

communal identity at the expense of individual interests. David Lionel Smith posits that the quest for “blackness” as a true nature common to all “black” people represents a fundamental theoretical failure (David Lionel Smith, 1991: 96). Hence, a new wave of playwrights like August Wilson, Charles Fuller, George Wolfe, Ntozake Shange, Steve Carter, Suzan-Lori Parks, to name but a few, individually readdressed blackness in a new context. Blackness is no more an absolute concept imposed on all black people, but a multidimensional notion, narrowed to individual sensitivity. It is about self-discovery through one’s artistic representations of black history and experience. However, in a flurry of self-redefinitions the most voiced require punctilious scrutiny.

The objective of this article is to nail the peculiarities of the post-black arts movement drama by exploring its features and visions of blackness. This study, without focusing on any selected play, examines the dramatic structure and thematic evolution in order to circumscribe the dominating trends and uncover the new terms of black identity within this period. The research spans from 1975 to 2005, because 1975 marks the publication date of *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (Shange, Ntozake, 1975), which opens a new dramatic era, whereas in 2005, August Wilson premiered *Radio Golf*, the last play of his ten-play cycle. The methodological tool is postmodernist theory as defined by Linda Hutcheon that [it] ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge (Linda Hutcheon, 1989: 2). It allows to adopt a skeptic regard toward the dominating thoughts. She adds that it seems reasonable to say that “the postmodern’s initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life” (Linda Hutcheon, 1989: 2), like black identity, and to reconsider various marginalized views.

1. The Post-Black Arts Movement Dramatic Form

The post-black arts movement drama rose from the ashes of the black arts movement drama faded away in the mid-1970s. It is featured by the emergence of black playwrights, prior unknown, who published and staged nonconformist plays. They dismissed the current imposing dramatic criteria to adopt freestyle drama marked by unfamiliar methods to craft forms and contents. One of the characteristics of the post-black arts movement drama is its iconoclastic form made up of strange structure, language, symbols, characterization, settings and plots.

Firstly the unconventional dramatic structure concerns visible aspects in the script. While flipping through a play, one can be struck by a discrepant organization. Shange’s *for colored*

girls... is a choreopoem performed by seven ladies bearing the different colors of rainbow and brown. Each poem is considered a section, a fragment of a whole story. Jayanthi says that through this play, Shange projects her independence from the standard theatrical forms (S. Jayanthi, 2017: 325). According to Elizabeth Brown-Guillroy, Shange has successfully broadened and redefined American theater by introducing the choreopoem as an acceptable, and legitimate dramatic form (S. Jayanthi, 2017: 325). Likewise, this iconoclastic structure permeates George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (George Wolfe, 1986). The playwright shares his text into eleven exhibits. Each has its own title, making up a puzzling melange of dialogue, soliloquy, poetry, prose, and music to lampoon the stereotypes. In *Venus* (Suzan-Lori Parks, 1997) the script is unconventionally built according to the playwright's perspective. It comprises thirty-one scenes in a reverse order (from 31 to 1) preceded by an overture. At the opening, there is the "Author's Notes" which draws the readership's attention to Parks's personal dramatic form. Parks says: "[...] I'm continuing the use of my slightly unconventional theatrical elements. Here's a road map." (Suzan-Lori Parks, 1997: ix) The same warning reoccurs in most of her plays including *Topdog/Underdog* (Suzan-Lori Parks, 2002: 3) Thus, Brian Crews stresses, postmodernism is really all about forms of representation... (Brian Crews, 1999: 19) which from Hutcheon's vision, [the forms] destabilize the dominant concepts, including authenticity, epistemic certainty, historical progress, linearity, presence, stability, univocal identity and univocity of meaning. (Mehdi Ghasemi, 2016: 13). Moreover, this dramatic form complexity includes the internal fragmentation and arbitrary reorganization of the plot. In her interview to Serena Anderlini Shange explains that:

I can change performance art when I want to. Before performance theatre we had the same thing every night. The same lines. I don't like that. [*C*]olored Girls.... was never the same at any reading...It defies some theatrical conventions in the sense that we have gone beyond that little story...Performance art is to pull pieces, and put pieces in at will....I need to get back to my own art form. We are not using a conventional theatre. I know the setting that we are going to use, and I designed the piece for it. (Serena Anderlini and Ntosake Shange 1991: 90-91)

Each character in her play lives in a given setting, yet the playwright collects their individual stories and makes up a total body of black American history from her own sensitivity. The succession of the recitations constitutes a kind of dialogue that unfolds each character's life experience highlighting the emotional relationships among them. At this juncture, ArDonna D. Hamilton thinks that though the women live in different settings (places and times) they respond to each other through call-and-response, and sometimes move as a collective (Saran Bellamy

and Lou Bellamy, 2018:16). In so doing, Shange's perception of performance goes beyond linear interactions and appears like a parody (Malcolm Bradbury, 1992:255). Hutcheon elaborates that parody, often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality, is usually considered central to postmodernism (Linda Hutcheon, 1989: 93) and it refers to a value-problematizing, denaturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations (Linda Hutcheon, 1989: 94). From this standpoint, parody as intertextuality can be traced through August Wilson's drama. Wilson affirms: "[W]hat I want to do is place the culture of Black America on stage, to demonstrate that it has the ability to offer sustenance" (Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, 2006: ix). When Wilson decided to write, his aim is to record and put on stage African American history throughout the twentieth century decade by decade. Each play constitutes a collage of black American history residues. In *Gem of the Ocean* (August Wilson, 2006), he portrays a city of bones in the ocean through Aunt Esther. The city recalls the Middle Passage which is only an episode of the whole black slavery history. He emphasizes: "There are hundreds of millions of bones of slaves in chains, entangled in ships. The city is part of all our history, our experience" (Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, 2006: 255) In *The Piano Lesson* (August Wilson, 1990) another portion of the same history appears wrapped in the metaphor of an inherited ancestral piano.

In many other plays, Wilson, through this same character (Aunt Esther) reconstructs the history of black Americans. In his interview with Yvonne Shafer, he asserts that he is essentially a collagist (Yvonne Shafer and August Wilson, 1989: 165). That is, he takes little scraps and pieces of things and out of them discovers and builds the world of a play (Yvonne Shafer and August Wilson, 1989: 165). Parks, similarly employs parody, as fragmentation and intertextuality, to craft a nonlinear plot. Several overlapping points can be pointed out from *The America Play* to *Topdog/Underdog*, to *The Death of the Last Man in the Whole Entire World* (Suzan-Lori Parks, 1995). One striking aspect is the repetitive characterization of Abraham Lincoln which filters through the plays to lampoon the murder of the sixteenth American president. Jochen Achilles observes that:

Re-enactments of Abraham Lincoln's assassination permeate both *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*. Throughout *The America Play* Lincoln is a volatile and sliding signifier. He is referred to as the "Foundling" rather than the "Founding" Father [...] In *Topdog/Underdog* as well as *The America Play*, the historical event of President Lincoln's assassination...and its reverberation emerge as a conflation of plays and games. (Philip C. Kolin, 2010: 111)

Parks has picked some pieces of American history which tells about Abraham Lincoln and uses them as the raw materials for her dramatic texture. In *The America Play*, the sixteenth American president and Founding Father, is ironically referred to as the “Foundling” in quest of paternal love. That is to lament over the president’s assassination. In *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks reinterprets Abraham Lincoln’s death through the character of Lincoln. She endeavors to reconstitute that episode in order to unveil unrecorded facts of America history. Nicole Hodges Persley weaves a link between *The Death of the Last Man in the Whole Entire World* and *The America Play* by uncovering inter-textual references from past and present of American history and African American life. For him, the Founding Father, in both plays, must have a proper burial to place him in the hole of history (Philip C. Kolin, 2010: 74). In other words, the sixteenth American president deserved an honorable sepulture that will be carved in the whole American history. In “Possession” Parks wrote that “Through each line of text I’m rewriting the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divided” (Philip C. Kolin, 2010: 142). By rewriting the history, she ends up repeating and reviewing pieces of the same story. Ghasemi observes that parody in Parks’s drama is over emphasized by the use of “Rep. & Rev. & Ref (Repetition, Revision and Reference) technique. (Mehdi Ghasemi, 2016: 21). Thus this method transforms her dramatic structure which flatly distances itself from the black arts movement dramatic form.

Another salient pattern of the post-black arts movement drama is its language. Contrarily to the explosive and brutal (LeRoi Jones, 1966: 214) linguistic style of the revolutionary drama in the 1960s, the post-black art movement drama is mainly expressive and narrative. It features personal punctuations and extensive usage of vernaculars. Considering the postmodernist scholar Foley’s assertion taken up by Hutcheon that a truth is being told with “facts” to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts [...] that teller—of story or history—also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to the events (Linda Hutcheon, 1989: 59). In order to build that truth, the teller creates his own linguistic style out of the standard language which becomes a manageable flexible tool. It allows him to articulate the truth of his resentment and the reality. Wilson’s drama is a typical illustration, because as Su Shama points out that his oeuvre is epic in scope, emotionally complex and full of lyricism and humor. His early ambition is to reclaim some of the many untold black narratives that have universal resonance. (Su Sharma, 2019: 370). His language is a wide and complex field of metaphors, vernaculars, African languages, double negations, musicals and emotional narratives. Shama overemphasizes that Wilson’s language incorporates emotive expressions,

slangs, and a lot of sexual humor, songs, and animated conversations [that] defy the standard English (Su Sharma, 2019: 370). He goes on that the use of dialect, double negation and slangs provide the play a more natural flavor where expressions are not chained into boring rules of grammar and vocabulary (Su Sharma, 2019: 370). The conversation between Rosa and Troy in *Fences* reads as follow: "Troy Maxon: Death ain't nothing. I done seen him. Done wrasled with him. You can't tell me nothing about death. Death ain't nothing but a fastball... (August Wilson, 1987: 10). These unconventional linguistic patterns build up Wilson's drama. Acronyms, abbreviations and apocope constitute distinctive linguistic traits which loom large in Charles Fuller's *Zooman and the Sign*: "[...] these are kids ain't about nothin', ain't goin' nowhea, and ain't no good". (Charles Fuller, 1982: 6) They also permeate Steve Carter's *Eden* (Steve Carter, 1992) and *House of Shadows* (Steve Carter, 1986) where apocope predominates, whereas acronyms, abbreviations and vernaculars spice up Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*, Shange's *for colored girls...* and Parks's drama. Jocelyn M. Richard, while commenting on Shange's play, asserts that her language denotes her ethnic style of writing. The playwright does not consider the English language restrictions, rather she relies on black polyphonic and rhythmic dialect to create her own diction. Shange explains that: "I don't write because words come out of my brain. I write this way because I hear the words." (Jocelyn M. Richard, 1999: 13). She hears the words and feels them within her interior the vibrations that generate a unique feeling. In this vein, Parks declares that the language of the play should come from people's gut—what they want, what they don't want, what they're going through, what they are not going through, what they are thinking... (Philip C. Kolin, 2010: 48). Thus the language of the post-black arts movement drama emerges from the playwright's inwards. It is his own fabric to shape the content.

2. The Quest Continues

Though the new dramatic movement is structurally distinct, its main interest is a continuum in the quest for black identity, which was in the previous waves, one-dimensionally defined and imposed on black people. The new generation of playwrights reject this mainstreaming notion of identity because it is fundamentally subjective. Parks explains that there is no single 'Black Experience', there is no single 'Black Aesthetic' and there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted. (Philip C. Kolin, 2010: 142) In the same vein, Touré contends that black identity can no more be crafted in rigid tests of authentic blackness (Touré, 2011: 22) because

the post-black is so suggestive a term: It clearly doesn't signify the end of Blackness; it points, instead, to the end of the reign of a narrow, single notion of Blackness. It doesn't mean we're over Blackness; it means we're over our narrow understanding of what Blackness means. (Touré, 2011: 21)

If the spectrum of black identity is infinite, then from postmodernist vision, any single definition is a reaction to the monolithic vision. It is a counteract that delegitimizes the traditional oppressive concept. Still that individual perception of blackness does not spring from emptiness. It has a history and a philosophy like Black Nationalist theory, integrationist, and feminist thought.

2.1. The Nationalist View

Many nationalist playwrights posit that African Americans are distinct and easily identifiable not only because of their physical traits, but for having peculiar ways. Their culture is different because it is a "field of manners...." (Yvonne Shafer and August Wilson, 1989: 170) which highlight their resentment. Wilson explains that [African Americans] do things differently, see the world differently... (Yvonne Shafer and August Wilson, 1989: 170). That is to say, "[we] decorate our houses differently, we have different values. We value style, we value linguistic ability. Everything is different because it speaks to our sensibilities." (Yvonne Shafer and August Wilson, 1989: 170). These manners which reflect black sensibilities are constructed by their history, philosophy, origin, religion, and music. Firstly African American history, notably the transatlantic slavery, has shaped black identity, because the historical knowledge of that trade reveals African decedents to themselves. It awakens their consciousness and allows to identify themselves as a different individual in America. Without shame, their attachment to that debasing past permeates their manners including writings. This means that the way slavery is portrayed by a black American playwright is unique. His interpretation flows out of his resentment and governs his attitudes which is perceivable through character craft.

In Leslie Lee's *The First Breeze of Summer* (Leslie Lee, 1992), Gremmar's ways are the result of the past degrading stories which continue to deeply penetrate her life throughout the play. She blames her grandson, Lou, of being ashamed of his past (Leslie Lee, 1992: 113). Through Gremmar, the audience can see to what extent the playwright is affected by his history. In William Branch's *Baccalaureate* (William Branch, 1992). Mrs Wembley makes it clear to Angela how far black historical knowledge can transform the new generation. Being for many years imbued with African American past life, she ends up revisiting her own image and relationships with other people. It is that shameful past which characterizes Mama's identity in

Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*. Her behavior toward her dead son reveals a connection with her ancestors' life. In the same vein, Wilson, in *The Piano Lesson*, employs a patrimonial piano which carries on a whole body of Boy family's history, to map Boy Willie's and Berniece's attitudes. Though their ways are diverging, the author's target is to highlight how past (piano) impacts the characters' future life. Herald Loomis's seven year enslavement under Joe Turner's cruelty in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* has shaped his philosophy. Marked by that humiliating past, Loomis denies the existence of God, (August Wilson, 1988: 52) and decides to trust himself for salvation. "I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself." (August Wilson, 1988: 93) In his speech, *The Ground on which I Stand*, Wilson energetically insists that black conduct and manners are part of a system that is fueled by its own philosophy, mythology, history, creative motif, social organization and ethos (August Wilson, 2001: 29). Therefore he believes that blacks have their own way of responding to the world, their own values, style, linguistics, their own religion and aesthetics (August Wilson, 2001:30) which must be accepted in America. Besides, when examining black linguistic aspects, one can right away uncover a strong link between history and the vernaculars. The slangs are communicative tools invented to express life experiences. In other words, the unconventional dramatic style which features the post-black arts movement drama is beyond mere structural deviance to operate as a particular medium to express the characters' thoughts and emotions. Thus, the characters can be identified through their individual linguistic ability.

Sylvester, in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (August Wilson, 1984), is principally marked by his linguistic disability. His speech disorder remains his peculiar identity pattern in the play. In addition to this, each character's lexicon is also an intrinsic identity characteristic. It displays the way that character thinks and behaves. As quoted in Harold Bloom's *August Wilson*, that "[e]very dialect is a way of thinking" (Harold Bloom, 2009: 79). The lexicon, the rhythm, the accent, including the vibration of the vocal cord are to each character important identity features. Aunt Esther's language, throughout seven plays out of Wilson's ten-play-cycle, labels her world. She embodies hope, because her speeches and attitudes are for other characters a source full of promises. Her conversation with Sterling in *Two Trains Running* (August Wilson, 1992), and in *Radio Golf* (August Wilson, 2007), has reinforced Sterling's determination to steadily work for himself. Henry Louis Gates, made an insightful observation that "[t]he black vernacular has assumed the singular role as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue." (Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 1988: xix). Therefore, African American tongue is a key aspect of identity. It is the manifestation of life experience. Likewise, black

music, and black religion constitute, in the post black-arts dramatic wave, the media to cast blackness as a peculiar black culture in America.

2.2.The Integrationist Stance

Early in her career, Suzan-Lori Parks declared that “We are not Africans, but African Americans” (Nina Byam, ed., 2003: 2606) When she defines herself as a mixed entity, made up of complex African and American materials, her target is to break with the traditional notion of race. She does not see black identity through empirical lenses, because she believes race does not exist. As Richard J. Perry asserts that “Race is not. The idea that human biological differences show distinct boundaries that define separate populations is a fallacy.” (Richard J. Perry, 2007: 1) Parks’s stance is a bold response to the patriarchal conception which she determinedly endeavors to redefine by reconstructing African American history. The integrationist dramatists, notably Parks, reshape blackness by re-contextualizing black ways. They refer to history, music, religion, language, philosophy, which characterize black manners as common values. Because they are not peculiar to black people, but they are a sum total of ways including borrowed ones.

The black slave trade is not exclusively a black matter. It is the whole human race history, because its atrocity is too tremendous to be contained among black people only. The playwright Carter, in *House of Shadows*, when re-historicizing the black enslavement story, he emphasizes its multidimensional effects on human being in general. In the following extract, he shows how characters from different horizons are victims of slavery.

ERIC: Them doors even look special. All them funny-looking statues and stuff on ‘em...

HECTOR: Them’s carvin’s...I don’t know what you talkin’ ‘bout. Just tell me how I get in them rooms.

CASSIE: You really want to look?

MARY: No! No! There’s nothing in my room. Only a lot of dead memories. Old secrets that should never come out. Old wounds that should not bleed again. The past keeps that door locked. It’s sealed with the nails of memory. [...] Ghosts that will not sleep. Ghosts that have been waiting to be free. (Steve Carter, 1984: 37)

Mary is a white character, Hector is a Latin young boy, whereas Eric and Cassie are Blacks. The two little boys, Eric and Hector, are in quest of the key to open and look into the sealed room. They want to dig into the past to unearth the slave narratives kept secret in that room. Though Mary, the octogenarian woman, is the slaveholder’s daughter, she cannot bear the horror of the slavery memories. Her psychological and physical crippling in addition to her

infantile attitude constitute the enslavement side effects from which she cannot recover. Consequently, the black slave trade has caused so awful collateral damage that it has become more than a trivial matter that entirely concerns black people. Franklin made an insightful remark that:

The most distinctive feature of United States history is Afro-American slavery and its consequences. The truth is at the heart of our political, economic and social experience as a nation-state. It is also at the heart of our culture experience and therefore the slave narrative like Afro-American culture in general is not peripheral, but central to American culture. (Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, 1979: 242).

In light of this quotation above, black history is adopted as American cultural experience. The task of the post black-arts integrationist playwrights is to move black matters so long considered peripheral to the center. In so doing, they deconstruct the traditional frustrating concepts and offer a new perspective to redefine blackness. Historiography, in this dramatic wave, becomes a process of denying one-dimensionally constructed historical concepts, in order to reconsider the American collective memory. Parks posits that:

African American history is scattered, confused, lost. On their journey through the Middle Passage, Kin-Seer, another choric voice, articulate the trauma of black memory—the destruction and creation of it through theatre pieces and how black people fit onto all this—is my primary artistic concern (Philip C. Kolin, 2010: 46).

Her project to reconstruct black trampled past through dramatic performance is twofold. By rebuilding black history, she reconstitutes at the same time the collective American memory which she sees incomplete. It contains “Great Hole of History” (Philip C. Kolin, 2010: 142) because it lacks black history. So she “reworks pieces from the canon of Western drama, situating black characters into the narratives where previously they were not represented”, (Philip C. Kolin, 2010: 141) to fill up that great hole. Therefore the integrationist playwrights hybridize black identity which they define as a dynamic notion. That dynamism also permeates black music and religion which are a complex mixture of African and western ways.

CONCLUSION

This study has focused on the post-black arts movement drama, which, in this very document, covers a three decade span (from 1975 to 2005). Its objective was to explore the peculiar dramatic structural aspects, and dig into its content in order to highlight black identities. Basing on Linda Hutcheon’s postmodernist vision, the investigation firstly reveals that this dramatic wave is particularly featured by freestyle structures that break with the rigidity of the 1960s

movement. Meaning that the use of unconventional patterns in plot, language, and characterization, triggers the emergence of marginalized voices and makes room for them in the sun. Moreover, the traditional monolithic perception of blackness is discredited. It becomes an active notion carried on by two preeminent thoughts: nationalist and integrationist. The former advocates black cultural richnesses and uniqueness, whereas the latter believes in black cultural hybridity.

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