



THE BLACK VOICE AND SHAPING AUDACITY

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## **The Black Voice And Shaping Audacity**

Throughout the course of the world history it has become very clear that the unrestrained black self is repugnant in the eyes of society, and as society demands that black culture strives for a more standardized aesthetic, theater can be used as a tool to educate and reshape these perceptions with a view to erasing reductions.

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## Introduction

I'm interested in how the process of thought, by black people, shapes the content and form of speech patterns and therefore art creation. How does a Eurocentric aesthetic and process of thought differ from African-based ideologies, and furthermore become implicitly forced and therefore standardized within our society? In what ways are black people affected by the expectation and need to unnaturally contort our bodies, voices, narratives, and philosophies to fit within an alien structure, and what might be the benefits of acknowledging, and therefore appreciating, our inherent differences.

The state of being awake, whether literally or metaphorically, is the state of being aware of self. In this paper, I will further interpret the state of "being awake" to be active and attentively watchful of those entities that intend to reduce black development and self-actualization, and keep the black self in a spinning whirlwind of confusion, self-hate, lethargy, and self-doubt. I will also consider the position of self amongst a hostile and ever-changing environment that seeks to suppress and dehumanize in particular the black body.

As black people, we must be watchful to resist believing that our inherent truths are inferior as compared to the images that we see around us, and that our actual being—thinking and speaking—is unsatisfactory and unacceptable, and, therefore, lacking a worthy sense of beauty and sophistication. Moving through the world as a black person, in this way—maintaining and managing the many variations of self that is needed to be accepted into society, can be taxing on one's soul and can blur the ideas of where one's authentic truth should begin and end.

It is my intention in this paper to explore this dichotomy between the wider society's negative perception of black people and culture together with the ensuing effects on their own lived reality through the medium of theater and using the plays *Funnyhouse Of A Negro* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* as prisms to spell out these ideas.

In the play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* the playwright, Adrienne Kennedy uses the character of Negro-Sarah as a microcosm for the psychology of black culture and its footing of double-consciousness,

a term coined by W.E.B Du Bois. According to Wikipedia, double-consciousness is a term describing the internal conflict experienced by subordinate groups in an oppressive society.<sup>1</sup> The term originally referred to the psychological challenge of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes” of a racist white society, and “measuring oneself by the means of a nation that looked back in contempt.” The term also referred to Du Bois’ experience of reconciling his African heritage with an upbringing in a European-dominated society. The understanding of this duality is captured in the following quote:

“The blacks whom history has treated in a rather cavalier fashion. I would even say that history has treated black men in a resolutely spiteful fashion were it not for the fact that this history with a large H is nothing more, after all, than the Western interpretation of the life of the world.” (Alioune Diop)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Double Consciousness.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 15 Apr. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double\\_consciousness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_consciousness).

<sup>2</sup> Diop, Alioune. “Princes and Powers.” *Baldwin - Collected Essays*, by James Baldwin, The Library of America, 1998, pp. 144–144.

## An Exploration of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

“My father often called me good-looking when in the mirror I saw a strange-looking face.”<sup>3</sup>

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* by Adrienne Kennedy is a play about navigating one’s truth and contending with variations of self-reflection, as a person might in a hall of mirrors. A “funnyhouse” is quite literally a maze-like puzzle of mirrors that distorts reality and reflections of self, it is easy for a person to become transfixed, and therefore inactive, by all of the fantastical distortions of self-imagery. Curved, concave, and convex mirrors heighten the obstacles within this maze, meant to obscure the reflected image and boggle the mind. I would imagine that if a person is trapped in this maze of distorted images of self for too long, that person may very well lose track of the higher objective of finding their way free from the topsy-turvy puzzle, and may also even lose a clear sense of self.

I often go to Mali in West Africa to study dance and music, cultural arts and folklore. I typically go far outside of the city boundaries to rural areas of Mali to study. Mirrors are not very necessary and therefore not prevalent in these rural areas of the country, where I tend to find myself. During one of my trips, after several weeks of being outside of a conventional metropolis, I decided to take a trip into the city of Bamako for a day of luxury at the pool at Hôtel l’Amitié Bamako, a major hotel in the downtown area. There were mirrors all over the hotel, and I was instantly struck by the mirrored reflection of myself, it was as if I had completely forgotten the contours of my very own face and body, and how I looked. I remember smiling and then laughing in amazement at my mirrored reflection as I lifted one arm, moved a leg, wiggled a toe and touched my face to make sure that this reflection was, in fact, my own. I’m sure that the people walking past assumed that I was some kind of a crazy person, as I looked into the mirror, for what may have seemed like the first time. I was, indeed, in awe of seeing myself for the first time after many weeks. It was as if I had found my way out of a maze. This is an interesting experience to recall when considering the play *Funnyhouse Of A Negro*, because similar to my experience in Mali, Negro-Sarah had been

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<sup>3</sup> “Junior High 1943 - 1946.” *People Who Led to My Plays*, by Adrienne Kennedy, Theatre Communications, 1996, pp. 41–41.

inundated with images that were not her own and therefore she became fixated being someone other than herself. Negro-Sarah, as I had during this trip to Mali, lost herself, but unlike my experience in the hotel mirror, she never was able to reclaim the lost parts of herself.

It is essential that a sense of self—the true self—is maintained and not lost amidst all the dizzying images that life presents on the journey to attain success and happiness. If we don't secure a steady handle on our "true north," we succumb to the visuals in the maze of distorted imagery that we are made to believe are superior and more beautiful than anything within our actualized reality. The distorted images begin to trick the mind into believing they are real, or that they are what we ought to look like, and we become confused, disoriented, insecure, and, ultimately, lost. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Adrienne Kennedy's main character, Negro-Sarah, has lost her ability of discernment and is becoming ineffectively able to sift through the cadre of images that fill her mind. She is not successfully fit to reckon with her true self.

"The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned for another and it is also a sign of genius since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perspective of the similarity in dissimilars."<sup>4</sup> The character of Negro-Sarah becomes an allegory for black people, especially in the United States—where images that promote an adequate sense of self are few and far between. And like black people, Negro-Sarah has lost an ability to differentiate and locate self because of the onslaught of distorted reflections and alien imagery forced upon the conscious as standard and exemplary. Existing in a space where the images that are most celebrated, are, in fact, reflections of a self leads to healthy ideas of self-worth, forward-thinking and progression. What, then, would be the adverse effect of existing in a space where there are little to no celebrated images that represent self, is the question that *Funnyhouse of a Negro* poses. In the book *People Who Led to My Plays* by Adrienne Kennedy, there is a passage where Ms. Kennedy speaks about her love of the first golden age of television (from the 1940s through the late 1950s). Actors such as Orson Welles and Ava Gardner filled the households and therefore the imagination of various men, women, boys, girls, and particularly, Ms. Kennedy. In the book, Kennedy writes about being a young girl fixated on these images of Hollywood Starlets, in fact,

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<sup>4</sup> Aristoteles, et al. *Poetics*. Harvard University Press, 1995.



the moment that she discovered that she was different from the women on her screen is when she was watching a scene of Ingrid Bergman sitting at a vanity elegantly and smoothly combing her silky hair. Shortly after, Adrienne, as a little girl, went to her own make shift vanity to imitate the very image that she saw, as most young girls might do. Kennedy as a little girl was confused that the comb did not run through her hair in the way that it did with Ingrid Bergman or Ava Gardner, this caused disappointment and confusion. This little girl was discovering how different that she was from the on-camera luminary that she looked up to, and I'm sure that this realization, wittingly or unwittingly, had much to do with her creating the character Negro-Sarah, who most identified with the image of Queen Victoria Regina and The Duchess of Hapsburg, two out of the four selves within Negro-Sarah's mind.

## The Characters of *Funnyhouse Of A Negro*

### **Negro-Sarah**

“If you lied something happened inside your body that made you change and people saw it. It didn’t have to be a nose.”<sup>5</sup>

Negro-Sarah graduated from City College as an English major, and works as a librarian. She writes poetry and she is heavily influenced by the British poet and critic Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell. She lives in the basement residence of an Upper West Side brownstone. Her mother was biracial and her father was a very dark black man. Her mother taught her negative things about her black self and she has therefore developed a strong disdain for the part of herself that is her father, and black. She believes that she has killed her father. She wants to embrace her whiteness and ignore, and therefore ultimately destroy, her blackness. Adrienne Kennedy was influenced by Pablo Picasso’s *Portrait of Madame Helene Parmelin* (1952), and felt that the hair in that portrait told much of a story worth exploring. Adrienne was also a fan of *Pinocchio* and felt that everyone is changed and affected by the telling of a lie, for *Pinocchio* it just happens to be his protruding nose, and for Negro-Sarah’s selves the telling of a lie manifested itself as the falling out of her hair. An interesting thing to keep in mind, with respect to the importance of hair, and to note is that hair is generally considered to be proof of a woman’s femininity and beauty.

The “tragic mulatto” is a stereo typical fictional character that appeared in American literature during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, from the 1840’s. The “tragic mulatto” is an archetypical mixed-race person (a “mulatto”), who is assumed to be sad, or even suicidal, because they fail to entirely fit into either the “white world” or the “black world.” As such, the “tragic mulatto” is depicted as the victim in a society divided by race, where there is no place for one who is neither completely “black” nor completely “white.” Negro-Sarah hides herself within the confines and comforts of white society: “I need them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro. For, like all educated Negroes—out of life and death essential—I find it

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<sup>5</sup> “Elementary School.” *People Who Led to My Plays*, by Adrienne Kennedy, Theatre Communications, 1996, pp. 18–18.

necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself. My white friends, like myself, will be shrewd, intellectuals and anxious for death. Anyone's death. I will mistrust them, as I do myself, waver in their opinion of me, as I waver in the opinion of myself."<sup>6</sup> Negro-Sarah does not want to believe that there is a world that exist outside of her funnyhouse, and realizes that she is most comfortable within the seclusion that is her imagination. She, therefore, stays inside of the funnyhouse. The psychological "rooms" that exists within Negro-Sarah's mind include:

- (1) a Hapsburg chamber,
- (2) a chamber within a Victorian castle,
- (3) the hotel where she murdered her father, and
- (4) the jungle.

### **Negro Sarah's alter-ego: Queen Victoria**

Queen Victoria represents the power, industrial, cultural, political, scientific, and military changes wrought by the spread of European colonialism and within the United Kingdom itself. Victoria was the Queen of England from 1837 to 1901 and Empress of India from 1876 to 1901, representing the reach of British colonialism, though she had less domestic political power as England was by then a constitutional monarchy. Her leadership spanned 63 years, and she was so formidable that the time of her rule was named after her, known as the Victorian era, and by the time of her death she was known as "Her Majesty Victoria, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland Queen, Defender of the Faith, Empress of India." Queen Victoria was also a standard-bearer of social strictures and personal morality, and suffered from depression at various points in her life, related to the loss of her husband, who was also her first cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. Throughout the course of the play she loses all her hair. When Negro-Sarah is Queen Victoria, she takes on a kind of pristine orderly and untouchable posturing, because for Negro-Sarah, Queen Victoria represented an obsession with whiteness, superiority, and her repressed sexuality. Adrienne Kennedy wrote this character to be played by a black actor with a white mask and coarse hair.

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<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, Adrienne. *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

### **Negro Sarah's alter-ego: The Duchess of Hapsburg**

“I was struck by the Duchess of Hapsburg as played by Bette Davis. In 1957 my husband, son and I visited Chapultepec Palace, where the Hapsburgs had lived. I bought many postcards of the palace and the Duchess of Hapsburg would become one of my characters' most sympathetic alter egos or selves. At the time in Mexico there seemed something amiss about European royalty living amid Aztec culture. European royalty in an alien landscape. Soon my Duchess of Hapsburg would exist in an alien persona, that of the character of the Negro writer.”<sup>7</sup>

The Duchess of Hapsburg, was also a noble figure as she represented European colonialism, however, for Negro-Sarah, The Duchess represented a kind of allure in ways that Queen Victoria could not exhibit. The Duchess, unlike Queen Victoria, because of her stately position and status, was allowed to show unmitigated rage, promiscuity, sensuality, jealousy and delight in ways that Queen Victoria could not. The Duchess was Negro-Sarah's racist subconscious and also her desired sexuality. In the play The Duchess is romantically involved with Jesus and most often onstage, or at the forefront of Negro-Sarah's consciousness, Queen Victoria's chambers. She loses almost all of her hair throughout the play, and like Queen Victoria, in this play is also written for a black woman with a white mask. A number of sources indicate that the specific Duchess of Hapsburg in this case was Carlota, who with her husband Archduke Maximilian, was appointed to the Mexican throne. They were no match for the Mexican revolutionaries, with her husband accused of treason and later executed, and the Duchess was exiled back home. Notably, The Duchess exhibited signs of mental illness that purportedly descended into schizophrenia

### **Negro Sarah's alter-ego: Jesus**

“My mother had always said holding her family together was the most important thing in the world. Suddenly that spring Jesus became a character in the play I was writing, and a surprising Jesus, a punishing Jesus; berserk, evil, sinister.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Marriage and Motherhood.” *People Who Led to My Plays*, by Adrienne Kennedy, Theatre Communications, 1996, pp. 96–97.

<sup>8</sup> “A Voyage.” *People Who Led to My Plays*, by Adrienne Kennedy, Theatre Communications, 1996, pp. 123–123.

Jesus, as one of Negro-Sarah's selves, was a figure of martyrdom, violence, retribution, fire, and brimstone, as well as sexuality and piety. The character of Jesus, in this play, represents Christianity and Sarah's hatred of her father. Kennedy described this character as dwarf "dressed in white rags and sandals" and leads the other "selves" into the jungle to kill Patrice Lumumba. Like, Queen Victoria and The Duchess, throughout the play Jesus loses his hair, and is the last character to do so. Traditionally this character is play by a black actor in a white mask or painted yellow skin. Only when Jesus was in proximity to The Duchess, does he become the loving, patient and gentle figure many might imagine. Jesus plays a variety of conflicting roles in the play, some of which are contrary to generally and historically accepted perspectives. Historically he is known for his holiness, and depicted as a white martyr, however in this play, he also has a sexual and murderous side. Christianity, the source of liberation, is also represented as a source of oppression. Given these contradictions, this character breaks apart many of the strict binaries and dualities in the play. As the last of the "selves" to lose his hair, it has been said that this can be considered the final nail in the coffin for Negro-Sarah's existence.

### **Negro Sarah's alter-ego: Patrice Lumumba**

"Just when I had discovered the place of my ancestors, just when I had discovered this African hero, he had been murdered. [...] Even though I had known of him so briefly, I felt I had been struck a blow. He became a character in my play...a man with a shattered head. [...] I remembered my father's fine stirring speeches on the Negro cause...and Du Bois' articles in *Crisis* which my father had quoted.... There was no doubt that Lumumba, this murdered hero, was merged in my mind with my father."<sup>9</sup>

Patrice Lumumba represents Negro-Sarah's father and the hate that she has for herself. He was the opposite of Queen Victoria and The Duchess of Hapsburg, because he was the victim of imperialism. He carries an ebony mask throughout the play and loses his hair during the play and

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<sup>9</sup> "A Voyage." *People Who Led to My Plays*, by Adrienne Kennedy, Theatre Communications, 1996, pp. 119–120.

offers a critical meaning about hair loss in the play overall: “For if I did not despise myself then my hair would not have fallen out.”<sup>10</sup> His head remains bludgeoned throughout the play. Patrice Lumumba (1925 – 1961) had an enormous impact in the Congo’s shift from Belgian colony into an independent republic, and was the first Prime Minister of the independent Republic of Congo from June-December of 1960. As an African-nationalist, which was a political movement for the unification of Africa and for national self-determination, Lumumba attempted to transform the identity of Africans. He led the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) party from 1958 until his death. After independence, there was an army revolt, and his requests for assistance from the United States and the United Kingdom were rebuffed and he later turned to the Soviet Union. Under the Mobutu regime, he was imprisoned by state authorities, executed by firing squad with both the United States and the United Kingdom considered complicit in his death, and was considered a martyr of the Pan-African movement. Within the world of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, this martyrdom can be regarded as a kind of dialectic between the more traditional reputation of Jesus viewed as a martyr for Christianity and Patrice’s fight for an independent and pan-Africanist republic. For Kennedy, Patrice Lumumba was the representation of hope, which the character of Jesus, in the play, was driving to extinguish. When Patrice Lumumba, as an entity within Negro-Sarah, was finally killed, so was her inner hope.

### **Landlady / Funnyhouse Woman**

Mrs. Conrad is the landlady and a white woman, who is the only character that is played by a white woman in the play, she runs Negro-Sarah’s boarding house and exists within the “reality” of the play. Considering, again, a hall of mirrors of various contours and bends, the landlady provides information about Negro-Sarah that is ostensibly objective and truthful, for the audience. Negro-Sarah and The Landlady never interact, and at times it is difficult to discern if she is actually a player within Negro-Sarah’s memory or a guide through this hall of mirrors. In narrative form, she takes on many of the voices within Negro-Sarah’s psyche. She is the person who finds Negro-Sarah’s body after she has hung herself.

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<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, Adrienne. *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

### **Raymond / The Funnyhouse Man**

Raymond, like Sarah, is also a poet who lives in the same boardinghouse as Negro-Sarah, and she considers him to be her boyfriend. He is of Jewish origin, and fetishizes Negro-Sarah because of her dark skin complexion and her coarse hair. Negro-Sarah does not appreciate the fact that Raymond is mainly interested in her because of her race, she says of him: “I would like to lie and say I love Raymond. But I do not. He is very interested in Negroes.”<sup>11</sup> He primarily exists within the “reality” of the play, and the part of Negro-Sarah that is The Duchess of Hapsburg. Throughout the play we, as the audience, are led to believe that Negro-Sarah’s father is dead, either by Negro-Sarah’s doing or his own, but when Raymond discovers Negro-Sarah’s body with the landlady, he provides an important closing line about her father: “Her father never hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered. I know the man. He is a doctor, married to a white whore. He lives in the city in rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books and oriental carpets. Her father is a nigger who eat his meals on a white glass table.”<sup>12</sup> In this regard, I believe that Raymond shows himself here and throughout the play as The Funnyhouse Man, similar to a carnival barker, a person who attempts to attract patrons to entertainment events, such as a circus or funfair, by exhorting passing members of the public announcing attractions of show, and emphasizing variety, novelty, beauty, or some other enticing feature of the show—in this case, the psychological hall of distorted reflections.

### **The Mother**

“My mother looked to me to be a combination of Lena Horne and Ingrid Bergman. I thought she was the prettiest person I’d ever seen. But I couldn’t look forward to growing up and looking like her...everyone said we looked nothing alike. I was often unhappy about this fact that when I grew up (no matter what else happened to me) I would never look like this beautiful woman with brown

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<sup>11</sup> Kennedy, Adrienne. *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy, Adrienne. *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

curly hair, pale luminous skin and keen elegant features. My face as an adult will always seem to be lacking because it is not my mother's face."<sup>13</sup>

Negro-Sarah's mother appears in the opening sequence holding in her hands a bald head and wearing a nightgown, in what seems a dream-like world. She repeatedly expresses that she was raped and defiled by Negro-Sarah's black father. Sarah's mother went to school in Atlanta, and like Sarah, she was also an English major. Her mother fell out of love with her father after they married and moved to Africa, she didn't want him to save the black race and spent her days combing her long black hair. Negro-Sarah's mother did not allow her new husband to touch her in their wedding bed, on the evening that Sarah's mother and father were married. Sarah says that, because of this, her father forced himself on her mother, the product being Negro-Sarah. Negro-Sarah's maternal grandfather was a white man and her maternal grandmother was a black woman, like Adrienne Kennedy. When Adrienne Kennedy would go to visit her wealthy grandfather in rural Georgia, she was instructed to use the service entrance, rather than the front door. The mother of Negro-Sarah was, therefore, biracial with light skinned with long straight black hair that she would often comb. Sarah felt that her and her mother were identical in appearance, and admired that about her mother. The mother of Negro-Sarah hated being in Africa and felt that she was trapped in blackness. The mother began to hate anything that was black, including her own daughter, Negro-Sarah. She preferred, instead, the company of night owls to that of Sarah and her father, and she disdained black people. Sarah's believes that her father is to blame for her mother going away to the insane asylum upon their return to the United States. The mother of Negro-Sarah's identity and beauty is believed to exist, primarily, in her mother's hair and the fact that it was straight, unlike Negro-Sarah's own hair.

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<sup>13</sup> "Junior High 1943 - 1946." *People Who Led to My Plays*, by Adrienne Kennedy, Theatre Communications, 1996, pp. 50–51.



## The Subjugation of Black Culture

What brings black people together into a singular global community, called Black Culture, is “their subjugation to Europe, or, at the very least, to the European vision of the world. Out of the fact that European well-being had been, for centuries, so crucially dependent on this subjugation had come that *racisme* from which all black men suffered.”<sup>14</sup>

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* represents ideas surrounding imperial control, as housed within Kennedy’s archetypes of Queen Victoria and The Duchess of Hapsburg, and its resulting aspects of subjugation by that imperial rule, as housed within her antithetical archetypes of Jesus and Patrice Lumumba. This maze-like play positions Negro-Sarah as a microcosm of black culture, and places her alone with the antithetical variations of her consciousness, her memories, and her speculations of how the world regards and thinks of her.

Further, there is a kind of revolt from imperial subjugation that has been deemed pious, heroic, and necessary, while another kind of revolt from a similar subjugation is thought of as irreligiously depraved. The martyrdom of Jesus and Patrice Lumumba are, for all intents and purposes, the same, and because Jesus—specifically the character within the play—props up, and assimilates into, ideas of European imperial rule, his revolutionary actions are seen to be forthright. This martyrdom is regarded differently from that of Patrice Lumumba, who was looked down upon by the United State and the United Kingdom, and became notorious for leaning towards pan-Africanism and making the choice not to assimilate toward the aesthetics of a colonizing body. What is the difference between the execution of Patrice Lumumba’s revolutionary actions to that of Jesus, besides one being crucified and the other being shot to death by bullets. More to the point, as *Funnyhouse Of A Negro* asks, what makes one sublime and the other lowly? Sarah is contending with all these polarizing sides of herself, and each of these selves are inherently inextricable. “Assimilation was frequently but another name for the very same brand of relations between human beings which had been imposed by colonialisms. These relations demanded that the

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<sup>14</sup> “Princes and Powers.” *Baldwin - Collected Essays*, by James Baldwin, Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998, pp. 144–144.

individual, torn from the context to which he owed his identity, should replace his habits of feeling, thinking, and acting by another set of habits which belonged to the strangers who dominated him. [...] The question of assimilation [...] was not a question, on the one hand, of simply being swallowed up, of disappearing in the maw of Western culture, nor was it, on the other hand, a question of rejecting assimilation in order to be isolated within African culture. Neither was it a question of deciding which African values were to be retained and which European values were to be adopted. Life was not that simple.”<sup>15</sup> This cultural swallowing and impeding “disappearing” of oneself is the preoccupation of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Negro-Sarah, as a microcosm of black culture, wrestles with rejecting a strange, yet dominating, imperialistic culture or picking and then choosing aspects of herself to either nurture or reject. Both of these options are reductive and neither are psychologically fortifying. The issue of double-consciousness is still being wrestled with throughout the world nearly 56 years after Ms. Kennedy wrote this play, as what we have come to understand as “code-switching” between different cultural and linguistic spaces to navigate relationships and proliferate networks that are outside of pre-assumed demographic boundaries.

The Landlady and Raymond also function as the funnyhouse lady and funnyhouse man that lead Negro-Sarah through this maze of distorted images. I don’t believe that they are part of Negro-Sarah’s personalities, but instead take up residence in another part of Negro-Sarah’s dream-life as memory. With the many images that Kennedy created in the play it is difficult for an audience to understand which is real versus imagined. In the end Negro-Sarah is consumed by the distorted images and she ends up hanging herself, perhaps to silence all the voices.

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<sup>15</sup> Diop, Alioune. “Princes and Powers.” *Baldwin - Collected Essays*, by James Baldwin, The Library of America, 1998, pp. 144–144.

## The Imposition of European Beauty Standards

I'm curious about where we get our ideas of beauty. Like what is an acceptable way of being and thinking, by acceptable I mean our ideas of right and wrong. In our culture there is such a thing as standard form, the right and the wrong, the acceptable and the unacceptable. From where do we get these ideas of a standardized form?

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* is a play that warns about the dangers of “making small” or attempting to extinguish inherent truths within self and suppressing authenticity for the sake of better assimilating toward a class more celebrated and accepted by the larger society. The play deals with becoming lost in a sea of images that do not feed nor celebrate the unique experiences and aesthetics of black people. Written at the height of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* aligns with the “black power” movement, the “black love” movement, and the “black is beautiful” movement, which gained momentum from the Négritude literary movement of the 1930's, 40's, and 50's, led by President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Aimé Césaire of Martinique, and Léon Damas of French Guiana. This Négritude movement was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, “a literary and artistic flowering that emerged among a group of black thinkers and artists (including novelists and poets) in the United States, in New York City, during the 1920s.”<sup>16</sup> Most recently my attention was drawn to a photograph taken by Ben Hines of an awe-struck two-year-old girl, Parker Curry, inside the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. as she stared up at Amy Sberald's portrait of former First Lady, Mrs. Michelle Obama. Ensuing conversations with friends, in particular non-black friends, attempted to make the point that our society is becoming more diverse and therefore more open to the stories and voices of black people. However, I question if we are truly becoming receptive to the diversity that exists within our culture or are hierarchical xenophobic notions of society simply being masked by temporal illusions of pallidity to pacify and hush. Amy Sberald is a wonderfully talented artist, and my suspicion over whether or not we are becoming more inclusive and appreciative of diverse

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<sup>16</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. “Negritude.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1 Dec. 2016, [www.britannica.com/art/Negritude](http://www.britannica.com/art/Negritude).

ideas of beauty that depart from convention has nothing to do with the painting that Sherald created, nor the photograph that Hines captured.

Pallidity has become the perfectly unobtrusive offering of ideas surrounding conversations of diversity, especially when referring to black culture. This portrait is a beautiful work of art by Sherald, but I cannot accept it as an exemplar for society growing a greater appreciation for diverse aesthetics. For the sake of the point that I am attempting to make in these pages, Mrs. Obama, like so many other black women whether or not they have attained any level of celebrity, exemplifies pallidity with wonderfully coiffed and straightened hair. In her white dress with its patterns of black, gray, red, pink, and yellow, I am able to very easily imagine any Eurocentric face being able to substitute the for original. The point that I am making here is that our standard ideas of beauty come from Eurocentric aesthetics, and because of centuries of oppression and white supremacy it is difficult to truly imagine unrestrained blackness as anything more than ethnic and therefore a niche trend. Justin Emeka's essay, entitled *Seeing Shakespeare Through Brown Eyes*, reflects my thoughts: "In the United States, because of our legacy of racial inequality and White supremacy, the scope of our stage has been historically limited to one racial perspective."<sup>17</sup>

To return to the conversation with my friends around the subject matter of the Sherald portrait, at this point a friend argued: "Can you imagine how people would react if she was styled like an Ibeji? A big wooden statue." The unspoken assumption was one of a negative reaction. This exemplifies the point of my argument, for as difficult as it might be to imagine an Ibeji style as main stream beauty, it is imperative that we do the work on ourselves to make sincere space for this kind of beauty in our hearts and minds, in the same way that we have made space for European modes of beauty. All of us, as citizens, have been programmed by the world that we find ourselves in to qualify or disqualify beauty and aesthetics in a particular manner. Here, I equate beauty and aesthetics with agency, narrative and voice. It is disheartening to know that in order for black people to be appreciated as beautiful, and valuable, it is expected of black people to conform to

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<sup>17</sup> Emeka, Justin. "Seeing Shakespeare Through Brown Eyes." *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, by Sharrell D. Lockett and Tia M. Shaffer, Routledge, 2017, pp. 89–90.

what is generally or traditionally accepted as right or true; established and approved, as deemed central to white standards of action and appearance.

## The Role of Language

The symptom of this mitigation of true self—and therefore assimilation—is marked by an expectation to iron or chemically straighten thick and coarse hair, adjust our speech patterns, and mask anything that is not in-line with Eurocentric aesthetics. Most recently, I went to hear Nikki Giovanni speak at The Apollo Theatre, and she brought to light the fact that the Oxford dictionary adds many words each year to the lexicon. She also mentioned that being on the front lines of the linguistic community she does not understand why they refuse to include the word “ain’t” in their catalog.

In an essay entitled “English as a Global Language and the Effects of Culture and Identity” by Ibrahim Alfarhan,<sup>18</sup> “English as a Proficiency in the English language enables one to understand the basic skills needed in the modern life; for example, proficiency in computer and driving. With the technological advancement, English still remains the dominant language of communication for many people. Therefore, attaining proficiency in English gives someone the perfect opportunity to understand the modern society. English is depicted as a form of cultural capital.” Alfarhan goes on to say, “English has influenced even other cultures that have been known to be conservative like the Chinese. China is one of the countries where culture is still regarded as important and protected at all cost. However, internationalization has influenced their dedication to culture; and over the past years we have witnessed several changes (Johnson, 2009). At first, the Chinese government refused to accept English to be taught in the schools. However, changes were made due to their increased contact with the outside world. Nowadays English is taught in various schools, although the main language of communication and instruction in schools remains Mandarin. According to John (2009), the internationalization has greatly influenced China to learn English. Nowadays, many Chinese students learn English as a foreign language for internationalization purposes. The international events such as the Olympic Games that were held in Beijing in 2008 at some point forced people to improve on their English skills. Taxi drivers,

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<sup>18</sup> Alfarhan, Ibrahim. “English as a Global Language and the Effects on Culture and Identity.” *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, 2017, doi:10.21694/2378-9026.16010.

official games staff were forced to improve their English skills even if they did not want to.”<sup>19</sup> I found this essay to be interesting because, like *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, it speaks of the suppression of a people and the marginalization of a culture in real time by the propagation of Eurocentric and white supremacist systems. Alfarhan also is speaking of the importance that language plays when thinking about fitting oneself into a new and elite class structure, “The main purpose of a language is to promote communication (Kanno & Varghese, 2010); however, the globalization of English has proved this statement to be wrong. Language is no longer for communication mainly, but rather, there is a hidden agenda behind the struggling to learn and attain a new language. Research indicates that the globalization of English has led to the emergence of a new sense of identity where the people proficient in English regard themselves to belong to a certain group. Cultural identity is mainly influenced by language (Hatoss, 2003); therefore, the class that is formed by the proficient second English language speakers in the third world countries in Africa and Asia is mainly influenced by the English language. Scholars refer to English as a kit that signals membership in a specific group.”<sup>20</sup> Language is a form of cultural domination. In excavating the origins of African-American linguistic structure and literary traditions Henry Louis Gates, Jr. urges the necessity to examine the literature of the slave, published in English between 1760 and 1865, and suggests that:

“‘The literature of the slave’” is an ironic phrase, at the very least, and is an oxymoron at its most literal level of meaning. “Literature,” as Samuel Johnson used the term, denoted an “acquaintance with ‘letters’ or books,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. It also connoted “polite or humane learning” and “literary cultural.” While it is self-evident that the ex-slave who managed (as Frederick Douglass put it) to “steal” some learning from his or her master and the master’s texts was bent on demonstrating to a skeptical public an

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<sup>19</sup> Alfarhan, Ibrahim. “English as a Global Language and the Effects on Culture and Identity.” *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, 2017, doi:10.21694/2378-9026.16010.

<sup>20</sup> Alfarhan, Ibrahim. “English as a Global Language and the Effects on Culture and Identity.” *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, 2017, doi:10.21694/2378-9026.16010.

acquaintance with letters and books, we cannot honestly conclude that slave literature was meant to exemplify either polite or humane learning or the presence in the author of literary culture. Indeed, it is more accurate to argue that the literature of the slave consisted of texts that represent impolite learning and that these texts collectively railed against the arbitrary and inhumane learning which masters foisted upon slaves to reinforce a perverse fiction of the “natural” order of things. The slave, by definition, possessed at most a liminal status within the human community. To read and to write was to transgress the nebulous realm of liminality. The slave’s texts, then, could not be taken as specimen of a black literary culture. Rather, the text of the slave could only be read as testimony of defilement: the slave’s representation and reversal of the master’s attempt to transform a human being into a commodity, and the slave’s simultaneous verbal witness of the possession of a humanity shared in common with Europeans. The slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community.”<sup>21</sup>

This reluctance to include a word that is so commonly used within the black community is best explained by Aaron Walton, who studies linguistics and says in an online blog: “For years, people have been opposed to the word “ain’t” existing because they say it doesn’t sound right. Or they may say that it is hurting the English language, or a sign of English’s decline or something like that. When people talk about grammar/words they are talking in one of two ways: either “prescriptively” or “descriptively”. When talking Prescriptively, people “prescribe” how people should use a language.... For example, for many years people thought Latin was the best thing ever and they decided that English should follow similar rules of grammar such as not ending a sentence with prepositions. (E.g. “Where are the groceries at?”). And as you observed, “ain’t” is a word and English speakers use it as a word, so at least in the mindset it is a legitimate word. Dictionary editors choose what to include and exclude. It depends on their own bias or desire to please an audience.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “The Trope of the Talking Book.” *Introduction from the Signifying Monkey*, by Henry Louis Gates, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 140–140.

<sup>22</sup> Walton, Aaron. Blogpost: [www.quora.com/Is-ain%E2%80%99t-a-real-word-Why-dont-the-dictionaries-ever-change-to-include-it](http://www.quora.com/Is-ain%E2%80%99t-a-real-word-Why-dont-the-dictionaries-ever-change-to-include-it)



## The Role of the Vernacular in Creating The Blues

The tragedy of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is that the primary archetype, Negro-Sarah, finds her greatest antithesis within herself and espouses all the things that actively attempt to snuff out that antipole. In so doing, this archetype devours her very essence, either wittingly or unwittingly. In this regard, the Négritude movement, along with its subsequent movements of the 1960s, began to critically examine Western values and reassess African sensibilities and aesthetics within a culture driven by these values. Negro-Sarah's death represents the suffocation of people by ideas, aesthetics, and modes of thought that are not inherent but learned within and due to a hostile environment, while suppressing the true self into a posture that is inactive, ineffective and mute. Once again, it is important to recognize Negro-Sarah as a microcosm for black culture and its relationship to white supremacy and an imperialistic European control that has claimed influence over not only the physical attributes of the body but also that this European aesthetic takes up enormous residence in the mind. *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* by Suzan-Lori Parks repurposes the signages of *Funnyhouse* and flips this great tragedy on its head, and opens its self to a new, but related, analogy in what feels like a love letter to black tropes—good and bad—that make up the black experience pre and post the triangulate slave trade.

*The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World AKA The Negro Book of the Dead* by Suzan-Lori Parks celebrates the vernacular and tonal architecture of the black voice. There are melodies inside of the human voice, and each social concord is uniquely calibrated—everyone has their own melodic calibration. In addition to this unique melody, the figuration of thought occurs, most often this thought is figured in direct alignment or contrast to the melodic firmament. After, speech is formed based on the way the idea collides with the melody (in the same way that framing a painting helps to give it the overall artistic context). The author and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston said that the “white man thinks in a written language, [while] the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics,” further, people of African heritage exist in a state of double-consciousness, essentially seeing yourself as yourself AND seeing yourself through the eyes of a dominant. Encoded within this dance of experience, thought figuration, speech figuration, and texture is a nonverbal transference of information. This, alone, without even getting to the substance or formation of story, is enough to give credence to the idea that perhaps other people telling black

stories is territory that's more dangerously complex than we have previously considered. It is important, therefore, to not only recognize the textual distinctions of people from differing cultural backgrounds, but to then dig deeper to understand the significance of the figuration of text from a preceding thought. The definition of text that I am speaking of has to do with the renderings of a person or people, such as letters, art, speech patterns, and other renderings that are the manifestations of a thought process, the Meriam-Webster dictionary says: “8(a) something (such as a story of movie) considered as an object to be examined, explicated, or deconstructed; (b) something likened to a text (the surface of daily life are texts to be explicated – Michiko Kakutani)<sup>23</sup>. In order to gain a sense of comprehension, true comprehension, of the make-up of a person’s core values it is necessary to understand the thought processing functions of that person. A person’s thoughts and the way that they are formed and then produced into textual renderings, are just as important, if not more important, than the very words that are produced. Therefore Zora Neale-Hurston’s quote above delineates one cultures way of thought processing (“not meant to be pronounced but serve merely to elucidate other signs” – Sigmund Freud<sup>24</sup>) from another, which, is tremendously important when it comes to qualifying literature and assigning value to one linguistic aesthetic over another. Information such as “white men” thinking in written language and “the negro” thinking in hieroglyphs reminds us that analyzing one person’s value, in the midst of cultural positioning and variations, against another person, utilizing the same measuring tape will yield inaccuracies. The properties that construct Shakespeare’s writing, for instance, cannot be measured with the properties that construct James Baldwin’s writing utilizing common or standardized principles. It is, therefore, important to understand the significance of black people finding it necessary to contort themselves and shift the very ways of processing information within their inherent cultural concord to then fit into a foreign shape. This contorting and fitting oneself into a foreign shape that black people have needed to do for survival, has rearranged the traditional definitions of the shape in question. This occurrence happened in every way imaginable, from developments in food to language to dancing. The evolution of jazz music in New Orleans provides a clear example of a people—African people—from various cultures, spiritual practices and

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<sup>23</sup> “Text.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/text](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/text).

<sup>24</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Interpretation of Dreams*. Basic Books, 2010.

systems of belief, being forcibly uprooted from a mother land and packed in strategic but mismatched fashion in a location, with no other choice but to directly encounter other peoples from differing cultures in Africa. There were the many tribes' people, for example, encountering other cultures from disparate regions within what would become the country of Senegal. There people from what would become the country of The Gambia encountering people from what would become Mali, and people from what would become Ghana coming in close proximity, for the first time, with people from what would become Nigeria. There were also earlier generation enslaved people from the West Indies encountering people freshly uprooted from Africa's soil. If that were not multicultural enough, add in the Germans, Irish, Italians, and French, as well as, the Native people of North American soil. African people along with the African diasporic global communities were forced to adapt into new ways of living, thought processing, forced to speak strange languages, all within a hostile environment. It is necessary for all humans to endeavor in a modicum, or even a semblance, of happiness, and this idea of finding, or fabricating, joy was also necessary for enslaved men and women, even in the midst of an unceasingly torturous existence. The distance between enduring extreme anguish and rising to an occasion of joy was transformative and created a tension that began a cultural shift.

From Geoffrey C. Ward book entitled Jazz:

By the mid-1890s, three new kinds of music had begun to filter into the city [of New Orleans]—three strains without which there would have been no jazz.

The first was ragtime, the formal outgrowth of the decades-old African America improvisational practice of “ragging” tunes—syncopating and rearranging them to provide livelier, more danceable versions. Created by black musicians in the cities of Midwest, who had found a way to recreate something like the percussive sound of the banjo on the piano, ragtime drew upon everything that had gone before—spirituals and minstrel tunes, European folk melodies, operatic arias and military marches—all filled with broken chords and set to fresh rhythms. Spread first by itinerant pianists, and then by the sale of sheet music, ragtime caught the fancy of young dancers all over the country who loved it all the more because—since it encouraged young men and women to dance close together as

couples together rather than in groups—their parents did not. “Ragtime is syncopation gone mad,” the editor of *Etude* magazine would write, “and its victims, in my opinion, can be treated successfully only like the dog with rabies, with a dose of lead. Whether it is simply a passing phase of our decadent art culture or an infectious disease which has come to stay, like leprosy, time alone can tell.”

Despite that kind of criticism—and in part perhaps because of it—ragtime had come to stay; jaunty, propulsive, irresistible, it would be America’s best-loved music for a quarter of a century. Nowhere was ragtime more popular or more ubiquitous than in New Orleans; by the turn of the century, Crescent City musicians, in dance halls as well as street parades, were routinely giving every kind of music the ragtime treatment.

Meanwhile, a steady stream of black refugees from the Mississippi Delta was pouring into the city, people for whom even hard labor on the levee promised a better life than any they could hope to have back home, chopping cotton or cutting cane. They brought with them as part of their baggage two interrelated forms essential to the development of jazz—the sacred music of the Baptist church and that music’s profane twin, the blues.

No one knows where or when the blues were born: “Ain’t no first blues,” the New Orleans clarinetist Louis “Big Eye” Nelson remembered: “The blues always been.” Blues lyrics could be about anything—empty pockets, a mean boss, the devil himself—but most were about the relationship between men and women and each performer was expected to tell a story and to make the listener feel better, not worse:

I’m goin’ to lay my head on some  
lonesome railroad track,  
I’m goin’ to lay my head on some  
lonesome railroad track—  
and when the train come along, I’ll

snatch my damn head back.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ward, Geoffrey C. and Burns, Ken. *Jazz A History of America's Music*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

## The Blues as a Vehicle for Black Imagery and Recollection

The earliest blues singers—wandering guitarists who played for pennies along the southern roads—followed no strict musical form. But as first New Orleans musicians and then others around the country began to try to play the blues on their instruments and songwriters started to see commercial possibilities in them, an agreed-upon form was developed: stripped to the essentials, blues came to be built on just three chords most often arranged in twelve-bar sequences that somehow allowed for an infinite number of variations and were capable of expressing an infinite number of emotions.

The blues were good-time music, which was why, to many churchgoers, they were anathema, the work of the devil, forbidden to the saved. But musically, the blues and the hymns black Baptists sang and played in church had always been virtually interchangeable—filled with identical bent notes, moans, and cries. And in the 1890s the distinction would blur still further as the new Holiness churches that had begun to spring up in the black neighborhoods of big cities all over the country started employing tambourines, drums, pianos, cornets, even trombones in order to make their noise still more joyful to the Lord. “Those Baptist rhythms were similar to the jazz rhythms,” said the New Orleans banjoist Johnny St. Cyr, “and the singing was very much on the blues side.” “You heard the pastors in the Baptists churches,” echoed the drummer Paul Barbain, “they were singing rhythm. More so than a jazz band.”

“In the [church],” the New Orleans clarinet master Sidney Bechet would remember, “the people clapped their hands—that was their rhythm. In the blues it was further down; they didn’t need the clapping but they remembered it.... And both of them, the spirituals and the blues, they was a prayer. One was praying to God and the other was praying to what’s human. It’s like one was saying, ‘Oh God, let me go,’ and the other was saying, ‘Oh, Mister, let me be.’”

Jazz music would eventually embody both kinds of invocation, the sacred and the secular, and New Orleans musicians would be the first to deepen the infinitely expressive sound of

the blues by bringing it to their horns, the first to echo the collective “moan” of the congregation, the first to reproduce the call-and-response patterns of the religious exhorter and his transported flock.<sup>26</sup>

Mr. Ward’s passage above about the beginnings of Jazz music coupled with Zora Neale-Hurston’s quote about the variant forms of thought-processing from one culture to the other is also analogous and representational of every facet of life that enslaved Africans endured in order to fit into a new way of living in North America, the Caribbean, and Europe. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. refers to this idea of re-contextualizing the meaning of a structure and shape-shifting, or symbiotic repurposing from the inside out—thereby altering its very definition—as signifyin(g). Signifyin(g) is the idea of “pointing” at a fixed thing (read “text” from my earlier definition above) with a new set of indicators that change the way an image, or “text,” is received. The cohesion of new thought-processing (from Zora Neale-Hurston) by way of written language (the shape or the fixed image in question) from pictured imagery is, essentially, the construction of black literature. Black literature comments on a set of fixed renderings, or “texts,” in the way that Declan Donnellan speaks about the necessity of the actor, who wears the mask of a fixed character, to comment on the “mask” (the text that an author has written) itself. And through the rhythm, musicality and tonal structuring of the human voice, and the physicality of the human body, we are provided narrative indicators that comment on the fixed “text.” These indicators “signify,” as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. might think of it, thereby rearranging conventionally understood meaning. This altering of definition is either a creation of new language or the remastering of an antiquated language that was provided to these United States by the English. Or how “jazz” is a form of signifyin(g), as explained by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and changing the meaning from the inside out.

Think of the word “bad,” for example, this word, depending on the physical and auditory indicators can alter the original definition of this word and produce several, even antithetical definitions—“bad,” depending on the textuality of the indicator, can most certainly mean “good,” for instance. This is one example that I am speaking of and how the “negro” thought-processing of hieroglyphs merges into the written language thought-processing of the “white mans,” as Zora Neale-Hurston explains, coupled with the snatching of black people from a mother land into

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<sup>26</sup> Ward, Geoffrey C. and Burns, Ken. *Jazz A History of America’s Music*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

enforced merging within the United States, as explained by Mr. Ward points to the evolution of Jazz. The quote below highlights the difficulties endured by the enslaved in assimilating to the dominant culture.

“When black people got to this country, they were Africans, a foreign people. Their customs, attitudes, desires, were shaped to a different place, a radically different life. What a weird and unbelievably cruel destiny for those people who were first brought here. Not just the mere fact of being sold into slavery—that in itself was common practice among the tribes of West Africa, and the economic system in which these new slaves were to form so integral a part was not so strange either. In fact, Melville Herkovits points out, ‘Slavery [had] long existed in the entire region [of West Africa], and in at least one of its kingdoms, Dahomey, a kind of plantation system was found under which an absentee ownership, with the ruler as principal, demanded the utmost return from the estates, and thus created conditions of labor resembling the regime the slaves were to encounter in the New World.’ but to be brought to a country, a culture, a society, that was, and is, in terms of purely philosophical correlatives, the complete antithesis of one’s own version of man’s life on earth—that is the cruelest aspect of this particular enslavement.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “The Negro as Non-American.” *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, by Imamu Amiri. Baraka, Perennial, 2002, pp. 1–1.



## Double Consciousness as portrayed in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*

Throughout this transfiguring and propagating of one culture's thought-processing to another, black people throughout the diaspora had to necessitate a dual existence. The difference between the function of Eurocentric art and African-based forms is that the artistic image of African art is not intended to represent the thing itself, but, rather, the reality of the force the thing contains. Art of the Western world attempts to imitate nature, while African art is concerned with reaching beyond and beneath nature, to contact, and itself become a part of "la force vitale."<sup>28</sup> Black literature, like black life, is highly complex, as represents the merging not simply textual renderings, but the cohesion of one way of processing thoughts into another way of processing thoughts, as well as the conjoining belief systems and cultural perspective into a unified singular form. With all of this merging that I mention, it becomes essential to keep in mind the ideas surrounding double-consciousness coined by W.E.B Du Bois. The idea of double-consciousness is very different from ideas of assimilation, because all aspects within the singular mind are active and salient. In Parks' play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, the "death" that is perhaps in question here, represents the eventual extinguishing of black language, and the tropes that surround the living existence of black culture.

The primary archetype of *The Death of the Last Black in the Whole Entire World* is Black Man with Watermelon who exists in a state of perpetual execution. This character personifies the waning of the black language. He dies many deaths, and with each reincarnation it becomes urgent for him to record his actual existence in the world as something more than a passing phase or a notion. Black Woman with Fried Drumstick is the mourning widow who is left with the responsibility to carry on the memory of her deceased husband, and the language between them. The play is an amalgamation of a number of topics that I believe captured Parks' attention, and began to delineate the play's content from its form. The content of the play was influenced by Parks growing up as an "army brat", she remembers, as a child, her father often left home, going

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<sup>28</sup> "Princes and Powers." *Baldwin - Collected Essays*, by James Baldwin, Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998, pp. 150–150.

away on active military duty for long spans of time on assignment. Each time that her father would go away, she, being just a little girl, presumed him to be dead, but whenever her mother would prepare a large meal he would, almost magically, return. In the mind of a young child, she believed that the ritual of her mother preparing the large meal would be the very thing that summons her father back to from the “dead,” but sooner or later he would “die” yet again and the process would repeat. I find this memory particularly striking and apropos as we consider the long history of police misconduct that has led to the extrajudicial murders of black men. The deaths of these men—and women—have been synthesized into the archetype that Parks has named Black Man with Watermelon. Similar to the “Everyman” character from the late 15<sup>th</sup>-century morality play *The Somonyng of Everyman*, where the play is the allegorical accounting of the life of Everyman, who represents all of mankind, so too, is Black Man with Watermelon a representation of all black persons that have suffered execution by a system that seeks their erasure. This erasure has everything to do with both their personhoods and the inventions of remastering the English language. In this respect, if Black Man with Watermelon represents the dead and the perpetually executed, Black Woman with Fried Drumstick represents the living, and the perpetually mourning legacy bearers. Parks correlates this incessant execution and erasure of Black Man with Watermelon to the idea of dismemberment, similar to how black bodies were captured and became enslaved, and then uprooted and dispersed throughout various portions of a New World during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Black Man with Watermelon desperately wants to be made whole again—or re-membered (to combine, aid, connect, help, repair, or join together), and with the constant admonishing by another archetype that Parks has named Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread towards Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, to “write that down and hide it under a rock,” this tragedy turns itself into a piercing story of love and perseverance.

## *Characters in The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*

### **Black Man with Watermelon**

“Any political and social regime which destroys the self-determination of a people also destroys the creative power of that people.” (Aimé Césaire). And likewise, Black Man with Watermelon represents the “Everyman” of black culture deprived of his power. He traverses the liminal space between the living and the dead, and carries around a heavy burden wherever he goes in the form of a watermelon. I was interested in seeing this watermelon become a football and various other things that keep him in bondage. The watermelon is his ball and chain, and it is also all of the attributes and assumptions that a society, anxious for his erasure, places squarely on his shoulders. Black Man with Watermelon has no agency over his own body because of all the assumptions and fears that impede his abilities. He is drowned as he runs chasing after freedom with bloodhounds hot on his tail; he is sentenced to the electric chair and then put to death by electrocution; he is also hung to death within a tree, and carries with him the tree branch that bowed and broke with the weight of his heavy load. In life as in death he frequently visits his wife, whose mourning bitterness, like his death, is perpetual and unending. He is most interested in being re-membered, and made whole through the process of language and the things that have filled him with happiness, like broccoli. It is important to note, here, the prominence of Black Man with Watermelon actually liking a food, or anything, and within what he is prescriptively assumed to enjoy.

### **Black Woman with Fried Drumstick**

Black Woman with Fried Drumstick is the ever-attentive nurturer and is the only fully living being in the play. I don't believe that she is able to clearly see her husband that has visited her from the dead, but she feels his presence near and around. She has made great sacrifices to enact the ritual that has, by her estimation, allowed the visitation of her husband. Her need to perform this ritual includes her sacrificing chickens so as to make offerings to the spirit of her husband. Animal sacrifice is central to various African-based spiritual practices, such as Santeria and Voodoo. The animal is not sacrificed as food nourishment, but rather for some obscure mystical purpose. Followers of Orisha, for instance, will offer these deities food and sacrifice animals to them in

order to build and maintain a personal relationship with a particular spiritual force. This process not only brings the worshipper closer to the deity that they are attempting to appease, but makes them more aware of the presence of that force within them. This is a mutual process; the food is essential for the Orisha, who will die without being fed, and in return the Orishas are able to help the worshippers. Chickens are the most common sacrificial animal, and they are cooked and eaten following all Santeria rituals. In healing and death rites, where the sickness is believed to pass into the dead animal, the animals are not eaten. Eating the sacrificed animal is considered a sharing with the Orisha, who only consumes the animal's blood, while the worshippers eat the meat. The preparing of food for funeral rites is a longstanding tradition. Fried chicken is a kind of food that one would easily associate with especially funeral traditions within black culture. The Black Woman with Fried Drumstick doesn't have the luxury of time to adequately grieve the loss of her husband, as she is the emblematic weight bearer. For the Black Woman with Fried Drumstick I was interested in signifyin(g) on the concept of the mammy figure. According to Wikipedia:

One of the earliest fictionalized versions of the mammy figure is Aunt Chloe in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was first published in 1852. As the mammy figure progressed into the 20th century, the persona changed over time into perhaps a mythology. Memoirs that describe the roles of mammies from the 1890s to the 1920s downplayed the mammy's relationship with her family.

The mammy figure is rooted in the history of slavery in the United States. Enslaved African American women were tasked with the duties of domestic workers in White American households. Their duties included preparing meals, cleaning homes, and nursing and rearing their owners' children. Out of these circumstances arose the image of the mammy.

While originating in the slavery period, the mammy figure rose to prominence during the Reconstruction Era. In the Southern United States, the mammy played a role in historical revisionism efforts to reinterpret and legitimize their legacy of chattel slavery and racial oppression. The mammy image has endured into the 20th and 21st centuries. In 1923, the United Daughters of the Confederacy proposed the erection of a mammy statue on the National Mall. The proposed statue would be dedicated to "The Black Mammy of the South".

The historicity of the mammy figure is questionable. Historical accounts point to the identity of most female domestic servants as teenagers and young adults, not "grandmotherly types" such as the mammy. Melissa Harris-Perry has argued that the mammy was a creation of the imagination of the White supremacy, which reimagined the powerless, coerced slave girls as soothing, comfortable, and consenting women. In 1981, Andy Warhol included the mammy in his Myths series, alongside other mythological and folklore characters such as Santa Claus, Mickey Mouse, and Superman.

In *Mammy. A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (2008), Kimberly Wallace-Sanders argued that the mammy's stereotypical attributes point to the source of her inspiration: "a long lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology, and southern nostalgia".

The romanticized mammy image survives in the popular imagination of the modern United States. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, a licensed psychologist, argues that political correctness has led to the mammy figure being less prevalent in the 21st-century culture, but the mammy archetype still influences the portrayal of African-American women in fiction, as good caretakers, nurturing, selfless, strong, and supportive, the supporting characters to white protagonists. She cites as examples Miranda Bailey, Mercedes Jones, and Ivy Wentz.

The mammy was usually portrayed as an older woman, overweight, and dark skinned. She was an idealized figure of a caregiver: amiable, loyal, maternal, non-threatening, obedient, and submissive. The mammy figure demonstrated deference to white authority. On occasion, the mammy was also depicted as a sassy woman. She was devoted to her owners/employers and her primary goal in life was to care for their needs. Some portrayals had the mammy have a family of her own. But her caregiving duties would always come first, leading to the mammy being portrayed as a neglectful parent or grandparent. And while the mammy was devoted to her white family, she often treated her own family poorly. Moreover, she had no black friends.

Melissa Harris-Perry describes the relationship between the mammy and other African Americans in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (2011) by summarizing that "Mammy was not a protector or defender of black children or communities. She represented a maternal ideal, but not in caring for her own children. Her

love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were reserved exclusively for white women and children.”

This stereotype contrasts with the Jezebel stereotype, which depicted younger African-American women as conniving and promiscuous. The mammy was occasionally depicted as a religious woman. More often than not, the mammy was an asexual figure, "devoid of any personal desires that might tempt her to sin". This helped the mammy serve as both a confidant and a moral guide to her young charges, capable of keeping them in line.

Kimberly Wallace-Sanders includes other characteristics of the mammy in *Mammy. A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (2008): A large dark body, a round smiling face, a deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, a raucous laugh. Her personal attributes include infinite patience, self-deprecating wit, an implicit understanding and acceptance of her own inferiority, and her devotion to whites. The mammy was also large-breasted, desexualized, and potentially hostile towards men. Many of these characteristics were denied to African-American female slaves but were generally attributed to the mammy.<sup>29</sup>

### **And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger**

“People who are always under siege often have no choice but to conjure their inner powers, to manipulate energies as they walk down streets where they were once beaten, to bend sound waves when invectives are close enough to the ear to cause pain, to suture broken hearts when the people they love refuse to love them back, and to appear again and again after death attempts to disappear them.”<sup>30</sup>

This archetype that Suzan-Lori Parks has named And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger comes directly from the protagonist of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas. Richard Wright’s character, Bigger Thomas, is a 20-year-old youth from Chicago, who is unclear about the about

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<sup>29</sup> “Mammy Archetype.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 4 May 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mammy\\_archetype](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mammy_archetype).

<sup>30</sup> “Magic.” *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black & Free in America*, by Darnell L. Moore, Bold Type Books, an Imprint of Perseus Books, 2019, pp. 89–90.

the world around him, and therefore how to conduct himself in this strange world and even what to think. He is an outsider and a misfit archetype, as he does not rightly fit into boxes that are prescribed to him. Through the course of the novel, Bigger Thomas, attempts to discuss his innermost feelings but he cannot find the words to express himself fully, nor does he have the time to actually say the words that come to his mind. Richard Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is found guilty of two crimes and is sentenced to death by the electric chair. It is not until his last moments before death that he has had the time to reflect and deeply understand the world in a different way, and therefore appreciate his life. In this moment he has made peace with his deeds and has accepted his fate. His lawyer, Boris Max, is a Jewish American and is in a position to understand that Bigger Thomas has been systemically destined for his eventual fate in a system that has always worked against him. The archetype of Bigger Thomas is trope that has been prevalent in the Black literary tradition from James Weldon Johnson to Zora Neale-Hurston to Richard Wright to Ralph Ellison to Toni Morrison to Alice Walker to Ishmael Reed and many others since the late 1800s beginning with the idea of "jes grew". Here Dr. Jim Nelson from [remixculture.ca](http://remixculture.ca), 2019, explains:

The phrase "jes' grew" became a common shorthand way of referring to something whose origins are not easily reduced to human intentions and actions, but more the result of an organic, natural, complex process. Someone who feels the city of Toronto as it exists today evolved more due to diverse events, interests, natural phenomena, accidents, and outside pressures than as the result of premeditated city planning, might say that "Toronto, like Topsy, jes' grew."

People use the phrase to refer to human creations that happen spontaneously, organically, and without intention or ulterior motives. Folk music like the blues, for instance, "jes' grew." Later it may become something intentional and premeditated, when people start to record it and monetize it, but it emerged as a natural expression of human feeling, not as a commodity.

The origins of this once common phrase are an interesting case of cultural appropriation in their own right. When African Americans were still slaves, the white author Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a novel called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel was intended to awaken

white people to the inhumanity of slavery and to cultivate their sympathy with black people. It was the second best-selling book in the United States in the 19th century (after the Bible!) and is considered to have had a hand in bringing about the Civil War. (Nevertheless, despite its good intentions, the novel is rife with stereotypical portrayals of black people such as were common at the time, and is thus an example of Cultural Appropriation itself.)

One of the most popular characters in the book is the little black girl Topsy, who is a disarmingly unsophisticated “force of nature.” At one point a proper white woman is asking Topsy what she thinks of God, and Topsy doesn’t really have any views on the subject. The woman is shocked and pushes Topsy, asking her who she thinks made her if she doesn’t accept that there is a God, and Topsy responds that she “expects [she] jes’ grew” (actually her phrasing is slightly different in the book, but this is the phrase that became popular).

Topsy is an engaging character and did much to encourage white sympathy for black slaves, but she is still the imaginary creation of a white person, representing a stereotypical black personality, while blacks themselves had no control over their representation in mainstream culture. This is one of the things that makes cultural appropriation so disturbing, the way in which it goes against the politics of *self*-representation.

In this class, “jes’ grew” is a shorthand for a form of cultural production more characteristic of folk culture, where creative work is collaborative and derivative. Examples of this include the Blues, early jazz, early hip hop, and even the Internet. These were all things that came about from human creativity and with their own internal logic. This kind of “jes’ grew” creativity is sharply contrasted with most of the creative work done in mainstream commercial culture, where there is a goal outside the creativity (making money) and creative work is intentionally and focused on some external goal. For instance, in the early days of hip hop this genre of music “jes’ grew,” amateurs freely enjoying and expressing themselves with no other end in mind. Hip hop today, on the other hand, is a commodity and created by professionals with goals outside of just expressing themselves: fame, wealth, etc.



Blues starts out in the later 1800s as an organic folk creation of African Americans. Songs have their origins in the cotton fields and taverns, though church music also plays an important role. Amateur musicians trade lyrics, music, and ideas around freely. No one is wholly responsible for any particular song. No one owns any song or can claim sole authorship of it. At first, nothing is published or recorded. Music is transmitted in performance alone. Each performance is a re-creation.

In Blues, and – at least initially – later in Jazz, authorship and ownership of cultural creations are not clear-cut or considered that important. Every performance is unique; almost nothing is published or recorded; songs are not “fixed” in an original or authorized version. What you do with the material is what’s important; not who created the original or who “owns” it. Nobody owns it.

In the 1920s, the African American writer James Weldon Johnson underscores this view of the Blues songs (which he somewhat inaccurately calls “ragtime”) in his preface to an early anthology of African American verse, *The Book of Negro Poetry* (1922):

The earliest Ragtime [blues and jazz] songs, like Topsy, “jes’ grew.” Some of these earliest songs were taken down by white men, the words slightly altered or changed, and published under the names of the arrangers. They sprang into immediate popularity and earned small fortunes. [...]

Later there came along a number of colored men who were able to transcribe the old songs and write original ones. [...] I remember that we appropriated about the last one of the old “jes’ grew” songs. It was a song which had been sung for years all through the South. The words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible, and belonged to nobody.

Johnson here charts the transformation from collaborative creation to intellectual property that occurred with the rise of sound recording and the white appropriation of the styles and actual songs created by African Americans. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, authorship and ownership become central not so much because of ego or giving credit where credit is due, but because of money.

In examining the early history of hip hop, I tried to show the ways in which it too “jes’ grew” in a non-contentious, collaborative, anonymous way – an “urban folk music” – and then how quickly it then became monetized and its appropriations became the focus of legal contention.<sup>31</sup>

### **Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread**

There is a legacy throughout black culture, but especially within the African American community of not writing things down in order to document them. René Descartes was a French philosopher who’s 1637 statement “I think, therefore I am” gave rise to the Age of Enlightenment, and during this era it became crucial for black people to prove their existence by figuring out ways of transcribing the black spoken voice within the text of Western letters. There is a tension and a distance between the spoken voice and the written voice that occupies distinct and discursive universes. At times these worlds intersect, but more often they do not. Western cultures have privileged written forms of art over oral traditions and musical forms. The presence of the “black printed voice of deliverance” would put an end to all claims of the black person’s sub-humanity. In this Age of Reason writing became both commodity and technology, and it was necessary for black people to textualize their existence. Suzan-Lori Parks archetype of Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread is ever-adamant of the necessity to “write that down, write that down and hide it under a rock” as the constancy and the stability of the rock will hide the paper from becoming destroyed. It is this slip of paper that will prove, within the Age of Enlightenment, the existence and the proliferation of black people. For many black families there is a tradition to actually write out their family line and history within the covers of the family bible. Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas and Cornbread is part of a chorus of ghosts, a great cloud of witnesses, that gather around the Black Woman with Fried Drumstick in her time of grieving to uphold and advise her. These witnesses also come together in order to meet and welcome the Black Man with Watermelon and advise him as he traverses liminality.

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<sup>31</sup> Nelson, Jim. Jes’ Grew, [remixculture.ca/jes-grew](http://remixculture.ca/jes-grew), 2019.

### **Before Columbus**

Christopher Columbus was an Italian navigator who completed four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean under the sponsorship of the Catholic Monarchs of Spain. He led Europe's first expeditions to the Caribbean, Central America, and South America that began a long-standing European colonization of the Americas. While he certainly did not discover America, he found the viable sailing route to the Americas but assumed that what he did discover was a route to the Far East. He opened the Americas for European conquest and settlement. Columbus's expeditions began many centuries worth of European colonization and the triangulate slave trade, helping to create and grow the modern Western world. According to Wikipedia, "the transfers between the Old World and New World that followed his first voyage are known as the Columbian exchange, and the period of human habitation in the Americas prior to his arrival is known as the Pre-Columbian era." Ivan Van Sertima's book called *They Came Before Columbus* speaks about the African presence in Ancient America, and all things before Columbus sailed the ocean in search of a so-called undiscovered world and new riches prior to 1492. The legacy of Columbus continues to be heavily debated, and is said to have discovered America, when in fact the technology of shipbuilding, navigating the open seas and friendly trade had been processed between African people and Native Americans long before his fleet out to sea. Before Columbus is the archetype that Suzan-Lori Parks has created as a part the great cloud of witnesses and personifies the so-called Pre-Columbian Era, along with the civilizations that were active prior to 1492. The moment that Columbus set sail in 1492 marks the first time that European fleets ventures out into the open sea to explore a world that they had never known and to come to the realization that the world was not flat.

### **Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork**

This archetype, Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork, is another part of the chorus that Suzan-Lori Parks has created. This character represents the impending death with his perpetual pronouncement of the constant refrain of "This the death of the last black man in the whole entire world." The idea of this character is based on enslaved people scavenging the scraps of the pig after the prime parts, such as the pork shoulder, the pork butt, the pork loins and the front hock were all consumed by the enslaver, his family, and their guests. The scraps such as the feet, the

tongue, the head, the testicles, and the intestines were, of course thrown in the trash. The diet of enslaved people consisted mainly on corn mush, which left much to be desired. Therefore, the enslaved people would scavenge the scraps in order to season food such as hoecakes and corn mush. Intestines, pig head, and pigs' feet have become a delicacy within the African-American cuisine, these parts of the pig are also very high in fatty content which have led to high diabetes and impending death rates of black people. For these reasons, I have come to understand this character as a survivalist in the midst of harshly inhumane conditions with regard to physical exertion and a need for high caloric intake in order to upkeep the physical strain on the body.

## **Ham**

Chattel slavery of black people was justified throughout the world by the biblical story in Genesis, chapter nine, verse 20 through 27, where Ham accidentally sees the drunkenness and nakedness of his father Noah within his father's tent. Upon seeing his father in this state, Ham told his brothers Shem and Japheth, and while averting their eyes and not seeing their father's nakedness, Shem and Japheth cloaked their father, Noah, during his sleep. After waking up, noticing that he was newly covered, Noah knew what his younger son, Ham, had seen and done to him. Noah, in anger, then placed a curse upon Ham's son Canaan to be a servant of servants to Ham's brothers. Noah exalted and praised Shem to be forever blessed and live in the house of God, alongside Japheth, while the son of Ham, Canaan, shall serve them. This preposterous story has, in fact given credence to justify the subjection of the Canaanite people to the Israelites, and later Christians, Muslims, and Jews throughout the world took this same story to explain how black skin came to be, and why it was divinely written that the Canaanite people, black people should forever be enslaved to the non-black person. This story has been upheld in court cases and even throughout the Age of Enlightenment and Reason, lacks both characteristics. The character of Ham in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* signifies upon this story in his speech "Ham's begotten tree." Ham shines a light on the pure silliness of this entire story behind "the curse of Ham" by creating his own version of how things have come to be, at least as he sees it all. In "Ham's begotten tree" Ham signifies and remixes the biblical genealogical list, known as the begets, of Genesis, chapter 5. In my production, I have Ham sitting near, what I have created as, "the door of no return" for most of the play as somewhat of a guardian, until the rest of his comrades call

upon him to explain the history of the begets. The door of no return is the opening that is within the slave castles in West Africa, and is the point of no return, the last point that enslaved Africans encounter of a mother land that they are uprooted from and shipped, as slaves, to the Western world. “Ham is not to blame” is spoken by Ham of the prevalence of the justification of this myth of Noah, Ham, and the curse of Canaan.

### **Prunes and Prisms**

A phrase that is spoken up to 41 times each day to give a “pretty” form to the lips, from Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* of 1857. Mrs. General, a character from Charles Dickens’s novel, insists “When you talk to your grandmother, stick to prunes and prisms so that you don’t offend her. If you want to become a proper lady, practice saying ‘prunes and prisms!’” According to [idioms.thefreedictionary.com](http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com) “Intentionally formal and/or prudish speech or action.” This character is part of the chorus and cloud of witnesses who represent the weight that the “black man” must carry, like the watermelon and the fried chicken.

### **Old Man River Jordan**

Ol’ Man River is a song from the musical *Show Boat*, written by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II in 1927. The song compares the endless workload of early 19<sup>th</sup> century African Americans to the perpetual flow of the Mississippi River. The song is from the perspective of a black waterfront manual laborer who is involved in loading and unloading ships, trucks, trains and airplanes. The song is meant to bring illuminate the anxiety and hardship of living in spite of the unaffected steadily flowing river. I have included the lyrics below, because reading them brings to mind what Suzan-Lori Parks might have been after when attempting to build this story of *The Last Black Man* into narrative form, as it represents the execution and torment that I referred to earlier that *Black Man with Watermelon* suffers perpetually.

Dere’s an ol’ man called de Mississippi  
Dat’s do ol’ man dat I’d like to be  
What does he care if de world’s got troubles

what does he care if de land ain't free

Ol' man river, dat ol' man river  
He mus' know sumpin', but don't say nuthin'  
He jes' keeps rollin'  
He keeps on rollin' along

He don' plant taters, he don't plant cotton  
An' dem dat plants' em is soon forgotten  
But ol' man river  
He jes' keeps rollin' along

You an' me, we sweat an' strain  
Body all achin' an' wracked wid pain,  
Tote dat barge! Lif' dat bale!  
Git a little drunk an' you lands in jail

Ah git weary an' sick of tryin'  
Ah'm tired of livin' an' skeered of dyin'  
But ol' man river  
He jes' keeps rollin' along

Niggers all work on de Mississippi  
Niggers all work while de white folk play  
Pullin' dose boats from de damn to sunset  
Gittin' no rest till de judgement day

(Don't look up an' don't look down)  
(You don' dar'st make de white boss frown)  
(Bend yo' knees an' bow your head)  
(An' pull dat rope until you're dead)

Let me go 'way from the Mississippi  
Let me go 'way from de white man boss  
Show me dat stream called de river Jordan  
Dat's de ol' stream dat I long to cross

(Ol' man river, dat ol' man river)  
He mus' know sumpin', but don't say nothin')  
(He just keeps rollin')  
(He keeps on rollin' along)

Long, low river  
Forever keeps rollin'

(Don' plant taters, he don' plant cotton)  
(And dem dat plants' em is soon forgotten)  
(But ol' man river)  
(He jes' keeps rollin' along)

Long low river  
Keeps singin' dis song

You an' me, we sweat an' strain  
Body all achin' and wracked wid pain  
Tote date barge! Lift dat Bale!  
Git a little drunk and ya lands in jail

Ah gits weary an' sick o' trying  
Ah'm tired o livin' an skeered o' dyin'  
But ol' man river

He jes' keeps rollin' along!<sup>32</sup>

### **Voice on Thuh Tee V**

The media represents, at least in our society, the primary function of how information is transmitted to society. The media plays an enormous role in how society functions by stimulating our attention in different ways. Things that we, as a society, are deeply concerned about have much to do with the kind of information that is withheld or provided, and the way in which that information is dealt with effects our individual psychology. This archetype of the play is the personification of a set of shared structures of the collective unconscious. According to Carl Jung, “the human collective unconscious is populated by instincts and by archetypes: universal symbols such as The Great Mother, the Wise Old Man, the Shadow, the Tower, Water, the Tree of Life, and many more.”<sup>33</sup> Voice on Thuh Tee V is our way of plugging into an information station. This voice is repetitive and inculcating, almost in an instructional kind of way. This voice warns us, but it is important to unplug in order to end this learned cycle of perpetual death.

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<sup>32</sup> Kern, Jerome, and Oscar Hammerstein II. “OL' MAN RIVER, Show Boat.” *Lyrics*, 1927, [lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/o/olmanriver.html](http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/o/olmanriver.html).

<sup>33</sup> “Collective Unconscious.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 29 Apr. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective\\_unconscious](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_unconscious).



## *The Intention for the Juxtaposition of the Two Plays*

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* by Adrienne Kennedy, and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* by Suzan-Lori Parks in juxtaposition to each other intrigues me because of how Suzan-Lori Parks remixes and signifies upon many of the tropes—30 years after—that Adrienne Kennedy deals with in her play *Funnyhouse of Negro*. This remixing of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* into *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is an example of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would call “Signifyin(g),” which is evident throughout African-American tradition since the start of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. An art museum curator unearths synergy and establishes new discourse from two works of art hanging side by side, and like an art curator, I believe the proximity of these works will allow an audience to view these two plays with a new perspective, and therefore ignite interestingly fresh dialogue. I also believe that this merging together of these theatrical works, into a 90-minute evening with no intermission will make the material, in itself, new. I named the evening “The Woman/The Man” for the vicinity of these two plays and their content, with Negro-Sarah as the representation of The Woman and Black Man with Watermelon as the representation of The Man. Also, I am interested in drawing attention to the parallel analogy of Negro-Sarah and Black Man with Watermelon as the archetypal “Everyman” from the 15<sup>th</sup> century morality play.

The symbiotic design utility might juxtapose the worlds of these plays resulting in a single conversation where both of these plays can exist. The discussion that I am most interested in having with an audience deals with the topic of assimilation, and how merging into ideologies of dominant, and seemingly more ethical, cultural practices, promotes delusions of hierarchy and class-based supremacy. Such assimilation silences diverse perspectives and anesthetizes cognitive sensibilities, thereby dulling feedback and feeds forward. This assimilation that I speak of encourages moving away from and leaving behind natural elements that distinguish inherent differences within an individual, in the hopes of existing primarily in the center rather than the assumed lesser colloquial margins. Negro-Sarah hopes to find redemptive success and acceptance from a colonizing culture which the Landlady (also Funnyhouse Lady) and Raymond (also Funnyhouse Man) characterize in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. This assimilationist idea does not allow for conscious transferences of blackness and has, no doubt, allowed for a colonial mentality to

permeate and strangle to death ideologies of black ways of speaking and existing. Negro-Sarah finds herself left on the fringes of a society that she is anxious to flee at all costs, even that of her own life. She has been consciously, pre-consciously and unconsciously taught that black, as a cultural state of being, is unfit, vile, ugly, violently dangerous, and the opposite of righteous. In Negro-Sarah's quest to find steady peace of mind and gain a modicum of righteousness, she implements the device of separating her good – and white – self from that of her wicked – and black – person. Therefore, by way of a coping mechanism, not only does Negro-Sarah fall victim to multiple personality disorder, but she also demonizes and derogates her father as the black “other.” Negro-Sarah's snuffing out, strangling, and exterminating her blackness, to assimilate into whiteness becomes her unraveling. The motif of Negro-Sarah's hair perpetually falling out symbolizes this unraveling, along with the multiple personalities that reside within her. Negro-Sarah is unable to serve two masters—the worshipping of her white selves while at the same time the berating and denigrating of her black person. The inner violence that exists within her is a weight that she cannot bear. For a nearly five-century reign, it has been the zeitgeist of the Western world to excavate and appropriate marginalized subculture, while, at the same time, eradicating and, indubitably, promoting the assimilation of black and brown people. This world conflict all takes place in Negro-Sarah's mind, and poetically the mind state of all colonized and oppressed people.

The slow death of Sarah, represented by the falling out of her hair, in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is a theme that permeates in the continued execution of her father and, in my view, the Black Man with Watermelon in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. While *Funnyhouse of a Negro* seems to take a microscopic view, in analyzing the inner world and workings of Negro-Sarah –and her multiple personalities – *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* takes a macroscopic view, and analyzes the “Black state.” The “Black state” is expressed by the victimhood of the macro-societal figures in the play, representing the many prejudices, stereotypes, presumptions, generalities, and prescriptions that, as burdens, black people must carry. Additionally, some of these figures are antithetical to the societal prescripts and serve the “Black state” as a way to break away from and fight, thereby undermining the black body into a permanent posture of confrontation. Therefore, whether as prescripts put upon the “Black state” or as a way of fighting against these stereotypes, all these figures immobilize the “Black state.”

### *The Physical Production and The Juxtaposition of the Two Plays*

Concerning the physical production, it is essential that the figure Black Man with Watermelon, along with his language, remain in a perpetually permanent state of annihilation, specified by drowning, an electric chair and tree-hanging. Black Man with Watermelon does not have agency over his own body and feels as if his body is that of an empty vessel. While the body belongs to him, a dominant power has usurped control rendering him without agency over his language, body, and thoughts. Metaphorically he is a passenger within the car that he is no longer certain even belongs to him and he has no power to drive this metaphoric car. Through the course of the play, he gains full cognitive control of his body, and through death, he gains, agency, knowledge of his selfhood, language, and is finally free. Beyond the idea of assimilation, I find it of prominence that Negro-Sarah (The Woman) finds a greater understanding and peace after death as she passes along the noose that she has used to hang herself onto to the Black Man with Watermelon (The Man) who in turn finds his freedom and happiness through the event of his final death, knowing that he has passed along a greater legacy to Black Woman with Fried Drumstick than what he was given at the start of his journey within the play.

In collaborating with my team of designers it was of utmost importance to me that the team understood what both of these plays were attempting. I, therefore, spent a great deal of time with everyone in social environments talking about the work. Over the summer, I hosted reading events which acted as a way to have illuminating conversations about plays with people that enjoy each other's company. And nearly seven months in advance to production, I began formal meetings with the set designer, Ramaj Jamar. After conceiving a design that we both felt was right, I was able to sit with that work for a while and imagine how this world would become populated. The original design that we created was replete with all the bells and whistles, but it did not equally fit the world of both plays and seemed like it would have been difficult to pull off in the  $\frac{3}{4}$  thrust of The Lenfest Center for Performing Arts, with the limited budget provided by Columbia. On the day that I made a detour from this original design plan, I met with Ramaj at NYU in the summertime, and, almost out of nowhere, I asked if he would be able to produce some other options that he and I could consider. It was more than evident, to me, that Ramaj was frustrated with my sudden change of heart, but I felt that the original design was too much of everything: too many

hanging things, too many set pieces, and too loud. In my heart of hearts, I was more interested in something stark and simple, but that would be able to hold the world of both plays with very little change over. Around that time, I was doing some research on Janus, the ancient Roman god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time duality, doorways, passages, and endings. This research led me to start to consider the door of no return of the slave castles in Senegal's Goree Island. I have long been attracted to the idea of this door of no return since my first visit to Senegal in 1995, and dramaturgically it seemed well suited for both plays. I re-introduced this idea to Ramaj, and he seemed to be enlivened by the finding a way of basing a scenic design on the door that haunts me. From the door, that leads to an ocean and ships, Ramaj found really interesting images of various docks and piers. The images were stark and brought forward a spirit of both plays, I could finally imagine both of these plays living inside of this world some way. And like the research that I did on Janus, the god of duality, I became interested in either play containing traces of the other and then being able to be flipped, almost inside out, to reveal something new. Now having a scenic design that sat right with my mind, I was able to move forward and to understand how this world that Ramaj created might become populated. I brought on a newbie costume designer name Sabrina Bianca Guillaume, and she was also excited about the world and gathered inspiration from Ramaj's creation. Ramaj, with respect to his major at NYU, is a costume designer, but he wanted to try his hand at developing a set design, I'm glad that I was able to let him play in way that is seemingly outside of his prescribed box. Nothing was perfect, and my team was anxious to ask for things that "should" be happening at a certain point in time. Ramaj had the help of his professors at NYU and our technical director John Trevellini, Sabrina had the help of my long-time friend and mentor Cookie Jordan. Sabrina did not have the skill to draw designs in the way that I envisioned standing in front of a cast of actors, happily showing and speaking the work, but she had a passion that was unmatched. Similarly, Ramaj didn't have the skill to build a model box that was worth of much to be proud of, but we all made it work and I was pleased with the spirit of our collaboration. Bethany Sharp and Mei Li Heman, came on board as my producers, most of the time it felt like they were officers of Columbia, sent to keep me in line, most of the time it was frustrating feeling like they were my babysitters. Often times, I wanted to display the fact that this in fact was my show and my own money that I am spending out of my own pocket. However, I managed to come out on the other side of the enormous frustration that I was feeling. Mei Li and Bethany introduced me to Eric Norbury, our lighting designer, and Kimberly S. O'Loughlin, our sound designer. At

first, I really didn't see the point of bringing on a sound designer because I wanted everything to be acoustic and simple, and I certainly did not want to have to be concerned with yet another meeting. Kimberly ended up be a fantastic addition to the team, and the sound scape that we created help to hold up the story that I was most interested in telling.

The big conundrum of this project was finding a way to transition out of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* into *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. I wanted to avoid an intermission at all costs, but still kept it as an option just in case I could not figure out a smooth way of transitioning from one piece to the other. A friend of mine, who is a student at UCSD, told me that one of his professors would often say "if you don't work on it, you worry about it" and in that spirit the transition was something that I often worried about. In pulling the work together, I was really influenced by the way John Giampietro worked on the opera *The Turn of the Screw*. In general, the way that opera worked really intrigued me and influenced the way that I worked on my thesis. I was John's assistant director on the opera, and what interested me the most was how painterly he was in pulling scenes together. In this respect, it was imperative that the full cast entered into the rehearsal process off-book, this way I would be able to focus on making the plays hearable, as you would a piece of music. I worked earnestly and quickly through each play, to best prepare the cast to transition to the stage. Again, the mantra playing in my head, "if you don't work on it, you worry about it," jumped right in to figure out the conundrum of transitioning. In working it out, it created a narrative almost all its own, something that that neither Adrienne Kennedy nor Suzan-Lori Parks orchestrated in their texts, but a conversation between the two works and myself. Negro-Sarah's suicide would create a psychologic eruption of sorts, the entities that vie for agency within Negro-Sarah, and end up killing her, shake her world. In this sense, this gives me a reason for a soundscape and a changeover that slowly begins to transition into the next play. Negro-Sarah has hung herself within her room and as she exits the stage space she encounters Black Man with Watermelon, perhaps in liminality. During the encounter Negro-Sarah removes the rope that has claimed her life and peacefully places it on to Black Man with Watermelon as a tie, before kissing him on the forehead and continuing up the stairs to her final destination. This rope that is placed on Black Man with Watermelon, along with the melon that he carries is his burden to bear, and in the midst of a New Orleans, Second Line-styled funeral procession we arrive at Black Man with Watermelon watching his wife dressed in black and him saying "Black Man

move he hands.” I am interested in the form of the physical productions being but an extension of the story’s content, and therefore not held captive nor conforming to traditional expectations and prescriptive assumptions. The set, costume, light, and sound design should work together to deepen the tale which is ignited by the text and begin to find new grounds on which to communicate subtextual layering. Upon the Black Man and Black Woman finally being able to lay their proverbial burden down (read: fried chicken and watermelon) and Black Man with(out) Watermelon being able to finally ascend peacefully into the heavenly realm away from earth, the finale of the evening was highlighted by Kendrick Lamar’s lyrics from “Alright”:

Alls my life I has to fight, nigga  
Alls my life I...  
Hard times like yah  
Bad trips like “God!”  
Nazareth, I’m fucked up  
Homie you fucked up  
But if God got us then we gon’ be alright

The proximity of these essential American canonical plays, side by side, ignite new and timely discourse concerning social justice and cultural relations.

## *Insights from My Experience at Columbia*

A practicum that encourages reaching, physically, just beyond a presumed ability or prescriptive position, and the kind of learning designed to tilt us out of balance and away from convenience, will intellectually stretch and fortify not only the student but also the studied material. I am interested in a system that nurtures a person while tilting them away from convenience and comfort. Drama is the art of change, capturing a human being within this state of imbalance and contending with self to recover. This "change" that I speak of is the "change" returning from a state of off-balance into a state of balance. The moment of imbalance forces both a release and deeper engagement of our most essential core, thrusting us into a limbic space. The limbic portion of the brain—or the id—allows for the frontal cortex—or the ego—to disengage, and it is here, at this moment, that we find and connect with our most authentic selves. When we are out of balance the part of our brain that controls reason is sent into a kind of catatonic shock and a mode of basic and essential survival. While in this mode of survival, there is nothing left in us but to fight with every part of our being to survive and return to a state of balance. This fight represents the engagement of our carnal instincts, and this is when the stakes are highest.

Dramatic art is the physical manifestation of this internalized "fight" and the incurred change from imbalance to balance, in either the most profound or straightforward ways. Whether the assailant, the sufferer, or the spectator, all humans gain a sense of cathartic and liberating thrill to experience this occurrence of "change." Ideas of being authentic and inauthentic are tossed around so quickly that I believe we are becoming desensitized as to what it means to be inauthentic. Inauthenticity occurs when we are so well-reasoned and perfectly balanced that the idea of reason becomes louder than our inherent carnal motivations. In a quest to find the truth of self and the zest of life, I find that it is crucial to embrace this state of imbalance, along with an impending fight to attain balance that follows. Consider a boxing match or a basketball game, and our meaning behind the moments that we say: "that was a good fight" or "that was a really good game." In the 1986 boxing match between Mike Tyson and Marvis Frazier, for instance, I was a young child but remembered that people were excited about this particular fight since Marvis Frazier was the son of boxing legend, Joe Frazier. Spectators paid a hefty fee to watch this fight on pay-per-view and other platforms, and the knockout occurred when Mike Tyson bested Marvis Frazier in under 20 seconds. For the

most part, people were upset, not because of Mike Tyson's win, but because everyone wanted to watch two humans contending with each other at the very edge of their existence, dangerously ebbing and flowing, while exerting tremendous amounts of energy and strategy until a bitter end.

Similarly, a basketball game where one team easily handles the other side makes for an uninteresting and disappointing game. In both of the examples as mentioned earlier, Mike Tyson and the overpowering basketball team, have not given any indication that there is a formidable obstacle that impedes them from attaining victory. There is no incurred risk, no high stakes, and therefore nothing to lose for Mike Tyson and the undefeatable basketball team. Moreover, because the winning sides put forth no struggle, there was no illustration of imbalance, both winning sides walked away from this match unchanged, which means, ultimately, here, there is no dramatic impulse.

I believe that the spectators in the above examples are unsatisfied because what they are searching for, and what is most cathartic, is the idea of human beings in a perilous state of danger becoming unhinged, and striving to recover from that imbalance, allowing us to reckon with a delicate truth that is present within each of us. Drama is that external and internal "fight," and is present, palpable, and exhibited within the actor, the dancer, and the singer. This occurrence warms the blood, races the heart, and reminds us of the magic of our existence and our shared collective unconscious as human beings. The dissonance of discordant musical notes like the sweet, spicy, and salty harmony of spices that formidably dance together, just right, titillate the mind and lure us in closer. The way the depth of flavor continuously evolves and captivates our attention. Life is about continuous and progressive change (the fight), and we naturally grow into a new set of struggles because we overcome a previous set—that's life—and when our battles languish, life loses its fervor.

The manifestation of a narrative is similar to that of an orchestra full of various instruments and parts attempting to attain a unified mood. Each music instrument has a particular quality of sound, along with a subdivision into two or more sections within one set of musical instruments, of the orchestra. The goal of the conductor is for all of the parts and subdivided instrumentations to find agreement and a quality that makes for a single complex piece of music. The conductor is not



there to teach a particular musician how to play their instrument but is there to provide signages and a clear trajectory so that the sound is hearable. At times the many parts contrast with one another and veer from a set target for an idea to be illuminated. Whether harmonious or in perfect unison, I believe that non-linear or linear story is transmittable and made intelligible through the simultaneous assertion of 4 distinctly different tracks working in tandem:

#### Physical Action

The physical body moves through space and interacts with other physical elements, producing a feeling. The body is postured from moment to moment in a particular way to reveal particularities that changes an audience and shapes its relationship to the overall experience. This physical action track provides an audience with new information that both contrasts and compliment a set of assumptions, concerning the unified story. The way that the human body dances, whether heightened (as “dance”) or naturalistic (as a pedestrian)—interacting with time and space—with other elements (and people) on the stage gives the audience information about the quality of mood;

#### Rhythm, Tonality, and The Architecture of the Voice

The musicality within the speaking or silent voice tells another story that is not necessarily apparent within the structure of the text. An example of this would be me going out to eat, and I ask the waiter, after reading over the menu if the specials are any good. I then wait for a response. The response that I am looking for is not necessarily in what words he chooses to say to me, because the waiter is being paid to be a good advocate for the restaurant, and it could, therefore, cost him his job to say that he hates all the specials and that I would be best getting up to leave. He would certainly lose out on the amount of tip that would line his pockets, and he could also jeopardize his positioning at the establishment. Instead, what I am seeking are pauses within his speech. Does his or her reply feel forced or scripted? Alternatively, does the melody and rhythm make me think that he excited to share something new with me that I hadn't before considered on the menu? In a sense, I presume that all the words he chooses to communicate to me will be

forced, perhaps even untruths, so I, therefore, look for other indicators that help me find the truth of where my money would be best spent and how my taste buds would be best appeased. The shape of words and the musicality of phrases are all fundamental in communicating a narrative that both contrast and compliment the intended objective that is being conveyed.

## Text

The etymology of the word *text* comes from the Latin word *textus* "style or texture of a work," literally "thing woven," from past participle stem of *texere* "to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build," from Proto-Indo-European root meaning "to weave," also "to fabricate."<sup>34</sup> Walter J. Ong says that the English word *text* is, "in absolute terms, more compatible etymologically with oral utterance than is 'literature,' which refers to the letters etymologically/(literae) of the alphabet."<sup>35</sup> Henry Louis Gater, Jr. says that when we "literate" use the term, we conceive of *text* by analogy, as a writing, and a written text is "fixed, boxed-off, isolated," unscoring "the chirographic base of logic." Gates, here, opens up the general understanding of the word *text* by saying: "The text, in other words, is not fixed in any determinate sense; in one sense, it consists of the dynamic and indeterminate relationship between truth on one hand and understanding on the other. [...] The relationship between truth and understanding yields our sense of meaning."<sup>36</sup>

In other words, *texts* are figurations that have come to be actual words that are to be spoken, the notes that are to be played, the set of choreographed movements and formations to be danced, the definitive ingredients to be used within the recipe. Note here that I have

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<sup>34</sup> "Text (n.)." *Index*, [www.etymonline.com/word/text](http://www.etymonline.com/word/text).

<sup>35</sup> "Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word." *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, by Walter J. Ong, Routledge, 1988, pp. 13–53.

<sup>36</sup> "A Myth of Origins: Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey." *Introduction from the Signifying Monkey*, by Henry Louis Gates, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 30–30.

indicated "to be" meaning that text is a set of objectives in the process of being. These *texts* are awaiting further execution, and still need to be read (ingested), spoken, danced, played, sung, and cooked. The space between the figuration of *text* and its impending execution is a territory full of extraordinary interpretive possibilities that can rearrange, distort and open up an original intended meaning. Miles Davis, the jazz musician, says "I don't play what's there, I play what's not there." The *text* most certainly tells a particular story, sometimes the story told by the *text* is gospel truth but most often the *text* acts only as a signifier or a mask for something much more extensive and crucial. It is, therefore, vital for me that these benchmarks that we have come to know as *text* is only part of the overall contour of the linear and non-linear story, dramatic devising and theatrical gesturing.

#### Mise En Scène

The way that a design shapes and informs the scene and the symbiotic relationship at play within the scene tells a story of its own. If you walk into my apartment right now, there are books and papers all over the place, a little food in the refrigerator. There are a few pieces of art hanging on the wall and inspiring books on the shelves, and while my apartment is undoubtedly not trashy, it has the feeling of being very lived-in. One might assume that it is the abode of a very busy and overworked student or artist type.

After working intimately with music artists such as Maria Carey, Jazmine Sullivan, and Beyoncé, as well as several productions on Broadway—as onstage talent and behind the scenes as part of the creative team—I had the great pleasure of being awarded the opera directing fellowship from The Juilliard School. For a full year, through the opera directing fellowship, I worked with world-class opera singers. I helped these advanced-level artists discover a more significant truth within themselves and the material. My work with these artists involved nurturing them into a position of in-depth exploration and mastering the craft of telling a real story to draw-in and shape the experience of an audience. The musicianship of these artists played an important role; however, their ability to affect and touch an audience lays squarely in the crafting together of the tracks that I mentioned above. This crafting together becomes the difference between a musician only

showcasing their technical dexterity and the exploratory fight of an artist impacting an audience profoundly, through music, with a well-wrought and intensely-wrestled with trajectory: the story. The stillness or sharpness of movement; the bending, elongation, and syncopation of the voice; the shape, indeterminacy, and double-voiced innuendo of the text; and the placement and juxtaposition of how the various design factors meet each other to impart the qualities that carve an event—that is the sharing of a story.

I have chosen *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Death of the Last Black in the Entire World* because they are both non-linear plays. They are works that will help me build the muscle of finding various methods of storytelling that fall out of the realm of conventional text. With both of these plays it was imperative that I allowed for them to “speak” and be heard, but it was equally important that I earnestly met the plays with alternative methods and tracks of story. These plays do not conform to the “perfect structure” Chekhovian or Shakespearian structure, therefore their anti-structure grew me tremendously. In this respect the work on these two plays challenged me in finding the delicate balance of theatre-making as an auteur while also making sure that the words are clear and, in a sense, simple.

During my time at Columbia, it has been my primary interest to run far away from all the things that I thought I knew and the assigned boxes that I previously fit into, for the purpose of being made anew. I wanted to learn about the classics of theatre and dramatic development, which I did. I feel that I have been provided a strong understanding of Shakespeare, Ancient Theatre of Greece, Brecht, and Chekhov, and I expect for those things to serve me very well in the future. I didn’t fully expect to be stretched so much, and the stretching out was good. I also feel that I have been grown in ways that make me understand contemporary works, and various ways to handle both classic and contemporary drama. I have been able to play and discover the great promise of building work within my own playpen, and within my own devising and machinations. I am thrilled to be able to understand the feeling of being confident with playing inside a sandbox of my own devising, and because of this new confidence, I feel that I would be a strong collaborator in the sandbox or playpen of another artists. I have been introduced to the delicate skill of collaboration, and I have become an effective teammate and artist collaborator.

We are all incredibly simple—and imperfectly complicated—human beings behind these big, swooping, dizzying, and perfectly specific ideas, contracts, and words. Most of the time you can find and receive the exact thing that you seek by speaking directly and plainly to a person. I have learned that listening with a willing, generous and open mind will change you for the better while engendering exciting work amongst students and collaborators. It is ineffective to be hell-bent on proving a point, as the more critical lesson has nothing to do with the point that a person is so hard-pressed to prove. I believe in a non-hierarchical learning environment where we can discuss and relate to each other not to have our thoughts replicate themselves, but to learn and grow from each other. In remaining vulnerable and open to change, we are also humbled and discover new things about ourselves that have yet to adequately challenge, attended to and analyzed while in the seclusion and unprovoked vacuum of our solitude. Learning is a journey, not a resolute destination, and we owe it to ourselves and our communities that we remain open to the process of learning. The classroom is a safe space to promote continuous growth and unending thirst for knowledge. The information that we transmit within the class structure is not without diligent and backbreaking work, work to be proud of—work that is “fought” for and has cost something more substantial than what money affords—and therefore my intentions, as it pertains to learning, are far from static or one-note. Education is delectable and thrilling.

As an artist, thinker, and educator, I’m anxious to find balance. I am a director and also a choreographer who is “preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper,” (Adrienne Kennedy) and its importance within a dramatic structure. I understand the importance of Stravinsky’s *The Firebird*, but I am still as fascinated by *Les Ballet Africains du Guinea’s* production of *Heritage*, as when I first watched it live onstage in the early 90s. I recognize the parallel in style between August Wilson and Anton Chekhov. I am thrilled by the brilliance and choreographic phraseology of Youssouf Koumbassa, Luam, and Pina Bausch, and excited by the operatic collaboration of Kurt Weill with Bertolt Brecht, Lorenzo Da Ponte with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Moreover, I am clear about the difference between Osun and Erzulie, and in awe of the cultural significance of Drake being on the new Meek Mills album.

My art is influenced by the ways that rhyme and rhythm traverse movement and visual textures, in addition to sound, generating stand-alone narratives. Blues music, for instance, ritualistically

repeats a structure, and progressively, within a set of parameters, serves to re-contextualize its meaning. Hip-hop also relies on a fixed pattern, and through riffing on sonic shapes, intensifies and transforms its original purpose in the same way that blues music does. I draw on these ideas of rhyme and rhythm—and repetition and revision—that are inherent in the work of painters such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kehinde Wiley as well as contrasted in the texts of playwrights such as August Wilson, James Baldwin, Bertolt Brecht, and William Shakespeare. My beginnings as a choreographer, too, allow me another language with which I can honor text within the theatrical tradition and more deeply mine its dramatic underpinnings.

## Preparation

Too often society appropriates and commodifies black voices and stories, sadly with no investment in the profound value therein. For this process, I am not interested in simply staging scenes. I hope to give those voices—that have been pushed to the margins of society and academic discourse—the attention and care they so deserve. I was pleased to be able to spend more time with this work than we initially planned because we have only begun to scratch the surface. Let me offer an example. In my Shakespeare study, for a full semester, we sat in a 3-hour lecture, twice weekly. As the Shakespeare “newbie” of my cohort, I did a tremendous amount of studying on my own, and only after all that did I start to directly contend with Shakespeare in my work. I believe the writings of Suzan-Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage, Wole Soyinka, Tarell Alvin McCraney, James Baldwin, August Wilson, Dominique Morisseau, and others deserve no less than this kind of investigation that I underwent with Mr. William Shakespeare. Anything less is an insult to ourselves, our craft, and the shoulders on which we stand.

Most of the time work by black authors are not readily offered as part of any kind of core curriculum within the academy. They certainly do not offer the same kind of support for these works as there is for the traditional canon. At times the system seems rigged and the cards are stacked against people interested in the type of investigation that will heighten the craftsmanship of black literature within the theatre. The average student does not have room and cannot easily juggle added and extracurricular projects, which is prohibitive and keeps black work within the theatre from developing into something finely tuned, bold, purposeful. I am, however, not easily shaken, and I believe that if our backs are not strong enough to carry this weight, the mishandling of these precious black voices and stories will undoubtedly persist. In particular, I refer to the fact that in:

“...much of what passes for public discourse about terror we, Black people, become the carriers of terror, terror’s embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments; the ground of terror’s possibility globally. This is everywhere clear as we think about those Black people in the United States who “weaponize sidewalks” (Trayvon Martin) and shoot themselves while handcuffed (Victor White III, Chavis Carter, Jesus

Huerta, and more), those Black people transmigrating the African continent toward the Mediterranean and then to Europe who are imagined as insects, swarms, vectors of disease; familiar narratives of danger and disaster that attach to our always already weaponized Black bodies (the weapon is blackness).”<sup>37</sup>

Here Christina Sharpe speaks about the perception of the black body not only as a weapon, but also as something that is able to weaponize inanimate and neutral objects such as a sidewalk. For some the presence of the unrestrained black body is vulgar and dangerous, certainly not fun and tasty as society would prefer. I believe that this is a hangover from the unresolved trauma in regards to the Mid-Atlantic Slave trade. In 1776 Thomas Jefferson wrote the first draft of the Declaration of Independence of the American colonies. In his original draft he includes a passage that positioned Great Britain as the main cause of the human trafficking and condemned the United States of America for its participation in the triangulate trading of humans as slaves and its persistence of slavery in North America:

“He has waged cruel War against human Nature itself, violating its most sacred Rights of Life and Liberty in the Persons of a distant People who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into Slavery in another Hemisphere, or to incur miserable Death, in their Transportation thither. This piratical Warfare, the opprobrium of infidel Powers, is the Warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. He has prostituted his Negative for Suppressing every legislative Attempt to prohibit or to restrain an execrable Commerce, determined to keep open a Market where Men should be bought and old, and that this assemblage of Horrors might want no Fact of distinguished Die”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “The Wake.” *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*, by Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 15–16.

<sup>38</sup> “Online Library of Liberty.” *Less Well Known Is Thomas Jefferson's First Draft of the Declaration of Independence in Which He Denounced the Slave Trade as an "Execrable Commerce" and Slavery Itself as a "Cruel War against Nature Itself" (1776) - Online Library of Liberty*, [oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/59](http://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/59).



This passage was one of the final points to be argued by congress, and a 26-year-old Rutledge took the position that neither he nor the southern delegation would sign the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain without removal of this passage. I include this because it is of importance when talking about the representation of black people within the United States of America and also the Western world. It is my position that we will not be able to move forward in appreciating and celebrating the intricacies and aesthetic value of our diverse culture, both outside of theatre and within theatre, until we have sincerely reckoned with our past.

“Conservatives would caw—they always do—and say, get over it, don’t play the race card. Liberals would complain that a simple apology did not go far enough, unless it entailed reparations for the descendants of slaves. But words of contrition—a formal acknowledgement of a grievous wrong by a great nation—have a power all their own. The British, the Vatican, the Germans and the South Africans have all issued formal apologies for their official cruelties, and each case has had a cleansing, even liberating effect. The United States Congress apologized to African-Americans for slavery in 2009, though it came with a caveat that the mea culpa could not be used as legal rationale for reparations.”<sup>39</sup>

The lack of contrition for the gains that the United States has seen due to its participation in the trading of human bodies as cattle leaves a stain that reverberates throughout the nation, like an undealt-with rotten foundation persistently receiving a mask of new stucco and plaster at the sight of its own ugliness and impending decay, and reveals itself in many different ways. Because of the unwillingness by United States to truly do the work in contending with its own past, a disease of self-hate persists, and we unwittingly lean upon the mother Eurocentric mother-nations of our republic.

Senator Elizabeth Warren recently speaking at Jackson State University in Mississippi said that “America was founded on principles of liberty and freedom and on the backs of slave labor. This is a stain on America, and we’re not going to fix that, we’re not going to change that until we

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<sup>39</sup> Egan, Timothy. “Apologize for Slavery.” *New York Times*, 2015.

address it head on, directly.”<sup>40</sup> In response to this Katie Pavlich argued, by saying “They keep blaming America for the sin of slavery but the truth is, throughout human history, slavery existed, and America came along as the first country to end it within 150 years. And we get no credit for that to move forward and try to make good on that.”<sup>41</sup> It is this kind of rhetoric and inaccuracies that keep our society from truly moving toward a great appreciation of diversity within our culture. There are several countries that outlawed slavery before the U.S. did in 1865. Further, slaves began to arrive in the United States in 1619, and therefore chattel slavery was legally endorsed in the United States for 246 years.

As a society we are both consciously and unconsciously taught that the darker your skin tone, the more tightly coiled your hair, the broader your lips, the wider your nose, and generally the further you are away from patterns and examples of whiteness, the worse-off you are, and more of a societal insult. As children, we are taught that running a comb smoothly through silky hair with ease is the foundation of beauty and respectability, but it is, in fact, impossible for a black person with type 3, curly, to type 4, kinky, hair to mimic these examples of beauty put before us on a regular basis. And because of these examples put in front of us through media, we are left to believe that we are unfit and lesser-than, leaving us with a need to assimilate toward an acceptability, and move away from self.

In addition to all of the reading and research that I did to meet the challenge of these plays, I decided that taking a deep dive into Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* would be worth an investigation to understand her mind. It’s rare to be afforded the luxury of time and space to deeply investigate the particularities of the world which we are building, in a way of having an actual conversation with the text and the critical ideas of the author. There are indeed platforms and

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<sup>40</sup> Press, The Associated. “Democratic Candidate Warren Sets Televised Mississippi Forum.” *Democratic Candidate Warren Sets Televised Mississippi Forum | Jackson Free Press | Jackson, MS*, [www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2019/mar/11/democratic-candidate-warren-sets-televised-mississ/](http://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2019/mar/11/democratic-candidate-warren-sets-televised-mississ/).

<sup>41</sup> “Pundit Gets Schooled on History of American Slavery.” *@Politifact*, [www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2019/mar/21/katie-pavlich/conservative-pundit-gets-schooled-history-american/](http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2019/mar/21/katie-pavlich/conservative-pundit-gets-schooled-history-american/).

organizations that attempt to engender integrity and uphold the investigative process within artmaking as important as the commodification of its resulting product, but alas, our work—as artists—often becomes simply about the ability to entertain.

I question the urgency in this practice of show-making, and how, if at all, it affects change in humankind and society. I'm sure it does ultimately, but I'm eager and committed to doing so sooner and with measurable impact. More than the making of the show, what excites me about deep-diving into the structure, tropes, and text of Ms. Parks, is the discovery through discourse and process to learn more about ourselves and the world. We have all our lives to entertain an adoring public, but I believe that being in the academy should be about a fuller and deeper level of investigation, research, and self-growth. I'm challenging myself to refine my craft through contending with this work and Suzan-Lori Parks, and already feel that I've grown 10 feet taller with my internal furniture rearranged. Based on my close engagement with the tropes that *Topdog/Underdog* offers, I hope to be a better human, able to move about the world with a new set of eyes. Additionally, it was my intention, in working on *Topdog/Underdog* to try my hand at non-linear structure. This exercise that I plunged into was a huge part of me preparing to meet the challenge of not only *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, but also it provides me with new muscles to take on Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

## Conclusion

I posit that a deeper level of investigation is necessary to put our notions of equity and inclusion into effective action. Art is a language that is cross-cultural, multi-lingual, trans-textual, which means that it has the capability to reach into the human mind in profound and unexplainable ways. It is, therefore, essential that we, as artmakers and curators, begin to understand the importance of this deeper investigation of diverse representation within our cultural norms. Old systems that instigate conventional ideologies and institutions are ineffective, with respect to making work that truly agitates for the benefit of effective productive change within society, and it is necessary for new systems to supersede antiquated theories of standardized aesthetics within culture.

If culture is a concord of experiences, ways of being, and thinking, it is understandable that every mode of being, thinking and speaking about things are not necessarily standardized transculturally. And if this is the case each concord would have developed its own intricate systems for thought and processing information, in addition to cooking, and speaking, and moving. How is could one concord, or cluster, lord over another as standard? We are inherently different, perhaps not necessarily due to our internal make-up, but because of the way we as an isolated concord have been nurtured over time. Black people, in particular, have been made to be shape shifters. The requirement for contorting not only our body and physicality, but also our voices and ways of being, down to the very stories chosen to be spoken, into spaces and shapes that contradict the very essence of our self is debilitating. We have been made to take this new voice and body on as an alternative self, and we put it on as easily as we would a coat before leaving the safety of our homes. This contradictory fitting-on of an alternative self necessitates what W.E.B Du Bois coined as double consciousness. There are two selves that exist within the black body: the one being the limbic, or unrestrained, self who processes thought and imagines and the other being the retrofitting-on of reason and presentation. Through the course of world history, it has become very clear that the unrestrained black self is repugnant, and the self must strive for the standardized aesthetic. The abandonment of oneself to assimilate into what society upholds as standard is the oppressive state of being that black people have endured, and it is important that space is made and attended to for us to begin to both remember, develop and speak the truisms of our stories and the physical structure and the perceived sound quality of the stories made manifest.

It is essential for any people—but in this case, I speak particularly about black people—to be allowed room to discover and tell their own stories, perhaps so that they can fully understand the curvature and wideness of not only their personal stories but the process of speaking them into existence. Yes, our stories are universal and cross-cultural; yes, our stories insight and arouse; yes, it is important to get outside of our own limited culturally specific and prescribed boxes—so long as we have solid footing on the ground in which we stand and in the body that we inhabit. There is no room to breathe, to discover our biggest selves, to rigorously dig into the most intimate points of the mind and find our voices properly, and our stories. There are very few non-black people in Hollywood or within the industry of commercial theatre who would be able to adequately tell the story of the killing of my little cousin, Ernie “Pete Street” with just the right Louisville verbiage. I’m also not so sure that many people would be proper arbiters of me having been raised within the subtle racism of Indianapolis and going from Catholic School, to Township school, to public school with the correct Naptown dialect. Why would I entrust these stories with anyone who has not lived similar experiences when I have yet to be granted the space to form these fuzzy, delicate, tender stories properly? My question, then, has become: What is the measure for empathy and investment? I don’t have a clear answer, but I think incurred risk, or skin in the game, is a pretty important starting point.

Therefore, there must be an intentional shift to engage black directors, black designers, and black choreographers to speak for and on behalf of black people who have not been allowed room to tell stories of our own, nor given access to discover a voice and style of our own within these stories. These stories are products of the collision of unique experiences, and ways of digesting those experiences into clear thought with the very specific melodic firmament of our social concord is much needed. The work, therefore, that it takes anyone to get this right is hugely necessary, doing this work builds muscle, sharpens craft, and allows for the reimagining and restructuring of not just the content but the container in which it lives, and the rules that apply therein to the form and its critical analysis.