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TRANSLATING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE ON THE STAGE: THE CASE OF ADRIENNE KENNEDY

Teresa Requena Pelegrí, Universitat de Barcelona

1 Black Nationalism and the translation of African American identity on stage

The need to accurately translate black difference, to shape the African American self in words, has been a recurrent goal of African American literature. In particular, the 1960s heralded the advent of a public political space in which previously disenfranchised groups made their claims and voices heard. The case was especially felt in the theater of the period. It was at that point in history when the monologism that had previously dominated the scene with psychological realism gave way to a polyphony of voices that constituted the characteristic diversity of late twentieth century theater.

The range of theatrical options in the period was proof of the increasing diversification of interests and contradictions that assaulted the country at that time. As Matthew Roudané has stated, "American drama since 1960 emerges as a dizzying amalgam of many voices, many peoples, and few resolutions" (Roudané 1996 6). The inrush of the ex-centrics, those marginalized by the mainstream, led to an appeal within the African American community to join forces and provide a truthful translation of black experience into art, which became the overriding concern of Black Nationalist leaders, who sought to renew a fragmented communal awareness.

Malcom X, for example, one of the most outspoken leaders of the Black Power Movement, argued that black cultural autonomy had to be established upon a cultural revolution that would bring African Americans closer to their African roots. As he put it,

> We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people. Our cultural revolution must be the means of bringing us closer to our African brothers and sisters. It must begin in the community and be based on community participation. Afro-Americans will be free to create only when they can depend on the Afro-American community for support and Afro-American artists must realize that they depend on the Afro-American for inspiration (in Leitch 1988: 335).

Malcom X's words −that echo W.E.B. DuBois and Garvey's pan-africanism− were formulated at a critical moment in the Black Liberation struggle, when urban riots in Northern cities showed the growing discontent of the lower black classes with the achievements of the non-violent and integrationist philosophy promoted by Martin Luther King, Jr. Thus, at a time in history when political, economic, social, and cultural fragmentation was most threatening to black Americans, "Malcom X sought to unite blacks in a nonreligious and nonsectarian organization militantly devoted to freedom from oppression and to black solidarity" (Leitch 1988: 335).

Given the context, it comes as no surprise that theater became the main stepping stone from which gender, race or sexual issues reached the target communities and the locus on which communal empowerment could be enacted. Theater became a powerful political tool that could have an immediate effect on society and, most important, on the communal level. The struggle for Black Liberation, especially in its Black Power (Nationalist) phase[1] made theatre key to the conveyance of messages of racial pride, black nationalist struggle, and the translation of an "accurate" black experience. Again, this was no new phenomenon. As Hay argues, "as early as 1911, W.E.B. DuBois envisioned theatre as the perfect arena to teach 'the colored people' the meanings of their history and of their rich emotional life. Most importantly, he wanted to use theatre to reveal the Negro to the white world as 'a human, feeling thing'" (Hay 1994: 2).

Such a belief in the function of theater as cultural mediator, an appropriate means to translate the African American experience, coincided with the agendas of many experimental groups of the 60s and was well summarized by Judith Malina and Julian Beck when they formulated the aims of the Living Theater. The purpose of the plays staged by the group was "to increase conscious awareness, to stress the sacredness of life, to break down the walls" (in Roudané 1996: 1). Most African American playwrights and Black Liberation leaders focused on increasing such conscious awareness as an effective political strategy to empower the community and demanded that black art should thus translate the plight for Black Liberation.

Imamu Amiri Baraka came to epitomize Black Nationalism in theater. The role of the artist, according to Baraka, was to accurately translate experience and thus, "aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report

[1]Vincent B. Leitch identifies two different phases in the struggle for Black Liberation: The Civil Rights movement phase (1954-64), and The Black Power Movement phase (1964-73).

and reflect so precisely the nature of society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering..." (Baraka in Leitch 1988: 338). As can be gathered from Baraka's words, artists were both didacticists and visionaries whose role was to provide a precise translation of reality that would urge the audience towards a "correct political understanding and action" (Leitch 1988: 339). Baraka's formulation led to the corollary that experience should be mediated by black images and most important, as Leitch further notes, "the task of contemporary black art, therefore, was to assault mainstream (white) images and promote black images as a means of fostering autonomous black consciousness, nationhood, and culture" (Leitch 1988: 339).

The need for a black art that managed to successfully translate black experience rested on the assumption that black aesthetics should be recognizably distinct from what came to be associated with the white, Western model. Thus, in the early 70s and throughout the decade, literary intellectuals such as Hoyt W. Fuller or Larry Neal devoted their efforts to theorizing the contours of black aesthetics. For both, the project of mapping out the distinctness of black art was inextricably linked to the nationalist project of the Black Power Movement and any black form had to be necessarily deprived from any white artistic model. In this sense, Black Nationalism considered the adoption of mainstream practices as a clear integrationist ─and therefore regressive─ move.

The nationalist urge to create an art distinct from white artistic modes brought the question of what 'black theater' entailed. In 1988, Errol Hill noted the unstable ground on which the label 'black theater' rested:

> Widespread recognition of the theater's potential for changing, healing, and restoring-a return, as it were, to the pristine function of the communal, ritual drama-has thrown the Afro-American theater into a flurry of controversy. [...] What, for instance, should be the principal objective of Black theater? Should its content be strictly defined by the overriding concern for Black liberation? To what audience should this theater be addressed primarily? What form should it take? How may it express a Black identity, if such a characteristic does in fact exist? (Hill 1987: 1).

The questions Hill was posing originated different answers. For Hatch, African American plays are by nature anti-well-made plays, assuming that what he identifies as the Scribe-Sardou-Ibsen formula to be a special European characteristic. Thus, the plots of the African American plays

> meander in circuitous association, returning at key moments to the center (altar) of the action [...] This style of writing is quite different from the straight line, build-to-a-crisis at the end of the scene, Western formula, which is

> complementary to the capitalist mode: Time is money; ergo, jump it, fuck it, and get back to the office! (Hatch 1980: 27).

While there was agreement on the idiosyncratic nature of Black theater as distinct from "Western" models, attempts at translating the reality of black experience and the 'blackness' of African American theater have proved to be a source of controversy. After all, what Hatch identifies as a Western formula complementary to the capitalist mode is, according to many feminists, a masculine formula complementary to ejaculation. As Reinhardt argues, "the structure of traditional Western drama, an 'imitation of action', is linear, leading through conflict and tension to a major climax and resolution....One could even say that this aggressive build-up, sudden big climax, and cathartic resolution suggests specifically the male *sexual* response" (Reinhardt in Schroeder 1995: 71). While the feminist critique of such universal models of narrative originally formulated by structuralists and formalists has proved to be useful in denouncing the gender bias of the models, the question of a female aesthetics remains problematic. As Michele Wandor has stated,

> there is not much to be gained from assuming that drama is per se some kind of 'male form', and that when women write, they write in a totally different form which has never been invented before and which is common to women. Emotional, aesthetic, and structural styles are very varied among women writers....It is the combination of the content and the writer's approach to it which produces the form which she thinks or feels is most appropriate. (Wandor in Schroeder 1995: 73).

There was a further implication springing from the prerogative that Black theater should faithfully translate black experience and this was the demand to offer positive role models for the African American community as a way of empowering it. Thus, African American playwrights were made to bear the burden of artistic responsibility and specifically portray positive role models for the African American community as a way to achieve Malcom's X cultural revolution. This need for what David Mikics has termed 'self-representation' has been a pervasive element throughout the history of Black theatre and key to understand the reluctance towards postmodern forms within the African American community as not being political enough.

2 Adrienne Kennedy's particular translation of African American experience

For writers such as Adrienne Kennedy or Ishmael Reed, who chose to shape their works within a postmodern aesthetics of fragmentation, split subjectivity, and self-referentiality that resisted the premise that there was one single black reality that could accurately be translated on stage, the Black Nationalist demand certainly posed a problem.

Adrienne Kennedy was from the beginning a controversial figure who was accused of treating blackness as a sickness instead of working to promote revolution through her works. These accusations led her peer black playwrights and critics to refuse to see her work as representative of the African American experience and thus discard Kennedy as a true translator of black reality, which initially excluded her from anthologies, reviews, and criticism.

Kennedy's work is an excellent example of the clashing of interests between the function of self-representation within the African American community and a postmodernist aesthetics that avoids a self-representative function through the use of fragmentation and the construction of the audience as critical and detached entity. In this sense, Kennedy's fragmented plays refused to comply with the demand that Black theatre should offer positive role models or openly show its political uses by displaying optimism in the power of the community to fight racial oppression. As David Mikics argues, Kennedy' obscure plays have been shadowed by more optimistic ones such as Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (Mikics 1991: 8). Kennedy's plays do not present the black community as a source of strength, especially for female characters, whose experience of blackness leads them to a split and tortured subjectivity.

In refusing to be pigeonholed as a political, feminist or African American playwright, Kennedy has struggled not to be identified with what most black playwrights have been assumed to be writing in advance, that is didactic, militant message plays about race (Solomon 1992: xiii). Kennedy's non-representative function of her plays also shows an attitude of resistance towards fixing meanings in advance. The accusation of not being representative of the African American community rests on a set of assumptions of what a proper representative should be, making a playwright into a spokesperson for the community on account of race. Thus, Mikics has noted how "the black writer is bound to a representative goal: bound, that is, to present encouraging or correct portraits of his/her culture" (Mikics 1992: 8).

This essentialist conception of an African American playwright as having to perform a representative function has complex historical roots, "often involving the burdensome obligation imposed on black writers to legitimize black life for a white audience" (Mikics 1992: 8). Thus, while not denying the material conditions that have prompted such a function within the African American community, the conflict between political self-representation and artistic freedom is also shaped by a widening gap between identity politics and postmodernist aesthetics. David Mikics has also referred to this confrontation and its development into the 1990s:

> in the 1990s., the wish for the representative is an anachronism, a symptomatic reaction against postmodern conditions in which, despite the continuing social and economic racism of American society, late capitalism has produced a diversity of intra- and interracial roles that erode cultural uniformity in black America, as elsewhere. Since multifarious and contradictory modes of African American life now exist on an unprecedented scale, any demand for representative description is bound to fail (Mikics 1992: 8).

Mikics' articulation of the dated wish for an essentialist, global representation of the African American community is appealing from a postmodern perspective. However, it does not take into serious consideration the so many voices that claim representation for political purposes. Not much is to be gained from the theorizing of postmodern claims of eradication of identity and a unitary representation if we do not acknowledge the claims towards self-representation that coexist with postmodernism. After all, the wish for representation may not be an anachronism in that the claim for an identity has proved to be very useful for political uses.

Kennedy's distance from identity politics' demands that what was showed on stage should construct the audience as a group of unified subjects was further reinforced by her use of a very particular postmodern aesthetics that revolved around fragmentation as a means to avoid identification of the audience with the play. Thus, her plays make constant use of fragmented, contradictory plots, and characters that baffle the audience. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* - the story of Clara, a mulato woman who is torn between her two heritages - is possibly one example of Kennedy's experimentalism.

Funnyhouse of a Negro (1964), together with other plays such as *A Movie Star has To Star in Black and White* (1976) are instances of what Catherine Belsey has termed as an "interrogative text", a text that, in opposition to the "classic realist text", "disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation ... it does literally invite

the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly arises” (Belsey 1980: 92). In this sense, both texts capitalize on the use of devices that work towards the undermining of the theatrical illusion and in this way refuse uncritical identification with the action on stage.

Kennedy’s use of fragmentation as an alternative mode of narrative has overreaching political consequences given the context in which these works were produced. By refusing to construct readers and spectators as coherent wholes - wholly identified with an action on stage that presents positive models rather than tormented ones-, Kennedy was discarding the self-representative function that Black Nationalists demanded. This was Kennedy’s refusal to write according to the Black Nationalist blueprint and the choice of an aesthetics that moved away from realism further reinforced her position. As Jeanie Forte has argued,

> realism ... supports the dominant ideology by constructing the reader as a subject (or more correctly, an ‘individual’) within that ideology. It poses an apparently objective or distanced viewpoint from which both the narrator and the reader can asses the action and ultimate meaning of the text, a pose which makes the operations of ideology covert, since the illusion is created for the reader that he or she is the source of meaning or understanding, unfettered by structures of culture. (Forte 1989: 115).

In the same line Catherine Belsey has further argued that the classic realist text also presents the subject as fixed and unchangeable, showing possible action “as an endless repetition of ‘normal’, familiar action” (Belsey 1980: 90) while at the same time, this kind of text conforms to the declarative function of language, i.e. “imparting ‘knowledge’ to a reader whose position is thereby stabilized....” (Belsey 1980: 91). Taking Belsey’s formulation, it becomes clear that Kennedy challenged the monolithic notion of Black Nationalism by exploring the different possibilities that African American identity meant to her.

Kennedy's use of a fragmented structure that affects both the construction of the plays and the selves of characters -emphasized by a literal splitting of characters' identities into different historical selves- can be read as a strategy that reflects the disruption of narrative centers of authority and at the same time foregrounds a self-reflexive quality by drawing attention to the formal construction of the play. Moreover, it is a way to link a typically decentered postmodern identity with the African American experience.

3. Translating African American identity in criticism: the postmodernism vs. identity politics debate

The demands for self-representation of Black Nationalist leaders and the example of Adrienne Kennedy's theater illustrates an ongoing debate about the real possibilities for political change that postmodernism can offer. Certainly, postmodernism has articulated a strategy for decentering the universal structures of thought that has opened the way to recognition of diversity and previously disenfranchised groups. As Carol Boyce Davies has argued, "postmodernism offers a disruption of metanarratives of all sorts and it is primarily at that level that one can see how that deconstruction of race or gender discourses which assume totality, can be activated by Black feminist critics" (Davies 1994: 51-52). While recognizing the initial potential of postmodernist discourse in its questioning of universal centers of authority that actually hide a white, Western, male perspective, there have also been many accusations against postmodernism, especially in those areas concerning subjectivity. One of them is that postmodernism is a masculinist discourse that perpetuates gender-blindness and excludes those who do not share a complicated jargon. Bell Hooks has powerfully voiced this accusation:

> disturbed not so much by the 'sense' of postmodernism but by the conventional language used when it is written or talked about and by those who speak it, I find myself on the outside of the discourse looking in. As a discursive practice it is dominated primarily by the voices of white male intellectuals and/or academic elites who speak to and about one another with coded familiarity. (Hooks 1990: 23-24).

In the same way, postmodernism has been systematically accused of avoiding and excluding the work of women and African Americans even though, as Hutcheon acutely notes, "female (and black) explorations of narrative and linguistic form have been among the most contesting and radical" (Hutcheon 1988: 17).

But the main aspect under discussion affects the different conception of identity and subjectivity that postmodernism shows on the one side and the conception that identity politics shows on the other. Thus, many of the formulations on the side of those in favor of identity politics have been deeply suspicious of the fact that it is precisely at a time that subjugated people are finding a voice and a collective identity that they are being asked to give it up for a postmodern decentered, non-essential subjectivity. These positions see the postmodernist critique of the subject as threatening and silencing those discourses which are just now gaining a voice. Thus, the appeal for the importance of identity politics in the face of the decentering of subjectivity is a

way to attempt to retain a specificity of experience. In this line, Betsy Erkkila has denounced the postmodernist and poststructuralist premises about the notions of subjectivity, authorship, experience, and representation: “whereas Foucault dismisses the questions of identity, subjectivity, and authorship as matters of indifference, these questions are still at the very center of the work of Blacks, Chicanos, Asian-Americans, women, gays, and other minority scholars in the United States” (Erkkila 1995: 565).

But, is there a way to reconcile both positions without excluding any of them? Carol Boyce Davies for instance, argues for a kind of selective activation,

> [...] talking with an entrenched ‘old/new’ critic, traditionalist, who wants to maintain the canon as it is, it is impossible not to activate some postmodernist positions. Or listening to an attack on a female colleague for her assertions into male space, can activate a feminist position. A nationalist, anti-imperialist position has to be articulated when black students are under attack. In other words, each position is deployed when each necessitates its own specific critique and one journeys accordingly or activates them simultaneously (Davies 1994: 53).

Although Davies attempts to bridge the gap between the two positions, there seems to be some problems with the model. First of all, the starting point is a supposedly center of neutrality where no positioning is established and this center activates a role depending on the person one is talking to so that it becomes basically a response to an external stimulus and the discourse is mainly aimed at a dialectical contestation without a strong political agenda or any hope for real transformation at the social level.

Bell Hooks also attempts to bridge the gap between postmodernism and identity politics by focusing on the benefits of a critique of essentialism for African Americans,

> employing a critique of essentialism allows African Americans to acknowledge the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on our lives. Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experiences. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy (Hooks 1998: 28).

While many of the formulations behind identity politics just make the margins into the center and riskily run into essentialist terrain, it seems that the claim for identity politics cannot be disdained right away. As Chris Weedon argues, “there may be strategic needs for identity politics, defined by shared forms of oppression and political objectives” (Weedon 1997: 176) in the same way that the first of the second wave feminist movement was largely based on a monolithic essence of “woman” that as the movement gained momentum was questioned and narrowed down to more specific material conditions by the ex-centric discourses of the very same movement. Hooks also argues that “given the pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics. Any critic exploring the radical potential of postmodernism as it relates to racial difference and racial domination would need to consider the

implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups" (Hooks 1990: 26). Hooks' conclusion on this aspect is that "an adequate response to this concern [the unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African Americans] is to critique essentialism while emphasizing the significance of the 'authority of experience'" (Hooks 1990: 29). This position, while being an attempt to formulate and bridge the gap, seems to be still unsatisfactory because it remains ambiguous. In Hooks' formulation, experience remains the ultimate source of truth and thus it assumes a certain set of presuppositions on the part of a black critic that pre-date his/her critical practice and restricts his/her range of options to 'black matters'. Chris Weedon has written about this gap in what seems to be the most satisfactory way of theorizing the way in which postmodernism can be an useful tool for political ends: "as postmodernists, we can use categories such as 'gender', 'race' and 'class' in social and cultural analysis but on the assumption that their meaning is plural, historically and socially specific" (Weedon 1997: 178).

The tension between the two positions has at heart the long-lasting debate about how a postmodern critique of categories of knowledge and grand narratives runs the risk of losing all kind of political agency at the communal level. It seems essential for the previously disenfranchised groups to retain a certain degree of operability at the political level. There is certainly, a gap to be bridged and maybe the way to start bridging it is to recognize the assets of each position and start working not on an either/or level but on a position that can incorporate a useful theorization of political agency drawing from different theoretical sources.

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