



Dutchman

By Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)

Directed by Lou Bellamy

and

The Owl Answers

By Adrienne Kennedy

Directed by Talvin Wilks

A Penumbra Theatre Company Production

March 3-27, 2016

Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

Penumbra's 2015-2016 Season: Revolution Love
A Letter from the Co-Artistic Directors
Lou Bellamy and Sarah Bellamy



The African American experience reveals unique insight into the triumphs and tribulations of humankind. At the core of black identity we find remarkable resilience and an unwavering commitment to social justice. We stand on the shoulders of giants — a proud legacy of millions who fought to survive and who kept the flame alive for the next generation. Some names we know and celebrate every year, others go unrecognized by the history books but are remembered and honored in the drumming of our hearts. Change does not happen overnight, or even in the life cycle of one generation. Progress is made in fits and starts but only through collective action do we see real advancement.

This season Penumbra offers you the opportunity to get involved. Hear from the very people who founded movements that shaped history, talk with local leaders, and meet others like yourself who love theatre and believe deeply in justice. At Penumbra, transformative art illuminates ways to move humanity forward with compassion — join us as we move from empathy to action, from emotion to solution. Ours is a brave, honest, intelligent, responsible, and hopeful community and there is a place for you here. Welcome.

Table of Contents

Penumbra’s 2015-2016 Season: Revolution Love	2
Table of Contents	3
EDUCATIONAL TOOLS	4
THE ARTISTIC PROCESS	5
The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society	5
Social Commentary and the Nature of Art	5
The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist	6
Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture	7
Summary	7
HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE	8
ABOUT THE PRODUCTION	12
Co-Artistic Director Statement by Lou Bellamy	12
DUTCHMAN	13
About the Play	13
About the Playwright: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)	13
Spotlight Interview with Director Lou Bellamy	14
THE OWL ANSWERS	21
About the Play	21
About the Playwright: Adrienne Kennedy	21
Director’s Statement by Talvin Wilks	22
Adrienne Kennedy – Original Writing on <i>The Owl Answers</i>	24
Spotlight Interview with Director Talvin Wilks	27
CROSSING BORDERS, IGNITING REVOLUTION – A Contextual Essay by Paul Adolphsen	36
Amiri Baraka	40
Adrienne Kennedy	43
The Black Arts Movement: Forging a Black Aesthetic	48
Crossing Racial Borders: The Anxiety of Racial “Mixing”	53
Conclusion	68
Works Cited	70
SET DESIGN MODELS by Maruti Evans	72
COSTUME DESIGN RENDERINGS by Mathew LeFebvre	73

EDUCATIONAL TOOLS

Welcome and How to Use this Tool

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

Penumbra Theatre Company occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

An exploratory essay by Sarah Bellamy

The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, and dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its source," is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture. Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or "mediums," to communicate meaning. The artist's effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture. His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed

by these symbols and will also inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist's "voice." Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist's perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as "artistic commentary." It conveys the artist's intent, or impetus for creating something.

The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will "read" (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent of, or limit to, the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the artist **loses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—

it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

Summary

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

An overview of the African American contribution to American theatre

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the African roots of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a unique canon of work. Still, as early as 1821 black American artists were creating, staging and performing for mixed audiences, showcasing both existing and original work.

One of the first theater companies to approach the dramatic performing arts from an African American perspective was The African Grove Theater in New York City. It was founded by William Henry Brown and James Hewlett, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where story-telling, performance, dance and music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented at the African Grove in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.¹

As Americans established a canon of their own, dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy and the Jezebel. These racist depictions would be reflected over and again in the theater, usually performed by white actors in blackface. African-American artists struggled against these stereotypical images as soon as they entered the public sphere. In 1857, William Wells Brown, (no relation to William Henry Brown) juxtaposed a stereotypical black male character named Cato with an exemplary black male character named Glen in his play *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*. This play highlighted the difference between an image created by black people for black audiences and an image created by white people for white audiences. It was an important statement.

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. Minstrelsy was very popular in the 19th Century. This performance tradition was created as whites made light of and fantasized about slave life and plantation culture in the antebellum South. White entertainers in blackface would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of blacks for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative and beloved form of theater for white audiences for many years. White theatre-goers filled houses to

¹ For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

laugh at representations of blacks as happy, contented and dim-witted. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. Responsible for the creation of one familiar American character, Jim Crow, this theatre tradition was hardly benign. Its impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage in American social, political and civil rights policy.

For many years, (largely due to the audience expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, *in blackface*. This absurd situation reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to “perform” white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming the white actors’ racist depictions of black people.

In Hollywood, some of America’s most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as The Harlem Renaissance. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* by Willis Richardson.² Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and parody it for audiences. Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer were particularly concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes’ famous poem “Notes on Commercial Theater”:

You've taken my blues and gone --
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.
You also took my spirituals and gone
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
All kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me --
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me --
Black and beautiful --
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!
Yes, it'll be me.³

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists

² Ibid., 165.

³ Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.

such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Harold Cruse, Ray Durem, Adrienne Kennedy, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry's famous play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (Lloyd Richards) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Lou Bellamy, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright August Wilson said of Penumbra:

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.⁴

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only "have to be at the table" to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

⁴ August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Two groundbreaking plays, one stage. In one night we present some of the finest work from the man dubbed “the father of the Black Arts Movement” and the woman ostracized as she took up nonlinear forms that challenged tradition. While one playwright reveals the absurdity of structural racism by evoking a nautical ghost story, the other uses absurdism to explore internalized racism. Both bravely traverse the ominous corridors of American history.

Act One: *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka

Act Two: *The Owl Answers* by Adrienne Kennedy

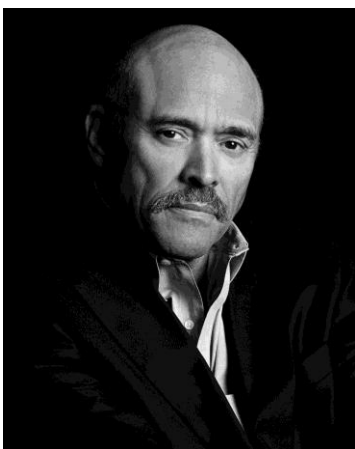
Same set, same cast, one amazing evening of performance.

Co-Artistic Director Statement by Lou Bellamy

Penumbra’s artistic leadership intended to stage *The Owl Answers* and *Dutchman* together in order to place two rigorous thinkers, Adrienne Kennedy and Amiri Baraka, in conversation. Given the differences in style, approach, and ethos, I was surprised to find that the plays refused to stay separate. Immediately, they challenged each other and the creative team. Challenges were waged for space, for definition, for style. The two playwrights informed not only the directors’ understanding of the work, but the expression and process with which we approached our individual assignments. Polemics of race, violence, political action, gender, power, and fear were played out in artistic expression. Kennedy and Baraka, two giants who immeasurably influenced the development of black intellectual thought, were thrown in comparison and stark relief.

It is important that we regard these plays in the context of their time. As an artistic expression of the budding black power movement, these avant-garde plays are not to be divorced from the political climate out of which they were born. Thus, the plays engage audiences in an emotional and intellectual experience that cultivates a desire for justice which might propel theatre-goers into social and political action. Their relevance today should feel haunting, unsettling, and hopefully this production will prompt sincere consideration of the racial climate in which we find ourselves today.

I’m proud to have contributed to a discussion between these two great works of art and the great minds responsible for them. This discussion is some 50 years in the making. I have confidence that you will be challenged and entertained both emotionally and intellectually. What more can one ask of art?



Lou Bellamy

Founder, Co-Artistic Director, Penumbra Theatre

Lou Bellamy is the Founder and Co-Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre, an Obie Award-winning stage director, and taught for 35 years as an Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota. Select Penumbra credits: *Two Trains Running*, *I Wish You Love* (The Kennedy Center), *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking* (National Black Theatre Festival), *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Gem of the Ocean*. Other: *Radio Golf* (Indiana Repertory Theatre and Cleveland Play House); *Two Trains Running* (Signature Theatre Company and Oregon Shakespeare Festival); *Jitney* (Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Arizona Theatre Company); *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (The Kennedy Center).

DUTCHMAN

by Amiri Baraka

Directed by Lou Bellamy

About the Play

Undaunted by the taboo of interracial relationships in 1963, Amiri Baraka imagines what might transpire when a handsome black man and a seductive white woman find themselves marooned together in a ghostly subway car. In this tense one-act drama, the space between attraction and mortality is but the width of a blade. Known as brilliant, audacious, inflammatory, seditious, bigoted, and a luminary, Baraka was a man who made art on his own terms and who spoke truth to power. The *Dutchman* will take you on a provocative, startling journey.

Setting

In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth.

Characters

CLAY, twenty-year-old Negro

LULA, thirty-year-old white woman

RIDERS OF THE COACH, white and black

YOUNG NEGRO

CONDUCTOR



About the Playwright: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)

From Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans

Edited by James V. Hatch and Ted Shine

Jones was born in Newark, New Jersey. He attended Rutgers University in 1951 and transferred to Howard University where he majored in English. He is a poet, playwright, author, and educator. He was founder-director of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Harlem in 1964, and later founder-director of Spirit House in Newark, where young African American playwrights' works were performed by the African Revolutionary Movers repertory theatre company. In addition

to plays, he has published more than two dozen books, including poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. He has been the recipient of numerous grants, fellowships, and awards, and in 1972 was awarded a Doctor of Humane Letters degree by Malcolm X College in Chicago. Jones is hailed as the leader of the revolutionary Black Arts and Black Theatre movements of the 1960s. *Dutchman* won the Obie Award for best Off Broadway play in 1964.

Spotlight Interview with Lou Bellamy on *Dutchman*

January 27, 2016

By Stephanie Lein Walseth, Director of Inquiry

Stephanie Lein Walseth: This is the first time that these two pieces – *Dutchman* and *The Owl Answers* - have been together in one evening. Can you talk about how the decision came about to put them together? What do you see as the connective tissue, and what is their significance?

Lou Bellamy: Well, I would say Sarah [Bellamy, Co-Artistic Director] is responsible for them being presented on the same night. There is a great amount of respect and appreciation by Penumbra and the artists who work here for the Black Arts Movement. The sign posts or tenets of the Black Arts Movement exist in *Dutchman*, so it's rather a manifesto, an artistic expression of those tenets. The Black Arts Movement allowed African Americans to create work that was measured by a value system, a measuring stick that was uniquely their own. Up until this time, trying to excel inside of a European-made paradigm was never possible. So, the Black Arts Movement allowed for a kind of freedom of expression and became a place for the expression of anger and hurt as well. But, it wasn't without its thorns. Many of the people who championed the movement were males, and there was frankly a degree of misogyny inside the Black Arts Movement, just as there was inside of the Black Power Movement.

So, this attempt, to give a playwright like Adrienne Kennedy voice that is equal to Amiri Baraka, who is in many ways the progenitor, or at least the artistic manifestation of the Black Arts Movement, is revolutionary in and of itself. Her plays and the questions she was asking don't fit, they don't march in lockstep with the mantras "we are black and we're going to move forward," and "Black is beautiful." That isn't to say that she doesn't know who she is or doesn't appreciate her blackness, but she has an intellectual curiosity and an honesty about where she stands in the world and why. She is willing to acknowledge the contributions of her white heritage as well. And frankly, she demands that she gets the fruits of that heritage. She sends her characters to London to meet Chaucer and Anne Boleyn and Shakespeare and that's rather different than what the Black Arts Movement said, "burn up all of those measuring sticks," "kill Dick and Jane and all those others perpetuators of evil." And one can understand that as the revolution is waging you need a united force, and you don't want people flying all off in the edges and talking about "what about me?" So, to a large degree, her message and her style marginalized her. She was dealing in expressionism and black theatres tend to deal more in naturalism and realism. So people just treated her as an odd-ball.

But placing these two pieces together, I hope, and Sarah hopes, will throw them into conversation with each other and allow an audience to see these two views that happen during the same time in the mid-1960s. Clearly they present two diametrically opposed views of blackness and its place in consciousness and the reality of living in America. So, it's quite an interesting thing. I think that certainly there is the intellectual dimension of this argument, of values and so forth, but there's also an emotional kind of confrontation happening between the plays: one is male-centered and one is female-centered and they come at some of the same issues and resolve them in very, very different ways.

SLW: Absolutely. There is a great deal of intersectionality in these plays: the characters are black and white, male and female, but they're also grappling with class and age and religion and other elements of identity. Each of these factors complicates the others. Can you speak to this complexity?

LB: Well, it is interesting. Both of the plays acknowledge history and its role in placing the individual where they are. Adrienne Kennedy, for example, speaks about her “Goddamn Father, who was the Richest White Man in Town,” and someone who cooked for him. So she is carrying all of that history with her continually, and it opens up an opportunity or rupture where Kennedy can interrogate self. There is that same sort of history in *Dutchman*. But for Baraka, that sort of lineage and that history and adherence to white precepts makes Clay vulnerable. He isn’t black enough, and when you’re not black enough, it’s a cautionary tale: this can happen to you. So, the same sort of historical presence or happenings come to completely different conclusions.

SLW: I think it’s interesting because gender and sexuality play a huge dynamic between Clay and Lula: Lula’s a woman, but ultimately she has more power than Clay because she’s white. And her sexuality plays a big role in her attempted seduction of him. Then you have Clara in *The Owl Answers* who talks about sleeping with all of these men, including this notion of God the Father...

LB: ...and the Negro man who she takes to the hotel and dresses as her father. It’s some bizarre stuff! It is interesting that Kennedy seems to embody all of these things at once and that accounts for the complicated nature of human beings. Baraka tends to be a bit more strident about the positions, but it’s interesting that Clay only finds his blackness, if you will, at the prodding of Lula, a white female. She drives him toward it and pushes him and prods him, until she says (and this has to do with white guilt), “you’re a murderer, Clay,” as they’re laughing and playing around. In the beginning you just let that go by, “you’re a murderer.” But she knows that he will find out someday and kill her, or symbolically what she stands for: the white race. So, she compacts that history and makes him admit who he is, and then of course, he’s got to go. But Baraka has both blacks and whites on that train. And I think the message is if you don’t do something about this, you’re part of it. In fact, those people are part of the deal. Lula says, “get this man off me,” and black people help pick him up and get rid of the body.

SLW: Interesting....so everybody’s implicated.

LB: You remember some of those poems of Baraka’s. There’s definitely a male edge them – outright calls for violence and so forth. That doesn’t exist in Kennedy’s work. The effects of meeting these two cultures and the sex and violence that’s part of it is just as hurtful and just as damaging, but it isn’t that sharp sort of thing. I guess that’s a more feminine way of telling a story. I learned to read Toni Morrison, for instance, and that has taught me a lot about the way women tell stories, it’s different.

SLW: One of the things that brought these two pieces together for you is that they both take place on a subway car, right?

LB: But that was after Sarah and I had chosen the pieces. We found that out later and we went “whoa!” Our original interest in the pieces was more about an intellectual interrogation of the ideas. And then we began to see these parallels, such as the setting, and it was so right.

SLW: The styles in the two pieces are really radically different. For audiences that might be used to seeing Penumbra’s usual style, can you talk about what they might expect in coming to Adrienne Kennedy’s work? If you’ve never experienced it before, it can be challenging to encounter and interpret.

LB: Well, I think that both of those plays will challenge the audiences’ understanding, or they’ll doubt themselves in their conclusions when they see the production. But you know, when audiences look for narrative in an expressionistic play, and they come away from it saying “I don’t know what that was about,” I just ask

them, “Well, what do you think it was about?” and they say, “The only thing I can think of is....” And then they get it! They don’t necessarily get it consciously, but they do get it. And I’m hoping that that’s the case here. I mean, when they see Clay and Lula, especially the way I intend to stage it, I think, they should be screaming to him “Run! Danger! Danger!” Her power is presented unabashedly.

Like, you [as a white woman] might not accept that power right now, but if the two of us were walking down the street and all of sudden you started screaming as a police car drove by, I’m going to get shot, Stephanie. That’s the kind of power that you frankly have. You could do it any time you want. And so, for someone like yourself who has seen and understands [that power of white privilege], that puts a certain kind of responsibility on you. Lula is accepting that power and using it. She knows that she is the prize, the ultra-feminine, and she’s using it in a kind of a way.

You know, Baraka studied [Antonin] Artaud, and you can see that “theatre of cruelty” stuff in this play, you can see it winding its way in. Kennedy on the other hand, as I said there’s danger in the horrible stuff in her work as well, but it seems a little more elevated. It seems to clear out of the mud a little bit and deal with the issues in an emotional way rather than a visceral manner. There’s still—a woman commits suicide and so forth — but it’s ritualistic. Both of the plays are ritualistic, but hers has an ethereal dimension to it. Both of them are symbol-laden. I mean you’ve got apples, and the garden and the snake and all that in *Dutchman*, and then in *Owl* you’ve got impotency and hair falling out and all these things.

SLW: What do you make of the Owl? What do owls represent in this piece?

LB: In all kinds of cultures they’ve represented wisdom and so forth, but they are also death symbols for some cultures. They do best at night. This idea of birds and feathers in black culture — I remember bringing a bird into my house [as a kid] and my grandmother just went berserk, because that meant death. You don’t bring birds in the house. So, I think she’s playing with all of that stuff. And there is a play of language, you know, of Owl — “ow,” like a hurt, and “hoo” — “who?” And then Kennedy gives these people these names that carry the history with them. Think of that, my “Goddamn Father, Who Was The Richest White Man in Town.” She calls him that. I kept thinking of Strom Thurmond. Every time I look at it I think of Strom Thurmond.

SLW: In the Ta-Nehisi Coates book *Between the World and Me*, he talks a little bit about this idea of racism without racists, and how nobody claims to be a racist, and then tells a story about someone he knew making an argument about Strom Thurmond not being a racist. I don’t know how you make that argument.

LB: But *no one* claims that anymore. In fact, racists quote Dr. King. I’ve heard them do it! They say, “A man should be judged by the content of his character not the color of his skin,” and so forth.

SLW: Right, they use his language as a justification for discrimination. Going back a bit, you talked about the tenets of the Black Arts Movement and how you see them exemplified in these two pieces. Can you illuminate for us a couple of those tenets and how you understand them operating here?

LB: Well, identity is certainly one of the key tenets; the construction of it, both positive and negative. Then there is the idea of responsibility for the position that you hold, and the responsible interpretation of history, and culture expressed in Afro-centric terms. You see those kinds of things in both these plays. In Kennedy they are more of a question, and in Baraka they are an imperative.

SLW: Both of these plays come out of the Black Arts Movement, although as you say they're situated differently – Baraka being the progenitor and Kennedy sort of pushing against that dominant thread. But both helped monumentally shift certain paradigms. I wonder if you might say anything about that, and/or how they're working today. Are they still revolutionary? Are they still shifting things?

LB: I do think so. Ntozake Shange said "it takes an infinitely longer time to wash off black paint than we thought." That minstrel mask. It takes longer to get rid of that than anyone thought. And so, we're still working on these issues. Look, for instance, at the post-black movement that was popular just a couple years ago. Well then white folks jumped up and started killing black people and it started getting publicized, and people went "Uh oh!" We're not post-racial, you know? And so these things that I feel like a younger generation wants to put behind them and get on with life, if you will, they're still present, and they're still shaping the world in which we live. They're informing our perceptions of each other, so much so that people in interracial relationships who see *Dutchman*, they're going to start questioning themselves and wonder about why they're in the relationship they're in and what are some of the determinants. What does beauty mean? You know, all those kinds of things.

Someone watching *Owl* with a mixed heritage — and most Americans have a mixed heritage — begin to wonder what it is they're sublimating, what it is they're ignoring. Why aren't they acknowledging Chaucer? Why aren't they acknowledging their part of Buckingham Palace? You go to Buckingham Palace and you see pillars that say "Africa," and "Asia." It's important to them [the British]. Why don't we claim some of that? It's interesting. My great, great, great grandparent emigrated from Ireland, so I'm as Irish as most of the people that I come in contact with. He married a free black in Oregon. But you don't see me going around [and getting dressed up in green] on St. Patrick's Day, you know. It's interesting what we choose to accentuate and identify with.

Kennedy really troubles that, really gets at it, where, in Baraka, the acceptance of that [complicated, mixed race] place in the world makes one vulnerable. And does that mean that Baraka is schizophrenic? Yeah, if one looks at his past. I met his first wife Hettie. She came here and we sat down in the theatre and talked for hours about him and what it was like to be married to this open and artful poet. And as he began to find out things and the world began to change, how it was to watch that openness become cynical. Of course, it ruined their relationship. He said after Malcolm X's death that he couldn't stay down in the Village anymore with Kerouac and Ginsberg and the other hip guys. He had to go uptown. He couldn't do that while they were being killed. James Baldwin said something similar. Do you remember?

SLW: I do remember.

LB: He said "I can't stay over here in Europe while my friends are being murdered."

SLW: It makes me wonder, what was your relationship to Baraka? I know you've had conversations with him, even in the past few years at the University of Minnesota. And likewise, what has your relationship been with Adrienne Kennedy?

LB: I've talked with her and I knew Amiri. We weren't ace boon coons, but you know, I knew him well enough so that we could jive together and it was a relaxed relationship. He was such a towering figure that to meet him was a little scary for me. Because you get a little afraid, like "Oh my God, what if I say something stupid?" (*laughs*) But he was very, very giving, very talented. A loving guy. Kennedy on the other hand I have never met in person. I've spoken with her over the phone. She doesn't come out a lot.

SLW: Interesting! I wonder if we could talk a little bit about the productions and the design elements? I am hoping to include some of the design sketches in the study guide, but if you could talk about the set, costuming, masks, and some of the things that are at play design-wise? It seems like it's going to be a really spectacular production.

LB: I think so. What we want to do is throw these two plays into conversation with each other, and so having *Owl* follow *Dutchman* puts a kind of a different kind of responsibility on me as a director to acknowledge the kind of storytelling, the magical aesthetic that Kennedy uses. Otherwise it'll look like *Dutchman* is the real world, and *Owl* is really out there, and that isn't the case. Baraka speaks about "in the flying underbelly of the city. Below, subterranean, steeped in modern myth." And his image, of course, is this recurring theme of the Flying Dutchman, which is that ghost ship. As I've told you, I've embraced that ghost ship idea and I'm going to intensify that ritual of the same thing happening over and over again. The audience should get the idea really clearly that the same thing will happen again and again given the same set of circumstances; this kind of preparation or lack thereof of a black male will land him in this cycle. Again and again and again. I'm sure that's what Baraka meant to see and to talk about.

SLW: Yes, and the cast is double cast in both productions, so how will that work?

LB: Well, my play is two people really. Nathan [Barlow], the guy who plays Clay in my play is "Negro Man" in Talvin's play *The Owl Answers*. The woman [Kate Guentzel] who plays Lula in my play is Shakespeare in Talvin's play. The other characters in his play, Chaucer, William the Conqueror, the Virgin Mary, are riders on my subway. As Talvin works and sets his characters, I'll be looking for ways to bring them on to the subway, as though they sort of haunt both plays. I don't know what that is yet. I can't tell you because we haven't discovered it, but as I watch what he does, I'm going to stage the beginning and ending of my play first, and then I'll begin to put in those specifics that hopefully will resonate when an audience sees the second play, they should go (*covers his mouth and points*) "Ohhh! He was on the subway!" And even, it's pushing it, but it would be interesting if they were on their way to *Owl*, you know? Riding the subway on the way. And then for Talvin, that subway, and the way it's constructed, turns into a jail cell. So, it'll be interesting I hope.

SLW: Have the two of you ever worked together before?

LB: No. I hired him to do *The Ballad of Emmett Till*. I've attempted to hire him to do other things, but he's really got a clear idea of the kind of work he wants to do. But he's so talented, and he could lend that to almost anything.

SLW: He seems particularly skilled, based on these pieces, at working in a surrealistic aesthetic.

LB: He is! Where, for me, that's a stretch. But anything that falls within the parameters of the African American experience, I'll go at it. I'll try it. Because there's all kinds of ways to tell this story.

SLW: As you were choosing these pieces, how, if at all, did you see them fitting in to this season's theme of Revolution Love?

LB: That's Sarah's problem! (*They both laugh.*) You know, it's interesting because I used to just choose the best plays that I could find, that reflected what was going on in the world; things that angered me or that I loved or whatever. And then I would get Sarah to write a statement that strung them together. But she is more theme-oriented.

Both of the pieces clearly fit the idea of Revolution Love. They personify those terms. This is about revolution and the perception of a revolutionary is rather like a rebel or a wild dog that is let loose on the world, that sort of thing. But what Sarah is asking people to consider is that what makes a revolutionary is love: love for self, love for family, love for community. Those are the things that send you out to fight, you know. That's what makes you do that. We don't often think of where they've come from, and I don't know why that is. I know that some cultures, Native Americans, for instance, have just a wonderful way of dealing with that. When these people go out and fight and come back, they'll tell them, "Okay, that was cool, thank you for allowing yourself to go crazy for us, you don't need to do that anymore." There's a ceremony to take away that pain. We don't necessarily have that, so it hangs on, you know? It's always so instructive to me when I talk with some Native folks and they say, "This shit ain't over! I never said it was over. I never signed anything. We're still at war!"

SLW: I know, talking to some of my Native friends and colleagues about the idea of "post-colonial," they say "Post?" What do you mean "post?" We're still in a state of colonization. Our land is being occupied.

LB: Yes, exactly! Exactly.

SLW: So, given all of that, do you see love at work in either of these plays? Or is it lust? Desire? Sexuality and power? Is there any kind of honest love in either of these plays? And what does that even mean in these contexts?

LB: That's a real hard question. With Baraka it's more a question about...these are archetypes, clearly, and he is dealing with the white race, and he's saying things like "What would make us sane? A certain kind of action could cure us, and it's a revolutionary act. It's a murderous act." But the problem is, if one takes that step, one loses art, one loses beauty. He says "Just let me bleed you, you loud whore, in one poem vanished. Bessie Smith wouldn't have needed all those wiggles and grunts in the middle of her soul if she would have just killed some white people." Do you know what I mean? So this art, and what we call beauty and perhaps love is a manifestation or a healing mechanism for the hurt. But at what cost? And Lula is of course a construct. That's sort of like setting up paper tigers. But she is the force that is onstage that you never see, for instance, in a Wilson play. You never see that. It's there. But it isn't on stage. She's on stage.

SLW: And it's so fascinating to me that she's a woman. Usually, in August Wilson it's always a white male force, the white patriarchy. So, it's such an interesting choice.

LB: It is, but, in this society it is a powerful, powerful position. That's what the Ku Klux Klan was organized around, to save that ultra-feminine from these "murdering, raping..." And it's interesting because it was the white males who were doing all the raping.

SLW: It certainly resonates with contemporary political rhetoric from certain presidential candidates...

So, my final question, and I don't know that this is an answerable question, but what do you hope audiences might walk away having learned or felt? In line with Penumbra's mission, do you hope that these pieces will spark dialogue or action?

LB: I think that this production should force in everyone a kind of introspection. It really should. I don't think this is going to make anyone get up and go change say, like an *Emmett Till* did, where you left feeling like "I can't let this happen again." This is more cerebral, this is deeper and forces us into the dark parts of our consciousness of ourselves and our motives. So I expect an introspective reaction. I think people will be angry. Some. Damn near

everybody, for different reasons. (*laughs*) I think that's going to happen. But I think that there is an intellectual discussion that one has to acknowledge when you see something like this. That's why it can't be too realistic. It's got to exist in that metaphor range, where you know that this is perhaps stretched at times to make philosophical points and so forth. Don't you think they're going to think? Or do you think they're just going to be angry?

SLW: No, I think, given the racial politics in the world right now, I think it's going to touch some nerves.

LB: Would you have placed them in that order?

SLW: That's a hard question. That makes you consider what the opening statement is and what the final statement is. I think so. But it would be interesting to think of it in reverse. If *Dutchman* were last it would indict the white world more clearly, and as you say, the archetypes are in the rigid, standard boxes that we think of them being in. And then that last moment, of a young black man being murdered, that resonates in the world right now. Having that as the final moment would say something. But also, I like the idea of the space being literally and physically confined in that first act, and then exploding open in the second act – structurally symbolically, physically, cracking it open and troubling the black/white binary that we think of, into Clara grappling with all of her heritage and her sexuality and what it means. There is a desire for it at the same time as a repulsion against it. Because in some ways that's more, it's a truer picture, because the world is that complicated.

LB: I think so, and I think you can only get there after you get past *Dutchman*. You gotta get past that. You gotta live. And if you live, then you can consider these things.

SLW: Right, right. Having *Dutchman* first provides the context from which to jump off, and to understand "This is the history, we can't let it go. We have to acknowledge the reality and the weight of that before we can explode it in all of these different directions."

LB: Exactly.

SLW: Thank you so much for talking with me today. I can't wait to see this production!

LB: You're welcome. Anytime.



Stephanie Lein Walseth is the Director of Inquiry for Penumbra Theatre Company. Her tenure with Penumbra began in 2007, and since then she has served the organization in various capacities, from August Wilson Fellow, to Summer Institute Coordinator and Instructor, to Education Programs Manager. She recently completed her PhD in Theatre Historiography at the University of Minnesota, and her research focuses on the cultural poetics and politics of contemporary African American, Native American, and Asian American theatre. In addition to her work with Penumbra, Dr. Lein Walseth has worked professionally as a theatre educator, administrator, actor, director, dramaturg, and stage manager throughout the Twin Cities.

THE OWL ANSWERS

by Adrienne Kennedy

Directed by Talvin Wilks

About the Play

There is a difference between love and obsession. Clara Passmore is lovesick, but the love she covets is toxic. The mixed race child of “the Richest White Man in the Town” and his black servant, Clara has lost herself to a delusional world. Fearlessly addressing stereotypes of the “tragic mulatto,” Kennedy plumbs the depths of consciousness, pushing the avant-garde to its edges, demonstrating a deft and daring mastery of surrealist style that artists of her day were only beginning to explore. Defying categories as an artist and as a woman, Kennedy fought to create her own space, making way for women writers who reject convention and continue to evolve theatre.

Setting

The scene is a New York subway is the Tower of London is a Harlem hotel room is St. Peter's. The scene is shaped like a subway car.

Characters

She/Clara Passmore/Virgin Mary/Bastard/Owl

Bastard's Black Mother/Reverend's Wife/Anne Boleyn

Goddam Father/Richest White Man In The Town/Dead White Father/Reverend Passmore

The White Bird/Reverend Passmore's Canary/ God's Dove

The Negro Man

Chaucer

Shakespeare

William the Conqueror



About the Playwright: Adrienne Kennedy

From *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans*

Edited by James V. Hatch and Ted Shine

Born in Pittsburgh in 1931, Kennedy's father was a social worker, her mother a school teacher. When she was four, the family moved to Cleveland. She attended unsegregated, predominantly Jewish schools. Upon graduation, she enrolled at Ohio State University, lived in a segregated dormitory, and suffered racial ridicule on campus. As a major in psychiatric social work, she never studied theatre. Two weeks after graduation, she married. At age twenty-

two, while pregnant with her first child, she wrote her first play. She followed her husband to Africa and then to Rome where, in 1961, she began *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. When they returned to New York, she joined Edward Albee's workshop at Circle in the Square Theatre, where her play received a workshop production. In January, Edward Albee produced *Funnyhouse* Off Broadway. The play shared an Obie Award (1964) with *Dutchman* by LeRoi Jones, as the best Off Broadway play. Many helpful clues to interpret her symbolism can be found by studying Ms. Kennedy's other plays. Her three best-known one-act plays—*Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *The Rat's Mass*, and *The Owl Answers*—all center around a young girl who is torn between the paradoxes of Spirit and Flesh, Black and White, Past and Present. *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley [said of Kennedy] "She is unmistakably the real thing: a strong utterly individual voice in American theater."

DESCENT AS TRANSCENDENCE

Director's Statement on *The Owl Answers* by Talvin Wilks

"My plays are meant to be states of mind."

-Adrienne Kennedy

During the rehearsal process for *The Owl Answers*, Adrienne Kennedy launched into an incredible email exchange with me. The exchanges were filled with thoughts, expressions, key information, and ended with one breathtaking passage -

"Racial. Hatred

*now. today I feel more than ever
RACIAL HATRED AND its marks its wounds*

*I can't see them
and it is very disturbing*

*very disturbed. today Feb 2016
by the seen and unseen. wounds of Racial Hatred"*

I took that message to heart. It is important to look at the play in the context of today, our very race obsessed, "post-racial" state of affairs and the "seen and unseen" impact of racial wounds. Although, *The Owl Answers* is meant to be surreal, fantastic, and hallucinatory, it is also meant to be human. It is filled with human fears, fears of the "seen and unseen wounds of Racial Hatred," that can drive one mad. But I say it's a form of madness as transcendence, a descent into madness as one's form of acceptance.

And this is what Kennedy has tapped into, for me, and this is what I will argue, is a truth, because supremacy and segregation and oppression create a type of madness. It's a cultural hypocrisy that we have fought and continue to fight. To be raised inside of a culture that consistently wants to denigrate you, separate you, deny you access, and claim to be a democracy at the same time is a form of madness. That more people haven't gone insane is the victory.

You can take that same framework and you can place it along gender lines, and you can deal with a whole history of sexism and misogyny and you can find that same madness, the suppression and oppression of the power of women and women's rights, women's identity. In the end I know people like their plays to be straightforward and realistic in a particular way, but when you really dig into the depths of a psychology or a psyche or a psychic crack, what does that look like? I think that is what this play is trying to do. This play is trying to manifest on stage the nightmare of a particular racial oppression. And that's ultimately why I say it's a descent as transcendence. I think ultimately Clara Passmore, the protagonist, finds peace.



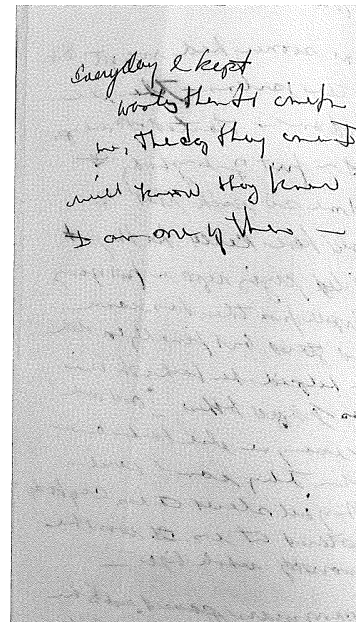
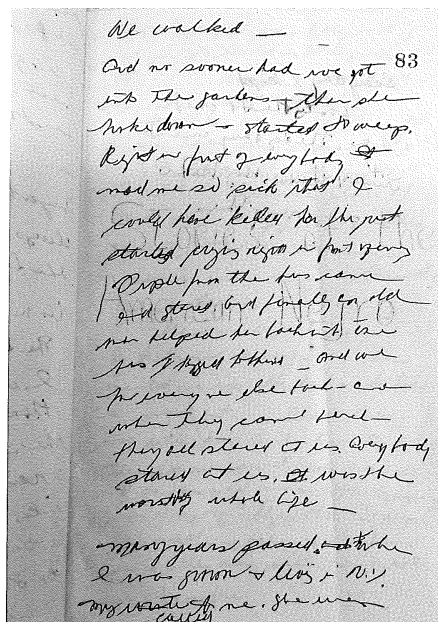
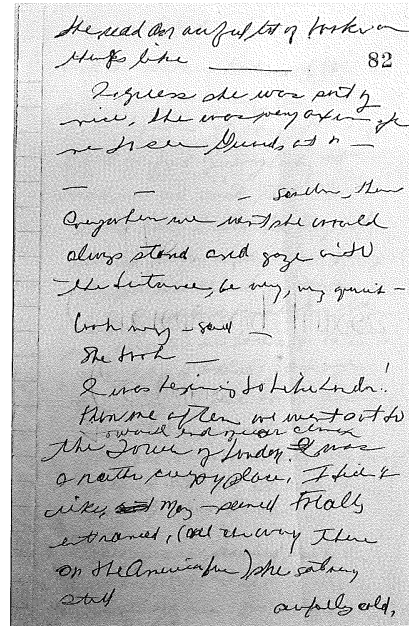
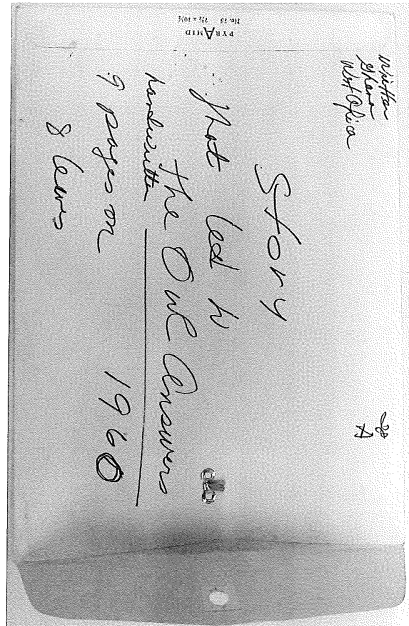
Talvin Wilks (Director of *The Owl Answers*) is a playwright, director, and dramaturg. His plays include *Tod, the boy, Tod*, *The Trial of Uncle S&M*, *Bread of Heaven*, *An American Triptych*, and the 2015 world premiere of *Jimmy and Lorraine*. Acclaimed directorial projects include *UDU* by Sekou Sundiata, *The Love Space Demands* by Ntozake Shange, *No Black Male Show* by Carl Hancock Rux, *The Ballad of Emmett Till* by Ifa Bayeza, and the OBIE Award winning *The Shaneequa Chronicles* by Stephanie Berry. He has served as co-writer/co-director for ten productions in Ping Chong's ongoing series of *Undesirable Elements*, as well as the recent premiere of *Collidescope: Adventures in Pre- and Post-Racial American*. He has created five world premieres with the Bebe Miller

Company, including *Landing/Place* for which he received a 2006 Bessie Award. Recent dramaturgical collaborations include work with Camille A. Brown and Dancers (*Mr. TOL E. RaNcE*, *Black Girl: Linguistic Play*), Carmen de Lavallade (*As I Remember It*), Urban Bush Women (*Hep Hep Sweet Sweet*, *Walking with 'Trane*) and baba israel (*The Spinning Wheel*).

Adrienne Kennedy – Original Writing on *The Owl Answers*

All of the images reprinted here are courtesy of the Adrienne Kennedy Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Special thanks to Ms. Kennedy, the Harry Ransom Center, and the Cline Curator of Theatre and Performing Arts, Eric Colleary.

The following images display the short, handwritten story that Kennedy wrote while in Ghana in 1960 that led to *The Owl Answers*.



These series of handwritten and typed fragments reflect Kennedy's writing approach. She would write out these fragments, then organize them, and then work on rewriting them in dramatic form.

Took out m. wanted -
 that her children would be owls
 give birth to a owl
 in africa

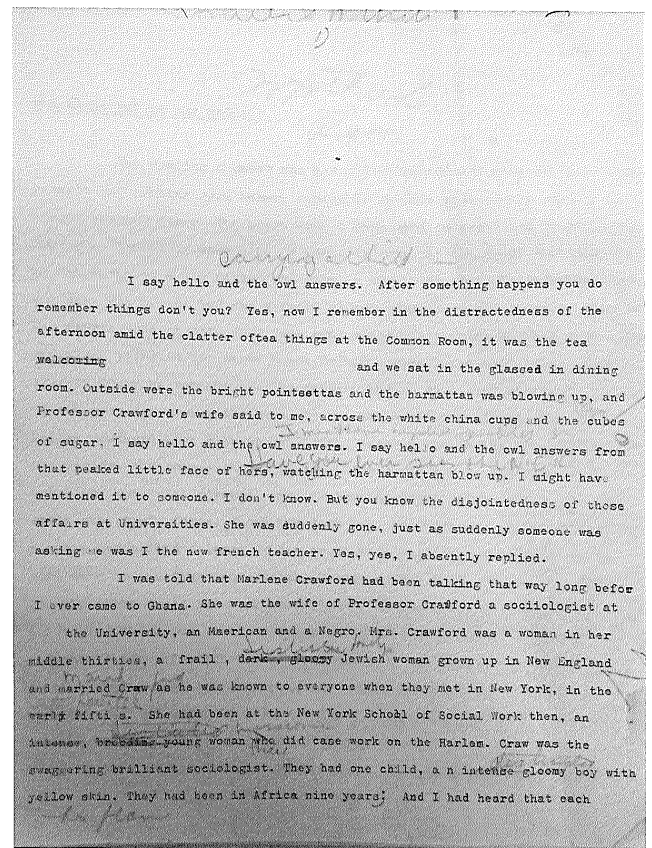
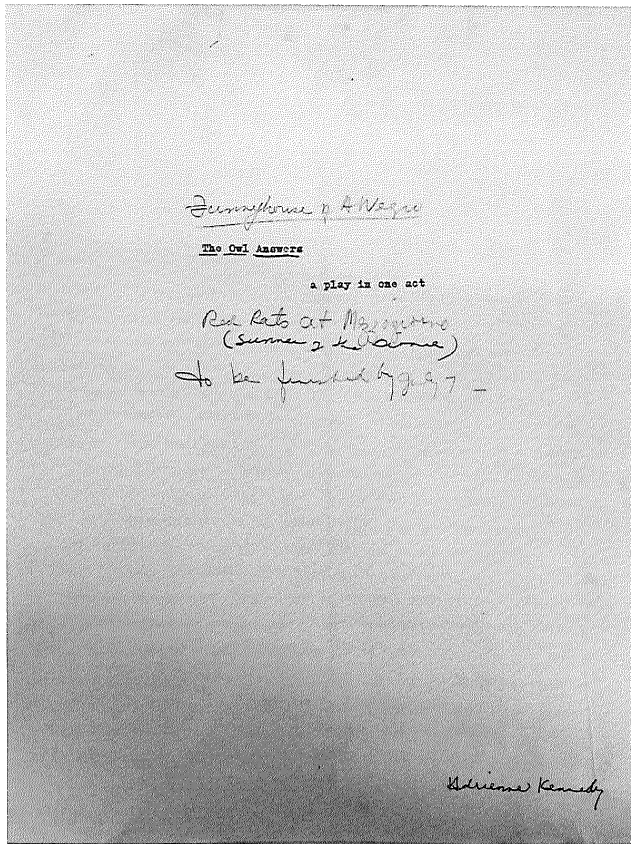
the Dream of Birth of the Owls

Do you know

She knew they were only humans

Many years passed. I did not hear from Margaret as I used. Before I had
 always heard from her through my mother, a gift for me, a chiffon scarf or a
 pale brooch edged in gold, gifts that would hardly interest me. ^{Step} My mother had
 kept them in a drawer. I remarked to my mother about not hearing from Margaret.
 She's not herself now, she said. She hadn't been herself since Mr. William died.
 And my ^{Step} mother went off into a solitary discourse of how Margaret had taken to
 write letters, first to Mr. William's wife, to the sheriff, to the county
 officials, it was all she pitiful, she concluded. Letters, I said. Letters
 to get the body. She wants to take the body home to England. It's all so
 pitiful. ~~Time~~ ^{XXXX} passed. I was grown and married and living in New York, when my
 mother phoned me long distance one day. She said that Margaret was in New York
 and going to Teacher's College at Columbia and after all it was so very near
 me, wouldn't I please go and see her. I said no. Oh Clara, she said, for me,
 please for me, she has written me the most pitiful letters about trying to
 secure Mr. William's body and take it to a crypt in London, somewhere. This past
 spring, she went down home (the town) and visited everybody, walking about in that
 burning sun, saying she had come to make the final arrangements to take Mr.
 William's body to England. It was so pitiful. I would write her but what good

These images are from the first typed draft of *The Owl Answers*.



Spotlight Interview with Talvin Wilks on *The Owl Answers*

February 1, 2016

By Stephanie Lein Walseth, Director of Inquiry

Stephanie Lein Walseth: This is the first time ever that these two pieces – Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* and Adrienne Kennedy’s *The Owl Answers* - have been put together in one evening. Can you tell us what you see as the significance of this pairing and what the linkages you see between the plays?

Talvin Wilks: I think they have an incredible conversation with each other because they are written by two right-of-the-moment 1960s playwrights, immersed in what one might call the experimental avant-garde realm of theater, and both are African American. So, the idea of that convergence, moving away from the “kitchen sink” drama of that time. And maybe even being a part of, or just before what one would consider to be the Black Arts Movement or the Black Power Movement [that was] influencing art at that time.

I think we see a transformation of Amiri Baraka, because he’s LeRoi Jones when he writes *Dutchman*. A few years after this [play] he becomes Amiri Baraka. So there is a whole transformation that he is a part of. And then Adrienne, of that moment too, is making discoveries as a part of an eclectic downtown scene, working in Edward Albee’s Writer’s Workshop. So, that answers a lot of where she is and the way she is thinking about art and literature, very influenced by what one would call the traditional American canon. She loves Tennessee Williams, Odets, she’s very aware of the success of *A Raisin in the Sun* and Lorraine Hansberry and Jimmy Baldwin. But she is constantly trying to find her form. So, ultimately she’s influenced by Lorca and Ionesco and these are the writers who are opening the door for her. Yet, both are dealing with these ideas of race, identity, assimilation, acculturation – that great maelstrom of where the black community is at that time in terms of thinking about integration, assimilation, Civil Rights, the Black Power Movement. How does *language* fit inside of that?

I feel the two of them are really sort of traveling on similar paths, and they’ve given us these two plays that have two very similar signature protagonists, and significantly – one a black man and the other a black woman – and both dealing with a type of assimilationist, metaphorical, English literature kind of maelstrom so to speak. Although [they were] completely written separately, and I don’t believe that one was influenced by the other. I am trying to think of the order. She finishes her play in 1961, though they’re not produced until 1964, 1965, so we can’t really say, even if her production was after *Dutchman*, we can’t say she was influenced by *Dutchman* because she wrote the plays prior.

Whether they are both embraced in the same way, that becomes a part of the discussion. But that we *have* these two signature pieces that have such similarities, written, you know, within a couple of years, and overlapping, and truly of a period and a time, I think is really quite significant. And it’s great to experience them in tandem.

SLW: You touched on this, and I want to take it a step further – coming out of this time and this movement, both of these pieces are crediting with propelling monumental paradigm shifts in theater, not just in terms of the content, but in terms of the form they’re each working with. Could you talk a little bit about that? What we’re known for here at Penumbra is [psychological] realism for the most part, and Kennedy’s work is more surrealistic. You were here to direct *The Ballad of Emmett Till* [by Ifa Bayeza], and there are a lot of parallels in terms of the aesthetics of that piece and *The Owl Answers*. Clearly this style is a great strength of yours. So, could you talk a bit about this particular form and style?

TW: Well, you know, it's an interesting thing because we can create subsequent lineages, but it's hard to necessarily say that they really impacted in that way. You can clearly draw a thread from Adrienne to Ntozake [Shange] to Suzan-Lori Parks to Kia Corthron to Ifa Bayeza. And Ifa and 'Zake being sisters and having this interesting correlation and understanding. Ifa was very much a part of working with 'Zake when she was developing *For Colored Girls [Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf]*...

SLW: Oh, I didn't know that!

TW: Yeah! Ifa always sees herself as part of that trajectory and not separate from it, and shares that aesthetic and that vocabulary. But I do not know directly if 'Zake was influenced by Adrienne. Being the scholar and intellect that she is, I am sure she had to be, absolutely, aware of Kennedy, but I do not believe that she was creating her form from Kennedy. But we are able to see that trajectory because of Adrienne, and she clearly is the foremother of these writers. They are not in a vacuum, you know. They have precedents, and they have precedents in a great deal because of Adrienne. I think clearly because Baraka is such the impactful artist of the Black Arts Movement and through essays, literature, playwriting, fiction, and short stories, he *is* the voice of that period. It's hard to say that Adrienne was the voice of that period. She was successful in that timeframe and very successful in what one would call the "downtown" theater scene, this more experimental kind of cutting-edge scenario. But I don't think in her time, even in her trajectory that she had the same impact that Baraka had.

In fact, in my research I came across a wonderful statement made by Paul Carter Harrison who knew both incredibly well, and in his mind he basically said that when you look at Adrienne's work at first glance, you think there's a type of victim scenario, sort of inside of it, or you can classify it in a particular way, or you can separate it from sort of a Black Power militancy at that time. And especially since there is such an obsession with white identity, white culture at that time, some people, and I think you know, incorrectly interpreted the play in a particular fashion, and so therefore she was not so much in fashion. But Paul says that upon reflection, she perhaps was dealing more with the madness of what people were actually dealing with in this realm of integration and assimilation much more so than the Black Power plays ever did. I think that there's something right about that, because if you start to look at the Black Arts Movement, you can see the impact and political insistence that's inside of the work, and here I think Adrienne is trying to reveal the notion of racism, segregation, racialized identity as a type of madness, which gets to the underbelly of what may or may not be happening to people as they think about this notion of this term of integration.

So, you know, we have wonderful scholarship now that goes back and reclaims these wonderful artists as our own and we understand them within the time and politics, but when you read anything that Adrienne is writing, she's just trying to get produced. She's trying to get the work that she wants produced. She's not trying to be political at the time. She's trying to tell the stories in the way that she knows to tell them. This is her particular style. But we can place her and frame her in a particular way and can say that she has impact because she was a forerunner and was a successful forerunner as a black artist in the experimental vanguard that often is not as accepting or can be overly critical of black artists who work in that vein. So, I think that's part of her impact and her importance. I interviewed her once, and even she would say, if it weren't for colleges and universities, she wouldn't have a career. Her work is understood inside of a frame of scholarship and academia.

SLW: So how do *you* come to the work? You seem to have a great understanding of it and an affinity for it. So how do you come to the work in terms of your background? How do you address it in rehearsal? And how do you explain it to folks who aren't as familiar with it, who might read it on the page and go "I don't know what this is"?

TW: I discovered both Baraka and Kennedy while in college - I went to Princeton University. While I was there I was very influenced by folks from the Open Theater, this would be Joseph Chaikin, folks from The Talking Band: Tina Shepard, Paul Zimet. So they are of the lineage of the Open Theater, of the Living Theater, they are in the vanguard of cutting-edge experimental theater. So I was influenced immediately by that. My playwriting instructor for two years was Jean-Claude van Itallie who wrote *American Hurrah*, and *The Serpent*, and all the plays of the Open Theater, so that had an influence on me. It was also something I was interested in seeking.

I had always been very connected to the idea of theater as ritual and you know that's where I really started to explore the notion of experimental theater and this ritualized avant-garde seemed to be my affinity because of the existence of poetry that exists inside of that, and music, and movement, and theater, that all of those things have always been together for me. So, for my senior thesis I wrote and directed my first play, which was called *Incubus: An American Dream Play*, and it was very much, I called it a "psycho-sexual-social indictment of racism and sexism in America." So, when I stumbled upon *Dutchman* and *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and I was like, "What?!?" Here it is. Being African American at Princeton at that time, we're talking about the 80s, when I arrived they were celebrating "10 years of Women at Princeton," so that should tell you something!

SLW: What?

TW: Yes. I arrived in the early 80s, and there had only been women there for 10 years.

SLW: What!?!?

TW: Right, so that's exactly the point. These are the histories that we forget. We come into our modern era, and we're seemingly so done with it, and we lose the importance of the battles that people were fighting just 50 years ago. Just 50 years ago, fighting for the right to be considered and present on an equal playing field. We so quickly want to step into this idea that there's an equal playing field, and we're post-racial. But no - we're still very much babies inside of these questions.

I think clearly *Dutchman* and *The Owl Answers* show us two playwrights in the vanguard of wrestling with these issues of race and identity and literature and culture, and what can one claim as one's own lineage? I find that all fascinating. Those influences and my own particular kind of inclination clearly led me to these two artists and subsequently, I had a company that worked with the Wooster Group and the Ontological-Hysteric Theater. So, you can get a sense of where I am in inside of theater.

But I also worked for many years at Crossroads Theater Company, which is a similar [African American] regional theater to Penumbra. And while I'm there, I arrive at Crossroads the year they premiered George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*, so that places them on the map. That becomes a second foundation for my education and affinity. There I am learning the works of Aishah Rahman, and knowing the work of Ntozake Shange. While I'm there I actually get to work with her and to develop a premier of her work *The Love Space Demands*. So, that affinity is rooted there. Also at that time I work with Ifa Bayeza for the first time on her piece *Homer G. & the Rhapsodies*, and I begin to work with poets who are working in theater, Carl Hancock Rux, Sekou Sundiata, I ran across Laurie Carlos, Robbie McCauley. So, this is my realm. You know, it's all called devising now, but that whole exploration is really rooted in the foundation of my earlier influences with the folks at the Talking Band and the Open Theater.

SLW: So, you're really been immersed in this kind of world for a while.

TW: I've been immersed in this kind of world for a while, those are the colleagues, the practitioners, my generational interpreters, like Kia Corthron, like Suzan-Lori Parks, we all bubbled up at the same time. And a wonderful interpreter, Grisha Coleman, who's way-way-out there, who's a colleague of Laurie Carlos. But I know that particular spectrum and had a wonderful opportunity with Adrienne in 1988 when *People Who Led to My Plays* was published. I did a staged reading of that publication as a celebration for the work at Rutgers University, and she was there. That was how we first met.

SLW: Wonderful! So, how do you describe the work for folks that aren't familiar with it or don't feel they know how to interpret it? How do you work on it in the rehearsal room?

TW: I think the first thing I say is that it is rooted in ritual. There are ceremonial aspects that you can understand inside of this piece. My big push is for people to take everything at face value. Don't think you don't understand it. Just understand what is there. Don't move beyond that. *Then* you really have to dig into the symbolism. What *does* the symbolism mean? What *could* the symbolism mean? What is this abstraction? What is she really trying to get at in this notion of a young black woman, or a young mixed race woman obsessed with the idea of identity, of who she is and what she is and what she has the right to claim? How does that lead into a particular obsession? If that's the literature that you're raised on [Shakespeare, Chaucer, etc.], that you're exposed to, do you not have the right to claim it? I mean, there are values inside of that [Eurocentric literature] that ultimately make people want to reject it, because we come out of a Black Power kind of notion. But black people don't live in a vacuum, don't live in isolation, you know, and that's where all of these questions come from. What is the ultimate fight? Is the ultimate fight to be separate? Is it Nationalism? Is it integration? Is that the call? What is the call? So, Adrienne is right out of that maelstrom of that time.

And we cannot necessarily put all of the onus on the black community. This psychic madness comes from the imposition of supremacy and segregation. It just does. If you want to battle with me about it... (both laugh)....we can get into it! My vulgar language would be "it is a psychic mind-fuck" to be raised inside of a culture that consistently wants to denigrate you, separate you, deny you access, and claim to be a democracy at the same time. That is a madness. That more people haven't gone insane is the victory.

This play is about what happens when someone does descend into madness. We can't deny that those things are caught up in oppression. Oppression creates post-traumatic stress disorder. That's how we describe it. What is this? It's post-traumatic stress disorder! Someone who has been in battle, and maybe it's an internal battle from outside conditions, trying to find their way to some sense of understanding who they are. Yes this play is extreme in its symbolism. Yes, it can seem uncertain in its design, in its unraveling, even in its final image. You know, the interpretation of that image is tenfold. I'm not going to tell you, ultimately, what it is. I say it's a form of descent as transcendence. A descent into madness which is one's acceptance that is a type of transcendence, but through another lens it looks like an insanity. But, what she has tapped into, for me, and this is what I will argue, is a truth, because supremacy and segregation and oppression create a madness. It's a cultural hypocrisy that we have fought and continue to fight.

You can take that frame and you can place it along gender lines, and you can deal with a whole history of sexism and misogyny and you can find another kind of madness. Just the suppression and oppression of the power of women and women's rights, women's identity, is another kind of psycho-sexual madness. I know people like their things to be spelled out and realistic in a particular way, but when you really dig into the depths of a psychology or psyche or a psychic crack, what does that look like? I think that is what this play is trying to do. This play is trying to manifest the ideas of the nightmare of racial oppression.

SLW: One of the things that strikes me in what you've just said, is how intersectional both of these pieces are. They're not simplistic black versus white binaries, although that is certainly one of the layers at play. But they're also about gender, sexuality, class, age, religion, generation, and all of these things. In both of the pieces sexuality, rage, tension and lust are present as well. How do you think about these layers complicating each other? How do you deal with this complexity?

TW: What's wonderful about it is we're coming to this play in 2016 and it was written in 1960, produced in 64, 65, so that's 50 years ago. In that timeframe, Adrienne has given us some gifts. *People That Led to My Plays* is a wonderful gift in understanding the way she uses her own life, symbolism, influences from childhood, things that actually occurred in her real life that create this kind of understanding. So, we have another way of grounding ourselves in understanding the play. As I told people, I said "I don't think *People*... give us answers, but it informs the ways we can answer the questions." And then also, subsequently, I've had the cast read *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* because that almost in real time talks about her life at the time when she was writing the play, and in that play she blends material from *The Owl Answers* into the text of *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*. And she breaks it down on a type of emotional logic, which I am using as a way to help inform my actors of what is there and what is underneath, and thinking about the depths of what you can play – what is on the page or what is at the surface. So, those are keys to kind of understanding what that is.

And then there are also traps you have to avoid. We can make assumptions, you can frame it in a classifying way, you can take the trope of the "tragic mulatta" and put that on top of that, but I caution that. That's another language and iconography that I'm not necessarily sure Adrienne herself thinks she's writing about or writing to. She perhaps does not even necessarily see Clara Passmore in the vein of tragic. I'm not sure that's necessarily what she is saying, ultimately. So the point is, how do you tease out all of these aspects of race and sex and sexual violence, desire and longing and love within the play? You really just have to go moment to moment and think of the truth in each one, and see, much of what I've been saying to the actors is "I'm just looking for the world, and for a way to set up the world, and to enact everything that's on the page. Then we can discover the next layer of meaning and image."

We had a particularly interesting moment, or breakthrough yesterday. I think Austene [Van, the actor playing Clara Passmore] would think it was a breakthrough. We just set the world in action and she had a real moment experience that wasn't blocked, that was so truthful to the horror of the things that were happening around her, and I was like "That's what I'm doing!" Everyone is sort of hard-pressed for me to answer questions and to definitely say A, B, C, and I am radically resistant to that. Not that I don't have ideas or answers, but my goal as a director is to guide us into the creation of this world in real time so that it has its own particular logic, and once we get that in motion, we live inside of it, and then make another level of discovery, and then maybe there's even more that we haven't thought of to unveil.

I said to the actors the first day, it's very important to say "Do not make this a period piece. We may be setting it in a particular time, but it is about the now, it is about Black Lives Matter, it is about an all-white Oscars, it is about who can play what role and why, it is about all of those seemingly inane popular culture things that reflect a truth about the way we still deal with race and culture and identity in this society." I think this notion of it as a type of madness is there.

Look at the whole controversy around the Oscars. Of course when you expose it, when you have an 80% membership of white males who are all over 50, you have a realm of bias that we are being told to accept as fair and impartial. When, in fact, how can it be by the mere definition of what it is? It is not! And so, [for black stars]

to simply say “I’m not going, I’m not going to be a part of that,” and that leads to controversy, really shows us how entrenched it wants to remain, and how clearly we need to continue to expose it.

So that’s my push. I want people to come to this and be able to connect to it inside of the obsession of where we are, even in this so-called “Obama Era.” I am not going to over-impose on the work itself, but I am trying to make that aspect of the story very clear. The challenge, one of the things I have been talking to Austene about is, “This is for whom?” You are directing this toward what? Whom? Where is this indictment? I do want to place it at the feet of the people who come.

SLW: There is so much in what you’ve said! One question for you is how you see this work fitting into Penumbra’s season theme of Revolution Love? Is this piece revolutionary? How so? Is the mere connection of this piece from 50 years ago with today, and the continuity of the struggle, is that revolutionary? Is the hope to spur people to new thought or action after seeing this piece?

TW: It is definitely a revolutionary work. Do I call it a black revolutionary work? Well, I’m not sure I would do that, because that’s something very specific, and has a list of very specific parameters. Can it be connected to that? Absolutely. But can you automatically categorize it in that particular lineage? I’m not so sure you can. But that doesn’t mean it’s not impactful in the same way and can be received as such. Because the Black Power, black revolutionary movement also did not happen in a vacuum. It wasn’t just a singular thing. There were multiple things happening together at that time that allow it to succeed or not succeed. You could say it was in line with the Civil Rights Movement, but was the Civil Rights Movement directly related or correlated to the Black Power Movement? They overlapped. They are in tandem. Does one come from the other? I’m not so sure. They are parts of multiplicities that are happening at that particular time. So, when you look at an artist like Adrienne Kennedy, you know, that whole era of artistic expression is particularly revolutionary. It’s not just what’s happening in that Black Power Movement. There’s an anti-war movement, there’s this whole ritualized abstraction...

I just worked on a piece about the Living Theater and they are radical anarchists, they’re imprisoned for the work that they’re doing, they’re totally rallying against the machine. They had wonderful rallies and debates with the Black Panthers at that time, and rallied to that particular cause. So there are multiple artistic movements going on at this time. So I think that behooves us, that’s very important to know, that even if you’re thinking about black radical politics or black revolutionary politics at that time, they are not happening inside of a vacuum and that is not the only liberationist movement happening at that time, and there’s a reason why there are multiple liberationists acts happening at the time. There’s a lot of overlap. So, absolutely I put this play, just in its own radical nature, putting issue, cause, language in this abstract landscape that is directly connected to race, to culture, as you said, to class, to even what we consider to be the so-called American canon, or Eurocentric canon. But you have to frame it in that way. You can’t automatically assign it a Black Power, black revolutionary label, because that would be an injustice to the piece. But is it related to that idea at that time in that moment? Absolutely.

SLW: Can we talk a little bit about the production itself?

TW: Sure!

SLW: Let’s talk about the design, about the set – both of these pieces are set in the subway. And the design sketches for the costumes, which I know you’ve had a lot of influence on, are just gorgeous and exciting. It’s also a departure from Penumbra’s usual visual aesthetic...

TW: Well Lou warned me, he said “we’re going to go out there.” When he called me [to ask if I was interested in directing the piece]. I said “I’ve been wanting someone to ask me for years, so absolutely the answer is yes.” And then I thought, “Oh my god, what have I done?” To really realize this play demands a lot. So, for me it’s been great to have the two plays to consider in relationship to each other. I think if I were just doing *The Owl Answers* alone, the environment would be very different. There would be things that would be more pronounced or more relevant. But having the two to work with has given me license to be a little more inventive in my concept. The subway is such a central reality [in this production, because of the pairing], much more so than I think *The Owl Answers* requires, and it creates its own frame that, for me, became an opportunity for deconstruction. You know, it’s set for *Dutchman* [in the first half of the production], but I get to break it apart [for *The Owl Answers* after intermission], and that breaking apart is the symbolic psychic split or crack. I want the final thing to feel as if it had actually been a cage. Had she been in the Tower of London? Is it an insane asylum? Is it a prison cell? She’s definitely trapped in some type of psychic place that is much more a cell than a subway. So, working with Maruti [Evans], a great friend of mine, and who did [the set design for] *The Ballad of Emmett Till*...

SLW: Which was gorgeous! We have part of that set in the countertop right behind me.

TW: I know! I call it the shrine. He’s a great thinker. So, ultimately, that became much more of the directorial stroke for me that is not even inside of the play as written. It’s this notion that the world deconstructs and re-frames itself, in many ways some of the characters do. And there are suggestive ideas of that inside of the costumes. The costumes, we’ve gone down the same road [Matt LeFebvre, the Costume Designer and I], even though we both came to it separately. But when we talked about it we realized we were thinking of the exact same thing. There is this notion of denizens on the subway and homelessness, so I thought my more fantastical costumes would want to be made up of detritus and trash and collective ideas, and Matt had already thought the same thing. The gown is made up of garbage bags, and the Shakespearean’s ruff is a car filter. We’re thinking about these fabricated things that keep this notion of real/surreal, and actually it’s more real because they’re made out of real pieces, but they’re surreal because they’re fabricated as renaissance garb.

So that was the way we’ve been playing and thinking about 1) how one world shifts into the other, but 2) how they’re integrated. Lou and I are both working on what of *Dutchman* is retained in *Owl*, what of *Owl* is suggested inside of *Dutchman*? We’re using the same cast, so that’s a gestural nod, it’s almost, the elements that Clara Passmore has in *Owl*, she already has, she’s an unidentified character on the subway in *Dutchman*, but she already has her books and papers and things and she’s already in that hustle. I am curious to see the impact and how that is reflected, and the symbolism. It’s interesting, there are knives, there’s blood, there are all these things that interconnect the two plays as well.

As you’ll see in my dramaturgical breakdown, I’ve restructured the play in my own way of thinking. There are so many things going on and so many transformations, that you can get kind of lost in the tracking of it. I feel that there is a journey to track for Clara Passmore, and they’re in these particular passages that I’ve called “confessionals.” There are five confessions. And each confession re-states some of the same language or the same story, but once I identified that, I wanted it to be understood as something much more structural, otherwise you could just play a state [of mind or emotion] and not quite know where you are. So, I’ve anchored the piece in these five confessions. And then around those confessions are a series of transformations and rituals. So then it’s about, what do those things mean, how do they build up to the next confession? How can we can feel a sense of progression? It’s given us a way of looking at the language and looking at sort of very investigative things.

There is also the grammar change, the tense change to deal with in Kennedy's language. This is no longer present tense, this is past tense. This is future tense now. This didn't happen, it's about to happen, or it's imagined that it will happen. Clara says "We did this," then she says "This happened," then she says "When I get there we will." And it's the same story. So, what does that mean? Did this really happen? Is this all about desire? Can each one be in its own tense? I think it can. But then what does that mean? So, you know, those are the ways that I've been... I'm hoping that I'll be able to help the audience understand that shift, but that's the way we're investigating the text now. What are the clues that are there? What do they mean before we start to invent?

SLW: It sounds very collaborative...

TW: It's very collaborative, very collaborative. I'm very comfortable in that. Ultimately, I'm looking for what comes back. If I set something up [in rehearsal], what comes back, what can come inside of that? What are the other discoveries that can be made?

SLW: I know you said you don't want to give away any answers, and it sounds like you're very much allowing the cast to come to the work and find their own meaning in terms of symbols and allegory. But in terms of the Owl and the White Bird, what do you think they represent? In *Dutchman*, we know about the legend of the Flying Dutchman, but the symbolism in *The Owl Answers* is a little more ambiguous. Can you share any of your thoughts?

TW: The white bird is not as important to me. The owl is very important to me. The white dove is God's dove, is God's messenger. There are biblical analogies to that. The statement that is the most significant [in the play] is "I call God and the owl answers." So this whole notion of the owl as an idea of "becoming" is ultimately what I am working on and what I'm trying to understand. And so for me it's this idea of the potential of a type of doctrine and a God-truth, and then there is the potential of a type of natural truth that may or may not be connected. But, a religious doctrine is something laid on top of the natural truth, which the owl seems to me to represent. It doesn't mean that these truths are in conflict, it just means that in trying to discover one or the other, or in trying to reach for one, there is the potential of a greater reveal. I don't mean that I'm trying to challenge God, or challenge doctrine. I meant that in trying to understand...natural truth. She is a mixed race child. This person is her father. This is her lineage. It is hers to claim by definition, not by doctrine or by society. So, for me there is this understanding that the answers of the natural world that are not necessarily the answers of religious doctrine. They can serve each other, but they can also be in conflict. And where does one find their peace? And that's ultimately why I say it's a descent as transcendence. I think ultimately Clara Passmore finds peace.

SLW: That's beautiful.

TW: That's my answer. (*Big laughs from both.*)

SLW: Is there anything that you're dying for folks to know about? Anything I haven't asked you about that you think is really important?

TW: I never really know how to frame this, but I think it's really important for us to liberate our artists from the parameters of realism. When artists are really investigating these other forms and modes of abstraction, they're not taking us further away from the truth, these investigations are taking, as I'm saying, they kind of bring us closer to those truths. To have that notion of awareness be in the room. We can talk about violence without having to enact a violence. We can think of it in all of our metaphorical, structural glory, in how do you represent

that onstage? There are many ways to represent our truths on stage. Hopefully we work toward being much more open fully because realism is a fiction too. And it does not necessarily get us closer to an inner truth, a psychological truth, a moral dilemma truth, a spiritual truth, a lineage, a heritage. All of those things are huge, larger than life types of ideas, and I think that it behooves us, benefits us to think about those larger than life ideas onstage.

There is a greater cultural acceptance of that cultural landscape for a white artist, and a male artist. We accept Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Pirandello. We go there. We go out there. We venture into those realms freely and openly and say “take us!” But the moment women or writers of color go there, we... But then you have to go, “Well, what about Lorca? What about Soyinka? What about all these other ways and these people who kind of deal in other cultural ideas of magic surrealism, magic realism, you know, in a mythical landscape, mythical realism?”

I think Suzan-Lori Parks is very much in the vein of Adrienne Kennedy, and is, I think the real breakthrough artist of our time who lives in this world and is particularly acknowledged and accepted. But it is still a challenge to do a Suzan-Lori Parks play. Except maybe *Topdog/Underdog*. But if you get into an *Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom*, I’m sure this audience would be like, “Whaaat? Where are we?” And yet she’s bringing an understanding to it. Because how do you bring a real understanding to, shall we say, hundreds of years of slavery, and the years of reconstruction, and the years of Jim Crow? How do you represent history when you really want to deal with the large stroke issues? You have to go to a type of abstraction! (*laughs*) You know, to get to that. So, I hope people will come with an open mind and really look at that symbolic place where we allow many, many other mediums to go, but don’t always allow our theater to go there. I know that it’s going to be a challenge to folks, but maybe we’ll present it in a way that will just wash over them! (*laughs*) That’s all I can say! Does that answer your question?

SLW: Absolutely, that was beautiful! Thank you so much for your time.

Crossing Borders, Igniting Revolution:

Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* and Adrienne Kennedy's *The Owl Answers*

A dramaturgical essay by Paul Adolphsen



Paul Adolphsen is a dramaturg, writer, and educator originally from Seattle, WA. He holds B.A. degrees in Theatre and English Literature from Seattle Pacific University and an M.F.A. in Dramaturgy from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. As a dramaturg he has worked with Book-It Repertory Theatre (Seattle, WA), Vashon Opera (WA), Hartford Stage Company (CT), Silverthorne Theatre Company (MA), and Five College Opera (MA). He has also served as a production dramaturg on several academic productions at Seattle Pacific and UMass. In 2012 he helped to found the UMass New Play Lab as a space to develop groundbreaking new work in a university setting. Paul's interests as a dramaturg and educator include trauma, testimony, and memory in the South African theatre, as well as methods of theatrical adaptation and new play development. He is currently conducting research in Cape Town as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of the Western Cape, where he is exploring how a dramaturgical sensibility can create space within the humanities classroom for students to reflect on their relationship to the apartheid past. Paul's writing about theatre and performance has been published by howlround.com, and he has a review forthcoming in the August 2016 issue of Theatre Journal.

Adrienne Kennedy and Amiri Baraka, two of the foremost dramatic chroniclers of 20th century African American psychic, spiritual, and political life, were both revolutionary boundary crossers. In their art and in their lives, these two writers consistently interrogated the forces that divide people from their history, their communities, and their sense of self. Art served as a tool for Kennedy and Baraka to illuminate society's fault lines while also imagining new ways of being. In his plays, poems, and prose Baraka helped usher in a new era of creative expression for black Americans that sought liberation from an oppressive and violent white supremacist culture by establishing a radical and powerful new black aesthetic. Uncompromising in his views and unapologetic in his work, Baraka held the strong conviction that art's chief responsibility is to ignite action. Kennedy's work, while less overtly positioned to incite revolution, still continues to be influential for the ways in which it probed and ultimately broke through the boundaries—both creative and gendered—of the 1960s avant-garde theatre. Kennedy's poetic dramas showed how the style and tactics of the experimental theatre could be used to usher in a wholly unique and startling black aesthetic. Her insistence on dramatizing the intersections of race and gender offered a revolutionary critique of the often-masculinist Black Arts Movement.

And while Kennedy's works are taught more than they are staged, they have inspired generations of playwrights of color to push boundaries and explore marginal and necessary registers of expression.

For the first time in professional theatre history, Penumbra Theatre Company will stage Baraka's controversial *Dutchman* alongside Kennedy's feverish masterpiece *The Owl Answers* in one evening of performance. Illuminating the season theme "Revolution Love," these plays unflinchingly examine the electric borderlines of desire that mark our lives and seek to unveil revelatory truths about what it has meant to live as a black person in the United States of America. First produced in the mid-1960s – *Dutchman* in 1964, and *The Owl Answers* a year later – the plays display the revolutionary aesthetics and political interests Baraka and Kennedy would continue to develop throughout their careers. Both pieces, to use Larry Neal's phrasing, "confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist West."⁵

Dutchman follows the uneasy relationship between garrulous, and cunning Lula (a white woman) and quiet, intellectual Clay (a black man). They first share a charged, wordless glance through the window of a subway car: he sitting alone on his way to a party, she standing solitary on the platform. Moments later, Lula boards the car and places herself next to Clay. So begins their high-stakes game of cat-and-mouse. After some teasing flirtation and frank appraisal, the two get together. It is an uneasy pairing though, as the confident, acerbic Lula delights in pointing out Clay's perceived foibles. Baraka charts the play of their desire through its violent climax and absurd denouement. Presenting a bleak picture of U.S. race relations, the play draws on the myth of the Flying Dutchman—a ghost ship doomed never to make port—to suggest that America will continually play out the drama of white predation and black annihilation enacted by Lula and Clay. Like the ill-fated Dutchman, the subway car on which Baraka's emblems of white and black America ride will forever continue its destructive circuit. As evidenced by *Dutchman*, Baraka's commitment to rage as part and parcel of the black aesthetic was indeed revolutionary, as was the relentless honesty and piercing clarity of his dramaturgical vision.

⁵ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review: TDR*. 12.4 (Summer 1968): 29.

The Owl Answers continues to offer a revolutionary alternative to traditional perspectives on what live performance can be, destabilizing any unitary, chronological sense of character and plot, exemplified by the protagonist's lengthy name: "SHE who is CLARA PASSMORE who is THE VIRGIN MARY who is the BASTARD who is the OWL."⁶ *The Owl Answers* is built on a dream structure that uses unanticipated associations and illogic as critical dramaturgical elements. The play follows SHE, the daughter of the "GODDAM FATHER who is the RICHEST WHITE MAN IN THE TOWN who is the DEAD WHITE FATHER who is REVEREND PASSMORE" and his black servant, and might best be described as a journey toward self-definition. SHE says to her parents at one point: "...you must know how it is to be filled with yearning."⁷ Throughout *The Owl Answers* SHE yearns for the answer to a basic question: "Who are you?" The question is a difficult one for SHE to answer, as the topsy-turvy, racist system of which she is a part brands her a bastard and denies her any attempt at crafting a stable sense of self. Instead, SHE defines herself in relationship to black and white masculinity, divided in her desire for both her (dead) white father and the anonymous black men she meets on the subway. SHE is also divided between the versions of black womanhood society has presented to her: she can either be pure and strive to be white, or she can embrace her blackness. Who is SHE? A virgin? A bastard? Or something else entirely? These are the revolutionary questions Kennedy places at the heart of her fantastic and fragmented play.

Dutchman and *The Owl Answers* are rarely seen together, though Penumbra's decision to produce both on the same stage creates an opportunity to explore the resonances between them. It's telling that Kennedy and Baraka both turned to the subway as the place to set their explorations of black identity. In conjuring the subway's subterranean heat and alluring speed, these plays suggest an interest with that which is hiding beneath the seemingly placid surface of our preconceptions. What desires do we ignore in our daily lives? What histories do we prefer to keep buried? Baraka asks these questions by setting his tale in a naturalistic subway car where strangers' faces flick by the hard glass windows. His subway is a place of public intimacy and boundary

⁶ From this point on, I will refer to this character as "SHE."

⁷ Adrienne Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, Production Script (Minneapolis, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, 2016) 12.

testing. Taking a different track, Kennedy's play inhabits a chaotic, clanging place, more emotional state than physical location. While they realize the subway car differently on stage, Kennedy and Baraka use its physical confinement and circular rhythms as dramatic terrain in which to explore the paradoxes of race in America. In particular, both plays engage with and trouble several complex dichotomies that defined black lives in the 1960s, and continue to do so today: madness and sanity, dreams and reality, lies and truth, illegitimacy and authority. In dismantling and illuminating these dualisms *Dutchman* and *The Owl Answers* take into account the various intersections between race, class, and gender.

Both plays examine the wounds inflicted on African Americans psyches by a society that seeks to close down and compartmentalize their expression. Baraka and Kennedy's plays resonate as they both examine male/female pairings across race. Who seeks to benefit from these relationships? How is black identity to be constructed in the wake of racism's insidious fallout? Through Clay and Lula, Baraka examines the charged pairing of the black man and the white woman, showing how black masculinity has been historically defined in its relationship to a fragile and vulnerable white femininity. He shows how structural racism – a constant privileging of that which is white at the expense of that which is black – can inculcate rage and self-hatred. Confusion and internalized racism is at the heart of *The Owl Answers*' focus on the intersections of race and gender as well. Kennedy takes us deep into SHE's fractured psyche as she tries to fashion a sense of self despite her sense of inadequacy and illegitimacy, which, in turn, is the direct result of an insidious, internalized racism that seems similar to Clay's own brand of self-hatred. The startling theatrical vision of these two writers pushes away sanitized, white rhetoric which, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, “serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.”⁸ For Kennedy and Baraka putting this bloody truth on stage, telling these stories from the speeding and dark subterranean halls of American history, was an essential step toward igniting change. Today, *Dutchman* and

⁸ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, (New York: Random House, 2015.) 9.

The Owl Answers show us what revolution meant in the 1960s, and ask us what it must look like today if we are to move toward a more just and equitable society.

Amiri Baraka

Baraka is widely considered to be one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, and his work helped to explain and develop many of the movement's core tenants and practices. In his poetry, prose, and plays Baraka expressed an apocalyptic vision that tore away the veil to expose the inherent madness of white America. He worked to prompt his African American audiences to value and proclaim their blackness in a nation built on its denigration. This was certainly a revolutionary act, this desire to cross the boundaries of propriety and reason established by a corrupt white culture and to form new ways of identification and meaning-making that were drawn from the African American experience alone.

Baraka was born Everett LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey on October 7, 1934. Shortly after graduating from Howard University in 1954 Baraka joined the U.S. Air Force. He served for three years until receiving a dishonorable discharge as a result of accusations concerning his Communist political beliefs. Baraka then moved to New York City where he married the poet Hettie Cohen and quickly became part of the city's thriving literary scene. He befriended Beat legends Allen Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac, as well as other members of the mostly white avant-garde of Greenwich Village, who influenced his understanding of poetry "as a process of discovery rather than an exercise in fulfilling traditional expectations."⁹ In 1958 Baraka founded Totem Press and the magazine *Yugen* with Hettie, and three years later published his first volume of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. Baraka's work at this point was not as politically radical as it was to become. While Baraka engaged African American culture in his early poems, he had yet to examine blackness in terms of Black Nationalist ideology.

⁹ "Amiri Baraka," *The Poetry Foundation*, 8 Jan 2016, < <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/amiri-baraka>>.

Baraka (who was still LeRoi Jones at this point in his life) became more dedicated to the ideals and goals of Black Nationalism after a 1959 trip to Cuba where he met revolutionary poets and artists who used their work to actively resist poverty and oppression. Baraka's discussions with these individuals altered his beliefs about the role and responsibility of the artist, and galvanized a more overtly political and race-conscious turn in his writing. Out of this shift in focus, then, came *Dutchman*, which premiered four years after Baraka's journey to Cuba. A year after *Dutchman's* well received New York run, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York. The death of one of Baraka's philosophical and political idols sparked something in the young artist, and he increasingly began to apply black national ideology to his writing in an attempt to separate himself from the white aesthetics and politics of the Beat poets that had, earlier in his writing life, been so influential.

Fueled by a desire to live by Black Nationalist ideals, Baraka made the decision in 1965 to leave his white wife and their children and move to Harlem. There he opened the Black Arts Repertory/Theatre School (BARTS). The mission of BARTS was twofold: 1) to establish a repertory theatre responsive to the needs of the largely African American borough, and 2) to build a school that could train a new generation of black artists. BARTS attracted many people from Harlem's young and talented crowd, including Sun Ra, Albert Ayler, and Sonia Sanchez. It also served as a model and inspiration for other community-based African American theatres throughout the U.S.¹⁰ Such was the influence and revolutionary potential of BARTS that the FBI kept a close watch on its operations, even sending some federal informers to observe early meetings.¹¹ While BARTS closed a few months short of its one year anniversary, its establishment helped mark the beginning of the Black Arts Movement and Baraka's ascendancy as one of its foremost theorists and practitioners.

After BARTS closed in 1965, Baraka moved to Newark, New Jersey. Two years later he married the poet Sylvia Robinson (now known as Amina Baraka). It was also in 1967, after a visit with the influential Africanist Maulana Karenga, that Baraka decided to change his name. Karenga is best known for creating the holiday

¹⁰ "Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School." *F.B. Eyes. Digital Archive.*

¹¹ Ibid.

Kwanzaa, and for the pan-African philosophy of Kawaïda (“normal” in Swahili) that he developed and continues to promote. Baraka's visit with Karenga came at the height of his Black Nationalist self-identification, when he was trying to extricate himself fully from a white culture he saw as corrupt and destructive. LeRoi Jones became Amiri (derivation of Amear, “prince”) Baraka (“Blessing, in the sense of divine favor”). In the years that followed, Baraka became increasingly involved in pan-African movements throughout the U.S. and globally, developing organizations that worked to form black nationality. In 1968 he founded the Black Community Development and Defense Organization, and later held leadership roles in the National Black Political Assembly and the Congress of African People.¹² Baraka's plays during this time reflected his personal embrace of black nationalism. Most notable is his 1967 play *Slave Ship*, a grueling and unflinching dramatic pageant detailing the horrors of the middle passage. While he might best be known for the ways in which his work developed theories of black aesthetics in the 1960s, in the mid-1970s Baraka began to distance himself from Black Nationalism, feeling a need to broaden the focus of his politics and his art to acknowledge how class contributes to racial oppression and the maintenance of white supremacy.¹³ In these years Baraka embraced a Marxism that opposed U.S. imperialism and was supportive of liberation movements seizing formerly colonial sites in the Global South.

Baraka continued to be a force in African American writing, social thought, and politics through his death in January 2014. He was not only a poet and playwright of note, but also a well-respected music critic and a committed, sometimes fiery, public intellectual. Controversy often surrounded Baraka in the last decades of his life, as when, in 2002 as poet-laureate of New Jersey, he wrote the poem “Somebody Blew Up America.” Some interpreted the poem as claiming that U.S. public officials and Israeli intelligence knew of the September 11th terrorist attacks ahead of time. Public outrage over the poem reached such a fever pitch that the Governor of New Jersey took action to abolish the position of poet-laureate altogether. The public controversy

¹² Magda Romanska, “Amiri Baraka,” *Encyclopedia of African American History*, Paul Finkelman, Chief Ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) 134-36.

¹³ Maurice A. Lee, *The Aesthetics of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka: The Rebel Poet* (Valencia, Spain: Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans, 2004) 12. Print.

surrounding this poem can be seen as a continuation of Baraka's boundary-crossing practice that sought to ignite revolutionary action in audiences. The legacy Baraka left behind is a rich and complicated one, marked by divergent critical opinion about his often incendiary, always powerful work. That work is part of a lineage that inspires new generations of African American writers to voice their tenuous relationship to a nation still characterized by the same willful ignorance, the same startling violence, that birthed *Dutchman* fifty years ago.

Adrienne Kennedy

As a woman, and as a playwright who sought to tell stories on stage in a language that complicated and even eschewed the naturalist style of many of her peers, Adrienne Kennedy was often located on the fringes of the Black Arts Movement. This despite the fact that many of her plays take up issues germane to the movement while also displaying a commitment to one of its central tenets: that ethics and aesthetics are tightly woven together. Indeed, much of Kennedy's surreal, fragmented, and dense writing asks the kinds of questions that Larry Neal, in this formative 1968 essay in *The Drama Review*, identified as central to the Black Arts Movement: “[W]hose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?”¹⁴ Neal's question about truth, and his concomitant query about vision, occupy much of Kennedy's impressive *oeuvre*. Kennedy's plays explore issues of race and kinship, gender and history in structurally adventurous ways, displaying an expressionistic interest in the ways that racism warps self-image and psyche. What separated Kennedy from the Black Arts Movement was that she insisted on asking Neal's questions from the point of view of women, providing a sort of corrective to works (like Baraka's) that embraced the masculinist, occasionally chauvinist, and decidedly hetero-normative bent of the movement's Black Nationalist-infused philosophy. Kennedy chose to tell these stories about women in an experimental way, utilizing a syncretic dramaturgical style that borrowed from

¹⁴ Neal 30.

and substantially developed the tactics of the European avant-garde. In this way Kennedy, too, was a revolutionary in form and content.

Kennedy was born on September 13, 1931 in Pittsburgh to teacher Etta Hawkins and social worker Wallace Hawkins. Kennedy's growing up years in Cleveland were marked by a diversity of geographic, artistic, and political influences that would later resonate in her experimental works. In her essay for Penumbra's production of Kennedy's play *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, Penumbra Director of Inquiry Stephanie Lein Walseth details the contradictions at the heart of Kennedy's family history and early life:

[she lived] in the industrial North of Pittsburgh and Cleveland, but [had] deep roots in the rural South, only one generation removed from Montezuma, Georgia; [she had] both black and white ancestry; and a passionate curiosity about both British royalty and African revolutionaries. While [Kennedy] was steeped in the aura of organizations like the NAACP, which her family worked with and for, she was simultaneously surrounded by white families of Jewish, Polish, and Italian descent in her childhood neighborhood and school.¹⁵

As a child Kennedy had a capacious imagination, inserting herself into the glittery (all white) Hollywood films she saw with her mother, and writing dramatic scenes about her family inspired by the first play she ever saw, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. It was her mother and father that instilled in Kennedy a fascination for storytelling. As Kennedy told fellow playwright Suzan-Lori Parks in a 1996 interview: "[My mother] just always talked to me. She would tell me things that happened to her...her dreams, her past...it's like the monologues in my plays, it really is. Because her stories were loaded with imagery and tragedy, darkness and sarcasm and humor...and my father always gave speeches about the cause, the Negro cause."¹⁶ Kennedy's love of her mother's tales and her father's speeches complemented her insatiable appetite for books, and in

¹⁵ Stephanie Lein Walseth, "Fragments, Refractions, Dreams, and Visions: Remembering America's Racialized History in *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*," (Minneapolis, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, 2010).

¹⁶ Suzan-Lori Parks, "Interview: Adrienne Kennedy by Suzan-Lori Parks," *BOMB*, Winter 1996: 54, *BOMB Magazine Online*, 29 Jan 2016 <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1929/adrienne-kennedy>>.

interviews today she still credits her parents and novels like *Jane Eyre* and *The Secret Garden* with galvanizing her interest in stories. “I’m genuinely fascinated and I will always be—by that pool of stories I heard when I was growing up,” she told Parks.

In 1949 Kennedy began attending Ohio State University, where she majored in elementary education and experienced racial hostility from her fellow students. In an interview, Kennedy said of her time at college: “I felt that the white world at Ohio State was against me. Totally. And the person who saved me was my husband to be.”¹⁷ That man was Joseph Kennedy, whom she married in 1953. After graduation Kennedy moved with Joseph to New York, where he was pursuing a PhD at Columbia University. During her time in the city Kennedy had two children while also beginning to write in earnest. Writing had always been a part of Kennedy's life, but something about the architecture of New York and the inspiring people she met there pushed her to make writing a priority. In an interview for American Repertory Theatre, Kennedy commented on her years in the city:

...I would stay up all night long and write. I had circles under my eyes. People laughed at me—
I'm still kind of bitter about that. People thought it was funny that this little housewife, the wife
of a successful student, wanted to be a writer. People would say, “Can you come to the park
with us?” And I'd say, “No, I can't come to the park; I'm working on my novel.”¹⁸

While she faced rejection from potential publishers, Joseph continued to support Kennedy's efforts. “He never laughed at me,” Kennedy said in an interview, “and he read every word I wrote.”¹⁹

It's not a stretch to read into Kennedy's plays a certain amount of autobiography. As she claimed in a 1977 article in *Drama Review*: “autobiographical work is the only thing that interests me.”²⁰ Indeed, throughout her career Kennedy has used playwriting as a way to examine her past and understand her present, describing writing as “an outlet for inner, psychological confusion and questions stemming from childhood. I don't know

¹⁷ Ryan McKittrick, “An Interview with Adrienne Kennedy,” *American Repertory Theater*, 7 Jan 2016, <<http://americanrepertorytheater.org/inside/articles/aftershock>>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Adrienne Kennedy, “Growth of Images,” *Drama Review* 21 (Dec. 1977): 41.

any other way. It's really figuring out the 'why' of things."²¹ In addition to her lived experience, Kennedy also draws inspiration for her plays from a wide set of influences from Greek tragedies to the poetry of Federico García Lorca. As a child Kennedy's mother frequently took her to the movies, and the narrative style of cinema—its masterful use of suspense, in particular—coupled with the opaque yet sparking mystique of white stars like Bette Davis, captured her imagination and found their way into her later plays, most notably her 1976 play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*. Throughout her career Kennedy has drawn on a startling constellation of influences and inspirations to create theatrical events of poetic power and force. Her work asks searching questions about the effects of racism on black psyches, and yet denies and even frustrates easy readings through its complexity and fragmented lyricism.

Kennedy's first play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, serves as a perfect encapsulation of the revolutionary potential of this experimental and layered dramaturgy. The play's critically-acclaimed 1964 production put Kennedy on the map as an innovative dramatist pushing the avant-garde forward and developing the techniques of the (mostly white) "downtown" New York experimental theatre scene. The play won an Obie Award for "Distinguished Plays" that year, sharing the honor with Baraka's *Dutchman*, which won the Obie for "Best New American Play." The emotional terrain that Kennedy explores in *Funnyhouse* is, in many ways, similar to the ground covered in *The Owl Answers*, written just a year later. Like *The Owl Answers*, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* explores the psyche of a young, mixed-race woman, Sarah, as she is torn between the two poles of her racial identity: her white mother (whom she worships) and her black father (whom she despises). To dramatize the struggle between whiteness and blackness that consumes Sarah, Kennedy chooses to divide the dueling facets of the protagonist's identity into different characters: the Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba. Through a collection of scenes that flow together to form a phantasmagoric nightmare world, Kennedy deftly blurs the lines between madness and sanity, past and future, dreaming and

²¹ Errol Hill and James Vernon Hatch, eds., *A History of African American Theatre*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 389.

consciousness. Like SHE in *The Owl Answers*, Sarah struggles to define herself apart from the sickening ideologies that mutilate her very identity.

Kennedy has received critical acclaim, and her plays have prompted a substantial body of scholarly work examining the import of her experimental dramaturgy and position within the ever-changing canon of African American theatre. The recipient of a 2008 Obie Award for lifetime achievement, Kennedy has won numerous accolades and grants, and has taught theatre and playwriting at such schools as Yale, Princeton, Brown, Berkeley, and Harvard. In 1995-96 New York City's Signature Theatre Company produced an entire season of Kennedy's work. Despite a few recent revivals, however, Kennedy's plays are rarely staged in the professional theatre, due partly to their ambitious stagecraft and their refusal to play by the rules of traditional dramaturgy. They are, however, taught regularly in University theatre and drama departments, inspiring young writers to cross borders and push limits. As Suzan-Lori Parks once described it to Kennedy: "A person who's new to theater can read your work and think: I can do anything I want. That's what your plays did for me. I can do with theater what I think needs to be done—it's liberating."²² Kennedy's playwriting is liberatory because it has shown generations of young African American writers like Suzan-Lori Parks that the theatre, so often elitist and conservative, desperately needs their voices. She has shown generations of black students that they can change patterns of representation, that they can shift things with stories. And in this sense, then, Kennedy's work is evidence of the Black Arts Movement's profound claim that aesthetics and ethics are deeply woven together, that how we write about black pain, about black experience, is directly tied to how we respond to difference—racial and otherwise—as we live in the world.

²² Suzan-Lori Parks, "Interview: Adrienne Kennedy by Suzan-Lori Parks," *BOMB*, Winter 1996: 54, *BOMB Magazine Online*, 29 Jan 2016 <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1929/adrienne-kennedy>>.

The Black Arts Movement: Forging a Black Aesthetic

Both *Dutchman* and *The Owl Answers* can be seen as early salvos of the Black Arts Movement, which continued to develop well into the 1970s. Baraka is widely regarded as one of the leaders of the movement, while Kennedy occupied a more ambivalent position, due partly to her gender and partly to the dramaturgical and stylistic risks she took in her experimental, lyrical, fragmented works. Regardless of these varying positions, Baraka and Kennedy's work was central to the development of the Black Arts Movement and an understanding of the movement's main goals and practices in turn help us explore *Dutchman* and *The Owl Answers* today.

The Black Arts Movement arose out of an uncertain and fraught moment in the U.S. Civil Rights movement. The first half of the 1960s had seen the inspiring marches on Washington, D.C. and Montgomery, Alabama, and a series of legislative successes (Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965) that seemed to validate the non-violent approach advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other movement leaders. In 1964, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam and joined the broader Civil Rights Movement, challenging the established black leadership on their cooperative attitude in dealing with white political power. X advocated, instead, for self-defense and for the philosophy of Black Nationalism, which included a call for African American economic self-sufficiency, pride, and separatism. Riots in Harlem, Philadelphia, and other cities that year, plus the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, led to confusion and disruption within a movement that only a few years earlier seemed on the verge of confident success.

It was out of this ideological field, charged by the tension between non-violent and Black Nationalist approaches, that the Black Arts Movement arose. Described by Larry Neal as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,”²³ the Black Arts Movement committed to using art to develop a sense of self within black America outside white culture's violent mandates. As Neal writes: “The Black Arts and the Black Power Concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts

²³ Neal 29.

are nationalistic. One of politics; the other with the art of politics.”²⁴ Thus, the Black Arts Movement was predicated on a deep sense of the interconnection between aesthetics and ethics. This meant that artists must see themselves as activists and teachers, and that art must “awaken radical consciousness, in individuals and establish nationalism in the black community.”²⁵

Artists of the movement saw two Americas – white and black – and understood it as their responsibility to “speak to the spiritual needs of Black people.”²⁶ In this vein, these artists sought to establish a particular black aesthetic that would confront the self-hatred bred by a white supremacist system while also working toward black self-actualization outside of white culture's oppressive frameworks of individual and collective selfhood. Western aesthetics (read: *white* aesthetics) were dead to the Black Arts Movement, and needed either to be variously revolutionized, destroyed, or ignored altogether. Neal writes: “It is the opinion of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure.”²⁷ Finding a new structure meant denying white culture as the arbiter of aesthetic value of artistic success. As Lou Bellamy writes in his 1977 paper about Amiri Baraka: “The self-determination that the black aesthetic...demands of black artists is a fundamental step in freeing black writing from the stereotypical suppositions with which white critics have too often burdened black writing. With this freedom as his artistic birthright, the black writer is much more likely to create in terms of what is instead of what appeals.”²⁸

A black aesthetic, then, was concerned with telling the truth, for revealing what “is.” And for dramatists of the movement, this meant using the artifice of the stage to reveal reality as it was lived by black Americans day in and day out. Baraka, in his influential manifesto, *The Revolutionary Theatre*, writes: “We will talk about

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jaqueline E. Lawton, *The Black Arts Movement: A Spotlight on Black Theatre Companies and Black Female Playwrights* (Minneapolis, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, 2015) n.p.

²⁶ Neal 29.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Lou Bellamy, *Imamu Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones): His Contribution to the Black Aesthetic*, un-published essay, 1977, 15.

the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world, will be our art...The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world.”²⁹ For Baraka, the black aesthetic grew out of a specific black experience, and in this sense eschewed the tendency toward universalism that many white critics had praised in previous work by African Americans. In his paper on Baraka, Bellamy writes that the artists of the movement constantly walked a shifting line between universality, the box into which white culture had historically relegated black writers, and a commitment to political specificity, which many saw as a death knell to any sort of creativity or artistry. Baraka had little interest in this dichotomy, and worked in his poetry, prose, and plays to build a black aesthetic operating on a different level from the aesthetic tradition of “universalism.” Kennedy, in her own right, also worked against universalism, deploying a diverse field of dramaturgical strategies to create dramas of physiological complexity and emotional specificity. Her work eludes simple categorization, for it is not solely “surreal,” or “expressionistic,” or even “feminist.” Rather, as a dramatist Kennedy is committed to a syncretism that hopes to embrace complex, sometimes contradictory, human experiences.

In working to establish a black aesthetic, the artists of the movement also sought to move away from white, western conceptions of individualism. Fueled by the conviction that black art must be in dialogue with black communities, these artists tried instead to establish a more collective, unified, and positive self-conception of blackness through their work. As Bellamy insightfully points out, however, this was a fraught subject for many African Americans because of the way white America had deployed individualism as a sort of aspiration for “exceptional” black people. Bellamy writes:

If Western culture has robbed black people as a whole of dignity and opportunity—and it has—it has also placed before the exceptional black the carrot of “individual achievement.” Since, historically, escape from the general black condition was only possible through this avenue, the

²⁹ LeRoi Jones, “The Revolutionary Theatre,” *Liberator*, 5 (1965): 4-6.

emotional attachment to the dream of such an escape dies hard. To writers in the Black Arts

Movement, it is a bitter carrot and a nightmare.³⁰

Regardless of the challenges posed by this “bitter carrot,” the artists of the Black Arts Movement continued to ground their work within the hopes and concerns of the specific black American communities of which they were a part.

As has been noted elsewhere in this essay, Baraka is widely viewed as one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, and many of his writings became central documents that imagined what a black aesthetic could, and should, be. For Baraka, the revolutionary theatre must,

[S]tagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness ... but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments. People must be taught to trust the true scientists (knowers, diggers, oddballs) and that the holiness of life is the constant possibility of widening the consciousness. And they must be inclined to strike back against *any* agency that attempts to prevent this widening.³¹

For Baraka, one of the purposes of a black aesthetic was to teach African Americans to value their blackness. Audiences must feel spurred to revolt against any oppression from the west that would seek to categorize or destroy their blackness. In Baraka's writing, the key catalysts for the formation of a radical sense of blackness within audiences are rage and anger. “Our theatre,” he writes,

will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims, if they are blood brothers. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that the pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and

³⁰ Bellamy 28.

³¹ LeRoi Jones, *The Revolutionary Theatre*, 4-6

they find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught.³²

In *Dutchman* we finally witness Clay, whom Baraka called a victim not a hero,³³ strike back against Lula's goading attempts to close his consciousness, to define him as a cowardly, unmanly "Uncle Tom." Clay warns all of white America against teaching black America "rationalism" because black people will understand it and apply it to their lives, carrying out the only rational response to an irrational situation: "They'll murder you, and have very rational explanations. Very much like your own. They'll cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities so the flesh can fall away from your bones, in sanitary isolation."³⁴ Thrumming beneath Clay's heated speech is an indictment of the western philosophical and aesthetic practice that rationalized slavery and segregation. Included in this western tradition are the individuals who make up the plural character THEY in *The Owl Answers*: Anne Boleyn, Shakespeare, Chaucer, and William the Conqueror. Throughout the play THEY seek to define mixed-race SHE as a bastard. If THEY were to allow SHE to be both black *and* the daughter of an important, white man—if THEY were to legitimate SHE—then the white history and culture that THEY uphold and represent would be rendered contaminated, would be "mongrelized." THEY works hard, then, to prevent the widening of SHE's black consciousness.

Interested in the intersections between race and consciousness, Kennedy and Baraka explore the tension between madness and sanity in their plays. Both *The Owl Answers* and *Dutchman* suggest that to be black in America is to be made insane by a mad system masquerading as a sane society. In different ways their work engages with the main tenets of the Black Arts Movement to interrogate this insanity, and to posit a new, black "sanity" drawn directly from lived experience. The way that Clay and SHE find and define this "sanity" for themselves, however, is not easy. SHE fully inhabits "Owldom" by the end of Kennedy's play, but her journey to this final transformational moment is fraught and her history is anything but clear by the conclusion of the

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman*, Production Script (Minneapolis, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, 2015) 29.

dramatic action. Clay, Baraka's "victim," is killed after telling the truth of his experience, a certainly ambivalent ending. The questions posed by these two revolutionary playwrights still haunt us today as we grapple with the insane deaths of young black men at the hands of the police. What does revolution look like now, and what might a black aesthetic look like today as we are still debating whether #blacklivesmatter? These are the important questions these two short plays ask us.

Crossing Racial Borders: The Anxiety of Racial "Mixing"

As they "confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist west,"³⁵ both Baraka and Kennedy illuminate the lines of race, gender, and class that society continually declares impermeable. How, they ask, are these lines constructed to privilege some and oppress others? What, they ask, happens when we cross these lines? And how do these consequences differ depending on who you are? Of particular interest to both Kennedy and Baraka are relationships that cross the uneasy lines that divide white femininity and black masculinity. *Dutchman* and *The Owl Answers*, each in their own way, examine the central taboo of racial "mixing" (or "miscegenation"), which has served as an anxiety for white America since slaves were first brought to the Virginia colony in 1619. The word miscegenation was coined in 1863 by the abolitionist authors of a pamphlet titled: "Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro." A Latin portmanteau of *miscere* ("to mix") and *genus* ("race"), miscegenation soon replaced "amalgamation" as the popular term referring to romantic, sexual, and marriage relationships between two individuals of different races. Anti-miscegenation sentiment and legislation was fueled by spurious racial science made popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, which claimed the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon "race" and preached against its "mongrelization." This "science" collaborated with racist theological interpretations of the Bible to provide a seemingly-solid intellectual basis for slavery, and later, Jim Crow legislation.

³⁵ Neal 29.

In the early 20th century many southern states adopted the “one drop rule,” meant to assuage the anxiety miscegenation elicited. These laws, which built on extant white supremacist thought and practice, “declared that a mixed race person with 'one black ancestor' or 'one drop of black blood' should be categorized/viewed/treated as black.”³⁶ This rule was made popular in the Antebellum south as a way to control the mixed-race offspring of white masters and their slaves. During slavery, all white masters had sexual access to black female slaves, as these women were considered property and had no legal recourse. The “mulatto” children that resulted from these unions were often declared black, and thus, slaves. The “one drop rule” allowed antebellum society to subjugate mulatto people, whose ambivalent racial position directly challenged dominant ideas of white superiority and threatened economic structures built on theories of black inferiority. Furthermore, the “one drop rule” served not only to buttress the fantasy of white superiority, but also to manage potential insurrection. As Shari Dworkin and Kari Lerum write,

Indeed, the courts have ebbed and flowed on the definition of 'black' and firmed up the definition of black when they experienced fears of slave rebellions. In fact, without fears of slave rebellions, mulattos were set free from the institution of slavery in some instances. However, when fears emerged that slaves might rebel, support faded for defining mulattos as 'in between black and white' and support rose to define mulattos as black.³⁷

If antebellum society tightly controlled the open secret of mulatto children, it was even fiercer in its protection of white female purity. Indeed, the entire calculus of slavery and white supremacy was predicated on a continued image of whiteness as pure and unsullied, gleaming and righteous in contrast to filthy, backwards, predatory blackness. White society was obsessed with the stereotype of the black man's craving of the white woman. White feminine purity kept alive the illusion of a generalized white superiority, while also providing another way of subjugating black masculinity.

³⁶ Shari Dworkin and Kari Lerum, “Race, Sexuality, and the 'One Drop Rule': More Thoughts about Interracial Couples and Marriage,” *The Society Pages*, 6 Jan 2016 <<http://thesocietypages.org/sexuality>>.

³⁷ Dworkin and Lerum, <<http://thesocietypages.org/sexuality>>.

It was partly this anxiety over racial purity that led to the creation of the Ku Klux Klan, a vigilante group that terrorized African American communities in the South for a majority of the 20th Century. The Klan was started by a group of bored, restless Confederate veterans from Pulaski, Tennessee on Christmas Eve 1865. Fueled by nostalgia for the Antebellum past and a deep fury over Southern defeat in the Civil War, the first incarnation of the Klan grew to become a loosely-organized network of vigilantes. According to historian Eric Foner, the first Klan's generalized goals were to “reestablish control of the black labor force, and restore racial subordination in every aspect of Southern life.”³⁸ Klan activity in the years 1866-1870 included violence against freed slaves and their families, the kidnapping and murder of black political, civic, and religious leaders, suppression of black voting, and intimidation of southern Republicans supportive of freedmen's suffrage. By 1870, however, the Klan had been deemed a terrorist organization, and in the years that followed the group became slowly defunct.

In 1915 the Klan experienced a rebirth, aided in part by D.W. Griffith's monumental film “Birth of a Nation,” as well as the death of a young woman named Mary Phagen in April of that year. Phagen was found raped and murdered in the basement of the Atlanta pencil factory where she worked. Leo M. Frank, a Jewish man who owned the company where Phagen worked was found guilty of the crime and sentenced to death on inconsistent and biased evidence. However, Georgia's governor commuted Frank's death sentence to life in prison, which enraged a large, anti-Semitic portion of Georgia's population. These men, calling themselves the Knights of Mary Phagan, kidnapped Ford from prison and lynched him on August 16, 1915. The Klan's rebirth was finalized when, three months later, Atlanta doctor William J. Simmons burned a large cross at Stone Mountain, Georgia. This image has come to symbolize the KKK's particularly insidious brand of terrorism and hate.

³⁸ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1988) 425-26.

Melding the racism of the Klan's earlier incarnation with new anger over increased urbanization and immigration, the second Klan focused on issues germane to a rapidly changing U.S. Much of its ideology was forged in response to the great migration of rural blacks to industrial cities in both the north and south in the early 20th century. In addition to guarding their jobs and their livelihoods from foreigners and African Americans, members of the Klan also saw themselves as safeguards of the home and the "white womanhood" of their wives. The second KKK slowly broadened its ideological horizon and became a movement characterized by the suffix "anti": anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-communist, anti-immigrant. Klan discourse, fueled by increased immigration and the threat of war in Europe, became extremely nativistic, obsessed with preserving and defending an idealized "American" morality under attack from the questionable influence of "hyphenated" foreigners. The KKK still exists in pockets of the U.S. today, fueled in no small part by the same fear of racial "mixing" that ignited the group a century ago.

The Klan was certainly not the only American response to a generalized anxiety about the sanctity of white femininity and the possibility of miscegenation. As discussed above, anti-miscegenation laws were passed in many states in the early 20th Century, a legislative move that attempted to control interracial relationships. Marriage, then, became a battle ground for those seeking to sustain white supremacy. As Susan Altman writes in the *Encyclopedia of African-American Heritage*, "Miscegenation was about *marriage* as well as sex, since sexual relationships were legitimized *by marriage*" (italics mine).³⁹ In their 1883 decision *Pace vs. Alabama*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that criminalizing interracial sex (a practice on the books in many states) did not violate the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause, since whites and non-whites were punished equally under Alabama's anti-miscegenation legislation. This decision was not overturned until 1967, with the court's ruling on *Loving vs. Virginia*, a case brought by Mildred and Richard Loving. The Lovings had been sentenced to a year in prison since their marriage violated the state's Racial Integrity Act of 1924 prohibiting interracial marriage. In 1967 sixteen

³⁹ "Miscegenation, a Story of Racial Intimacy," *African American Registry*, 6 Jan 2015, <http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/miscegenation-story-racial-intimacy>

states had passed such anti-miscegenation legislation, which often declared interracial marital sex a felony, and interracial extramarital sex a misdemeanor. The court's historical decision reversed *Pace vs. Alabama*, and ruled that all legislation banning interracial marriage was unconstitutional. In his unanimous opinion, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote:

There is patently no legitimate overriding purpose independent of invidious racial discrimination which justifies this classification. The fact that Virginia prohibits only interracial marriages involving white persons demonstrates that the racial classifications must stand on their own justification, as measures designed to maintain White Supremacy.⁴⁰

The Owl Answers and *Dutchman* premiered before the *Loving vs. Virginia* decision, and were addressing an America (white *and* black) still highly attuned to the fraught possibilities and the dangerous consequences of interracial relationships in Jim Crow America. In particular, this audience was fully aware of the particularly charged pairing of a white woman and a black man. For, if white-supremacy rested on the preservation of white femininity, it gained security through the policing and suppression of black masculinity. As numerous news stories attested, an accusation of rape leveled at a black man by a white woman was surely a death sentence. Consequences for crossing the color line were severe, and were carried out in formal and informal ways. Formally, individuals could face prison time, especially after the passage of anti-miscegenation laws in the early 20th century. Informally, white individuals could be ostracized from communities and their families. Black men were routinely the victims of vigilante violence, commonly taking the form of lynchings, which were often public affairs carried out by the Ku Klux Klan. Punishment for miscegenation was not meted out equally, and black men and women endured the worst penalties, which included harassment, violence and, often, death.

Dutchman continues to be so controversial in part because it flips the usual equation, showing a white woman as predator and a black man as victim. Though Lula destroys Clay by the end of the play, she receives no

⁴⁰ Chief Justice C.J. Warren, "Opinion," *Legal Information Institute Online*, n.d., Cornell University Law School, 2 Feb 2016, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/388/1#writing-USSC_CR_0388_0001_ZO>.

punishment, and indeed, seems poised to strike again at the close of the action. While Lula and Clay are more than just “predator” and “victim,” they nevertheless can be read as allegorical, as Baraka deliberately plays on the charged taboo of a black man sleeping with a white woman to communicate his complicated message about black rage and survival. About *Dutchman's* sexual politics Larry Neal has this to say:

Symbolically, and in fact, the relationship between Clay (Black America) and Lula (White America) is rooted in the historical castration of black manhood. And in the twisted psyche of white America, the Black man is both an object of love and hate. Analogous attitudes exist in most Black Americans, but for decidedly different reasons. Clay is doomed when he allows himself to participate in Lula's 'fantasy' in the first place. It is the fantasy to which Franz Fanon alludes in *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Masks*: the native's belief that he can acquire the oppressor's power by acquiring his symbols, one of which is the white woman.

When Clay finally digs himself it is too late.⁴¹

Here, Neal identifies the allegorical nature of Baraka's play, and the way it tells a story of two individuals while also weaving a larger narrative about two Americas. There is Lula, who stands in for white America – rapacious and cocksure. Neal describes her as a “white bitch-goddess.”⁴² From the moment she enters the subway car Lula knows she has the power, fully aware of how much a potential romantic relationship with a white woman will cost Clay as a black man. Like white America, however, Lula's predation betrays a desire for and unease with blackness, a fear from which her final, murderous action arises.

Baraka has described Clay, in turn, as a “victim,” and here again the character serves a microcosmic and macrocosmic purpose. Clay is a victim of the “fantasy” Neal identifies above, a fantasy that the game is fair and the deck unstacked. Baraka sets Clay up as a foil to Lula. He is a sanguine, younger man who seems to drift, rather than walk, into his relationship with her. At the beginning of the play his aimlessness, his willingness to go

⁴¹ Neal 34.

⁴² Ibid.

along for the ride suggests the actions of an unformed young man. However, this impression is upended by Clay's blistering final monologue, which demonstrates in no uncertain terms that he knows how to play the game. He's been playing it his whole life. He and Lula, though, have a different set of rules. Earlier in the play Lula tells Clay, "I lie a lot. It helps me control the world."⁴³ Both Lula and Clay are united in their deceptions, though their lies are not equal. Lula lies to cover up the anxious truth of her position in white America, an identity built on the bodies of men like Clay. And Clay lies to survive, just like the singers and poets he invokes in his final jet of honesty.

Lula knows what they are doing is dangerous, but her whiteness shields her from any of its consequences. "Eating apples together is always the first step" she tells Clay in a cheeky reference to the Biblical account of "original sin."⁴⁴ This reference casts Lula and Clay's relationship as transgressive and allegorical. Like Adam and Eve, they are both complicit; both gain new knowledge they didn't have before. But as Neal points out, by the time Clay gets wise, it is too late.⁴⁵ Lula, by the end of the play, can escape history by virtue of her whiteness (which must destroy Clay's blackness). But it's a different story for Clay, who daily shapes his identity to take into account how he is sexualized and surveilled by the society around him. Lula expresses the fantasy of a black and white relationship free from the specifics of history, a universal relationship like the kind the Black Arts Movement eschewed. "[W]e'll pretend the people cannot see you," she tells Clay, "That is, the citizens. And that you are free of your own history. And I am free of my own history."⁴⁶ In *Dutchman*, Baraka shows us the hard reality behind this dream.

If race is at the heart of *Dutchman's* conflict, so too is gender. As Lula says:

LULA: ...we'll sit and talk endlessly, endlessly.

CLAY: About what?

⁴³ Jones, *Dutchman*, 6.

⁴⁴ Jones, *Dutchman*, 8.

⁴⁵ Neal 34.

⁴⁶ Jones, *Dutchman*, 17.

LULA: About what? About your manhood, what do you think? What do you think we've been talking about all this time?⁴⁷

Society defines black manhood in relation to white femininity, and because of this, it is Clay's understanding of himself as a black man that is at stake in *Dutchman*. Frustrated that Clay won't dance to the ridiculous blues song she starts to sing on the train, Lula berates him, calling him a "black bastard," a "liver-lipped white man," and a "would-be Christian." "You ain't no nigger," she tells him, "you're just a dirty white man."⁴⁸ Her barbs become increasingly pointed as Clay tells her to shut up: "You're afraid of white people. And your father was. Uncle Tom Big Lip!"⁴⁹ Clay explodes here, explicating a whole subterranean syntax of black pain and anger that has remained steadily invisible to Lula's white sensibility. He puts forth a vision of art as a channel for rage: "If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music."⁵⁰ Lula is right, Clay does inhabit an Uncle Tom-style masculinity, but she is wrong in that he doesn't stay quiet because of fear, he stays quiet because to speak would mean the destruction of the world. To fully inhabit his black masculinity would mean murder and rage, precisely those things that white America has for so long claimed were dormant within him, but that white America itself inculcated. Larry Neal writes that *Dutchman* and *The Slave* (another of Baraka's early plays) "present Black men in transition."⁵¹ Clay does indeed go through a transformation of consciousness in *Dutchman*, waking up from the seductive fantasy spun for him by Lula, and into his own sense of black masculinity. He finally is able to articulate the truth of his existence, albeit to an uncaring audience that denies him a true witness.

What Clay has to say about being a black man in America resonates powerfully with Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask":

⁴⁷ Jones, *Dutchman*, 21.

⁴⁸ Jones, *Dutchman*, 26.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Neal 34.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!⁵²

Published nearly seventy years before *Dutchman's* premiere, this poem dramatizes the struggle to which the Black Arts Movement provided a solution. For Dunbar, living as a black person in post-Civil War America meant projecting a veneer of respectability and calm to white culture, a pose of unthinking gratitude that ignored the harsh realities of black life: “torn and bleeding hearts,” “tears,” “sighs.” In the poem Dunbar is essentially referencing the trope of the Sambo, the smilin', laughin', shufflin' black man, uncritically content in his subservient role. But Dunbar's poem has apocalyptic weight, and a resonance with Baraka's work, because it suggests that there is a revolution brewing behind the Sambo's mask that will one day shatter the dreams and illusions of white America. We get a glimpse of this at the end of *Dutchman*, when Clay removes his mask. Lula, recognizing the threat, kills him. And the subway moves ever onwards, as the grinning black conductor enters the car, mask securely in place.

The Owl Answers also deals with transition, showing SHE's messy and incomplete transformation into “owldom.” The story of SHE, like the story of Clay and Lula, is marked by the anxiety of racial mixing, and charts SHE's changing sense of self. Kennedy's play does not record this transformation as the end product of a series

⁵² Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” *Poetry Foundation*, 6 Jan 2016, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173467>>.

of reasonable events structured around the logic of cause and effect. Rather, she structures the play in a way that mirrors the rhythm and flow of the subway: “The scenes should lurch,” she writes in the opening stage directions.⁵³ A subway train is a long string of distinct cars that, despite their uniqueness, travel forward as part of a whole. In some ways, this metaphor can be applied to Kennedy's play, which presents a series of “lurching” scenes that blur into one another, united not only by their disjointed nature, but also by their forward motion. Even though the play's structure relies heavily on repetition and circularity, in performance one can imagine how this jumble of scenes nevertheless moves forward, relentlessly toward the transformational end. And yet, this structure also suggests that the transformation SHE undergoes in terms of her self-image is the product of a long and confusing journey. And what, precisely, characterizes the new identity SHE embraces by the end of the play is left decidedly open-ended and ambiguous.

Several of the characters, most notably the plural presence THEY, demonstrate acute anxiety about SHE's paternity. At the top of the play THEY brand SHE a “bastard.” SHE, the daughter of “GODDAM FATHER who is the RICHEST WHITE MAN IN THE TOWN who is the DEAD WHITE FATHER who is REVEREND PASSMORE,”⁵⁴ is trapped in the Tower of London, and pleads with THEY to release her. Her father has just died and SHE wants to see him buried in St. Paul's chapel. But THEY (the custodians of white culture) won't let her see him. He is white (we know this because the actor is in white-face and wears a wig of long, white hair) and SHE is black. She cannot possibly be his legitimate daughter. SHE must be a bastard. And if SHE is a bastard then that means she is black, and if she is black that means she cannot enter the church and must be subject to the rules and whims of white society as embodied by the plural character THEY. “I am almost white” SHE pleads with Anne Boleyn. But with the absurd logic of the ‘one drop rule’ that is not enough.

⁵³ Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 3.

⁵⁴ Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 6.

A question that runs throughout the play centers on who, exactly, SHE is. Her mother tells her that, because she is the product of a white master and black slave, she is an “owl.”⁵⁵ Owldom, then, can be seen as a mixed race identity, positioned somewhere between white and black. Of course, according to the “one drop rule” discussed above, SHE is considered by the majority culture to be black, even though her father was white. SHE’s dead father confirms this when he tells her, “You are not my ancestor. You are my bastard...Daughter of somebody that cooked for me.”⁵⁶ Her white father will not acknowledge that SHE is his. Most importantly, this means that SHE cannot inherit the belonging and security afforded by white culture. Instead, she must live life as an owl, always asking “Who? Who?”

Funnyhouse of a Negro, Kennedy’s first play, is also concerned with inheritance, focusing on another mixed-race woman—Sarah—who seeks an identity apart from the racial dichotomies presented to her by mainstream society. In an interesting inversion of *The Owl Answers*, Sarah desires to be white like her mother, which partly manifests itself in a desire for the material things of white culture. “It is my dream,” she says, “to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table.”⁵⁷ These are the accouterments of a “white life” - ordered, secure, the product of a known and knowable past. Sarah’s desire to be white also manifests itself dramatically in her divided selves—the Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria, etc.—who inhabit the nightmarish world of *Funnyhouse*. In a theatrical gesture that reverberates with *Dutchman* and Dunbar’s poem above, Kennedy has these characters wear masks with “an alabaster face, the skin drawn tightly over the high cheekbones, great dark eyes that seem gouged out of the head, a high forehead, and full red mouth and a head of frizzy hair.”⁵⁸ These white masks, which echo the minstrel’s make-up, are an emblem of Sarah’s desire to be white like her mother. However, they are only a façade, flimsy covers for Sarah’s real “black” identity suggested

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 8.

⁵⁷ Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (New York: Samuel French, n.d.) 9.

⁵⁸ Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, 6.

by the hair pouring from behind the masks. Victoria and the Duchess are, in some sense, reminiscent of the white individuals who make up the plural character THEY in *The Owl Answers*: Shakespeare, Chaucer, Anne Boleyn. In *The Owl Answers* these characters represent the white culture that declares SHE an illegitimate heir to that which is pure and sacred.

SHE's mixed-race identity, and her struggle with legitimacy in *The Owl Answers*, can be seen in light to the literary trope of the "Tragic Mulatto," popular in 18th and 19th century fiction. In *The Owl Answers*, Kennedy breaks-apart the image of the tragic mulatto, which arose out to the anxieties and legislation about racial mixing outlined above. The character of the tragic mulatto first appeared in "The Quadroons," an 1842 anti-slavery short story written by Unitarian abolitionist and women's rights advocate Lydia Maria Child. The trope continued to be used by authors and commentators well into the 20th century, and its descendants can still be seen in some literary and pop culture characters today. A stock character of Abolitionist literature, the tragic mulatto was usually a woman of mixed race who could pass for white, oftentimes raised in a white household. Her story followed a predictable path. Once her black parentage is inevitably revealed, the mulatto usually experiences some sort of revelation, as she has been previously unaware of this fact. The disclosure of her "true" race (by the logic of the "one drop rule") inevitably leads both groups—black *and* white—to reject the mulatto. Unable to fully inhabit either a black or a white identity in a society distinctly divided by race, the tragic mulatto faces a profound psychic split that causes emotional distress, and often led to suicide. Abolitionist writers like Child used the trope of the tragic mulatto to highlight the central place of sexual exploitation in the system of slavery while generating sympathy in a white reading public by portraying a palatably-black victim.

The tragic mulatto trope was, in fact, an inversion of two other character types—the mammy and the white virgin—that, together, helped to define black and white femininity as both intensely interwoven and distinctly separate. Sociologist Robert W. Pineda-Volk describes how these two tropes were both folded into the tragic mulatto:

In contrast to the mammy, [the tragic mulatto] is portrayed as light-skinned, thin, physically attractive, desirable and sensual. Unlike the white virgin; [the tragic mulatto] is ambitious and is morally suspect, willing to use her sexuality to manipulate men and gain power. She emerges as the “exotic other.” Thus, her presence threatens the extant race and gender hierarchies. Against this backdrop, the mammy – and those characteristics associated with her – comes to represent wholesome goodness, family and religion, peace and contentment – the hearth. The mulatto, on the other hand, represents discontent, temptation, vice, and ultimately, grief: the ingredients of tragedy.⁵⁹

The tragic mulatto, while deployed by abolitionist writers to create (a problematic) sympathy in their white readership, at times also engaged anxieties around racial “mixing,” as she used her white-seeming sexuality to “pollute” “authentic” white bloodlines. Instead of a white femininity that was pure and docile, the tragic mulatto, at times enacted a predatory female sexuality that threatened white, masculine hegemony. Indeed, though abolitionist writers hoped that the tragic mulatto would show white readers the traumatic reality of slavery, as the character solidified into a trope it nevertheless served to secure and promote white supremacy.

As Steven F. Riley writes:

It did this by: Firstly reinforcing the notion of 'white purity' that anyone not 100% 'white' was not white at all; secondly, further denigrating non-whites by implying that they all somehow secretly wished to be white and escape their lot in life; thirdly, effectively isolating mixed race individuals from both the whites they allegedly “wished to be” and the non-whites they wish to allegedly “wish to flee”; and fourthly, It leveled scorn upon those interracial unions that would bring such “hybrids” into the world.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Robert W. Pineda-Volk, “Exploring the 'Tragic Mulatto' Stereotype Through Film History,” 2007, *National Social Science Association*, 7 Jan 2016, <<http://www.nssa.us/journals/2007-28-1/2007-28-1-12.htm>>.

⁶⁰ Steven F. Riley, “Commentary,” 23 Aug 2009, *Mixed Race Studies*, 7 Jan 2016, <<http://www.mixedracestudies.org/?p=454>>.

Some critics have built on the points that Riley articulates above, observing that the trope allowed a largely female, white readership the ability to view the tragic mulatto's fate through the lens of gender, thereby occluding the ways in which race factored into her fictional situations. As Eva Allegra Ramon writes, this allowed white readers to still sympathize without experiencing the uncomfortable recognition that would be required by "confronting a racial ideology that denies the full humanity of nonwhite women."⁶¹ Other critiques suggest that it is not so much the emphasis on gender that caused the trope to be dangerous, but rather the veil of whiteness that abolitionist authors placed over the tragic mulatto. In this sense, white, female readers were not required to sympathize with a racial "other," but rather were spared this anxious position since the tragic mulatto's whiteness was so foregrounded in the narrative. The tragedy of the tragic mulatto, ultimately, was that she could not escape the destiny to which her "one drop" of "Negro blood" condemned her. This, in turn, played on the nervous fantasy of many readers that they, too, had a "drop" of "black blood," and thus would experience the same material and psychic unravelling as the tragic mulatto.

While it would be doing a disservice to the complexity of Kennedy's vision to claim that *The Owl Answers* is entirely focused on the legacy of the tragic mulatto, the play does nevertheless explore the trope's tensions and possibilities through the character of SHE. As the daughter of the "richest white man in town and the woman who cooked for him," SHE is, in many ways, typed as the tragic mulatto. SHE begins the play certain of her white status and secure in her white inheritance. However, THEY immediately brand her a bastard, no matter how convincingly SHE makes her case for her whiteness. In this sense, then, *The Owl Answers* begins where most of the abolitionist stories about the tragic mulatto found their climax: in the revelation of the protagonist/victims "true" identity. *The Owl Answers* is less concerned with this moment than with its reverberations through SHE's psyche.

⁶¹ David Pilgrim, "The Tragic Mulatto Myth," 2012, *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, at Ferris State University, 6 Jan 2016, <<http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/mulatto/>>.

What Kennedy exactly means by “owldom” is unclear and left purposefully open to multiple interpretations. Each production of *The Owl Answers* will understand SHE's final transformation in divergent ways, based partly on the positions of the artistic and production teams. What is thrilling about Kennedy's plays is the capacious spirit of creativity and discovery they encourage in the artists who seek to put them on the stage. Keeping this in mind, then, one interpretation of “owldom” might understand it as a new type of liberatory, mixed-race identity that tries to distance itself from the destructive trope of the tragic mulatto. SHE, like the tragic mulatto, desires to live into the white part of her identity while eschewing the black, an urge that displays itself in her desire to see the body of her dead, white father, who denies her in his life and his death. SHE tries, then, to be Clara Passmore, the quiet and reserved school teacher adopted by a black reverend and his respectable wife. This identity, though, is ill fitting. SHE turns instead to seducing men on the subway, taking them to a Harlem hotel room, where she directs them to become her father and “take her.”⁶² But their transformation never works, something always “happens.”⁶³ Finally, she turns to God the father. In one of the last moments of the play SHE tries to transform herself into the Virgin Mary (pure, white) and her anonymous lover into God. In the Harlem hotel room they rehearse the Immaculate Conception. Their child will be neither black nor white, but something else altogether. But their union does not work. SHE calls out to God, but gets no response. “I call God and the Owl answers.”⁶⁴ In the end SHE becomes the Owl, an identity removed from the conformity and patriarchy of the black Christian church, from the racist and exclusionary culture of white Europe, from the tragic and hybrid mixed-race position forced on her by a white supremacist American society. In contrast to the caged bird (who laughs like SHE's mother), Owldom does offer a sort of freedom. In becoming the Owl, SHE embraces the bastard identity she has been fleeing throughout the play. Like Clay at the end of *Dutchman*, SHE embraces that which white society has scorned. She embraces a new type of 'sanity,' which is the struggle and strength of Owldom.

⁶² Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 14.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Kennedy, *The Owl Answers*, 19.

SHE's final transformation, though, is certainly ambiguous, and the interpretation above is just one of a host of possible approaches to Kennedy's script. One thing is certain: by the end of the play SHE's future happiness is in question. *The Owl Answers*, with expressionistic verve, shows the deleterious effects of internalized racism. It dramatizes another route for black rage apart from the desperate creative expression that Clay references in his final monologue, a direction that seeks to wear fully the mask of white respectability that Paul Lawrence Dunbar laments in his poem. Kennedy's play shows both what happens when an individual wears the mask, and the tough, revolutionary possibility that ignites when it is taken off.

Conclusion

It almost seems a disservice to *The Owl Answers* and *Dutchman* to pin them down in an essay, to box in and subdue their revolutionary ideas and their radically capacious theatricality. Like all plays worth their salt, they are at their best when performed live, when the boundaries between the world as it is, and the world as it could be, are blurred. It is their reliance on the power of live performance to cross borders—in terms of form and content, politics and society—that has ensured the continuing influence of Baraka and Kennedy's work. Both *The Owl Answers* and *Dutchman* signaled revolutions in American theatre. Through his play, and subsequent writings, Baraka sounded a startlingly clear and compelling clarion call for the Black Arts Movement, demonstrating how theatre could incite action and encourage self-definition. He called on his fellow African Americans to value their blackness and to speak loudly against a system built on their silence. Kennedy's plays, too, pushed the envelope in their daring dramaturgy and in their fiercely theatrical vision. Her writing catalyzed both the avant-garde and the Black Arts Movement to develop their aesthetics in tandem with their ethics. And her plays continue to reveal the revolutionary possibility of the stage as a place of working through, of digging up. Both *Dutchman* and *The Owl Answers* were revolutionary in the way they illuminated the boundaries that separate us from ourselves. And their apocalyptic visions urge us to seek out answers anew.

In presenting these two plays together, Penumbra is also putting Baraka and Kennedy's historical moment in dialogue with our own. *Dutchman* and *The Owl Answers* premiered at a time when the tide of the Civil Rights Movement was shifting. Policies of non-violence that had succeeded in the past were questioned, and a new form of resistance suggested. The plays spoke to a segregated America willfully ignorant of the trauma of the past and blind to the realities of its black citizens. Now, the plays are being performed at a time when we are asking anew where we are to go from here. How can we acknowledge the wounds of the past while changing the structures of the present to actualize an equitable future? As we continue to grapple with the insidious fallout of slavery, segregation, and white supremacy, how can we imagine and enact revolution today, in both our art and our politics? How can we continue to cross boundaries, which is another way of asking: how can we continue to make connections across the gaps that all too easily divide us? And what's at stake when we do try to forge such connections? It's these questions that Baraka and Kennedy ask us, as they beckon us to join them in the speeding, apocalyptic subway cars of their revolutionary plays.

WORKS CITED

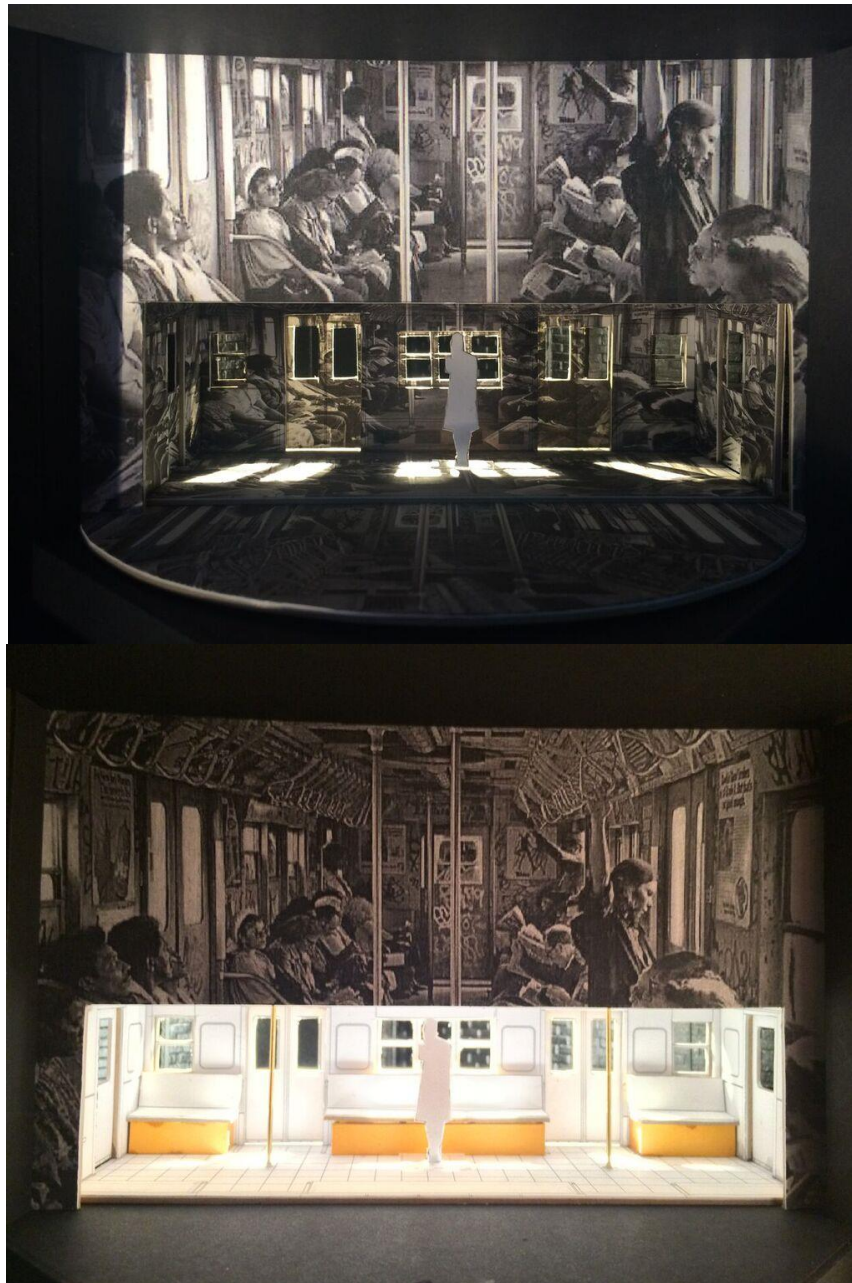
- . "Amiri Baraka." *The Poetry Foundation*. 8 Jan 2016. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/amiri-baraka>.
- . "Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School." *F.B. Eyes. Digital Archive*. 29 Jan 2016. <<http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/fbeyes/theatreschool>>.
- Bellamy, Lou. *Imamu Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones): His Contribution to the Black Aesthetic*. Unpublished essay, 1977. Print.
- Chief Justice C.J. Warren. "Opinion." *Legal Information Institute Online*. n.d. Cornell University Law School. 2 Feb 2016. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/388/1#writing-USSC_CR_0388_0001_ZO>.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Random House, 2015. Print.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. "We Wear the Mask." *Poetry Foundation*. 6 Jan 2016. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173467>>.
- Dworkin, Shari and Kari Lerum. "Race, Sexuality, and the 'One Drop Rule': More Thoughts about Interracial Couples and Marriage." *The Society Pages*. 6 Jan 2016. <<http://thesocietypages.org/sexuality>>.
- Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1988. Print.
- Hill, Errol and James Vernon Hatch, eds. *A History of African American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.
- Jones, LeRoi. "The Revolutionary Theatre." *Liberator* 5 (1965). 4-6. Print.
- Jones, LeRoi. *Dutchman: Production Script*. Minneapolis, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company. 2016. Print.
- Kennedy, Adrienne. "Growth of Images." *The Drama Review: TDR*. 21 (Dec. 1977): 41. Print.
- Kennedy, Adrienne. *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. New York: Samuel French, n.d. Print.
- Kennedy, Adrienne. *The Owl Answers: Production Script*. Minneapolis, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company. 2016. Print.
- Lawton, Jaqueline E. *The Black Arts Movement: A Spotlight on Black Theatre Companies and Black Female Playwrights*. Minneapolis, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, 2015. Print.
- Lee, Maurice A. *The Aesthetics of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka: The Rebel Poet*. Valencia, Spain: Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans, 2004. Print.
- Lein Walseth, Stephanie. "Fragments, Refractions, Dreams, and Visions: Remembering America's Racialized History in *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*." Minneapolis, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company. 2010. Print.

- McKittrick, Ryan. "An interview with Adrienne Kennedy." *American Repertory Theater*. 7 Jan 2016. <<http://americanrepertorytheater.org/inside/articles/aftershock>>.
- Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review: TDR*. 12.4 (Summer 1968): 28-39. Print.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. "Adrienne Kennedy by Suzan-Lori Parks," *BOMB Magazine Online*, Winter 1996: 54. 29 Jan 2016. <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1929/adrienne-kennedy>>.
- Pilgrim, David. "The Tragic Mulatto Myth." 2012. *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University*. 6 Jan 2016. <<http://www.ferris.edu/JIMCROW/mulatto/>>.
- Pineda-Volk, Robert W. "Exploring the 'Tragic Mulatto' Stereotype Through Film History." *National Social Science Association*. 7 Jan 2016. <<http://www.nssa.us/journals/2007-28-1/2007-28-1-12.html>>.
- Riley, Steven F. "Commentary." 23 Aug 2009. *Mixed Race Studies*. 7 Jan 2016. <<http://www.mixedracestudies.org/?p=454>>.
- Romanska, Magda. "Amiri Baraka." *Encyclopedia of African American History*, Chief ed. Paul Finkelman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 134-36. Print.

Set Design Models by Maruti Evans

"In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth." – *Amiri Baraka*

"The scene is a New York subway is the Tower of London is a Harlem hotel room is St. Peter's. The scene is shaped like a subway car." – *Adrienne Kennedy*



Costume Design Renderings by Mathew LeFebvre

"The characters change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves, leaving some garment from the previous selves upon them always to remind us of the nature of She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl." – Adrienne Kennedy

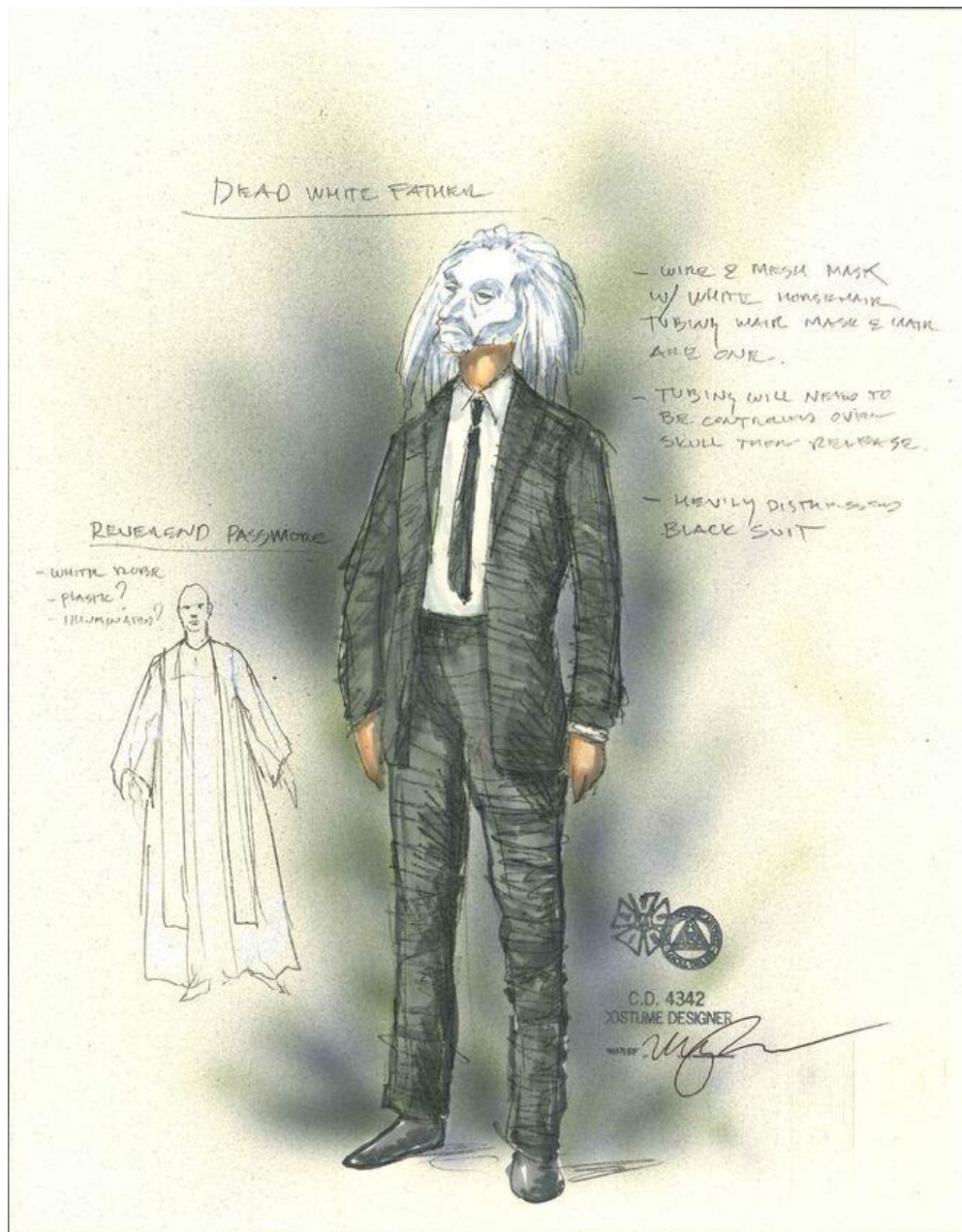


"Rather than presenting linear plots with chronological narrative progression, Kennedy portrays the fragmented mental states of her characters, who dramatize their many facets by changing costumes as a symbolic representation of their changing personalities or by having their separate selves externally represented as separate characters."

Pictured here: BASTARD'S BLACK MOTHER who is the REVEREND'S WIFE who is ANNE BOLEYN in The Owl Answers



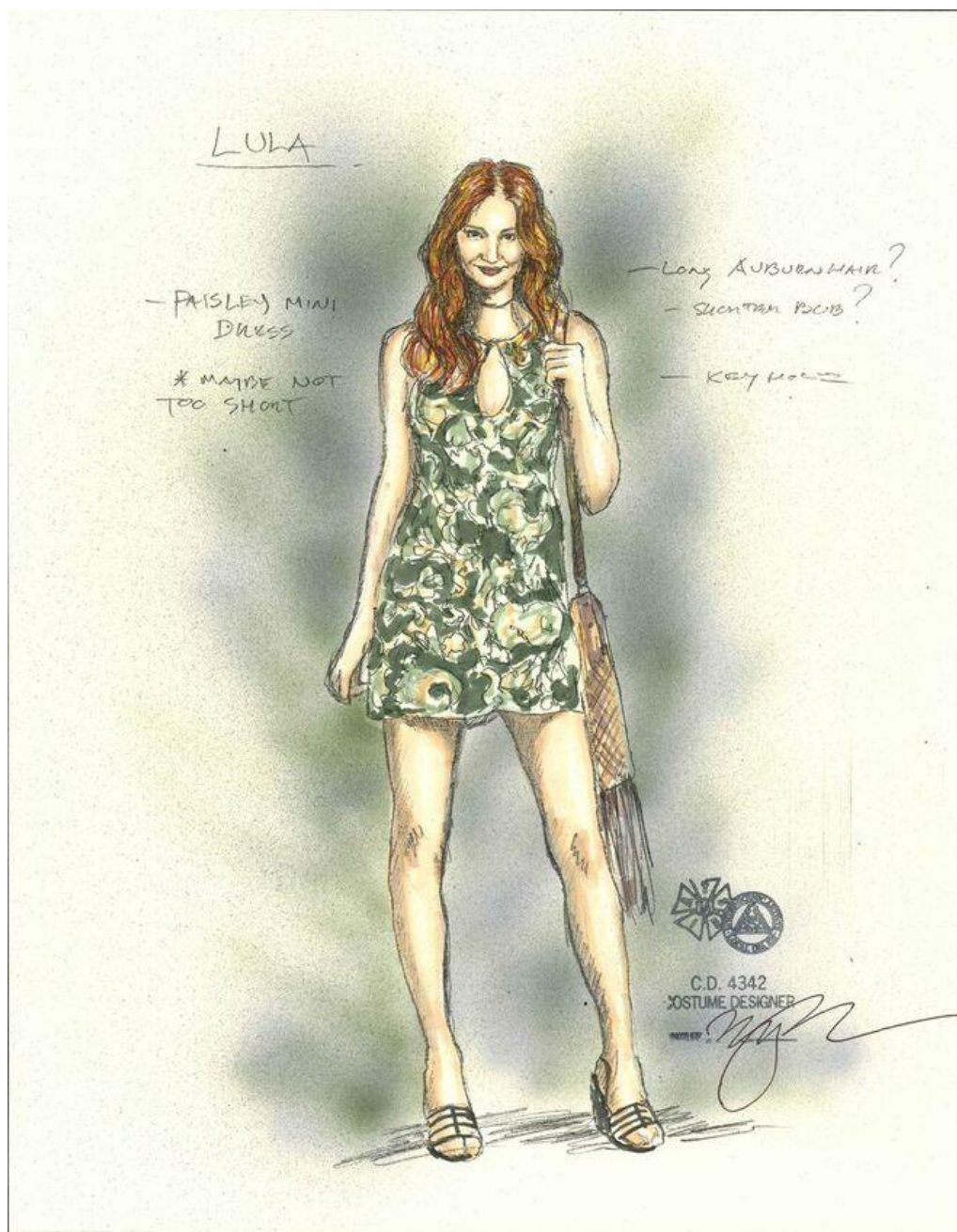
Pictured here: GODDAM FATHER who is the RICHEST WHITE MAN IN THE TOWN who is the DEAD WHITE FATHER who is REVEREND PASSMORE in The Owl Answers



Pictured here: THE WHITE BIRD who is REVEREND PASSMORE'S CANARY who is GOD'S DOVE in The Owl Answers



Pictured here: Lula in Dutchman



Pictured here: Clay in Dutchman

