

**Language of Blood: Embodied Women's Experiences in
Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and
White***

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Just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood. We are not going to refuse, if it should happen to strike our fancy, the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy which have actually been always exaggerated or conjured away—or cursed—in the classic texts. For if there's one thing that's been repressed, here's just the place to find it: in the taboo of the pregnant woman.

Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"¹

Beth apologized at one point for sounding "dramatic," but at the same time emphasized words like "ghastly" and "horrendous." She contrasted her experience several times with the "wonderful stories" told by other women about birth, and complained about the silence about experiences like hers.

Tess Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth*²

When I have the baby I wonder will I turn into a river of blood and die? My mother almost died when I was born.

Adrienne Kennedy, *A Movie Star Has to Star in
Black and White*³

When Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" called upon women to "write about women and bring women to writing," she also noted that there is no such thing as *the* woman's story: "what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more that you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible."⁴ Despite this

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nod to the wide range of women's stories, her essay embraced almost exclusively the uplifting, triumphant, "unsurpassed pleasures" of woman's embodied experience. While the literary body of work that explores women's embodied experiences continues to grow among poets, novelists, and academics, so that a woman no longer has to bemoan the dearth of such things as literary explorations of childbirth (as Adrienne Rich found herself doing in the 1950s, leading to her influential 1976 study *Of Woman Born*), the cultural taboo around the frightening or "horrendous" aspects of many women's childbirth experiences remains. As Susan Maushart points out, for a woman in contemporary culture to openly acknowledge a less-than-perfect childbirth experience is seen as supporting the old stereotype of female inadequacy. Stories of pain and bleeding in childbirth, difficult, out-of-control pregnancies and labors, stillbirth or miscarriage, are still relegated to the arena of the suspect that a well-informed, well-prepared woman should not have to encounter. Although the ideal woman today—pregnant or not—is supposed to be in control of her own body and destiny, the reality experienced by many women entering determinedly or unexpectedly onto the path of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood can be quite different from the preferred image of empowerment. Kathryn March sums up this point of view succinctly when she states: "For those of us living in women's bodies, the issue of control is not the same issue it is for those who do not. If anything, pregnancy and childbearing are the prototype for absence of control."⁵

Adrienne Kennedy's theater has documented such complications in women's embodied experiences since her first play, 1964's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Whether her heroines are struggling against patriarchal religious ideas of female sexuality (in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*), or the guilt associated with menstruation (*A Lesson in Dead Language*), or the devaluing of a mother's actions and words in part because she is a mother (*Sleep Deprivation Chamber*), Kennedy's plays have consistently returned to moments of crisis and failure for her female characters, to the loss of control often experienced by women in regard to sexuality, reproduction, and motherhood. In this same vein, one aspect of Kennedy's 1976 play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* examines the challenges to a woman's identity presented by pregnancy and child rearing due to both social expectations and physical reality. Examining the play itself as well as its critical interpretations reveals how, even in a post-feminist age, women and men tend to write over the most difficult physical experiences of women. Often, even when we acknowledge the topic of deeply female issues, we theorize those experiences rather than see the physical embodiment, especially if that embodiment does not mesh with feminist ideals of independent, strong, in-control women.

Movie Star's central character is a young black woman named Clara whose costume, a maternity dress, visually emphasizes her central conflict of trying to actualize herself against the cultural expectations and impending physical demands of mothering. At a crisis point brought about by the pressures of family

responsibilities and her pregnancy in conflict with her ambition to be a professional playwright, Clara is also confronting her fears about childbirth and the realities of motherhood. Living in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Clara runs up against that era's expectations regarding a woman's role as mother and wife. Ironically, in giving voice to these female experiences that our culture has long trained women and men to overlook, Kennedy's play fell victim to the silencing that Cixous describes. It was a long time before critics mentioned the play's treatment of pregnancy, preferring instead to focus upon the "black and white" and "movie star" issues highlighted by the title.

The racial issues of this play, which have their own embodied aspects, are certainly important. The title ironically emphasizes how the Hollywood movie star system with its white movie stars traditionally excluded minorities, such as Clara, who are given bit parts at best in the classical Hollywood image of American life. This racism is foregrounded in Clara's mother's first speech describing her memories of the segregated South. While the racial aspects of this play have already been discussed effectively by previous critics,⁶ aspects of the play's staging of the female experience have yet to be fully addressed. *Movie Star* not only conveys racial tensions and oppressions for blacks but is also an oddity in American theater in being so fully immersed in deeply female experiences presented in all their rawness and not mediated through traditionally male-oriented structures and metaphors. In *Women Writing Childbirth*, Tess Cosslett comments that "The maternal body, though always culturally mediated, creates its own particular problems for the male-centered discourses of our culture."⁷ In her discussion of Kennedy's play, Linda Kintz notes that men have often used the experiences of pregnancy and labor metaphorically, with no reference to women or femininity,⁸ co-opting them, as Michele Lise Tarter discusses, to further entrench male power and authority.⁹

The critical tendency in reading Kennedy's theater has been to see the embodied female experiences of Kennedy's heroines as metaphors for oppression. On one level, they certainly are metaphors, as Kennedy herself has even expressed about her work. In discussing *The Ohio State Murders*, she explains how she chose the murder of twin baby girls by their white father as a metaphor for the dark depravity of racism that she had experienced as a college student at Ohio State University.¹⁰ Claudia Barnett discusses Kennedy's use of failed pregnancy as a major metaphor in her writing, commenting in regard to *Movie Star* that Clara "is trapped in a world in which her play production cannot compare in value to her reproduction."¹¹ While the cultural valuation of the "woman's work" of procreation is certainly a valid aspect of Kennedy's play, it is important to acknowledge how *Movie Star* examines pregnancy, not simply as a metaphor but as a lived experience—the actual embodied experience of an individual woman (although, ironically, Kennedy uses other metaphors and symbolic staging to convey her heroine's physical and psychological experience of pregnancy).

The physical threats of childbirth are established clearly in *Movie Star* by Bette Davis's first lines, which voice Clara's fear of death in childbirth: "When I have the baby I wonder will I turn into a river of blood and die?"¹² Bette Davis, speaking Clara's thoughts, indicates that Clara's fears come from the fact that her "mother almost died when [she] was born" and also from Clara's previous pregnancy that ended in miscarriage.¹³ Clara describes her experience of becoming a married woman as "I was a virgin when we married. A virgin who was to bleed and bleed," not with the menstrual blood that indicates non-pregnancy but with the blood of childbirth and of miscarriage.¹⁴ As will be discussed in more detail later, Jean Peter's continued bleeding in her *Movie Star* scene is a direct manifestation of this fear of bleeding as well as a re-enactment of Clara's earlier miscarriage. This bloody business of being a woman is an experience that refuses to be, as Linda Kintz has phrased it, "sanitized" in Kennedy's plays,¹⁵ although it has traditionally been sanitized by the culture that created classical Hollywood and its Hays Code, which writes out of the picture the "unpleasant" business of a woman's body other than as a coolly clean sex object and trains women to hide their pregnancies, breastfeeding, and periods from public view.

The fears about childbirth expressed by Clara and those who speak for her should not be dismissed as ignorance or hysteria; these fears are grounded in the character's lived experience as well as in historic and current reality. Clara is not an oddity in experiencing difficult pregnancies and childbirth. Until very recently in American history a leading cause of death for woman has been childbirth, and it remains a leading cause of death for women in many nations of the world.¹⁶ Due to the extremity of the experience, labor is a frightening prospect for many women. Ironically, techniques of medical science have often further complicated the experience. With the advent of knock-out anesthesia (most significantly the "twilight sleep" of the early twentieth century) and later drugs to induce labor as well as the increased success rate of caesarian births, medical science alienated a woman from the experience by placing control of the labor on the (usually male) doctor.¹⁷ In addition to the medical lore and practice surrounding childbirth, there is the oral culture among women: the stories women do or (more significantly) do not share with one another about pregnancy, labor, and child rearing. Rich notes that in the 1950s, at the time of her own pregnancies as well as of Clara's in Kennedy's play, a woman often had only the stories from her own mother or within her family to go by, if that.¹⁸ The conspiracy of silence about the "excruciating, outrageously painful" reality of childbirth, as Susan Maushart phrases it, is still alive today despite the proliferation of pregnancy and labor guides and pre-natal birthing classes.¹⁹ With no books or classes to guide her, Clara has only family stories to rely on, and clearly the family story that Clara knows, in addition to her own experience, is a frightening one of the specter of death—her mother's near death at Clara's own birth.

How Clara speaks her concerns is an important aspect of this play's portrayal of pregnancy. The play opens with a speech by the Columbia Pictures Lady, familiar from the opening title of so many films, who sets the scene for us:

Summer, New York, 1955. Summer, Ohio, 1963. The scenes are *Now Voyager*, *Viva Zapata!* and *A Place in the Sun*.

The leading roles are played by Bette Davis, Paul Henreid, Jean Peters, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, and Shelley Winters.

Supporting roles are played by the mother, the father, the husband.

A bit role is played by Clara.

Now Voyager takes place in the hospital lobby.

Viva Zapata! takes place in the brother's room.

A Place in the Sun takes place in Clara's old room.²⁰

The movie stars are described as the leads in this story while Clara has only a "bit role." Yet, Clara *is* the center of this play. It is her thoughts, fears, and experiences that the movie stars speak and enact. Since the story is actually about Clara, the pertinent question of staging becomes why Clara chooses other figures to speak for her—why does she sideline herself in her own drama? Although many critics have accurately pointed to the way this sidelining of a black woman's experience in this play replicates how the black experience has been erased from public view by institutions such as Hollywood films, there is another aspect to this sense of being pushed off the stage of one's own life that is related to pregnancy and child rearing.²¹

Clara's relegating aspects of her maternal self to the sidelines echoes the way a child's arrival in the world alters a woman's focus within her own life. Fay Weldon's 1980 novel *Puffball* captures this aspect of the experience, using the same theatrical metaphor that Kennedy employs. The mother in this story imagines her child triumphing in his centrality:

She sensed its triumph. None of that was important, the baby reproved her: they were peripheral events, leading towards the main event of your life, which was to produce me. You were always the bit-part player: that you played the lead was your delusion, your folly. Only by giving away your life do you save it.²²

While this quote reflects the solipsism of a newborn whose knowledge of the world is limited to itself and its bodily needs, the mother experiences how this necessary infantile solipsism subsumes her. As Clara, and Kennedy, well know, the baby will not care if its mother is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright or not; he just wants

to be fed and kept warm and clean. Those needs are so immediate and clear that they force the care-giver to concede to them. A “good” mother will of course do so willingly, but a “bad” mother might do so resentfully. So what does it mean if an otherwise “good” mother sometimes feels resentment? This is a narrative not to be spoken.²³ The baby claims “everyone, as bit-part players in his drama, dancers in his dance, singers to his tune.”²⁴

Speaking about her own experiences as a mother expecting her second child, Kennedy describes in her autobiography:

His birth brought into focus the need for me to understand where I stood in relationship to my work. I knew I faced two years when caring for a small child was exhausting. I thought, I am never going to write another word now.²⁵

This conflict between self-needs and mothering that Kennedy expresses in both her autobiography and *Movie Star* is part of the crisis of identity faced by women striving for a public life in the face of the traditional positioning of women in the domestic sphere, but the conflict is not solely culturally created. The physical demands of pregnancy and child rearing are real despite the mythologies that surround them. Of course, Kennedy did go on to write many more words, having plays produced throughout the next three decades, but she clearly struggled to do so, juggling child rearing demands with those of her career and acknowledging that doing so is far from easy.²⁶ In *Movie Star*, Kennedy stages that crisis point for a pregnant woman, that moment of not knowing where one’s life is going next now that another life and its demands have taken or will soon take precedence. Clara illustrates what Maushart describes as “the painful process” precipitated by motherhood, “of reevaluating life choices, of bringing to consciousness our most deeply embedded assumptions about the way things ought to be.”²⁷

Thus, for Clara, the fear of childbirth is accompanied by a growing sense that she has lost control of her life. Becoming pregnant, the aspiring writer who had wanted to divorce her husband finds herself immediately written back into the marriage and motherhood plot that her society dictates is the only one acceptable for a woman. But this loss of control is not only due to cultural mandates; it is also grounded in the physical realities of pregnancy. Even in a healthy, uncomplicated pregnancy, a woman witnesses her body change in amazing and at times alarming ways. While amazement and pride at the generative power of the female body is often part of the experience, pregnancy also accentuates the mind/body split, so that a woman may have an internal sense of self that does not match her external experience.²⁸ Clara’s husband, Eddie, tells her that it is her obsession with writing that has turned her into “a spectator watching [her] life like watching a black and white movie.”²⁹ This sense of spectatorship goes beyond the movie metaphor,

which has already been effectively discussed by Deborah Geis in her analysis of the play, to the experience of pregnancy itself that can make a woman feel like a spectator watching her own body as it morphs into a completely different shape and feel during pregnancy. Clara's experience of pregnancy reflects Julia Kristeva's description of it as "the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech."³⁰ The sense a pregnant woman has of standing on the sidelines and watching her own body and life change in ways that are beyond her control is staged overtly in the play as Clara projects her thoughts into the bodies of her movie stars, who speak for her, reflecting her physical and psychological splitting. Though she relegates her "real" self to a "bit role" in the larger drama of her pregnancy, doing so conveys the sense of compromised identity she experiences as she faces the new lives her pregnancy will produce, both the life of the child and the life that she will have after the arrival of the child.

After the Columbia Pictures Lady sets up the scenes of this play, indicating the simultaneous presentation of the Hollywood films with scenes from Clara's life, she—not Clara—goes on to voice Clara's inner monologue:

Lately I think often of killing myself. Eddie Jr. plays outside in the playground. I'm very lonely . . . Met Lee Strasberg: the members of the playwrights unit were invited to watch his scene. Geraldine Page, Rip Torn and Norman Mailer were there. . . . I wonder why I lie so much to my mother about how I feel. . . . My father once said his life has been nothing but a life of hypocrisy and that's why his photograph smiles. While Eddie Jr. plays outside I read Edith Wharton, a book on Egypt and Chinua Achebe. Leroi Jones, Ted Joans, and Allen Ginsberg are reading in the Village. Eddie comes every night right before dark. He wants to know if I'll go back to him for the sake of our son.³¹

As this opening indicates, the basic conflict for Clara in *Movie Star* (one that she feels unable to voice herself) is created by her disillusionment about her life due to the socially mandated roles of wife and mother she feels trapped into playing in contrast to her struggles to become a professional playwright—the author of her own story. Kennedy's use of multiple times and places occurring simultaneously in Clara's life elides the key moments of challenge to Clara's sense of self, which are located in her experiences of pregnancies and motherhood. Told chronologically, Clara's life story sounds like this: after graduating from college and marrying her college sweetheart, Eddie, Clara experiences a miscarriage while Eddie is serving in Korea. After this miscarriage, she wants a divorce, yet upon her husband's return from war, she is soon pregnant again and thus remains married. Living in

New York City while Eddie works on a graduate degree, Clara tries to write as she bears and raises their son, Eddie Jr. A few years later, when Clara and Eddie are separated, she gets news that her brother, Wally, is in a coma due to a car accident and may not survive. She goes to the hospital in Cleveland to see her brother and her (now) divorced parents, still confused about what to do with her life. The moments that are focused upon in this play, as the Columbia Pictures Lady tells us, are summer 1955, when Clara is pregnant with Eddie Jr., and summer 1963, when she is separated from Eddie and visiting her brother in hospital. Throughout the play, however, she remains pregnant, dressed (in all but the last scene) in the maternity clothes of 1955.

The film images and movie star selves onto which Clara projects her thoughts and experiences are typical of Kennedy's theater in the way they resonate complex layers of significance for understanding Clara's psyche. These three films, *Now Voyager* (1942), *Viva Zapata!* (1952), and *A Place in the Sun* (1951), are replete with traditional positionings of women in American culture: spinsters, fallen women, fiancées, wives, mothers. All of these roles define women based on their relationships to men and marriage. *Now Voyager* chronicles a lonely woman's "re-birth" under the tutelage of a caring man; in *Viva Zapata!* a revolutionary leader's nurturing wife gives up her way of life for that of her husband; in *A Place in the Sun* a pregnant woman is drowned by her lover so as to free him from his obligations to her and his child. Nowhere in the actual films would Clara see a reflection of an independent woman successfully pursuing her own career. Shelly Winters's character Alice in *A Place in the Sun* may work a factory job, but her modest employment cannot be viewed as a career, seeming instead a tedious necessity until the hoped-for romantic relationship and marriage.

Given how male-defined these on-screen women are, it is important to realize that Clara's fascination is not only with what the screen roles communicate, but also focuses on the actresses themselves and what they represent. Each conveys an aspect of Clara's psychological and sometimes her physical state. Even though Clara is married, she has felt like the Bette Davis character at the opening of *Now Voyager*, an ugly spinster who has been controlled by her mother. And she longs to, as that character does, escape into another world to find adventure and her own sense of self. That Bette Davis's character, Charlotte, eventually "finds" herself due to the attentions of a man, and resolves at the end of the film to be happy taking care of his child reflects why Clara (much like Kennedy herself) wants to be not Charlotte but Bette Davis.³² While Charlotte is ultimately male defined, Bette Davis represents a strong, independent, outspoken, successful, and glamorous career woman. Yet Clara finds herself more like the Jean Peters character throughout the film *Viva Zapata!*, forced into sacrificing herself for marriage and becoming the mother/caretaker to her husband, whose actions are the real focus of the film. Peters's character in *Viva*

Zapata! is simply, as Kennedy describes herself in the early years of her marriage, “accompanying another person as he lives out his dreams.”³³

Ultimately Clara, due to her troubled pregnancy, ends up literally and figuratively in the same boat as Shelley Winters’s Alice of *A Place in the Sun*. This latter choice of character is particularly interesting in regard to Clara since *A Place in the Sun* actually has two main female characters: the dowdy working girl played by Shelley Winters whose premarital sex gets her “in trouble” and the glamorous debutante played by Elizabeth Taylor whose tantalizing beauty is enough, even unwittingly, to tempt a man into evil acts. So, too, the actresses themselves represent different possibilities culturally. Taylor as herself or as her character in *A Place in the Sun* is as much of a fantasy for audiences as she is for Montgomery Clift’s character in the film. In the section of her autobiography devoted to “Marriage and Motherhood,” Kennedy writes of Taylor, “If you are beautiful, the whole world can be yours. And feminine beauty is an *achievement*.”³⁴ In contrast, Shelley Winters’s character lives a more believable life, just as Winters herself seems more like a real person compared to the “movie star” Taylor. Feeling trapped due to her pregnancy, Winters’s character sees her choices as being limited to marriage to the baby’s father. This pregnancy and the expectation of marriage is also seen by Clift’s character as an entrapment, and thus he drowns her, or allows her to drown, so that he can instead pursue the glamorous upper-class life, symbolized by the prize of the beautiful Taylor. In the scene on the lake in Kennedy’s play, Clara wears a nightgown that connects her not only to house and home, but specifically to bed where a woman experiencing a physically difficult pregnancy often finds herself confined. Here, though, she sits in the back of the boat and watches this drowning—a symbol of her own dreams and desires being pulled under by her pregnancy.

While Clara’s movie star women voice her thoughts, the movie star men are silent. Paul Henreid, Marlon Brando, and Montgomery Clift never speak, or if they do, Kennedy’s stage directions tell us, they speak lines from their movies rather than Clara’s thoughts as the movie women do. This fascinating choice reverberates with semiotic significance for an audience watching the play. Consider, first, that the male silence, which places the action of this play (speaking) upon the woman, is an inversion of the usual gender roles in cinema where the action is traditionally driven by and about the man. Laura Mulvey, in her influential article “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema” argues that

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.³⁵

Kennedy's play clearly explores the pain caused for Clara by the fact that she is a bearer of meaning rather than a maker of meaning in her own right. The pregnant Clara is a baby-machine that produces junior versions not even of herself but of her husband. However, she is not allowed to be a writer or creator of her own stories, characters, and plots, or of her own life.

If, as Mulvey argues, in the traditional Hollywood film men drive the action and impose their will on the "silent image of woman," why, in Clara's world, do the movie men not speak? Following Mulvey's argument Clara may not have the men speak because she cannot actually control them as she can the movie women; she cannot turn them into objects for manipulation in her own fantasies as she can the women. If so, then the play would support Mulvey's assertion that the image of woman on screen is the one that can be, in fact is meant to be, manipulated by the audience, turned into the fetishized object, while the man supposedly retains his integrity and independence. But such a reading gives the male movie stars in this play too much power. When performed, these characters come off as emblematic and peripheral. They are there to light Bette Davis's cigarette, to change Jean Peters's bed sheets, to observe Shelley Winters drowning. They take no active role, but serve more or less as audience to the woman who is the central focus of each vignette. In presenting her movie images, Kennedy has managed to shift the traditional Hollywood focus from the story of the man to the story of the woman. While this shift is not so spectacular a change in her version of *Now Voyager*, a movie that focuses on the woman's story albeit as she is molded by a man, it is certainly a feat for both *Viva Zapata!* and *A Place in the Sun*, which both focus on the male character and relegate the women to background, conflict, or support for the man's story. Clara not only makes these white female movie stars speak her innermost thoughts and fears, but she also makes them the focus of the story, with the men sidelined into supporting roles. The real drama of this play, the compelling quest and its conflicts, is women's embodied experience to which the men can only remain silent outsiders.

Significantly, the origin of Clara's sense of disillusionment with traditional women's roles is located in her experience of a miscarriage shortly after her marriage. Clara states, "after I lost the baby I stopped writing to Eddie and decided I wanted to get a divorce when he came back from Korea. He hadn't been at Columbia long before I got pregnant again with Eddie Jr."³⁶ The young woman, married and pregnant and thus following the marriage plot that society taught her is the only narrative open to her, finds that path first called into question by the frightening experience of miscarriage. On one hand, this miscarriage reflects metaphorically the derailment of her life—a plan that has gone terribly wrong. But the actual physical experience of miscarriage itself is central to this play, especially in its sense of loss and as it results in bleeding. In Kennedy's *Viva Zapata!* scene, the actors stage an actual miscarriage. Kennedy's stage directions make clear: "JEAN PETERS

stands up. She is bleeding. She falls back on the bed. MARLON BRANDO pulls a sheet out from under her. The sheets are black.” Jean Peters then comments, “The doctor says I have to stay in bed when I’m not at the hospital.”³⁷ In this moment, she is enacting the current pregnancy that the Clara of 1955 is experiencing—one that is precarious and requires bed rest for the woman. In addition, Peters is re-enacting the actual miscarriage that Clara had experienced a year or so earlier. Thus, the troubled pregnancy and the miscarriage are conflated within the Peters scenes because they are similar experiences for Clara. Peters tells us of Clara’s current pregnancy, “This reminds me of when Eddie was in Korea and I had the miscarriage. For days there was blood on the sheets.” But, ironically, Eddie was unable to come to her because “For a soldier to come home there has to be a death in the family.”³⁸ The psychological immediacy, for Clara, of this past experience of miscarriage is conveyed by Peters’s continual re-enactment of it. The bleeding does not happen once and is over. The bleeding continues, as it does for a woman hemorrhaging into a miscarriage. Throughout the rest of the play, Peters continues to bleed, while Marlon Brando pulls sheet after sheet off the bed, piling the sheets around them, each one “black” with blood.

Audience members familiar with Kennedy’s plays will recognize how blood imagery appears frequently, usually reflecting the way that woman’s experience is often written in what Sharon Olds’s poetry describes as the “language of blood.”³⁹ Kennedy’s 1966 play *A Lesson in Dead Language* portrays the experience of girls’ first menses, connecting the “lesson” of their bodies to the simultaneous inculcation into cultural acceptance that the menstrual cycle is a punishment for woman’s original sin of questioning male authority. In other Kennedy plays such as *The Owl Answers* and *A Beast Story*, women characters enact a blood sacrifice, attempting to cleanse themselves from the perceived unwholesomeness of their sexuality.⁴⁰ Jean Peters’s bleeding in *Movie Star* is the result of miscarriage, but her actions convey how bleeding is a necessary, though sometimes dangerous, part of “normal” childbirth.

Although the physical and emotional challenges for Clara are multi-layered in this play, most can be traced to the life-altering event of her pregnancies. Even when a woman has willingly chosen to conceive and has done so successfully, the prospect of childbirth and the subsequent child rearing can be frightening and might make a woman feel trapped—much more so if, as with Clara (who had wanted to divorce her husband before she found herself pregnant), there is ambiguity or reluctance to begin with in a woman’s desire to have a child. So, too, physical complications can alter a woman’s self-perception during pregnancy. Yet, as Sylvia Plath expressed it in her poem “Metaphors,” a pregnant woman has “Boarded the train there’s no getting off,” and the fear is of derailment rather than safe arrival at the final destination of holding a healthy child.⁴¹ While pregnancy and childbirth can be ennobling, empowering, and life-affirming, they can also

be dangerous, difficult, and deadly. The two sides of this experience have been effectively chronicled recently by Barbara Katz Rothman and Kathryn S. March. In "Childbirth with Power," Rothman describes her personal experiences of a triumphant and successful home delivery of a healthy child.⁴² In contrast, March, in "Childbirth with Fear," recounts a long string of miscarriages, still births, and life-threatening pregnancies.⁴³ While the preferred model is, of course, the empowered childbirth experience that Rothman describes, there are many women like Clara who through no fault or choice of their own find such "empowerment" in pregnancy and childbirth impossible.⁴⁴ The quotation opening this essay from Cosslett's interview of a woman whose "horrendous" birth experience left her feeling isolated and in fact betrayed by the silence surrounding such experiences further illustrates the social forces that lead Clara to suppress discussion of these fears and experiences except with and between her movie star women.⁴⁵ Clara's childbirth experiences reflect what March describes: "births and non-births [that] have been all wrong," both physically and in the way they have affected other aspects of her life.⁴⁶

The repercussions of Clara's miscarriage and second pregnancy, experienced by Jean Peters, reverberate through the final scene of the play. As the boat bearing Shelley Winters, Montgomery Clift, and Clara appears on stage, Peters and Brando "continue to change sheets" in their scene. Clara now wears a nightgown, and the stage directions indicate she "looks as if she has been very sick." Her first line in the scene echoes Peters's earlier line: "I am bleeding. When I'm not at the hospital I have to stay in bed."⁴⁷ Although her current bleeding raises for Clara the specter of death—death of her child and even her own death in childbirth—this prospective death remains unacknowledged by the world around her, much as the military refused to recognize a miscarriage of a baby as "a death in the family." Instead the prospective death that is seen and discussed is that of the brother, Walter, whose still, white-draped body, center stage, represents a corpse that is clean of any mess or blood. While her brother hovers near death on clean white sheets as his family gathers around him, Clara is alone in facing the prospect of another death in the black sheets of her own bed. Thus the *mise-en-scène* of the play, both the color scheme and the placement of the two beds, further indicates the sometimes stark differences between woman and man in regard to physical experiences. The mother, father, husband, and Clara see and discuss Wally's automobile accident and psychologically damaging experiences with racism while Clara's embodied female experiences are sidelined, occurring in the privacy of a bedroom and unremarked upon by the real people in her life. Only her movie star women describe Clara's physical experience, placing her in line with the women who have lost pregnancies that March describes, women who "do not talk about specifics" and "definitely do not talk about them" in public places such as "on airplanes, or at parties" as other women do.⁴⁸

With her sense of self challenged on both physical and psychological levels, Clara feels frighteningly vulnerable—a vulnerability that she projects through her movie star women's words and actions. Even though Clara is experiencing, and has experienced, great trauma over her pregnancy, she never speaks of it even to her mother. When her mother worries "I don't know what I did to make my children so unhappy," the well-bred Clara finds herself responding "Please, don't think I'm unhappy" despite her earlier suicidal thoughts expressed by the Columbia Pictures Lady.⁴⁹ When Clara does attempt to speak to her husband and mother about her desire to become a playwright, these attempts fall on deaf ears because her self-definition is deemed unacceptable by her family and husband. Both her mother (enforcing patriarchal ideals of feminine behavior in her daughter)⁵⁰ and her husband think she is simply being difficult and illogical in not giving up her desire to be a writer now that her physical state of pregnancy so obviously defines her for them as a wife and a mother. And her inculcated desire not to have conflict, to complain, or to show anger—to "take it like a woman"—finds her playing the good daughter to her mother.⁵¹ The bond between mother and child, the way that the mother's identity is entangled with that of the child, is clearly displayed in this relationship between Clara and her mother and offers another level of complication for Clara. She is a daughter, a wife, a mother-to-be, and a mother. All are roles that require her to subjugate herself to another person's needs, but she does not get acknowledged as being what she has chosen for herself: a writer who voices the crisis of identity within pregnancy and motherhood that her culture requires her to erase. Clara can speak her real fears and desires only in her fantasy images of the movie star women who embody and enact them for her.

Kennedy has commented that "For me, a heroic woman is trying to create a mode in life that will sustain her."⁵² *Movie Star* chronicles one woman's attempts to do so in the face of intense challenges to her personal identity, and even to her own life. Clara voices the socially unacceptable fears and doubts about pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood that are an intrinsic part of the embodied female experience, the part that is the most taboo of what Cixous describes as "the taboo of the pregnant woman."⁵³ Although a contemporary audience might want to put Clara's experiences in a time capsule, relevant only to the 1950s and 1960s, more recent discussions of women's experiences in pregnancy and childbirth reveal that there is still a silence surrounding these experiences, especially the versions that are difficult, unhappy, or fearful—models that do not conform to the contemporary ideal of female empowerment. As is apparent in Clara's inability to be honest even with her own mother, there is a divide created between women by the inculcation of "appropriate" social dialogue that does not allow them to communicate openly many of the painful truths of their lives as women. By accepting the "ghastly" and "horrendous" stories as well as the "unsurpassed pleasures" of women's embodied experiences as realities and not simply metaphors, perhaps we can view Kennedy's

complex theatrical portrayal of crises in a woman's life with the intellectual and physical understanding it demands. In *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, Adrienne Kennedy has effectively staged the paradox of pregnancy: its embodied, out-of-body experience of a life that is/not one's own.

Notes

1. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1980) 261.
2. Tess Cosslett, *Women Writing Childbirth* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994) 157.
3. Adrienne Kennedy, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*, 1976, reprinted in *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001) 64.
4. Cixous 245-46.
5. Kathryn S. March, "Childbirth with Fear," *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*, ed. Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001) 168.
6. For examples of critical readings of the racial aspects of this play, see Jeanie Forte, "Kennedy's Body Politic: The Mulatta, Menses, and the Medusa," 157-169, and Deborah R. Geis, "'A Spectator Watching My Life': Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*," 170-178, both in *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*, ed. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992).
7. Cosslett 118.
8. Linda Kintz, "The Sanitized Spectacle: What's Birth Got to Do with It? Adrienne Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*," *Theatre Journal* 44 (1992): 72.
9. Michele Lise Tarter, "Bringing Forth Life from Body to Text: The Reclamation of Childbirth in Women's Literature," *This Giving Birth: Pregnancy and Childbirth in American Women's Writing*, ed. Julie Tharp and Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 2000) 21.
10. Marianne Evett, interview with Adrienne Kennedy, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* 14 June 1990: 7f.
11. Claudia Barnett, "'This Fundamental Challenge to Identity': Reproduction and Representation in the Drama of Adrienne Kennedy," *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996): 143.
12. Kennedy, *Movie Star* 64.
13. 64.
14. 67.
15. Kintz 67.
16. For a good summary of historical statistics on maternal illness and death as well as on stillbirth and infant death, see Susan E. Chase, *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*, 145-150. Also see March's "Childbirth with Fear," 169-172, in which she discusses her interviews with women from developing nations.
17. For an extended discussion of "alienated labor," see chapter 7 of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976; New York: W. W. Norton, 1986) 156-185.
18. Rich 166.
19. Susan Maushart, *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't* (New York: New Press, 1999) 92. Maushart vividly details how, even with today's pervasive pre-natal classes and books about pregnancy and labor, there is a conspiracy of silence about the event itself—the quality and intensity of the pain, and the chaos of the experience. She describes how "most of us emerge from the experience [of childbirth] battle scarred, bewildered, and betrayed. The most common postnatal reaction remains (after sheer relief) sheer disbelief. Disbelief at the extent of our ignorance. Disbelief at the extent of our arrogance. Disbelief that we could ever have imagined we could control and direct our responses, that we could 'manage' the pain. In short, most of us emerge from the experience of childbirth in a state of shock, aghast with the discovery that everyone 'prepared' us, but no one told us the truth" (64-65).
20. Kennedy, *Movie Star* 63.
21. See articles by Forte and Geis.
22. Fay Weldon, *Puffball* (New York: Summit Books, 1980) 240.

- 23 Rich devotes chapters 1 and 10 in *Of Woman Born* to exploring the taboo of maternal anger (21-40, 256-280). Chase and Rogers also explore ideas of “good” and “bad” mothering in *Mothers and Children*.
24. Weldon 248.
25. Adrienne Kennedy, *People Who Led to My Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987) 124.
26. For Kennedy’s comments about this struggle between motherhood and her own ambitions, see the “Marriage and Motherhood” section of her 1987 autobiography, *People Who Led to My Plays*, 75-111.
27. Maushart xix.
28. For discussion of other literary treatments of this mind/body split, see Cosslett, 137-140.
29. Kennedy, *Movie Star* 75.
30. Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 206.
31. Kennedy, *Movie Star* 64.
32. “‘As long as I can remember I’ve wanted to be Bette Davis.’ [Pause.] ‘I still want to be Bette Davis.’ I am quoting Adrienne Kennedy, at least, I think I am.” See Elin Diamond, “Mimesis in Syncopated Time: Reading Adrienne Kennedy,” *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*, ed. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992) 131.
33. Kennedy, *People Who Led to My Plays* 122.
34. 99; emphasis in text.
35. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema,” reprinted in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 199.
36. Kennedy, *Movie Star* 70.
37. 73.
38. 73.
39. Sharon Olds, “The Language of the Brag,” *Satan Says* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1980) 44-45.
40. For a more detailed reading of these aspects of *The Owl Answers*, see my article “God and The Owls: The Sacred and the Profane in Adrienne Kennedy’s *The Owl Answers*,” *Modern Drama* 40.3 (Fall 1997): 385-402.
41. Sylvia Plath, “Metaphors,” *Colossus* (1960; London: Faber and Faber, 1967) 41.
42. Barbara Katz Rothman, “Childbirth with Power,” *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*, ed. Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001) 163-168.
43. March 169-173.
44. For further discussion of the sense of failure for a woman who does not experience the socially acceptable empowered childbirth experience, see Susan Maushart’s chapter “Laboring Under Delusions” in *The Mask of Motherhood*.
45. Cosslett 157.
46. March 169.
47. Kennedy, *Movie Star* 74.
48. March 172.
49. Kennedy, *Movie Star* 71.
50. “It is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations” (Rich 243).
51. Mausart 76.
52. *Moon Marked* 189.
53. Cixous 261.

PRAXIS

