

## Violence, Tragedy, and Race in Kia Corthron's *Wake Up, Lou Riser*

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Kia Corthron's play *Wake Up, Lou Riser* asks us to consider questions of justice, especially in the U.S. context of racial oppression. Although not published nor widely produced, *Wake Up, Lou Riser* provides an example of both dramatic literature and theatrical experience, which complicates and challenges our understanding of our culture, our history, and our present. This early play of Corthron's also reveals themes and issues, which appear in her other works, including *Breath, Boom* (her most-produced play), *Seeking the Genesis*, and *Come Down Burning*, which has been anthologized in two popular anthologies of plays by African Americans and women of color.

*Wake Up, Lou Riser* is a play about four young black women and a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Through the presentation of this story, the situation of these young women focuses our attention not only on historical circumstances, but also on the function of justice and questions about issues of justice within a racist and sexist culture. Corthron's play highlights and creatively reiterates the tragic situation of black women within U.S. culture.<sup>1</sup> There are three ways in which the play evokes tragedy as a genre. First, the play structurally links to classical tragedy through its plot, which contains devices such as revenge, blood feud, and mistaken assumptions. Second, the situation in which the Kaylor sisters find themselves in scene three is representative of the tragic situation of racism. Racism, in this play and in Corthron's other works, directly or indirectly contributes to the difficulties that her characters experience. In other words, when the characters must deal with violence and/or death, individual or institutional racism is usually the precipitating factor. Finally, Corthron's use of violence, particularly retold violence, connects the play to classical tragedy.

This current work examines how *Wake Up, Lou Riser* critiques the failures of a liberal democratic society and how that failure creates a tragic situation for peoples of African descent in the U.S. The actions of the four young women are then examined using Frantz Fanon's notion of revolutionary violence. Finally, I

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address questions of justice in a racist and sexist context—both the seeking of justice and the possibilities for the realization of justice.

Addressing such issues as these is not uncommon in Corthron's work. Her most recent play, *Breath, Boom*, tells the story of the life of the leader of a girl-gang, including her time in prison; an earlier play, *Seeking the Genesis*, asks questions about violence in children and the nature of that violence. *Life By Asphyxiation* tackles questions about the death penalty. *Wake Up Lou Riser*, one of Corthron's early plays, was produced at Circle Rep Lab in 1992, and received the Delaware Theatre Company's Connections Award in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Her next plays, *Come Down Burning* and *Cage Rhythm*, were part of the workshop series at Long Wharf Theatre, and she then developed *Cage Rhythm* for the Crossroads Genesis Festival; her works have become more and more widely produced, Off-Broadway and in regional theatres, across the country.

*Wake Up Lou Riser* is not a historical play, although it does echo the historical situation of black Americans, in general, and black women, in particular. The play is written in three scenes. In Scene One, five black children are staying alone while their parents are away at a wedding. There is only one boy, Owen, who is a seventeen-year-old high school senior. His sisters are Boot, his closest sibling, who is a year behind him; Anj, the eldest (twenty-four); Trace, the next oldest (twenty); and Cory, who is twelve. Owen is outraged at the Ku Klux Klan rally, which is taking place in their Southern town the next day. He wants to make a statement, and he and Boot decide to impersonate Klansmen and infiltrate the rally. Trace encourages them and jokingly agrees to make their outfits for them.

This is not the first time Owen and Boot have attended a Klan event. We discover early in the play that, the previous year, they went to the rally and cross burning on the hill and, hidden by darkness, watched the entire event from a few feet away. They no longer threaten Owen: "Cuza all the horror stories 'bout 'em, my spine did tingle when I first seen those hoods. But after that: they was nothin'. Boot and me gaggin' ourselves so we don't laugh out loud."<sup>3</sup> He feels that if he and Boot (they do most things together) infiltrate the Klan, that they could not possibly be harmed. He is, however, very serious about stopping the Klan parade.

Anj and Trace, on the other hand, do not feel that there is anything they can do about the rally; after all, it is the Klan's constitutional right to hold such a public meeting. Owen is obsessed with the Klan, as evidenced by both his late-night trip up the mountain the previous year and his insistence on infiltrating this rally. Anj is the only one of the siblings who opposes the plan. The scene ends with Anj's objection and Trace's agreement to help. At a crucial point during the march, Owen plans that he and Boot will leave the march for the sidelines, remove the gloves that hide their race, and raise their fists in a black power salute.

The second scene is the rally, where we meet Lou Riser, head of the local Klan, and a variety of other Klansmen and women including Mrs. Grey, the high

school English teacher, and Rodney, who has only recently graduated from their high school. Boot and Owen arrive at the rally wearing their hoods, of course, so that they are not identified as black. They are the only ones wearing hoods. Out of a sense of pride in Klan membership, we learn, the members no longer wear hoods. Owen's plans hinge upon his understanding of the workings of the Klan. The no-hoods rule makes it impossible for them to "hide" among the Klan members because it is obvious that they are not regular members. They call even more attention to themselves by their crude robes and their seemingly formal gloves. There is so much interest in them, Owen has to spend a significant amount of time talking to Klan leader Riser. He has to explain that he and Boot are from Virginia (which is why they are wearing gloves).

Owen is also exposed to the various philosophies of these Klan members; they are not unitary, and some are quite different from what he has imagined. Of all the members, Mrs. Grey is the most "reasonable;" she opposes the more contemporary, violent racist organizations. "Separation is one thing, violence, brutality – something else. I don't go for it."<sup>4</sup> Rodney keeps insisting that Owen and Boot remove their hoods, but his elders let the siblings slide. It looks like they will get away with their plan, but as the march begins, a little girl (who had been walking around with a small black doll hanging from a noose on a stick) pulls Owen's hood off. He is identified, and he and Boot run away. Mrs. Grey, the pacifist, says "Hope that was the funniest joke you ever pulled. Nigger. Wait."<sup>5</sup>

When the third scene of the play opens, we discover Cory, dressed in a black cape and hood (reverse Klan attire), and we hear Riser's screams from offstage. The girls bring him blindfolded into the space. The audience sees that Boot carries a pistol, Trace has a knife, Anj has a rope that she tosses over a tree branch and forms a noose. They proceed to threaten and torture Riser throughout the scene. As the torture continues, we discover that the Klan kidnapped Owen from his room and murdered him. Though Riser at first denies any role in Owen's death, he eventually gives the sisters what they want: a confession — but only after they put his head in the noose and are ready to pull the chair out from under him. The meaning of the play's title is revealed at this point: when the Klan members came to get Owen, they told him, "Wake up, Owen Kaylor." Riser recounts the murder, and, at the end of his recounting, the sisters yank the chair out from under him.

Before Riser is fatally injured, the sisters change their minds about killing him. Cory grabs Riser's body and holds it so that it is no longer hanging. Riser is not dead, only unconscious. They then debate about what they could possibly do at this point. If they kill him, they will likely be found out; if they let him live, he can certainly identify them. They decide to take the risk of being identified, cut Riser down, and leave him to be found by the police.

**Liberalism, Law and Punishment**

The Kaylor sisters' situation reflects the historic situation of women of African descent in the U.S. In cases involving the Klan, the legal system has been notoriously slow in bringing suspected murderers to trial, when it has acted at all. To cite one recent example, it took nearly forty years for the last of the Klan members responsible for the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham to be tried and convicted. Corthron chooses to have the Kaylor sisters respond to their brother's murder with violence, rather than waiting for the legal system. She also has them choose not to kill him.

Corthron's dramaturgical choice points out that the law is not in favor of the oppressed. The Kaylor family has no recourse within a legal system that has historically demonstrated this point. Peter Fitzpatrick, in his essay "Racism and the Innocence of Law," states that "the very foundational principles of law as liberal legality import racism into law."<sup>6</sup> While our icon of Justice is blindfolded, the actual practice of law has not been blind to race. In fact, as David Theo Goldberg points out in his *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*,

This is the central paradox. . . of modernity: The more explicitly universal modernity's commitments, the more open it is to and the more determined it is by the likes of racial specificity and racist exclusivity. Liberalism . . . has become the defining doctrine of self and society for modernity. The way in which racial characterizations are articulated in and through, and so come in part to define liberalism, will thus serve to locate this paradox at the center of the modern project.<sup>7</sup>

Liberalism's appeal to equality is made possible through its systematic racist exclusions; in other words, the foundation of law, residing in liberalism, carries into its practice the racism that undergirds it.<sup>8</sup> The "universal" man remains the white European man, and all others attain universality only to the extent that they attempt to embody that "universal." It carries the belief that people are judged as individuals and that the system is blind to race, gender, or class, in spite of the fact that race is not an irrelevant category. The ideology of liberalism (equality, individuality) reveals itself to be a myth; it is believed that difference among individuals has no bearing on their political or legal status. However, race as a category retains a central place within culture and does indeed have bearing on the political and legal status of individuals.

The stark reality of the differences that race plays in the American legal system is evidence of the practical effects of the ideology of liberalism. Race has long played a role in the choice to prosecute, the ability to attain conviction, and in the sentencing of individuals. While some Klan members have been tried for murder

and assault, it is only recently that there have been consistent convictions. Within the play, the Klan's murder of Owen is expected to go unpunished, echoing more than a century of unpunished violence against U.S. blacks by white mobs. The sisters also feel the effects: part of their decision to cut Riser down from his noose lies in the knowledge that they are more likely to be prosecuted for his murder than for him to be prosecuted for Owen's. It also implies that the value of Riser's life is higher than that of Owen, or of his sisters.

These circumstances point out boldly the historical predicament of blacks when faced with mob violence from whites. Not only were blacks more likely to be prosecuted, but they were also more heavily penalized when prosecuted for crimes against whites; this is still the case. Whites were essentially immune from prosecution in cases of lynching until 1968 (as Cory states in the play).<sup>9</sup> Within the legal/justice system of the United States, particularly in the South (where the play takes place) there is little precedent for the prosecution of this kind of murder. Consider how long it took for the murderers of Medgar Evars, Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley to be prosecuted, much less successfully. Several other cases involving the murders of Civil Rights Activists remain unsolved and may remain so as witnesses age, forget, or die.

As an audience, we understand that because of the history of alleged lack of evidence against Klan members, the legal system will fail to prosecute Owen's murderer(s). We understand that the town has acted in bad faith, knowing who is responsible but behaving as though it does not. Because we understand the historic situation of the legal system and its historic lack of prosecution of those who lynch, it makes sense that the only alternative is for the sisters to act—to become the moral law that acts against the murder. The victims of his crime, Owen's sisters, are Lou Riser's only punishers. They act as judge, jury, and executioner, and ultimately, even as the governor providing a last minute stay of execution. The situation of the Kaylor sisters echoes Antigone's agonizing decision to obey moral law (the laws of the gods, which require her brother's burial) rather than society's law (Kreon's order that Polyneices not be buried). She concludes that Kreon's law is unjust and chooses to act in keeping with moral law. Historically, black women in the U.S. have also needed to act outside of the law because it denies them justice due to their race and gender. Many historical texts written about black women in the U.S. elucidate their struggles against violence. Angela Davis's *Women Race and Class*, Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter*, and Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America* all recount the exasperating circumstances of black women who were unable to prosecute the white men who had perpetrated violence against them. The historical reality demonstrates a tacit acceptance of lynching: perpetrators of such horrors were typically known, yet rarely prosecuted.<sup>10</sup> Black women could not appeal to the legal system, but rather were required either to live with the results

of such violence (i.e., the loss of loved ones, unwanted pregnancy, etc.) or to find ways outside of conventional legal methods to exact justice.

Corthron's protagonists act outside the law in order to see justice. But what exactly is justice, in this case? The play asks us as an audience to consider the meaning of justice in an unjust system. On an existential level, as the third act opens and the play reaches its climax, the audience is implicated in the sisters' decision and in the murder of Owen. We understand the sisters' inclination to treat their brother's murderer the way that he was treated and their desire not for punishment, but retribution. Although, historically, black women have not had the "satisfaction" of the punishment of—or retribution upon—the perpetrators, the Kaylor sisters occupy a different place. They may not have the opportunity to have Riser and the Klan legally punished, but they might be able to exact retribution—an eye for an eye, torture for torture, murder for murder. We also understand, as an audience, that their vigilante "justice" can never truly be justice. What might be the appropriate punishment for Riser? Is it the death penalty? In other words, do we feel that the sisters are justified in their attempt to kill Riser? As we consider these questions in the context of the play, they resonate strongly (especially at the beginning of the twenty-first century) with the larger issues of justice, "punishment," and retribution.

These three issues—justice, punishment, and retribution—continue to form the core of Corthron's dramas. She challenges us as an audience to explore and define the concept of justice in different contexts. For example, in *Splash Hatch on the E Going Down*, Corthron challenges us to define environmental justice. What are the implications of Erry's lead poisoning or Shaneequa's asthma? If they are connected to an institutional racism that permits environmental hazards in communities of the poor, then how can Thyme possibly attain "justice"? What is the appropriate punishment for *Breath, Boom's* Prix, who Corthron describes as "a mass murderer?"<sup>11</sup> None of the answers to these questions are simple, and Corthron leaves her audience to ponder the answers, in the hope that she has motivated them to think differently.

### Elements of Tragedy

As is abundantly clear in Mary Karen Dahl's *Political Violence in Drama*, violence is related to tragedy as a genre, and this play is both violent and tragic. Dahl points out that while there was not a physical presentation or representation of violence on the Greek stage, there was a plethora of retold violence that occurred offstage.<sup>12</sup> Corthron's plays, including and especially *Lou Riser*, draw (consciously or not) upon plot elements and situations that we also find in the plays of Sophocles and Euripides: the retelling or relating of violence that has occurred offstage; a sacrifice that initiates a blood feud; and a ritual "sacrifice" that results in the "healing" of the community.<sup>13</sup>

One of the implications of Corthron's invoking of tragedy as a genre is that it encourages her audience to take the events and characters in her plays seriously. Corthron is dedicated to drama as a path to social change; as she says, her plays always start "with a political impetus."<sup>14</sup> Tragedy is appropriate to evoke emotion from its audience, and by evoking the emotions that accompany tragedy—pity and fear—the audience should be moved to a catharsis. In this case, we hope that the catharsis educates and motivates the audience toward social change and social justice.

Corthron provides us with both retold violence and staged violence in *Lou Riser*. The presence of staged violence adds another dimension to Corthron's play. Phenomenologically, the staging of violence (and the pain that results from violence) "invades, and is in turn invaded by, the perceptual actuality of pain in a way that foregrounds the uncanny circuitry and ambiguity of dramatic representation itself."<sup>15</sup> This phenomenological experience is true not only of the watching of actual violence, but also in the hearing of violence described or retold.

Riser's description of Owen's murder is a chilling account, made more immediate by the fact that the audience watches as the actor playing Riser stands on a chair with a noose around his neck, and the Kaylor sisters stand around the chair ready to pull it out from under him. Under duress, he relates:

pull you outa bed nigger scream monkey scream slap them 'cuffs  
twelve -year p'lice force 'cuffs slap on ya sweat blackie scream  
cry I kick you in your fuckin' black balls I slap slap you knock  
aroun' your fuckin' black fuckin' ugly face ape face blood all  
over it let's tie you to the backa the pick-up awhile drive aroun'  
drag your ass aroun' blood black red body, rope 'roun' your neck  
gun to your head we pullin' a trick, cock the trigger to your head  
move it last second and shoot away but you scream cry like you  
think we got anything less than the noose intended for you.<sup>16</sup>

After the sisters cut him down and he regains consciousness, he continues his "confession": "Dragged him back of a pick-up for a mile, beat him, kick him, hard to find a place on his face not bruised, bleedin'. Both, and . . . rope 'round his neck, I'm puttin' it around, thinkin' he out cold and the rascal digs his teeth way into my finger, way into the Jesus bone break the skin, break the bone Jesus . . . Strong man."<sup>17</sup>

When Corthron wrote this play, she had no way of knowing how prescient this image would be. Today, the image created by Riser in this recounting brings another image to mind for an audience, that of the murder of James Byrd, Jr., who was beaten, tied up, and dragged behind a pickup truck in Jasper, Texas, in 1998.<sup>18</sup>

This image contradicts any desire we may have, as an audience, to deny that this kind of murder still occurs.

Owen was not afraid of the Klan; his lack of respect for their potential violence amounts to hubris on his part. His belief in their benignity is a mistaken assumption on his part. This mistaken assumption is the inciting incident for the play. When violence appears in classical tragedy, an element of sacrifice is usually involved. As Dahl points out, the *Orestia*'s blood feuds emerge out of an initial (albeit erroneous or otherwise incorrect) sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> In Corthron's play, it is possible to see Owen's death as an incorrect initial sacrifice that begins the blood feud. Therefore, his sisters can avenge his murder; retribution must answer it; the sisters become like Aeschylus's Fates, seeking Riser's blood in payment for Owen's death.

The chronicle of the sisters' violence is certainly chilling, but, then again, the violence done to Owen offsets it. It is also the means by which they are transformed. The nature of violence both contaminates and transforms the violent. The girls are transformed from executioners (which, I argue, was their original intent) to a tribunal. They are the Furies who become the Eumenides after the "trial" of Riser. The representative bloodletting (token amounts) does not end anyone's life, but is a method by which all of the participants in the ritual are cleansed.

### **Justifying Revolutionary Violence**

The violence in which the Kaylor sisters engage also relates to the tragic nature of their situation. As Fanon argues, colonialism is a tragic situation. While blacks in the U.S. were not colonized in the same way as Africans were colonized in Africa, the situations are analogous. While not strictly colonial, many of the psychological and social elements of colonial systems were and are present for blacks. Fanon explores the uses of revolutionary violence in his classic text *The Wretched of the Earth*. Decolonization requires violence:

Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies. Their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together—that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler—was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons.<sup>20</sup>

The situation of blacks in the U.S. has typically been one in which this dynamic is present. Because race and racial oppression are also fundamental to the colonial system, revolutionary and post-colonial theories have long been useful in understanding the situation of blacks in the U.S. As Bob Blauner asserts,



The colonial order in the modern world has been based on the dominance of white Westerners over non-Western people of color; racial oppression and the racial conflict to which it gives rise are endemic to it, much as class exploitation and conflict are fundamental to capitalist societies. Western colonialism brought into existence the present-day patterns of racial stratification, in the United States, as elsewhere, it was a colonial experience that generated the lineup of ethnic and racial division.<sup>21</sup>

The sisters' violence relates to their status as black within a culture that is both racist and sexist. The blood feud in which they participate is not only the immediate one that Owen's murder instigates, but also one that extends to the beginnings of the colonial order, indeed to the earliest days of the American colonies and republic. Violence marks the encounters between the Klan and Owen and between the sisters and Riser. The Klan's violence against Owen is clearly the result of racial oppression. The violence of the sisters against Riser is also the result of racial oppression: the sisters are obligated to avenge their brother's murder, which is a response to the Klan's racism.

How, aside from meeting violence with violence, can the oppressed act against the oppressor? Two things characterized the nonviolent Civil Rights movement in the U.S.: attempts on the part of blacks to achieve equality through the courts (legally) and the violence of the police and white supremacists in resisting those efforts. The Civil Rights movement was followed by a much more militant Black Power movement, which did not hesitate to advocate violence in the face of violence.

"The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity."<sup>22</sup> At the beginning, the sisters respond to Riser with violence and circumstances in an attempt to balance his previous actions. They dress in black hoods and capes; they torment him, hit him, and even hang him. The examples of violence in this third scene of the play are abundant. Weapons are present: a knife, a gun, a rope. The gun is cocked. It is placed against Riser's temple. He is forced to stand on the chair and put his head in the noose. Anj punches him in the stomach. Trace describes his death as "do the mad jig tonight, Lou Riser, rope snaps your neck you do the three-second jerk-jig."<sup>23</sup> Boot chews on Riser's hand, then spits his own blood in his face. What is surprising, perhaps, is their reluctance to meet completely Riser's violence with like violence: they decline murder as the end of their violent actions.

Just as the audience must consider questions about justice and retribution, we must also consider questions about the ultimate purpose of the sisters' violence. At this point, a consideration of another play in which a woman has the opportunity to

strike back at someone who has done violence to her is helpful. In Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden*, a woman who was tortured believes that her torturer has made his way to her home. He has, knowingly or not, placed himself in her power. Like the Kaylor sisters, Dorfman's protagonist, Paulina, must choose whether or not to end the life of her torturer. Dorfman leaves us an ambiguous ending: we are not certain whether Paulina has killed him or released him. She believes that she sees him, some time later, at a concert of the symphony (which features the very piece that he played while he tortured her). It is a great accomplishment that she can sit and listen to the music, but we cannot be certain whether or not she actually sees him.

One difference between the two plays is that Paulina was the one who was physically and emotionally tortured, where the Kaylor sisters' torment at the hands of Riser is only emotional. Still, the juxtaposition of these two plays provides us with an opportunity to explore female responses to torture in similar situations. In both cases, the women do not hesitate to exact revenge; in both cases, the ultimate fate of the torturer is ambiguous. The ambiguity allows us to continue to think of the women as merciful if we choose to do so. It also allows us to conceive of violence or murder as something of which women are capable.

With Corthron's play, we know that it is unlikely that Riser will die, but we do not know his ultimate fate. The women in both of these plays have responded to a prior violent incident with violence, but they do not necessarily match the violence of those who performed the original violence. Are they more "human" because they decline the apparent invitation to respond in kind? The Kaylor sisters want a confession from Riser. They want to know what happened to their brother, and Riser recounts that night to them. In his essay "Fanon's Tragic Revolutionary Violence," Fanon scholar Lewis Gordon concludes, "the human being tragically emerges out of a violent situation of 'gods' and the 'wretched.'"<sup>24</sup> Riser becomes more human to the audience when he declares that he wants his own son to grow up to be as strong as Owen; the Kaylor sisters' humanity emerges out of their decision not to murder Riser. The sisters' violence against Riser becomes an act of "bring[ing] the white god down to humanity."<sup>25</sup> That moment is a startling one: Riser, who has referred to Owen in just about every derogatory term he can imagine, calls him strong and ultimately recognizes Owen's humanity in the midst of brutalizing him. Whether he realized that he wanted his son to be like Owen during Owen's murder or during the confession to the sisters, the effect is that, at the last moments of the play, Riser declares to Owen's sisters that he was someone to be emulated.

"The tragedy faced by any one seriously engaged in a struggle against the institutional encouragement of dehumanization is that institutionalized dehumanization is fundamentally a state of war."<sup>26</sup> Gordon also suggests that the violence of the oppressed be treated differently than that of the oppressor. In such a situation, then, are we to allow the sisters their violence in reaction to that of

Riser's and his fellow Klansmen, because the initial violence created a state of war? In the face of Riser's retelling of the violence done to Owen, the violence of the sisters is recontextualized for the audience. The Klan's response to Owen's infiltration is an excessive punishment for his transgression. The fact that Corthron has the Klan choose only Owen (after all, Boot was with him) for their punishment is also reflective of history.

The combination of both retold and staged violence could function to further numb an audience already immune to violent images. However, there is a difference between violence portrayed on the screen and violence created on stage. On film or video, we know that there are stunt doubles and other methods to create the illusion of violence and its results. On stage we are dealing with live actors in the immediate—real human beings we can reach out and touch. We are aware on some level that what we are watching is illusion and that the actors are trained in stage combat. The guns cannot be real, or at least they do not have real bullets. But what if there is a mistake? What if the actor playing Anj *really* hits the actor playing Lou? Our intellectual understanding of live performance provides us with the knowledge that sometimes, mistakes do happen, and at any point, something can go “wrong.” There is yet another level, though: we are present, as an audience, at these acts of violence. They are being perpetrated right in front of us. There is a physical reaction to watching certain acts: our bodies respond in spite of our intellectual understanding. The gun and knife are not as threatening as they might be, because we are aware that there is a long tradition of stage weapons that are not real. However, the hanging of a live human actor on stage is different. The illusion, when well done, is a little too real. We see the actor hanging by the neck, and our physical response is to cringe. We understand, intellectually, that it is not real, but that intellectual understanding does not override our physical response. We still gasp, sometimes audibly, when the chair is gone, and we see the actor hanging by his neck. Though some might respond by closing or covering their eyes, the adrenaline levels of every audience member rise. This act creates a visceral climax to the play by heightening the tension in the audience. We must remind ourselves that it cannot be real in order to reduce our physical response.

Before we can remind ourselves that it is only an illusion, however, we have already reacted. Our bodies' responses bring us closer to the act of murder than most of us come in our lifetimes. If we agreed with the sisters' actions up to this point, we are placed in a situation where it is more difficult to agree with it. We must ask ourselves if we really believe that death is the appropriate punishment for Riser's crime. By implication, we must also ask ourselves when death is an appropriate punishment for any crime, an issue that Corthron revisits in *Life by Asphixiation*. Both our presence and our reactions to the sisters' decision to cut Riser down and spare his life connect us to this question. Corthron uses an onstage hanging again in *Breath, Boom*, where Prix's cellmate hangs herself in their cell.

The tension is increased by Prix's suggestion to Cat that she jump. In both plays, the audience learns something about itself and about the characters on stage by their reactions to the hanging.

### Realizing Justice

They always win, don't they? Don't they, Anj? I mean, they're the majority but they're not the entirety, I mean . . . I mean by odds you'd think somebody else'd win sometime, uh uh. Uh uh, never, all the time they win, us never. Us never. And justice ain't nothin', Justice never was nothin' 'bout right and wrong. Justice never was anything but black and white, I hate white people, Anj!<sup>27</sup>

Trace's words highlight the questions that the play poses to the audience. What is justice? Who gets justice? How is justice racialized? How is justice possible within the context of a racist and sexist culture? After the murder of their brother, the Kaylor sisters seek *something* in response. Their avenues to legal justice are limited; history is not on their side when it comes to issues of black and white. Trace understands that justice is not about right and wrong, at least not for four young black girls in the South (although the other "four little girls" of the Birmingham church bombing did finally get justice). Justice, as Trace sees it, is all about power; power gives one "justice," and they do not have sufficient power to get "justice" for their brother.

If not justice, then what? Retribution? Vigilantism? While the sisters engage in vigilantism, seeking "justice" in the only avenue that they see open to them, the meaning of that justice is obscured. Their decision to release Riser after his confession makes us question the purpose of punishment and retribution. As an audience, we might not be satisfied with the end of the play. We feel the outrage at the murder of young Owen; we feel surprise, perhaps horror at the hanging of Riser. As an audience, we must find a way to negotiate between these two actions.

Riser's coerced confession makes possible reconciliation, or at least a kind of resolution. Such honesty has proven a positive step in the recovery of South Africa from decades of interracial violence. There is in such a process an understanding that, in this context, where there are centuries of violent history, that the shedding of more blood does not help in healing the community. As a genre, tragedy teaches us that blood feuds never end, but that the violence inherent in them perpetuates itself until the bloodlines have died out. Such annihilation cannot be the answer to centuries of racial conflict. If the sisters, by refusing to kill Riser, have ended the blood feud between black and white in the U.S., then what are the implications for justice?

Justice, in this case, comes not from the exacting of revenge; an eye for an eye only continues the classic blood feud. Instead, in a context where there is a history of institutional dehumanization, it is the recognition of the humanity in the Other that enables justice. It answers Ariel Dorfman's question, "'How can those who tortured and those who were tortured coexist in the same land?'"<sup>28</sup> In Dorfman's play, Paulina must also draw a confession out of her torturer. Where there are centuries in which the oppressor and the racialized, "inferior" oppressed Other have been engaged in a state of war (fueled by the oppressor's lack of recognition of the Other), confession necessitates reciprocity. As Simone de Beauvoir says in reference to gender (although it certainly applies to race as well), "the quarrel will go on as long as men and women [or whites and blacks] fail to recognize each other as peers."<sup>29</sup> Justice is possible only when there is reciprocity, when the blood feud has ended. If Riser can see the humanity of Owen, and the sisters can see the humanity of Riser, then they have begun to recognize each other as peers. This recognition, because it is not an attempt to erase difference, is a step on the right path. Corthron's play makes it possible to glimpse justice and movement towards a non-racist and nonsexist culture. Corthron began engaging the issues of violence, racial injustice, and gender in this early play; her work since has continued to engage these issues. Her subsequent works ask us as audience members to reconsider our ideas about the progress of race relations in the late twentieth century.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Lisa M. Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

2. The Connections Award is an Annual playwriting contest seeking the best new play about contemporary race relations. Typically plays receive a staged reading; *Wake Up Lou Riser* received a full production.

3. Kia Corthron, *Wake Up Lou Riser*, unpublished ms. (March 1996) 8.

4. Corthron, *Lou Riser* 31.

5. 37.

6. Peter Fitzpatrick, "Racism and the Innocence of Law," *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 248.

7. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993) 4.

8. By *liberalism*, I mean not *liberal* as a political perspective (as opposed to *conservative*), but rather the political *philosophy* that emerged from the Enlightenment based on a belief in progress, essential human goodness, and individual autonomy.

9. Corthron, *Lou Riser* 42.

10. Because many lynchings were photographed with the participants clearly visible, the idea that the perpetrators were anonymous is absurd. Many of these photographs were made into postcards

or otherwise distributed. See James Allen, ed., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, N. Mex. : Twin Palms, 2002).

11. Kia Corthron, interview, *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists*, ed. Alexis Greene, (New York: Smith and Kraus, 2001) 83-105; here 97.

12. Mary Karen Dahl, *Political Violence in Drama: Classical Models, Contemporary Variations* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987).

13. See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ, 1982).

14. Corthron, interview 96.

15. Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 45.

16. Corthron, *Lou Riser* 57.

17. 63.

18. The three white men convicted of Byrd's murder are the only white people sentenced to die in Texas for killing a black person. According to a CNN report, "The only white man ever executed in Texas for killing a black person was a farmer who killed another white farmer's favorite slave in the 1850s" (<<http://cnn.com/US/9902/25/dragging.death.04/>>).

19. Dahl 65.

20. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 36.

21. Bob Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 12.

22. Fanon 88.

23. Corthron, *Lou Riser* 45.

24. Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 76.

25. Gordon 76.

26. 81.

27. Corthron, *Lou Riser* 62.

28. Ariel Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992) 73.

29. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley ([1952]; New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 719.

# THE FIELD

