The Negro Ensemble Company: Beyond Black Fists from 1967 to 1978

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

How did The Negro Ensemble Company reconstruct and reframe Black American experience on the stage. This study identifies The Negro Ensemble Company’s agenda through a close textual analysis of eight Negro Ensemble Company plays spanning from 1967-1978. The analysis contrasts Amiri Baraka’s blueprint for a militant separatist based Black Nationalist Theatre to The Negro Ensemble Company’s quest to move beyond the rhetoric of race. Each chapter is organized around specific investigative questions and theories that critically interact with the thematic resonances intoned in each play. Some of the questions considered are the following: How did The Negro Ensemble Company alter the representations of black performativity before and during the early 1960’s? What is the link between The Black Arts Movement and The Negro Ensemble Company Movement? How did Black Nationalist theory help The Negro Ensemble Company to reframe black experience? How did the plays produced by The Negro Ensemble Company deconstruct historical black family traditions? How are the tensions of the transatlantic slave trade and primordial origins of the African Diaspora situated in some of these plays? How did The Negro Ensemble Company permanently alter the landscape of Black American Theatre? This dissertation examines The Negro Ensemble Company’s deemphasizing of white oppression while probing its restaging of black subjectivity in relation to rather than in opposition to Western paternalism.
Dedication

This is for my African and African American Griots, Ancestors and Elders in honor of their primitive inspired recording and performance of history: Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Joseph Beam, Sylvester James, Beah Richards, Reggie Montgomery, Ernie McClintock, Lena Horne and Whitney Elizabeth Houston.

I speak your names.
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Theatre

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On August 8, 1966, Douglas Turner Ward wrote what would become a landmark document in his New York Times article “American Theatre: For Whites Only”. Ward questioned the present state of affairs for Black Theatre in America at the time. Unsatisfied with mainstream America’s reproach of Black American Theatre as a whole, in addition to its limited appeal to whites, Ward embarked upon an ambitious and often ambiguous mission to drastically shift the revolutionary landscape known as Black American Theatre. What emerged in the process was a Black Theatre institution of epic proportions. Equipped with a company of trained actors, a diverse staff and governmental funding, Ward and NEC maximized its re-imagination of Black Theatre using a wealth of resources to generate wide spread appeal in an effort to recondition and eventually shift the militant didacticism of the 1960’s Black Arts Movement.

The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), under the artistic vision and leadership of Douglas Turner Ward was once the leading and most successful Black Theatre Company in America. During the years 1967 to 1978 NEC staged an enormous body of dramatic work. Over thirty five productions were presented regionally, nationally and abroad.
NEC’s bold redefinition of Black experience and its artistic discourse of what constituted the institution of Black Theatre sought to impact the lives of Black Americans, mainstream Americans, Africans, Caribbeans and people of various cultures around the world. As NEC emphasized an international approach in its Pan African aesthetic, it superimposed West African ritual on the European traditional dramatic structure while also implementing a wide range of dramatic expressive forms. Ultimately, the cultural intermixture, cultural differences and complexity of African and African American experience was synthesized on stage.

For reasons, somewhat unclear, in the year 2012, NEC is now a fading Black Theatre institution. Minimal resources and frugal funding is presently used to support sporadic stage readings here and there in addition to main stage productions presented in a variety of venues in New York. Not only does America’s most successful Black Theatre institution lack a building of its own to stage its work, little is known about NEC’s heyday in the past among contemporary audiences. A reevaluation of NEC’s pivotal height of success is necessary in order to ritually revive its past situation in order to provide critical insight on its present circumstance.

In what specific ways did The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) position itself as a Black theatre institution for the Black nation in America during the waning years of the militant Black Arts Movement? This dissertation posits NEC’s dramatic repertoire as the antithesis to the previously politically-driven, militant and racial separatist Black plays presented throughout the 1960’s beginning with Amiri Baraka’s Dutchman (1964). The chapters of this dissertation offer a close-textual analysis of select NEC plays while, also
considering the historical context for each play, as it relates to the social and political climate of its time.

A critical understanding of how and why NEC sought to provide a new artistic vision for the representation and assessment of Black experience in America is of critical importance. The Black Arts Movement’s emphasis on racial solidarity is a precedent to NEC’s ideological shift, particularly in its social reconstruction(ing) of Blacks. The perils in the continued struggle for civil rights during the wake of the brutal assassinations of both Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X have historically overshadowed the multicultural and transcultural significance of NEC during the primary phases of its development.

A number of race-conscious Black plays, whether directly or indirectly, have historically patronized the creative efforts of NEC through their exploitation of the oppressed Blacks. They expressed rage and fury in response to the tensions between Black and white Americans. For instance, Amiri Baraka’s pre-NEC play *Dutchman* (1964) became the precursor of a revolutionary discourse of the 1960’s from which other Black nationalist plays emerged. *Dutchman* effectively evoked the interconnectedness of both politics and art, which, in turn, expressed Baraka’s commitment to a “revolutionary theatre” that sought to “release Black audiences from those everyday social conventions that induced and authorized their devalued racial status in a liberal, bourgeois social order that often pretended to be non-racist.”¹ The concept of revolution as it relates to Black nationalist plays written in direct response to the oppression of Blacks in America, is by in large an apt concept. In addition to its thematic link to Clay’s rebellious rant in

Dutchman, the notion of Black protest and revolution appears in later plays including Ed Bullins’s Clara’s Ole Man in 1965, Douglas Turner Ward’s Happy Ending/Day of Absence in 1965 and Ben Caldwell’s The First Militant Minister in 1967.

Of great significance to Baraka’s attempt to liberate Black people out of the thresholds of hegemonic oppression was his promotion of what he called Urban Renewal, a concerted effort to encourage Blacks to form their own economic, educational, political and theatrical institutions. Because of the racist sentiments and depictions in the media that dominated American consciousness during this era, Baraka’s quest to radically shift the debilitated mindset of Blacks was in direct reaction to the onslaught of racial violence in the 1960’s. Much of the violence and Black agitation was in reaction to the inequitable treatment of Blacks in the workforce which resulted in economic devastation and poor housing conditions for many Black Americans. Baraka was certainly of the mindset that the stabilization of the Black community in America should be of top priority, prior to moving his work forward on an international scale.

It is important to note that, for Baraka, the promotion of a revolutionary aesthetic in his work “moves to reshape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the [Black] mind in the world.” However, it is in fact, Amiri Baraka, who positioned himself as the leading agitator for Black separatism in America. He contends in his poem Black Art in a quest toward a politically centered theatre that, “We want ‘poems that kill’. Assassin poems. Poems that shoot guns. Poems that wrestle cops into

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alleys.”

In his consciousness raising agenda, Baraka sought to illuminate the tension between militant Black artists versus non-violent contenders.

Aligned to extremist nationalist leaders such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, Baraka would eventually develop his very own Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Brunswick, New Jersey in the form of a guerilla-like theatre as he took to the streets with his radical arts collective, promoting Black consciousness in inner-city poor Black neighborhoods with a radical determinism to demonize and overthrow white hegemony. Finally, as Baraka microscopically examined the architecture of race relations in America he, “tears off masks and dismantles the mechanisms of domination and rationality in a world of oppression.”

Baraka also initiated the first wave of grassroots Black radicalism with his daring offering of Dutchman. Inspired, in part, by early public figures including Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Dubois, Baraka’s attack on white paternalism and his anti-integrationist politics will eventually become the anti-thesis to Douglas Turner Ward’s 1966 vision for The Negro Ensemble Company.

In order to invert within his dramatic work, the condescension of white male patriarchy against the rabid pulse of reactionary Negro Americans, who strategically sought vengeance against this intemperate assertion of European authority at the impugning threat of both imprisonment and death, Baraka, inventively and violently, condemned the narcissistic architecture of race relations in America as a means to radically overthrow its fatuous system. Even as he vilifies the literal, figurative and practical notion of Black male/white female miscegenation through his biblically-mythically based probing of the Black male psychosis in Dutchman, Baraka aureates a

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3 Gafio 176.
sort of symbolic abscess layered within the cultural conjugality of NEC’s theoretical premise while philosophically divorcing his self from the type of Black American theatre that Ward espouses.

Ward’s theatre logic, concentrates more on the reconciliation rather than the indifference of race as he aims toward what Ellen Foreman describes as an aesthetic that displays “astonishing range and quality, in a dazzling array of outlooks, moods and styles, offering the broadest possible definition of Black experience.”

Foreman further argues that Ward and NEC, while in most instances retaining traditional dramatic conventions within their repertoire, also creatively explored the discontinuities within Black identity itself, seeking to juxtapose the tensions between internalized Black oppression and the perils of homogeneity while also reinterpreting Black histories from the inside out. In sum, Ward centered his theatre vision around Alain Locke’s Inner School art based school of Drama, which essentially deemphasized Black preoccupation with white oppression, instead forcing Black Americans to confront the self-imposed oppression of themselves.

Baraka’s militant resistance against the detrimental psychological and sociological effects of racism, in his vexatious undoing of the insolence of white privilege unconscious is indirectly linked to NEC’s dramatic discourse, especially because he also reveals the unconscious repressive states of Black subjectivity. However, Baraka’s racial rhetoric revolved around an uncompromising disapprobation of cultural pluralism, similar to Marcus Garvey’s social and race theory. This is the fundamental difference between Amiri Baraka’s theatre versus Douglas Turner Ward’s.

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Just as Garvey sought to advocate against the capitalistic displacement of marginalized ethnicities, he also theorized that their resolve can only be achieved through Marxist-Communist efforts. According to Marcus Garvey “as civilization grows and the Negro becomes more keen in his observation of it, he will find his scientific methods of coping with or outdoing anything that would possibly hinder his advancement.”6 Garvey’s philosophy for American Negroes included a worldwide coalition of Black international cultures in addition to “the proud and self-respecting Negro [who] never feels obedient absolutely to imposed authority, except authority that comes from within his own ranks.”7 Based on Garvey’s re-thinking of Negro autonomy, these international minorities would collectively work toward the abandonment of a reprehensible system via the rebuilding of new mores and values, achieved and projected, in part, in their relocation and construction of a non-bureaucratic civilization, an anti-myopic flight to a new geographical location, namely the continent of Africa.

As Baraka incorporates some of the primary principles of Garvey’s theory inside his anti-imperialist world of often absurdist dramatic literature, he simultaneously disavows any suggestion of Black social conformity in his paradoxical idioms on Black identity, an identity that is constantly manipulated by white hegemony, the key premise to his 1960’s literary trope. Esther M. Jackson speaks of how Baraka emboldens the tensions embedded in Black consciousness through a radical re-ordering of the Western world in a concerted effort to invent a new world social order that would highlight the searing truths of race with keen ethical insight. Jackson also assesses that, Baraka, while

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7 Garvey 367.
simultaneously investigating the psychology of racism on both the national and the international levels; he creatively measures and relocates the truisms of Blackness against his symbolic design of a terrorizing reality, one that echoes the romantic traditions of Edward Albee and Dante. While authoritatively linking himself to these aforementioned aesthetic sensibilities, Jackson notes, that as Baraka “seeks[s] to compose the disordered realities of his world, Jones would [also] project the universal condition of contemporary man.”

She concludes:

His drama, like his poetry and essays, records a search for meaning. The body of his work would trace a progression of consciousness, a poetic passage from despair to the tranquility of ethical totality. The central motif of his progression of consciousness would derive from his perception of racial conflict in American life.

Baraka augments a somewhat sinister exasperation of white consciousness. He deemphasizes its hierarchal power through a dynamic literary thesis which, in part, is the implication of an expanded, yet separatist, Black consciousness. This consciousness also deculturalizes his own socialization of Blackness via a rhetorical decomposition of race.

There was also an inherently rooted ritual component to Baraka’s politically based theatre psychology. Shelby Steele postulates that as Baraka assesses the landscape of America he also economizes the moral component to his theatre through the ritualistic “presenc[ing] of symbols, characterizations, themes and language styles, which are

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9 Jackson 37.
frequently repeated from play to play.”\textsuperscript{10} Using his piercing historical insight, Baraka imbued his plays with an artistic rebellion against dramatic tradition as he works toward “reaffirming the values and particular commitment of the audience for who the plays are written.”\textsuperscript{11} Steele also demarcates Baraka’s ritualizing affect between the ritual characteristics indigenous to the Black church stating that, “the term ritual is used in the modern sense, which is looser than the traditional religious views of ritual.”\textsuperscript{12} Subsequently, Baraka’s modern ritual is a dramatic break from the ecstatic and the cathartic Black church ritual. Baraka is pre-occupied with “substitute rituals [from] the breakdown in our society of the traditional religious rituals [for] other more secular rituals.”\textsuperscript{13} Thus, Baraka exacerbates a theatrical strife with himself and NEC as he shapes an alternative attitude of what Black theatre is and should be in his vicious distortion of dramatic totality; a linguistic estrangement of both a Black assimilation of imperialized aesthetic and the principle nature of white artistic affinity.

Even in his ritual drama \textit{Slave Ship} (1967), replete with a loose dramatic structure used to highlight the vernacular propensity of drum rhythms and tones as an entryway into Baraka’s metaphorical imagination of the primitive, there is a clear awareness of his anti-paternalistic attempt to upbraid mainstream generalizations of Blackness, as he consciously stages what was essentially the equivalent to the raw experience of The Middle Passage. The performance, veiled in temporary darkness, as theatre participants


\textsuperscript{11} Steele 30.

\textsuperscript{12} Steele 30.

\textsuperscript{13} Steele 30-31.
are forced to endure the aural psychic horror of slaves, their exasperated screams and the simulated smells of human excrement, Baraka induces what he perceives to be the audacity of assimilation at the expense of a forgotten, blood-ridden history.

Kimberly W. Benston recalls, “Slave Ship has no definitive plot. There is very little sense of discursive speech and almost no dialogue. Every theatrical device is directed toward creating ‘an atmosphere of feeling’.” Unlike NEC’s aesthetic, which was heavily dependent on the traditional dramatic structure in its multi-cultural expressions of Blackness, ritual plays such as Baraka’s Slave Ship, not only defied the traditional school/formula of a well-made play, it also, tactically, magnifies raw visceral emotion over narrative linearity, in its retrospective and improvised movement through time and space, propelled further by its anti-structural depth.

According to Benston, Baraka’s brand of theatre indicted the West and its corruption of capitalism as an unjust system that sought to secure the continued denigration and enslavement of ethnic minorities, specifically Blacks. Baraka forcibly brings to the consciousness of Blacks the historical stagnation of themselves due to the power of a racist system. The stifling conditions of past history, according to Baraka, have the capacity to either continue the suppression of Black Americans or can be called upon in order to eventually bridge cultural gaps. In the meantime, Baraka’s primary concern was to ritualize, re-visit and re-energize the contested liminal spaces of oppression in an effort to collectively move oppressed Blacks forward both socially and politically. Benston concludes, “The Afro-American historical experience in Slave Ship is

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the product of event, memory and communal emotion.”¹⁵ With a central focus on its didactic value, according to Benston, “for Baraka, slavery is the key to the interpretation of Afro-American history: it is both the central, finite epoch and the general, persistent condition of Afro-American life.”¹⁶ Finally, Amiri Baraka reveals the many layers of internalized oppression that tends to permeate modern Black consciousness. His artistic ethics are greatly invested in the liberal power conjoined in the re-historicization of the past, a liberal power, based on Baraka’s aesthetic sensibility that has often been discounted by Blacks at the expense of their individual/collective undoing.

Slave Ship’s tenuous premiere, at Baraka’s newly erected Spirit House Theatre in Newark, New Jersey, juxtaposes itself with NEC’s inaugural year (1967). While Baraka experimented with the relationship between the writing or righting of history with a mythic-based symbolic offering of history’s innumerable fallacies, free of both form and content; meanwhile NEC’s first production situates itself as the antithesis to Slave Ship. Stripped of mythical allure, rather than abandon structure altogether, Peter Weiss’ Song of the Lusitanian Bogey (1967) adapted by Ward uses succinct plot coupled with concrete dialogue and as Foreman readily points out, “[is] written by a European about Portuguese oppression in Angola from the point of view of the oppressed.”¹⁷ Ward’s decision to inaugurate NEC with a production such as Bogey alludes to his ambivalence toward the redundancy of white oppression narratives in many of the militant Black plays at the time. He faced the challenge of presenting the particularity of Black American

¹⁵ Benston, Vision and Form 175.
¹⁶ Benston, Vision and Form 175.
¹⁷ Foreman 273.
experience from a different point of view while interpolating the theme of oppression with an Angolan backdrop.

The embodiment of the universal underscored by the omnipresence of Black social conditions was contemptuously widened and abstracted by the NEC. Although met with mixed, yet overall objective reviews in New York, during Bogey’s international run in London in 1969, NEC was faced with riots and protests including some theatre observers attempting to violently attack NEC’s actors as they performed on stage. London observers where vehemently resistant to the subject of Black oppression expressed in such a new and experimental manner. According to Irving Wardle in a 1969 Daily London Times article:

> It would be hard for me to devise any show more certain of winning white liberal applause than this anti-colonial diatribe performed by a Black company: The more so since the target is the Portuguese regime in Angola, and the Company are not Black Arts Revolutionaries, but the more moderate Negro Ensemble Company from New York who are working out their race’s theatrical destiny within the embrace of a Ford Foundation Grant.  

Thus was the oxymoron of NEC, its clustering of Black American sentiments around a moderate frame while attempting to escape the margins of radicalism in its attempted appeasement of a divergent audience. More importantly, unlike Baraka’s rejection to foundational support, from its beginnings, NEC’s continuance and survival was

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18 Irving Wardle’s Daily London Times 1969 article was written while NEC members endured death threats, racial epitaphs and acts violence including objects thrown at the actors as they performed on stage during the London run of Peter Weiss’ *Song of the Lusitanian Bogey*. 
dependent on and complicated by the financial support and microscopic gaze of a white governmental institution.

Nevertheless, to NEC’s credit, its first production suggested that the artistic framing of Black experience is neither particular, nor circular. Rather, it is a cultural intermixture of expression that lapses through space and through time. While caricatured depictions of Blackness are largely exonerated by the NEC’s expansive level of international multi-consciousness, its tension with Baraka’s pre-occupation with radical indictments of the West, is the primary incongruence that ultimately divides these two institutions.

What NEC and Baraka do share, in terms of theoretical perspective, are by and large the ritual dimensions of Black expressivity. The difference is that Baraka’s ritual approaches, attempt to create a paradigm. This paradigm is again agitated by the error of white privilege as it works against the grain of dramatic tradition, and re-visits or circumvents the genesis of Black human struggle. NEC, however, ritualizes the universality that is inherent to Black experience. While certainly excavating through indigenous features of Black identity in plays such as Dream on Monkey Mountain (1971) and Daughters of the Mock (1978), NEC artistically repudiates Baraka’s reactionary views on white sociolinguistic norms coupled by his obvious resistance to racial reconciliation, which is a primary objective of the NEC. While certainly loaded with artistic and structural ambivalence, what Baraka and NEC also share, is their conscious decentering of Black marginalization.

Their competing sensibilities that are manifold in their textual and dialogical exchanges with history are modeled quite differently, especially because of Baraka’s
opposition to NEC’s liberalizing multiracialism. Even still, their polemical relationship does not disqualify their shared rejection of cultural powerlessness. In spite of their principled contestations and artistic derisions, the tangible reality that intersects these two theatre schools, is at a minimum, the creative reference point that promotes Black social progression, a shared commitment to the continuous survival of a socially conditioned community with a keen emphasis on the peculiar concerns of Black American people.

This dissertation challenges the limited and restrictive radicalization of Amiri Baraka’s anti-white segregationist propaganda which is realized most significantly in his plays, and essays but also in the development of The Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School. This dissertation explores the ambiguities of a radical paradigm in Baraka’s social and political ethics. As militant Black theatres (including Ed Bullin’s New Lafayette Theatre and Baraka’s Black Arts Repertory Theatre) began to reach their point of demise, young playwright Douglas Turner Ward offered up an altered “Negro angle of vision”\(^{19}\) in his proposal for an independent, yet inclusive Black theatre in America while providing the groundwork for the initial phase of the NEC in 1966. Funded by the Ford Foundation\(^{20}\) during its inaugural season in 1967, the NEC marks the beginning of a more effective Pan-African, international, all-inclusive artistic approach to racial indifference in America.

Traces of early nineteenth century Black nationalist ideologies reveal critical links with the Black Nationalist Movement of the 1960’s. Beginning with David Walker’s innovative manifesto *The Appeal*, radical Black activism began to take form in its pivotal

\(^{19}\) Foreman 272.
\(^{20}\) The Ford Foundation was used by the government to dilute the strong message of Black Nationalism. In its image building as public benefactors to the NEC, Ford and other organizations were considered suspect by Black militant proponents because they collaborated with the political environment. These agencies were created to exonerate themselves from the white patriarchal system that Amiri Baraka argued against.
call for the overthrow of antebellum slavery and African colonization. Walker, a free Black slave at birth, confronted the proslavery forces that advocated the inhumane institution of slavery including such groups as The American Colonization Society which aimed to maintain and enforce the international slave trade in order to continue Black servitude in southern states including Virginia, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina and Louisiana. Walker’s seventy eight page proposal in *The Appeal* was informed by “a matrix of solidifying Black communities, interconnected leaders, and high hopes for Black improvement and freedom.”

Unlike Marcus Garvey’s world-wide consolidation of Blacks back to Africa approach, Walker’s proposal “pertained much more to spreading knowledge among Blacks and uplifting their characters than it did to violent resistance” in a concerted effort to establish full citizenship rights for both powerless Black slaves in bondage as well as oppressed free Blacks often threatened and harassed by a great number of proslavery advocates.

Another crucial objective of *The Appeal*, in its opposition of slavery, was to not only gain the support and commitment of largely illiterate Black slaves, but also to convert pro-slavery proponents including white abolitionist William Garrison who would eventually work alongside David Walker. Their collaboration ignited violent forms of Black resistance that was just as strong as the threat of white patriarchal authority which lead to the development of other major slave rebellions including the historical Nat Turner revolt in 1831 with its monumental rise against the institution of slavery.

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22 Hinks 108.
David Walker’s promotion of a militant Black nationalist discourse in the early nineteenth century vigorously challenged white supremacist notions of Black bodies as material property in a call for literacy, social progression and a collective sense of Black validation. In seeking to decenter the subjugated Black subject from docile servitude to enlightened free will, Walker also sought to situate Blacks as independent, free-thinking agents in the combative atmosphere of race politics. While white stewards of racism and slavery often distorted biblical texts as the premise for the debasement of Blacks and a scriptural justification for slavery, Christian sentiments in support of slavery began to dramatically decline as Blacks began to establish their own religious institutions including the development of the culturally autonomous African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816.

According to Wilson Jeremiah Moses these early forms of revolt and Black Nationalism arose out of a conscious desire for Blacks to unite as one cohesive community/unit regardless of geographical location; whether they were centralized on American soil as “Westernized Africans”\(^\text{23}\) or still residing on their traditional African continent as indigenous peoples thriving in their own autonomous societies. Wilson argues that this world-wide advocating of Black collectivism, “resulted from the desire of a subject people to break away from foreign rule; in other cases it represented the desire to unite traditionally disunited peoples. Black Nationalism has historically conformed to both of these patterns.”\(^\text{24}\) Moses also surmises that because of a conscious desire to break away from these oppressive constructions of Anglo-Saxon socialism, politically charged


\(^{24}\) Moses 17.
Pan-African revolts, as a radical reaction to imperialism, originally formed and sprung out of a direct result of the institution of slavery. Because of this conscious desire to destabilize their oppressed conditions, the Black characters in militant plays attempted to overthrow the insidious power of whites, in their violent ascent to power which is metaphorically represented and dramatized to a great degree in Jean Genet’s *The Blacks*, (1960). In spite of their tenuous efforts, progenitors of Black Nationalism suffered from the same kind of degenerative behavior for which they indicted white Americans. As a result, these early forms of Black Nationalism tended to be just as destructive, if not even more so than European Colonialism. The phenomena of militant Black Nationalism as it continued to progress throughout the late eighteenth and early century, continued to maintain an opposition to a transcultural worldview of society, imbued by Douglas Turner Ward over half a decade later.

Of important note, William Alexander Brown’s African Grove Theatre Company founded in 1821 is the earliest and most extant form of militant Black theatre. Brown challenged white America’s perceptions of what Black Theatre should be. This challenge was accomplished through his staging of Shakespeare’s plays featuring all Black performers to his rivalry with mainstream theatre companies such as The Park Theatre led by the controversial European director Stephen Price. Brown’s early resistance to white theatre critics primed The Black Arts Movement for its arrival in history; specifically their shared racial uplift with The African Grove Theatre Company was realized, most significantly, through a theatrical confrontation with White America.

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While pragmatic in his approach, Brown’s legacy contains a militant historical link to subsequent incarnations of Black militarism and, of course, predates The Black Arts Movement of the 1960’s. On one level, his repertoire of dramas shares NEC’s international perspective on Black expressionism in their similar use of narratives through and beyond the transatlantic. Nonetheless, Brown’s radical ratification of an autonomous Black theatre institution, tempered by his rejection to public censorship, also set the stage for the militant artistic sentiments imbued by Amiri Baraka and in many cases by Ed Bullins as well. Baraka’s and Bullins’ revisionist response to The African Grove Theatre Company, expounded on Brown’s politically-based ideology while equally severing aesthetic ties with traditional dramatic structures, especially with Shakespeare.

Early forms of Black Nationalism also consisted of the publication of periodicals that politically promoted and fought for the equitable social rights of Blacks. Of great significance, Crisis magazine (1924), under the sponsorship of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) founded in 1909, supported the cause for Black art exclusivity. Guided by the editorial leadership of Outer Theatre protest proponent W.E.B. Du Bois, Crisis magazine was of particular interest to the advancement of Black theatre in its promotion of Black playwrights who wrote plays specifically for Blacks focusing solely on Black subject material. Harlem Renaissance luminary Langston Hughes advanced NAACP’s political efforts even further, arguing that Black plays should radically reject mainstream commercial theatre even going as far as producing Black plays in untraditional venues including churches, lodges and juke-joints. NAACP’s presence thrived in both the political arena and the artistic arena, creating
social-artistic platforms arguing against undemocratic system including unjust voting laws that prevented Blacks from voting in the south through the exploitation of their limited education and in many cases their subsequent illiteracy.

To escape the southern plantation system that continued for years during post-emancipation, Black Americans, fraught by the Great Depression, began to migrate toward the north in droves, searching for the individual proprietorship of newly acquired property rights as well as economic prosperity and especially the overall civil liberties afforded to their white male counterparts.

_Justification for the Study_

Militant protest plays dominated the Black Arts theatre scene during a large portion of the early 1960’s. Research studies on the tensions between politically and racially charged versus more art-focused plays produced by The Negro Ensemble Company from 1967-1978 is quite limited. The historical periods known as Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement have merit as both autonomous and interdependent entities. The key problem here is to understand the central role The Negro Ensemble Company played in the advancement and exploration of Black experience which is largely underdeveloped particularly during the waning years of Black Nationalist drama in the late 1960’s. With the exception of a handful of scholarly articles, dated theses, and short chapters in a very small number of books, a keen focus on The Negro Ensemble Company’s controversial departure from militant Black Nationalist discourse is rarely mentioned.
One of the key contributing factors to the lack of scholarship on NEC can be attributed to the inadequate understanding of what NEC stood for during the first three years of its existence from 1967-1970. A narrow perception of the knotty issues related to Black experience is evident, in part, in the attitudes of white theatre producers and directors who artistically grappled with the NEC’s bold progressive vision for a new Black America. While white professionals, perhaps in earnest, sought to gain a deeper understanding of the NEC’s aim toward Black social progress via an international multicultural philosophy, many Black playwrights and artists, who consciously stood outside of NEC’s ambitious new atmosphere, often attempted to diminish the institution’s efforts to attract a broader audience.

Foreman addresses the issue of NEC’s contested relationship with militant Black theatre detractors and critics who in their antagonizing attacks reprimanded the NEC on almost every aspect of its anti-confrontational inventiveness including, but not limited to, the politically incorrect usage of the loaded word Negro, mainly because of its racially charged back history that continued to permeate the consciousness of Black America. The production of plays during NEC’s early years was largely embraced by the mainstream that celebrated NEC’s paradigmatic shift on expressions of Black experience. NEC’s efforts were mostly affirmed and uplifted in the reviews of white critics, but NEC was met with radical Black resistance and it endured the “strongest and most sustained negative criticism from parts of the Black community that Ward called ‘a few self-appointed defenders of the Black grail’.”

This intense backlash from a primary group of militant Black theatre practitioners was in direct response to NEC’s culturally and ethnically diverse infrastructure including.

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26 Foreman 274.
the inclusion of white administrative director Gerald Krone in addition to NEC’s willingness and conscious desire to allow the personal narratives and histories of Blacks to be articulated through the collective imagination of both Black and white playwrights, of note, European playwright Peter Weiss and his NEC play *The Song of the Lusitanian Bogey* (1967). The inauguration of NEC with a multi-ethnic play constructed through a white male gaze was monumental for the racially marked era of the 1960’s. The timing of NEC’s radical departure from the artistic mission of other Black theatre companies set the tone for their continued contestation with the nationalist minded Black theatre detractors and it created a new wave in the continuum of African American theatre. NEC’s diversity ethic initiated the quintessential features of its first three years of development.

Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch in their book *History of African American Theatre*, address the inequity of a racially balanced audience during NEC’s inaugural years, specifically noting that “in 1968, NEC’s first season played to a 25 percent Black audience.” NEC’s initial lack of Black audience reception, in one respect, was an overall Black resistance to NEC’s new framing of a world centered Black consciousness. This resistance was of course advocated in the name of political correctness. NEC’s multi-faceted representation of Black experience while in its inception lacked a significant amount of Black audience response was also fueled by Douglas Turner Ward’s precise conditioning of a Black theatre institution that evoked the psychological vulnerabilities of Blacks emphasizing both the power and powerlessness of its people. Foreman argues that Ward’s description of NEC’s ideology was championed by a

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transcendent itinerary in which she explains, “Black autonomy for Ward was not synonymous with racial separatism.” She further contends:

He envisioned a theatre in which the Black playwright, ‘committed to examining the contours, contexts and depths of his experiences from an unfettered, imaginative Negro angle of vision,’ could communicate with an audience of ‘other Negroes, better informed through commonly shared experience to readily understand, debate, confirm or reject the truth or paucity of its creative explorations.’

Therefore Ward, while using the traditional narrative structure as a primary model in the re-imagination and re-historicization of the Negro, was strongly invested in documenting a mutation of Black narratives and histories framed around an unfiltered theatrical investigation that traverses through an American as well as an international landscape.

In 2004, playwright and theatre critic Gus Edwards, who was among the many playwrights that conceived new plays for NEC’s original repertoire, further assesses the problems/factors surrounding the lack of scholarship on NEC in the introduction to his book Advice to a Young Black Actor: Conversations with Douglas Turner Ward. According to Edwards, in the case of Ward as it relates to his achievements and the vision for his company, “our [the American] idea of what constitutes a hero has been so debased by fraudulent history and tabloid press [even in the case of Ward and NEC] that when one comes along and touches our lives, we usually fail to recognize that individual

28 Foreman 272.
29 Foreman 272.
until after they have passed on.” Edwards emphasizes that Ward’s status as a progenitor in the honest dispensing of marginalized ethnicities and cultures, though recognized abroad, has been virtually devalued and downplayed in American Theatre. Edwards also argues that “Douglas Turner Ward helped America to see—to see the color and ethnicity of its own population. Before Ward came along, worthwhile theatrical works were frequently rejected as being ‘too ethnic’.” Ward and NEC enriched and expanded the political agency and subjectification of Blacks while assessing both its colonial and non-colonial features inhabited by a hybridized interaction of discourses.

In spite of the cultural rivalry perpetuated by NEC’s neoteric wave of Black theatre consciousness, competing Black theatre companies struggled to forge ahead, including Ed Bullins’ short lived New Lafayette Theatre. Unlike NEC, Bullins sought to situate the social problems of class and race at the center of his theatre edict in order to edify the suffering and oppression of Black people. Bullins, who largely rejected both W.E.B. Dubois’ Outer School protest based theatre as well as Alain Locke’s Inner School art centered theatre, sought to retain the radical elements of Dubois’ propaganda themed ideology by continuing to incite emotional tensions among the races. At the same time, Bullins also resisted the traditional narrative dramatic structure emphasized in Locke’s Inner School ideology, though he was quite concerned with exploring the fragile and innate human qualities of Blacks as a fundamental feature to his ambiguous theatre aesthetic. Using what Bullins called a “revolutionary commercial” play and what Sell

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31 Edwards xiii.

termed an “agitprop closet drama” what differentiated Bullins from Baraka’s manipulation of his characters was the sense of no clear plot or logical final solution to the problems addressed in his plays. Bullins allowed the audience to arrive at their own conclusion.

Samuel A. Hay contends that while neither divorcing himself from nor reconciling the tensions between the two schools of drama, Bullins, like Ward, also expressed the need for a new category of Black theatre, one that would “simultaneously analyze and indict racism while calmly promoting racial harmony.” A didactic indictment or treatment of racism, however, was the anti-thesis to Ward’s approach.

Bullins sought to retain a Black revolutionary-based logic in his conflicting anti-nihilistic, yet narcissistic sentiments, while Ward, sought to analyze the exegetic dictums of nihilism underscored in NEC’s manipulation of marginality in its primordial questioning of the indigenous nature of being linked specifically to many incarnations of Black existence(s). Bullins’ subtle indifference to both previously mentioned schools is expounded upon by Hays as he explains the rationale for Bullins resistance to Du Bois’ and Locke’s schools of drama maintaining that, “the best way of bringing about [racial] harmony, Bullins believes, is to get people upset by making them look at racism in totally new ways.” However, there is little to no distinction or separation between Du Bois’ and Locke’s schools in Bullins’ experimental and absurdist based theatre pedagogy other than what can conceivably be argued as a deconstructed theoretical fusion of the two.

33 Sells, Introduction 1.
35 Hay, Ed Bullins 33.
This slight shift in approach is what Bullins calls “the two subclasses of the Inner versus Outer Life Play [race and politics].”\textsuperscript{36} Unfortunately, although Hay contends that Bullins to some extent did transcend the boundaries of Inner and Outer Theatre, he also argues that, “Bullins struggled publicly to distance himself from his characters; [with Bullins himself] stressing that they in no way represented his personal views. He justified the separation by explaining that characters are but inventions, things made up of elements of the human psyche, from human experience.”\textsuperscript{37} It is from this re-grounding of Black experience using a multi-ethnic lens, that Ward, unlike Bullins, interconnects literal and metaphorical reality with art. NEC’s ideology emphasized a deliberate cohabitation with many cultures in its linguistic collaboration with all races. This inventive angle of expression is emblematic of NEC’s departure from the previously mentioned competing Black Schools of Drama: Alain Locke’s Inner School (art based) dramatic theory versus W.E.B. Du Bois’ Outer School (protest and propaganda oriented) dramatic theory. In addition to furthering the gap between the two schools, Ward, rather than merely replicate Locke’s Inner School, he persistently de-emphasized an ethical treatment of white patriarchy, formerly the central pulse of Black narratives. In its genealogy of Blackness, NEC’s foundation is largely rooted in American realism, with the exception of a select group of aforementioned NEC ritual dramas. These ritual plays including \textit{Home}, \textit{The Great MacDaddy} and \textit{Dream on Monkey Mountain}, while exploring the mythical antecedent qualities of Black experience, in their transient search,

\textsuperscript{36} Hay, \textit{Ed Bullins} 33.

\textsuperscript{37} Hay, \textit{Ed Bullins} 54.
all fortuitously circle back to a tangible questioning and personification of concrete immediate reality.

Essentially the aesthetic and theoretical distinction of NEC resides in their symbiotic relation to the unromantic tone of the language in their plays, using both a representational and presentational technique. Ultimately, NEC’s artistic value and literary content is driven by a post anti-resistance to the West. While taking into consideration Benston’s examination of The Black Arts Movement she argues that NEC’s newly constructed theatre logic is indeed a radical departure from what, “Amiri Baraka first termed a ‘post-western form’ [through his] ‘self-staging of Black theatrical consciousness’.”38 NEC’s dialogue is an elemental collaboration with the proletarian and the prolific, in respect to both the assailant white imperialist and the Black colonized subject. NEC’s conscious advocation of this advanced form of spectatorial participation is essential to the institution’s predisposition, thus alleviating itself from Baraka’s absolute typification of the West.

Though the white imperialist has historically depreciated the Black subject, in spite of this historical denigration, according to Ward, Blacks should willfully emerge from the throes of marginality. Without relinquishing his/her culture’s autonomous heritage, Ward suggest that through great diplomatic effort it is indeed possible for Blacks to socially and politically align themselves with its former white oppressor. This is the premise, artistic drive and cultural authenticity that comprised the theatrical approach of NEC.

The majority of scholarly research in the area of Black Nationalist discourse (particularly books that examine the era of Black protest plays from the 1960’s) has been confined primarily to a crucial period that spans from the 1970’s well into the early 1990’s. Only a handful of books in the new millennium, have aligned themselves specifically with a study of Black Nationalist drama. In searching for books, essays and articles critical to my specific study, I have attained original editions of both Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) and non NEC Black plays which have mainly been published individually by independent and mainstream press. Of important note is the anthology *Classic Plays from the Negro Ensemble Company* (1995) edited by Paul Carter Harrison and Gus Edwards, from which the majority of my primary texts were selected.

The 1993 documentary *The Negro Ensemble Company* produced by Films for the Humanities and Sciences, has also been useful to my study because it includes detailed and intimate interviews with theatre luminaries such as NEC artistic director Douglas Turner Ward, playwright Lonne Elder III and various NEC company members. These NEC members emphasized the multicultural democratic power of NEC that interchangeably interacted with white America not as a Black counter-culture but as an ally in the continuing struggle for social progress. The rationale of NEC, based on the previously noted documentary, is that the Black theatre holds the capacity to communicate to all people, regardless of race. One of the most critical components to NEC’s vision, driven by this post-colonial frame, is that destructive and counter-productive racial alterity has no place in the theatre, whether mainstream or Black. As a primogenitor of earlier companies including Baraka’s Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, Spirit House and The New Lafayette Theatre, NEC worked toward a globalized
vocabulary in its expanded understanding of race, while also challenging the conspicuous genealogy of Black nationhood and the incongruence of ethnic solidarity driven mainly by racial fundamentalism. It is with this intercommunicative stance in mind, articulated through the lens of these artists which serves as the socio-political context and historical backdrop of NEC. What is plausible in Ward’s optimistic aim toward the American Black theatre’s world-wide potentiality, is his radical departure from narratives on ethnic inferiority, crystalized through an anti-absolutist re-thinking of theatrical representations of Black consciousness.

In Henry D. Miller’s comprehensive book *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965*, he confronts the “militant separatist propaganda”39 of Amiri Baraka and re-examines the “integrationist propaganda”40 of Lorraine Hansberry in order to situate the complexes of their radical views beside pre-Black nationalist discourse. He contends that both literary luminaries, Lorraine Hansberry and Amiri Baraka, suffered from a historical disconnect with their Black artistic predecessors, particular those from the Harlem Renaissance, a central point of discussion in his reflection on the Harlem Renaissance’s historical significance to future movements. While emphasizing the contestations and incongruences of what will eventually become known as Black Arts Theory, Miller contends that paternalistic leftist politics, post-war apathy, anti-Harlem Renaissance sentiments and communism, compelled Black Arts writers to rethink the practical functions of Harlem Renaissance’s past. This desire to drastically shift and create a new paradigm, entailed writers such a Hansberry and

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40 Miller 180.
Baraka, often using their own genius as writers to create an aesthetic, while certainly recognizing the influence of earlier intellectuals including Langston Hughes, Alain Locke and Theophilus Lewis, their arrival into the theatre was filled with an enormity of philosophical indifference with the past.

Whether Hansberry’s and Baraka’s re-appropriation or restructuring of past Black literati philosophers was unconscious or not, according to Miller, they both suffered from a “historical aesthetic discontinuity [with the past].”41 These artistic ambiguities were indeed heightened by the idle state of affairs for Black theatre, particularly during an era attempting to work its way through the perils of Black post-war politics. Hansberry’s and Baraka’s theatrical re-investigation and re-investment in Black American subject matter triggered a new wave within a dying institution known as Black theatre.

Miller stresses the crucial role The Harlem Renaissance and The Great Depression played in the evolution of Black Arts Theory when he highlights how Baraka expresses the same ideas about “Black middle class mediocrity”42 that Langston Hughes did in 1926. Similarly, Hansberry promotes the same humanistic expression of Black experience that Alain Locke did in his Inner (non-protest) theory of Black art. In addition to Locke and Hughes, Theophilus Lewis43, one of the most underrepresented critical thinkers from the World War II era, has been virtually removed from contemporary scholarship on Black art. Of greatest importance, Miller’s book provides the necessary

41 Miller 180.

42 Miller 185.

groundwork in the unpacking of the Black Arts Movement’s historical disconnect and strained relationship with the past.

Samuel A. Hay offers a more in-depth examination of Alain Locke’s Inner Life (art centered) philosophy versus W.E.B. Du Bois’ Outer Life (protest centered) philosophy. Hay’s contends that these two competing schools of theatre were at odds with one another primarily because Du Bois’ effort to advance the Negro race through theatre was purely political, while Locke was more interested in “changing the Du Bois school from within, to shift it from protest to art theatre.” 44 Hay vividly describes how Locke was more pre-occupied with the “lusty lives” of Black people from all walks of life, simple human beings with a wide-range of human emotions: which was the epicenter of his art based ideology. To the contrary, in Hay’s estimation, Du Bois’ model for a protest based theatre was grounded in the notion that “literate and thought provoking language was necessary” in order to “prick the consciences of white people.” 45 Although in opposition to one another, Hays explains that although the gap between these schools was often widened, plays such as Langston Hughes’ Tambourines to Glory (1963) and Adrienne Kennedy’s Funny House of a Negro (1962) would lead to a tenuous union of the two schools.

Harry J. Elam’s and David Krasner’s African American Performance and Theatre History continues an investigation of this union of arts(Inner School) and politics (Outer School), specifically in Black nationalist drama, realized most significantly in Mike Sell’s essay “The Black Arts Movement: Performance, Neo-Orality and the Destruction


45 Hay, African American Theatre 5.
of the White Thing”. Sell argues that the metaphysical relationships of objects and text were in fact “the material components of a much broader cultural, political and economic renaissance.” While promoting an oral literary tradition rooted in West African culture, Sells simultaneously attacks the materialization and paternalism of European Western art (i.e. the patriarchal domination of white American classics) as he argues for a revised aesthetic that will specifically serve the needs of Black people from a performance, textual, economic and political perspective. In sum, Sell sought to ritualize the merging relationship of narrative, performance and performance space in his simultaneous unpacking of the Black Arts Movement’s ontological purposes.

Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II and Gus Edward’s Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora re-evaluates specific elements of the Black Nationalist movement with a critical emphasis on African Diaspora connections to Black drama, in an effort to reconnect the Black American theatre experience, influenced heavily by European western aesthetics, with its indigenous African roots. In forming/rediscovering a mythology that speaks specifically to the commonality and spiritual lives of Black people, Harrison argues that a “symbolic reversal” as a new language and frame of reference is needed so that the “social and sacred codes vital for the transformation of consciousness” can in fact “overcome the negative connotations

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48 Harrison 2.
of Blackness constructed in Western consciousness for over 2000 years.”49 Featured in this collection of essays, is Femi Euba’s “Legba and the Politics of Metaphysics: The Trickster in Black Drama”. This essay explores how the trickster figure Esu-Elegbra, the West African god of fate/destiny, has the capability to redeem/reclaim the positive potential of Black human experience, in spite of the crisis of slavery.

According to Euba, by invoking what Wole Soyinka calls “essences of the gods”50 in a ritualistic passage of human potential, the communion of god, performer and audience, allows every “Black person, by nature of his or her African origins”51 the capacity to possess Esu “trickster potential.”52 In short, by the virtue of reclaiming indigenous African symbols, languages and codes of expression, the possibilities for indigenously inspired Black dramatic characters are limitless through a conscious and strategic reestablishment of ancient mythical gods in African American literature.

This idealization of a male centered god essence that Euba speaks of, is ascertained in at least one NEC play examined in this dissertation, Derek Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. The measuring of one’s totality in respect to indigenous African deities is allegorized in Walcott’s imaging of hegemonic institutions; to point out that a socially codependent factor is needed for the survival of Black men. This myth inspired play is a mediatory summoning of the gods, to exorcise the Westernized Black male psychosis, in an effort to liberate the colonialist-oriented Black subject from

49 Harrison 2.


51 Euba 169.

52 Euba 169.
reinforced socialist ideals which is the adverse cause for the subject’s subsequent self-effacement. Aligned with NEC’s mission, Walcott suggests that Black autonomy is interconnected to artistic and mythical collaborations with a primitive African consciousness.

NEC actively dialogues with this reinforcing world view. The source of this value system is grounded in NEC’s universalizing of Africa’s psychological and spiritual world. What is surrealistic about NEC’s prioritizing of myth, is what Marta Moreno Vega describes as “the invisible point where heaven and earth merge. It is in this elusive space that balance between good and bad, humor and gloom, health and sickness, order and disorder occurs.” Her essay *The Candomble and Eshu-Eleggua* argues that in order to reach human resolve, “we must look at all sides of a situation in order to make an informed decision.” The heart of her logic informs NEC’s transnational aesthetic. Again, NEC’s original mission espoused toward what Ward envisioned as an autonomous expression of African American experience, its particularities, while gathering a repository of resources for their source material, again, including, but not limited to dramatic texts by international Black playwrights in addition to European playwrights such as Peter Weiss, who contextualized Black experience in some of his literary work.

*Statement of Purpose*

In view of all of the above historical, literary and critical elements, including NEC’s estrangement from previously mentioned Black theatre institutions, issues of

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54 Vega 163.
cultural authority and the transformative potential in Black dramatic representation are of significant interest and value to this dissertation.

Also, because of its strained relationship to the idiosyncratic didacticism that energized the principle tenets of The Black Arts Movement, a dialogical resistance to NEC’s deterministic logic, strongly suggests, that NEC has been inadequately periodized and philosophically enclosed by a conundrum of cultural critics. The problems discussed and analyzed by this dissertation also correspond with the underdevelopment of scholarship on NEC’s international importance.

The purpose of this dissertation is to challenge historically vetted treatments of NEC propagated by its encounters with Amiri Baraka’s discursive Militant School of Drama. In response to Baraka’s limiting school, this dissertation explores NEC’s multi-ethnic, multi-racial politics in their anti-ontological constructions of Black American life. This dissertation also engages in a continental discourse on Black gender politics while analyzing the masculine and feminine variables inscribed in NEC’s scripting of Black cultural experience. The interdisciplinary features of NEC’s continental and transcontinental nuances, its marginal placement of the Black and white binary, confronts the reiterating of a separatist race logic emboldened by Baraka’s violent descriptions of White America.

While identifying and reifying the containment of Baraka’s phallocentric negotiation of race, this dissertation explores the varied codes and signs inscribed in NEC’s original mission, pathologized by their position counter to Black Nationalistic sentiments. The multiracial language that helped to sustain NEC for almost twenty years, was in no way rigid or counterproductive to specific, humane and multidimensional
representation of art and its relation to Blackness. In fact, NEC’s international appeal provides a deeper critical understanding of how Black narratives were filtered. This dissertation shows how NEC’s collective exchange with a pluralistic society, granted them effective communication with a broader audience.

In other words, the purpose of this dissertation is to provide a clear answer to unanswered questions relative to the above racial tensions that contributed to a limited understanding of NEC. Although NEC has been clearly recognized for its uncontested reception by the American mainstream theatre, its aesthetic aim toward multi-ethnic artistic potential was indeed questioned and challenged by Black Nationalistic mandates that managed to diminish the significance of NEC. Therefore a productive study of the contributions of the NEC is long overdue. This dissertation will explore the link between conceptual Black experience with abstract intercultural representations of Black experience in NEC’s artistic privileging of an unorthodox posting of culture and ethnicity. It will also revisit NEC’s aesthetic reconditioning of Black Theatre by foregrounding theories from the past two decades. It is hoped that this dissertation gives new meaning and offers contemporary momentum to NEC’s unprecedented body of dramatic work.

**Methodology**

This dissertation pursues a close-textual analysis of eight NEC plays, under the central rubric of post-nationalist discourse, and provides a re-evaluation of the transient outcome and political transgressions embedded in Black Nationalist drama. My analysis is guided by Paul Gilroy’s Raciology Theory, Alain Locke’s Inner School Black
Dramatic Theory, W.E.B. Du Bois’ Outer School Black Dramatic Theory, Amiri
Baraka’s Black Arts Theory, Bryant Keith Alexander’s Black Masculine Theory, Gus
Edward’s and Paul Carter Harrison’s African Ritual Theory and Edward Bruce Bynum’s
African Unconscious Theory. The literary devices and socio-political ideologies extolled
in decades prior to The Black Arts Movement provide a contextual and sociological link
to the predecessors of the Negro Ensemble Company.

After a re-examination of Black Nationalism in the late nineteenth and early
twentieth century, the focus shifts to the poetry ritual in some of these plays, in order to
highlight the Negro Ensemble Company repertoire’s resemblance to mythological
features found in indigenous West African cultures and folkloric traditions. NEC’s
deliberate cross-cultural use of the African, African-American and Afro-Cuban ritual and
mythical aesthetic will be emphasized.

The primary focus will remain on selected dramatic texts, but consideration will
also be given on why militant Black Nationalist sentiments were briefly revisited by The
Negro Ensemble Company during their fourth season from 1970-1972. The seasonal
premiere of Joseph A. Walker’s ritual musical production *Ododo* (1970), coupled by the
wording of their fourth season, “Themes of Black Struggle”\textsuperscript{55}, marked the beginning of
The Negro Ensemble Company’s back and forth ideological shift during their next six
years of existence. As each chapter defines the liminal and primary spaces where
thematic structure resides, this dissertation attunes itself with the proliferation of
recurring themes that actively engage with NEC’s symbiotic relationship to the Black
Arts Movement with each play grouped according to its literary style and dramatic
function.

\textsuperscript{55} Foreman 275-276.
While also considering the ideological tensions between Black Nationalist discourse versus post-Black Nationalist discourse, where deemed necessary, I overlap the two, in so far as The Negro Ensemble Company’s body of work is concerned. In addition, I link the selected plays either with Alain Locke’s Inner School of Theatre, W.E.B. Du Bois’ Outer School of Theatre or both. While calling upon the scholarship of a wide array of theorists and cultural critics, I situate attitudes about The Negro Ensemble Company’s significance against violent attitudes about the use of the word negro by outspoken NEC detractors, which were more often than not fellow artists of color. Nevertheless, NEC transmissions of Black experience are theoretically tied to contemporary conceptualizations of Black identity which argues that Black identity is neither essentialist nor absolutist.

The analyses of the selected plays lean heavily on homi bhabha’s seminal text the location of culture (1994), which argues for “the very act of [even] going beyond [posts] and [a] revisionary energy [that] transforms the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment.”\(^{56}\) As his investigation of identity explores the liminality of racial, sexual, class, gender and political difference it also speaks to “the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacement of peasant and aboriginal communities [and] the poetics of exile (highlighted in Dream on Monkey Mountain).”\(^{57}\)

I incorporate bhabha’s theory of the beyond when negating and ungirding ontological manifestations of Blackness in the selected plays. bhabha’s deconstructed location of cultural typology, allows me to further my inquiry into NEC’s displacement

\(^{56}\) homi bhabha, the location of culture (New York: Routledge, 1994) 4.

\(^{57}\) bhabha 5.
of racially bound discourse, as a critical bridge between antiquated definitions of Blackness and ones established through active encounters with modernity. I also contextualize bhabha’s theory as he along with Rene Green and NEC seek to “displace the binary logic through which identities of difference are often constructed – Black/White, Self/Other.”

More specifically bhabha metaphorically relates his Beyond Theory to:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity [which] becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, Black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. The interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

While considering specific strategies used by The Negro Ensemble Company to move beyond didactic, often exploitive dialogues on Blackness in the 1960’s, I will explore their blueprint for mapping out cultural differences on stage and also determine ways in which these selected eight plays either resist or emphasize imposed racial hierarchy in their literary design of Black originality. The deliberate absencing of race-bound rhetoric is relevant to the politicized questioning of disproportionate conversations on racial and cultural difference that are counter-productive and insufficient to NEC’s move beyond these instituted realms. The dated racial authoritarianism of Baraka’s

58 bhabha 5.

59 bhabha 5.
performance of Blackness, largely challenged by NEC, is the post-modern link of my dissertation yielded specifically in homi bhabha’s text.

Chapter 2, “Reimagining the Black Family”, inquire into NEC’s conscious reimagining of the Black Family as a space necessitated by semi-autobiographical language and the desire for empowerment through self-inquiry using a universal apparatus approach in their revised literary tropes. While mapping out their previously mentioned theatre criterion in Chapter 1, I narrow my focus on two selected plays for close-textual analysis: Leslie Lee’s *The First Breeze of Summer* (1974) and Phillip Hayes Dean’s *The Sty of the Blind Pig* (1971). Three central questions are considered as I probe the historicization and utterances of Black family in these texts: 1) how do these individual playwrights radically reshape white patriarchal notions of Black family by privileging them both in and outside of Black Nationalist discourse? 2) How is the Black American family re-structured in these plays? And 3), in what specific ways are women empowered in Lee’s and Hayes’ re-imagination of the Black domestic? Furthermore, I identify ways in which Black matriarchal figures such as Weedy and Gremmar are as tragically flawed as their Black male counterparts. They function as a socio-political precursor for the effacement of the Black mammy stereotype. The juxtaposition of the Black female domestic with historically-bound stereotypes, fueled by the inner conflicts of the Black male patriarch, is important to the functioning of gender role reversals in these texts as they speak directly to the social limitations placed on Black women in addition to the internal subjugations that have permeated Black male consciousness.

In Chapter 3, “Poetic Odysseys, Ritual and Black Male Autonomy”, I investigate the opposition between the poetic particularity of Black male individualization versus the
urbanized Black American male. In doing so, I ask how and why he alienated himself from his African origins. This question focuses the answer on the construction of the Black male figure in two selected Negro Ensemble Company plays: Samm-Art Williams’ *Home* (1979) and Paul Carter Harrison’s *The Great MacDaddy* (1973). The Black male figure, driven by Western capitalism, is on more than one occasion, an allegorical representation for the search for Black male autonomy in these plays.

bell hooks’ examination of Black men in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) speaks specifically to the violent conditioning of Black men in America. Don Belton’s *Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream* (1995) helped me to link contemporary scholarship on Black masculinity with the radical/militant scholarship written during the Black Nationalist movement. These playwrights decenter their marginalized Black male characters through the use of literary devices that include jazz riffs, improvised beats, and metaphorical skits. As myths are challenged and destroyed, in a search for Black male identity in these two plays, The Negro Ensemble Company renders complex, multi-dimensional Black male characters who are not equivocators of violence or death. Both playwrights, aesthetically, philosophically and thematically espouse, a productive re-conditioning of Black men.

In Chapter 4, “Re-performing Militant Black Nationalism”, I bring into conversation NEC’s contentious struggle to completely distance itself from the essentialist values imbued by Baraka’s rhetoric. In recognizing this artistic contradiction, I ask, should NEC, in an effort to transcend the delimiting Black/white binary, also bear the responsibility of reducing the reality of Western sentiments in order to appease a larger audience? I also ask, did NEC’s subtle indictment of racism’s deficiencies
circumvent the reality of its timeworn history? Did at any point NEC trivialize their original mission in their sudden cataclysm of Black militant plays? In what ways do these contradictions delegitimize the practicality of cultural pluralism? Two plays, Lonne Elder III’s *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1969) and Joseph A. Walker’s *The River Niger* (1971) signal a surprising, although, brief return to Black Nationalist sentiments in the Negro Ensemble Company’s repertoire. During their 1970-1972 season, militant/revolutionary themes began to overshadow Douglass Turner Ward’s original proposal for a theatre “evolving, not out of negative need, but positive potential.” This temporary departure from Ward’s vision, in part, signaled The Negro Ensemble Company’s effort to silence their fellow Black critics and detractors. This chapter will explore, how each of the above mentioned plays reflects the interchangeable tragic realities of assimilation, the myths of Black collectivism versus militant individualism.

Chapter 5, “Staging Blackness as a Dream Using International Themes ”, interacts with NEC’s realization of international themes in its inward investigation of the Black male psychosis. Using psychoanalytical theory as a premise to this chapter, I situate Edward Bruce Bynum’s *The African Unconsciousness: Mysticism and Modern Psychology* as the central text in identifying the relevance of African based abstract symbols and codes. I discuss how they fundamentally fuel the mental landscape that underlies the orientation of the Black man’s confrontation with the material world in which he inescapably resides. After exploring the dream language in Derek Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, I concluded that all human consciousness, regardless of race, is measured in terms of its orientation to African thought. Consequently, the

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60 Foreman 272.
fragmented dream space in Walcott’s play is the non-linear realm for a provocative negotiation with the Black male self.

In Chapter 6, I review the competing ideologies sampled earlier for this study in the post-nationalist plays. I speak on the present state of affairs for The Negro Ensemble Company insofar as the flexible expression of Black identity is concerned. I consider three of the questions asked earlier: in what specific ways has the NEC retained their practice of a multi-cultural Black theatre during the first decade of the 21st century? How has the Negro Ensemble Company impacted the separatist ideologies of militant Black nationalists such as an Amiri Baraka? What cultural legacy has The Negro Ensemble Company left us with? I then theorize on the ways in which NEC’s new vision, originally proposed by Douglas Turner Ward in 1966, has served as a blueprint for the disruption of a closed ethnic discourse.

This dissertation makes a significant contribution in four ways. Firstly, it distinguishes NEC’s vast repertoire from a one-dimensional relationship with a Western dramatic canon. It forges NEC’s interpolation of universal themes on Black experience into a sustaining conversation in the new millennium and illuminates NEC’s ostensible language in close proximity to militant reactionary nationalism. Secondly, it places NEC within an African-based model that is in continuous communication with intercultural and transnational dialogues and it interrogates NEC’s accessibility to a larger audience while certainly articulating the limitations of its effect. Thirdly, it probes NEC’s subliminal assaults on the perils of colonialism while simultaneously reflecting on strategic ways in which this institution encouraged Blacks to confront their own self-inflicted wounds of cultural disempowerment. Lastly, it recognizes the destabilization of
NEC’s original mission. It turns the study of NEC into a modernist interpretation of Black consciousness. While actively considering the lineage of the Black Arts Movement to both alternative and traditional approaches of informing NEC, its importance to American Theatre, qualifies this dissertation as an entry way into a renewed topographical examination of its past.
CHAPTER 2

RE-IMAGINING THE BLACK FAMILY

Chapter 1 provided a historical overview of Black Nationalism from the early eighteenth century into the mid 1960’s and theoretically linked its ideological tensions with the original mission of The Negro Ensemble Company addressing the practical functions of Black Nationalism and its elitist characteristics. While taking into consideration the factors that prompted Douglas Turner Ward to publicly give voice to the circumscriptions of Black Nationalism and its predominant role in Black American theatre, I outlined the socio-political constraints of its restricted system which essentially galvanized the annihilation of Black American people in the early 1960’s. It also provided a theoretical framework for my discussion of select NEC plays that articulate the indelible durability of NEC’s transnational orchestration of Black experience within the powerful framework of militant separatism in Black American theatre.

The aim of this chapter is to question nontraditional re-imaginings of the traditional in relation to Black family institutions that have been constructed in two Negro Ensemble Company plays, namely, Leslie Lee’s *The First Breeze of Summer* and Philip Hayes Dean’s *The Sty of the Blind Pig*. By comparing the writings of Henry D. Miller, bell hooks, John Hope Franklin and John Edgar Wideman, in this chapter, I investigate how the Black family is situated in these plays. I also discuss specific ways in
which the depiction of each family in the plays interacts with historical representations of the nuclear Black family. Another crucial component to my textual analysis is an overview of the televised productions of these two plays, with a strict focus on the way the actors built some of the characters through their precise interpretation of the play’s text. This approach allows me to split my reading of the text from my analysis of the televised theatrical productions.

I consider narratives about the aging Black body and especially the Black female body. I discuss how sexism is embedded in these conflicted narratives and how they inform Black male prejudices and biases of Black women’s role on stage and in life. Finally, I observe the tapestry of these characters’ memories and of how they serve as the catalyst to their ability to reconcile their past failures with their present self-induced shortcomings. I analyze how Gremmar and Alberta are stripped of their sexual desires partly by their own will and partly by their family members because of aging. I consider ways consideration ways in which each play expresses a culturally bound female identity shift, enclosing aging Black women within the strict confines of a codified Black matriarchy. These cultural expectations are enforced by gender stereotypes coupled by the diminishing sexual allure of these ailing Black female characters.

I place the Black female narratives in these two plays within the context and the politics of slavery that exploited their bodies to accommodate the punitive and divergent interests of white men. Both plays concentrate on and speak to the power of Black women who reclaimed their bodies at any age in order to protect it. The re-constructions of Black familial histories becomes the focus of my criticisms as I explore the many roles
of Black women, and the literal and metaphorical castration of Black men by the powerful white male hegemony.

Eugene D. Genovese asserts that, “slaves created impressive norms of family life, including as much of the nuclear family norm as conditions permitted, and that they entered the postwar social system with a remarkably stable base.” 61 According to Genovese:

Many families [also] became indifferent or demoralized [after slavery], but those with strong desire for family stability were able to set the norms for life in freedom that could serve their own interests and function reasonably within the wider social system of White-dominated America. 62

While the cultural spirit of Black family continued to prevail during the latter years of the nineteenth century, it was in no way completely freed from the scars underscored by the vestiges of slavery.

The interrelationship of chattel slavery and illiteracy that infringed upon the Black family household continued to anguish most freed Black Americans who struggled to gain dignity for themselves in the Reconstruction era. Ultimately, poor economic conditions in the south coupled by increasing migration to northern urban communities, promoted a rampant influx of extended Black family households including multiple matriarchal figures that emerged in the presence of usually one Black patriarchal head.

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Robert Staples highlights the “variables of gender”\textsuperscript{63} that permeated Black families throughout history, in which the roles of Black men shifted quite drastically after a long period of nuclear stability whereby “the post-slavery Black family structure was essentially similar to that of White Americans of that period, 1865-1925.”\textsuperscript{64}

Black female family heads gradually began to challenge the emblematic nature of patriarchy. The question of Black male stability in the household, and its relevance to the livelihood of Black men was addressed in the controversial Moynihan Report written in 1965 by then Secretary of Labor, Daniel Moynihan. His report links the presumed dangers of female dominated households with an increase in Black male incompetency and Black male homosexuality. Eugene D. Genovese refutes Daniel Moynihan’s opinion that “slavery had emasculated Black men, created a matriarchy, and prevented the emergence of a strong sense of family.”\textsuperscript{65} Genovese contends that Moynihan’s report needs to be drastically reassessed while factoring in the lack of accurate data in its findings. Whereby Genovese seriously considers the historical primacy of Black family embodied by the co-existence of Black matriarchal power, Moynihan focuses solely on the political/economic realities of destitute Black men vexed by the distressing conditions of post-war Black family culture.

In 1965, Black men in America struggled to gain employment at alarming rates. Writhed by the Eurocentric forces of socio-political domination, Black Theatre of the


\textsuperscript{64} Staples 18.

\textsuperscript{65} Genovese 25.
1960’s situated itself at the epicenter of Black men’s struggle to gain autonomy amid the inequitable treatment they endured due to the influx of institutionalized white power structures. As an outlet for systematic public protest, while “dialectical[ly] confronting Blacks with the negative aspects of their consciousness”66, Black Theatre of the 1960’s and 1970’s also “succeeded in projecting a sense of Black Consciousness thematically reflect[ing] styles of realism and naturalism.”67 Within these indelible and particularly crucial decades, the repertoire of plays produced by The Negro Ensemble Company including family dramas such as Leslie Lee’s *The First Breeze of Summer* and Philip Hayes’s Dean’s *The Sty of the Blind Pig*, as theatrical mediums of investigation intended to push the boundaries of historical cultural sentiments rather than exploit Black family life. The Negro Ensemble Company primed the American Theatre with an innovative racial ontology. NEC raised the bar for Black artists as it aligned itself with Alain Locke’s Inner School Black Dramatic Theory in its depiction of Black life in these two plays. The two plays reveal the inner conflicts of Black people free from the agitation or domination of the violence of white hegemony.

According to Henry D. Miller what constitutes one category in the shaping of Black Dramatic Theory (that is more an art centered theory rather than a politically oriented theory) is Black theatre’s capacity to do as Alain Locke suggests, which is, “to call for Negro plays which would be, in some sense, modeled after classical drama. Here Locke writes that there are circumstances in Negro life analogous to many issues taken

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67 Mance Williams 6-7.
up in classical tragedy.” Of note, Douglas Turner Ward builds on Locke’s theory as he offers an antidote in the creation of his own theatre, expressing that NEC’s determinism, “in attempting to cultivate primarily Black audiences, without excluding Whites.” In his own re-thinking of Black Dramatic Theory Ward, Foreman concludes that during NEC’s first eleven years it was very much connected to inner life depictions of Blacks arguing that, “no other Black company over a consecutive period of eleven years has sustained such a sweeping range of dramatic forms: symbolic, realistic, expressionistic, poetic, folk, musical, historical, documentary, psychological and sociological.”

Miller, Locke and Ward seemed to be unanimous, as far as multi-faceted inner depictions of Black narratives are concerned. Ward prefers narratives that speak directly to the Black human experience, but he also takes into consideration the stories’ intercultural palpability and universal range in order to purposefully affect other non-Black audience members, in addition to a primary pool of targeted Black spectators. Although bold in its experimentation and conscious of Black vernacular traditions, NEC’s depictions of inner life are largely framed around a traditional dramatic structure with the exception of three plays that will be discussed later, namely, *Home, The Great MacDaddy* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. As I stated in Chapter 1, non-Black audience reception and multi-ethnic accessibility was of significant interest to NEC. In order to reach a larger white audience, NEC’s dramatic contexts on race were, of course, designed in terms of reiterating the inescapable realities of racism. NEC’s aesthetic

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68 Miller 9.
69 Foreman 272.
70 Foreman 278.
sensibility was in no way overpowered by its desire to reach a larger audience. The traditional method was employed in many plays produced by NEC play in order to disseminate the multi-dimensionality of Black experience. Ward felt that NEC’s traditional approach to dramatic structure was useful to his multicultural theatre vision and that the textures and nuances of Black life was capable of being expressed and achieved through the use of a Eurocentric model.

The Eurocentric model had a propensity to bring the essential features of an interracial society into existence. This existence is conveyed through the fundamental source of Black experience, but the cataclysmic agency of race is not completely ignored. Rather it is negotiated in terms of conventional methods. Douglas Turner Ward assures us of this as he affirms, “while ideas of ‘good’ and bad’ are inevitable subjective constructs and premises, fortunately in theatre, some objective verification is attainable within the crucible performance practice and audience reception” (xxiii). In completing this difficult task, NEC blurs the interchangeable line between the racial, the social and the universal.

Consequently, the ethnic expressiveness supplanted in both The First Breeze of Summer as well as The Sty of the Blind Pig provides a structural and cultural interactive representation of experience beyond the strict binary of Black and white in their undelimited framing of the Black family structure. Charlotte Perry explores the pervasiveness and enculturation of older Black female members who have nurtured and assisted in socializing practically their entire immediate kin. Grandmothers, great-grandmothers and even great aunts have had a considerable impact on this multi-generational family framework. Patricia Hill Collins speaks of competing definitions of Black motherhood against Eurocentric models of motherhood and tells of how, in fact,
this cultural tension has not only devalued ancient African archetypes of Black family, but also “brings the danger of the lowered self-esteem of internalized oppression, one that, if passed on from mother to daughter, provides a powerful mechanism for controlling African-American communities.”\textsuperscript{71} This cultural overlapping of family ideology appears in the previously mentioned Negro Ensemble Company plays.

Both plays illustrate the need for maternal and paternal participation from which the intimate dominion of Black family is able to thrive and survive. Instead of diluting the traditional mindset, notions of re-performed and re-imagined tradition arise as each play differentiates between genuine authority and hierarchal position— between institutionalized Christianity and ecstatic spiritual experience in order to radically disindoctrinate the cultural narrative of Black family while elucidating pre-existing Black familial structures as a key reference point for new notions of family. In both plays, the Black middle class interacts with White America in NEC’s re-imagined synthesis of the Black family.

According to Jim Haskins and Hugh F. Butts in their collaborative essay \textit{America’s Debt to the Language of Black Americans}, middle-class codified Black language is a central character in the shaping of Black dramatic experience. This character is not completely foreign to White Americans as they duly note its mainstream appropriation apparent in “the speech of those whites who ‘dig’ jazz, in that of whites who are associated with those who ‘dig’ jazz, and in that of those young whites disillusioned with the dominant American culture who have absorbed the language of the

Therefore, I hypothesize that NEC does not tone down Black rhetorical language in an effort to appease a larger white audience. Ward makes it clear, that NEC’s use of Black expressive constructs are not marginally placed at the expense of diminishing its authenticity. Instead, he carefully elucidates an objective Black perspective not by destroying its cultural specificity, but rather, by creatively navigating through the rigidity of vernacular language as a means of recording history. The development of NEC in its recollection of African American experience articulates a variance in the expression Black language, the depiction of the Black social class and the artistic grounding of the disjunctions in Black people’s lives.

_The First Breeze of Summer – Leslie Lee, 1975_

_The First Breeze of Summer_ was written in 1975, almost a decade after the height of the militant Black Nationalist Movement. Unlike the separatist propaganda of the 1960’s promoted by earlier Black theatre companies, The Negro Ensemble Company of the early 1970’s, while often returning briefly to militant themes of Black struggle, it also, balanced the need for Black autonomy in the theatre and also fostered the political importance for a multicultural audience. One of the features of The Negro Ensemble Company as a premiere Black theatre institution of the 1970’s was what Gus Edwards and Paul Carter Harrison describe as “the codification of Black character from within the culture, as opposed to becoming witness to illegitimate stereotypes created outside the culture. In the process of clarifying the Black experience, a new affirmation was

achieved.” Subsequently, the characters in *The First Breeze of Summer* project an ideological demystification of Black experience. Lee privileges authoritative image and text over a fictive language of Blackness. As Lee reshapes the tradition of Black expressionism, he also attempts to overthrow marginalized codes of expressivity often employed in dominant Eurocentric modes of Black discourse.

Set against the summer backdrop of an unnamed small northeastern town, *The First Breeze of Summer* opens with Lou and Nate, Milton’s two young Black sons, engaging in a heated game of sidewalk tennis on a humid afternoon in the middle of June. The heavy summer atmosphere is situated among the modest surroundings of the Edwards home: a plain concrete porch compounded by a single piece of aged furniture, a plain wood bench, the porch’s centerpiece. A distressed young Lou pleads with his older brother Nate to finish their game of tennis in order to reach their agreed upon score. Lou reminds Nate that they only have three more points until the end, although Lou is in the lead for a change. Foiled by Lou’s incessant plea to continue their game, Nate blames the heat on his sudden decision to quit and arrogantly reminds Lou that he’d won the previous two games before deciding to throw in the towel.

Lou is convinced that Nate is determined to quit (and while aging matriarch Gremma is playing a joyful hymn on the piano inside the house) he changes the topic of their conversation to their grandmother. As Lou applauds her matriarchal devotion to the family, with Nate in full agreement, both men begin to reflect on the countless sacrifices Gremmar has made for them over the years.

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Clearly, seventy something year old Gremmar, is established by Lee in the opening scene of the play as the rock, the authoritative foundation of the Edwards home, the spiritual glue that has held them all together. While Lee situates Gremmar as the leading Black female figurehead in the play, he also establishes Lou and Nate as the grateful benefactors of her selfless nurturing and guidance.

The action builds up when Aunt Edna, Milton’s sassy mouth sister, arrives on the scene crossing into the yard with as much physical force as possible. While possessing both a love for her nephews as well as a self-righteous air of indignation that suddenly dominates the already somber atmosphere of the porch, Aunt Edna is emblematic of a middle aged Black woman bitter and scorned, yet still holding on to the sexual allure of her faded youth, as she reveals her desire for younger men in a brutal refusal to gracefully grow old: the antithesis of her mother Gremmar. In the company of her virile nephews, she relishes in their playful teasing of her radiant and brimful attraction to men.

As both Edna and her affectionate nephews begin to finally enter the intimate interior of the Edwards home, Lou pauses for a moment, almost resistant to the sacred atmosphere that awaits him. At this point in the play, Gremmar is fully immersed in a gospel hymn and Lou is reeled by her ecstatic proclamations to her lord and savior. As Edna greets her mother by joining her in song, eventually all Edward family members will dutifully enter the living room, including Gremmar’s hardworking son Milton and his devoted wife Hattie who embodies both the spiritual magnitude of Gremmar and the graceful female essence of a traditional mother and wife. In this brief moment of family fellowship, old wounds are temporarily healed, family honor is consecrated and the desire to worship Christ is consentaneous. At the ending of the song, Gremmar strokes the final
keys, as if an enormous weight has been lifted, as if all of her worldly cares have been
carried away, as if the spiritual and earthly realm has merged into one.

When Gremmar finally speaks, her copious mood is a temporary one. “I just love
that hymn!—such a beautiful song!”74 A familiar brooding tension between siblings
Milton and Edna arises in its shameless display of maliciousness. Milton balks at Edna’s
“playful” suggestion that he has been sexually admired for years by Mrs. Armstrong, the
organist of their church. In her sly attempt to shake the very root of his stable marriage in
both jealousy and in jest, Edna seethes as Gremmar manages, in typical motherly fashion,
to calm the violent fire between brother and sister in her gentle mediation, in a concerted
effort to restore balance to the family atmosphere. Also, it has yet to be revealed that
Edna was fathered by a white man and has always felt secondary to Milton in her cloudy
perception of him as Gremmar’s favorite child. Haunted by her lascivious past, often
Gremmar seeks to intercede on behalf of her children with careful restraint. Encompassed
by their uncongenial temperaments, Gremmar must not only resolve the controversy of
her past for herself but for her children as well.

Douglas Turner Ward, who directed the 1975 Broadway production of The First
Breeze of Summer, contends that the play was “large in scope, passionate in emotions,
[consisted of] fully drawn characters, and [was] equally acute in measuring tensions
across generational fault lines.”75 He surmised that “the indomitable spirit and tenacious
survival of Gremmar” allowed Black audiences “to recognize, identify, relate, criticize,

74 Leslie Lee, The First Breeze of Summer. Classic Plays from the Negro Ensemble Company, eds. Gus

75 Douglas Turner Ward, Foreword, Classic Plays from the Negro Ensemble Company, eds. Gus Edwards
and grapple directly with the particularities of its own ethos and history.”\textsuperscript{76} As an unsentimental narrative presented “from within the culture”\textsuperscript{77}, \textit{The First Breeze of Summer} theatrically accomplishes a dialectical inversion of history in its dispersion of flawed, intricately constructed human beings impassioned by their own individual struggles toward the full realization of their complex lives. Ironically, Lee’s \textit{First Breeze}, is a semi-autobiographical account of his own grandmother’s personal story. He attempts to recreate the memory and subjectivity of his maternal grandmother utilizing the positionality of his particular Black male voice. Because of Lee’s complicated interpretation of his grandmother’s personal narrative through a Black male gaze, within the context of the play, Gremmar’s story is paradoxically placed within the interpretive framework of an appropriated female position legitimized most significantly by its sense of an un-imitative language that seeks to cross/break through the boundaries of gender. Thus, a balance of self-reflexive performativity and male female posturing is established through an ambidextrous identity politics that breathes at the center of the play.

Frances Foster as Gremmar, in both the original theatre production of \textit{The First Breeze of Summer} as well as the Education Broadcast television version\textsuperscript{78}, imbues an artful acuteness in her unapologetic portrayal of Gremmar. Her evocation of Gremmar is not of a tragic figure beguiled by the burdens of an irrevocable past; rather, Foster projects a spiritually solid woman of age struggling neither against her sharp mind nor her fluid passage of conscious/unconscious memory. Instead, the physical frailties that

\textsuperscript{76} Ward xxii.

\textsuperscript{77} Ward xxii.

dominate her present life simultaneously engage in a dual relationship with the sorted tragic moments in her past. In sum, Foster presents a flawed human figure in constant negotiation/reconciliation with specific tragic moments, not a tragic life.

The consequence of Foster’s objective rendering of Gremmar, suggests the certainty of a dying woman increasingly enlightened with the passage of time, unapologetic in her memory of her young sexual allure and equally accepting of the unpredictable intervals in her life. However, the actor Moses Gun, who portrays Milton Edwards, produces an entirely different effect. His sons, often castigated by his restrained yet unpredictable fits of anger, are strictly forbidden to express their individuality. In doing so, Nate and Lou risk the expense of disintegrating the stability of Milton’s construction company which is linked directly to the fundamental good of the Edwards home: their meager financial stability. In fact, Milton’s perturbed rigidity toward his unconventional sons, ideally Lou, creates a potentially dangerous paradox between him and his mother. Specifically, Moses’ self-indulgent often cynical portrayal of Milton is the anti-thesis to Foster’s calm natured deeply spiritual rendering of Gremmar. The full range of his character, however, is performed with a keen execution of immanent insight and poetic musculature. Gun’s lumbering embodiment of Milton bespeaks the incendiary tension between potentially violent expressions of fatherhood and the incantation of his Christian based spiritual impulses that often wrestle with his violent nature. Whether spirited or dispirited in his authorizing representation of Milton, actor Moses Gun is resolute in his artistic emphasis on the tragic irony of his character’s self-negotiations.

Actor Reyno in the role of Lou, although slim and small in stature, effectively projects the dimensionality of his character as the double-conscious Black sheep, which
constitutes Lou’s agonistic interrogation of every staple of the traditional Black family. In an often glazed over, other-worldly demeanor, Reyno as the outsider Lou, provides a perhaps critical commentary on the ethical contradictions that have engendered the nuclear Black family. His inner logic is a shifting paradigm, a generational tension that merges into an unresolved evaluation of himself:

LOU: I mean, I want to be a doctor or a scientist—right? And you have to study hard—right?

GREMMAR: That’s right. Oh yes!

LOU: I don’t know….The colored kids at school…most of ‘em…they fool around. They don’t care! And just because I don’t act silly as they do—because I know what I want to do—they call me a bookworm and really—I mean really get jealous because I study hard. I mean, they try to make me feel guilty. You know what I mean.79

Reyno in his Du Bois-ian enactment of Lou belies the public oppositionality he encounters in his neurotic representation and performance of self. His cognoscente doubling of Lou is a continuous inscription of Lou’s alienation with the Black community as a whole, in addition to his misidentification with family lineage. Reyno’s unpredictable pacing of Lou re-emphasizes the character’s struggle for autonomy and while equally confronting the double-edged reality of family sacrifice even at the expense of his medical future.

79 Lee 323.
Cultural critic bell hooks, in her seminal book *Salvation: Black People and Love*, addresses the colonized inscriptions of self-love ascribed in Christian theology. According to hooks, an authentic reception of self in the Black family was often usurped by “internalized racism [which] meant the values of white supremacy [were brought] into our homes.”

Much like this resistance to a salient exaltation of self that hooks vividly describes Lou attempts to destabilize the shattering possibilities that history tends to project through radical language. It exposes the transgressed conditions of his family in order to deflate the destruction of colonial domination.

One strategy that Reyno uses to invoke the juxtaposition of the ostensible and the ambivalent in Lou’s character, is the tender vocalization of violent language, realized most significantly in the final scene between Lou and Gremmar only moments before her death. Because Lou literally questions the unexplained circumstances of Gremmar’s seemingly precarious life, specifically giving birth to three children out of wedlock, he remains displaced and rather distanced from her for the first time. Reyno’s choice for Lou to warmly whisper to his grandmother in an irresolvable tone “you’re just a nigger, that’s all,” reveals the insidious delirium Lou experiences during Gremmar’s last breaths which is theatrically necessary and bears heavily on the play’s denouement. Reyno’s preemptive tenderizing of the word nigger compounded by the aching tone of his voice, demonstrates the actor’s ability to illumine the contestation of two overlapping personal histories in the short space of time before Gremmar’s death.

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81 Lee 368.
The humanizing effect of his voice is oxymoronic because of the historical implications of the word nigger, replete with the unresolved complexes of Lou’s own self-image. According to Harold Cruse, the identity problem that arose during the Cultural Revolution in the infrastructure of Negro life, is the catalyst for Lou’s radical rebellion. Cruse argues that “a basic reason why the cultural aspect of Negro reality has been overlooked [is because] Negros are beguiled to think of culture solely in terms of the white Anglo-Saxon ideal, which is the cultural image America attempts to project to the world.” Consequently, Lou responds to his grandmother from a place of anarchic profundity. The provocation of Gremmar’s death is tempered by Lou’s doubled cultural perception beset by a psychological crisis that is almost nihilistic. As Lou abandon’s traditional family honor, the nexus of their relationship is permanently scarred. Disrupted by Lou’s cultural image of himself, reinvigorated by this white Anglo-Saxon ideal, Gremmar’s final moments are infused with an amalgam of physical suffering, subversive judgment and candid revelations of a perpetual life.

The interdependent relationship of the actors’ character development with their interpretation of the text is of great importance to this play. The cultural specificity, vernacular authenticity and musicality of the language calls for a keen awareness of its aesthetical function. One particular moment in the play that signals a need for this conscious awareness occurs in Act Two during one of Gremmar’s/Lucretia’s flashbacks to a strained moment with her lover, Harper, an aspiring preacher. Upon engaging in pre-marital sex with Lucretia, a much younger Gremmar, Harper is writhed with guilt. Lucretia’s attempts to rationalize with Harper’s misguided logic prove fruitless as he

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engages in a violent struggle with his carnal desires versus a spiritual reverence/commitment to his new church congregants. The increasing tension that ensues during their volatile exchange serves to highlight the interweaving of textuality and meaning and its potential to ritualize Gremmar’s self-fragmentation as her past life is once again historicized in the present:

LUCRETIA: You shouldn’t fault yourself Harper, you shouldn’t—

HARPER: I let him down, that’s what I did! I let him down!—

LUCRETIA: Harper, you didn’t…Harper, you’re…you’re a—man!

HARPER: I’m a minister! You hear me? I’m a minister!

LUCRETIA: You’re a man too!83

This scene signals the collapse of Lucretia and Harper’s courtship as he is gravitates toward a restricted scripture bound reality while Lucretia, on the other hand, suggests that Harper’s acceptance of his manhood is in no way a denial of his spirituality. Lucretia is not dismissing Harper’s obligation to his new church, rather she reminds him that his antagonistic relationship with the flesh is senseless and irrational.

Leslie Lee infuses his play with multiple constructions of Black womanhood in its non-linear configuration of Gremmar/Lucretia. Her younger self equally embraces and celebrates her sexual needs while philosophically liberating Black women from fetishizing asexual caricatures/stereotypes, namely, the Black mammy archetype. Harper’s arrestment of his fleshly needs palpably activates Lee’s overthrow of the

83 Lee 359.
sexually violent brute stereotype. His desexualization of Harper encodes an antithesis of the animalistic sexual Black male while also theatrically exorcising the colonialist representation of Black men as unintelligible deviants.

In an earlier scene with Gremmar’s/Lucretia’s first lover Sam, Lee addresses the historical alignment of Black men with these savage/brute stereotypes. While Sam angrily recalls his encounter with a racist white train passenger who verbally attacks Savage, a Black porter, who was once a medical doctor, Lee brings into question the nonsensical practice of racism and how its dehumanizing legacy has created a primary reality for Black men:

SAM: I’m telling this cracker off! I got my hand, my fist, my nose into his, and I’m screaming at him—yelling at him—calling him the names he’s calling Pop. And that stupid Pop—Doc is pulling at me—yanking at me, because he knows, because he’s made it all so simple! And he’s struggling with me! And I’m yelling at the cracker: “This man’s a doctor, goddammit! You oughta be carrying his bags, you sonofabitch! Don’t you talk to Dr. Savage that way!”

Sam fiercely defends Dr. Savage/Pop in a concerted effort to preserve his good name while also giving voice/esteeming Savage’s unrecognized status as a degreed medical doctor. In spite of Sam’s rage, Lee also affixes him with a subtle sentimentality toward the white passenger. While Sam’s face to face confrontation with a white man is, in fact, a theatrical enactment of racism, Lee politically implodes the history of white

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84 Lee 316.
oppression on to itself in his symbolic and simultaneous naming of the Black porter as both a savage and a doctor. Lee memorializes racial oppression as opposed to reactivating it as Sam recounts the story to Lucretia with shades of pity and compassion. The character Sam, although enraged, is psychologically motivated by Lee’s lamenting of racism’s fundamental evil as he eventually empathizes with Dr. Savage’s/The Porter’s doubled identity:

LUCRETIA: A doctor? Lord Jesus!

SAM: You never heard nothing like that in your life, have you? A porter!

LUCRETIA: What—what in the world is he doing down there at the station, Sam?

SAM: He couldn’t get any work babe—

LUCRETIA: Sam, there’s plenty of need for doctors around here—

SAM: He couldn’t make it, baby. You have to eat. What are you going to eat—promises? \(^{85}\)

Sam’s assertions are historically motivated by the dire conditions of Reconstruction after The Civil War, which tragically scourged the south particularly for Blacks struggling to gain individual and collective propriety for themselves. Consequently, this inherited circumstance of cultural disempowerment extends well into and beyond The Great Depression. From a theatrical standpoint, Lee, in his non-linear movement of history and time, exposes a generational pattern by situating Lou’s medical

\(^{85}\) Lee 315.
aspirations with Dr. Savage’s incongruous relationship with his social medical status. Lee’s text is also a revisionist response to previous literary texts including Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) where the character Beneatha, Walter’s younger sister, is also consumed by medical goals, and similar to Lou, possesses a radical resistance to family lineage and European colonialism. Omnipresent in both plays is an ambivalence to the virtues of family although both Beneatha’s and Lou’s careers are inextricably linked to a much needed social acceptance into a larger capitalistic society. The enclosure of Walter’s rage within the nuclear domain of the Black family household, rather than is thematically linked to Sam’s insulated expressed outwardly within the safe confines of one space of temporary empowerment, his architecturally safe and sound home space.

In his assertion of autonomous Black men, in their desire for a cultural distinction from their white counterparts, Lee’s language permeates his play with the previously mentioned literary tropes while consciously furthering The Negro Ensemble Company’s artistic call for a symbiotic arrangement of the spiritual with new principals of Black human survival. Artistic Director Douglas Turner Ward addresses his company’s mission to usurp past theatrical/militant observations of racist oppression with a new literary authority that engages the Black experience *in spite* of rather than *because* of white oppression. While distancing themselves from the ideological limits of militant and separatist race propaganda, Ward argues that one-dimensional plays with a sole focus on racial separatism and oppression ignore the multi-dimensionality of Black identity and Black experience. In furthers his argument and theoretical elucidation of plays such as
The First Breeze of Summer and other award-winning NEC’s productions from 1967-1978 stating:

There is no one Black spokesperson, no one point of view, no one form or style of expression. Black writers are as diverse as their experience is complex. They differ as much as they share in common. History has bequeathed a legacy of commonality, but history, time, space, and geography have assured divergences and particularities.86

The socio-political potentiality that Ward espouses in the representational spaces of Lee’s play and other dramatic texts in the Negro Ensemble Company’s vast repertoire, perhaps reflects a cultural movement seeking to execute a redistribution of culture that authoritatively negates the philosophical temperaments of Black Nationalist Art Theory. Ward’s artistic move away from previous Black/white dramatic confrontations constitutes a re-imagined negotiation of race, a thematic departure from the Black subject’s corrupt pre-occupation with human misery.

The First Breeze of Summer’s tyrannizing tension with luminous evocations of the Black family institution anguished by contestations of the historical, governs the profusion of a post-nationalist discourse that denounces a strict enclosure of racial difference contained only by rage. The emancipative potential of Leslie Lee’s reformation of Gremmar, his culpable transcription of Milton’s subliminal rival with an ex-slave mentality, his doubled construction of Lou and his metaphorical infusion of summer heat that is finally replaced by a cool breeze in the final moment of the play are

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86 Ward xxiv.
literary signifiers, poetic indicators that in part subterfuge previous expressions of revolutionary Blackness. This first breeze, prior to the last scene’s Blackout, seeks to herald in the potentiality of reverberate new Black family cultures as the breeze’s ostentatious relief ontologically sears the illusion of a marginalized African American family culture.

*The First Breeze of Summer* crystallizes the empowering process of remembering in its ancestral celebration of Black women. While, of course, humanizing the identities of Black women in both a social and intimate context, Lee pays homage to their resilience because of the significant burdens they are forced to bear in the presence of all sorts of isms including sexism and racism. As an intentional homage to the generational entity of Black grandmothers, Lee allows his character Gremmar to find resolve in herself during her final moments prior to death. The play’s radical departure from male centered Black subjectivity, elicits a new rendering of Black family filtered through the inner psychosis of Gremmar who embraces her shortcomings as well as her triumphs.

Gremmar’s grandson Nate, no longer reveres her upon being awakened to her human frailties and flaws. He figuratively and literally dismantles her from the petulant pedestal he had upheld her throughout his entire youth. His passage into manhood, though marred by colonialist ideals, is metaphorically wedded to her inescapable passage into death. As she courageously transitions from life to death, she reminds her embittered grandson, “I was a young woman once, child—yes I was. Wasn’t always your
grandmother, wasn’t always tired. No, baby, don’t close your eyes to my needs. They were real.”

The Sty of the Blind Pig – Philip Hayes Dean, 1972

Lawrence W. Levine claims that, “freedom ultimately weakened the cultural self-containment characteristic of the slaves and placed an increasing number of Negroes in a culturally marginal situation.” If, in fact, the cultural weakening of Blacks has been purportedly transmitted through theatrical expressions on stage, then, the demise of African based indigenous religion and ritual practices exposes and perhaps offers deeper insight into the struggle for cultural and spiritual redemption that most of the characters in Philip Hayes Dean’s The Sty of the Blind Pig tend to endure. In The Sty of the Blind Pig, Dean ungirds the contestation between the sexual and the spiritual as he attempts to foreground four characters with both a colonized and autonomous expression of themselves. As each character desperately seeks to reconcile these two warring ideals, their individual confrontation with cultural freedom further complicates the paradoxical terror of their marginalized positions. From a historical standpoint, the northern urbanization of these characters represent the migration of southern Blacks to the north in pursuit of a more progressive life abound with better economic and social opportunities instead of the inequitable treatment of them in the Jim Crow south. Figuratively,

87 Lee 366.

however, they have also been ruptured by past cultural traditions that have been staunchly ritualized in these oppressed southern communities.

*The Sty of the Blind Pig* is an allegorical cosmological odyssey that enraptes itself with southern church hymns. It symbolically excavates the inherent beauty of the old negro spiritual. Dean’s play critiques the subsequent tragedy of a self-righteous mother and embittered daughter. Their journey together through life reveals the shared suffering experienced in the absence of a patriarchal head.

As Dean delineates the difference between Black female autonomy versus the grim reality of Black women agonized by the physical absence of a man, he, also, reifies the juxtaposition of the sensuous with the spiritual through Alberta’s myopic sexual awakening which is disrupted by her self-righteous overbearing mother Weedy. In his representation of Weedy, Dean also capitalizes on the exploitation of Christianity, revealing how its conventionality has generationally fractured Black women in its excessive intoning of an oppressive theological system.

The play opens with seventy year old Weedy deliberately rocking in her chair, consumed in the expressive intoning of unspoken thoughts. Underscored by the blending of a storefront church choir singing in the distance, Weedy, unable to separate from her daughter in her old age, engages in the familiar grief for a husband who long abandoned her. Compounded by the haunting harmonious presence of the choir, Weedy’s silence against the revelatory singing is the beginning action of the play. Her stillness emblematizes an intimate negotiation with her past She rocks sullenly in her quietude as she listens to a church choir in the distance:
CHOIR (offstage): Father alone knows all about it

Father alone understands why

Cheer up, my mama, walk in the sunshine

You’ll understand it all by and by.  

The lyrics foreshadow the impending arrival of Blind Man Jordan, a street singer, whose otherworldly presence will nearly shatter Weedy and Alberta’s rocky relationship while also historicizing the grave memory of slaughtered Black bodies and the spilling of blood in the segregationist south. The offstage lyrics also speak to the unbalanced psyche of middle aged Alberta whose been permanently scarred by the asexual treatment of herself, influenced greatly by her mother’s radical denial of men. Contained within the play’s initial moment of spiritual hymn and silent memory is the functionality of music as an aesthetic approach to Weedy’s relationship to the past facilitated by the inequities of culture and race deeply rooted in African-American consciousness. Just as *The First Breeze of Summer* shifts back and forth between the present and the past, *The Sty of the Blind Pig’s* conversations with space and time are tantamount to the religious symbols and cultural ideals that permeate Dean’s text. Houston A. Baker Jr.’s analysis of cultural conditions predicated by the brutal realities of an American slave history further bears witness to the figurative function of the play’s opening moment:

Where historical facts are concerned, the implications of the analogy lead one to concur with Barthes that historical discourse ‘does not follow

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reality, it only signifies it’. What one derives from linguistic, historical facts, therefore, is not reality, but meaning. And meaning is always contingent upon the figurative, semantic resources available to us as readers, viewers, or auditors.⁹⁰

Baker’s argument that history is signified on rather than literally translated in African American literature gives further potency to Douglas Turner Ward’s sentiments on history’s mediated role The Sty of the Blind Pig as he expressed its timeless value in Dean’s reassessment of an unvindicated past:

The play resonates with the sounds and echoes of an entire world, quivering with the ever-widening ripples of a vanishing way of life. Philip Hayes Dean, as combative in person as his work is sensitive, succeeds in delivering a threnody to a regional Southern past, while pointing the way to emerging upheavals in American social life and human relationships. It is an elegiac play whose repercussions continue to haunt long after experiencing it.⁹¹

Ward’s directive of the play as an elegiac mourning of a dying southern history predicates Baker’s description of history that functions most significantly as a literary trope within the context of African American theatrical discourse. The Sty of the Blind Pig juxtaposes an aging Weedy who re-visits the south for an annual church convocation with Blind Jordan’s abandonment of the south in pursuit of an allegorized female figure

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⁹¹ Ward xxii.
named Grace. Blind Jordan’s escape from the south reverberates back to the historical Black great migration, particularly that of Black southerners fleeing their collective roots while abandoning sacred familiar places such as Mississippi and Alabama. Dislocated to urban communities where Black husbands walk out on their Black wives, Black women such as Alberta suffer in silence with schizophrenic insanity worn down from the monotony of church, domestic work and celibacy. Blind Jordan’s lyrical arrival to Alberta’s doorstep as he sings the hymn “‘Amazing Grace’”92 speaks to the cultural memory of scarred Black men awakening the resistant bodies of unsatisfied Black women conflated by their shared ordinary existence with these Black men. The men fill them up with their (re)performed Blackness, stopping over for a spell, eventually giving them up only to arrive at another woman’s doorstep, passing time, in search of amazing grace while offering these resurrected Black women temporary moments of grace.

Throughout the journey of the play, Philip Hayes Dean uses an allegorical female character Grace, who is never seen by any of the characters. This allegorical Grace is used to illuminate the yearnings and inner conflicts of Weedy, Alberta, Doc and Blind Jordan in their struggle for redemption from a subjugated southern past. Their alienation from the south entangled by the tragic irony of northern urbanization bolsters their desperation for a spiritual return to their primordial existence in what Blind Jordan describes the woman Grace as “raindust…white rain—hard heavy cooling rain you can smell. Like th’ ole earth is reborn. Fresh as the mornin’ it was created.”93 While drawing on indigenous imaginations of African American identity, Dean also stresses the

92 This spiritual hymn written by John Newton was published in 1779 in a book of hymns called Olney Hymns, published by John Newton and William Cowper. See Williams Cowper, William Cowper’s Olney Hymns, (Minnesota: Curiosmith, 2010)

93 Dean 213.
interdependent relationship of spiritual salvation and cultural primacy. This relationship traces itself back to African myths of origin where individuation is linked directly to Western African conceptions of cosmogony. Other Negro Ensemble Company playwrights (including Derek Walcott, Judi Ann Mason and Paul Carter Harrison) have all excised this recurring theme by creating characters that pursue their indigenous origins.

The old earth as it is described in *The Sty of the Blind Pig* contains the potential power of a non-colonial old time religion, a cultural renewal evidenced through the omniscience of Yoruba Gods such as Ogun, Baron and the thunder God Shango. Musical expressions of the old earth can be traced back to aboriginal African languages, customs and traditions embodied by sounds projected through the body and with makeshift instruments. Therefore, Dean’s critical commentary is more than just a figurative elucidation of a diminishing south, it is also the reminder of a forgotten, neglected and suppressed African past underscored by an un-American coded language. Blind Jordan’s mystical imagination of Grace as rain dust is a metaphor for the hymn of the blind attempting to see. Also, his vision of Grace functions as an elusive articulation of the hybrid relationship between African and Black cultures, the latter desperate in its search for lost authentic African-ness. Blind Jordan’s vision is a radical decentering of southern Black subjectivity conflated by the trauma of multiple corrupt realities, segregation, lynching and Jim Crow-ism.
In the televised version of *The Sty of the Blind Pig* illuminates the deprivation of each character in the play.94 Ivan Dixon’s staging of these four characters, who are rarely placed in close proximity to one another, re-creates a forgotten era, a world of Black men and women emotionally and physically dislocated by their past. They constantly revert back to what once was and they are over pre-occupied by the urgency of their deferred dreams. Their shifting worlds rest firmly on the foundation of racial injustice in America and the beginning of the historical Civil Rights Movement. Martyrs such as Rosa Parks, political leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin radically usurped the racial hypocrisy that plagued the entire nation. As men and women of the old world began to ennoble Black America with their courageous deeds, the socio-political climate for Blacks still situated in the south was beginning to drastically and permanently change.

With this historical context in mind, *The Sty of the Blind Pig* philosophically depicts characters unceasingly seeking to recapture the missing elements of their reconstructed existence, exacerbated by this laborious task. Weedy, Doc, Alberta and Blind Jordan, though languished by the imprisonment of their private lives, are emboldened by the possibility and hope that the coming years bestow.

Through Dixon’s deliberate direction, the cataclysmic tension between Weedy and Alberta is pronounced early on as actor Mary Alice imbues Alberta with a subtle air of cynicism. Even in her first entrance into the apartment she tramples in on the daily conversation between siblings Weedy and Doc. Alice in the role of Alberta, with groceries in hand, greets both her uncle and her mother with absolutely no eye contact.

Mary Alice as Alberta artfully maintains this ambivalent and intentional distance from her mother throughout the play. She has grown sour toward Weedy and is barely able to autonomize her suppressed Black womanhood. Alice’s performance of Alberta presents a complex woman, tragically anguished by her dire circumstances in life, yet somewhat purposeful in her desire to escape her tormented existence. This psychological veil which distances Alberta from Weedy is effectively constructed whenever Alice as Alberta emphatically drifts past her mother in swift displays of physical assurance. Alice’s keen awareness of minute details including the deliberateness of Alberta’s walk, even her frantic pouring of whiskey into a glass, offers an untraditional perspective of domesticated Black women in 1955. Alberta, unmoved by the ritual of church, is insubordinate to religious theology and coincidentally consoled primarily by the drinking of hard liquor.

The tragic consequences of northern urbanization are also revealed in *The Sty of the Blind Pig*, ideally realized by Maidie Norman in the role of precarious Weedy. Weedy is embittered by the benign uprootedness from her former southern existence. Norman as Weedy emblemsizes an aged colored woman crushed by the unfulfilled potentiality of the Black migration. Upon being abandoned by her own husband shortly after moving to Chicago, other than her brother Doc, Weedy possesses a grudging suspicion for any man who enters her private domain. Blood-stained Black men whom she knows are as familiar to her as her own self. Essential to Norman’s offering of Weedy is her radiate lamenting of these avaricious Black men. She despises them but she is psychologically disimpassioned by their bleeding absence.
Actor Scatman Crothers as the spiff and distinguished Doc, renders a distinct sensibility to his character while simultaneously expressing the tense paradox of Doc’s eventful life: the former, one of wealth, good times and prosperity, the latter, is that of an anguished man whose long trek has transformed him into a superstitious gambler in hopes of recapturing a mere remnant of his lively past. In his characterization of Doc, Crothers emphasizes Dean’s recapitulation of history inhabited by the tapestry of past memory. As a daily survival tool, Doc maintains his sanity through drawn out conversations with Weedy. Otherwise, he would be tragically overtaken by his once fully realized dreams.

Central to Philip Hayes Dean’s *The Sty of the Blind Pig* is Blind Jordan, masterfully portrayed by actor Richard Ward. Though Blind Jordan is positioned as a physical manifestation of the play’s dying southern past, he also conjures the internal and external wounds of illegitimate Black boys, born in blood-ridden New Orleans brothels, disinherited by their mothers and eventually abandoned as a result of their maternal disinheritance. The last in a long line of blind street singers, Blind Jordan invokes the intrusively violent depiction of Black men who often articulate their ritually intoned masculinity through the slaying of other Black men or anyone who poses a threat to their expressions of virility. Blind Jordan functions as the catalyst for each character’s warring engagement with themselves. Jordan, as the progenitor of the plot, awakens the suppressed sexuality of Alberta, offers renewed hope to Doc whose been writhed by his expulsion from the good life and compels Weedy to contend with her own dignified disremembrance: the reality of an unfulfilled sexual life.
Figurative significations of history are ensconced in Blind Jordan. Dean uses him to give immediacy to the other character’s collective memory of their southern past. The coming of Blind Jordan dismantles the psychological wall that has enabled Weedy, Alberta and Doc to survive in their new world. Blind Jordan explains how death follows him wherever he goes: “I do have the smell of blood on me. The smell of butchered pig. That smell gets into your pores—can’t wash it off,” he dispenses a central narrative in the play. He has witnessed many murders in his life, the brutal slashing of throats, even physically cutting other men and being cut himself. Weedy, Blind Jordan’s outspoken rival, regenerates the memory of his violent past, while equally offsetting Alberta’s gentle antidote to his pain. The severity of Blind Jordan’s blood stained hands is conjoined with the dehumanizing horror of a racially bound south. Blind Jordan figuratively interacts with history once he is prompted by Weedy’s insistent interrogation of him during the play’s climatic moment, “He’s got the smell of blood on him. I could smell it the minute he walked into this house” (223). Dean’s placement of this particular dialogue toward the end of the play excavates the remnants of Blind Jordan’s unspoken past. Once his own ghosts are uprooted, adding even more human complexity to the dimensionality of the play, each character is faced with the all too familiar choice of whether to fight or take flight. Rather than fight to preserve his union with Alberta, Blind Jordan, similar to Weedy’s long gone husband, chooses to abandon Alberta shortly after his past has been revealed. Both Weedy and Alberta’s journey together comes full circle once history literally repeats itself.

What ensues within the historical context of *The Sty of the Blind Pig* is a memory play with Dean memorializing the tragic spilling of blood: Black men and women

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95 Dean 223.
murdered not only by whites, but also by Blacks. Not just physical murder, but emotional and spiritual murder as well. Blind Jordan, who walks through the door of Alberta’s apartment wearing a Black shirt represents a symbolic oxymoron. Of important note, in the tradition of African Hoodoo culture the color Black can be used to either remove evil curses or send harm. Supplanted within the tension of his other worldliness, the ethos of Blind Jordan’s plight is an inherent struggle between the physical and the spiritual, a battle between the darkness and the light. With Blind Jordan’s early departure from New Orleans, he is Dean’s most articulate southern voice. Blind Jordan and his Black attire epitomizes the innate tragic history that Dean is signifying on which is inextricably bound to both the removal as well as the transmission of past evil deeds. The potential potency of individual and collective redemption rests at the inner core of Blind Jordan’s metaphorical significance in Dean’s memory play.

The final scene of The Sty of the Blind Pig reveals an aged Alberta who has symbolically replaced her mother Weedy. She strains to position her elderly body in the ritually intoned rocking chair that has sat in front of the living room window for years. Like Weedy at the beginning of the play, other than her occasional proverbial scolding of wild youngsters outside, Alberta much like her mother suffers primarily in silence. As Alberta rises in tears to survey the bleakness of an empty apartment, she equally mourns and pays homage to her dead mother with the line “I’m alright, Mama! I’m alright! Because I got grit in my craw, I got a whole lotta grit in my craw!” The force of this last line is loaded with the undertones of a collective Black female consciousness. It speaks of urbanized Black women such as Weedy and Alberta, scarred by the great Black migration, yet able to prevail and travail through life without the assistance of men.

96 Dean 228.
The irony of Alberta repeating her dead mother’s life-long affirmation ennobles her temporary suffering. Her resilient spirit transcends the corporeal, denounces weakness and reenergizes Alberta’s commitment to persevere even though she is physically and mentally exasperated many years after her mother’s transition into the spiritual world. Alberta’s declaration to both herself and her mother is a key moment in the play. It is a necessary confrontation with her impending immortality, as she prepares to journey alone on “the flight of the purple angels.” She is imbued by the sustenance of old age and prepared to carry on even beyond death.

A space of cultural liberation from their past must be regenerated for the male and female characters in these two plays. This test of each character’s will is expanded as much as possible in the text, enabling them to realize that an entrapment to one’s past can only be reversed through self-determination. Although emancipation has physically freed them, the authoritarian power of slavery’s brutal legacy continues to invade their consciousness. Both Leslie Lee and Phillip Hayes Dean disassemble the traumas embedded in history, to circumvent a new psychological understanding of the Black family. *The First Breeze of Summer* and *The Sty of the Blind Pig* constitute a historical performance of Black womanhood that bestows upon the human psyche the mobility of remembrance as a tool for resurrecting old wounds while simultaneously interacting with the circumstances of the present.

The past is summoned to question these characters’ eager submissiveness to degenerative forms of religion, passed down to them from generation to generation at the hands of their white masters. While neither play, yields a metaphorical erasure of the past, they do attempt to reveal the unreconciled sufferings of Blacks due to colonialist

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97 Dean 215.
agendas through a conscious re-staging of Black subjectivity. Ironically, the Black male characters in these two plays actively contribute to the plays’ emphasis on Black female subjectivity. The Black male characters, though placed indirectly on the periphery of these narratives, are nevertheless, the driving force that enables their female counterparts to actively engage in a confrontation of themselves.

Both plays are aligned in close proximity to Alain Locke’s Inner School (art based) Black Dramatic Theory with the expressive idioms of each character negotiating their particular circumstance. These subjective idioms function as rhetorical tools to move each play forward. As the arc of each play is heightened, the characters, through intense dialogue, selflessly work toward a sense of final resolution for themselves. Most importantly, in each playwrights’ historical discourse, self-resolution is a central feature. The hierarchal arrangement and praxis of gender is ultimately challenged by Lee and Dean. Thus, these plays are emphatically empowered, through a feminist reimagining of the Black family.
CHAPTER 3

Poetic Odysseys, Ritual and Black Male Autonomy

In Chapter 2 I examined the reimagining of the Black family in two NEC plays. I emphasized the dichotomy between historical narratives on Black family with a feminized rendering of family by two playwrights. I discussed the ways in which the traditional nuclear family structure was inextricably linked to subjective reflections of the past with the characters’ present social circumstances. I also examined the function of memory as a central tool in the negotiation of Black male and female identity in the shaping of these texts. I juxtaposed these shifting identities with the radical urbanization of southern customs displaced in northern cities during the height of The Great Black Migration.

In addition to a limited reading of the televised staged productions of the previously discussed plays, I investigated how various actors’ interpreted the characters of the text. I linked the plays’ aesthetic with Alain Locke’s Black Dramatic Theory to explain NEC’s mainstream success which was due, in part, to its use of Black vernacular and culturally specific expressive idioms that maximized its appeal and overall success with multi-racial audiences.

In Chapter 3, I continue my discussion of NEC while identifying specific ways in which the conjuring of poetic odysseys, ritual and the search for Black male autonomy in
Samm-Art Williams’ *Home* and Paul Carter Harrison’s *The Great MacDaddy*, reifies mythic values in their non-traditional dramatic construction of a play. Baraka’s ritual style, mentioned earlier, is re-appropriated, re-constructed and infused within the ritual aesthetic and style of these two plays. While absenting transgressive and enclosed racial confrontation in these texts, I identify ingenious and disharmonious elements of performed Black male identity and once again bring into question the stifling social conditions and ramifications of Baraka’s confrontational Black and white discourse.

As I segue into my analysis of these two plays, I will first examine two earlier ritual plays, Sonia Sanchez’s one woman ritual drama *Sister Son/jii* (1969) and Ed Bullins’ *To Raise The Dead and Foretell the Future* (1970). I will briefly explore the ways in which these two plays served as historical precursors to *Home* and *The Great MacDaddy*, while tracing their influence on Samm-Art Williams’ and Paul Carter Harrison’s stylistic approaches in the conjuring of dramatic ritual. Paul Carter Harrison’s Kuntu Drama Theory, Babatunde Lawal’s African Cosmological-Indigenous based Theory, and Rolland Murray’s book *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power and Masculine Ideology* are called upon to show how ritual assisted Douglas Turner Ward’s reconfigured marginalized modes of Black expression for his premiere African American Theatre Institution.

According to Victor Leo Walker II in the introduction to his collaborative book *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, “Most Black Africans in the Diaspora who create performative rituals do so to reaffirm the life force of the community by engaging the community in an experience that reinforces the collective worldview in which the natural rhythms and cosmic balances of the community, despite
periodic disruptions, are in harmony." The communal component to ritual, thus, serves as a didactic and spiritual guide allowing its transformative energy to transcend beyond the earthly realm in the authentic scripting of Black Africans’ daily lives while equally privileging the linguistic-expressive agency of ritual over structural form.

As in the mythic primordial origins of the African ancestors, their yearning for human potential and self-actualization, indigenous people, borne of the sky and of the sea, so are these two Negro Ensemble Company plays. In their attempt to revisit notions of cultural origination, these two Black ritual dramas address Black people estranged from their families and psychologically strained by traditional religious customs. These plays (similar to the plays examined earlier in Chapter 2) also highlight those Black Americans displaced by northern urbanization. They give voice to those honorable Black men seared by the Vietnam War. They reemphasize the traumas of countless men and women torn from the social fabric of their rural existence.

The ritualistic plays of Samm-Art Williams and Paul Carter Harrison are aware of the great divide between northern and southern communities, the cultural intermixture of time, history and geographical space. The Negro Ensemble Company’s ideological shift to “themes of Black struggle” included metaphorical poetic odysseys, expressing incongruent and nonlinear constructions of Blackness. These playwrights took tremendous artistic strides to extract vernacular languages which highlight the corruption of a westernized world, while stressing unique expressions of localized identities, equally

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99 Foreman 275-276.
emphasizing the disenfranchisement of urban relocation: African-Americans physically moving themselves toward what they hoped to be an idealized existence.

The architectural framework of *Home* and *The Great MacDaddy* stands in direct opposition to the traditional dramatic structure of the familiar Eurocentric play form. Each playwright individually masterminds an overlap of natural dialogue with spontaneous interjections of improvisational musical interludes. While accentuating the ritualistic and recapturing or reinventing West African signs and codes against the enculturation of American tokenism, their strategic use of a didactic aesthetic serves as a key reference point in each of these texts. In their radical implosion of Black subjective reality at the center of history, the indictment of capitalism, colonialism and consumerism is leveraged in a rich display of cultural cadence and folk sensibility. What emerges in both plays is what Joni L. Jones describes as conjuring where the “making [of] art affords one the opportunity to create that which did not previously exist. Likewise, the act of conjuring brings into being something that would not otherwise have occurred.”

Jones’ contention of conjuring as a creation of something artistic that otherwise wouldn’t exist certainly assists in authorizing these plays, ideally legitimizing them as metaphysical signifiers of unprecedented proportions.

These plays stem from the reality of African oral literature ensconced with the presence of the gods while seeking to import African Diaspora signs to American soil. What is forcibly operating within the context of an indigenous based mythical morality is the aggressive power of the iron fist god Ogun. Each playwright appropriates the “myths

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and rituals of the Ogun complex [which] serve[s] as a kind of ‘ideology of progress’
devised by these peoples to explain their [or other] dominant positions in the world.”101

Jones’s reverence of conjuring exerts a rousing awareness of how Blacks,
particularly those living in the 1960’s and 1970’s, were disempowered by their own self-induced dislocation. The traumatic repercussions of assimilationism, primarily the
destructive aimlessness of the Black migration, the deceptive wonderment of the big city,
is crystallized in Home while The Great MacDaddy metamorphoses the complicated
process of Black male actualization while identifying the material forces that continue to
usurp Black male autonomy including drugs, sexual promiscuity and alcoholism.

Resplendent in each of these plays’ extolment of conjuring, particularly for Black
Americans, is the possibility for a sacramental reconciliation with their hyphenated
identities. As Jones delineates the relationship of conjuring to Black drama, she
concludes:

Conjuring then, has a direct kinship to art, as both seek to release their
vision upon the world. Conjuring makes use of natural properties—herbs,
roots, blood, soil, water, hair—and the appropriate ordering and repetition
of words that activate the ase, or life force, of the material elements.

Conjuring’s reliance on the power of words gives it a very particular union
with theatre.102

Jones’ precise synthesis of conjuring in relationship to the medium of theatre accelerates
and gives further insight into the materialization of Black culture present in these plays as

101 Sandra T. Barnes and Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, “Ogun, the Empire Builder,” Africa’s Ogun: Old

102 Jones 227.
characters are often bound and unbound to southern soil, as the doublings of their struggle appears and reappears in the admonishment/stripping of blood ties in place of self-preservation. Consequently, the ritual of conjuring is beholden with multiple possibilities including the tense binary relationship of a celebrated culture versus a diminishing one, the defacement of African based symbols in place of Americanized codes and images and even the danger of self-abasement. Jones also implies that the efficacy of conjuring is ideologically linked to the universal precepts of fate and destiny.

Poet-playwright-social-activist and Black Arts Movement proponent, Sonia Sanchez, took to the stage, militantly armed with her one woman solo piece *Sister Sonjii* (1969). Replete with loose-verse poetry, indigenous African inspired chants; ensconced with a nostalgic imagination of Black womanhood and semi-autobiographical text, Sanchez engages in a negotiation between America and herself, as she invokes her desire for an interdependent survival of Black men and women in the country. The surreal atmosphere of the play is imbued by Baraka’s racial separatist politics, dominated by the oppositional historical tensions between Blacks and whites.

Sonia Sanchez’s play is clearly uninterested in cultural pluralism as she directly denounces racial integration and radically re-exposes the subversive rule of whites, unmasking her own subjectivity in the process. She opposes the pre-existing hierarchal architecture of race relations in America while intoning/conjuring the tribal features of her existence. Literally, she appears center stage, during the opening of the play adorned in a gray wig, accentuated by the pitch Black sounds of harsh music.

Interwoven in her Black self-sufficient theatre stratagem is a socio-political critique of Black people as well, as Sanchez guides the audience backward, revisiting
traces of her girlhood, the traumas tied to her first sexual awakenings as well as her active involvement with the militarily armed Black Panthers. In Sanchez’s self-created psycho-spiritual world, she rhythmically arouses the collective medium of primordial consciousness, as she un-restricts time in her poetic-bound travels into multiple intimate spaces and geographical locations.

According to Elizabeth Brown Guillory, “Sanchez’s connection to Africa is the structure of the plot. Ancient African mythology, particularly the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt, suggests that the Afrocentric approach to life is one that reveres the cyclical nature of things.”103 Sanchez stimulates her text with an aural African sensibility as she retraces the genealogy of African American men and women, with a keen focus on their historical disenfranchisement, using a cosmic based morality to particularize the Western exploitation of her people.

Bartholomew Abanuka suggests that the type of communal world consciousness emboldened in Sanchez’s text, springs from, “[a] primordial religious consciousness. It is the bedrock on which the entire worldview and culture rests. This primordial religious consciousness is theological in the sense that it includes awareness of a Supreme God or gods.”104 This primordial positionality, what Abanuka also calls “national consciousness”105, is indicative in Sanchez’s culturally specific jazz-intoned poetic language, as she radically reassembles the Black male and female psyche. In her overthrow of paternalism, she also pursues an anti-archetypical framing of Black culture.


105 Abanuka 33.
Her pillaring of poor Blacks and keen concentration on their daily plight is articulated with pitching rage and artistic clarity. Sanchez also appropriates the rhetorical language and dynamic speech inflections of Nation of Islam member Malcolm X and consciously uses Baraka’s anti-Western aesthetic as a blueprint for her socially conscious ritual. According to Elizabeth Brown Guillery, “the non-traditional structure of her dramatic pieces expresses the violence and turmoil of Blacks in America.”\textsuperscript{106} The movement of the play is energized by quick spurts of non-linear narratives, almost spontaneous in nature. These undeterminable flashes often collide into other flashes of sporadic memory.

The following year Ed Bullins, using poetry as his medium, also appropriates an African based primordial worldview in his play \textit{To Raise the Dead and Foretell the Future}. Using repetition, alliteration, Black nation building ethics and anti-colonialist ideals in the pulsating movement of his piece, Bullins reminds Black Americans that, “We are the African nation of the West. We are the African Nation in this dead place. We are the lost found colony of Black men in this Western tomb.”\textsuperscript{107} (221). Bullins, using affirmations of “Black souls [rising] from the bed of white culture”\textsuperscript{108} as his methodological premise, seeks to promote racial retribution in his prophetic facilitation of a new Black future. Bullins’ text interacts with Sanchez’s text, in addition to a plethora of other nation building ritual plays that consciously confront debilitating forms of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Brown-Guillory 151.
\item Bullins 222.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
oppression. Mike Sell expounds upon Bullins themes and there connection to Black American tradition. He writes:

Rituals dominated the stages and periodicals of Black theatre in the late 1960’s. Generally such pieces blend a boldly drawn dramatic structure; a range of presentational techniques (chanting, choral movement, song); multi-media; and, especially, the deeply affecting invocation of the texts, movements, cadences, and [of particular emphasis], intonations of Afrocentric spiritual traditions.¹⁰⁹

These ritual plays’ separatist objectives, in their socio-political overlapping content, are the anti-thesis to the pro-integrationist agenda of NEC. Their blatant castigation for all things white, although rich in presentational style, disproportionately fails in the progression of American race relations and has no productive impact on NEC’s shift toward multi-ethnicity, thus deeming these texts transgressive and ideologically restricted to one particular era in history.

Following the ritual tradition of late 1960’s Black theatre, Samm-Art Williams and Paul Carter Harrison, also privileges ritual in their dramatic texts. Unlike Sanchez, Bullins and Baraka, their rituals are not pre-conditioned by a decadent Black oriented agenda. Instead, they are more concerned with the individual and cultural accountability of Blacks as it relates to productive race relations in America, clearly suggesting that the perils of racism, though fraught with hegemonic dominance, should not be the central motivating factor in Blacks’ relentless search for cultural value and expressive meaning. Williams and Harrison, with social and historical awareness, promote a firm sense of

purposed rootedness in the daily lives of Blacks while also raising an awareness of how
Blacks have equally entrapped themselves with materialism, capitalism and
consumerism.

Samm-Art Williams’ *Home* pays homage to the rich southern folk life of Blacks,
suggesting that the essence of one’s existence is not and should not be preordained by the
tenets of social constructivism. Williams honors the resilience and simplicity of the Black
southern spirit. Though marred by Jim Crow-ism, countless lynchings and the
metaphorical and literal castration of Black men, Williams, in his lyrical elegy to the
south, illuminates a preeminent and endemic nature to Black people’s familial roots. In
doing so, he indicts the social entrapments that Black men have created by their own
doing in an urbanized often aimless displacement of themselves.

In a similar vein, Paul Carter Harrison, uses allegory as the central focus of his
play. Also, metaphorical representations of African deity and myth, situates *The Great
MacDaddy* in close proximity to the psychological imprint in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. He
poetizes the Westernized Black Man using vernacular slang, masculine idioms and
hipster speech, to interpolate the proclivity of Black masculinity with sexism, escapism
and the bondages of capitalism. He juxtaposes Black Africa against the white West, not
to reinforce their opposing force, rather to reveal the Black man’s greed-ridden desire to
thrive inside established institutions of authority. As he riffs on the cultural liminal space
of the Middle Passage, he intones what Paul Guillory describes as “intermediate concepts
lodged between the local and the global, which have a wider applicability in cultural
history and politics because they offer an alternative to the nationalistic focus which
dominates cultural criticism.” Harrison gives his play greater momentum in his examination of social politics that are tied to Black American life while aligning the Sun god Hyperion with the Yoruba God Obatala in his social critique.

Just as Poseidon traverses far throughout the world, the newly crowned Great MacDaddy travels to almost every crevice throughout the landscape of America in a symbolic rite of passage; from the cacophonous sounds of the city to the sweltering heat of the desert. Thus, his abuse and irreverence to the Gods is illuminated in his travels. Just as Poseidon is scathed by his own self-grandiosity; both pride and greed quickens The Great MacDaddy’s egocentric behaviors as well.

I will now proceed to Home and The Great MacDaddy. I will examine the ways in which these two plays use ritual heavily in order to give greater precedence to the contestations and class divisions that exist between impoverished and affluent Blacks. Questions of cultural ownership permeate both plays as the central male characters undergo a spiritual and psychological journey that bears witness to the fetishisms that corrupt them both. I will also address the lack of kinship that also exists in Black communities while intellectualizing the fractured bifurcations entangled in the trajectory between southern American soil, urban American cities and the African Diaspora.

I will consider how the playwrights’ approaches seem to impart what Richard Wright calls “a psychological nakedness” (57) that is “rooted [in these characters’] own disinheritedness” (57) aligned closely with an inner negotiation of their Black

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112 Wright 57.
subjectivity. For example, Houston A. Baker asserts and expounds on Richard Wright’s psychoanalytical examination of the Negro. He references Wright in their shared view stating:

Colored peoples of the world [were] awakened by raucous industrial cities and were abandoning dreams of homogenous rural communities in order to face the overwhelming realities of advanced technological societies. The Black writer was faced with the question of what to make of a diminished thing and how to fulfill this role in a modern world.\(^{113}\)

I will conclude this chapter by revisiting how the various temperaments of the Black male character’s subjectivity often encounter an unavoidable crisis with pre-established systems of social domination.

**Home – Samm-Art Williams, 1978**

The notion of home, as a literal or figurative place of comfort and refuge is rooted in the African-American search for a stable congenial state of being. The reclamation of home and the desire to return home, back to one’s African roots is inextricably linked to an extensive lineage of ancestors who neither chose to abandon their native soil nor even possess the power to prevent their displacement from the so called motherland. If in fact the act of leaving home was not a matter of choice, in the case of slavery, then one can argue, that the inheritors of those stripped from their indigenous environments during the middle passage have been permanently marred by history’s ghosts, its repudiation of home for Blacks in both a geographical and architectural renunciation. Therefore, newly

freed Blacks, upon their emancipation from slavery often lacked the political agency and authoritative power to reclaim, restore or even reconstruct that which had been lost and in many cases long forgotten.

The ever ceasing desire for home precipitated a multilateral search for Blacks who’d been imported to America eventually transforming itself into a recurring act of individual and collective will purposely illuminated by American precepts of capitalism, materialism and social order. The material gain through the ownership of tangible property, the struggle to retain land unwillingly forfeited, the unfulfilled promise of forty acres and a mule, implicitly scourged the Black human conscious thwarted by this false hope for property rights. Subsequently, Samm-Art Williams’ refulgent drama *Home* offers a fresh perspective of one particular Black man’s prodigal like odyssey in his escape and eventual return back to the south. This was a radical drama for its time which skillfully addressed the recourse in the possession and dispossession of home.

In *Home*, Williams explores the complicated tensions between the urbanized lives of northern Blacks and those still situated in the rural south. Set in the late 1950’s, during the pivotal height of the Civil Rights Movement, Williams artfully articulates one man’s harrowing journey from his peaceful farm life in Crossroads, North Carolina to the cacophonous chaos of the inner city. Central to his contemplation of historical facts which have significantly contributed to the perils of home, is Williams’ sensitive portrait of the fictionalized character Cephus Miles through every phase of his human existence from his early pubescent years to the ripe age of forty. One overt image in Cephus’ subversive travels is Williams’ clever use of the Greyhound bus, a contemporized re-imagining of the loaded slave ship as Blacks willfully transported themselves like
exported goods with baskets of cold fried chicken, tattered clothes and perhaps a dollar or
two in their pockets to provide meager comfort in the abetting of their citified dreams.

The earthy Cephus Miles initially appears to be a man firmly rooted in his rural
North Carolinian soil, one who knows himself, never questioning his place in the world,
constantly assured of where he rightfully belongs. His daily survival is dependent on
tilling the farmland at the break of every dawn, honoring god at Cornerstone Baptist
Church then drinking and frolicking with the women at Saturday night fish fries. With the
recent inheritance of his newly acquired land after the death of his grandfather and uncle,
young Cephus, in his initial state of being, fully embraces his inherited position as the
newly appointed over seer of his family’s land. Enamored with dreams of marrying and
providing for his girlfriend Pattie Mae, his devotion to rural family life is apparent as he
confesses to bright-eyed Pattie, “We can get hitched next year. I can work the farm in the
spring and summer and work at the sawmill in the winter.”\textsuperscript{114}

Although Cephus is deeply invested into his self-imposed station in life, Pattie
Mae eventually envisions a future beyond the limitations of a rural existence: not one
surrounded by the domestic ritual of cooking, cleaning, rearing children and regularly
attending church. She is split between her college aspirations in Virginia and her desire to
cultivate an honorable Christian life in North Carolina. Once she suddenly strays from the
comfort of Cephus Miles, escaping to college with no intentions to return, they tragically
become the antithesis to one another.

Confronted with the tragic fate of attempting to survive in the absence of each
other’s, while unconsciously awaiting their collective human redemption, Cephus’ and
Pattie’s genuine love for one another is eventually recaptured in the play upon

undergoing their own individual suffering enraptured by the trials and tribulations of the inner city. In spite of his desperate pleas for Pattie to remain with him, Cephus is foreboded by her infectious declaration, “I’ve got to get an education. A man can always get a job. But a woman needs her education, Cephus”\textsuperscript{115}, Cephus half-heartedly accepts Pattie’s irrevocable decision to depart with a firm determination to prepare for her return.

In spite of Pattie’s constant rebuke of his foul tongue, in her absence, Cephus resorts to the cussing habits of his beloved late grandfather eventually turning to incest to cope with the loss of Pattie Mae. While taking up with his second cousin Pearlene Costin, Cephus’ grandiose imaginings of the city are far from the brutal realities of urban sophistication soon to come, the alienation of the city that will antagonistically unwelcome him. Writhed by Pattie Mae’s abrupt abandonment of him, initially, Cephus maintains a fierce resistance to the city in his resilience to forever remain connected to home.

Samm-Art Williams’ unique use of conjuring is of great significance to the stylized assemblage of his text. While alliteration, allegory and illusion are marginally positioned in this rural epic narrative, the literary device of poetry is the epicenter of \textit{Home}. The improvisational dispersions of poetic language represent a multiple overlapping of voices/characters situated throughout the journey of the play. The language in the text shifts back and forth from natural dialogue to a unified chorus of voices to Cephus’ poetic soliloquies back to natural dialogue. Two female parts Woman #1 and Woman #2 intone all of the female characters in addition to other male characters in the play as well.

\textsuperscript{115} Samm-Art Williams 20.
Without the use of musical instrumentation, some of the narrative/poetry invoked by the chorus is often sung acappella with the actors using their bodies to create the sounds of instruments. J.C. De Graft in his connection of everyday drama to ancient African roots suggests that “drama certainly derives from everyday life, but it is not the same thing as everyday life; just as song, no matter how stirring, or a picture, no matter how vivid, about hunting is not the same thing as an actual hunt.”116 As De Graft continues to delineate the fundamental difference between drama and actual life, he acknowledges how life force phenomena have its direct impact on the transmission of drama when he argues that:

Drama is condensation from everyday life, whose many aspects—visible and invisible, tangible and intangible—it attempts to manifest, embody or affirm. It is in this sense that drama is an art form, drama unique as an art form is that not only is it capable of drawing on all life for its raw material, but it also does and must utilize the pulsating raw material of actual human bodies, attributes and behavior as the sine qua non of its very medium of expression.117

Of great significance to Home is also the use of raw materials that De Graft mentions in his essay such as the evocation of soil and land in addition to the inventive placement and movement of bodies on stage. For example, Williams purposely calls for a bare stage with only two visible costume racks requiring minimal costume changes resulting in the central presence of the actors’ inner psyche, bodies and voices. By


117 De Graft 20.
primarily focusing his attention on the actors as the transmitters of his language, as the physical and musical impetus in his conjuring and re-conjuring of blood ties and land, Williams imbues his audience with a loosely framed, bare to the bone, highly lyricized observation of the metaphorical.

A central feature of the chorus as a unified manipulator of the plot is its intentional conjuring of southern traditions of old, its intimate interrogation of a time that once was and also its poetic plea and ancient Greek imbued prophecy, for men and women overtaken by the inner city, to faithfully and dutifully return home:

ONE

Children of the land. Babies of the soil.

Where have they all gone?

With the good teachings.

The spiritual souls of

Their Mothers and Dads.

To cities and places far to the North.

TWO

Come home. Come home.

The land sadly cries.\(^\text{118}\)

In this opening passage, Samm-Art Williams rhythmically uses repetition to poetically emphasize the historical, the medium of poetry represents the historical discourse of the great migration of how begotten land is simultaneously celebrated and mourned. Images of “spiritual souls” in flight also give great precedence to the frustrations of Blacks struggling for economic independence in the north. The conjuring

\(^{118}\) Samm-Art Williams 3.
of poetry as a signifier of the oppressed, Black men and women blighted by the instability of home is gently poised against the personal narrative of Cephus Miles. In Williams’ radical rejection of the northern movement of Blacks, he equally reprimands the anti-southern positionality of those who have rejected their native land while forcing theatre spectators to reconsider their own regional contentions of colonized disempowerment, the terror of culturally undesirable, predominately white controlled demographic spaces.

Williams expresses competing viewpoints in *Home* with his placement of a Greek like chorus, a continuous commentator and provoker of the plays’ action, imbued with traditional poetic forms, situated against the vernacular language of Cephus, Pattie and other characters whose cultural Black expressivity is influenced by their regional location. As the plot continues to unfold, prior to Cephus’ eventual sojourn to the city, his speech becomes strained and anguished with both traditional poetic expressions with a mixture of his ever present vernacular speech. As Cephus articulates his loss and yearning for Pattie Mae, he does so in the manner of traditional poetic language unrepresentative of his usual folksy blues lilt speech when he says, “I’ll never love another girl. Not in my whole life. The gayly colored leaves float and dance, on a soft summer day. Kissed for a moment by the wind, then slowly drift away.”119 As Cephus mourns for Pattie, he does so in a colonized standard Americanized language exhibited in iambic pentameter verse, he is gradually becoming aware of his diminishing peculiar folkness. The overlap of poetic language with vernacular folk speech demonstrates Williams’ conscious presentation of two autonomous linguistic codes and symbols, although strained, though somewhat magnanimous in their co-existence with one another.

119 Samm-Art Williams 19.
While these competing linguistic narratives assist in reexamining the implicit role the migration plays in its estrangement of the respectable conditions supplanted in rural life, Williams also instantaneously prefaces the preceding action in *Home* including Cephus’ refusal to fight in the Vietnam war, the burdens of his governmental imprisonment, the loss of his land, all of these preceding incidents provide further historical emphasis to Cephus’ personal narrative. Williams theatrical convention of sporadic overlapping of language and shifting bodies in space illumines Cephus’ dilemma, his struggle to fit in, in an urban sense, his strained language which highlights his double consciousness, even his disillusionment of the city are all linked to the opening chorus’ foreshadowing of both Cephus’ and Pattie’s subsequent fate and impending doom in the brutal city.

The severity of Cephus’ punishment for refusing to participate in the Vietnam War is anguished by a recent letter from his buddy Tommy, presently serving time in Nam. Tommy vividly describes bloody images of bullet ridden bodies in the hot murky stink of a foreign country which impedes upon Cephus’ psyche, further propelling him to remain in his homeland. Cephus’ radical resistance not to fight is mobilized through Tommy’s descriptive letter. Refusing to turn a deaf ear on the biblical scripture, “Thou shall not kill. Love thy neighbor”\(^{120}\), Cephus is immediately found guilty for abiding by his anti-war grievances and is subjected to “the huge, cold, steel gates of the prison.”\(^{121}\)

Returning to his eloquent use of traditional verse, Williams describes the devastating impact of Cephus being stripped from his farmland for refusing to fight in a country he’s never even heard of. Within the context of his imprisoned isolation, coupled

\(^{120}\) Samm-Art Williams 33.

\(^{121}\) Samm-Art Williams 33.
with the peeling away of his inherited property, Williams concludes that a white
hegemonic system once again succeeds in: “Taking the freedom from one more bird of
reason. Chopping off the wings and burning the feathers. No more to fly on the land.
Earth bound in a pit of steel and concrete. A cubicle to sleep in. Freedom a bastard.”
Cephus’ inner logic of an unjust war becomes more than just his own individual stance
against soldiers in battle.

His resistance ultimately demonstrates the rejection of a hegemonic political
system strained by the incongruence of the United States Constitution. Cephus’ resistance
functions as a retaliatory challenge against violent/militant expressions of Americanism.
Williams’ historical conjuring of the traumatic repercussions of the Vietnam War, the
supposed communist sentiments that it ensued, allows him to achieve a figurative
collapse of this former America of the past often haunted by these disparaging forms of
patriotism. Therefore, “freedom [is] a bastard” cloaked in ambiguity, evidenced
through the pressures of a corrupt society that menaces itself in its indignant
characterization of democracy.

While Cephus’ battle to maintain his autonomy in the south is usurped by the
ideological expectations of his country, like the common struggle for many Blacks in the
1960’s, Cephus, whose primary concern is his own individual freedom, is keenly aware
of the peculiarity of his idiomatic suffering abruptly disrupted by the intrusive
unmitigated principles promoted by groups heavily scrutinized by the Federal Bureau of
Investigation Unit as they closely monitored the establishment of political forces such as
the People’s Party, the underground activities of Beah Richards, William Patterson,

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122 Samm-Art Williams 33.
123 Samm-Art Williams 33.
W.E.B. Du Bois and of great importance, Marcus Garvey’s controversial Pan-African Movement. Williams conjures up the omnipresence of these often short lived political parties in the form of another letter written to Cephus from his Aunt Hannah who forewarns him of The Political Party’s arrival on her doorstep in an effort to recruit Cephus to join them in their advocation for his cause, “to take up your fight”\textsuperscript{124} Cephus counters their efforts with the subtextual declaration, “I don’t have no fight. That’s why I’m here cause I don’t have no fight.”\textsuperscript{125}

While in prison, Cephus perhaps empathizes with The Political Party’s genuine efforts to elicit his participation in a Black male controlled progressive nationalist ideology. Cephus, on the other hand, is solely concerned with recapturing and reclaiming his rural farm status. Although he harbors no resentment for the Political Party’s male dominated community agenda, Cephus intentionally distances himself from this intrusive political organization, propagated by relentless tactics and recruitment efforts. Significant to \textit{Home}, is the fact that Cephus, although energized by his own self-assuredness, is not even remotely interested in any collective cause nor is he beholden by the lofty political aspirations of urban intellectuals.

Rolland Murray discusses collective assertions of Black masculine ideals perpetuated by liberal nationalist institutions during the 1960’s including the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam, who on more than one occasion, promoted a collective “patriarchal nationalism.”\textsuperscript{126} Murray espouses that these radical groups sought

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\item \textsuperscript{124} Samm-Art Williams 34.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Samm-Art Williams 35.
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to “bind the oppressed to the dominant [Black] order.” Murray argues that leaders such as Huey P. Newton of The Black Panther Movement sought to emasculate Black men who rejected their premise of dominate Black patriarchy, while vehemently assaulting Black homosexual men with sexist theology as well as men like Cephus whose identity, though marred by urbanization, did not rest upon these radical dogmatic ideals on Black masculinity.

Murray asserts that, “Newton posits communal identity and oppositional group consciousness as a revolt against bourgeois hegemony.” Samm-Art Williams, however, in his artistic authorizing of his central male character Cephus, did not construct the inner psychosis of Cephus based on Newton’s sexist patriarchal typology. Rather, Cephus’ Black subject position is informed by his reverence to Black women. His transformation is forged in part by his alliance to Patty Mae and in spite of the power she holds in her promoted social status. Cephus’ rurally inspired assertion of identity re-prioritizes the patriarchal and matriarchal figure as equal allies in the exigency of Black family as he represents, in the words of Murray, “the hollowing out of nationalist political ideology.” Hence, Cephus is not attempting to escape the entrapments of colonialism through a male reversal of power roles, instead his learned values in the deep south forces him to reconsider his misappropriated flight to the urban city.

In his eventual return home, Cephus soon rejects the falsehood of opportunistic symbols including elitism, education and wealth. Eventually the measure of his manhood against the materiality of a consumerist oriented world is disrupted by the reclamation of

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127 Murray 25.

128 Murray 25.

129 Murray 104.
his southern based world. The reclamation of Cephus’ southern roots renews his southern pride subsequently allowing him to regain his inner balance as he returns to a complete state of Blackness that is authentically his own.

Inside the skirting “blues and jazz in the middle of the night”\textsuperscript{130}, Cephus settles into a deep smoky sleep within the confines of his jail cell armored with a steely confidence to find and win Patty Mae over upon his release. He drifts away, anxiously overcome by the memory of stolen land and a foregone love. Williams smoothly transitions the play into a dream sequence prior to Cephus embarking to the new city. What emerge during the course of his dream are two contrasting images: one of Pattie Mae and the other of a dancing woman. Accompanied by the figure of an unnamed woman driven by her passionate dance are Cephus and Pattie Mae, face to face in close proximity to one another. As they stand inside the gaping hole that has now become Cephus’ home, the primacy of their love is briefly celebrated and remembered:

\begin{verbatim}
ONE/PATTIE MAE
You’ve laid your troubled head many a night on my breast, and softly, very softly. You kissed them. Remember?

CEPHUS
I remember, Pattie Mae. I remember.

ONE/PATTIE MAE
Hot. Hot in the summer. We lay in your grandfather’s hay loft. Wet with love and perspiration. The hay clinging to our bodies and hair. We had a blanket. It was damp and sticky from our
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{130} Samm-Art Williams 35.
love making. Remember?\textsuperscript{131}

Williams’ conjuring of Cephus’ dream celebrates the memory of Cephus and Pattie’s youthful love while imbuing a poetic dialogue between the two. The language is interwoven with a stirring image: two naked Black bodies languished in the lacquer of intoxicating southern heat. The phrasing of Pattie’s language is rhythmic and descriptive signifying on the overall musical tonality of the play. Cephus’ responses to Pattie Mae’s lofty sentiments are brief, the use of minimal words as bare as he has presently become, yet intimate. The dancing woman is actually a dancing man. This unnamed figure is a youthful Cephus in flight. He has become a bird, set free, dancing the dance of mourning and remembering. This is a dramatic moment in the play that produces an episodic converging of the present with the past.

The signifying of the past is centered through the metaphorical posturing of a dancing figure on stage and it creates a slippery slope between the imagined versus the real, the ambiguity of the dancer’s gender conjured in the previously mentioned scene. Perhaps it was not Williams’ creative intention at all. However, the improvised choreography and bareness of Cephus’ dream does give keener focus to the landscape of history that is refracted in the play while also assisting Williams in the eventual articulation of Cephus’ necessary resolve, a theatrical conclusion to his suffering.

The most intensified conflict for Cephus takes place in the city, once again widening the cultural and moral gap between urban and rural life. Manifested in this portion of the play is Cephus’ failed attempt to appear at ease at all times, effortlessly centered in his virile manhood, smooth and slick. Once he gains factory employment loading trucks, as if night time is always the right time to be liberated and free, he begins

\textsuperscript{131} Samm-Art Williams 36.
to frequent smoky bars and dark drug corners; ‘he’s getting the spirit in the dark’ or ‘he’s out catting’, a wise old uncle or aunt would say. The play magnifies Cephus’ relentless search for amorous Black women. Cephus preoccupies his spare time ‘chasing tail’, his other new gig. bell hooks explains that, “in imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, hatred of Black masculinity finds its most intense expression in the realm of the sexual. The dehumanization of the Black male body (often taking place with Black male consent) is widespread and normalized.” hooks investigates the proliferation and demoralizing expressions of Black male virility, the contestation between a healthy expression of Black male sexual agency versus the sexual violent trauma of a Black super macho complex.

The performed temperament of Cephus’ potentially fatal act of coolness is alluded in the character’s own words, “I’m gonna be so mean. I’m gonna blow out every neon light in every bar in this city. I’m gonna blow. I’m gonna walk and strut. Just a mean “motor scooter”. That’s what they gonna say when I strut by.” The conjuring of the degenerative Black male, the materiality of Cephus’ sexualized and racialized body, becomes the shifting point of focus in Williams’ play. Cephus’ coded expression *to blow* interacts with symbolically driven street phrases such as: to blow off steam, to blow on a mean old sax, to blow women’s minds, to do some blow. The underlying reality for Cephus, unfortunately, depending on the severity of his destructive ego is the binary opposite: to be blown away, either by a bullet, or by one’s own discursive mind.

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132 bell hooks, *We Real Cool* 82.

133 Samm-Art Williams 40.
Perhaps as a literary revisionist response to the notion of Grace pursued in *Sty of the Blind Pig*, Williams also metaphorically conjures the sacred hymn “Amazing Grace” relocating its sentiments in the context of his play. With Cephus illegitimately supplanted in the promised land of the city, unlike Jordan, he experiences grace whenever he is in sexual flight, whenever the whiskey coaxes his pores. Eroticism replaces the loss he feels in his estrangement from his farmland. Cephus’ farm was grace-like. He has been tragically stripped from its replenishing soil.

In the final sequence of the play, Cephus and Pattie Mae are reunited after undergoing their own individual trials and tribulations of the inner city. Recently divorced, no longer clouded by elite inner class circles and the deceptions of social status, upon the ending of her brief marriage to a lawyer, Pattie Mae is finally able to see what she never was able to see: Cephus Miles in all of his simplicity. Unlike Clay, in *Dutchman*, Cephus grows to despise middle class imitation choosing to no longer hide behind a renegade or a mask. Through their citified epiphany, both Cephus and Pattie have been eloquently exposed, liberated by the return to their rural commonality. They are now bare, revived, stripped to the bone.

In his play, Williams reveals that home is more than the ownership of land, one’s regional location or a secure family institution. Home is as much the reclamation of one’s autonomous identity, as it is the manifestation of material reality, a radical rejection of the imitative in his decentering of a rural American narrative. Williams’ resistance of white patriarchy, the hegemonic domination of a fetishized city, is also a celebration of cultural artifacts and metaphorical themes seeking to preserve the symbolic elements of his historical southern universe.
**The Great MacDaddy** - Paul Carter Harrison, 1973

*The Great MacDaddy* continues to mark The Negro Ensemble Company’s in-depth experimentation of both re-imagined domestic dramas as well as West African inspired ritualistic dramas. In February 1974, Paul Carter Harrison’s ritual play in the mode of primal rhythms, jazz beats and riffs was presented at the St. Marks Playhouse in New York City under the direction of Douglas Turner Ward. While representing imaginations of African Americans about their African origins and myth, Harrison’s ritualized theatre violently disassembles the traditional dramatic structure. He indicted Black men through a critical examination of their hyper-masculinity in their rebellion against the vile nature of capitalism. In his play, marginalized Blacks are conflated by the wiles of fast money, alcohol and drugs. Adapted from Amos Tutuola’s novel *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952)
134, Harrison describes *The Great MacDaddy* as “a translation of African mythic and cosmic references as they appear in the African-American modes of experience which receives cosmic focus from the Black church, and gives expressive weight to such mythic heroes as The Great MacDaddy.”
135 His play traces the historical roots of internal and external forces that incited the materialist and consumerist ideals implored by European colonialism. Defying most theatrical conventions, the audience is conjoined with the performance of the play, their participation a vital component to Harrison’s exorcism of the past, specifically in his cognoscente polarization of Black masculinity with white male patriarchy.

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134 Amos Tutuola’s 1952 novel *The Palm Drinkard* is rooted in the folklore tradition of West Africa. It centers on the Yoruba myth story of the *The Palm Wine Drinkard* using a literary mixture of both the spiritual and the real.

In the African continuum of Black American Theatre, Harrison’s ritual theatre is also known in the African Diaspora as “kuntu drama”\(^{136}\), a sacred, ceremonious kind of drama that “reflects the African spirit wherever it is located”\(^{137}\) while excavating or retracing individual and collective experiences of the past in an attempt to merge man’s earthly strengths with his god given strengths. In this tantalizing re-affirmation of the theatrical experience, Harrison notes that “the play is the ritualized context of reality” \(^{(xi)}\). While ritualizing history, Harrison equally deconstructs the sanctum of humanity, particularly the humanity of Black and white Americans. He demonstrates first how rituals can strip people’s identity and destabilize the root of their existence. He then fractures the artifice of the traditional play by speaking to the artificiality of consumerism and commercialism as he juxtaposes these two oppressive societal entities. More importantly, *The Great MacDaddy* attempts to confront and erase the social order that has constructed these debilitating mores.

The presentation of ritual in *The Great MacDaddy* is heightened by its jazz influenced structure in its musical sequence of “primal rhythm, beat one, beat two, beat three, beat four, beat five, beat six, beat seven and terminal rhythm.”\(^{138}\) Part of this revelatory style is the reverberation of the drum placed at the center of Harrison’s reordering of time, furthering the play’s function as a shape-shifter, the pulse of jazz, the imbalance of energy in search of proper sequence, balance and form. What the music’s ritual is to jazz’s pulse; *The Great MacDaddy* is to musical ritual. The drum’s urgent


\(^{137}\) Oliver Jackson ix.

seven count beat merges the secular with the sacred. Harrison’s reimagining of myth conjures otherworldly forces for social change. He accesses ritual to unearth the metaphysical properties of sacrifice.

Oliver Jackson notes that the infusion of African American experience with indigenous African institutions reveal the variables involved in the binary opposition between Black and white power, between secular and sacred power, and between material and immaterial power. He argues that:

It is necessary to relate to the proper power relationships in order that the mode becomes definitive and revelatory. Certainly, the degree of power depends upon dialogue, presentation, tensions, etc., for these elements of the ritual are its bones; but the bones are only the vehicles of modality.

The content is the principle thing.  

If, in fact, ‘the content is the principle thing’ in Harrison’s conjuring of ritual, then it is safe to suppose that the play is led, to a certain degree, by a dramatic structure that relocates ritual rather than simply perform ritual. The mode of performance is a central feature in the theatrical transmission of ritual, but Harrison’s makes ritual present in so many dimensions, musical or otherwise, that it “project[s] the aspect of the force or power needed or eventually revealed within the mode” whether it be “attitude, speech, dress, song [as well as] music.” The performance of ritual (as Jackson purports) is a means to an end, an expressive/ gestural medium within the ritual rather than a totalization of its overall function.

139 Oliver Jackson xii.

140 Oliver Jackson xii.
Jackson’s theoretical premise that the ritual not the thing, lends itself to the notion that power is temporal regardless of the mode in which it is expressed. Whether it be sexual power, racial power, gender power or even cultural power, their distinctions are often blurred, loosely bound, contained and aimed within the unilateral scope of Harrison’s self-reflexive demonstration of ritual.

The play opens on the momentous occasion of Big MacDaddy’s death, the young MacDaddy renowned father whose legacy and fortune has been passed down to him. The emotionally charged pre-funeral services, the wake of the once powerful and well-respected Big Daddy is loaded with metaphorical subtext, cultural codes and symbols providing added texture and tension to the breadth of this ritual play. Of great importance is an enormous wine cask placed downstage center which seems to dominate the primal rhythm of the play. Antagonistic in nature, it is the metaphysical object that will ultimately propel the plot forward.

The purported spiritual renewal which it culturally identified and inherently linked to the central focus of the cask, coincides with The Great MacDaddy’s deliberate drinking of the wine which serves to mobilize the play’s metaphorical transition through time and space. His consumption of it initiates the ritual. Wine, with its potential power to invoke Black male rage, sends The Great MacDaddy on his inevitable rite of passage in and throughout America. It also becomes the catalyst that destroys and transforms the Black community (congregants) who devoutly enter the theatrical space to dutifully surround The Great MacDaddy on this occasion. As they lavish in his inherited power, their intention is a silent hope for material gain achieved only through him. In their minds, their desire for wealth can be secured only through The Great MacDaddy. From
the onset, Harrison, the play’s ritual manipulator, establishes The Great MacDaddy as wine’s familiar and treacherous gatekeeper, a scourge on his own community. Central to Harrison’s plot is the thematic drinking of wine, the making of wine and more importantly the tragic disappearance of wine leading to The Great MacDaddy’s relentless voyage to recover and replenish the material source of hope for both himself and his community.

Situated within an elaborately adorned funeral parlor, during the booming jazz age of the Harlem Renaissance, the play opened with the Black community/chorus visibly transformed into what eventually manifests itself into a pretentious, racially induced, theatrically innovative tableaux. These Black people, upon their entrance into the parlor, with the exchange of few pleasantries, will gradually metamorphose their elaborately adorned bodies into a picture pose. It is as if Harrison, in this specific opening moment, is purposely lamenting history, prior to confronting it, under the guise of a still photo. The play’s state of spiritual exhilaration abruptly severed by its stillness both embraces Harrison’s conjuring of history and is a visible signification of his ritual’s movement backward, its riveting stasis often splintered with the erratic movement of time.

The ritual act of snapping a photograph also summons the ghastly appearance of the white faced Scag Photographer who briefly embodies the only white presence on stage, a presence that is purposely distanced from the Black community. Underneath the safety of his lens is the objectification of Black culture. His other worldly gaze is a necessity, for it provides the foreshadowing of The Great MacDaddy’s impending crisis: his resistance to, and heated exchanges with white hegemony expressed in the ensuing
ritual beats with great poignancy. Cloaked underneath a Black garment with a white camera in hand, the powdered faced Scag’s racially loaded bright camera flashes, initiates a beat change, ironically relieving the Black community of their temporary moment of stasis as they begin to celebrate death through laughing, dancing and drinking in a symbolic display of indigenous African expressions. Rather than allow the Black community to remain stagnant, emblematized in their photographic pose, Harrison breaks through the stillness, and makes it collide with the rhythmic jazz system of his play.

In his allusions of indigenous expressionism and disruption of chronological time, Harrison coalesces through questions of cultural (in)stability while simultaneously exposing the overall lack of community empowerment and unity for Black people. He also probes the vagrancy of the main character’s polluted nature against his strained relationship to white male patriarchy. Ultimately, The Great MacDaddy’s structured Black male essence and the contestations of its cultural authenticity are thematically linked with the exploitation of the earth’s natural resources, his economic dependence on wine. The varying degrees of his masculinity are also amplified based on his codependence of this material resource, the means in which he survives in his racial and gendered world.

The Scag Photographer, satisfied in his ideological and marginal referencing of Black culture, documented under the guise of a camera lens, immediately escapes from the funeral parlor during the Black community’s celebratory vocal and physical actions. As they simultaneously give honor to their new heir and also pay homage to their ancestor who died, The Scag Photographer’s disassociation with this particular moment of the play’s ritual adds greater incentive to his speedy exit. Implicit in his immediate
departure is his unfamiliarity with the ritual’s meaning and purpose that leads him to construct his own idealistic beliefs (i.e. his idiomatic conclusions of “the moment” he had just witnessed), about Black people as a whole, the absolutist, essentialist notion that they are all the same.

While the Black congregants continue to relish in The Great MacDaddy’s fleeting authorization of himself, unaware of The Scag Photographer’s convenient disappearance, Deacon Jones, Big MacDaddy’s closest confidante and friend, begins to express his own skepticism of the newly crowned Great MacDaddy’s ability to effectively exert his recently acquired power:

**DEACON JONES**

MacDaddy, you might be great, but maybe you better give this movin’ out…or movin’ in…a bit more thought. After all, I don’t know if your movin’ around gon’ sit right with the Man.

**MACDADDY**

The Man? What Man? You lookin’ at the Man…who can do anything in this world he pleases. And if I’m the Man, can’t be no other man runnin’ my game.141

The Great MacDaddy is victimized by the excess of his grandiosity when he denies the existence of an outside dominating force and refuses to recognize his key opponent, The Man. His rejection of the racially generated, historical advantage of whites and their prolonged debasing of Black men stimulates the play ritual’s inevitable denouement. Erringly, The Great MacDaddy ignores the leverage of white male power,

141 Harrison, *MacDaddy* 517.
disillusioned by the mistaken belief that he possesses the resources to sever its control of him. What is revelatory about Harris’ intentional exaggeration of The Great MacDaddy’s flawed judgment, is how the system will outwit him in his own game, a game epitomized by a socio-political structure specifically designed to overtake him. In his innocent naïveté, his ensuing journey with The Man will contemptuously minimize him. Supplanted in his opponent’s strategic guile is the repercussion of his fate, the extreme capacity of The Man destined to plunder him.

His inheritance ignites him with confidence and a misguided will to spread his wealth outside his inner court, situated in Los Angeles, California. His enormous egocentricism to a great measure contributed to his desire to move out into the world. The Great MacDaddy wanted to reclaim and preserve his plentiful resource of wine in a continued effort to flaunt and capitalize on his wealth no matter the consequences. Like the blind prophet Tiresias in Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone* (442 B.C.), Deacon Jones bestows his own great wisdom upon The Great MacDaddy, warning him of his hubris and his ultimate demise. Having experienced the social ills as a second-class American citizen firsthand, Deacon Jones is more astute in worldly matters. He is indebted to the late Big MacDaddy and he unceasingly probes into The Great MacDaddy’s worldly intentions. He dutifully pricks The Great MacDaddy’s youthful perseverance sharply forewarning him, “Ain’t never been a man, on this land, who didn’t have to come by the Man, at least once. Who didn’t have to pay by hook or crook, for his benevolence. And he that don’t know ‘bout sacrifice, I say sacrifice, I mean sacrifice, can only know the back-hand of the Man’s patience.”

142 Harrison, *MacDaddy* 517.
The price The Great MacDaddy will eventually have “to pay by hook or crook, for his benevolence”\textsuperscript{143} is central to the poetic statement of Harrison’s play. The flippancy of his response to Deacon Jones’ warning will be of critical significance to the overall arc of Harrison’s ritual drama. Of importance to Harrison’s establishment of the main character’s gradual transformation, are the disparaging encounters that he will face on his journey across America, racially marked encounters that will eventually deflate him. The Great MacDaddy’s consumption of material entitlement, the grit and spunk of his vile egocentricity, are linked directly to the interrelational tensions that will eventually give voice to Harrison’s thematic through line of self-imposed empowerment. Harrison’s explicit positing of base desires (despite their mythically inspired literary elements) are ingredients that make for good dramas such as this one. The Great MacDaddy’s and Deacon Jones’s hyperbolic discourse pedagogically provide a textual signifier to Harrison’s didactic treatment of misappropriated power, achieved most significantly through The Great MacDaddy’s subsequent fall.

From out of their tense exchange of dialogue, a disheveled Wine appears, “the keeper of the illegal still and the possessor of the precious Palm Wine formula.”\textsuperscript{144} He is the destructive force that skirts around the Black community. Positioned on the outskirts, but central to their demise, he devitalizes them of their fundamental potential. Through manufacturing and ritualized production of wine, he is represented as the metaphorical activator of The Great MacDaddy’s power, prestige and wealth.

In African voudoun culture and myth, the celestial power of wine holds the capacity to invoke a spiritual connection between hero-gods such as the masculine

\textsuperscript{143} Harrison, MacDaddy 517.

\textsuperscript{144} Harrison, MacDaddy 518.
Yoruba-Haitian iron clad Ogun who drinks red wine (represented by the color blue) and the love goddess Erzulie who drinks white wine and is represented by the color pink. Both of them are also known as Loas within the context of Haitian vodoun practice.

According to Wole Soyinka ritualized references to the gods is a necessary prescription in Yoruba culture. He states that “their symbolic roles are identified by man [in] the role of an intermediary quester, an explorer [of ideal] territories.” He argues, that “It is within their framework that traditional society poses its social questions or formulates its moralities.” Harrison questions the preferential treatment of financially privileged Blacks, particularly Black men, negated by their misuse of material power and abuse of nature, providing him ample literary space for an explosive commentary on the dire consequences of exploiting earth’s natural properties: “Wine was good. Wine was great. Wine was everybody’s mistake. Though wine was a gift of God. Wine is of the Blood and the Father and the Weary Spirit, but Wine was abused.” By allowing Deacon Jones to give voice to Harrison’s ritualistic framing of self-induced negation, his literary trope is increasingly inflected by The Great MacDaddy’s bisected positionality: his progressive ideals assaulted by his own projected threat to his race imparted by his objectification and desecration of Wine.

What is poignantly conveyed on the other spectrum of Wine’s doubled role within the context of the play is the opposite to the reverencing of Wine linked to the previously mentioned Gods. The contemptuous consumption of wine is magnified in Harrison’s text,

146 Soyinka 2.
147 Harrison, MacDaddy 519.
replete with codes and symbols, and thematically linked to the biblical myth of man’s fall from grace upon his consumption of a red apple, the forbidden fruit. Harrison’s ritual drama highlights God’s contempt for Palm Wine, which bears heavily on the play’s literal deformation of the Black community. Figuratively embedded in the play is the drinking of wine in direct disregard of the mandates of one god, namely the elder god Obatala. The great Yoruba God Obatala, the most ancient of the omnipotent Orishas/Loas/African Gods, is centrally located in Harrison’s *The Great MacDaddy*. He is situated in close proximity to the Supreme Being in African folklore and myth. Like God in the bible, he is the creator of man. Because of Obatala’s excessive drinking of Palm Wine, many humans were created with deformities both physical and mental.

This symbolic premise of wine as a degenerative force which debilitates the Black community and places Blacks at a political and social disadvantage, is the focal thesis of Harrison in his heavily political play. This premise is realized when Wine stumbles inside the parlor and eventually confirm Deacon Jones’s earlier premonition. He is badly bruised, clothes tattered and on the physical brink of death. Central to the plot’s development is an exasperated Wine delivering the tragic news to The Great MacDaddy, i.e., that his treasured Palm Wine formula has been confiscated by The Man, a formula that Wine is only privy of. Within Harrison’s literary trope is the abrupt removal and vanishing of the Palm Wine formula which has been clearly established as the bedrock of The Great MacDaddy’s wealthy enterprise. The Great MacDaddy’s relationship to Wine is dialectical in their painful necessity to one another, as both characters reciprocally seek to capitalize on their involvement in the particularly paralyzing function of the formula,
which is manifested most significantly in the Black community’s symbolic reverence and consumption of its irresistible juice.

Consequently, The Great MacDaddy, unbeknownst to him, has already been debunked by The Man prior to ever experiencing the luxury of his wealth. Here Harrison, dislocates The Great MacDaddy from his powerful position. Thwarted by the formula’s absence, Harrison promisingly suggests that the cultural legacy of Blacks can, in fact, be restored. However, the overthrow of The Great MacDaddy’s rebellious self-serving nature, cannot be fully achieved until he undergoes a spiritual and psychological rite of passage. Harrison parodies his stubborn defiance in order to not only secures his replenishment and eventual disavowing of wine, the play’s social parody is also a radical repositioning of his self-abused inalienable rights. In order to salvage his community, and in turn, find himself, The Great MacDaddy’s hyper Black masculinity must first become desecrated.

It is within the moral aptitude of his sacrificial passage that The Great MacDaddy’s autonomy is threatened and the oppositionality in his encounters with both Blacks and whites is ritualistically re-emphasized. During The Great MacDaddy’s lofty mission to retrace the lost formula, Harrison shows the paradox of his central character’s brooding tension with his socially constructed relationships. The Great MacDaddy is required to travel primarily on foot in his efforts to follow The Wine Keeper’s steps, to overtake him and fiercely rebuke him for his purposeful abandonment of him, but also, inadvertently, to indirectly expose the thievery and trickery of his own game.

The symbolic code of The Man in caps signifies on its power, its autonomy, its capacity to paralyze MacDaddy. Its historical and literary signification re-orientates The
Great MacDaddy with the brutal truths of his Black subjectivity, decentralizes him and thus positions him back to the unmeasured profundity of his oppressed identity, the frayed margins of his existence in White America. White America or The Man is the progenitor of his fall from grace and will oversee/orchestrate the fragmentation and disintegration of the invincible power he so proudly utters and also exacerbates. The exaggeration of The Great MacDaddy’s power will faithfully give order to the eventual fatality of his virile Black manhood: his impending doom, his tragic destiny.

Most importantly, the merging of The Great MacDaddy’s struggle with the Black community’s struggle, historically situates the play within the rhetorical framework of racial subordination suffered by both Black men and women throughout the trajectory of American race relations. The racial and gendered realities of The Great MacDaddy’s social condition is carefully negotiated, while Harrison constantly marks and redefines his eventual return back to the liminal space(s) between race, culture and also masculinity.

The Negro Ensemble Company’s award winning productions of both Samm-Art Williams’ *Home* and Paul Carter Harrison’s *The Great MacDaddy* successfully reified and courageously institutionalized a continuous paradigm shift in the production and theatrical representation of Black experience in America. With these two plays, Douglas Turner Ward’s vision for his company is cogently displayed in its call for “Black autonomy” and unsympathetic expressions of Black experience. Both Williams’ and Harrison’s aesthetic closely mirrors Alain Locke’s Inner School pedagogy which promoted the need for self-accountability and resiliency of the spirit in Black communities. The dynamics of their polarizing investigations of the Negro opened up the
possibility for a productive racial dialogue. These plays have earned their rightful place in the continuum of Ward’s original philosophy.

In NEC’s productions of ritual dramas, the masculine ideals of Black nationalism are intricately retraced. Their conjuring of the components of a liberal Black patriarch, is the leading cultural advancement that demarcates NEC even further from the Black misogyny of the first half of the 1960’s. This artistic-political split distinguished the practical functions of NEC’s proposed aesthetic even further. Many of the structural and rhythmical features of ritual drama were similar for both the Williams-Harrison brand of ritual and the Bullins-Sanchez trope. However, Williams’ and Harrison’s propensity and pre-occupation to emphatically move beyond the terrain of racial indifference was redemptive in the sense that they rejected both Eurocentric forms of nation building as well as Black-centered nation building ethics. Central to their aesthetics was the empowering of Blacks to think beyond the nationalist frame. Williams and Harrison promoted an ethnic autonomy that sought to thrive in relation to its hybridity with other cultures as a healing paradigmatic shift in the theatricalizing of all things relative to race, rather than the limitations of an absolute degenerative identity.

In the subsequent years, the NEC seemingly abandoned its integrationist framing of universal American dreams, values and political systems with a subtle return to radical militant Black sentiments featured in early Black dramas that had been produced by former protest theatre companies. Pressured by colleagues and creative affiliates, The Negro Ensemble Company’s tenure on the mainstream stage eventually suffered due to its own experimental attempt to establish a creative balance between two opposing ideological positions.
CHAPTER 4

RE-PERFORMING MILITANT BLACK NATIONALISM

In this Chapter I explore the struggles that erupted during NEC’s fourth season (1970-1972). I examine NEC’s appeasement to their patriarchal-conscious Black male critics, espoused by its step backwards into sexist nationalistic framing of reference. I limit my analysis of NEC’s pro-racist return with two plays, one from its 1968-1969 season, Lonne Elder III’s Ceremonies in Dark Old Men (1969) and the latter from its 1970-1972 season, Joseph A. Walker’s The River Niger (1971). Both plays, in an all too familiar fashion, orchestrate, again, a heightened didactic debasement of the West.

At the core of NEC’s ambiguous return to militant Black Nationalism is the ego-centric agitation of conflicted Black male characters in the plays discussed in the earlier chapters. This Black male egocentricism was intensified through Elder’s and Walker’s mediatory re-performance of degenerate and internalized forms of racism. The Black male characters in their plays exhibit a tremendous amount of illogical reasoning and often sexist, masculine rationalizing in response to their displaced position in Western culture. Elder and Walker emphasized the turmoil that these men cause as they react to their violent hegemonic displacement.
The portraiture of Black male identity in these plays is ambiguously blurred by NEC’s aesthetic infusion of both nationalistic and post-nationalistic views. As these contested ideologies dynamically engage with one another, the classification of NEC as a multi-ethnic international theatre institution becomes more complex. Unclear overarching themes mar the ideological grounds on which NEC previously stood. NEC’s altering frame of reference was precipitated, in many cases, by the rhetoric of racial separatism that overshadowed its previous artistic uses of non-nationalistic frames of reference.

Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd’s assessment of Black Nationalist politics in relation to modernity, Samuel A. Hay’s contextualization of nationalism and absurdism, and bell hook’s theory on the constructions of gender is used in this chapter to explain the misalignment of militant Black masculine power in *Ceremonies in Dark Men* and *The River Niger*. My analysis focuses on the two central male characters in both plays, the patriarchs Russell B. Parker and John Williams. In addition to explaining to the evocation of Black male egocentricism in these two plays, I examine the intentional restructuring of Black Nationalism by both plays and map out the versatility of NEC’s Black Nationalist rhetoric in the context of earlier forms of Black Nationalistic sentiments that I discussed in earlier chapters.

Russell B. Parker’s final monologue in Lonne Elder III’s *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, underscore the physical and mental anguish experienced by a forlorn patriarch—the glorious memory of his former profession as a swift vaudeville performer, fueled by a highly receptive audience, only to be eventually dismounted by his debilitating
physical incapacities induced by old age. While threading an inextricable link to Parker’s renowned past with the tragic elements of his present circumstantial condition, Elder pays homage to the cultural heritage and creative expressivity of the historical Harlem Renaissance. However, he equally mourns the sudden loss and disappearance of its lively atmosphere, extenuated, subsequently, by the Great Depression.

Elder situates the personal narrative of Russell B. Parker’s individual struggle against the historical echoes of a lost era that once fashioned the artistic livelihood of a plethora of entertainers including Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington and Bert Williams. Elder provides an eventful literary journey in his re-shaping of Black cultural experience, almost three decades later, after Harlem’s epic boom, within the socio-political context of his play. Symbolically, Parker’s elegiac monologue represents the repercussions of Black artistic institutions brutally indicted by the violence of colonialism in both his radical resistance to move beyond his famed past but also in the implicit recognition of his own impending death.

A reconfigured imaging of Black nationalist sentiments is overtly implied in Russell B. Parker’s physiological confrontation with his own Blackness. However, in Elder’s treatment of Black nationalist symbols, there is a reconstruction of militant sentiments confined solely within Black experience, assisted by a radical removal of the Man from its hierarchal position. White oppression is no longer central to the plot; rather Elder compels Blacks to seek to liberate themselves by the development of an autonomous identity that is not antagonistic.

The transgression inherent in Black people’s unproductive disdain for whites is drastically reversed in the agitated peculiarity brought on by Parker’s anguished state of
self-induced contempt. Central to this new viewpoint, is the regeneration of Black nationalist sentiments which implode upon within the Black family structure in Elder’s play. Elder, to some degree, subtly disavows the Black versus white racial binary, as he undercuts its previous framing of racial opposites by consciously grounding the vast majority of his characters under the paradigmatic rubric of Blackness confronting Blackness, the central core of *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*.

Joseph A. Walker’s *The River Niger*, on the other hand, seeks to circumvent the tensions confounded by racism in a bold unearthing of Black militant sentiments that are explicitly bound by the ideology of racial separation. Unlike, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, *The River Niger* interpolates The Negro Ensemble Company’s new angle of negro vision with the linguistic appeal of violence and murder that is brutally enacted in Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman*. The philosophy of Douglas Turner Ward’s company, initially evident in its artistic quest of Blackness confronting Blackness, was eventually blurred by the ambiguity of their vision’s strained relationship with traditional Black nationalism. In revisiting violent notions of Black nationalism, Walker reconnects The Negro Ensemble Company with Baraka’s revolutionary theatre that sought to shift the power dynamic in Black-white American relations through a newly construct reality which eradicates the social dilemmas of the oppressed. In doing so Blacks gain “the fundamental sense of belonging to a definite time, a definite place, and a specific milieu, without which authentic pronouncements, even a true understanding of the self, cannot be born.”

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Though, Walker’s momentary return to the radical, partially obscures the original tenets of Ward’s pioneering vision, it also seeks to reconcile The Negro Ensemble Company’s contemptuous relationship with other Black theatre institutions. In doing so, however, The Negro Ensemble Company’s definitive goals are deeply wounded by the complications of two competing doctrines represented in Walker’s and Elder’s texts.

The opposing doctrines of a patriarchal Black Nationalist structure versus the cultural plurality pursued through a post Black Nationalist structure was coherently energized by NEC’s initial attempt to provide a definitive artistic response to these doctrines’ incongruent relationship. However, NEC marred its mission, in its artistic return to Black militarism, with a subsequent infusion of both doctrines in the previously mentioned plays. NEC negated itself with this abrupt return. It did not maintain its clear-cut aesthetic demarcation that held the potential of articulating these doctrinal dissimilarities for the benefit of NEC’s multi-racial, multi-ethnic audience.

Although, this doctrinal infusion, occurred in reaction to militant Black detractors at the time, the outcome of NEC’s appeasement to its patriarchal dominant and segregationist critics, intensified and facilitated an ideological contradiction that was counter-productive to NEC’s multi-cultural mechanism. Therefore, it maximized the inaccessibility of other races into theatrical conversations about human suffering. The co-dependent doom of Black human suffrage and the racial cynicism that precluded it, was once again explicitly re-centered, in Elder’s Ceremonies in Dark Old Men and Walker’s The River Niger.
According to Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd the conceptual inclinations of Black Nationalism sought to maintain Black patriarchal domination and a clear cut divide between all races. Its disparate qualities were also measured in terms of its resistance to all facets of cultural pluralism including NEC’s initial mission toward an intersectional ethnic and cultural theatre. Alexander-Floyd argues that, “the Black cultural pathology narrative as an instance of white, as opposed to American, [the role of nationalism] has [therefore] played in state formation [the development of] an imagined community for the United States.” The tangibility of Black Nationalism’s political reach toward a “race first” and ‘ideal national community’ was simply not plausible from any practical standpoint. NEC’s artistic move backward into this negative political terrain, ultimately strained its original mission and created a subtle dissent into a race driven Black monolithic theatre language. NEC’s deployment of this kind of artistic ambiguity facilitated a reductivism of their groundbreaking reshaping of Black historical narratives.

NEC’s convergent staging of these competing theatre ethics mirrors some of its historical predecessors in what Samuel A. Hay describes as Adrienne Kennedy’s absurdist centered infusion of The Inner School and Outer School of drama in her play *Funny House of the Negro* (1960). According to Hay, Kennedy’s play functions as a literary revisionist response to Locke’s Inner School as she, “made Sarah’s [the central character’s] questions about her lineage unanswerable, causing several of the plays’


150 Alexander-Floyd 21.

151 Alexander-Floyd 21.
‘Herselves’ (or possibilities) to present their own versions.”¹⁵² Hay argues that Kennedy’s staging of Sarah’s multi-Black selves, supports the principle that every person’s experience regardless of ethnicity and race is “relative and personal.”¹⁵³

Unlike NEC’s aesthetical fusion of Black Nationalism and post Black Nationalism, Kennedy’s play contends that there are no definitive answers about Truth. For example, the male Black patriarchs in Ceremonies in Dark Old Men and The River Niger have absolutely defined their fate. Their inner and outer truths are manifested in their shared denial of self-accountability voiced through their own self-imposed degeneration. Russell B. Parker’s final self-loathing monologue highlights Elder’s framing of apathy in Parker’s private world with no clear sense of resolution for him.

There is a Western driven sense of self in Elder’s down trodden construction of Russell B. Parker. This sense of unredemptiveness, in spite of tremendous suffering, indicates that Parker is both incapable and unwilling to take full responsibility for his actions. Due to his brutal and misconstrued understanding of social class and race, unlike Sarah in Funny House of the Negro, Parker represents a singular self-inscribed articulation of Black male identity extensively illuminated by Elder’s literary configuration of him. Russell B. Parker’s and John Williams’ identity rests inside a racial and cultural vacuum of anti-self-resilience. Parker asserts the wantonness ascribed upon himself in his final monologue during a reflection of his life as he asserts, “I knew

¹⁵² Hay 37.
¹⁵³ Hay 37.
nobody would hire me to dance again—I just couldn’t run downtown to meet the man the way she did—not after all those years of shuffling around like I was a dumb clown.”

Accordingly, John in *The River Niger*, also caricatures himself as he declares to his best friend Dudley, “Ain’t none of us gone be free until poetry rides a mercury-smooth silver stallion.” These two Black male characters epitomize an elucidation of a symbolic Black male fragility primed by both playwrights, evidenced in their paralleled behaviors; destructive behaviors ostensibly motivated by their psyche.

The dilemma in NEC’s restoration of degenerative, subjective performances of the Black male self, postures an interesting historic repetition motivated by a refigured Black Nationalist aesthetic that continues to use the rhetoric of race. This rhetoric characterizes the West as white and male centered and provokes the kind of unattainable, counter-productive community that Alexander-Floyd speaks of.

Alexander-Floyd’s examination of the limits of Black Nationalism suggests that its livelihood centers on a mastery of the nihilistic and interpretive significations of a Black male centered world, a world in which the force of Black endurance is demonstrated by the characteristics of a metanarrative that strongly suggests, “moral uplift will advance the status of Blacks and make Blacks worthy and viable members of the body politic.”

Russell B. Parker’s self-imposed isolation from the outer world, facilitated by his seclusion in an empty barbershop, neither supports Floyd’s notion of


156 Alexander-Floyd 24.
Black Nationalism’s aim for moral uplift nor does his seclusion facilitate his movement forward toward a productive interaction with a culturally pluralistic society.

Though Parker’s stubborn masculine persistence is militantly evinced, his station in life is propelled by his own undoing. Nonetheless he constantly blames outside forces for his innumerable human errors and missteps. His minimal participation in social reality has an adverse and generational effect on his two sons Bobby and Theo as they mirror his behavior evinced by a similar kind of apathy toward a capitalistic world in which they have chosen not to conform to, to the dismay of daughter-sister Adele and to the tragic demise of their lives.

Through Russell and his two sons, it is thematically revealed that resistance against oneself and resistance against society hold the capacity to implode militant internalized oppression onto itself with a devastating aftermath in one’s conscious and unconscious undoing of their identity. The magnitude of this cyclical Black male undoing is measured by NEC in terms of a relative approach which holds the capacity to utilize remnants of Black Nationalist logic in proximity to post Black Nationalist logic, in order to close their ideological gap in one sense and to replace their disassociation two one another with incontestable results.

Therefore, it is plausible to conclude that NEC did not arbitrarily return to Black Nationalist territory only to appease Black militant artists desiring to be appeased? Further, NEC’s act of returning is also a symbolization of turning separatism into an interdependent stimulator of integrationism. For example, the two schools must artistically engage on the stage to mutually/simultaneously analyze the underlying issues
of Black male autonomy. However, NEC reverses the violence in militant sentiment as these playwrights become the authors of an inter-relational fulfillment of Black male autonomy, a critique of its degenerate qualities not completely realized in these characters. Yet, due to the striking honesty in each character’s authentic revelation of themselves, their attention to their plight, whether misguided or not, is constantly stimulating this purposeful construct of Black male autonomy, constantly revised, advanced, re-invoked through the physical delicacy of a number of mental landscapes.

If in fact self-motivated militarism is imploding onto itself through the individualization of these Black male characters, then perhaps NEC was not totally abandoning their post-nationalist theatrical mission at all. By the nature of revisiting militant incarnations of Black suffering, perhaps NEC’s thematic revisit into militant domain functions as a literary revisionist response to Black Nationalism while actively deconstructing the idea of Black male autonomy from the ground up.

According to Paul the fundamentalism espoused in nationalist ethnic identity has the propensity to manipulate individuals from their expansive psychological terrain of self-individualization into an idealized cultural collectivism often using fascist and community building tactics as a key strategy. As a result, Gilroy argues that:

identity ceases to be an ongoing process of self-making and social interaction. It becomes instead a thing to be possessed and displayed. It is a salient sign that closes down the possibility of communication across the
gulf between one heavily defended island of particularity and its equally fortified neighbors, between one national encampment and others.¹⁵⁷

Consequently, the Black male self in the two NEC plays examined in this chapter, is in constant conflict with himself, his race and the pathology of Black Nationalism that restricts the self-agency in his understanding and performance of race. Black Nationalist rhetoric has historically pre-figured the imaging of the Black male subject as both a referential symbol and code in the staging of their lives and also as an authorial structure that stigmatizes them using an enigmatically volatile cartography of the racial landscape.

Ceremonies in Dark Old Men - Lonne Elder III, 1965

bell hooks provides a meaningful understanding for constructions of gender in response to racist domination in America, particularly as it relates to the lives of oppressed Black men and women. She writes:

Oppressed Black men and women have rarely challenged the use of gendered metaphors to describe the impact of racist domination and/or Black liberation struggle. The discourse of Black resistance has almost always equated freedom with manhood, the economic and material domination of Black men with castration, emasculation. Accepting these sexual metaphors forged a bond between oppressed Black men and their

white male oppressors. They shared the patriarchal belief that revolutionary struggle was really about the erect phallus.\textsuperscript{158}

This statement identifies and thus supports Lonne Elder III’s textual framing of an oppressing form of Black masculinity centrally located and situated in The Parker Barbershop, a fledgling family empire ran by the head male figure Russell B. Parker. Elder’s play seeks to underscore the failure of Russell’s entrepreneurial pursuits upon suffering from the physical debilitation brought on from his dancing career on the vaudeville circuit.

While purposefully exploiting the elder Parker’s physical ailments, Elder metaphorically connects Parker’s fragile Black body with his fragmented psyche. A daily game of chess with his long-time friend Williams Jenkins, centrally located in the dank dwelling of his empty barbershop is often emasculated by the violent reactions of his only daughter Adele. As a woman, she is the sole bread winner and only employed member of the Parker household. Here, Adele purposely serves as the superior Black matriarch while treating her father as her inferior. She strips him of all authority. Her assertions of power contribute to his mental and physical demise.

Evidenced in her antagonistic reductivism leveled against her father and her two unemployed brothers Bobby and Theo, the iron clad impact of her assault on their competency as Black men often renders them powerless. Ironically, Adele seeks to encourage them to find gainful employment rather than depend solely on her as the only breadwinner. After violently reacting to Adele’s forewarning of expelling all of these

unemployed dead beat men from her dearly beloved dead mother’s house, Adele asserts her reasons for throwing them in her retort, “me, Adele Eloise Parker, Black, over twenty-one and the only working person in this house. I am not going to let the three of you drive me into the grave the way you did Mama.”

Her negation of her father and two brothers dominates the better part of Elder’s drama. Elder’s liberation of Adele from Black male centered authority is celebratory and allows minimal literary space for Parker and his sons’ redemption. Black female subjectivity is therefore given precedence over Black male subjectivity. The authoritative positioning of Adele is a central to the plot as she illuminates and resituates the binary positions of Black man/Black woman.

Adele’s particular negation of both her father and her two brothers arises also out of the tragic absence of the Parker’s dead mother and Russell’s late beloved wife. Subjected to his wife’s death at a young age and also bifurcated by his position as both father and widower, the duality of Russell’s doubled function in the play serves to intensify his incompetency as a father negated by his inability to move beyond his failed career and his wife’s early death.

Elder’s lament and evocation of Black women in Ceremonies in Dark Old Men forces one to revisit the title which lends itself to a critical reevaluation of Black male power. The ceremonial game of chess in the play is a metaphor for Russell B. Parker’s struggle against himself, his daughter and white society.

159 Elder III 63.
In his old age, Parker’s life is stagnant and bleak as he battles against himself and his past which is a central feature of his existence. Parker’s internal self-war is contained within the confines of his barbershop. While detailing Parker’s lofty past juxtaposed by his ongoing search for self-esteem, Parker’s search for self-actualization and eventual redemption functions metaphorically in the contentious chess games with his longtime friend. Russell’s determination to overcome his own self-induced conflicts is emphasized through his effort to win a game of chess, at least once. This effort is actualized as he engages in the game on a daily basis. Every day throughout the day, his back and forth exchange with his inner and outer self adds purpose to his life as he aspires to overtake his opponent.

There are different degrees of Black male subjugation shared by patriarch Russell and his two sons Theo and Bobby, in their struggle for autonomy. Philosophical dissimilarities add texture to the masculine dimensions of the play. Gender differences and their hierarchical tensions are the central conflict in the play. The inter-textuality of gender and race is clearly at work in Ceremonies, establishing a liminal space, whereby Adele can not only construct a Black female identity through her consistent resistance of Black male domination, the conversation of gender and race also interacts with the failure the Parker’s unproductive barbershop.

The grim consequences of Adele’s undoing at the hands of her father and two brothers will eventually lead to her liberation and the dismantling of their Black male power. Adele’s choices and actions are important of Parker’s counter-narrative in the play’s final moments. Unbeknownst to Russell, his son Bobby has been murdered by the sophisticated drug lord character Blue as he engages himself in an endless justification
for his conflated and isolated existence. Elder situates Russell B. Parker’s revelatory monologue during the final moment of *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* in order to disclose during the play’s conflicted denouement, Parker’s exuberant performance of his cynical pessimism.

Although Parker, has the contingency to emphasize his own suffering over the suffering of others, he refuses to resign himself to regrets. In his final speech, he is recalling, acting out and re-performing particular instances from his life as he insists to his daughter Adele, his son Theo and to his buddy Jenkins that everything he has intended in the performative strategy of his life, has been, “acted out [through] the ceremony of a game.”

Therefore, the ceremonial metaphor of his masculine identity has been self-orchestrated through his personal performance of the past; his conversation with the past has been revered inside the strict isolation of his barbershop.

Parker’s distancing of himself from the external world in his immediate present life is a direct result of his temporal space of existence. The barbershop is Parker’s theatrical space to wrestle with his own inner demons through his purposed game of chess. It didn’t matter to him that customers rarely patronized his shop. It was his time and his space to do with it whatever he desired and in spite of the consequences and his inability to catch up with himself and against the persistent memories that mediate between the past and he present. The conflicted ceremonies acted out by Mr. Russell B. Parker are a liminal based negotiation with time, on his terms.

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160 Elder III 117.
If *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* is a ceremonial re-performance of the politically charged Black Nationalist male in his negation of racist white America and unconscious negation of himself, then NEC’s linguistic treatment of Black Nationalism’s racially marked typography, serves to splinter the innate quality of militarism from the inside out as a historical revision of its genealogy in their particular re-grounding of Black male experience. Russell B. Parker then becomes a precursor to the effacement and erasure of the metaphorical Black fist (from the title of this dissertation), while symbolizing NEC’s continuance effort to interpolate their new multi-cultural logic onto the pre-ordained tenets of Black Nationalism.

For Elder to juxtapose two seemingly opposing theatrical languages in addition to using them as a literary tools for his examination of Black Theatre’s aesthetical history manages to super-impose a new design of historical narrative on separatist thought. Elder also critiques Black Nationalism as he simultaneously re-performs it. He counter-poses its edict with subjective exaggeration. While decoding the language of militancy, he intones an epigraph onto the metaphorical punctuation of the Black fist.

*The River Niger* - Joseph A. Walker, 1965

In 1973, Joseph A. Walker writes in his part militant, part anti-militant play *The River Niger*, “Peace is a muscle-less word. A vacuum. A hole in space. An ass-less anesthesia. A shadowy phantom.” Walker suggests that the very idea of peace is an illusion, a dysfunctional ideal in terms of liberalizing Black men from their estrangement

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161 Walker 447.
with the white male colonizer. The practicality of his assertion also suggests that the point of exploring these impaired racial relationships is not to perpetuate the idea of peace, but rather to repudiate the capitalistic enfranchisement of Black men. Walker’s literary rhetoric suggests that peace is irrational, the anti-thesis to an urgent return to a pre-colonial African existence. Perhaps, the most efficient strategy Black men should use through a conscious reorientation of themselves.

The river in the title to Walker’s play is indigenous to the dignity, the moral codes and value systems lost at sea. He is metaphorically representing the journey between Africa to America during the Middle Passage. He symbolizes the estrangement of this indigenous African culture energized by Black men and women’s crossover into American soil. The river is also imagery for the haunting memory of alive and dead bodies thrown overboard. In a similar tone, Russell B. Parker, in the previously examined play, also energizes the metaphor of a massive river. The river is the psychological terrain where Black origination is bound. Both Walker and Elder strongly suggest that the loss of an original African identity is linked directly to the movement and displacement of imported Black bodies in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Playwright Lonne Elder III subtly converses with Walker in his conscious placement of the following line, “by time tomorrow comes, let’s see if we can’t all throw it into the river.” The river theme, the notion of throwing one’s piteous struggle into it, is a retaliation for everything that has gone asunder in the contested lives of the Black male characters in both plays. The interconnection of these two lines is a subtextual repudiation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Black men’s desire to escape the

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162 Elder III 118.
mundane conditions of imposed Americanization. This chapter examines NEC’s profound and controversial revisit into these militant Africanized dramatic moments in Black Theatre.

In the 1970’s, The Negro Ensemble Company sought to universalize Black dramas on stage. With the strident tension of militant sentiments omnipresent, an increasing number of both national and international narratives sought to violently overthrow the marginalization of Black Nationalism in mainstream theatre. Separation propaganda themes are also complicated by the contributions of an increasing womanist movement with writers including Ntozake Shange and Alice Walker who sought to intone oppressed conditions of Black women within the intimate domain of the Black home environment. Black women, in this shifting landscape of Black female autonomy called for rethinking of Black interrelationships and gave voice to its affinity for critiquing Black men in Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) and reinforcing Black female self-definition in Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (1967).

What resulted in these works was an indictment of Black men for the patriarchal role they played in the subjugation of Black women. Resistance subsequently was foregrounded in the personal sphere of the home environment then out into the political world of racial, social and sexual consciousness. Resistance in the 1970’s was no longer exclusive to only Black resistance, it expanded itself into other subsystems of resistance in both Elder’s and Walker’s play.
bell hooks historicizes fundamental features of the Black home, while also placing critical emphasis on the Black matriarch’s mediated role as caregiver to both her children and her husband. According to hooks, within the reality of their predestined lives, their selflessness serves as a codependence for these indolent Black men. hooks, further gives voice to the masochistic suffering endured by Black women. This is tightly contained in these intimate home environments arguing: “Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of Black women to construct domestic households as places of care and nurturance.”

She continues:

In the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression or sexual domination. Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a home place, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of apartheid, of domination, one’s home place was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist.

Joseph Walker, in turn, utilizes the Black domestic household as an authoritative medium for radical Black female resistance. Although traditionally informed by their subservience to men, what Walker attempts to accomplish in the strict perimeters of his text, is a transcendent confrontation of these family conventions traditionally imposed upon Black women. hooks, duly notes, “Black women resisted by making homes where


164 Quoted in hooks, “Homeplace” 42.
all Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.”

The key function of this Black female resistance that hooks speaks upon, is theatrically situated in the opening moments of Walker’s play. Emblematized by the eldest member of the Brown household, eighty-two year old grandmother Wilhemina Brown, cloaked in generous silence, as she purposefully moves in a methodical manner into the kitchen area of the home to prepare her afternoon coffee. In her initial moment of resistance, she retrieves her hidden stash of liquor to synthesis her brew with the perpetual pungency of alcohol. This key moment is the genesis of the play that immediately places the Black woman in direct opposition to her traditional self.

What ensues in the process of Wilhemina’s defiance is the establishment of the play’s untraditional offering of Black women. The image of alcohol, its purposeful appearance and disappearance, is tied to Wilhemina’s rejection of her elderly self in her unwillingness to conform to hooks’ previously mentioned definition of who she is. Within the context of Wilhemina’s resistance is a direct foreshadowing of the play’s tragic outcome while demonstrating, to some degree, the great measure of radicalism that is yet to arise; a radicalism that will ultimately shatter the Williams household in both the public and personal realm.

As a literary recall to The Great MacDaddy’s subjugation of wine consumption, symbolically situated as an aching wound in the Black community, Walker, in the opening scene of The River Niger, underscores Harrison’s metaphor, using it as a symbol

165 Quoted in hooks, “Homeplace” 42.
of resistance and empowerment rather than as the degenerative enforcement of wine in *The Great MacDaddy*. Within the intimate domain of a Black family household, resistance and Black militancy are initiated from the inside out. Out of the poignancy of the Black woman’s remembered role in the framing of both inner radicalism in *The River Niger*, Walker speaks specifically of how these women have been immured by a familial system which they have authoritatively anchored in the historical memory of traditional Black family.

Walker reconstructs the shared subjection that both Black men and women endured in the face of the inordinate conditions of colonialism. As a snapshot in history, Walker articulates the experience of one particular family’s struggle to survive in the presence of a heated racial dialogue during an American era that witnessed Black families nearly destroyed by the fervor stemming from the situational forces that often fraught them with enormity. Walker, in return, reaches beyond the perimeters of merely re-articulating history by confronting white oppression. He also overthrows the traditional in his presentation of a face to face battle with the Black community’s ill-conceived institution of the Black family itself.

*The River Niger* tells the story of the impassioned patriarch John Williams, a blue collar working class poet. A central component to John’s identity, within the harsh conditions of an unjust society, is his evincing linkage of poetry to the cosmological realm of his primordial existence. Like Wilhelmina, John is also codependent on a hidden stash of booze. The consumption of it provides a spirited entrance into his rhythmic atonement of loosely structured jazz poetry. Once the booze re-connects John to his aesthetic aura, his muse, his primitive life force, Walker further dramatizes John’s
transformation, facilitated by the entrance of a harsh bass line, “I am the River Niger—
hear my waters. I wriggle and stream and run. I am totally flexible.”\textsuperscript{166} In the mode of a
rhetorical literary trope, Walker signifies on John’s emulation of an enormous body of
water centrally located in Western Africa.

The configuration of its specific geographical location in the play, through the
artistic medium of poetry, serves to heighten the world in which John aggressively
navigates. In proportion to his reconstructed realm of poetic potentiality, John is in turn,
a shape-shifter. There is no engaging relationship between him and the River Niger. In
Walker’s moment of thematic synthesis, John becomes/is The River Niger. The intrinsic
bass thump helps to sustain the lyricism of John’s voicing of his otherworldliness which
is essential to the muscular presentation of himself.

The link between John, his jazz poetry and its militant rage against racist society,
helps to inform his peculiar search for a firm sense of place amidst the thwarted
conditions of an incongruent society.

The aural and spiritual dimension of his poetry is a hostile illumination of his
individualization in this territorial landscape called America. John’s invective hostility
toward a governmental force greater than himself is often expressed to his longtime
friend and Jamaican confidante Dudley:

\textbf{JOHN}

I don’t like white folks either, but I sure do love their war
machines. I’m a fighter who ain’t got no battlefield. I woke up one

\textsuperscript{166} Walker 439.
day and looked around, and said to myself, There’s a war going on, but where’s the battlefield? I’m gonna find it one day—you watch.

DUDLEY

In other words, you’d gladly give your life for your poor downtrodden Black brothers and sisters if you only knew where to give it?\(^{167}\)

As Walker seeks to establish an ideological tension between John and his longtime friend Dudley, he also situates John, the militant poet as a central literary trope in the play. John’s poetry fights against white oppression. In one respect, John’s riveting poetic language is also a political language that directly expresses the warring engagement of his complex struggle for cultural autonomy and authenticity. Also, the urgency of his vocal inflections and body language that accompanies his opening poem, employs a reverent participation with both the aesthetic and theatrically expressed dimensions of the text. To further the vitality of John’s purposeful elation of his existence, is the disruptive placement of the narcissist Caribbean Dudley. Dudley, is presented as a seemingly insubordinate Black figure. His Caribbean origins motivates his thoughts as he vehemently resists all expressions of Black American militancy, specifically in his strained dialogue with John.

As Dudley blatantly signifies on the plight of Black Americans, Walker simultaneously references the racialized struggle of a dispossessed community, echoed most significantly in Margaret Walker Alexander’s poem “For My People” as she writes,

\(^{167}\) Walker 440
“For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly. Their dirges and their ditties and their blues and jubilees. Praying their prayers nightly to an unknown god. Bending their knees humbly to an unseen power.”168 (6).

As Walker-Alexander’s poem rivets Black culture with a call for a post-slavery renewal of African and African-American based human consciousness, she also celebrates a collective and primordial remembrance of themselves. Walker, in turn, through his literary recall of “For My People”, captures John’s aural participation with Walker-Alexander’s seminal poem as well as Dudley’s misalignment with John’s shared sentiments with “For My People”. Yet, Dudley’s self-contained ambivalence toward community empowerment is only one of the numerous antagonistic forces that will essentially seek to disassemble the identifiable features of John’s essentialized reality.

Ironically, in The River Niger, as Walker poetically characterizes John’s negotiation with himself and with white society, he also images John’s invested patriotism for his country which is in direct contrast with his militant potency. The play also begins on the eve of Jeff’s return home from The United States Air Force. While impatiently awaiting his son’s return, John proudly boasts of Jeff’s first-lieutenant status shoulderied by his honorable military awards. Dudley, in typical fashion, retorts John’s braggadocious attitude proclaiming, “How in the name of your grandma’s twat could you get so worked up over the white man’s air force? I’ve always said, ‘That’s what’s wrong

with these American niggers. They believe anything that has a little tinsel sprinkle on it. ‘Shining silver bars.’ Fantasy man!”

Dudley’s role in the play, in his purposeful distancing of himself from Blacks, creates a cultural tension between Black American sentiments versus the “otherness” of his indigenous Jamaican roots. The agency of his un-American ideals reinforces its interaction with symbolic allusions of American patriotism, conveyed solely through John’s celebration of what he perceives to be his son’s undying commitment to his country.

Despite Dudley’s antagonistic attitude, John blindly reinforces the capitalistic corruption of armed battle, regardless of its infinite fallacies inherent to racism. While uplifting his son Jeff as a symbolic accomplishment of and for his people, the victory embedded in John’s fatherly pride also communicates to Dudley in a simple yet loaded expression, “He’s my son, Dudley, and I’m proud of him.” John’s quickened response to Dudley deepens his relationship to his own ensuing redemption, a redemption that will also result in the tragic discovery of Jeff’s deception to his father. Driven by a force much greater than himself, John’s rage will end in an inevitable blood sacrifice for his family. Arrested by his own self-fulfilling prophecies, Walker perpetuates John’s relentless quest for cultural autonomy while affixing his exaggerated pride in his son to Dudley’s narrow-minded awareness of Jeff’s political achievement for his community.

At its most significant level, the dialogical exchange between John and Dudley bears heavily on the exploitation of Black America that is dominantly contained in

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169 Walker 440.
170 Walker 440.
history. In fact, *The River Niger* is historically situated against the backdrop of a post-Depression era, strained by the non-violent ideology of the 1955 Civil Rights Movement. The play also coincides with the armed resistance of militant groups including the leftist Black Panther Party birthed out of Oakland, California in 1966 with controversial figure Huey P. Newton at its helm.

With dramatic and often fatal consequences, their Marxist, Garvey and Malcolm X inspired racial rhetoric penetrated the socio-political landscape of white America while also calling to arms the violent insurrection of marginalized minority groups. Scrutinized and under careful observation by The Federal Bureau of Investigation Unit, The Black Panther Party’s revolutionary role in history, is ideologically attached to Walker’s play; the ethos of its violent insurgency is actualized in Jeff’s return to his neighborhood, a neighborhood, heavily impacted by the economic deprivation and political atmosphere of the mid 1960’s.

These previously discussed Negro Ensemble Company plays express two opposing extremes: Elder’s elucidating confrontation with the Black self and Walker’s re-confrontation with the white oppressor. Their dissimilar aesthetic, reconditions The Negro Ensemble Company in some respects, while problematically blurring the boundaries between Baraka’s separatist Black Nationalist views with the company’s original aim for a post Black Nationalist theatre.

What emerges in the process of these two plays’ complicated framing of Black experience, is the dialectical intermixture of two competing literary elements: the phenomenological reflection of one’s Black existence in a larger outside world with the
thematic resonances of Black survival achieved by any tactic even violence. In these two plays, violent rhetoric is theatrically rendered in their embrace of radical nationalistic ideals. Of important note, though the years 1969-1972 marked NEC’s controversial return to militant Black nationalist sentiments in its theatrical rendering of Black experience, it also marked NEC’s definitive attempt to elucidate the discrepancies found in both Black Nationalist and post-Black Nationalist theatre logic as an entry way into their subsequent exploration of the interchangeable attributes of both ideologies as they mutually interact with one another in their shared manipulation of Black dramatic expressivity.

I conclude that NEC’s historiography of the past is continuously referenced in Elder’s and Walker’s play to further NEC’s terminology of a new Black Theatre logic that re-characterizes Black human experience because of rather than in spite of their conflicted socio-political relationship with historical Black militancy and resistance. Though, constrained by many indifferences, the links between the two movements are continual even as NEC strives to precisely condition its theatre with a re-reading of this turbulent Black militant history in order to show that the archaeology of post-Black Nationalism cannot be fully realized and constructed without arranging itself in relation to Black Nationalism, instead of simply rendering the literary tropes of the early 1960’s completely and utterly invisible.
CHAPTER 5

STAGING BLACKNESS AS A DREAM AND INTERNATIONAL THEMES

In the previous chapter I questioned the authenticity and creative validity of both the Black Nationalist and post Black Nationalist approaches in two NEC plays. I examined innovative ways in which the two distinct ideologies often overlap, clash or collapse onto one another in Ceremonies in Dark Old Men and The River Niger. The authority and complexity of Black male identity is disrupted by the tense interactions between the two competing schools of pro Black Nationalism and post Black Nationalism.

In Chapter 4 I concluded that a return to militant sentimentality was necessary for NEC to sustain its purposed international approach to Black Theatre. This sentimentality was used to revisit nationalist territory in order to build upon NEC’s transcendental movement beyond radical rhetoric in its reconstructed expression of Black American experience. Rather than allowing its theatre to function solely as a strict departure from liberal reactionary nationalism, NEC sought to establish a philosophical understanding of what had been radicalized by early theatre companies such as The New Lafayette Theatre, Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School and Spirit House, in order to establish the grounds for its own multicultural post anti-West ideological standard.
In this chapter I examine NEC’s continued pre-occupation with ritual performance aimed specifically in its staging of dreams and traditional national cultures. I also consider the mythical implications that coincide with NEC’s theatrical engagement of dreams. NEC mystically, metaphorically and geographically relocates the language, cultural expressions, and symbolisms of the Black human conscious. I consider Edward Bruce Bynum’s genealogy of human evolution while exploring a historical linkage to human consciousness with the continent of Africa. Subsequently, I’ve framed the premise of this chapter around an African based sensibility as I closely contextualize and analyze the allegorical representations of dreams in Derek Walcott’s *Dream On Monkey Mountain*.

In this chapter, I discuss Derek Walcott’s international framing of Blackness in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, with a focus on Walcott’s shifting positionality as both poet and playwright. I examine the way in which he elucidates the genealogy of his West Indies heritage from both an autobiographical and multicultural mode of expression. I recount, unpack and reiterate Walcott’s artistic engagement with interchangeable constructions of Black identity explicitly facilitated by a metaphorical dream. Finally, as indicated in his epic text, I critically implicate the tragedy of European colonialism evidenced in and throughout the play’s loosely structured plot.

I also situate earlier African inspired dream theories against Bynum’s Africanized movement of human civilization throughout the delicate trek of history. Specifically, the phenomenological link between Derek Walcott’s psychoanalytical drama *Dream on Monkey Mountain* with Freud’s African based study on the representation of dreams in
both reality and the human unconsciousness is also a major theoretical premise in which my close-textual analysis of Walcott’s play is mined.

I link the dramatic structure and content of Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain* with the ethos of the Black male mind that is indebted to a pro-African anti-Western human psychology. This chapter doesn’t seek to engender a reductivism of Freud’s critical discourse; instead my analysis decenters Freud’s interpretation and theory of dreams using an indomitable African Diaspora paradigm. This re-assemblage of dream psychology is intoned by a dialectical tension rooted in the African dream reality of man versus man. The genesis of non-linear African based dreams is the theoretical importance for Walcott’s play.

I also examine Wole Soyinka’s *Kongi’s Harvest* with a specific focus on the political tensions that arise due to the dramatic shift in the function of governmental systems of authority. Soyinka’s play focuses on the pathology of resistance to political progression and social change. According to Gilroy, traditional-minded groups rally against new forms of government because “this difficult stance challenges that unarmed group to witness sufferings that pass beyond the reach of words and, in doing so, to see how an understanding of one’s own particularity or identity might be transformed.”

I examine Soyinka’s metanarrative focusing on how it expresses ways in which traditional cultures are often destabilized in their resistance to change. With a particular emphasis on Black male patriarchy, I’ve framed my analysis of *Kongi’s Harvest* around the intersectional categories of individualization and socially constructed identity. I also

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reveal how the dream state of male unconscious is engendered by the masochistic discourse of Black patriarchal politics.

*Dream on Monkey Mountain* - Derek Walcott, 1970

The cosmological energy of African myth is useful in particularizing and Africanizing the dream world and dream state of the central male character Makak in Derek Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. The slipperiness of his identity between the sacred and the divine is contextualized as a dream in real time throughout the journey of the play. There is a constant movement inside Makak’s fragmented dream space. The tangible reality of his awakened state reinforces a distance and conflict with himself between the images in his dream world with the images in reality. This distancing of Makak’s authentic image of himself functions as a stylistic approach in Walcott’s excavation of the fundamental features operating inside Makak’s fragmented dream space.

Walcott’s play serves as an international representation of a multicultural ideology that concentrates specifically on an indigenous oriented narrative inhabited by Afro-Caribbean experience; and is quite possibly the most transcendent realization of Douglas Turner Ward’s shifting paradigm in his theatricalizing iconology of Negro people. As a result of the plays’ international reception, a number of critics have intricately examined Walcott’s often poetic and historically conscious reverberation of West Indian politics including Stewart Brown, Laurence A. Breiner, John Figueroa and Edward Baugh.
All of these previously mentioned writers have been brought together in one text as they critically engage in the dialogical book; *The Art of Derek Walcott* (1991) edited by Stewart Brown, a detailed study on Walcott’s prodigious capability to artistically span through the disproportionate landscape of Afro-Caribbean expressionism. Specifically, this book assesses what Brown describes as “a kind of hinge between cultural worlds; French and English, North and South, Latin and Anglo-Saxon, Amerindian and Afro-American.”172 The shifting landscape in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is metaphorically inspired as it loosely moves in poetic fashion from its central location on a West Indian Island to a euphoric mountaintop to a run-down jail cell to the invoking of continental rivers including the West African Niger River and the vast Congo River in central Africa. Then, the play lyrically proceeds into the tropical landscape of a darkened forest. This is the rhythmical function of the play as it moves from one dream space to the next.

From the onset, as these previously mentioned spaces/realms of imagination are situated, violent inscriptions are placed on Makak by imperialist government officials. He is unjustly imprisoned in their concerted attempt to dismiss, devalue, diminish and dehumanize him. Makak’s racially perpetuated invisibility, conscripted by racial utterances of bestiality and unworthiness, sets the precedence for his subsequent return to a primordial formation of identity masterminded in the through-line of the text. During the play’s opening moments, Makak’s human transformation in the play has yet to be realized.

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The hope and eventual actualization of his perpetual self serves to genuflect the central functioning and movement of the dream. The deferentially ignored realm of his inner psyche challenges the infinite dominion of the white colonist. The validity of Makak’s indigenous self is also challenged, fraught with the oppression of established social codes and constructs. Walcott represents the catastrophe of social constructivism, in the socially projected othering of Makak. Makak is an allegorical contradiction in the construction of the play/dream: witnessed by his self-chosen lack of knowledge coupled with the effacement of his purposed identity by white paternal forces.

Therefore, the actual dream is a conscious smashing of Makak’s image as Walcott circumvents “the history of racist contempt that [also] lies behind the naming of Makak (macaque) of ‘Monkey’ mountain [which] is turned back onto itself as the scorned ‘Nobody’ [who eventually] rediscovers his real [self].” Walcott’s inversion of a fragmented psychosis in his dream play motif, exacerbates the illusion of authority which seeks to strip Makak of his ancient customs and generational traditions.

Ostensibly, Walcott reinforces the interlocking systems of the working class versus the socially elite, the hegemonic power of colonialism versus the disenfranchised Black human subject as he “speak(s) to a fundamental Caribbean sensibility—[that characterizes] just about all of the people of the region [as] migrants in that sense of rootlessness, of a willingness to dare to try to make ‘another life’ elsewhere’.” Cultural displacement within the context of the previously mentioned hybridized realities; incongruent societies in constant widespread movement, the agency of their disquieting

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interdependence is the critical threshold in which Walcott’s radical mobilization of their international permutations and collisions intensely reside.

The purpose of Makak’s dream is to represent two opposing views of his existence. His imprisoned circumstance allows him to metaphorically, figuratively and literally come into his Black manhood as he begins to reject the benign mistreatment and proclivities that heighten his abound oppression. The culpability of Makak’s dream is to elevate his social status through an individual negotiation of his identity.

Edward Bruce Bynum examines the ancient origins of dreams and the inner manifestations of the unconscious with an emphasis on dissociation with egocentricity and self during the meditative process of all dream states. While historicizing the exportation of ancient dream functionality from one civilization to the next, Bynum first establishes the claim that unconscious is “the dimension of mental life in which information is processed outside of the conscious awareness.” 175 After providing a general and universal definition of the unconscious, Bynum begins to build upon his argument of unconscious dreams linked to an African sensibility citing that the “notion of consciousness is [the act of] descending in sleep and in death to an all-Black underworld of symbols, animals, forces, and dynamics, only to be reawaken or be resurrected in the future.” 176

Bynum, therefore, asserts that the initiation of the unconscious dream state always begins in darkness and its originality and central function is historically interconnected to


176 Bynum 81.
systematic “‘dream temples [from] ancient times’.”\textsuperscript{177} This hallowed arid space of dream omnipotence and spirited existence serves to signify on the particular impressions and allusions of life itself epitomized by Bynum’s description of this transient world as, “the consciousness of the finite individual material life with the infinite collective and luminous life of the great spiritual being.”\textsuperscript{178} The central object of the temple is the dreamer himself whose conception/perception of literal space and time is circumvented by ingenious inner manifestations and arousing conversations with human desire.

Frantz Fanon also probes the inner workings of Black male subjectivity espoused in and throughout the multi-functionality of the unconscious state, arguing that the elemental process of inner psychosis, “does not come at random out of the void of nothingness; in some situations, it has previously evoked an effect in [the Black male subject/dreamer].”\textsuperscript{179} He further argues that the psychological functioning of the Black male subject is governed by what he describes as a destructive “phobic object”\textsuperscript{180}, one that undercuts the value system of this unmarked world which often “arouses terror”\textsuperscript{181} at the center of inner Black psychosis.

According to Fanon, the destabilization of the inner psyche (dream state) has the potential to produce uncontrollable anxiety for the Black male subject, an anxiety that is precipitated by a Black human psychology wrought with self-induced fear. This fear

\textsuperscript{177} Bynum 81.

\textsuperscript{178} Bynum 82.


\textsuperscript{180} Fanon 155.

\textsuperscript{181} Fanon 155.
disrupts the activation of one’s potentiality in relation to dominant external forces that co-exist inside the dream, as part conductor of its inner manifestations. Once again, the Black male subject’s psychosis is invaded by a socially dominant co-conductor of his dream-world invoking a kind of fear which often results in violent consequences, even death.

These Blackened temples described earlier by Bynum, in their ritualistic originality, are inherently informed by a literal threshold/space of spiritual meditation in which the fertility of the subject’s mind is provoked by outside objects and dominant forces to conjure an “altered state of consciousness, through certain realms of experience and into deep trance.” In order to gain access into these dark temples of trance Bynum argues, that in traditional “sleep temples” of ancient African societies, one must be initiated through a rite of passage led by a spiritual guide to ensure the participant’s total engagement with this expansive dream experience.

Bynum’s reading of ancient and meditative dream processes is one angle in which to explore the vast terrain of Makak’s inner psyche. Of equal significance, is the externality of invasive objects, based on Fanon’s theory, objects that stimulate and corrupt the varying degrees of Black male psychosis as it struggles to emerge out of the overlapping tension of cultural disempowerment infused upon the subject’s struggle to autonomize the mind both consciously and unconsciously. Walcott situates Makak as the central participant of the dream in his play. The agency of his psychosis is heightened by

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182 Bynum 81.
183 Bynum 81.
a shifting conflict of social and race-bound discourse interfaced in the production of his dream. Therefore, Makak is not a free agent, even during the course of his own dreams.

In order for Makak to escape these inscriptions, Ronald L. Jackson II argues that, “past and present portrayals are not drawn to erect a nihilistic prophecy that Black bodies [and minds] are trapped irreversibly and deterministically in a web of ontological despair.”184 Jackson concludes that, “Black bodies [and minds] must be aware of their historical and contemporary habitat in order to understand how they actively participate in or resist scripting.”185 Of note, Walcott eventually empowers Makak’s scripting of himself (prior to the end of the play) through a strategic restructuring and rewriting of his race, a race identity that has been previously engendered by hegemonic racial discourses.

As Walcott charts through the delicate cartography of a Black male dream, he begins to energize Makak’s quest toward the reclamation of his originality as an implicit dialogue of purposed self-confrontation, to demonstrate that the allegorical and metaphorical presencing of Makak’s dream is intertextual in the sense of fusing Makak’s fragmented dream language, codes and symbols against the aboriginal essence of his Caribbean roots. Walcott, in a familiar stylization of his poems, places Makak at the center of the double conscious performance of *Dream on Monkey Mountain* while supplanting the narrative exchange between Makak and other participants of the dream on one equal playing field as a rhetorical strategy to implode the marginality of his identity onto itself.


185 Jackson II 46.
What is plausible in Walcott’s rhetorical approach is the debasement of Black male identity that he eventually overthrows once Makak’s reconditioning of himself becomes evident in his reversal of the exploitation of colonialism. The ambivalence of European colonialism projected onto Makak, though fascist and racist on all levels, must be performed and theatricalized during the dream in order to awaken Makak’s redemptive state of being. Ironically, Makak’s renewed state was already accessible, but not yet realized. The impoverished conditions of Makak’s self-created isolation on a metaphorical mountain is politicized and transformed into a functional race knowledge and cultural clarity of himself once Makak is able to fully embrace his own reflection.

Walcott artistically and theoretically tackles the closely situated juncture between dreams, reality and the unconsciousness; conflicted thresholds, both accelerated and pontificated by the social conditions represented and intoned through aristocratic conflicts. These societal tensions are vigorously embedded in the struggle for Black male autonomy. These racial and class based oppositions are potently emphasized in his play. While using the metaphysical phenomena of one Black man’s dream as the central premise in his play, Walcott, according to Edward Baugh, “engages the Black colonial psychosis”\textsuperscript{186} and through the central character Makak, Walcott also “retraces the Middle Passage and acts out the wish-fulfillment of [Makak] being a king of African kings.”\textsuperscript{187} Walcott, from an international perspective, highlights the similar struggle for Black male essence grounded in \textit{The Great MacDaddy} as \textit{Dream on Monkey Mountain} leans heavily


\textsuperscript{187} Baugh 85.
on African folkloric tradition to euphemize the physical and spiritual plundering of Black men.

The immediacy of Makak’s dream functions as a medium for striving toward the philosophical potentialty of his own free will, an unrestricted individualization which “draws into itself all the characters of his actual world. The dream is purgatorial, bringing him to self-acceptance and psychic wholeness.”

Baugh reveals that the dream space is not strictly guided by hegemonic influence, instead, it metaphorically exaggerates the dynamics of social constructivism to allow Makak to break through these representations in order to begin the provocative process of his own self-imaging.

Baugh further emphasizes Walcott’s social commentary on the tragedy of disillusionment in Makak’s self-encounter with a dream as he continues to note:

[Makak] must work through and work off his romantic nostalgia in order to free himself. Makak must [also] come to see in its soul-destroying pettiness his dream of magnificent revenge against all the achievements of the white worlds that has oppressed him. Finally though, he must ‘kill’ the white goddess, whom his own mind has exalted in order to keep itself in thrall.

This conscientious strategy, to aggressively distance Makak from the Westernized strictures of white idealism, will eventually lead him back to a self-created mobilization of himself which will subsequently and further dislocate the power of white hegemony. The emphasis on a non-colonial construction of identity through the simultaneous de-

188 Baugh 85.

189 Baugh 85.
emphasis of a colonial based existence is dramatically centralized within the literary trope of Walcott’s play, as he seeks to facilitate The Negro Ensemble’s central ideology of Black self-accountability. For NEC, the overthrow of a transgressive Black militant approach is the most transformative political and creative means of re-enacting and re-imagining Afro-Caribbean and African-American experience solely from the viewpoint of the autonomous rather than the white oppressed.

Of significant note, Dream on Monkey Mountain, functions as a both socially conscious and uncompromising art-based template for The Negro Ensemble Company’s radical detraction from the reductive binary of Black/white oppositionality. Walcott’s Obie Award Winning Dream on Monkey Mountain, which premiered in 1971, during the waning years of the historic Black Arts Movement, theoretically echoes Alain Locke’s inner school ideology/anti-political propaganda approach (art for art sake), an internal negotiation of the Black self rather than one strictly based on external forces. At the center of the play’s dramatic progression, is a clear reproach of Black nationalistic interest and an abandonment and disavowing of Garveyism, Marxism and Baraka-ism. The subtext of the play reflects the notion that the division of class and race is counterproductive in every ideological sense.

Walcott espouses cultural pluralism and collectivism as the basis for social progress among multiple races and social classes of people. Thus, a Black American theatre institution grounded in the employment and gradual progression of a productive social exchange begins to unfold. Finally, Walcott’s dream-driven play, serves as the catalyst for The Negro Ensemble Company’s forceful entrance into international expressions of Black identity.
According to Derek Walcott, “a poet is distinctly closer to the theatre than a novelist or fiction writer because, structurally, the feel of the poem is the feel of a play, or the feel of a play is like a very large poem.” While largely constructing his plays around a metaphysical historical tradition, aimed specifically toward the indigenous expressionism of Afro-Caribbean experience, Walcott expands the post-nationalist discourse of the Negro Ensemble Company, specifically by situating its multi-cultural aesthetic beyond the cultural scope of African American experience, as he attempts to re-direct the theatre institution’s production value and language into the sociological and political terrain of hybridized international cultures.

Even more so, Walcott establishes a cultural medium between the specificity of The Negro Ensemble Company’s African American based repertoire with the acculturation of emerging vernacular symbols and codes via the company’s re-routed investigation/questioning of Black identity within the large and disembodied gulf of overlapping transatlantic voices. Critics such as, Laurence A. Breiner espouse that “Walcott’s talent as poet and painter gave him at once the means to achieve immediate impact: language, gesture, music, and spectacle. From the beginning, those are his secure resources, opulently laid on.” While refocusing The Negro Ensemble Company’s attention on an unearthing of time and history beyond geographical boundaries, Walcott equally emphasizes the tension between metaphorical Black identities with the importation of non-temporal reality in his staging of a stylistic dream. Lowel Fiet is certainly in agreement with Briener as she emphasizes in her essay that, “the act of

190 Baugh 3.

performance itself [and its] character’s become increasing metaphors in the interpretation of Caribbean culture and society.”

In my reading of the play, not only do the characters and cultural situations embody both allegory and multiple metaphors, the dream component of the play’s performance also interacts with the interworking’s of the Black man versus the powers of the state (meaning government). Makak’s inferior status is reversed once he is able to see himself outside of the mediatory terrain of a dark fragmented dream. Immediately outside of the darkened threshold of his dream, Makak is thrown into a world fueled by his unjust imprisonment which is necessary to his eventual awareness. His Black self in relation into his otherness within a larger pathologically white society is pivotal to Makak’s eventual independence. His otherness is cognitively and abstractly performed whenever his conscious state is activated by the masquerading incoherent dimensions of his dreams.

Freud speaks to the masked or ambivalent affect that dreams tend to project onto humans during their supposed states of awareness or awakened-ness. In his seminal text *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1965), Freud signifies on the African tradition of dreams as he questions, “the significance of the appearance of involuntary ideas in dreams, as to the light which the emergence during the night of these morally incompatible impulses throws upon the psychology of the waking and dreaming mind.” Freud’s assertion of dreams occurring during the silent dark hours of night echoes Bynum’s African treatment of the dream.

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Specifically, Bynum speaks to the counterpoint of how tangible life forces interact interdependently with abstract dream discourse. According to Bynum all unconscious is marked by significant African characteristics indigenous to the disparate realms that extend beyond an earthly existence. This dream phenomena synthesized by primitive African traditions begins in Africa then expands across the globe. Bynum surmises that both African conscious and world conscious is unequivocally an Africentric space expressed in the theories of himself, Jung and Freud. No matter how wide their ideological gap, the commonality that they share is and will always be an African based lens from which to contemplate unconscious narrative in both the public and private sphere.

The phenomenological link between Derek Walcott’s psychoanalytical drama *Dream on Monkey Mountain* with Freud’s study on the representation of dreams in both reality and the human unconsciousness is one of the major theoretical premises in which my close-textual analysis of Walcott’s play will be mined. Just as Walcott emphasizes a metaphysical questioning of Black male identity within the geographical scope of a large and racially marked international world, Freud contextualizes Burdach’s critical and historically familiar pathology on the unconsciousness in his assessment on the stimulation of dreams as he quotes him in the following passage:

> In dreams, daily life is never repeated. Dreams aim to free
>
> us from [life]. When we are torn by some deep sorrow or

> when all our intellectual power is absorbed in some problem, a
dream enter[s] the tone of our mood and represent reality in symbols.\textsuperscript{194}

Walcott signifies on Burdach’s analysis of the interrelationship of concrete reality with abstract dreams as he situates Makak’s unconscious mind with a metaphorical representation of incongruent codes and symbols specifically reverberated within the social apparatus of his West Indies world. Literary allusions to a mountaintop are dissected and observed through Derek Walcott’s cosmological placement of Makak, far removed from conscious reality; a man placed in isolation from the world and from himself.

The end result, then, is the psychosis of Makak’s particular dream as both a mediator between his idealizations of self-versus a cathartic actualization of reality. The central crisis of his inner-conflict is further propelled as his unconsciousness leads to the self-directed facilitation of a re-ordered world. Walcott invokes the inevitable revival of Makak’s indigenous, conscious-minded self as he contentiously imposes upon his psyche an awareness regenerated through symbols and code based dreams.

In European civilization, as articulated by Frantz Fanon, “In the collective unconscious, Black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality. In other words, he is Negro who is immoral.”\textsuperscript{195} The self-negation of the Negro is therefore provoked and invoked by the racial, social and political white controlled, capitalistic institutions of power, historically inscribed in its dehumanization of this marginalized ethnic group. In constructing the poetic dream which tragically unfolds in \textit{Dream On Monkey Mountain},

\textsuperscript{194} Freud 41.

\textsuperscript{195} Frantz 192.
Walcott immediately establishes a multi-layered rhetoric that purposely responds to this spectatorial observation and debilitating orientation of Black male identity.

Walcott’s literary response to the obscenity of racism omnipresent in white hegemony is informed, most notably, through the subverted central character Makak. Makak, who is immediately tempered in the play by a reductive objectification of himself, initially surrenders to the oppressive institutions that seek to violently overthrow him and thus permanently delegitimize his Caribbean oriented self.

In the opening chant-filled prologue, an offstage Greek inspired chorus can be heard. An enlarged revolving disc/drum simultaneously functioning as both moon and sun, is situated as the object established as artifice; its modality critically emphasizes the urgency and inflectional agency of the chorus. Complimented by the overlapping imagery of two barely clothed prisoners, coupled by a drummer and dancer who embody and reverberate a somewhat other-worldly presence, these converging images assist in the atmospheric lamenting of Makak’s symbolic and rhetorical function in the play in addition to his subsequent imprisonment. The chorus, forceful and with increasing unrestraint, unifiably give warning to his mother while also repudiating the preceding events that have yet to unfold:

CHORUS

Mooma, mooma,

Your son in de jail a’ready
CONTEUR

I pass by the police station,

Nobody to sign de bail bond. 196

Walcott poetically situates his dream play, in its ritualistic opening moments, with two conflicting positions: the shifting tension of a vernacular Afro-Caribbean language violently disrupted by the ideological presence of an alternating Westernized language. The chaotic lament and disturbing cry of the chorus, off-set by these two opposing codes of expression, is further confounded by Makak’s interplay with self-exploration and the utterances of his subsequent contestation with colonialism. The impending battle between the deprecated Caribbean and European hegemony is the catalyst to the conflict in the disruption of Makak’s indigenous existence.

The chorus resonates and celebrates the palpability of an undisturbed aesthetic, while simultaneously underscoring the reality of Makak’s predetermined tragic fate echoed, in the line, “Your son in de jail a’ready.” 197 Symptomatic to Makak’s entrance on stage, with a jute sack in hand, is the ethnological invasion of his West Indies subjectivity, destabilized by the presencing of racial intermixture as he is led in silence to his cell by a mulatto male corporal. Makak embodies a dying folk culture.

The enactment of his resistance functions as the metaphorical inscription of Walcott’s anti-colonialist stance throughout the play. Makak’s crisis is emblematic of

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197 Walcott, Mountain 380.
what Derek Walcott describes as “the sweating blurring of a mirror in which the people might have found their true reflection.”

Thus, the tension of two opposing languages that descend upon the text is an implosion of two distinct social constructs onto themselves; two constructs that dialogically re-order Makak’s constructed world in its imposing subversion of his cultural origination.

Walcott situates Makak’s illusory dream, voiced through his peculiar psychosis, through the intersectionality of poetry and portraiture, foregrounded specifically on a mountain as his imminent reality. The site in which Makak negotiates his identity will be forcefully challenged beyond measure by foreign outside forces. In this opening sequence, Walcott creates two conflicting paradoxes in Dream on Monkey Mountain, the theoretical praxis of a dream at the beginning of Makak’s metaphorical journey, specifically in the atonement of himself.

The intricacy in which Walcott delineates the encounter of one’s autonomy with the violent insurgency of colonialism is quickened by the refractories inherent in its socio-political composition. More importantly, Makak will seek to reify and re-indigenize himself in the reclamation of his dream, which will be fundamental to the stratagem Walcott uses toward his eventual transformation.

The corporal punishment of Makak, at the beginning of the play, rhetorically signifies on the pathological impact of white supremacy and of how this racist institution has historically relegated Black men to inferior social positions in and across the Atlantic since pre-colonial times. The preconditioning of Black men demonized, fetishized and

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often epitomized by these inferior constructs are echoed, in varying degrees, in previously mentioned Negro Ensemble Company plays including, but not limited to, *Home, Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* and *The River Niger*. What distinguishes *Dream on Monkey Mountain* from these aforementioned texts is Walcott’s use of what Edward Baugh describes as, “The apparent fondness for paradox and contradiction [which] is one aspect of the self-image that Walcott projects and pursues.”

Under this paradigm of the self-projected Black male image, is also an international re-thinking of the Black and white oppositional matrix. While dismantling and thus re-figuring the discontinuities that exist in these international racial tensions, Rolland Murray argues, “The Black Man’s very language aspires to the material agency of a phallic assault. And binding together this ideological counter to American nationalism is the production of the Black nationalist subject himself through violation and profanation of the white nation’s incarnation.” While questioning the psychological and spiritual dimensions of this international Black male politic that Murray espouses on, Walcott masterfully approbates Makak’s metaphorical dream world as he systemically seeks to ungird the schisms that exists in the play’s race-driven polemic while also attempting to universalize the dream space that it ultimately typifies; engendered to great affect by Makak’s aboriginal identity.

Because of his mixed breed inheritance, the mulatto corporal, is representative of the physical traumas placed on Black women during antebellum slavery’s transgressive sexual past. The racial ambiguity that he imbues by the mere shade of his arrogant skin,

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199 Baugh 5.

200 Murray 74.
afforded specifically to him by a hierarchy instituted by a corrupt racial code, subsequently empowers him to aggressively lay down specific charges against Makak. For it is indeed the corporal’s physical and ritual act of incarcerating Makak that initiates the inevitable savagery of his character which, for the purposes of the play’s plot, is dramatically necessary for him to endure.

This irreverence to Makak’s earthly being, is further emphasized and compounded by the bestiality that the corporal ascribes upon him as an inhumane “animal, savage and nigger”\(^{201}\); a series of racial epitaphs which set the tone for an even greater progression of Makak’s intensified denigration. The corporal’s racial referencing of Makak is facilitated, specifically, by the interpolation and re-imagination of biblical scripture as he proclaims, “In the beginning was the ape, and the ape had no name, so God called him man. Now there were various tribes of the ape, it had gorilla, baboon, orangutan, chimpanzee, the blue-arsed monkey, and the marmoset.”\(^{202}\)

While the corporal, in his prophetic positionality, seeks to situate the evolutionary components of Darwinism within the context of the Black male body, in an effort to overtly emphasize Makak’s pre-destined objectification, the corporal equally reinforces a racially-driven hierarchy on the progression of mankind utilizing biblical text as a precursor to the racially flawed human social order that he sets forth.

While actively re-conceptualizing this destructive hierarchy from the primitive beginnings of time, during the (cosmogony) origination of man and cosmology (structure) of the earth, he in effect, digresses into an extraterritorial imagining of human

\(^{201}\) Walcott, Mountain 382.

\(^{202}\) Walcott, Mountain 382.
civilization. The corporal illuminates intensely vulgar and deprecating aboriginal imagery to historically reference and particularize his prisoner’s inferior status. In spite of the corporal’s negation of Makak as “the blue-arsed monkey”\textsuperscript{203}, whose occupation, for metaphorical purposes, is that of a charcoal burner, Makak continues to plead with the corporal to allow him to return to his home on Monkey Mountain although he has been arrested and must face the charges laid out to him. For he has been retained due to a public disturbance he caused during his drunken state at a local café.

The corporal’s resistance to set his Black captive free, steeped in the mythical colonialist shaping of his prisoner which he firmly upholds, expressed specifically, in the previous revisionist scripture, is intricately linked to the distinct dissonance he establishes between his own mulatto intra-racial self and the inept Black other, whom he literally disposes of any semblance of humanity. Because of the elitist ideologies produced and upheld by these colonialist social institutions, Black male sexuality is exploited on an international level while providing an antiquated discourse that specifically impede on the trajectory of Black male body politics.

According to Murray, Fanon’s critical response to these kinds of destructive sexual institutions, brutally foisted onto Makak, are degrading as “Fanon imagines himself transcending the binaries that characterize racial identities in the West through both his analytical dissection of these discourses and his repudiation of their dehumanizing effects.”\textsuperscript{204} While assaulting these fractious multivalent discourses that

\textsuperscript{203} Walcott,\textit{ Mountain} 382.

\textsuperscript{204} Murray 45.
seek to authoritatively hold Black male bodies in bondage, Fanon also recognizes the need for “cohesive identities of ‘new men and with a new language, a new humanity.’”

Walcott, in his rejection of these previously mentioned transgressed institutions of power, strategically highlights Makak’s bilingual ability to perform and speak his West Indies native language as he repudiates the imposed transgression of European vernacular systems. Makak’s innate ability to multi-vocally move through a plethora of language codes serve to symbolize the pungency of his own human excavation and eventual actualization of his indigenous Afro-Caribbean code of expression.

The descriptive displacement of Makak’s racially marked body and aboriginal language, the relegation of him to a singular absolutist Westernized ideal, greatly signifies on the fixity of the Black race as one cohesive whole. This literary marginalization of Blacks is evidenced through the functioning of the corporal.

The corporal purposefully annihilates Makak while the remaining Black prisoners’ dual function as both racial objects and the play’s Greek inspired chorus, is utilized to simultaneously coerce and indict the corporal’s abusive actions. The compartmentalization of race groups imbued in Walcott’s text is a signification of historic national customs that serve to diminish, with great measure, the universal nature of human experience embedded in biblical myth through monolithic tenets of racial identity, namely the social markers assigned to Black race identity.

According to Paul Gilroy “the trope of race as family [is] the principal means to signify racial authenticity.” He further notes that the “racial displacement” of Blacks

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205 Murray 45.
both in America and abroad is a system of hegemonic authority that constantly moves in
circularity throughout the world. The overlapping movement of multi-cultures often
disrupted by the moral bias of European dominated codes is the liminal space in which
*Dream on Monkey Mountain* intensely resides. Makak, burdened with a social paradigm
constructed explicitly for his own undoing, must find and re-construct his own reflection,
a radical decentering of his Black male subjectivity, which is a direct anti-thesis to the
structural bedrock of colonialism.

In Gilroy’s theory of W.E.B. Du Bois’ double-consciousness, he explains that the
trope of multi-conscious raises issues of larger political mandates that take shape once an
individual’s or collective group’s sense of identity is compromised. In relation to
colonialist representations of national identity as the psychological premise for racial
displacement, he argues:

> This doubleness has proved awkward and embarrassing for some commentators
> since it forces the issue of cultural development, mutation, and change into view
> and requires a degree of conceptual adjustment in order to account for the tension
> that is introduced between the same and the other or the traditional and the
> modern.  

This conundrum of a doubled identity is what Makak is constantly negotiating with. His
socially scripted identity and self-created identity are constantly at odds with one another.
In spite of the discursive narratives that privilege whiteness over Blackness, Makak seeks
to re-assume a Black male sense of self on the basis of his own desires and needs.

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207 Gilroy, *Modernity and Double Consciousness* 91.
Makak’s engagement with his dream in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* forces him to reconcile the loss of his indigenous existence. As he desires to return to a place of cultural totality, Makak must resolve his power struggle against white authority. In order to reclaim his authentic Black self he must also exorcise his own internal racism. This exorcism will in fact free him from the stasis of the dream. Makak’s final transformation is eventually achieved through a radical act of violence. David Mikics recounts, “Makak climbs back to his mythical home at the play’s end after beheading the white goddess who has imprisoned him in his role as a Black messiah. After freeing himself from an oppressive past, Makak returns back to the mountain of his origins.” The metaphor of his divergent dream is projected through a nonhuman female figure. The white goddess attempted to inhibit Makak’s access to the indelible heritage of his past. Therefore, in order to end his negation, Makak consciously chooses to destroy the facilitator and manipulator of his devalued societal status.

What is most significant about *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is again, its relationship to the transcendental features of Bynum’s African-centered unconscious theory. Bynum dislocates Freud’s Western notion of psychological repression. He argues that Freud does in fact access African sociocultural traditions in his questioning of human psychosis. According to Bynum, any interpretation of a dream is commodified by these African traditions. In my analysis of Walcott’s play, I also surmise that Western dream theories are historically influenced by the Western import of Africentric mythology. Subsequently, these dream theories are an appropriation of all things African. Bynum’s

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theory centers the geographical significance of Makak’s abstract world and provides cultural meaning and purpose to the theorization and dramatization of dreams. Lastly, in his mediatized theory, Bynum Africanizes the competing ways in which humans identify themselves. In Makak’s aboriginal return to his home-space (his mountain) the shifting authority of his dream is energized by the individualization of his renewed Black male identity.

*Kongi’s Harvest - Wole Soyinka, 1967*

With a keen focus on the political divisions in his country, international playwright Wole Soyinka sheds light on its militant counteractions to social change. He provides The Negro Ensemble Company with a play that speaks of how traditional systems (in both art and politics) are threatened once the institutionalized features of their culture begin to transition. This play, although situated in Nigeria, serves as a metaphor and commentary to NEC’s artistic and political state of transition. It also provides a critical and artistic lens for the metamorphosis that was taking place within the continued development of NEC. While confronting the socio-political tensions in his country, based on first-hand experience, Soyinka addresses militant retorts against new political structures that began to unfold.

The Negro Ensemble Company takes its local critics abroad while forcing them to examine the moral order and social codes of Africa. Soyinka’s *Kongi’s Harvest* illuminates the inner trappings of those beholden by destructive traditions. He also speaks to the unwillingness of iron-fisted leaders to look beyond their own self-interests. He indicts their unwillingness to shift their leadership ambitions toward the interests of their
people. The paradoxes of political illusions are also heightened in the play. Soyinka highlights how these illusions serve to stagnant rather than move African people forward.

1970’s R&B funk, slow jam and disco group The O’Jays’ anthem song *Ship Ahoy* brings a mainstream, pop culture awareness to the perils of patriarchal rule. The song chronicles the forced servitude of Black Africans beginning with their origins on native soil. The linkage of this song to Soyinka’s play is significant in terms of challenging the initial site and geographical space of African bondage. Soyinka makes it clear that the displacement and immobilization of African peoples began prior to boarding them as underground cargo on large ships. *Kongi’s Harvest* reveals that the physical and social bondage of Africans began in their own country at the hands of fellow Africans in their own image rather than whites.

Soyinka’s play seizes the opportunity to remind audiences that oppression on native soil did in fact inhibit the liberalism of aboriginal Africans prior to their arrival in Northern America. Paul Gilroy furthers this point as he speaks to the progression of African’s forced detachment to their traditional cultures. Gilroy makes the claim that:

> The de-territorialized history of the modern African diaspora into the western hemisphere and the racial slavery through which it was accomplished has something useful to teach us about the workings of identity and identification. [There is] something valuable to impart about the claims of nationality and the nation-state upon the writing of history itself.²⁰⁹

What is important to consider is the association between African victimization in Africa and African victimization in America as it relates to an examination of this play.

²⁰⁹ Gilroy, *Against Race* 112.
Although the degrees of victimhood and oppression varied from one country to the next, the bond of oppression creates a dynamic relationship between America and Africa. Soyinka opens up the borders of oppression and discredits the insidious belief that the victimized African was stripped of a free and autonomous identity at the beginning of The Middle Passage. Governmental renunciations to traditional cultures had already taken place prior to the movement of African slaves abroad.

While actively suggesting that African oppression began with the Africans themselves, Soyinka drives his point home as he deliberately imputes within his play the exegesis of the Black male ego. He addresses how African male leaders took great measure in their efforts to maintain their authoritative positions. Soyinka also confronts how these leaders were driven by their male ego at the expense of the citizens that they were expected to lead. These men had a tendency to project the impunity of their eccentric behaviors onto their nation with no respect to diplomacy or persons. Their accessibility to wealth and material resources were influential factors in their continued control and confinement of the male and female citizens in their country.

The dethronement of Yemi’s former ruler Oba Danola is at the center of Kongi’s Harvest. He and his court are being detained and minimally fed at the order of President Kongi, the new ruler of Yemi. Danola is expected to present the annual Harvest Yam crop to Kongi as a sign of submission to him. The symbolic gesture is a necessary ritual in Yemi culture. It is meant to signify the surrendering of Danola’s power to Kongi. This play is a historical testament to the warring of power among former and present Black male leaders. While establishing the tensions that arise in old and new government,
Soyinka exhibits how narcissistic rulers such as Kongi are self-serving in their manipulative control. This manipulation is achieved under the guise of social progress.

Within the framework of an African sensibility NEC participates with Soyinka in shaping an aesthetic that reaches beyond an assessment of Black Nationalism. An examination of the nation of Africa is of importance to NEC as well. For it centers its post-nationalist approach to Black American experience on a reflection of the race politic in Africa which had a direct influence on the evolution of the race dynamic inscribed in Black American Theatre. Kongi devalues traditional rule in his demand for validation from Danola during the Harvest Festival. In his aggressive denial of Danola’s authority he also continues to practice the sexist representations of leadership that took place in Danola’s regime. While Danola prides himself in his courtship of multiple wives, all of the members of Kongi’s advisory council are male. Both Oba Danola and Kongi embody the degenerative characteristics of colonialist thought in their conscious self-annihilation and chosen estrangement from society.

In Wole Soyinka’s Kongi’s Harvest, political tensions ensue as the newly formed governmental regime of Isma wages a public battle between the traditional leadership of the dethroned and imprisoned ruler Oba Danola. Similar to Walcott’s Dream on Monkey Mountain, Kongi’s Harvest begins in prologue fashion with the reverberating sound of drums. Oba Danola and his loyal supporters, in a public act of defiance, recite old African proverbs in unison to express their rejection and disapproval of Kongi, the newly appointed president of Isma. Together, Danola and one of his wives Ogbo and his servant Dende, protest the usurping of Danola’s power. They chant, “and we the rooted bark, spurned. When the tree swells its pot, the mucus that is snorted out when Kongi’s new
race blows.”

Soyinka uses the metaphor and lyrical imagery of these cultural African proverbs to minimize Kongi’s newly reformed Aweri Fraternity. These proverbs also indict Kongi for his dictatorial rule while also seeking to preserve the legacy of Oba Danola as well as the integrity of Isma’s historical customs and traditions.

The rhetorical function and recitation of African proverbs is important to the opening of the play because it establishes a codified indigenous language that references the corruption of imperialist rule while also placing emphasis on the chant’s interconnectedness to higher gods. Danola’s loyal followers also defame Kongi’s National Anthem in their didactic treatment of his newly formed council. Bound by old tradition, fundamental to Danola’s survival is his persistent resistance. The collective voicing of the chant is also what Edward Bruce Bynum describes as “communal consciousness” as he argues that, “this emphasis on shared consciousness has very many practical aspects. In a very real way the approach is a much more ecological and relational one as opposed to an autonomous or atomistic one.”

The tension between a communal consciousness with an autonomous one is the theoretical premise that permeates Soyinka’s play.

With this notion of a communal consciousness, what is evident in Wole Soyinka’s Kongi’s Harvest, is the emerging of a violent brigade and their erasure of historical institutions. This is a play about the reversal of power as a newly constructed government seeks to overthrow its old reactionaries. Because of the subsequent imprisonment of Danola and his devout supporters, they have been inhibited in their fight to restore the

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210 Soyinka 61.

211 Bynum 97.

212 Bynum 97.
interests and vision of their group. The Superintendent, one of the key organizers of Kongi’s reformed infrastructure, supplants himself as a mediator between Danola and Kongi’s followers. In an effort to silence Danola and his detractors, The Superintendent attempts to reason with.

Even as The Superintendent speaks, the retaliatory sound of drums and chants can still be heard. He implores that: “These antics may look well on a common agitator but really, an elder is an elder, and a king does not become a menial just because he puts down his crown to eat.” Although self-assertive in his silencing of the drums, The Superintendent sympathizes with the elders although he does not approve of their mockery. He is placed in an overwhelming compromising position as he attempts to control the actions of a ruler he once revered while remaining loyal to Kongi’s new regime.

It is necessary for The Superintendent to maintain a balance of respect for the elders and a devotion to his fraternity. In his interaction with Danola and his people, he scolds them for their insubordination against President Kongi. He is offset by the intensity of their resistance and equally conflicted by his indignation toward their communal spirit. Soyinka situates The Superintendent as the central figure in his confrontation against Danola. He is one of the key organizers to help move Kongi’s agenda forward. In doing so, Soyinka also reveals how the power of radicalism cannot be easily silenced even within the confined walls of a prison.

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213 Soyinka 62.
Thus, the battle for leadership between Danola and Kongi is also a Black against Black rupturing of a nation as Kongi declares, “I am the Spirit of Harvest.” His dutiful secretary devoutly responds:

SECRETARY: Of course my leader, the matter is not in dispute.

KONGI: I am the SPIRIT of Harvest

SECRETARY: Of course my leader.

KONGI: I am the Spirit of HAAAR-VEST!

SECRETARY: Of course my leader. And a benevolent Spirit of Harvest. This year shall be known as the year of Kongi’s Harvest. Everything shall date from it.

The nameless Secretary appeases Kongi’s ego in an effort to reaffirm his President’s vision of a Kongi centered world. The Secretary’s devotion to Kongi is strategically handled with sharp intellect. Fortunately, The Secretary has an ability to maintain a semblance of individuality in spite of his efforts to assist Kongi. He finds subtle ways to reproach Kongi’s diabolical vision for Yemi. In doing so, he constructively critiques Kongi using subtle directives. During one of their many debates, The Secretary offers more effective ways for Kongi to delegate responsibilities among members of The Reformed Aweri Fraternity. He asserts: “You shouldn’t give your books to only one person to write. It causes dissension. At least let one of the others select the title or write the footnotes.” Kongi is codependent on The Secretary just as much as the

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214 Soyinka 91.
215 Soyinka 92.
216 Soyinka 90.
Secretary is codependent on him. In his illustration of their relationship, Wole provides an alternative perspective of how Black men should communicate and work together.

Soyinka uses Kongi and The Secretary to demonstrate how encounters between Black men are not merely destructive and confrontational. Their relationship does not function as a restricted binary position of King and servant. Neither is it predicated based on the ideological differences between the common citizen and the socially elite. The Secretary’s role as Kongi’s right hand man is not common in any sense. For the Secretary is a counter-power to Kongi’s idiosyncrasies. This counter-power is necessary to Soyinka’s didactic treatment of Kongi.

Kongi entrusts the Secretary to assist him in assuring the usurping of Danola’s power at the Harvest Yam Festival. Although he exploits The Secretary’s intellectual prowess, Kongi is fully aware that his attainment of power can only be achieved through The Secretary. He has no better choice other than allowing The Secretary to guide him on his vigilante mission to successfully overthrow Danola. The Secretary embodies the indelible features that are crucial to the fabric of Kongi’s existence. Kongi’s political power can neither be competently attained nor functional without the strategic genius of The Secretary.

Kongi is fasting in preparation of the Yam Festival. He knows that he must be intellectually prepared prior to his permanent reign. The invocation of his spiritual being is a balancing act for power as well. This is the logic behind his fast. The Secretary also reminds Kongi that in order to defeat his dissidents he must comply to at least a few of their demands. At The Secretary’s persuasion, he reluctantly decides to grant Danola and his men amnesty from execution. The Secretary convinces Kongi that their regime will
eventually be able to sway the minds of their detractors. He proclaims in a prophetic declaration:

SECRETARY: [You are] The Spirit of the Harvest. The Face of Benevolence. The Giver of Life...who knows how many other titles will accompany such pictures around the world. And then my leader, this is the Year of Kongi’s Harvest! The Presiding Spirit as a life-giving spirit—we could project that image into every heart and head, no matter how stubborn.217

Clearly, there is an admonishment for the gods that is taking place in Kongi’s Harvest. In terms of the mythical and traditional African Pyramidal structure, Man’s devotion to the omnipotent Supreme being is crucial to his survival and functional existence in the earthly realm. Traditionally, in most African cultures, irreverence to the gods is quite taboo and Man’s repudiation for their spiritual authority can often lead to a tragic fate including death. According to Bartholomew Abanuka “in the innermost center of his being, man appears to recognize that his true home is not here: his heart seems to be yearning for a reality which surpasses the being of man himself or a state of being which is more perfect than his present existence.”218

Based on Abanuka’s African myth-based theory concerning Man’s proper place in the universe is subservience to the gods. Clearly Kongi defies Abanuka’s mythical logic. He is seeking to present himself to the people as “a life giving Spirit of Harvest.”219 Kongi has elevated himself above the gods. This hierarchal rearrangement of Kongi as

217 Soyinka 93.
218 Abanuka 16.
219 Soyinka 94.
God-Spirit and as the one who replenishes life is a recurring theme in the pathology of Black male egocentrism in both Kongi’s Harvest and The Great MacDaddy.

The incantation of Kongi as God-Spirit represents an alternative entity. This alternative entity functions as a symbolic underscoring of Kongi’s arrestment and erasure of otherworldly, invisible god forces. Kongi’s dismissal of otherworldly forces serves as a rejection to historical symbols and codes that implicitly undermine the tradition and efficacy of African God deities in African myth culture. The paradox of Kongi’s actions is the privileging of himself within the context of political discourse and the paradigmatic shift in the traditional practice of God myth.

The offering of a reprieve is an overarching theme in Kongi’s Harvest. It is pivotal to the through-line of Soyinka’s dramatic plot. Kongi’s promise to Danola for a reprieve in exchange for his offering of the Yam at Harvest raises the stakes in the play. The threat of deception on the part of Kongi, Danola or both men intensifies the male character’s individual anxieties. Kongi orders The Secretary to: “Tell your Danola I’ll reprieve those men if he co-operates fully. Now go. But look here, we must make it a last minute reprieve. It will look better that way don’t you think?”220 The Secretary complies and responds, “I will do it my Leader.”221 He assures Kongi that he will withhold any announcement of a reprieve until shortly before Danola and his men’s scheduled hanging. Because of Kongi’s lack of leadership experience, he constantly seeks validation from The Secretary in every facet of his decision making process.

What is more pressing, however, are the lives of Danola, his nephew Daodu and their male counterparts. Their final fate hangs in the balance even with the remote

220 Soyinka 94.
221 Soyinka 94.
possibility of a negotiation in place. Eventually The Secretary informs Daodu that his life and the lives of Danola’s regime will be spared once the Yam is offered to Kongi. Daodu responds, “The New Yam for the lives of five men. It’s a generous bargain.”

Kongi knows that if Danola refuses to offer the sacrificial Yam, it will create a definite obstacle to his full reign of power. Daodu, Danola’s mediator between him and The Secretary.

Daoudu is keenly aware that an exchange of power between Danola and Kongi will permanently alter the political atmosphere and social fabric of Yemi. The performed ritual component to The Yam Harvest is necessary for this paradigmatic shift to take effect. In attempting to achieve his goal of gaining Daodu’s trust, The Secretary is just as clever and manipulative with him as he is with Kongi. Oyekan Owomoyela explains how the persuasive tactics of the trickster figure in African folklore has influenced social interactions and political negotiations among African people. He explains, “folkster tricksters have so impressed their human observers by some exceptional qualities that they have become invested with uncommon mental agility and extraordinary capabilities.”

The mental prowess of The Secretary enables him to secure the trust of his adversaries while equally eluding them of his deceptive intentions. In addition to securing Daodu’s confidence, he also exploits the fragmented psyche of Kongi as he seemingly helps to sharpen Kongi’s intellectual abilities. He skillfully evades President Kongi of the mind-play that undermines his authority. This idea of the trickster is a model for ways in

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222 Soyinka 95.

which characters such as The Secretary are able to ensure their long-term survival in African society. Through his strategic mental revolt against both his leaders and his opponents, The Secretary, accomplishes what Owomoyela describes as “portable armor [that] endow [tricksters] with a mental nimbleness that more often than not eases their passage through a treacherous and dangerous world.” Subsequently, The Secretary functions as a vehicle for Soyinka’s overall commentary on the deceptions of dictatorial government. He speaks of how the aggression of political power in African societies has been disseminated throughout history.

Black African misogyny is linked to mythical characteristics in folklore tradition. Soyinka surmises that “Yoruban tragedy [is] not [limited only] in exclusionist, racial-chauvinist terms, but all the same as a distinctive presence in the world on its own terms.” Soyinka emphasizes that tragic figures like Kongi make the conscious choice to privilege themselves above the African gods. *Kongi’s Harvest* is a reminder that in spite of man’s rebuke of them, gods such as Obatala and Ogun continue to serve as the symbolic and spiritual agency of Yoruban culture.

In both *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and *Kongi’s Harvest*, dreams, gods and ritual emerge as a direct response to the crises that African men experience with themselves, colonial society and each other. David Mikics writes “the symbiosis of folk and high culture [and] a juxtaposition of fantasy and reality provides the foundation [for Walcott’s work].” Walcott brings into focus the competing dream theories as he

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224 Owomoyela x.


226 Mikics 104-105.
decenters the cultural dream realm and metaphors on Black male psychoses. Soyinka’s play replaces dream psychology with the appropriation of folklore myth in his politically themed play. Using the paradigm of the trickster, he dramatizes the reverse psychology of Black male manipulation while also highlighting derision that occurs in traditional communal cultures.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In 2004, Douglas Turner Ward granted an interview to Gus Edwards, one of NEC’s playwrights who participated in its history making theatre nearly forty five years ago. This was the first time Ward had granted anyone an interview in a number of years. His distant relationship with NEC since his departure from the company as its visionary leader and original artistic director is without question. In addition to his departure from NEC, Ward’s original mission has been somehow lost in the face of a new technological age, an ambivalence on the part of Blacks themselves and for many unknown reasons that merit an engaging and productive discussion in a public forum. Since NEC’s 1978 season which produced Edward’s wrenching drama *The Offering* (1977), the company has virtually vanished from the mainstream theatre spotlight. No longer garnered with Tony nominations, awards or even a slight hint of a Broadway revival, NEC, the booming Black theatre company that once was has now become a mere footnote in most scholarly writings and in the world of theatre in the new millennium. Given the tenacity of the company’s 1967 arrival on the New York theatre scene and because of Ward’s ability to literally ward off his detractors in the midst of tremendous racial divisions among Black
theatre artists, there is no reason why NEC can’t have a new beginning, a new future, a new survival.

For eleven consecutive years, NEC was a milestone in the arts. In terms of legitimizing and maximizing the potential of Black creativity on stage, its contribution to African American Theatre history is unprecedented. Unfortunately, the only semblance of an NEC infrastructure in recent history is a cramped tiny office in a dank building in downtown New York with a handful of staff members in tow. Is this what Ward’s original mission has come to—a tiny office in disarray, poorly funded educational tours, sporadic stage readings and main stage productions in rented venues that do not come close to the bar of artistic excellence that Ward demanded and called for?

The struggle for Black Theatre companies to remain afloat amid economic devastation and intense crisis in the arts has not been limited to NEC. Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a 22 year old Tony award winning company has also endured its share of institutional demise and financial devastation as well. Faced with possible shutdown shortly after garnering the 1999 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre in the United States, Crossroads begun to show promise of restoration with its recent production of plays including The Adventures of Fishy Waters: In Bed with the Blues staged in February 2012 starring Guy Davis, son of legendary actors and activists Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. In spite of the efforts of Crossroads and Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnessota, a thirty five year old company, the state of Black Theatre in America is still suffering from a conundrum of issues including poor funding, limited visibility, a lack of renewed vision and divisive ethics and politics within these Black theatre institutions themselves.
The question remains: What must be done on the part of the Black community, Black political leaders and Black artists themselves to clear the path for NEC’s revival as well as the revival of these other historical Black theatre institutions? In spite of the innumerable factors contributing to their present state of affairs, it is impossible to answer all of the questions surrounded their struggles in this limited study. Yet, a resurgence and recommitment to a full time professional Black Theatre with trained actors, high production value and a diversity of narratives and artistic purpose remains to be realized in the new millennium.

Though the current situation for NEC is less than favorable, the analysis of eight select plays from The Negro Ensemble Company’s production history, afforded us a look into the nationalist and post-nationalist discourses that emerged from the examined literary works and their literary response to one another. Both private and public displays of Black militancy and resistance are represented in all of plays. There is also a divisive relationship that resonates between southern narratives of Black American experience versus ones expressed in northern narratives: two hybridized cultural regions both participating in the desire for family, community and self-fulfillment. What is produced in the process, are two interdependent literary tropes, one that attempts to highlight the disessentialization of the historical Black migration, and the other, seeking to dismantle codes and symbols that embody the ideal American dream. Also, the liminal space situated in the struggles present in rural life, directly signify on the expressed tragedy that abounds in the deceptions of sophisticated urbanity.

There is an assertion of Black cultural ownership in the traditional family value system examined and reexamined in *The First Breeze of Summer*. Early on in the play’s
opening scene, the mediation between Gremmar’s past and present life is centrally situated in the plot. The ritual metaphor historicized and performed in *The Great MacDaddy*, seeks to reconcile the inherent tragedy of self-aggrandizing expressions of masochistic Black manhood with an overt essentialization of marginalized culture. In *The Great MacDaddy’s* return home, upon finally resolving the conflict in himself and his antagonism toward his outer world, he demands for the ghastly Scag Photographer to, “Get outta my life! Get outta my life and stay out.”²²⁷ Within the play’s terminal rhythm or denouement, Harris juxtaposes *The Great MacDaddy’s* return home with a metaphorical return of the Black community, to a collective state of harmony, social order and balance. As a reinforcement of the play’s resolve, *The Great MacDaddy*, in a final display of his cathartic return to humanity, willfully rejoins the renewed Black community in a ritual incantation toward the audience, “We gonna rise up this mornin’. We gonna stay up all day. Ain’t gonna let nobody stand in our way. Brutha/sista gonna find their way home someday.”²²⁸ The theme of redemption, the journey of going back or symbolically returning to a state of originality or authenticity, is a multi-functional through line in all of these plays. Even the dynamic of Blacks confronting white oppression disrupted by a face to face confrontation with their own Black selves, seems to permeate these diverse narratives from one dimension to the next. The tension between these two literary expressions of confrontation, help to establish a dialogical exchange and social commentary on cultural power, specifically, as each playwright re-imagines and decentralizes the subjective Blackness of their complex characters.

²²⁷ Harrison, *MacDaddy* 584.

²²⁸ Harrison, *MacDaddy* 588.
The irony, the exploited presence and metaphorical dismantling of the aging Black matriarch, is achieved, most significantly in Philip Hayes Dean’s capitulation of one specific woman’s cultural and historical contradictions. His dramatic critique is evidenced via the contentious character Weedy, illustrated in her defiance against inevitable social progression, immortality and death. Her resistance to Alberta’s sexual awakening is juxtaposed with the self-induced power of her absolute authority. Weedy attempts to inhibit Alberta from gaining access to full expressions of her womanly virtue, while equally refusing to sever ties with her broken past, resulting in a life reinforced by internalized racial oppression and countless regrets.

The groundwork for a post-nationalist investigation of the Black American experience, prompted by The Negro Ensemble Company’s initial start, was cut short and eventually overshadowed by a flawed attempt to infuse Baraka’s separatist agenda with Turner-Ward’s autonomous presentation of Black America, realized, in part, through a multicultural conversation of racial and cultural identity. In Gus Edwards’ Advice to a Young Black Actor: Conversations with Douglas Turner Ward, Ward argues:

Theatre has its own priority that people don’t want to accept. A lot of people are now being political in terms of being Black, employing what I call the pseudo bourgeois debate about positive and negative. Some actors literally say, Why do I have to play a negative Black character? And you almost want to say, Do you know what drama is? I mean, the whole description of drama. The term is self-explanatory; it’s conflict.229

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Embedded in Ward’s critical call for both positive and negative Black characters in the theatrical presentation of Black dramatic literature, is a strong reinforcement of the ideological tensions that his company struggled with in its early years. Artistic attempts to dislocate white oppression, to centralize Black subjective narratives while simultaneously addressing both a cross-cultural and cross-generational audience, to its largest extent, were tenuous as much as they were strenuous. The wide ideological gaps that eventually threatened this ‘new angle of negro vision’ bordered on the danger of a disingenuous voicing of Black experience. Ward’s artistic strategy would prove to be a monumental feat in attempting to achieve. Coupled with its wide acceptance into mainstream Broadway in relation to the contentiousness of Black militant detractors, Ward created a double edged sword, so to speak, specifically in its play’s progression toward non-linear narratives that expanded on questions of cultural ownership and propriety while momentarily regressing backward in its delimited resurfacing of Black and white oppositionality in plays such as *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men, The River Niger* and most significantly in *The Great MacDaddy*.

No matter how tenuous or strenuous its aim to transcend racial discourse with a cultural reordering of African American vernacular institutions, The Negro Ensemble Company accomplished within a span of roughly eleven years what no other Black theatre company had previously achieved, namely, a new social order and historical authority in the shaping and re-shaping of Black American life.
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Appendix A: The Mission of The Negro Ensemble Company

The mission of the Negro Ensemble Company, Inc. (NEC) is to provide African-American, African and Caribbean professional artists with an opportunity to learn, to work, to grow and to be nurtured in the performing arts. The overall mission of the NEC is to present live theatre performances by and about black people to a culturally diverse audience that is often underserved by the theatrical community.
Appendix B: A Chronological Production History (1967-1978)

1967-1968

*Songs of the Lusitanian Bogey*--Peter Weiss

*Summer of the Seventh Doll*--Ray Lawler

*Kongi’s Harvest*--Wole Soyinka

*Daddy Goodness*--Richard Wright

Monday Playwright Series

*One Last Look*--Steve Carter

*Ladies in Waiting*--Peter deAnda

*Two in a Trap*--Ted Shine

*Black Is... We Are*--Workshop Project

1968-1969

*God is a (Guess What?)*--Ray McIver

*Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*--Lonnie Elder, III

*String*--Alice Chlldress

*Contribution*--Ted Shine

*Malcochon*--Derek Walcott

Workshop Festival

*The Man Man Room*--J.E. Franklin
Maggie--Lee Hunkins

The Last Dragon--Workshop Project

Black Circles Around Angela--Hazel Bryant

Man Better Man--Errol Hill

1969-1970

The Harangues--Joseph A. Walker

Brotherhood--Douglas Turner Ward

Day of Absence--Douglas Turner Ward

Akokowe--Coordinated by Afolabi Ajayi

1970-1971

Ododo--Joseph A. Walker

Perry's Mission--Clarence Young, III

Rosalie Pritchett--Carlton & Barbara Molette

The Dream on Monkey Mountain--Derek Walcott

Ride a Black Horse--John Scott

Repertory Workshop -

The Terraced Apartment--Steve Carter

Us vs Nobody--Hal de Windt

His First Step--Oyamo

The Corner--Ed Bullins

Dreams--Bill Drake
1971-1972

*The Sty of The Blind Pig*--Phillip Hayes Dean

*A Ballet Behind the Bridge*--Lennox Brown

*Frederick Douglass..Through His Own Words*--Arthur Burghardt

1972-1973

*The River Niger*--Joseph A. Walker

Repertory Workshop

*Laundry*--Gertrude Greenridge

*Wild Flower*--Robert McCauley

*Indiana Avenue*--Debbie Woods

*Galavantin’ Husbend*--Milburn Devis

*The Death of Little Marcus*--Herman Johnson

*Johannas*--Bill Gunn

*Playstreet*--Ted Harris

*Crocodiles*--Femi Euba

*The Riddle of the Palm Leaf*--Femi Euba

*The Yellow Pillow*--John Perkins

*Buy a Little Tenderness*--Burial Clay, II

Special Attractions Festival

Music and Dance Festival
1973-1974

*The Great MacDaddy*--Paul Carter-Herrison

Season-Within-A-Season

*Black Sunlight*--AI Davis

*Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide*--Herman Johnson

*Terraces*--Steve Carter

*Heaven and Hells Agreement*--J.E. Gaines

*In the Deepest of Sleep*--Charles Fuller

1974-1975

*The First Breeze of Summer*--Leslie Lee

Season-Within-A-Season

*Liberty Call*--Burial Clay, II

*Sugar Mouth Sam Don’t Dance No More*--Don Evans

*The Moonlight Arms*--Rudy Wallace

*The Dark Tower*--Rudy Wallaca

*Welcome to Black River*--Samm-Art Williams

*Waiting for Mongo*--Silas Jones
1975-1976

*Eden*--Steve Carter

Season-Within-A-Season

The Trap Play--Reginald Vel Johnson

*A Love Play*--Samm-Art Williams

*A Fictional Account of the Lives of Richard and Sarah Allen*--Sylvia-Elaine Ford

Kingdom--Ali Wadud

*Sunshine, Moonbeam*--Alberta Hill

Livin' Fat--Judi Ann Mason

1976-1977

*The Brownsville Raid*--Charles Fuller

The Great MacDaddy--Paul Carter Harrison

The Square Root Soul--Adolph Ceasar

Playwrights' Units Presentation

1280 On Your Dial--William A. Walker

1977-1978

The Offering--Gus Edwards

Black Body Blues--Gus Edwards

Twilight Dinner--Lennox Brown

Playwrights' Series
The Pathétique--Samm-Art Williams

Sherry and Wine--Jimi Rand

As Time Goes By--Mustapha Matura

Mr. E--Michael Abbensetts

Last Brownstone in Brooklyn--Grady Whitfield

Haliki--Mae Jackson

A Long Way Home--Reginald Vel Johnson