Chapter 3

Narrative

Fourth among the elements enumerated comes Diction; by which I mean ... the expression of the meaning in words...

-Aristotle

I think it's important for us never to forget that language determines how we perceive ourselves and unless women and people of color take charge of the language we are nothing.

- Shange

Narrative constitutes one of the most important ways in which ideologies are concretized in relation to life experience. “Language incarnates meaning in the form of the series of positions it offers for the subject from which to grasp itself and its relations with the real”, says Nowell-Smith. Ideology therefore interpellates the concrete individual, as subject, resulting in fixed identities. Subjectivity then, is linguistically and discursively constructed and displaced across the range of discourses in which the concrete individual participates. In the theatre, classic realism, which perpetuates the dominant ideology through representation, suppresses language in its construction of the subject.
Theatre incorporates not only spectacle but also narrative which propels dramatic action. As a dramatic element, ‘diction’ or *lexis*, has been variously described as “the expression of the meaning in words”, “the mere metrical arrangement of words” and “the manner of imitation” (Butcher 25-29). Diction makes apparent on stage, the *dianoia* or thought, and the internal and external action alluded to the characters. “*Ethos* is revealed through the speeches and actions of the dramatic characters” (341). “The languages embellished” included rhythm, “harmony” and “song” (23). Thus diction or *Lexis* constitutes the manner of conveying meaning, the events arranged and the dialogues/narrative constructed to organize and convey meaning, and is embellished by rhythms, harmony of words and actions, metaphor and style. This investigation interprets these features as forms, narrative structures and discourse, rhythms and analyses the strategies used by Black women playwrights to subvert the gaze, through narrative.

In the theatre, narrative constantly positions women in the oppressed subjectivity of being an object. The arrangement of events that constructs the plot relies on the actions and intentions of the protagonist. These actions are far removed from the real world of women or women’s desires. Plot, in the theatre, becomes a discourse of male desire and is revealed through the narrative, which projects male enterprises of adventure, war and conquest. These actions are far removed from the real world of women or women’s desires. By contrast, women’s experiences amount to ‘inaction’ and are therefore rarely represented in Western dramatic discourse.
Women, particularly Black women, have had a muted existence in both historical and cultural contexts. Barbara Christian quotes "[...] women were neither the world, nor the world though sometimes we could be dots or some i’s, muses or furies in the service of the text or the idea" (Warhol and Herndl 54). Though Black women have been telling stories, playing with language, speculating and specifying, reaching for wisdom and transforming the world in their own image, yet they have had a non-storied existence. In such a context, the narrative act becomes a source of possibility that can transform the narrated world. The narrative impulse motivated by desire is manifested not only in the telling but also the narrative act. The question of subjectivity thus becomes a crucial factor in Black women’s writing and the evidence of underlying affinities between structures and themes often implies an ideological position.

Black feminist consciousness generates structures of aesthetic production, which are quite distinctive and different not only from male authors but also white authors. Black women’s writing and Black feminist politics organize discursive meaning around a female subject, generating a number of narrative models grounded in different conceptions of history and truth. Christian in A Race for Theory (1987) states, “people of color have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. [...] our theorizing [...] is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs [...] since dynamic rather than fixed
ideas seem more to our liking (226). The political meanings of Black women’s writing cannot be theorized in a rigid fashion, by appealing to an inherent relationship between specific linguistic or literary form. They can be addressed only by relating the diverse forms of Black women’s writing to the cultural and ideological processes shaping the effects and potential limits of literary production in specific historical contexts.

In order, to understand the ways Black women use narrative to construct their identifies and narrate their experiences, it is necessary to look at the cultural, historical and ideological processes shaping the effects and limits of literary production. Black playwrights adopt significant gestures to subvert the structures and patterns of male- oriented narratives. These include the question of subjectivity, the construction of a Black female identity, the literary forms and structures of Black women’s literary productions. This description of processes and structures includes a broader perspective of narrative in order to show how Black women playwrights subvert male defined models of narrative/diction. This analysis includes narrative forms, structures, rhythm and the metaphorical discourse, that these Black women playwrights adopt, appropriate and create. These Black women playwrights have been engaged in a critique of reflectionist aesthetics that are male determined. This critical negation of the existing codes of representation has resulted in the search for alternate forms, such as the choreopoem, or in the modification of existing forms, such as the realist and avant-garde forms, that relate to the contemporary social and ideological conditions that shape their lives as Black women.
Black women playwrights have frequently chosen to employ realist forms in order to address urgent political issues and to re-write these stories. These realist forms encourage a functional and content-based approach. However, though the realist narrative is the ideological apparatus that controls subjectivity, yet Black women playwrights have appropriated the gaps and silences and turned them into spaces of contradiction, wherein the very sites that control them are questioned and investigated. By using realist feminist narratives they network existing literary structures to create distinct woman-centered narratives.

Bonner's play *The Pot Maker* revolves around the narrative of mastery and domination, of separation and punishment. Elias, the preacher has a hidden agenda in using his sermon to convict Lucinda of her sin and folly in taking a lover. Though the play ends with the accidental deaths of Elias, Lucinda and Lew, there is no narrative fulfillment, only anticipation. Bonner writing in the twenties appropriates the realist narrative form for political reasons. Plays that were published in Black literary journals, as Bonner's were, had to be didactic and create positive pictures of Negroes. While employing folklore and analogy in this play, she also gives in to the feminist impulse and comments on the system that denies Black uneducated women a chance at personal and material happiness. She adopts realist gestures, but also poses questions raised by it. Even though Lucinda seems to be in the extreme subjectivity of being an object to be won or punished, she is able to confront the pseudo-realities of
the context she is in. Lucinda thus returns the gaze by challenging Elias’ morality and in turn the prerogative of phallocratic righteousness over female sexuality.

Childress and Hansberry use the realist narrative form to capture the immediacy of the racial struggle of the sixties. The struggle for racial equality was seen also as a struggle to prove Black manhood. The chauvinism of the period led to distinctive displays of male pride. Against this political background, Childress and Hansberry confront the dialectics of oppression through realist narratives that are women-centred. While Hansberry was trying to show that the idea of the universal depended also on the specifics of race, sex and class, Childress was trying to empower Black women and place them alongside Black men in their struggle against racism.

In Trouble in Mind, Childress stages conflicts between Black actors and a white director. The subject of the play “Chaos in Belleville” is lynching. The conflict of expectations leads to a confrontation and climax. Wiletta, the protagonist accelerates the momentum and disrupts the narrative by refusing to comply with Manner’s view of history. There is no clear resolution, as there are multiple choices—submissions, assimilation, compromise and advocacy, that the play offers. Wiletta’s resolution is both personal and political. There is no triumph over the context but there is a triumph of the spirit. Though the play follows the traditional realist thread of conflicts, climaxes and resolutions, yet Childress’ heroine confronts the mythical white subject, with her resistance.
In *Wine in the Wilderness*, the narrative follows realist patterns of romance and quest for the ideal. Bill the artist, is looking for the ideal woman who he is believes is the African woman, regal, resplendent and remote. However, when he meets Tommy, the “grass-roots”, “messed-up chick”, he assumes that she will be transformed by him. However, it is Tommy with her disruption of all accepted norms, who causes a recognition and reversal in the characters around her. Tommy’s heroism transforms Bill. Childress exposes through the linear progression, the gaps and silences, the ironies and omissions in the ‘realistic’ expectations that society has of Black women.

While Childress believed that “Black experience means living a segregated and a very special existence”(*Black Scenes* xi), Hansberry emphasized that “[…] people to the extent we accept them and believe them as who they’re supposed to be, to that extent they can become everybody”(*To Be Young* 128). In this sense, though she did not see realism as a specific form or genre, she saw it as a means of achieving what was possible, that “the imagination has no bounds in realism”(*TBY* 7)

The play, *A Raisin in the Sun* is informed by the quest for a better life by the Younger family. The interpretations of what constitutes ‘a better life’, leads to the conflicts. Lena Younger, whose money is going to fund individual dreams, dreams of owning a house with a garden. Walter, wants to be his own boss and run a business.
Ruth’s quest is to enjoy a decent standard of living and for Beneatha, it is to pursue her ambition of becoming a doctor. The narrative has units of anticipation and fulfillment that are motivated by desire.

The realistic portrayal of a Black family’s quest for the American Dream also reveals the inconsistencies in the idealization of the myth. The American Dream marginalizes those who do not subscribe to its qualifications. The dreams of the Younger family are deferred because the specifics of race, sex and class disqualify them. The family’s will to transcend this context results in a rupture of the old order. While each of the characters engages with, negotiates and confronts issues, they have their individual moments of recognition and transformation. Hansberry shows how the personal is political. Their individual triumphs are minimized by their greater struggle against the politics of race. The Younger’s stand as a family signifies the resistance put up by the urban poor black family against the racist stance of the white neighborhood at Claybourne. Heroism is redefined here, as Hansberry proves that reality is “not only what is but also what is possible” (*TBY* 234).

In *The Drinking Gourd*, Hansberry contextualizes history and event from the perspective of the Black slave woman, Rissa. Hansberry’s task was not so much to rewrite history but to evaluate its effects. As she quotes “what I think a dramatist has to do is to thoroughly inundate himself or herself in an awareness of the realities of the historical period and then dismiss it. And then become absolutely dedicated to the
idea that what you are going to do is to create human beings whom you know in your own time.] (Nemiroff 147). Hansberry did not set out to create stereotypical black heroes or white villains but was intent on locating "the sources of human behavior and villainy within the slave society" (Nemiroff 152). Set in the South, against the background of the Civil War, this realist narrative reveals the feelings and thoughts of three groups of people who were victimized and made less than human by the institution of slavery.

Hansberry uses an omniscient narrator to establish the background and comment on it. Objectivity is ensured in the detached viewpoints of the soldier/narrator who has "a certain idealized American generality" and whose "voice is morbidly free of identifiable regionalism" (TDG 714). At the end of the play, the soldier returns, but this time in a Union uniform, emphasizing that despite his political stance, he is still objective enough to voice the feeling that slavery has cost America far too much as a nation and "too much of our soul" (735).

The narrative includes three perspectives on slavery— that of the white master, Hiram Sweet and his family and friends; the white immigrant worker, Zeb Dudley and his family; and the slave family of Rissa, Hannibal, Sarah and Joshua. The narrative reveals the tensions in each group. Rissa has to deal with Hannibal’s rebellious thirst for freedom and her future as a slave in Hiram’s house. Hiram’s Southern way of life is threatened by his son’s pragmatism and Zeb Dudley is forced to serve the bigger
man because of class struggles. The three threads become one when Hannibal is caught in the woods learning to read. The white overseer Dudley, who under the orders of Everett blinds Hannibal, discovers this criminal act. This act sets in motion several resolutions. Rissa resolves to help her son escape, while allowing Hiram to die. Hannibal is poised to flee and the Sweets sit comfortably in the illusion that their way of life will never end. Hansberry highlights the contrasts between black and white, master and slave, in a series of comparisons and contrasts. Hiram struggles with the conflicts within himself while Hannibal has to deal with them externally. They are both heroes and victims. When Hiram states “there are some men born into this world who make their own destiny. Men who do not tolerate the rules of other men or other forces”, he was talking about being “a master” (723). However the irony embedded in the narrative, is his failure to recognize the same instinct in Hannibal. Hansberry uses the realist form to point to what is possible by showing what is.

Bonner’s play The Purple Flower is also an indictment of slavery. This play is an attempt to answer the questions raised by Locke and Dubois during the Harlem Renaissance, about the role of the Negro in Literature and Art. However, Bonner’s play critiques the realist form by using avant-garde techniques to explore the issue. It is interesting to note, how both Bonner and Hansberry return to the roots of racism, in order to historicize the moment and re-examine the far-reaching consequence of slavery in their own times from the Black woman’s perspective.
Bonner's refusal to treat the issue of slavery in the realist mode shows her rejection of being enslaved in the master's discourse. Using symbol, surreal sets and expressionistic techniques, she traces the history of conflict between black and white. The allegory is presented from the slaves' perspective who are collectively called the "Us's" while the 'Other' is objectified as the "Sundry White Devils". The action revolves around the 'purple flower', "The Flower-of-life-at-it's-fullest". The Us's plan strategies to obtain the flower, though there are differences between the Young and Older Us's. A compromise results in the creation of New Man, who will save them. The play ends with Finest Blood going after the Sundry White Devil who pinched Sweet. There is no narrative closure as the quest for the purple flower ends in the search for blood. Bonner succeeds in not only historicizing slavery but also legitimizes it by portraying the pre-cedents of racism and the ante-cedents of slavery. This is pointed out in the stage directions which read, "The Middle-of-things-as-They-Are (which means the End-of-Things for some of the characters and the Beginning-of-Things for others") (191). Bonner's multi-voiced narrative ends in a question. Hansberry and Childress answer her question in the sixties, as they figure new directions for Black intervention in the history of America through their narratives of desire for liberation and subjecthood.

Kennedy also uses the _avant-garde_ form to critique realism. She sets up an oppositional Black woman's culture through fragmentation and subversion of patterns of meaning, especially when they refer to an ideological position. By deconstructing
received notions of Black female identity, she offers gaps for negotiation of meaning. Kennedy’s works, like Bonner’s, represent the inevitable rupture in tidy definitions that are imposed upon individuals. Her plays are obsessional narratives of a divided consciousness that is revealed in the monologic incantations of her character’s many selves. The ambiguity articulates the impossibility of identifying with a narrative position. The characters try to locate themselves in the gaps of unnarrated silence. The layering of oppressions is revealed through self-narrative, dream and nightmare. Blau calls these narratives “antiphonal agitations of desire” (537).

The narrative structure of Kennedy’s plays resists temporal linearity and are instead filled with ellipses. Kennedy’s diffused and subversive narrative strategies resist the gaze and frustrate as Forte surmises “the audience’s expectations vis-a-vis narrative” (Keyssar FT & T 26). Kennedy’s distorting critique of classic realist drama and narrative intelligibility is at once both personal and political. In this staging of narrative self-exploration, history and personality reflect one another.

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro* Sarah the protagonist enacts her terrifying haunting by her many selves. The narratives of Sarah’s selves – Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus, Patrice Lumumba and Mother intersect at the matrices of race, sex and class. Black and white, Christian and pagan, slave and sovereign intersect and resist each other, thus disrupting Western epistemology. Sarah’s many selves reveal that Sarah has a white mother who was raped by her Black father. So she kills him on
the day Patrice Lumumba was assassinated. However Raymond and the Landlady reveal that Sarah hanged herself because her father was black and her mother, a white whore. Kennedy’s staging of these auto-erotic confessions of a shifting subject reveals the alternate realities that affect a Black female’s conception of history and truth. Sarah expresses this de-valuation of self and society in her prologue: “These are the places my selves exist in. I know no places. To believe in places is to know hope and to know the emotion of hope is to know beauty. It links us across a horizon and connects us to the world, I find there are no places, only my funny house (FH 7).

The distortion of narrative is further exacerbated in A Rats Mass where there is no exit, only madness, metamorphoses and death. As in Funnyhouse, the characters resist recognition. Here the Black self is articulated by the dualistic halves of incomplete genders, Brother and Sister Rat. They are not complete but represent non-human characteristics. The narrative, structured as a hysterical obsessional confession reveal how Brother and Sister Rat are caught in incest, inspired by the Catholic girl, Rosemary, who refuses to pardon them. Alienated by Rosemary, their guilt is expunged by the state’s religious apparatus, the Nazis who join Jesus and his entourage, in eliminating the rats. The almost nonsensical and repetitious dialogues reify the horrific nightmare of being alienated by the Euro-Christian society. The narrative which begins distinctly, disintegrates rapidly into confused chants that resemble rats gnawing sounds and metamorphoses before us into a death chant.
While Kennedy locates her subject in these fragmented narratives, Shange creates new spaces that celebrate Black womanhood. Shange experiments with a form that defies and resists artificial categories of traditional theatre and which is an organic extension of the Black female experience. The choreopoem descends from the African heritage of story telling, with its rhythms, gestures and emotional catharsis. Shange's experimental form shows how individual experiences trigger the collective memory and how these narratives connect the personal with the political across history. Grounded in the tradition of the oral narrative form, Shange reveals an inherent Black female aesthetic, through the choreopoem.

Each character, in her choreopoem tells a story that enfolds the larger context of being Black and female and each narrative piece demands immediacy and engagement. In *For Colored Girls...*, Shange uses seven women representing different colors of the rainbow and originating from suburbs across America, to structure the choreopoem. Each poem tells a story that causes another story to be told or re-told. These self-narrations accentuate the intimacy of revelations and truths that are different in the telling and the hearing. The introductory piece clearly reveals why the stories will be told and what that will accomplish. The lady in brown announces:

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   somebody / anybody
   sing a black girls song
   bring her out
   to know herself
   to know you (4)
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The seven ladies tell the Black woman’s story, which is also their own. Each piece is centred on an issue that is woven into a personal story. These individual narrative acts are connected by choral pieces that voice their empathy, anger, agreement and encouragement in relation to the stories and issues. Thus the illusion of seamlessness which is broken by the episodic pattern of narration is also connected to construct a unified theatrical experience. The shifting subject and the plurality of expressions creates a layering of meanings of oppression that are encountered by the Black woman. The growing rage at these exploitations reaches a pitch, when the lady in red admits that she is Crystal. The narrative exit is a ritual of self-affirmation that makes them whole again. ‘The half-notes’ and ‘dark phrases’ of womanhood are gathered up in the laying on of hands.

Spell #7 is set in motion by the interlocutor/narrator Lou, who with his spells can initiate or stop action. Set against the minstrel mask, Shange’s play is to be read in the gaps and silences that Lou creates. Lou’s narrative connects, then dis—connects. Under Lou’s spell, the characters become actors that dare to tell their stories of pain and humiliation. Eli’s bar becomes the free space in which their silences become stories. Ross, Bettina, Dahlia, Lily, Alec and Eli, recount theirs and others experiences. The shifting from first person to third person, objectivity to subjectivity keeps the narrative flexible, meandering through dark alleys and bright lights, seedy pubs and down town parks to unravel Black stories. The penultimate narration by the three women is the climactic junctures in which history and identity coalesce.
Lou’s magic causes the healing of their wounds as he re-affirms blackness in his final incantation “we gonna be colored & love it”. Lou, as the interlocutor, has the privilege of debunking white myths right there. He says “crackers are born with the right to be alive/ I’m making ours up right here / in yr face / (116). The whole narrative has to be read from Lou’s position as a magician. It is only under Lou’s magic that the narrative escapes from the mask of the minstrel imposed on Blacks by whites. This play stages the hyper-reality of the illusive myths that structure belief. The narrative is grounded in the trickster tale and thus reifies the subterfuge of the minstrel mask and the cultural warfare and codified language that Black people are forced to adopt in order to survive.

By relating these forms that these Black women playwrights employ, to the ideological and cultural processes that shape their thoughts and dramaturgies, it is possible to identify and determine the political meanings they wish to convey. It is evident that subjectivity is a crucial factor in these plays and that Black women playwrights choose not only realist, avant-garde and experimental forms to make political and aesthetic statements, but also construct narratives of female identity which are subversive in intent.

In the plays chosen for analysis, one sees the emergence of a narrative structure, that traces a process of separation from the ideological and social constraints that frame the Black woman, to a degree of self-discovery, self-
ion and autonomy. Felski in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change (1989) identifies two directions that feminist narrative has taken (83). Felski does not apply these models to Black feminist writing, but since Black women playwrights have an inherent feminist approach, they have been useful in identifying the structures that determine their plays. The first, is the narrative of autobiographical self-revelation, which is an authentic expression of “authorial self” (83). The second, the emancipation narrative is a biographical narration, which traces the female hero’s journey, from a state of alienation within an ideological site, to a discovery of identity rooted in the self. However these models are not mutually exclusive and often form a continuum.

The confessional narrative is autobiographical in that the position of the character reflects the position of the playwright. This “unmediated subjectivity” bridges the gap between the perceived and the ideal (Felski 83). This kind of authentic expression challenges the notions of reality from inside as well as outside. The interior nature of such an autobiographical confession delineates the specific problems and experiences that bind women together. The emphasis here is on the ordinary events of a protagonist’s life, their typicality and relation to a communal identity. The intention of such writing is to make public what affects the self, while rejecting the detached viewpoint in its perusal of the truth. This attempt at self-definition has correspondences to other stories that are similar, thus constructing a communal female identity. Felski suggests that “feminist confession thus appropriates some of the
functions of political discourse. It is instrumental in the delineation of a group identity through the establishment of norms, formulates elements of a more general feminist critique, and concretizes aspects of the aims and interests of the women’s movement” (95).

It is evident from the plays of Shange and Kennedy that the narrative structure of confession emphasizes the self, caught in an ideological site where race, sex and class negate or devalue Black women. The narrative thus approaches political discourse. Their plays construct identities for Black women while deconstructing received images. The personal nature of the confession creates an intimate bond between the narrator and listener thereby enlarging the concerns of Black women writers in creating communities of liberated or autonomous Black women. Both Shange and Kennedy attempt to reveal the psychological and sociological constraints that affect Black women. They do not pretend detachment but instead offer an intimate picture of the character, who authenticates and legitimates Black female experience.

“Autobiographical work is the only thing that interests me, apparently that is what I do best”, says Kennedy in her autobiography People Who Led to My Plays (42). Her experimental autobiography reveals an intimate connection between her life and works. Mckay speaks of this characteristic of Black women; he says, “[…] the ability to name the self autonomously is an important part of their historical identity, a
means of reclaiming and affirming selves” (Braxton and McLaughlin 280). In her preface to Adrienne Kennedy in One Act (1987) she states:

More than anything I remember the days surrounding the writing of each one of he places...Accra, Ghana and Rome for Funny house of a Negro...our wonderful brand new apartment in New York in Park West Village for A Rats Mass[...].Without exception the days when I am writing are days of images fiercely pounding in my head (xi).

Kennedy claims she wrote Funnyhouse of a Negro in 1960 and that it reflected her fourteen months of travel to Europe, Ghana and Nigeria. “I would say that almost every image in Funnyhouse took form while I was in West Africa where I became aware of masks...I discovered a strength in being a black person and a connection to West Africa” (qtd. in Bryant -Jackson and Overbeck 23).

Sarah-Negro’s lines echo the spell of these places and of their associations. These places and the images connect and disconnect revealing the discontent and dilemmas within the mind of an educated urban Black woman. Sarah says in her monologue, “These are the places myselfs exist in ...I try to give myselfs a logical relationship but that too is a lie ... I clung loyally to the lie of relationships, again and again seeking to establish a connection between my characters” (FH 7).

Sarah, like Kennedy, is an English major, who spends her days “preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper”(6). In her preface to The Dramatic Circle (1994), she states that her characters are “[...] trying to explore in
this work the history of race, which for me is the pre-dominant question of my existence" (191). Sarah, like Kennedy, experiences her struggle to define her individuality through writing. In an un-edited version of the play, Sarah states that the play has no themes or statement as she refuses “to accept the fact that a statement has to come from an ordered force [...] for the statement is the characters and the characters are myself” (Oliver 195). Sarah’s lines could well be Kennedy’s for she echoes a similar sentiment in her preface to The Dramatic Circle. She says, “I’m always trying to recreate a synthesis of those women to make a statement and of course to add myself” (TDC 195).

Kennedy sets her plays in the time period that they actually happened. She writes, I learned that if I can get a story or a play or parts of it in the right year, something unlocks in my imagination that gives it greater power (TDC 189). A Rats Mass came out of a dream while Kennedy was travelling between Paris and Rome. She writes in A Growth of Images “I had this dream in which I was being pursued by red, blooded rats. It was [a] very powerful dream...I was just haunted by that image, about being pursued by these big red rats” (44). These haunting images materialized as Brother and Sister Rat. The images of blood and rats combining in a sacred ritual attests to the sense of oppression by the socio-religious and political contexts that haunt and terrorize the black psyche. In the play this personal nightmare is objectified in the following lines.
Rosemary: In my mind was a vision of us rats all
Brother Rat: If only we could go back to our childhood.
Sister Rat: Now there will always be rat blood on the walls of
our rat house just like the blood that came on the slide
(62)

The idea of a rats mass may have been inspired by the many stories and rituals
that Kennedy experienced in her childhood. Her recollection of nativity scenes is
recorded in her autobiography. The characters, Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Two Wise Men
and Shepherd make their appearance in several plays including A Rats Mass,
Funnyhouse of a Negro, and The Owl Answers (1968). Kennedy’s plays are auto-
erotic confessions in which various voices try to locate themselves. Benston in his
essay “Locating Adrienne Kennedy” writes, “the autobiographical project is
inescapably if indeterminately, dialogic, its scene a multi-voiced nexus of subtle
conflicts and purported confluences” (Bryant-Jackson and Overbeck 119). Kennedy’s
personal quest for the continuity of self in time is seen in her materializing her own
desire, dream and memory along several sites of marginality. This staging of narrative
self-exploration becomes a dramatic proposition, which experiences self through
representation.

In her preface to The Dramatic Circle, she writes “[...] so my wanting to be
writer is very much parallel to the struggle for individuality (190). In her preface to
Deadly Triplets she says, “My plays were filled with the intricacies of race in my
life”(vii). Kennedy’s plays with their ‘unmediated subjectivity’ between the imagined
and the real, between the interior and exterior become political disclosures as the issue
of race, sex and class are located in the voices of her characters – Sarah and Brother and Sister Rat.

Shange uses the confessional narrative to uncover the illusion of seamlessness and the detached viewpoint and transform personal pain into narratives that correspond with other women’s stories of rape, rejection, infidelity, betrayal, loneliness, violence, abortion, divorce and infatuation. The narrator initiates these individual stories, but they are taken up by the others who react, respond, disagree, add to it and criticize it. One story leads to another, forging communities of shared experience. In her preface to the play, For Colored Girls... Shange concludes “I am on the other side of the rainbow / picking up the pieces of days spent waitin for the poem to be heard /[...]]” (xviii). The lady in brown who introduces the play declares “this is for colored girls who have considered suicide / but moved to the ends of their own rainbows” (6). At the end of the play she says “this is for colored girls who have considered suicide / but are moving to the ends of their own rainbows” (64). The two lines connect playwright, narrator and audience in a single experience that forges a link between the past, present and future.

Shange appears in her play as the lady in green. She narrates, “this is mine / ‘ntozake’ her own things’ / thats my name / now give me my stuff / why dont ya find yr own things / and leave this package of me for my destiny /” (50-51). Shange willingly participates in the shared destiny of coloured girls and engages in
constructing the identity of a Black girl spontaneously. This immediacy lends the play an authenticity found lacking in most classic realist plays. About the autobiography and fictional threads, she says, “while everything hasn’t happened to me. I’ve endured everything mentally – and that can be even more painful (qtd. in Lester 67).

Shange’s coloured girls bring to birth the whole Black female self. Though these seven women are nameless, yet they are identifiable through their experiences. Through their anonymity they are able to be specific and uninhibited in their confessions. Their anonymity makes their identity fluid and flexible, giving them the intimacy and immediacy to construct their identity as Black women. Thus the events, emotions, impressions and thoughts comprising that context are inseparable from the identity they produce. This articulation of lived experience connects with other experiences, thus becoming an act of consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising is a priority that helps to affirm Black women by cutting across a range of contexts that they may inhabit. Personal experiences thus become a means to validate the collective. Felski quoting Kietel, states “the lyrical self articulated in these texts always perceives itself as part of a collective, whose experiences constitute its norms and on behalf of whose members it speaks” (96)

In Spell #7 the experiences of the individual become the collective memory of a people subjected to racism. The play attempts to dismantle images imposed on Black people in the theatre and outside. The personal confessions of the actors under
spell #7, approach the truth as it can be uttered, only in the spaces provided. Here they dare to live and articulate their true identities. Eli, the poet-bartender makes his territorial claim over his kingdom, his bar and his mind. He quotes, “I am mantling an array of strength / no one shall interfere with this / the construction of myself”(76)

This construction of an identity is the objective of the narrative. In doing so, these characters also rewrite history from the position of the unvoiced. Alec’s monologue in Act Two on slavery and racism, attempts to historicize the Civil War, like Hansberry did in _The Drinking Gourd_. Alec reinforces the fact of personal oppression and cultural domination. He states: “I dont get any pleasure from nobody watching me trying to be a slave I once waz / who got away / when we all know they had an emancipation proclamation / that the civil war waz not fought over us (110).

Alec’s personal experience demands public ratification when he jogs their memory and asks for a response. While Alec talks about racism, the three women narrate how racism and sexism together create an even more difficult and ambiguous position for Black women. When Natalie narrates a white girl’s experience, she subverts the position of a minstrel while mimicking the white girl. However Natalie, while narrating a day in the life of a white girl, still locates herself in the un-narrated silence of Black women, on whom the life of the white girl depends. Maxine’s continuation of Natalie’s narrative, from a Black girl’s perspective is both harrowing and ironical by contrast. She states at the end of the play “no one understands that
surviving the impossible is supposed to accentuate the positive aspects of a people” (115).

The narratives of oppression historicize the legitimate experiences of the common Black man or woman. Shange provides spaces in her narrative to record the voices of the voiceless. Her narrators are men and women forced to wear the masks of conformity under domination. Shange uses Lou the magician, to uncover the masks of minstrelsy and upstage the whites up front. By using the inter-active oral narrative form, on which most Black women’s writing rests, she brings authentic, new expressions into the theatre. The subjective experiences, the spontaneity of narration, the intimacy and lack of detachment, the inter-active element, the accommodation of peoples experiences, all contribute to make Shange’s choreopoem a novel Afro-centric experience.

Both Shange and Kennedy reject the ideology of romantic love or idealization of marriage in a patriarchal society. They offer instead a critique of these models, raising woman-consciousness to a greater degree of autonomy and self-hood. In both their plays, the Black female hero reveals that her threat comes from within the patriarchal society. Kennedy’s protagonists long for a love that will ease the burden of being black. Sarah is in a relationship with Raymond, a Jewish poet, however the relationship is again a contradiction, a confrontation of black and white. Sarah longs for whiteness, represented by Raymond, who is also the figure who mocks her, in her
funny house. Her unfulfilled quest leaves her the alternative of the void, of death. Brother and Sister Rat, like Sarah are terrorized by their incestuous acts inspired by Rosemary, a white girl. Kennedy’s view of love is distorted as she points to the fact that if the protagonists cannot love themselves, who can?

Shange’s narrators also point to sexism and racism. For Colored Girls... is an indictment against Black men who cannot love a Black woman for who she is. Constantly compared to white women, they are devalued, denigrated, exploited and rejected. The poems reflect the different ways Black men have betrayed them – physically, sexually, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. In a bold statement, the seven women reject the notion of waiting to be loved by a Black man. Instead they find love within themselves and heal themselves into wholeness. In Spell #7, the three men re-iterate “anyway the whole world knows/ european & non- european alike the whole world knows that nobody loves the black woman like they love farah- fawcett- majors, the whole world don’t turn out for a dead black woman like they did for marilyn monroe” (100). The Black actresses ignore them, reject their terms of endearment and express their individuality and independence, by choosing their careers over love.

In a similar vein, the emancipation narrative embodies a rupture with the old. This narrative structure depends upon the psychological transformation of the female hero, making it seem like a spiritual conversion. The transformation takes the
protagonist from a stage of alienation to a conscious affirmation of her identity. The characteristics that marginalize the protagonist provides the impetus for a refusal of those ideological codes that enslaved her. The narrative challenges the traditional plot of conforming to a patriarchal destiny. Instead it shows the female hero as being restless in the negative model from which she alienates herself and moves on to autonomy. The female hero’s new self-knowledge creates a basis for future negotiation between the subject and society. Though the narrative endings may differ, and active self-realization are common.

Features of the emancipatory narrative are also found in Shange’s plays as the two kinds of narratives discussed here are not mutually exclusive and often find a continuum, as mentioned earlier. The transformation of the protagonist, who moves from a state of social entrapment to spiritual awakening, refuses those codes, which enslaved her and moves towards a phase of negotiation between herself and society. In both Shange’s plays discussed earlier, the ladies of the rainbow, and Lou’s minstrel actors move towards self-realization. This realization that one must love oneself, allows the individual to assert herself.

In For Colored Girls ... the seven women find God in themselves, find healing in nature and the affirming touch of a Black sister’s hand, which enables them to move on towards the ends of the rainbow. In Spell #7, the actors are liberated by Lou’s spell to come to an active self-realization that in order to survive racism, one has to
participate in community rituals that are self-affirming. Both the plays have rites reminiscent of their African cultural heritage that restore wholeness and love to these socially deprived people. The spiritual awakening is significant in their transformation.

In emancipatory narratives, one finds the protagonist in a state of restlessness in the given codes, which prompts her actions. In The Pot Maker, Bonner places Lucinda in a state of moral restlessness triggered off by her frustration at her husband’s lack of sensitivity to her needs. Trapped in a patriarchal culture that devalues women like her, who are rustic, uncouth and illiterate, Lucinda’s salvation seems to rest on the benevolence of her husband Elias, her in-laws, the Jacktans and Lew, her lover. Defying the conventional trend of placing the heroine in a moral dilemma and leaving her to make the choice, Bonner makes Lucinda expose the hypocrisies of the code. Her refusal to submit ends in her accidental death which leads to a moral transformation in Elias. Lucinda thus does not make the choice expected of her. Her resistance points to the anomalies in the system, which allows men to dictate morals to women. Though this narrative is not one of self-discovery, Lucinda’s interrogation of the dominant order and her refusal to submit to it, is an exercise of will, and is therefore one of emancipation.

In The Purple Flower, Bonner’s theme is the quest for freedom. The Us’s plan strategies to obtain freedom and equality. The compromise between the Young and
Old Us's is to create a New Man who will be a blend of African and Christian sensibilities. However 'blood' is a pre-requisite for this creation, so Old Man asks for blood. The violation of Sweet's modesty, by a Sundry White Devil awakens the Us's thirst for blood. In an ironic twist, Old Man quotes the Judeo-Christian story of Abraham's sacrifice and God's provision of a ram in the bushes. The Sundry White Devil is 'the ram in the bushes', that Finest Blood seeks for the sacrifice. The narrative is an obvious narrative of emancipation as the plot traces the biographical development of the Us's from a quiescent lot to an active and rebellious people, who move from helplessness to motivation, from ideas to action.

While Bonner presents symbolically the beginnings of revolt against an oppressive white society, Hansberry presents a continuum of that struggle in realistic terms. Hansberry structures the narratives of both her plays to include not only the emancipation of the individual, but also that of the family and the Black community at large. In A Raisin in the Sun, the Younger family is frustrated by the material conditions of their existence. The adults feel trapped physically, emotionally and economically by the effects of racism. Lena Younger has worked herself to the bone and now waits for the means, her insurance, to make her dream come true. Ruth is hoping the money will enable her to give up her job as a domestic maid, Walter hopes that the money will give him the freedom to be his own boss and not a white man's servant. Beneatha dreams of becoming a doctor and hopes that the money will give her the means to get herself an education. Each of them is confronted with a conflict.
Lena wonders whether she should fund everyone’s dream and compromise on her own. Ruth has to decide between abortion and another mouth to feed; Beneatha between George who represents the assimilationist and his phoniness and Asagai, the African rebel and idealist. Walter has to decide whether being a man amounts to having his way or being responsible.

Each of them makes his or her choice but risks losing everything because of Walter’s selfishness. The family crisis is heightened by the appearance of Karl Lindner and the choice he offers them. Mama Younger’s dream house is in a white neighbourhood and Lindner offers them money to shift to a Black neighbourhood. When the larger question of race figures, Walter realizes what it means to be a Black man. The realization affirms him as a man, and the realization of what the choice would cost them, makes the Younger family resolve their differences and make a ‘black’ choice. The larger question of racial oppression and its effects on individuals and the family is dealt with in the play. Here the individual and the collective move towards realization, affirmation and autonomy. They move from being oppressed to being liberated; free to make choices that enable them to deal with society on their own terms.

A similar structure informs The Drinking Gourd in which Hansberry traces the journey of Hannibal and Rissa from enslavement to emancipation. Rissa, like Lena Younger, is trapped between her desire to help her son flee to freedom and her loyalty
to her good master, Hiram. Hannibal’s restlessness in the play derives from his sense of self worth. He wants to read and write but knows he will be punished if he does. He is the romantic idealist whose every thought is freedom. When Rissa sees that in the equation between slave and master, the slave accounts for nothing, she decides to act. She avenges Hannibal’s blinding by letting her master die, unattended. Her awakening leads to action as she facilitates Hannibal’s escape to freedom. Rissa’s selfless but significant action, like Lena’s, makes it possible for Hannibal (again, a dreamer, like Walter) to start life anew. Hansberry’s narratives thus enjoin the cause of race to gender to create powerful stories in which Black women exercise their will to change the course of an irrevocable destiny to one they can control.

Childress’s narratives like Hansberry’s are women–centered. These narratives clearly point to the protagonist’s refusal to accept the dominant order. She holds her own against the tide, getting stronger in her self-actualization as the current gets stronger. The strength of her character, causes transformation in others, she becomes the means to the realization of their inadequacies and motivates them towards racial consciousness and moral strength.

In Trouble in Mind, Wiletta has no illusions about racism in the theatre. Having struggled with it for twenty odd years, she can say that ‘show business, it’s just a business. Colored folks ain’t in no theater” (139). Wiletta has also experienced sexism in the kind of roles and direction she has been forced to endure. She tells
Sheldon, "I always say its the man’s play, the man’s money and the man’s theater, so what you gonna do?" (141). Wiletta, with her long history in the theatre is aware of the anomalies, but has survived without challenging it. She is forced to do so when she has to make a choice between betraying her instincts and pleasing the director. She chooses the first when she refuses to play the Black mother from a white perspective, in a lynching episode. Wiletta points out “They weren’t sent to be killed by their mama. The writer wants the damn white man to be the hero - and I’m the villain” (169). Wiletta’s awakening, which happens because she refuses to submit to the dominant order, causes her to risk her career and livelihood, for the cause of truth, as she sees it. Her courage inspires the others, though they are mere survivors, like Wiletta had been. At the end of the play, Wiletta has her moment in the theatre, alone and on her terms. She has journeyed to a sense of self-worth and dignity in the face of all odds.

Tomorrow Marie, the protagonist of Wine in the Wilderness, journeys from the outside to the inside, from being a ‘messed-up chick’ to being ‘the wine in the wilderness’. Though the narrative has a romance plot, yet here the traditional hero is saved and transformed by the courage of Tommy. Bill, Cynthia and Sonny-man represent the white ethos in their idealization of beauty and culture. Tommy by contrast is alienated by these phony sensibilities. While Bill is busy constructing an identity for her in derogatory terms, such as the “lost woman”, “ignorant, unfeminine, coarse, rude...vulgar...poor, dumb chick” (26), Tommy shows them how she has
created herself in her own image. She relies on her strength and dignity to survive humiliation. When she realizes that she has been used, she refuses to give in. She says, “there’s something inside a me that say I ain’ suppose to let anybody play me cheap. Don’t care how much they know” (146). She ends her tirade with “...That’s wine in the wilderness...a woman that’s a real one and a good one and you just better believe I’m it” (148). Tomorrow Marie debunks the myth of the ‘messed-up chick’ and in her emancipation lies the tomorrows of Black people.

The plays discussed under the emancipation model reveal in their narratives a nurture with the old, or from a superficial world. They subvert expectations by debunking myths and construct instead an identity for themselves on their own terms. Their self-knowledge allows them to take control of their lives and gives them new strategies to survive or negotiate alternate orders. In the process they form a network of support to the community enabling and transforming them by their strength and assertiveness: This model, like the confessional becomes an aesthetic expression of the ideological codes which inform Black women’s drama.

While a discussion of these narrative models reveals the structure of Black women’s plays, it also attests to the strong feminist impulse that determines these structures. However what makes these plays distinctively Black and female is the rhythm, influenced by the African oral narrative tradition. Rhythm is an integral part of Black writing. Senghor quotes, “The organizing force which makes the black style
is rhythm. It is the most perceptible and least tangible thing.” Drawn from older traditions of drumbeats, percussion, call and response, these rhythms with their variations of metre and accent create polymetry, which is a distinctive characteristic of Black music. This adaptation of various rhythms in various Black styles establishes a historical continuity and fluidity between genres – oral narrative, music, theatre, liturgy and song.

Black music’s evocative rhythms not only set up beats that are polyphonic, but also the rhythms themselves evoke characteristic moods, reverberate through history and stimulate the collective memory. Black women playwrights use these rhythms creatively and exploit the features of these metres to create their own rhythms. The seminal quality of Black music is its spaces for improvisation, repetitions and contrapuntal harmonizing. Subverting the predictable metronomic quality of Western speech and forms, these playwrights improvise on the subtle variations, moods and beats to create a rich tonality in the narrative.

Improvisation has been interpreted by Euro-Americans in an imitative or mimetic manner; these writers however interpret it in a deeper, broader way, extending it beyond just a controlling element of form to a structuring element of content and meaning. It offers spontaneity, freedom and culturally specific historical and social contexts. The three forms used extensively by Black women playwrights are the slave songs, blues and jazz.
African–American music is derived from slave history. Zora Neale Hurston expresses it metaphorically in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* “I, who am borne away to become an orphan, carry my parents with me. For rhythm is she not my mother and Drama is her man? So he groaned aloud in the ship and hid his drum and laughed”.

The antecedents of this cultural warfare, which began on ‘the middle passage’, are seen in the codes of slave songs. The call-and-response pattern, which was a part of African community rituals, now became a means to identify with other slaves and to sing together of their pain. This interactive element is central to understanding Black rhythms and musical structures. This interaction is explicitly seen in Southern Baptist sermons, which grew out of the call-and-response ritual. Bonner uses this structure in *The Pot Maker*. Elias’ sermon with its repetition, improvisation of line and rhythm, and the Gullah accent make it distinctly Black American. Interruptions, repetitions and rhythms are typical of this tradition. This ‘perceptible’ rhythm is seen in these lines from his sermon:

Tain’t but just so long that you got to be on this earth in the dark – anyhow. Set up. Set up and hold your head up. Don’t lay down on God! Don’t lay down on him! Don’t spill on the groun’. No matter how hard the folks wear and tear and worry you, set up and don’t spill the things he give you to keep for Him. They tore Him – but he come into the world. Jesus and He went out of it still Jesus. He set hisself up as Jesus and He ain’t never laid down (7).

The blues, like the sermon, evolved from the slave song tradition. As the name suggests, the blues are a unique expression of Black feelings about racism, oppression
and loss of love or home. These sorrow songs were adapted to religious and secular situations. While slave songs and spirituals were community rituals, the blues are an individual’s imaginative response to a situation. Panish concludes that “inherent in the blues idiom are tropes like signifyin’ and call-and-response” and also those experiences that are unique to Black Americans” (126). According to Hill, “‘the blues hero’ puts on the cloak of irony which shields him neither from the wound of nobility nor from the foibles of the ordinary, but prepares him for the task of endurance which is his ordeal (60). Hansberry and Childress represent the blues ethos in their plays, locating their characters in situations that seem insurmountable. The struggle to survive, the strength of the human will to overcome oppression may be identified with the blues tradition.

Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun places its characters in grim circumstances. The Younger family has small earnings but big dreams. Their collective struggle against racism may be paralleled to the call-and-response pattern, in which the leader calls and the community responds. Beneatha asks Walter “O God. Where is the bottom”, when they have lost everything. Walter responds “Where is the bottom? Where is the bottom? ...there ain’t no causes – there ain’t nothing but taking in his world and he who takes most is smartest – and it don’t make a damn bit of difference how”(114). Walter’s cynicism and anger makes him feel helpless enough to sign away their dreams along with their dignity. Lena’s quiet wisdom is reminiscent of the tone of the spirituals. She says, “Son - I come from five generations of people who was slaves and share croppers - but ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay’
...no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth. We ain’t never been that poor. We ain’t never been that dead inside” (115). This belief that one can lose the whole world but not the soul, echoes the plaintive hopeful, pained yet dignified measure of the blues. Their individual responses to their context not only express unique perspectives but also form a continuum of shared feeling.

The triumph of spirit over a demeaning existence that denies the legitimacy of one’s existence is again brought out in The Drinking Gourd. Hannibal’s love for freedom and his recognition of his slave condition is poignantly brought out when Sarah asks him “Even if you make it – h’ you known what’s up there, what it be like to go wandering around by yourself in this world?” Hannibal replies, “I don’t know. Jes known what it like to be a slave” (718). Yet Hannibal does not give up his yearning for freedom. His composition entitled “The Drinking Gourd” explicitly points to this persistent need and deep longing for freedom. He writes: “I do not know why - but when a man lie on his back and see the stars there is something that can happen to a man inside that be...bigger than whatever a man is.” (731)

Childress’s women inhabit a similar world – they are plain, simple, homegrown women who have worked hard to survive poverty, unemployment, racism and sexism. Their struggle is covered in ‘a cloak of irony’ which allows them the dignity to face humiliation within and without the Black community. Tomorrow Marie describes herself to Bill in Wine in the Wilderness “Tomorrow Marie cussin’
and fightin’ and lookin’ out for my damn self ‘cause ain nobody else ‘round to do it, dontcha know” (148). By the end of the play, Bill has learned to respect Tommy for her spirit, that puts all the “junk” in their minds to shame. His praise song for her is also for all Black women in general, as she is a representative of the ordinary Black woman on the street. He say’s “Look at Tomorrow. She came through the biggest riot of all, …something called “slavery”, and she’s even comin’ through the “now” scene…and look how…with her head held high like she’s poppin’ her fingers at the world” (149).

Wiletta, of Troublem in Mind, is the lady who sings the blues with the same spirit as Tommy. “Trouble in mind” is a blues song and it reflects the mood and tone of the play. Childress’s stage directions suggest that “Blues music” be played at curtains up and down. It is evident that the song is a signifyin(g) trope that expresses not only the problems of the Black actors but also the white directors, whose play “Chaos in Belleville” echoes the sentiments of the song. Wiletta sings the blues literally and metaphorically and reveals the spirit of the blues even in her rendition of Psalm 133 at the end of the play. At the end of Act One, Wiletta confides in Henry “[...] I want to be an actress, I’ve always wanted to be an actress and they ain’t gonna do me the way they did the home rule […]. Every damn body pushin’ me off the face of the earth! I want to be an actress...yes dammit...and why not? Why in the hell not?” (154). Wiletta’s tone is reminiscent of the lady blues singer who dominated the blues scene in the twenties.
Another key element of the blues is the moral or spiritual element. Romantic or religious idealization and a search for peace and love feature in the lyrics. This quest is seen in all the blues heroes that have been discussed. The introspection, philosophical reasoning and spiritual awakening point to an intrinsic attitude, to the special circumstances those Black men and women were enjoined to share. The past surfaces repeatedly in these plays mirroring the long-memoried blues singer who still sings of the never-ending struggle. These playwrights historicize not only form but also the political and personal struggle of Black people, particularly Black women, by using the themes and settings from the blues tradition and investing them with contemporary meanings.

Just as the blues connote a certain mood and setting, jazz and racial politics too have had an intimate history. The influence of the blues on jazz is evident in the many ‘solos’ and individual melodies. In the blues tradition, the individual sings of his personal pain in the racial context; in the jazz narrative, the individual adds his “solo” to the many different solos to create a harmony of disparate voices. While the blues rely on vocals, jazz relies on instruments that are stretched to the utmost to resemble the human voice. For every style of talking there is an analogue in the language of jazz.
From the thirties to the late sixties, "Jazz would be the main musical
expression of protest, an anthem for civil and economic rights" (Peretti 540-55). It
not only helped to cement audiences into communities, but it stimulated the creation
of politically active groups. Jazz became a language of improvisation, of story- telling
of personal and collective experience, of dialogue and negotiation. Black writers have
often used the structure of jazz as an extension of this cultural medium of protest.
Kennedy and Shange notably adapt the nuances and the structure of the jazz narrative.
Improvisation is a key element in jazz and it is this characteristic that influences these
Black women playwrights to adopt these subversive strategies to dismantle the
inflexible structures of linearity and an irrevocable destiny. Peretti says "[...] improvisation is both spontaneous and organized, a moment of instant inspiration but
also a reflection of historical and musical context" (8).

King’s outline on how context gives jazz its meaning and sense, clearly points
to the ways Kennedy and Shange use these features to create dissonant notes in the
theatres. King points out that jazz improvisers draw on a corpus of common musical
ideas and expressions that have evolved over the years. He quotes, "She starts with
the past but speaks into the future. Secondly these improvisations rely on an
underlying song whose rhythmic structure loosely provides the limits to the solos that
are to be played. These solos are spontaneous responses to what is happening around
her" (7).
Shange’s use of the jazz narrative in her plays is due to her own love for music and gesture, and her recognition of these cultural forms as powerful tools to create a distinctive voice in the theatre. In *For Colored Girls*... the symbol of the rainbow may also be translated into a metaphor for jazz, the many solos are distinctive and yet cohere to form a harmonic structure. The play begins with the lady in brown’s ‘solo’ piece. She introduces the ‘dominant chord’ in jazz jargon. She talks about “dark phrases”, “half-notes scattered”, “no tune”, “the melody-less-ness”, “no singers”, “lyrics”, “no voices & interrupted solos”. She appeals to the audience to “sing a black girl’s song”, “sing her rhythms” (*FCG* 3-5)

The play is built up of solos and choral parts. The solos work like chord progressions that flow into each other, building a harmonic structure. The solos are distinct yet they are responses not only to each other but also the common chord of being Black and female. King explains “[...] everything you play has meaning primarily in relation to the chord that underlies your choice of melody” (17). In jazz, one person chooses a subject to discuss; in *For Colored Girls*, it is the Black girl’s song of life; in *Spell #7*, it is the discrimination that Black actors face in the theatre. The individual then expresses her ideas on it. This is called ‘soloing’ or ‘blowing’. The other conversationalists interrupt with their responses to the solo. This is called ‘comping’ in jazz parlance. By making the conversation an interaction, they create a harmonic structure on the subject.
In *For Colored Girls*... each section focuses on an issue that affects a black girl’s life. For example, the lady in yellow narrates her sexual initiation on graduation night (7-10). The responses to it, are in intermittent phrases that ‘comp’ on sexual experiences. The lady in blue takes up the ‘tune’ and begins her solo, which grows out of the previous melody. It gradually grows into a different melody on infatuation, but harmonizes with the underlying chord (11-15). The section ends in a choral response (16).

In *Spell # 7*, Lou the narrator is the chief soloist who defines the prominent chord. Each of the soloists is an actor/actress in the theatre. They are minstrels in black face. Lou sets the tone and builds up the tune. At the end of his solo, he tags Alec who begins his solo on his experiences of racism. The transition is made seamless by Lou’s line “I didn’t want certain moments at all/ I’d give ‘em to anybody ... awright Alec” and Alec begins to describe his “moment” (73- 74). 

Another feature that Shange adopts from the jazz narrative structure is the ‘cut’. The ‘cut’ is normally employed when a tune has been ‘cookin’ in a given key or tempo. A series of rapid repetitive beats indicates a ‘cut’, which either reverts the tune back to the initial tune or begins a new one. This rupture serves to strengthen the rhythm. An illustration of this is found at the end of the first section in *For Colored Girls*... which has several brief phrases that are repeated by the chorus like an incantation. The coloured women chant “come to share our world’s witchu / we come
here to be dancin / to be dancin / baya” (16). There is a sudden change of lighting and the women freeze “all of the ladies react as if they have been struck in the face” (16). The ladies in green, yellow, orange and brown exit, while the rest begin a new sequence on the issue of rape.

Theatrical ‘moments’ are significant in Shange’s plays and she creates these through improvisation, which is the keynote of jazz performances. The spontaneous interaction between characters that respond to the moment is creatively portrayed in Shange’s plays. In the section on rape, the women contribute phrases and construct and construct a picture, of a rapist (17-21). In Spell #7, Ross and Maxine spontaneously build a narrative around ‘Fay’ (85-87) Similarly Alec and Natalie improvise on ‘Sue-Jean’, constructing a story around her, imaginatively (92-96). Improvisation thus adds theatricality and a unique Black expression to the plays.

Shange’s narratives also end on dramatic notes. Both the plays spiral to a high note that quickly diminishes into ‘riffs’ or rounds of repetitions, that gradually fade out like a musical effect. In For Colored Girls... the narrative reaches its highest pitch in Crystal’s narration, and then slowly spirals down to a steady rhythm of repetitions as the chorus chants “i found god in myself & i loved her” (63). In Spell #7, Maxine’s narrative is the longest sustained note which reaches a climax and then descends to the “riff” that repeats “colored and i love it being colored” (116).
Shange’s indebtedness to Black musicians is clearly spelt out in her foreword to Spell #7, in which she feels challenged to address “the real implications of the dynamic” of Black artists “who gave the world they lived in an independently created Afro-American aesthetic” (Foreword 67). Shange concretizes these dynamics in her inimitable style using Black expressions of storytelling, solos, call-and-response interactive phases, conversation, improvisations, repetitions and riffs. She thus creates not only a continuum of Black culture in the theatre, but also finds an authentic voice to sing ‘the black girls song’.

Kennedy uses jazz rhythms to break up linearity and the rigidity of frames that threaten to kill her spirit of freedom. Kennedy’s use of jazz rhythms is primarily to rupture Western discourse with the dissonant and pulsating rhythms of the protagonist’s psyche. Kennedy’s dialogues are lyrical and repetitious and contrapuntality is a means of uncovering the divided consciousness of the Black female characters. The plaintive solos crash and whine around the contours of the subject, creating discordant notes which, however seem in harmony with the underlying chord progression. These antiphonal notes express the discord in the character’s mind increasing the ambiguity and the violence in the structure. “Wrong notes”, according to King, “create dissonances and tensions that can increase the drama of what you play” (17).
In _Funnyhouse of a Negro_ and _A Rat's Mass_ the long monologic incantations have a frightening intensity in the rhythms. These solos revert again and again to a particular point, enacting the ritual of returning to the original scene. In _Funnyhouse_, Sarah keeps returning to the subject of rape and in _A Rats Mass_, Brother Rat returns to the incestuous act he committed. Repetition itself becomes a means of rupturing linearity and predictability. Snead states that one of the predominant characteristics of Black music is that “it sets up expectations and disturbs them at irregular intervals: that it will do this, however, is itself an expectation” (qtd. in Gates _BL&LT_ 69).

Kennedy's narratives are a manifestation of this characteristic and it becomes subversive as she constantly ruptures the real, exposing the subterfuge of myths. Her plays like Black music defy notation and yet the rhythm is perceptible and inescapable. With its oppositions, counter points, repetitions and polymetric rhythms, Kennedy captures the essence of the Black American pulse.

The creative use of Black musical rhythms and the characteristic features of spirituals, work songs, blues and jazz narrative make these plays unique and original in the American theatre. As vehicles of transference, they historicize Black cultural forms with its myriad expressions and moods creating theatrical expressions of Black women's creativity. It is not only in adapting and improvising Black forms that these playwrights are unique, but they are also constantly re-shaping, re-inventing and re-visioning ways of locating authentic Black expressions in the theatre. They subvert
The politicization of forms and historical consciousness is dependent on how these playwrights use the language to create new meanings in the theatre that validate the Black woman’s presence. A significant strategy to accomplish this is through, “metaphorical literacy” which has been basic to Black survival in oppressive western cultures (Gates BL&LT 6). Figuration, has always been a means of using language as a tool to create new meaning. In Black discourse, this is done through ‘signifyin’, a rhetorical device and cultural tool for subversive gestures. Gates compiles a list of features that describe ‘signifyin’. These include “the tricksters ability to carp, cajole, needle and lie”, to talk around a subject, encompass a whole complex of expressions and gestures, parodying motions behind someone’s back”, “a technique of indirect argument or persuasion”, “a language of implication by indirect verbal or gestural means” (BL&LT 289).

‘Signifyin’ thus becomes a subversive gesture against the monolithic transcendental signifier. This openness to negotiation lends itself to women’s discursive language. Bonner, Hansberry, Childress, Kennedy and Shange offer new meanings while challenging accepted ones and offer multiplicities of meaning over fixed ones. The plays chosen for investigation contain several examples of ‘signifyin’, though only a few significant and obvious references have been made
Bonner’s use of the ‘purple flower’ in her play by that name is an act of ‘signifyin’. In The Purple Flower, Bonner subverts the idealization of white or crimson and chooses purple. While in her short stories Bonner uses it as a symbol of sexism, here it symbolizes racism. This representation of the purple flower as the “Flower-of-life-at-it’s-fullest” also suggests that this utopian ideal, with its ungendered whiteness is hypocritical and dangerous. This white ideal has been stained purple with the blood of colored people, who have made it possible for the “Sundry White Devils” to live ‘Somewhere’.

It is also interesting to note that the homogeneity represented by the standardization of whiteness is contrasted with the heterogeneity of Us’s. “They can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the center of a poppy” (191). The Sundry White Devils on the other hand all look alike. “They are artful little things full of artful movement and artful tricks. You are amazed at their adroitness. Their steps are intricate. You almost lose your head following them” (191). Bonner, like Caliban, is ‘signifyin’ on the whites who with their trickery robbed them of everything they possessed except the strength to survive and the power of language.
In *The Pot Maker*, Bonner uses a folktale with a twist. This double voiced discourse whose real objective is hidden and which is a subversion of trusting the teller and not his tale, is ironically responsible for convicting Elias of his own “crack”. Elias signifies on his wife by preaching the sermon of the pot maker, an analogy he hopes would convict Lucinda of her sin of adultery. However, the teller is ‘hoist with his own petard’ as Lucinda’s resistance reveals the chink in his self-righteous armour. Bonner’s analogy exposes how men in a patriarchal society assume the sovereign disposition of the potmaker and mould women to play the right roles. Lucinda subverts the gaze by showing Elias that he is also tin. Bonner’s feminist impulse is clearly revealed in her use of a traditional folktale. She re-locates the woman’s position to one of control rather than one of helpless submission to a patriarchal order.

Hansberry’s use of metaphor with its own cultural and topical significance is also interesting. The phrase ‘A raisin in the sun’ is borrowed from a poem by Langston Hughes entitled “Harlem”. In the poem Hughes asks what happens to a dream deferred. Hansberry chooses to answer it through her play. The deferred dream of Black folks in the twenties comes to fruition in the sixties. The title thus has cultural and historical significance. Hansberry shows that the dream, like a raisin in the sun, will explode rather than wither like a prune.

Walter Younger is not a straight talking man; he is comfortable with indirections and generalizations. His inability to express his frustration at the lack of
support from the women in his family makes him signify on them constantly. For example, he tells Ruth, "First thing a man ought to learn in life is not a make love to no colored woman first thing in the morning. Y'all some evil people at eight o'clock in the morning" (Raisin 36). In another scene at the end of the play he acts like a minstrel signifying on the Negro. He moans like a slave "Yassssssuh! Great White Father, just gi’ussen de money fo’ God’s sake and we’s ain’t gwine come out deh and dirty up yo’ white folks neighborhood" (116). However Walter does precisely the opposite when he meets Lindner. ‘Signifyin’ helps Walter deal with his feelings and come to terms with the truth.

Hansberry’s title “The Drinking Gourd” is again borrowed from a slave song, whose codified lines helped slaves to escape. Slaves travelling by the Underground Railway followed their dreams by following “The Drinking Gourd” a constellation, which points North. While whites saw it as a metaphor for the constellation, to the slaves it meant a means of escape. In the play, Hansberry shows how slaves got even with their white masters at night by imitating and mocking their manners and mannerisms. In the community round “Raise a Ruckus” which is a call-and-response ritual, the slaves signify on the whites. The little boy Joshua sings:

My old master promise me
Mmm Mmm Mmm
That when he died he gonna set me free
Well he live so long ‘til his head got bald
That he gave up the notion of dying at all” (726).
The ironies in the innocent little boy’s tune points to the ways slaves expressed their feelings. The longing for freedom is counterpointed against their irrevocable destiny. However, they survived this painful knowledge by laughing at it. Hansberry creates such spaces for her signifying acts. Childress shows that such hidden codes and behaviour was not confined to slaves, it still is a strategy for surviving racism.

In Trouble in Mind, Wiletta educates John on how he must behave in the theatre with white directors. She asks him to cajole them by pretending to love everything that they do. She signifies on Manners while talking to John “Suppose the director walks in, looks around and says... Well if the air around here doesn’t choke us to death, we’ll be able to freeze in comfort? We laugh and dispute him. (She illustrates) Oh, now Mr. Manners, it ain’t that bad! [...] White folks can’t stand unhappy Negroes... so laugh, laugh when it isn’t funny at all” (135). Wiletta however reaches a pitch while rehearsing “Chaos in Belleville”. She realizes that white folks don’t deserve to be treated nicely. She states “I’m sick of people signifyin’ we got no sense” (17). While Wiletta opts out, for Sheldon and others like him, the subterfuge

Childress plays on the title of her play and the play-within-the-play signifying act. While “Trouble in Mind” expresses a blues ethos, of Wiletta’s emotional response to the situation and her restless yearning spirit, “Chaos in Belleville”, which is a play by a white playwright, points to the ironies in the white
While Wilettia has trouble in her mind, Manner’s mind is filled with the chaos of conflicting ideas. Though he parades as a liberal, yet he is framed by his whiteness. By exposing the hypocrisies in ‘Belleville’ which is a white construction of a happy place, Childress blows the myths of whiteness and order away.

In a similar vein, in Wine in the Wilderness she exposes the way white ideas color Black people’s views on culture and how the result is vapidity and sterility. Tommy, in comparison to the wilderness of Bill and his group’s thoughts and feelings, is wine with its richness, wholeness and clarity. She is a symbol of the evolving Black woman, who has come through slavery and racism to be a source of sustenance and life.

Childress’s use of the triptych in Wine in the Wilderness is also a subversive gesture. The triptych symbolizes the illusions that Black men harbor about Black women. Bill has already painted a Black girl in all her Sunday best, representing innocence and future possibilities. The next painting uncovers romantic idealization of Black womanhood at its best. The painting reveals “a beautiful woman, deep mahogany complexion; she is cold but utter perfection, draped in startling colors of African material, very ‘Vogue’ looking…” (125). Bill calls her his “Wine in the Wilderness”. His idealization has been constructed on Omar Khayyam’s romantic view of paradise, which is to have “a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and ...a woman
him in the wilderness. She is the woman; she is the bread; she is the wine; she is the singing” (125).

Childress portrays the ridiculous assumptions and the objectification of women by men, here, Black men. By contrast, Bill wishes to paint the real Black woman, as “a messed-up-chick” who’s “underneath the grass-roots”, “a poor dumb chick” for whom there is no hope. When Tommy arrives, Bill is excited by the find as she fits the description that he has drummed up from “the junk room of his mind” (149). Tommy is grassroots, as she proudly announced, but she is the salt of the earth, the substance of survival. She proves to be “the bread”, “the wine” and “the singing” - the Wine in the Wilderness. Childress thus using the trope of the triptych deconstructs the gaze and sets up the real Black woman as the centerpiece, thus bringing the Black woman from margin to center, from being “underneath the grassroots” to being the Wine in the Wilderness.

An interesting characteristic of Black man-woman relationships is the way they trade insults to express their attraction for each other. This verbal sparring, like ‘the dozens’, is a mating ritual. Tommy and Bill trade insults a sign of their growing attraction for each other. When Bill calls her “Bitch” because she criticizes him, she retorts “You must be talkin’ ‘bout your mama!” His response is an indulgent “Shut up! Aw, shut up!” (140). Later in the play, she calls him “nigger” and then says at the end of the heated argument on the word, “They hate you and call you ‘nigger’, I
called you ‘nigger’ but I love you.” (145). Tommy signifies on Bill, thus expressing her feelings, which are hard to define.

It is interesting to note here how these Black women playwrights have responded to the term ‘nigger’. ‘Nigger’ has in time come to represent different meanings that have serious political implications. Black women playwrights unburden themselves of the weight of the term by claiming the right to expose racism, and the right to define it, on their terms. Hansberry, Childress, Shange and Kennedy have reacted to this naming of coloured people by whites. Childress attempts to clarify and define the term, in the process unraveling the history of a people forced to endure the burden of a name. Hansberry shows how Negroes become ‘niggers’ on account of the way they behave before their white masters. In the scene where Walter and Lena wait for Lindner, he journeys back in time, to a place in his collective consciousness, and acts like a sniveling, petrified slave. This is what white people expect of slaves and Walter knows Lindner, conditioned by history would be expecting the same.

Childress’s discussion on the term is a way of signifying as it plays in the gaps of meanings. When Tommy calls Bill nigger, he recoils, as it is a dirty word in his worldview.

Bill: (questions Tommy) What is a nigger? (talks as he is trying to find word). A nigger is a low degraded person, any low degraded person. I learned that from my teacher in the fifth grade.

Tommy: Fifth grade is a liar. Don’t pull that dictionary crap on me.

Tommy: I don’t need to find out what no college white folks say nigger is.

Bill: I’m tellin’ you it’s a low degraded person. Listen *(reads from the book)*. Nigger, N-i-g-g-e-r...A Negro...a member of any dark skinned... Damn *(amazed by dictionary description)*

Sonny-man: Brother Malcolm had said that’s what they meant,...nigger is a Negro, Negro is a nigger.

Bill: *(slowly finishing his reading)* A vulgar, offensive term of hostility and contempt....

Sonny-man: No, they do not call low, degraded White folk’s nigger. Come to think of it, did might call him a nigger-lover, you ever hear Whitey call Hitler a nigger? Now if some Whitey digs us, ...the others but they don’t call him no nigger” *(147)*

Childress very powerfully makes an indictment against white folks for ratifying and legitimizing ‘nigger’ as a term of hostility and contempt for Negroes.

Kennedy’s response is more symbolic than verbal. The Black woman becomes the very site of representation, a historical site, in *Funnyhouse*. By using an archaic term rife with political implications, Sarah’s use of the word ‘nigger’ points to a hatred of blackness as it opposes whiteness. For Sarah, whiteness is all, as her body, mind and soul’s blackness has led to her alienation and divided consciousness. Sarah calls her Black father, ‘nigger’. By using the word repeatedly, Sarah brings out the hatred of whites for all things black. In a single scene, Sarah as the Duchess of Hapsburg repeats the word in different forms – as a noun, adjective and adverb, revealing how the hostility has permeated language and has taken control of the way Blacks are defined.

Duchess: Ever since I can remember he’s been in a nigger pose of agony. He is the Wilderness. He speaks niggerly grovelling about wanting to touch me with his black hand. He is a nigger” *(10-11)*.
Sarah maintains all these positions of hatred and distress as “they are necessary” as she says, “to maintain recognition against myself” (13). Benston quotes “Nigger, as the white name for blackness is a name for difference which serves the ideological function of imbuing ‘whiteness’ with a sense it primarily lacks” (151).

These Black women playwrights through their plays investigate the unnaming violence of the word.

A trope that Kennedy uses often, and which becomes symbolic in the title “Funny house of a Negro”, is the mirror which becomes the signifier that reveals the way white people reflect Negroes, even to themselves. Sarah’s image of herself is distorted, fragmented, and grotesque like a funny house of mirrors. The Lacanian mirror-image is distorted and so is Sarah’s identity. Her mind does not merge with her blackness and this identity crisis is reflected through the broken images. Kennedy’s strategy is to subvert the gaze that traps individuals in its rigid frames, of conventional expectations. Kennedy subverts history and religion, rituals and icons in her bid to dismantle the structures that have constructed whiteness as the transcendental signifier, thereby negating blackness.

In A Rats Mass, the Christian ritual of mass, the Eucharist, is portrayed as a grotesque ritual that alienates Blacks as evil sinners who are eliminated by gun-toting religious icons, Jesus and his nativity entourage. In Funnyhouse, Jesus is a yellow
skinned, hunch-backed dwarf. These distortions are indices that exhibit Black people's inability to accept the practice of Christianity. The prejudice against Blacks seem to be ratified by a White Christian God and therefore Black people find contradictions in the Gospel of love that are evident in Kennedy's disturbing images.

Shange sets up similar spaces of contradiction in her theatrical pieces. Shange's most significant act of signifying is her defiance of all theatrical conventions, her distortion of language and her caustic indictment of racism and sexism. In *For Colored Girls...* Shange signifies on Black men, by objectifying and constructing their identities. By naming the acts of violence and betrayal, Shange claims subjecthood. Whether it is in constructing the identity of a potential rapist, or a philandering lover, a manipulative chauvinist or a violent husband, Shange gives her women a space to exhale, to signify on all those men who have for years signified on Black women.

Spell #7 is signifyin' in its blackest tradition. Deriving its strategy from minstrelsy, Shange shows how black people were trapped in black face and turned and turned into clowns who laughed at themselves to make the whites laugh. Here Shange uses the minstrel mask subversively to laugh at the whites instead. Lou's spell # 7 is the liberating power of 'blk magic' that dismantles the mask and sets the minstrels free to be their real selves. Lou's lines are an example of signifyin' in the
minstrel tradition, only here instead of minstrels' signifyin' themselves, they signify on the bewitched white audience. Lou says at the end of play “crackers are born with the right to be alive / I’m making ours up right here in yr face / & we gonna be colored & love it” (116). Shange effectively signifies against the construction of black identities by whites.

Natalie signifies on white girls in Spell # 7. Natalie begins her act with “as a white blooded white woman / i can’t allow you all to go on like that cuz today i’m gonna be a white girl” (111). Her strong language and biting sarcasm is set off by the humour of the situation. She says “being a white girl by dint of my will is more complicated than i thought it would be / but i wanted to try it cuz so many men like white girls/ white men/ black men/ Latin men/ Jewish men/ Asians everybody so i thought if i was a white girl i might understand this better” (112)

Natalie overturns with her signifyin’ act the whole history of minstrelsy as she claims her right to act in white face and expose the irony of the situation. Maxine’s monologue on being a Black woman sets off the vapidity of being a white woman. Her narrative reveals that white women can be what they are at the expense of the humiliation of Black women. The contrapuntal narrative structure of white against black becomes an act of signification that exposes the illusion of social constructions. Shange in both these plays reveals that whiteness and maleness are all and nothing.
If language incarnates meaning and determines how subjects perceive themselves and their relation to what constitutes the real, then Black women playwrights have effectively re-visioned the way meanings are created and conveyed. By dismantling the way narrative controls destiny, these playwrights have constructed new spaces for the negotiation of meanings that derive from the real world of Black women. By interrelating themselves as concrete individuals, they take control of the stage and become authors of the word and its meaning.

These Black women playwrights organize discursive meanings by generating narrative models that affirm the subjecthood and autonomy of their characters. They dismantle the structures of western dramatic discourses by refusing an irrevocable destiny. Even while appropriating Western dramatic conventions and forms, they subvert them by creating spaces of contradiction within them. Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange create narrative structures of emancipation and confession to re-vision the ways Black women are projected. By arranging the events around their Black female heroes, they invest the Black woman with the will to confront and challenge the conditions that oppress her. These narratives deconstruct the negative images imposed on Black women. The characters present and stage their reality; they voice their concerns, express their feelings, enact their rituals and celebrate their Blackness and femaleness.
These Black women playwrights create ruptures in the language that describes or negates them. They ignore “the embellishments” of language, relying on their inherent rhythms of story telling, gesture and rituals. By adapting their own cultural forms of dance, music and rituals, they create spaces for authentic self-definition. Their ‘metaphorical literacy’, codified language and signifyin’ discourses together with their narratives of emancipation and confession legitimize the presence and reality of Black women in the theatre and outside of it. It is through language that these Black women playwrights have re-named critical areas of human life – mothering, sexuality, bodies, friendships, spirituality, economics and the process of literature itself.

Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange create a language that is always situated in a context, in which pleasure and emotion of language are as important as its meaning. The rhythms, cadences and lyricism create a unique polyphonic harmony of their complexities. By capturing the way Black people talk, they create vehicles of authentic expression. The characters in the their plays speaks like the way Black people hear the sounds. By featuring a variety of accents, dialects and rhythms of Black speech, they build bridges of colour across class, region and education. From Sarah’s urban educated jargon to Lucinda’s Gullah dialect, these Black women playwrights create through language a literary space through which and in which, Black women can be understood.
Narrative thus becomes a significant element in dramatic discourse through which these playwrights historicize and legitimize the presence of Black women in the theatre and outside of it. The Black woman playwright has claimed a space in language to locate herself. In doing so, she has created, in Shange’s words “a land for us where we can live” (qtd in Lester 269). Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange have through their plays, subverted the gaze, by seizing the word and the world, through narrative.
Notes


