

تمثيل طقوس الصراع: الهوية السوداء في مرحلة ما بعد الحداثة
في دراما أدريان كينيدي وتاريل ألفين ماكراني

مجلد كلية التربية الأساسية للعلوم التربوية والإنسانية
مجلة علمية محكمة تصدر عن كلية التربية الأساسية / جامعة بابل

Staging Rituals of Conflict: Postmodern Black Identity in the Drama of Adrienne Kennedy and Tarell Alvin McCraney

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الملخص

يقدم البحث الأساليب المسرحية ما بعد الحداثية التي يوظفها أدريان كينيدي وتاريل ألفين ماكراني لإعادة تعريف الهوية السوداء في أعمالهما المسرحية. يستخدم الكاتبان المسرحيان تقنيات سردية غير نمطية، فمن خلال تقديم شخصيات ذات طابع رمزي وطقوس ولغة شعرية يتجه الكاتبان الى مواجهة أشكال التقديم المسرحي السائدة مما يمكنهم من تقديم وجهات نظر جديدة حول الهوية الأمريكية الأفريقية، تدرس كينيدي التشرد الداخلي والصدمات العرقية والآثار النفسية للتفوق الأبيض على النساء السود من خلال سردية سريالية وأصوات مشتتة في حين يقدم ماكراني نهجاً مختلفاً من خلال دمج علم اليوروبا مع ثقافة الجنوب الأسود والهوية غير التقليدية من خلال طقوس غنائية تعمل كآليات علاجية للشكالية التي تمثل صميم العمل المسرحي، يوضح البحث كيف أن عملهما لا يتوافق مع الأعراف الدرامية الغربية، بينما يبنى مساحة تتداخل فيها الذاكرة والأسطورة والأداء لتصوير تجربة حياة السود المتنوعة، يستخدم البحث مراجعة أدبية وإطاراً نظرياً ودراسة حالة مقارنة لإبراز كينيدي وماكراني كشخصيتين أساسيتين في دراما ما بعد حداثية أمريكية أفريقية مميزة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثة، الدراما، الهوية الأمريكية الأفريقية.

Abstract

This research examines the postmodern theatrical methods that Adrienne Kennedy and Tarell Alvin McCraney use to redefine Black identity in their stage productions. The dramatists employ non-linear storytelling techniques together with symbolic characterizations, ritualistic elements and poetic language to stand against dominant representation forms while presenting new perspectives on African American identity. Through surrealist structures and dislocated voices, Kennedy examines interior fragmentation, racial trauma and the psychological effects of white supremacy on Black women. McCraney presents a different approach by integrating Yoruba cosmology with Black Southern culture and unusual identity through ritualistic

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and lyrical elements that function as healing mechanisms. The research demonstrates how their work is not in concord with Western dramaturgical conventions while building a space where memory, myth and performance merge to depict the diverse Black life experience. The research uses a literature review and theoretical framework and comparative case study to bring forward both Kennedy and McCraney as essential figures in a distinctively African American postmodern drama.

Key words: Postmodernism, drama, African American identity.

Introduction

Postmodern American drama has become a fertile ground for innovation across racial and cultural lines because it rejects linearity and stable meaning and traditional realism. Postmodern forms serve African American playwrights as more than just artistic choices because they function as political instruments. Postmodernism's fragmented nature and its multiple perspectives and self-referential elements match the fragmented Black history of the United States which includes experiences of displacement and suppression and identity transformation. The playwrights Adrienne Kennedy and Tarell Alvin McCraney employ postmodern techniques to reveal and transform Black identity through their work.

During the Civil Rights Movement Kennedy established herself as a pioneer of surreal dream-infused theatre which disrupted the conventional realism of her time. The Owl Answers and Funnyhouse of a Negro by Kennedy break away from conventional storytelling methods to build a psychological world that reflects internalized racism and memories and maternal trauma. McCraney writes in the early 21st century with a distinct approach by using poetic speech and ritual and spiritual elements to present African mythologies and queer identity and Southern Black masculinity in his Brother/Sister trilogy. The two playwrights from different generations employ non-linear storytelling and symbolism and multiple identities to explore Black life complexities in similar ways.

The research examines Kennedy and McCraney's postmodern aesthetics through multiple analytical threads which explore their historical backgrounds and cultural settings and their formal techniques and identity portrayals and language and memory usage and performance theory connections. The research includes a literature review of African American postmodern drama scholarship and theoretical sections that use Black feminist and queer thought and a detailed analysis of Funnyhouse of a Negro and The Brothers Size. The research demonstrates that Kennedy and McCraney redefine Black theatre while simultaneously transforming how identity functions in performance spaces.

The field of postmodern American literature and theatre has received extensive scholarly attention but the specific ways African American dramatists transform postmodern techniques remain understudied. Harry J. Elam and Soyica Diggs Colbert have established important research in this field by demonstrating how Black

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playwrights transform postmodern fragmentation to represent cultural loss and ancestral disconnection instead of existential boredom or irony. Elam's *The Past as Present* demonstrates how Black playwrights disrupt linear time and historical closure through what he terms "ritual dramas of memory" (Elam 23). According to Colbert in *Black Movements* Black performance functions as a reclaiming practice because postmodern theatrical methods in African American drama fight against disappearance by using ritual and repetition and spiritual invocation to affirm presence (Colbert 47).

The surrealist and symbolic elements in Kennedy's work have been thoroughly examined by scholars including Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Claudia Tate. According to Tate the female characters in Kennedy's work exist within their inner worlds while Bryant-Jackson connects her artistic style to experimental Black performance traditions. The theatrical community widely admires McCraney's work yet scholarly research about his theatre has remained relatively scarce. The critics Colbert and Lisa Anderson both recognize McCraney for his work in establishing queer Black male identity and his contribution to revitalize ritual performances on American stages. The research extends previous work by providing an extended comparative analysis of Kennedy and McCraney using postmodern performance as its analytical framework.

I. History, Identity, and Aesthetic Openings

The period of Adrienne Kennedy's development during mid-century witnessed major changes in racial political dynamics. Kennedy diverged from the mainstream African American theater of the 1960s which focused on protest realism by rejecting the need to depict politics directly. Her works demonstrate that psychological wounds suffered by Black women demand intricate non-linear dramatic presentations. Through her writing she reveals the broken psychological makeup of her characters that bear marks from colonial history and cultural myths and maternal conflicts. McCraney advanced his exceptional writing style through his involvements in poorly-lived surroundings where Christian and West African divine rituals amalgamated together. The characters in McCraney's plays are young black males who reflect manhood through desire and reminiscence while existing in societies that confront both official rejection and communal bygone ordeal.

A unifying aspect for both playwrights is that they deal with past downgrading through their distinct approaches of facing this experiment. The suppressed facet of disruption displays through characters who tolerate the burden of white authority and past trauma.

II. Non-Linear Structure and Symbolic Language

It is not an exaggeration to state that Kennedy's plays dynamically defy usual dramatic constructions. The *Funnyhouse of a Negro* introduces its storyline through figurative scenes which describe Sarah's psychological collapse instead of the usual linear exposition of characters and events. As a result, the audience will receive a more direct message related to emotional trauma rather than mere forthright justifications.

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Furthermore, the theatrical language of Kennedy integrates frequent symbols which create an evocative however plain surreal setting. Her plays and characters are deprived from intervention while voicing the innermost ordeal of suppressed passion. McCraney, on the other hand, works in terms of avant-garde and progressive theatrical frameworks as a platform for audiences for responsive commitment rather than old-fashioned theatrical norms. Employing a blend of monologues, stage directions and collective singing, McCraney presents the action in *The Brothers Size* on the stage. The play is written in a way that defies the conventional plot structure but instead to employ a repetitive pattern of passionate impulses that interchange between individual choice and inherited devotion. The names of the characters Ogun, Oshoosi and Elegba derive from Yoruba orisha which makes them both real people and divine representations. The artist creates a path that connects human life to sacred meaning through his art form.

III. Identity in Unrest: Race and Gender

Black women are the central focus of Kennedy's dramatic exploration which portrays their fragmented mental states. Throughout *The Owl Answers* the main character receives conflicting names between "the bastard daughter of a Negro man" and "a duchess". The main character faces continuous rejection when she tries to establish physical and metaphorical dominance since other characters dismiss or alter her identity. The repeated sense of displacement mirrors the phenomenon Frantz Fanon called "epidermalization of inferiority" (Fanon 93). Through her work Kennedy reveals the inner psychological effects which result from colonialism and racism. McCraney presents identity as an expression which emerges from physical connections while embracing sacred traditions. The characters in his works search to achieve unity while existing between two opposing realities. Through his play *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* McCraney portrays a queer Black teenager who seeks to understand his dreams and his father's past while finding words to describe his sexuality in a society that remains silent about such matters. McCraney enables Marcus to express both his confusion and his beauty and his vulnerability. His queerness faces no consequences because the writer only demands that he learn to express his identity.

Both playwrights reject the practice of limiting their characters to stereotype or single-issue representation. Their artistic works demonstrate that identity exists dynamically since it emerges from the combination of personal memories with personal desires and verbal expressions.

IV. The Influence of Language: Speech, Silence, and Supplication

Most speeches in Kennedy's theatrical works exist in fragmented form. The characters in his plays frequently repeat specific phrases while moving between poetic language and adopting other characters' speech patterns. In *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* Clara speaks with the words of white film stars which shows her mind is controlled by colonialism. Her disconnection between actual life and creative

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words shows how cultural barriers limit self-identification. Kennedy demonstrates the inexpressible content through the combination of wordlessness and repetitive language along with metaphoric expressions.

In respect of emotional language which brings its musicality from verbalized backgrounds, McCraney generates his characters to use speech patterns which resonate spiritual discourses and old African American choral styles. For instance, Elegba sings while Ogun speaks compellingly, but self-possessed and Oshoosi is overwhelmed in tiredness. McCraney's aim is to fashion an emotive manifestation which permits the show of individual recollections alongside the individual identity. To McCraney, uncertainty is off-limits in terms of divulging himself during his verbal language. He embraces openness of language as it empowers connection between individuals. Equally, the two playwrights defy prevailing linguistic standards. Kennedy uses language to display its intense nature while McCraney adjusts it for the discovery of pleasure and warmth.

V. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Brothers Size*

To melt the *Funnyhouse of a Negro* by Kennedy and *The Brothers Size* by McCraney in one crucible, the outcome validates that both playwrights are interested in the analysis of identity, memory and the deeply-rooted frame of mind devoted to the sense of belonging by exploiting postmodern techniques. The consequences of the ethnic identity struggle inside *Funnyhouse's* central character Sarah is profoundly manifested in bodily disintegration of her character. Sarah splits into various past renowned historical characters including Jesus and Lumumba and Queen Victoria which signify her numerous psychological conditions. To intensify the restricted mood that stands for Sarah's psychological internment, the stage setting in the "funnyhouse" is built in a narrowed way to symbolize her inner imprisonment. Her psychological breaking point happens when she looks into the mirror to find out that she lost her hair. The drama ends with the finding of Sarah's dead body because she surrendered to self-contempt.

On the contrary, McCraney's *The Brothers Size* introduces more like a curative procedure to his audience. The characters of Ogun and Oshoosi preserve passionate split-up till the plot rises in the direction of an instant association. The brothers, Ogun and Oshoosi, exhibit their innermost struggle about choice as opposed to responsibility as they interchange their involvements through ritualized storytelling. The play ends with the ritualistic performance of Ogun doing the foot-washing ritual which mixes Christian baptism and Yoruba purification rituals. Performing this, Ogun shows caring, redemption and human self-respect. To sum it all, Kennedy's drama concludes with devastation, whereas McCraney's work offers a meaning of grace.

The denial of the lifelike staging approaches by the two playwrights does not necessarily mean that they did not preserve diverse emotive reverberation. Kennedy

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portrays how persecution through organizations harms the inner world whereas McCraney introduces the renewal manner through ritual and love.

Conclusion: Reworking Identity on the Postmodern Stage

Adrienne Kennedy and Tarell Alvin McCraney propose two unique yet harmonious views about African American theater in the postmodern era. The surrealistic elements and fragmented structure of Kennedy's work reveal the psychological effects of racism on the human self through systematic oppression. McCraney uses ritualistic elements combined with lyrical speech to explore the recovery of Black queer identity and community sense in his non-linear symbolic plays. Postmodernism functions as an instrument of cultural reclamation according to the plays of Kennedy and McCraney. McCraney employs postmodern techniques for self-healing purposes instead of McCraney. Their theatrical works redefine what Black theater must contain by creating emotionally powerful spiritual theatre with bold formal structures. Through their plays Kennedy and McCraney demonstrate that identity exists as an ongoing performance which develops from historical contexts and linguistic systems and personal memories as well as deep desires. The stage serves a dual purpose according to their work since it enables both storytelling and the transformation of these narratives.

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