna end. Soon. Huh. Mercy. Thuh three. Springtime. And harvest. Huh. Somethins turnin… Gnaw on this awe on that” Black Woman tells Black Man (125). Although she may not be ready for his final rest, the seasonal signs tell her it has finally come. As the panel’s title also reads, they are in the garden of “hoodoo it” as in “*who* do it” or “who done it” or “who is going to do it.” The term “hoodoo” also references an African American folk tradition that share some traits as voodoo, but also melds Christian spirituality with African ancestral traditions. In simplest terms, the power of hoodoo relies on a conjurer, or rootworker, who offers elements from the earth (roots, herbs, animal remains, blood, and the like) to create poultices, potions, or other spirituality-infused items to help with common problems. Here Black Woman offers the fulfilling elements of the chicken to restore Black Man—not only the nourishing meat of the chicken and its eggs, but also the feathers to fill him as well. This Eden is Christian and African at the same time.

The scene also signifies on the play itself, as Black Man recounts his *own* personal history or family tree, but here it is in a much more intimate moment between Black Woman and himself. His retelling affirms his identity, and he reconstructs his memories to solidify his present state. Instead of the flagrant use of slang pronouns as Ham laughably uses, Black Man employs various derivations of the verb “to be,” literally and figuratively claiming his own existence:

> We sittin on this porch righ now aint we. Uh huhn. Aah. Yes. Sittin righ here right now on it in the ainthuh first time either iduhnt it…. I bein in uh Now: uh Now bein in uh Then: I bein, in Now in Then, in I

> will be. I was be too but thats uh Then thats past. That me that was-be is uh me-has-been… (126)

He also alludes to the slavery folktale of flying, asserting that he can fly around their yard, but "them stays fixed" (126). Them—the white slaver of the initial folktale? Them—the hegemony? Them—the stereotype? Again, the multiplicity of signifyin' allows a variety of readings. As Black Woman cleans his feet (which certainlys allude to Christian imagery of Jesus and Mary Magdalene), Black Man asserts "I: be. You: is. It: be. He, She: thats us (thats it.) We: thats he in she: you aroun me: us be here" (126). Black Man need not write this down, as Yes And Greens has been telling everyone to do—he affirms himself into existence through his own admission. "You. You. Remember me," he tells Black Woman, returning to the only sure way of passing on history orally. Later "remember" repeats and revises into "re-member" so that not only is Black Man asking for his stories to be committed to memory, but also his corporeal self. Ironically, he picks a "stripey suit" to be buried in—one more backhanded joke from Parks (for he *is* Black Man With Watermelon, is he not?)

The poignant goodbye between Black Man and Woman flows into the Final Chorus, where all the figures repeat and revise statements they have made throughout the play, recounting Black Man's various deaths, recounting the history of the worl when it was roun. Most significant for me is Yes And Greens's command about writing "it" down, echoing W.E.B. DuBois's call for African American theater for us, by us, near us, and about us:

> You will write down thuh past and you will write down thuh present and in what is thuh future. You will write it down. *(Pause)* It will be *of us* but you will mention them from time to time so that in the future when they come along theyll know *how* they exist. *(Pause)* it will be

> *for us* but you will mention them from time to time so that in the future when they come along theyll know *why* they exist. *(Pause)* You will carve it all out of a rock so that in the future when we come along we will know that the rock does yes exist. (131, emphasis mine).

Yes And Greens demands that the history writ must be inclusive, deliberately implicating hegemonic historical practices, but also alluding to the importance and influence of the Africanist presence central to dominant white culture (in the word choices of "how" and "why" relative to existence).[25] Among the figures, this cultural knowledge is already known, however, as Ham says "In thuh rock. I wrote: ha ha ha" (131). The rest of the characters follow suit, as the laugh increases in tenor. This is not the first time there is collective laughter, but this particular laughter reflects not only a taunt, as in "I know something you don't know," but also a confirmation that regardless of how many black deaths, regardless of how many erasures of black humanity, black existence continues. The figures endlessly repeat at the final bell tolls, "Hold it. Hold it. Hold it…." (131). Again, Parks employs "it," the empty yet undeniably full pronoun, signifying nothing and everything at the same time.

The play's strategic turn of phrase, multiple meanings and connotations for single words, and rep and rev turn generalized stories from African American history and stereotypical stories from dominant culture about African Americans into a singular story of one black man. By singularizing this particular story, the play in return adds to the larger compendium of the history of African Americans. This cycle, this going "roun," mirrors the cyclical nature of her play. Each repetition and its

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[25] Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and Brenda Dixon Gottshield's *Digging the Africanist Presence* both detail the importance of Africa and African Americans as *integral* and *intrinsic* to American culture, as opposed to thinking that African Americans have merely "contributed" or added on to existing structures.

subsequent revisions, each “that,” “this,” or “there,” each signifyin(g) reference on African American stereotypes are all strategically placed within the trajectory of the play not to confound audiences and readers, but to leave much open to interpretation. Parks purposefully uses such vague modifiers as “that” to allow for multiple subtexts and inroads into a dense script. As she told Steven Drukman, “I’d rather talk about the ‘reading’ of my plays than the ‘meaning.’ Every time I talk about meaning to people it sounds like they’re trying to substitute something else for what I’ve written” (356). “Reading” the script requires multiple reads to dig through the (sometimes) impenetrable layers. I think that is why the format of repetition and revision seems a natural fit for Parks’s writing. By offering particular words or phrases again and again, sometimes choosing to change a word slightly with great effect, or not changing the word at all but rather allowing such revision in the delivery of the speaker or the placement of the dialogue, allows the reader or audience to review the statement again and process the moment anew. In a way, there is an act of freedom in the rep and rev which removes the text from any standard meaning; thus, the script becomes fluid instead of static. Repetition and revision also epitomize the main character of the play: the Black Man keeps coming back. Varying tropes of blackness keep circulating back and forth between Black Man and Woman to the chorus of voices. Like Walker’s silhouettes, the figures represent multiple angles of vision. Like gallery viewers, we gaze into the varied characters signifying on blackness, reaching for comprehension in the multiple layers. Stereotypes may provide the starting point, but are quickly negated through Parks’s effective theatrical devices. The play meditates on the perpetual

nature of black death, but in its revisions (and the return always of the black man) it also commemorates black survival.

"Why substitute one set of stereotypes with another?"

Art critic Thomas McEvilley writes in the exhibition catalogue of the recent retrospective on Kara Walker's work:

> At issue is whether it is possible—whatever one's intention may be—to draw attention to something without increasing its power or implicating oneself in the hegemonic claims that one is critiquing…. Some would argue that Walker is 'unwittingly reinforcing the stereotypes she parodies' but the objection immediately arises: Does that mean one should repress expression of the things one wants to denounce—try to make them go away simply by refusing to admit they exist? (54)

McEvilley puts into clear relief the aim of this dissertation. If harmful stereotypes are employed overtly, or rather, if stereotypes are not the intention, but are clearly identifiable, what is the goal of such work? I would argue that Parks's and Walker's work, and the plays that follow, remind us that these stereotypes have not passed, that America still lives with its haunted memories in the present day. Granted, those ghosts have been morphed and manipulated into modern incarnations, but their ancestry is apparent. The negotiation of stereotypes from slavery to today in the varied works palpably present the past in its explicit present tense.

In the world of visual arts, Walker's medium provides her the outlet to do something that playwrights Parks, Corthron and Nottage do not necessarily have the ability to do: she is able to put forth her work on the gallery walls and leave the space to the viewers. Ultimately, the responsibility of the reception lies in what an individual

audience member perceives. Within theater, the "viewer's response" to a text is multi-layered, filtered many times after leaving the playwright's hand, going through director to actor, from costume designer to dramaturg and so on. What makes theater unique is that there are many viewpoints working toward completion of a theatrical production, and with such, the text can be performed as the playwright may have intended or become a different piece altogether as the collaboration team finds ways to stage the text that might highlight themes the playwright may not have envisioned.

These women viscerally bring race to the forefront by bringing attention to stories and narratives that the general populous all thought were best forgotten. In Walker's case, her narratives reconstruct slavery and the (re)memory of it while reinventing it at the same time. Through fantastical and sexualized forms, through black on white and white on black images constructing blacks and whites, Walker's silhouettes force audiences to reckon with the past. While Walker's silhouettes, in their positions of not so delicate sexual acts, recall embodiment, the plays of Parks, Corthron, and Nottage have an advantage over this two dimensional art: the plays desire and require actual bodies on stage. In Walker's work, audiences must read *into* the corporeal, but in the theater, audiences read *on* the corporeal. In the silhouettes, viewers must fill in the blackness, fill the hole to make the body whole. The looking that occurs, the viewing of the "bodies" is one-sided: Walker's bodies do not look back. However, on stage in the production of these plays, an engagement takes place between actor and audience for "the black body is not a blank screen against which meaning gets projected. Instead, it is the core text already infused with meaning"

(Young "Touching History" 144). The actor's body physically enacts blackness at the same time the audience imbues blackness on the character the actor is portraying.

While the silhouettes are *in* an exhibition, the actors onstage *are* exhibited in multiple ways and meanings. If the black body is "a body that is made to be given, to be seen" (Young 144), then these plays provide a particular kind of seeing, an opportunity for witnessing the stories of black bodies not usually portrayed on most American theater stages, or if shown, given auxiliary roles in stereotypical fashion. In a way, it is as if through theater, Walker's silhouettes can be rescued from their endless cyclorama around the gallery walls, given flesh, and be fleshed out. Now the work can begin, and a dialogue between actors and audiences can take place. As viewers, audiences have the power either to accept or reject the performances of class, race or gender on the stage. According to Susan Bennett, "Cultural systems, individual horizons of expectations and accepted theatrical conventions all activate the decoding process for a specific production, but, in turn, the direct experience of that production feeds back to revise a spectator's expectations, to establish or challenge conventions, and, occasionally, to reform the boundaries of culture" (207). This feedback loop between actor and audience, between text and representation, provides an opening for the disruption and re-envisioning of stereotypes. Unlike Walker, the playwrights have access to the image *and* the word. This is not to say that Walker's images do not "speak" to audiences in a highly theatrical way; however, the uniqueness of theater allows for the interrogation of stereotype, of cultural commodification, of varying identities through the suggestive power of speech. Michael Harris notes "Turning derogatory images in on themselves or inventing them to destabilize their meanings is

not as effective as the performance of speech has been in undermining terms" (221). As if they jumped out from the wall, Parks's Black Man and Black Woman fill out the silhouettes that run through Walker's murals. Like Walker, Parks asks audiences to discern her various coded meanings through the continual device of repetition and revision. Each repetition offers a new way in which to uncover the myriad constructions of blackness, each revision delving deeper in the historical implication of stereotypes.

Chapter Three:

From Welfare Queens to Original Gangstas:

Narratives of Power in Kia Corthron's *Breath, Boom*

The opening scene of Kia Corthron's 2002 play *Breath, Boom* powerfully initiates the audience into the life of a teenage girl gang in the Bronx. The action takes place on a street corner, with Malika, Angel and Prix waiting for their fellow gang member Comet to arrive. "*What*," she states as she walks on, and her monologue progresses into a rant, accusing the gang of disrupting her birthday party, but it seems the real reason is that she was made to look like a fool in front her of friends because of her mother:

> *I* know where you goin'! *I* know where you goin'! Huzzy! Ain't that a sweet way talk to you daughter only daughter her eighteenth I think but say nothin', no time to bitch with her cuz I got the damn call, know my duty I come down here and now yaw got nothin' to say? Hop my ass down to work cuz I'm called… (Corthron 5)

In these short bursts, much is revealed. First, she is turning 18, a pivotal year in that she is no longer a minor; second, her relationship with her mother is fraught, as her mother does not approve of her participation in the gang, but has no control over it. The gang is clearly "work," and she must fulfill her "duty;" however Comet does not understand until the final moment what the girls intend to do. It is only with the stage direction, noting "Prix gives Angel and Malika a look" that "Comet is suddenly terrified" knowing that they will punish her with a severe beating (5). Corthron specifically notes in the directions that the girls beat "the crap out of Comet: no mercy" and that by the end of the beating the audience should find "on the ground: a

bleeding, near-unconscious Comet" (5-6). Just as Comet seems as if she cannot take any more, a Memorial Day fireworks display interrupts the brutal beating. "Don't kill her," Prix "absently repeats" as she watches the display, and the women stand "captivated," ignoring the damage they just inflicted on Comet (6). The seemingly incongruous addition of fireworks to this scene does two things: they save Comet's life, and they disrupt, however briefly, the audience's reception of these characters as representative of typical black gang members. At this moment, the audience may not recognize the work the fireworks are doing in bifurcating the representation of these characters, but they will become a powerful theatrical device throughout the rest of the play

Focusing on fourteen years in the life of Bronx gang member Prix, on the surface, *Breath, Boom* highlights the stories of girl gangs in juvenile detention and prison, and, more deeply, the power of white hegemonic discourse to control the insidious, stereotypical link between blackness and criminality. Black urban youth, particularly, are routinely characterized as criminal, whether the stereotype relates to gangs, drug pushers, or a more generalized fear of young blacks as suspicious. "Impoverished youth of color are seen as surplus in the sense of an unusable commodity, the remainder stock, the detritus of the economy, an inhuman capital capable of producing profit on capital investment only by being treated as alien(able) objects," David Theo Goldberg surmises (219) and the path created for such teens usually ends in incarceration or, at the very least, being branded as possibly criminal. Affecting exponentially more minorities than whites, America's prison system is, in essence a "(re)invention and perpetuation of racial vision and division" (Wacquant,

"Race As" 136). Growing out of the "black brute" stereotype of the early twentieth century where black men were characterized as savage and destructive, criminal and malicious, the contemporary stereotype of poor African Americans as criminal (either possible prisoner, actual prisoner, or previously imprisoned) has assaulted American society in recent decades.

In *Breath, Boom*, playwright Kia Corthron interrogates notions of criminality and blackness through the various characters in the play, most intently through the main character of Prix. The play also exposes the complicated stereotype of the welfare queen through the character of Prix's mother, known in the play only as "Mother." Act One concentrates on Prix's teenage years, where she not only witnesses her mother in prison, due to the domestic violence-induced killing of her boyfriend, but finds herself there soon after, spending time in juvenile detention for gang-related activity. In Act Two, now an adult, Prix's continued vocation of running drugs ensures incarceration once again, as the second half of the play focuses on Prix's prison term and subsequent months after parole.

Through a cursory glance, Corthron's play reifies black pathology; however, deeply imbedded within the play's structure, the suggestion of actual firework displays or the description of fireworks thread throughout the thirteen scenes, embellishing violent clashes with aural interplay or interrupting intense dramatic dialogue with visual symbolism. This chapter argues how Corthron strategically uses the unique theatrical device of fireworks to dismantle the black criminal stereotype. By interrupting the narrative with firework displays, descriptions of fireworks, and at one point, a violent episode that symbolically echoes fireworks, the play disarms the black

criminal stereotype. Like Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man…* Corthron's strategy is risky, in that she invokes stereotypical situations and characterizations, but I argue that the play re-appropriates the stereotypes by upending them from within. Prix may conform to the black criminal stereotype when viewed initially by audiences, but as the play delves deeper into her character, a more complex portrait emerges, causing the stereotype to unfix itself from her black body. Through detailed structural analysis of *Breath, Boom* and the character of Prix, these "firework moments" literally and figuratively explode the continuation of the black criminal stereotype, but at the same time, as fleeting as the wisps of trailing smoke after a light explosion, this may only be possible during the ephemeral space of performance.

Livin' large: original gangstas and firework dreams

In Corthron's work, the stereotypes that could be interpreted from the characters are rooted in their status as urban, poor, and black: Prix is the "OG" or "original gangster," her mother the welfare queen, and her fellow juvie inmates, unwed teenage mothers. It is not that Prix is completely emblematic of all black gang members (for example, she is female rather than the more usual male gang member), but the qualities that she represents are endemic of America's continued linkage between blackness and criminality. Saidiya Hartman notes, "Blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference. Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection… it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle" (56). Bodies marked racially as "black" do not get to fully choose whether to

perform “blackness” or not: the choice has been made for them by the color of their skin. This is not to say that blacks have no agency, but rather the power that is enacted on their bodies reduces, and in the case of this play, denies possibility for agency.

The narratives at work in Kia Corthron’s play locate within the ghetto and fasten tightly onto poor African Americans, stereotypes that have been fabricated and cultivated for decades by the American populous. Each character’s specific narrative of blackness, whether welfare queen or gangbanger, is subject to such abjection by the state, defined in this play by the effects of inner city poverty and the power of the penal system. In this context, state power is readily visible in matters of economics, from welfare qualifications for the poor, to Medicare stipulations for the elderly, to financial aid grants and loans for students. The state also powerfully exerts itself in matters of justice. The creation and enforcement of laws compose a majority of the state’s dominant role in our lives, as these “rules” are summarily followed by consequences for infringement upon those rules and reach across economic, social, and racial lines.

Varying narratives then emerge from the machinations of this power, narratives that work their way into the general consciousness and eventually become indelibly linked with the power of the state. These narratives embellish state power by providing legitimacy to its control, inciting respect and/or fear. Initially, while these narratives may have been created from actual situations, they proliferate into epic tales that find foothold in the social consciousness, reducing individuals to mere characters in a highly successful fiction propagated by the state. With the wide acceptance by the hegemony of such narratives, they ultimately sanction forms of state violence—from

brutal, physical enforcement of laws to forced arrests and incarcerations, to the wider insidiousness of the dependence on welfare and the fostering and sustainment of a culture of poverty. As Joy James articulates, "Racialized narratives constructed around crime, declining national intelligence, and white 'victimization' by affirmative action instigated by dark-skinned aggressors—in short, the violent, intellectually unqualified, and morally corrupt who usurp the rights of the law-abiding, moral, and intellectually competent—would be more amusing if such mythmaking were not so widely embraced" (15). Why then would an African American playwright such as Corthron (who has self-identified as a political playwright) continue to re-inscribe these narratives, these myths James so pointedly describes? While on the surface, the characters in *Breath, Boom* situate within such stories, the play purposefully builds upon common knowledge of black stereotypes in order to expose them, showing the audience that by blithely accepting these narratives, they are bound to gain greater hold in society.

What Prix initially represents through the performance of the OG stereotype is what Loic Wacquant would deem a product of the carceral continuum. As he suggests in "Slavery to Mass Incarceration," the prison system is a continuation of slavery, the Jim Crow South, and the ghetto. Each of these institutions contains and reinforces blackness, all requiring anti-black animus in the constant (re)production of institutionality. Violence against the black is within the "distinct space" of the ghetto or the prison, a "relation of ethnoracial control and closure built out of stigma, constraint, territorial confinement, and institutional encasement" (50). Trapped within the enclosure of the ghetto, the gang life does not offer a way out, but rather a path to

the captivity of the prison. In both worlds, as there is no way out, there is no advancement, no progression, rather just a change of scenery. For Wacquant, the path from the chains of chattel slavery to the bars of prison directly ties into the reception of blackness. In stereotypical images, the historical notion of the black brute or black savage evolves into a well-circulated type, a contemporary stereotype of black as criminal, or at the very least, black as suspect, with the intent to criminalize. Thus, the stereotype morphs into black as prisoner—not one to be pitied as subject to harsh treatment, but one to be feared and locked away behind bars.

From the beginning of the play, Corthron deftly dances between stereotypical characterizations and complex portraits. While the welfare queen is not the focus of the play, by virtue of being her daughter, Prix is a product of "the agent of destruction, the creator of the pathological, black, urban, poor family from which all ills flow; a monster creating crack dealers, addicts, muggers and rapists—men who become those things because of being immersed in *her* culture of poverty" (Lubiano 339, emphasis in original). According to stereotypical rationale, The Mother is the reason Prix desires to be in a gang. Continually through the play, *Breath, Boom* shows the audience how urban, poor African Americans are "normally" conceived and treated by the general populous, and in this way, I argue the audience can look *through* these stereotypical narratives to see the proverbial "man behind the curtain" in the way that blackness and criminality are continually linked in American society. To reconsider the power and effectiveness of stereotype reflects the primacy of the visual and its potent currency in contemporary identity politics. Kia Corthron's work negotiates the slippery interplay, and in taking the risk to use and riff upon certain stereotypes, her plays provide "the

possibility of investigating the fetishistic force of stereotypes in American culture" (Carpio 14) and ultimately, offer the possibility to re-envision and reconstruct African Americanness.

Who's wearing the crown now? The welfare queen and her court

Comet's tirade monologue in the opening scene of this play sets the stage for the characterization of stereotypical welfare queens, either embodied on stage by Prix's mother or referenced in the stories told by the gang girls. In the next scene, Angel mentions that her mother sends her to Prix's house for "errand-runnin' every five minutes" to borrow this week's *Jet* magazine or to "buy couple food stamps" (7). Malika remarks that Angel's mother is "nice. Soft. Not hollerin' all the time I bet she never even whipped yaw" (7). When Comet enters a few lines later, home from the hospital after her beating, Angel asks "you getting' along between with your mother?... while you was in the hospital, all by herself she was babysittin'" (8). Comet retorts, "First bruise I'da found on my baby, I'da killed that bitch," (9). Now a clearer picture emerges, conforming to the dominant narrative of the urban black poor: they subsist on welfare, their homes are run by screeching black mothers who beat their children, who, in turn, have babies of their own.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes that the welfare mother is a major stereotype labeling black women, for "she is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring" (76). Without introducing the Mother to the audience via onstage dialogue or visual clues, as her first exchanges with her boyfriend Jerome are off-stage, the

audience must access the common welfare queen narrative of their imaginations so popularized by the America media, television and film. As Collins argues, “Creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty and that of African American communities shifts the angle of vision away from the structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves” (77). While the arc of the play’s main narrative does not privilege the Mother’s story, the elements that do make up a composite sketch of her do influence how Prix could be read by audiences or readers, contributing to the OG stereotype.

First, “the sound of laughter, a man and a woman” (Corthron 8) is heard, then after a bit of dialogue, the character Jerome says: “What did you say?” with the Mother’s replying “I didn’t say nothin’ I didn’t say nothin’,” followed by a bang “as if someone had been thrown against the wall” (9). After Malika and Angel leave, there are “a few moments of laughter and sexual breathing” (10) and another blowout ensues, complete with Jerome’s “Bitch, where is it?” and “a brief struggle with furniture banging” (11). “The battle rages on” underneath Prix’s conversation with Comet, and the fight backstage ends with “a huge crash, then silence” (11). At her entrance into Prix’s room, the Mother is “bruised from the fight” and “laughs nervously” to Prix as she tells her, “that crash, I hardly hit him I think he’s mostly passed out. Wine. Lots and lots and lotsa…” (11). Prix’s first comment to her is not “are you ok” but “guess he didn’t kill ya” (11). The Mother launches into a string of excuses for why she “lets” the abusive Jerome continue to play a role in their lives. Here is yet another image added to the cadre of social narratives of blackness, in this instance, representing urban black men as deviant, abusive drunks. The same system

that affects Prix and her mother also implicates Jerome: the blight of the urban poverty as enacted on the black populous. It would be easy initially to read the Mother's following tirade on Jerome as the sign of a weak woman battered by the angry black man, yet another stereotypical quality. "You think I wanted it?" she says to Prix (Corthron 12). "I got the restrainin' order! I got it, fourteen years! Fourteen years *dumb!* Fourteen years I been puttin' up with it, finally I wise up, restrainin' order, six months it been effect, how many times he been her that six months? Seven!" (12). The Mother offers the fact that the police are too slow to arrive to stop Jerome from picking the apartment lock with a paper clip.

Corthron's strategic insertions against commonplace welfare queen narratives are subtle, such as when we learn of the police's inability to enforce the restraining order or that public housing can hardly protect her if Jerome can open the door with a mere paper clip as reasons why the Mother allows Jerome into the apartment. The Mother's argument "shifts the angle of vision" Collins refers to in the qualities of the welfare-mother stereotype with the treatment of the urban poor implicated: while the Mother may have followed the rules of law and order by filing a restraining order, she is summarily ignored by the state, here represented by the police. Later in the scene, as Jerome awakes and tries to enter Prix's room, the Mother "escapes" into the closet, a visual euphemism on many levels. In the context of the story, she has been "in the dark" in relation to Prix's childhood molestation by Jerome (which she soon learns from her hidden spot in the closet), but in the ensuing social narrative of power that I locate within this text, the poor black woman has receded to the shadows after admitting her inability to stand up to Jerome, to get herself and her daughter out of

their debilitating situation. Prix's final line of the scene, "If you weren't always playing Helen Keller, bitch, you mighta knowed a long time ago" marks their relationship (13). From Prix's perspective, the mother has been deaf, dumb, and blind to Jerome's past molestation of Prix, and, the audience is led to assume, most of her childhood in general. Quickly in the next scene the audience learns through Prix's visit to a prison that the Mother has been put in jail for killing Jerome. Whether she did it in self-defense in defiance of his decades' long brutality to the family or because of the revelation of Prix's molestation, the Mother unfortunately becomes another black woman in jail. Lubiano highlights the inequities within this stereotype and the larger societal view of lower class black women, noting:

> The welfare-dependent single mother is finally the synecdoche, the shortest possible shorthand, for the pathology of the poor, urban, black culture. Responsible for creating and maintaining a family that can only be perceived as pathological compared to the normative (and thus allegedly 'healthy') family structure in the larger society, the welfare mother is the root of greater black pathology. (335)

With this cultural stigmatism surrounding the stereotype of the welfare queen, and thus her progeny, the black criminal, the play indeed must have jarring events to dislodge the stereotype from the character, or if not radically remove such stereotypes from circulation, cause readers and audiences to rethink how these stereotypes are created and perpetuated.

The one character who could seemingly "escape" from the "distinct space" of ethnoracial control that hems in Prix and her Mother is Angel; however, even Angel's narrative in the play is still a product of the social systems of power. While in the context of the play's structure, the details of Angel's life serve to compose a fuller

picture of the character, Corthron has not added them in solely for the actress's benefit of a back story, but rather makes a comment on the systems of control that subject African Americans. While Angel is a member of Prix's gang, it is clear she does not desire to become an OG. She follows the rules: she beats Comet, she learns successfully to twirl the razor blade on her tongue, but she also knows her limits. In a way, Angel is completely complacent to her position: she follows the rules and puts up with the system. She even devotes a scrapbook to the family and friends *who are dead*, cheerily showing Prix the layout of the pages, mentioning old boyfriends and fellow classmates, and devoting a centerfold "*and* the next eight pages" of her scrapbook to her brother Vince, shot by a stray bullet from a drive-by (15). In a review of the New York premiere at Playwrights Horizons, Sarah Stevenson writes "this speech is magnificent, destabilizing the audience and leaving it unsure whether to laugh at her seemingly blurred border between life and death, or react with a sentimental empathy to the deaths she describes" (293). While she is glad that she "ain't been caught yet, no Probation Officer slave-masterin' my life" (13), what she fails to realize is that her entire life has been "slave-mastered" by the system in which she lives, and in actuality, a probation officer is the least of her worries.

Her re-emergence in Act Two, after the girls have grown up, solidifies the power of the state to "master" her life and that of her family. Angel invites the recently released Prix to a belated July Fourth picnic with her children because "my mother thought it be nice to ask" (40). The scene begins mid-story, as Angel fills Prix on what's she missed over the past few months, recounting the beating her husband received at the hands of the police. Why? Racial profiling. "I don't know why he don't

get ridda that damn car anyway," she laments, "he been stopped harassed three times in four months ain't he figured out yet cops don't like a black man drivin' that make a car?" (39). She then mentions that her younger brother Darryl has been arrested for selling food stamps, recalling that "ain't the taxpayers so mad he cheated thirty bucks this month feed his kids while business people writin' off two hundred dollar lunches every fuckin' day a the week" (40). While Angel recognizes the inadequacies, her consequences unfortunately do not exempt her from this system. Both her husband and her brother are subject to the same controls that place Prix in prison: their blackness marks them as criminal. Her husband is flagged as a car thief and not a man able to afford the car he drives, and her brother receives a felony conviction and a "lifetime a welfare" for trying to make ends meet in a system that refuses to meet the ends (40). The urban ghetto, a current version of slavery's plantation system, highlights the continuity of hegemonic power most specifically in the narrative of Angel's family.

Strategically, Angel's storyline is not overt, rather the implications are subtle. Why? Is it because Angel is a likable character? Because she follows the rules? While her story may create sympathy for her character, it offers yet another example of the dominant social narrative. By virtue of being a secondary character, the audience is not given many opportunities to judge Angel any other way than through what she tells us about her situation. Angel is only an "angel" in the course of this play because she cannot help but work within the system that has created her condition, not because she is delivered from it. It is, however, in Prix in which Corthron displaces the black criminal narrative through a force as explosive as the fireworks themselves.

Situating the Stereotype

At the outset of the play, while Prix is not at OG status, she controls the gang's activities and its members. *Youth Gangs in American Society* describes OGs as "those referred to in African American gangs as men who have earned respect through a combination of longevity and achievement. Often they are expected to teach younger members the ways of the gang and/or to straighten out younger members causing trouble with the gang. Sometimes they are literally the founding member or members of the gang" (40). While the OG historically has been considered a male, Corthron skews the image of the OG by switching genders—the play focuses on women in gangs, a part of gang life not usually explored. This gender reversal also contributes to the strategy in troubling the stereotype, destabilizing audience assumptions about gang life and its fervent members. This is not to say that Prix exudes femaleness, per se, and her brief retorts to fellow gang girls do not join in discussions of boyfriends and dates, clothing and familial connections. Yet having her perform as a *female* OG calls to mind more than just the OG stereotype.

After Comet's tirade of having to leave her birthday party to meet her fellow gang members, Prix needs only give members Angel and Malika a look to cue them to beat Comet. However, Corthron specifically notes, "eventually Prix herself throws in a few kicks or punches" (Corthron 5). As the leader, Prix does not have to participate in the beating, but rather is there to make sure her directive is carried out. Yet the gang beating is decisively interrupted and stopped by Prix's rapture of the city fireworks erupting above their heads. "Don't kill her" speaks Prix to the girls, calmly asking them to stop, which they do on command (6). Not only is Comet saved by the

fireworks, but so is the audience from the violence onstage. Prix certainly could have had the gang continue to beat Comet, but the fireworks completely stop the women in their tracks.

The clash between the OG stereotype and its subsequent erasure continue in the following scene in Prix's room, as fellow gang members banter about twirling razor blades with their tongues. Without looking up, Prix flatly states, "I find a spot of blood on my floor the owner's gonna lose six pints more" (9). The game quickly comes to a halt; the room goes quiet, filled only with the sounds of Prix's mother fighting in the hallway. Prix attempts no idle conversation with them, nor do they expect it, thus the first two scenes lay the foundation for Prix's OG edge. Yet when Comet attempts to connect to Prix and explain why she ditched the gang to attend her birthday party, the fireworks save her again; this time, they interrupt Prix's tirade on her betrayal of the gang. Comet's simple question of "Whatchu wanna do? Shoot 'em off?" brings a full monologue detailing how she might create a fireworks display (10). Her description becomes animated and lyrical as she excitedly describes the colors and the images, the dialogue hardly even punctuated, as if the writing tells the actress not to take a breath to slow down:

> . . . the designer ain't the joyful bystander, she's right there pushin' the buttons and while the crowd's oohin' aahin' this'n she's already on to the next button . . . . I'd throw in a few willows, slower timin' and a softer feelin', tension to relaxation keep the audiences excited, anticipatin', then time for multiple-breakers, shell breakin' into a flower breakin' into another flower 'to another, then few comets Comets! . . . . *Now* finale, which of course is the bombs and the bombs and the bombs and "chaos" can't possibly be the description cuz this be the most precisely planned chaos you ever saw! (10-11)

Prix's excitement is infectious. Through the retelling of her visions, she finds a way to relate to Comet, happily recognizing that her name brings to mind one of the firework types she would use. However clichéd this moment may be, it is clear the fireworks divert her from playing the heavy and offer a moment to let her dream of an alternative narrative for her life, where a crowd of people relish in designs of exploding light, not exploding gang violence. However, this moment does not linger, as Corthron chooses to interrupt this dialogue with the argument between Prix's mother and boyfriend from backstage. This pattern continues throughout the play as Prix's visions of a firework future take her away from her present situation, alleviate her suffering, and conceptualize a possible future apart from what society has set up for her. Then reality enters in and the fireworks vanish as quickly as they appeared, tangible only in her words and visions, but not in actuality.

By scene four, Prix has been sentenced to time in juvenile detention, and here, out of any of the environments the play presents, the OG stereotype is most palpable. In her juvie cell, her roommate Cat prattles on, fueling the stereotype. "What the big one?" Cat asks. "Single most thing earned you all the gracious undivided esteem? I heard this: shot an enemy girl in the face…. And one time" she continues with the story, "and one time… and one time…" and the stories go on (18). Prix's reputation has preceded her: Cat knows the stories, and even if they exaggerate the actual circumstances, Prix rarely does anything to correct her. "Fifteen," she does interject to Cat's "you shoot dead some boy ten years old." "I don't kill no kids. Fifteen," Prix intones with no more explanation, as if a fifteen year old could be considered an adult. "OG! You gonna earn it" Cat screams in infatuation. "Original Gangsta, people

respect you long after you retire take me in!" pleads Cat excitedly (18). While the juxtaposition between Cat and Prix is at times laughable, Prix's role as the OG stays secure through the dramatic storytelling from Cat.

This "mystique" of the OG is further reinforced by Jerome's ghostly appearance. It reads "during Cat's speech, Jerome will enter the cell, eyes on Prix. Prix sees him; Cat doesn't. He exits" (17) and later during another one of Cat's lines, "Jerome will enter. Prix takes Cat's hairband—Cat doesn't notice—and effortlessly strangles Jerome to death" (18). During the ghostly strangling moment, Cat asks Prix, "the power, them dead you not, *you* made it happen, them dead, *you* done it! You ever get that high?" (18). "'Course," Prix calmly answers as Cat screams to be a part of the gang at the same time Prix strangles the already dead Jerome. The audience hears Prix confirm the excitement from gangbanging and killing as she physically "kills" another onstage. This moment actualizes the power of bodies onstage: it is not enough for Prix to speak about strangling Jerome, so here a monologue about her desire to kill that part of her life would not provide the most intense choice. Rather, Corthron uses a technique available to her through the possibilities of theater: the actor playing Jerome just reappears onstage. By now, audiences are well indoctrinated into non-realistic theatrical devices, so the addition of Jerome as a ghost does not seems out of the ordinary in theatrical terms. However, what *does* create tension between the audience and Prix is the physical abuse enacted between the actors. It is not Jerome appearing onstage that makes this moment unique (the audience has learned the scene before that he has been killed by the Mother) but rather the physical violence which Prix enacts upon his body that jars the situation, as if every violent episode retold in sing-song

fashion by Cat has been capsulated into this one moment. Violence becomes symbolic, as if in this moment, Prix strangles her past to death, laying to rest the OG in the lifeless body of Jerome.

The culmination of the firework device in Act One falls in the middle of a counseling session with some of the girls in juvie. The stage directions read that the monologue is "in her head," as Prix tries to escape the fighting going on around her. Structurally, however, the monologue also lets the audience escape a particularly terrible moment. Here Cat just has been ridiculed severely for the reason she has been sentenced to juvie, her story slowly leaking out between two other girls as a hilarious joke. This is no laughing matter however and highlights the inequities of the poor, black subject position: at fifteen, Cat is arrested for prostitution to obtain money for food, and it is at this moment that Corthron places Prix's monologue about designing a fireworks display. As her previous fireworks monologue in Scene Two disrupted Prix's OG stereotype, here the monologue suspends Cat's suffering. As Prix's daydream culminates in yet another big firework finale, she relishes in its final moments: "nothin' left but pastel smoke, pink, blue floatin' calm. Calm" (23). The repetition of "calm" here offers a symbolic demand for what these monologues represent: calm in the middle of emotionally charged scenes; calm in the middle of the tempest of violence, poverty, and racism. Resorting to the artistic envisioning of firework displays provides not only a structural strategy for the play, but also one for Prix. When the realities of life intervene, Prix designs fireworks in her mind.

Likewise, in the next scene, Prix even envisions her own death as a result of a firework mishap and the ensuing funeral a great firework show she designs: it is the

"most appropriate funeral finale cuz they wasn't just my life. My death" (26). At such a young age, both of them have already faced death head-on and planning a funeral seems the equivalent of young girls dreaming of a perfect wedding. Here, however, within such a space, a funeral seems a more tangible entity. Cat has already chosen her processional music, which she happily hums to Prix in the midst of describing the details of what she will wear to what the mourners will say. In this liminal space of the cellblock, the girls dream of escape in many ways: the possibility of death is as comparable to, and even more tangible than, the end of the detention. Prison and ghetto both conform to a place of absence, a "non-place."[26] If where one "belongs" is a place of nothingness, then the possibilities of imminent death are interchangeable with the possibilities of life. Prix's role as the "OG" may offer her the power to facilitate the constrictions of a life better than the welfare queen, but it does not allow her escape from such a predicament. For how might one escape from nothing? Ironically, the most ethereal thing—a fleeting burst of light—the fireworks provide the only "place" for Prix. Her daydreams and visions of firework displays are all she can have to call her own.

Corthron's insertion of these "firework moments," as well as the symbolic usage of fireworks as connected to Prix's character, continues throughout the play in a variety of situations—just as the stereotype of the OG solidifies, just as the ghetto and the prison begin to swallow Prix whole, fireworks enter and explode the moment. On the level of characterization, the theatricalization of the fireworks appears incongruous

[26] Achille Mbembe discusses, in the book *On the Postcolony*, the colony as a "non-place" where those who are there "do not know whether they are alive or whether they are condemned" (198). Prison also conforms for such a non-place, where prisoners constantly live in a veritable limbo, awaiting either early parole, release at the end of a specified term, or death.

to Prix's OG stereotype: a ghetto gang girl wants to design firework displays? A rather specialized career choice she has chosen for herself, and after her incarcerations, a highly unattainable one, as she would never receive a pyrotechnical license with her criminal history.

In Act Two, the audience witnesses Prix physically counting crack vials, waiting for a phone call to facilitate a pick up—yet another embodiment of the black drug dealer pushed by today's media. Here she sits, in her public housing, certainly not "rehabilitated" from her stay in juvenile hall. Once again, Jerome appears, not as a vehicle for Prix to kill metaphorically, but instead as her conscience. As Prix complains to him that her only options for legitimate work after prison can be found in a hair salon, Jerome refuses to pity her, taunting "boo hoo life so hard. Least you had counselin', school. I got nothin'… pulled in by the college promise, then they fine-print robbed me out of it" he tells her, although he is really telling the audience the fate of poor black men. He also chastises her for refusing to contact her mother in jail and continuing her involvement in the gang. Jerome admonishes her, "Get caught your business this time you be put away *years*… Ain't twenty-four bit old still be playin' gang gal?" while Prix tries to ignore him. "I got a prediction for your life: jail—second home… no, first" (29) he retorts. As her conscience, his words are quite powerful, so much so that Prix gives him a cupcake with a fireworks candle that explodes off stage, erasing Jerome from her mind. This is an interesting move: Prix uses fireworks to ignore her conscience, blasting away her thoughts about what she's done with her life, or in her case, what she has not done with her life. The fireworks moments always shift the scene when they erupt, and their entrance into dialogue takes the audience out

of the moment. Echoing Brecht ever so slightly (yet depending on the audience's emotional connection to the scenes and character), this thematic device provides not only a rhetorical strategy for Corthron to comment on the politics of black, urban poverty and incarceration, but also a process by which audience members' (and ostensibly readers) assumptions concerning black pathology are engaged and challenged.

Transforming the Stereotype

In *National Abjection,* Karen Shimakawa writes on Velina Hasu Houston's play *Tea* and the techniques Houston uses to liberate the characters from the stereotypical Asian female image. Houston's play introduces the audience to five war brides at a moment of loss: one of the women has committed suicide and the remaining four convene at her empty home to clean and tidy the remains of her distraught life. Presented within the first few pages as they take tea together, each of the women seem to fit the stereotypical images of Asian women; however, not only does the play present stereotypical images of the women as they identify themselves, but also the blatant stereotypes the women impart on each other. Shimakawa writes that Houston specifically invokes these stereotypical constructions *in* relationship to one another rather than "situating them in relation to 'normal' American women" (106). She instead argues that these stereotypes must be overtly addressed so that the interrogation of stereotype becomes a process rather than a swift disavowal. Shimakawa considers the stereotypical device that at once assumes *and* disallows the process of abjection through the potency of mimicry. The strategy to utilize

stereotypes is not to "refute accuracy or applicability" but rather to "consider how those 'types' develop within a cultural context" (107).

Such devices are at work in *Breath, Boom* as well. The theatricalization of Prix's firework dreams creates a catalyst for complicating the black criminal stereotype, but cannot completely disarm the stereotype's efficacy in social structures. In the climax of the play in Act Two, scene five, where Prix is brutally beaten in jail by none other than Comet's estranged daughter, Jupiter, fireworks cannot save her from this beating, but rather the fireworks *are* the onstage violence. The beating Jupiter hands Prix seems not so different than one Prix handed Comet at the beginning of the play, yet here the audience's imagination conjures much of the onstage violence, as Prix is first beaten behind a toilet stall door with only the sounds of "Pepper and the girl punching and kicking the crap out of Prix. Jupiter, keeping watch outside, finally opens the door, allowing the audience to see: Prix being beaten severely" (37). Later, Jupiter violently grabs Prix's head and flushes it in and out of the toilet. While the initial violence results from Prix forgetting the correct prison codes for drug deliveries, the final beating comes from Prix's appeal to Jupiter's family ties, choking out "your mother…" as if Prix's remembrance of Comet would come to her aid. "My mother fuck" Jupiter responds. "Like I ever see the bitch between jail and the fosters *good!* And each time I'm took away she wanna bawl and bawl like she so Christ fuckin' sad. . ." (39). Prix wrongly assumes that Comet's memory would come to her aid, but the idea of "mother" means nothing to Jupiter. Dreaming of fireworks cannot save Prix from this beating; however, we cannot read Prix as an OG after the final slam of her head against the prison toilet. Her status and

reputation has been lowered by this visceral beating, and certainly within the play's logic, she cannot be the OG she once was; however, Prix as a stereotypical, hardened black criminal is also beaten away in this exchange. The stereotype explodes in Jupiter's gratuitous onstage violence. It takes the audience seeing her bloodied body by a prison toilet to effectively move beyond the OG stereotype onstage. It is these moments of extreme tension and extreme theatricality that take the audience away from the stereotype, which take the stereotype away from the character.

Although the fireworks provide a disruption of the stereotypes that operate within this play, the characters never completely escape from the dominant social narrative that hegemonic power enacts on black bodies. Just as the fireworks burst into and onto the act of stereotyping, metaphorically the fireworks dissipate as quickly as they appear. As Carpio contends, "Particular stereotypes are resuscitated and adjusted depending on the kind of politics they are made to serve, but the system of stereotypes remains" (13). While one could assume that these characters and dialogue may reinforce a dominant narrative, Corthron places onstage, at the same time, the effects of this domination for audiences to view and consider. Treading on dangerous ground, Corthron's play could be accused of failing to present a "positive" image of the black, urban poor.[27] Using the stereotype to upset cultural norms that embrace stereotypes is tricky business and a two hour play is not going to change stereotypical characters so deeply ingrained in the American psyche, no matter how riveting a theatrical performance may be.

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[27] I am reminded of the heated discussions surrounding the premiere of the film *Precious: Based on the Novel* Push *by Sapphire* where critics and audiences debated the "necessity" of the production and subsequent witnessing of yet another film that re-inscribes black pathology, and the stereotypes of the welfare queen and unwed teenage mother.

For example, in one of the final scenes in the play, the firework dreams *do* fail Prix, refusing to take her away from her situation and instead, force her to confront her past. Just released from prison, Prix informally shoots off a few fireworks for former gang member Angel at her July Fourth picnic. She has just told Angel how fireworks make her feel, how the idea of creating a show for others creates "harmony" because "just when we thought couldn't get no more radiant, no more splenderous, that it already has it does, sometimes so high I wish it *would* stop, I think can't nobody stand this much… beauty? No. Ecstasy" (Corthron 42). The dialogue builds the moment to an intensity matched only by the sounds of the fireworks display Prix creates. For the first time in the play, Corthron denotes that Prix should show "elation" (42). As Prix stands in awe, the moment unravels with the entrance of Jo, preceded by the squeaky wheels of her wheelchair.[28] "YOU DONE IT," Jo yells. As Prix "vehemently shakes her head," Jo reminds her, "You sixteen, my seventeen, the zoo. BRONX ZOO! REPTILES!" Prix again denies, offering, "It mighta happened! I ain't saying it didn't happen, a lotta stuff… Lotta stuff I did Don't remember it all!" (42-43). Though the circumstances are slightly unclear in their veiled language, the audience must assume that Jo's wheelchair-bound condition is because of Prix. After they silently stare each other down, Jo wheels off stage.

True to the symbolic nature of the fireworks within the play, Prix attributes Jo's entrance as an effect of her fireworks show; ironically, its creation is not the "beauty" and "ecstasy" she had hoped, but rather a painful reminder of her past in the

[28] Corthron specifically states in the stage directions "Sound: slow squeaky wheels" which is no idle direction as the sound cuts through the silence onstage like a knife.

gang. “I didn’t do ‘em right,” she wonders. “Maybe I done ‘em wrong musts put the wrong colors together, clashed some colors dampened the emotional scheme WHAT’D I DO?” (43). This exchange with Jo (a minor character never onstage before or after) forcefully realizes the play’s paradox: fireworks connect indelibly with Prix’s performance as the OG and, each time, disrupt the process of viewing the character as just a stereotype; however, the moment also avows that stereotypes are palpable and can be accessed while viewing this play. By refusing to settle on one clear path or outcome, the play strategically presents characters that defy commonplace description. While fireworks structurally affect the play by moving the stereotype *beyond* at important moments, they pull the audience back toward the stereotype to remind that stereotypes are indelibly embedded in our social and cultural systems. When Jo wheels offstage, Angel says “Maybe she just crazy,” as if to placate Prix as “Prix turns to Angel quickly, this suggestion having given her great hope. Just as quickly she is disappointed to see in Angel’s face that Angel doesn’t believe what she just said” (43). In this non-verbal exchange of glances, Angel is the embodiment of that reminder, showing Prix that she will never escape her past because her future is tied to the environment in which they live. Fireworks force a rupture into this environment, but cannot cause a breakdown of their society and their position within such constrictions.

The final scene of the play suggests the fireworks may provide more than just an escape for Prix in the possibility of familial connection. Seemingly, for the first time in Prix’s life, she actively chooses to visit her mother, following a note her mother left for her to meet her at the Empire State Building minutes before midnight.

Released from prison early because she is dying from AIDS, Prix's mother tries to connect, witnessing the effects that prison inflicted upon her daughter's body. "Different," her mother tells her, "was a time you'da seen that note from me, tossed it in the trash, gone boutcher business. Seems you different, all growed up, seems you ain't s'mad no more" (45). As the Mother tries to offer change to Prix for buying pipe cleaner to make firework designs, the stage directions read "Prix gazes at her mother, for the first time in the play really seeing her" (46). Does this move ask the audience to believe that over the progression of 14 years, Prix's family can be "renewed" in one simple moment? Not likely, however, in that one scripted look, there may be hope for a way out of the continuum for Prix and her mother. Up until this point, the character of "the Mother," nameless yet for her supposed role, functions as Prix's version of how she views her mother—the "Mother" is shown to the audience filtered through Prix's eyes. Thus, it is only when Prix finally *sees* her, as the stage direction so clearly insists, that the Mother is not filtered through Prix's character, but stands alone. For the final time in the play, fireworks allow Prix to subvert stereotype, and here, the Mother is afforded the same possibility. After this moment, Prix can accept her mother for who she is and choose to resume her fireworks dreams. As her mother tells her, "We go to the fireworks, I can't hardly look at 'em. Busy starin' at your face. The wonder, happy happy. And best is when it's over, after the last big boom, the moment the light all out, I see in your eyes a… sweetness. Calm after the joy storm" (45). The Mother's dialogue has put into words what the audience has witnessed in brief moments throughout the play, and the effects these simple fireworks have on a broken woman. The Mother even echoes Prix's early speech in Act One, referencing the

"calm" that Prix desires at the end of the fireworks show, and possibly, at the end of this decade of her life. As the play closes, the theatrical device of the fireworks moments ends its active accumulation within the play's action and crosses into literary symbolism: the audience is led to believe a literal "calm after the storm" might be the next step for Prix's life, which up until this point, has been one big blast after another.

Fireworks do not offer a deliverance from the dominant social narrative that encases many blacks within the confines of ghettos and prisons, within stereotypes of indigent welfare queens and violent gang leaders. If, as Lubiano asserts, "State power is patriarchal power, whether it is externally imposed or produced and reproduced within the individual, private, and domestic realms of black communities" there is no greater example of its effects on these particular African American women than in *Breath, Boom* (350). From police ineptitude and living on the dole, to drive-bys and long imprisonment on drug charges, from teenage mothers to "driving while black," the play paints a grim picture of the state of the African American condition. As blackness continues to become wedded with criminality, *Breath, Boom*'s narrative may indeed confirm and even reinforce this unfortunate distinction, especially as the play's production history finds itself in theater companies that have an overwhelming majority of white audiences. However, by the addition of Prix's fascination with fireworks, the play's structure and overarching narrative disrupts to the point where the play cannot return to strengthen stereotypical black pathology, but rather implode it from within.

Chapter Four:

Finding Redress from the "Inescapable Prison House of the Flesh"

> "When the path home disappeared, when misfortune wore a white face, when dark skin guaranteed perpetual servitude, the prison house of race was born."
> ~ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

As the previous chapter on *Breath, Boom* elucidates, stereotypical portrayals of blackness rupture through the use of particular theatrical devices. While Corthron's play may not necessarily eliminate black urban stereotypes from mainstream media, the structural strategy of fireworks offers a tool in which to recognize the pervasiveness of linking blackness with criminality, and, hopefully, an alternative narrative can emerge. This chapter focuses on the broader implications of blackness itself, how the black body is read by others (including those who identify as black or otherwise), and how the social institution of prison particularly heightens the link between the criminal and the black. As outlined in the previous chapter, sociologist Loic Wacquant connects the perilous institutions of slavery with Jim Crow, the ghetto and now, the prison industrial complex in the United States. He writes:

> Viewed against the backdrop of the full historical trajectory of racial domination in the United States, the glaring and growing "disproportionality" in incarceration that has afflicted African Americans over the past three decades can be understood as a result… of the continuing stigma that afflicts the descendents of slaves by virtue of their membership in a group constitutively deprived of ethnic honor. ("Race As…" 42)

For Wacquant, the path from the chains of chattel slavery to the bars of prison directly ties into the reception of blackness, and for me, the black brute stereotype morphs into black as prisoner—not one to be pitied for being subjected to harsh treatment, but one to be feared and locked away behind bars, or as Ruth Gilmore labels them, "cages."[29] Kia Corthron's *Cage Rhythm* considers the stereotype of the black prisoner, and in this case, the doubly oppressed stereotype of the black female prisoner. While Corthron does undercut stereotypes in this play as she does in *Breath,Boom* with signature theatrical devices and structural language, in this play, I focus on the ways blackness itself is defined and how the enclave of prison sustains and continues to contribute to how blackness is represented in larger society. In this particular chapter, I rely on theories of blackness as defined by Hartman and Wilderson, as defined in Chapter One, where blackness is not a signifier for anyone to perform, but rather a "pained constitution and corporeal malediction" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 59).

Corthron wrote *Cage Rhythm* because she believed "no one was hearing the voices of women in prison" (*Cage Rhythm* 35). Through a long one act of short, tight scenes, the audience follows the story of three characters: Avery, TJ, and Montana. Each are at a different stage in their incarceration: Avery is in prison for drug abuse, with the prospect of release in three years; TJ shuttles between prisons, imprisoned because she pushed a policeman off a platform into the path of an oncoming train, and Montana is a lifer, possibly wrongly accused but with no outlet for reprieve. The play begins with TJ joining Avery's cell, and the audience learns their stories through

[29] While my use of Gilmore's arguments come mostly from her published book *The Golden Gulag,* I also draw from personal notes from her lecture "Understanding American's Addiction to Prisons" given on January 25, 2008 at UC San Diego.

interactions with other inmates in the cells and recreation areas. Unlike most condensed one-acts, the play does not work succinctly toward a central climax revealed on stage, but rather formats like a series of vignettes. The play jumps across time: for example, the last scenes of the play cover three months, from Montana giving TJ the combination to a back door to escape and then TJ returning from nine weeks in solitary, waiting to be transferred to another prison. The women's incarceration plays out through singular conflicts between two characters, ending largely without resolution. The play does not offer a solution to Wacquant's carceral conundrum, but opens a space for consideration in the ways in which America views the stereotypical "black" prisoner, and how the act of imprisonment itself continues to construct and bind blackness to criminality.

In *Cage Rhythm* in particular, the play structures the ways in which the prison system heightens the loss of simple freedoms, so much so that blackness becomes inexorably linked to this loss. "Black" and "prisoner" find a new connection beyond the superficiality of a contemporary stereotype. The image of blackness itself truly becomes a lack, a "void" as the dictionary definition of "black" suggests.[30] This loss shapes the prisoners' blackness in such a way that blackness defines their incarceration, regardless of the tenure of their sentences or the severity of their crimes, thus becoming subject to the emptiness that being black and being prisoner comes to suggest. "The elasticity of blackness enables its deployment as a vehicle for exploring the human condition," writes Hartman (*Scenes of Subjection* 34). *Cage Rhythm* plays within such malleability, highlighting the ways in which prison defines the black

[30] See Chapter Two for a brief litany of connotations of the negativity associated with the word "black."

body, not as a body, but rather a lack of body. In prison, blackness becomes more than just an idea of skin color, blackness becomes a definition defying rigidity, subject to fluctuation depending on the situation. “Despite the effort to contextualize and engage blackness as a production and performance, the sheer force of the utterance ‘black’ seems to assert a primacy, quiddity, or materiality that exceeds the frame of this approach,” Hartman argues (58). Put another way, blackness can be defined by a material presence but not claim materiality or presence, or “in other words, the Black has sentient capacity but no relational capacity” (Wilderson 56).

In this chapter I undertake a particularly delicate position between scholars who argue a theory of black relationality that is marked by “power politically rather than culturally” (Wilderson 23) and my own agenda which reads these plays through a cultural and aesthetic lens, where I affirm the position of blackness as a social and cultural signifier, and therefore a logical connection to representations of such blackness in the act of stereotyping. As one can see, then, there is an impasse between the ways in which we see the world. Choosing to employ their arguments in relation to this specific play when the rest of my research does not necessarily embrace such thinking may seem incongruous. However, the ways in which *Cage Rhythm* relates to these assumptions on the nature of blackness seem a productive path to follow, if it is only in the context of *this* specific play. In *Cage Rhythm* the corporeal markings of blackness inextricably relate to loss of place, of time, and of personhood, where prison literally becomes a liminal void, stripping away all possibilities of being in the world, and at times, the very act of being.

However, as in *Breath, Boom* and the rest of the plays examined, the use of an unrealistic theatrical device in the play also disrupts the markings of blackness by allowing the characters to briefly escape their situation, offering a reprieve from blackness as criminal, blackness as always already incarcerated, blackness as lack. This device offers the possibility of reprieve for the characters subjected to and subjected by the prison system. While the body will always be incarcerated, the mind offers the only possible way to "escape." Detached from the choppy, but linear storyline, specific scenes in the play show the character of Avery interacting with a child at a pond's edge, sharing pizza with at a picnic table, reciting poems with a child in a bedroom. These are not daydreams, but out-of-body experiences, or as Corthron calls them, "astral projections" (35): Avery "transports" herself out of prison and into other people's bodies. Certainly not common to scenes in realistic theater, this mystical intervention provides a "way out," as Avery says, from the intensity of prison life, and a "way out" in terms of a space of freedom for the black body.

I recognize that "for the Black, freedom is ontological, rather than experiential" according to the theorists I engage with in this chapter (Wilderson 23). So maybe the use of the word "freedom" is too broad a leap—and thus Hartman's concept of redress offers distinct ways of looking at this particularly "mystical" theatrical device. I locate the term "redress" as detailed in *Scenes of Subjection,* where she theorizes the possibility of redress for the pained body of the slave. For Hartman, redress is not freedom, but a calling attention to, and recognition of, pain. She refers to how certain situations try to "humanize" the slave, offered by those in power as a liberating gesture; however the process of transforming "slave" to "human" (as the

two are not interchangeable in Hartman's argument) only serve to intensify suffering. The current prison system operates in much the same way. Although the system offers the prisoner humanizing activities—semblances of "real" life, such as phone calls, visits, library privileges, a "job," and such, these idle gestures do not call to mind the possibilities of eventual liberty but rather continued suffering. Using Hartman's discussion of redress of the pained body as a suggestive tool, these mystical moments provide a form of redress: a redress from the confinement of the prison system and a redress in the way in which this particular stereotype marks blackness as criminal and suspect. Specific moments in the play only highlight the fact that Avery cannot access the outside world as a physical being, but must resort to psychic posturing to relieve her pain. Hartman (and also Spillers and Wilderson) do not employ the spiritual or divine in their arguments for this "ideal" does not exist in their theoretical representations of blackness, and by using these theoretical leanings, I may be shifting their structurally-based argument to the level of the empirical (an incongruous move). However, as I have already set forth in Chapter One, this particular text offers the possibility of utilizing the Afro-pessimist theory as well as finding my own in-roads into a seemingly paradoxical argument. Ultimately, for Hartman, redress cannot offer an ontological shift for the Black, catapulting the body from object to subjecthood; however, in this play, I see the window for such possibilities, however slight. What would redress look like, fashioned in the realm of the mystical? Within the world of the play, it does offer a "calling attention to and recognition of" the pain of which Hartman writes. Thus, in conjunction with redress, I also argue that these out-of-body moments in *Cage Rhythm* are akin to the slave activity of "stealing away." "Stealing

away" (leaving the plantation to attend secret worship meetings, surreptitious dance gathering, or lovers' trysts at neighboring plantations) for Hartman suffice as acts of redress, and I contend that although in a realm of the divine (which, arguably is the only other place that the prisoners can access), Avery's psychic leaps "steal" her blackness away.

For Hartman, redress is "a re-membering of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of devastation, captivity and enslavement" (*Scenes of Subjection* 76). By recognizing this suffering, a state of redress is enacted, and in the case of the characters in *Cage Rhythm,* the "mystical" stealing away calls attention to the constant suffering experienced in prison and the need for a moment "away." The scenes of redress which I identify do not offer a way out of prison, but rather an enunciation of the loss prison enacts on blackness and on the stereotypical black female prisoner. As Hartman clearly argues, redress is not remedy, but recognition. I am not trying to argue that a play, however potent, can shed years of stereotypical layering, for as Hartman notes it is "impossible to fully redress this pained condition without the occurrence of an event of epic and revolutionary proportions" (76). Yet I argue Corthron's strategy of inserting Avery's "way out" shows the possibility for continued struggle against the dehumanizing facets of the prison system.

Before accessing the ways in which redress changes how the characters are viewed through the lens of a stereotypical blackness, I first outline how prison structures the black body through various states of loss (for one must detail the loss redress may effect, however subtle). While the characters continually try to overcome

these lacks, the system summarily denies them, constantly forcing them to recognize each loss repeatedly. Each of the losses enacted by the prison system reinforces the stamp of criminality upon blackness.

Doin' Time

Within the prison walls, the concept of time is at once the most important and negligible aspect in the women's lives. Prison sentences are structured in terms of months and years, but the definitive length of a prison stay is negotiated through various factors, including "good" behavior, possibilities of parole, and court appeals. In prison, time denotes how long one may be behind bars, how long until the possibility of parole, and how long until one may return, considering the rate of recidivism among prior inmates. Time also structures each minute of a prisoner's day, but time that is on a schedule of its own, not time as it was on the outside. Thus, time is everything, but arbitrary. Time is not structure *by* the prisoner herself, but *for* the prisoner and in most cases, *in spite of* the prisoner. This personal loss of temporality feeds the need and desire for an act of redress.

In the play, Avery obsesses about the persistence of time. She constantly questions Montana, a "lifer," about how long she has been behind bars. Montana replies, "Forever" but Avery presses, "How long?" (Corthron *Cage* 45). Montana does not answer. Later in the scene, Avery asks again, holding out her arm for Montana to show her: "Look at this, it's a line. You was born here (*indicates shoulder*), this is now *(Fingertips).* When you came to jail? *Montana considers, then touches Avery's arm between the shoulder and elbow*. All this inside?" (44). For Avery, who reminds

herself constantly of her time in jail (seven years) or her time left (three), the essence of time mentally structures her daily life. She counts how old her children are now, how many years she has been clean, how long it took for her track marks to disappear.

However, for Montana, who has been in prison longer than she has been anywhere else, the concept of "time" means nothing. While Montana may not be consciously aware, she accepts the destruction of her metaphysical capacity to mark time. Prison has left time untraceable. Once freedom was denied, time was lost and irreconcilable. For Montana, there is no point in charting time, as she inherently accepts its loss. The absence of time also marks TJ corporeally as it does for so many "lifers" like Montana. Montana does not even need to ask TJ her sentence, she knows: "You a lifer too. Ain'tcha, TJ? Guess what? That information I didn't even have to rely on rumor, that information written all over your eyes, your walk" (66). Through similar interactions between the characters throughout the play, Corthron reinforces the arbitrariness of temporality within the prison walls.

Throughout the play, TJ goes in and out of solitary confinement or "seg" as she calls it. Nothing destroys time like solitary confinement, thus if solitary is TJ's "second home" (40) then she suffers a double lack: not only has the very act of being in prison taken away a normalizing concept of time and replaced it with a structure "out of time"—solitary takes even that small semblance of time away as well. So when the guards release her from solitary, TJ will have to restructure her relationship to time all over again, a vicious cycle that will never be fulfilled. The only way TJ has been able to survive her continual placements in solitary is to place a structure of time on the endless days. In solitary time repeated punishes TJ; solitary is at once time-

sensitive, in that it is conferred upon her in numbers of days and weeks, but once within the solitary cell, time becomes an absence, for there is no way to track time, although TJ still tries desperately to do so. “Time’s up,” the C.O. calls to her after a bout in solitary. “Knew it, I knew it was today,” she says. “Counted the meals, I know how to calculate it, I know when three days are up” (60). By counting down how many meals she may have been given, she can impose time upon a situation that gains power from lack of definable time.

Inmate Joy Ann marks time by the rhythm of her voice, much to the annoyance of TJ and Avery. Usually heard as a voice offstage, Joy Ann repeats phrases or childish rhyming patterns over and over under the main dialogue in particular scenes. Corthron’s stage directions denote “Joy Ann will repeat this throughout the scene. She may say it twice, take a break, say it four times, long break, say it once. The number of repetitions should be irregular, but the rhythm itself always the monotonous tone” (46). Joy Ann’s need to rhyme, to structure her time with repetitive sing-song phrases comes off as a sort of madness to the audience, a visceral embodiment of the play’s title, the caged rhythm of the prison ward. Even the prospect of rare treats from the prison store cannot make Joy Ann stop her litany: the loss of time is too great. While both Joy Ann and TJ find different ways of imposing time upon their virtually “timeless” situation in prison, these temporary structures do not offer the redress necessary to enunciate the full extent of their suffering, nor alleviate them from the pain.

The text also implicates the audience in a loss of time. Much like Corthron’s style in *Breath, Boom*, the audience must work hard to find out the story’s progression

and pay attention to the clues the characters offer. While it is clear the story progresses forward, it is *not* always clear how much time has passed between scenes. While this is part of Corthron's writing style, in this particular play it works specifically to disorient the audience, making them understand the elusiveness of time, the preciousness of charting time and how its structures, or rather, deconstructs daily prison life. Thus, the loss of time infiltrates all aspects of this play, from the characters' seemingly inconsequential daily habits, such as Joy Ann's monotonous rhyming, to major plot points within the script, as detailed by TJ's constant back and forth to solitary. Their ability to reinvent time in a place where time has no meaning does not offer true structural temporality for counting the days and meals in solitary, rhyming endlessly, or marking time until the possibility of parole falls drastically short of redress.

Cartographic Wasteland

Connected directly to loss of time is loss of place. As the women cannot place themselves temporally, it becomes difficult for them to place themselves spatially as well: they live in a state of civil limbo from being in prison. The cartography of prison maps them outside a functioning society. As arbitrary as time, a lack of definable place structures their loss. Usually located far from centers of industry or populations in which they pull, the geographical space of a prison already infers a loss. As Ruth Gilmore writes, "prisons sit on the edge—at the margins of social spaces, economic regions, political territories, and fights for rights" (11). As a C.O. tells Avery, "I don't understand nunna you and don't wanna. Thank God we're far enough out [of the city]

when *your people* come it's for a day visit and leave" (51, emphasis added). As the C.O. infers, there is not even a place for those connected to the prisoners: not only are the prisoners lacking in place, but their visitors cannot place themselves near the location as well. Their blackness marks them visually as well as geographically.

Within the prison walls, each of the prisoners acts differently toward this loss. Montana pretends to accept it, and for the most part, she convinces the other inmates; however, there is one moment when she lets Avery see through her hard veneer. "You want out?" Avery questions, for Montana seems so "at home" to her and the other inmates. "You think I don't?," Montana spits back. "Cuz I lived in hell so long you think now I call hell home? I want out. I want out!" (59). Even though she usually plays the stoic lifer, Montana surprises Avery by refusing to accept this placement. TJ also searches for ways to get out. "Don't worry" she tells Avery, "I'm hardly ever here. They like to keep me in segregation, seg's my second home. Or my first" (40). She tries to escape multiple times during the play, each time landing in solitary. She cannot locate herself within the prison walls, for in each situation, she is still imprisoned. She cannot even call her cell a "place" because she never stays in one cell long enough to consider it a place in the mapping of her world: continually sentenced to time in solitary, TJ must endure constant uprooting and shuttling back and forth between arbitrary locations. A prison vagabond of sorts, the lack of any definable place has contributed to TJ's aloofness with most inmates. As Avery notices, "solitary you hate when they give it to ya, but the resta your life you spend solitaryin' yourself" (45). Without a place to literally "place" herself, she grasps at straws for connections and, out of convenience, completely removes herself from any possibility of

community. She has no place to call her own and, at times, not even her body is her own. Returning from visiting hours, she is strip-searched without reason. She muses, "Sarah and I laughing, old times. For a second I forgot I was here" as the accompanying stage directions describe "*C.O. feels their mouth, behind their ears, through their hair, under their breasts, in their buttocks"* (53). There is no forgetting: prison continually reminds her of her relation to the institution through the violation of her thoughts and her body.

Ironically, what the act of extended incarceration does is impose boundaries on the women, borders which can change at the whim of the system. Certainly the women have their "own" cells, but a cement room with bars is certainly no place to call home. They might be allowed to visit the library or the recreation room, but, as Avery reminds TJ about the rec room, they have no control of when they can leave such spaces: "If you came to be around people once in a blue moon, you'd know the rules a the rec. You done make the decision to come means you stick here for the hour" (45). The difference between prison and the outside world may be spatially constructed, but must be metaphorically considered: it is a continuing conflict between "here" (prison) and "there" (the outside). Both are nebulous commodities without availability of redress. While prison situations may imply that they have a sense of place, it is summarily denied by the rules of *this* particular place. When Montana yells to Avery "I want out," "out" does not mean anywhere specific, just anywhere but "here." How might redress happen if there is no "there" there?

That was my life, my life. That was me. That was it.

The stereotype of the black criminal sends the women to prison, and once there, the stereotype expands and morphs into the reception of blackness on all levels of their existence. Thus, loss of time and place leads directly to a loss of self—not of being in the world, but rather surviving outside of it. The stereotype is subsumed behind the bars of the "prison house" of their black flesh. Their selves, then, are examples of Hartman's concept of black fungibility, where in this particular case, their bodies are surrogates for the power of the state and interchangeable with any other black body, prisoner or not. Hartman writes, "the elusiveness of black suffering can be attributed to racist optics in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity, the denial of black humanity, and the effacement of sentience integral to the wanton use of the captive body" (20). Fungibility marks the loss of sentience as human where being becomes only "captive body." Thus, the prisoner is an "abstract vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" and as such, the body acts as a "surrogate for the master's body… a sign of his power and domination" (21). Prisoners dwell in this state of fungibility, sentenced by and subject to the control of the state—from the uneven laws that sentence them to prison to the restrictions and systems of control that keep them there. Avery and TJ are every and any black prisoner, fungible and interchangeable, where their bodies can be invaded by the C.O.s at will and placed in solitary at the whim of the guards on duty. As TJ tells Avery, "Too bad you're not white. White they send you to the rehab center. Black they send you to jail" (50). Thus, if criminality attaches itself to blackness, then any and every black body is criminally fungible, a "violent effect that marks the difference between Black positionality and White positionality" (Wilderson 89). In prison,

fungibility intensifies, for there is a seemingly never-ending supply of black bodies to prison. Corthron's play highlights the optics of which Hartman exposes: the black women in this play are moveable objects, shuttled from cell to cell, confined in a rec room or solitary, without regard for who they might be, but rather what they are.

TJ's forays in and out of solitary confinement typify such fungibility. The prison assigns her to Avery's cell in the opening scene because the correctional officers forgot she was in solitary and gave her bed to someone else. She tells Avery "the left hand never knows the right's business, I'm locked up, seg, three days, and the admitting C.O. notices my empty cot, claims it for some new thing" (40). However TJ is mistaken if she believes her new ward assignment was because a C.O. was unaware she was in solitary; rather, the fungibility of her black body has marked her as interchangeable with any other black inmate in the prison. Consciously or not, she even quantifies the new inmate in her previous cell as a "thing." It does not matter to the C.O.s that she was in solitary: she is fungible, transferrable, mutable with any of the other black prisoners in the ward regardless of whether she was involved in the fight or not. Pick one. Pick one black body, it does not matter which. The prison does not exploit these women, but accumulates and collects them.

While the inextricable link between blackness and fungibility also put Montana in prison, once there, the loss of her personhood becomes more pronounced. Prison has structured her life to such a degree that she has learned how to operate with loss, so much so that the daily histories created in prison are not remembered as she cannot share many stories with either Avery or TJ. Instead, Montana mourns her previous self as one would a long dead relative, pouring over pictures in the recreation room. TJ

looks at the pictures with her, mistaking a picture of Montana for her granddaughter. "Looked good, didn't I?" Montana muses. As the scene progresses, TJ begins to wonder if she too will become like Montana, and in a fit of frustration, rips the picture in two. "Whadju do that for?" Montana asks. "That was me…. That was me! That was me! That was my life, my life. That was me. That was it" (67). The repetition of "That was me" haunts the scene, its subtext intoning her loss, the use of the past construction "was" more telling than the actual picture. Her final "that was my life… that was *it*" opens and summarily closes the small glimpse into the utter loss Montana suffers as a lifelong resident behind bars. Her personhood has been reduced not to her physical body as it currently walks and breathes, but rather a faded photograph of a young girl long gone. "That was *it*" equals a life that was over many years ago; "*it*" was a life for the girl in the photograph, but certainly not for the woman she is now, "*it*" because in terms of her blackness, she is merely a being, an object, not a self.

With the loss of personhood that prison intensifies, the women have also been subject to loss of their womanhood. While Corthron notes that she wanted to write a play about women in prison, the system within which she places her characters effectively denies the possibility for the distinction of gender. Even Corthron's choice for the women's names echoes non-gender specific monikers: TJ, Avery, Montana, Micky. As Hortense Spillers argues in her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," "in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of 'female' and 'male' adhere to no symbolic integrity" (204). Here, in the domineering prison system, the fungibility of their black bodies marks them not only as objects but as transposable with *any* prisoner. Gender differentiation becomes

negligible for "the captive body… is reduced to a thing, to a *being* for the captor" (Spillers 206, emphasis in original). The "grammar" to which Spillers refers in the essay's title transfers not from the pronoun "she" but rather the fungible "it" as black bodies do not engender pronouns.

For example, when in solitary, TJ explains: "In seg they flush the toilet from the outside, you have no control they have it all. For a lark, they won't flush all day, especially if there is crap in the bowl, or they'll flush flush flush 'til it overflows" (Corthron 54). TJ is not viewed as a *woman* in solitary, but a negotiable *object* to torture at will. Her "femaleness" is merely used to classify her in a women's prison, but not as a *woman* per say because the prison system has objectified her. For Spillers, "'gendering' takes place within the confines of the domestic" and thus, (in her example) there is no difference between men and women captives aboard a slave ship: they are merely cargo. Likewise, in prison, with the absence of a domestic sphere, where these women are captive, they become ungendered or "subjects taken into account as *quantities*" (Spillers 214, 215, emphasis in original). Thus, the need for redress from the loss of personhood becomes paramount, not only to redress the visceral loss of time and place, but the corporeal loss of the self, of the female body, and the fungibility of one own's blackness.

The loss of self affects the character of Avery most deeply through the loss of her connection to motherhood. TJ's first conversation with Avery includes the question, "You got kids? You ain't too popular, that usually means kids," and Avery's quick response is not a simple answer of "Yes", but a defense—"I was a good mother! *(pause)* You sayin' I wa'n't? I'm a good mother, don't call me child abuse" (Corthron

47). While TJ has asked only about the pictures near Avery's cell to confirm that they were of her children or not, Avery immediately believes TJ is questioning her capacity as a mother. It is clear with this simple exchange that Avery is obsessed with her dispossessed attempts at motherhood. While Avery seems ambivalent towards the children's absent father, she is desperate to reclaim her motherhood, or rather the idea of motherhood. Spillers deems this notion "sentimental" but impossible:

> When we speak of the enslaved person, we perceive that the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually *misnames* the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because motherhood is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate process of cultural inheritance. (228)

What Spillers addresses here is the effects of the move from the African to the slave (and as Wilderson argues to the Black) where natal alienation begins in the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Slaves cannot be mothers (or, for that matter, fathers) because *property* cannot form kinship ties.[31] As I try to reconcile Spillers's theories on the slave to my own transference on blackness in prison as presented in this play, I make the leap (however tenuous) toward the inability of motherhood within the prison system as well. For are not prison uniforms, and therefore the bodies in them, stamped with the phrase "*property* of the state?" Or as Jared Sexton notes, "'Racial profiling,'

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[31] Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* is a touchstone for this argument regarding kinship ties and the slave. Patterson defines natal alienation as a "constituent element of the slave relation… which rests on the control of symbolic instruments" (5). Natal alienation does not mean that the slave is unable to conceive children or consider those children within the bounds of a social reality, but rather alienation does not formally recognize ancestors or descendants. "Alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, [the slave] ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate order. Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate" (5).

then, is a young term, but the practice is centuries-old. In other words, the policing of blacks—whose repression has always been state-sanctioned, even as it was rendered a private affair of 'property management'—remains a central issue today" (202). Property of the state, akin to property of the master, do not lay claim to their children for "Mother" and "Father" are mere monikers that have no value in this particular system.

I am a good mother, right?

The play's narrative implies that in the seven years Avery has been in prison, she has never seen her children. "Leesy's eleven, Bina's nine. Away from my kids seven years, jail. I gotta see 'em twice a year or they call me 'negligent,' a legal term. But the foster parents ain't required to bring 'em more 'n fifty miles, and don't. They adopted Bina away" (Corthron 57). How can she "be" a mother, negligent or otherwise, when she has not even looked upon her children in seven years? In her first years in prison, she worked in the visiting day nursery, but as she was "still crack nervous" she harshly reprimanded a child (68). She was removed from working the nursery and ended up with a "reputation," alluding to the fact that such a "reputation" refers to her inability to be a good mother (68). Not only must she defend her conception of motherhood toward other inmates, but she also must continually convince herself. Each time she questions TJ with "I am a good mother, right?" Avery looks for an affirmative response, but the answer returned is a hollow lie; motherhood for Avery is neither good nor bad, it is unattainable. Throughout the scenes in her cell, Avery continues to reference the Santa and sleigh that she has been making out of

construction paper for Leesy, if she ever gets to see her. When she finally finds out that Leesy's foster family is "letting" her visit, Avery tears about the cell, looking for the sleigh. "*Rips her bed apart.* I can't find it! I had it right here under the sheets!" she screams. TJ stops her and "*calmly feels under the bed; in a few moments pulls out the tape-dispenser sleigh. Santa has been torn. Avery moans*" (69). The crude art project never seems finished, never completely whole, a symbolic reminder of her impossible motherhood.

Beyond the simple paper gift, the scene where Avery finally meets her daughter typifies the prison's effective closure of Avery as mother. While it is hard to refrain from being "sentimental" at Avery's heart-aching inability to connect with her daughter, Avery's physicality as rendered in the stage directions and her clipped, short dialogue with Leesy confirms her incapacity for mothering as structured by the prison system. As Leesy walks into the visiting room, Avery "*sees her, but fidgets and stares mostly at the floor. Avery sits on a chair, turned slightly away from Leesy and continues doodling on TJ's pad*" (70). Leesy asks, "Are you my mother?" and Avery only nods. "You got any other kids?" she asks, and Avery shakes her head no. "Do I have a father?" Leesy presses, and Avery again shakes her head no yet again (70). Avery looks at the clock, and says "4:22. When you got here – 4:15? 4:15, you said you was gonna be here four. *(pause)* You said you gonna be here four, late now. I gotta go to work now, I got stuff to do. Sorry" (71). With nothing left to say, Avery gets up, and confused, Leesy puts on her coat.

Corthron's stage directions are very specific in this scene, and one can picture clearly how the scene could be staged: the actor playing Avery aloof, a fish out of

water next to the child on stage. As scripted, Avery's body language belies her professed desire to be a "good mother." Her body language, as suggested by the stage directions, does not lie—her physical body has no idea what to do with this child in the room. In fact, Avery's constant doodling as suggested by the stage directions brings to mind a role reversal. She becomes the petulant child as Leesy tries to coax a response, any response from her. She even asks Avery for money to get a soda, and Avery replies, "No money, I got no money. Ask your mother" (72). Unconsciously, Avery has stated the inevitable: she is not *her* mother. She is no one's mother. She even repeats it again: after Leesy tries to give her an awkward hug as Avery's last line before she exits is "Late now, go find your mother, okay?" (72). Although Avery has said she has imagined this moment for the last seven years, convincing herself (and possibly the audience) with each "I am a good mother," she is unable to have any meaningful connection with her daughter. The prison system ruptures the sentimental bonds between her and her children, negating motherhood.

Simple Acts of Redress

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* "redress" as a verb means "To set (a person or thing) upright again; to raise again to an erect position" as well as "to remedy or remove (trouble or distress of any kind); To cure, heal, relieve (a disease, wound, etc.)" (Oxford English Dictionary Online). As a noun, redress relates to the "reparation of, satisfaction or compensation for, a wrong sustained or the loss resulting…" (Oxford). For Hartman, however, redress does not remedy, raise, or set upright, but rather "the significance of the performative lies not in the ability to

overcome this condition or provide remedy but in creating a context for the collective enunciation of this pain…" (51). The key word here is "context," a specific choice delineated by Hartman in that redress offers a way in which to elucidate pain and suffering, a recognition of pain and suffering but not a solution or remedy to pain and suffering. The collectivity that Hartman defines also becomes crucial to the process of redress. The characters in this play try to practice community, or communal relationship-building, as TJ and Avery do become involved and TJ and Montana progress toward a "friendly" arrangement, if their scenes together could be called such. The collectivity that moments of redress can sustain, however, is rather short-lived.

During the course of the play, TJ and Avery form a relationship based on their mutual subjugation. "You got a wife? Inside." Avery asks TJ early in the play. "No" she replies, "Why? I have one on the out." But Avery presses, "Inside's where you need one. Lonely" (Corthron 48). Whether or not TJ's girlfriend on the "out" visits her over the eleven years she has been in prison, her incarceration has changed and ultimately denied her from continuing such a connection. Hartman notes, "the yearning to be liberated from the condition of enslavement facilitates the networks of affiliation and identification" (59). Avery and TJ need one another to create a semblance of community, yet because of the confines of the prison, they must constantly renegotiate and redevelop where they stand in relation to each other. Avery tells Montana later, "She don't wanna do the public weddin' though: she's lez out there, got a real wife. She's lez out there and pissed we only play gay on the inside" (Corthron 58). The relationship between Avery and TJ may mirror TJ's outside

relationship, but not for Avery, as she's only "playing gay on the inside." This communal relationship forges itself out of visceral needs within confinement rather than a relationship formed by attraction and love.

The prison system ultimately takes away community, the networks of connected personhoods the women have tried to establish. "Despite the 'warmly persuasive' and utopian quality that the word 'community' possesses," Hartman writes, "with its suggestion of a locality defined by common concern, reciprocity, unity, shared beliefs and values, and so on, it cannot be assumed that the conditions of domination alone were sufficient to create a sense of common values, trust, or collective identification" (59). Rather, for Hartman, commonality is created from a need to end the situation rather than celebrate bonds that are formed because of it. In referring to communal enactments by slaves, Hartman calls it a "network of affiliation" (61) rather than go so far as to call it a community, and it seems for Avery and TJ, this is what they have, not only with each other, but with the other prisoners. The forming of a community also seems to imply that stasis must be achieved before community can be formed, and for these women, stasis seems next to impossible.

The sense of community, or rather affiliation, that Hartman recognizes is found in moments called "stealing away." The use of the gerund "stealing" is a subtle pun, in a way, for slaves (and prisoners too) were property and thus "stealing" was akin to theft, "thus alluding to the captive's condition as a legal form of unlawful or amoral seizure" (66). Slaves, as property, were "stealing" time from the masters who owned them, akin to the movement of stolen objects in a robbery. As Hartman notes, the "activities" that constituted stealing away were "by whatever limited means available"

(66). For Avery, her limited means is her mind, the last location she has left in which to escape. For Avery, stealing away is mental, not physical. In the play's out-of-body moments, Avery steals into someone's body, if only for a time, and "steals away" from the effects of the prison system. These scenes happen throughout the play, and at first, seem very out of place in the relatively realistic narrative. In scene three, Avery holds a child's hand, walking to the edge of a pond, whereas in the scene prior, she has just met TJ in her cell for the first time. While in this scene it is unclear what might be happening, throughout the play, Corthron leaves hints in the dialogue to uncover that Avery has found a way to "get out" (Corthron 44). The most explicit description of what she does is told to TJ by Montana quite late in the play:

> You know you can get out. Your woman got the secret. Avery? Too devilish for me to play with, but I know the method: Ya leave your body. Your spirit lookin' for a body some other spirit left. You occupy long as you want, remember though, your vacant body's open for other wanderin' souls, and there's the catch: Some other spirit might decide it likes your body. Stays. Not too much jeopardy however—what spirit's gonna wanna set up permanent residence in a body in jail? (64)

While this might sound contrived, many of Corthron's plays contain mystical elements or nonrealistic moments that operate within a largely realistic structure (as evidenced by the ghost of Jerome in *Breath, Boom,* described in Chapter Two).

I argue this theatrical device offers a place beyond temporality, beyond the disarticulation of space and subjecthood, where it does not matter what space or what time is eclipsed or lost, only that Avery has a chance to experience redress as she "steals away." This does not necessarily mean she achieves total redress for these moments do not procure a solution, but rather a brief alternative to the prisoner as captive flesh; she must "come back" and cannot escape forever. Through the out-of-

body experiences, she can find brief respite and recreate an existence she could never experience bound by the prison walls. Hartman writes, “Stealing away involved unlicensed movement” (67), and Avery’s technique for finding empty bodies in which to escape cause her to be placed in solitary confinement. Although the guards place her there because she failed to come in from the yard when she was supposed to, no one but Montana understands where she actually “goes” during these out-of-body moments.

Hartman concedes that “acts of redress are undertaken with the acknowledgement that conditions will most likely remain the same” (51). I do not believe that this play is suggesting that by psychically transporting oneself into other situations offers the ability to withstand the suffering of prison, and by extension, the suffering of being marked as criminal. “The play on ‘stealing’… articulates the dilemma of the subject without rights and the degree to which any exercise of agency or appropriation of the self is only intelligible as crime or already encoded as crime” (Hartman 68). Avery’s stealing is deliberate, and Corthron’s unique device is purposeful, calling attention to the condition of the black prisoner through disrupting traditional theatrical structure.

The “freedom” offered to Avery by the out-of-body experiences provides for what Hartman deems a “loophole of retreat—a space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity” (9). Avery mentions to TJ when questioned, “You gotta find a body whose spirit’s out meanderin’ just like you. Can’t force nobody’s spirit out. *(pause)* Believe me? *(TJ doesn’t answer)* Make your life easier. Seg” (Corthron 68). Avery realizes that this practice will not change her situation completely, but rather

make it “easier,” a “retreat,” a freedom that finds its way back to captivity. This loophole offers brief redress from the stereotype, from the losses enacted upon her blackness. Avery plans her escapes consciously, fully recognizing the temporary nature of such jaunts, however limiting. TJ asks her, “Why didn’t you ever stay out there? In a *free* body?” (Corthron 69, emphasis added). Avery replies after a pause, “Be livin’ somebody else’s life. Somebody else’s face in the mirror” (70). Avery does not deny her state as a prisoner, she knows she is not free; she chooses to play within the boundaries for as she seems to know intuitively “redress is itself an articulation of loss and a longing for remedy and reparation” (Hartman 76) rather than a dismantling of the inherent structure enacted upon her life. The out-of-body experiences call attention to her blackened subject position, while at the same time sharing with the audience her desire to repudiate her losses, as referenced acutely by the scenes specifically with children. However by acknowledging that staying in a “free” body would be a different “life,” Avery understands that redress is not an act totally capable of mending her situation.

The most poignant of Avery’s “stealing away” scenes concerns what is most important to her: motherhood. Through these moments, she lives out her fantasy of being a “good mother.” In one instance, she lets a child wade into a pond. “You never talk like that before,” the child says, “Yesterday you tole me I get in the pond you beat my butt.” Confused, Avery replies, “I did?” (41). Certainly the confusion is over the fact that Avery has slipped into another body, not knowing the context of anything other than the present moment; however, her leniency to let the child enjoy the coolness of the water contrasts against the child’s “real” mother. When Avery is

locked in solitary, she escapes to another mother's body where she comforts a crying child, tickling the child's stomach and making him squeal with laughter. Not only do the scenes enunciate the loss of personal freedom to her body, but also the loss of motherhood. "Stealing" is the only way she can regain the limited ability to connect with a child for redress is merely an "articulation of needs" not a fulfillment of them (Hartman 77).

At the end of the play, the natural order of things predictably returns. The ephemeral moments of redress have brought two women together in singular moments of community through the sharing of suffering and of their confined condition, but such redress does not change their position—the loss suffered by incarceration is too overwhelming. As a reminder, redress may only serve as a "collective enunciation," certainly not a "remedy" (Hartman 51). Together, TJ and Avery can articulate their loss, but articulation does not provide redemption. TJ's escape and subsequent retrieval leads her predictably back into solitary confinement for *nine* weeks, a "record" as she calls it. We last see her in the play packing up her things, heading to another prison, transferred yet again to another situation in which she must start over, experiencing the effects of loss all over again.

Avery, too, has slipped back into a routine in the months that TJ wasted away in solitary: she turns back to drugs. TJ calls her on it, and Avery immediately becomes defensive, "I been clean three years! One time I slip, you judgin' me? Won't happen again, I don't need that stuff. Think I'm lyin'" (Corthron 81). TJ does not answer, imbuing the silence with an almost palpable, voiceless "yes." Joy Ann starts up with her incessant counting, as she has done throughout the play. Order has returned. As the

footsteps of the C.O. are heard offstage, Avery desperately reminds TJ that she never explained "the secret. Way out. Easy, the book's in the library" (81). TJ does not want it. This act of redress will not satisfy her loss. "No," she replies, "Cuz it's also gonna show me the way back in" (81). TJ understands that this act of redress may articulate her pain, but not absolve it. A brief respite from this pain is not enough for her. She knows she is deeply embedded in this carceral continuum, for even if she were to escape, she will be marked forever. As Foucault hauntingly argues, "The carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside. . . . The delinquent is not outside the law; he is, from the very outset, in the law, at the very heart of the law" (301).

The last moment with Avery onstage is an idle exchange with Joy Ann. She teases Avery, making her try to guess how old she is as this day is her birthday. Joy Ann eyeballs a paperweight in Avery's hand, a gift from the marred visit with her daughter Leesy. Hesitantly, Avery gives Joy Ann the paperweight as a birthday gift, symbolically relinquishing all ties to her daughter, giving over and giving up on motherhood. "Now I owe ya," Joy Ann says, "I'll sing at your funeral" (82). Ironically, little does Joy Ann know the loss of TJ and now the transfer of the paperweight has truly sealed Avery's death. The overwhelming structure of the prison has consumed her life. She now is but an object of loss, as negligible as the paperweight itself.

Corthron's play reveals blackness as "the inescapable prison house of the flesh" (Hartman 57). The women in this prison are locked in Wacquant's carceral continuum, with the path from the ghetto to the cell littered with their black bodies.

While the play ends on slightly hopeful note—Montana finds herself at the beach, hand held by a little girl, leading her to swim in the ocean—the audience knows that Montana is merely in "seg," finally utilizing Avery's out-of-body practice to help her cope with solitary. This redress, this "stealing away" provides temporary relief from the losses that prison enacts on the body, but she will always be contained by her blackness. She is marked as criminal by the traditional stereotype and by the prison industrial complex. Moving "out of body" does not move her "out of blackness." Redress enunciates, but does not cure, this loss.

Chapter Five:

Fashioning the Tar Baby *and* Wishing for the Briar Patch: the Trickster Aesthetic in Lynn Nottage's *Fabulation*

Lynn Nottage's play provides the last artistic work analyzed through the lens of stereotype. While the tools Nottage uses are similar to Parks and Corthron, in that she manipulates dramatic structure, *Fabulation* utilizes the particular strategy of satire to complicate African American stereotypes as well as a traditional African American folk story framework. Nottage creates a modern day trickster tale, an intervention challenging the boundaries of traditional theatrical discourse by offering a twenty-first century take on the trickster figure. The main character Undine plays the trickster, seemingly in control of her narrative as self-referential narrator, but also subject to the whims of a trickster god that is playing with her position in the world. In nineteenth century American literature, the trickster figure was usually the "confidence man" or con-man, and Nottage's Undine reflects facets of this slippery character: the manipulation of familial history, ability to tell a tall tale, and success at slipping out of and into new worlds.

Since storytelling is at the heart of trickster interplay, Undine is perfectly situated to serve as the narrator for her own story. However, it is when Undine lets down her defenses and falls into the trap of another con artist—her own husband, Hervé—that the jig is up, and her trickery takes a different turn. Lewis Hyde notes that the "trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox" (7). In the development of Undine, Nottage

calls attention to this doubling. She subtitles the play the "Re-education of Undine" which highlights not only the learning but also the *re-learning* that Undine and the audience experience. The "re" solidifies Nottage's re-envisioning of the trickster tale, and as the story unfolds, Nottage chooses to relish the liminality of trickster life, placing Undine in the discomfort of the in-between, while at the same time challenging audiences to discover the possibilities afforded by dancing upon the threshold. Through this re-education, Undine is at once the trickster and the tricked, embodying what Hyde notes is a "trickster consciousness" (270). Playing upon W.E.B. DuBois's notion of double consciousness, this duality offers the space for the trickster to play on as well as be played upon.[32]

Central to the operation of the trickster figure in *Fabulation* is, of course, the fable in which the trickster operates. Nottage's fabulation (and therefore Undine's fabulation) unsettles the standard definition of what is commonly understood as a fable. The Oxford English Dictionary offers multiple definitions for "fable" including "a fictitious narrative or statement; a story not founded on fact; a fiction invented to deceive; a fabrication, falsehood; and a short story devised to convey some useful lesson." While these pithy phrases provide useful context in which to assess the play, *Fabulation* is more than just a "story devised to convey some useful lesson;" rather, it

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[32] As a reminder, in DuBois's 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, he wrote of the duality faced by African Americans: "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (7). The concept of double consciousness finds its way into many forms of African American literature and art. Hyde connects this doubleness with the trickster figure and in his book, locates this particularity in the writings of Frederick Douglass.

is a riff on fabrication, a narrative-defying convention, a fabulation upon a traditional fable. Nottage lays her cards on the table in this respect, as the play's title is the first obvious giveaway; however, the fables at work in this play are multi-layered and over-lapping. Many fables circulate through the play either as plot points or as characterizations. To succeed in the high-powered business world of New York City, Undine fabricates a story about her family dying in a fire so no one knows she was associated with "low-class" folk; her husband Hervé fabricates his love for her and then disappears with all her money; and later on, Undine even fabricates a past drug addiction so she will fit in with the rest of the drug rehab classes to avoid telling them that she was buying heroin for her grandmother. Her brother Flow is also working on a fabulation—the long awaited poem/rap he has been devising for fourteen years, yet when he finally performs the poem in Act II, it is far from a fable and rather a series of lyrical truths. The inception of Flow's creation of his fabulation coincides with Undine's fabulation: while Flow tries to create art through his rap, Undine creates lies through her stories about her background and family life.

Nottage's play revises the familiar definition of fable as much as Undine's brother Flow revises his unfinished rap, riffing and rhyming—rewriting and evolving into something different as the scenes unfold. Obviously the play itself is a fabulation, as, to an extent, all plays are fabulations built by the ultimate fabulator, the playwright. However, in this play in particular, the concept of fabrication serves as a theatrical device, a plot point, and thematic concept connecting the characters within the play. Everyone "fabulates," but not everyone's fabulation is out to deceive. If Undine's life has been a fable up until this point—or at least when she fabricated the death of her

family and chose her "new" life as Undine—then this play is also a story about letting the fable go. It is a fable about breaking down the myth, releasing the fictitious narrative, and finding truth within. Undine must recognize who she is—or more importantly, who she was and who she will be. This rhetorical turn located within the main character's narrative is an example of the strategy used by Nottage to re-educate the audience in the (dis)use of contemporary African American stereotypes.

Also key to a traditional trickster tale is the use of humor, whether as received by the audience (as in a comedic trickster tale) or as used by the trickster (at the expense of others). As Jeanne Rosier Smith notes in *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*, "Critic and creator, the trickster challenges culture from both within and without, strengthening and renewing it with outrageous laughter" (3). Elements of *Fabulation* attend to the nuances of trickster humor and do so specifically in conjunction with stereotype, as Nottage plays upon known stereotypes for humorous moments in the play. However by employing trickster elements within her text, Nottage's humor straddles a fine line between the laughable and uncomfortable as much of the humor replies upon well-known stereotypes for its delivery. Most importantly to this research, through the power of the trickster and the constantly changing form that she embodies, Nottage challenges and re-envisions stereotypes. In the multiple layers of fables at work within the piece and the levels of each trickster turn, Nottage weaves stereotypical situations with popular cultural knowledge of African American stereotypes. Here stereotypes are vehicles for humorous moments and rely on the audience's knowing the stereotype in order for the joke to land. She also uses stereotypes for reversals, as in the portrayal of Undine's

family and Guy, Undine's friend, at the therapy group. By deploying the stereotype at first and then complicating its delivery, characters become more than a mere stereotypical image on stage. Humor attracts the audience, but its structural position within the text acts more subversively, undercutting the stereotypes used to initially create the laughter.

Because of Nottage's risky choice to use humor derived from stereotypes in *Fabulation,* this chapter also investigates the precarious position of humor in similar instances where the laugh derives from racially-charged moments. Comedian Dave Chappelle (like Richard Pryor before him) wrestled in this mire of race-based laughter during the short-lived run of his comedy variety show on television. Stepping sideways from theater to consider Chappelle's work will more deeply illuminate how Nottage's use of satire in *Fabulation* is purposeful and strategic. Ultimately, I am most interested in how Nottage troubles and challenges stereotypical images through the various devices she employs (the trickster narrator and satire through stereotypes) and the ability for contemporary theater to encourage new ways of engagement that counteract African American stereotypes.

Jumping into the briar patch: the fabulating trickster

Trickster figures hold a place in stories and folklore in many cultural groups across the world: Chinese folktales tell of the Monkey King, Native Americans have the Coyote, peoples from the Pacific Northwest harness the Raven, the Greeks had Hermes, and various West African tales invoke Eshu and Anansi. In each of these cultures, the trickster operates in various ways, usually as a conduit for the messages

of the gods; however the message may be skewed, veiled, or coded. Although the various folktales concerning each trickster vary from culture to culture, certain traits of trickster figures share commonalities. Tricksters are wanderers, roaming either between lands or between worlds, and their appetite fuels their journeys whether in search of food or lust for otherworldly pleasures. Hyde argues that the trickster's cunning inherently tie to this insatiable appetite; I would add to this presumption that such appetite can never be satiated, for if full, the trickster would cease to desire more and thus lose the edge that all tricksters rely upon for success. The unresolved hunger not only comes from the trickster's inherent protection of the self (or one could also interpret this as a perpetual greediness) but also hunger due to scarcity. Depending on the particular tale, their hunger can be tangible—as in hunger for food—symbolic, or an amalgamation of both. Tricksters must "make do" with what is presented, and often times, making due does not fill the belly or the soul. Due to this instability, tricksters live at the boundary or straddle the boundaries from one world to another, a veritable liminal existence, always at the threshold of something new, keeping one eye focused on the past while looking straight into the future.

This litany of characteristics is drawn from variations upon variations of folktales and myths, but certainly the trickster figure does not operate entirely the same way in each culture, or even within a particular culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr's *The Signifying Monkey* traces the circuitous path of the African American trickster, the "signifyin(g) monkey" from the West African Yoruba myths of Eshu. While the path is not always definable and the Monkey's morphology incomplete, the similarities between the ways in which the trickster figure, and most importantly, the tales the

figure inspires are clear. For Gates, the Monkey appears specifically in African American oral (and later) written literature in the form of signification, the double-voiced, intertextual, play-on-words, codification, rhetorical interplay that is hard to define specifically yet recognizable when employed. While I do not deny that signification is an element found in *Fabulation* and in the dialogue between characters, I would not confine Undine to simply an incarnation of the Signifying Monkey. Rather, her trickster nature borrows from another African American tale, that of Brer Rabbit, and other elements of trickster figures across cultures.

Fabulation actually begins at the end of the story, and as the play progresses, hurdles towards the beginning. In the first few minutes of the play, Undine Barnes Calles, the main character and sometimes narrator, finds out that she does not have a celebrity to headline an upcoming benefit for which she has been hired as the public relations liaison; her husband of barely two years has left her while at the same time cleaning out their joint bank account; and she is pregnant—Nottage certainly stacks the beginning of the play with loaded events. In the first scene, the audience learns a lot about Undine's character, not only in what Undine reveals to the audience through direct address, but also in the way she interacts with the people around her. It is in these first few moments where Undine as trickster figure begins.

First and foremost, Undine is a trickster storyteller. Because she narrates the play, she has linguistic control over the transmission of her story. By scripting Undine to speak directly to the audience as this narrator, Nottage creates a unique connection, setting up the audience as receivership of the confidences of Undine, not unlike the aforementioned "confidence man" character. An intimate relationship is established at

the beginning, giving Undine the upper hand in the transmission of her tale, regardless of whether or not the tale is true. Although she does not have complete control over what happens to her, at least she can situate events through her own trickster viewpoint. Tricksters are masters at linguistic manipulation, and Undine is no different: she is quick in her judgments and uses verbal acrobatics to control others. It is not surprising that Nottage assigns her main character the vocation of a publicist, a job well-suited to the manipulation of written and oral language. Her exchange with her assistant Stephie, as the play begins, showcases her talent for language control: moving quickly from one thought to the next, dominating conversation, dropping insult through witticism in each line, her amusing but biting turn of phrase punctuating each exchange.

For example, when Stephie counters that the celebrity Undine wants to book is an alcoholic and an unwise choice for a dinner benefits, Undine quickly snaps "I don't care if she's an alcoholic. As long as she can hold it together long enough for a photo-op. After that she can swim to Taiwan in booze for all I care" (Nottage 80). Undine's success as a publicist seems tied to her ability to manipulate words, people, and situations, which the first scene's dialogue showcases. Undine's signifying may not always be as masked as her other verbal interplays, but what it allows is Undine to always hold the power position. It is clear that Undine's tenacity has led her to her current social status, as she tells her doctor that she "decided years ago never to view [her]self as a victim" (88) and rather use her trickster skill set to her advantage. I find her use of the word "victim" particularly telling in relationship to trickster tales, as the slaves who created and retold them *were* victims, and thus, the traits of the trickster

could never be too ridiculous or outlandish if in the end the goal was met. “Because the American slave system involved living with whites in daily power-based relationships,” writes Jeanne Rosier Smith, “African American trickster tales strongly reflect the necessity for the trickster's subversive, masking, signifying skills” (113).

While Undine would have audiences believe that she is in control, she becomes a modern day Brer Rabbit instead. Brer Rabbit, the crafty anti-hero in Southern slave stories, functions as a trickster as well, with many of the same characteristics as Gates’s Monkey.[33] Brer Rabbit outwits his fellow animals by always being one step ahead, and while in control of his exploits, does so from a inferior situation.[34] “Brer Rabbit's position as trickster in African American folklore and culture is a highly controversial one because he is often maligned as a sneaking, selfish, greedy dissembler,” Smith points out (113). Undine comes off looking the same, but as the play progresses, these qualities seem born out of survival tactics and her desire to succeed rather than mean-spiritedness. At first, Undine acts as if she has always been in a power position, but this power struggle seems all for show; rather, she *perceives* she is in power, when in actuality she loses ground in each dialogue exchange. Stephie

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[33] Traditionally, Brer Rabbit is notated as Br’er Rabbit, with its initial pronunciation of the word as “Bruh” (and not ‘brair’) as Br’er was a shortening of the word “brother” in a written version of a Southern dialect (initially published by Harris in his “Uncle Remus” stories). In this chapter I have chosen to remove the apostrophe for typesetting simplicity.

[34] Brer Rabbit is also a contested figure among scholars in that his existence was widely circulated beyond the slave quarters by white author Joel Chandler Harris at the turn of the last century, first in Harris’s columns in the Atlanta *Constitution* and then in a series of published books. Rabbit’s exploits were framed as stories to a little boy through Harris’s creation of a narrator (and in hindsight, rather textbook “Uncle Tom” stereotype) Uncle Remus, an old field hand who relayed the stories that Harris had collected and remembered from his time living and working on a plantation. While Harris’s writing does suffer from a patronizing white attitude towards African Americans, the tales were subsequently bastardized by Disney’s 1946 film *Song of the South* into grossly stereotypical characters, leaving the trickster qualities of Brer Rabbit and the symbolism in the stories of black oppression out of the film’s narrative.

cannot find the celebrity that Undine demands for the benefit she is representing, no press outlets are interested in covering the event, she does not even have control over her own body anymore (as the audience soon finds out that she is pregnant).

Tricksters can be characterized as the underdog—or at least provide a platform for the qualities that people come to root for in an underdog. Undine quickly becomes that, and although she still tries to maintain her status, the audience quickly realizes that her status has been lowered. By creating a character that alternately tells her own story while at the same time subject to its entrapment, Nottage creates a unique trickster tale where audiences can at once see the trickster at work *and* the trickster becoming the tricked. By establishing an intimate connection with the audience through the device of a narrator (and watching that narrator quickly fall), Nottage offers the audience a chance to "root" for Undine as one would a typical underdog character, but not necessarily in the way that one would expect. The audience desires to see her succeed by accepting who she is and where she came from, not necessarily climbing quickly back to her upper-class social status.

As the opening scene begins to spiral out of Undine's control—the audience learns that her husband Hervé has not only left her, but also left her bank account with a mere $47.51—Undine wrestles with the storyline and interrupts with an address to the audience: "Actually, this is where the story will begin. It is mid-thought, I know, but it is the beginning" (86). A trickster's stories usually depend on his ability to lie and his mastery of wit and cunning, and Hyde argues that lying directly connects with the insatiable appetite of the trickster—one of his base and most intense desires. Undine's hunger for wealth and status transforms her to her current position, revealing

to the audience that a “misprint” (86) in an industry journal noted that her family died in a fire, but as this error was beneficial to her upward mobility, she did little to discourage its existence. In fact, the play insinuates that Undine may have even encouraged the “misprint” as a way to change her own personal history, so much so that she continues to tell and re-tell the account. Her trickster hunger fuels her relationships with men as well, as she was dating a “rapper in the twilight of his years” with a “six-figure income” certainly for status value more than relationship potential, and her marriage to Hervé offers her “flair and caché” (87). This sort of masking is an element of trickster existence and particularly apparent in African American folktales, as masking constitutes survival, figuratively and literally, for tellers of tales. As Smith argues, “The attributes for which the trickster is often condemned—selfishness, slyness, trickery, and an apparent lack of moral sense—were essential adaptive behaviors for enslaved Africans in America” (113). The way Undine tells it, her desire to rid herself of her family’s poverty and her stereotypically precarious social position seems as equally urgent as the desire to “steal away” off the plantation. For her, “survival” constitutes upward mobility and monetary stability, all afforded by a better social position and outwardly showy career.

This exposition reveals the successful life Undine had been living up until this point. In light of the many fables at work in this play, it is a “fabled” existence. Her boarding school scholarship, her Ivy League education, her “fierce boutique PR firm”—all elements that could be part of the American dream even though the audience begins the play watching it crash down around her (87). Even her choice of her husband (and their marriage’s subsequent demise) seem too “fabled” for it to have

ever worked successfully. Undine and Hervé's relationship is based on a web of fabulations: from the moment the two met (as Undine tells it) until he disappears into the night with all her money (and her dry cleaning), both appear to be people they are not and thus the relationship is inherently unstable and unreliable. As she tells it, "I met my husband Hervé at a much too fabulous New Year's Eve party at a client's penthouse. Eleven months later we were married. Two years later he had a green card. What can I tell you? Hervé was dashing, lifted from some black-and-white film retrospective" (87). Even for Undine, however, this "fabled lover" was too good to be true: a character from film noir, a Rudolph Valentino to her Dorothy Dandridge. While he fit into the life that she created for herself, it seemed a marriage destined for a textbook fall: a fabled relationship created not from desire and attraction to each other, but rather the desire and attraction for upward mobility. Not only does Hervé leave her, but proceeds to "abscond with *all* of [her] money" (83, emphasis mine). If Undine had constructed her life meticulously, one would think that she would have had control of her financial accounts; however, this revelation about her husband only adds to the fabulous story—fabulous not only for its fictitious nature (in one meaning of the word) but also its great satirical and humorous appeal.

Undine's fable continues to unravel as the play progresses, but this first scene establishes certain markers: audiences must keep their wits about them, for not everything the characters say or do should be trusted, not even that which the narrator of the piece communicates. Traditionally, theater audiences have been conditioned to accept the narrator who, for the most part, is the unbiased voice of the production. However in *Fabulation*, Nottage complicates the audience's guide: Undine is not only

the narrator, but also the main character of this story. As the structural fable begins to disintegrate, the audience will continue the journey with Undine as tour guide, but must remember to ask questions of the moments they are being shown. Which fable are they to believe?

Although Undine does reflect many of the qualities that define a trickster including her fabulous ability to fabulate, she does not hold the ultimate trickster hand. Hyde notes that this precarious position of being trickster, and also being "tricked upon," calls to mind a trickster "consciousness" rather than a full trickster. It is as if all the strategic qualities of the trickster are inherent, but due to circumstances beyond her control, the freedom available to the trickster is not offered to Undine. While her narration (and actions) do consider the qualities of a trickster, something higher than herself is in control of her world. It is as if she is at once subject to the whims of a trickster god, but also knows how to play the trickster herself. This threshold, this boundary that Undine straddles is central to the trickster myths. In Yoruba, the trickster Eshu acts as a messenger between the gods and mortals, translating the gods' coded messages for mortals to heed warning.[35] He is also the orisha of roads and traveling, particularly of the crossroads, poised between one world and the next. As the play unfolds, Undine finds herself in this liminal space, about to enter into a new phase of her life. Her physically pregnant body becomes a corporeal reminder of this liminal state: no longer a wife, not yet a mother; no longer high society, but not yet lower class, the character of Undine embodies the paradox of the trickster.

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[35] In West Africa, and more specifically in the Yoruba religion, the trickster character of Eshu is also be called Esu Elegbara, Elegba, Legba. Eshu is an orisha, a spiritual deity that is a part of a larger group of orishas that are all elements of Oludumare, or God. In this play, Nottage chooses the name Elegba for this particular trickster figure.

It is here that Nottage inserts a minor character, a Yoruba priest, who Undine consults at the behest of her friend and accountant Richard, divining to Undine that she has "angered Elegba, the keeper of the gate… one of the trickiest and most cunning orishas" (94). The fact that Undine would turn to African spirituality at this moment serves the structure of the text, binding the plot even closer to a traditional trickster tale, as it overtly opens the connection between the Yoruba orisha and Undine. In Hyde's explanation, Eshu helps return people to their chosen track in life:

> The Yoruba believe that before we are born we meet the High God and request the life we want. Although the too-greedy may find their requests denied, within limits we can choose our fate. Unfortunately, at the moment of birth the soul forgets all that transpired; therefore, when men and women feel they've gotten off-track, when the way seems confused and knotted up, they go to the diviner in hopes of seeing once again the design of things as it is remembered in heaven. (109)

Undine has clearly strayed from her path and only by remembering her initial way and returning home can she find her true self. In literary terms, the play must have conflict, and Undine's downfall may be her only way back up. But more than just a convenient plot point, Undine's appeal to the priest showcases how desperate Undine is for relief from her equally desperate situation.

More importantly the Yoruba priest's divination provides the move for Undine's re-education, the realization of the play's subtitle and the "morality" aspect of Nottage's fable. As noted above, the Yoruba believe people "forget" who they were supposed to be or the path they were supposed to follow, and as exemplified in Undine's divination: her path is re-routed for her—she is literally "re-educated" in how the next part of her life is destined to play out. The fact that it is a "*re-education*"

and not an “education” is a strategic move on Nottage’s part for several reasons. In the back story, Undine receives her traditional education from a New England boarding school and the Ivy League Dartmouth, and a social education from a “list of friends that would prove valuable down the line” (Nottage 86). However, all this rather formalaic learning has not been enough: what she needs to learn is the person she left behind when she changed her name to Undine. As the FBI agent that enters into her conversation with her accountant notices, “you seem to have materialized from the ether. We are not quite sure who you are” (86).

At the top of Act Two, Undine has been sentenced to a drug therapy class after being arrested for buying heroin for her grandmother (an amusing but poignant subplot of this play), and another fable creation begins. Ironically, as no one believes Undine when she tells the truth about why she was buying drugs, she must concoct a story to participate in the therapy sessions she has been sentenced to attend. Entranced with recovering addicts’ stories of addiction, she creates a “tale so pathetically moving that I am touched by my own invention and regret not having experienced the emotions firsthand. But the tears are genuine. I am crying” (113). Undine weeps not at her supposed addiction, but rather at her ability to tell an amazing tale. This simple turn here is a fascinating choice by Nottage: the audience is not subject to Undine’s story first-hand to judge its heart-wrenching authenticity, but rather only told of its magnificence by Undine the trickster.

Logistically, the move saves Nottage from creating such a story, but stylistically it continues the development of Undine and her ability to fabricate parts of her life successfully. “I am applauded by the room of addicts, and it is exhilarating,”

Undine tells us. “A rush. And I understand addiction” (113). At this moment, Undine’s susceptibility towards trickery comes full circle, learning that her ability to fabricate is an addiction and when such tales are effective, she also is addicted to the applause. In a way, this group therapy session may be just what she needs to recover from a life of telling tall tales. Nottage’s subsequent stage direction for the actress to “break down in tears” (113) could be played a few ways to highlight her trickster nature—tears of joy, basking in the attention that the group offers Undine, or tears of joy from the admission of her addiction to fabulation.

Interestingly, this release provides the opening for Undine to actually speak the truth, as her next admission to the group is “I’m pregnant and I don’t know whether I want this child” (114). In the exchange with Guy, a recovering drug addict in the group who eventually becomes Undine’s partner (of sorts), the audience learns how the rest of Undine’s fable will play out. Guy tells Undine that “it’s a blessing to be faced with such a dilemma” because “a child is a possibility, a lesson” (114). The impending birth, an uncontrollable part of Undine’s long story, offers this play the “useful lesson” that a traditional fable should include. When Guy asks her, “How long have you been using?” her answer of “Long enough” may very well refer to her propensity for fabulating, not a coy response about her supposed drug addiction. While telling fables and multiple fabulations circulate throughout the play, Nottage also inserts a cautionary statement: fabulation can become an addiction and idle storytelling can quickly turn into a life of lies.

The name of Nottage’s main character provides another small, but intriguing fabulous allusion within the play, if audiences can catch the reference. It is not until

Undine returns home to her parents' apartment that the audience learns her name is actually Sharona and not Undine. As brother Flow retorts, "I ain' calling her Undine. If it was Akua or Nzingha, a proud African queen, I'd be down with it. But you are the only sister I know that gots to change her beautiful African name to a European brand" (100). Ever the social climber, Undine's choice of name suits her path well, and for those audience members who catch this quick reference, her fable becomes even more complex. Undine chose her name from Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, where the main character Undine Spragg schemes throughout the book to gain position in high society through marrying, a fitting connection for this play's trickster, or as Undine tells the audience, "an intriguing parvenu discovered in an American literature course at Dartmouth" (133). However, Undine is a water nymph in mythology; in some myths, this slippery water sprite could only gain a soul by marrying a man and having his child. Certainly the impetus for the naming of Wharton's character, the myth ironically calls to mind Undine's own situation in the play: might she finally, metaphorically, "gain a soul" by having this baby?

Who is the real rabbit now? Nottage plays the trickster

Smith argues that a "trickster's medium is words. A parodist, joker, liar, con-artist, and storyteller, the trickster fabricates believable illusions with words—and thus becomes author and embodiment of a fluid, flexible, and politically radical narrative form" (11). The traditional definition of a fable is a story concocted to confer a lesson, a moralistic tale with the intent of teaching the audience who reads or listens to the story. While Undine, as narrator, is her own "author" of sorts, Nottage is the supreme

author, fabulating a trickster's tale, telling a story from which audience members indeed could learn. Nottage creates a modern day Brer Rabbit story, a tale of a sneaky trickster with a moral lesson. By titling the play a fabulation Nottage deliberately announces that the story or the premise is not real, and as the play is fictitious, it affords Nottage the license to venture in various directions and ultimately undermine the fabulations her characters weave throughout the play, playing her trickster hand. "Although trickster tales can, and often do, offer a socially sanctioned way of institutionalizing rebellion in order to reinforce political and cultural norms (as when the tales teach morals through negative example),a trickster also inherently questions the limits of order and thus carries the potential for radical (re)vision" Smith contends (13). In *Fabulation,* Nottage also undermines traditional theatrical structure and motifs by complicating her play with an unreliable narrator and strategically-placed satirical humor.

She re-envisions a Brer Rabbit tale, where her trickster figure is the wily hare and Nottage is the storyteller, asking audiences to follow and learn from Undine's faults. In many ways, the play loosely follows the plot of one of the most famous of the Brer Rabbit tales, "Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby." In the story, Rabbit meets a baby made of tar on the side of the road. In some tales, the tar baby has been constructed by a farmer, in others, it is Brer Fox; regardless, tar shaped to resemble a baby is concocted to catch Brer Rabbit for his wily ways. As Rabbit tries to engage in conversation with the tar baby, he gets increasingly frustrated that the baby will not answer in return, so he swats at the baby in disgust; the more he hits, the more stuck in tar he becomes. As the farmer/Brer Fox comes out of hiding laughing because he has

finally caught Brer Rabbit once and for all, Rabbit knows he will be done for if he does not come up with something fast. “Don’t throw me in that briar patch!” he offers. “You can do anything, but don’t throw me in that briar patch.” By the power of suggestion, the farmer/Fox naturally thinks that throwing Brer Rabbit in the briar patch *would* be the worst thing, so off he goes. But instead of screams of pain, Brer Rabbit begins to laugh, letting on that the briar patch is his home, marveling at his own wit and cunning to escape a tight situation yet again. Undine can be conceived of as a symbolic tar baby, and throughout the play, she is constantly stuck: stuck without her job, without her husband, and without her social network to rely on, and she has been handed a literal baby as she deals with her pregnancy throughout the play. But she also plays the wily Brer Rabbit, and by going into the briar patch (or back home to the Walt Whitman projects) [36] Undine returns to her beginnings. Here the re-education begins.

Envisioning Nottage as a trickster seems simple for, in a way, all playwrights are tricksters to a point. Yet I also see Nottage embodying and aligning herself with the onstage character of Flow, Undine’s brother. Throughout the play, Flow works on an “epic poem about Brer Rabbit” (97), and the topic is no idle coincidence. As Flow first describes, “it is the exploration of the African American’s journey… exploring the role of the trickster in American mythology… using Brer Rabbit, classic trickster,

[36] While it is common for many public housing units to be named after famous Americans (and there are actual “Walt Whitman Houses” in Brooklyn managed by the New York City Housing Authority), I do not think this choice to ascribe Undine’s childhood home to the Walt Whitman housing was idle. Over his life, Whitman constantly worked and re-worked his seminal book *Leaves of Grass*. Within its pages, scholars have questioned the various clues to who Whitman was himself (his sexuality, relationships, politics), which is seemingly detailed in his epic “Song of Myself” and may indeed call attention to his various selves, as well as the myriad facets of humanity. This relates (subtly) to how Undine has also edited and reworked the stories in her life.

as means to express the dilemma faced by cultural stereotyping and the role it plays in the oppression on one hand and the liberation of the neo-Afric (to coin a phrase) individual on the other" (97). Undine's narration cuts off Flow's intellectual posturing by her disparaging assumption that her brother was "never the same" after his tour of duty in Desert Storm, but I think Undine's interruption and quick dismissal of her brother is meant to throw the audience off track.

The next time he is onstage, Flow continues on about Brer Rabbit, retelling the paradox that is this wily trickster figure; here, most overtly Flow is Nottage, explaining the reason for this play and exposing her role as trickster. Flow's epic poem adds to the list of fables at work within the play; however Flow's rap seems more of a thinly veiled truth than a fictitious story, a twenty-first century Brer Rabbit tale rife with symbols and directives. More than just sibling rivalry, Flow's tale elucidates the difference between creating fables to eschew an unwanted past and creating fables to illuminate and celebrate the past. Flow's fable engages in truth—Undine's fabulations engage in falsehoods. When Flow says, "There ain't no greater crime than abandoning your history" as he recounts a conversation he had with a potential shoplifter in Walgreens (128), it is as if he is really talking about Undine.

In fact, the moment that causes Flow to begin his poem is when Undine yells at her family, frustrated that they all seem lost in their own particular worlds and are insensitive to her situation. It is here that Flow jumps into the actual text of his poem in a "furious passion" (130). To Flow, "it ain't a poem, but a reckonin,'/ Be it sacred or profane,/ Or a divine word game" and it is "'bout who we be today,/ And in our fabulating way / 'Bout saying that we be / Without a-pology" (131). Here, the "we"

can be interpreted as his singular family unit as well as African Americans in general. Flow's epic fable weaves African American stories, folklore, and politics—a commonality of contemporary emcees in the hip hop genre. The poem references spirituals, Gullah folktales, Biblical passages, and, of course, Brer Rabbit, as the recurring refrain to the piece is "It all about a rabbit,/ Or it ain't" (130). With "our fabulating way," Flow calls attention to the importance of storytelling and the long history of African American oral culture in addition to his own fabulating contribution—this unfinished poem. Here in the poem, Flow touches on what the play itself is about: a rabbit… or not, as if Nottage is asking the audience: Do you think the play is *really* about Undine? Or is the play a larger fable about the repercussions of denying one's past and the problems that come with forgetting from where one came? As Flow slows in his tracks with the continuation of the poem, the Mother and Father encourage him to speak, but "Flow stops mid-sentence as abruptly as he began, struggling to find the next word in the poem" (132). He counters, "It ain't finished. It ain't done till it's done. A fabulation takes time. It doesn't just happen" (132). This important moment refers not only to his poem's creation and, for that matter, Undine's own concocted fable, but also the stories of African Americans that continue to unfold, the messages in rabbit folktales that are eerily prescient still today.

Smith states that "by slipping in and out of different realities and states of consciousness, the writer as trickster blurs the boundaries between self and other, between male and female, between the real and the fantastic, and even between story and audience" (21). Nottage speaks through Flow and his epic, unfinished poem, and through the lesson that Undine's story represents. The slippery strategy, the

destabilization of norms, and the attention to floating boundaries that embody the trickster figure offer Nottage a versatile position as a playwright. After Flow's performance, the play does not return to Flow's fable again, for this play is not his story: Flow's fable can only continue when Undine realizes who she truly is. When Undine asks Flow how long such a fabulation really takes, Flow replies metaphorically, "I don't know, fourteen years and nine months. You tell me" (132). Flow's thinly veiled reference to the time Undine ignored her family (fourteen years) and to the impending birth of her child (nine months) directly ties the fable to Undine's re-education. Undine uses Flow's inability to finish the poem as fuel for insults—several points within the play when Flow becomes particularly harsh in his criticism of her, she retorts with a question of how his poem is progressing. Flow's immediate response is to quiet; however, that is also Undine's response when questioned about her past wrongs toward the family or when teased by Flow about her changed name.

"And so you know," Flow tells Undine and their parents, "the poem is not about Brer Rabbit, he is merely a means to convey a truth… It is open-ended. A work in progress. A continuous journey…" (97). Here might be the line that encompasses the point of the play, and yet Flow is cut off from further discussion because he is late for work. The unfinished thought and the larger unfinished poem reflects Nottage's work on this play: while certainly the play is not literally "unfinished," the retelling of Undine's journey is. In a way, Flow's fable *must* be unfinished within the structure of this play—until Undine's re-education is complete, the poem will never be completed

either, for Flow's message provides a crucial element of Undine's learning. They are inextricably linked.

The play's multiple fabulations coalesce in, appropriately of all places, the last meeting of the drug therapy group. Guy confronts Undine about the upcoming birth, reminding her that she should enroll in childbirth classes. This realization launches Undine into a fit of frustration, culminating with her honest admission of her fears about not being a good parent. When Guy tries to console her that she's a good person, she admits "No! I'm not. I killed my family" (138). Undine begins to recount the day of her college graduation and how the sight of her family (assumingly in comparison to the other attendees) gave her cause to renounce them through the story of their deaths in a fire. She admits, "Sharona had to die in a fire in order for Undine to live. At least that's what I thought" (138). This admission—the rejection of her old self to fabricate the new—is a common trickster move, but also an honest admission. "I really want to change, I do," she finally reveals, "but I'm afraid I can't. I'm not ready for this" (139). Truth, a rarity for Undine, confirms the potentiality of the re-education that has been taking place and offers closure on the larger fable on which this play rests. Certainly, with the birth of her child, Undine will begin a whole new education, but this story reaches beyond the bounds of the play and is something on which audience members only can speculate.

All of the play's fables add up to a common American fable or myth: the fabled story of the American dream, a rags to riches story, a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" sort of tale. However, Nottage strategically skews this inevitable plotline in favor of rags to riches in reverse: by leaving the riches behind and returning to rags,

Undine must remake her life through truth, not through fabled lies. Because Undine must make do without the luxuries of her former life, she then personifies the trickster aesthetic more fully: her hunger for a better life, her constant roaming through various situations and locales, her strong willed desire to protect her inner self, and even her ability to survive no matter what she is handed.

Calculated stereotypes and concentrated humor

Nottage's fabulation and the humor derived from the fable rely on the knowledge of particular African American stereotypes at work within the play. As the play progresses, the stereotypes unravel just as much as the fables Undine creates for herself and form another level of re-education, not only for the characters, but also for the audience. Nottage dismantles stereotypes through her satirical situations and quick-witted trickster reversals. At the beginning, Undine plays into gendered notions of the black bourgeois. I specifically situate this stereotype in the qualities of the "black lady" as defined by Wahneema Lubiano, a stereotype she argues solidified with the performance of Anita Hill on Capitol Hill during the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court hearings. I consider the black lady stereotype a derivation of the black bourgeois stereotype because, historically, this has been a stereotype within the African American community and not necessarily outside of it—other than the image circulating of upper-class blacks posing as upper-class whites.[37] When Undine loses

[37] This ridicule began on the stage in blackface minstrel performances with the character of "Long Tail Blue" who quickly developed into "Zip Coon," the Northern dandy who "acted" white but was really a character vehicle for the skits to make fun of free blacks.

her money to her conniving husband, she returns home to the projects in Brooklyn: unwed and pregnant, quickly turning into the welfare queen.

Lubiano considers the welfare queen and black lady narratives "social taxonomies" and "recognized by the national public as stories that describe the world in particular and politically loaded ways" (330). In *Fabulation*, Undine personifies both. Undine's fabulation seems unavoidable because she believes she cannot simultaneously be the woman from the projects and the upwardly mobile black woman: Undine has bought into the stereotype that African Americans cannot be both. Contemporary social logic assumes such stereotypes to be an either/or situation, a binary of mythical proportions, so Undine *must* concoct the tale of her family dying in a fire to achieve the success that she seeks. In line with her riches to rags reversal, Undine stereotypically falls into the trope of the black lady who betrays her family to become an overachiever, and then her downfall seemingly conscripts her to a life of the poverty-stricken welfare queen. As Lubiano writes, "It is difficult to conceive of a 'normal,' an unproblematic, space in our historical moment for black women outside the demonic-narrative economy of the welfare queen or the betrayal-narrative economy of the black lady overachiever" (333). While white patriarchal culture defines and propagates both of these narratives, Undine as fabricator has also not conceived of another narrative for herself to play. She refuses to live the life of a welfare queen (what she believes Sharona Watkins might become) and thus creates her new image of Undine Barnes as the black lady stereotype.

For Lubiano the black lady is a narrative in the "national historical memory" (330) that provides "simple, uncomplicated, and often wildly inaccurate information"

and could even "stand for threats to ideas about what the relationship of the family to the state ought to be" (331). While Lubiano does not use the term "stereotype" to identify the term, such clarifications of how the image of "black lady" is used signify a stereotype at work. She writes that the narrative is a "form of shorthand" that is "constructed over time and transformed to fit the requirements of maintaining the present terms of the U.S. political economy" (331, 332). The stereotype of "black lady" is a recurring social narrative, a social signification, if you will, that works in tandem with dominant ideology, re-inscribing the assumed impossible: a bourgeois black woman with goals of upward mobility.[38]

As mentioned above, verbal interplay and manipulation of words is a trait common to tricksters. In African American vernacular traditions, this is signifying, and since it has already been argued that Nottage's trickster qualities run amok throughout this play, her preying and playing upon various stereotypes seems clearly an effective use of signification, presenting one thing while meaning something entirely different. In returning to the character of Undine, it is as if Nottage recognizes the stereotype: Undine plays the role of the black lady, and, as such a role in society is inconceivable, Undine is stripped of her social position at the top of the play. Nottage is not merely going along with convention by using the stereotype; rather, by exposing Undine for achieving her position fraudulently, she also exposes the ridiculousness of the stereotype. Yet as I argue, the structural elements of *Fabulation* complicate such

[38] In Lubiano's argument, the Hill-Thomas hearings exposed hegemonic animus against such possibility, shunning Hill's admissions against the conservative, Bible-toting Thomas, chastising her for not only suggesting Thomas's guilt, but showcasing her social position that seemed incomprehensible to a white-male-dominated establishment on Capitol Hill.

stereotypes, exposing these elements as fabricated as the multiple fables at work in the play.

In order to become a successful businesswoman, Undine's strategy was to fight any connection to the black working poor. When her accountant Richard notes that she is "one month away from—" she cuts him off with "Goddamn it, don't say it," meaning, do not say welfare or any other African American stereotype to be avoided (85). She admits to her friend Allison, in bemoaning the loss of her solvency, that she has "returned to [her] original Negro state" and is "on the verge of becoming a statistic" (93). I find the particular usage of "Negro" and "statistic" intriguing word choices: what is an "original Negro state" or "a statistic" for Undine? A welfare case? Homelessness? A slave? In line with how her character has been created thus far, it could refer to the family that she has abandoned, her childhood in the Brooklyn projects, a working class narrative. "Negro" signifies on contemporary slang usage, connoting a black person who tries to "act" white or deny his/her blackness; however, it seems that Undine would rather fabricate a "deprivation narrative" and reference her "ancestors… shackled in wooden ships" than consider the present that she faces (85). She tells Allison she imagines that "they were actually going to put *me* upon the block and sell me to highest bidder" (92). Wanting to avoid being branded as a welfare case, she brands herself a slave, as if in the society in which she circulates, she gets more credit for relating to her slave ancestry than relating her working class upbringing. Playing into notions of victimhood offers more accessibility for Undine at a time when referencing slave ancestors and travelling to West African slave ports has more

societal caché than returning to public housing.[39] Scripting herself into a narrative of infinite historical loss is more tangible than her family over the river in Brooklyn and thus can be part of the larger fable she continues to script. She even jokes that she will "attend church or give alms… tend to some limbless African children in the middle of a malaria zone" (93). Satirically, Nottage places the stage direction "they share a laugh at the notion" directly after Undine's suggestion. While being considered a welfare case is inconceivable, being a do-gooder seems just as bad to Undine—laughable, even.

Here, the characterization of Undine strays from Lubiano's strong-headed, smart black lady stereotype into a mockery of upwardly mobile African American bourgeoisie, a stereotype that travels in the black cultural community more than it circulates in larger societal groups. Allison, although a minor character, also provides a ready example of Nottage's biting satire of such people, for "there is nothing less forgiving than bourgie Negroes" Allison notes, of which the audience later finds, she is included (92). While Undine assumes Allison is her friend, she typifies the social climber and Nottage offers many physical cues in the stage directions to reveal the shallowness of her character. She has "an affected continental accent," does not walk but "struts," and is on fertility hormones to conceive a child because "everyone else is doing it" (91). She is visibly surprised that she is the only friend to have visited Undine, and is "truly disturbed by the revelation" that Undine is broke (92). When Undine desperately asks her for a place to stay after Allison has said "whatever you

[39] In the past few years, there has been an upsurge in tourism to West African slave ports and the castle dungeons (the architectural buildings used to hold slaves in preparation for the Middle Passage across the Atlantic). Henry Louis Gates, Jr also filmed a two-part series for PBS tracing the DNA and genealogy of prominent African Americans to their ancestral past and their connections to slavery.

need, I'm here" Allison cuts her off with "My goodness, look at the time" and as she leaves, drops her affectation, telling Undine "you understand" (94). This "understanding" encompasses Allison's fear of dropping down the social ladder if she continues her friendship with Undine, a ladder (as the audience is told earlier by Undine) Allison has struggled to climb. This brief encounter with Allison does create a moment of humor surrounding Undine's pathetic situation, but it also bitingly attacks the bourgeoisie status Undine strived to attain. Through the character of Allison, the audience sees what Undine was /is without Nottage having to provide much back-story or extraneous scenes about Undine's former, socially mobile life. Thus the situations in which Nottage places Undine throughout the rest of the play become even more humorous, as theatrically, a protagonist's fall from hubris provides successful dramatic structure.

Undine's refusal to conform to the welfare queen stereotype continues throughout the rest of the play, as she tells the audience "my entire life has been engineered to avoid this very moment" (104). The particular moment here is purchasing drugs on the street, but regardless of the actual situation, the connotation of "engineered" references Undine's detailed plan, meticulously executed to circumvent the stereotype. It is as if the moment she decided to "kill off" her family in the fictitious fire was part of a larger architectural layout of life, with Undine skillfully drafting each moment, each outcome planned for a specific desired result—all to avoid being labeled a stereotype. After Undine's family confronts her about perpetuating the fire story, she tells the audience "I'm ready to surrender, I'm ready to concede, I'm so ready" (133). To what, she does not offer, but I interpret that she is ready to surrender

to the stereotype. Here she is, six months pregnant with a fatherless child, living in her parent's apartment in the projects, ready to buy "white lace" (133). She prepares to become a stereotypical statistic, a position she has been fighting her whole life. Right at this junction, Nottage intercedes with another plot device, the return of her estranged husband Hervé. This move effectively subverts Undine from buying drugs and succumbing to yet another stereotype: the pregnant mother addicted to drugs, ready to give birth to yet another "crack baby."

This moment is yet another example of increasingly stereotypical situations throughout the play, things Undine would have definitely "engineered" out of her life. However in each location, Undine (and ostensibly the audience) finds that people placed in such locales are not always stereotypes. "I don't belong here" Undine tells another woman after she has been placed in jail for buying drugs, and the woman responds "Guess what? I don't belong here, she don't belong here, but we here" (108). She then tells Undine, "People think they know your history 'cause of what you wearing," an obvious reference to stereotyping, and a not-so-subtle snub at the audience that may be making judgments as the scenes unfold (108). Again, in a short scene in Act Two, Undine walks through the housing complex past two women who immediately recognize her. They are the "Double Dutch Twins," two women whom she knew growing up. While Rosa is still living on public assistance, Undine finds out that her sister Devora recently purchased a brownstone in another Brooklyn neighborhood and is a "senior financial planner at JPMorgan" (118). Undine stops in her tracks, unable to answer as she assumed that Devora was still living in housing as well. As Undine stutters out her next few lines in disbelief, Devora tells her she is

"starting a financial planning program for underprivileged women" and asks Undine if she wants to join (119). Here, Devora becomes an example, in the flesh, of moving beyond her humble beginnings, as Undine also did, but offering herself back to her community, instead of shunning and ignoring them. Not knowing Undine's recent history, Rosa asks Undine why she changed her name, and cutting in, Devora tells her that her "new name" reminds her of "that public relations exec" she read about in the paper. "Pity what happened to her. I hate to see a sister get hurt. I hear she was quite a remarkable diva but got a little lost" (119). Devora's idle comment presciently affirms the re-education that Undine requires throughout the play as she literally "lost" her family by rejecting them and her upbringing. As usual, Nottage's wit in this brief exchange humorously increases the awkward moment for Undine, highlighting her ridiculousness even more.

Throughout the rest of the act, these stereotypical situations provide Undine's re-education. Each of the social services that Undine must interact with (welfare office, doctor's clinic, drug therapy group) explore another facet of the poor black stereotype and, in each exchange, characters defy stereotypical convention. In a waiting room at the clinic, a "very young pregnant woman" tries to engage Undine in conversation. "You're my mother's age," she tells Undine, and Undine tells the audience "I say nothing, though I want to let her know that I don't belong here, that my life experience is rich and textured and not presented well in the low, coarse clinic lighting. As such, I show her a touch of condescension, perhaps even pity" (123). Reflective of Undine's uppity nature, she immediately sees the woman as stereotype, when in actuality they are really both the same thing: unwed mothers on welfare. "I'm

scared" the woman admits, and in a moment uncharacteristic for Undine, she admits that she is scared as well (124).

The play's humor derives from the audience's knowledge of a variety of stereotypes, and for the satire to be effective audiences must recognize the stereotypes at play. However, the strength of Nottage's satire comes from the fact that she upends the stereotypes, pointedly twisting a laughable moment into a larger comment about how stereotypes work in American society. For example, Undine's grandmother is a heroin addict; while Nottage toys with the stereotype of black as drug addict, she twists it because she makes this addict a 80-year old wheelchair-bound grandma, using heroin to avoid the pain of her late husband's death. Her reasons for addiction are poignant, but she does, however, tell Undine uncharacteristically, "I need smack and I need it now!" (104).

As Glenda Carpio argues in her study on the satire of slavery in African American art, literature, and performance:

> Black Americans have not only created their own stereotypes of white Americans—of 'peckerwoods' and 'honkies'—but have also directed their laughter at the stereotypes with which they have been represented, appropriating those images in order to diffuse their power of humiliation. They have also used jokes about stereotypes of blackness to laugh at, and thus chastise, those who were complicit in perpetuating such images. (86)

While this excerpt is in relation to Carpio's study on the stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor, Nottage's satire in *Fabulation* and her use of stereotypical situations implicates the audience in the very chastisement that Carpio notes. Subtle, yet swift, Nottage's use of humor through stereotypes provides for the re-education of audience members participating in the viewing of a performance. By drawing a parallel to the comedian

Dave Chappelle and his liberal use of racial stereotypes in his comedy (the skits on the two seasons of *Chappelle's Show*), I would like to connect his skits (and subsequent fallout) with the satiric devices at work in *Fabulation* and how the use of humor based on stereotypes can be a slippery route to navigate. When playing with volatile stereotypes, an artist risks the unknown reaction of an audience and the possibility of humor being mis-read. This divide ultimately caused Chappelle to cancel his wildly popular variety show; however I believe the "re-education" trope that runs through *Fabulation* and Nottage's unseen role as a trickster herself gives the play the necessary tools in which to circumvent the uncomfortable laugh.

The danger of stereotypical humor: Dave Chappelle's lesson

Dave Chappelle started his comedy career at the tender age of 14, watching and performing at comedy clubs in Washington, DC after moving to the capital from his father's house in rural Ohio. After moving to New York at 17, Chappelle worked the stand-up circuit and then found his way to Los Angeles, playing supporting roles in various B-movie comedies, and also co-writing two of his own. He was offered a sitcom deal at Fox, but turned it down due to the fact that the network stipulated some artistic control of his material. He contracted his own variety show at Comedy Central, home of the equally boundary-pushing and offensive *South Park*. Working with writing partner Neal Brennan, Chappelle quickly established *Chappelle's Show* as an outlet for his particular brand of comedy, to which Bambi Haggins refers as "post-soul" where a "kind of hopeful cynicism (or cynical hopefulness) permeates contemporary black comedy and the construction of the black comic persona" (5).

Chappelle's particular brand of sketch comedy (most sketches were written by Chappelle and Brennan who, incidentally, is white) runs the gamut from base humor (as in his "New York Boobs" interview-style sketch of nothing but pinning buttons on women's chests on the street of Times Square) to brilliant racial satire.

The sketches that overtly parody America's racial history and contemporary racial politics are of particular interest to my argument. As Haggins notes, "with an interracial writing team at the helm, specifically engaging in issues of race, Chappelle and Brennan model comedic social discourse where the unspoken is spoken—and the absurdities and hypocrisies that often inform 'polite' conversations about race relations are laid bare" (207). Chappelle creates humorous skits that people can laugh at on different levels depending on their own cultural experiences and knowledge of popular culture. The trap in this humor is that people can laugh at the racial stereotypes that perpetuate the original intent of the stereotypes—as vehicles for white ridicule against blacks—instead of laughing at Chappelle's intent of the humor—to expose such stereotypes. This particular strategy also affects the audience's level of "downness" according to Haggins (207), where "being down" means how and to who jokes land and if particular audience members understand the various satirical references. Put another way, "down" refers to an audience's reaction to sketches being inside or outside the scope of the sketch's meaning. Audiences must have access to popular culture references to "get" Chappelle's humor and this affects how the humor may land with audiences.

Chappelle has called his skits cultural rather than political, but writing and performing skits such as the black white supremacist, the Niggar family, and the race

draft, how can audiences *not* see these performances as anything but politically relevant? Chappelle's sketches may derive their humor from the audience's knowledge of racial stereotypes, but they do not rely upon it alone; however, it is his racially charged sketches that are the most well-written and representative of the effect of race relations in America today. Chappelle's skits commodify images of blackness *and* whiteness, and in a way, his embodiment of white stereotypes is visually and viscerally the most prescient. Chappelle repeatedly takes on the persona of white characters and deliberately exposes white stereotypes. In fact, many of Chappelle's most amusing characters are when he "plays" white, usually as a white television news anchor or an on-the-beat journalist. Donning whiteface is certainly not a new shtick, but through Chappelle, white stereotypes are just as fair game as black ones. This move is particularly strategic, considering that the bulk of his at-home viewing audiences are white males. While a detailed analysis of the total sketches is not within the scope of this chapter, I would like to draw attention to Chappelle's employment of African American stereotypes and the variety of perspectives he showcases through their repeated use, an aesthetic that I also see at work in *Fabulation.*

In a skit from Season Two, *Leave It to Beaver* becomes "The Niggar Family," a black-and-white-filmed parody of 1950s television family kitsch, where Chappelle plays the black milkman to a white family with the surname of Niggar. As Haggins so aptly describes it, "Whether in reference to their newborn niece's 'Niggar lips' or the 'Niggar boy' being 'such a talented athlete and so well spoken,' racial stereotypes are sprinkled on top of the narrative like jimmies on a sundae" (225). This stereotypical deployment is multi-layered— the stereotypes are African American but they are

directed at a white family through Chappelle playing the milkman (here, as African American, not white). Channeling a mix of Stepin Fetchit and Mantan Moreland, Chappelle jokes with the family, spouting statements like "I know better to get between a Niggar and their pork" in reponse to the mother's offer of some breakfast bacon, and when asking the father to pay the bill, "I know how forgetful you Niggars are when it comes to paying bills." The audience laughter roars at each double entrendre, and most emphatically when the statements come directly from Chappelle. Are audiences laughing uncomfortably at the flippant use of the word "Nigga(e)r?" Are they laughing at the stereotypical statements associated with the "Niggars" (but clearly associated with African Americans)? Obviously, the sketch's humor benefits from this ambiguity, but it can be hard to assess total audience reaction and why exactly people laugh. Toward the end of the sketch, Chappelle as the Milkman and his wife run into the Niggars' son and his date at a restaurant. As the maitre d' calls out "Niggar, party of two!" and both Chappelle's character and the son come to the podium, they all laugh at the misunderstanding. Under his breath, and barely audible with the audience's reaction, Chappelle says "Oh Lord, this racism is killing me inside." This admission, although part of a throwaway line, speaks volumes not only about this sketch but also forebodingly describes how Chappelle will handle his continued involvement in this particular brand of racialized humor. He treads dangerous ground.

It seems obvious that Chappelle wears the trickster's cloak with finesse; yet it is this slippery position that I wish to tease out in relation to *Fabulation* with regard to Nottage's risky choices of employing stereotypical situations and satirical humor. This

fine line offers one of the speculated reasons why during the filming of Season Three for *Chappelle's Show*, Chappelle abruptly left filming and turned up two weeks later in Durban, South Africa, never to film another sketch for Comedy Central or the show again. In an oft-referenced interview with Oprah Winfrey, Chappelle said, "I was doing sketches that were funny but socially irresponsible… I felt like I was deliberately being encouraged, and I was overwhelmed. So it's like you cluttered with things and you don't pay attention to things like your ethics." Like comedian Richard Pryor decades before him, Chappelle seemed to have a change of heart. As he explained to Oprah, the proverbial straw came in the process of filming a sketch now called the "Racial Pixies," where, in his words:

> The premise of the sketch was that every race had this, like, pixie [on their shoulder], this, like, racial complex. But the pixie was in blackface. Now, blackface is a very difficult image. But the reason I chose blackface at the time was this was going to be the visual personification of the 'N' word. It was a good spirited intention behind it. But what I didn't consider is how many people watching the show and how--the way people use television is subjective. So then when I'm on the set and we're finally taping the sketch, somebody on the set that was white laughed in such a way—I know the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me. *And it was the first time I had ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with***.** (emphasis mine)

Chappelle's admission of feeling awkward for being laughed *at* for his particular brand of racial humor highlights the fine line between stereotypes as vehicle for pointed satire and stereotypical perpetuation. Can this style of satire address racial stereotypes at the level in which the comic, or here, the author intends?

Chappelle's concern offers more than just a question of the nature of audiences and their "downness," or with those who can respect the humor from "inside" rather

than “outside.” Can the humor still hold efficacy when experienced through multiple viewpoints? Certainly, as a white analyst, my level of “downness” could also be called into question in my ability to analyze Nottage’s multiple meanings. As Haggins puts it, “I know what I’m laughing at, but what are you laughing at?” (236). Mel Watkins notes that this discomfort could be a specific trait of African American humor, in that it “ridicules both those outside and those inside the ethnic group, and frequently embraces the profane” but that there is a fine line between satire and “self-derogatory ‘coonery’” (xxiii). However, who can make that distinction? Can Chappelle specifically require that his audiences reach a level of sophistication so that they understand race is a social construct, that targeting particular African American stereotypes from multiple perspectives is not a form of perpetuating the stereotype, but rather exposing the system of stereotypes that undergirds American racism and identity politics? Asking this from the totality of a television viewing audience is next to impossible.

The situation Dave Chappelle found himself in is not unique, and in making connections to *Fabulation*, Nottage’s use of the trickster, within the character of Undine as well as Flow, offers a possible circumvention from the slippery slope of circulating stereotypes. By situating Undine in stereotypical situations, the stereotype can be de-centered and exposed by Nottage’s simple but effective intrusions into otherwise stereotypical setups. Where Chappelle’s skits played among stereotypes, Nottage’s scenes deploy stereotypes and at the same time refute them. For example, Undine introduces her family and their jobs as security guards, and in her narration, the audience hears her condescension at them not advancing to anything else. She does

let it slip later that the reason her parents are "just" security guards is that they took the NYPD exam repeatedly in the 1970s and with each denial of acceptance into the force, *chose* to stay security guards, rather than continually subject themselves to the racism of the New York City police squad. As mentioned, Grandma is a junkie, but not "just" another African American poor drug addict, as she uses heroin to dull the pain of her age and her husband's death. Guy was "that brother you cross the street to avoid" (Nottage 137) but now his "sincerity is sickening" (116). Each time Nottage taps into the audience's knowledge of the stereotype, she turns it around so that it cannot linger indefinitely as "just" a stereotype. As Haggins notes, "Comedy is a powerful discursive tool; the notion that if one gets an audience laughing, then while their mouths are open, you can shove the truth in….the articulations of racial identity in black comedy speak to a multiplicity of reflections on the African American condition" (243). While Nottage's stereotypical turns are not a laugh a minute, as one might see in Chappelle's work, the play does open a space for humorous moments that satirically attack the stereotypical system from within through the strategic use of stereotype. Through Undine as narrator, Nottage can make audiences think they are "down," feel that they are on the "inside" of the joke, and, in this moment, complicate the stereotype.

Carpio writes that Chappelle "employs classic postmodern techniques to measure the distance from his subject. Not only are his scenes representations of representations, but they also flaunt their seams, thus bringing attention to the process of making fiction while commenting on the overt familiarity of the scenes they parody" (107). In light of this chapter, this "technique" finds roots within a trickster

aesthetic. Utilizing the ability to shape shift and self-fashion, Undine the trickster flows in (and forcefully out) of very separate worlds defined by class structure and racial inequities. However, Nottage as trickster defines various narratives for Undine to participate, exposing the stereotypes associated with each particular situation. The black bourgeoisie is undone, the welfare queen is dethroned, and the unwed mother finds support and comfort in a community of drug addicts. *Fabulation* encases the trickster paradox Hyde articulates, "that the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on" (9) or as Flow (or rather Nottage) admits in his epic poem "It that ghetto paradox,/ When we rabbit and we fox" (131), when playing Brer Rabbit, the trickster plays the enemy Brer Fox as well.

Post-script or Prescription

As alluded to in the title and introduction of this dissertation, "using the master's tools" provides a way to re-center racial stereotypes, but this does not mean that the tools can tear stereotypes apart. Certainly this is an impossible fantasy. Walter Lippmann's early-twentieth-century posturing could be right: we *need* stereotypes to function in the world, and regardless of the fact that they can be derogatory and irrevocably harmful, stereotypes serve an innate purpose in social structures. However, this does not mean that reimagining stereotypes is futile. Obviously, the artists' works examined here meditate on such understanding, and by using the stereotypes in tandem with structural theatrical devices, find ways of debilitating the notion that African Americans are synonymous with the stereotypes created to oppress them in

the first place. As I have mentioned before, this is tricky work. Art derived from stereotypes can be misconstrued, misrepresented, mistaken, and misused—Dave Chappelle believed that was the case with his own racially and stereotypically charged comedy. Sometimes the strategy fails. But then again, who is the ultimate judge in deciding that failure? The artists? The critics? Work that engages in the delicate deconstruction of stereotypes provides a locus in which to understand why these images and qualities are still so potent in American society today.

Walker, Parks, Corthron, and Nottage are not alone in their endeavors. Clearly not only African American women are leading the charge in strategic use of stereotypes, and this employment of stereotypes is not limited to just American cultural production either. I would argue, however, that American society's continued usage, even fascination, with racial stereotypes endures. Parks and Walker meditate on the stereotypes from slavery and minstrelsy that haunt our histories, riffing on stereotypes in fantastical ways, and Corthron and Nottage locate their work at the other end of the spectrum in contemporary images of the black urban poor. As I have argued earlier, to use stereotypes to attack stereotypes is risky. As Manthia Diawara writes, "To embrace the stereotype… is therefore a subversive and critical act. It is then possible to maintain that the meaning and impact of the stereotype are delimited by history, that we can have a different relationship with it today, and that it can be used to say something new about art and society that disrupts our conventions" (15).

The act of disruption, then, seems the most fitting term to describe the overarching thematic that runs through these four artists' works. By using the stereotype and transforming its image throughout the course of the play (or on the

gallery walls), ultimately that stereotypical image is disrupted in its power over how blackness is represented. Parks's and Walker's disruptive strategies involve the transformation of stereotypes into absurd images; Corthron employs non-realistic theatrical elements, such as ghosts, the imagery of fireworks, and astral projections; and Nottage harnesses the power of humor and the literary framework of a trickster tale to disrupt stereotypical images and interrupt the constant deposits in the audience's memory bank.

For too long, many artistic endeavors have been complicit in the continuation of derogatory images of blackness. Film and television, music and theater too often re-inscribe the stereotypes exposed in each of these works. Yet ignoring this continued practice does not in any way cause stereotypes to disappear. The "political correctness" movement of the early 1990s did nothing to destroy common stereotypes; if anything it caused their use to surge in defiance of "p.c" proponents. In a way, these artists answer to this particular cultural moment. Kara Walker titles one of her journal entries in the aforementioned *Do You Like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, "The merits of Arguing over Representation: I mean, you can't please everyone and why should you anyway?" Her glib phrase typifies the candor in which I see these artists operating, finding their own position in the slippery in-betweens of constructed identities, political subversion, and racist hierarchies. Instead of hiding America's past in the proverbial closet, they seek to highlight the ways in which the creation and continuation of such stereotypes have in fact become a part of the framework of our society. By harnessing the power of representation, a disruption of stereotypical blackness can occur.

At the tail end of the 2008 presidential campaign, a Republican women's club in California created an image for their monthly newsletter picturing a currency entitled "United States Food Stamps" with Barack Obama's face surrounded by barbeque ribs, watermelon, and fried chicken. The club's president was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as saying "If I was racist, I would have looked at it through racist eyes. I am not racist, which is why it probably didn't register. Everyone eats those foods, it's not a racial thing." Arguably, we could just dismiss this incident as stupid and ignorant, but I think that actually gives the act more power. Certainly the political organization used these direct images to call attention to Obama's blackness, linking once again the watermelon and the lazy coon stereotype, and food stamps with poverty and blackness. But, wait—are not Suzan-Lori Parks's characters "With Watermelon?" and "With Drumstick?" I would argue the difference is in the strategic turn. In Parks's play, the use of stereotypes provides for the meditation on their pervasiveness and the ability for these one-dimensional images to subsume all other stories (such as the one written when the "worl" was "roun"). Watermelons and fried drumstick offer a link to this past and to how these stereotypes can be disrupted in the future—with nourishment to aid in strength for survival and the almost superhuman ability to cheat death. The artists here seek to face the stereotype directly, and by confronting it head-on, ask us as audiences to do the same. This is not easy work. Through different modes and mediums, the artists radically question the effects of racial stereotypes and their powerful circulation in American culture.

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