Breaking Through Liminal Spaces: A Study of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

Lenke Németh

> I know no places. That is I cannot believe in places. To believe in places is to know hope and to know the emotion of hope is to know beauty. It links us across a horizon and connects us to the world. I find there are no places only my funnyhouse.
> —A. Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

Repulsed by her black heritage and rejected by white society, Negro Sarah, the mixed-blood protagonist in Adrienne Kennedy's one-act play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) constructs a place of refuge, a *funnyhouse* for herself. She populates it with four historical figures who represent the warring selves of her mixed ancestry. Rather than empowering her, the iconic figures, namely the Congolese liberator Patrice Lumumba, a hunchback Jesus Christ, Queen Victoria, and the romantic Duchess of Hapsburg entrap her as she is unable to situate her selves in geographical locations: "I try to create a space for myselves in cities, New York, the Midwest, a southern town, but it becomes a lie" (563). Pushed into (non)existence, to a "borderland," a no man's land, Sarah is forced to create an alternative place for her selves: "the rooms are my rooms; a Hapsburg chamber, a chamber in a Victorian castle, the hotel where I killed my father, the jungle. These are the places myself exists" (563). The denial of the physical space entails the failure of spiritual reconciliation with the differing selves, so Sarah cannot escape her destiny and commits suicide.

Although Sarah, the protagonist fails to cross the borderline artificially set up between blacks and whites, Kennedy as author succeeded in breaking through several barriers—racial, cultural as well as literary and even personal—with her first play, *Funnyhouse* completed in 1962 and produced in 1964. The figurative bordercrossings, however, were preceded by literally crossing geographical borders when Kennedy and her husband traveled to Europe and Africa in 1960-61. Inspired by her long-coveted trip, the Cleveland-born Kennedy was able to overcome her sense of rootlesness, which had continually haunted her. Feeling torn between forces of her ancestry, as she admitted in her autobiography *People Who Led to My Plays* (1987), she had always dreamt about a journey: "One day I'm going to take a trip on an ocean liner, I thought, and all my dark thoughts and feelings, all my feelings that I don't belong anywhere will go away" (91). Indeed, she was able to unite her fragmented selves formed and shaped by European and African cultures and histories and to come over her identity crisis. Kennedy's confrontation with her roots in Europe and Africa gave rise to an exceptional burst of creative energies, which launched her dramatic career. The writing process of *Funnyhouse* also displays the inspirational force of traveling across

borders: conceived in West Africa in 1961, continued in Rome, *Funnyhouse* was sent to Edward Albee, who supported its opening at an East End Theater, off-Broadway in 1964.[1]

It was the liberating and the enlightening effect of the geographical bordercrossings that led Kennedy to the completion of *Funnyhouse*, a play that by itself abounds in subversive impulses both in theme and form. The reading I offer here will explore the extent to which Kennedy dismantles cultural, racial, and literary boundaries as presented in her Obie-winning play. I will argue that Kennedy not only re-defines and revises the *tragic mulatta* figure considered a taboo subject in the heyday of the Civil Rights Movements, but also, by dispersing the protagonist's fragmented identities into public selves, she introduces a new character (re)presentation technique that enables her to render the internal psychic torments of her character. By refusing to adopt preset fashionable ideologies of the 1960s as well as departing from a realistic dramatic style dominant in the narrative history of American drama, Kennedy clearly isolated herself from any group or movement that may have put claims on her. In formulating her dramatic credo she unambiguously points out her breaking-through-barriers spirit:

> I took up being writing because I wanted to break through barriers. I never wanted to identify totally with women playwrights or Black Playwrights or anybody. And since I did not get into the theater like that, it has been hard for me. I think that the theater is segregated enough. I am totally opposed to women's theater. One thing is important to know: if you don't write for a total audience, you are not going to survive as a playwright. I wanted to communicate with people. (qtd. in Binder 108)

Kennedy was excluded from the community of African American writers on account of her addressing the issues of passing and miscegenation in *Funnyhouse* in a period when the proponents of the Black Arts Movement expected Black artists to produce works that would celebrate Black Pride. Nevertheless, a mulatta's desperate attempts to carve a space for herself in American society is closely related to a dominant theme running through in African American literary tradition, namely the trouble of discovering identity via framing the space of that identity. Negro Sarah's torment felt about the lack of place and the resulting confusion about the disintegration of identity appears to be a recurrent motif in African-American literary discourse. The tremendous burden of the geographical dislocation of blacks from Africa to the New World America, then from the American South to the North left an indelible mark on black imagination and has provided ample material for all forms of African-American expressiveness since the advent of Black literature in the mid-nineteenth century. In their search for a home and self, numerous protagonists face the dilemma that Ralph Ellison articulates as follows: "if we don't know *where* we are, we have little chance of knowing *who* we are, that if we confuse the *time*, we confuse the place; and when we confuse these

we endanger our humanity, both physically and morally" (*Shadow* 74). Viewed in this light, addressing the mulatta theme aligns Kennedy with major authors' concerns in mainstream African American culture and literature. Yet, in her treatment of the cliché figure of the mulatta Kennedy deviated from norms and standards set by the Black community in the 1960s.

It came as no surprise that, revolving around a mulatta's futile attempts to integrate herself into the white community, *Funnyhouse* invited more frowns than appraisals in the volatile socio-political period of the 1960s. Apparently, the reductive stereotypical figure of the *tragic mulatto* ceased to exist by the middle of the twentieth century, while notions like miscegenation and passing closely attached to it vanished in the fervent upheaval of the socio-political uprisings in the 1960s and 1970s when "the dramatic expansion of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement parallel to the movements asserting ethnic consciousness swept away both the topicality and the socio-historical importance of passing" (Virágos and Varró 126).[2] The ideologies and slogans of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement celebrating racial pride (a feeling of self-respect and pride at one's own black heritage) contended that a Black author "must embrace Black nationalism and cultural separatism," and literary works should have "social protest overtones, either strident or muted" (Virágos, *The Myth* 228). On the face of it, these official directives made the saga of passing, and the act of passing itself, outdated. The newly-coined phrase "Passing is passé" proved to be accurate, at least, for a time.

The subject of passing, however, did not vanish entirely even in the controversial period of the 1960s. The often harsh reactions against the theme of passing resurfacing in the main character in *Funnyhouse* substantiate the claim that "literary stereotypy is not primarily an aesthetic problem: stereotypy is essentially an ideological and epistemological—as well as moral—exercise closely bound up with processes of mythicization, especially as these latter procedures shape and maintain a group's belief system and scale of values" (223). Indeed, Kennedy's work diverged from the "norm" as expected by proponents of the Black Arts Movement since her play did not share the militant racism of Imamu Amiri Baraka: she did not expose the enemy; neither did she inspire revolutionary action through her work. A major objection to her characters was, as Alisa Solomon notes, that her [Kennedy's] characters "were confused about their identity and place in the world," and they "did not proclaim an uncomplicated pride in being black" (qtd. in Barnett, "Fundamental" 148). No wonder that Kennedy's outright rejection of following the "prescriptions" of the Black Arts Movement led to her exclusion from the community of African American writers.

As opposed to the reductive and narrow-minded evaluations pertaining to *Funnyhouse* and its protagonist, Barnsley Brown is right in claiming that Kennedy's writing is "profoundly political in its revision of the tragic mulatta" since it "reveals the deleterious effect of her protagonist's efforts to pass for white" (282). Also, I believe that in effect Kennedy had a much clearer vision concerning the space and place of the African American community in the "painful web of American race and kin relations"

(Sollors, Introduction vii) in the turmoil of the sixties than her contemporaries did. Kennedy's *muted revolution* lies in overturning the stereotypical figure of the tragic mulatta as well as in her insistence on acknowledging racial mixing as a legitimate part of African American heritage and American history. The fact that the sheer number of the white-black mixed-blood citizens in the US is very high, actually, by the end of the 20th century about "three quarters out of the 30 million African Americans are descendents of mixed-blood parents," reinforces Kennedy's boldness and foresightedness (Virágos and Varró 113).

In the ensuing analysis of the tragic mulatta in *Funnyhouse*, I will extend the functional and operational validity of definitions and concepts offered in character typology studies that provide insights into the *tragic mulatto* stereotype in American literature. I contend that the figures of the tragic mulatto and the mulatta share essential traits including certain thematic and compositional attributes; thus no specific "tailoring" transactions are required in the linkage of the gender counterparts. However, gender-specific dimensions—a fear of rape—specifically relevant to the character of the tragic mulatta will be given due attention.

With her effort to break down dualities that imprison mulattos and mulattas (or people living at the crossroads of two different cultures), Kennedy subverts the conventionally accepted dualities on several levels. By definition, "the figure of the *tragic mulatto* (usually born of a white father and a colored mother of mixed origin), widely-used in American sentimental fiction and drama, designates a light-skinned person [. . .] who is entrapped in a no man's land of the American society arbitrarily polarized into two extremes based on the color of the skin" (Virágos, *A négerség* 173). By contrast, Kennedy reverses the enduring white father–versus-colored-mother pattern only to replace it with another equally haunting stereotypical pair of a light skinned mother and a black father. Sarah's mother was "the lightest one," while her father is "a darkest one of them all," "the nigger" (Kennedy 562), moreover "the wilderness" and "the jungle" (564) metonymically also refer to her father. The subversion of the pertinent duality on the level of skin color extends both the thematic dimensions and the arsenal of stereotypes to be dismantled in the play: an all-pervading fear of rape is included and the cliché figure of the *Brute Nigger* is evoked. The reversal of the white-against-black rape pattern, which was overwhelmingly more frequent during slavery, to a black father rapist of a light-skinned mother and a potential rapist of her daughter allows Kennedy to condemn the damaging phobias of a racialized and sexist society, no matter which sex or people of what color are affected. As Rosemary Curb claims, "it is a distortion fabricated by phobic white racists to imagine that the darker the man the more likely he is to rape and the lighter the woman the more likely she is to be the victim" (145).

The stereotypical beliefs are successfully debunked by a powerful presentation of an obsessive fear of rape omnipresent in the play, which is achieved by a unique structuring principle. The mosaic-like, fragmented design intricately interwoven by expressionistic and surrealistic devices serves as a proper means to illuminate Sarah's

mental state imbued with a constant fear of rape. The disruption of a linear narration technique combines with a complex interplay of various effects like ominous sounds, light effects and objects gaining symbolic meanings. "On the level of grammar as well as of narrative, Kennedy eschews cause and effect structure," as Deborah Thompson remarks about Kennedy's prose style with reference to her autobiography. However, I find that the same observation is valid for *Funnyhouse* as well. Similarly, Thomson's conclusion concerning the lack of causality also applies to the structuring principle in the play: "many of her entries present sudden unexpected connections—or lack of connections—and leave a reader wondering what conclusions (if any) to draw," nevertheless, "startling juxtaposition of statements makes sense because of its irreconcilability, its inability to relate its components causally (64). As a result of this method, though both Sarah and her light-skinned mother are haunted by the "black bastard" evoking the *Brute Nigger* stereotype, in describing various facets of Sarah's acute fear of rape, Kennedy evokes the "collective memory of institutionalized rape by white masters during slavery" (Curb 143).

The working of the fragmented narrative line can be illustrated by describing how the motif of rape surfaces and resurfaces in the character-selves' utterances. Although the opening scene of the play sets both the tone and some of the recurrent imagery of the play by having a woman in a white nightgown walk across the stage, before the "ghastly white curtains" and, as if in trance, mumbling to herself something while carrying a bald head in front of her (Kennedy 562), the reason for the appearance of the haunting image of Sarah's mother will be clarified only after Sarah's selves narrate, repeat, and extend their own stories. The woman's voice becomes audible on her second appearance after the loud KNOCKING, incessantly heard signaling the arrival of Sarah's father: "Black man, black man, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me and now my skull is shining" (563). In between, however, Sarah's selves, her idolized white aristocratic ladies also echo her fear of rape in their first encounter:

> VICTORIA. (*Listening to the knocking.*) It is my father. *The Duchess makes no reply.*) He comes through the jungle to find me. He never tires of his journey.
> DUCHESS. How dare he enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one? (562)

Only at a later stage does Sarah the Negro's narrative reveal that she was conceived by rape: "in Africa he started to drink and came home drunk one night and raped my mother. The child from the union is me" (565). The threat of rape is reiterated by Sarah's royal selves several times. Queen Victoria voices: "He keeps returning forever, coming back ever and keeps coming back forever. He is my father" (562). The Duchess begs Raymond: "the blackest one of them all [. . .] comes through the jungle" (563)—hide me so the nigger will not find me" (564). Further aggravating the horror,

Sarah recalls the threat of her father's abuse in her childhood: "he speaks niggerly groveling about wanting to touch me with his black hands" (564) —"nights my father came from his school in the village struggling to embrace me. But I fled and hid under my mother's bed while she screamed of remorse" (565). As a consequence, not only is she in constant fear that her father will return from the jungle and rape her as well, but also blames herself for her mother's pain, for her being sent to an asylum. From this perspective the significance of the opening scene with the Mother appearing "as an archetypal madwoman" (Curb 144) is fully clarified to offer a powerful image of the insane mother insistently haunting Sarah.

Sarah's father is modeled on "the most damaging Black stereotype that projected the image of the African American male as beast," the *Brute Nigger*, which "emerged in Southern prose in the wake of Reconstruction" (Virágos, "Myth" 230). An utter fear of "the Black man's potential economic and political ascendancy, as well as intermarriage" (230) prompted the creation of this cliché figure. The *Brute Nigger* figure "reflected the myth of the Black's sexual potency and the fear of retaliation by black men for white men's use and brutalization of black women during slavery" (232). "The new stereotype portrayed the Black male as an arrogant, degenerate, bestial, and apelike creature, a spectre of rape against white womanhood" (232). The adjectives as well as the metonymical references employed to describe Sarah's father resonate with the features attached to the stereotype and the following linkages tend to emerge: bestial-nigger, degenerate-wilderness, and apelike-jungle. Sarah's father's sin to have sexual union with a white woman is condemned by a racialized, sexist culture that "always privileges white over black, male over female, European over African, [. . .] (Curb 146). "Brainwashed" by the racist discourse of the white society Sarah reiterates *their* ideology: "He had married her mother because he could not resist the light" (Kennedy 566).

Kennedy's mastery in using extremely powerful and polysemic images is evident in her choice of the fear of rape motif since it gains further symbolic extension of meaning. Inseparable in Sarah's mind from her black father's figure, the rape motif is extended to the rejection of her black heritage she desperately intends to shake off. But "Sarah can neither accept nor escape her own blackness," as Susan Meigs asserts (176). Her denial of the black heritage is crystallized in the image of her black father coming back from the jungle to visit and rape her. However hard she tries to suppress her blackness, she is all the more entangled in it. She builds a fortress against her black ancestry and creates a space for her selves, a castle room, where she can shut herself up from her past, which, however, never ceases to disturb her.

In her feverish attempt to escape from her father Sarah claims to have murdered him by her own hands: "I bludgeoned his head with an ebony skull that he carries about with him" (562), or blames herself for driving him to hang himself. Both these acts turn out to be her "wish-fulfilling fantasy of vengeance" (Curb 148), though. The riddle of whether Sarah's father is alive or dead is not solved in the play. On the contrary, Raymond's final comments over Sarah's dead body: "Her father never hung

himself" and "he is a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table" (Kennedy 567) raise questions that remain unanswered. Inevitably, the clarification of Sarah's father's death would impart a realistic strain to the play leading to a fracture in its dream-like quality.

The literary representations of divided loyalties have called for stock characteristics of mulattos and recurrent compositional elements: "the mixed-blood character is associated with a wide spectrum of predictable sentiments and attitudes (self-pity, the complaint mode, easy nostalgia, cultural sentimentality) as well as with a set of narrowly defined thematic preoccupations (e.g. the recurrent theme of 'passing' or the oft-described skin color mania") (Virágos, "Myth" 230). A most striking departure from the presentation of the cliché figure of a mulatto in *Funnyhouse* lies in the elimination of its sentimental treatment. By rule, a tragic mulatto stereotype is "almost invariably melodramatically conceived" (230), however, Negro Sarah is not a pitiable character arousing sympathy in readers or viewers, thus she fails to be an apt subject for melodramatic treatment. A talented and educated university student of English, Sarah has both existential security (she lives in a brownstone with her Jewish boyfriend in New York) and a chance for social advancement. The "tragic" modifier in her case connotes that in spite of her free, independent status quo in society she fails to find a space for herself as a consequence of being condemned and mocked by the whites.

Far from being sentimental, the only characters placed outside Sarah's mind are the Landlady and Raymond, Sarah's Jewish boyfriend. They represent outsiders' perspectives and their ironic and deeply sarcastic attitude to mulattos. They voice society's indifference verging on hostility to Sarah, and indirectly, to African Americans. In endowing these characters with traits and behavior typical in a funnyhouse, Kennedy alludes to the fact that they are mere puppets manipulated by the racist ideology of the community. Accordingly, both of them treat Sarah condescendingly and even mockingly. The distorted nature of their physical build—both of them are tall, thin, and white, what is more, Raymond looks "*ghostly thin*"—as well as the colour imagery accentuate that they belong to the funnyhouse: the Landlady is "*dressed in a black and red hat*" (Kennedy 563), while Raymond is "*dressed in a black shirt and black trousers attire suggesting an artist*" (564). Most importantly, they both laugh *like mad characters in a funnyhouse* (564). It is also revealing that Raymond's primary motive to have a relationship with Sarah derives from his interest in Blacks rather than out of genuine love. The outsiders' indifference and their total lack of sympathy and regret become evident in their cynical comments when confronting Sarah's dead body hanging above. The Landlady remarks, "The poor bitch," while Raymond adds, "she was a funny little liar" (567). As Ruby Cohn articulates, "there is neither truth nor rest for the perturbed spirit in the white funnyhouse of a Negro" (109).

The anti-melodramatic atmosphere dominating the play is further enhanced by a consistent application of sound and light effects, arresting imagery, and a fragmented narrative technique reflecting Sarah's confused mind. A detailed analysis of the working of these elements is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, suffice it to say

here that a skillful combination of surrealistic imagery (kinky hair protruding from under the royal women's white headpieces, ravens, a bald head) and the expressionist techniques comprising an effective use of sound, strong lighting, costume, makeup and color effects (persistent knocking throughout the play, the elaborate use of black and white color images supplemented occasionally with red and yellow) all contribute to the illustration of the nightmarish world and the psychological state of Sarah's mind.

As opposed to a conventional, what I would call an *external* representation of psychic torments through dialogues between characters, Kennedy's character portrayal technique—which I term *dialogized polyphony*—places emphasis on revealing the *internal* struggle of Negro Sarah. Essentially, it is a peculiar *monologue* of one character whose self-imposed masks/imagoes/alter egos converse with each other. By dispersing Sarah's conflicting selves to four historical figures, Kennedy lets the reader/viewer enter the confused and troubled consciousness of Sarah to show us the burdensome legacy of the tragic mulatta. In this way "Kennedy manages to make the private world of her characters as public experience for her audiences and to assault her audience just as her characters have been attacked by racism in various forms: institutionalized prejudice, public ridicule, and self-hatred" (Brown 283). The iconic selves are supplemented by a fifth one, the student Sarah, who is also viewed from outside: "When I am the Duchess of Hapsburg I sit opposite Victoria and [. . .] we talk. The other time I wear the dress of a student, dark clothes and dark stockings" (Kennedy 563). Analogous with the *stream-of-consciousness* narrative technique used in modernist fiction in its function of entering the mind of the character, *dialogized polyphony* marks a significant step in the history of character portrayal techniques in drama.

Dialogized polyphony serves as an effective character configuration to convey the sense of disintegration of identity and the fragmentation of the subject. The main character's split selves thus arranged in a polyphonic design display a multiplicity of consciousness which enter into dialogue with each other and comment on each other. In their original site of application, in the novel, Mikhail M. Bakhtin uses the concepts of dialogue and polyphony as modes of foregrounding characters. In a polyphonic structural design a character's word "is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice" (Bakhtin 7). Similarly, the distinct voices of the self in the case of split characters are also arranged in a polyphonic fashion, whereby they adequately mirror the main character's fight for self-realization. In this way the conflicting identities of characters are foregrounded and each is granted his own voice. It is a highly effective way of conveying the play's main thematic concern; the female protagonist's disintegrating identity and her failure to construct a coherent self. What is displayed is a psychological battle in which the protagonist attempts to overcome her identity crisis.

The approach to the (re)presentation of multiple aspects of character in Kennedy's drama may stem from a childhood experience. As she mulls this over in her autobiography *People Who Led to my Plays*: "people turning to different characters and feeling

that you have a lot of characters inside of you, that's so much a part of me. I've always been like that. I always just could easily become a character in the movies or a book" (89). However, Kennedy's choice of the historical figures to display her burdensome mixed-blood heritage reflects the impact of her first trip to Europe and Africa. In the same text she details the origin of her imagery in *Funnyhouse* as follows:

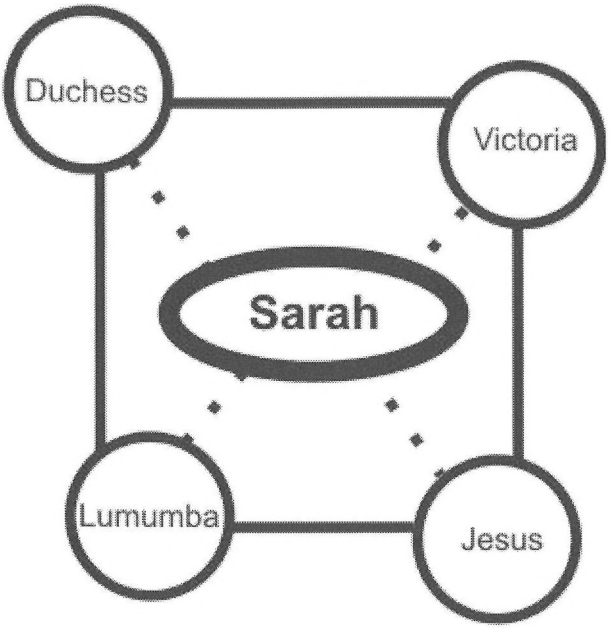
> In 1960 my husband and I left New York on the *Queen Elizabeth*. It was my first sight of Europe and Africa. We stopped in London, Paris, Madrid, Casablanca, and lived in Liberia before we settled in Accra, Ghana. The imagery in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* was born by seeing those places. Queen Victoria, the statue in front of Buckingham Palace, Patrice Lumumba on posters and small cards all over Ghana, murdered just after we arrived, fall 1960. The savannas in Ghana; it was impossible to keep my hair straightened, I stopped straightening my hair. I had always liked the Duchess of Hapsburg since I'd seen the Chapultapec Palace in Mexico. (95)

Furthermore, her drama is also shaped by references to the members of her own family:

> In May (1961) my mother had written me that my father had left Cleveland and returned to Georgia to live after thirty years. So Jesus (who I had always mixed with my social worker father) and the landscape and memories of Georgia and my grandparents became intertwined with the paragraphs on the Ghanian savannas and Lumumba and his murder. (95)

In the course of the play Sarah is heard and seen through the four selves of Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Patrice Lumumba, and Jesus. The figure below illustrates Sarah's conflicting selves revolving around her inner self like satellites.

Negro Sarah suffers from the same anguish as a typical mulatto character who is "too refined and sensitive to live under the repressive condition endured by ordinary Blacks and too colored to enter the white world" (Virágos, "Myth" 230). The torment of Sarah's liminal existence, her in-between-state is presented through multiple selves, by her imagoes, thus underlying the acute pain felt over this state. As Elin Diamond argues, "Negro-Sarah is not an 'I' but always an I-as-other" (118). The dangers of identification lie in the fact that "identification creates sameness not with the self but another," and while "identity operates through logic of exclusion—my being or consciousness affirms its self-sameness by not being you—identification is trespass, denying the other's difference by assimilating her behavior, taking her place" (107). Indeed, the multiplicity of consciousness through Sarah's internalized imagoes displays her troubled and tormented mental state, yet the cultural-historical figures fail to solve or give solace to Sarah's multicomponential identity crisis. Eventually, her self-imposed alter egos become estranged, weaned as it were, from Sarah and "far from empowering her, these character masks trap Sarah in a role of self-hatred, fear, and



inability to integrate her personality" (Meigs 174). The technique employed by Kennedy illustrates the protagonist's confused mind so powerfully that it is legitimate to claim that "[n]o contemporary US playwright has theatricalized the disturbances of identification with the acuity of Adrienne Kennedy. No one had underscored with her tenacity the imbrication of identity and identification" (Diamond 107).

In empowering Sarah with women of royal blood, Kennedy departs from the nostalgic-sentimental and sensational-melodramatic presentation of mulattos, on the one hand, and on the other hand, she retains the passing and "skin color mania" motifs in as much as Sarah's main motivating force is to cross the color line. Negro Sarah attempts to find her space in the much-idolized white culture. In her identification with Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg she is eager to acquire their qualities because their female power promises invulnerability and inaccessibility. Also, the white female aristocrats represent whiteness, sophistication, a desired life-style and a respected social status, which are models to follow for Sarah. As she herself defines her ultimate objectives, "it is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meal on a white glass table" (Kennedy, *Funnyhouse* 563).

Kennedy herself was fascinated by Queen Victoria as a "woman who dominated her age" and she remembers that "the statue of Victoria in front of Buckingham Palace was the single most dramatic, startling statue I'd seen" (*People* 118). In like fashion, Queen Victoria is Negro Sarah's idol as she has placed Victoria's statue opposite the door. Yet, ironically, Victoria's contradictory qualities are more evident in the racially

charged atmosphere of *Funnyhouse*. The power and the image that Sarah intends to endow herself with is based on colonization. The replica of Queen Victoria is "a thing of terror, possessing the quality of nightmares, suggesting large and probable deaths," Raymond reminds Sarah (Kennedy, *Funnyhouse* 563). Negro Sarah's compelling desire to assimilate into the white culture makes her adopt even the racist ideology of the dominant culture: "Victoria always wants me to tell her of whiteness. She 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" (563).

In an attempt to find reconciliation with her character selves, Negro Sarah is eager to build a relationship with them and negotiate between them but she fails to do so: "I clung loyally to the lie of relationships, again and again seeking to establish a connection between my characters [. . .] a loving relationship exists between my characters [. . .] but they are lies" (564). It is bizarre that the character (or persona) Negro Sarah is trying to make contact with is the statue of a powerful woman, or rather a replica of the statue of a powerful woman. This device is utterly ironic and illuminates the futility of Negro Sarah's endeavors. Kennedy explains her method as follows: "In my play I would soon have the heroine, Sarah, talk to a replica of this statue [. . .] And the *statue* would reply, the statue would inform my character of her *inner* thoughts. The statue would reveal my character's secrets to herself" (*People* 118).

The Duchess, the wife of an Austrian Hapsburg archduke, became "one of Kennedy's characters' most sympathetic alter egos or selves" (Kennedy, *People* 96). She came across her in the movie *Juarez*, in which the Duchess was played by Bette Davis, the actress that the playwright always adored. She could easily identify with the qualities and characteristics of the Duchess as emphasized in the film: "the Duchess' power over her husband but also her failures, that she loves her husband immeasurably, accepts the responsibility for her actions" (97). And again, "the Duchess seems an odd choice for a figure of female power. She was beautiful and powerful but she was childless, miserable, and ultimately insane," as Barnett comments ("A Prison" 379).

Neither of the royal women possesses glory, power, strength or beauty any more, only Negro Sarah's imagination projects these qualities upon them. Instead, their masks and faces look grotesque, lifeless, and reminiscent of gothic descriptions: "*they look exactly alike and will wear masks or be made up to appear a whitish yellow. It is an alabaster face, the skin drawn tightly over the high cheekbones, great dark eyes that seem gouged out of the head, a high forehead, a full red mouth and a head of frizzy hair*" (*Funnyhouse* 562). As Barnett suggests, "rather than absorbing the Queen's and the Duchess's personalities into herself, she has projected herself onto them" ("A Prison" 379). However, the historical figures recreated as Sarah's selves are only phantoms in a make-believe mausoleum whose "faces possess a hard expressionless quality" (562), indicating that they are no longer at the zenith of their power that Sarah could appropriate. Also, their "stillness as in the face of death" (562) coincides with Sarah's will to die.

Negro Sarah, as a typical mulatta, is obsessed with the skin colour mania: "My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman's. And at least I am yellow, but he is black, the blackest one of them all" (Kennedy 562). Talking to Raymond, the Duchess repeats: "My father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest. I am in between" (564). She wishes to assimilate, to disappear, to disburden herself from the disdain: "as for myself I long to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now. Pallid like Negroes on the covers of American Negro magazines, soulless, educated and irreligious" (Kennedy 563).

Entrapped by her imagoes, Negro Sarah's fate is doomed, just as that of previous tragic mulattos' as there is no way out of the borderland/the funnyhouse she inhabits. Her first appearance on stage with a hangman's rope around her neck serves as a multifunctional symbol. Evoking the image of a lynch victim, the rope stigmatizes her, and as Curb asserts, "condemns her for being black" (148). Furthermore, that opening foreshadows Sarah's self-destruction, her hanging herself. In the final jungle scene the *polyphony* of voices merges into a *cacophony* of voices effectively producing a climactic moment with all the selves speaking simultaneously while the KNOCKING—suggesting Sarah's father's imminent arrival throughout the play—intensifies, then a flash of light Sarah's father figure rushes upon herand after a blackout Sarah's hanging figure can be seen.

No matter what tricks and illusions Negro Sarah uses to project herself into the white community, her identifications prove to be mismatched and ill-advised. Paralyzed by self-hatred and crippled by her failure to reconcile with her mixed ancestry, she hangs herself. In her self-annihilation she follows the pattern set by her male dramatic counterpart, Robert Norwood, the mulatto son of a plantation owner in Langston Hughes's drama *Mulatto: A Play of the Deep South* (1935). In contrast with Hughes's play, however, which appears to reinforce the inevitability of black and white duality, Kennedy aims to eliminate "the accepted binary, black-white construction of race" and calls attention to "the usually ignored history of racial mixing that has characterized North American life" (Brown 282). By emphasizing the interface of black and white cultures and histories as forces shaping Sarah's personality, Kennedy dismantles cultural and racial boundaries, while the blending of various dramatic techniques (expressionist, surrealist, and absurdist) allows her to break down boundaries between dramatic trends and styles.

The disruptive strains apparent on both the thematic and formal levels in her first drama, and also in her subsequent plays[3] readily align the author with postmodernism and the postmodern dramatic idiom emerging in the 1960s on the American scene. In a somewhat narrower sense, however, when we consider the socio-historical and political context and its implications in her drama, it is legitimate to claim that "Kennedy seems less a postmodern celebrant of unfixed subjectivity than a woman of 'mixed ancestry' longing for a stable identity in a social system which insists on the binary identities of black or white, male or female" (Thompson 70). Through the revision of the apparently *deceased* stereotypical figure of the tragic mulatta Kennedy not only raises

the American audiences' consciousness to the harmful consequences of stereotyping but also attempts to exorcise the demons of creating any stereotypes. In a similar vein, Ralph Ellison also seems to have believed in the final erasure of Negro stereotypes once the white individuals find space/home in the world for themselves:

> The Negro stereotype is really an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life, forces through which, by projecting them in forms of images of an easily dominated minority, the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America. Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man. (*Shadow* 57-58)

Kennedy and Ellison appear to share a belief that American society must reconcile with their multi-racial legacy and eliminate the color line that has been created in American history to separate people and cultures rather than unite them.

NOTES

[1] Kennedy remembers that Albee "loved the language, he loved the rhythms in the monologues, and he liked the form" (qtd. in Binder 104).

[2] My translation. L.N.

[3] Her subsequent plays from 1963-1969 address issues of race and a search for identity. *The Owl Answers*, 1963, *A Rat's Mass* (1966), *The Lennon Play: In his Own Write* (1967), A *Lesson in a Dead Language* (1968), *Sun: A Poem for Malcolm X* (1968), *A Beast Story* (1969), *Boats* (1969).

WORKS CITED

Bakthin, M. M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. and Ed. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

Barnett, Claudia. "A Prison of Object Relations: Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*." *Modern Drama* 40.3 (1997): 374-85.

—. "'This Fundamental Challenge to Identity': Reproduction and Representation in the Drama of Adrienne Kennedy." *Theatre Journal* 48.2 (1996): 141-55.

Binder, Wolfgang. "A *MELUS* Interview: Adrienne Kennedy." *MELUS* 12.3 (1985): 99-108.

Brown, Barnsley, E. "Passed Over: The Tragic Mulatta and (Dis)Integration of Identity in Adrienne Kennedy's Plays." *African American Review* 35.2 (2001): 281-95.

Cohn, Ruby. *New American Dramatists: 1960-1980*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

Curb, Rosemary. "(Hetero)Sexual Terrors in Adrienne Kennedy's Early Plays." *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*. Ed. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992. 142-57.

Diamond, Elin. *Unmaking Mimesis*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Dixon, Melvin. *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature.* Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1987.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

—. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1966.

Kennedy, Adrienne. *Funnyhouse of a Negro.* Ed. W. B. Worthen. *Modern Drama: Plays/Criticism/Theory.* Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995. 562-67.

—. *People Who Led to My Plays.* New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987.

Meigs, Susan, E. "No Place But the Funnyhouse." *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*. Ed. June Schlueter. New Jersey: Associated UP, 1990. 172-84.

Sollors, Werner. "Owls and Rats in the American Funnyhouse: Adrienne Kennedy's Drama." *American Literature* 63 (1991): 507-32.

Thompson, Deborah. "The Fiction of Postmodern Autobiography: Adrienne Kennedy's *People Who Led to My Plays* and *Deadly Triplets*." *MELUS* 22.4 (Winter 1997): 61-76.

Virágos, Zsolt. "Mítosz és társadalmi tudat: irodalmi és társadalmi mítoszok az amerikai kultúrában." [Myth and Social Consciousness: Literary and Social Myths in American (USA) Culture]. Diss. Debrecen University. 1998.

—. *A négerség és az amerikai irodalom*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975.

Virágos, Zsolt, and Varró Gabriella. *Jim Crow örökösei: Mítosz és sztereotípia az amerikai társadalmi tudatban és kultúrában.* [The Heirs of Jim Crow: Myth and Stereotype in American Social Consciousness and Culture]. Budapest: Eötvös, 2002.