

***FUNNYHOUSE OF A  
NEGRO: REJECTION OF  
WOMANNESS AND  
BLACKNESS AS A  
“MELANCHOLIC” CRY  
FOR A TRUE DIVERSITY  
IN AMERICAN SOCIETY***

*Emilio Ramón  
Universidad Católica de Valencia*

*Abstract*

*Funnyhouse* highlights the struggle of Sarah whose black skin evinces a lack of identity and a lack of social placement in the dominant society. She projects her self onto various selves who punish and betray her, leading her to reject Blackness and femaleness as well, and eventually commits suicide. An example of extreme violence, it exposes the same conflicts African American women are still faced with. For Sarah, a “living dead” in Balibar’s words, life becomes “worse than death or more difficult to live than death itself and her failed attempt to “fit in” can be considered, in Bhabha’s terms, another form of colonized Other. Despite the media claims that racism is over, we may be facing a new kind of discrimination which relies heavily on the manipulation of ideas. *Funnyhouse* is

*Resumen*

*Funnyhouse* plantea la lucha interior de Sarah, a quien su piel negra evidencia tanto su falta de identidad como su falta de lugar en la sociedad dominante. Ella se proyecta en una serie de yos que la castigan y la traicionan, llevándola a rechazar tanto su negritud como su feminidad, convirtiéndola en una “muerta viviente” según el término de Balibar. En un intento de borrar su herencia, se imbuye de las tradiciones históricas y literarias europeas convirtiéndose así en *otro*, en términos de Bhabha. El rechazo de su identidad lleva a Sarah a fracasar como mujer y como persona de color, y acaba suicidándose. La cuestión que se nos plantea es si hoy en día, cuando los medios de comunicación reiteran que el racismo es cosa del pasado, seguimos encontrándonos con situaciones como la de Sarah y aún nos queda camino por

still a valid reminder of how much we still need to achieve in terms of truly appreciating diversity among us.

*Key Words:* Fragmentation, Racism, the Perfect Identity, Feminist writing, African American, “Living dead”, the Other.

recorrer en cuanto a una verdadera apreciación de la diversidad.

*Palabras clave:* Fragmentación, racismo, la identidad perfecta, escritura feminista, afroamericano, “muerto viviente”, el otro.

For most women, [...] they would not be so much guilty as ill. Mutilated, wounded, humiliated, and overwhelmed by a feeling of inferiority that can never be cured. [...] Women do not make laws, even for themselves; that is not in accordance with their nature. (Irigaray 1985:88)

Contemporary efforts to explain the position of African-American women in the USA were built upon the notion of “double jeopardy” (Beale, 1970). Beale’s idea recognized that African-American women faced double discrimination because of their race and sex. [...] they lack access to authority and resources in society and are in structural opposition with the dominant racial/ethnic group (Euro-American) and the dominant sexual group (male) (Lewis, 1977) (Barbee & Little 2004:559)

Women’s writing has been usually patronized and misunderstood by a cultural establishment operating according to male norms out of male perceptions; mostly considered as singular and anomalous, not as universal and representative. Both literary history’s sins of omissions and literary criticism’s inaccurate and biased judgments of women writers have come under attack since the early 1970s by feminist critics. Luce Irigaray points out that women’s “prehistory”, their history prior to the feminist movement, “implies such a misprision, such a negation, such a curb on her instincts and primary instinctual representatives, and therefore such an inhibition, [...] as to bode ill for the history that follows” (111). Consequently, women will remain:

in a state of childish dependence upon a phallic super-ego that looks sternly and disdainfully on her castrated sex/organ(s). In its cruelty, woman’s super-ego will favor the proliferation of masochistic fantasies and activities, rather

than help build up “cultural” values -which are masculine in any case.  
(Irigaray 1985:124)

Women’s writing therefore highlights this dependent reality and their struggle to overcome it. Despite their efforts to place Western women at the same level with men, these early theorists and practitioners of feminist literary criticism were largely white females who carried out against the African American woman writer the same exclusive practices they so vehemently censured in white male scholars.

African American women writers have also been frequently expunged from those on the Afro-American literary tradition by Black male scholars. Their first efforts were to orient Afro-American art toward white opinion and to acquaint whites with the existence of respectable African Americans. Calvin C. Hernton observed that except for Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks no, Afro-American female writer or protagonist was given worthy recognition in Afro-American literature before the 1970s, not even Lorraine Hansberry, the first African American to have a play on Broadway. Academia generally dismissed writing by women of color. Washington (1990:34) points out that without exception Afro-American women writers have been dismissed by Afro-American literary critics until they were rediscovered and reevaluated by feminist scholars.

The recognition among African American female critics and writers that African American women’s experiences are considered as deviant by white women, white men, and even African American men has given rise to African American feminist criticism. Unfortunately, while Virginia Woolf argues in *A Room of One’s Own* that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction and see the male-dominated cultural system as an obstacle to the equality between men and women, many African American feminists attack not only the male (black and white) supremacists but also middle-class white women even as recently as the late twentieth century. Alice Walker, for instance, claims that they are “incapable as white and black men of comprehending blackness and feminism in the same body, not to mention within the same imagination” (qtd. in Hodges 1997:110). She specifically attacks white women feminists who misperceive their African American counterparts as absent, non-existent. Notwithstanding, Hodges points out that a rigorous textual analysis must also involve those aspects of white feminist criticism that can be useful for their African American counterparts. They should not be dismissed altogether because merely they are Western.

Most of the male Afro-American academic world was outraged, claiming that African American feminist critics were planted by Caucasian racists. Lee believes the disapprobation resulted because Afro-American women speak from the most marginal position in society and, therefore, undermine the self-image of African American males (Lee 1992:48). Many Caucasian males in academia were outraged because their elitism, racism and obvious desire to maintain the Euro-American patriarchal status quo were exposed. Finally, Eurocentric feminists were also outraged because the African American feminists were exposing the racism in the woman's movement. Following the 70s and the 80s, several social and racial achievements have been made; however, as Evelyn Barbee and Marilyn Little (2006:561) point out, despite all that,

African-American women occupy a structural position in which they are viewed as subordinate to all other women and men in society. Beliefs, myths and stereotypes about African-American women have served to intensify their status as "other" [...] No other woman has suffered physical and mental abuse, degradation, and exploitation on North American shores comparable to that experienced by the Black female.

As late as the 1990s, Anne Cheng (1997:49) shows, the "race card" gets still played even in a worldwide televised event as the O. J. Simpson trial, and "its accompanying rhetoric suggest, racial rivalry is hardly over. Indeed, it has acquired the peculiar status of a game where what constitutes a winning hand has become identical with the handicap" and things get worse when the race and the gender cards get combined. Even in the first decade of the twenty-first century, we can still observe the unavoidable interaction among racism, sexism and often classism in a large part of society. For all this, literary pieces from the 1960s and 1970s written to expose the fragmentation and the search for the Perfect Identity are still valid. As Philip Kolin points out, a study of playwright Adrienne Kennedy is always timeless, for she, like many others, is a woman caught up in a world of seeming endless conflicts in human nature and efforts to solve them it.

Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* was written and produced before the African American feminist approach to criticism gained ground. This play, her first produced work, earned an Obie Award in 1964 and established hers as a unique voice in the avant-gardetheater of the 1960s, while almost every African American playwright was fundamentally concerned with realism. The play, in its new polished form, appears in an anthology for the first time in *The Best Short Plays 1970*. Despite the fact that her play has never enjoyed wide spread popularity since, as she admits at her interview with Elin Diamond,

*ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 32 (2011): 289-308

“My plays make people uncomfortable so I’ve never had a play done in Cleveland [her hometown]” (1993:157), over time *Funnyhouse* has gained respect and admiration, especially from feminist critics.

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, as with much of her work, Miss Kennedy is concerned with the problems of identity and self-knowledge and her writing is pervaded by powerful imagery and intense desire to unite a self fragmented by opposing forces, the racial and gender tensions which plague African American women. Most of her characters, thus, symbolize the history of race and oppression, representing the battle between blackness and whiteness and the struggles of African Americans against oppression. As Bider claims, “These dramas are to some degree exorcising personal and collective racial traumas and have anger, the urge to communicate and (attempted) liberation as motivating forces” (1985:99). Storytelling becomes a deliberate, conscious illocution performed in diverse spans of time by different storytelling voices. At times, we have a Faulknerian type of narration with different characters narrating their stories. All these experiences are fragments and it is their sum total that makes up the memory of a whole people. Focusing on these fragments is a way of highlighting the state of absence, the presence of a partial memory that needs to be completed by multiple pieces.

Adrienne Kennedy’s style is short and intense, with the dense language of symbolic poetry. Working in a surrealistic theatrical style, Kennedy acknowledges the violence that is beneath the surface in most human beings. By conveying Sarah’s internal struggle through traces of different selves, Kennedy portrays the mixture of racial hatred and fear that has long characterized American society. Her play addresses the cultural and political fragmentation suffered by African Americans when they were beginning to join efforts to construct an Afro-American community. The use of this damaged social identity in her play is a symptom of the deeper psychological fragmentation suffered by African American women. Her characters walk the fine thin line between dream and consciousness, between reality and the surreal fantasies. Kennedy achieves her greatest impact in the arresting though critically resisting images that surround her major protagonist. In order to achieve a better comprehension of them it is useful to point out that her plays are also an expression of herself. She views writing as an outlet for inner, psychological confusion and questions stemming from childhood and a creative way to figure out the why of things,

I think about things for many years and keep loads of notebooks, with images, dreams, ideas I’ve jotted down. I see my writing as a growth of images. I think all my plays come out of dreams I had two or three years

before; I played around with the images for a long period of time to try to get to the most powerful dreams. (Kennedy 1977:43)

Kennedy sees herself as a collage of language, drawings and photographs, making no distinction between things and humans that lead her to the writing of her plays.

Her works are autobiographical and project onto the stage an interior reality by means of letting “the material come out and not be frightened about it and not censor it. Just trust yourself and do not have an opinion of your previous work” (Kennedy 1977:42). The shocking nature of her images emanates from her insistence on honestly portraying material from the subconscious, “your intellect is always working against you to censor...One must always fight against that limitation of oneself” (Kennedy 1987:42). Thus her play is controversial, intense, and forces unrelenting encounters with myriad selves. She will create a character who is confused with multiple levels of consciousness. She tries to capture in dramatic form the theme closest to her heart, the individual at war with inner forces and struggling with conflicting sides of the personality. She also admitted to using the works of playwrights Tennessee Williams and García Lorca as models,

I admire Tennessee Williams and García Lorca, and I struggled for a long time to write plays- as typified by *Funny House*- in which the person is in conflict with their inner forces, with the conflicting sides to their personality, which I found to be my own particular greatest conflict. (Kennedy 1977:47)

She thus combined those conflicting sides with memories from her own life. We can see that in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*’s Raymond and the landlady; two characters who are modelled after the looming clown-like figures that guard an amusement park in Kennedy’s hometown, Cleveland (Kennedy 1987:10). She had also seen, for example, the mammoth statue of Queen Victoria in front of Buckingham Palace in London, and later used it in this play.

It is not by chance that Adrienne Kennedy’s autobiographical writing, particularly *People Who Led to My Plays*, is essentially a theatrical act of self-ascription. When it is used as an access to Kennedy’s “resisting images”, many possible interpretations of Kennedy’s dramaturgy are opened. For example, Kennedy speaks of her trip to Ghana in terms of a personal renaissance. During the several stages of this trip she started to think of the powerful images she would use in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* “I remember [...] I had seen Jesus as sweet, docile. I had believed “what a friend we have in Jesus.” But that spring, sitting in the Pensione Sabrina, I went on creating a cruel Jesus Christ”

(Kennedy 1987:123). Thus we can find a yellow Jesus Christ who wanted to kill Patrice Lumumba in order to reject Blackness. This rejection led the main character, Sarah, to seek her placement in the white English world, which also has its origin in her travel,

I was always interested in English literature and in England. There's always been a fascination with Queen Victoria. It always seemed to amaze me that one person could have a whole era named after them. I find the obsession with royalty fascinating. Not only Queen Victoria, but other great historical literary figures such as Patrice Lumumba and, it's obvious, Jesus Christ. Well, I took these people [...] and then used them to represent different points of view –metaphors really. (Kennedy 1987:123)

Likewise, some time before writing this play Kennedy visited Chapultepec Palace in Mexico City and bought postcards of the Duchess of Hapsburg. “At that time in Mexico there seemed something amiss about European royalty living amid the Aztec culture, European royalty in an alien landscape. Soon my duchess of Hapsburg would exist in an alien persona, that of the character of the Negro writer” (qtd. in Kintz 1992:157). Thus the images exhibit African-American, Aframerican, African, European, and European-American features that contribute to the conflict in *Funnyhouse*; a conflict of rejection of her blackness and of yearning for assimilation in Eurocentric tradition, as shown in her reverence for European antiques, books and photographs, among other symbols.

Although Kennedy's characters tell stories, their narratives are not the focus of her plays, and the purpose of the play is not to recreate past occurrences. Overt action in Kennedy's plays is not an end in itself. She is more interested in the intimacies and anguish of the psyche. She focuses on states of mind and of being-womanhood, fragmentation, longing, the tensions that African American women suffer. *Funnyhouse* highlights the struggle of a central female character whose black skin evinces a lack of identity and, therefore, a lack of social placement in the dominant white society. The play deals with a split main subject which indicates the multiple marginalizations she endures. It projects a world where Blackness, femaleness and education are equally important isolating factors. The action takes the form of separate scenes made up of monologues, dialogues, or pantomimes, and grotesque figures. These multiple associations come clear of themselves when the plot structure is read as action segments. Sarah, the central character, longs for social placement by attempting to annihilate her loathsome parentage. This miscegenation, coupled with society's oppression of women, yields her a liminal place in society.

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Sarah is inhabited by various selves who punish and betray her even as they speak her history. She identifies herself, projects her self, as Freud would say it, onto those other selves; rejecting her own identity. Following Elin Diamond, the play follows the form of a classical Freudian dream. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud states that identification resembles the conditions of hysterics, enabling patients to suffer on behalf of a whole crowd of people and to act all the parts in a play singlehanded. This tendency to play all parts produces an obvious threat to identity, creating an indistinction of the “I” and the “s/he”. He goes further in his subsequent studies stating that the loss of a loved object provokes identification with the abandoned object, setting itself inside the ego. However, and this is the cruelty of melancholia, the object, now set up, acts as a critical agency that reproaches the ego, becoming constitutive of psychic development. As Anlin Cheng (1997:50) contends, this melancholic condition produces:

a peculiarly ghostly form of ego formation. Moreover, that incorporation of loss still retains the status of the original lost object as loss; consequently, as Freud reminds us, by incorporating and identifying with the ghost of the lost one, the melancholic takes on the emptiness of that ghostly presence and in this way participates in his/her own self-denigration.

In Freud’s account, it would seem that all subjects, in the process of identification, are constituted by the psychical history of the cathected objects that have transformed them. Adrienne Kennedy’s text provides access to such multiple identifications and in endless search for the perfect identity, the white one, in a way that echoes in the words of Kate Bornstein over thirty years later.

There are so many ways to classify people, but the top of this pyramid just might remain the same: the Perfect Identity. At the top we’d have the Perfect Gender and the Perfect Race and the Perfect Class. So the culturally agreed-upon standards of perception just might all converge into one identity that’s got the bulk of the power in the world, and *that* identity relies on its granted perfection from each of the classifications that support it.

The posited “perfect identity”, this powerful oppressive force made up of the composite perfections of all systems of classifications, has a lot of names today. Feminists call it a MAN. Jews have called it GENTILE. African-American activists call it WHITE. [...] In this binary-slanted world, we keep naming our oppressor [...] in terms of some convenient opposite (27-8).

Far from feeling at the top of this social pyramid, the main character in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is constantly faced by her conflicting sides, all of them wishing to become a part of that pyramid top. Following Anlin Cheng, the



character's "melancholic" construction of her ego "provides a provocative metaphor for how race in America, or more specifically how the act of racialization, works. While the formation of the American culture may be said to be a history of legalized exclusions (Native Americans, African-Americans, Jews, Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans...) it is, however, also a history of misremembering those denials" (51). Hers is a struggle to find her place in society by means of denying her own history.

In the opening scene we see a grotesque imagery that is nightmarish. The play opens with a woman wandering across the stage as if in a trance, carrying a bald skull. The play's structure then begins to unfold, not only as a growth of images but also as collections of events. The main character, Sarah, is played simultaneously by different characters who represent various sides of herself, sometimes saying the same lines, but never in unison, and never in dialogue where each might hear or understand the other. Sarah's efforts to achieve wholeness and identity, and her simultaneous conflict with paranoia, and the will to self-destruction, ultimately result in a disintegration of her personality. Her loyalty to her European heritage, represented by Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, forces her to hate and deny her African heritage, forces her to murder her father, much as the Europeans murdered Patrice Lumumba because he threatened European dominance. All of these conflicts rage inside Sarah's mind, which is the funnyhouse, the madhouse, from which she cannot escape the deadly psychic and physical space of its rooms:

The rooms are my rooms; a Hapsburg chamber, a chamber in a Victorian castle, the hotel where I killed my father, the jungle. These are the places my selves exist in. I know no places. To believe in places is to know hope and to know the emotion of hope is to know beauty. It links us across a horizon and connects us to the world. I find there are no places only in my funnyhouse.  
(7)

Each room represents not only her melancholic search for the perfect identity, the white one, and her rejection of her African heritage but also, her oppression within their walls. As Janice Richardson (2010:57) contends, "Feminists have pointed out the way in which the definition of 'private' as non-political sphere marginalised women's oppression within the home." The only two characters outside her mind- Raymond, her Jewish lover, and her landlady- contribute to her anguish through mockery, making her oppression even more acute. Sarah's struggle is the struggle of all women in a world which not only mocks and rejects Blackness but femaleness as well.

Probably the most powerless group, biracial women, are usually rejected by both races by virtue of their sex and mixed blood; an already subaltern condition aggravated by racial animosity. They are often a source of embarrassment to both sides of their family, because on their white relations side they are a physical statement which lowers the class status of the family. To her black relations she is a tangible embodiment of consorting with the "enemy" (Lee 1992:55). The word miscegenation can be traced to the Latin words *miscere*, meaning "to mix" and *genus* meaning "race". Miscegenation describes the cohabitation or marriage between persons of different races. As with most African Americans, Jill Nelson reminds us, "light skin is the result of rape and sexual exploitation during slavery" (2006:139), and *Funny house's* Sarah is obsessed with her "light" colored female identity. Her inability to reconcile her divided self is seen in the play through the multiple characters or personas that are all parts of Sarah's selfhood. Lee suggests that Kennedy created Sarah as a mulatto rather than a 'black' girl to emphasize Otherness by taking marginality in Euro-American culture to its extreme (1999:57). Sarah's desire to be assimilated by the dominant culture seems a natural rejection of being stigmatized by society's definition of Otherness.

Central in her struggle are her parental figures, which psychically haunt her. Although Sarah's mother looked white, "My mother was the light. She was the lightest one. She looked like a white woman" (Kennedy 1969:7), she was in fact biracial, and Sarah's father was 'black'. This is psychically most disturbing to Sarah, who identifies so strongly with her mother that she cannot resolve the racial conflict of her birth. Her mother, who is dressed in a white nightgown carrying a bald head, continuously mutters "Black man, black, man, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me and now my skull is shining" (Kennedy 1969:7).

The play is dominated by a threat of rape by her father who, she believes, continues to come to her room, knocking loudly throughout the play in an unending ritual suggesting incest and violence,

Victoria. (*Listening to the knocking*) It is my father. He is arriving again for the night. (*The Duchess makes no reply*) He comes through the jungle to find me. He never tires of his journey.

Duchess. How dare he enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one? My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman's. And at least I am yellow, but he is black, the blackest of them all. I hoped he was dead. Yet he still comes through the jungle to find me. (Kennedy 1969:6)

The father is associated with bestiality, inscribed with white culture's imagery of African American men as rapists, always referring to him as "a wild black beast" (Kennedy 1969:5), although he also represents Africa and Blackness. Sarah's father is a highly complex border character. Though he has been entrusted with enacting the redemption story of white Christianity for his 'black' people in Africa, another part of his image stands for the evil Christianity attempts to purge. Connected to abjection and pollution, the coding of blackness has been fundamental to the symbolic privileging of whiteness. The irony is that the parent Sarah identifies so strongly with, her nearly white mother, rejects her while the parent she rejects, her very 'black' father, reaches out for her wanting her love and approval, "I wanted to be a Christian. Now I am Judas. I betrayed my mother. I sent your mother to the asylum. I created a yellow child who hates me. And he tried to hang himself in a Harlem hotel" (Kennedy 1969:17). The generational transference of the rape from mother to daughter symbolizes the rape of the African American, generation after generation, by the dominant Euro-American culture. Additionally, the rape also symbolizes the social, political and often physical rape of the black woman by everybody.

When she identifies herself with her mother's world, she isolates herself, and hides in her room where she dreams of living in rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, and oriental carpets. She spends her days longing for living in a white, European culture, and that's why

It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table. I will visit my friend's apartments which will contain books, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos and oriental carpets. My friends will be white. (Kennedy 1969:9)

She attempts to efface her African American heritage by injecting herself into white society. Sarah's identification and empathy with the literary and historical traditions of England leads her to choose Victoria and the Duchess to escape the sense of powerlessness and the implications of depreciated sexuality attached to an African American girl, "Victoria always wants me tell her of whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones" (Kennedy 1969:8). Thus, when associated with Victoria, Sarah momentarily rejects all 'blackness'.

Sarah's identification with these figures of white and female power would be complete were it not for her African American hair, which gives away her negritude. The choice of words she uses to describe herself is poignantly

negative: “no glaring Negroid features, medium nose, medium mouth and pale yellow skin. My one defect is that I have a head of frizzy hair, unmistakably Negro kinky hair” (Kennedy 1969:6).

Though Sarah lives in a brownstone apartment with her Jewish boyfriend, she mentally inhabits the expressionistic settings suggested by her selves. Sarah is disconnected from the world and cannot find a place for herself. On the one hand she has assimilated herself into the dominant culture; she majored in English; she writes poetry in imitation of a white woman (Sitwell); she longs for middle class materialism; she seeks to neutralize her African American heritage by living with her white boyfriend whom she unsuccessfully wishes she could love in an apartment run by an also white landlady. Despite this, her African American identity haunts her because, in a patriarchy, the father’s self-identification determines the social identification of the child. Sarah’s inability to identify with her father, where her social identification should take place, sets her adrift (Lee 1992:62). Within her violent universe, Sarah is haunted by her selves, all of whom represent archetypes within her collective unconscious. These cathected figures reject Sarah’s ego and, at the same time, she identifies with them completely.

When I am the Duchess of Hapsburg I sit opposite Victoria in my headpiece and we talk. The other time I wear the dress of a student, dark clothes and dark stockings. Victoria always wants me to tell her of whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones. For as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning. Even before my mother’s hair started to fall out. Before she was raped by a wild black beast. Black is evil. As for my self I long to become a more pallid Negro than I am now; pallid like Negroes on the covers of African Negro magazines, soulless, educated and irreligious. I want to possess no moral value, particularly value as to my being. I want not to be. I ask nothing except anonymity. (Kennedy 1969:5-6)

Sarah’s rejection of her identity is evident throughout the play, yet she is cognizant of the selves she becomes. Victoria and the Duchess were both powerful European women and symbolize the dominant culture in America that teaches a distorted view of history. This is a point of view which propagandizes the European patriarchal system. Queen Victoria, despite her power, kept her sex powerless. Sarah’s identification with Victoria not only shows identification with the oppressor but symbolizes a complete repudiation of her African American female identity.

Hair takes on importance throughout the piece, its progressive loss equated with the loss of African-American identity. In folklore hair often symbolizes fertility or power over the person whose enemy might shear it. In this play, which begins with Sarah's mother passing before the closed curtain carrying before her a bald head, various characters lose their hair, which slowly and nightmarishly falls around them. 'Kinky black' hair sticks out from "from beneath both [the Duchess and the Queen] their headpieces spring a handful of wild kinky hair" (2-3), while the long, straight black hair that continually falls out is associated with the Sarah of mixed blood who tries to be as white as possible.

Duchess and Jesus (Their hair is falling more now, they are both hideous.)  
My father isn't going to let us alone. (Knocking) Our father isn't going to let us alone, our father is the darkest of us all, my mother was the fairest, I am in between, but my father is the darkest of them all. Ha is a black man. Our father is the darkest of them all. He is a black man. My father is a dead man.

(Then they suddenly look at each other and scream, the Lights go to their heads and we see that they are totally bald). (Kennedy 1969:19)

Throughout the play, the farther away one gets from 'blackness', the more hair falls out –the whiter the character, the balder. As her female selves lose their hair, the threat of her father's return, of a confrontation with her irreconcilable blackness, grows imminent.

Sarah's search for love and acceptance in the white world offers her no solace or comfort. She admits she doesn't love the Jewish poet, though she responds wildly to Raymond's embrace, even though he is unmoved by her fears and torments. Disarmed and unprotected, an archetypal fallen woman, she begs for love. In spite of this, Raymond watches her suffering and when he discovers her death his only remark is, "She was a funny liar". To him she is an oddity to be observed from a distance (Barnett 1995:146).

The white landlady's scenes (there are three in the play) mark important structural divisions of the plot. She appears toward the beginning and at the end, and she appears at the precise moment the play reaches its climax. She behaves as a corroborating witness, like an innocent bystander responding to an official investigation of the events. Curiously enough, her name, Mrs. Conrad, reminds us of Joseph Conrad who in his *Heart of Darkness* narrates the inaccuracy of a white man to understand the African world.

Not all of Sarah's selves are white. One of them is Patrice Lumumba, the assassinated quintessential African hero. However, the fact that this is a male figure despises her womanness. The persona of Patrice Lumumba, whom Sarah

both adopts and associates with her father, acts as a bridge between Sarah and her father, since “her father hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered” (Kennedy 1969:10). However, when he represents the African man’s noble efforts to save his race we witness the disintegration of Sarah’s personal histories and consequently the destruction of her universe of European antiques as well. Patrice Lumumba repeats Sarah’s words but in a despising way, always adding the adjective “vile” to her utterances, “It is my vile dream to live in rooms with European antiques [...]. They are necessary for me to maintain recognition against myself” (Kennedy 1969:15). Lumumba repudiates Sarah’s rejection of her African American heritage.

Sarah’s own spiritual link with God is Jesus Christ, yet another male. But Jesus is a yellow-skinned hunchback dwarf dressed in white rags and sandals. This self is also linked with her father, who wanted to be Jesus, “to walk in Genesis and save the race [...] and heal the pain of the race, heal the misery of the black man” (Kennedy 1969:20). Like her father, this Jesus made no good either. In their last scene together, Sarah, as Jesus, admits to attempting to escape being non-white, and she vows to go to Africa to kill Patrice Lumumba because she recognizes that her father was an African American man and identifies him with her/his African American father. He literally embodies that blackness that so torments her. It is he who separates Sarah from her white ancestry and the white European royalty she so admires. The Jesus character’s response to discovering the hanged Duchess is a fascinating climax in the play:

I am going to Africa and kill this black man named Patrice Lumumba. Why? Because all my life I believed my Holy Father to be God, but now I know that my father is a black man. I have no fear, for whatever I do, I will do in the name of God. I will do in the name of Albert Saxe Coburg, in the name of Victoria, Queen Victoria Regina, the monarch of England, I will. (Kennedy 1969:19-20)

Not even this Jesus can save Sarah’s identity. God is not his father any more and he wants to kill a noble black man in the name of the white world.

The selves are all potential saviors, but they are destined to fail, for they are strategies of escape; each is a possibility of being other than Negro-Sarah. “As they each successively appear they all too have nimbuses atop their heads in a manner to suggest that they are saviours” (Kennedy 1969:22). In the end, neither the individual alter egos nor their collective ritual can save Sarah from her nightmare. The Jungle scene is the last-ditch effort to keep dreaming. It was Freud who pointed out that the ultimate motive of any dream is to allow the

dreamer to dream- in other words, to “resolve” the crisis that would otherwise require that the dreamer wake and deal consciously with the pressures generating the dream (Scanlan 1991:106-7). Symbolically then the appropriate place for Sarah’s final disintegration is the jungle, which “has overgrown all the other chambers and all the other places with a violence and a dark brightness, a grim yellowness” (Kennedy 1969:22). Her inability to resist the pressures of society and to resolve the conflicts which raged within her is a vivid reminder of the fragile nature of all psychic balance. Her death also emphasizes the perils of evasion and escape as methods of alleviating anguish. By this time the color white has come to be associated, in the masks of the characters and in the lightning, with a deathly pallor and fixation. This deathly white is reinforced by the huge plaster statue of Queen Victoria which looms over the scenes that take place in her room. All of Sarah’s selves appear and they wander about repeating each other’s words, chanting motifs connected with Sarah’s suffering, until the tension reaches fever pitch. After an intense silence, a re-enactment of her father’s murder occurs. At this point the selves suddenly run about, madly laughing and shouting, creating a terrifying image of her complete collapse.

Sarah’s inability to exist at the intersection of resisting realities and images, to unravel their meaning within an African American context, marks her as a person without reality (or within madness). As she had said at the beginning, “everything is a lie” (Kennedy 1969:10). When Raymond and the landlady found her dead we find out that her father may not be dead after all,

Raymond. (Observing her hanging figure.) She was a funny little liar.

Landlady. (Informing him) Her father hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba died.

Raymond. Her father never hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered, I know the man. He is a doctor, married to a white whore. He lives in the city in rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books and oriental carpets. Her father is a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table. (Kennedy 1969:24)

In doing so, her father may be living just the way she wanted her life and her friends to be. As a result of all these conflicting external forces, a battle is waged in Sarah between projected image(s) of self/selves and a real self. These characters are archetypes of oppressors of African American women. The Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria represent the royal line beginning with the Holy Roman Empire. Jesus Christ suggests the religion that became the rationale for conquest. Patrice Lumumba, the martyred leader, represents the emerging African nations. In the play, these figures constantly clash. Thus,

Sarah's identity crisis is at once a crisis with political and social resonance- a legacy of the historical confrontation between whites and non-whites, and between men and women, who have always been denied a social context and a place in history. Sarah's lack of grounding with either of her parents, and her inability to define or identify herself positively, sets the stage for her suicide. Her rejection of African American heritage and womanness lead her to despise her own identity in a failed attempt to "fit in."

The history of the United States is overwhelmingly a history of racial mixing and Adrienne Kennedy's play is a painful reminder of a society's collective denial of this fact. As Homi Bhabha (1994:126) shows, there is a connection between cultural assimilation and falsehood, as he identifies that "mimicry" as a postcolonial device. According to him, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite." In doing so, Anlin Cheng (1997:56) points out, the person trying to "fit in" finds him/herself in the position of melancholy echoing the master, incorporating both the master and his own denigration. Each of the conflicting sides of Kennedy's main character were potential saviors, but her rejection of her identity in a desperate attempt to feel integrated in white society made her fail utterly both as an African American and as a woman. In Étienne Balibar's words, when they call "into question [his/her] personal and social identity, they necessarily call into question the integrity of the body and of the mind, as well as the mutual link of belonging between subjects and their historical and geographical environment [thus crumbling down] one's own identity" (2009:10-11). According to him, the domestic slavery of women as well as the habitual dominations which are part of the very foundations of society or culture are nothing but examples of extreme violence (2009:11). A clear example of extreme psychological violence, Adrienne Kennedy's play exposes the same conflicts African American women were/ are faced with every day. For Sarah, a "living dead" in Balibar's words, life becomes "worse than death or more difficult to live than death itself" (2009:14). *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, although written in 1969, is still a valid reminder of how much we still need to achieve in terms of truly appreciating racial and gender diversity among us.

If we still get to play the "race card", we should then ask ourselves, as Patricia Collins does, if "The Past is Ever Present". Adrienne Kennedy's play may have been a response to those plays which, as Fabre points out, were promoted by the dominant society out of a desire to control its development and its integration in the Marcusian sense of the term, "The entire movement in



theatre from 1965 to 1975 must be understood in light of this contradiction: the dominant society helped to promote black theatre mainly out of a desire to control its development and its integration into existing social structures" (Fabre 1983:15). I now wonder if we are facing a new kind of racism which relies more heavily on the manipulation of ideas within mass media. As Collins puts it, "these new techniques present hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism is over. They work to obscure the racism that does exist, and they undercut antiracist protest. Globalization, transnationalism, and the growth of hegemonic ideologies within mass media provide the context for a new racism that has catalyzed changes within African, Black American, and African-Diasporic societies (2006:49). Nobody should be asked to deny his/her self in order to become a proper member of a society.

## REFERENCES

- Anlin Cheng, Anne. "The melancholy of a Race." *Kenyon Review* 19.1 (1997): 49-61.
- Balibar, Étienne. "Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Anthropology." *Differences* (2009): 9-36.
- . "My Self and my Own: One and the same?" *Accelerating Possession. Global Futures of Property and Personhood*. Eds. Bill Maurer and Gabrielle Schwab. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006: 21-44.
- Barbee, Evelyn L., and Marilyn Little. "Health, Social Class and African-American Women." *Reconstructing Gender. A Multicultural Anthology*. Ed. Estelle Disch. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2006: 559-574.
- Barnett, Claudia. "'This Fundamental Challenge to Identity': Reproduction and Representation in the Drama of Adrienne Kennedy." *Theatre Journal* 48.2 (1995): 141-55.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994: 85-92.
- Bider, Wolfgang. "A MELUS Interview; Adrienne Kennedy." *MELUS* 12.3 (1985): 99-108.
- Bodjadzije, Manuela and Isabelle Saint-Saëns. "Borders, Citizenship, War, Class: A Discussion with Étienne Balibar and Sandro Mezzadra." *New Formations* (2004): 10-30.
- Bornstein, Kate. "Who's on Top?" Eds. Joan Z. Spade and Catherine G. Valentine. Toronto: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2004: 22-30.
- Braxton, Joanne M. "Ancestral Presence: The Outraged Mother Figure in Contemporary Afro-American Writing." *Wild Women in the Whirlwind Afro-American Culture and the* *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 32 (2011): 289-308

- Contemporary Literary Renaissance*. Ed. Baxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990: 299-315.
- Brown, Lorraine A. "For the Characters Are Myself: Adrienne Kennedy's Funnyhouse of a Negro." *Negro American Literature Forum* 9 (1975): 86-88.
- Bryant-Jackson, Paul K. "Kennedy's Travellers in the American and African Continuum." *Intersecting Boundaries. The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*. Eds. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992: 45-57.
- Bryant-Jackson, Paul K., and Lois More Overbeck, eds. *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Carbone, Melissa. "The Concomitant Forces of Placement: Re-Placing the African-American Woman in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *Ohio State Murders*." *Text & Presentation Journal of the Comparative Drama Conference XIV* (1993): 5-10.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "The Past is Ever Present. Recognizing the New Racism." *Reconstructing Gender. A Multicultural Anthology*. Ed. Estelle Disch. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2006: 48-62.
- Curb, Rosemary. "Fragmented Selves in Adrienne Kennedy's Funnyhouse of an American Negro and the Owl Answers." *Theatre Journal* 32.2 (1980): 180-95.
- . "Re/cognition, Re/presentation, Re/creation in Woman-Conscious Drama: The Seer, the Seen, the Scene, the Obscene." *Theatre Journal* 37.3 (1985): 302-16.
- Diamond, Elin. "Rethinking Identification: Kennedy, Freud, Brecht." *The Kenyon Review* 15.2 (1993): 86-99.
- . "An Interview with Adrienne Kennedy." *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present* 4 (1989): 143-57.
- Fabre, Genevieve. *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor, Contemporary Afro-American Theater*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Hatch, James V. and Ted Shine, eds. *Black Theatre USA. Plays by African Americans*. New York: The Free Press, 1996.
- Hodges, Graham Russell, ed. *Race and Gender in the Making of an African American Literary Tradition*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.
- Hurley, Erin. "BLACKOUT: Utopian Technologies in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*" *Modern Drama* 47.2 (Summer 2004): 200-218.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Kennedy, Adrienne. *People Who Led to My Plays*. New York: Knopf, 1987.
- . "A Growth of Images." *The Drama Review* 21.4 (1977): 41-47.
- . *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. New York: Samuel French, 1969.
- . *Funnyhouse of a Negro. The Best Short Plays*. Ed. Stanley Richards. New York: Chilton Book Company, 1970.
- ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 32 (2011): 289-308

- Kintz, Linda. *The Subject's Tragedy. Political Poetics, Feminist Theory, and Drama*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- Kolin, Philip C. and Matthew J. Bruccoli. Preface. *Understanding Adrienne Kennedy*. Columbia, SC: University of South Columbia Press, 2005.
- Koppen, Randi. "Psychoanalytic Enactments: Adrienne Kennedy's Staging's of Memory." *HJEAS* 4.1-2 (1998): 121-34.
- Lee, Knan Bernadette. *Bludgeoning Father's Head: The Politics of Marginality and Oppression in Funnyhouse of a Negro by Adrienne Kennedy*. Diss. University of Florida, 1992.
- Lorber, Judith. *Breaking the Bowls. Degendering and Feminist Change*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.
- McDowell, Deborah. "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." *Black American Literature Forum* (Winter 1980): 153-58.
- McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege and Male Privilege. Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." *The Kaleidoscope of Gender*. Eds. Joan Z. Spade and Catherine G. Valentine. Toronto: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2004: 79-82.
- Meigs, Susan Elizabeth. *No Place but the Funnyhouse: The Struggle for Identity in Three Adrienne Kennedy Plays*. Diss. University of Texas at Austin, 1988.
- Nelson, Jill. "Who is the Fairest of Them All?" *Reconstructing Gender. A Multicultural Anthology*. Ed. Estelle Disch. Boston: Mc Graw Hill, 2006: 137-141.
- Oha, Obododimma. "Her Dissonant Selves: The Semiotics of Plurality and Bisexuality in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*." *American Drama* 6.2 (1997): 67-80.
- Özbek, Özge. "Transformation of African-American Self in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* and *Owl'dom*." *JAST* 18 (2003 Fall): 49-64.
- Richards, Stanley, ed. *The Best Short Plays: 1970*. Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1970.
- Richardson, Janice. "Feminism, Property in the Person and concepts of Self." *BJPIR* 12 (2010): 56-71.
- Scanlan, Robert. "Surrealism as Mimesis: A Director's Guide to Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*." *Intersecting Boundaries. The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*. Eds. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991: 93-112.
- Shinn, Thelma J. "Living the Answer: The Emergence of African American Feminist Drama." *Studies in the Humanities* 17.2 (1990): 149-59.
- Trimmer, Joseph F. *Black American Literature: Notes on the Problem of Definition*. Muncie, Indiana: Ball State University, 1971.
- Washington, Mary Helen. "The Darkened Eye Restored." *Reading Black. Reading Feminist*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates. New York: Penguin Group, 1990.
- Wilkerson, Margaret B. "Diverse Angles of Vision: Two Black Women Playwrights." *Intersecting Boundaries. The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*. Eds. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991: 58-75.

*How to cite this article:*

Ramón, Emilio. “*Funnyhouse of a Negro*: Rejection of Womanness and Blackness as a “Melancholic” Cry for a True Diversity in American Society.” *ES. Revista de Filología Inglesa* 32 (2011): 289-308.

*Author's contact:* emilio.ramon@ucv.es.