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Formulating the Aesthetics of African-American Women Playwrights: The Resonance of the Black Liberation and the Black Theatre Movements

> The dancer of the future will be one whose body and soul have grown so harmoniously together that the natural language of that soul will have become the movement of the body. The dancer will not belong to a nation but to all humanity. She will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette, but in the form of woman in her greatest and purest expression. She will realize the mission of woman's body and the holiness of all its parts. She will dance the changing life of nature, showing how each part is transformed into the other. . . . She will dance the freedom of woman.
>
> Oh, she is coming, the dancer of the future: the free spirit, who will inhabit the body of new woman; more glorious than any woman that has yet been; more beautiful than . . . all women of past centuries—the highest intelligence in the freest body.
>
> Isadora Duncan (1983: 108-109)

With her eyes on the future, Isadora Duncan envisioned the new woman yet to come, by freeing her of past stereotypes and chains. Duncan used the body as the metaphor and best expression of freedom for future women; the freedom of her body would help her liberate her spirit imprisoned by centuries of oppression, exploitation and stereotyping imposed by a patriarchal society.

Black women, however, needed a double liberation: from White oppression and from patriarchal rule. Writers such as Sonia Sanchez reflect in their works women's need for power, the need to express themselves in their own voices and the need for self-affirmation by presenting a complex

perspective that reconstructs Black Women's history of oppression and enforced stereotypes.

The place of Black women was not asserted as it deserved during the Black Theatre Movement. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory affirms that Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins portrayed Blacks as sensitive, hard-working and rational, but many of their plays dealt exclusively with the Black male experience in North America, while the portraits of women were simplistic and uninteresting (Brown-Guillory 1988: 108). Baraka himself has lately recognized the patriarchal attitudes inherent in many revolutionaries during the 1960s and has formulated the need to create new alternatives, in which the concept of womanhood needs to be redefined. In order to achieve this, Baraka suggests that the community must annihilate "negro chauvinism" and allow their women to expand in the Black struggle standing side by side with men and becoming visible in that struggle (Baraka 1974?: 4-5).

Brown-Guillory maintains that the 1970s became a better decade for Black women, for there was a rebirth of the Feminist Movement of the 1960s. African-American writers made "a significant gain as a result of the Black Power and women's movement" (1988: 119). As a critical and perceptive observer, the African-American woman commenced a process of self-reflection. Aware of the parameters formulated by both movements, she applied them to her specific socio-political situation of race and gender. Sandra Richards insists that there is a close connection between society and art and this connection is a pivotal component in Black feminist criticism (1982: 233). Needless to say, the Black Power movement of the 1960s was a great influence on the women's movement as well. According to Brown-Guillory, African-American playwrights such as Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange literally reshaped American theatre by including their own perceptions and visions of African-Americans.

Some African-American women playwrights, such as Adrienne Kennedy, were not considered part of the Black Theatre Movement because they did not present the same socio-political problems as men did. This exclusion is symptomatic, for Black women were also ignored by the different Black Power and Black Consciousness movements which silenced the oppression that black women were suffering at the hands of both the government and Black men. The African-American scholar Margaret Wilkerson affirms that the characters created by these Black women playwrights incorporated a world in which the personal became political, "in which something as intimate as one's hair may indeed declare one's politics . . . . Connections are forged between a black woman's hips and thighs and the politics of beauty, or between a white man's compassionate gesture

and a black man's rebellion" (1986: xiii,-xiv). Theatre being the most public of all literary genres, African-American women artists had an extra shackle to break in order to become playwrights, directors and/or actresses. Before 1950, women participated fully in theatre protest against the living conditions for African-Americans, either in historical dramas, folk plays or race propaganda. They contributed to shape a "unique perspective of black women's reality" as part of their protest; but only after the 1950s did their voices extend beyond their communities (Wilkerson 1986:19).

African-American women playwrights, novelists, and poets, then, began to portray a totally different reality—a reality that was exclusively and distinctively theirs, and, in doing so, they established the original patterns of a new aesthetics. One of the elements that characterizes their writing, according to Mae G. Henderson, and which shows the power of their works, is precisely their "ability to disrupt and break with conventional imagery." Henderson emphasizes that the commitment of the Black feminist project has been the "*privileging of difference,* for it is, after all, the rhetoric of universality that has excluded gender, race and class perspectives from the dominant literary critical discourse as well as the socio-political center of power" (1989: 161-162). Thus, African-American women embarked upon a process whose purpose was to define themselves and stop others doing it for them.

Barbara Christian maintains that African-American women, far removed from universalistic patterns, strove for self-definition as a strategy for survival:

> As poor, woman, and black, the Afro-American woman had to generate her own definition in order to survive, for she found that she was forced to deny essential aspects of herself to fit the definition of others. . . . It is primarily in the expressions of herself that she could be her totality. And as a result of that expression is also the articulation of the interconnectedness of race, sex and class as a philosophical basis for the pattern of dominance and hierarchy in this society. (1985: 161-162)

Referring to African-American women writers, Claudia Tate adds that self-esteem is a primary issue in their works and that the heroine in their plays "is aware that she alone must be determined to understand the conditions of her life, first by means of intense introspection, before she can move on to establish meaningful relationships with other people" (Tate 1983: xxi, xxii). The introspection exercised by African-American women is the goal that Baraka and Frantz Fanon proposed for the

oppressed, exploited and colonized in order that they should reach a state of self-esteem and a national consciousness. Only through consciousness and self-esteem can each individual achieve his/her sense of identity or that of his/her community. Once this step has been taken, individuals will be able to merge with others without losing their selfhood, and a real communication between people and cultures will be achieved. A sense of wholeness is fundamental in order to be present, to exist as part of the international family.

The Black liberation movement not only helped develop the Feminist movement, but also helped Black women understand their ethnicity in their two-fold oppression: race and gender. Black women's writings give clear evidence of their awareness that their gender is inextricably linked to their people and culture. In their works, they "problematize the notion of community," remarks Susan Willis, and "rather than paying it lip service, they scrutinize the community as it existed in the past in order to question whether or not and in what form it might exist in the future" (1985: 214).

Black women have been obliged to share a specific political, social and economic experience. As a result of that experience, Black women writers have stylistic, thematic and aesthetic factors in common. Barbara Smith describes the existence of a different aesthetics as expressed in the language Black women use and the culture experience they share: "The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books *by* and *about* Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures" (1986: 174). Furthermore, there is not only a specific aesthetics that differentiates Black women's writing from a White/male literary structure, but also one that differentiates between Black male and Black female writing.

In describing the gender difference in Black writing, Deborah E. McDowell offers as an example the theme of journey. The journey of the Black male character, as portrayed in works written by Black men, takes him underground. This journey is mainly social and political—as in Baraka's *Dutchman* or *The Slave,* or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man.* The journey observed in Black women's works, though sometimes it touches the social and the political, is essentially a psychological and personal journey—e.g. in Adrienne Kennedy's plays. The journey of Black women's characters moves from victimization to consciousness (McDowell 1985: 195), and this final consciousness is the evident assertion that women's journey is political, like that of men.

By identifying the elements which differentiate their particular history, culture and gender, Black women's writings establish the existence of the aesthetics of self-affirmation (see Barrios 1992, chapter 11, on this aesthetics). And by breaking with the stereotypes and/or oversimplification of women characters as generally portrayed by men, the works by African-American women exhibit the complexity and pluralism of their personal and historical personalities. Consequently, a critical approach to their writings requires a plurality of methods that will safeguard them from the risk of oversimplification.

With regard to theatre, Sue-Ellen Case points out that the different dialogue patterns employed by men and women have been established by a different historical past and a different tradition:

> Since women have generally been confined to the domestic domain and denied admittance to the public arena, their performance space has often been within their houses. Their focus has been directed to the personal networks of family and friends, creating kinds of experience which did not lend themselves to articulation in the public figures of rhetoric and oratory. For this reason, some women have developed a different tradition of dialogue from that of men. These women have excelled in the personal forms of dialogue (1988: 46).

These personal forms of dialogue usually include women's issues, such as menstrual blood, pregnancy, or clitoral images of feminine body language that raise a political issue of sexual difference. Helen Keyssar says that feminist drama is unquestionably "the most tenacious and resonant forms of discourse about sexual politics." The sexual identity portrayed and enacted on stage in feminist theatre shows that power is allocated not in a biologically defined sexual identity but in social gender roles. (Keyssar 1985: 167, 3).

When portraying her sexual identity, woman needs to reconstruct her history and deconstruct the traditional patriarchal system that has imposed on her the position of the "other" instead of herself. Not only women writers, but also critics must contribute to reconstructing women's history in a consciousness-raising process and in offering new strategies for approaching a play and suggesting new "alternative modes of perception" (Case 1988: 113). Elisabeth Lenk suggests the need for a woman to develop new relations with herself through relationships with other women (1985: 57).

The Black Consciousness Movement of the 1960s had a great repercussion on African-American playwrights, especially on Sonia Sanchez's

works. For Sanchez the Movement continues to be "a significant component of her social and political participation. . . . [Women need to] remove [themselves first] from the oppression of a man [and then] from the oppression of a country." Moreover, Sanchez recognizes that women write differently from men. In her opinion "men write in [what she calls] an objective mood . . . [whereas women] tend to write in a subjective mood" (1983: 133, 134, 143). Sanchez's plays did greatly contribute to developing a theatre which reflects the complexity and perspective of the African-American woman.

As is widely acknowledged, access to musical and theatrical careers has been especially restricted by matters of race. The stage became the manifestation of dignified and meaningful roles. Traditionally, plays involving Black characters had tended to show them in demeaning roles (servants, clowns, etc.) but as a consequence of the Black Consciousness Movement plays were being written and performed that gave them dignified and meaningful roles (Lerner 1973: 81). African-American women such as Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry offered a new dimension to their African-American women characters, and Sonia Sanchez enlarged that dimension. Sanchez's *Sister Son/ji* is proof of the complexity that surrounds the African-American woman. In her play, the woman character has gone through many changes and difficulties: she has lost husbands, children; she has been to college; she has been a militant and fought; she has seen death; yet she has been able to survive. Although she ages on stage, her spirit never does.

As many critics have already indicated, music, song and dance have always been an essential part of African-American history and culture. These elements are equally included as fundamental components of the plays written by African-American women. Music, song and movement are taken as elements of speech, and music is given the attributes of human voices. The inextricability of rhythm and movement with speech already occupied an essential place within the plays written by the African-American men of the Movement; but these elements are given even greater stress in the plays written by African-American women. Angela Davis remarks that "Black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom" (1990: 201). Music has definitely helped to shape African-American playwrights' aesthetics in their struggle for self-affirmation both as African-Americans and as women—Ntozake Shange and Aishah Rahman's plays are proof of this.

Lynda Hart regards music as a powerful metaphor for the African-American woman's experience in redefining and recreating herself:

> Jazz and blues and other forms of black music are inseparable from the attitudes and experiences that shaped them. The changes in pitch and time, the shifts in stress, the texture of timbre and vibrato negate European regularity and stability of tone. . . . This music "speaks" the rage, the irony, the profundity of Black-American life in tonalities and colorations absent from conventional western speech. . . . African drumming set the foundation through its complex, phonetic reproduction of words and its polyphonic and contrapuntal rhythmic structures. . . . *For the playwright, this rich musical background stimulates new ways of conceptualizing music as an element of drama. Thus contemporary black women playwrights find in music a second language that gives expression to the profound anguish and joy of their vision and experience* (1989: 62. My emphasis).

Music brings out an emotional mood that underlines subjectivity in contrast to the more *objective mood* in the works of male writers, as Sanchez has pointed out. Hart considers that it is in the hands of African-American women playwrights that the theatre is presenting a new and different dimension, for these women know music is as political, sensual and emotional as their lives (Hart 1989: 74).

Regarding movement in theatre, Case underlines the need for women to create a new body language that encodes the female gender signs on the stage. Case underlines how on stage bolder movement is usually reserved for men, whereas women's movements have been more restricted. Consequently, "stage movement replicates the proxemics of the social order, capitalizing upon the spatial relationship in the culture at large between women and the sites of power" (Case 1988: 117-18). Case's observation expresses the concept that form, content and context cannot be separated. In their search, women need to free their own movements in order to express the complexity of their own body language, as Duncan had foreseen (see the epigraph to this article).

Annya P. Royce equally asserts, in regard to dance and movement, that form and context are intertwined:

> There is meaning in form and structure, and it affects meanings derived from the contexts of the arts—Shange's *for colored women who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, is a clear example. Conversely, historical developments in art forms demonstrate that context implies preferred and meaningful forms. (1984: 201).

Katherine Dunham's dances clearly exemplify Royce's view. Dunham's introduction of African rhythms has left an indelible mark upon subsequent African-American dancers and choreographers. The Black Theatre Movement, and especially some Black women playwrights—such as Shange—followed the African and African-American tradition of dance and movement that became part of Black Women's Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation. Dunham's dances interpreted mourning and marriage ceremonies and ancient fertility rites, "blending modern and primitive dance forms" (Malpede 1983: 122). Hence, movement and dance appear as essential components in the plays of the Black Theatre Movement, with special intensity in the Movement that emerged in South Africa. Dance, then, expresses feelings and emotions emerging from a people's enormous desire to live and love, to express their anger and to assert themselves (Malpede, ibid.).

African-American men playwrights committed themselves to integrating music, song and dance in their plays; African-American women playwrights added a perspective proper to their gender and, thus, created a difference that widened and completed a Black Aesthetics. Wilkerson adds that the works of Hansberry, Childress, Kennedy and Shange "strengthened the social consciousness of Black plays, integrated the social and political with the private and personal self in new ways and validated the theatrical richness of women's experience." Their plays thrust beyond the restrictions of realism to innovative theatrical forms which expressed a Black reality that was part of these women's own experience (Wilkerson 1986: xxii-xxiii). Thus, African-American women playwrights have widened and enriched the scope of theatre and drama with a genuine and feminine Black aesthetics.

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