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## The Violence of Duality in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

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### Abstract

Adrienne Kennedy's psychodrama *Funnyhouse of a Negro* personifies in her protagonist, Sarah, the internalized racism and mental deterioration that a binary paradigm foments. Kennedy also develops the schizoid consciousness of Sarah to accentuate Sarah's hybridized and traumatized identity as an African American woman. Kennedy's play was controversial during the Black Arts Movement, as she refrained from endorsing black nationalist groups like Black Power, constructing instead a nightmare world in which race is the singular element in defining self-worth. In her dramatized indictment of both white supremacy and identity politics, American culture's pathologized fascination with pigmentation drives the protagonist to solipsistic isolation, and ultimately, to suicide. Kennedy, through the disturbed cast of Sarah's mind, portrays a world in which race obsession triumphs over any sense of basic humanity. The play urges the audience to accept the absurdity of a dichotomized vision of the world, to recognize the spectral nature of reality, and to transcend the devastation imposed by polarizing rhetoric.

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In the wake of the Charleston shootings on June 17, 2015, when a 21-year-old white man entered a historic black church in South Carolina and murdered nine African Americans in a premeditated act of radical, leftist terrorism, Jon Stewart, in his popular comedy series *The Daily Show*, in a rare diversion from humor, spat the following words into the camera:

[...] once again, we have to peer into the abyss of the depraved violence that we do to each other in the nexus of a, just, gaping racial wound that will not heal, yet we pretend doesn't exist. I'm confident, though, that by acknowledging it, by staring into that and seeing it for what it is, we still won't do jack s—. Yeah, that's us. (Yahr n.p.)

Stewart voiced the immense frustration currently boiling over in the United States, as videos and images of brutality against blacks dominate news cycles and social media, sparking protests and the birth of movements like Black Lives Matter. At a moment when the historically racial conflict between blacks and whites has

once again risen to the forefront of the national consciousness, literary works like Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* remain painfully relevant. The plot of this drama consists of actions by attendants who surround Sarah, the female protagonist, and projections from Sarah's mind in the moments before her suicide, as her various selves, all major figures in Western history, discuss the self-revulsion that Sarah has been conditioned to feel as a black woman in the United States.

### 1. The Detrimental Effects of Assimilation

Each of Sarah's projected selves represents a facet of Western culture, and Kennedy contrasts each with the others to expose how current rhetoric perpetuates a simplistic, flawed, and in Sarah's case, fatal paradigm. Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, historical principles of the colonial epoch, become demonic, wanton, and violent figures who represent the devastation that imperialism wrought upon the African continent. Interestingly, Queen Victoria had African ancestry: DeNeen L. Brown writes in an article published in *The Washington Post* that Queen Charlotte (1744–1818) was Britain's black queen who "passed on her mixed-race heritage to her granddaughter, Queen Victoria" (Brown n.p.). Patrice Lumumba, the assassinated Congolese president, often a symbol of resistance for the Black Power movement, is cast as a broken, defeated rapist, representing the ultimate failure of various black nationalist groups. Jesus, the founder of Christian faith, is projected as a hideous, tortured dwarf, who symbolizes the role that Christianity has had in African American disenfranchisement. In her article written for *The Huffington Post*, Taryn Finley quotes Franchesca Ramsey: "Historically, white Jesus has been used to oppress and erase the histories of people of color [...]" (Finley n.p.). Ironically, the portrayal of Jesus as a tortured dwarf evokes the image of a physically abused and exploited black slave. Through these historical characters, Kennedy examines the crushing weight of history on the black individual, which in the extreme can drive African Americans to insanity and self-destruction. Journalist and author Ta-Nehesi Coates writes:

In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor – it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random mangling, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. (103)

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Kennedy offers a harrowing vision into the private, personal torment born of this historical destruction, a destruction so often described clinically, with charts and figures. Yet rather than suggest black nationalism or separatism as the solution, the play makes clear the fallacy of any response with

race at its core, and the resultant suffering when the worth of an individual is reduced to demographic identifiers like ethnicity or gender.

Performance art differs in its examination of the human condition from the plastic and literary arts most significantly in the directness with which it communicates with the viewer. Rather than offer a work to be contemplated at the audience's leisure, staged performances present a dynamic, shifting universe that demands constant, active engagement. The proximity of actor and spectator removes layers of separation between the work and the audience, often eliciting a primal, rather than cerebral, response in the onlooker, contributing to a more personal, intimate experience. Traditionally, playwrights construct a plot within which their characters interact, conveying insight into various aspects of consciousness and society. It is seldom, however, that authors manage to create a new mode of artistic investigation and expression within established genres, employing truly innovative methods to reveal the generally concealed dynamics of interaction between human psyche and culture. Kennedy is one of those rare innovators. In her terrifying dreamscape *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, she constructs a play in which the action occurs almost entirely within the rapidly deteriorating mind of Sarah, during the brief moments preceding her suicide. Delving into the surreal world of the subconscious, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is unconstrained by temporal, physical, or logical restrictions. The action consists in a series of parallel internal monologues or projected conversations between Sarah's various selves, all monumental figures in the racial and colonial history of Western civilization, interspersed with cynical interjections by a Funnyhouse Lady and Funnyhouse Man – Sarah's landlady and boyfriend, respectively. Through the staged projection of Sarah's mind, Kennedy deconstructs the complex of culturally ingrained attitudes of mind that have infected the psyches of Americans. To understand one result of such infection, we refer readers to a chapter on "Black Aesthetics," in which Vincent B. Leitch paraphrases Houston A. Baker's insightful observations: "Black culture in America possessed a collectivistic rather than an individualistic ethos, a repudiative rather than an accommodative psychology" (Leitch 294). Imposed by white slave owners, the lie of a natural racial hierarchy, suggesting that blacks are inherently inferior to whites, once internalized, foments the self-loathing psychosis that ravages Sarah's consciousness.

Kennedy's deviation from the conventional Aristotelian plot structure of a beginning, middle, and end reflects the aesthetic she employs: "I see my writing as a growth of images. I think all my plays come out of dreams I had [...]." She also states that "autobiographical work is the only kind that interests me" (qtd. in Gates and Smith 617, 619). In writing *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Kennedy draws from her own experiences, relating some of her intensely personal feelings of anxiety, disenfranchisement, and frustration, and her play rings with authenticity, despite its surrealistic structure. Kennedy captures a reality familiar to many African Americans living under the constant threat of violence in a society that

views them as racially inferior. She exposes truths that white Americans often refuse to recognize, but which blacks must grapple with on a daily basis. Claudia Rankine, in an OpEd piece for the *New York Times*, wrote in the days immediately following the June 2015 South Carolina massacre:

The Confederate battle flag continues to fly at South Carolina's statehouse as a reminder of a history marked by lynched black bodies. We can distance ourselves from this fact until the next horrific killing, but we won't be able to outrun it. History's authority over us is not broken by maintaining a silence about its continued effects. (n.p.)

Kennedy, through the fragmented hallucinations of Sarah, illuminates the darker, often denied, part of America's history, juxtaposing classically conflicting ideologies to lay bare the violence that a binary social order generates. The distorted world of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, far from rejecting history's effects, magnifies them, urging the viewer to recognize the necessity for a re-examination of racial politics in the United States.

By casting the entire play in a nightmarish pall, Kennedy anatomizes and reconfigures Western notions of *good* and *evil*, of *positive* and *negative*. Through her hyperbolic demonization of the black as well as the white communities, she also rejects the reactionary rhetoric of the Black Separatist movement, of Malcolm X's early declaration: "No *sane* black man really wants integration [...] for the black man in America the only solution is complete separation from the white man" (Terrill 96; original emphasis). Instead of portraying one race in a more positive light than the other, she creates a funhouse mirror that reflects racism, and the notion of race itself, as a distorted reality, magnifying its grotesqueries and demonstrating the dangerous absurdity of connoting immutable characteristics upon skin color. This decision to deviate from black theater's conventions of the 1960s to present proud, realistic depictions of everyday black life (like Lorraine Hansberry's African American play *A Raisin in the Sun*), and to explore the murkier waters of a psyche tortured by racial politics ensured that her plays "remained controversial because of their failure to comply with the nationalistic orientation of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s" (Boucher 84). However, rather than weaken *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Kennedy's rejection of a particular political agenda augments her ultimate message: any attempt to attribute superiority to skin pigmentation is absurd, whether it be white racism or Black Power. She uses a hyper-dichotic rhetoric to demonstrate her point: a binary paradigm, reinforced by language itself, seeds self-destructive insanity in the individual, and every citizen, whether black or white, must recognize this linguistic fallacy in order for the United States to progress beyond the disease of America's racism, born in the belly of slave ships crossing the Atlantic.

## 2. The Violence of Duality

Marcel Danesi, in his analysis of the formation of structuralist theory, "Opposition Theory and the Interconnectedness of Language, Culture, and Cognition," writes: "The implicit philosophical idea in early structuralism was that the human mind is inclined by its nature to perceive the world in terms of opposites" (13). This tendency – to perceive meaning through the juxtaposition of theoretically contrasting terms or concepts – is the structural origin that Kennedy reveals as dangerous in her indictment of language's "violent hierarchy," noted deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. Poststructuralist critics, influenced by Derrida's monumental book *Of Grammatology*, recognized the inherent danger of binary thinking and the dualistic paradigms it produces.

The presence/absence dichotomy, fundamental to structuralism, suggests to the poststructuralist that, in the mind, every word also contains a "trace" of its binary opposite, and this *différance* allows the mind to generate meaning. Derrida expanded upon the problem inherent in the presence/absence means of arriving at definition in his landmark work *Positions*, in which he suggests that, in the moment of conceptualization, "one of the two terms governs the other," connoting positivity upon one image and negativity upon the other, creating "a violent hierarchy" (Derrida 41). Claude Levi-Strauss, a French structuralist anthropologist, utilized this insight into language's primary power in constructing one's understanding of the world in his analysis of various cultures – among communities with or without a written language. In her study of poststructuralism's impact upon modern anthropology "Legacies of Derrida: Anthropology," Rosalind Morris employs Derrida's and Levi-Strauss's insights:

writing is [...] associated with violence, forgetting, and political hierarchy. It is the instrument of colonization and the means for disseminating an economic logic whose most salient characteristics are its abstraction of value, its simultaneous devaluation of utility, and its tendency to waste. (358)

In Western history, the conventional use of language, especially written language, has supported a power structure favoring wealthy, heterosexual white men, ascribing a positive value to their recurrent representative adjectives and images: *white, wealth, lightness, civilization, masculinity, logic* – while demonizing their binary opposites: *black, poverty, darkness, primitivity, femininity, superstition*. This linguistic inequality is part and parcel of racial oppression, and it is this binary system of definition that Kennedy seeks to expose as poisonous in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

Because language is inherently rife with hierarchical notions of superiority and inferiority, Kennedy's decision to conduct her deconstruction of binary thinking within an individual's consciousness is ingenious. The mind is the realm in which the signifier and the signified conjoin, yet this melding of words with images or

ideas occurs so instantaneously that the process itself is rarely examined. Kennedy recognizes the vast, often overlooked, power that this relationship between the signifier and signified holds over the manner in which an individual perceives reality. Randi Koppen observes:

Part of the creative process, as [Kennedy] experiences it, is to allow oneself to be taught by these signifiers with which she believes herself to stand in communication – the signifiers of a knowledge that actually proceeds from herself, from her own memory, but which is nonetheless outside the bounds of conscious cognition. (122)

To demonstrate the menace of the binary system of signifier and signified, Kennedy invented a new form of dramatization, one not constricted by classic temporal boundaries. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the protagonist's dissected, multivariant consciousness occupies a dream world in which time is elastic, and in which her various fragmented selves are unleashed to roam wild, appearing and disappearing through the wormholes of her distressed mind. The schizoid nature of her psyche represents an unintegrated, rapidly collapsing personality whose covalent factions are at war with each other. The play exists within this internalized tempest of Negro-Sarah's mental state.

### 3. Black Identity and Kennedy's Critique of Western Colonialism

The character Sarah gives voice to the other living outside of the American power structure in virtually every aspect: female, mixed-race, a child of rape. Sarah's gender allows Kennedy to explore her own more personal struggles, reflecting her tendency to use her own life experience as a source for her dramatic material, and this personal dimension cements the character's fundamental vulnerability. A theme of sexual violence pervades the play, alluding to both the specter of the black rapist, which has been used to demonize African Americans, and the historical reality of white slave owners sexually abusing their female slaves. Sarah's mixed-race status contributes to her sense of alienation, of non-belonging to either race, black or white. She oscillates, instead, between two poles, trapped in the warped space of the mental and physical funny house that confines her. As a child of rape, forged in the crucible of the most violent and abhorrent act one human can commit against another, the self-loathing that permeates Sarah's character is exacerbated by an order of magnitude. Stage directions describe Sarah as representative of white America's dismissive, dehumanizing vision of the African American race: "*She is a faceless, dark character with a hangman's rope about her neck [...]. She is the NEGRO*" (Kennedy 621; original emphasis). Faceless, inextricably linked with death, she is seen not as human but as a nightmarish shade, her entire being defined by her race. Her first monologue establishes the internal conflict that W. E. B. Du

Bois called “double consciousness,” or the tendency of African Americans to define themselves through the white ideals designed to disenfranchise them from birth. When an African American internalizes the linguistically and culturally instilled notion that the color of her skin indicates inherent inferiority, that another race is superior, it becomes nearly impossible to transcend the stigma. Sarah embodies the manic self-hatred that results from this internalization, as she has European royal figures living inside her:

She [Queen Victoria Regina] wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is white, and there are no unfortunate black ones. For as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning. Even before my mother's hair started to fall out. Before she was raped by a wild black beast. Black was evil. (Kennedy 622)

As the footnote explains, Kennedy refers here to the story of Genesis 1.1–1.3, which reads, “in the beginning [...] darkness was upon the face of the deep. And God said, Let there be light” (Gates and Smith 622). The Judeo-Christian tradition, central to the development of Western culture, begins with the image of light triumphing over darkness, as a result of God's divine will. This symbolic victory colored all subsequent Judeo-Christian history and has been used to justify horrific atrocities, during the colonial epoch and continuously thereafter. For, while the Bible extols the virtues of peace and benevolence, European mercantilists often rationalized the violent destruction of indigenous peoples and cultures through their perceived lack of godliness, ascribing a subhuman nature to people of color. A classic justification for colonial expansion offered by Western conquerors was the desire to bring civilization, in the form of Christianity, to unenlightened savages, masking the underlying motivation of colonial exploitation for the sake of economic profit.

Kennedy uses each of Sarah's various selves to subvert the historically accepted racial hierarchy, the idea that one race is inherently superior and another inferior. According to Rosemary Curb, Queen Victoria in the play represents “White imperialist plunder of continents populated by darker races, the White man's religion and culture, and the self-righteous Puritanism of the sexually repressed Victorians” (181). In the Western canon of historical figures, Queen Victoria is a symbol of the apex of colonial expansion, of civilization triumphing over barbarism, a rare example of a powerful woman in the political arena. She also embodies Puritanical ideals of purity and virginity, of the rejection of female desire. However, in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, she is introduced as a phantasmagoric figure, as is the Duchess of Hapsburg, with whom she is inextricably linked: “*They look exactly alike [... with] an alabaster face, the skin drawn tightly over the high cheekbones, great dark eyes that seem gouged out of the head, [...] a head of frizzy hair [...] a stillness as in the face of death*” (Kennedy 621; original emphasis). By casting these two women in such a charnel light, Kennedy portrays the life-destroying nature of a racial *gestalt*, as well as precludes any attempt to



appropriate these figures as representatives of a particular ideology prevailing in the modern era, Western or otherwise. Instead, they represent the danger of writing history in such convenient but misleading terms of victors and losers, superior and inferior, conqueror and conquered. Such dichotomies fail to capture the nuanced experience of the individual, especially one trapped between binary linguistic oppositions. Sarah voices this sense of entrapment: “I know no places. That is, I cannot believe in places. [...] I find there are no places, only my funnyhouse. [...] I try to give myself a logical relationship but that too is a lie” (Kennedy 623).

Kennedy uses each projected figure to highlight aspects of the other, for while she uses Queen Victoria to satirize Victorian oppression and repression, a sex scene involving the Duchess is equally ludicrous. In it, the Duchess and the Funnyman are discussing her father’s rape of her mother, and then, inexplicably, they fall into the throes of passion. In their preceding conversation, the Duchess’s description of her father is particularly vulgar and racist, this juxtaposition contrasting violent sexual assault with the ideal of sexual intimacy as a physical expression of love: “He was a wild black beast who raped my mother. [...] He is the wilderness. He speaks niggerly, groveling about wanting to touch me with his black hand. [...] He is the darkest, my father is the darkest [...]. My father is a nigger who drives me into misery” (Kennedy 624–625). In her article “A Prison of Object Relations,” Claudia Barnett describes the Duchess thus: “She was beautiful and powerful but she was also childless, miserable, and ultimately insane. Onto this conflicted figure Sarah projects her nightmares and fantasies, appropriately united in a figurehead who has flourished and failed” (379). This combination of nightmare and fantasy further blurs archetypal boundaries and taboos, because the sex scene occurs directly after a discussion of rape. The conversation is rife with images conveying the “black brute” stereotype, as graphically imagined by the Negrophobic writer George T. Winston, president of the North Carolina College of Mechanical and Agricultural Arts, in his address to American Academy of Political and Social Science in 1901:

When a knock is heard at the door [a White woman] shudders with nameless horror. The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost demoniacal. A mad bull or tiger could scarcely be more brutal. A whole community is frenzied with horror, with the blind and furious rage for vengeance. (108–109)

Kennedy, in having the Duchess employ similar rhetoric to excoriate her father, demonstrates the dangerous absurdity of such caustic racism, for the scene is hyperbolically ludicrous, shifting from a stomach-turning discussion of rape to a love scene in an instant.

The character of Patrice Lumumba represents a political, rather than a social, facet of oppression, as Kennedy once again draws upon a Western fear, this time the threat of an educated, revolutionary black man resisting colonial subjugation.

One of the most conspicuous victims of modern American imperialism, Patrice Lumumba became the first democratically elected president of the Congo after Belgian rule finally ended. He was assassinated less than a week after taking office, through a joint effort by the CIA and the Belgian government, who funneled money to support the insurgent activities of a violent, but Western-friendly, political faction. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, an African American scholar, called Lumumba's murder "the most important assassination of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" and "a shattering blow to the hopes of millions of Congolese for freedom and material prosperity" (Nzongola-Ntalaja n.p.). Kennedy uses Lumumba to demonstrate the arrogance of European and American power in the international political arena by melding Lumumba and the Father into one stereotype, that of the "black beast." He parrots Sarah's opening monologue: "I am a nigger of two generations. I am Patrice Lumumba. [...] He is black of skin with dark eyes and a great dark square brow [...] then in Africa he started to drink and came home drunk one night and raped my mother" (Kennedy 625–626).

Although thoroughly convoluted, a close analysis of the elements of the monologue reveals that Lumumba simultaneously represents both the historical figure and the fictional Father as an amalgamation projected from Sarah's psyche. He represents a deep internalization of the scars of her racial and personal heritage, and his rhetoric demonstrates Kennedy's artistic dexterity in conflating spacial and temporal dimensions as he describes himself as of "two generations." He is constructed subtly as his own father, a familial and political time-traveling rapist: "I am Patrice Lumumba who haunted my mother's conception" (Kennedy 628). The Landlady confirms the characters' interchangeability in her monologue by describing the Father's attempt to reconcile himself with Sarah: "He sat on a bench [...] crying out – forgiveness, Sarah, forgiveness for my being black, Sarah. [...] And now he is dead [...]. He left Africa and now Patrice Lumumba is dead" (Kennedy 629). These layers of blended internalization muddle divisions between characters, melding them into an amorphous representation of African American angst resulting from centuries of languishing under the imposition of social and political constraints. However, Lumumba's character also reveals Kennedy's disassociation from the Black Nationalist movement, through his inextricable connection with the tragic, demonic Father, as well as through the descriptions of his brutal physical injuries, his shattered head and bloody eyes. Lumumba, an African resisting the yoke of colonialism, was a hero for many in the Black Power movement in America, and yet he ultimately fell before his work really could begin. As Georgie Boucher observes: "his [Lumumba's] presence appears to be just as suffocating to [Sarah's] being as that of Sitwell and the figures of English royalty. [...] Lumumba] may be read as a visceral image of either a tragic hero or a failed, fallen extremist" (Boucher 96).

The final projection of Sarah's internalized selves is Jesus, the most volatile of her selves. As the single most important historical and religious personage in Western

civilization, Jesus represents a conundrum that *Funnyhouse of a Negro* grapples with: the transition of ideal to reality, of signifier to signified. In her article analyzing the impossibility of staging some of Kennedy's directions, Erin Hurley asserts:

these impossible requirements highlight an impulse that lies at the core of theatrical representation: the impulse to substantiate or render the ideal. In the possibility that subtends that impulse [there] is, I think, a utopic sensibility – a sense that something different or better could come out of current conditions. (204)

Kennedy understands that a contradiction has developed through the history of Christianity: the loving message delivered by Jesus in the Gospels has been distorted and disfigured to serve Eurocentric, colonial interests. To represent this perversion of an ideal, Kennedy creates a truncated and distorted caricature of Jesus: “[Jesus’s] *hair is falling more now*” and he is “*hideous*” (Kennedy, 628; original emphasis). The character cries out:

Through my apocalypses and my raging sermons, I have tried to escape him, through God Almighty I have tried to escape being black [...]. I am going to Africa and kill this black man named Patrice Lumumba. Why? Because all my life I believed my Holy Father to be God, but now I know that my father is a black man. (Kennedy 629)

Using this caricature to weave Sarah's image of Jesus with her other component selves, Kennedy projects the grimmer aspects of the black experience as victims of a subverted Christian doctrine – the “raging sermons” that draw random, out-of-context verses from the Old and New Testament to justify atrocities against blacks, from lynchings to political assassinations. These misguided, overzealous, and all-too-often self-serving Christians completely misinterpret the core of the value system propounded in the Gospels, which generally promote love, forgiveness, and inner peace, besmirching the name of the vast majority of the faithful who attempt to adhere to these ideals. That the character Jesus states, “I am going to Africa and kill this black man” (Kennedy 629), reinforces Kennedy's attempt to demonstrate how a peaceful religion became the vehicle for violence and oppression, and it reveals the inherent absurdity of using Christianity as a means for justifying atrocities. Additionally, Kennedy uses Jesus to represent the repressed fear of white racists of all historical eras and geographical locations: the fear that they were fundamentally no different from Africans, a realization that would reveal that they were in fact enslaving and torturing human beings just like themselves. Kennedy captures this fear in the completion of the preceding quotation: “Why? Because all my life I believed my Holy Father to be God, but now I know that my father is a black man” (Kennedy 629), a realization that, in her case, precipitates Sarah's collapse and her suicide in the concluding scene.

Sarah's suicide serves as the ultimate insight into the spurious nature of many culturally and linguistically established values (values used to support artificial

notions of racial superiority or inferiority, for example), demonstrating the fallible subjectivity behind binary thinking – a fallible subjectivity that ascribes, culturally and linguistically, a positive value to *whiteness* and a negative value to *blackness*. The stage directions themselves emphasize this fallacy, describing lightness and darkness in equally negative terms: “*It is set in the middle of the Stage in a strong white LIGHT, while the rest of the Stage is in unnatural BLACKNESS. The quality of the white light in unreal and ugly*” (Kennedy, 620; original emphasis). This fundamental issue of dichotic thinking, woven into the fabric of language itself, resists any convenient solution. As Shelby Steele notes in a chapter on white guilt in his revolutionary study on race relations *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, the response offered by the extremists of the Black Power movement, for example, who called for separatism and self-imposed segregation, ultimately represents a reaction detrimental for all parties:

With black power [...] knowledge of ill-gotten advantage could now be evidenced and deepened [...] into the sort of guilt from which institutions could redeem themselves only by offering [...] forms of reparations and compensation for past injustice [...]. After black power, racial preferences became the order of the day [...]. Blacks, then [...] must be seen as generally ‘less than’ others. Their needs are ‘special’ [...]. They are seen exclusively along the dimension of their victimization, so they become different people with whom whites can negotiate entitlements, but never fully see as people like themselves [...]. The selfishly guilty white is drawn to what blacks like least in themselves – their suffering, victimization, and dependency. This is no good for anyone. (Steele 86–92)

Kennedy, in hindsight, underscores the failure of programs like affirmative action, a policy intended to treat symptoms, while allowing the deeper causes of racism to metastasize. As Steele explains, in many respects, black Americans today are worse off than they were during the early days of the Civil Rights era, because the solutions offered by the government are more an attempt to placate white guilt than to actually promote equality and progress. He argues that what America needs are “deracinated social policies that attack poverty rather than *black* poverty [...]. The white message to blacks must be: America hurt you badly and that is wrong, but entitlements only prolong the hurt while development overcomes it” (Steele 91). Blacks, receiving certain “benefits,” are now expected to repress their feelings of rage and frustration at the stagnancy of social change, because somehow through affirmative action whites have atoned. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* forces this repression to the forefront of the conversation, demanding a complex reflection on the incredibly convoluted racial politics of the United States. Georgie Boucher asserts that Kennedy

portrays a fractured protagonist whose multiple selves [...] enable an examination of the notion of internalized racism, whereby Black subjects internalize deep

feelings of inferiority assigned to them externally by racism. Additionally, Kennedy's fractured protagonists also convey the failure of the essentialist project of Black Nationalism in the 1960s, adopted to aid the ontological crises of African Americans. (85)

This assessment certainly is supported by Kennedy's play. The simplistic appeal of Black Nationalism, or any sort of identity politics, is obvious, as it offers a clear Other to blame. Yet is premised on the same ideology as white supremacy: an individual's value should be derived from a nexus of demographic vectors, and nothing more. In today's climate of polarization and sensationalist rhetoric, Kennedy's plea, to recognize the hell created within a binary paradigm of 'Us and Them,' black and white, men and women, is more germane than ever.

## Conclusion

A cursory reading of Kennedy's play suggests total dismay for the human condition. The play presents no truly redeeming character, and even the Christian deity is removed from a position of exaltation, which ultimately precipitates the Negro Sarah's psychosis and suicide. The play examines the dangerous effects of binary thinking, generated in language itself, and the subsequent psychological collapse these binaries produce. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* offers a dystopia generated by demographic divisions, yet in the play neither race is redeemed, and images of blackness and whiteness are suffused with equal revulsion. Nevertheless, an audience might extrapolate from Kennedy's play the transcendent view of an enlightened harmony in which one color or race is not dichotomized as superior to another. Blackness and whiteness then might be perceived as non-essential relics of a flawed binary paradigm, replaced by unity under a common human essence. To demonstrate unequivocally the unsustainable and destructive nature of racially defined hierarchies, Kennedy ends the play with Sarah's suicide. Her method of suicide, hanging, is an allusion to the brutal culture of lynching used to terrorize and subjugate blacks in the American South. Kennedy captures the indifference of white bystanders in the final lines of the play, spoken by the white Landlady: "The poor bitch has hung herself," and then by Raymond: "She was a funny little liar" (Kennedy 631). These casual observations voice the final, tragic irony, which must astound the sensitive audience by its coldness. The utter absence of compassion reflects the violence cultural and linguistic dichotomies all but guarantee, and demonstrates Kennedy's twin insights: race itself is an artificial, dangerous construct, and focus on phenotypical attributes inevitably leads to an oppression that denies the essential humanity of both the oppressor and the oppressed. It is far past time that American society began to recognize the profound implications of Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Transcendence of the binary patterns of

thinking that divide the races must be paramount in an on-going effort towards true equality. Tragically, we have again recently seen the sanguine failure of this transcendence realized in a Charleston church and on streets throughout the United States. Until we learn to transcend our black and white paradigm, we are all doomed to occupy Kennedy's absurd funnyhouse, and to repeat the history that she so scathingly portrays in her groundbreaking drama.

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