

Weight of the Mask: Parody and the Heritage of Minstrelsy in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

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In his study *Parody: Critical Concepts Versus Literary Practices*, *Aristophanes to Sterne*, Joseph Dane argues that “the choice of the word ‘parody’ and its attendant definitions or descriptions is no less a commitment for the literary historian than the proclamation of a political stance.”¹ Dane’s statement seems particularly applicable to the manner in which parody can be studied within an African-American theatrical context. Parody is unavoidably connected to the political as well as literary dimensions of African-American dramatic tradition, especially in terms of the minstrelsy legacy. Eventual black appropriations of early performances of whites in blackface have inevitably complicated the politics of blackface on the stage and have provided models for more recent black dramatists’ parodic inversions of minstrel figures. Written over a hundred years after black, blackface performances such as those of the famed Williams and Walker team, new renditions of minstrelsy, materializing in roughly the last three decades in African-American drama, revisit the tradition of rewriting the menace of the blackface mask. Such contemporary rehearsals of black blackface minstrelsy confront the complex relationship of African-American ontology and the heritage of white and black American blackface minstrelsy performance. Thus the vision of parody as political is of vital importance to understanding, in particular, the political and social complexities of playwrights like Adrienne Kennedy, whose (re)visions of blackface minstrelsy are most striking in her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962). Through this play we can see a contemporary rendition of masking that repositions notions of parody and enables us to recognize African Americans as shaped by the force of history in terms of blackface minstrelsy—a heritage not easily or even necessarily avoided. Neither is this heritage completely understood, as a study of this play suggests, for the legacy of blackface minstrelsy may both underwrite and undermine polarized notions of sexual and racial identities. While Kennedy clearly recognizes that a polarized vision of racial selves may be reminiscent of, but not limited to, dichotomized notions of blackness as primitive/emotional and whiteness as advanced/rational, in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, she succeeds in addressing this duality by revealing a dynamic and unwieldy third space inscribed in the complex play of parodic masking.

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Use of parody has proven to be a particularly effective conduit for African-American cultural and political resistance. As such borrowings are best evident in the microcosm of the American minstrelsy phenomenon, a brief historical example of the workings of minstrel parody can demonstrate African-American appropriation in an African-American theatre context. Consider the case of William Henry Lane (known as Master Juba), an African American who “corked up” (used burnt cork to blacken his face) in 1841 to earn a living with the P.T. Barnum circus.² This black man in blackface eventually became so effective at imitating whites imitating blacks that in 1844-45 he engaged in a number of dancing duels. He competed with any dancer, black or white, but most notably with the self-proclaimed and publicly acknowledged best white blackface minstrel dancer living, John Diamond. Ultimately, Lane’s dances were consistently declared as better at imitating whites imitating black dance than any dance imitation that Diamond himself could muster up.³ Significantly, while performing in white minstrel shows and exhibitions, Lane, through a wily reversal, constructed a transgressive form of self-representation in that he eventually became the one and only black dancer accepted and known as black on the white stage in the 1840s.⁴ This redirection through parody of the potency of minstrelsy illustrates the necessity in black art and performance to create a presence out of the negative, a presence, though conflicted, that insists upon recognition.

Theorizing the Mask

In order to effectively approach the performative concept of parody from this “political stance” as it might apply to African-American drama and, particularly, to Kennedy’s radical rewriting of blackface, it is helpful to look at Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the discursive implications of parody as they might relate to Henry Louis Gates’s discussions of “Signifyin’,” where Signifyin’ is itself seen as a black hermeneutics of the parodic performance. In terms of the conflicts inherent in black appropriation of parody, the necessary notion of exposing what might be deemed a hostile relationship between the codes of the parodied and the parodying is best explained in Bakhtin’s series of discussions on discourse. Bakhtin recognizes the antagonistic processes of parody in his analysis of three categories of discourse. For him, parody as an operative in the third type of discourse, the “double-voiced,” goes beyond humorous repetition or simplistic ridicule; parody implements additional operations that effectuate a conflictual interaction in the parodic process. Bakhtin conceives of the “original” (that which is parodied) as a polemical force, not only acted upon, but also acting. The “original” influences the “secondary” (that which parodies or reproduces it), creating an antagonistic intercourse between the two. Bakhtin explains that in parodic narration “discourse becomes an arena of battle between two voices.”⁵ Significantly, his recognition of the defining conflictual nature of parodic discourse is particularly suited to African-American literary

tradition; parody's double-voicedness takes on a special significance since it may directly engage the cultural and social necessity of double-consciousness in the African-American experience.

In relation to this connection, Henry Louis Gates considers in detail Bakhtin's conclusions in his *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self* and again in his *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates applies Bakhtin's concept of double-voiced discourse as part of his analysis of parody and its relationship to black hermeneutics. Repetition and revision (the essence of Signifyin') are, Gates argues, fundamental operatives in African-American adaptations of parody. The Bakhtinian parodic narration or hidden internal polemic operates effectively in African-American literary tradition where "relationships [are] based on the sorts of repetition and revision inherent in parody and pastiche."⁶ In Gates's view, then, narrative parody is immediately tied to Signifyin'.

But more significantly in terms of minstrelsy, Bakhtin's concept of the "hidden polemic" seems crucially linked to heightened forms of masking in black stage performance. Indistinct, reflective, and mutually affective, parody is a quintessential force in the doubling effects of an African-American penchant toward the indirect and becomes a process of bicultural repetition and revision, particularly exacerbated by the ontological layering necessitated in staged black versions of blackface minstrelsy. Such a relationship allows for the original and secondary to be bound up in an inextricable interplay of self-construction with a twist of inter-dependency here that is both ironic and resistant to definable borders.

The hidden polemic working within the mask is thus uniquely appropriate in terms of African-American theatrical history, a history unavoidably impacted by the enigma of minstrelsy. In terms of the distorted parody of black culture inscribed in blackface and then doubled back upon itself through black artists' signifyin' performances of blackface, the dual-voiced discourse of parody becomes a series of self-reflective repetitions. These repetitions embody textually the workings of an indistinct "original" and "secondary" conflictually bound in the process of interrogating the meaning of the original while tinting the meaning of the secondary. Neither is free of the other's influence, producing a kind of precarious interaction where each might, at times frighteningly, ratify the other's purpose. Ultimately, the double bind inscribed in an African-American confrontation with the specter of blackface minstrelsy, as Kennedy attempts in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, emerges: how can one establish out of the violence and terror of American racist performatives some redemptive or at least productive figurations of black life and culture on the stage?

Such a project is historically essential since refusal to take on the ominous mechanisms of blackface would be at the same time to allow them to flourish without dispute.⁷ Early in the twentieth century, for example, Bert Williams and George W. Walker (partners in the famed Williams and Walker black minstrel team)

attempted to confront artistic weaknesses in the white performance of blackface as a way of turning the minstrelsy phenomenon to their own advantage. Walker, in his 1906 article "The Negro on the American Stage," explains that "nothing about these white men's action was natural and therefore nothing was as interesting as if black performers had been dancing and singing their own songs in their own way."⁸ Both men were interested in what they recognized as a need for authenticity and were convinced that this could only occur through black renditions of blackness. Walker continues, "We finally decided that as white men with blackfaces were billing themselves as 'coons,' Williams and Walker would do well to bill themselves the 'Two Real Coons.'"⁹

Both were, however, quite aware of the risks of such an endeavor. Walker illustrates an astute awareness of the contradictions black performers faced as they corked their own faces and attempted to reproduce the ludicrous, demeaning humor of white blackface minstrelsy. Walker observes that "blackfaced white comedians used to make themselves look as ridiculous as they could when portraying a 'darker' character. . . . Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself."¹⁰ Walker also seemed to recognize that there was a certain power in appropriating the medium, of protesting its negative implications through a kind of ownership. He describes the attempt to ameliorate race image through the unwieldy powers of such parody: "My partner, Mr. Williams, is the first man I know of our race to attempt to delineate a 'darker' in a perfectly natural way, and I think much of his success is due to this fact."¹¹ Out-performing white performers of blackface thus offered an opportunity early in the century for black actors, such as Williams and Walker, to appropriate and in some ways redefine the demeaning devices of this medium of racism.

Still, contradictions inherent in Walker's own conclusions about Williams's efforts to recreate the "real darker" are, as with more recent attempts such as Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, deeply troubling. Any attempt to reproduce blackface, no matter how radicalized, includes a certain recognition of a form that is, through its characteristics, wont to undermine in some ways any challenge of it. This risk exists because of the insidious implications inherent in the more common figures of minstrel performances such as the good-humored, ignorant, shuffling, plantation darker Jim Crow, or the uneducated, bombastic, urban slick Zip Coon. The following excerpt from "Root, Hog, or Die," a minstrel song performed in the early 1800s by white minstrels such as Billy Emerson or Dan Emmett from the Virginia Minstrels, illustrates such seemingly simplistic, yet frightful, images of what were considered the "natural" attributes of blacks.

I'se de happiest darkee on de top ob de earth,
I get fat as possum in de time ob de dearth,

Like a pig in a tater patch, dar let me lie,
Way down in old Virginy, where it's Root, hog, or die.

De Boston dandies, dey look so very grand,
Old clothes hand me down, gloves upon de hand,
High heel boots, moustaches round de eye,
A perfect sick family ob Root, hog, or die.¹²

In the first verse, the happy darky expresses joy in his capacity to eat as much as he wants until he gets “fat as a possum.” This construction also slyly reinforces images of generous and supportive slave masters who do not let their darkies starve; on the contrary, whites must feed them in spite of their incurable laziness. Also, likening a darky to possums and pigs determines his place, conjuring up images of slavery where humans are livestock. The next verse shifts abruptly, suggesting another alternative behavior for blacks, that of ridiculous imitation of propertied, genteel whites. Here the black figure fares no better. His is a lack of style, a lack of intelligent comportment, or authenticity inherent to his race. Yet the verses also imply that either figure is completely responsible for his own survival “to root . . . or die.” This contradiction is the crux of the black individual’s need to create a medium of double consciousness, the struggle with self that Kennedy ultimately works to address in her adaptation of blackface. The mask offers a way of addressing colliding expectations and characterizations of African-American personhood with the realities of social condition. Here then is the predicament; the black psyche confronting blackface minstrelsy becomes an allegory for the dilemma of African Americans in their struggle to address American racism and all that it represents and promulgates.

Notably, contemporary African-American playwrights have recognized the ironic relationship existing between blackface and African-American performance. Other than Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse* (1962), of the nearly uncountable allusions and references to blackface that occur in contemporary African-American drama, two 1960s plays, Douglas Turner Ward’s *Day of Absence* (1966) and Paul Carter Harrison’s *Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel* (1963), attempt directly recognizable and sustained parodies of blackface where images or forms of blackface exist onstage throughout the plays.¹³ In both of these instances, the rewriting of blackface establishes and emphasizes a black presence on the stage that attempts to expose and protest against perpetuation of the racist social behavior inscribed in minstrelsy. *Day of Absence*, for example, depicts the tumult and anarchy that occurs in a small, southern, white town when all the “nigras” (who work as servants, shoe shine boys, maintenance workers, janitors) disappear for one day. In the initial stage directions the play calls for the white characters to be portrayed by blacks in whiteface: “the play is conceived for performance by a Negro cast, a reverse minstrel

show done in white face” and “race members are urged to go for broke, yet not to ham it up too broadly.”¹⁴ This reversal is ironic terrain for examining racist stereotypical positioning of both blacks and whites. Character Mayor Henry Lee describes remedies he has taken to quell the chaos as the citizens search desperately for their “nigras” in a city paralyzed by an absence of workers and servants.

In an unusual, but bold, maneuver we have appealed to the NAACP ‘n all other Nigra conspirators to help us get to the bottom of the vanishing act. . . . We have exercised our non-reciprocal option and requested that all fraternal Southern states express their solidarity by lending us some of their Nigras temporarily on credit. . . . We have already gotten consent from the Governor to round up all stray, excess and incorrigible Nigras to be shipped to us under escort of the state militia.¹⁵

The white mayor here obviously posits stereotypical representations of the character of blacks and their value to his town. For Lee, if blacks are not working, they are conspirators or incorrigible worthless vagrants; their only use is in service to whites. At the same time, Lee is also exposing his own place within the stereotyping paradigm. In his racialized view of blacks, he reveals himself as bigoted, ignorant, selfish, and overbearing—much like Northern stereotypical characterizations of Southern whites, for example. Ward’s juxtaposition of the two vehement visions of blackness and whiteness reverberates with the doubled meaning of blackface minstrelsy because the whiteface characters are ultimately black underneath, and the irony of these actors playing the roles of bigoted whites fundamentally engages the unfounded, questionable, constructed function of stereotype. Ultimately, however, this irony in *Day of Absence* does little more than suggest that things should or could be different. The actions and developments of the characters do not in any consistent way challenge the materiality of race but rather accentuate and protest the ludicrous inequities and assumptions of racist difference.

(Re)Fusing Parodic Boundaries

Kennedy in *Funnyhouse*, on the other hand, reaches beyond protest dimensions of black appropriations of minstrelsy introduced in early African-American blackface minstrel troupe performances and in approaches such as those of Ward in *Day of Absence*. She transcends these by stressing the deconstructive potential of parody and thus creates a radical insistence upon not only an acknowledged, black presence on the stage as an agitation against racialized performance, but also the further political possibilities of new productive spaces within masking acts. In these spaces African Americans may both defy and redefine American racist and, for black female playwrights particularly, sexist definitions of the body.

Funnyhouse examines the uncontrollable anxiety of a bi-racial, young woman. The play presents the character Sarah (also identified as The Negro) struggling, as the rest of her family has, against the disintegrating effects of inter/intra-racial bigotry and sexism. Her mother, a very light skinned, sexually frigid, black woman, is institutionalized, driven insane from being raped by her sexually frustrated, extremely dark husband. The mother exclaims, "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."¹⁶ Sarah's mother's frigidity and loss of "her beauty, her straight hair,"¹⁷ are signs of deeply imbedded alienation in an assimilated, light-skinned, African American who has no emotional capacity to accept the darkness of her husband.

Sarah, like her mother, is characterized as recently noticing a frightening loss of her own hair. This condition is an indication of the difficulties she is encountering psychologically as a result of her own propensity to reject black skin and to glorify whiteness as a skin color, a culture, and a kind of religion: "it is my dream to live in rooms of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table. I will visit my friends' apartments which will contain books, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos, and oriental carpets. My friends will be white."¹⁸

Sarah, surrounded by the emblems of elitist European culture, cherishes her glass table as a kind of sacrificial altar with ceremonial meals offered up on its cold, white surface. Oriental carpets, a library of books, a piano, all represent a bourgeois conception of the good life; the details of the rooms also smack of an imperialism operating to procure such luxury. And her attempt at glorification of Western culture through the recognition of lifeless Roman ruins suggests the abortive nature of European influence in her experience. The things she wishes for and her insistence on white friends at the beginning of the play present her dilemma as a racially mixed, thoroughly assimilated Negro in a racist culture. Sarah says she needs white friends "as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro. For, like all educated Negroes—out of life and death essential—I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself."¹⁹

But the necessity to run from the self makes a fragile consciousness even more so. This character's already piecemeal personality progressively disintegrates in the play as she comes more and more to recognize the significant power of blackness in her life; ultimately, she is portrayed as at least six personalities in the play. Her inability to integrate the self because of her racialized past demonstrates that, in denying blackness, Sarah denies herself, her mother, and her father. Her identity is bound up in the question of what role her black family history must play in the larger scheme of her self-comprehension. As the quote below illustrates, although ironically aware of the implications of embracing an identity of the "pallid

Negro,” she wishes to be such a Negro and/or, ultimately, cease to exist: “as for myself I long to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now; pallid like Negroes on the covers of American Negro magazines; soulless, educated and irreligious. I want to possess no moral value, particularly as to my being. I want not to be.”²⁰

Sarah’s adamant, unanswerable desire to be pallid and/or not “be” reveals Kennedy’s interest in challenging simplistic notions of racial and gendered binaries, black faces (op)posing white faces. In spite of the misery caused by Sarah’s undefined boundaries in identity, for Kennedy, Sarah’s loss of a racial and psychological, unified self actually offers new venues of protest and cultural engagement, alternative spaces for negotiation of what had become in the 1960s trenchantly dichotomized views of race in America. Through the polemics of parody—in this play, parody of polarized racial identity expressed through bi-racial, or blackened, figures who appear in whiteface—Kennedy can, then, attempt to produce ameliorative configurations out of racist constructions such as those that Sarah internalizes.

For Kennedy, as for other black artists who have attempted to rewrite the meanings foisted upon them by racist stereotypes, revision of blackface minstrelsy offers moments of cultural/artistic redefinition within the singular domain of drama, performer, stage, and audience. Kennedy’s masked bi-racial female characters exemplify most consistently in *Funnyhouse* a transgressive third space; her re-masking of minstrelsy is both a declaration of presence and a potential moment for revision of the negative. Re-framing race as outside of the black/white binary allows Kennedy to see an “in-between” within her appropriation of blackface. This in-between becomes a “beyond” that, as Homi Bhabha suggests, provides “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.”²¹ For example, elided and eliding boundaries of racial identity determine Sarah’s dilemma: “He is the darkest, my father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest. I am in between.”²² Yet such newly positioned self-recognition can also offer Sarah a fresh venue for negotiating that dilemma.

The epistemological weight of the mask is further evident in *Funnyhouse*, when Kennedy, like Ward in *Day of Absence*, reverses traditional, American white blackface minstrelsy by positioning her bi-racial black characters behind white masks. Her emphasis on the details of “masking the mask” adds, however, a new dimension to earlier appropriations of minstrelsy by forcing a highly pitched, more complex staging of whiteness. Kennedy here approaches the slippery slope of the minstrel mask, marking what David Krasner observes as its “room for ambivalence.”²³ This enhanced reversal of blackface in the play engages, again, Bakhtin’s hostile relationship of the original and the secondary by not only protesting, but also subverting constraining American constructions of African-

American racial inferiority. Through this insistence on “white” as fabricated, Kennedy challenges the obvious comfort zone of American white blackface minstrelsy where blackness can be quickly and easily wiped away to reveal a consoling, reaffirming and pre-eminent whiteness. She, rather, underpins whiteness with an immanent darkness, incomprehensible and unrecognizable to whites, inescapable for blacks. Although such reversal risks in some ways the perpetuation of stereotyped blacks as the inscrutable Other, this strategy also singles out and elucidates the unavoidable interdependencies of blackness and whiteness, a representation suited to the peculiar complexities inherent in the mixed-race, white-faced, multiple personalities of Kennedy’s character Sarah.

Sarah’s selves in *Funnyhouse* have lost a sense of social definition precisely because Kennedy insists in her play upon the materiality of whiteness, as well as blackness, in the American racial matrix. If, in America, materiality of blackness is most visible, while whiteness as the “normal” is invisible, then Kennedy’s characters in whiteface confound the invisibility of whiteness by making it emphatically apparent. However, while whiteness here is interrogated, it is also an object of desire for Sarah and her selves because for them blackness is at the same time unavoidably present. As a result, Sarah in whiteface cannot escape the irony of the binary, subverting and, in a Bakhtinian reversal, privileging the object of scrutiny and further complicating her own interstitial locations. This irreducibility is perhaps the most eloquently expressed aspect of Sarah’s anguished existence.

The predominant image of whiteness in *Funnyhouse*, for Sarah, is thus inescapable. Marked by their whitened outer color, two of Sarah’s selves, Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, are described in stage directions as follows:

their faces look exactly alike and will wear masks or be made up to be whitish yellow. It is an alabaster face, the skin drawn tightly over the high cheekbones, great dark eyes that seem gouged out of the head, a high forehead, a full red mouth and a head of frizzy hair. If the characters do not wear a mask then the face must be highly powdered and possess a hard expressionless quality and a stillness as in the face of death.²⁴

Emphasis here on bold facial features reiterates similar exaggerations of blackface minstrels. Much as George Walker contended in 1906 in his observations on minstrel performances, historical descriptions characterize the makeup practices of minstrelsy consistently as “always . . . distinguished by an unusually large mouth and a peculiar kind of broad grin.”²⁵ These performers had their faces “‘made up’ with big lips . . . , [and] exercised great care in fixing their mouths. . . . These big lips and the distended mouth helped accentuate their shining white teeth.”²⁶ The deep black cork of blackface makeup also accentuated the whites of the eyes, and the performers distinguished themselves by “grimacing . . . to the accompaniment

of various clever or grotesque steps . . . which sometimes became indescribably eccentric gyrations."²⁷ Performers also availed themselves of a number of accessories, using boxes of "burnt cork . . . , and special 'scare' or 'fright' wigs to make the hair stand on end at will."²⁸

Clearly Kennedy is emphasizing the obvious similarities that can be construed from the masking in the above cases. Yet, in the instance of minstrelsy, the exaggeration of black cork, huge lips, and kinky hair evokes a fascinating, but unacceptable, black physicality; color and augmented features are here marks of commodification, production of blackness for the consumption, control, and cultural assent of white audiences. On the other hand, for Kennedy the blackness pouring through the "great dark eyes gouged out of the head" in the "highly powdered" white faces of Sarah's selves is primarily unmanageable, representative of what Eric Lott calls the "unruly resonances of blackness and femaleness" in American experience.²⁹ This blackness is unruly for Sarah because she cannot manage awareness of her black blood and ultimately is consumed by her need to both confront and flee its existence. Blackness as an operative of her multiple personalities is perhaps one of the most powerful justifications for the "hard expressionless quality and a stillness as in the face of death" that reside in the masked faces of Sarah's selves. Black blood exists as an emblem of Sarah's torture, her inability to find resolutions to personal, cultural, and racial conflicts that her position as a mulatto in a racist society demands of her:

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 was evil.³⁰

Ultimately, the "stillness as in the face of death" in the masks that Sarah's selves must wear predicts her inability to address effectively the multiple difficulties of her bi-racial, bi-cultural position and foreshadows her complete loss of self, with suicide as her final release.

Gender, another kind of mask that Sarah must challenge, is also deeply significant to her crises while at the same time raising the question of sexual identity as a convolution of blackface minstrelsy. Kennedy's development of both male and female selves for Sarah raises aspects of minstrel parody where gender becomes the visual/material as politic. Historically, gender parody in the blackface minstrelsy tradition was, as Annemarie Bean observes, "the portrayal of femininity in its most

elaborate form—that of a blackened, cross-dressed white male minstrel portraying an ultra feminine prima donna female impersonator.”³¹ Such characters were very popular among minstrel companies, with female impersonators by mid-1800s becoming as important to most shows as their Interlocutor or their endmen.³² Primarily two types of female impersonators were characterized on the minstrel stage, the mulatta wench and the prima donna. Both constructed images of desire and eroticism with a concomitant implication of femininity and manageability, conversant qualities that created for the audience a “sexuality saved from disappearance and contained by the white male body at the same time.”³³ The complication of gender construction in the development of blackface minstrel masking offered white males, then, an additional avenue for instituting and re-affirming dominance. In addition to racial superiority, gender-crossing minstrels thus sought an empowered position in white male superiority as well. Not surprisingly, during the heyday of blackface minstrelsy the wench and the prima donna were immensely popular and influential; they titillated male and female audiences, constructing boldly sexual images rendered relatively harmless and controllable within the portrayal of disempowered, black female figures. This provocative masked performance rehearsed in effect the dynamics of what Judith Butler describes as normative power where “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.”³⁴ Butler’s recognition of parody as a sign of the constructed, performative nature of gender and, by extrapolation, of race illuminates further the possibility of a third space opened up by the instability of the parodic.

In *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy, through her own re-doubling of minstrel masked gender parody, reverses the outcome of traditional blackface minstrel female impersonation. She evades, via her bi-gendered whiteface Sarah figure, a dominant reification of racially, sexually informed identity politics.³⁵ At the same time, Kennedy’s Sarah figure further problematizes identity construction by addressing head-on the impact of politico-cultural and socio-economic forces upon racial and sexual determinacy. A nexus of sexist and racist victimization, Sarah is subject to multiple oppressions, first illustrated in the play through the threat of patriarchy concretized in the act of rape; secondly, challenged by the very assumption of male identity in three of Sarah’s selves; thirdly, parodied through the complex juxtaposition of larger-than-life colonial figures that rehearse the politicized dynamics of black-over-white masking.

Sarah’s female selves dread the coming of their father as “the blackest of them all,” for he is to them the black rapist who ostensibly threatens the whiteness in their womanhood, like that of their mother.³⁶ Ideological fear of black rape conjoins Sarah to white women as stereotypical objects of male desire in general and as

particularly vulnerable to black male sexual violence. Yet in her rehearsal of white (fe)male fear of black, male sexuality, Sarah ultimately participates in the construction of a white womanhood that at the same time eludes her. Kennedy seems to suggest here that European, female figures of power such as the Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria who inhabit Sarah's identity offer Sarah a false sense of strength against the threat of her black father, reaffirmed by and reaffirming Sarah's fear of and revulsion toward male, physical domination defined here as well by race. Significantly, gender parody in this play can thus strategically address both issues—the struggle against female disempowerment compounded by a futile search for racial authenticity.

Kennedy, through three male figures as Sarah's selves—Man, Jesus, and Lumumba—answers these two issues by collapsing gender definition and, at the same time, complicating the questions further through Sarah's ironic fascination with blackness and her confused acceptance/rejection of white colonial, and Christian, tradition. Sarah's self as Man (appearing initially as the "Man," then the "unidentified Man,") is the first male fragment of her conflicted identity.³⁷ In creating this male self, Kennedy precipitates a gender shift that suggests Sarah's intense, reluctant need to in some ways accept, be one with, or be her father—to embrace his threatening blackness. As a result, Sarah also suffers an excruciating distancing from the authentic female, who for her is everything her mother was not: white, powerful, European. Interestingly, through this transgression of gender boundaries, Sarah begins to maneuver more freely among her selves and perhaps initially to view her world differently. She leaves a tenuous sense of security underwritten by whiteness-as-the-familiar, female, dominant, and enters the "wilderness" of her blackness which she equates with the maleness of her father and of Man. This final gravitation toward a blackness that she cannot reconcile with her whiteness, and toward a maleness that she cannot ultimately effectively relate to her femaleness, aggravates Sarah's self-hatred, causing her hair to fall out and, ultimately, pressing her to suicide. She moves away from merely mistrusting to despising her white friends and to destroying whiteness as herself, a whiteness that is in her imagination decidedly Western and female.

At the same time, this parody of maleness within femaleness suggests the amorphous nature of cultural as well as gendered boundaries. The second male self, Jesus-as-Sarah, is an even more potent use of gendered masking, creating a self for Sarah so disfigured that he is reminiscent of the most exaggerated white blackface caricatures. Sarah as Jesus is "a hunchback, yellow-skinned dwarf, dressed in white rags and sandals."³⁸ Characterizing this Christian icon, this ultimate male symbol of the Christian church, as a corrupted, faded vision is merely the beginning of Kennedy's subversion and conversion of Jesus into a figure that will convey and challenge the complexities of racism, sexism, and cultural domination. Jesus-as-Sarah attempts frantically to negotiate his position in the in-between. His hair,

like that of all Sarah's selves, is falling out rapidly. He and the Duchess are forced to try to prevent further losses:

JESUS: My hair (*The Duchess does not speak, Jesus again screams.*) My hair. . . . (*Holding [his] hair up, waiting for a reaction from the Duchess.*)
 DUCHESS: When I awakened I found it fallen out, not all of it but a mass that lay on my white pillow. I could see, although my hair hung down at the sides, clearly on my white scalp it was missing. . . . *She sits on the bench next to Jesus and starts to comb her remaining hair over her baldness. . . . Jesus then takes the comb and proceeds to do the same to the Duchess of Hapsburg's hair.*³⁹

These male and female selves for Sarah are irrepressibly linked by this loss. As two figures historically implicated in the proliferation of European cultural dominance, both Jesus and the Duchess create for Sarah a moment in staving off the impending arrival of blackness as a real part of her psychic existence while raising issues concerning Sarah as a confluence of sexism, racism, and imperialism.

The realization of this confluence culminates in the synergetic figures of Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, and Patrice Lumumba, characters who, while reiterating the fluidity of gender boundaries, interrogate directly the racial and political implications of Western colonial domination and function as perhaps the oppositional selves who demonstrate most powerfully the "hidden polemic" within minstrel masking. Queen Victoria and the Duchess emerge as loci of power informed by contemporary global experiences of patriarchal imperialism and racism.⁴⁰ They are dominant white figures, superimposed upon blackness, symbolizing the political imposition of European power over black—read African here—society.

Queen Victoria clearly resonates in the play as an icon of Western dominance. Her statue is a central prop in Sarah's small room; she is the first character to speak, and is described by the Duchess as "Queen Victoria Regina, Monarch of England."⁴¹ Historically, she is an appropriate figure for portraying England's most active involvement in global colonial domination. While Queen of England, Victoria saw the establishment of protectorates, settlements, governmental authority over or outright annexation of an outrageously high number of countries, including the following: New Zealand, Western Pacific Islands, India, Cyprus, Malay States, Egypt, Sudan, Gold Coast, Gambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, Boer Republic. Victoria reigned during the most organized period of British domination culminating in the well-orchestrated direction of the British Home Office. Her image as female icon of power for Sarah, who is a well-read college student steeped in European culture, is informed by the nuances of history.⁴² But Victoria, as a historically criticized and challenged political figurehead in the colonial period, is also ultimately revealed as corrupt in Sarah's understanding.

The Queen is described at the end of the play in terms of a statue again, this time with telling detail: "The main prop is the statue. . . . The figure of Victoria, is a sitting figure, one of astonishing repulsive whiteness, suggested by the dusty volumes of books and old yellowed walls."⁴³ For Sarah there is no relief in taking on the semblance of Victoria's mask of empowerment. It is a mask corrupted by racism and imperialism, outdated in its stance, anachronistic in self-conscious self-aggrandizement.

Interestingly enough, even with such emphasis on the image of Queen Victoria in *Funnyhouse*, the Duchess of Hapsburg is actually the most visible character of these two politically implicated female figures in the play. The Duchess appears in almost every scene, emphatically and consistently re-iterating the onus of European colonial domination. She bemoans the loss of her hair, stridently criticizes the black racist father, imperiously establishes her presence: "How dare he enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one?"⁴⁴ In this characterization of the Duchess of Hapsburg, Kennedy most likely alludes to Maria Theresa of the eighteenth century Hapsburgs, Archduchess of Austria, Queen of Hungary and Bohemia. Like Victoria, Maria was bent upon preserving and expanding her empire. During her reign she battled challenges against her control over Hungary and ultimately acquired part of Poland through an alliance with Russia and Prussia. Both Victoria's and the Duchess's masks simulate some of the most commanding of historical moments in colonial domination and in female empowerment. But the hidden polemic inscribed in their masking-as-Sarah insists upon acknowledging the black Sarah underneath that whiteness, ironically revealing how these two royal selves violently obtrude upon Sarah's blackness, how they impose a destructive self-hatred, raising the stakes of ever attaining any personal resolution.

In significant juxtaposition to these figures of Western domination is the third of Sarah's male selves, Patrice Lumumba. As an imposing international figure of black, male, political power, he serves as a contrast to white European figures of imperialism. Kennedy's characterization of Lumumba is informed by his historical image as a man of revolutionary action in colonial Africa. An angry opponent of imperialism and resistant political leader of the National Congolese Movement, Lumumba worked fiercely during the 1950s for absolute independence of the Congo from Belgian colonization. Through his efforts and those of many Congolese grassroots organizations, Belgium eventually was compelled to grant the Congo independence in 1960. Lumumba became the Congo's first Prime Minister and was assassinated less than a year later. He remained for his people, however, a revered, courageous leader and political idealist. He, ultimately, has become for black people around the world a powerful symbol of resistance to Western colonization, openly admired for his brave efforts toward a hard-fought independence for his country.⁴⁵

Kennedy, in choosing Lumumba as a male Sarah, offers a radically different kind of empowerment for Sarah's oppressed psyche. Sarah's tenuous goal of embracing her blackness seems momentarily attainable through this figure who, in contradicting the image of the colonized, castrated black male, may also contradict her oppressive fear of her own blackness (or black father) and her subjugated sensibility as an assimilated mixed-race female. In taking on the identity of Lumumba, Sarah interrupts disempowerment as both female and black, looking to the historical Africa her father loved so much that he traveled there to "heal the race, heal the misery;" to help "the black man to make a pure statement . . . to rise from colonialism."⁴⁶ Sarah's futile attempts to reach out to her father and thus embrace her blackness are, however, as doomed as the fates of her father and of Lumumba, the former living to his old age in suicidal self-loathing and disappointment, the latter sporting a head "split in two with blood and tissue in [his] eyes" and carrying his "ebony mask."⁴⁷ It is this mask that tips us off to a moment imbued in double-voiced parody. The "ebony mask" is the minstrel mask as donned by the black performer, undermining white dominance through the appropriative act, but still forcing blackness to operate from within the strictures of a racist and demeaning dramatic moment. Kennedy thus characterizes the Lumumba self, while momentarily a hopeful figure, as ultimately unable to go the distance in saving Sarah from disastrous, self-imposed strictures of black meaning. Like Jesus, who is deformed, weakened, irresolute, Lumumba roams the play sporting a split skull and a useless ebony mask. He is a mournful shadow of his historical profile. As a part of the finally victimized Lumumba, the ebony mask is an empty vessel further demonstrating the impotency of Sarah's struggle against the enduring impetus of white colonial imperialism that she has internalized, a white hate for and concomitant need to dominate that which is black.

Thus even the most promising of Sarah's selves cannot transcend the ultimately debilitating impact of multiple oppressions. In her troubled but ultimate acceptance—and in fact perverted glorification—of dominant European racial ideologies, she participates in her own oppression. This entanglement of locations exposes yet another dimension of the debilitating effects of sexist and racist oppression and its impact on the presence, identity, and psychological health of African-American women. Through the multiple masks that Sarah wears as her selves, Kennedy engages in the third space questions of self-incrimination, both gendered and racial.

The Funnyhouse in Context

In spite of the ambiguities inscribed in Kennedy's portrayal of Sarah's psychic disunity—or perhaps because of them—it is important to emphasize that, as male, female, black, and white, Sarah is a ground-breaking characterization in Kennedy's early drama. Through the character Sarah, Kennedy is able to confront the issues

of dual oppression endured by African-American women but not readily considered by black male playwrights and critics when this play was first published in 1964. Kennedy wrote her early works as a contemporary of such well-known black revolutionary dramatists as Imamu Amiri Baraka, Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, and Larry Neal.⁴⁸ Unlike the plays of these celebrated artists, however, Kennedy's drama was not well received at a time when the Black Power Movement strongly criticized any efforts by black women to work toward their own personal liberation as a serious detraction to the greater cause of liberation of the black race (read black male).⁴⁹ Kennedy through her masked, parodic figures in *Funnyhouse* and the development of oppressed female characters in several other of her plays (for example, *The Owl Answers*, *A Rat's Mass*, *A Lesson in Dead Language*, *A Beast's Story*) courageously insists upon a recognition of the double bind of racial and sexual domination that black women could/can not avoid.⁵⁰

In addition, Kennedy's extreme depictions of black female characters in plays of the 1960's and 1970's recognize and articulate racial and sexual oppression in a way unprecedented for black militant dramatists by interrogating racism and sexism in an intensely personal manner. Rather than invoking a generic, almost monolithic, collective black experience as more recognized black revolutionary drama of the period does, *Funnyhouse* through its emphasis on the search for Sarah's selves acts out a subconscious, primitive vision of the racialized, sexualized self.⁵¹ This vision explores and privileges individual black experience—even autobiographical experience, a radical writing of a self into existence—as a necessary part of Kennedy's rendition of African-American protest.⁵² And it is in this strategy that Kennedy perhaps most distinguishes herself. In her early 1960s (re)-vision of blackface, a seizure of the interstitial as new terrain for interrogating American racism and sexism, Kennedy provides a startling pre-figuration of postmodern drama. Disruptive, jarring, full of gaps and indeterminacies, her works explore experimental form and content—incoherent characters and sets; unconventional, stylized/poetic language; open, incomplete plots, repetition and symbol; masking—in order to first and foremost confront and deconstruct binding ideological binaries such as subject/object, white/black, male/female. In this, she differs radically from other black revolutionary playwrights of her time, as they, in their own kind of grand narrative, emphasized rather than interrogated the above binaries as representative of and proof for American racial and sexual polarization.

Thus in *Funnyhouse*, where Sarah fails to achieve a synthesis of racial and sexual selves that may offer some resolution for her psyche, Kennedy still succeeds in moving away from her own limited historical positioning within the black arts movement toward a careful exposition of a new space, the interstitial as possibility, the in-between as inevitable terrain for the interrogation of racial/sexual politics. *Funnyhouse*, as her first play, illustrates to us the originality and richness of Kennedy's vision even in a time when the postmodern was unfamiliar to many and

certainly antithetical to the political ambitions and artistic aesthetics of the black revolutionary period. In this unique approach, Kennedy re-produces the manner in which early black performers attempted to re-appropriate within an antagonistic environment the complex dynamics of blackface minstrelsy as a way of declaring a new kind of black presence. But, as illustrated, her work goes beyond the mere establishment of presence. It demonstrates a clearly original postmodern bent toward developing innovative ways not just to confront American racial history but also to derive contested spaces out of destructive constructions of African-American racial and sexual identity, a terrain so uncharted as to offer moments of intellectual and psychological risk as well as moments of personal clarity.

As a result of this perceptivity, Adrienne Kennedy is a playwright who at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century is finally beginning to receive credit for the complex manner in which she views and has always viewed American race politics. In *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy's parodic masking begins the journey toward new ways of addressing American sexual and racial ontologies, particularly since the play engages early on what we now see as a vigorous trend in criticism concerning the recuperative powers of African-American Signifyin'. Her unusual position of having historically been both inside and outside of African-American dramatic tradition perhaps echoes in some ironic manner the way in which minstrelsy itself has been regarded as both inside and outside of American theatrical history. As with the recent burgeoning critical interest in the significance of American minstrel heritage, the new resurgence of interest in the powerful yet inscrutable role that Kennedy has played in the making of African-American theatre and of American theatre in general is long overdue. Unlike the mixed effects of minstrelsy heritage, however, Kennedy's impact on African-American theatre is one of deeply positive implications. She has created and then revitalized interest in the uniquely experimental and symbolic in African-American drama while maintaining a stance steeped in African-American historical experience and endurance. And because her primary characters are almost always female, as in the case of *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy through her adaptations of the minstrel mask is at the same time, as early as 1963, able to interrogate women's issues that are still today center stage in African-American literary discourse. She brought to the immediacy of her audience black feminist issues, including family struggle, self actualization, male-female relationships, intraracial bigotry and sexism, issues that currently continue to demand attention of black women writers.⁵³

Ultimately, then, with *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy launches her drama-writing career by forever impacting American theatre, acknowledging, through her uniquely symbolic appropriation of blackface minstrelsy, the African-American artistic tradition of parody and its capacity to engage a multiplicity of challenges. Thus her return to the blackface mask is a potent exposition of the cultural as well as personal African-American will-to-survive so evidenced through historical

confrontations with the troubled heritage of minstrelsy, so revelatory in its seemingly endless capacity to artistically appropriate that which appears bent upon its destruction.

Notes

1. Joseph A. Dane, *Parody: Critical Concepts Versus Literary Practice, Aristophanes to Sterne* (Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma P, 1988) 23.

2. Lane undoubtedly acquired his stage name from the dance most often attributed to early Negro stage performance, an African cultural survival *giouba* step-dance similar to a jig that became known as *juba* or *jube* among slaves and their descendants. For an extensive and informative discussion of Lane and the development of *Juba* in American blackface minstrelsy, see Marian Hannah Winter, "Juba and American Minstrelsy," *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1996) 223-241.

3. Winter 226.

4. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1974) 43.

5. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Disclosure in Dostoevsky," *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 193.

6. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 110.

7. For a thorough investigation of the complex dynamics of American blackface minstrelsy, see the numerous essays on its history, political climate, structure, humor, music, dance, and concerns with gender and class in Bean, Hatch, and McNamara. For an alternative, more conservative view, see William Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and American Antebellum Culture* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1999). David Krasner also offers a convincing analysis of blackface minstrelsy as part of his study *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African-American Theatre 1805-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

8. George Walker, "The Negro on the American Stage," *The Colored American Magazine* 10 (1906): 244-5.

9. Walker 246.

10. 248.

11. 248.

12. Daley Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth, eds., "*Gentlemen, Be Seated!*": *A Parade of the Old-time Minstrels* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1928) 47.

13. Ntozake Shange in her play *Spell #7* adapts minstrelsy also with a purpose to create new spaces out of racism working from within the African-American community. Although her play is not a sustained parody of blackface, her acknowledgement in both her play and her critical writing of the complexities of African-American artists addressing the potential of blackface merits an article in itself.

14. Douglas Turner Ward, *Day of Absence*, *New Black Playwrights*, ed. William Couch, Jr. (New York: Avon Books, 1971) 47.
15. Ward 73.
16. Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *In One Act* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 4.
17. Kennedy 14.
18. 6.
19. 6.
20. 5.
21. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 1-2.
22. Kennedy 11.
23. Krasner 160.
24. Kennedy 3.
25. Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, N.C., Duke UP, 1930) 8.
26. Wittke 141.
27. 141.
28. 141.
29. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 28.
30. Kennedy 5.
31. Bean 245.
32. 247.
33. 246.
34. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 2.
35. For a specific look at the multiple meanings of Sarah's selves, see Obododimma Oha's "Her Dissonant Selves: The Semiotics of Plurality and Bisexuality in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*," *American Drama* 6.2 (1997): 67-80.
36. Kennedy 3.
37. 11-12.
38. 7.
39. 16-17.
40. For a specialized analysis of the colonization trope in Kennedy's play, see Janet Winston, "Queen Victoria in the *Funnyhouse*: Adrienne Kennedy and the Rituals of Colonial Possession," *Remaking Queen Victoria*, ed. Margaret Humans and Adrienne Munich (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 235-257.
41. Kennedy 3.
42. Christopher Hebert's *Queen Victoria: A Personal History* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) is a valuable source on the detailed life and reign of Queen Victoria.
43. Kennedy 22.

44. 3.

45. For an informative description of Lumumba's life and work see Robin McKown, *Lumumba: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

46. Kennedy 14-15.

47. 7.

48. Historical and critical discussions of these playwrights can be found in Samuel Hay, *African-American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994); and Michael Kaufman, "The Delicate World of Reprobation: A Note on the Black Revolutionary Theater," *The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Erroll Hill (New York: Applause Book, 1987) 192-209.

49. For a sample of powerful observations by women of the period on the masculinist stance of black males toward the liberation of black women, see two chapters, "Civil Rights and Women's Liberation: Racial/Sexual Politics in the Angry Decades" and "Discourses of Resistance: Interrogating Black Nationalist Ideologies," in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995). Also see Calvin Hernton, "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers," *The Black Scholar* (July/Aug. 1985): 3-11; and bell hooks, "The Imperialism of Patriarchy," *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston: South End Press, 1981) 87-117.

50. Only one other female playwright of the period dealt consistently with the dual struggle of black women. See Sonia Sanchez's plays: *The Bronx is Next*, *Sister Son/ji*, and *Uh Huh, But How Do it Free Us?*

51. The Black Revolutionary Theater Movement was primarily informed by Black Nationalist philosophy, which insisted, "all art must be revolutionary and in being revolutionary it must be collective, committing, and functional" (Maulana Karenga, "On Black Art," *Black Theatre* 4 [1970]: 9-10). Black revolutionary aesthetics demanded that artists structure their visions toward the revolutionary needs of all of the black community and emphatically discouraged personal vision.

52. Kennedy expresses her sense of the personal and its importance in the politics of literature in her unique autobiography *People Who Led to My Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987).

53. A few examples of the many contemporary works that continue to address womanist and feminist issues so uniquely introduced in Kennedy's drama include: bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990); H. L. Gates, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Meridian Books, 1990); Stanlie James and Abena Busia, *Theorizing Black Feminisms* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1994); Hazel Carby, "White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 110-28; Sheila Radford-Hill, *Further to Fly: Black Women and the Politics of Empowerment* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000).