

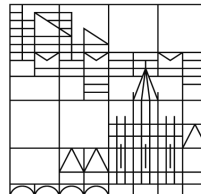
**Enacting Cultural Identity:
Time and Memory in 20th-Century African-American
Theater by Female Playwrights**

Dissertation
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Finally, I owe my deepest gratitude to my partner Dirk and to my parents Monika and Axel for their unflagging encouragement and loving support throughout my studies and this challenging project. Thank you very much.

Abbreviations

- RA Grimké, Angela Weld. "Rachel (1916)." *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans*. Eds. Hatch, James V. and Ted Shine. Vol. 1. New York: Free Press. 1996. 133-68.
- TTSD Burrill, Mary. "They That Sit in Darkness (1919)." *Black Theater, U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*. Eds. Hatch, James V. and Ted Shine. New York: Free Press, 1974. 178-83.
- CS Hurston, Zora Neale. "Color Struck. A Play in Four Scenes (1925)." *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*. Ed. Perkins, Kathy A. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989. 89-102.
- FUC Livingston, Myrtle Smith. "For Unborn Children (1926)." *Black Theater, U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*. Eds. Hatch, James V. and Ted Shine. New York: Free Press, 1974. 184-87.
- EN Gilbert, Mercedes. "Environment (1931)." *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940*. Eds. Hatch, James V. and Leo Hamalian. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996. 201-26.
- RIS Hansberry, Lorraine. "A Raisin in the Sun (1959)." *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans, 1847 to Today*. Eds. Hatch, James V. and Ted Shine. New York: Free Press. 1996. 512-54.
- WIW Childress, Alice. "Wine in the Wilderness (1969)." *Black Theater, U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*. Eds. Hatch, James V. and Ted Shine. New York: Free Press, 1974. 737-55.
- FCG Shange, Ntozake. "for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem. (1976)." New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997.
- CM Wolfe, George C. "The Colored Museum (1988)." *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans*. Eds. Hatch, James Vernon and Ted Shine. Rev. and expanded ed. Vol. 2. New York: Free Press. 451-72.
- WMW Jackson, Judith Alexa. "WOMBmanWARs (1992)." *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women*. Ed. Mahone, Sydné. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994. 143-85.
- AP Parks, Suzan-Lori. "The America Play (1994)." *The America Play and Other Works*. Ed. Parks, Suzan-Lori. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995. 157-99.
- TD/UD Parks, Suzan-Lori. "Topdog/Underdog (2001)." New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013.

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1. Introduction

The road to BLACK LIBERTY is paved with BLACK CULTURE.
BLACK CULTURE is the sum of all expressions
of BLACK THOUGHT, of BLACK LOVE and of BLACK ART which,
throughout history have enabled the black race
to be less enslaved by the cultural shackles of colonialism.¹

When I first told a much valued colleague and a dear friend of mine about my intention to work on 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights, she was quite astonished and asked me which authors I was thinking of. Holding an M.A. in African-American Studies, she was of course familiar with female playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange whose plays *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) were also produced on Broadway. She had however never heard of Mary Burrill, Myrtle Smith Livingston, Mary Mercedes Gilbert, or Judith Alexa Jackson. Over the course of working on my dissertation I received several similar reactions to my work from different renowned experts in African-American and Theater Studies, both in Germany and in the United States of America.

This lack of familiarity with the writings of 20th-century African-American female playwrights is indeed indicative of the general state of the art on this specific field of study. Thus far, the literary tradition of African-American theater by female playwrights has been largely overlooked by both public interest and scholarship. The different scholars to whom I presented my work were surprised by the richness and diversity of this dramatic art, and even the most avid theatergoer can rarely name more than a few plays by black American women playwrights. Whereas narrative texts like Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and

¹ Bookmark by Ronald A. Blodgett (American, born 1963).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) have become integral parts of the African-American literary canon, plays by black American female playwrights largely tend to fall by the canonical wayside.

In many cases only little information exists on the life and work of black female playwrights, as the example of Myrtle Smith Livingston reveals. Depending on the source, Livingston's date of birth is sometimes listed as 1901, sometimes as 1902. Similarly, her date of death, when listed, is either given as 1970 or 1974, indicating the scarcity of solid information about her life.² Although we know that Livingston wrote several sketches and plays while holding a teaching position at Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Missouri, none of her plays besides *For Unborn Children* (1926) have been located.³ During my research stay at Yale University, Connecticut, I discovered that neither the archives of Yale's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library nor the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York – one of the leading institutions for the comprehensive collection and preservation of material on black life, literature, and culture in the world – host any documents or material on Livingston. This lack is quite surprising given the fact that during her career as a teacher of physical education and health at Lincoln University, Missouri, she spent several sabbaticals at New York University and Columbia University, New York, where she received her M.A. in 1940.

Collections in anthologies are always valuable indicators of how much attention a specific literary tradition has received, and they are especially illuminating with regard to the status of African-American theater by female playwrights. They reveal that black female playwrights are largely underrepresented when compared with their male colleagues. For example, of the 45 plays included in *Black Theater, U.S.A.: Forty-Five*

² In James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, eds., Black Theater, U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974 (New York: Free Press, 1974). Myrtle Smith Livingston is said to be born in 1901; the date of her death is not listed. The entry on Livingston in the African American National Biography (Henry L. Gates and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, The African American National Biography, 8 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): Vol. 5: 281-282) lists her date of birth as May 8, 1902, and her date of death as July 15, 1974. According to the information given in Henry L. Gates and Jennifer Burton, eds., Zora Neale Hurston, Eulalie Spence, Marita Bonner, and Others: The Prize Plays and Other One-Acts Published in Periodicals (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996), however, she lived from 1902 to 1970.

³ The play is reprinted in Hatch and Shine, eds., Black Theater, U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974: 184-187. The Lincoln University archives, Jefferson City, MS, are indeed the only institution that hosts some material on Livingston.

Plays by Black Americans. 1847-1974, only fourteen plays were written by female authors. Considering that this collection was published in 1974 at the height of the feminist movements, this disproportion is quite surprising. Similarly, even in the “revised and extended” 1996 edition of *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans, 1847 to Today* there are only ten plays written by female playwrights among a total of twenty-eight works included in the collection. Eight of these ten plays are subsumed under the heading of “Early Plays by Black Women,” covering the time period between 1916 and 1928, while the rest of the 20th century is represented only by single plays by Zora Neale Hurston and May Miller, the two most-read and most published female writers of the Harlem Renaissance. These examples reveal that if black female playwrights are included at all, their representation is often restricted to a few prominent examples. With the exception of a handful of respected plays such as Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), or Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990) black female playwrights remain quite invisible in the history of African-American literature.

It is indeed only in recent years, influenced by the feminist movements of the 1970s, that scholars have begun to rediscover and reinvestigate African-American theater by female playwrights. By publishing 19 selected plays, Kathy A. Perkins’s 1990 groundbreaking collection *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*, aims to acknowledge the works of seven pioneer black women writers before 1950.⁴ Elizabeth Brown-Guillory’s *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1990) brings together thirteen plays by black women playwrights from the 1920s to the 1980s.⁵ With her anthology *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women* published in 1994, Sydné Mahone draws attention to the role of eleven black women writers in contemporary

⁴ Kathy A. Perkins, *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989). Authors included in this collection: Georgia Douglas Johnson, Mary P. Burrill, Zora Neale Hurston, Eulalie Spence, May Miller, Marita Bonner, and Shirley Graham.

⁵ Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990). Authors included in this collection: Marita Bonner, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Eulalie Spence, May Miller, Shirley Graham, Alice Childress, Sonia Sanchez, Sybil Klein, and Elizabeth Brown-Guillory.

theater, documenting current politics of publication, performance, and production of African-American theater.⁶

This growing interest in (re-)publishing lost or forgotten primary materials has stimulated a developing body of criticism by scholars such as David Krasner, Steven R. Carter, Trudier Harris, Neal A. Lester, and Glenda Dickerson. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's full-length study *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America* (1990) and the compilations of studies in *Black Women Playwrights: Vision on the American Stage* (1998) edited by Carol P. Marsh-Lockett and in *Contemporary African-American Women Playwrights: A Casebook* (2007) edited by Philip C. Kolin represent major contributions to this field of study.⁷ The latest publication in this context is probably Taylor Hagood's *Secrecy, Magic, and the One-Act Plays of Harlem Renaissance Women Writers* (2010), which "seeks to rescue the plays of seven black women, Marita Bonner, Mary P. Burrill, Thelma Duncan, Shirley Graham, Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, and Eulalie Spence, from obscurity."⁸

However, in spite of this growing interest in rediscovering and re-evaluating the dramatic work of African-American female playwrights for a wider scholarly and public audience, the existing body of criticism is still far from having exhausted the full potential of this significant literature. Mainly consisting of single articles and book chapters, criticism so far is usually restricted to individual plays or playwrights, while a more comprehensive approach to African-American theater by female playwrights is still lacking. Having identified this deficit, the main objective of the present study is to direct attention to this specific literary tradition by focusing on the cultural performance of time and memory in selected plays by African-American female playwrights from the 1910s to the 1990s.

⁶ Sydné Mahone, *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994). Authors included in this collection: Laurie Carlos, Kia Corthron, Thulani Davis, Judith Alexa Jackson, Adrienne Kennedy, Robbie McCauley, Suzan-Lori Parks, Aishah Rahman, Ntozake Shange, Anna Deveare Smith, and Danitra Vance.

⁷ Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America* (New York: Praeger, 1990); Carol P. Marsh-Lockett, *Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage* (New York: Garland Pub., 1999); and Philip C. Kolin, *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A Casebook* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁸ Taylor Hagood, *Secrecy, Magic, and the One-Act Plays of Harlem Renaissance Women Writers*, Black Performance and Cultural Criticism (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010).

1.1 Time, Memory, and the Construction of African-American Identity

In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” Toni Morrison writes:

I don’t regard Black literature as simply books written *by* Black people, or simply as literature written *about* Black people, or simply as literature that uses a certain mode of language in which you sort of drop *g*’s. There is something very special and very identifiable about it and it is my struggle to *find* that elusive but identifiable style.⁹

Like Morrison, the present study also seeks “to find that elusive but identifiable style” in selected plays by 20th-century African-American female playwrights by focusing on the interplay between time, memory, and African-American identity as enacted on stage. Drawing on major theories of cultural and memory studies, the study argues that the representation and embodiment of the characters’ African-American identity is grounded in a culturalization of time, i.e., in a cultural performance of time that reveals itself in a particular culturally and historically shaped perception and interpretation of time. The main hypothesis of this work is that 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights enacts a continuum of time in which the past informs both the present and the future. The plays articulate a particular socially, culturally, and historically shaped experience and interpretation of time as a ‘remembered time’ that is defined in and through memory in that it draws on a conscious remembering and re-interpreting of the past on the part of the characters. This culturalization of time is interpreted as cultural performance in support of a particular African-American cultural identity, which is enacted and embodied on stage.

The present study is a study of “memory *in* literature,”¹⁰ examining the representation and enactment of collective memory in African-American theater. As such, it is based “on the assumption that literature exists in a relationship to contemporary discourses of memory and illustrates functions, processes and problems of memory in the

⁹ Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Press, 1984): 342. Emphasis original.

¹⁰ Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, “Concepts and Methods for the Study of Literature and/as Cultural Memory,” Literature and Memory: Theoretical Paradigms - Genres - Functions, eds. Ansgar Nünning, Marion Gymnich and Roy Sommer (Tübingen: Francke, 2006): 13.

medium of fiction through aesthetic forms.”¹¹ It will not deal with models of remembering such as Marcel Proust’s individualized acts of remembering in his *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, but rather with the interplay of temporal structures related to the past, the present, and the future, which forms the basis for constructing a collective cultural identity. The representation of remembered time that is defined in and through memory is not a chronological re-searching of history, but rather an “elaborative encoding”¹² of the past on the part of the characters, while the act of remembering is conceived as a transforming and shaping force in the characters’ self-creation on stage. The study examines what is remembered and why it is remembered, dealing with “the moment recalled,” rather than with “the moment of remembering.”¹³

In addition to being a study of “memory *in* literature,” the present study is also a study of “literature as a medium of cultural memory,” demonstrating how the plays aim to engage “in the formation and transformation of cultural memories.”¹⁴ The mobilization of shared ties to the past and the raising of awareness about the significance of ancestry have become central to the construction of African-American identity. The objective of this study is to examine this mobilization of the past and its strategies in African-American theater. Based on the conviction that the plays represent an artistic mediation of history and memory, 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights is foregrounded as a constitutive carrier of collective memory that displays a cultural performance of time in support of a particular African-American identity. It is understood as a site of black productivity that mirrors processes of African-American identity formation in a white-dominated society. By re-articulating a collective and culturally shaped perception of the past, the plays take part in the process of the culturalization of time and affirm its significance in the construction of African-American identity.

In contrast to previous research, the present study seeks to answer the question of how the literary genre of drama enables African-American female authors of the 20th

¹¹ Erll and Nünning, “Concepts and Methods for the Study of Literature and/as Cultural Memory”: 13.

¹² Vera Nünning, “Fictions of Collective Memory,” *Literature, Literary History, and Cultural Memory*, eds. Herbert Grabes and Catherine Belsey (Tübingen: Narr, 2005): 327.

¹³ Udo J. Hebel, *Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003): x.

¹⁴ Erll and Nünning, “Concepts and Methods for the Study of Literature and/as Cultural Memory”: 14.

century to approach, codify, and convey the specificity of black cultural identity formation within the context of temporal organization and experience. This study offers an analytic approach to the representation and creation of African-American identity by anchoring the question of a culturalization of time within the dramatic work of selected 20th-century African-American female playwrights, seeking to direct attention to the diversity and cultural significance of this rich literary tradition.

1.2 Text Selection

To discuss all plays by 20th-century African-American female playwrights would require a much larger scope than is possible in the present study. I have therefore chosen to restrict the text corpus to the manageable size of nine plays, in which it is still possible to make significant statements about the cultural performance of time in this dramatic art. In order to illustrate the multiplicity, richness, and diversity of African-American theater by female playwrights I have selected plays from different moments in time throughout the 20th century. This study does not aim to give a general overview of the development of the dramatic art of African-American theater by female playwrights, and it deliberately avoids a too-narrow focus on a specific moment in time. Rather than giving a historical overview of the general development of African-American theater since its early beginnings, information on the plays' specific historical contexts are inserted in appropriate places in the analyses.¹⁵ While the text corpus also includes canonical authors, the emphasis is especially set on dramatic texts which have not yet gained the scholarly and public attention they deserve. The common link between these very different dramatic texts is the fact that all of them introduce family stories that are presented within the paradigms of a culturally shaped representation and understanding of time.

¹⁵ For a general overview see for example: Errol Hill and James V. Hatch, A History of African American Theatre, Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Annemarie Bean, A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements, Worlds of Performance (London; New York: Routledge, 1999); and Glenda Dickerson, African American Theater: A Cultural Companion (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2008). For an astute analysis of the development of African-American theater between 1895 and the Harlem Renaissance see the studies by David Krasner: David Krasner, Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) and David Krasner, A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

The two earliest plays in the text corpus are Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* and Mary Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness*. The melodrama *Rachel* was written in 1916 and self-subsidized published in 1920. This three-act play, originally produced for the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Washington D.C., is generally considered to be the first full-length play by an African-American woman to be publicly staged. Mary Burrill began to write plays in the early 1910s. Besides *Aftermath* (1919), *They That Sit in Darkness* is the only play that is known to have survived. It is a one-act play that was written for the September 1919 issue of the *Birth Control Review*, featuring a special issue on "The Negroes' Need for Birth Control, as Seen by Themselves."

Zora Neale Hurston, a prominent Harlem Renaissance writer, is primarily known for her novels, while her plays are mostly only marginally considered. The play *Color Struck* is one of Hurston's first published works. It won second prize in the *Opportunity* magazine contest in 1925 and was published in a revised version in the only issue of *Fire!!* in November 1926.

The one-act play *For Unborn Children* by Myrtle Smith Livingston was also first published in a magazine. It won third prize of ten dollars in *The Crisis* magazine contest of 1925 and was published in the July 1926 issue. Although it is known that Livingston wrote several plays and skits while holding a teaching position at Lincoln University, Missouri, none of her plays besides *For Unborn Children* has been located so far.

Similarly, of the plays that writer and actress Mercedes Gilbert wrote, even for her own "One Woman Theatre" show, only *Environment* has survived, although she "[had] been writing since [her] grammar school days"¹⁶ by her own account. It was published in 1931 as the only play included in *Selected Gems of Poetry, Comedy, and Drama*, a collection of Gilbert's writings.

With the advent of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement the production of literature by black artists was flourishing and African-American theater witnessed some important firsts. The premier of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959 is regarded as a milestone in the history of

¹⁶ Letter to Langston Hughes from September 23, 1959 (Langston Hughes Papers (JWJ MSS 26), Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University: Box 67, Folder 1293).

African-American theater. Hansberry was the first African-American playwright to have a play produced on Broadway and she became the first black, the fifth woman, and the youngest American to win the prestigious New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

The play *Wine in the Wilderness* by Alice Childress, who was the first African-American woman to win an Obie Award in 1955 for her play *Trouble in Mind*, was first presented by Television Station WGBH in Boston, Massachusetts, on March 4, 1969. It constituted the first play in a series “On Being Black” and received high critical acclaim, as original newspaper clippings reveal.¹⁷

Ntozake Shange, alias Paulette Williams, is best known for her play *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* from 1976. A unique theatrical invention, her choreopoem was first produced in Bacchanal, a woman’s bar just outside Berkeley, California, in December 1974, but soon moved onto Broadway to win a number of prestigious awards, including the Obie Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, and the Audelco Award. It was the first play by a black woman author to run on Broadway since Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Finally, the most recent play included in the text corpus is the one-woman performance play *WOMBmanWARs* by writer and performance artist Judith Alexa Jackson. It was commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Massachusetts, and premiered there in March 1992.

With the exception of the close friendship between Angelina Weld Grimké and Mary Burrill, who are sometimes even identified as lovers,¹⁸ a direct collaboration or influence between two or more of the female playwrights of interest here cannot be confirmed from

¹⁷ In the March 5, 1969 issue of *The Boston Herald Traveler* Eleanor Roberts describes *Wine in the Wilderness* as a “great opener” of the television series, which allows viewers to see black life without any “pretense” and without “the eyes of whites,” through which viewers “until now” have seen black Americans. Kay Bourne in the *Bay State Banner* of February 27, 1969 praises the “pertinent, heartfelt and colloquial” dialogues in the play, and in the March 5, 1969 review by Percy Shain *The Boston Globe* announces: “If the ensuing plays can approximate the quality of this opener, the series could be one of the high spots of the viewing season” (Alice Childress Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library: Box 37.)

¹⁸ cf. Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987) and entry on Grimké by Gloria A. Shearin in Yolanda Williams Page, *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007): 229-234.

the materials available. Autobiographical information preserved in archival materials, however, reveals that Langston Hughes, a key figure in the history of African-American literature, was in close contact with many of the women playwrights treated here. Looking at the materials preserved in the archives of Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library and in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, I discovered that between the 1920s and the 1960s Angelina Weld Grimké, Mercedes Gilbert, Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, and Alice Childress all corresponded with Hughes at some point in time, talking about their writings and receiving encouraging words to pursue their careers.¹⁹ To my knowledge, this connection between the female playwrights has not been considered in scholarship so far. It can well be assumed that Hughes had a strong influence on the women and their writings. The esteem and respect that he felt towards each of these women writers is revealed in the way he provided them with letters of recommendation

¹⁹ The time in which Hughes corresponded with Angelina Weld Grimké and Mercedes Gilbert slightly overlap. Gilbert acted in Hughes's play *Mulatto* (1936) and he wrote the foreword to her novel *Aunt Sara's Wooden God*, published in *The Christopher Publishing House*, Boston, MA, in 1938, placing it alongside Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) (cf. JWJ MSS 26: Box 67, Folder 1293; and JWJ MSS 26: Box 428, Folder 9525). The materials preserved in Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library reveals that Hughes and Grimké corresponded between the years 1926 and 1938 (Small Collections in the James Weldon Johnson Collection (JWJ MSS Small), Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University: Box 2, Folder 89), while the letters between Hughes and Gilbert are dated between 1936 and 1950 (JWJ MSS 26: Box: 67, 370, 428). Though it cannot be proven, it is quite possible that Hughes introduced them to each other at some point.

Much has been written about the relation between Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston and their collaboration on the unfinished play *Mule Bone* (1930). They were both members of the group of the self-proclaimed 'Niggerati' group, who produced the literary magazine *Fire!!* in 1926. The letters preserved in the archives were written between 1927 and 1930 and attest to a close friendship and familiarity between the two writers (JWJ MSS 26: Series I: Personal Correspondence, Box: 82).

In a letter from February 8, 1958 Lorraine Hansberry asked Hughes for permission to use the line "a raisin in the sun" from his poem "Montage of a Dream Deferred" (1951) as the title of her play (JWJ MSS 26: Box 74, Folder 1426.) This letter stands at the beginning of a personal correspondence and a close friendship that lasted until Hansberry's premature death in 1965.

During the same time Hughes was also in contact with Alice Childress. The material preserved in the Beinecke reveals that Hughes gave repeated feedback to her writings, praised the quality of her work in his own columns and writings, and wrote a letter of recommendation for scholarships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and from the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study (JWJ MSS 26: Personal Correspondence, Box 74).

No information on a connection between Hughes and playwrights Mary Burrill and Myrtle Smith Livingston could be deduced from the materials available, although it is quite likely that they at least knew of each other. Contemporary playwrights Ntozake Shange and Judith Alexa Jackson, whose materials have not yet entered the archives, were born only a few years before Hughes's death in 1967.

and wrote about their works in forewords and in his own columns. While this study does not aim to examine the influence of Hughes on these female playwrights, it does share his high estimation of their work and aims to demonstrate its value for analyzing processes of cultural identity formation.

1.3 Structure

Since the present study focuses on the cultural performance of time, memory, and identity on stage, it does not consist of a series of analyses with complete discussions of each individual play. Instead, it is structured according to the different forms of collective memory that are important for the construction of African-American identity on stage, which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural significance of the temporal structures of the remote and the recent past in the present moment on stage. This focus means that individual aspects of the dramatic texts, especially with regard to specifics of form, had to be omitted in the interest of a coherent focus on the relation between time and memory in the plays. While not every play is discussed in every chapter, each of the plays considered here is treated in several sections of different chapters, which better serves to demonstrate their similarity in the representation and embodiment of the culturalization of black time on stage.

To provide a theoretical foundation for the analysis of time and memory in 20th-century African-American theater, the study begins by outlining the main conceptual threads with regard to collective memory and collective identity relevant to the investigation. Supported by selected examples from the plays considered here, **chapter 2** engages with trajectories of major theoretical issues and perspectives in the field of cultural and memory studies with a primary focus on the concepts of cultural and communicative memory and their relation to the temporal dimensions of the remote past and the recent past.

The following chapters build on this identification of collective memory as a basis for African-American identity formation and look at how its forms and elements are performed and embodied on stage. **Chapter 3** focuses on the cultural narrative of slavery as a key collective memory of the remote past transported in and through cultural memory. In the context of African-American identity the collective memory of slavery

has become a unique historical narrative from and about the past that singles out the cultural and social roots of black Americans at the time of slavery in order to point to the particularity of this specific we-group. In the plays considered here the characters proudly identify themselves as descendants of slave ancestors and re-interpret the “cultural trauma of slavery”²⁰ as a source of pride and success, thus turning it into a means of cultural self-affirmation and self-empowerment. The enactment of the American North-South divide in the performance on stage further supports this cultural significance of the memory of slavery.

While chapter 3 focuses on slavery as the roots of African-American identity, **chapter 4** deals with the construction of Africa as “a symbolic homeland”²¹ in the deep past of pre-slavery times. As the term African-American already indicates, the idea of ‘Mother Africa’ has always been a valuable resource of identification in the construction of African-American identity. While the first decades of the 20th century were dominated by a conscious process of re-working the slavery past, it was especially the time from early mid-century onwards that witnessed a critical process of examination and differentiation of black American identity as being rooted in Africa. Focusing on Africanisms and African influences in the plays, it will be shown that the African homeland is represented as a projection that stems from the characters’ desire to create a home and a sense of place in a white-dominated society.

Chapter 5 singles out specific African-American iconic figures introduced in the plays and focuses on their meaning in African-American collective memory. The stories of freedom fighters such as Toussaint L’Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr., become a source of inspiration and strength for the characters to deal with their own lives. In the plays these “cultural heroes”²² from different moments in African-American history function as divinized ancestors and representatives of a unique black American history, proving black America’s agency in spite of oppression, discrimination, and racial violence. The act of remembering these cultural heroes in the

²⁰ Ron Eyerman, Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²¹ Eyerman, Cultural Trauma: 194.

²² Bernd Engler and Isabell Klaiber, "Kulturelle Leitfiguren: Prozesse und Strategien ihrer Funktionalisierung," Kulturelle Leitfiguren - Figurationen und Refigurationen, eds. Bernd Engler and Isabell Klaiber, Schriften zur Literaturwissenschaft (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2007). I use ‘cultural heroes’ as a possible English translation of the German phrase “kulturelle Leitfiguren.”

dramatic texts is a conscious gesture of honoring their struggles and their significance for black American history.

While chapters 3, 4 and 5 examine the representation and enactment of the remote past on stage, the analysis in **chapter 6** focuses on a more recent past preserved in family memory as a major form of communicative memory. It examines the intersection of family memory, national history, and cultural identity presented in African-American theater. By talking about the family's ancestors the living elders make the past available to the younger generations, for whom the memories have a major impact on their self-creation and self-understanding. In the context of plot development, the transmission of family memory drives the action and functions as the agent of *peripeteia*, accompanied by the young protagonists' *anagnorisis*.²³ The contents of family memory provide a certain kind of wisdom for the living family members, who either identify themselves with (continuity) or distinguish themselves from (discontinuity) their parents and ancestors.

Also examining the significance of ancestors for the characters in the plays considered here, **chapter 7** discusses how Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) aims to establish a female generational link by enacting a unique family memory that is not based on familial ties but rather on aspects of gender and race. The poems in *for colored girls* represent parts of a shared gender we-memory that is passed on from the mother characters on stage to the 'colored girls' in the auditorium and, thus, from one female generation to the next. The unique dramatic form of Shange's choreopoem enables her characters to actually re-live particular female memories on stage in the form of "choric testimonies"²⁴ that display a female process of liberation, healing, and rebirth, aiming to create a participatory cathartic and therapeutic drama for a traumatized black female identity.

²³ The concepts of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* were first introduced by Aristotle in his *Poetics* to describe the turning point of the action in drama, particularly in tragedy, that is caused by a critical discovery by the protagonist. For an explication of the concepts see Aristoteles and Manfred Fuhrmann, *Poetik: Griechisch / Deutsch* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003).

²⁴ Paul C. Harrison, "Form and Transformation: Immanence of the Soul in the Performance Modes of Black Church and Black Music," *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, eds. Paul C. Harrison, Victor L. Walker and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002): 325.

The transmittance of collective memories in and through communication is also the focus of **chapter 8**. The formation of cultural meaning is always linked to its representation in and through signs, especially through the signs of language. Focusing on the use of language in African-American theater by female playwrights, a close analysis of the plays reveals that the African-American language system developed from a reader-oriented feature for purposes of realism and local color to a deliberate in-group marker and a traditional index of African-American identity on stage. In the construction and representation of African-American identity language has become a tradition and a unique marker of difference, mirroring a birth of cultural consciousness in the 20th century. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out, language “has assumed the singular role as the black person’s ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue.”²⁵

Chapter 9 looks at how the African-American continuum of time is enacted by examining the introduction of a male and a female temporality on stage that points to the close relationship between issues of race and gender. Female time and subjectivity in the plays is created by a focus on the transgenerational experience of motherhood that presents the different female characters on stage in their social roles as actual or prospective mothers who struggle with the challenges of having to raise their children in a white-dominated society. The particularity of African-American identity reveals itself in the focus on the extraordinary challenges of motherhood and mothering in a very specific cultural, social, and political background, which also includes the female characters’ responsibility for initiating a process of learning and maturing in the male characters on stage. The focus on black motherhood and male maturity in the engendering of time on stage serves the articulation of a culturalization of time in that it points to the female characters’ responsibility for preserving and stabilizing a continuum of time that links the past to the present and the future.

While there are discussions of the effect of the enactment of collective memory on a target audience in numerous sections of the different chapters, with **chapter 10** the focus finally shifts explicitly to the interaction between the stage and the audience. Based on the principle of contemporaneity, i.e. the approximation of the plot’s fictional present and the contemporary historical present of the plays’ production, the black female playwrights

²⁵ Henry L. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): xix.

produce a 'Theater of the Present' that presupposes a specific cultural, social, and historical background of knowledge, which results in interesting effects of inclusion and exclusion in the audience. Specific references to and borrowings from African-American social history, politics, and popular music in dramatic speech ensure that the dramatic situation is constituted in the speech-act, sending out a number of implicit signals that make the historical situation more concrete for the audience. These references are not explained, but the target audience is expected to be able to decipher these hints and to be familiar with the background evoked. As playwright Ntozake Shange puts it: "I have an overwhelming amount of material I could footnote if I wanted to. [...] ...but why should I. I'm not interested in doing an *annotated Shange*."²⁶

While this study clearly focuses on 20th-century plays by black American female writers, **chapter 12** offers a brief outlook for the development of this literary tradition in the 21st century. It demonstrates that the cultural performance on stage continues to serve as a public platform to inform the reassessment and reinterpretation of African-American history and identity, while contemporary playwrights also seek new forms and practices to further develop this specific theatrical tradition. With the advent of the 21st century, black theatrical traditions undergo a critical reevaluation, replacing the formerly restrictive depiction of a 'pure,' all-black counter-history with a self-reflexive and more inclusive approach to American history and memory. By introducing white cultural figures as sources of identification for the African-American characters on stage, contemporary playwrights like Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks rewrite both American and African-American history. In the process, they present a more subjective view on a variety of useable pasts that serve respective needs in the present, blurring the previously strict boundaries between male and female, black and white traditions.

With this structure, the present study aims to draw attention to the different mechanisms of African-American cultural self-creation and self-affirmation as displayed on stage. It will show that the cultural performance of time and memory in the plays serves to construct and confirm a distinct African-American identity based on a specific re-working and re-assessment of time and history, thereby informing the creation of a counter-history and a counter-memory to white American history. Focussing on the close

²⁶ Ntozake Shange, "Interview," *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983): 163. Italics original.

interrelation between time, memory, and identity, it aims to demonstrate the cultural significance of theater in understanding how cultural identity is constructed and confirmed in literature as a carrier of collective memory.

2. Time in Memory – Memory in Time: Collective Memory and African-American Identity

Time has become a key concept in cultural and literary studies. It has been shown that time is not an a priori category, but rather a social construct. As such, both the notion and the experience of time vary depending on historical and cultural differences. Time itself has a history and is contingent on the respective social and cultural contexts in which it is experienced, so that the experience of time is never time-independent or timeless. It is rather perceived in “culturally specific structures of time” that “refer to cultural attitudes, value orientations and codes which manifest themselves in the individual life as well as in the social organization, and at the same time determine them.”²⁷

Time is a dimension of social reality and, thus, constitutes a shared point of reference for how the individual members of a society deal with and experience time. It functions as “a generator of identity”²⁸ in that it represents a focal point of reference in the formation of a collective identity. As Johannes Fabian points out, time constitutes “a carrier of significance, a form through which we define the content of relations between the Self and the Other.”²⁹ Every society is characterized by a particular historically and culturally shaped perception, representation, and interpretation of time, creating a collectively accepted frame for how time is perceived and interpreted by the individual members of this collective. For any social we-group, this culturalization of time may serve as a means

²⁷ Ulfried Reichardt, “The ‘Times’ of the New World: Future-Orientation, American Culture, and Globalization,” *Theories of American Culture, Theories of American Studies*, eds. Winfried Fluck, Herbert Grabes, Jürgen Schläeger and Brook Thomas (Tübingen: Narr, 2003): 251.

²⁸ Bernhard Waldenfels, “Zeitverschiebung. Motive einer Phänomenologie der Zeiterfahrung,” *Zeit und Text: Philosophische, kulturalanthropologische, literarhistorische und linguistische Beiträge*, ed. Andreas Kablitz (München: Fink, 2003): 34. My translation. In the original: “Zeit erweist sich als Generator von Identität.”

²⁹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983): ix.

of self-affirmation and cultural self-creation in that time needs to be acted out in order to gain its social and cultural meaning.

Since there are culturally specific structures of time that change in and through time, time constitutes a privileged focus for analyzing processes of collective identity formation as displayed in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. The cultural performance of time on stage constitutes an interesting entryway for analyzing and identifying culturally specific notions and experiences of time in the context of African-American identity. Based on this study's main assumption that the African-American collective experience of time is defined by and through a conscious re-working of the past in the present, the following chapter foregrounds the key conceptual threads with regard to collective memory and identity relevant to this analysis. Supported by selected examples from the plays considered here, it engages with the trajectories of major theoretical issues and perspectives in the fields of cultural and memory studies with a primary focus on the concepts of cultural and communicative memory as the two forms of collective memory as outlined by Jan and Aleida Assmann.³⁰ In line with these concepts, the focus will be on the two overlapping temporal dimensions of the remote past and the recent past as they are remembered in the present moment on stage.

2.1 The Remote Past and Cultural Memory

There has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in memory since the 1980s. Theories of individual and collective memory have made a major impact on the interpretation and analysis of literature and culture. This body of work is characterized by an effort to analyze the importance of this concept in different processes of identity formation, both individual and collective. It has been shown that our sense of identity is dependent on the functioning of memory as a constantly changing process of creating and forgetting the past in the present. As Walter Benjamin writes: "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]." ³¹ The act of remembering is generally conceived as a transforming and shaping force in collective identity formation. As an intellectual process, memory

³⁰ cf. Jan Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen (München: Beck, 2007): 48-56. The following discussion is based on the major differences between cultural and communicative memory that Jan and Aleida Assmann identify in this work.

constitutes “the place and process where past and present interact in instances of individual and communal self-positioning and definition.”³²

Especially in the context of the reconstructive creation of collective identities such as the African-American we-group, the deliberate re-working of the past and the conscious identification with it are conditioning circumstances of the present.³³ As Ron Eyerman points out:

It is important to keep in mind that the notion “African American” is not itself a natural category, but an [sic] historically formed collective identity which first of all required articulation and then acceptance on the part of those it was meant to incorporate.³⁴

A major condition for the formation of African-American collective identity was the deliberate processing and “elaborative encoding”³⁵ of the shared past that is preserved and transmitted in a distinct African-American “cultural memory.” Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs’s pioneering work on collective memory,³⁶ Jan and Aleida Assmann first introduced the notion of cultural memory as a key form of collective memory that is socially conditioned and symbolically conveyed and encoded:

The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.³⁷

³¹ Walter Benjamin and Hanna Arendt, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992): 252-253. Italics original.

³² Hermann Lübbe, *Im Zug der Zeit: Verkürzter Aufenthalt in der Gegenwart* (Berlin; Heidelberg: Springer, 1992): 10.

³³ For an explication of the concepts of collective and personal identity see Jürgen Straub, “Personale und kollektive Identität. Zur Analyse eines theoretischen Begriffs,” *Identitäten*, eds. Aleida Assmann and Heidrun Frieze (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998).

³⁴ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 16.

³⁵ Vera Nünning, “Fictions of Collective Memory,” *Literature, Literary History, and Cultural Memory*, eds. Herbert Grabes and Catherine Belsey (Tübingen: Narr, 2005): 327.

³⁶ cf. Maurice Halbwachs, *Das kollektive Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1991) and Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985).

³⁷ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 132.

Supported and enacted by traditions, rituals, and other cultural performances, cultural memory comprises a pantheon of canonical collective memories of a remote and absolute past, transgressing chronological boundaries and reaching beyond the everyday and the scope of individual memory. It transports a comparatively stable stock of collective knowledge about a group's cultural and social roots in an "Ursprungszeit"³⁸ and a "mythic prehistory."³⁹ Serving as a means of cultural self-definition and self-affirmation, cultural memory transports and preserves a particular collective knowledge that is communally shared by the individual members of this specific we-group. For the individual member the identification with this collective knowledge transported and preserved in cultural memory is an act of choice and a deliberate performance, displaying his or her belonging to this specific collective.

The collective cultural knowledge preserved in cultural memory is thereby not pre-existent, but its appropriation and interpretation is rather influenced by a society's needs at a specific moment in time. The formation of cultural memory is not based on research of historical facts, but rather on an intellectual process of constant construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the past in the present. As French historian Pierre Nora emphasizes, history means reconstructing and organizing the past, while memory is associated with a dynamic process of recollecting and forgetting the past.⁴⁰ The cultural meaning of the past is not related to where the moment recalled is situated on a linear scale of time, but rather to how it is remembered and what social significance it gains in this process of memorization. Cultural memorization is "an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-described even as it continues to shape the future."⁴¹ Cultural memory preserves the past, i.e. a specific idea and reading of history in the present. Explaining the idea of partial cultural identity in liberal, multicultural societies, Homi Bhabha argues that especially minority groups have "to reinscribe the past, reactivate it, relocate it, *resignify* it" in order to reinterpret it as "an

³⁸ Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: 48.

³⁹ Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: 56. My translation. In the original: "mythische Urgeschichte."

⁴⁰ cf. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux De Mémoire*," History and Memory in African-American Culture, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁴¹ Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe and Leo Spitzer, Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College: University Press of New England, 1999): vii.

ethics of ‘survival’ that allows [them] to work *through the present*.⁴² A re-assessment of the past is a means of self-determination and self-definition, enabling the members of a society to define and to cope with the present situation. “The past characteristically operates as a psychological support for the present,”⁴³ as Melville J. Herskovits writes, pointing to the importance of the past and of collective memory in the context of African-American identity formation.

For the black American who was long considered “a man without a past”⁴⁴ the reconstruction and re-making of the past represented an existential necessity. The emergence of the notion of African-American identity was informed by a conscious re-working and re-interpretation of African-American history after the forced social and cultural dislocation of the Middle Passage.⁴⁵ “History must restore what slavery took away” in order to repair “the social damage of slavery,”⁴⁶ as historian, writer, and activist Arthur A. Schomburg wrote in his 1925 essay “The Negro Digs up His Past.” One of the possibilities to repair this social damage was the attempt to re-establish the link with Africa as a homeland in pre-slavery times.

As the hyphenated term already indicates, Africa has always been a significant reference point for identification in the creation of African-American identity. While it was the period of the Harlem Renaissance with Marcus Garvey’s call for repatriation that first fostered a heightened interest in Africa, it was especially the political agitation of the 1960s and 1970s that encouraged a deliberate creation of a collective memory of ‘Mother

⁴² Homi K. Bhabha, “Culture’s in-Between,” Questions of Cultural Identity, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996): 59. Italics original.

⁴³ Melville J. Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1962): 298.

⁴⁴ Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past: 2.

⁴⁵ Especially since the 1970s numerous studies have analyzed the importance of a conscious re-working and re-interpretation of the American history in African-American culture. In addition to analyses of history and memory in selective writings, there are some studies which attempt to give a more comprehensive access to the African-American cultural understanding of the past.

Examples include Günter H. Lenz, ed., History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture (Frankfurt; New York: Campus, 1984); George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, eds., History and Memory in African-American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” Alternative Modernities, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ Arthur A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs up His Past (1925),” The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938, eds. Henry L. Gates and Gene A. Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007): 326.

Africa.’ With the advent of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, cultural pride in an African heritage gained a strong political dimension when the adoption of cultural signifiers became en vogue and were deemed “ideologically right-on.”⁴⁷ In Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) the female character Beneatha tries to find and express her cultural identity by adopting the African name Alayio, dancing to African music, dressing in African robes, and wearing an Afro hairstyle. For her, the identification with Africa represents a desirable alternative to being an “assimilationist” black American “who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case, *oppressive* culture” (RIS 534; emphasis original).

Similarly, it was this desire to dissociate her own African-American identity from white American identity that inspired poet and playwright Ntozake Shange in her work. With the invention of the theatrical form of the choreopoem in *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) Shange, who changed her name from Paulette Williams to the Zulu name in 1971, created an eclectic theatrical form combining African ritualistic structures with dance, song, and music as “proof of origin” (FCG 12) and a means to access “the depth of [her] past” (FCG xi).⁴⁸ This identification with Africa as a homeland in a deep, pre-slavery past during and after the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements indicated the desire to re-establish a disrupted continuity and to retrieve the social and cultural roots of African-American identity. It was an attempt to overcome the cultural trauma of slavery that has also become one of the key elements of African-American identity.

In his study *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* Ron Eyerman has shown that a generation of black intellectuals in the later decades of the 19th century helped to turn slavery into an ‘Ursprungereignis,’ a collective root experience, and a foundational myth that “formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory.”⁴⁹ According to Eyerman, slavery constituted “a ‘primal scene’ which could, potentially, unite all ‘African Americans’ in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had

⁴⁷ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 99.

⁴⁸ Chapter 4 entitled “The Idea of Mother Africa and African-American Identity” will go into further detail into the social and cultural meaning of Africa as a homeland in the context of African-American identity formation.

⁴⁹ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*: 1.

any knowledge of or feeling for Africa.”⁵⁰ Like the collective memory of Africa, slavery represented a “useable past”⁵¹ that has gained a constitutive meaning in the definition of African-American identity. When the heroine Tommy in Alice Childress’s *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) retells the history of her family and explains that the first generation of “her great, great grandparents was [sic] slaves” (WIW 750), the character Bill replies: “Guess everybody’s was” (WIW 750).⁵²

In the re-working of African-American history, slavery gained entry into cultural memory as a normative collective memory that is inextricably linked with the definition and creation of African-American identity. Through processes of deliberate reflection, selection, and interpretation the cultural trauma of slavery is re-interpreted as a source of pride and empowerment. The character Lena Younger in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) proudly identifies herself as a descendant of slaves, explaining that she “come[s] from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers” (RIS 551). She holds her ancestors that “never let nobody pay ‘em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth” (RIS 551) up as an example and teaches her children to be proud of their origins, too. By commemorating her slave ancestors, Lena reassures herself of being a member of a unique cultural and ethnic we-group. At the same time she also integrates herself into the specific genealogical chain of a family lineage that dates back to the time of slavery.

It is indeed this intermingling of cultural and familial memories influenced by the passing of generations that signifies the transition, the “floating gap,”⁵³ between memories of a remote and memories of a more recent past, i.e. between cultural and communicative memory.

⁵⁰ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*: 1.

⁵¹ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*: 194.

⁵² For a detailed analysis of the significance of the collective memory of slavery in the plays considered here see chapter 3: “Slave Ancestors and Mythic Geography: The Cultural Narrative of Slavery on Stage.”

⁵³ For a discussion of Jan Vassina’s concept of the “floating gap” and its meaning in the context of collective memory see Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*: 48-56.

2.2 The Recent Past and Communicative Memory

In addition to the collective memories preserved in cultural memory, there is also a shared knowledge of the past that is transmitted in “communicative memory,”⁵⁴ as Harald Welzer has shown. In “memory talk” and in the practice of “conversational remembering”⁵⁵ social groups constitute and celebrate themselves as interactive communities, thereby confirming their collective identity. In contrast to the comparatively stable stock of canonical memories preserved in cultural memory, the collective knowledge passed on in communicative memory is more fluid, changing in and through time and the passage of generations. It refers to “the short-term memory of a society” that “is bound to the existence of living bearers of memory and to the communicators of experience.”⁵⁶ Communicative memory is created in human interaction in the everyday and represents the experience of a more immediate or recent past situated within a temporal frame of about three to four generations.

In the context of families, this generational memory represents a particular “family memory”⁵⁷ that is passed on in and through memory talk between the older and the younger generations of this particular social we-group. The act of conversational remembering of the family history establishes a link between the past, the present, and the future in that the memories of the older generations intermingle with the experiences of their children and grandchildren. It ensures that the family’s history is preserved as a legacy for the present and the future members of the family who are supposed to learn from the past. The protagonist Leroy in Myrtle Smith Livingston’s *For Unborn Children* (1926) terminates his relationship with his love Selma, a white woman, when he learns about his family’s past. When Leroy’s grandmother recognizes that her grandson wants to marry a white woman, she feels obliged to tell him that his mother was white and that she had left the family because “[s]he never could stand the sight of” (FUC 187) her biracial children. Not wanting to “make the same mistake [his] father did” (FUC 187) Leroy

⁵⁴ cf. Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (München: Beck, 2008). Also: Harald Welzer, “Communicative Memory,” *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll (Berlin; New York, NY: de Gruyter, 2008).

⁵⁵ Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*: 16.

⁵⁶ Welzer, “Communicative Memory”: 285.

⁵⁷ Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*: 165.

decides to give up his love and he heroically faces his death as God's punishment for his relationship. When a white mob approaches in order to lynch "the dirty nigger" who "fool[s] around a white woman" (FUC 187), he advises his grandmother to think of his death "as a sacrifice for UNBORN CHILDREN!" (FUC 187; emphasis original) It is Grandma Carlson's revelation of the long-kept family secret which finally changes Leroy's mind, causing him to recognize his responsibility for the happiness of the coming family generations. As the female elder, she acts as the guardian of family memory and the preserver of culture, keeping the past alive in the present. She initiates a process of learning and maturing in Leroy by sharing her memories about the recent past, aiming to protect him and his unborn offspring.⁵⁸

This generational link established in and through communicative memory is also acted out in Shange's ritualistic theater of *for colored girls* (1976). In the play the seven anonymous female characters on stage turn into othermothers⁵⁹ who prepare their daughters in the audience for the "metaphysical dilemma" of "bein [sic] a woman & bein [sic] colored" (FCG 45). In using the form of "choric testimonies,"⁶⁰ the play displays a communal and ritualistic activity that includes both the characters and the audience members, seeking collective self-definition based on the performance of a unique generational gender memory. By re-living traumatic memories on stage the female archetypes on stage pass on the knowledge they have gained from their own past experiences to the next generation of "colored girls" who are watching the performance. The poems in *for colored girls* represent parts of a shared we-memory based on aspects of race and gender, which is passed on from the stage to the auditorium and from one generation of women to the next. The members of the audience are engaged in the

⁵⁸ For a detailed analysis of the representation and function of family memory in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights see chapter 6 on "Learning from Absent Ancestors and Living Elders: Family Memory on Stage."

⁵⁹ For an explication of the significance of othermothers in black culture see Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁶⁰ Paul C. Harrison, "Form and Transformation: Immanence of the Soul in the Performance Modes of Black Church and Black Music," Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora, eds. Paul C. Harrison, Victor L. Walker and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002): 325.

testimonial process as active witnesses who gradually turn into a collective participant in the ritual in the course of the performance.⁶¹

It is precisely this interaction with the audience in the cultural performance of time and memory on stage that makes theater such an interesting opportunity for studying the representation of African-American identity. Theater allows a communal cultural performance of a collective African-American experience and interpretation of time in which the culturally specific temporal structures are not only talked about but even embodied and acted out in the now of the performance on stage.

2.3 The Present and the Role of the Theater

In his influential study on the human being as a *homo ludens*, a ‘playing man,’ Johan Huizinga explores the play-element of culture. He argues that as a “cultural phenomenon”⁶² and “a social construction”⁶³ play is a necessary and primary condition for the generation and functioning of culture. As an integral element of life, play becomes “a necessity both for the individual – as a life function – and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function.”⁶⁴ In the playgrounds, i.e. in the imaginary or material sphere in which play takes place, the *homo ludens* presents closed and self-contained actions, creating “temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”⁶⁵

Theater, derived from the Ancient Greek word *theatron* for ‘a seeing place,’ is indeed one of the places where the play-element of culture is most evident and most integrated into a public cultural and social context. Drawing on the notion of “culture as performance,”⁶⁶ one of the main assertions of the present study is that it is precisely

⁶¹ See chapter 7 entitled “Dramaturgy of Time: Re-Lived Gender Memories in Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls*” for a detailed analysis.

⁶² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980): 1.

⁶³ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*: 4.

⁶⁴ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*: 9.

⁶⁵ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*: 10.

⁶⁶ With the so-called ‘performative turn’ in the 1990s, the notion of “culture as text” was replaced by a focus on “culture as performance,” emphasizing the transformative power of cultural activities and events that cannot be grasped with traditional text models. For further information see Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,”

theater's "culture function" that reveals how a culturally, socially, and historically shaped understanding and representation of time is involved in the formation of African-American identity. Due to its performative quality theater provides an exemplary site on which to study processes of collective cultural identity formation. As Performance and Cultural Studies have shown, cultural identity is not a static product, but it is created, invented, and renegotiated in an ongoing process of performance grounded in historical and social influences.⁶⁷ In his study on the anthropology of performance Victor Turner points out that

[...] cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting "designs for living." [...] Performance reflexivity is a condition in which a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively, turn, bend or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public "selves."⁶⁸

This study argues that these processes of "cultural performance" and "performative reflexivity" also inform the formation of African-American identity based on the cultural constitution and staging of time as it occurs in African-American theater by female playwrights. It is understood that in order to gain a specific social and cultural meaning and significance, time needs to be acted out. Culturally specific structures of time need to be expressed and acknowledged by those they are meant to comprise.

Communication Monographs Vol. 58 (June 1991).

⁶⁷ cf. the influential studies by scholars such as Victor Turner (Victor W. Turner, From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play (New York: Performing Arts Journal Pub., 1982); Clifford Geertz (Clifford James Geertz, Dichte Beschreibung: Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994); Erving Goffman (Erving Goffman, Wir alle spielen Theater: Die Selbstdarstellung im Alltag (München: R. Piper & Co., 1969); Stuart Hall (Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (London: Sage in association with The Open University, 1997); and Erika Fischer-Lichte (Erika Fischer-Lichte, The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics. Translated by Saskya Iris Jain. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

⁶⁸ Victor W. Turner, The Anthropology of Performance (New York, NY: PAJ Pub., 1986): 24.

The cultural performance in theater indeed represents a very interesting possibility for fulfilling this task. The “liminoid”⁶⁹ process of theater as identified by Turner enables the playwrights to “*play with the factors of culture*”⁷⁰ and, thus, to confirm a culturally shaped perception and interpretation of time that forms the basis for the formation of African-American identity. African-American theater represents a carrier of cultural memory and is, thus, involved in the preservation and transmittance of an ethnically specific perception and interpretation of the past in the present. It articulates and enacts a particular African-American collective memory, thereby helping to shape and emphasize the significance of this specific collective experience of time in the process of cultural identity formation.

Due to the fact that memories always necessarily transport history as parts of what Harald Welzer calls the “conversational unconscious,”⁷¹ the transmission of collective memory on stage is also a transmission of national history, based on the inextricable connection between personal and political perspectives. For the characters on stage their collective memories are situated in a fictional “present past,” interwoven with personal memories and emotions that connect the living with their ancestors. For the audience, however, the plays are to a certain extent also illustrations of a “pure past” that can be deduced from the fictional family histories positioned within real national American history.⁷² The performance of history in the plays partakes in the process of what Aleida Assmann calls “kulturelle Bildung,” i.e. in the formation of a “comprehensive knowledge of identity based on a particular cultural self-understanding.”⁷³

This representation of a culturally specific re-working of American and African-American history causes effects of exclusion and inclusion for the audience, which is especially evident with regard to the fact that the plays of interest here are all written-to-the-moment in a very literal sense. 20th-century African-American theater by female

⁶⁹ Turner, From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play: 114.

⁷⁰ Turner, From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play: 40. Emphasis original.

⁷¹ Welzer, Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung: 16.

⁷² The terms “present past” and “pure past” are my translations of Reinhard Koselleck’s distinction between “gegenwärtige Vergangenheit” and “reine Vergangenheit,” introduced in his epilogue to Charlotte Beradt, Das Dritte Reich des Traums. Mit einem Nachwort von Reinhart Koselleck (München: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1966): 117.

⁷³ Aleida Assmann, “Kulturelle Bildung,” Ringvorlesung "Bildung und Kultur" (Würzburg: Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, 2009). My translation. In the original: “[...] ein umfassendes Identitätswissen [...], das sich auf ein kulturelles Selbstverständnis gründet.”

playwrights constitutes a ‘Theater of the Present’ based on the principle of contemporaneity, i.e. on the approximation of the plot’s fictional present and the contemporary real present of the plays’ first production.⁷⁴ The dramatic texts include references to and borrowings from contemporary African-American social history, politics, and popular music in dramatic speech, sending out a number of signals that help to make the historical situation of the action on stage more concrete to the audience. The playwrights do not feel obliged to explain these references to contemporary contexts; they rather expect their audiences to be familiar with current events, developments, and discourses, so that they are able to decipher the specific names and dates mentioned in the speech-acts on stage. The plays presuppose a specific background of cultural knowledge, which may not be shared by a non-contemporary audience. As playwright Shange points out: “I have an overwhelming amount of material I could footnote if I wanted to. I could make my work very official and European and say the ‘Del Vikings’ were a group of singers... the ‘Shorrells’ were a group...but why should I. I’m not interested in doing an *annotated Shange*.”⁷⁵ The dramatic approximation of fictional time and real time creates a closed community of knowledge, a temporary “*communitas*,”⁷⁶ between the playwright, the characters, and the audience. The plays’ cultural significance in the context of the creation of a distinct African-American cultural identity is thus inextricably linked with recognition of the references’ social, political, and cultural meaning for 20th-century black America.

Drawing on the major theories of cultural and memory studies outlined above, the present study aims to examine the cultural performance of African-American identity by focusing on the meaning, representation, and enactment of time and memory in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. Since theater is a social practice and, thus, a primary medium of cultural self-representation, the focus on plays by

⁷⁴ For a detailed analysis see chapter 10: “Theater of the Present: Writing to the Moment and to the Audience.”

⁷⁵ Ntozake Shange, “Interview,” *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983): 163. Emphasis original. The “Del Vikings,” also “The Dell-Vikings,” was an American doo-wop musical group who recorded several hits in the 1950s. They were one of the few successful integrated vocal groups at that time. With the “Shorrells” Shange is probably referring to the 1960s all-black quartet “The Shirelles” who represent the first successful female vocal group of the rock-and-roll era. They were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1989.

⁷⁶ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*: 47.

African-American female playwrights offers an interesting approach to how African-American collective identity is culturally performed via the staging of different temporal structures. Based on the conviction that the plays represent an artistic mediation of history and memory, African-American theater is foregrounded as a constitutive carrier of collective memory that displays a cultural performance of time in support of a particular African-American identity. Because of its performative quality theater is a means of cultural self-definition and self-affirmation in that it represents a possibility for staging an African-American ‘remembered time’ that constitutes a counter-memory to white American history.⁷⁷

The performative quality of theater enables not only an abstract reference to the past, but it allows the embodiment of it on stage through the introduction of African-American characters who represent and rearticulate the significance of memory as the defining force in the cultural constitution of African-American time and identity. The normative canonical memories of an absolute remote past preserved in cultural memory as well as the passing on of collective formative memories about the recent past transported in communicative memory serve to differentiate between a ‘we’ and a ‘they’ and, thus, to create a unique African-American identity in the present. The representation and enactment of cultural and communicative memory and the introduction of the different overlapping temporal structures of the remote past, the recent past, and the present help to stabilize and promote a specific African-American perception of time that forms the basis for the construction of the characters’ African-American identities.

The characters are identified and identify themselves within a continuum of time in which the past informs both the present and the future. Temporal continuity is ensured through a perception of the past as an instructive force whose legacy is preserved in family genealogy. The acceptance of the past’s legacy and the individual characters’ integration into the larger genealogical chain of their families are major preconditions for the individual characters to find their own cultural identities and to cope with the challenges of being black in a white-dominated society. The conscious recollection of the

⁷⁷ The concept of counter-memory was first introduced by Michel Foucault (Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).

past and of the ancestors in the actual moment of performance serves to ensure temporal continuity and bridges the gap between what Reinhart Koselleck has termed the “Erfahrungsraum” and the “Erwartungshorizont,” between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation in modern times.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ cf. Reinhart Koselleck, Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989): 349-375.

3. Slave Ancestors and Mythic Geography: The Cultural Narrative of Slavery on Stage

Every society bases its collective cultural identity on unique stories from and about the past. These cultural stories or narratives single out specific moments, actions, and events within the larger context of human existence and gain social significance in the formation of a specific we-group. The creation, transmission, and remembrance of cultural narratives functions as a means of cultural self-creation and self-affirmation in that they are involved in the process of “self-creation through self-storying” and in the configuration of “the stories we are.”⁷⁹ Cultural narratives are founding myths or “master narratives” that are transported in cultural memory. They “are passed on through traditions, in rituals and ceremonies, public performances which reconnect a group, and where membership is confirmed.”⁸⁰ By identifying and celebrating the social and cultural origins of a society, cultural narratives emphasize and confirm its particularity. As elements of cultural memory, they “serve[] to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image.”⁸¹ Culturally specific narratives help to establish the difference between a ‘we’ and a ‘they,’ between oneself and the Other, serving to validate and to confirm a specific cultural status and self-understanding. For the members of a society, knowledge about their own cultural and social roots is a source of empowerment in that it raises their awareness of their own cultural particularity. In the context of minority groups, they “can provide means for a ‘counter-story’ [...] in which some of the central concepts of a dominating discourse can be appropriated and given new meaning.”⁸²

⁷⁹ William Lowell Randall, *The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1995): 4.

⁸⁰ Ron Eyerman, "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory," *Acta Sociologica* 47.2 (2004): 162.

⁸¹ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 132.

⁸² Eyerman, "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory": 162.

As an illustration of how cultural narratives are involved in processes of identity formation, the following analysis will focus on the representation of the cultural narrative of slavery in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. It will examine how the collective memory of slavery is enacted in the plays and what meaning it has for the cultural self-definition of the characters on stage. Although none of the plays considered here is set during the time of slavery, it will be shown that the collective memory of slavery constitutes a focal point of reference in the construction and representation of African-American identity on stage.

3.1 Identifying with Slave Ancestors

The American slavery past has become a focal point of reference and identification in the context of African-American identity. As an ‘Ursprungseignis,’ a collective root experience, and a foundational myth, slavery stands at the beginning of the African-American experience. Publications such as Toni Morrison’s novel *A Mercy* (2008) and *Some Sing, Some Cry* (2010) by renowned writers Ntozake Shange and Ifa Bayeza demonstrate the persistent significance the history of slavery has gained in African-American literature and culture since the turn of the century. In the later decades of the 19th century a generation of black intellectuals first initiated a conscious re-working of this collective past and, thus, helped to turn slavery from a national into a cultural trauma, as Ron Eyerman has shown:

In this sense, slavery was traumatic in retrospect, and formed a “primal scene” which could, potentially, unite all “African Americans” in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa. Slavery formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory, one that signified and distinguished a race, a people, or a community depending on the level of abstraction and point of view being put forward.⁸³

Slavery has become a constitutive element of African-American identity in that it represents a unique past that is shared by the members of this particular we-group. The collective memory of slavery as well as its social and cultural meaning is transmitted and preserved in cultural memory. It has become a key cultural narrative and represents a

⁸³ Ron Eyerman, Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 1-2.

“useable past”⁸⁴ that is “recollected by later generations who have had no experience of the ‘original’ event, yet continue to be identified and to identify themselves through it.”⁸⁵

In 20th-century African-American theater these “later generations” are represented by characters such as Tommy, the heroine in Alice Childress’s play *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969). When Tommy retells the history of her family to the character Bill, she enters the past in reverse chronological order, talking about her parents first, then her grandparents, and ending with her great-great-grandparents who were slaves in Sweetwater Springs, Virginia:

TOMMY My great, great grandparents was slaves.

BILL Guess everybody’s was.

TOMMY Mine was slaves in a place called Sweetwater Springs, Virginia. We tried to look it up one time but somebody at Church told us that Sweetwater Springs had become a part of Norfolk... so we didn’t carry it any further... As it would be a expense to have a lawyer trace your people.

(WIW 750-751)

For Tommy, her slave ancestors from Sweetwater Springs stand for the origins of her family and of herself and she sees the beginning of her family lineage in slavery times. When Tommy identifies herself as the fifth generation of her family in the United States, she consciously integrates herself into this family lineage. Although her family members were unable “to trace [their] people” due to a lack of money, the memory of Tommy’s slave ancestors is preserved and passed on in family memory and in Tommy’s “memory talk”⁸⁶ on stage. Their remembrance supports Tommy’s pride in her family story as a story of survival and resistance to white supremacy:

TOMMY (*now on sure ground*) I was born in Baltimore, Maryland and raised here in Harlem. [...] My mama raised me, mostly by herself, God rest the dead. Mama belonged to “The Eastern Star.” Her father was a “Mason.” If a man in the family is a “Mason” any woman related to him can be an “Eastern Star.” My grandfather was a member of “The Prince Hall Lodge.” I had a [sic] uncle who was an “Elk,”... a member of “The Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World.” “The Henry Lincoln

⁸⁴ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*: 194.

⁸⁵ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*: 15.

⁸⁶ Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (München: Beck, 2008): 16. For more information on the presentation and meaning of family memory and family history in the plays considered here see chapter 6: “Learning from Absent Ancestors and Living Elders: Family Memory on Stage.”

Johnson Lodge.” You know, the white “Elks” are called “The Benevolent Protective Order of Elks” but the black “Elks” are called “The *Improved* Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of *the World*.” That’s because the black “Elks” got the copyright first but the white “Elks” took us to court about it to keep us from usin’ the name. Over fifteen hundred black folk went to jail for wearin’ the “Elk” emblem on their coat lapel. Years ago,... that’s what you call history.

(WIW 750; italics and emphasis original)

As Tommy’s narration reveals, within only a few generations Tommy’s family worked itself up from slaves to active members in leading African-American fraternal organizations and sororities, fighting for integration and equality in a racial and segregated American society. For Bill, it is this family story that constitutes Tommy’s beauty as a black woman who has come “through the biggest riot of all, ... somethin’ called ‘Slavery’ [...]” (WIW 755; capitalization original). In an interview, playwright Childress once explained: “Events from the distant past, things which took place before I was born, have influence over the content, form, and commitment of my work. I am a descendant of a particular American slave, my great grandmother, Annie.”⁸⁷ Childress’s admiration of and identification with her slave grandmother is mirrored in the family story of her character Tommy who also proudly identifies with her slave ancestors.

This pride in the family’s slave origins is also shared by Walter Lee Younger in Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). In the final scene of the play Walter Lee rejects the bribe money that he is offered in return for not moving into their new home in an all-white neighborhood by explaining that his father and his family have “earned” (RIS 553) it, as he says. He points out that his family “come[s] from people who had a lot of pride” (RIS 553) and who constantly fought for their rightful share in the American Dream. When he emphasizes that his son “makes the sixth generation of [his] family in this country” (RIS 553), Walter Lee almost literally repeats the words that his mother Lena spoke to him a few moments before. Walter Lee indeed initially intended to accept the money and it was only when his mother reminded him of the family past and of his responsibility towards his ancestors that he changed his mind:

⁸⁷ Alice Childress, “A Candle in a Gale Wind,” *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Press, 1984): 111.

MAMA Son – I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers – but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor. (*raising her eyes and looking at him*) We ain't never been that dead inside.

(RIS 551; italics original)

In the play Lena functions as the guardian of family memory in which the cultural trauma of slavery is re-interpreted as a source of pride and empowerment for the living family generations. For her, accepting the bribe money would mean accepting denigration of her ancestors and of everything the family has achieved since the time of slavery. Within five generations, the Younger family has worked its way up from “slaves and sharecroppers” to the owners of a house. Walter Lee is a chauffeur and Lena's daughter Beneatha goes to college in order to become a doctor, aspiring to a middle-class profession. By reminding her son of the family's past and its legacy Lena points out that he and the other family members are only what they are and where they are because of their ancestors. Slavery stands at the beginning of the family's continual social progression that is supposed to be continued in subsequent family generations. Lena holds her slave ancestors up as an example and does not want her son to disgrace their memory. She advises Walter Lee to show his son Travis “where [their] five generations done come to” (RIS 553), emphasizing his responsibility towards the memory of his ancestors who paved the way for his and his family's well-being.

As the representative of the past, Lena cannot understand why her son does not appreciate the freedom and security that he could enjoy growing up in “a home” (RIS 532) in Chicago's Southside. When Walter Lee, who is only concerned about getting rich, tells his mother that money is life, she replies:

MAMA (*quietly*) Oh – (*very quietly*) So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life – now it's money. I guess the world really do change...

(RIS 531; italics original)

When Walter Lee explains that “[life] was always money, Mama” (RIS 531), Lena objects and reminds him of the atrocities and hardships that his ancestors had to struggle with in

the South. She points out that unlike previous family generations, Walter Lee has “a home” and does not “have to ride to work on the back of nobody’s streetcar” (RIS 532). He and his family do not have to be “worried about not being lynched and getting to the North [...] and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too...” (RIS 532).

This differentiation and comparison between life in the South and life in the North is indeed a recurring motif in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. The binary topographical distinction represents an integral element of the cultural trauma of slavery in that it is an enactment of the symbolic American North-South divide that is grounded in the cultural memory of the American Civil War as the war about slavery.

3.2 The Symbolic American North-South Divide

Although the American Civil War was the result of a variety of causes, it has gained primary symbolic cultural meaning as the conflict about the abolition or perpetuation of slavery, dividing the country into the ‘free states’ of the North and the ‘slave states’ of the South. A “rich mythography of discordant imagery”⁸⁸ has developed that “calls forth associations from literature and history, politics and sociology.”⁸⁹ While the North has come to signify the land of freedom and abolitionism, slavery has become the outstanding feature of the South, the cradle of racial violence and discrimination that black American slaves such as Frederick Douglass struggled to escape from. In his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. An American Slave* (1845) Douglass describes the moment when he finally found himself in a Northern free state as “a moment of the highest excitement [he] ever experienced.” He felt like an “unarmed mariner [when] he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate,” like someone “who had escaped a den of hungry lions”⁹⁰ in the South.

⁸⁸ Mark Zelinsky and Amy Cuomo, “Southern Drama,” *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, eds. Richard J. Gray and Owen Robinson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004): 280. Another interesting study in this context is Trudier Harris, *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South*, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2009). For further information on how literature has helped to shape and perpetuate the symbolic encoding of the American South see the articles in Richard J. Gray and Owen Robinson, *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004).

⁸⁹ Zelinsky and Cuomo, “Southern Drama”: 280.

⁹⁰ Frederick Douglass and Robert B. Stepto, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. An American Slave*, The John Harvard Library (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009): 106.

As a key element of the collective memory of slavery, the symbolic imagery of the American geography is also important in African-American theater by female playwrights. The plays of interest here use the symbolic American North-South divide as explanatory background for the action on stage and, thus, ground the construction of the characters' African-American identities in the representation of their surroundings by writing – or rather enacting – the South and the North on stage.

3.2.1 Enacting the South

Especially in early 20th-century plays the South is presented as a place of racism, inequality, and racial violence. The Southern environment supports the feeling of racism and racial prejudice that characters such as Emmaline in Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* (1925) have to struggle with.

Color Struck takes place in Jacksonville, a “Southern City,” “twenty years ago and present” (CS 89) and, as the title indicates, focuses on the black heroine Emmaline, or Emma, and her life-long struggle with the hue of her skin color. In a place that is considered the cradle of slavery the black female character's desire “to turn white”⁹¹ is especially strong. Emma has internalized the racism that surrounds her to such an extent that she is not able to see her beauty and to accept herself as a black woman throughout the twenty years presented on stage. The main conflict lies in her jealousy towards lighter-skinned women which destroys her relationship with her lover John, “a light brown-skinned man” (CS 89). As John puts it: “She so despises her own skin that she can't believe any one else could love it!” (CS 102) In the end it is this lack of self-love that even kills Emma's daughter. When John returns after a twenty-year absence in the North in order to finally marry his love, he learns that Emma has given birth to “a very white girl” (CS 89) who suffers from a severe illness. John repeatedly asks Emma to get a doctor, but Emma hesitates, not wanting to leave John with her “mulatto” (CS 100) daughter, whose prettiness and light-skin make her a rival. Shocked by Emma's self-contempt that even makes her jealous of her own daughter John exits the stage, “on the verge of tears” and “closing the door after him” (CS 102). Emma's daughter finally dies before the doctor arrives. When the doctor asks her why Emma did not call him sooner, she replies that she “couldn't see” (CS 102), being caught in the darkness of her racist

⁹¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991): 54.

self-contempt. The inescapable force of her racial thinking is emphasized in the fact that she remains in the “Southern city” of Jacksonville throughout the play, while we learn that John, who does not suffer from a damaged self-love, escapes to the North. In the end it is Emma’s internalized racism and her lack of self-love and self-acceptance that cause the tragedies of her life, making her lose both her love and her daughter.

While Hurston examines the psychological effects of racism in her play, Mary Burrill’s *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919) focuses on the social and legal status that black Americans had in the South’s white-dominated society in the early 20th century. The action takes place “in a small country town in the South” (TTST 179) and deals with discriminatory laws of contraception and birth control. The play was written for the Birth Control Review in September 1919, featuring a special issue on “The Negroes’ Need for Birth Control, as Seen by Themselves,” and points to the fatal effects of a lack of education on birth control knowledge for African-American working-class women in the South. The play depicts the family of Malinda Jasper, a mother of seven children, who has to do heavy work as a laundress to feed her family, even just one week after giving birth to her youngest child. She is “a frail, tired-looking woman of thirty-eight” (TTSD 179) and dies of exhaustion in the course of the play. Although Elizabeth Shaw, a “visiting nurse” (TTSD 179), sees how much Malinda suffers from her hard work and from having to bear too many children, she is not allowed to tell her how to escape this cycle of poverty and children. She explains: “Malinda, when I took my oath as nurse, I swore to abide by the laws of the State, and the law forbids my telling you what you have a right to know!” (TTST 182) Malinda, however, knows that she does not have any rights in the South, not even when her own daughter Pinkie is raped by a white man as she explains to Miss Shaw:

MRS. JASPER (*sadly*) Yuh nevah seed Pinkie ‘cause she lef’ ‘fo’ yuh come heah. She come ‘tween Miles an’ Aloysius – she warn’t right in de haid – she wuked ovah tuh Bu’nett’s place – Ah aint nevah been much on my gals wukin’ round dese white men but Pinkie *mus’ go*; an’ fus thing we know Bu’nett got huh in trouble.

MISS SHAW Poor, poor girl! What did you do to the Burnett man?

MRS. JASPER (*with deep feeling*) Lor’, Mis’ ‘Liz’beth, cullud folks cain’t do nothin’ to white folks down heah! [...]

(TTSD 181; italics and emphasis original)

Malinda knows that black people in the South do not have any rights, making them powerless against white injustice. She knows that “cullud folks cain’t do nothin’ to white folks down heah,” not even in the case of physical violence. The explicit reference to the situation of black people “down heah” implies that things might be different in the North, but in the South Malinda has to accept the inferior position that she is put in.

This legally and socially enforced powerlessness of black people to act against racial violence is most obvious with regard to the practice of lynching. In the first decades of the 20th century many African-American authors such as Myrtle Smith Livingston and Angelina Weld Grimké wrote anti-lynching plays, aiming to protest against this violent form of oppression that was especially widespread in the 1920s.⁹²

Livingston’s one-act play *For Unborn Children* (1926) is set “somewhere in the South” (FUC 185) in the 1920s. It focuses on the love relationship between black Leroy Carlson and white Selma Frazier, whose mixed relationship is considered a taboo in the South at that time. Leroy’s grandmother, Grandma Carlson, and his sister Marion are constantly worried about his life and his well-being because of “the sentiment down here” (FUC 186) as they say. Marion says that “[i]t’s terrible not knowing whether he’s all right or if some mob has – (*buries her face in her hands*)” (FUC 185; italics original). Leroy is very aware of the danger that he and Selma are in, so that he intends to leave the South and to “go north someplace” (FUC 185). He explains to his grandmother: “O, Granny, I hate to leave you and sis; but you know we can’t stay here and marry, confound these laws! It will be better for us to go some place where we aren’t known, anyway” (FUC 186). Grandma Carlson and Marion try to persuade him to abandon his love, pointing out that he would betray both his race and his unborn children if he married her. Leroy reconsiders his relationship and his plans to marry Selma, especially when he learns that his own mother, a white woman, “hated” her biracial children and “never could stand the sight” (FUC 187) of him and his sister. While he is thinking, “sit[ting] with his head bowed in his hands” (FUC 187), Selma suddenly arrives and tries to warn him of the

⁹² As Judith L. Stephens points out in her introduction to a collection of early lynching plays: “Lynchings reached their peak in 1892 when 255 individuals (155 black victims, 100 white) were killed by lynch mobs. As the years progressed, the number of lynchings decreased, but the ratio of black to white victims increased. Of the 100 lynchings recorded from 1924 to 1928, 91 of the victims were black and 9 were white” (Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens, eds., Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998): 8).

white mob that is approaching. She begs him to hurry but it is too late and voices shouting “‘Lynch him! ‘The dirty nigger!’ ‘We’ll show him how to fool around a white woman!’” (FUC 187) grow louder as a crowd of white men nears the house. Leroy does not try to escape but interprets this mob as a sign of God’s will. “Looking heavenward” he says: “Thy will be done, O Lord!” (FUC 187) Like a martyr, Leroy finally “walks out to his death victorious and unafraid” (FUC 187), accepting the expected punishment for his “mistake” (FUC 187) of loving a white woman in the South.

While Leroy is not able to escape “the sentiment down here,” Mrs. Loving in Angelina Weld Grimké’s play *Rachel* (1916) had left the South some ten years ago in order to save her life and the lives of her children. In this lynching drama that is set in a “northern city” in the “first decade of the Twentieth Century,”⁹³ the South signifies a cruel past that Mrs. Loving, the oldest character on stage, talks about to her children Rachel and Tom. She explains that she fled to the North with Rachel and Tom after the lynching of her husband Mr. Loving and her son George. In an act of “conversational remembering”⁹⁴ she reveals this long-kept family secret and re-tells what happened in the South some ten years ago, when “the wrongs of the Negro – ate into [the] soul” (RA 143) of her “utterly fearless” (RA 143) husband:

He edited and owned, for several years, a small Negro paper. In it he said a great many daring things. I used to plead with him to be more careful. I was always afraid for him. For a long time, nothing happened – he was too important to the community. And then – one night – ten years ago – a mob made up of the respectable people in the town lynched an innocent black man – and what was worse – they knew him to be innocent. A white man was guilty. I never saw your father so wrought up over anything: he couldn’t eat; he couldn’t sleep; he brooded night and day over it. And then – realizing fully the great risk he was running, although I begged him not to – and all his friends also – he deliberately and calmly went to work and published a most terrific denunciation of that mob. The old prophets in the Bible were not more terrible than he.

(RA 143-144)

⁹³ This information is included in the play’s original publication in Boston by the Cornhill Company in 1920. This version is reprinted in Angelina Weld Grimké and Carolivia Herron, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁹⁴ Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*: 16.

In spite of threats to his life Mr. Loving did not retract his article so that one day “some dozen masked men came to [their] house”:

We were not asleep – your father and I. They broke down the front door and made their way to our bedroom. Your father kissed me – and took up his revolver. It was always loaded. They broke down the door. *(a silence. She continues slowly and quietly)* I tried to shut my eyes – and I could not. Four masked men fell – they did not move any more – after a little. *(pauses)* Your father was finally overpowered and dragged out. In the hall – my little seventeen-year-old George tried to rescue him. Your father begged him not to interfere. He paid no attention. It ended in their dragging them both out. *(pauses)*

(RA 144; italics original)

In order to escape a similar fate, Mrs. Loving decided to go North with Tom and Rachel. “I couldn’t bring you up – in the South” (RA 144) she tells her children. Rachel fully understands her mother’s decision as she realizes that “everywhere, everywhere throughout the South, there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear, whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hearts is three parts – pain” (RA 145). By fleeing to the North, Mrs. Loving was able to escape the constant fear for her life and the lives of her children. For her, the “northern city” that they now live in represents a place of safety, a promised land, and a refuge.

However, although their mother’s escape to the North has enabled Tom and Rachel to grow up without the constant threat of racial violence and lynching mobs, they have to struggle with racism and racial prejudice in the North, too.

3.2.2 Enacting the North

Rachel and Tom have to realize that the North does not fulfill the freedom and equality that it promised to the over two million black people who left the racially segregated South in search of a better future during the Great Migration in the early part of the 20th century. Hoping to escape racial prejudice and to start anew in the booming industrial cities in the North, they soon had to realize that they had not left racism behind.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ For further information on the Great Migration see for example the publication by Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010).

Interestingly enough, the numbers of black Americans moving back to the South have increased over the past decade according to 2011 national census data. A *New York Times* article from

Growing up in the North enabled Tom and Rachel to receive an education that they could never have had in the South, but it does not allow them to practice their chosen professions after graduation. The discrimination on the job market makes it impossible for Tom and Rachel to find a job and to earn money, as Tom complains to his mother:

Tom (*slowly; as though thinking aloud*) I hear people talk about God's justice – and I wonder. There, are you, Ma. There isn't a sacrifice – that you haven't made. You're still working your fingers to the bone – sewing – just so all of us may keep on living. Rachel is a graduate in Domestic Science; she was high in her class; most of the girls below her rank have positions in the schools. I'm an electrical engineer – and I've tried steadily for several months – to practice my profession. It seems our educations aren't much use to us: we aren't allowed to make good – because our skins are dark.

(RA 149; italics original)

Rachel and Tom are not the only black characters in Grimké's play who have to deal with this lack of employment opportunities. Tom's friend John Strong, who also came from the South with his widowed mother, had to face the same "stone wall" (RA 151) after graduation as he tells Tom. As he was unable to find a job in his profession, he finally accepted a job as a waiter because he "couldn't let [his] mother starve" (RA 151). Since then he has fought severe struggles with his self-respect, as he admits to Tom: "College friends, so-called, and acquaintances used to come into the restaurant. One or two at first – attempted to commiserate with me. They didn't do it again. I waited upon them – I did my best. Many of them tipped me. (*pauses and smiles grimly*) I can remember my first tip, still" (RA 151; italics in the original). Although John "can stand their attitude now" (RA 151), his bitterness is still perceptible, when he explains: "My philosophy – learned hard, is to make the best of everything you can, and go on. At best, life isn't so very long" (RA 151). John has learned to accept the fact that he will "die a head-waiter" (RA 151) as

March 25, 2011 entitled "Many U.S. Blacks Moving to South" deals with the high increase of the nation's black population in the American South and talks about a "reversing trend" of migration. The percentage of black Americans living in the South has increased to 57 percent, the highest rate since 1960. As Clement Price, a professor of history at Rutgers-Newark who is quoted in the article, explains: "The notion of the North and its cities as the promised land has been a powerful part of African-American life, culture and history, and now it all seems to be passing by. The black urban experience has essentially lost its appeal with blacks in America" (Sabrina Tavernise and Robert Gebeloff, "Many U.S. Blacks Moving to South, Reversing Trend," The New York Times March 25, 2011).

he says, because he needs to earn enough money so that his mother “can live comfortably” (RA 151).

Listening to John and thinking about his own situation increase Tom’s hatred of the pretentious white American society, both in the South and in the North. For Tom, the situation of black people in the South and in the North is quite similar. In both regions they have to struggle with racism and racial prejudice, albeit in different forms and degrees:

TOM Today, we colored men and women, everywhere – are up against it. Every year, we are having a harder time of it. In the South, they make it as impossible as they can for us to get an education. We’re hemmed in on all sides. Our one safeguard – the ballot – in most states, is taken away already, or is being taken away. Economically, in a few lines, we have a slight show – but at what a cost! In the North, they make a pretense of liberality; they give us the ballot and a good education, and then – snuff us out. Each year, the problem just to live, gets more difficult to solve.

(RA 152)

Although Tom sees why his mother had left the South and went to the free states, he does not completely share his mother’s appreciation of life in the North. Even in the more liberal North, they still have to struggle with “the tremendous handicap of being colored” (RA 138). For Mrs. Loving, the North represented the land of freedom in which she and her children did no longer have to fear for their lives. For Tom, Rachel, and John, however, this promise turns out to be only “a pretense of liberty.”

This generational difference with regard to the perception of the North is also dealt with in Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. By moving to the North, Lena was able to provide their children with a safe and happy childhood and to keep them “out of trouble till [they] was grown” (RIS 532). Beneatha and Walter Lee grew up in the free state of Illinois and do not know their mother’s worries “about not being lynched and getting to the North” and “how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too” (RIS 532). They do not fear physical racial violence, but they nevertheless experience a different form of racism that is expressed in their worries about money. Walter Lee struggles with the disappointment and dissatisfaction of being a poor chauffeur for a rich white man. “I’m thirty-five years old,” he explains, “I been married eleven years and I got a boy who

sleeps in the living room – (*very, very quietly*) – and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live...” (RIS 518; italics original). Like Tom, Walter Lee does not share his mother’s appreciation of the ‘promised land’ because he suffers from a lack of opportunities for achieving economic and material wealth as a black man in the North.

Interestingly enough, this generational difference is also linked to the character’s attitude towards God. For the older generations represented by characters such as Mrs. Loving in *Rachel* and Lena in *A Raisin in the Sun*, their faith in God functioned as a “refuge in a hostile white world,”⁹⁶ providing them with consolation for the atrocities they had to endure. For the younger generation of their children, however, religion has lost its comforting and reassuring meaning and is replaced by a critical humanism. For Rachel and her brother Tom in Grimké’s melodrama, the cultural narrative of the Bible no longer fits the experiences they have in “this white Christian nation” (RA 145). Their mother Mrs. Loving begs them in vain “not to lose faith – in God” and to “try to believe, again” (RA 149). Similarly, although Lena “went to trouble to get [her children] to church every Sunday” (RIS 524), her daughter Beneatha is “tired of hearing about God all the time” (RIS 524). She explains: “It’s all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don’t accept. [...] It’s just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort” (RIS 524). No longer wanting to simply endure the discrimination and inequality that surrounds them, Beneatha rejects her parents’ faith in God, pointing to the importance of her own action and agency instead.

What difficulties and challenges young black Americans such as Tom, Rachel, John, Walter Lee, and Beneatha had to face in the industrial cities in the North in spite of their resolute belief in their own strength and power, is most poignantly illustrated in Mercedes Gilbert’s play *Environment* (1931). As the title indicates, the play focuses on the influence of the surroundings of Harlem in the late 1920s and early 1930s on the family of Mary Lou Williams. We learn from the dialogues between the characters that before the action starts the family had left the rural environment of Durham in the former slave state North Carolina, hoping for a better life in New York City. Their hopes were not fulfilled, however, as Mary Lou’s daughter Edna points out. Being unable to earn money, the family had to move into “a poorly furnished” (EN 204) basement apartment:

⁹⁶ Edward F. Frazier and Charles E. Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974): 50, 88.

We came here with money, [sic] we received from the sale of our farm, and for a while lived in a better neighborhood. Then, when father could not get work, and the money was all spent, father started drinking and then, this (*Indicating surroundings with her hand*) I don't know how it will end.

(EN 205; italics original)

Ever since moving to the city, the family members have suffered from moral, emotional, and physical decline. Mary Lou has changed from “a beautiful woman, full of hope” into a person “broken in health and mind” (EN 205). In order to save her family, she even becomes involved in the business of drug dealing. Her husband James has become a drunkard who spends the family's money and who is searched by the police. Their daughter Edna, a hardworking typist, becomes a drug addict, and their son Henry is a liar and a thief who spends his time with “the gang” (EN 211), breaking into houses and ending up in jail. It is only when they finally return “home to Durham” (EN 205) that the characters are able to recover their former strength, health, and financial well-being. In Durham, they no longer have to live in the run-down apartment, but the family's living room is instead equipped with a “large settee, comfortable chairs and living room table, piano, and a general air of comfort, and prosperity” (EN 220). Edna and her father are cured from their addictions, Henry has served his sentence, and Mary Lou has found her place as the conductor of the church choir of Durham. For these characters, the rural South is a place of belonging, a home where they can forget about life in New York City's Harlem. Back in the place where they belong, they are “safe” (EN 220) and they “can all start life anew” “in better environment” (EN 226), as they say.

This representation of the American landscape is indeed an interesting twist in the North-South-imagery in that the association of the South as “a better environment” (EN 226) contradicts its representation in the other plays considered here. In *Environment* the South is not enacted as a dreadful place of lynching and racial violence situated in the realm of remembered time, but as a place of belonging and a home where the characters can live safe and sound and forget about Harlem, “this dreadful place [that] has done [them] so much harm” (EN 205). Although the South is introduced as the families' origins in all of the plays treated here, *Environment* is the only play that enacts a movement back to the family's Southern roots as a precondition for its happy ending.

3.3 Conclusion

In October 2008 the *Washington Post* published an article entitled “A Family Tree Rooted in American Soil: Michelle Obama Learns About Her Slave Ancestors, Herself and Her Country.”⁹⁷ Two months later *The Chicago Tribune* published an article on the same topic entitled “Michelle Obama’s Family Tree Has Roots in a Carolina Slave Plantation.”⁹⁸ Both articles deal with the findings of a genealogical study on the First Lady’s ancestry that was commissioned at the onset of the presidential campaign, revealing the family’s origins as dating back to the early beginnings of American history. Genealogists have shown that Obama’s great-great-grandfather who was born around 1850 was a slave in Georgetown, South Carolina, and lived on a rice plantation at least until the Civil War. In both articles President Barack Obama is quoted as saying that he is “married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners.” The findings reveal the history of a black American family who has made its way from rags to riches, from the hardships of slavery to a historic presidential election. Obama’s family history indeed connects her to the African-American cultural trauma of slavery and she asserts that the revelation of her family’s roots is part of the process of “uncovering the shame, digging out the pride”⁹⁹ in African-American history.

It is this process of “digging out the pride” that is also evident in the representation of the cultural narrative of slavery in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. In the plays of interest here the cultural narrative of slavery is embedded in the individual family stories introduced on stage. The characters proudly identify themselves as descendants of slaves who are considered the first generation of their families. They deliberately integrate themselves into the family’s genealogical chain that has its beginning in the collective root experience of slavery. Lena in *A Raisin in the Sun* introduces herself as “com[ing] from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers” (RIS 551). Walter Lee points out that his son “makes the sixth generation

⁹⁷ Shailagh Murray, “A Family Tree Rooted in American Soil: Michelle Obama Learns About Her Slave Ancestors, Herself and Her Country,” *The Washington Post* October 2, 2008.

⁹⁸ Dahleen Glanton and Stacy St. Clair, “Michelle Obama’s Family Tree Has Roots in a Carolina Slave Plantation,” *Chicago Tribune* December 1, 2008.

⁹⁹ Murray, “A Family Tree Rooted in American Soil: Michelle Obama Learns About Her Slave Ancestors, Herself and Her Country.”

of [their] family in this country” (RIS 553). Tommy in *Wine in the Wilderness* represents the fifth generation of her family that aimed to trace their slave ancestors, “[their] people” (WIW 751), in Sweetwater Springs, Virginia. In the plays, the characters’ family histories are re-evaluated and re-interpreted as victorious struggles against discrimination and racial violence, demonstrating black Americans’ agency and strength in spite of racist oppressive forces. For the living family members, the remembrance of their slave ancestors functions as a source of pride that empowers them to deal with the racism and racial prejudice that surrounds them.

As the analyses have shown, the representation of the cultural narrative of slavery in the plays is closely linked to the mythic geography of the American North-South divide. In the plays the North represents both the land of freedom and safety for older characters such as Lena and Mrs. Loving who have experienced lynching and racial violence in the South, and a place of “pretense” in which the generation of their children has to struggle with a lack of opportunities for practicing their profession and for achieving economic and material wealth, making them gradually lose the faith in God that their parents had taught them. Similarly, like the North, the South is also enacted as a place of “discordant imagery.”¹⁰⁰ On the one hand, it is introduced as a place dominated by racial violence towards the black body and the black psyche against which characters such as Emma and Malinda are completely powerless. On the other hand, the South also signifies a place of belonging that their family trees are rooted in. For the characters in *Environment*, the only possibility to survive, to recover, and to regain their physical and emotional strength is to return to their origins and roots in the South. This interpretation of the South again emphasizes the close relation between the symbolic encoding of the American North-South divide and the cultural narrative of slavery as a foundational myth whose cultural meaning is constituted and conveyed in the performance on stage. By representing and enacting the cultural narrative of slavery on stage the plays help to transport and further manifest its significance in African-American cultural memory.

¹⁰⁰ Zelinsky and Cuomo, “Southern Drama”: 280.

4. The Idea of Mother Africa and African-American Identity

As the hyphenated term already indicates, Africa has always been a significant reference point for identification in the context of African-American identity. Since the turn of the century, Africa has been a dominant theme in works by African-American artists who aimed to express and to refashion a collective sense of black American identity based on the awareness of a common history. In plays, pageants, dance, music, film, and other art forms, 20th-century African-American artists, activists, and intellectuals aimed at establishing a bonding force within the black American community by glorifying the African roots and forging links to contemporary Africa. Starting with musical comedies such as *In Dahomey* (1902), *Abyssinia* (1906), and *Bandana Land* (1907) as well as historical pageants such as *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913) at the turn of the century, Africanist endeavors peaked during the Harlem Renaissance, aiming to convert the notion of Africa as “a badge of shame” and the “reminder of a savage past not sufficiently remote”¹⁰¹ into a cause for racial pride. Accompanied by Marcus Garvey’s call for repatriation to Africa, many musicians, poets, dancers, and artists such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Katherine Dunham, and Pearl Primus embraced all things African in their art. In his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” Langston Hughes introduced the idea of a pulsating bodily memory of Africa. Similarly, Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage” circles around the question “what is Africa to me?,” dealing with the desire to identify with African roots as an alternative to the American white Christian society. As a counter-memory to white American history the Afrocentric focus persisted in the following decades.

The question on Africa as a cultural home was especially fueled by the 1940s controversy between anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits and sociologist E. Franklin

¹⁰¹ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1962): 32.

Frazier on the nature of culture contact in the Western Hemisphere, especially with regard to Africans, Europeans, and their descendants. While Frazier was critical about the survival of a distinct African heritage and argued that slavery has obliterated any usable African past for black Americans, Herskovits argued that black American culture still contained African practices and traditions that had survived the traumatic dislocation. In *The Myth of the Negro Past*, originally published in 1941, Herskovits wrote about the importance of a unique African heritage as a basis for the formation of an African-American collective identity, pointing out that “a people that denies its past cannot escape being a prey to doubt of its value today and of its potentialities for the future.”¹⁰²

At mid-century with the advent of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, cultural pride in an African heritage gained a strong political dimension. With the invention of the black holiday tradition Kwanzaa in 1966, celebration of African heritage gained an annual commemorative position and a public space in the American calendar that represented a site of struggle between white and black Americans.¹⁰³ The political agitation was accompanied by a cultural movement under the heading ‘black is beautiful,’ which attempted to cultivate racial pride by celebrating and re-evaluating blackness. The movement aimed to oppose the contemporary prevailing idea that black features were less attractive and desirable than white features, challenging “the internalization, or, better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority [complex].”¹⁰⁴ The adoption of African clothes, hair, and other cultural signifiers became fashionable and were deemed “ideologically right-on.”¹⁰⁵

Contemporary discourses on African heritage and identification with all things African were also dealt with in African-American theater at that time. The following

¹⁰² Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*: 32.

¹⁰³ cf. Keith A. Mayes, *Kwanzaa: Black Power and the Making of the African-American Holiday Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2009). Kwanzaa is a weeklong celebration of universal African heritage and culture in the US between December 26 and January 1. The black holiday tradition features seven principles of blackness such as unity, faith, and self-determination, which, according to the founder Maulana Karenga, constitute a communal African philosophy.

¹⁰⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991): 11. The psychic damage that this idea had for many African-American men and women is strikingly illustrated in Zora Neale Hurston’s play *Color Struck* (1925), which focuses on the issue of colorism within the black community. For a detailed analysis see chapter 3 on “Slave Ancestors and Mythic Geography: The Cultural Narrative of Slavery on Stage.”

¹⁰⁵ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 99.

analysis will trace Africanisms and African influences in select plays by African-American female authors in the second half of the 20th century. It will examine what kind of African elements are included and how they are presented in the context of the characters' identity formation. The focus will be on Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), and Judith Alexa Jackson's *WOMBmanWARs* (1992) which serve as interesting examples of the contemporary critical discussions surrounding questions of black American identity as rooted in Africa.

4.1 African Names

During the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements of the 1960s and 1970s many black Americans such as Amiri Baraka and Ntozake Shange adopted African names in order to publicly announce their identification with Africa. Such African names established a link to a remote past before the cultural trauma of slavery, aiming to re-constitute lost genealogical bonds. In 1967 Everett LeRoi Jones, author of the play *Slave Ship* (1970), adopted the African name Imamu Amear Baraka, which he later changed to Amiri Baraka. Similarly, Ntozake Shange was born Paulette Williams in 1948. In 1971 she changed her name to the Zulu names Ntozake, meaning 'she who comes with her own things,' and Shange, meaning 'she who walks like a lion.' The adoption of African names turned into an index of both her own personal identity and of her emotional bonds to a collective black identity that also strongly influenced her art.

In *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) she includes the two African names "naomi kenya" and "kwame" (FCG 56) in the very last poem on crystal and her family.¹⁰⁶ This poem constitutes the most powerful story of the whole choreopoem, which is also evident in the fact that this is the only poem in which the agents are identified by names. naomi kenya and kwame beau willie brown are crystal's children who are killed by their mentally ill father beau willie brown, a Vietnam War veteran:

¹⁰⁶ The lack of capitalization in the characters' names is original and part of the new orthography that Shange introduces in her play. For a detailed discussion of language in *for colored girls* and in the other plays of interest here see chapter 8: "African-American Language Identity on Stage."

i stood by beau in the window / with naomi reaching
 for me / & kwame screamin mommy mommy from the fifth
 story / but i cd only whisper / & he dropped em

(FCG 60)

In the choreopoem it is the lady in red who tells the story of crystal and who finally in the passage just quoted reveals that she is crystal herself when the perspective suddenly shifts to the “I” of the first person singular. While the daughter’s name refers to a country in East Africa, crystal’s son carries the popular Ghanaian name Kwame, often associated with Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, who led his people to independence from Great Britain in 1957, making Ghana the first African country to achieve independence in the postwar period. With regard to the fact that the other voices on stage are archetypes that remain anonymous and un-particularized throughout the whole play, it is quite significant that Shange chooses African names for crystal’s children.

This African influence on African-American female playwrights and their work is also evident in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). In the play the female character Beneatha Younger adopts the African name Alayio, meaning “One for Whom Bread – Food – Is Not Enough” (RIS 529), that is given to her by her suitor Joseph Asagai. This male character is indeed regarded as the first authentic African character on the American stage.

4.2 African “Accessories”

Until the middle of the 20th century there was a tendency in black theater to present African heritage in musical shows that “lent themselves to romantic feelings about un-particularized African characters.”¹⁰⁷ This pattern was first disrupted with the production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry was indeed quite familiar with African history, culture, and politics. W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and her uncle William Leo Hansberry, who was the first professor of African history at Howard University, had a very strong influence on Hansberry’s understanding of Africa and the relation between Africans and

¹⁰⁷ James V. Hatch, “Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theatre,” *The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Errol Hill (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980): 18.

African Americans.¹⁰⁸ Hansberry was an active spokesperson for the African liberation movement and repeatedly expressed her opinion in magazines and journals such as *Freedom* and *The New York Times*.¹⁰⁹ Her interest in Africa is also evident in her dramatic art.

In *A Raisin in the Sun* Hansberry introduces the Nigerian exchange student Joseph Asagai, “a particularized African”¹¹⁰ and “the first literate and un-stereotyped African character on the Broadway stage.”¹¹¹ In an interview with Studs Terkel in 1959 Hansberry explained that in Asagai she wanted to represent “the true intellectual”¹¹² and a challenge to the stereotypical African character on stage:

I was aware that on the Broadway stage they had never seen an African who didn't have his shoes hanging around his neck and a bone through his nose, or his ears, or something. [Laughing] And I thought that just theatrically speaking, he would be a most refreshing character. In fact, this boy is a composite of many African students in the United States whom I have known.¹¹³

According to the stage directions Asagai is “a rather dramatic-looking young man” (RIS 527) who speaks both English and Yoruba. His name Asagai resembles the African name ‘assegai’ for spear and he is very proud of his African origins. He feels privileged to be

¹⁰⁸ cf. Deborah Jean Wood, “Plays of Lorraine Hansberry: Studies in Dramatic Form,” Thesis, University Microfilms, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1985: 68-95.

¹⁰⁹ In a letter to *The New York Times Magazine* from 1961 she said that “the continuation of intrigues against African and American Negro freedom demands high and steadfast unity among Negroes.” Quoted in Kristin L. Matthews, “The Politics of Home in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*,” *Modern Drama* 51. Winter 2008: 564. Furthermore, we can read the following lines in her autobiography:

“Sometimes in this country maybe just walking down a Southside street...

Or maybe suddenly up in a Harlem window...

Or maybe in a flash turning the page of one of those picture books from the South
you will see it -

Beauty... stark and full...

No part of something this – but rather, Africa, simply Africa. These thighs and arms and flying winged cheekbones, these hallowed eyes – without negation or apology...”

(Robert Nemiroff and Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969): 106; emphasis original)

¹¹⁰ Hatch, “Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theatre”: 18.

¹¹¹ Brenda Murphy, *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge, U.K.; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 142.

¹¹² Lorraine Hansberry, “Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry,” *American Theatre* 1.2 (November 1984): 41. The interview originally aired in Studs Terkel’s “Almanac” radio show in Hansberry’s home town Chicago.

¹¹³ Hansberry, “Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry”: 41.

able to study in the United States and intends to return to Africa one day in order to pass on his knowledge to his people:

In my village at home it is the exceptional man who can even read a newspaper or who ever *sees* a book at all. I will go home and much of what I will have to say will seem strange to the people of my village... But I will teach and work and things will happen, slowly and swiftly.

(RIS 548; emphasis original)

In the play Asagai is in love with Beneatha, the youngest female in the Younger family, who hopes to learn from him about her African heritage. When he first comes to her place and is introduced to her mother Lena, Beneatha tries to prepare her mother for their first meeting by teaching her the right pronunciation of his name and by begging her to refrain from asking “ignorant questions about Africans” and repeating current stereotypes about Africans:

MAMA What’s his name?

BENEATHA Asagai, Joseph. Ah-sah-guy... He’s from Nigeria.

MAMA O, that’s the little country that was founded by slaves way back...

BENEATHA No, Mama – that’s Liberia.

MAMA I don’t think I never met no African before.

BENEATHA Well, do me a favor and don’t ask him a whole lot of ignorant questions about Africans. I mean, do they wear clothes and all that –

MAMA Well, now, I guess if you think we so ignorant ‘round here maybe you shouldn’t bring your friends here –

BENEATHA It’s just that people ask such crazy things. All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan –

(RIS 526)

In contrast to her daughter, Lena does not identify herself with Africa so that she finally indignantly asks her daughter: “Why should I know anything about Africa?” (RIS 526) Although Lena is associated with the dignity and appearance of African women in that her “bearing is perhaps most like the noble bearing of the women of the Hereros of Southwest Africa” (RIS 520) according to the stage directions, she does not identify herself with an African heritage.¹¹⁴ For Lena, Asagai is a stranger from another continent,

¹¹⁴ Lena rather identifies herself with her family’s slave origins, coming “from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers” (RIS 551). For a detailed discussion of slavery and its meaning in *A Raisin in the Sun* and in African-American cultural memory in general see chapter 3: “Slave Ancestors and Mythic Geography: The Cultural Narrative of Slavery on Stage.”

representing an alien culture. For Beneatha, however, Asagai is a teacher from whom she hopes to learn about her cultural origins. For her, Asagai is the embodiment of Africa and a link to her past.

Beneatha is the youngest female in the play and she is characterized by an insatiable effort to find a way of expressing herself and her own identity as a modern young woman, who is able to attend college and to become a doctor one day. For her, Africa is not the stereotyped uncivilized country of “Tarzan” and “grass huts” (RIS 534), but it rather represents the roots of her African-American identity. The seriousness of her attempt to find her identity in an African heritage is also recognized by Asagai, who recalls their first meeting:

You came up to me and you said – and I thought you were the most serious little thing I had ever seen – you said: (*he imitates her*) ‘Mr. Asagai – I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my *identity*’ (*he laughs*)

(RIS 527; italics and emphasis original)

The way Asagai narrates his memory reveals that he respects Beneatha’s thirst for knowledge; yet, he also smiles at the naivety of her endeavors in that she does not seem to recognize that she is not an African woman, but rather a “young creature of the New World” (RIS 549) who does not know much about African culture. When Beneatha tries to dress herself in the traditional African robes that Asagai has brought her, he tells her: “I shall have to teach you how to drape it properly” (RIS 527). He acts like a teacher and encourages his student to think critically about herself. When Beneatha poses in front of the mirror wearing the African robes, he admiringly tells her “you wear it well...,” but immediately criticizes her for her “mutilated hair” (RIS 527):

BENEATHA (*turning suddenly*) My hair – what’s wrong with my hair?

ASAGAI (*shrugging*) Were you born with it like that?

BENEATHA (*reaching up to touch it*) No... of course not. (*She looks back to the mirror, disturbed*)

ASAGAI (*smiling*) How then?

BENEATHA You know perfectly well how... as crinkly as yours... that’s how.

ASAGAI And it is ugly to you that way?

BENEATHA (*quickly*) Oh, no – not ugly... (*more slowly, apologetically*) But it’s so hard to manage when it’s, well – raw.

ASAGAI And so to accommodate that – you mutilate it every week?

BENEATHA It's not mutilation!

ASAGAI (*laughing aloud at her seriousness*) Oh... please! I am only teasing you because you are so very serious about these things.

(RIS 527; italics original)

Asagai's behavior towards Beneatha is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, he admires her and finally even proposes to her, asking her to accompany him to "Nigeria. Home" (RIS 549). On the other hand, he also makes fun of her identification with Africa as her homeland on the level of clothes, hairstyle, and music. Beneatha indeed wants to become "a queen of the Nile!" (RIS 529) by wearing an Afro hairstyle, draping herself in African robes, and dancing to African music. Her quest for identity in pan-African unity culminates in the following scene between Ruth and Beneatha, which deserves to be quoted at length:

RUTH What have we got on tonight!

BENEATHA (*emerging grandly from the doorway so that we can see her thoroughly robed in the costume ASAGAI brought*) You are looking at what a well-dressed Nigerian woman wears – (*she parades for RUTH, her hair completely hidden by her headdress; she is coquettishly fanning herself with an ornate oriental fan, mistakenly more like Butterfly than any Nigerian that ever was*) Isn't it beautiful? (*she promenades to the radio and, with an arrogant flourish, turns off the good loud blues that is playing*) Enough of this assimilationist junk! (*RUTH follows her with her eyes as she goes to the phonograph and puts on a record and turns and waits ceremoniously for the music to come up. Then, with a shout –*) OCOMOGOSIAY!

(*RUTH jumps. The music comes up, a lovely Nigerian melody. BENEATHA listens, enraptured, her eyes far away – „back to the past.“ She begins to dance. RUTH is dumfounded.*)

RUTH What kind of dance is that?

BENEATHA A folk dance.

RUTH (*Pearl Bailey*) What kind of folks do that honey?

BENEATHA It's from Nigeria. It's a dance of welcome.

RUTH Who you welcoming?

BENEATHA The men back to the village.

RUTH Where they been?

BENEATHA How should I know – out hunting or something. Anyway, they are coming back now...

(RIS 532; italics and emphasis original)

For Beneatha, music and ritual dance are means of identity formation in that they are supposed to function as bridges to her African past. Her serious desire to retrace her roots

by shouting the Yoruba chant “OCOMOGOSIAY!”¹¹⁵ wearing African clothes, and dancing to African folklore music is undermined by her being unable to explain the meaning of the dance and the music to Ruth. She acts “mistakenly more like Butterfly than any Nigerian that ever was,” as the stage directions point out. In this scene Beneatha performs her own interpretation of African culture.

This becomes even more obvious when her brother Walter Lee, who comes home drunk, joins his sister, “his eyes look[ing] off – ‘back to the past’ – as he lifts both his fists to the roof, screaming: ‘YEAH...AND ETHIOPIA STRETCH FORTH HER HANDS AGAIN!...’” (RIS 533; emphasis original). Dancing on a table, Walter engages in a made-up tribal ritual of war. Imagining himself as “a leader of his people, a great chief, a descendant of Chaka” (RIS 533) in the possession of “an imaginary spear” (RIS 533), Walter pronounces himself “Flaming Spear” (RIS 533) and chases enemies all over the room. Beneatha and Walter engage in a call-and-response pattern with Beneatha encouraging her brother to continue his descriptions of an imaginary African countryside with “waters rushing,” “the screeching of the cocks in yonder hills,” and the “beating of the wings of the birds flying low over the mountains and the low places of our land” (RIS 533). It remains unclear if Walter is mocking his sister in this scene or if he is really identifying with African war chants at this moment. Yet, the fact that he is drunk and that he does not talk about Africa when he is sober suggests that he does not identify with Africa as seriously as his sister. Depending on the way it is acted, this scene does indeed have high comic potential.

Beneatha and Walter Lee are interrupted in their dancing and shouting when George Murchison, Beneatha’s other suitor, comes to pick her up for an evening out. When he sees her, he says to her: “Look honey, we’re going *to* the theatre – we’re not going to be *in* it... so go change, huh?” (RIS 533; emphasis original) For Beneatha, the clothes are a visible sign of her African “heritage” (RIS 533), while for George her appearance resembles an artificial masquerade, emphasized by the meta-textual reference to theater. For him, “being eccentric means – being natural” (RIS 533), an attitude that he despises in black people. For him and his personal identity, Africa has no meaning at all:

¹¹⁵ In 1951 Hansberry also published a poem entitled “Ocomogosiay!,” which foreshadows Beneatha’s identification with Africa in this scene. The poem is reprinted in Gerald Goff, ed., This Is Just to Say (Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley, 1969): 50-51.

GEORGE Oh, dear, dear, dear! Here we go! A lecture on the African past! On our Great West African Heritage! In one second we will hear all about the great Ashanti empires; the great Songhay civilizations; and the great sculpture of Bénin – and then some poetry in Bantu – and the whole monologue will end with the word *heritage*! (*nastily*) Let's face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts!

BENEATHA Grass huts! (*RUTH crosses to her and forcibly pushes her toward the bedroom*) See there... you are standing there in your splendid ignorance talking about people who were the first to smelt iron on the face of the earth! (*RUTH is pushing her through the door*) The Ashanti were performing surgical operations when the English – (*RUTH pulls the door to, with BENEATHA on the other side, and smiles graciously at GEORGE. BENEATHA opens the door and shouts the end of the sentence defiantly at GEORGE*) – were still tattooing themselves with blue dragons... (*she goes back inside*)

(RIS 534; italics and emphasis original)

This discussion between Beneatha and George engages with two contemporary discourses in the second half of the 20th century. While some black Americans such as George saw Africa as “a savage past not sufficiently remote,”¹¹⁶ others such as Beneatha embraced the African reference as a counter-culture to Western society. For Beneatha, the identification with Africa represents an ideal alternative to being an “assimilationist” black American “who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case, *oppressive* culture” (RIS 534; emphasis original). Yet, it is not the real Africa that Beneatha is looking for. It is only one of many attempts to find her own identity and to express herself, competing with such things as play acting, horseback riding, and playing the guitar (RIS 523). Beneatha's behavior is an imitation of African life and culture that lacks an understanding of its deeper cultural meaning and significance, so that her behavior is turned into a mockery, serving as a comic device in the overall structure of the play. As is also seen in the quote above, the scenes in which Beneatha is most serious about her African identity are the most comic scenes in the whole play. She fervently and vigorously searches for her African identity by wearing what Tommy, the main female character in Alice Childress's play *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), calls “accessories.”

¹¹⁶ Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*: 32.

4.3 Idealizing the “African Queen”

In Alice Childress’s play the protagonist Tommy, a female factory worker, is confronted with artist Bill Jameson’s vision of ideal black womanhood based on a romantic notion of African beauty. The play is set in Bill’s apartment, the decoration of which reveals his interest in all things African: “There is a three-quarter bed covered with an African throw, a screen is placed at the foot of the bed to insure privacy when needed. The room is obviously *black* dominated, pieces of sculpture, wall hangings, paintings” (WIW 738; emphasis original). While the “room also reflects an interest in other darker peoples of the world” (WIW 738), Bill’s aesthetic is determined by Africa and African women as embodiments of beauty and grace.

In the play Bill is working on a triptych on black womanhood, entitled “Wine In The Wilderness” (WIW 740). On the first canvas on “Black girlhood” there is “the painting of a charming little girl in Sunday dress and hair ribbon” (WIW 740). This visual representation of innocence and purity is contrasted with the painting on the second canvas that shows “a beautiful woman, deep mahogany complexion, she is cold but utter perfection, draped in startling colors of African material, very ‘Vogue’ looking. She wears a golden head-dress sparkling with brilliants and sequins applied over the paint” (WIW 740). For Bill, this woman stands for “Mother Africa, regal, black womanhood in her noblest form” (WIW 740). She is indeed the reason why the triptych is entitled “Wine in the Wilderness”:

BILL Once, a long time ago, a poet named Omar told us what a paradise life could be if a man had a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and ... a woman singing to him in the wilderness. She is the woman, she is the bread, she is the wine, she is the singing. This Abyssinian maiden is paradise, ... perfect black womanhood.

(WIW 740)

In describing the woman on the painting as an “Abyssinian Maiden,” Bill creates a romanticized and mystified version of the origins of black womanhood. In Romantic poetry the image of the Abyssinian maiden was used self-reflexively to symbolize the

artist's creativity.¹¹⁷ Displayed in a public space such as a post office, a library, or a bank, his "black queen" (WIW 741) is supposed to serve as a role model for the "messed-up chicks" (WIW 741) whom he sees in the black women of his day and who will be painted on the third canvas:

BILL [...] This is the unfinished third of "Wine In The Wilderness." She's gonna be the kinda chick that is grass roots,... no, not grass roots, ... I mean she's underneath the grass roots. The lost woman,... what the society has made out of our women. She's as far from my African queen as a woman can get and still be female, she's as close to the bottom as you can get without crackin' up... she's ignorant, unfeminine, coarse, rude... vulgar... a poor, dumb chick that's had her behind kicked until it's numb... and the sad part is... she ain't together, you know, ... there's no hope for her.

(WIW 740)

The black woman that Bill sees in his female contemporaries is much different from the ideal Bill has in mind: "[i]f you had to sum her up in one word it would be nothin'!" (WIW 740) He associates the African woman with beauty, grace, mystery, and femininity; all attributes and features that Tommy, his model for the third canvas, seems to lack when she first appears on stage:

TOMMY is dressed in a mis-matched skirt and sweater, wearing a wig that is not comical, but is wiggy looking. She has the habit of smoothing it every once in a while, patting to make sure it's in place. She wears sneakers and bobby sox, carries a brown paper sack.

(WIW 741)

For Bill, Tommy represents the ideal model for his painting of the "messed-up chick." Tommy, whose real name is Tomorrow-Marie, tries to excuse her appearance by telling Bill and the other characters that all her belongings were destroyed in the 1964 race riot that is going on in the background when the play starts. Yet, even if the clothes are not hers, the wig definitely is. Asked by Cynthia, the only other female character in the play, if Tommy really has to wear the wig, she answers:

¹¹⁷ As early as 1797 Samuel Taylor Coleridge used the image of the Abyssinian maiden in his poem *Kubla Khan* to point out the creative imaginative force of art on a self-reflexive level.

TOMMY (*a little sensitive*) I like how *your* hair looks. But some of the naturals I don't like. Can see all the lint caught up in the hair like it hasn't been combed since know not when. You a Muslim?

CYNTHIA No.

TOMMY I'm just sick-a hair, hair, hair. Do it this way, don't do it, leave it natural, straighten it, process, no process. I get sick-a hair and talkin' 'bout it and foolin' with it. That's why I wear the wig.

CYNTHIA I'm sure your own must be just as nice or nicer than that.

TOMMY It oughta be. I only paid nineteen ninety five for this.

CYNTHIA You ought to go back to usin' your own.

TOMMY (*tensely*) I'll be givin' that some thought.

(WIW 746; italics and emphasis original)

Challenging the contemporary belief that black hair is always necessarily connected to a political or social statement, Tommy's answer to Cynthia's question is surprising. She does not wear the wig out of a certain political conviction but rather as a means of evading the discussions and any political valuations of her appearance. Yet, from Bill's perspective it is exactly this wig that completes her image as the "messed-up chick." When she asks Bill if she should take off the wig for the painting, he answers: "No, it's part of your image, ain't it? You must have a reason for wearin' it" (WIW 749).

Tommy's posing for the picture is interrupted when she accidentally spills over orange juice into her lap. While she is putting on the "African-throw cloth" (WIW 749) that Bill hands, he talks to an art dealer on the phone and praises his painting of "Mother Africa." Tommy, dressing behind the screen and unable to see Bill standing in front of the canvas, falsely assumes that he is talking about her, gaining confidence from his words:

TOMMY is dressed in the African wrap. She is suddenly awakened to the feeling of being loved and admired. She removes the wig and fluffs her hair. Her hair under the wig must not be an accurate, well-cut Afro... but should be rather attractive natural hair. She studies herself in the mirror. We see her taller, more relaxed and sure of herself. Perhaps braided hair will go well with Afro robe.

(WIW 750)

Bill is confused when he perceives her in the new dress without the wig and has to admit: "That is very becoming... the drape thing" (WIW 750). Without the wig Tommy no longer represents the "messed-up chick" he wants to paint, and so he asks her to put it on again, which she refuses:

TOMMY It's time to paint. *(steps up on the model stand and sits in the chair. She is now a queen, relaxed and smiling her appreciation for his last speech to the art dealer. Her feet are bare)*

BILL *(mystified by the change in her. Tries to do a charcoal sketch)* It is quite late.

TOMMY Makes me no different if it's all right with you.

BILL *(wants to create the other image)* Could you put the wig back on?

TOMMY You don't really like wigs, do you?

BILL Well, no.

TOMMY Then let's have things the way you like.

BILL *(has no answer for this. He makes a haphazard line or two as he tries to remember the other image)* Tell me something about yourself, ... anything.

(WIW 750; italics original)

Tommy's appearance in African clothes and her new found self-confidence unhinges Bill's perception of her. When she tells him about her family and how it has worked its way up from slavery, Tommy is changed from the stereotype of a degenerate black woman to an individual person that Bill admires. The "worst gal in town" (WIW 752) turns out to be a strong and beautiful black woman. Reiterating a popular slogan in the 1960s, Bill finally admits: "I'm glad you're here. Black *is* beautiful, you're beautiful, [...]" (WIW 751; emphasis original).

Yet, the beginning of their love affair is based on false signs. Tommy is not loved for herself, but for her visual approximation to Bill's African ideal by wearing African clothes. The stage directions explicitly demand that at the next morning after their romantic night "Tommy's hair is natural, she wears another throw [African design] draped around her. She sings and hums a snatch of a joyous spiritual" (WIW 751; brackets original). She only changes her clothes when she learns about Bill's original intention to portray her as the "messed-up chick," i.e. as the counter-image to the African ideal of black womanhood. She is deeply hurt and calls Bill and the other characters a "bunch-a liars" (WIW 752): "I was your fool, thinkin' writers and painters know moren' me, that maybe a little bit of you would rub off on me" (WIW 752). She finally realizes that Bill is a "Phoney Nigger," caught up in pre-fabricated pictures of black Americans and ignorant of "flesh and blood niggers" (WIW 753) such as Tommy. His admiration for black people is reduced to "a black somebody [who] is in a history book, or printed on a pitcher, or

drawed on a paintin'” (WIW 753). Regaining her strength and pride, Tommy finally explains to Bill:

TOMMY [...] Bill, I don't have to wait for anybody's by-your-leave to be a “Wine In The Wilderness” woman. I can be it if I wanta, ... and I *am*. I am. I am. I'm not the one you made up and painted, the very pretty lady who can't talk back,... but I'm “Wine In The Wilderness”... alive and kickin', me... Tomorrow-Marie, cussin' and fightin' and lookin' out for my damn self 'cause ain' nobody else 'round to do it, dontcha know.

(WIW 754; emphasis original)

Talking to Cynthia she emphasizes: “if my hair is straight, or if it's natural, or if I wear a wig, or take it off,... that's all right” (WIW 754) because things like the wig, the shoes, the hat, and even the African throw she wore a few moments ago are just “Accessories. Somethin' you add on or take off. The real thing is takin' place on the inside... that's where the action is. That's 'Wine In The Wilderness,'... a woman that's a real one and a good one” (WIW 754). While at the beginning of the play it was Tommy, the uneducated female factory-worker, who was presented as the pupil being taught by sophisticated members of the middle class, the roles have now changed at the end of the play. It is now Tommy who teaches the other characters about self-pride, self-respect, and the beauty of blackness. When Tommy starts to leave the room, Bill calls her back:

BILL Tommy. (*she turns. He takes the beautiful queen, “Wine In The Wilderness” from the easel*) She's not it at all, Tommy. This chick on the canvas,... nothin' but accessories, a dream I drummed up outta the junk room of my mind.

(WIW 754; italics original)

Bill finally recognizes that the ideal of black beauty that he was looking for in Africa was only an illusion and “a dream.” He painted “in the dark, all head and no heart” (WIW 755) without recognizing the beauty of the strong and independent black woman of his day. Although he points out that “[b]lack is beautiful” (WIW 748; italics original), repeating the key phrase of a cultural movement that was started in the 1960s, he only at the end understands what this beauty is really about.

At the end of *Wine in the Wilderness* the notion of Mother Africa is unmasked as a superficial imaginary ideal reduced to the outer appearance of black women. It is

contrasted with Tommy's genuine authenticity and self-respect which gains her the admiration of the other characters. Tomorrow-Marie replaces the imaginary womanhood with the picture of a real woman who "came through the biggest riot of all, ... somethin' called 'Slavery,' and she's even comin' through the 'now scene,' ... folks laughing at her, even her own folks laughin' at her. And look *how* ... with her head high like she's poppin' her fingers at the world" (WIW 755; emphasis original). As Joe E. Cranshaw points out: "While the original triptych is intended as a reflection on 'black womanhood,' composed of 'Black girlhood,' 'Wine in the Wilderness,' and the 'messed-up chick,' the final version of the triptych represents blackness through history."¹¹⁸ By referring to slavery Bill places the beginning of African-American history in slavery times, implicitly denying the necessity to go back to roots in pre-slavery times. The painting of Tommy is placed between a canvas showing Cynthia and Sonny-Man, "Young Man and Woman, workin' together to do our thing" (WIW 755) and a painting of his friend Oldtimer, "the guy who was here before there were scholarships and grants and stuff like that, the guy they kept outta the schools, the man the factories wouldn't hire, the union wouldn't let him join..." (WIW 755). The painting of Tommy, sitting on the model seat, wearing her natural hair, "holding the wig in her lap" while her "hands are very graceful looking against the texture of the wig" (WIW 755), finally replaces the painting of Mother Africa and the African Queen. The wig turns into a symbol for a stereotypical and superficial understanding of black womanhood, challenging African ideals of black womanhood and beauty that are unmasked as over-generalized, imaginary, and unreal.

As Childress's play illustrates, although Africa remains an important reference point for identification during the 1960s and 1970s, its universal appeal was challenged by the confrontation and comparison with real black American womanhood. The idealization of Africa was confronted with a critical examination of how 'African' black Americans really are. The play points out that a direct transfer of African elements into contemporary African-American culture is not possible, but an inspiration gained from them is nevertheless welcomed as the discourse on Black Theater reveals.

¹¹⁸ Joe E. Cranshaw, "African Queens and Messed-up Chicks," Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Lang, 2007): 74.

4.4 Affirming Black Theater Aesthetics

In June 1996, at the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University, August Wilson, one of the most popular and celebrated black American playwrights of the 20th century, gave a talk entitled “The Ground on Which I Stand.” In his speech he talked about influences on his work and on his contemporary playwrights, describing Black Theater as a conglomerate of European forms and “African aesthetics”:

The foundation of the American theater is the foundation of European theater that begins with the great Greek dramatists; it is based on the proscenium stage and the poetics of Aristotle. This is the theater that we have chosen to work in. And we embrace the values of that theater but reserve the right to amend, to explore, and to add our African consciousness and our African aesthetics to the art we produce.¹¹⁹

With the reference to “African aesthetics” and an “African consciousness” Wilson writes himself into the discussion of the characteristics of a distinct black aesthetic that dates back to the Black Power Movement, seeking to demonstrate the African spirit of black American dramatic art. Paul Carter Harrison, a contemporary playwright and professor emeritus of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, has been one of the most influential spokespersons in this context, encouraging the discovery of African and African-inspired traditions in contemporary Black Theater produced by black American playwrights such as Barbara Ann Teer.¹²⁰ Harrison does not argue for a direct adoption of African traditions on the American stage, but urges black American writers to develop a unique style that is able to express the “continuum of African memory” in black American theater:

¹¹⁹August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, Dramatic Contexts (New York; St Paul, MN: Theatre Communications Group, 2001): 41.

¹²⁰ Barbara Ann Teer (1937-2008) was the founder of the National Black Theater (NBT) in Harlem and developed eclectic forms based on the combination of Yoruba traditions and a close examination of black life in America. For further details on Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theater see for example Hatch, “Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theatre” and Barbara Lewis, “Ritual Reformulations. Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre of Harlem,” *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements*, ed. Annemarie Bean (London; New York: Routledge, 1999).

The challenge of contemporary Black Theatre is to formulate a specific practice that can contextualize African-inspired values and overcome the trauma of dislocation and subjugation. Black Theatre must generate a transformative ritual style of work informed by the expressive strategies located in the continuum of African memory throughout the Diaspora. At its expressive core is a spiritual connection between shadow and light, ancestors and the living. Most importantly, whatever value it might have as entertainment, the inventive process of Black Theatre must illuminate the collective ethos of the black experience in a manner that binds, cleanses, and heals.¹²¹

According to Harrison, an Afrocentric black theater uses African traditions such as ritualistic structures, repetition, and the combination of music and dance on stage in order to create a “methexis drama [that] demands full audience engagement.”¹²² Two striking examples of this inclusion of an African aesthetic in art by African-American playwrights are Judith Alexa Jackson’s play *WOMBmanWARs* (1992) and Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls* (1976).

In her play *WOMBmanWARs*, that draws on the social and political controversy about the 1991 court case of Anita Hill versus US Supreme Court Justice Senator Clarence Thomas, Jackson combines masks, pantomime, film, video, and live and recorded sound to address the questions of power politics within the African-American community. In the explanatory notes to *WOMBmanWARs*, she defines her aesthetic “as political satire and movement theatre” and explains:

I use the story format and the West African idea of telling a story in a circle, giving you bits and pieces but not in a linear order. In western culture, stories are told from A to Z. What I like about the West African storytellers is that they don’t necessarily tell you where the beginning is and where the end is, but by the time they are finished, you have the whole picture.¹²³

In *WOMBmanWARs* Jackson interweaves three main plot strands. First, there is the reproduction of the Hill-Thomas court hearings with original visual and audio material on stage. According to the stage directions, “the objective here is to remind the audience through visual and audio means of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee’s

¹²¹ Paul C. Harrison, Victor L. Walker and Gus Edwards, eds., Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002): 4-5.

¹²² Harrison, Walker and Edwards, eds., Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora: 249.

¹²³ Jackson, “WOMBmanWARs (1992)”: 147.

insensitive handlings of the harassment charge brought against the Supreme Court nominee” (WMW 153). Second, there are several scenes that introduce us to the family living of Sapphire and her husband Danny, who watch the court hearings on stage, while their daughter Danisha is fighting with her playmate outside the house, who tries “to look up [her] dress” (WMW 180) against her will. Finally, there is the Anima/Animus figure, the ancient unity of man and woman, who can move back and forth in time, and who repeatedly comments on the action presented on stage as well as on the position of black females in today’s society on a meta-level. The Anima/Animus figure introduces itself as originating from the Ituri Forest, a rainforest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Accompanied by “the music from any indigenous forest people” (WMW 170), the figure tells the audience: “My memory of the Ituri Forest is particularly strong. We played amid the trees as they made breath for us” (WMW 170).

During the play the focus is constantly shifted from one strand to the other, disregarding any linear progression. The circular structure that Jackson adopts from the West African art of storytelling thereby allows her to combine different temporal and geographical dimensions on stage. There are indeed also scenes of temporal standstill in which the characters talk to the members of the audience about their thoughts and about the action on stage. Although the plot strands do not directly interfere with each other and they do not follow a linear progression, they are nevertheless closely connected by their common focus on the black male-black female relation, presented from different perspectives. In Jackson’s words, at the end of *WOMBmanWARs* the audience has been told three different and nevertheless similar stories that form parts of “the whole picture.”

Another playwright that deliberately borrows from African culture and art is contemporary poet and playwright Ntozake Shange. With her play *for colored girls* Shange introduces the new theatrical form of the so-called choreopoem, which unifies the three characteristics of ritualistic structures, repetition, and the combination of music and dance on stage that Harrison expects from black theater as quoted above. The choreopoem focuses on the productive combination of word, song, and bodily movement in order to elevate a distinct black female consciousness, creating what Harrison calls “a total event”¹²⁴ for the audience and for the actors. The choreopoem deviates from traditional theatrical forms in that there is no division into acts and no clearly defined setting. It

¹²⁴ Paul C. Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo* (New York: Grove Press, 1972): 231.

mainly consists of a sequence of different poems which are accompanied by effects of lighting and music.

In the preface to her play Shange describes the beginnings of it in 1974, when “[w]ith as much space as a small studio on the Lower East Side, the five of us, five women, proceeded to dance, make poems, make music, make a woman’s theater for about twenty patrons” (FCG ix). According to Shange, they used *for colored girls* to express themselves and their femininity, “clarifying [their] lives – & the lives of our mothers, daughters, & grandmothers” (FCG x). In order to emphasize the diversity of black female experience and identity, Shange does not include specific characters in her choreopoem, but rather presents a choral group of anonymous female voices or archetypes who re-live traumatic female memories in the form of “choric testimonies”¹²⁵ on stage. In her art Shange combines a female aesthetic with elements of African culture, using dance, songs, and music as “proof of origin” (FCG 12) and a means to access “the depth of [her] past” (FCG xi), thus “preserv[ing] the elements of our culture that need to be remembered and absolutely revered.”¹²⁶ Elsewhere she explains:

I wanted to use the forms that were available to us (that is, dance, music) that are used colloquially and in a vernacular art form to move those to another level, so that I could use the things that were endemically black in some cultural way as a further extrapolation of my understanding of our realities and our unconscious desires [...]¹²⁷

Shange indeed repeatedly stresses the significance of rituals and ritualistic structures associated with African forms in her art. For her, dancing enables her to discover that “everything African, everything halfway colloquial, a grimace, a strut, an arched back over yawn, waz mine” (FCG xi). She emphasizes that she is “very concerned about and passionately committed to the idea of creating new rituals and new mythologies for people of color,”¹²⁸ who witness and take part in the action on stage.

¹²⁵ Paul C. Harrison, “Form and Transformation: Immanence of the Soul in the Performance Modes of Black Church and Black Music,” Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora, eds. Paul C. Harrison, Victor L. Walker and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002): 325.

¹²⁶ Ntozake Shange, “Interview,” Black Women Writers at Work, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983): 163.

¹²⁷ Neal A. Lester, “Interview with Ntozake Shange,” Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights, eds. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996): 218-219.

¹²⁸ Lester, “Interview with Ntozake Shange”: 218.

The collective participatory force of the choreopoem that aims to actively engage the audience in the theatrical event is based on the African formal element of call-and-response. According to Gunter Schuller, “the call-and-response pattern permeates all African music, and usually takes the form of a chorus responding to a leader or soloist.”¹²⁹ In *for colored girls* the pattern is used to support the “testamental”¹³⁰ quality of the play. The women react to each other, answer each other, but seldom do they directly address each other. During the different scenes or stories the individual woman rather talks to herself in a monologue, being caught up in her feelings, while the others encourage or support her verbally, creating a powerful tension between individual and community. The pattern intensifies the performative and choreographic quality of the play in “encourag[ing] speakers to continue because the listeners are totally engaged in the conversation, in agreement with the speaker’s point of view or in awe of it.”¹³¹ For example, in the following scene the lady in yellow’s expression “my love is too delicate to have thrown back on my face” is picked up by the other ladies and varied in the course of the action:

lady in yellow

my love is too delicate to have thrown back on my face

*The lady in yellow starts to exit into the stage
right volm.¹³² Just as she gets to the volm, the
lady in brown comes to life.*

lady in brown

my love is too beautiful to have thrown back on my face

lady in purple

my love is too sanctified to have thrown back on my face

lady in blue

my love is too magic to have thrown back on my face

lady in orange

my love is too saturday nite [sic] to have thrown back on my face

¹²⁹ Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 27.

¹³⁰ Paul C. Harrison, *Totem Voices: Plays from the Black World Repertory* (New York: Grove Press, 1989): xlii.

¹³¹ Lisa J. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 154.

¹³² “Volm” refers to the Latin term *vomitioria* that designates the passageway for the spectators in an amphitheater such as the ancient Coliseum in Rome.

lady in red
my love is too complicated to have thrown back on my face

lady in green
my love is too music to have thrown back on my face

everyone
music
music

*The lady in green then breaks into a dance,
the other ladies follow her lead and soon they
are all dancing and chanting together.*

(FCG 46-47; italics original)

Single words are then repeated by the women several times, resulting in a quasi-spiritual ecstasy: “The dance reaches a climax and all of the ladies fall out tired, but full of life and togetherness” (FCG 49). This scene strikingly illustrates that the focus is not set on the individual female archetypes but rather on the way they are part of a larger entity. In the inclusion of the call-and-response pattern on stage Harrison sees the African tradition of oral performance preserved, pointing out that “choreopoems reach beyond descriptive commentary to reveal encoded nuances of experience.”¹³³ The performance of *for colored girls* becomes a mutually conceived ritual for the “activators” on stage and the “participators”¹³⁴ in the audience. In the discourse on Black Theater, the inclusion of African-inspired traditions and forms in theater written by black American playwrights is seen as a necessity, enabling the expression of a unique black consciousness and experience associated with a collective sense of African-American cultural identity.

¹³³ Harrison, Walker and Edwards, eds., Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora: 249.

¹³⁴ Harrison, The Drama of Nommo: 198.

4.5 Conclusion

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) Toni Morrison traces the appearance and function of an “Africanist presence”¹³⁵ in literature written by 19th-century non-black American authors such as Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. She points out that the inclusion of black American characters in literature written by white American authors served both the development of a proto-American literature and the formation of a distinct white cultural identity. Blackness, race, and their pejorative associations functioned as productive counter-images to whiteness and were objectified in the African presence in literature. Consequently, Morrison argues that “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness”¹³⁶ from its origins to the present.

The previous analyses have supported Morrison’s claim, albeit from a slightly different perspective. The focus was not on a close examination of the African presence in literature written by 19th-century white American authors; rather, the aim was to trace Africanisms and African influences in 20th-century black theater written by black American female playwrights. The analyses have shown that Morrison’s claim may also be rephrased into ‘Africanism is inextricable from the *self*-definition of *black* Americanness.’ Since the early beginnings of theater written by black American playwrights at the turn of the century, Africa has been a valuable resource for identification. Like W. E. B. Du Bois, since the turn of the century many black Americans have struggled with the question of “What is Africa to Me?”¹³⁷ While the first half of the 20th century was dominated by a pan-African longing for originarity and rootedness, the recourse to Africa was accompanied by a critical process of examination and differentiation from early mid-century onwards. Several generations after the Middle Passage black Americans started to recognize that the Africa evoked was not the real one, but an imaginary construction. In 1940 Langston Hughes reconsidered his former identification with Africa and concludes: “I was only an American Negro – who had

¹³⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 5.

¹³⁶ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*: 65.

¹³⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, “What Is Africa to Me?,” *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David L. Lewis (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1995).

loved the surfaces of Africa and the rhythms of Africa – but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem.”¹³⁸ With the search for a distinct ‘Black Aesthetic’ and especially with the advent of the Black Arts Movement, the assumed likeness of Africans and black Americans underwent a critical examination, asking how African black Americans actually were.

Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Alice Childress’s *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) deliberately deal with the question of black American identity construction based on the adoption of African cultural elements. While Hansberry primarily focuses on a naïve access to African rituals and traditions whose meanings remain opaque for Beneatha, Childress connects the discourse on Afrocentrism with questions of gender differences, unmasking the romantic ideal of African female beauty that obstructs the appreciation of real black womanhood. The black characters in both plays try to express themselves by experimenting with a wide variety of cultural practices such as naming, clothing, hairstyle, music, and dance, all seen as endemically African. At the end, however, these practices are recognized as mere “accessories,” foreshadowing the post-Afrocentric discourse on Black Aesthetics and Black Ritual Theater during the 1970s and 1980s. As Olaynian points out, “[t]he post-Afrocentric discourse not only quests for different representations but also, simultaneously, queries the *representation of difference*.”¹³⁹ The adoption of and identification with all things African turned out to be a primary outcome of black Americans’ desire to distinguish themselves from white hegemonic culture. The African identity was invented and formed by black Americans’ needs and desires for empowerment and solidification of the black community. It turned out that African elements adopted by black American culture “engaged in a critical dialogue between black and white Americans, not one between black Americans and Africans.”¹⁴⁰

Playwrights Judith Alexa Jackson as well as Ntozake Shange aimed to represent these cultural differences between white and black America in her art. While Jackson adopts the circular structure of West African storytelling in her play as a means to

¹³⁸ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, American Century Series (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993): 325.

¹³⁹ Tejumola Olaniyan, "Agones: The Constitution of a Practice," *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, eds. Paul C. Harrison, Victor L. Walker and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002): 78. Emphasis original.

¹⁴⁰ Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*: 111.

combine different temporal dimensions and plot strands, Shange introduces the form of the choreopoem, creating an eclectic theatrical form by combining music, dance, song, as well as African ritualistic and testimonial structures, all things that are “endemically black in some cultural way,”¹⁴¹ as she says. This selective approach to African culture reveals that the issue of African rootedness in the discourse on black American identity is not a question about what things are genuinely African but what elements are adopted by African-American culture, creating a conglomerate of both sides of the hyphen.

In a mirror image to the deliberate dissociation from blackness that Morrison detects in the construction of whiteness, black America longs for the dissociation from whiteness in order to construct blackness. The identification with “Mother Africa” (WIW 740) is a way to create a home and a sense of belonging based on social, ethnic, and cultural lineage. The recourse to the distant past in pre-slavery times and to the ancestral memory of Africa are important means of expressing the uniqueness of a black American experience and consciousness. This African heritage links black American men and women, allowing them to articulate the basis for resistance in the present and to engage with the struggle of belonging and un-belonging. As one of the characters in Jackson’s play *WOMBmanWARs* aptly explains: “I am amused by Afrocentricity, but invest enthusiastically in ethnic art. It is the least I can do for affirmative action” (WMW 154). Identifying with Africa and ethnic art becomes one positive alternative to identifying with white American culture. As Harrison, drawing on Northrop Frye’s observations on mythology, rightly points out:

While the black experience in America and throughout the African Diaspora is not monolithic but exhibits a wide range of class and regional diversity, there is sufficient commonality of collective response to African retention to construct a culturally specific mythos that reveals ethnic authenticity, if not ethnic purity.¹⁴²

Especially for African-American artists and writers in the second half of the 20th century, the idea of Africa, the African “mythos,” has been a driving force in their creative endeavors in that it enabled them to make original contributions to the world of art and thus to support the formation of a distinct African-American identity. Black America’s

¹⁴¹ Lester, “Interview with Ntozake Shange”: 218-219.

¹⁴² Harrison, Walker and Edwards, eds., Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora: 1-2.

African history turned out to be “a symbolic homeland, and a useable past”¹⁴³ in the discourse on African-American cultural identity, creating a counter-memory to white American history and mending American history in general. The African homeland presented in the plays is a projection and an idea that creates an imaginary homeland and a sense of place in order to construct African-American identity. In the process of cultural identity formation, Africa has become “the locus of reconstruction and invention of self-image,” a source of empowerment, and “a necessary strategy for surviving slavery, colonization, and their aftermath.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Ron Eyerman, Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 194.

¹⁴⁴ Harrison, "Form and Transformation: Immanence of the Soul in the Performance Modes of Black Church and Black Music": 319.

5. Cultural Figures to Re-Construct the Past

The re-working of history is a key element in processes of identity formation. History is never only a matter of fixed facts, but it is a contested social space of constant rethinking and reworking of the past. Especially in times of change there is a basic need for orientation that may be met by re-assessing, re-valuing, and re-interpreting the past. As Pierre Nora emphasizes, “the passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history.”¹⁴⁵

An important part of this revitalization process is the search for and the identification with “cultural heroes.”¹⁴⁶ In his study on memory and its collective frame, Maurice Halbwachs writes:

Every person and every historical fact, when entering into a collective memory, is transformed into a doctrine, a concept, or a symbol of sorts. When appropriated by a collective memory, it acquires a social significance, it becomes an element of a given society's ideational system.¹⁴⁷

In any social group or society there is usually a multitude of cultural icons that represent its specific social and cultural background. For a society, the commemoration of and identification with these cultural figures as elements of its cultural memory and its

¹⁴⁵ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux De Mémoire*," History and Memory in African-American Culture, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 291.

¹⁴⁶ Bernd Engler and Isabell Klaiber, "Kulturelle Leitfiguren: Prozesse und Strategien ihrer Funktionalisierung," Kulturelle Leitfiguren - Figurationen und Refigurationen, eds. Bernd Engler and Isabell Klaiber, Schriften zur Literaturwissenschaft (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2007). I use 'cultural heroes' as a possible English translation of the German phrase "kulturelle Leitfiguren."

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Aleida Assmann, "Three Stabilizers of Memory: Affect - Symbol - Trauma," Sites of Memory in American Literatures and Cultures, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003): 19. This is Assmann's translation, for the original see Maurice Halbwachs, Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985): "Jede Persönlichkeit und jedes historische Faktum wird schon bei seinem Eintritt in dieses Gedächtnis in eine Lehre, einen Begriff, ein Symbol transponiert; es erhält einen Sinn, es wird zu einem Element des Ideensystems der Gesellschaft" (389-390).

“ideational system” become a way to re-narrate, to re-discover, and to re-interpret its own past and history and, thus, its own cultural identity. Functioning as representational iconic figures and resulting from a deliberate process of differentiation and discrimination against other cultures and societies, cultural figures are directly involved in processes of cultural self-creation and self-affirmation. Acting at the intersection of individual and collective memory, they enable any social group to reassure itself of its own cultural and social roots, offering different possibilities for identification to the members of that group.

As a means of illustrating how cultural heroes are involved in processes of identity formation, the following analysis will focus on the presentation of African-American icons in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. The analysis will look at which cultural figures are included and what significance they have for the characters and for African-American culture in general.

5.1 Personal Role Models

A cultural figure carries significant meaning as a representative of a society and this society’s cultural self-understanding. It is however the individual members of this society who create a figure’s meaning by identifying with him or her and his or her past efforts and achievements. In the context of African-American history, the period of the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries African-American freedom movement produced a significant number of important cultural figures, whose names carried the promise of betterment and fostered the hope for a better future.

The efforts and achievements of black American leaders and intellectuals such as Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) demonstrated black Americans’ strength and power in spite of discrimination, racism, and segregation. Born into slavery as the son of a white father and a slave mother in southwestern Virginia, Washington gradually worked his way up to become one of the leading black educators and politicians at the turn of the century. The importance of Washington’s political and educational efforts was nationally acknowledged in 1940, when he became the first African-American to be depicted on a U.S. postage stamp. He was the first African American ever invited to the White House as the guest of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1901. In 1881 Washington, who is especially revered for his substantial improvements for black Americans in the field of

education, became the first leader of the new Tuskegee Institute, a historically black university located in Alabama. As such, he encouraged many young black Americans such as Lindy in Mary Burrill's one-act play *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919) to go to college and to receive an education in order to help their families to escape a life in poverty and misery.

In *They That Sit in Darkness*, the female character Mrs. Jasper recalls how she and her eldest daughter Lindy met Washington "some ten yeah ergo" (TTSD 181) when he had "talked to de farmers" (TTSD 181) in the South:

MRS. JASPER [...] Ah kin see him now – him an' Lindy, jes a teeny slip o' gal – after de speakin' wuz ovah down dere at Shady Grove, a-standin' under de magnolias wid de sun a-pou'in' through de trees on 'em – an' he wid his hand on my li'l Linly's haid lak he wuz givin' huh a blessin', an' a-sayin': "When yuh gits big, li'l gal, yuh mus' come to Tuskegee an' larn, so's yuh kin come back heah an' he'p dese po' folks!" He's daid an' in his grave but Lindy ain't nevah fo'git dem words.

(TTSD 181)

For Mrs. Jasper Washington is "a great man" (TTSD 181) who planted the seed for Lindy's dream of going to college. Lindy "ain't been thinkin' an' dreamin' 'bout nothin' else sence" (TTSD 181) their encounter, as she says. At the beginning of the play it seems that Lindy's dream will indeed come true as she is said to be "gittin' off to Tuskegee to school tomorrer" (TTSD 181). The Jaspers are poor working-class people who have to live in a "dingy and disorderly" (TTSD 179) apartment that is far too small for Mrs. Jasper, her husband, and their seven children. Although Mrs. Jasper works to the point of exhaustion, there is hardly enough food for the family members. When Lindy raises concerns about leaving her weak and worn-out mother, Mrs. Jasper insists on her taking this chance to be educated and tells her daughter:

Ah ain't a-goin' be stan'in' in de way yo' gittin' dis edicashun. Yo' chance don' come, Lindy. An' Ah want ter see yuh tek it! Yuh been a good chile, Lindy, an' Ah wants ter see yuh git mo'e out'n life dan Ah gits.

(TTSD 179)

Packing her trunk, Lindy talks to her siblings and gives them a detailed description of how she imagines the time after her return. She promises: "When I comes back I'm goan

to bring yuh all some pretty readin' books, an' some clo'es so I kin tek yuh to school ever' day where yuh kin learn to read 'em!" (TTSD 182) She plans to buy a guitar for her brother Miles and to have the "bow legs" (TTSD 182) of her brother Aloysius straightened. In her dreams she imagines the idyll of middle-class family life:

LINDY [...] An' in de evenin' we'll have a real set-down-to-de-table suppah – Dad he won't have to wuk so hard so he kin git home early – an' after suppah we all kin set 'round de fiah lak dey ovah to Lawyer Hope's an' tell stories an' play games –

(The CHILDREN, radiant as though these dreams were all realities, huddle closer about Lindy who, packing done, now sits enthroned upon her battered trunk)

(TTSD 182-183; italics original)

Accompanied by "plaintive notes of an old Spiritual that MILES is playing upon his guitar," Lindy explains that they will "git some fine Sunday clo'es, an' a hoss an' wagun" so that "when Sunday come [they]'ll all climb in an' ride to Shady Grove to Meetin'" (TTSD 183) in order to learn from the Bible. Although Lindy has to abandon her dreams when her mother suddenly dies at the end of the play, the memory of Washington and her encounter with him as a child remains a source of hope and empowerment for Lindy who "ain't nevah fo'git dem words" (TTSD 181).

This idea of a cultural figure functioning as a personal role model and a source of strength for the individual is also dealt with in Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) in which the lady in brown strongly identifies with François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture. A former slave, L'Ouverture became famous as the leader of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) that resulted in the elimination of slavery and the establishment of Haiti as the first black republic led by people of African ancestry. The revolution is regarded a significant moment in African-American history and his name represents the aspirations of black people and of people everywhere for liberation, freedom, and independence.

In Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls* the lady in brown narrates how as a child in "st. louis 1955" (FCG 30) she learned about L'Ouverture and his achievements. After "months uv / cajun katie / pippi longstockin / christopher robin / eddie heyward & a pooh bear" (FCG 25-26) she clandestinely entered the "ADULT READING ROOM" (FCG 25;

capitals original), although she knew she “waznt sposedta” (FCG 26). There she came across a book about “TOUSSAINT” (FCG 26; capitals original), who became her “first blk man” (FCG 26). “i never counted george washington carver,” she adds in parentheses, “cuz i didn’t like peanuts” (FCG 26). The lady in brown explains that learning about L’Ouverture and his efforts to free the slaves in Haiti “waz the beginnin uv reality for [her]” (FCG 26). His pride and his resistance to white suppression deeply impressed the lady in brown:

TOUSSAINT waz a blk man a negro like my mama say
who refused to be a slave
& he spoke French
& didnt low no white man to tell him nothing
not napoleon
not maximilien
not robespierre

(FCG 26; capitals original)

In contrast to the names of the white military leaders, L’Ouverture’s name is constantly capitalized in the dramatic text, which indicates both the importance of L’Ouverture in African-American history in general and the lady in brown’s deep personal admiration of him. For the lady in brown, L’Ouverture was not merely an anonymous dead person in a history book, but she established a personal relationship with him when she “carried dead Toussaint home in the book” (FCG 27). L’Ouverture whom she only calls by his first name was both “dead & livin to [her]” (FCG 27) at the same time. She says that he became a dear friend, a confidant, and “[her] secret lover at the age of 8” (FCG 27):

i entertained him in my bedroom
widda flashlight under my covers
way into the night / we discussed strategies
how to remove white girls from my hopscotch games
& etc.

(FCG 27)

In the lady in brown’s imagination L’Ouverture came to life as a confederate with whom she shared her concerns when she was alone. She translated the things she learned about his struggle against white supremacy into her own world of children’s games, inventing strategies “how to remove white girls” from the playground. The imagined emotional

support of her role model that “nobody cd see [...] cept [her]” (FCG 28) helped her to cope with the everyday challenges of being an 8-year old girl in 1955 which “waz not a good year for lil blk girls” (FCG 30), as she points out.¹⁴⁸ “TOUSSAINT / waz layin in bed wit me next to raggedy ann,” she remembers, when she decided to run away from her “integrated home / integrated street / integrated school” (FCG 27; capitals original). L’Ouverture told her “lets go to haiti” (FCG 27) so that she “packed some very important things in a brown paper bag” (FCG 28) and went “to the river” (FCG 28). Sitting at the river and talking to L’Ouverture about how to travel to Port-au-Prince, the lady in brown met “this silly ol boy” (FCG 29) Toussaint Jones, who gradually replaced her invisible childhood hero:

i felt TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE sorta leave me
 & i waz sad
 til i realized
 TOUSSAINT JONES waznt too different
 from TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE
 cept the ol one waz in haiti
 & this one wid me speakin English & eatin apples
 yeah.

(FCG 30; capitals original)

Although the conversations with L’Ouverture ended when the lady in brown met Toussaint Jones, her search for similarities between her personal role model and her first boyfriend reveals that L’Ouverture remains a focal point of reference and identification for her. He only “sorta [left] her” and she continues to talk and to think about him in the “speaker-now”¹⁴⁹ of the performance. Even as an adult woman it is still L’Ouverture that

¹⁴⁸ In African-American history 1955 marks the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement as this year witnessed several important social and political events that motivated acts of resistance in the following decade. On August 28, 14-year old Emmett Till from Chicago was brutally murdered by two white men in Mississippi for reportedly flirting with a white woman. His death caused heated debates about racism and racial violence in the South. Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on a public bus on December 1 led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a social and political protest that lasted until November 1956 and aimed to oppose racial segregation on the public transport system. It is quite likely that the lady in brown’s remark that 1955 “waz not a good year for lil blk girls” alludes to the controversy that arose after the landmark decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) that abolished segregation in public schools. In the 1955 decision known as ‘Brown II’ the Supreme Court delegated the task of carrying out school desegregation to district courts and required its fulfillment with “all deliberate speed.”

¹⁴⁹ This term is taken from Suzanne Fleischmann, *Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990): 125.

the lady in brown deliberately chooses from a whole gallery of cultural heroes that she might identify with.

5.2 A Gallery of Cultural Heroes

Another key period in African-American history that yielded a wealth of cultural heroes was the social and political change of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements that fostered a deliberate promotion and recreation of America's black history. The aim was to raise black people's awareness of their ancestors and their efforts and achievements, also in theater. In Alice Childress's play *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) the character Bill teaches Tommy, the play's heroine, about many important leaders, politicians, and intellectuals that shaped African-American history. According to the stage directions, Bill's apartment is "obviously black dominated" (WIW 738). He has several books about "Afro-American History" (WIW 745) and paintings of important cultural figures such as Frederick Douglass and John Brown are hanging on the wall. Tommy, a female factory worker, is not very familiar with the people that Bill honors in his apartment:

TOMMY (*[...] Examines the room. Looks at portrait on the wall*) He looks like somebody I know or maybe saw before.

BILL That's Frederick Douglass. A man who used to be a slave. He escaped and spent his life trying to make us all free. He was a great man.

TOMMY Thank you, Mr. Douglass. Who's the light colored man? (*indicates a frame next to the Douglass*)

BILL He's white. That's John Brown. They killed him for tryin' to shoot the country outta the slavery bag. He dug us, you know. Old John said, "Hell no, slavery must go."

TOMMY I heard all about him. Some folks say he was crazy.

BILL If he had been shootin' at *us* they wouldn't have called him a nut.

(WIW 747; italics and emphasis original)

By entering Bill's apartment, Tommy and the audience undergo a journey of re-discovering the depths of black American history. When Tommy explains that "[s]chool wasn't a great part-a [her] life" (WIW 747), Bill replies: "If it was you wouldn't-a found out too much 'bout black history cause the books full-a nothin' but whitey, ... all except the white ones who dug us, ... they not there either" (WIW 747-748). Bill questions her about other iconic figures such as Elijah Lovejoy, Monroe Trotter, and Harriet Tubman and tells her what they have become famous for:

BILL [...] Tell me, ... who was Elijah Lovejoy?
 TOMMY Elijah Lovejoy, ... Mmmmmmm. I don't know. Have to do with the Bible?
 BILL No, that's another white fella,... Elijah had a printin' press and the main thing he printed was "Slavery got to go." Well the man moved in on him, smashed his press time after time... but he kept puttin' it back together and doin' this thing. So, one final day, they came in a mob and burned him to death.
 TOMMY (*blows her nose with sympathy as she fights tears*) That's dirty.
 BILL (*as TOMMY glances at titles in book case*) Who was Monroe Trotter?
 TOMMY Was he white?
 BILL No, soul brother. Spent his years tryin' to make it all right. Who was Harriet Tubman?
 TOMMY I heard-a her. But don't put me through no test, Billy. (*moving around studying pictures and books*) [...]

(WIW 748; italics original)

During the whole play, Bill repeatedly refers to popular black writers such as Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, LeRoi Jones, and Margaret Walker, demonstrating his middle-class education.¹⁵⁰ For Bill, knowledge about these iconic figures is essential for his self-understanding as African American. As an artist of the Black Arts Movement, he believes in racial pride and tells Tommy: "This is the black moment, doll. Black, black, black is bee-yoo-tee-full. Got it? *Black is beautiful*" (WIW 748; emphasis original).

As a member of the working class, Tommy was not able to enjoy a higher education and to learn about the different heroes of African-American history. When Tommy admits that Bill's apartment is "full-a things [she] don' know nothin' about" and asks him "How'll I get to know?" he advises her to "[r]ead, go to the library, book stores, ask somebody" (WIW 748). Names such as Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Elijah Lovejoy, Monroe Trotter, and Harriet Tubman lack meaning for her, but she nevertheless

¹⁵⁰ He also refers to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, quoting one of the protagonist's most famous soliloquies: "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow!" (Act 5, Scene 5) Without further ado, Tommy jokingly adopts this icon of English literature and claims him being African-American: "I bet Shakespeare was black! You know how we love poetry. That's what give him away. I bet he was passin'. (*laughs*)" (WIW 751; italics original). This idea of Shakespeare being black is a mocking reversal of white American culture adopting black American art forms such as blues and jazz, disregarding their origins in black culture. Accordingly, we can hear Bill from offstage telling Tommy: "Just you wait, one hundred years from now all the honkeys gonna claim our poets just like they stole our blues. They gonna try to steal Paul Laurence Dunbar and LeRoi and Margaret Walker" (WIW 751).

wants to show that she is also familiar with some important African-American cultural heroes and asks him about contemporary intellectuals and leaders:

TOMMY (*eager to impress him*) What you think-a Martin Luther King?
 BILL A great guy. But it's too late in the day for the singin' and prayin' now.
 TOMMY What about Malcolm X.?
 BILL Great cat... but there again... Where's the program?
 TOMMY What about Adam Powell? I voted for him. That's one thing 'bout me. I vote. Maybe if everybody vote for the right people...
 BILL The ballot box. It would take me all my life to straighten you on that hype.

(WIW 748; italics original)

In contrast to Bill and to the other characters analyzed above, Tommy looks for cultural heroes in the present rather than in the past. She challenges Bill's selective gallery of cultural heroes from the past by introducing iconic figures from the present that are alive when the action takes place. *Wine in the Wilderness* is set in Harlem in "the summer of 1964" in the "night of a riot" (WIW 738) during the Civil Rights Movements in which Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the figures that Tommy identifies with, were actively involved. In a confrontational scene at the end of the play Tommy criticizes Bill for admiring figures that are "dead, and outta the way, and can't talk back" (WIW 753). While he idealizes "a black somebody [...] in a history book, or printed on a pitcher, or drawn on a paintin'" (WIW 753), she identifies with "livin' and breathin'" (WIW 753) icons that are representatives of the ongoing struggle for equality and independence. While the paintings and books in Bill's apartment introduce dead cultural heroes from a distant past, Tommy points to cultural figures that represent 'history in the making.'

5.3 History in the Making

In order for an individual to enter cultural memory and to become a cultural figure, he or she has to have enjoyed high public attention at some point in time. The creation and the establishment of an iconic figure is indeed strongly influenced by how much public attention a person receives and how he or she is represented in newspapers, radio shows, or on TV.

It is this impact of media and media coverage on the creation of cultural figures that is critically dealt with in Judith Alexa Jackson's play *WOMBmanWARs* (1992). First performed in 1992, the play draws on the political controversy about the court case of Anita Hill versus US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991, which was a major issue in the US news at that time. In the play Jackson includes original clippings and footage materials in order "to remind the audience through visual and audio means of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee's insensitive handling of the harassment charge brought against the Supreme Court nominee" (WMW 153). This emphasis on public media is supported by the stage setting:

Audio/visual: Integral to the set design are the audio/visual components. Not just there for amplification, the electronic media must pervade the performance space and evoke the mediated experience had by all who watched the confirmation proceedings. As was apparent during the hearings, microphones on stands are in abundance and are strategically placed about the stage for the convenient use by the performer. There are two television monitors, mounted on six-foot pedestals and positioned downstage right and left, and a large screen upstage center. Appropriate lenses and projectors are requisite for video and slide images to fill entire screen. One video camera on a tripod is visible upstage right.

(WMW 152)

The large amount of media equipment on stage and the variety of the material included signifies the vast media attention that the court case received in 1991. During the play the audience is repeatedly confronted with original clippings, video portions, and news reports about Anita Hill, Judge Clarence Thomas and his wife, President Bush, the Senate Judiciary Committee, and other people involved, merging the fictional world on stage with the audience's real world experience. The fact that the hearings caught more public attention than any other issue at that time becomes especially obvious in the news reporter scene. Accompanied by projections of print-media headlines published in 1991 in the background, a news reporter reads the latest news to a camera on stage:

REPORTER (*Speaks into the mike*): October 12th, 1991: THOMAS'S ACCUSER TELLS OF OBSCENE TALK AND LASCIVIOUS ADVANCES!
other news: former assistant secretary of state admits (*She yawns*) guilt in iran/contra scam.
JUDGE PREFERS DEATH BY ASSASSIN'S BULLET OVER LYNCHING!!

other news: all charges dropped against oliver north. (*Looks bored*)
 TALK OF BIG BREASTS AND GIANT MEMBERS!!!
 other news: slave practices discovered in oil-rich Kuwait.
 LONG DONG DOGGETT EXPECTED TO MAKE APPEARANCE AT
 HEARINGS!!!!
 other news: haitian president ousted, haitian boat people refused refuge in
 the states.
 PUBIC HAIRS FOUND IN COKE!!!!!!
 ex-head honcho of kkk gains in the polls.
 ANITA IS LYING!!!!!!!
 [...]

(WMW 176; capitals and italics original)

The capitalization in the dramatic text visually illustrates the huge space that the affair occupied in American society in 1991, superseding other national and international bits of news. Through voice, mimic, and gesture as well as through the selection of provocative vocabulary and manipulative phrases the reporter makes sure that her audience's attention is primarily focused on the Hill-Thomas affair. The authoritative and manipulative position of the media with regard to what is broadcasted is most obvious when the reporter at the end of the scene provocatively explains that "[a]lthough street reactions to the hearings were mixed, we've selected to air only the views which reflect those like our own" (WMW 177). This scene in the play strikingly illustrates what Jackson criticizes in the introduction to *WOMBmanWARs* when she says that "[s]ex takes priority in this country in the news" so that we "always get sidetracked from really big issues [...]." ¹⁵¹

In Jackson's play, the omnipresence of the hearings in public media is also noted by the characters Sapphire and her husband Danny who watch the hearings on TV. Danny tells his wife: "Ain't nothing else on but Clarence. (*He clicks remote control*) Clarence. (*Click*) Clarence (*Click, click, click*) Clarence" (WMW 155; italics original). The couple watches the broadcast of the hearings together, but their reactions to it are very different from each other. Although Danny's and Sapphire's attitude towards the truthfulness of Hill and Thomas slightly vary during the play – Danny calls Clarence first "Uncle Tom" and then "homeboy" (WMW 160) as Sapphire provokingly remarks – their positions are finally made clear. When Danny accuses Hill of "acting," Sapphire answers: "Act? That's

¹⁵¹ Judith Alexa Jackson, "WOMBmanWARs (1992)," Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women, ed. Sydné Mahone (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994): 147.

no act. That woman is telling the truth. I believe her” (WMW 156). She identifies with Hill and condemns Clarence who “[doesn’t] mean black folks no good if he’s sexually harassing young black women on the job” (WMW 162). Danny, however, accuses her of being “some kind of a feminist” (WMW 156) and fervently supports “[his] man” (WMW 162). While Sapphire notices Thomas’ “lying eyes” and the “guilt water” (WMW 162) of sweat running down his forehead, Danny interprets Thomas’s body language as “rage”:

A black man’s RAGE! That’s 400-years-of-being-treated-like-a-slave
RAGE! That’s I-don’t-have-a-job-! RAGE. That’s I-can’t-feed-my-family
RAGE. That’s What-does-it-take-to-get-through-to-you-people-? I-went-to-
Yale-dammit RAGE!!!

(WMW 162; capitals original)

For Sapphire and Danny, Hill and Thomas become projection screens for their own interpretations of the world. While Hill stands for the fight against sexual discrimination and against the victimization of black women by black men, Thomas becomes the black hero who fights a white racist American society. The characters’ reactions to the broadcast on stage indeed mirror the general discourse on power politics in the US with regard to questions of race, sex, and gender that the affair resulted in.

In the Hill-Thomas event “sexism and racism become interchangeable”¹⁵² as both Jackson and contemporary scholars such as Lisa B. Thompson and Elizabeth Alexander point out. Thompson argues that Hill has become “one of the most recognizable and visible icons of middle-class black womanhood”¹⁵³ in U.S. culture. Alexander refers to the Hill-Thomas affair as a galvanizing moment for black women “to come together collectively and be articulate and proactive about the issues facing black women across boundaries as the new millennium approached.”¹⁵⁴ Anthologies such as Toni Morrison’s *Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (1992) attest to the social and cultural meaning the Hill-Thomas affair has gained within a very short period of time. In the introduction to her anthology that features eighteen essays by prominent intellectuals and academics such as Nell Irvin Painter, Paula Giddings, Cornel West, and Homi K. Bhabha, Morrison writes

¹⁵² Jackson, “WOMBmanWARs (1992)”: 145.

¹⁵³ Lisa B. Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class*, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009): 22.

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior: Essays* (Saint Paul, MS: Graywolf Press, 2004): 102.

that the collection wants to explore “what happened” as opposed to “what took place”¹⁵⁵ at these hearings. She explains that “what was at stake during these hearings was history” in that “the site of exorcism of critical national issues was situated in the miasma of black life and inscribed on the bodies of black people.”¹⁵⁶ Morrison describes the hearings as an exchange of “racial tropes”¹⁵⁷ that the figures of Hill and Thomas were to embody. In accordance with Morrison’s critical analysis of the hearings Jackson points out that “*WOMBmanWARs* was inspired by what [she] perceived as the ‘high-tech lynching’ of Anita Hill after checking out the twenty-one or so odd hours of primetime woman-bashing.”¹⁵⁸ With her play Jackson aimed to question the American “gender socialization”¹⁵⁹ that the hearings demonstrated for her and that are mirrored in the characters’ reactions to the TV broadcast.

The significance that the court trial acquired in American and especially in black American history was also pointed out by Clarence himself, who himself used the term “a high-tech-lynching” for the trial. His famous comparison is quoted in Jackson’s play in the original:

THOMAS: “This is a circus. A national disgrace. And from my standpoint as a black American, as far as I’m concerned, it’s a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves.”

(WMW 183; quotation marks original)

By referring to the practice of lynching Clarence puts himself into the historical context of racial violence against African Americans that rose in the aftermath of the American Civil War. The adjective “high-tech” again emphasizes the role of the media and their power to influence the “construction of social reality”¹⁶⁰ and the construction of iconic

¹⁵⁵ Toni Morrison, ed., Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992): x. Another anthology that focuses on the 1991 affair is Robert Chrisman and Robert L. Allen, eds., Court of Appeal: The Black Community Speaks out on the Racial and Sexual Politics of Clarence Thomas Vs. Anita Hill (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).

¹⁵⁶ Morrison, ed., Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality: x.

¹⁵⁷ Morrison, ed., Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality: xvi.

¹⁵⁸ Jackson, “*WOMBmanWARs* (1992)”: 145.

¹⁵⁹ Jackson, “*WOMBmanWARs* (1992)”: 145.

¹⁶⁰ Morrison, ed., Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality.

figures such as Hill and Thomas. As Danny tells his wife Sapphire: "Baby, I've got to watch this thing. This is history in the making" (WMW 178).

5.4 Conclusion

In 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr., pointed out that the disregard of African-American forefathers in American school books obscured the "great contributions of Afro-Americans to the growth and development" of America. He explained:

When we send our children to school in this country they learn nothing about us other than that we used to be cotton-pickers. Every little child going to school thinks his grandfather was a cotton-picker. Why, your grandfather was Nat Turner; your grandfather was Toussaint L'Ouverture; your grandfather was Hannibal. Your grandfather was some of the greatest black people who walked on this earth. It was your grandfather's hands who forged civilization and it was your grandmother's hands who rocked the cradle of civilization.¹⁶¹

Throughout the 20th century the commemoration of African-American freedom fighters has served an important vehicle of the re-narration of African-American history and, thus, of the construction of African-American identity. The institution and creation of commemorative occasions and holiday traditions such as the Black History Month and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as well as the practice of commemorative street naming "provided visibility and a public voice to African-Americans."¹⁶² This process of revitalizing the past was however not considered the sole responsibility of historians, but

¹⁶¹ Malcolm Little, *Malcom X on Afro-American History* (New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, 1982): 64-65.

¹⁶² Keith A. Mayes, *Kwanzaa: Black Power and the Making of the African-American Holiday Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2009): 41.

According to Derek H. Alderman, a cultural geographer at East Carolina University, by 1996 there were 483 streets in the United States that were named after Martin Luther King, Jr. In 2003 he assumed that "[g]iven the problematic nature of collecting such data and the popularity of the commemorative practice, the current number of streets is likely much higher" (Derek H. Alderman, "Street Names and the Scaling of Memory: The Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. within the African American Community," *Area* 35.2 (2003): 163-164). His argument is supported by the politics of street-naming in Harlem. After the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s, many of Harlem's street names were changed to honor prominent African Americans such as Frederick Douglass, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Malcolm X. Even fifty years after the movements in November 2009, two streets were re-named in honor of A. Philip Randolph and W. E. B. Du Bois, two civil rights leaders (cf. Jennifer Lee, "Two Harlem Streets Named for Civil Rights Leaders," *The New York Times* November 9, 2009.)

it has also been the concern of 20th-century African-American female playwrights, as the analyses above have shown.

In the plays considered here the re-writing of black American history attaches itself to the introduction of and reference to specific iconic figures such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Anita Hill, and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. They all represent strength of resistance against different oppressive forms of racism and racial prejudice from the late 18th to the late 20th century. As intellectuals, leaders, activists, and politicians these cultural figures have captured the public's attention and have thus gradually gained entry into African-American cultural memory. This creation mechanism is strikingly illustrated in Jackson's play *WOMBmanWARs*, which focuses on public media such as television and newspapers and their impact on the representation of Anita Hill and Thomas Clarence in contemporary collective memory. By including original material Jackson directs our attention to the role of the spectator and the audience in the construction of iconic figures, transcending the sphere of the fictional world on stage. It is very unlikely that there will be an Anita Hill holiday or a Thomas Clarence Avenue anytime in the future, but there is no doubt that they have both gained entry into the iconic system of African-American cultural figures.

However, the plays themselves also contribute to the meaning of these public personae in collective memory. Just as media coverage influences the creation of cultural heroes as seen in *WOMBmanWARs*, the theater stage helps to promote and to establish their meaning in collective forms of memory. With the plays functioning as carriers of cultural memory, the inclusion of cultural heroes in the plays supports the creation and solidification of their cultural significance in general. In the dramatic texts the cultural figures are kept alive as parts of a unique African-American cultural memory that constitutes a counter-memory to white American history. As George Lipsitz points out:

Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions

and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story.¹⁶³

The commemoration of individual freedom fighters and cultural icons in African-American theater contributes to the formation of an African-American counter-memory on the basis of “the local, the immediate, and the personal.” In the plays the characters identify with specific African Americans who, as important parts of African-American history, are turned into personal role models, thereby offering different possibilities for identification with and a re-interpretation of African-American history to the audience. The theater performance enables a re-staging of the past that transgresses a mere re-narration of it, making it directly perceivable and tangible for the audience. The act of remembering specific African-American freedom fighters in the plays is indeed a conscious gesture of honoring their struggles and their significance for black American history. The cultural heroes introduced in the plays represent idealized or even divinized ancestors, whose memories are transmitted and preserved in the dramatic texts, serving to establish and transmit an understanding of African-American identity that is deeply rooted in the commemoration of history and its heroes.

¹⁶³ George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990): 213. The concept of counter-memory was first introduced by Michel Foucault (cf. Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977)).

6. Learning from Absent Ancestors and Living Elders: Family Memory on Stage

When Yaisa, Kunta Kinte's grandmother in Alex Haley's novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), dies, his father Omoro Kinte explains to him "that three groups of people lived in every village":

First were those you could see – walking around, eating, sleeping, and working. Second were the ancestors, whom Grandma Yaisa had now joined. "And the third people – who are they?" asked Kunta. "The third people," said Omoro, "are those waiting to be born."¹⁶⁴

Kunta Kinte is here taught about the circle of life in which the past, the present, and the future overlap through the co-presence of deceased ancestors, living elders, their children, and their unborn grandchildren. Kunta learns that when we are born we are always born into a larger community consisting of parents, grandparents, and all other people related to us by familial bonds. We necessarily join the genealogical chain of our ancestors, which may then continue with our children who preserve the past in memory.

For the individual, the collective we-group of his or her family means both a particular succession of generations and a communicative sphere in which the different generations overlap.¹⁶⁵ The family cultivates a collective memory, a "family memory,"¹⁶⁶ that preserves the family's past and passes it on from one generation to the next. This familial storage of memories is unique; it represents the remembrance of a particular history that is only shared by the members of the family. Family memory, that is often supported through chronicles, documents, and pictures, establishes a link between the

¹⁶⁴ Alex Haley, *Roots. The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976): 18.

¹⁶⁵ cf. Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: Beck, 2006): 22-23.

¹⁶⁶ Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (München: Beck, 2008): 165.

past, the present, and the future in that the memories of the older generations intermingle with the experiences of their children and grandchildren. In the context of family memory scholars usually speak of three generations of family members who communicate with each other and who pass on knowledge about their particular family history. This Three-Generations-Memory, which is usually dissolved after eighty to one hundred years, ensures that the family's history is preserved as a legacy for the present and the future members of the family. Ancestral memory in the family is a kind of "mutual life insurance that the living-dead ancestor and his or her living lineage guarantee one another."¹⁶⁷ The physically deceased family members are kept alive in the process of remembering by the living generations, for whom the stories from the past are integral elements of their identity formation. In "memory talk" and in the practice of "conversational remembering"¹⁶⁸ families celebrate and constitute themselves as interactive communities, thereby confirming their social identity as a collective entity. The communicative reproduction of the past is thus not only a sharing of knowledge and experience, but also a common practice of defining the family as a distinct we-group embedded in a broader social and historical context.

Studies on German *Väterliteratur* and *Familienromane* have shown that art, and especially literature, play an important role in both the individual's processing and the scholarly analysis of collective memory in familial contexts. While it is especially biographical and autobiographical writings that allow a critical evaluation of identity in relation to national history and the family past, there are also other literary genres that are concerned with the functions and mechanisms of family memory. Theatrical art is a very interesting case in this context in that it offers a unique possibility to display and enact the close relation between family memory and cultural memory in a public sphere. The performance in the auditorium provokes an assessment of the past which transcends the private sphere of the family, enabling the audience to study 'history in memory.'¹⁶⁹

As a means of illustrating how theater may serve as a means of dealing with the intersection of family memory, national history, and individual identity, the following

¹⁶⁷ La Vinia D. Jennings, *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 135.

¹⁶⁸ Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*: 16.

¹⁶⁹ cf. Aleida Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis: Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung* (München: Beck, 2007).

analysis will focus on the representation and transmission of family memory in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. The plays considered here enact unique family histories, which are closely linked to American history and African-American cultural identity. The following analysis will focus on which parts of family memory are transmitted, when they are transmitted, and which effects they have on the plot and on the living family members.

6.1 Continuity: Absent Ancestors as Positive Role Models

A glance at the stage directions concerning the dramatic personae reveals that 20th-century African-American female playwrights often favor family stories in their dramatic art. The plays usually involve several generations of family members. The representation of characters typically includes a younger generation of children or grandchildren and an older generation of living elders consisting of parents or grandparents, so that there are always two or three family generations simultaneously embodied on stage.

Furthermore, the performative quality of the dramatic text enables the playwright to include other family members who are not bodily present. While theories on family memory are usually synchronous models, assuming an interaction between living family members, the performative power of language enables a temporal extension by making unborn or deceased members alive through narration. When talking about their plans for the future the characters often include references to unborn children, so that the audience is encouraged to anticipate the genealogical development not represented on stage. Similarly, even if the ancestors are not bodily present as characters, they are integrated into the action through narrations and stories from a fictional past that precedes the presented time on stage. From this position they still maintain a strong influence on their children and grandchildren, serving as admonishing figures from the past. The presentation thereby usually adheres to the temporal frame of eighty to one hundred years associated with the Three-Generations-Memory.

In Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), for example, the father is presented as a role model for the younger generation of the Younger family. The memory of dead Walter Harris Younger, Sr., which is upheld by his widow Lena Younger, is supposed to teach their son Walter Lee Junior racial pride and pride in the family's past in

the face of racial discrimination and segregation. The play opens as the family, consisting of Lena Younger (“a woman in her early sixties,” RIS 520), her children Beneatha (“about twenty,” RIS 519) and Walter Lee Younger (“in his middle thirties,” RIS 515), her daughter-in-law Ruth Younger (“about thirty,” RIS 515), and her grandchild Travis Younger (a “boy of ten or eleven,” RIS 515) anxiously await the arrival of a \$10,000 check by the insurance company after the death of Lena’s husband Big Walter. The conflict between the characters arises over the use of the money because each family member intends to use the money differently. As the matriarch of the family, Lena Younger finally decides to buy a house in an all-white neighborhood, from which the Youngers experience threats of violence and discrimination even before moving. Mr. Lindner, “a representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association” (RIS 542), offers them money to keep them from moving into their new home. Lena is shocked when she realizes that her son Walter Lee is willing to accept the money. It is then that she feels obliged to remind him of his ancestors’ achievements since the abolition of slavery and their unbreakable racial pride:

MAMA SON – I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers – but ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay ‘em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth. We ain’t never been that poor. (*raising her eyes and looking at him*) We ain’t never been that dead inside.

(RIS 551; italics original)

For Lena, accepting the money is accepting denigration of her family, of her ancestors, and of her husband’s memory. In the Younger’s family memory the trauma of slavery has become a source of pride in that the family’s history stands for a constant quest for black Americans’ rightful share in the American Dream.¹⁷⁰ In a conversation with Ruth, her daughter-in-law, she holds her husband up as an example. Caught in her memories and “seeing back to times that only she can see” (RIS 522) she remembers that Walter had worked all his life for the well-being of his children, “always want[ing] them to have something – be something” (RIS 522). Although Lena knows that “there was plenty

¹⁷⁰ For a detailed analysis of the representation and meaning of the cultural trauma of slavery in African-American theater by female playwrights see chapter 3 on “Slave Ancestors and Mythic Geography: The Cultural Narrative of Slavery on Stage.”

wrong with Walter Younger” (RIS 522), she admires him for his love for his children, who made his life as a black man in a segregated society worth living:

MAMA [...] Big Walter used to say, he’d get right wet in the eyes sometimes, lean his head back with the water standing in his eyes and say, “Seem like God didn’t see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams – but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worth while.” (*she smiles*) [...]

(RIS 522; italics original)

For Lena Younger and her husband Walter, the well-being of the younger generations of family members ranges among the highest family values. They value life according to the options available to their offspring. In their descendants they hope to see their dreams and the American Dream of freedom, prosperity, and success fulfilled. The care for the younger generations of family members, and thus for the family’s future as such, is indeed one of the main issues of *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is also evident in the family name ‘Younger.’ When Lena learns about her daughter-in-law’s decision to terminate her pregnancy she admonishes her son:

MAMA (*presently*) Well (*tightly*) Well – son, I’m waiting to hear you say something... I’m waiting to hear how you be your father’s son. Be the man he was... (*pause*) Your wife say [sic] she going to destroy your child. And I’m waiting to hear you talk like him and say we a people who give children life, not who destroys them – [...]

(RIS 532; italics original)

When Walter does not reply, she bitterly declares: “You... you are a disgrace to your father’s memory” (RIS 532). When Walter Lee does not react to the news and when he thinks about accepting the bribe money, he challenges the two main values that his father’s memory stands for: family and freedom. As the “harvest” (RIS 552) of the living elders and the living fulfillment of their dreams for a better life, Walter Lee and his sister Beneatha are expected to live by the values that they have been taught, including self-respect, ancestral pride, and the duty to teach these values to Lena’s grandson Travis who represents the next generation of the family. Lena wants her son Walter Lee, who is named after his father and who is the oldest male family member, to praise his father’s memory and to pass on his pride and strength to his own child Travis. She wants her husband to serve as a role model for her son Walter Lee, just as she wants Walter Lee to

serve as a role model for her grandson Travis. When Mr. Lindner arrives in order to give Walter Lee the bribe money she insists that Travis witness the scene and says to her son: “And you make him understand what you doing, Walter Lee. You teach him good. Like Willy Harris taught you. You show where our five generations done come to. Go ahead, son –” (RIS 553). Although slightly hesitating at the beginning, Walter Lee finally changes his mind and decides to decline the money. To Mr. Lindner he says:

What I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this is – this is my son, who makes the sixth generation of our family in this country, and that we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father – my father – he earned it.

(RIS 553)

Walter Lee’s stuttered repetitions, which relate specifically to his son and his father, emphasize again the importance of seeing his own actions within the context of the genealogical chain. For Lena Younger, her son’s explanations to Mr. Lindner signal a ritual passage “into his manhood, [...]. Kind of like a rainbow after the rain...” (RIS 554), as she says. While he is speaking, she “has her eyes closed and is rocking back and forth as though she were in church, with her head nodding the amen yes” (RIS 553). The family’s loyalties and norms are thus transmitted from father to son, from the absent ancestor to the living generation.

The turning point in the play is caused by the memory of the past in a moment in which the legacy from the past and the moral obligation towards the absent ancestors risk to be forgotten by the living generation. The activation of family memory on stage, initiated by Lena as the representative of the past, causes Walter to recognize that he is an important link in a chain of several generations of Younger family members. He is not only an individual independent human being, but he is also part of a transgenerational collective for which he carries responsibility. Walter Lee’s personal identity is not primarily characterized by his individual achievements, but rather by him stepping into his father’s footsteps. In *A Raisin in the Sun* the previous generation serves as a positive role model for the next generation, creating a circular structure which is supposed to be endlessly repeated within the subsequent generations. This continuity is based on the assumption that the younger generations of the family are willing to integrate their own

individual identities into the larger familial chain and are able to identify themselves with their forefathers.

Whereas in Walter Lee Younger's case this identification results in his maturing process and in a positive outcome of the overall plot, the revelation of family history may also have disastrous effects on the individual as Angelina Weld Grimké's play *Rachel* (1916) illustrates. In *Rachel*, family history indeed functions as an everlasting admonition, which finally severely impacts the happiness of the living generations of the Loving family. As the title already indicates, the play focuses on Rachel, a black girl who grows from a naïve but happy child to a disillusioned and traumatized aged woman over the course of the play. With her coming of age Rachel is made aware of racial segregation, violence against and debasement of blacks, which results in her giving up her hopes for a happy future. It is again the revelation of the family past which indicates the turning point in the plot. On October 16th in "the first decade of the Twentieth Century"¹⁷¹ Mrs. Loving, Rachel's mother, addresses her son and her daughter:

MRS. LOVING [...] (*pauses, continuing slowly and very seriously*) Tom and Rachel! I have been trying to make up my mind for some time whether a certain thing is my duty or not. Today – I have decided it is. You are old enough, now, - and I see you ought to be told. Do you know what day this is? (*both Tom and Rachel have been watching their mother intently*) It's the sixteenth of October. Does that mean anything to either of you?
TOM and RACHEL (*wonderingly*) No.

(RA 143; italics original)

Since the death of her husband and her stepson ten years ago, October 16th has been a day of mourning for Mrs. Loving. For her children Rachel and Tom, however, this date has no special significance so far. They know that their father and their half-brother had died in October but they do not know the circumstances of their deaths. After having listened to a conversation between Rachel and Tom about their experiences of segregation and discrimination in school, Mrs. Loving finally decides that it is her "duty" (RA 143) to tell her children that their father and their half-brother had been lynched by a white mob in the South. By passing on her knowledge about the past to her children she turns October

¹⁷¹ This information is included in the play's original publication by the Cornhill Company, Boston, in 1920. This version is reprinted in Angelina Weld Grimké and Carolivia Herron, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

16th into a familial commemoration day. From this day on, their father and half-brother, who heroically fought against racial violence, serve as role models for Rachel and Tom. After learning about his father's and his half-brother's deaths, Tom explains:

I want you to know, Ma, before I go – how – how proud I am. Why, I didn't believe two people could be like that – and live. And then to find out that one – was your own father – and one – your own brother. – It's wonderful! I'm – not much yet, Ma, but I've – I've just got to be something now.

(RA 144)

In Mrs. Loving's narration she describes her husband as a "Saint" (RA 143), who is cruelly murdered by a white mob consisting of "church members in good standing" (RA 143). She introduces her seventeen-year-old son George as a martyr and a hero, who proudly followed his father: "My little George – was – a man! (*controls herself with an effort*) He never made no outcry. His last words to me were: 'Ma, I am glad to go with Father.' I could only nod to him" (RA 144; italics original). She admonishes her children Tom and Rachel:

Always remember this: There never lived anywhere – or at any time – any two whiter or more beautiful souls. God gave me one for a husband and one for a son and I am proud. (*brokenly*) You – must – be – proud – too.

(RA 144; italics original)

For Mrs. Loving, her husband and her step-son are "white," innocent, pure souls who have been cruelly murdered by a mob in a country that identifies itself as Christian. When Tom learns about his father's and his half-brother's murders, he develops hatred toward the "white devils" (RA 144), which makes his mother doubt if it was right to tell her children about the lynching. Rachel comforts her and tells her that she no longer has to carry the burden of memory alone, because hereafter Tom and Rachel "share and share alike" (RA 144) with their mother.

In the course of the play the burden of family memory indeed seems to be completely transferred to Rachel, for whom the revelation of her father's death initiates a ritual awakening from a sheltered childhood to the harsh reality of segregation and discrimination against black Americans. In the following action one can see that Rachel suffers severely from her father's fate which for her stands for the fatal impact of racial

discrimination in America's segregated society in general. The loss of her former vitality signals Rachel's emotional death, which is accelerated by the racial violence that her adopted child Jimmy has to endure in school. She finally abandons her dream of becoming a mother in order to spare future generations from a similar life in desperation and fear. To God she swears "that no child of [hers] shall ever lie upon [her] breast" because she "will not have it rise up, in the terrible days that are to be – and call [her] cursed" (RA 157). The family's conversational remembering of her father's and her half-brother's death indicates an important turning point in Rachel's life, influencing the future of the Loving family in general. Rachel's decision to abandon her dream of motherhood results in her self-destruction. Furthermore, it creates a break in the genealogical chain, preventing the family's natural reproduction in unborn offspring. Grimké's play not only demonstrates the destructive force of racism "on the souls of the colored mothers everywhere, and upon the mothers that are to be [...],"¹⁷² but it also points out the impact of traumatic experiences in family memory for all generations of a family.

6.2 Discontinuity: Absent Ancestors as Negative Role Models

The past passed on in family memory from one generation to the next may indeed constitute a burden for the present and the future, so that the individual may decide to deliberately break with the family past and with his or her ancestors as is shown in Myrtle Smith Livingston's play *For Unborn Children* (1926).

In *For Unborn Children* (1926) it is the protagonist's attempt to stop history from repeating itself and to act differently from his father, which causes him to discontinue the genealogical chain. The play focuses on the black Carlson family, consisting of Grandma Carlson and her grandchildren Leroy and Marion Carlson. The dialogue between Grandma Carlson and Marion at the beginning of the play reveals that Leroy is in a relationship with Selma, a young white girl, which makes Grandma and Marion worry about his safety. They fear that this mixed relationship will endanger his life, so that they try to convince him to abandon the affair. The discussion between Marion, Leroy, and their grandmother, which arises when he returns home, constitutes the main part of the

¹⁷² Angelina Weld Grimké, "'Rachel': The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author," *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké: The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, ed. Carolivia Herron (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 414.

action. The presented time is here almost congruent with the time that is needed to present the action on stage. There are two main arguments that the women put forward against the relationship.

First, both Marion and her grandmother see Leroy's love for a white woman as a betrayal of his own race. It is especially Marion who emphasizes Leroy's moral obligation to black women and she asks him: "What is to become of us when our own men throw us down? Even if you do love her can't you find your backbone to conquer it for the sake of your race?" (FUC 186) She finally threatens him: "Well, if you marry her, may God help me never to breathe your name again! (*runs from the room sobbing*)" (FUC 186; italics original). Similarly, Grandma Carlson had moaned a few moments before: "I'd almost rather that he should die now than to marry a white woman, [...]" (FUC 185). In the conversation with her grandson she points out that his wish to marry a white girl "adds another link to the chain" (FUC 186) that binds black Americans. She explains that "[...] before we can gain that perfect Freedom [sic] to which we have every right, we've got to prove that we're better than they! And we can't do it when our men place white women above their own!" (FUC 186) For Leroy's grandmother and sister, the advancement of African-American people is the main duty of black Americans who have to support their race, even if this forces them to sacrifice their personal happiness. Leroy, however, is not convinced; he is not willing to give up his love for the sake of his race. For him, Selma's skin color is not important. "[...] I love her so much! Not because she's white, but just for herself alone; I'd love her just the same if she were black!" (FUC 186), he implores his grandmother and his sister.

It is only the second argument that finally changes his mind when Grandma Carlson begs him to "[t]hink of the unborn children that you sin against by marrying her, baby!" (FUC 187) She tells her grandson: "Oh, you can't know the misery that awaits them if you give them a white mother! Every child has a right to a mother who will love it better than life itself; and a white woman cannot mother a Negro baby!" (FUC 187) A few moments before, in the conversation with Marion about how they could stop Leroy from marrying Selma, Grandma Carlson said more to herself than to her granddaughter: "I suppose I'll have to tell him; well, if it will stop him – " (FUC 185). It is now in the discussion with Leroy that it becomes obvious what she feels obliged to tell him:

GRANDMA CARLSON (*pathetically*) [...] I've never told you this, – I didn't want you to know, – but your mother was a white woman, and she made your father's life miserable as long as he lived. She never could stand the sight of you and Marion; she hated you because you weren't white! I was there to care for you, but I'm getting old, Honey, and I couldn't go through it again!

(FUC 187; italics original)

The story about Leroy's parents explains the absence of Leroy's mother on stage and proves Grandma Carlson's argument about a white mother being unable to love her biracial children. She insistently begs her grandson not to "make the same mistake [his] father did!" (FUC 187) Grandma Carlson decides to reveal this family memory to her grandchildren when she realizes that the present is caught up with the past, and it is the revelation of this long-kept family secret which finally changes Leroy's decision. In an antagonistic tone he asks her: "Oh, Granny, why didn't you tell me before? My mother, white! I've wondered why you never spoke of her! And she hated us! My God! That makes it different!" (FUC 187) In order to give Leroy time and space to think about what he has just learned, Grandma Carlson leaves the stage, telling him: "I'll leave you alone with God and your conscience, and whatever you decide, I'll be satisfied" (FUC 187). In the end Leroy does not repeat his father's "mistake." Leroy's decision to abandon the relationship coincides with the appearance of a white mob that approaches the Carlson home in order to lynch "the dirty nigger" who "fool[s] around a white woman" (FUC 187). Like a martyr, Leroy faces his death "victorious and unafraid" (FUC 187). According to the stage directions "a light breaks over his face and he is transfigured; a gleam of holiness comes into his eyes; [...]" (FUC 187) when he explains to Selma:

It has to be, sweetheart, and it is the better way; even though we love each other we couldn't have found happiness together. Forget me, and marry a man of your own race; you'll be happier, and I will too, up there. Goodbye.

(FUC 187)

The appearance of the crowd supports his decision to terminate his relationship with Selma. He tells his sister Marion: "I want you to know that even if this hadn't happened, I was going to give her up" (FUC 187). He repeatedly explains to Selma, his sister, and to his grandmother that "it has to be" and "this is the better way" (FUC 187). He accepts his death as a punishment and, "looking heavenward," he says: "Thy will be done, O Lord!"

(FUC 187) While he does not mention his concern for future generations of children in his parting words to Selma, he advises his grandmother and his sister to “just think of [his death] as a sacrifice for UNBORN CHILDREN!” (FUC 187; emphasis original) It is finally the memory of his parents that triggers Leroy’s decision to change the present situation in order to guarantee an alternative future for the next generation of the Leroy family. Leroy wishes to dissociate himself from the past and from his parents whose mixed relationship is seen as a negative role model. The absence of Leroy’s parents on stage carries a strong symbolic meaning in that it signifies the discontinuity in family history. The ancestors’ absence foreshadows Leroy’s attempt to stop history from repeating itself and to compensate for the “mistake” his parents had made in the past. In the end he has to suffer the same fate his parents did in that his love for a white woman results in his death, creating another space of absence in the genealogical tree.

In general, for the younger characters in all of the plays analyzed above, family history serves as a model from which they are supposed to learn for the present and for the future. By learning about the past they learn about the present and take responsibility for the future. For a contemporary audience, however, the conversational remembering of the fictional family past on stage also conveys additional information about history in general.

6.3 Family Memory and African-American History

All memories have a unique place in world and/or national history. According to Harald Welzer, communicative memory mediates both personal experiences about ancestors and historical knowledge about the circumstances, the people involved, and the specific moment in time in which these experiences are situated. He speaks of the “communicative unconscious” in this context and explains: “A large part of the practice of communicative memory transports the past and history en passant, unnoticed, incidental, unintentional by the speakers.”¹⁷³ The conversational remembering of an event or a situation in the life of a father, mother, grandfather, or any other ancestor necessarily also communicates a picture of the experience’s particular historical positioning in time.

¹⁷³ Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*: 16. My translation. In the original: “Ein großer Teil der Praxis des kommunikativen Gedächtnisses transportiert Vergangenheit und Geschichte en passant, von den Sprechern unbemerkt, beiläufig, absichtslos.”

Accordingly, family memory in the plays represents a pars pro toto for a collective black experience of the past, creating a counter-memory to white American history.

For example, when Mrs. Loving in Grimké's play *Rachel* remembers the killing of her husband and her step-son, her memory relates back to the beginning of the 20th century when black Americans were terrorized by lynching mobs throughout the South.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, family memory as presented in Livingston's *For Unborn Children* is not only a personal remembering of the past, but it also transmits information about contemporary social attitudes towards interracial marriages and miscegenation, which have long been regarded a taboo in American society. The fictional family memories in African-American theater are thus also a subjective rendering of national history. In the plays abstract dates and anonymous documents in history books are substituted with a fictional representation of 'lived history.'

This crossover between individual autobiography, family history, and national history is most poignantly dealt with in Alice Childress' play *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969). In one of the key scenes of the play the heroine Tommy, a female factory worker, tells the other characters about her ancestors:

TOMMY (*now on sure ground*) I was born in Baltimore, Maryland and raised here in Harlem. My favorite flower is "Four O'clocks," that's a bush flower. My wearin' flower, corsage flower, is pink roses. My mama raised me, mostly by herself, God rest the dead. Mama belonged to "The Eastern Star." Her father was a "Mason." If a man in the family is a "Mason" any woman related to him can be an "Eastern Star." My grandfather was a member of "The Prince Hall Lodge." I had a [sic] uncle who was an "Elk,"... a member of "The Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World": "The Henry Lincoln Johnson Lodge." You know, the white "Elks" are called "The Benevolent Protective Order of Elks" but the black "Elks" are called "The *Improved* Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of *the World*." That's because the black "Elks" got the copyright first but the white "Elks" took us to court about it to keep us from usin' the name. Over fifteen hundred black folk went to jail for wearin' the "Elk" emblem on their coat lapel. Years ago, ... that's what you call history.

(WIW 750; italics and emphasis original)

¹⁷⁴ cf. information given in the introduction to Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens, eds., *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

According to Tommy's explanations her parents and her grandparents were active members in leading African-American fraternal organizations and sororities, fighting for integration and equality during the time of segregation and white supremacy in the United States.¹⁷⁵ The significance of her parents' political agitation becomes especially obvious when compared to the social status of the family's origins. Tommy recounts that her "great, great grandparents was [sic] slaves" (WIW 750) in a place formerly called Sweetwater Springs in Virginia. From a historical perspective Tommy's family memory is a cultural pool which mirrors the African-American fight for their rights after the abolition of slavery. "[T]hat's what you call history" (WIW 750), she says to Bill, an African-American artist who made fun of her unfamiliarity with cultural figures such as Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and Harriet Tubman a few moments before. In the previous scene he had advised her to "[r]ead, go to the library, book stores, ask somebody" (WIW 748) in order to learn about African-American history.¹⁷⁶ Tommy's family history however shows that she does not need to rely on books and anonymous cultural heroes; African-American history and cultural memory are encapsulated in the story of her ancestors. She severely criticizes Bill for understanding African-American history as a lifeless matter of facts and dates, which has nothing to do with people in real life:

If a black somebody is in a history book, or printed on a pitcher, or drawn on a paintin', ... or if they're a statue, ... dead, and outta the way, and can't talk back, then you dig 'em and full-a so much-a damn admiration and talk 'bout "*our*" history. But when you run into us livin' and breathin' ones, with the life's blood still pumpin' through us, ... then you comin' on 'bout how we ain' never together.

(WIW 753; emphasis original)

¹⁷⁵ For further information on the mentioned fraternal societies and sororities see for example Charles H. Wesley, History of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World, 1898-1954 (Washington: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1955); Robert J. Wilson, Peggy J. Coplin and Theodore D. Murray, A Documentary History of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the World: 100 Years of Benevolence and Image Building (United States: Published by the Authors, 1996); and F. A. Bell, Order of the Eastern Star: An Instructive Manual on the Organization and Government of Chapters of the Order with Ritual and Ceremonies (Chicago, IL: E. A. Cook, 1948).

¹⁷⁶ Ironically, Bill takes back his advice in the next speech act when he replies to Tommy's request to teach her: "Aw, baby, why torment yourself? Trouble with our women, ... they all wanta be great brains. Leave somethin' for a man to do" (WIW 748).

The personal history of Tommy and her family shows what lived history literally means. Tommy is inextricably linked with her ancestors and thus with American and African-American history since slavery times. The confrontation between Tommy and Bill in *Wine in the Wilderness* points out that history is not an abstract discipline, but it is created by the past experience of real people, impacting the present and the future. By including such details and references to black American history on stage, the playwrights use family memory as a counter-memory that claims to be included in America's national memory.

6.4 Conclusion

In her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" Toni Morrison emphasizes the importance of figures from the past in novels written by African-American authors. For her, the inclusion of an ancestor is a distinctive element of African-American writings. She points out that "[t]here is always an elder there,"¹⁷⁷ who has a strong influence on the story and whose "absence or presence [...] determine[s] the success or the happiness of the characters."¹⁷⁸ According to Morrison, ancestor figures in black literature "are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom."¹⁷⁹

As the analyses have shown, Morrison's observations about the representation and function of ancestor figures in African-American novel writing can also be applied to 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. The plays incorporate black history and emphasize the importance of relying upon ancestors for strength and guidance. There are always several generations of family members portrayed in the plays, creating a generational chain in which the past influences both the present and the future of the family members. The absence of an ancestor as in Livingston's play *For Unborn Children* can be threatening as it indicates a severe rupture in the familial structure. The fate of the protagonist Leroy shows that "it is impossible to understand the present or prepare for the future unless we have some knowledge of the past."¹⁸⁰ In order to fill this

¹⁷⁷ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Press, 1984): 343.

¹⁷⁸ Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation": 343.

¹⁷⁹ Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation": 343.

¹⁸⁰ Malcolm Little, *Malcom X on Afro-American History* (New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, 1982): 3.

genealogical gap, the living elders aim to make the absent ancestors present by encouraging memory talk between the family members, thereby creating a shared lived family past. The living elders and their memories of the past indeed play an integral part in the plays, whose plots usually focus on the members of a single family. They establish a connection between the fictional present on stage and a fictional past which precedes the presented time on stage and which can only be accessed through the memories of the older generation of family members. The living elders in the family usually render the presence of absent ancestors to the younger generations as benevolent guides, straddling the worlds of the narrated past and the present.

Acting as living bridges to the past, the living elders such as Mrs. Loving, Lena Younger, and Grandma Carlson give earthly 'presence' to deceased ancestors who still impact the present as spiritual and guiding forces preserved in family memory. By talking about the ancestors, the living elders make the past available to the younger generations who must know these stories in order to understand who they are by learning where they come from. The memories of the deceased ancestors constitute an African trickster presence, i.e. a divine spiritual force that is used "to convey an important moral or cultural message."¹⁸¹ The younger characters are made aware "that certain dangers, possibly fatal, may arise if the message is not heeded."¹⁸²

In the plays the contents of family memory are reproduced in moments of change or disorientation in which the younger family members experience important developments in the process of identity formation. Knowledge about their ancestors and about certain elements of family memory enables them to find out who they are and who they want to be in the future. In the context of plot development, the transmission of family memory drives the action and functions as the agent of *peripeteia*, accompanied by the young protagonists' *anagnorisis*.¹⁸³ Ancestral memory forces the younger characters to reconsider their deeds, attitudes, and ideas of life, and to change their actions accordingly.

¹⁸¹ Femi Euba, "Legba and the Politics of Metaphysics: The Trickster in Black Drama," Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora, eds. Paul C. Harrison, Victor L. Walker and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002): 167.

¹⁸² Euba, "Legba and the Politics of Metaphysics: The Trickster in Black Drama": 167.

¹⁸³ The concepts of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* were first introduced by Aristotle in his *Poetics* to describe the turning point of the action in drama, particularly in tragedy, that is caused by a critical discovery by the protagonist. For an explication of the concepts see Aristoteles and Manfred Fuhrmann, Poetik: Griechisch / Deutsch (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003).

The act of conversational remembering on stage generally initiates a turning point of the plot in that it gives the younger family generation thought-provoking impulses for their own lives, marking their final transition into adulthood and initiating a process of learning and ripening. As positive or negative role models, the contents of family memory provide a certain kind of wisdom for the living family members, who either identify themselves with (continuity) or distinguish themselves from (discontinuity) their parents and grandparents. This results in the genealogical chain either being continued or broken off.

It is interesting to note that in all of the plays the family memories are always transmitted by female characters, who are representative of an older generation of black Americans. In the plays the female elders such as Mrs. Loving in *Rachel*, Grandma Carlson in *For Unborn Children*, and Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* have to encourage their children to remember the past and to learn from their ancestors. As widowed mothers and grandmothers they occupy a power position in that they are responsible for initiating the conversational remembering of family history with the other characters and, thus, for passing on family memory to the younger generations. The black female living elder is thus stylized as the preserver and the carrier of the past, whose task it is to uphold the past in the present and to preserve it for the future. It is her duty to pass on the past's legacy to her children and grandchildren in order to protect and to educate them. Traditionally understood as the preserver of culture, the woman is responsible for the stabilization of the temporal continuum of genealogy that links the past, the present, and the future.¹⁸⁴

In addition to this work-immanent function, the ancestor figures and family memory in African-American theater are also important in a real historical context, as has become especially obvious in the analysis of Childress's play *Wine in the Wilderness*. As Soyica Diggs writes: "Building on the function of performances of blackness, *Wine in the Wilderness* presents an audience learning from a performance and, therefore, stages a meta-commentary on the function of the theatre."¹⁸⁵ While this idea of a play teaching history to the audience is especially obvious in Childress' play, the transmission of family

¹⁸⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the gender differences introduced in the plays see chapter 9: "Engendering Time: Black Motherhood and Male Maturity."

¹⁸⁵ Soyica Diggs, "Dialectical Dialogues: Performing Blackness in the Drama of Alice Childress," *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A Casebook*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (London: Routledge, 2007): 40.

memory can be seen as a presentation of history in fiction in all of the plays. Due to the fact that memories always necessarily transport history as parts of the “conversational unconscious,”¹⁸⁶ the transmission of family memory is also a transmission of national history, based on the inextricable connection between personal and political perspectives. For the characters on stage, family memory is situated in a fictional “present past,” interwoven with personal memories and emotions that connect the living with their ancestors. For the audience, however, the plays are to a certain extent also illustrations of a “pure past” that can be deduced from the fictional family histories positioned within real national American history.¹⁸⁷ The fictional memories presented in the plays all relate back to specific moments in time, thereby representing real history in fictional family memory. For the audience, especially for a non-contemporary audience, watching the performance and taking part in the transmission of memory is thus also a kind of history lesson, possibly triggering own memories about the past and about family history. When the audience members witness the conversational remembering on stage, they are turned into temporary members of this fictional social group who also learn from the past in a very real sense.

According to French historian Pierre Nora, history and memory are two different but related entities. History means reconstructing and organizing the past, while memory is associated with a dynamic process of recollecting and forgetting the past.¹⁸⁸ In the fictional family autobiographies in African-American theater these two processes of dealing with the past intermingle. For the fictional characters on stage the remembrance of ancestors and past events is a recollection of their collective identity as a family; due to the fact that these memories are all rooted in real African-American history, theater also takes part in the reconstruction of the past for the audience. The fictional memories transmit knowledge about slavery times, lynching practices, and other elements of black American history. African-American theater by female playwrights is thus turned into a selective public staging of African-American history since slavery times. From today's

¹⁸⁶ Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*: 16.

¹⁸⁷ The terms “present past” and “pure past” are translations of Reinhart Koselleck's distinction between “gegenwärtige Vergangenheit” and “reine Vergangenheit,” introduced in his epilogue to Charlotte Beradt, *Das Dritte Reich des Traums. Mit einem Nachwort von Reinhart Koselleck* (München: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1966): 117.

¹⁸⁸ cf. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux De Mémoire*,” *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

perspective the focus on memory in African-American theater offers an approach to African-American history in general in that the theatrical performance on stage is used as a commemorative medium that preserves and transmits African-American cultural memory and history to the audience.

7. Dramaturgy of Time: Re-Lived Gender Memories in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*

In his influential study on the play-element of culture, Johan Huizinga has identified the human being as a *homo ludens*, a “playing man.” He argues that play is a necessary and primary condition for the generation and functioning of culture. As a “cultural phenomenon”¹⁸⁹ and “a social construction”¹⁹⁰ play displays specific characteristics, which make it a unique human activity that strongly differs from other human actions. Playing is a voluntary and free act disconnected from the idea of immediate satisfaction of wants or material interests in real life. As play is distinct from ordinary life, it is also temporally and spatially secluded. As Huizinga explains: “Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is ‘over.’ It plays itself to an end.”¹⁹¹ Play is indeed bound to certain limits of locality and duration, proceeding in accordance with its own rules and orders; play is “a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.”¹⁹² The playground, i.e. the imaginary or material sphere in which play takes place, constitutes an independent and closed entity in which rules and customs of real life do temporarily not apply. In the playgrounds the *homo ludens* presents closed and self-contained actions, creating “temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”¹⁹³ In the performing arts and especially in stage plays, these unique characteristics of playgrounds indeed constitute the integral principle of operation.

Theater, derived from the Ancient Greek word *theatron* for ‘a seeing place,’ is indeed one of the places where the play-element of culture is most evident and most integrated into a public cultural and social context. One may argue that the theater indeed offers one

¹⁸⁹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980): 1.

¹⁹⁰ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*: 4.

¹⁹¹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*: 9.

¹⁹² Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*: 9.

¹⁹³ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*: 10.

of the main artistic playgrounds for the *homo ludens*. When we enter the theater, we step out of real life and enter a new world. Like the card-table, the screen, or the magic circle, the stage is a specific playground, an isolated temporary sphere within the ordinary world, fully dedicated to the concept of play. As the audience, we acknowledge a “temporary abolition of the ordinary world”¹⁹⁴ for the time of the performance. During a performance we are separated from the present as well as the past. When we enter the theater, we yield to a place in which time stops for the time period of the play. Although theater is placed within a very real time frame of blackouts, episodes, scenes, and acts, the moment of watching a performance also creates an effect of temporal standstill for the audience. Even if the performance is set in the past or in the future, it always happens before us in the performative now. This emphasis on the now creates the effect of timelessness in that it “removes the timely from time,”¹⁹⁵ rendering real time invisible for the time period of the play. The temporal immediacy of the presentation in front of an audience also accounts for the “liminoid process”¹⁹⁶ in theater. Ritual structures in performances take the action out of time in order to refer to something outside the artifact and to impact on the real present.

As a way of illustrating how theatrical performances may experiment with time and temporal structures in order to change the potentials of the now, the following analysis will focus on Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) as a striking example of 20th-century black feminist theater.¹⁹⁷ It will examine how the play connects different temporal structures in order to present a distinct black female identity on stage and to enhance the play's dramatic effects for the audience. It will be shown that Shange uses the interconnection between individual memory and group memory to create a communal and ritualistic theater that includes both the actors and the audience members, seeking collective self-definition based on the performance of a unique generational gender we-memory.

¹⁹⁴ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*: 12.

¹⁹⁵ Harry J. Elam, *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004): 6.

¹⁹⁶ Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Pub., 1982): 114.

¹⁹⁷ Shange's play was made into a film in winter 2010 (*For Colored Girls*, dir. Tyler Perry, 2010). The cast included famous actresses Janet Jackson, Anika Noni Rose, and Whoopi Goldberg. The movie received very mixed reviews when it was released in the United States on November 5, 2010.

7.1 A Colored Female Group Protagonist

for colored girls is written in the form of the so-called choreopoem, a theatrical invention by Shange, which combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music on stage. It deviates from traditional theatrical forms in that there is no division into acts and no clearly defined setting. It mainly consists of a sequence of different poems which are accompanied by effects of lighting and music. In the preface Shange describes the beginnings of the play in 1974, when “[w]ith as much space as a small studio on the Lower East Side, the five of us, five women, proceeded to dance, make poems, make music, make a woman’s theater for about twenty patrons” (FCG ix). According to Shange, they used *for colored girls* to express themselves and their femininity, “clarifying [their] lives – & the lives of our mothers, daughters, & grandmothers” (FCG x).

This focus on women and a distinct female perspective is already evident in the title, which explicitly names the target audience. It is not addressed to the “white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male”¹⁹⁸ spectator which, according to Jill Dolan, has long dominated American theater, but it is rather written for an audience consisting of “colored girls.” Although the play is not children’s theater in the traditional sense, it is nevertheless addressed to a young age group. Why Shange favors the word “girls” to other nouns such as ‘women’ or ‘females’ will become clearer in the course of the analysis. For the moment let us focus on the adjective “colored,” which specifies what kind of girls are addressed in the title. Shange indeed plays with the different meanings of “colored” in her choreopoem, presenting a multifaceted black female identity on stage.

First of all, the term “colored” refers to the physical appearance of the girls, describing the color of their skin. The term was widely used as a conventional description of black people of African ancestry well into the first half of the 20th century.¹⁹⁹ Although it persists in certain contexts, for example in the acronym NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the term is usually regarded old-fashioned and politically incorrect today. Even though the term was no longer seen as a conventional description of African Americans when the choreopoem was produced,

¹⁹⁸ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988): 1.

¹⁹⁹ cf. *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

Shange nevertheless constantly associates 'colored' with 'black' and 'African-American' in her play, so that one may rephrase the title as having been written 'for African-American girls.' Throughout the dramatic text phrases and terms such as "blk [sic] man" (FCG 26), "black brown young man" (FCG 37), "negro" (FCG 26), "niggah [sic]" (FCG 38), and "niggers" (FCG 7) are repeatedly used. It is the "lady in brown" who both opens and closes the play, framing the action as the first and the last voice heard on stage. According to one of the female voices the choreopoem is "a black girl's song" (FCG 4), which deals with the "metaphysical dilemma" of "bein [sic] a woman & bein [sic] colored" (FCG 45) at the same time. The references to African-American history and music in the dramatic text further support this specific reading of the adjective "colored" as African-American.²⁰⁰ By introducing the pejorative phrase "colored girls" in a play which celebrates black womanhood and femininity, Shange attempts to initiate a re-evaluation of black female identity. She thereby stresses black women's diversity and the manifoldness of black female identity as the second meaning of the adjective "colored" reveals.

In everyday language "colored" is used to describe something which has a particular color or a combination of colors rather than being just one color. This denotation of the word also applies to *for colored girls*, in that it refers to the complexity of female identity which is personified in the seven female voices on stage. The seven female speakers do not wear costumes and do not have individual names as signifiers of character, but only specifications according to the colors of the rainbow: lady in brown, lady in yellow, lady in purple, lady in red, lady in green, lady in blue, and lady in orange.²⁰¹ The color brown is of course not directly part of the spectrum of rainbow colors. However, mixing paint of all these colors would create the color brown. Thus, it fits the general presentation of the ladies as personifying different facets of a single female consciousness and identity.

²⁰⁰ For a detailed discussion on the intertextual and intermedial references as elements of a distinct African-American cultural identity see chapter 10: "Theater of the Present: Writing to the Moment and to the Audience."

²⁰¹ There is indeed one exception: The next to last poem entitled "a nite with beau willie brown" (FCG 55-60) introduces crystal, a mother of two and the girlfriend of Vietnam War veteran beau willie. She and the other family members are the only characters identified with individual names. For a detailed discussion of the specific meaning of this poem see chapter 9 on "Engendering Time: Black Motherhood and Male Maturity."

Throughout the performance the characters remain shadowy, unspecified, and almost interchangeable voices. Their appearance on stage seems to be quite arbitrary in that there is no clear scheme that determines the succession of the speakers. The symbolic connotations often associated with colors also resist any clear thematic ordering of the different poems and their speakers. In contrast to fictional characters, they lack any individual qualities and features which would make them distinct from each other. According to Shange, this indeterminacy of the seven voices serves the general concept of the choreopoem as representing a collective female identity while mirroring different facets of a single consciousness:

The rainbow is a fabulous symbol for me. If you see only one color, it's not beautiful. If you see them all, it is. A colored girl, by my definition, is a girl of many colors. But she can only see her overall beauty if she can see all the colors of herself. To do that, she has to look deep inside her. And when she looks inside herself, she will find ... love and beauty.²⁰²

The adjective "colored" is here used in the sense of 'colorful,' stressing heterogeneity and the diversity of black female identity. As the ladies themselves say, they have "come to share [their] worlds witchu [sic]" (FCG 16). The plural form of "world" emphasizes that there is not one single world that is shown but rather a multitude of experiences, situations, events, thoughts, and emotions. The female voices indeed serve as anonymous blueprints for different types of formative female experiences such as a first sexual encounter on graduation night, unrequited love, sexual harassment, rape, prostitution, abortion, and motherhood. One after another each woman makes herself heard in order to "sing a black girl's song / bring her out / to know herself" (FCG 4). As Shange points out:

If my characters don't do anything else, they talk to each other. And they talk to each other about their lives and what they want to do. No matter how crazy their talk is sometimes, what matters is that they're talking, that they're postulating their realities and their visions of the world.²⁰³

Although the poems are presented as individual speech acts about highly emotional issues, the ladies all remain surprisingly flat and anonymous, making the audience's

²⁰² Neal A. Lester and Ntozake Shange, *Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays* (New York: Garland Pub., 1995): 26.

²⁰³ Neal A. Lester, "Interview with Ntozake Shange," *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*, eds. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996): 220.

identification with any individual character impossible. The figures are indivisible “due to the fact that they all had one voice, which [Shange] proceeded to divide.”²⁰⁴ The seven female voices on stage are no characters in a traditional sense, but rather female archetypes used to illuminate the collective experience of black womanhood. Each of the archetypes represents a particular female experience in a choral form. As Paul Carter Harrison points out, in *for colored girls* we discover “choric testimonies constructed in the form of poetic blues arias that awaken our consciousness to the female agency of spiritual kinship.”²⁰⁵

This choral form is also evident in the choreography on stage. There is a constant crossover between the movements of the individual actors and the movements of the group as a whole. On the one hand, there are moments of sudden standstills in which time is stopped for a while, as the following example shows: “The four ladies on stage *freeze*, count 4, then the ladies in blue, purple, yellow, and orange move to their places for the next poem” (FCG 39; emphasis added). On the other hand, there are also sudden and apparently fearful reactions which accelerate the action, and thus the tempo, on stage: “There is a sudden light change, all of the ladies react as if they had been struck in the face. The lady in green and the lady in yellow *run out* up left, the lady in orange *runs out* the left volm, the lady in brown *runs out* up right” (FCG 16; emphasis added). Whereas the action of running is here accompanied by visual effects of lighting, the movements on stage are often also accompanied by music, adding audible effects to the visible ones:

As the lady in brown tags each of the other ladies they freeze. When each one has been tagged the lady in brown freezes. Immediately “Dancing in the Streets” by Martha and the Vandellas is heard. All of the ladies start to dance. The lady in green, the lady in blue, and the lady in yellow do the pony, the big boss line, the swim, and the nose dive. The other ladies dance in place.

(FCG 6-7)

One after another the female figures thaw and come to life. The music finally unites the individual archetypes, encouraging them to dance together as a group on stage. The way

²⁰⁴ Lester, “Interview with Ntozake Shange”: 225.

²⁰⁵ Paul C. Harrison, “Form and Transformation: Immanence of the Soul in the Performance Modes of Black Church and Black Music,” *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, eds. Paul C. Harrison, Victor L. Walker and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002): 325.

the action is staged supports the notion of a shared black female identity, while the music and songs in *for colored girls* are used as a liberating “survival tool,”²⁰⁶ accelerating the process of liberation and healing on stage. The choreography and the visual effects visualize the close relation and the constant crossover between the individual archetypes and a shared black female identity. The focus is not set on the individual archetypes but rather on the way they are part of a larger female entity. Instead of introducing individual characters with names and certain specifications, Shange presents an anonymous black female group protagonist consisting of different facets and colors. The audience's attention is thus not primarily directed towards the speakers of the poems but rather to the poems themselves.

7.2 Re-Lived Memories on Stage

Shange indeed exerts considerable effort to turn the poems into intense and impressive speech acts on stage. In the majority of the poems the female voices narrate individual memories from the past that are re-lived in the moment of utterance. The poems usually start in the past tense form, but extend into the present in the course of the speech act, pointing out a temporal progression and development.

A striking example in this context is the poem entitled “abortion cycle #1” in which the lady in blue describes the abortion of her unwanted child:

tubes tables white washed windows
 grime from age wiped over once
 legs spread
 anxious
 eyes crawling up on me
 eyes rollin in my thighs
 metal horses gnawin my womb
 dead mice fall from my mouth
i really didnt mean to
 i really didnt think i cd
 just one day off...
get offa me all this blood
 bones shattered like soft ice-cream cones
 i cdnt have people
 lookin at me
 pregnant

²⁰⁶ Lester and Shange, *Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays*: 42.

[...]
this hurts
 this hurts me
 & nobody came
 cuz nobody knew
once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself.

(FCG 22-23; emphasis added)

In general, the verb tenses are used to signal the “grammaticalization of location in time,”²⁰⁷ marking the temporal position of a situation or discourse in relation to a specific temporal reference point, in this case the now of the female speaker. In “abortion cycle #1” there are several moments in which the lady in blue changes the temporality of the verbs, alternating between the present and past tenses. Her use of the past tense form in “i really didnt mean to / i really didnt think i cd” indicates that she is remembering a past experience and narrating this on stage. The use of the temporal adverbial “once” makes this reference to a recalled past very explicit.

This basic past tense reference frame in the poem is directly contrasted with different present tense forms, for example in the following lines: “eyes crawling up on me / eyes rollin in my thighs / metal horses gnawin my womb / dead mice fall from my mouth.” The lady in blue here employs a ‘dramatic present,’ which enhances the dramatic effect of the lady’s memory by making the audiences feel as if they were present at the time of the experience. The intensity of the lady in blue’s memory is further emphasized by the progressive aspect of the verbs “crawling,” “rollin,” and “gnawin.” The continuous form is usually used to express an incomplete, ongoing process, making the description in the poem even more dramatic and pressing. Although the verb forms may also be grammatically interpreted as gerunds, their identification as present progressive forms is supported by the lady in blues’ use of the present tense in the following lines: Her memory becomes so vivid that she even re-feels her pain when she says “this hurts / this hurts me.” She also addresses anonymous people present during the abortion who she asks to “get offa me all this blood.” These people are invisible for the audience, but not for the lady in blue who is completely caught up in her memory of an unspecified

²⁰⁷ Suzanne Fleischmann, Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990): 15.

moment in the past.²⁰⁸ While narrating her traumatic experience, the lady in blue becomes so involved with her memory that she simultaneously re-lives it; her memory 'comes alive' in the moment of performance. The past and the present, or more precisely the "story-now" and the "speaker-now," radically coincide, uniting two formerly separated temporal dimensions in the performative now which may also be termed the 'audience-now.'²⁰⁹ The spectators are thus turned into witnesses of the re-enactment and re-living of a traumatic past on stage in the performative now.

Another striking example of tense switching in *for colored girls* is the poem entitled "no assistance" (FCG 13-14) in which the lady in red talks about a love affair that started in the past but is now, at the moment of the speaker's performance, ended:

without any assistance or guidance from you
i have loved you assiduously for 8 months 2 wks & a day
[...]
i want you to know
this waz an experiment
to see how selfish i cd be
if i wd really carry on to snare a possible lover
if i waz capable of debasin my self for the love of another
if i cd stand not being wanted
when i wanted to be wanted
& i cannot
so
with no further assistance & no guidance from you
i *am endin* this affair

(FCG 13-14; emphasis added)

Like the lady in blue, the lady in red also uses both progressive and simple present tenses. The progressive form in the final sentence of the poem – "i am endin this affair" – however also implies a future dimension by pointing at the ongoing processual quality of

²⁰⁸ The imperative form may also be addressed to the audience as will be seen in section 7.4. However, this reference seems to be unlikely here. The emotional intensity of the lady in blue's memory of the traumatic experience makes its interpretation as a reference to anonymous people from the past more likely.

²⁰⁹ This terminology is taken from Fleischmann, Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction: 125. Fleischmann writes: "Narratives are intrinsically structured with two time frames: the time of telling the story and the time during which the events of the story are assumed to have taken place. I refer to these respectively as speaker-now and story-now" (125; emphasis original). The term 'audience-now' is not included in her analysis as she does not focus on dramatic texts. For the present analysis the extension of her terminology, however, proves to be quite useful.

the lady's decision to stop the love affair and to become a self-loving and independent woman. She has not yet completed her journey, but she is at the now of the performance right in the middle of it. Neither the lady in red nor the audience knows how or when this process of transformation and development will be completed.

This implicit progression from an unspecified moment in the past to the performative now and finally to a future perspective indeed determines the overall structure of *for colored girls*.

7.3 Two Kinds of "Colored Girls"

The whole choreopoem starts in the past, extends to the present, and foreshadows the future. This temporal structure is especially evident in the comparison of the first and the last sentences of the dramatic text. Whereas at the beginning of the play the lady in brown announces: "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide / but *moved* to the ends of their rainbows" (FCG 6; emphasis added), she in the end explains:

& this is for colored girls who have considered
suicide / but *are movin* to the ends of their own
rainbows

(FCG 64; emphasis added)

Grammatically speaking, the present perfect used in the first part of the sentence – "& this is for colored girls who *have considered* suicide" (FCG 6, 64; emphasis added) – expresses a present tense situation due to the fact that this grammatical form emphasizes the impact of a completed action on the present moment of the utterance. The present perfect implies that the girls have not committed suicide after all. In both cases the lady in brown refers to the colored girls' past action of considering suicide in an unspecified moment prior to the "speaker-now" and thus prior to the now of the performance, creating a meta-textual temporal reference which escapes the audience's immediate perception. This holds true for both the first and the last address of the colored girls in the dramatic text. The sentence structure, however, diverges concerning the tenses in the subsequent parts. Whereas in the first speech act the lady in brown sticks to the perfect aspect of the

verb 'to move,'²¹⁰ she at the end of the play adds a new temporal dimension in using the progressive form of "are movin [sic]." This difference suggests that there are at least two kinds of "colored girls" addressed here.

The "colored girls" at the beginning of the play are certainly the seven archetypes on stage who have already "*moved* to the ends of their rainbows" (FCG 6; emphasis added). The aspect form of the verb implies that for them the process of moving is already completed. Shange puts herself in the same position when she announces in the preface to the play that she herself is already "on the other side of the rainbow" with "other work to do" (FCG xvi). After a traumatic past the ladies have found their pots of gold filled with beauty, peace, and harmony. This fits the general design of the poems as memories of past traumatic experiences, emotions, situations, thoughts, and actions, which are re-lived and re-enacted on stage in the respective now of every single performance, presenting the speakers' transformation from 'girls' into 'ladies.' The happy ending becomes especially obvious in the last scene of spiritual cleaning and ritual rebirth which introduces the healing practice of "a laying on of hands," representing "[...] the transmission of a miraculous power that heals, restores, and transforms all that it touches."²¹¹ When the lady in red ends her story with "i found god in myself / & i loved her / i loved her fiercely" (FCG 63) all of the other ladies join her while entering "into a closed tight circle" (FCG 64) and the "the holiness" (FCG 62) of the women's selves is finally released.

By contrast, the "colored girls" that the lady in brown addresses at the end of the performance constitute a different group of women: namely the female members of the audience, who "*are still movin* to the ends of their own rainbows" (FCG 64; emphasis added). The progressive tense implies that their journey is not yet completed. It has indeed only started during the performance. As the analysis above has shown, the memories are not objectively described but emotionally re-lived by the female archetypes, enabling the audience to share their emotional development while watching. The female

²¹⁰ It cannot be precisely determined whether this is present perfect '[have] moved,' with the helping verb 'have' from the first part of the sentence understood in the second, or whether it is a simple past form 'moved.' However, with regard to the overall structure of the choreopoem the present perfect tense is much more likely in this case.

²¹¹ Joanne V. Gabbin, "A Laying on of Hands: Black Women Writers Exploring the Roots of Their Folk and Cultural Tradition," Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance, eds. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée N. McLaughlin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989): 247.

process of liberation, healing and rebirth presented on stage consequently turns into a kind of model for the female spectators who testify to the healing process on stage. The play enables the audience to watch and experience a positive example of how they might overcome their own individual traumatic experiences. The play intends to accompany or prepare its female audience for being a woman, more specifically a colored woman, in the 20th century.

When asked in an interview if she had a special audience for whom she writes, Shange answered: "The reason that *For Colored Girls* [sic] is entitled *For Colored Girls* [sic] is that that's who it was for. I wanted them to have information that I did not have. I wanted them to know what it was truthfully like to be a grown woman."²¹² The information Shange has in mind "isn't just contraceptive information but emotional information" that protects the colored girls in the audience from "great disillusion[s]"²¹³ and prepares them for the psychological challenges of being a woman. The term "girl," which is used in the title and repeated throughout the play, is thus not restricted to biological age but it is also meant to describe the situation of women who have not yet discovered their own self-worth and strength. In this sense Shange's play gains a kind of trans-temporal or rather trans-generational quality: "I want [the little girls who are coming of age] to know that they are not alone and that we adult women thought and continue to think about them."²¹⁴ Shange assures herself that she "will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves."²¹⁵ In short, *for colored girls* is a ritual performance that aims to turn its female target audience from girls into women and 'ladies.' This change presupposes the audience's active and affirmative participation in the performance, which is constantly encouraged by the way the dramatic text is supposed to be staged.

²¹² Ntozake Shange, "Interview," *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983): 161-162.

²¹³ Shange, "Interview": 162.

²¹⁴ Shange, "Interview": 162.

²¹⁵ Shange, "Interview": 162.

7.4 Uniting the Stage and the Auditorium

In the introduction to her play Shange points out that *for colored girls* was not at first intended for the public theater on Broadway. Influenced by performance art, the play was originally performed in “Women’s Studies Departments, bars, cafes, & poetry centers,” leaving much room for improvisation “[w]ith the selection of poems changing, dependent upon our audience & our mood, & the dance growing to take space of its own [...]” (FCG xiii). When the play moved to Broadway in 1976, the actors’ freedom for improvisation was reduced. The script which forms the basis for this analysis prescribes the selection of poems as well as the succession of the speakers. The proximity to the audience is preserved, however, emphasizing the position of the audience as witnesses to the female transformation on stage.

The relationship between stage and auditorium is quite indicative in this context. The way a playwright intends his or her play to be performed provides information about the target relation between the actors and the spectators. In *for colored girls* the staging directions are clearly geared towards uniting the two spaces during the performance. This becomes especially obvious at the figures’ first appearance when they “run onto the stage from each of the exits” (FCG 3), meaning they run through the auditorium, such that they appear to originate from and actually be a part of the audience. Furthermore, Shange repeatedly refers to the space of the right or left “volm” (FCG 16, 23, 25, 31, 36, 46) through which the female archetypes enter and exit the stage. This is an allusion to the Latin term *vomitoria* that designates the passageway for the spectators in an amphitheater such as the ancient Coliseum in Rome which allowed people a quick entry to their seats. Shange thus foregrounds the idea that the female figures and the members of the audience are understood as forming a kind of community. The ladies emerge from the audience, and thus from real life, which encourages the audience’s intellectual involvement with the action from the very beginning.

The way *for colored girls* experiments with temporal structures as has been shown above intensifies this identificatory appeal, turning theater into an emotional experience for the audience. Even if the members of the audience distance themselves from the action on stage they are nevertheless taking part in what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the

autopoetic “feedback loop” between the stage and the auditorium. She points out that “[a]s long as they remain in the auditorium they cannot *not* participate. In the auditorium, they cannot maintain the same distanced position as when regarding a painting or reading a poem.”²¹⁶ Participation in this context refers to various kinds of reactions, such as physiological, affective, energetic, emotional, and cognitive processes. In *for colored girls* the audience is repeatedly addressed directly during the performance, which urges them to consciously follow and take part in the action and its development on stage. Right at the beginning the lady in brown provokes a critical and self-reflexive stance in the audience:

somebody / anybody
sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
[...]
sing her sighs
sing the song of her possibilities
sing a righteous gospel
let her be born
let her be born
& handled warmly

(FCG 4-5; emphasis added)

By using the imperative form and by including the line “to know you” (FCG 4) the audience is asked to celebrate womanhood and invited on a journey of self-discovery at the same time. The present tense form here designates both the now of the performance and an implied future perspective, again retrieving the dual signification of the phrase “colored girls.”

Interestingly enough, the signifier ‘you’ is used for several signifieds during the play. Whereas at the beginning and at the end of the poem it mainly addresses the implied female audience, the ‘you’ may also refer to an anonymous male position such as in the poems “without any assistance or guidance from you” (FCG 13-14) and “somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff” (FCG 49-50). In all cases, the borders of the stage

²¹⁶ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Translated by Saskya Iris Jain. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008): 155. Emphasis original.

are transcended by addressing somebody who is not present as a character on stage, breaking with the fictional and illusionary quality of theater.

Even the creation of the poem itself is made an issue during the performance. Shange as the creator of the poem is present on stage in the lady in brown who introduces herself as a writer from the lower east side of New York City: "I'm a poet / who writes in english / come to share the worlds witchu [sic]" (FCG 16). The introduction of a dramatized author is probably the most radical technique an artist may use to break the illusion of the theater and to activate their audience to consciously deal with and thus immediately react to the action perceived. The audience is constantly reminded of the claim to realism in *for colored girls*. Shange wants the audience to consciously react to the play rather than being lost in a fictional world. According to her, theater and performance art give her the opportunity "to be involved with process and to change things" in order to "create situations that unavoidably involve us in some way or another, where we have to say, 'Oh God, I can't deal with this!' or 'I can deal with this!' [...]"²¹⁷

7.5 Conclusion

In the introduction to his collection on *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (2002) Paul Carter Harrison writes:

The Committee on Aesthetics, Standards, and Practice (which included myself and two other contributors to this volume [...]), arrived at the following formulation of objectives for Black Theatre practice: Black Theatre is performative, not didactic, yet seeks collective self-definition. In both ensemble and solo work, the performance objectives rise above self-aggrandizement, recognizing the tension between I/we that subjects the individual self to collective responsibility. It is a preservative and transformative dramatic ritual that requires ritual ground as the space to focus centrality of spirit.²¹⁸

According to this definition, Black Theater constitutes a "preservative and transformative dramatic ritual" that challenges the traditional binary distinctions between stage and auditorium, between actor and spectator. It draws on the relation between the "I" and the "we," between "the individual self" and the "collective responsibility" in order to

²¹⁷ Lester, "Interview with Ntozake Shange": 229.

²¹⁸ Paul C. Harrison, Victor L. Walker and Gus Edwards, eds., *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002): 9.

“illuminate the collective ethos of the black experience in a manner that binds, cleanses, and heals.”²¹⁹ Shange's invention of the choreopoem of *for colored girls* is indeed a striking example of this specific kind of theatrical art.

Seeking collective self-definition based on the inextricable link between gender and race, *for colored girls* experiments with different temporal structures in order to create a participatory cathartic and therapeutic drama for a traumatized female identity. Drawing on the intersection between individual and collective memory, Shange's choreopoem stages a 'dramaturgy of time' in the form of “choric testimonies”²²⁰ that display a female process of liberation, healing, and rebirth. The play not only resembles a female “theatrical bildungsroman”²²¹ that stages the ritual passage into womanhood, but it displays a communal and performative activity that includes both the actors and the audience members by making the individual female archetypes re-live their traumatic memories in the audience-now on stage, thereby turning the performance into a timeless emotional experience and “a ritualized release of pure feeling which is experienced rather than ‘performed.’”²²²

The deliberate experimentation with different temporal structures in the dramatic speech is a potent method of transforming the performance into a participatory and testimonial ritualistic drama in which the boundaries between stage and auditorium, between actors and audience, and between fiction and reality are blurred by referring to something outside the artifact, namely to a shared traumatized black female identity. The

²¹⁹ Harrison, Walker and Edwards, eds., Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora: 5.

²²⁰ Harrison, "Form and Transformation: Immanence of the Soul in the Performance Modes of Black Church and Black Music": 325.

²²¹ Pamela Hamilton, "Child's Play: Ntozake Shange's Audience of Colored Girls," Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Lang, 2007): 95. In her study on American feminist playwrights Sally Burke also argues that *for colored girls* functions as a “bildungsroman, chanting the coming into consciousness and community of black Everywoman” (Sally Burke, American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History (New York/London: Twayne Publishers/Prentice Hall International, 1996): 184.) Similarly, Tobe Levin and Gwendoly Flowers speak about *for colored girls* as a “female Bildungsroman” in their study on black feminism in Shange's play (Tobe Levin and Gwendolyn Flowers, "Black Feminism in *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*," History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture, ed. Günter H. Lenz (Frankfurt; New York: Campus, 1984): 185).

²²² Deborah R. Geis, "Distracted Laughter: Monologue in Ntozake Shange's Theater Pieces," Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights, ed. Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 216.

group protagonist consisting of seven female voices presents different facets of a distinct black female identity and consciousness, symbolically conveyed through the colors of the rainbow. During the performance the ladies re-live and re-stage individual formative and often cruel experiences such as rape, abortion, and motherhood. The tense switching and especially the use of the dramatic present in the dramatic text transfer the past or more precisely the "story-now" into the "speaker-now,"²²³ i.e. the performative now, enabling the audience to simultaneously accompany the journey of black female self-discovery acted out on stage.

Through the ladies' de-personalization their narrations are made into representative experiences of an abstract black female identity, so that the individual memories turn into elements of a specific communicative gender memory. The poems in *for colored girls* represent parts of a shared female we-memory which is passed on from the stage to the auditorium and from one generation of women to the next through the practice of "conversational remembering"²²⁴ during the performance on stage. Metaphorically speaking, the figures on stage turn into mothers, or rather othermothers,²²⁵ who prepare their daughters in the audience for life by passing on the knowledge they gained from their own past experiences. Shange's play is an attempt to show how a broken female spirit may be restored and strengthened by a kind of trans-generational communication between different generations of women.

In *for colored girls* the traumatic past is re-enacted in the performative now, while temporarily interrupting the real present, in order to turn the individual experiences of the seven female archetypes into a black female group experience. Encouraging the female spectators to learn from the female voices on stage and to discover 'their own rainbows,' Shange extends the theatrical tradition in using the stage as a transmitter of female wisdom and a means of communal female bonding, informing the general shift from *mimesis*/drama to *methexis*/ritual in African-American theater.²²⁶ The performance

²²³ Fleischmann, *Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction*: 125.

²²⁴ Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (München: Beck, 2008): 16.

²²⁵ For an explication of the significance of othermothers in black culture see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

²²⁶ cf. Kimberly W. Benston, "The Aesthetic of Modern Black Drama: From *Mimesis* to *Methexis*," *The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Errol Hill (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980).

resembles a talk-therapy for both the female voices on stage and the female members of the audience, serving “as a vehicle for social edification and psychic clarity.”²²⁷ Theater makes it possible to temporarily imitate a communicative frame of a face-to-face relationship between the actors and the spectators.

Although *for colored girls* cannot be defined as a *rite de passage* due to a lack of the transformation's social recognition, it may nevertheless be understood as a liminal phase for the female figures who overcome their traumatic experiences by re-living their memories on stage, as well as for the selective audience of “colored girls” whose identity formation is supposed to be initiated during the two-hour-performance and completed in an unspecified moment in the future. The re-enactment of traumatic experiences on stage creates a testimonial ritual in which the members of the audience function as active witnesses who gradually turn into a collective participant of the ritual in the course of the performance. As the lady in yellow puts it, “bein [sic] a woman and bein [sic] colored is a metaphysical dilemma” (FCG 45) that many black women have to deal with. The communal act of witnessing creates a force that transcends the individual and solitary female existence as the transformation processes are affirmed by other women who testify to the ritual's regenerative and healing effect.

In short, by drawing on the intersection between individual and collective memory, *for colored girls* aims at creating a bond of empathy between the female archetypes on stage and the female members of the audience on the basis of one overarching in-group, the membership of common black womanhood, seeking collective self-definition based on the performance of a unique generational gender we-memory through the practice of “conversational remembering”²²⁸ on stage.

²²⁷ Harrison, “Form and Transformation: Immanence of the Soul in the Performance Modes of Black Church and Black Music”: 325.

²²⁸ Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (München: Beck, 2008): 16.

8. African-American Language Identity on Stage

Cultural Studies today focus on the preconditions, functions, and consequences of culture and its diverse manifestations. Numerous studies have shown that the formation of cultural meaning is always linked to its representation in and through signs, especially through the signs of language. We use language to communicate with others, to represent and to express something, including ourselves. Every speech act is an act of choice, displaying its speakers' identity. Human beings use language as a "representational system"²²⁹ in order to establish their own position in the face of an Other. It is the existential medium of human self-creation, enabling us to represent our ideas, feelings, and thoughts to other people.

Yet, language is not only a synchronic medium of communication. Language is indeed both an identity label for the individual and a badge for culture in general. It also contains and preserves collective knowledge and a historical memory, which is passed on from one generation to the next. As Philip Riley points out, "[t]o be learnt, culture has to be transmitted and any society that fails to pass on its knowledge to future generations fails to reproduce itself."²³⁰ Language is one means of transmitting this cultural knowledge. The kind of knowledge that is transmitted changes over time. Culture as well as cultural identity cannot be formed ad hoc but are bound to gradual processes of development and change so that it is indeed necessary to add a temporal dimension to the questions of what cultural identity actually is and how it is represented. We do not only have to ask *how* culture is shaped, but we also have to ask *when* and *why* it is shaped.

As a way of illustrating how language preserves and hands on a distinct cultural memory, the following analysis will deal with the importance and meaning of language discourse with regard to African-American identity as displayed in 20th-century African-

²²⁹ Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (London: Sage in association with The Open University, 1997): 1.

²³⁰ Philip Riley, Language, Culture and Identity: An Ethnolinguistic Perspective (London: Continuum, 2008): 40.

American theater by female playwrights. The stage is thereby regarded as a significant contributor to the public discussion of social and cultural concerns. Focusing on the use of language in plays by female playwrights, it will be shown that language change mirrors a birth of African-American cultural consciousness in the 20th century in that the plays use language to indicate a distinct African-American cultural memory which is transmitted and passed on in the performances on stage.

The first section of this paper will deal with naming practices after slavery times. The acts of naming, un-naming, and re-naming will be discussed with regard to the search for cultural roots and origins in the distant past of pre-slavery times. Section 2 will then focus on the constant changes in the classificatory system of African-American nomenclature. It will be shown that language critique concerning imposed labels and self-labels was accompanied by social changes and changes in the social consciousness. Finally, the last section will concentrate on the meaning of African-American English in the process of cultural formation. Discussing the purposes of this special variety of the English language in African-American theater, the analysis will show that African-American English has undergone a complete re-evaluation and re-assessment in public discourse since the end of the 19th century.

8.1 Naming, Un-Naming, Re-Naming

A name is a person's most obvious identity marker. It expresses the individual identity of a unique human being who is thus distinguished from other individuals. The lack of a name makes a person invisible as Ralph Ellison's protagonist is forced to recognize. He is not able to surmount established stereotypes and exaggerated generalizations about black Americans, so that he remains the nameless *Invisible Man* (1952) until the end. A name is a form of distinction and an index for one's own individual and personal identity. At the same time, a name also establishes a link between the individual human being and the larger group of the family to which he or she belongs. The family name unites different generations and genealogies of individuals who share a common group identity. Through the tradition of naming a child after his parents or his grandparents he or she is integrated into a lineage and identified as one part of the family, whose group memory is upheld in naming practices. As a child we are usually not able to influence what name we are given.

Naming is usually done by others for oneself. During slavery times in the United States this act of naming was often done by the slave masters who gave their last names to their slaves. In his fictional autobiography *Black Boy* (1945) Richard Wright asks his mother:

“What was Granny’s name before she married Grandpa?”

“Bolden.”

“Who gave her that name?”

“The white man who owned her.”

“She was a slave?”

“Yes.”

“And Bolden was the name of Granny’s father?”

“Granny doesn’t know who her father was.”

“So they just gave her any name?”

“They gave her a name; that’s all I know.”²³¹

As Wright’s grandmother does not know her father, she lacks important information on the genealogy of her family. The lack of a name marks her inability to trace the family’s history and lineage and thus to identify herself as belonging to a larger family story. This fate was indeed shared by many slaves, whose family genealogy was disrupted through slave trade. In pursuit of their own financial interests, slaveholders often disregarded black familial relationships, separating fathers and mothers from their children. In order to point out the property status of slaves they were often given a slave master’s last name. In the case of Wright’s grandmother she was given the name Bolden. This imposed naming practice was a judicial form of turning slaves into objects of possession and marking them as a member of the group of slaves working on the Bolden plantation.

After slavery many former slaves decided to abandon their imposed names and to adopt a new name that they chose for themselves. The act of un-naming and subsequent re-naming was an act of reclaiming and reconstructing their own identities, finally claiming freedom and independence. It was an act of defiance to overcome the past and to start anew. Changing one’s ‘slave name’ became especially en vogue during the time of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements between the 1960s and 1970s. Even 101 years after the official abolition of slavery Malcolm X, who was born Malcolm Little, explains: “For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ‘Little’ which some

²³¹ Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper Row, 1978): 57.

blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears.”²³² The replacement of the last name was a common practice among the members of the Nation of Islam, a religious organization founded in 1930, which Malcolm X had joined in the late 1950s. For them the X resembled a claim to an independent history and past, to one not overshadowed by racial hierarchy. The letter ‘X’ was used as a substitute for an African family name, which was assumed to be existent but unavailable at the moment of re-naming. According to Malcolm X, the “Muslim’s ‘X’ symbolized the true African family name that he never could know.”²³³

During the 1960s and 1970s many black Americans aimed to re-construct their fragmented familial past by identifying with a distinct African heritage and origin.²³⁴ They adopted African names as a means of “genealogical revisionism”²³⁵ in order to re-create their familial pasts in pre-slavery times. In 1967, for example, Everett LeRoi Jones, author of the play *Slave Ship* (1970), adopted the African name Imamu Amear Baraka, which he later changed to Amiri Baraka. Similarly, playwright Ntozake Shange was born Paulette Williams in 1948. In 1971 she changed her name to the Zulu names Ntozake, meaning “she who comes with her own things,” and Shange, meaning “she who walks like a lion.”

The adoption of African names and their meanings was also dealt with in literature. A striking example in this context is Beneatha, one of the female characters in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). In the play she is constantly addressed as “Alayio” by her African suitor Asagai. As she is not familiar with African languages, she does not know the meaning of the name she is given.

BENEATHA You didn’t tell us what Alayio means... for all I know, you might be calling me Little Idiot or something...

ASAGAI Well... let me see... I do not know how just to explain it... The sense of a thing can be so different when it changes languages.

BENEATHA You’re evading.

²³² Malcolm Little and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X with the Assistance of Alex Haley* (London: Hutchinson, 1970): 296.

²³³ Little and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X with the Assistance of Alex Haley*: 296.

²³⁴ For a detailed analysis of the importance of the identification with Africa in the process of African-American identity formation see chapter 4 on “The Idea of Mother Africa and African-American Identity.”

²³⁵ Kimberly W. Benston, “‘I Yam What I Yam’: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature,” *Black American Literature Forum* 16.1 (1982): 3.

ASAGAI No – really it is difficult... (*thinking*) It means... it means One for Whom Bread – Food – Is Not Enough. (*he looks at her*) Is that all right?
 BENEATHA (*understanding, softly*) Thank you.

(RIS 528-529; italics original)

For Beneatha, Alayio is an opaque name whose meaning she does not understand. Asagai as the giver of the name occupies a superior position of knowledge at this moment. Consequently, Beneatha is self-conscious and quite suspicious about what her African friend calls her. Only when she gets to know the translation of the name in English is she able to identify with it. She indeed happily adopts the name as its metaphoric meaning fits her constant search for identity and her pursuit of social upward mobility in the play. For Beneatha, the imposed name Alayio turns into an accepted and embraced self-label in this scene. While Beneatha finally happily adopts the name that she is given, the history of African-American nomenclature includes many imposed labels that black Americans did not want to accept.

8.2 Classificatory Systems: African-American Nomenclature

Nigger, colored, Negro, Aframerican,²³⁶ Black, Afro-American, African American – these are some of the terms that members of this specific we-group have used to refer to themselves within the comparatively short period of about 150 years, usually with some overlap and fierce debates about capitalization and the use of the hyphen. The labels indeed sometimes changed from one generation to the next as Robert Stepto's autobiographical information reveals: "[...] my grandfather (born 1885) preferred the term 'colored.' Many people born after him preferred the term 'Negro' and insisted that Negro be spelled with a capital 'N.' That preference spilled over into my era: on my birth certificate I am listed as 'Negro' (I was born in 1945)."²³⁷

These numerous shifts in the classificatory system mirror the constant social and political changes in 20th-century African-American history. Language in this context

²³⁶ During the 1920s there was a brief effort to launch the term "Aframerican." It was supposed to be an alternative to the term "Afro-American," insisting on fusing the terms "African" and "American" without hyphens or spaces in between. For further information see Clare Corbould, Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): 217-218.

²³⁷ Robert B. Stepto, Personal Email Correspondence (September 22, 2009).

serves as a “sensitive seismograph of social crises,”²³⁸ due to the fact that questions of labeling are also questions of how to use language in society and, thus, questions of social politics in a broader context. The imposition of labels is always also a question of power politics between those who label and those who are labeled. As Sabine Wierlemann points out: “Language change and social change often accompany each other and may not be clearly separated from each other.”²³⁹ Even if language change is usually not controllable, it may nevertheless be influenced or fostered by human action. Incisive events such as political movements, revolutions, and changes in the political system are usually accompanied by a change in the social consciousness that often includes a change in language usage.

In the context of African-American identity formation it was especially the political and social developments during the 1960s and 1970s which fostered a strong sensitivity for the linguistic representation of black Americans in public discourses. Black America’s resistance to the imposed labels “nigger” and “Negro” indicated the increasing force of the Black Power Movement to revolt against the inferior position of black Americans in segregated America. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” Martin Luther King, Jr., listed linguistic devaluation as one of the reasons why black Americans were no longer willing to wait for a change in society in 1963:

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” [...] But [...] when your first name becomes “nigger,” your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; [...] when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness” – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Sabine Wierlemann, *Political Correctness in den USA und in Deutschland* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2002): 20. My translation. The full quotation in the original reads: “Sprachkritik kann als empfindlicher Seismograph gesellschaftlicher Krisen beschrieben werden.”

²³⁹ Wierlemann, *Political Correctness in den USA und in Deutschland*: 29. My translation. In the original: “Sprachgebrauchswandel und gesellschaftliche Veränderungen gehen oft Hand in Hand und sind nicht immer klar voneinander zu trennen.”

²⁴⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Books, 1964): 81-82.

In contrast to Ralph Ellison's invisible man who finally falls silent and conforms to his "nobodiness," King wanted to put an end to the black people's endurance of being put into a subordinate position. He expressed indignation at the fact that black women, men, and children were not adequately addressed as individuals with proper names. By giving them pejorative generic names such as "boy" and "John" they were stripped of their unique individuality, becoming all alike and forming an unspecified group of "niggers."

King's rejection of "nigger" ran almost parallel to Malcolm X's revolt against the label "Negro." Still common as a designation for black Americans during the 1960s and 1970s, it was finally turned into a taboo word, considered old-fashioned and offensive today.²⁴¹ In a speech to the people of Harlem in a public meeting on January 24, 1965 Malcolm X argued that the term "Negro" was deliberately used to damage African-American identity:

One of the main reasons we are called Negro is so we won't know who we really are. And when you call yourself that, you don't know who you really are. You don't know what you are, you don't know where you came from, you don't know what is yours. As long as you call yourself a Negro, nothing is yours.²⁴²

Similar to King, Malcolm X pointed out that imposed labels had a negative influence on the quality of black Americans' self-understanding, blocking the formation of African-American identity in general. In his speech he aimed at raising his audience's awareness of this destructive force of imposed labels.

In Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) the character Bill pursues a similar aim in teaching the female character Tommy how to speak 'properly' about black Americans. Telling the other characters about her experiences during the Harlem Race Riot she repeatedly uses the term "nigger," which causes Bill to interrupt her:

TOMMY (*suddenly remembers her troubles*) Niggers, niggers ... niggers, ... I'm sick-a niggers, ain't you? A nigger will mess up everytime... Lemmie tell you what the niggers done ...

²⁴¹ There was a fierce controversy about the use of the term "Negro" on the 2010 US census form (cf. Katie Mcfadden and Larry Mcshane, "Use of Word Negro on 2010 Census Form Raises Memories of Jim Crow," New York Daily News January 6, 2010.)

²⁴² Malcolm Little, Malcom X on Afro-American History (New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, 1982): 15.

BILL Tommy, baby, we don't use that word around here. We can talk about each other a little better than that.

CYNTHIA Oh, she doesn't mean it.

TOMMY What must I say?

BILL Try Afro-Americans.

TOMMY Well, ... the Afro-Americans burnt down my house.

(WIW 742; italics original)

In this scene name change is presented as an act of education and an imposed substitution of one label with another. Tommy, a “woman factory worker” (WIW 738) who has not enjoyed a higher education, is a willing student who wants to learn from Cynthia, “a social worker” (WIW 738), and Bill, “an artist” (WIW 738). She does not question the correction of her speech but simply accepts the other characters' authority. She immediately abandons the term “nigger” in her story and replaces it with the seemingly more appropriate term “Afro-American.”

Yet, this teacher-student-relation completely turns upside at the end of the play when the issue of correct or incorrect labeling comes up again in a scene in which Tommy accuses Bill of his bad and superior behavior towards her and towards the lower class of African Americans in general. In their quarrel she repeatedly addresses him as “nigger” until Bill authoritatively stops her:

BILL (*pulls dictionary from shelf*) Let's get this ignorant “nigger” talk squared away. You can stand some education.

TOMMY You *treat* me like a nigger, that's what- I'd rather be called one than treated that way.

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

TOMMY Fifth grade is a liar! Don't pull that dictionary crap on me.

BILL (*pointing to the book*) Webster's New World Dictionary of The American Language, College Edition.

TOMMY I don't need to find out what no college white folks say nigger is.

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

(WIW 753-754; italics and emphasis original)

The controversy about the term “nigger” is in this scene directed towards the major question of who uses the term. The position of the speaker always carries connotations

which influence the meaning of a name or an expression so that Tommy points out: "When they say 'nigger,' just dry-long-so, they mean educated you and uneducated me. They hate you and call you 'nigger,' I called you 'nigger' but I love you" (WIW 754). It is now Tommy who is in the position to teach Bill about the different meanings of the term "nigger," dependent on its usage as an in-group or an out-group label. Accordingly, the term was regarded as insult when used by a white person after the Civil Rights Movement; when used by a black person, however, it might also be used "affectionately by one negro of another."²⁴³

For both the characters on stage and the real audience attending the performance this scene in Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* turns into a lesson in the power politics of language and the question of labeling that is still with us today. The re-naming of Yale's 'Afro-American Studies Department' as 'African American Studies Department' in 1992 exemplifies that the question of African-American nomenclature is still being discussed. Robert Stepto, who participated in the process, explains that the re-naming process was completely an internal decision involving only the faculty of the department. According to him the only external pressure was the idea of "being up to date regarding what to call ourselves."²⁴⁴

Until today there are different collective nouns in African-American identity discourse which are simultaneously used. While some people call themselves Blacks or black Americans, some prefer the terms Afro-American or African(-)American, identifying themselves with their ancestry by using a so-called hyphenated identity label. Influenced by the 1990s discussions on Political Correctness, hyphenated identities have become a commonly accepted form of labeling, as "for a group brought to America as slaves and until very recently denied the rights of American citizens, this assertion of identity also represents a claim of the uprooted to historical roots ('African') and of the historically unequal to fully equality ('American')."²⁴⁵ In the year 2000 the term "African American" was for the first time included in the United States Census form, marking its

²⁴³ Henry W. Fowler and Ernest Gowers, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965): 391. For further information on ethnic labels see for example Jeff Greenberg, S.L. Kirkland and Tom Pyszczynski, "Some Theoretical Notions and Preliminary Research Concerning Derogatory Ethnic Labels," *Discourse and Discrimination*, eds. Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson and Teun A. van Dijk (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

²⁴⁴ Robert B. Stepto, Personal Email Correspondence (September 26, 2009).

²⁴⁵ Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene* (London: Routledge, 1995): 145.

official recognition. From a linguistic point of view the pattern ['ethnic origin' + – *American*] describes a uniform and thus non-discriminating determination for minority groups in the American society. Non-discrimination in this context refers to the idea of treating Mexican-American, Asian-American, Native-American, and other dual American identities alike. The hyphenated term is usually used respectfully, acknowledging an individual's ethnic, regional, or cultural origin and ancestry which unites with his or her American citizenship. The hyphen is usually no longer seen as a cut creating "a divided American"²⁴⁶ but as a link between two cultural origins in America's multicultural society.

Both the naming practices after slavery times and the development of the African-American classificatory system reveal that 20th-century America has witnessed a gradual birth of cultural and social consciousness. This process, that reveals itself in a critical re-examination of language in plays by African-American female playwrights, also included discussions on the social status and value of African-American English (AAE).

8.3 Varieties and Standards: African-American English (AAE)

Negro dialect, Nonstandard Negro English, Black Street Speech, Black English Vernacular, Ebonics – these are only some of the terms that have been used by linguists and sociolinguists in talking about this special variety of the English language since the initial heightened interest in African-American English (AAE) in the early 1960s. As the terminology's diversity already indicates, AAE has long been the most controversial variety of the English language, "correlate[ing] more with the socio-economic segregation of their speakers than with the greater distinctiveness of their structural features."²⁴⁷ Linguists such as William Labov, Walt Wolfram, John R. Rickford, and Lisa Green have however shown that AAE is not a random conglomeration of speech habits but rather an independent, rule-governed system.²⁴⁸ The variety has unique morphological, phonological, lexical, and syntactic features, in which it differs from Standard English.

²⁴⁶ During the 1970s John Wayne, a famous American film actor and producer, voiced public criticism about the double American status in his poem "The Hyphen," in which he introduces the notion of "a divided American". The first stanza of the poem reads: "The Hyphen, Webster's Dictionary defines, / Is a symbol used to divide a / Compound word or a single word. / So it seems to me that when a man calls himself / An 'Afro-American,' a 'Mexican-American,' / 'Italian-American,' an 'Irish-American,' 'Jewish-American,' / What he's sayin' is, 'I'm a divided American.'"

²⁴⁷ Salikoko S. Mufwene, "What Is African American English?," *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English*, ed. Sonja L. Lanehart (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001): 23.

It is this uniqueness that has inspired many writers and artists to use it in their works in order to mark ethnic differences between their characters. Especially during the Local Color Movement at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century AAE was used to convey an authentic depiction of black people and to confront the different cultural perspectives of black and white America with each other. The African-American characters in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick, or the Whale* (1851), Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1881), and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) are some of the most prominent examples in this context. Although the authors aimed to convey authentic and realistic portraits of people and regions, sociolinguistic studies have shown that their orthography often suggested linguistic differences that were not necessarily reflections of actual dialect differences but rather non-scientific, conventionalized stereotypes about AAE speech. In linguistic terms, a so-called "eye dialect" was used which "means nothing to the ear, though it may mean something to the eye."²⁴⁹ For the predominantly white authors the direct confrontation between white characters speaking Standard English and black characters speaking AAE was a means to ameliorate their own position as members of a supposedly superior culture. AAE was indeed seen as a substandard to the English language, associated with the speaker's limited education, naivety, and verbal incompetence. With reference to Pierre Bourdieu's imagery of the "symbolic marketplace" one might argue that due to its deviation from "the legitimate language" AAE had less "symbolic power" in society than Standard English.²⁵⁰

Mirroring contemporary discourse on the social value of AAE, 20th-century African-American female playwrights have made extensive use of it in their work. In their plays AAE is used for three main purposes: to mark ethnic differences between white and black

²⁴⁸ cf. William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 1972); Walt Wolfram, *Dialects and American English* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991); John R. Rickford, "The Creole Origin of African American Vernacular English: Evidence from Copula Absence," *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use*, eds. Salikoko S. Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey and John Baugh (London: Routledge, 1998); and Lisa J. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁴⁹ George P. Krapp, "The Psychology of Dialect Writing," *A Various Language: Perspectives on American Dialects*, eds. Juanita V. Williamson and Virginia M. Burke (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971): 24.

²⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, John B. Thompson and Gino Raymond, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

characters; to mark regional and generational differences between members of the African-American community; and, finally, to mark the memory of a common past.

8.3.1 Ethnic Differences

Especially in early 20th-century theater the AAE variety of the English language was used to indicate the characters' ethnicity and their social and educational status. In Mary Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919), for example, language indicates the difference between the educated, upper-middle-class, white nurse and the uneducated, black mother from the lower class of society. Similarly, in Angelina Weld Grimké's three-act play *Rachel*, first produced for the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in 1916, language is also presented as an indicator of the speaker's social and educational background. The protagonist Rachel, who is trained as a teacher, is particularly concerned about the speech of her adopted child Jimmy and repeatedly corrects him, for example in the following scene:

JIMMY [...] Ma Rachel, I'm a "nawful," big boy now, aren't I? I are almost a man, aren't I?
 RACHEL Oh! Boy, I'm getting tired of correcting you – "I am almost a man, am I not?"

(RA 146; quotation marks original)²⁵¹

It is Rachel's higher educational standard and her aspiration of upward social mobility which are symbolically presented in her admonishments toward a correct usage of the English grammar. Yet, whereas the majority of speech acts in Grimké's play is written in Standard English, the text surprises by including the lyrics of the song "Mighty Lak' a Rose" that is played and sung by Rachel on stage. The lyrics, which are completely written in AAE, are re-printed in the play script at length. The first stanza reads:

Sweetest li'l feller,
 Ev'rybody knows;
 Dunno what to call him,
 But he mighty lak' a rose!
 Lookin' at his Mammy
 Wid eyes so shiny blue,

²⁵¹ It is not quite clear if Jimmy's grammatical 'mistakes' mark him as a speaker of AAE in this passage. The use of "are" in combination with the first person singular is not identified as a typical syntactic peculiarity of AAE in linguistic studies, but it may nevertheless be intended as such by Grimké in this scene.

Mek' you think that heav'n
Is comin' clost ter you!
[...]

(RA 139)

The song is an example of the “dialect songs”²⁵² popular at the beginning of the 20th century. It was composed by Ethelbert Nevin, a well-known American pianist and composer, in 1901. The song gained its entrance into white culture through its later recordings by popular artists such as Paul Robeson, Frank Sinatra, and Bing Crosby. In contrast to the rest of Grimké’s play, the use of the variety in the song is here accepted and even encouraged as the re-print of the lyrics in AAE orthography shows. The linguistic deviation from Standard English strongly contrasts with the way the song is performed according to the stage directions:

Presently RACHEL raises her eyes to Raphael’s “Madonna” over the piano. Her expression becomes rapt; then, very softly, her eyes still on the picture, she plays and sings Nevin’s “Mighty Lak’ a Rose”

(RA 139)

Rachel’s presentation of the song indeed resembles an act of *mimicry* of white culture, emerging “as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.”²⁵³ In this scene the shortcomings of AAE in terms of social value are confronted with the variety’s acceptance in dialect songs. As the song is appropriated and treasured by white culture, it becomes acceptable as an AAE element of culture in theater. The ambivalent presentation of the song simultaneously supports and undermines the superiority of Standard English as the legitimate language, foreshadowing the re-evaluation of linguistic differences during the following decades in the Harlem Renaissance.

²⁵² cf. John Graziano, “The Use of Dialect in African-American Spirituals, Popular Songs, and Folk Songs,” Black Music Research Journal, Fall 2004.

²⁵³ Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 2008): 123. For more information and an interesting discussion of *mimicry* in the context of African-American and postcolonial literature and culture see Monika Reif-Hülser, Fremde Texte als Spiegel des Eigenen: Postkoloniale Literaturen und ihre Auseinandersetzungen mit dem kulturellen Kanon (München; Paderborn: Fink, 2006). Especially: 125-127.

8.3.2 Regional and Generational Differences

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed a time of cultural flowering and outburst of black creativity in visual arts, music, and literature. Black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke aimed to create art “about us, by us, for us, near us”²⁵⁴ and called for a theater “of free self-expression and imaginative release, [that] has no objective but to express beautifully and colourfully the folk life of the race.”²⁵⁵

As a part of the larger New Negro Movement the Harlem Renaissance also initiated a re-assessment of the AAE variety, urging black Americans to reflect on their identity and position as African Americans. In his essay “Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk-Poet” (1934) Locke demanded an increased awareness of the stereotypical depiction of black Americans via linguistic patterns in the arts, emphasizing that

[a]s a matter of fact, Negro dialect is extremely local – it changes from place to place, as do white dialects. And what is more, the dialect of Dunbar and the other early Negro poets never was on land or sea as a living peasant speech; but it has had such wide currency, especially on the stage, as to have successfully deceived half the world, including the many Negroes who for one reason or another imitate it.²⁵⁶

According to Locke, literature and theater served to promote and justify a false depiction of AAE speakers. Paul Laurence Dunbar and other African-American writers helped to turn a hetero-stereotype into an unchallenged auto-stereotype, which influenced both the perception of the variety and the self-perception of black Americans.

Locke’s critique was shared by Zora Neale Hurston, a preeminent folklorist and author during the Harlem Renaissance. In “Characteristics of Negro Expression” she explained: “If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of ‘ams’ and ‘Ises.’ Fortunately we don’t

²⁵⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Krigwa Little Negro Theatre,” *Crisis* July 1926.32: 134.

²⁵⁵ Alain Locke, “The Drama of Negro Life (1926),” *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, eds. Henry L. Gates and Gene A. Jarrett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007): 523.

²⁵⁶ Locke, “Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk-Poet (1934)”: 120.

have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself.”²⁵⁷ Both Locke and Hurston agreed that black Americans speak differently from white Americans, but these differences had not been properly reproduced by writers and performers so far. Consequently, Locke asked for an author who “has localized [the dialect] carefully, after close observation and study, and varies it according to the brogue of the locality or the characteristic jargon of the *milieu* of which he is writing.”²⁵⁸ Aiming to fulfill this demand and to present the language of the specific “milieu” she is writing about, Hurston explicitly localizes the origin of the black characters in her play *Color Struck* (1925) in Jacksonville, “a Southern city” (CS 89). The dialect they use is thus introduced as a regional particularity and dialect form, which does not assume validity for all AAE speakers.

Similarly, in her play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) playwright Lorraine Hansberry also uses language to indicate the regional differences between their characters. At mid-century equality in education posed a central issue, peaking in the landmark decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. In 1954 segregation in public schools was finally abolished, aiming to reduce the differences between black and white students. Colleges and universities, formerly restricted to white Americans, opened their doors to African Americans such as Beneatha Younger, one of the main characters in Hansberry’s play. Contrary to her mother and her sister-in-law Beneatha is the only one in the play who enjoys a higher education, being able to study medicine at college. According to the stage directions,

[h]er speech is a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family’s insofar as education has permeated her sense of English – and perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally – at last – won out in her inflection; but not altogether, because over all of it is a soft slurring and transformed use of vowels, which is the decided influence of the Southside.

(RIS 519)

²⁵⁷ Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” *Negro: An Anthology*, eds. Nancy Cunard and Hugh D. Ford (Continuum, 1996): 31. Replacing one stereotype with another, Hurston explains this linguistic difference by introducing a new, in this case biological stereotype that endows all black Americans with thick lips: “I think the lip form is responsible for this to a great extent. By experiment the reader will find that a sharp ‘T’ is very much easier with a thin taut lip than with a full soft lip. Like tightening violin strings” (31). Her theory is based on field studies that she conducted in Harlem while studying anthropology under Franz Boas (cf. Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (London: Camden Press, 1986)).

²⁵⁸ Locke, “Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk-Poet (1934)”: 120. Emphasis original.

In the description of Beneatha's speech Hansberry refers to regional differences between the Midwest and the South in order to point out the characters' particular way of talking. These geographical references also carry symbolic meanings. Whereas the Midwest stands for Beneatha's education at college in the presented time of the play "sometimes between World War II and the present" (RIS 514), the South symbolizes the family's origins and past, which is personified in Beneatha's mother Lena Younger. As the oldest member of the family she is the only one who recalls the dangers and hardships in the South which caused the family to flee to Chicago. Her speech is "careless" and "she is inclined to slur everything – but her voice is perhaps not so much quiet as simply soft" (RIS 520).

By combining the characters' speech differences with an association with the present and the past, respectively, Hansberry adds a symbolic temporal interpretation to the discourse on AAE. On the one hand, language differences are used to indicate generational differences between the older generation in the family represented by Lena and the younger generation represented by Beneatha. On the other hand, the Southern speech idiom is also introduced as a cultural heritage which binds the different members of the family together. In spite of her higher education, Beneatha's English still carries traces of her family's Southern origins. The Midwestern dialect has "not altogether" (RIS 519) permeated her way of speaking in that there is still "a soft slurring and transformed use of vowels, which is the decided influence of the Southside" (RIS 519), as the stage directions point out.

This identification of language as an element of cultural memory and a signifier of a collective past that is shared by the individual members of this specific we-group became especially important in language discourse in the second half of the 20th century.

8.3.3 AAE and the Collective Past

Between the 1960s and the 1970s the use of AAE in the educational system became a major public issue in the United States. Two main questions were under debate: What is the status of AAE in relation to Standard American English? and: How should AAE be dealt with in classroom? Because of the fact that almost a decade after the introduction of integrated schools black children still achieved worse results than white students, many voices were heard demanding a top-down reform of the educational system. William A.

Stewart, for example, argued that speaking Standard English burdened AAE speakers with extra language learning requirements which were unaccounted for in the classroom:

In many ways, the plight of the Negro child who enters school speaking a non-standard dialect is similar to that of a foreign-language-speaking child entering an American school. And, while it can be argued that no Negro dialect is as different from standard English as is, say, Spanish, this does not necessarily mean that the linguistically-different Negro's task is that much easier.²⁵⁹

As a solution to this imbalance of learning requirements in school, he proposed a kind of bilingual education that used material written in the vernacular in inner-city elementary schools in order to prepare a gradual learning process of Standard American English. As Paul Stoller points out, Stewart's proposals caused heated debates and controversies, especially by African Americans who feared a reinforcement of segregation practices in education.²⁶⁰

The linguistic and pedagogical debates were additionally fueled by Judge Charles W. Joiner's landmark decision in education politics in 1979. In the so-called Ann Arbor Decision a suit was brought on behalf of AAE-speaking students at the Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School. A group of parents and social workers accused the Ann Arbor School District of disseminating against black students by ignoring their cultural and linguistic background. The court decided in favor of the elementary school children, urging teachers to take AAE into consideration in instruction. In December 1996 the Oakland School Board of Education reinforced the 1979 Ann Arbor decision by recognizing 'Ebonics' as a legitimate language in educational affairs. While often used interchangeable with AAE, the term 'Ebonics' particularly stresses the African roots of AAE and its connections with other languages spoken elsewhere in the Black Diaspora. The Oakland Ebonics controversy supported the legitimacy of AAE as a rule-governed

²⁵⁹ William A. Stewart, "Continuity and Change in American Negro Dialects," Perspectives on Black English, ed. Joey L. Dillard (The Hague: Mouton, 1975): 239. For further studies in this context see for example Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann, Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966) and Labov, Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular.

²⁶⁰ cf. Paul Stoller, ed., Black American English: Its Background and Its Usage in the Schools and in Literature (New York: Dell, 1975): 15.

language system, independent of Standard English, and implicitly asserted its association with the speakers' particular cultural backgrounds.²⁶¹

Aiming to emphasize this distinct cultural heritage preserved in and through language, playwright Shange introduced a new idiom in her choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976). By adding dance, songs, and black music as "proof of origin" (FCG 12) the play enlarges the AAE sign system. Combining prose, song, music, and dance with AAE lexical and phonetic features, the play stimulates a transition from the spoken and embodied language on stage to a written language on the page, approximating the written to the pronounced word. Placing much emphasis on the way her art looks on the page, Shange surprises the reading audience with a new style of writing, trying to create a musical form of language with unconventional spelling forms and "dancing letters" on the page, which is intended to visually stimulate the reader, "so that reading becomes not just a passive act and more than an intellectual activity, but demands rigorous participation."²⁶²

For Shange, this new orthography repeated the American War of Independence in a written form, enabling a kind of verbal and emotional liberation "because in murdering the King's English, we free ourselves."²⁶³ With her language she aimed to create an African-American "home" that was "endemically black in some cultural way."²⁶⁴ As such, *for colored girls* is a conscious attempt at "preserv[ing] the elements of our culture that need to be remembered and absolutely revered,"²⁶⁵ as she emphasizes. In Shange's work, the focus in AAE language discourse has changed from the presentation of a difference in opposition to white culture, to celebrating the shared memory of a common past and heritage that is preserved in and through language.

²⁶¹ For more information see Ronald Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006). Especially chapter 14.

²⁶² Ntozake Shange, "Interview," *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983): 163.

²⁶³ Neal A. Lester, "Interview with Ntozake Shange," *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*, eds. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996): 221.

²⁶⁴ Lester, "Interview with Ntozake Shange": 219.

²⁶⁵ Shange, "Interview": 163.

8.4 Conclusion

Every paperback copy of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* includes an audio CD with recordings of great musicians like Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington, of orators like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, and of other famous black American writers and artists. According to the editor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., listening to original recordings is essential to understanding the artistic and cultural significance of the works and their creators. This conviction is shared by many black American 20th-century authors such as Toni Morrison who deliberately uses dialect forms in her writings as a visual/audible marker of African-American identity. When asked about the distinctive feature of good fiction, Morrison once answered:

The language, only the language. [...] Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language.²⁶⁶

Both Gates and Morrison describe African-American culture as an oral culture and introduce language as carrying a specific social and cultural significance. In the context of African-American identity, AAE has indeed assumed "the singular role as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue,"²⁶⁷ which is also evident in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights.

As the analyses above have shown, African-American English and AAE elements of language develop from a reader-oriented feature for purposes of realism and local color to a deliberate in-group marker and a key index of African-American identity on stage. By mirroring contemporary discussions and controversies on AAE and its social status and value, the plays engage in a critical re-examination of the ethnification of language and the power politics of naming and labeling practices, thereby assisting a gradual birth of cultural consciousness in the 20th century. Especially during the 1960s and 1970s Civil

²⁶⁶ Thomas LeClair and Toni Morrison, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison (1981)," *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994): 123-124.

²⁶⁷ Henry L. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): xix.

Rights Movements there was an increasing awareness about the importance of language as a representational system that discriminated against black Americans. The naming practices after slavery times were conscious attempts to get rid of the cultural trauma of slavery and to re-construct broken genealogical bondages from pre-slavery times, while the protest against pejorative imposed labels such as “nigger” and “Negro” contested the position of “nobodiness” that black Americans were put into. This idea of independence and linguistic self-determination is most evident when Tommy, the heroine in *Wine in the Wilderness*, tells the character Bill: “When they say ‘nigger,’ just dry-long-so, they mean educated you and uneducated me. They hate you and call you ‘nigger,’ I called you ‘nigger’ but I love you” (WIW 754).

For black Americans, the increasing awareness of black positioning in white America based on their representation in and through language also initiated a critical re-assessment and re-evaluation of African-American English as a special variety of the English language. Linguistic and sociolinguistic studies since the 1960s have rejected the variety’s seemingly substandard status compared to Standard English and have increased its social value in identifying it as a rule-governed and systematic language. As the previous analyses have shown, African-American theater mirrored the contemporary discussions and controversies in the discourse and thus assisted the gradual formation of African-American cultural consciousness.

In the construction and representation of African-American identity in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights language has become a traditional marker of difference whose social and cultural significance is performed and embodied on stage. AAE’s development from a pejorative linguistic deviation from Standard English into an embraced indicator of African-American identity was supported by playwrights such as Grimké, Hurston, Childress, Hansberry, and Shange who elaborately used the variety in their writings. By using AAE and AAE elements of language to mark ethnic and regional differences between the characters and to introduce a distinct cultural heritage that is passed on in and through language, the plays support AAE’s development into a powerful means of cultural self-definition and self-affirmation and a key element of African-American cultural memory. Using the representational system of language to mark and enact the characters’ African-American identities on stage, the plays turn the

AAE language system into a tradition which preserves and hands on a distinct cultural memory from the stage to the auditorium, from one generation to the next. Informed by the act of “self-narration”²⁶⁸ on stage, African-American English becomes a *lieu de mémoire* with “a symbolic aura”²⁶⁹ based on the will to remember and affirm a distinct African-American cultural background.

²⁶⁸ Anthony P. Kerby, "The Language of the Self," *Philosophy Today* Fall 1986. Here: 220.

²⁶⁹ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux De Mémoire*," *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 295.

9. Engendering Time: Black Motherhood and Male Maturity

By birth we are influenced by specific physiological rhythms and periodic cycles. Periodical temporal structures and processes like the pulse, the heart beat, sleep rhythms, the female menstrual cycle, or bioclimatic factors such as the change of the seasons and of day and night determine our lives and influence our bodies. In a social context, the perception of this “inner clock”²⁷⁰ is always embedded in a culturally conditioned experience of time.

As elements of social reality, the structures of physiological time undergo cultural interpretations and encodings and, thus, come to convey a certain meaning. This is especially obvious with regard to the social significance of the female reproductive cycle. As Arnold van Gennep has shown, pregnancy is not only a physiological process of change in the female body, but it is also a woman’s *rîte de passage*. From an anthropological perspective, pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity have a considerable social importance in that they mark a woman’s transition from one social status to another. “Becoming a mother,” van Gennep writes, “raises her moral and social position; instead of being just a woman, she is now a matron.”²⁷¹

Similarly, Julia Kristeva argues that due to its social significance the female reproductive cycle forms the basis for what she describes as “Women’s Time.”²⁷² Drawing on the development of feminism and feminist movements, Kristeva traces a gender-specific experience of time that is divided into the binary distinction between a male and a female temporality. Kristeva identifies men’s time as a linear temporality linked to male

²⁷⁰ Jürgen Aschoff, “Die innere Uhr des Menschen,” *Die Zeit*, eds. Anton Peisl and Armin Mohler (München: Oldenbourg, 1983). My translation.

²⁷¹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977): 48.

²⁷² Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

subjectivity in that it signifies “a time of project and history” which is “readily labelled masculine.”²⁷³ This form of temporality that associates time with “departure, progression and arrival”²⁷⁴ is “at once both civilizational and obsessional;”²⁷⁵ it “renders explicit a rupture, an expectation or an anguish which other temporalities work to conceal.”²⁷⁶ In contrast to men’s time, women’s time is linked to cyclical and monumental structures. Kristeva points out that “[a]s for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations.”²⁷⁷ As part of the “all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space”²⁷⁸ of monumental time, the creation of women’s time is based on the periodical biological structures of “cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature.”²⁷⁹ Like van Gennep, Kristeva identifies the unique female experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity as integral elements of the social and cultural construction of time and, thus, of the social and cultural construction of male and female identity.

As a means of illustrating how this gender-specific perception of time interacts with identity formation processes, the following analysis will focus on the construction and representation of male and female temporality in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. The analysis will examine how gender-specific time and temporality are used to create and to represent distinct African-American male and female identities on stage. It will be shown that black female temporality in the plays is created by a focus on the particularity of black motherhood and its responsibility for initiating a male process of learning and maturing, pointing to the close relationship between issues of race and gender. By representing the universal female experience of motherhood and mothering within a very specific social and political context, the plays point to what it means to be a black woman and mother in a white-dominated society.

²⁷³ Kristeva, "Women's Time": 193.

²⁷⁴ Kristeva, "Women's Time": 192.

²⁷⁵ Kristeva, "Women's Time": 193.

²⁷⁶ Kristeva, "Women's Time": 192.

²⁷⁷ Kristeva, "Women's Time": 191. Emphasis original.

²⁷⁸ Kristeva, "Women's Time": 191.

²⁷⁹ Kristeva, "Women's Time": 191.

9.1 Different Female Family Generations

In 20th-century theater by African-American female playwrights there is a clear majority of black women characters on stage. In the plays considered here the female characters noticeably outnumber their male counterparts. From the overall number of 79 characters, there are 45 female and 34 male characters.²⁸⁰ If we only focus on the main characters in the plays, the difference is even more striking. There are 26 main characters in total, out of which 21 characters are female, while only five of them are male.²⁸¹ In all but one of the plays there are at least two, sometimes even more different generations of black female characters simultaneously introduced on stage.²⁸² Because of the fact that the plays all portray family stories, the female characters represent different generations of female family members around whom the plots generally evolve.²⁸³

This generational representation is most strikingly illustrated in Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which introduces Lena Younger, "a woman in her early sixties, full-bodied and strong" (RIS 520), and her daughter Beneatha, who is "about

²⁸⁰ The count only includes those characters whose sex can be unambiguously defined by the list of characters, the stage directions, or by the references in the characters' dialogues. Excluded from the count are (1) unspecified groups of characters such as the dancers, musicians, and passengers in Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck*, the mob in Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children*, and the moving men in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and (2) single characters whose sex is undeterminable such as the Gorilla, the senators, witnesses I and II, the reporter as well as the mythic Anima/Animus figure in Judith Alexa Jackson's play *WOMBmanWARs*. Although Jackson's play is a one-woman show, so that the stage directions use the pronoun "she" when referring to the unspecified characters such as the witnesses or the senators, the list of characters nevertheless also includes explicit references to the sex of specific characters such as the "Good Christian Woman" (WMW 151) or "Mama Thomas" (WMW 151). The count therefore only includes those characters whose sex is explicitly mentioned.

²⁸¹ This count includes the exact number of characters that constitute a group protagonist, so that there are three main characters in Gilbert's *Environment*, two main characters in Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness*, four main characters in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, seven main characters in Shange's *for colored girls*, and five main characters in Jackson's *WOMBmanWARs*.

²⁸² The only exception is Alice Childress's play *Wine in the Wilderness* in which the two female characters are about the same age. Tommy, the heroine, is "a woman factory worker aged thirty" (WIW 738) and Cynthia is "a social worker aged twenty-five" (WIW 738).

²⁸³ There are Mrs. Loving and her daughter Rachel in Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel*; Malinda Jasper and her daughter Lindy in Mary Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness*; Emma and her daughter in Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck*; Grandma Carlson, her grandchildren, and their unborn offspring in Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children* (1926); Mary Lou Williams and her family in Mercedes Gilbert's *Environment*; Lena, Ruth, and Beneatha in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*; the female archetypes on stage and their colored daughters in the audience in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*; and, finally, Sapphire and her daughter Danisha in Judith Alexa Jackson's *WOMBmanWARs*.

twenty” (RIS 519). Lena is the oldest character on stage and the matriarch of the family.²⁸⁴ As such, she occupies a power position in the family and has a strong influence on her children, who are supposed to be her “harvest” and her “beginning again” (RIS 552). Lena is a determined and “high-minded” (RIS 550) woman whose position as the head of the family gives her the moral authority to decide what her family needs. When she sees that her family is “falling apart today... [sic] just falling to pieces in front of [her] eyes” (RIS 538), she decides to invest the money that she receives after her husband’s death in a small house in an all-white neighborhood, aiming to provide “a home” (RIS 537) and a place of belonging for her family against all odds.²⁸⁵

It is this resoluteness that Lena shares with her daughter Beneatha, the youngest female character in the play. Beneatha is the only family member to receive a higher education at college and she repeatedly displays her knowledge and beliefs to the other characters, while emphasizing that she does not “expect [them] to understand” (RIS 523).²⁸⁶ By aspiring to the traditionally male medical profession, she challenges conventional gender allocations, which is also indicated in her nickname ‘Bennie,’ a name usually used for men, and in her attitude towards marriage. When asked about her

²⁸⁴ She does however not fit the stereotypical myth of the black matriarch as “the black-widow spider” as Steven R. Carter has convincingly argued (cf. Steven R. Carter, Hansberry's Drama: Commitment Amid Complexity (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991)).

²⁸⁵ For an interesting discussion on the meaning of “home” and the different kinds of “home” in Hansberry’s play see Kristin L. Matthews, “The Politics of Home in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*,” Modern Drama 51. Winter 2008.

²⁸⁶ Rachelle S. Gold argues that “Beneatha uses two modes of knowledge to separate herself from her family, one where she merely broadcasts her beliefs, without asking anyone to subscribe to them, and one where she elevates her belief systems over theirs [...]” (Rachelle S. Gold, ““Education Has Spoiled Many a Good Plow Hand”: How Beneatha’s Knowledge Functions in *A Raisin in the Sun*,” Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Lang, 2007): 7.) It is however important to note when Beneatha displays her knowledge, using language that “differs from the rest of the family’s insofar as education has permeated her sense of English” (RIS 519), as the stage directions put it. On the one hand, she uses this language in conversations with her suitors George Murchison and Joseph Asagai, who have also been to college and who thus share Beneatha’s education and knowledge. On the other hand, she uses her higher-class terminology to speak *about*, but not to speak *to* or *with* the other family members. When she calls Walter Lee a “*Monsieur le petit bourgeois noir*” and a “Symbol of a Rising Class! Entrepreneur! Titan of the system” (RIS 649; italics original), she is not talking to him and does not expect him to reply. She rather comments on him and asks an absent third persona: “Yes – just look at what the New World hath wrought!... [sic] Just look! (*she gestures with bitter disgust*) There he is!” (RIS 549; italics original) The theatricality of her advice to look at Walter Lee suggests that she is addressing the audience in this moment, even if the invisible border between the stage and the auditorium is not completely transgressed or destroyed.

relationship with her suitor George Murchison, Beneatha replies: “Listen, I’m going to be a doctor. I’m not worried about who I’m going to marry yet – if I ever get married” (RIS 524). Although she repeatedly stresses her independence and insists that she has “never asked anyone around to do anything for [her]” (RIS 519), the fulfillment of her dream of becoming a doctor is, however, dependent on the financial support of her mother, who is determined to provide her daughter with the money she needs. When asked how she wants to invest the money she inherits, Lena replies: “Some of it got to be put away for Beneatha and her schoolin’ – and ain’t nothing going to touch that part of it. Nothing” (RIS 522).

In spite of their similarities in terms of strong-mindedness and determination in trying to achieve their aims, there are also some major differences between Lena and her daughter, which reveal themselves in a confrontation about faith in God. In contrast to Beneatha, her mother is a deeply religious woman who believes in God and his benevolence. When Beneatha explains that she is “tired of hearing about God all the time” (RIS 524), Lena rebukes her, telling her: “It don’t sound nice for a young girl to say things like that – you wasn’t brought up that way. Me and your father went to trouble to get you and Brother to church every Sunday” (RIS 524). In spite of her mother’s reprimand, Beneatha continues to emphasize that she does not believe in God, which results in a severe confrontation between the two women which is worth quoting at length:

BENEATHA Mama, you don’t understand. It’s all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don’t accept. It’s not important. I am not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don’t believe in God. I don’t even think about it. It’s just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God – there is only man and it is he who makes miracles!

(MAMA absorbs this speech, studies her daughter and rises slowly and crosses to BENEATHA and slaps her powerfully across the face. After, there is only silence and the daughter drops her eyes from her mother’s face, and MAMA is very tall before her)

MAMA Now – you say after me, in my mother’s house there is still God *(there is a long pause and BENEATHA stares at the floor wordlessly. MAMA repeats the phrase with precision and cool emotion)* In my mother’s house there is still God.

BENEATHA In my mother's house there is still God.
(A long pause)

(RIS 524; italics original)

For Lena, God is an existential truth, while for her daughter Beneatha God is only an "idea" that she does not want to accept and that she replaces with humanism. In contrast to her mother she believes that mankind forges its own destiny and that people can live well without religion. Lena cannot accept her daughter's lack of faith and her neglect of God's power and so uses her authority to forbid Beneatha to blaspheme God in her presence. The structure of the sentence "in my mother's house there is still God" places religion within the sphere of Lena's house, giving Beneatha the freedom not to believe in God outside the range of her mother's authority.

This focus on the social role of mothers in interaction with their daughters is indeed a common theme in all of the plays considered here. They all introduce intergenerational mother-daughter-relations and represent the female characters in their roles as either actual or potential mothers struggling with the question of how to mother black children in a white-dominated society.

9.2 The Issue of Black Motherhood

Influenced by the matrilineal system of slavery that automatically transferred the burden of bondage from the slave mother to her children, black motherhood has become a dominant theme in African-American theater by female playwrights. Motherhood became "a profoundly vexed issue," as Patricia R. Schroeder points out, "[w]hen a child could be sold at an owner's whim, when a slave woman's behavior could be coerced by threats to her child, when a child is the result of rape, or when a child's inevitable slave status would only perpetuate the institution of slavery."²⁸⁷ The extraordinary tensions of being a mother to black children in a white-dominated society have inspired many African-

²⁸⁷ Patricia R. Schroeder, *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996): 115. Similarly, in her study *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, Jacqueline Jones writes: "As blacks, slave women were exploited for their skills and physical strength in the production of staple crops; as women, they performed a reproductive function vital to individual slaveholders' financial interests and to the inherently expansive system of slavery in general" (Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985): 12).

American playwrights such as Angelina Weld Grimké to deal with black motherhood in their writings.

In Grimké's work the question of whether a black mother should give birth to a child in a society in which black Americans have to struggle with racial violence and discrimination has a consistent presence. In the short story "The Closing Door," for example, published in 1919 in the *Birth Control Review*, the female protagonist Agnes, who had always wished to become a mother, kills her baby son because she cannot stand the idea of her beloved child being killed by a white mob, just like her brother was. She does not want to be "[a]n instrument of reproduction! – another of the many! – a colored woman – doomed! – cursed! – put here!" who "bring[s] children here – men children – for the sport – the lust – of possible orderly mobs."²⁸⁸

This representation of childlessness as a form of protection is also dealt with in Grimké's play *Rachel* (1916). Like her name-giver from the Old Testament, the heroine Rachel struggles with her wish to become a mother. At the beginning of the play Rachel repeatedly talks about motherhood as being "the loveliest thing of all the lovely things in this world" (RA 139). For Rachel, motherhood is "a sacred thing" (RA 139) that would be assigned to her by God as she tells her mother:

RACHEL [...] Ma dear, if I believed that I should grow up and not be a mother, I'd pray to die now. I've thought about it a lot, Ma dear, and once I dreamed, and a voice said to me – oh! it was so real – "Rachel, you are to be a mother to little children." Wasn't that beautiful? Ever since I have known how Mary felt at the "Annunciation." [sic] (*almost in a whisper*) *God spoke to me through some one, and I believe.* And it has explained so much to me. I know now why I just can't resist any child. I have to love it – it calls me – it – draws me.

(RA 139; italics and emphasis original)

In her belief in the sacredness of motherhood the heroine strongly identifies with the Virgin Mary who is a key figure in Christianity as the woman who gave birth to Jesus. Rachel cannot explain why she loves black babies best, but she is especially concerned

²⁸⁸ Angelina Weld Grimké, "The Closing Door: A Short Story," The Birth Control Review: Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood, 1919: 10. The short story was published as a serial in two issues of the *Birth Control Review* in September and October 1919: Angelina Weld Grimké, "The Closing Door: A Short Story," The Birth Control Review: Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood. The New Emancipation: The Negroes' Need For Birth Control, As Seen By Themselves 1919: 10-13 and Grimké, "The Closing Door: A Short Story": 8-12.

about them: "I pray God every night to give me, when I grow up, little black and brown babies – to protect and guard" (RA 139). In the course of the play Rachel however abandons her dream of becoming a mother and she consciously decides to remain childless. Her decision is triggered by her mother's memory of how Rachel's father and half-brother were lynched by a white mob in the South. This story from the past initiates a process of learning and maturing in Rachel and marks her passage from childhood into adulthood. She is forced to realize that "everywhere, everywhere, throughout the South, there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear, whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hearts is three parts – pain" (RA 145). With her coming of age Rachel becomes aware of the harsh reality of racism and racial violence that her unborn children would have to face, so that she finally questions God's power and the sacredness of motherhood that she had believed in at a young age. According to Rachel, "this white Christian nation – has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful – the most holy thing in life – motherhood!" (RA 145) Hardly able to bear the racism that her adoptive son Jimmy has to endure in school, she finally swears an oath to God to never have children of her own:

You God! – You terrible, laughing God! Listen! I swear – and may my soul be damned to all eternity, if I do break this oath – I swear – that no child of mine shall ever lie upon my breast, for I will not have it rise up, in the terrible days that are to be – and call me cursed. [...] If I kill, You Mighty God, I kill at once – I do not torture.

(RA 157)

Rachel abandons her love to her suitor John Strong and rejects his proposal, explaining: "If it nearly kills me to hear my Jimmy's crying, do you think I could stand it, when my own child, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood – learned the same reason for weeping?" (RA 168) Breaking with the contemporary stereotypes of the always laughing Topsy and Pickaninny characters, *Rachel* presents black children "as a source of pain and vulnerability to African American families."²⁸⁹ In a 1917 synopsis to her play Grimké explained that with *Rachel* she wanted her target audience of white women to "see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers,

²⁸⁹ Robin Bernstein, "'Never Born': Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* as Ironic Response to Topsy," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*. Spring 2007.

husbands, sons were having on the souls of the colored mothers everywhere.”²⁹⁰ At the end of the play Rachel “suffers from acute melancholia” as “a highly subjective response to the violence of the time,”²⁹¹ as David Krasner writes.

This melancholia and emotional suffering also affect her outer appearance. According to the stage directions, Rachel “is noticeably all four years older” (RA 145), with a frown in her face and “a set expression about the mouth” (RA 145). It is racial prejudice that makes her and all other black Americans age prematurely, as Rachel explains to her lover John:

RACHEL I am twenty-two – and I’m old; you’re thirty-two – and you’re old. Tom’s twenty-three – and he is old. Ma dear’s sixty – and she said once she is much older than that. She is. We are all blighted; we are all accursed – all of us –, everywhere, we whose skins are dark – our lives blasted by the white man’s prejudice. (*pause*) And my little Jimmy – seven years old, that’s all – is blighted too. In a year or two, at best, he will be made old by suffering. (*pause*) [...]

(RA 167; italics original)

Both Rachel and her mother suffer from premature aging and Rachel points out that the male characters John, Tom, and Jimmy have the same fate, although they never talk about their age in the play. It is only the female characters who explicitly express their awareness of this acceleration of biological time and whose appearances attest to their premature aging. Within only four years Mrs. Loving becomes a “bent and worn-looking” woman who “limps a trifle” (RA 146) and suffers from acute rheumatism. She explains that “[i]t’s sixty long years since [she] was born” and asserts that she is “much older than that, much older” (RA 147). Similarly, Rachel turns from a naïve but happy girl with “the spirit of abounding life, health, joy, youth” (RA 136) to a disillusioned, “haggard, and grey” old woman who speaks “as one dead might speak – tonelessly, slowly” (RA 167) and her “world-weariness makes her much older in some ways than her mother.”²⁹² At the

²⁹⁰ Angelina Weld Grimké, ““Rachel”: The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author,” Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké: The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, ed. Carolivia Herron (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 414.

²⁹¹ David Krasner, A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002): 98.

²⁹² Trudier Harris, “Before the Strength, the Pain: Portraits of Elderly Black Women in Early Twentieth-Century Anti-Lynching Plays,” Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage, ed. Carol P. Marsh-Lockett (New York: Garland Pub., 1999): 34.

end of the play both Rachel and Mrs. Loving have become noticeably “old by suffering,” a fate that is indeed shared by many of the female characters presented in the plays.

9.2.1 Becoming Old by Suffering

The idea of the black woman becoming old by suffering from the extraordinary tensions of being a mother to black children and of having to care for the well-being of her family in a white-dominated society is indeed a topos that is repeated in many plays by African-American female playwrights. In Mary Burrill’s one-act play *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919), for example, the mother character even dies of exhaustion from her duties as mother and laundress for white families at the end of the play.

First published in a special issue of *The Birth Control Review* on “The Negroes’ Need for Birth Control, As Seen By Themselves,”²⁹³ *They That Sit in Darkness* is a propaganda play that takes part in the contemporary discourse on birth control by pointing at the tragic results of poverty and limited access to education for black women in the South. In the context of black women’s right to reproductive freedom, birth control was “beginning to be seen as a necessary and desirable part of health care”²⁹⁴ in that repeated childbearing was often hazardous to the health of black women, as Burrill’s play points out. It focuses on the poor working-class family of Malinda Jasper who is the mother of seven children, “a crest-fallen, pathetic looking little group – heads unkempt, ragged, undersized, under-fed” (TTSD 180), ranging in age from a one-week old infant to seventeen-year-old Lindy. Her husband is absent during the whole action so that the focus is completely set on Malinda and her situation.

Although Malinda is only “thirty-eight” (TTSD 179), she is described as “a frail, tired-looking woman” (TTSD 179) who “walks unsteadily” (TTSD 182), speaks “with

²⁹³ Mary Burrill, “They That Sit in Darkness: A One-Act Play of Negro Life.,” *The Birth Control Review: Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood. The New Emancipation: The Negroes' Need For Birth Control, As Seen By Themselves* 1919. The Birth Control Review was published by Margaret Sanger, who wrote several papers and articles on the question of women’s reproductive freedom in the first three decades of the 20th century (cf. Margaret Sanger, Esther Katz, Cathy Moran Hajo, Peter Engelman and University Publications of America, *The Margaret Sanger Papers: Collected Documents Series* (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1996)).

²⁹⁴ Jamie Hart, “Who Should Have the Children? Discussions of Birth Control among African-American Intellectuals, 1920-1939,” *The Journal of Negro History* 79.1 (1994): 81. For further information see also Jessie M. Rodrique, “The Black Community and the Birth Control Movement,” *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, eds. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989).

extreme weariness” (TTSD 181), and repeatedly leans her head “wearily against the back of the rocker” (TTSD 181) or “sinks [...] exhausted” (TTSD 180) into it. In spite of her poor health, Malinda has to work because she knows that “dey ain’t no ravens flyin’ ‘roun’ heah drappin’ us food. All we gits, we has to git by wukin’ hard!” (TTSD 181) The hard work does not leave her the strength or the “time tuh look at’er [her children’s] sperrits” (TTSD 182). “When Ah git through scrubbin’ at dem tubs,” she explains, “all Ah kin do is set in dis cheer an’ nod – Ah doan wants tuh see no chillern!” (TTSD 182)

This representation of Malinda as an old, worn-out woman is supported by the introduction of the white character Miss Elizabeth Shaw, “in the regulation dress of a visiting nurse” (TTSD 180). In contrast to Malinda, Elizabeth Shaw does not suffer from premature ageing. As a nurse, she knows about birth control, but is not allowed to pass on this knowledge to Malinda, as she explains:

My heart goes out to you poor people that sit in darkness, having, year after year, children that are physically too weak to bring into the world – children that you are unable not only to educate but even to clothe and feed. Malinda, when I took my oath as nurse, I swore to abide by the laws of the State, and the law forbids my telling you what you have a right to know!

(TTSD 182)

Although Elizabeth has sympathy for Malinda and her situation, and although she would like to tell her “what [she] [has] a right to know,” she has to follow the law that enforces an inequality between black and white women. Malinda’s death at the end of the play suggests that it is this enforced lack of black female self-determination which accelerates black women’s becoming old by suffering. When Malinda dies, her eldest daughter Lindy, who is said to be leaving for college at the beginning of the play, instead has to take her mother’s position. When Lindy enters the stage in the last scene, “the light has gone from her face for she knows that the path now stretching before her and the other children will be darker even than the way that they have already known” (TTSD 183). The ending suggests that the circle of children, poverty, and the mother’s premature ageing will repeat itself in the next female family generation. The presence of Mary Ellen, Lindy’s six year old sister, as the only other female character on stage, as well as the fact that Burrill chose *Unto the Third and Fourth Generations* as the title for a revised version of the play in

1930 further support this focus on black motherhood as a burden that will finally affect all female generations of the Jasper family.²⁹⁵

Another play in which the black mother character is presented as becoming old by suffering is Mercedes Gilbert's *Environment* (1931), which focuses on Mary Lou Williams and her struggle for the well-being of her family in New York City's Harlem during the time of the Great Depression. Hoping for a better life in the North, the family had left their home in the rural area of Durham, North Carolina, one year before the action starts. The Williams' home consisting of a "poorly furnished combination dining room and kitchen" (EN 204) equipped with a "delapidated [sic] table in the center of the floor" (EN 204) testifies to the family's financial shortcomings. Unable to find a job, Mary Lou's husband has become a violent drunkard who has to flee from the police so that Mary Lou is forced to work up to the point of exhaustion to support her family, which she tries to hide from her children. Only when she is alone on stage does she "drop[] her head on table and sob[]" (EN 206), telling herself: "Oh! but I'm tired. I worked hard today, but I must work hard, to just barely live" (EN 214). When Mary Lou forbids her son Carl, who "can't stand to see [her] working like this, night and day" (EN 206), to quit school and go to work in order to support his mother, he asks her: "But, what about you? You have grown twenty years older, and you're working yourself to death" (EN 206). Mary Lou had "left home a beautiful woman, full of hope," but within only one year she has become "broken in health and mind" (EN 205).

It is only when the family finally escapes from Harlem and returns to their former home in Durham that Mary Lou can recover her mental and physical strength. In direct contrast to their apartment in Harlem, the living room is now furnished with a "large settee, comfortable chairs and living room table, piano" and there is "a general air of comfort, and prosperity" (EN 220). When Jackson, a bad acquaintance from Harlem, appears and intends to destroy the newly found idyll and happiness of her family by revealing that her son is an ex-prisoner, Mary Lou has the courage to confront him, threatening him: "If you say one word, if you try to disgrace my boy and I, and send him

²⁹⁵ In 1930 the revised version received the Junior Play Award by Emerson College in Boston, MA, where Burrill had graduated as one of the first African Americans in 1904. It was published in the school's yearbook the same year. For more information see Henry L. Gates and Jennifer Burton, eds., Zora Neale Hurston, Eulalie Spence, Marita Bonner, and Others: The Prize Plays and Other One-Acts Published in Periodicals (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996).

back to the life, he has just got away from, I'll kill you" (EN 225). At the end of the play Mary Lou has regained her former power and strength and is determined to fight for the preservation of her family's recovered happiness and security.

This idea of the mother character regaining her strength in the prospect of a better future for herself and her family is also presented in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, in which the character Ruth sacrifices her own dreams and health for the benefit of her family. According to the stage directions Ruth is "about thirty" (RIS 515) and

[w]e can see that she was a pretty girl, even exceptionally so, but now it is apparent that life has been little that she expected, and disappointment has already begun to hang in her face. In a few years, before thirty-five even, she will be known among her people as a "settled woman."

(RIS 515)

In her social role as wife and mother, Ruth is caught in an exhausting daily routine of housekeeping and working as a laundress in order to support her family. She is very aware of their financial shortcomings so that she continues to work although she "look[s] like [she] could fall over right here" (RIS 521) as her mother-in-law puts it. When Ruth realizes that she is pregnant, she even considers having an abortion in order not to place an additional burden on the family. Ruth's tiredness and frustration with life are only interrupted when she learns about the new home that her mother-in-law Lena has bought:

RUTH [...] Well – well! – All I can say is – if this is my time in life – *my time* – to say good-bye – (*and she builds with momentum as she starts to circle the room with an exuberant, almost tearfully happy release*) – to these God-damned cracking walls! – (*she pounds the walls*) – and these marching roaches! – (*she wipes at an imaginary army of marching roaches*) – and this cramped little closet which ain't now or never was no kitchen!... then I say it loud and good, *Hallelujah! and good-bye misery... I don't never want to see your ugly face again!* (*she laughs joyously, having practically destroyed the apartment, and flings her arms up and lets them come down happily, slowly, reflectively, over her abdomen, aware for the first time perhaps that life therein pulses with happiness and not despair*)

(RIS 538; italics and emphasis original)

Ruth reacts with enthusiasm and "jubilation" (RIS 537) to the prospect of escaping the family's run-down apartment in Chicago's Southside and moving into a new home with "a whole lot of sunlight" (RIS 538). It is in this moment that Ruth decides for her unborn

child as the gesture towards her abdomen indicates. She gains new strength and confidence to fight for the realization of her dream of having a better life in the new home. When it seems that the family has lost all its money and is not able to move into their new home, she is the only one who does not despair and promises her mother-in-law “with urgency and desperation” (RIS 550):

Lena – I’ll work... I’ll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago... I’ll strap my baby on my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to – but we got to move... We got to get out of here...

(RIS 550)

On moving day Ruth’s exhaustion and weariness are finally gone and she has regained her power and strength. When the curtain rises, her voice can be heard in a “triumphant surge, a penetrating statement of expectation”: “Oh, Lord, I don’t feel no ways tired! Children, oh, glory hallelujah!” (RIS 540) As the stage directions point out, at the end of the play the audience of *A Raisin in the Sun* can witness how Ruth is finally “coming to life” (RIS 553).

It is indeed this idea of black women coming to life that feminist playwrights Ntozake Shange and Judith Alexa Jackson focus on in their plays, encouraging their target audience of black women to find self-love and strength in themselves.

9.2.2 Self-Love and Female Solidarity

In Zora Neale Hurston’s play *Color Struck* (1925) the female heroine Emmaline so “despises her own skin that she can’t believe any one else could love it” (CS 102). Emma has internalized the racism that surrounds her to such a degree that she is not able to see her beauty and to accept herself as a black woman. It is this lack of self-love that finally even causes the death of her “mulatto” (CS 100) daughter. Although her daughter is sick and needs a doctor, Emma does not want to leave her alone with her love John, fearing that he will fall in love with her “very white” (CS 89) daughter. In the end Emma’s self-doubt makes her lose both her love and her daughter.

Aiming to encourage black women such as Emma to regain their self-love and to break with a false female self-understanding, black feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s challenged traditional representations and understandings of black women. For many

black American female artists, theater was an important means of making women heard, breaking with given stereotypes and provoking a new understanding of black womanhood. Contemporary playwrights such as Ntozake Shange “behave[d] like explorers, sending back maps for their audience of apparent but uncharted territories”²⁹⁶ of womanhood and women’s place in society.

With the invention of the so-called choreopoem of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) Shange created a participatory, cathartic, and therapeutic theater for a traumatized black female identity that aims to influence the female target audience’s self-understanding by enacting and re-living a black female process of liberation, healing, and rebirth on stage. As the title already indicates, *for colored girls* is a performative ritual written for the female members of the audience, aiming to support their development from ‘girls’ into ‘ladies’ by showing them how to deal with the “metaphysical dilemma” of “bein a woman & bein colored” (FCG 45). The play is written by a woman for women about women that celebrate the particularity of the female body in order to re-define and to re-evaluate black womanhood as a source of strength and power. Functioning as a testimonial ritual, in which the archetypes presented on stage re-live different elements of a collective female memory,²⁹⁷ the choreopoem imitates a kind of mother-daughter-relationship in which the ‘mothers’ on stage aim to prepare their ‘daughters’ in the audience for unique female experiences, including the experience of motherhood.

The dramatic climax of the play is reached in the next to last poem entitled “a nite with beau willie brown” that focuses on crystal, a mother of two, who has to witness her two children kwame and naomi being killed by their own father beau willie.²⁹⁸ It is the longest poem in the play and it is the only one in which there are individual characters with names rather than anonymous archetypes of female experiences, indicating the importance of motherhood in the construction of black female identity. The poem is spoken by the lady in red who narrates that after the Vietnam War crystal’s lover beau

²⁹⁶ Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1990): 2.

²⁹⁷ For a detailed analysis see chapter 7: “Dramaturgy of Time: Re-Lived Gender Memories in Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls*.”

²⁹⁸ The lack of capitalization in the characters’ names is original and part of the new orthography that Shange introduces in her play. For a detailed discussion of language in *for colored girls* see chapter 8: “African-American Language Identity on Stage.”

willie brown “came home crazy as hell” (FCG 55), suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and being unable to reintegrate into society. Having become a drug and alcohol addict, beau willie started to abuse crystal and to beat her up. When she told him that she was pregnant with their second child, “beau most beat / her to death” and “she still gotta scar / under her right tit where he cut her up” (FCG 56). In order to protect her children, crystal “got a court order saying beau willie brown had no access / to his children / if he showed up his face he waz subject / to arrest” (FCG 56). beau willie however disregarded the verdict, broke into her apartment, and tried to force crystal to marry him by threatening to kill their children. He “kicked the screen outta the window / & held the kids offa the sill” (FCG 59) from the fifth story, urging crystal to tell everybody who was witnessing the scene that she would accept his proposal. In order to support this dramatic moment, there is a brief moment of silence in the performance indicated by a blank line in the dramatic text before the lady in red speaks the final lines, in which the perspective suddenly shifts to the “I” of the first person singular:

i stood by beau in the window / with naomi reaching
for me /& kwame screamin mommy mommy from the fifth
story / but i cd only whisper / & he dropped em

(FCG 60)

According to the lady in red, the reason why the catastrophe could happen was that she “waz missin something” (FCG 60), namely “a layin on of hands” (FCG 62), the ritual with which the performance of *for colored girls* ends and that aims to release “the holiness of [herself]” (FCG 62). At the end of the play each of the seven female archetypes starts to repeat the lines “i found god in myself & i loved her” (FCG 63), culminating in a choral “song of joy” until “the ladies enter into a closed tight circle” (FCG 64) that symbolizes female solidarity. This feeling of togetherness is supposed to initiate a process of healing for a damaged female self-understanding that made crystal, “who had known so lil” (FCG 59), not stop beau willie from killing her self and her children. The ending enacts the strength that stems from female solidarity and a sense of togetherness and seems to suggest that, if crystal had found and loved “god in herself” before, her children would be still alive.

This focus on a woman's self-worth and self-love in the representation of motherhood is also evident in Judith Alexa Jackson's play *WOMBmanWARs* (1992) in which the mother character Sapphire has to learn to love her self before she can love her daughter Danisha. Influenced by the feeling of having to react to "the twenty-one or so odd hours of primetime woman-bashing"²⁹⁹ of the Anita Hill-Thomas Clarence court hearings from 1991, Jackson combines a medial re-enactment of the hearings with the presentation of the fictional family life of Sapphire, her husband Danny, and their daughter Danisha. For Jackson, the Hill-Thomas hearings "demonstrated the gender socialization that all of our spirits suffer from."³⁰⁰ Based on the premise "that we all have some woman in us and we all have some man in us," Jackson read the event as a form of "self-bashing" that revealed the cultural and social (self-)understanding of black women in which "sexism and racism [had] become interchangeable."³⁰¹ Alluding to the title of her play, Jackson explained:

I wanted to demonstrate that there are wars that go on within women. Our wars start in our wombs. All women have wombs, even as fetuses. We are inside the womb with our own womb. *WOMBmanWARs* are wars that women have with themselves in just trying to be whole in this world.³⁰²

By pointing to the importance of the womb as the basis of female identity construction, Jackson presents motherhood as an integral element of the definition of womanhood and female self-understanding. Accordingly, it is her social role as a mother to a girl child that challenges and gradually changes the character Sapphire's self-understanding in Jackson's play. Like her husband Danny, Sapphire would have preferred a boy child, as she admits to "one female audience member as if they were old friends" (WMW 171):

You see the kids around? Well, when you've got girls... you have to worry.
So much going on nowadays.
People snatching kids off the street. Bodies mangled in ditches. ... Girl ...

²⁹⁹ Judith Alexa Jackson, "WOMBmanWARs (1992)," Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women, ed. Sydné Mahone (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994): 147. For an interesting reading of Jackson's play as a "signifyin(g) performance" see Beatrix Taumann, "Strange Orphans": Contemporary African American Women Playwrights (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999): 260-270.

³⁰⁰ Jackson, "WOMBmanWARs (1992)": 147.

³⁰¹ Jackson, "WOMBmanWARs (1992)": 147.

³⁰² Jackson, "WOMBmanWARs (1992)": 147. Italics original.

can't get a minute's peace... You must count your blessings every day that you've got a boy child. It's a man's world.

(WMW 171)

According to Sapphire, girl children need extraordinary protection in “a man's world,” so that she is convinced that “[w]omen don't want girl children no more than men do” (WMW 171, 172). She adds: “I know it sounds like I don't love Danisha. Probably sounds like I don't love myself, I do love Danisha... I do love my child” (WMW 172). However, even if Sapphire loves Danisha, she is caught in a false understanding of womanhood that leaves “half of [her daughter] in dreamtime” so that she “can't see [her] whole” (WMW 170) as the Anima/Animus character, the “fetus/spirit child” (WMW 151) that Danisha developed from, points out.

Sapphire is only made aware of her daughter's beauty and strength when Danisha is found fighting with her playmate Jerome, who wanted “to look up [her] dress” (WMW 180) against her will. While Sapphire's husband condemns Danisha's reaction because “[he] hate[s] to see little girls fight” (WMW 181), Sapphire realizes that her daughter “was defending herself” (WMW 180) against sexual harassment, just like Anita Hill with whom Sapphire had sympathized before. In the next and last scene in which Sapphire appears on stage she enters her daughter's room, sits on the edge of her bed, and talks “to [her] as much as [her]self” (WMW 181) about how her perception of her daughter has changed. Watching the 1982 drama *Sophie's Choice* in which the protagonist has to choose whether her daughter or her son should live and be spared from death in Auschwitz, Sapphire finally realizes that her thinking about womanhood was caught in “a man's world” and she tells her daughter:

I saw Sophie standing there, holding both of her children close... trying to choose who would be cremated. How could she choose? How could any mother choose? I saw her mind working. He might be a warrior. He might change the world. It was a man's world to change. I knew her choice before she ever opened her mouth. I would have made the same choice. Death for the girl.

And that's when it hit me Danisha. I have never chosen you. I have never chosen life for you.

(WMW 181-182)

In contrast to the previous scene in which Sapphire addresses a female audience member when talking about her preference of a boy child, she now addresses Danisha directly, which indicates the new attention that she pays to her girl child and to her own womanhood. She explains that when Danisha was born, she “actually cried” because she did not want to have the responsibility to raise a girl:

My heart knew it would be my job to break you. To break your spirit before you were grown and some stranger came along and did it. I had to do what my mother did to me and her mother to her. To protect you from your dreams.

But no more, my darling, precious daughter. I don't know how. I don't even know why. I only know today is the last day. The last day I stand back and watch your spirit cry.

(WMW 182)

At the end of the play Sapphire finally realizes that it is her duty to strengthen her daughter's spirit and self-confidence in order to prepare her for life. Referring to this scene in her play, playwright Jackson once pointed out that “[i]t's very important to teach children, and not just teach them how to read, write and do arithmetic, but how to believe in themselves.”³⁰³ She explained that she and all black women must continue what their mothers' generation of “subliminal feminists”³⁰⁴ had started when they “stopped breaking the spirit” of their daughters and, thus, paved the way for a subsequent generation of “overt feminists”³⁰⁵ such as Jackson, who aims to foster a new and positive self-understanding of black women with her art. Sapphire's promise “I choose you. I choose you” (WMW 182) at the end of *WOMBmanWARs* is not only the promise to choose her daughter, but it is also the promise to choose her self. She finally realizes the importance of what the Anima/Animus explained earlier: “Centuries went by as the world awaited the coming of a female savior. And let me tell you now. No one's coming. Save your Self” (WMW 159). With Sapphire, Jackson portrays the development of a black woman who finds what she calls “the light,” i.e. “the knowledge of your self,”³⁰⁶ and who becomes aware of her responsibility to teach her daughter how to find this light, too.

³⁰³ Jackson, “WOMBmanWARs (1992)”: 149.

³⁰⁴ Jackson, “WOMBmanWARs (1992)”: 148.

³⁰⁵ Jackson, “WOMBmanWARs (1992)”: 149.

³⁰⁶ Jackson, “WOMBmanWARs (1992)”: 149.

Interestingly enough, Sapphire's husband Danny does not undergo a similar development in the course of the play. His absence on stage in the last scene of the play indicates that he has not gained a similar knowledge or a similar level of maturity. This difference between the male and the female characters on stage is indeed introduced in several other plays considered here.

9.3 Male Maturity, or: "I couldn't see until you came, baby"

Although all of the plays considered here portray male characters on stage or at least include references to men in the dramatic dialogues, there are only few male characters that act as main characters with a direct influence on the plot development.³⁰⁷ The stage is clearly dominated by a focus on the female characters, while the male characters such as Bill in Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) serve as a foil for comparison in that they lack a certain level of knowledge and maturity that the female characters already have.³⁰⁸

In Childress's play the heroine Tommy is presented as a teacher who causes the arrogant and self-centered character Bill to change his perception of "the black people" (WIW 753) and of blackness in general. Although Tommy, whose proper name is "Tomorrow Marie" (WIW 747), lacks Bill's middle-class education, she challenges his stereotypical understanding of black womanhood and his arrogant feeling of superiority that reveals itself in race and class prejudice against black working class Americans. When Tommy enters his apartment in "sneakers and bobby sox," "dressed in a mismatched skirt and sweater" (WIW 741) with a wig on her head and a brown paper sack in her hands, Bill thinks that he has finally found one of the "messed-up chicks" (WIW 741), the "worst gal in town" (WIW 752), that he wants to paint in his triptych entitled "Wine in the Wilderness" in between paintings of "Black girlhood" (WIW 740) and of "Mother Africa, regal, black womanhood in her noblest form" (WIW 740). For Bill, Tommy fits his conception of the black American woman of his time as the "lost woman" and the "dumb chick that's had her behind kicked until it's numb" (WIW 740). Being caught up in his imagined version of what a black woman is like, Bill disregards Tommy's

³⁰⁷ There is Leroy in *For Unborn Children*, Bill in *Wine in the Wilderness*, Thomas Clarence and Danny in *WOMBmanWARs*, Henry in *Environment*, and Walter Lee in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

³⁰⁸ The analyses in this section overlap with the analyses of family memory as an agent of *peripeteia* in chapter 6, but focus on the gender differences introduced in this context.

explanations that she has lost all her belongings in the riot and that this is not her usual clothing. Displaying his higher education, he repeatedly makes fun of Tommy's appearance, her name, and her lack of education.

In the course of the play, however, Bill is forced to reconsider his perception of Tommy and her working-class background. Tommy unmasks Bill as superficial and biased, as a black American who hypocritically does not believe in the blackness and brotherhood that he preaches. She argues that although Bill and his friends talk about "'our' history" and a feeling of "we-ness," they "ain't got no use for none-a us" (WIW 753) who represent "'the' masses" on the street (WIW 753; emphasis original). Tommy knows that she lacks education, but she also knows that this is no reason to be treated badly: "There's something inside-a me that says I ain' suppose to let *nobody* play me cheap. Don't care how much they know!" (WIW 753; emphasis original) Listening to Tommy saying "You hate us, that's what! *You hate black me!*" (WIW 753; emphasis original), Bill is "stung to the heart, confused and saddened by the half truth which applies to himself" (WIW 753) as the stage directions point out. It is this revelation of "the half truth" that finally initiates a process of re-thinking and learning in Bill.

At the end of the play Bill decides to re-paint his triptych and replaces the canvases on "black girlhood" and the "African queen" with paintings of Tommy and his friends Oldtimer, Cynthia, and Sonny-Man, "the real beautiful people" (WIW 755), as he says, who represent the creation of "blackness through history."³⁰⁹ The painting of Tommy is placed between a canvas showing Cynthia and Sonny-Man, "Young Man and Woman, workin' together to do our thing" (WIW 755), and a painting of his friend Oldtimer, "the guy who was here before there were scholarships and grants and stuff like that, the guy they kept outta the schools, the man the factories wouldn't hire, the union wouldn't let him join... [sic]" (WIW 755). The center canvas of the triptych presents Tommy who "belong[s] up there in the center, 'Wine In The Wilderness'" (WIW 755). At the end of the play Bill recognizes Tommy's beauty and strength and reconsiders his ideas about who constitutes "the Afro-American" and "the black people" (WIW 753). Knowing that it was Tommy who ended the "nightmare" (WIW 755) that he was in, Bill tells her: "I was

³⁰⁹ Joe E. Cranshaw, "African Queens and Messed-up Chicks," Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Lang, 2007): 74.

painting in the dark, all head and no heart. I couldn't see until you came, baby" (WIW 755).

This representation of a male process of learning and maturing initiated by the female characters on stage is also found in other plays by African-American female playwrights considered here. In Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* it is the female elder Lena who plays a vital role in the development of her son Walter Lee. By reminding him of the fact that he is part of a transgenerational collective for which he carries responsibility, Lena triggers a process of learning and maturing in her son. Against his former intention, Walter Lee finally rejects the bribe money that he is offered in return for not moving into their new home in an all-white neighborhood. He explains that he and his family "are very proud people" who "make[] the sixth generation [...] in this country" (RIS 553) and that they have decided to move into their new home "because my father – my father – he earned it" (RIS 553), as he says. While Walter Lee is speaking, Lena "has her eyes closed and is rocking back and forth as though she were in church, with her head nodding the amen yes" (RIS 553). For her, Walter Lee's action in this scene signals a final passage "into his manhood" and his wife Ruth agrees:

MAMA (*quietly, woman to woman*) He finally come into his manhood today, didn't he? Kind of like a rainbow after the rain...

RUTH (*biting her lip lest her own pride explode in front of MAMA*) Yes, Lena.

(RIS 554; italics original)

At the end of the play Walter Lee has regained his dignity and has earned himself the position as head of the family "like [he] supposed to be" (RIS 540), enjoying the respect and the pride of the other family members, but he needed Lena to teach him what it means to be a 'man' in the Younger family.

Another play in which the female elder initiates a process of learning and maturing in the male character in order to make him learn what the female characters already know is Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children* (1926). Drawing on the contemporary popular stereotype of the tragic mulatto,³¹⁰ the play introduces the female elder Grandma

³¹⁰ Interestingly enough, the play reverses the stereotypical coupling of white man and black woman and introduces a male mulatto, although the female version of the "tragic mulatta" was a much more popular image at the late 19th and early 20th century. For further information on the mulatto image in literature see for example Janet Sims-Wood, *The Black Female: Mammy, Jemima, Sapphire, and Other Images* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

Carlson as the guardian of family memory and the preserver of culture, whose task it is to uphold the past in the present in order to protect her grandson Leroy, his unborn offspring, and the black race in general from miscegenation. When Leroy refuses to refrain from his love to Selma, “a young white girl” (FUC 185), insisting on his personal right to happiness irrespective of the fact that they “don’t belong to the same race” (FUC 186), Grandma Carlson teaches him that his love is not only a personal, but rather a political issue that will eventually affect “every member of the Negro race”:

GRANDMA CARLSON (*sadly*) We have the right to be happy, child, only when our happiness doesn’t hurt anybody else; and when a colored man marries a white woman, he hurts every member of the Negro race!

LEROY (*perplexed*) But, – I don’t understand; – how?

GRANDMA CARLSON He adds another link to the chain that binds them; before we can gain that perfect Freedom to which we have every right, we’ve got to prove that we’re better than they! And we can’t do it when our men place white women above their own!

(FUC 186; italics original)

By pointing to Leroy’s responsibility towards the black people, Grandma Carlson shares the opinion of Leroy’s sister Marion who argues that Leroy has “to conquer [his love] for the sake of his race” (FUC 186). Explaining that “intermarriage doesn’t hurt them as much as it does us” (FUC 186), Marion angrily asks: “What is to become of us when our own men throw us down?” (FUC 186) When Leroy asks his grandmother to understand that he loves Selma “[n]ot because she’s white, but just for herself alone” (FUC 186), Grandma Carlson also reminds him of his responsibility as a black father, begging him to “[t]hink of the unborn children that [he] sin[s] against by marrying her” (FUC 186-187). Leroy finally changes his mind and does not “make the same mistake [his] father did” (FUC 187) when Grandma Carlson explains that “a white woman cannot mother a Negro baby” (FUC 187). She proves her argument by revealing the long-kept family secret that Leroy’s mother was a white mother who “hated” her children and “could never stand the sight” of them “because [they] weren’t white” (FUC 187). After a while Selma will “long for her own race,” because “the call of her blood will be stronger than her love for you” (FUC 186), as she tells Leroy. Grandma Carlson predicts that unlike herself “who was there to care for” (FUC 187) her grandchildren, a white woman such as Selma will finally turn her children down, just as Leroy’s mother had done with her children before.

9.4 Conclusion

In his study on *Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora*, Michael Hanchard introduces the notion of “racial” or “racialized time” in order to understand “[h]ow and in what ways [...] African-descended people [have] been modern subjects.”³¹¹ He argues that with the beginning of slavery Western and Afro-Modernity have become disjunctive temporalities in a politics of racial difference that is grounded in “the inequalities of temporality that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups.”³¹² The differences between these groups “produce unequal temporal access to institutions, goods, services, resources, power, and knowledge, which members of both groups recognize” so that “racial time has operated as a structural effect on the politics of racial difference.”³¹³

It is this perception and experience of racial time that informs the en-gendering of time and especially the representation of black female temporality in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. The black female characters in the plays are all introduced as either actual or potential mothers whose experience of motherhood is strongly impacted by the unequal social and political situation that surrounds them. In the plays the focus is clearly set on the particularity of black motherhood whereby personal and political issues intermingle, demonstrating the inextricable link between gender and race.

As part of a biological cycle, the experience of black motherhood represents a transgenerational link between the different female family members presented on stage and is passed on in a maternal lineage from mother to daughter, from one female generation to the next. Motherhood and mothering are introduced as unifying female experiences such that Helene Keyssar speaks about a “hybrid consciousness” in this context. In her discussion of the representation of black women in Grimké’s *Rachel*, Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Shange’s *for colored girls* Keyssar argues that “it is possible in many circumstances to ignore, unify, or diminish the multiple points of view

³¹¹ Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): 272.

³¹² Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora”: 280.

³¹³ Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora”: 280-281.

inherent in being a black woman, but a hybrid consciousness reemerges insistently for each of these characters in the presence of the possibility or actuality of motherhood.”³¹⁴ The self-understanding of Rachel, Ruth, crystal, and of all the other mother characters introduced in the plays is defined by their roles as caring mothers while their self-understanding as women is torn between the “pleasure in reproducing and loving children” and their “resistance to sustaining or reproducing the pain of being born black in America.”³¹⁵ Aiming to create what bell hooks refers to as a “homeplace,”³¹⁶ the women characters all struggle with their responsibility to protect both themselves and their children against racism and sexism.

The extraordinary tensions that the black female characters have to deal with are visually represented in their premature ageing, introducing the notion of becoming ‘old by suffering’ as a recurring topos in the plays. In contrast to the male characters and the white female characters that do not experience a similar acceleration of time, the black female characters are presented as feeling and appearing older than they really are. Their bodies are used as the sites upon which the playwrights explore the effects of racism and racial prejudice on nurturing black mothers who give all for their children.

The particularity of African-American female identity reveals itself in the focus on the task of mothering in a very specific cultural, social, and political background, which also includes the female characters’ responsibility for initiating of a process of learning and maturing in the male characters on stage. In the plays male temporality is created in opposition to female temporality in that the male characters lack a certain level of knowledge and maturity that the female characters already have. “Men’s time” is presented as a ‘not yet’ that the male characters have to compensate for in the course of the plays. Akin to Kristeva’s differentiation between women’s and men’s time, female temporality in the plays is characterized by a focus on “cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature,”³¹⁷ while male

³¹⁴ Helene Keyssar, "Rites and Responsibilities: The Drama of Black American Women," *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights*, ed. Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 233.

³¹⁵ Keyssar, "Rites and Responsibilities: The Drama of Black American Women": 233.

³¹⁶ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990): 41-49.

³¹⁷ Kristeva, "Women's Time": 191.

temporality signifies a temporality of “departure, progression and arrival”³¹⁸ in that the male characters’ development represents a liminal phase of transition “into manhood” (RIS 554). At the end of the plays, the male characters have gained full inclusion into the female-dominated social collective we-groups presented on stage.

By introducing a male and a female temporality on stage and by pointing to the close relationship between issues of race and gender, the plays enact an en-gendering of time that also informs the general representation of African-American identity on stage. Both the focus on black motherhood as a transgenerational link and the representation of male maturity on stage thus serve the articulation of a culturalization of time in that they point to the female characters’ responsibility for preserving and stabilizing a continuum of time that links the past to the present and the future.

³¹⁸ Kristeva, “Women's Time”: 192.

10. Theater of the Present: Writing to the Moment and to the Audience

In 1740 Samuel Richardson published his novel *Pamela, Or Virtue Rewarded* that consists of a series of letters in which Pamela, a virtuous servant-maid, tells her parents about life in her master's house. In his work Richardson combined the form of the epistolary novel with the new technique of 'writing-to-the-moment,' giving a minutely particular account of Pamela's thoughts, actions, fears, and emotions. The heroine's thoughts are formed and recorded in ink almost simultaneously with her actions, allowing the reader to follow them as they evolve. This simultaneity between the character's action and the reader's reception of it evokes a dramatic intensity, which is usually only found in theater.

Theater is generally defined by the absence of a mediating narrator and the immediacy of the presentation of acting characters in front of an audience.³¹⁹ The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators produces the event of the performance. Every action on stage elicits a response from the spectators, which has an impact on the entire performance. Writing drama means writing for a performative now, which is created through the "self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop"³²⁰ between the stage and the auditorium at the moment of performance. In this sense, writing-to-the-moment in theater means 'writing-to-the-actual moment-of-performance.'

There is yet also a second meaning attached to this notion. In a literal sense the phrase 'writing-to-the-moment' also describes a historical point in time at which the dramatic text is written or produced, so that we might also rephrase it as 'writing-to-a-specific-moment-in-history.' Art is never created in a vacuum. Each writer is influenced

³¹⁹ cf. Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³²⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Translated by Saskya Iris Jain. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008): 38.

by the particular social, political, and historical background which surrounds her and which she shares with her contemporary audience. Current discourses, events, conflicts, and developments constitute a real historical present which influences a playwright's work and reveals itself in the dramatic text and its "external communication system,"³²¹ thereby informing the creation of social reality in and through theater.

In order to illustrate how theater engages in the cultural construction of social reality, the following analysis will deal with the relation between fictional time and historical time in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. It will be shown that based on the principle of contemporaneity, i.e. on the approximation of the plots' fictional present and the contemporary historical present of the plays' production, the black female playwrights produce a 'Theater of the Present' that presupposes a specific cultural, social, and historical background of knowledge, which results in interesting effects of inclusion and exclusion in the audience.

10.1 The Present in the Stage Directions

A dramatic text generally consists of two interdependent layers of text, which are often distinguished typographically. The spoken dialogue between the characters on stage comprises the primary text. The secondary text layer is not verbally reproduced on stage. It includes the title of the play, dedications and prefaces, the identification of the individual speakers, the announcements of acts and scenes, the dramatic personae, and also the stage-directions, which influence the play's realization on stage. The stage directions usually give instructions concerning the actor's behavior on stage as well as concerning the visual and acoustic context of his or her performance. Whereas the stage-enactment of the instructions may vary from one director to the other, from one actor to the other, and from one performance to the other, the stage directions as such give information about how the playwright anticipated the performance in his or her mind during the writing process. It is the author's imagination and her vision of a future performance that are revealed in the stage directions, while the length and the quality of the stage directions vary depending on the playwright's intention and theatrical conventions.

³²¹ Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*: 246.

From the mid-1910s through the 1920s several lynching plays were written by African-American playwrights such as Angelina Weld Grimké who aimed to evoke social change through the presentation of “naturalistic settings, vernacular language, realistic characters, and linear causality in their plots to depict the conflicts over motherhood faced by African-American women of their era.”³²² In a commentary on her play *Rachel* (1916) Grimké explained that “the purpose was to show how a refined, sensitive, highly-strung girl, a dreamer and an idealist, the strongest instinct in whose nature is a love for children and a desire some day to be a mother herself – how this girl would react to this force.”³²³ Influenced by naturalistic writers who believed in the determining role of the environment on the human being,³²⁴ Grimké placed special emphasis on the stage design. The stage directions at the beginning of the dramatic text give detailed information about the setting of the plot in Mrs. Loving’s apartment in a “northern city.”³²⁵ Besides the description of the curtains, paintings, bookcases, clocks, and other pieces of furniture in Mrs. Loving’s living room, they also include detailed information about when the action takes place. According to the stage directions, the play is set on “October 16th” in the “first decade of the Twentieth Century.”³²⁶ By setting the plot at the time of the play’s first production, Grimké emphasizes the similarity between the characters’ fictional world on stage and the real contemporary historical situation at the beginning of the 20th century.

³²² Patricia R. Schroeder, *The Feminist Possibilities of Dramatic Realism* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996): 112. For a collection of early lynching plays see Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens, eds., *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

³²³ Angelina Weld Grimké, “‘Rachel’: The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author,” *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké: The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, ed. Carolivia Herron (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 413-414.

³²⁴ According to Robert J. Fehrenbach, Grimké admitted four years after the play’s first production in 1916 “to having read a good deal of Ibsen as well as two naturalistic dramatists: Strindberg and Hauptmann” (quoted in: Robert J. Fehrenbach, “An Early Twentieth-Century Problem Play of Life in Black America: Angelina Grimké’s *Rachel* (1916),” *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, eds. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée N. McLaughlin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989): 95-96.)

³²⁵ This information is included in the play’s original publication in Boston by the Cornhill Company in 1920. This version is reprinted in Angelina Weld Grimké and Carolivia Herron, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³²⁶ Grimké and Herron, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*.

This approximation of the fictional present and the historical present can also be found in the other 20th-century plays of interest here. The stage directions in Mary Burrill's play *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919), for example, read: "The action passes in a small country town in the South in our own day" (TTSD 182). In 1925 Zora Neale Hurston published her play *Color Struck*, which is set in a "Southern City" "[t]wenty years ago and present" (CS 89). Similarly, in Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children*, which won third prize in a magazine contest in 1926, "[t]he time is the present" (FUC 185). Mercedes Gilbert's play *Environment* begins "at present" at "[a]round 9 p.m." and ends "two years later, early afternoon" (EN 203-204). The action of *A Raisin in the Sun*, written by Lorraine Hansberry and first presented at New York's Ethel Barrymore Theater in 1959, is "set in Chicago's Southside, sometime between World War II and the present" (RIS 514). Finally, according to the stage directions the time in Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* is "the summer of 1964" (WIW 738), five years before the play's first production in 1969.

In spite of the differences concerning the authors, topics, and the time of their creation, these plays all share the idea of approximating the fictional time of the plot and the real historical background of the plays' first production and/or publication. The phrase "the present" is used to locate the situation of the plot in relation to the reference time of the play's premiere production. By juxtaposing the fictional "speaker-now"³²⁷ with the historical 'audience-now,' the playwrights do not write about the past or the future, but about the contemporary historical present, thereby turning the audience into contemporaries of the characters.

10.2 References to Social History and Political Landmarks

As contemporaries, the characters and the audience share the same historical background. Both groups are familiar with current social and political events and discourses that are part of collective knowledge at a particular moment in history. In order to retrieve this collective knowledge during the performance, the playwrights include hints and

³²⁷ This terminology is taken from Suzanne Fleischmann, *Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990): 125. The term 'audience-now' is not included in Fleischmann's study as she does not focus on dramatic texts. For the present analysis the extension of her terminology, however, proves to be quite useful.

references in their dramatic texts in order to remind the audience of the specific contemporary issues invoked.

Between the late 1910s and the 1930s the reference to birth control in dramatic speech ensured that the audience was reminded of the current discussion on women's reproductive rights which drew on issues of demography, eugenics, public health, theology, and racism to support or oppose contraception.³²⁸ Many contemporary African-American female authors and playwrights such as Angelina Weld Grimké and Mary Burrill picked up the question of birth control in their work and challenged black women's moral obligations towards future generations. In Grimké's play *Rachel* the female protagonist abandons her desire to become a mother and swears to God "that no child of [hers] shall ever lie upon [her] breast, for [she] will not have it rise up, in the terrible days that are to be – [...]" (RA 157). Similarly, Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness*, first published in a special issue of the Birth Control Review on "The Negroes' Need For Birth Control, As Seen By Themselves,"³²⁹ deals with the issue of birth control, focusing on the interconnection between racial injustice and black women's fertility rates. When Malinda Jasper, a worn-out black mother, whose health severely suffers from frequent childbearing, desperately asks "But whut kin Ah do – de chillern *come!*" (TTSD 185; emphasis original), the white nurse who visits her answers: "Malinda, when I took my oath as nurse, I swore to abide by the laws of the State, and the law forbids my telling you what you have a right to know!" (TTSD 185)

Similarly, playwright Ntozake Shange also draws on contemporary political discourses when she refers to the Vietnam War in her choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, locating the plot within a particular historical situation in the 1970s. First produced on Broadway one year after the end of the war in 1976, Shange's play portrays the character beau billie brown³³⁰ as a Vietnam War veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. His girlfriend crystal recalls that

³²⁸ cf. Jamie Hart, "Who Should Have the Children? Discussions of Birth Control among African-American Intellectuals, 1920-1939," *The Journal of Negro History* 79.1 (1994).

³²⁹ Mary Burrill, "They That Sit in Darkness: A One-Act Play of Negro Life.," *The Birth Control Review: Dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood. The New Emancipation: The Negroes' Need For Birth Control, As Seen By Themselves* 1919.

³³⁰ The lack of capitalization in the characters' names is original and part of the new orthography that Shange introduces in her play. For more information see chapter 8 "African-American Language Identity on Stage."

beau willie “came home crazy as hell” (FCG 55) but he insisted that “there waznt nothin wrong with him / there waznt nothin wrong” (FCG 55). Having a psychotic breakdown, he mistakes “the spotlights in the alleyways” for search lights in Vietnam and hides “under the covers,” waiting “for an all clear or till he cd hear traffic again” (FCG 55). His attempts to readjust to society fail in spite of “remedial classes” (FCG 56) and he becomes a drug-addict and a violent drunkard who finally even kills their two children by dropping them from the window of their fifth floor apartment. In *for colored girls*, the tragedy of beau willie brown and his family is presented as inseparable from America’s engagement in war in Vietnam. At the end beau willie’s children “have joined the many Vietnamese children as innocent victims of war,”³³¹ as Marilyn Elkins puts it.

Another example of how the plays considered here rely on the introduction of a specific contemporary historical context is Childress’s play *Wine in the Wilderness* in which the audience is assumed to be familiar with the so-called Harlem Race Riot, which forms the background of the action presented on stage. According to the stage directions the action is set in the “night of a riot” in the “summer of 1964” in “Harlem, New York City, New York, U.S.A.” (WIW 753), alluding to an especially severe confrontation between white and black Americans following the killing of fifteen-year-old James Powell by Police Lt. Thomas G. Gilligan. The violent protest began in the night of July 18 in Harlem and spread to the Bedford-Stuyvesant community in Brooklyn. It lasted six days and involved about 8,000 people. According to Shatema A. Threadcraft, this riot marked the beginning of “an era of urban unrest that would continue throughout the decade”³³² and it became “the symbol of blacks fighting for their right to be let in.”³³³ In *Wine in the Wilderness* the riot takes place off-stage and forms the acoustic background of the action with “[n]oise and screaming [...] in the distance, ... running feet, voices shouting over loudspeakers” (WIW 738) and even “the whine of a bullet” (WIW 738) is heard. “This riot blew my life,” the female heroine Tommy says: “All I got is gone like it never was” (WIW 742). For a contemporary audience in 1969, Childress’s play triggers

³³¹ Marilyn Elkins, ““Sicker Than a Rabid Dog”: African American Women Playwrights Look at War,” *Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage*, ed. Carol P. Marsh-Lockett (New York: Garland Pub., 1999): 64.

³³² Shatema A. Threadcraft, “Harlem Race Riot,” *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots*, Vol. 1, A-M (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007): 478.

³³³ Threadcraft, “Harlem Race Riot”: 478.

collective memories of a quite recent past, probably reminding them of their own experiences of this particular event in African-American history.

This aim of reminding the audience of a recent social or political event is most explicitly stated in Judith Alexa Jackson's play *WOMBmanWARs*. First produced in 1992, the play draws on the 1991 court case of Anita Hill versus US Supreme Court Justice Senator Clarence Thomas, the second African-American to serve at the Court. Thomas's confirmation hearings became a national issue after Hill, a former subordinate, had accused him of sexual harassment. Jackson's play opens with a projection of "the actual video footage" (WMW 154) of portions of the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings and "a collage of slides depicting the hearings – news stories, in media or print, of Judge Clarence Thomas, his wife, Anita Hill, President Bush and the Senate Judiciary Committee – while prerecorded voices read the transcript below" (WMW 154). As the stage directions point out: "The objective here is to remind the audience through visual and audio means of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee's insensitive handling of the harassment charge brought against the Supreme Court nominee" (WMW 154). The idea of "remind[ing] the audience" implies that the audience is already familiar with the issue, so that their memories need only be refreshed by visual and audible stimuli.

Jackson expects her audience to be aware of this controversial issue, so that she does not need to explain who the people on the projection actually are. For a contemporary audience, names such as President Bush, Anita Hill, and Clarence Thomas, as well as Desiree Washington and Mike Tyson, whose court case in 1991 is also dealt with in the play, need not be further explained. Jackson even asks for "[s]lides of Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, Dan Rather and other national and local news personalities" (WMW 175), who might not be known by audiences outside the United States. Also, it requires a certain background of knowledge to decipher the following news item presented by a reporter on stage as referring to the 1991 Rodney King beatings: "l.a.p.d. caught on video beating unarmed black man. (*Reporter appeals to TV audience*) Can't we all just get along?" (WMW 176; *italics original*)³³⁴ The slides, projections, and the news bits presented by the

³³⁴ For an interesting reading on the Rodney King case as an example of bodily torture based on racism see Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be Black and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Alexander refers to the black body as an important site of memory that is transmitted from one viewer to the next via narrative structures in media such as TV broadcasts, newspapers, and pictures.

reporter are thought-provoking impulses whose meanings and contexts need to be reconstructed by the audience themselves. This implies that the play's target audience is a contemporary audience that is able to identify the verbal and acoustic signals on stage as references to contemporary American journalists and to current or very recent political issues in American and African-American history.

Like the other playwrights discussed above, Jackson simply presupposes a certain familiarity with contemporary social and political history. While Jackson chooses references to a collective knowledge about current political and social discourses and events, some female playwrights also include references to contemporary black music and musicians in order to create this effect of contemporaneity.

10.3 African-American Music and Musical References

In the formation of African-American identity black music has become an important means of cultural self-definition and self-affirmation. From spirituals and blues to jazz and rap, black music "was considered an instrument of truth, the 'purest expression' of the black reality in America; [...]"³³⁵ Playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange included black music in their theatrical work to deal with topics such as racism, sexism and the formation of African-American cultural identity. For the characters in their plays, black music not only calls forth an aesthetic pleasure, supporting the emotional atmosphere of the dramatic speech on stage; it also signifies a "coded and private language"³³⁶ that provides a "cultural matrix for an orientation in history."³³⁷

In Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) there are several scenes in which blues music is heard during the performance.³³⁸ The play is set in Chicago, one of the blues'

³³⁵ Larry Neal, "Into Nationalism, out of Parochialism," *The Theatre of Black Americans: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Errol Hill (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980): 297.

³³⁶ Margaret B. Wilkerson, "Music as Metaphor: New Plays of Black Women," *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1989): 62.

³³⁷ Wilfried Raussert, *Negotiating Temporal Differences: Blues, Jazz and Narrativity in African American Culture* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2000): 161.

³³⁸ Hansberry also includes music as a dramatic device in the telescript *The Drinking Gourd* (1959) and in her plays after *A Raisin in the Sun*. For a detailed analysis of sound and music in these writings see Deborah Jean Wood, "Plays of Lorraine Hansberry: Studies in Dramatic Form," Thesis, University Microfilms, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1985: 96-138.

geographical strongholds during the time of the play's first production.³³⁹ In an interview Hansberry once emphasized that she did not present just any black family, but "a specifically Southside Chicago"³⁴⁰ one, which is also indicated by the characters' preference for blues music. Mirroring the fact that the broadcast of blues music by radio-DJs such as Alan Freed had been common since the 1940s, the characters' radio is usually turned on in the play so that the music accompanies the action presented on stage. While Ruth and Beneatha Younger are cleaning the apartment, the radio program "is inappropriately filling the house with a rather exotic blues" (RIS 525), and Ruth is listening to "the good loud blues that is playing" (RIS 532) while ironing. On the family's moving day Walter and his wife Ruth dance to the music played on the record player, to express their happiness and "new-found exuberance" (RIS 540). When Walter is appointed the head of the family and becomes responsible for the family's savings, the gravity and emotional intensity of this moment is transported in music. He "sits looking at the money on the table as the music continues in its idiom, pulsing in the room" (RIS 540). For the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the blues is not just an acoustic expression of their feelings and emotions, but it signifies a unique African-American cultural background that they identify with. According to Walter, the saxophonist in his favorite pub "ain't but 'bout five feet tall and he's got a conked head and his eyes is [sic] always closed and he's all music...[sic]" (RIS 540). He "talks to [Walter]" (RIS 540) through his blues music that is introduced as a unique acoustic expression of black American culture and identity.

This representation of black music as a marker of African-American identity is most strikingly evident in Shange's theatrical invention of the so-called choreopoem of *for colored girls*. As the compound word derived from choreography and poetry already indicates, Shange's play strongly works with the effects of dancing and physical movement on stage. It combines dramatic speech with song, dance, and music to create a physical theater and "a total event,"³⁴¹ in which dance and music are not conceived as ornamental elements that merely enrich the aesthetic quality of the performance, but

³³⁹ For a detailed discussion of the history of the blues see for example Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) and Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking Press, 1981).

³⁴⁰ Lorraine Hansberry, "Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry," *American Theatre* 1.2 (November 1984): 5.

³⁴¹ Paul C. Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo* (New York: Grove Press, 1972): 231.

rather as the very constituents of the performance and the dramatic text. In her work Shange introduces a new style of writing and an unconventional orthography to visualize “the idea that letters dance”³⁴² and to create a musical form of language. For the female archetypes presented in the play, dance serves as a “defense mechanism”³⁴³ and a liberating “survival tool”³⁴⁴ to deal with the challenges of “bein [sic] a woman & bein colored” (FCG 45). As the lady in orange explains: “[...] i can make the music loud enuf / so there is no me but dance / & when i can dance like that / there’s nothing cd hurt me / [...]” (FCG 42-43). In the preface to her play Shange explains that dance and music enabled her to discover her own body and identity:

Knowing a woman’s mind & spirit had been allowed to me, with dance I discovered my body more intimately than I had imagined possible. With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs & backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman & as a poet.

(FCG xi)

For Shange, dance and music are “endemically black in some cultural way”³⁴⁵ and represent a distinct African-American cultural identity, which is transmitted in music on stage. In addition to references to traditional children’s songs such as “mama’s little baby likes shortnin [sic] bread” (FCG 6) and “Little Sally Walker” (FCG 6) dating back to the 19th century,³⁴⁶ *for colored girls* primarily focuses on contemporary music from the 1960s and 1970s, again approximating the temporal background on stage and the historical background of the play’s first production. Shange borrows from black musical groups such as the famous all-black R&B band The Dells and their 1968 hit “Stay in My Corner” (FCG 9) as well as from black musicians such as Willie Colon, a contemporary Puerto

³⁴² Ntozake Shange, “Interview,” Black Women Writers at Work, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983): 163.

³⁴³ Philip U. Effiong, In Search of a Model for African-American Drama: A Study of Selected Plays by Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, and Ntozake Shange (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000): 126.

³⁴⁴ Neal A. Lester and Ntozake Shange, Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays (New York: Garland Pub., 1995): 42.

³⁴⁵ Neal A. Lester, “Interview with Ntozake Shange,” Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights, eds. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996): 217-218.

³⁴⁶ Especially the song “Little Sally Walker” is included in several early anthologies of children’s songs such as William W. Newell, Games and Songs of American Children (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883).; and Alan Lomax, J. D. Elder and Bess Lomax Hawes, Brown Girl in the Ring: An Anthology of Song Games from the Eastern Caribbean (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

Rican salsa musician born in New York City in 1950. “[L]et willie colon take you out / swing your head / push your leg to the moon with me” (FCG 15) is the lady in orange’s advice to the other characters and to the audience, while his song “Che Che Cole” is played on stage. In one of the scenes the characters start to dance to the song “Dancing in the Streets.” According to the stage directions, “[t]he lady in green, the lady in blue, and the lady in yellow do the pony, the big boss line, the swim, and the nose dive. The other ladies dance in place” (FCG 7). This song was first recorded in 1964 by Martha and the Vandellas, the first and most popular all-black girl bands that was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1995. “Dancing in the Street,” which is probably the band’s best-known song, was very successful in the 1960s and 1970s and was certainly very appealing to a contemporary audience in 1976.

10.4 Conclusion

Works of art such as texts, paintings, and sculptures are generally created for eternity. Although they are produced at a special moment in history, they are not the exclusive property of a particular time or a particular generation. In a written or otherwise archived form they transcend time and are passed on from one generation to the next. In theatrical art, however, this temporal universality contrasts with the actual moment of performance. A dramatic text is spectator-oriented, so that writing a dramatic text is writing for a special moment of performance and for a special kind of audience. A dramatic text is always constitutively anchored in the specific historical and cultural background of its production, as the analysis of 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights has shown.

All of the 20th-century African-American female playwrights considered here produce what may be called a ‘Theater of the Present’ based on the principle of contemporaneity, i.e. on the approximation of the plots’ fictional present and the contemporary historical present of the plays’ productions. According to the stage directions, the plays are all set in a particular moment of “the present.” The plays tend to equate the presented temporal background on stage with the real historical background of the play’s first production, creating a kind of extrinsic simultaneity between the stage and the real world of a contemporary audience. Drawing on a direct relationship between the

fictional plot and African-American national history, the plays are very much situated in a specific cultural context and in a specific moment in time, making them transient and ephemeral to a certain extent.

By approximating the “speaker-now”³⁴⁷ and the ‘audience-now’ the plays create effects of inclusion and exclusion for the audience by presupposing a specific background of knowledge, which may not be shared by a non-contemporary audience. The plays turn the characters and the audience into contemporaries who are assumed to share a certain body of experiences including knowledge of current events and issues such as the Vietnam War, the 1964 Harlem Race Riot, and the Anita Hill-Thomas Clarence affair in 1991. References to and borrowings from African-American social history, politics, as well as popular black music in dramatic speech ensure that the dramatic situation is constituted in the speech-act, sending out a number of implicit signals that are supposed to make the historical situation more concrete to the audience. The playwrights do not feel obliged to explain these references to contemporary contexts; they expect their audiences to be familiar with current events, developments, and discourses in African-American history, so that they are able to decipher the specific names and dates mentioned in the speech-acts. Based on the principle of contemporaneity, the dramatic approximation of fictional time and historical time creates a closed community of knowledge, a temporary *communitas*,³⁴⁸ between the playwright, the characters, and the target audience who is familiar with the specific social, political, and cultural background referred to on stage. As playwright Shange points out: “I have an overwhelming amount of material I could footnote if I wanted to. I could make my work very official and European and say the ‘Del Vikings’ were a group of singers... the ‘Shorrells’ were a group...but why should I. I’m not interested in doing an *annotated Shange*.”³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Fleischmann, *Tense and Narrativity: From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction*: 125.

³⁴⁸ Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Pub., 1982): 47.

³⁴⁹ Shange, “Interview”: 163. Italics original.

11. Conclusion: Re-Thinking the African-American Literary Canon

During my research stay at Yale University, USA, in 2010, I attended a class taught by renowned poet and scholar Elizabeth Alexander that was entitled “Rethinking the African-American Literary Canon.” According to the course description, the aim was “to consider, discuss, and revise some of the touchstones of the African-American canon,” re-reading works considered canonical “with fresh eyes.” Including authors from 18th-century Phillis Wheatley to writer-activist James Baldwin and Nobel Prize-winning Toni Morrison, the selected text corpus mainly consisted of novels, short stories, essays, and poems. The syllabus included a total of eighteen works, out of which only Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, August Wilson’s *Fences* and Joe Turner’s *Come and Gone* were dramatic texts. For a term project, the students were asked to “present a work not on the syllabus and argue for its necessity to African-American literary study.” In this sense, the present study has aimed to show that a re-thinking of the African-American literary canon should also include a re-assessment of 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights. The lack of research on many of the plays and playwrights considered here suggests that a large number of works are still waiting to be saved from obscurity.

Drawing on major theories of cultural and memory studies, the analysis has argued for the cultural significance of 20th-century African-American female playwrights and their dramatic work by focusing on the cultural performance of time and memory and its influence on the representation and construction of African-American identity on stage. It has shown that the black American characters’ self-understanding and self-creation are embedded within a cultural performance of a remembered time that is defined in and through memory. In order to constitute and confirm their identities, the characters integrate themselves into a genealogical chain, establishing a continuum of time that links the past to the present and the future. The significance of this culturally specific

representation and interpretation of black time becomes especially obvious when compared to the notion and experience of time in modernity.

In the modern age, the experience of time has become inextricably linked to notions of rupture, progress, and change. Pointing to the notion and experience of time as social constructions, several scholars have shown that concepts of modern time are characterized by an emphasis on the aspects of acceleration and a constant process of renewal. Hermann Lübbe, for example, speaks of a “Gegenwartsschrumpfung,”³⁵⁰ a constriction of the present moment, arguing that the meaning and significance of the present are continually decreasing due to an accelerated process of social and cultural change. Similarly, Reinhart Koselleck points out that the ever-increasing acceleration of time is a characteristic phenomenon of modernity, in that “everything changes faster than could be expected thus far or than had been experienced previously.”³⁵¹ “Due to the shorter spans of time,” he explains, “an element of unfamiliarity enters the daily lives of those affected, an element that cannot be derived from any previous experience: this characterizes the experience of acceleration.”³⁵² It is this experience of acceleration in the modern age that creates a gap between what Koselleck has termed the “Erfahrungsraum” and the “Erwartungshorizont,” between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” in modern times.³⁵³

However, while the acceleration of time has become a key characteristic for the understanding of time, there are also other concepts of time, as Aleida Assmann points out. Arguing for the co-presence of different cultural representations and interpretations of time, she writes:

³⁵⁰ cf. Hermann Lübbe, *Im Zug der Zeit: Verkürzter Aufenthalt in der Gegenwart* (Berlin; Heidelberg: Springer, 1992).

³⁵¹ Reinhart Koselleck, “Gibt es eine Beschleunigung der Geschichte?,” *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik. Mit einem Beitrag von Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000): 164. My translation. In the original: “Modern dagegen ist jene Veränderung, die eine neue Zeiterfahrung hervorruft: daß sich nämlich alles schneller ändert, als man bisher erwarten konnte oder früher erfahren hatte.”

³⁵² Koselleck, “Gibt es eine Beschleunigung der Geschichte?”: 164. My translation. In the original: “Es kommt durch die kürzeren Zeitspannen eine Unbekanntheitskomponente in den Alltag der Betroffenen, die aus keiner bisherigen Erfahrung ableitbar ist: das zeichnet die Erfahrung der Beschleunigung aus.”

³⁵³ Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989): 349-375.

While the modern time regime [...] has fully implemented the linear characteristic of time and has linked it to a cultural orientation that privileges innovation, rupture, acceleration and, to a certain extent, forgetting, there are also other time regimes that do the opposite.³⁵⁴

In support of this argument, the cultural performance of time and memory in 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights can be seen as one example of such time regimes that “do not emphasize and support the rupture between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation, but rather bridge the space of experience and the horizon of expectation.”³⁵⁵

The present study has shown that in contrast to the understanding of time as a break with the past and a continual new beginning in the present, 20th-century African-American theater by female playwrights enacts a continuum of time in which the past informs both the present and the future. The plays articulate a particular socially, culturally, and historically shaped experience and interpretation of time as a ‘remembered time’ that is defined in and through memory in that it draws on a conscious remembering and re-interpreting of a collective knowledge about the past on the part of the characters. This culturalization of time is interpreted as cultural performance in support of a particular African-American identity, which is enacted and embodied on stage.

Interestingly enough, in all but two of the plays considered here the characters are never explicitly introduced as specifically ‘black’ or ‘African-American’ characters. Even in Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), arguably the most popular and most successful play by an African-American female playwright, the dramatic text does not explicitly mention the cultural background of the Younger family members, although Hansberry repeatedly stressed that *A Raisin in the Sun* is “a Negro play before it is anything else,”

³⁵⁴ Aleida Assmann, "Kulturelle Zeitgestalten," *Time and History. Zeit und Geschichte*, eds. Friedrich Stadler and Michael Stöltzner (Frankfurt: Ontos-Verlag, 2006): 481. My translation. In the original: “Während das moderne Zeitregime [...] den linearen Charakter der Zeit konsequent durchgesetzt und mit einer kulturellen Orientierung verbunden hat, die Innovation, Bruch, Beschleunigung und auf eine bestimmte Weise das Vergessen privilegiert, gibt es andere Zeitregimes, die das Gegenteil tun.”

³⁵⁵ Assmann, "Kulturelle Zeitgestalten": 481. My translation. In the original: “Sie betonen und fördern nicht den Bruch zwischen Erfahrungsraum und Erwartungshorizont, sondern schlagen umgekehrt eine Brücke zwischen Erfahrungsraum und Erwartungshorizont.” For further information on cultural structures and encodings of time see Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne* (München: Hanser, 2013).

portraying “a Negro family, specifically and culturally.”³⁵⁶ Except for Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel* (1916) whose original publication explicitly introduces the characters as “colored”³⁵⁷ and except for Zora Neale Hurston’s *Color Struck* (1925) in which the main characters are described as “light brown-skinned,” “black,” and “mulatto” (CS 89), the dramatic texts only mention the characters’ ethnic backgrounds in the context of individual white characters portrayed on stage. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, for example, Mr. Lindner, the representative of the all-white neighborhood that the Younger family moves to, is introduced as “a quiet-looking middle-aged white man in a business suit” (RIS 541). Similarly, Selma Frazier in Myrtle Smith Livingston’s *For Unborn Children* is described as “a young white girl” (FUC 185), while the main characters Leroy, Marion, and Grandma Carlson are simply introduced as “a young lawyer,” “his sister,” and “his grandmother” (FUC 185).

The analysis of time and memory in the plays has however revealed that the characters are not universal types, but rather represent unique members of a distinct African-American we-group, in that they are identified and identify themselves with a particular, culturally-specific knowledge of the past that is passed on from one family generation to the next. For the characters, the acceptance of the past’s legacy, awareness about the significance of ancestry, and the integration into a larger genealogical chain are shaping forces in the process of cultural self-creation and self-affirmation, helping them to cope with the challenge of being black in a white-dominated society.

By introducing several generations of characters simultaneously on stage, all of the plays considered here emphasize the aspect of genealogy and, thus, the temporal continuity ensured by the female characters in the plays. In their social roles as mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers the female characters act as preservers of culture and guardians of collective memory. They are responsible for ensuring and stabilizing the link between the past, the present, and the future by transmitting the collective knowledge of the past to their children and grandchildren. With the goal of helping the younger generations to learn from the past and from the experiences of their ancestors in order to

³⁵⁶ Lorraine Hansberry, “Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry,” *American Theatre* 1.2 (November 1984): 5.

³⁵⁷ Angelina Weld Grimké and Carolivia Herron, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

ensure continuity in the future, the living female elders act as teachers and initiate a process of learning and maturing in the younger family members by deliberately fostering a collective remembering of the past in the present moment on stage.

The social and cultural meaning of the past is thereby not related to where the moment recalled is situated on a linear scale of time, but rather to how it is remembered and what social significance it gains in the process of memorization. The representation and embodiment of the characters' African-American identity on stage is grounded in a conscious re-working and a reconstructive encoding of the collective past by the characters. In "memory talk" and in the practice of "conversational remembering"³⁵⁸ on stage the collective knowledge about a remote past preserved in cultural memory and the shared memories of a more recent past transported in communicative memory intermingle, turning the past into a source of pride and empowerment for the characters. By reassessing the collective trauma of slavery, by re-establishing the link to Mother Africa as a homeland, by commemorating specific African-American freedom fighters and cultural figures, and by re-interpreting family histories as stories of survival and success, the different family members mobilize shared ties to different moments in the past, thereby identifying themselves as members of a specific African-American we-group based on the deliberate identification with a specific collective memory.

On a metalevel, this enactment of African-American history on stage is a staging of difference that serves as a means of cultural self-definition and self-affirmation. Serving to constitute and confirm the particularity and singularity of African-American identity, the plays present a cultural performance of African-American time as a remembered time based on a deliberate re-working and encoding of the past, thereby informing the creation of a counter-history and a counter-memory to white American history in the public sphere of the theater. For any society, the particular shared knowledge transported and preserved in collective memory represents focal points of identification in that it serves to differentiate between a 'we' and a 'they.' Based on the conviction that the family introduced in each of the plays can be conceived as a trope for the community as a whole, theater thus represents an important vehicle for the definition and formation of African-American identity in general. By articulating and enacting specific moments in black

³⁵⁸ Harald Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis: Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (München: Beck, 2008): 16.

American history on stage, African-American theater by female playwrights functions as a medium of collective memory and a carrier thereof, pointing to the cultural significance of this specific dramatic body of work. Due to the fact that all memories have a unique place in international and/or national history, the representation of a particular African-American collective memory on stage also encourages a re-assessment of African-American history in general. By introducing integral elements of African-American cultural memory on stage and by creating a Theater of the Present that draws on particular contemporary social and political events and discourses, the plays enact and confirm a very specific cultural and historical background. As an artistic mediation of history and memory, the re-assessment of the past on stage thus functions as a re-appropriation of time in general.

In general, across its various parts, the present study has aimed to understand how the cultural performance of time and memory in the plays informs the representation and construction of African-American identity on stage. Due to the fact that theater represents a constitutive carrier of collective memory, the cultural performance and embodiment of time and memory on stage provides a most valuable opportunity for analyzing and identifying processes and mechanisms of cultural identity formation, transformation, and affirmation. At the intersection of literary, cultural, and memory studies, and including both canonical and non-canonical plays and playwrights from different moments in the 20th century, the present study has given an insight into the as yet largely undiscovered cultural significance of African-American theater by female playwrights for the understanding of African-American identity construction in and through culturally specific notions, experiences, and encodings of time.

The inclusion of plays by black female playwrights in anthologies such as *The Fire This Time: African-American Plays for the 21st Century* (2004)³⁵⁹ as well as events such as the 2009 and 2011 *Ensemble Studio Theatre* festivals "The River Crosses Rivers: Short Plays by Women of Color,"³⁶⁰ which presented plays by Lynn Nottage, Kia Corthron, Cori Thomas, France-Luce Benson, and other contemporary African-American women

³⁵⁹ Harry J. Elam and Robert Alexander, *The Fire This Time : African-American Plays for the 21st Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004). The collection includes plays by black women playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks, Oni Faidi Lampley, Lynn Nottage, and Kamilah Forbes.

³⁶⁰ For a review of the 2009 festival see Rachel Saltz, "In Plays by Women, a Tug of War between Parent and Child," *The New York Times* September 24, 2009.

playwrights, attest to the continuing richness and vitality of this specific tradition of dramatic art and further emphasize the necessity of re-discovering and re-assessing this body of work in future research on African-American literature and culture.

12. Continuation with a Difference – A Brief Outlook

Throughout the 20th century African-American female playwrights sought to find their place in the history of American literature. Especially since the 1960s and 70s they have successfully claimed center stage in American theater. Feminist playwrights joined their male counterparts in their struggle for political, social, and cultural recognition in a white-dominated society by directing attention to the contributions and experiences of women throughout black American history on the public platform of theater. They claimed ‘a room of their own’ by focusing on female family generations and, thus, on a distinct female perspective in the representation of African-American history and identity on stage.

This claiming of a distinct tradition, however, faced new challenges and innovations as it entered the 21st century. It is perhaps the hallmark of a successful tradition of any art form that it has to undergo critical processes of renewal. A highly critical reassessment, for instance, came from George C. Wolfe who revisited his predecessors’ artistic endeavors and challenged popular 20th-century theatrical traditions. In his famous satire *The Colored Museum* (1988) Wolfe, both a playwright and the producer of prestigious plays like Suzan-Lori Parks’ Pulitzer-Prize winning *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), critically re-evaluated the validity and significance of black theatrical traditions. Set in a museum-like setting of “white walls and recessed lighting” the play draws attention to “the myths and madness of Black/Negro/colored Americans” (CM 453)³⁶¹ throughout history. In a series of eleven “exhibits” (CM 453) or sketches the play stages prominent “lieux de mémoire”³⁶² in African-American history and pop culture such as slavery, miscegenation, Black hairstyles, famous basketball stars, Josephine Baker’s legend, as well as common

³⁶¹ George C. Wolfe, "The Colored Museum (1988)," Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans, eds. James Vernon Hatch and Ted Shine, Rev. and expanded ed., vol. 2 (New York: Free Press). Here: 453.

³⁶² cf. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux De Mémoire*," History and Memory in African-American Culture, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

stereotypes like the mammy and the Topsy figures. In the context of this sweeping survey Wolfe also critically deals with traditions and developments in black drama history in a most famous sketch entitled “The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play”:

NARRATOR We are pleased to bring you yet another Mama-on-the-Couch play. A searing domestic drama that tears at the very fabric of racist America. *(he crosses upstage center and sits on a stool and reads from a playscript)* Act One. Scene One.

(MAMA revolves on stage left, sitting on a couch reading a large, oversized Bible. A window is placed stage right. Mama's dress, the couch, and drapes are made from the same material. A doormat lays down center.)

NARRATOR Lights up on a dreary, depressing, but with middle-class aspirations tenement slum. There is a couch, with a Mama on it. Both are well worn. There is a picture of Jesus on the wall ... *(a picture of Jesus is instantly revealed)*... and a window which looks onto an abandoned tenement. It is late spring.

Enter Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie-Jones *(Son enters through the audience)* He is Mama's thirty-year-old son. His brow is heavy from three hundred years of oppression.

MAMA *(looking up from her Bible, speaking in a slow manner)* Son, did you wipe your feet?

SON *(an ever-erupting volcano)* No, Mama, I didn't wipe my feet! Out there, every day, Mama, is the Man. The Man, Mama. Mr. Charlie! Mr. Bossman! And he's wipin' his feet on me. On me, Mama, every damn day of my life. Ain't that enough for me to deal with? Ain't that enough?

MAMA Son, wipe your feet.

(CM 461-462; italics original)

Wolfe here draws on dominant themes and characters in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Notzake Shange's *for colored girls*, criticizing the fact that they fostered the development of theatrical stereotypes like the self-confident matriarch who remains completely unimpressed by the rebellious complaints of her hotheaded son. The artistic drive of Wolfe's highly self-reflexive meta-drama is no longer addressed towards the oppressive living condition of black communities but against their artistic conventions. What had once been captivating and innovating theatrical inventions have lost their historical momentum and are restaged as the laughing stock of a new epic and post-dramatic theater. In recycling two of the most famous and successful plays in the history of black female theater in such abridged and overexposed scenes, Wolfe's caricature exposes a continuity of one-dimensional stereotypes running through black drama, even questioning “the most sacred image in African American theatre, the Black mother who

holds the family together.”³⁶³ His retrospective and satirical view of 20th-century African-American theater deconstructs a female perspective based on the depiction of intergenerational family stories and, thus, implicitly asks contemporary female playwrights to think of alternate ways to deal with the triangle of time, memory, and cultural identity on stage.

As *The Alexander Plays* (1995) reveal, for contemporary playwright Adrienne Kennedy one of these alternate ways lies in creating a less stereotypical and much more personal, self-reflexive meta-drama that emphasizes the importance of a subjective reassessment of history and memory in the creation of art. Best known for her surrealistic award-winning one-act play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), Kennedy won several prestigious awards for her work, including three Obie Awards, the 2003 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards, and the PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award in 2006. In her autobiographical text *People who led to my plays*³⁶⁴ Kennedy is very explicit about the cultural background of her work. She explains that while spending some time in Ghana with her husband in the 1960s³⁶⁵ she was indeed torn between what she perceived as her African and her European roots. She repeatedly writes about the importance of Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, and explains that with Nkrumah’s face on her skirt she “had sealed [her] ancestry as West African.”³⁶⁶ At the same time she was also very interested in Beethoven as a representative of her European ancestry. She “read and reread Sullivan’s book on the life of Beethoven – his spiritual development, his music, his lukewarm Danube baths and his growing deafness – and [she] listened to his string quartets,”³⁶⁷ as she explains. Kennedy is indeed very aware of the fact that this cultural duality in her life strongly influenced her writing:

I’d often stare at the statue of Beethoven I kept on the left-hand side of my desk. I felt it contained a “secret.” I’d do the same with the photograph of Queen Hatshepsut that was on the wall. I did not then understand that I felt

³⁶³ Wolfe, “The Colored Museum (1988)”: 452.

³⁶⁴ Adrienne Kennedy, *People Who Led to My Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988).

³⁶⁵ Kennedy, *People Who Led to My Plays*: 115ff.

³⁶⁶ Kennedy, *People Who Led to My Plays*: 122.

³⁶⁷ Kennedy, *People Who Led to My Plays*: 108.

torn between these forces of my ancestry... European and African... a fact that would one day explode in my work.³⁶⁸

It is this cultural duality in her work that Kennedy self-reflexively deals with in *The Alexander Plays*. The dramatic cycle represents a meta-poetic depiction of her own writing as an African-American female playwright being “torn between these forces of [her] ancestry.” The four plays *She Talks to Beethoven*, *The Ohio State Murders*, *The Film Club* (*A Monologue by Suzanne Alexander*) and *The Dramatic Circle*, that are generally subsumed under the title *The Alexander Plays*, circle around the female protagonist Suzanne Alexander, “a well-known black writer” (AP 26), and present a self-reflexive “process of turning memory into meaning”³⁶⁹ as the protagonist recalls different events and experiences in her life on stage as major influences on her writing. While *The Ohio State Murders* focuses on Suzanne’s personal trauma of her babies being killed by their own father, the other three plays deal with her life as the wife of David Alexander, “an American professor of African poetry” (AP 6), who was kidnapped during a research stay in Ghana, West Africa, while working on the biography of Afro-French political philosopher Frantz Fanon, a key scholar in the fields of post-colonial studies.³⁷⁰

She Talks to Beethoven, the first of the four Alexander plays, is set in an apartment in “Accra, Ghana, in 1961, soon after the independence” (AP 4). This African surrounding is emphasized through many aspects such as Suzanne’s “robe of kinte cloth,” “a photograph of Kwame Nkrumah” (AP 5), and the African music that is heard every time Suzanne thinks her husband returns (AP 6, AP 9, AP 23). In the play this African cultural background is directly contrasted with the European background of German composer and pianist Ludwig van Beethoven who also appears on stage. We learn that Suzanne and her husband were working on a play on the famous composer, when David suddenly disappeared. Time and again interrupted by radio features on David’s disappearance from an anonymous “voice on radio” (AP 6), the female protagonist tries to continue to work on this play by reading original “diary entries [...] from actual sources” (AP 4) and talking to Beethoven himself. She tells him that David told her to read more diaries about Beethoven because “many scenes of [him] [were] too romantic” (AP 11). For Suzanne,

³⁶⁸ Kennedy, *People Who Led to My Plays*: 96; italics original.

³⁶⁹ Alisa Solomon, “Foreword,” *The Alexander Plays*, ed. Adrienne Kennedy (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992): xvi.

³⁷⁰ cf. for example: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).

the act of reading the diaries and using this gained knowledge for her own writing is, thus, not only a possibility to stay emotionally connected with her husband but it is also a means to ‘correct’ her understanding of Beethoven’s time and to access a distant past she cannot otherwise go back to.

Similar to the cultural duality that Kennedy attests for her own writing, the fictional dramatist Suzanne in *She Talks to Beethoven* is “torn between the forces” of her European and African ancestry. However, unlike Kennedy’s prediction these forces do not “explode” in the play. The play does not end with a forceful clash between Beethoven as a representative of the protagonist’s European ancestry and the play’s setting as an illustration of her identification with Africa. The audience does indeed never get to know if Suzanne’s play is completed at all. In fact, Beethoven suddenly disappears from stage in the very moment that her husband David returns:

(She cries. Music from the road, of African stringed instruments. SUZANNE rushes to the door.)

SUZANNE: David. You sent Beethoven until you returned. Didn’t you?

DAVID’S VOICE: *(Not unlike BEETHOVEN’S.)* I knew he would console you while I was absent.

END

(AP 23; italics original)

When David, accompanied by “African stringed instruments,” finally returns home to their apartment in Ghana, distraction in form of a European cultural figure from a distant past is no longer needed. His sudden disappearance signifies that Beethoven served as a temporary crutch and consoling device for Suzanne when she was lacking the comforting presence of her husband in Ghana. For her, the cultural figure is part of a useable and alternating past that satisfies the fictional writer’s needs in the present.

In *She Talks to Beethoven* Kennedy points out that in the end both the identification with ancestors and the reassessment of collective cultural memories and traditions are highly personal acts of choice and identification. By giving a European cultural figure from a distant past a voice on stage, Kennedy challenges the idea of creating a black counter-memory based on a fixed notion of African-American history, presenting a new and manifold understanding of tradition and cultural transmittance.

This idea of using the stage to rewrite history and cultural memory is also shared by contemporary playwright Suzan Lori-Parks, who won several prizes for her work, including the 1990 Obie Award for the Best New American Play and the prestigious 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play *Topdog/Underdog* (2001). As Parks points out:

A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to “make” history – that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to – through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life – locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.³⁷¹

In almost all of her plays Parks deals with the exploration and formation of black American history and identity. For Parks, theater is an “incubator for the creation of historical events” that “are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history.”³⁷² In her attempt to “‘make’ history” Parks uses theater and its public platform as a medium to close gaps in African-American history and to rewrite history from a distinct black American point of view. Through her plays Parks aims to rewrite “the Time Line – creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined.”³⁷³

In line with her 20th-century predecessors, Parks aims to create Identity Theater through language as an in-group marker of identity.³⁷⁴ However, instead of repeating predetermined linguistic features of AAE, she created her own language with a separate dictionary of “foreign words & phrases”³⁷⁵ that she uses in her plays. Due to the fact that Parks wants her dramatic texts to “look and sound more like a musical score,”³⁷⁶ the innovative form of her language does not so much rely on the invention of new words and meanings but the emphasis is rather set on the sound and the physical effects of the words. Like her fellow writer Ntozake Shange, Parks sees language as “a physical act”

³⁷¹ Suzan-Lori Parks, “Possession,” *The America Play and Other Works*, ed. Suzan-Lori Parks (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995): Here: 4.

³⁷² Parks, “Possession”: 5.

³⁷³ Parks, “Possession”: 5.

³⁷⁴ For a detailed analysis see chapter 8: “African-American Language Identity on Stage.”

³⁷⁵ Parks, “From *Elements of Style*.” This idea of inventing a new kind of language reaches a climax in the introduction of a three-page-appendix to *The Red Letter Plays* to translate the language of the specific female language called TALK in the play.

³⁷⁶ Parks, “From *Elements of Style*”: 9.

that “involves your entire body – not just your head.”³⁷⁷ Emphasizing the performative quality of her texts, she also adopts the Jazz concept of call-and-response into her art, seeing the technique of “Rep & Rev”³⁷⁸ as another way to demonstrate the cultural background her art and her artistic self-understanding stem from. She points out: “It’s like this: I am an African-American woman – this is the form I take, my content predicates this form, and this form is inseparable from my content. No way I could be me otherwise.”³⁷⁹

While Parks shares the 20th-century idea of using language as a marker of cultural identity, she deviates from former theatrical conventions with regard to the historical events she reenacts on stage. Like Kennedy, Parks does not aim to construct a supposedly ‘pure’ black counter-history on stage; in her play *Topdog/Underdog* she rather opens up a narrow understanding of African-American history and culture by appropriating former US president Abraham Lincoln and his 1865 assassination, a key historical event in white American history, for the representation of African-American cultural identity on stage. Leading the United States through its bloody Civil War and being responsible for the abolition of slavery, Lincoln has become a “mythic figure,” as Parks explains:

To me, Lincoln is the closest thing we have to a mythic figure. In days of great Greek drama, they had Apollo and Medea and Oedipus – these larger-than-life figures that walked the earth and spoke – and they turned them into plays. Shakespeare had kings and queens that he fashioned into his stories. Lincoln, to me, is one of those.³⁸⁰

According to this understanding of Lincoln as a “figure of memory,”³⁸¹ Parks is less interested in an astute historical representation of Lincoln but rather in the figure’s impact as a source of reference and identification for the protagonists’ cultural self-creation in *Topdog/Underdog*. In this play she recreates and redesigns “the black Lincoln impersonator”³⁸² she introduced in her earlier *The America Play* (1994). In both plays the

³⁷⁷ Parks, “From *Elements of Style*”: 11. In *The Red Letter Plays* she also includes songs to heighten this physical effect of her work and language.

³⁷⁸ Parks, “From *Elements of Style*”: 10.

³⁷⁹ Parks, “From *Elements of Style*”: 8.

³⁸⁰ Parks quoted in Joshua Wolf Shenk, “Theater; Beyond a Black-and-White Lincoln,” *New York Times* April 7, 2002.

³⁸¹ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997): 2.

³⁸² Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013): Foreword by Parks.

focus is set on a black man who earns his living by impersonating Abraham Lincoln and reenacting his assassination. Yet, while the Lincoln character in *The America Play* consciously identifies with the historical figure although he “remains condemned to work out his life in the shadow of the Great Man,”³⁸³ the impersonation of the historical figure and the repetition of the past finally result in the death of the Lincoln character in the later play.

In *Topdog/Underdog* the action focuses on Lincoln and his younger Booth, whose given names result from their father’s “idea of a joke” (TD/UD 24), as Lincoln explains. When the characters look into “the raggedy family album” (TD/UD 13) and talk about their childhood and their memories on stage, we learn that when their parents split up the brothers were left alone at the age of 16 and 11, fostering a very close relation between the two boys. As Booth explains: “I didnt mind them leaving cause you was there. [...] It was you and me against thuh world, Link.” (TD/UD 70) Since this day the boys have been trying to cope with their lives and to earn a living, often also illegally. Lincoln remembers that before his job as the impersonation of the former president, he was involved in illegal card games, taking “a mothers [sic] welfare check” and “a father for the money he was gonna get his kids new [sic] bike with” (TD/UD 55). He finally “swore off thuh cards” as “something inside [him] [was] telling [him] – But [he] was good” (TD/UD 56) and started his job as the impersonation of “Honest Abe” (TD/UD 11).

For the protagonist, this “Lincoln connection” (TD/UD 11) is at first only part of his job and he makes fun of the “fools” who want to relive history through shooting him. He tells his brother Booth:

Worn suit coat, not even worn by the fool that Im supposed to be playing,
but making fools out of all those folks who come crowding in for they [sic]
chance to play at something great. Fake beard. Top hat. Dont make me into
no Lincoln. I was Lincoln on my own before any of that.

(TD/UD 30)

When Lincoln comes home after work, he reclaims his own identity by putting off “that shit that bull that disguise that motherdisfuckinguise” (TD/UD 9) and “appl[y]ing cold

³⁸³ Ilka Saal, “Suzan-Lori Parks,” *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights*, eds. Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, Christopher Innes and Matthew C. Roudané (London / New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014): 252.

cream, removing the whiteface” (TD/UD 11). In the course of the play Lincoln, however, stops changing his clothes and finally stays in “his full Lincoln regalia” (TD/UD 38). This changed behavior mirrors the gradual loss of his own individual identity as “a black man in his later 30s” (TD/UD 8) in the “here” and “now” (TD/UD 2). In the course of the play the boundaries between the character’s individual identity and the identity of the past that he impersonates become blurred and the reenactment of the assassination becomes temporarily “real” for him:

[...] And there he is. Standing behind me. Standing in position. Standing upside down. Theres some feet shapes on the floor so he knows just where he oughta stand. So he wont miss. Thuh gun is always cold. Winter or summer thuh gun is always cold. And when the gun touches me he can feel that Im warm and he knows Im alive. And if Im alive then he can shoot me dead. And for a minute, with him hanging back there behind me, its real. Me looking at him upside down and him looking at me looking like Lincoln. Then he shoots.

(TD/UD 50)

At the moment of shooting, the situation becomes “real” for Lincoln, turning the historical reenactment into a killing of the black man on stage. Like the shooters, Lincoln “gets into it” (TD/UD 50) and the assassination loses its historical importance, opening up space for individual interpretation, as he points out: “People are funny about they [sic] Lincoln shit. Its historical. People like they [sic] historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming.” (TD/UD 52)

Being replaced by a dummy, Lincoln finally loses his job and has to reenter the illegal business of a “3-card monte hustler”³⁸⁴ to earn a living. When he plays against his younger brother and wins his inheritance, the only money Booth has ever saved, Lincoln is killed by his brother Booth in a rage. Although Booth “sobs” (TD/UD 110) and seems to regret his deed, the plot’s ending clearly reenacts the historical event of the president’s assassination and the “brothers’ given names turn out to be more than a personal joke, indexing instead the melancholic re-enactment of a traumatic history,”³⁸⁵ as Ilka Saal puts it. Pointing out the fatal impact that the past has on the characters’ present, she concludes

³⁸⁴ Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*: Foreword by Parks.

³⁸⁵ Saal, “Suzan-Lori Parks”: 253.

that it is finally “[h]istorical overdetermination” that “leaves the brothers with little room for choice and agency.”³⁸⁶

It is, however, less a lack of “choice and agency” than the inability to reconcile the past and the present that is at the core of Lincoln’s tragic ending. Throughout the whole play the protagonist is always directed towards identification with the past, unable to ever access the present moment of his identity. First, when impersonating Abraham Lincoln, the protagonist goes back to a distant and mythic past of American history “when folks was slaves and shit” (TD/UD 22). During the moment of shooting, this distant past becomes “real” for him, but only momentarily and he is immediately drawn back into the present. Second, when looking at the family album and remembering his childhood experiences, Lincoln tries to access a more recent past, but has to realize that it lacks the stability he needs, both with respect to the familial structures and to the reliability of his own memories as the following explanation for the origins of the brothers’ given names reveals: “[Our father] was drunk when he told me, or maybe I was drunk when he told me. Anyway he told me, may not be true, but he told me. Why he named us both. Lincoln and Booth” (TD/UD 24). Finally, when Lincoln loses his job as impersonator, he has to return to his former life as a criminal card dealer, which finally results in the fight with his brother and his subsequent assassination. In all three cases Lincoln’s attempts to go back to the past to define himself only reveal his “inability to distinguish between ‘what is’ and ‘what ain’t.’”³⁸⁷ In the end Lincoln is unable to use the past as a basis for his identity formation because there is no past that he can rely on.

For Parks, Lincoln and his brother “come from holes” and signify “the fabricated absence”³⁸⁸ of African-American identity in American history. As she explains: “It’s the story that you’re told that goes, ‘once upon a time you weren’t here.’”³⁸⁹ For her, a reassessment of the past is a crucial part of cultural self-creation but there’s a “Great Hole of History”³⁹⁰ that her characters have to cope with in this process of identity formation in the present. According to Parks, there is no meaningful past without the present. A

³⁸⁶ Saal, “Suzan-Lori Parks”: 254.

³⁸⁷ Saal, “Suzan-Lori Parks”: 253.

³⁸⁸ Steven Drukman, “Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond,” *TDR* Vol. 39.No. 3 (Autumn 1995): 56-75. Here: 67.

³⁸⁹ Drukman, “Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond”: 67.

³⁹⁰ Parks, “The America Play”: 158.

reassessment of the past without considering the present is, thus, the “the great mistake of American culture,” as she puts it:

There’s a relationship with the past, an important one. But I think to focus on that relationship and de-emphasize the relationship of the person right in the room with you is the great mistake of American culture and the mistake of history. We have to deal with what’s happening right now.³⁹¹

In this sense *Topdog/Underdog* can be seen as an attempt to deal with “the mistake of history” by rewriting American history from the present perspective. The protagonist is presented as looking for a useable past in a process of cultural self-creation, extending the scope of black American cultural memory by claiming the mythic figure of Abraham Lincoln as a crucial source of identification. Parks does not accept the story “that goes ‘once upon a time you weren’t there’” but she rather uses the public platform of theater for a critical reassessment of history and memory as the basis of African-American cultural identity formation. For the representation of African-American history and identity in *Topdog/Underdog*, the “holes” of history serve as points of entry and enable Parks to rewrite history by writing blacks into white American history. In her essay “Elements of Style” Parks writes: “History is time that won’t quit.”³⁹² It is because of memory and the transformation of history into memory that the past undergoes a constant process of reevaluation and reinterpretation, turning the stage into a crucial carrier of collective memory that mirrors different approaches to African-American history since the early 20th century.

As has been shown, theater has served as an important public platform to reassess and reinterpret African-American history and memory throughout the 20th century. Playwrights like Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Burrill, Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, and Ntozake Shange, and other female writers discussed here fostered the creation of an African-American female theatrical tradition that served their needs to cope with a traumatic past in cultural history and memory at that time. By focusing on family stories and how the different female generations cope with discrimination and racism against black people, they created a distinct female perspective

³⁹¹ Shenk, “Theater; Beyond a Black-and-White Lincoln.”

³⁹² Parks, “From *Elements of Style*”: 15.

to foster the development of a black counter-history and a distinct African-American cultural identity in a white-dominated society.

A glance at plays by contemporary playwrights Wolfe, Kennedy, and Parks reveals that with the advent of the 21st century black American theater seeks new forms and practices to reinvent and further develop this specific theatrical tradition. While contemporary playwrights still share their predecessors' desire to fill the "Great Hole of History," their work strongly differs with regard to the historical and cultural points of reference they revert to in order to rewrite American history and memory on stage. The characters in *The Alexander Plays* and *Topdog/Underdog* question their own cultural identities and do no longer present stable cultural identities rooted in "an uncomplicated pride in being black."³⁹³

Wolfe, Parks, and Kennedy experiment with new paradigms that break with the theatrical traditions of family stories and the focus on the genealogical chain that tend to present simplified types of characters restricted to their domestic settings. In their work they do no longer restrict themselves to the depiction of a 'pure,' all-black counter-history that has to be preserved and transmitted by the black woman in the family. The self-restricting perspective is abandoned in favor of a self-reflexive and more inclusive approach to American history. By introducing white cultural figures like Beethoven and Lincoln as sources of identification for the African-American characters on stage, the playwrights rewrite both American and African-American history and present a more subjective view on a variety of useable pasts that serve respective needs in the present, blurring the previously strict boundaries between firm male and female, black and white traditions.

This retrospective view reveals that the 20th-century theatrical search for a distinct African-American cultural identity continues, but the preference for self-reflexive and post-dramatic texts indicates also an important turning point in this theatrical tradition. As a carrier of collective memory, the cultural performance on stage continues to serve as a public platform to inform the representation and construction of African-American identity, but the formerly restrictive approach to history and memory is replaced by a more inclusive and pluralized approach to tradition. The playwrights point out that the

³⁹³ Solomon, "Foreword": xii.

past's legacy cannot be simply received or transmitted but it has to be constructed as a useable past in the present. The stage continues to function as a frame for continuity to fill the "Great Hole in History," but the theatrical traditions and methods used in this context have become much more self-reflexive, presenting not only alternative visions of the past, but also focusing on the performing of these pasts on stage.

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14. Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Während narrative Texte wie Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) und Toni Morrisons *Beloved* (1987) zum festen Bestandteil des afroamerikanischen literarischen Kanons gehören, haben Theaterstücke afroamerikanischer Autorinnen wie Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Burrill, Myrtle Smith Livingston oder Judith Alexa Jackson bisher kaum öffentliche Beachtung oder wissenschaftliche Aufmerksamkeit erhalten. Erst in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten hat unter dem Einfluss der feministischen Bewegungen der 1970er Jahre ein Prozess der Aufarbeitung und (Wieder-)Entdeckung des Bühnenwerks afroamerikanischer Autorinnen eingesetzt, welcher sich in erster Linie durch die Reproduktion von Primärwerken in Sammelanthologien bemerkbar macht. Der vorhandene Forschungsstand beschränkt sich dagegen auf die Besprechung einzelner Stücke oder Autorinnen in gesonderten Artikeln und Buchkapiteln, während es an einem übergreifenden und umfassenderen Zugang zum Werk afroamerikanischer Autorinnen bisher mangelt.

Um diesem Defizit zu begegnen und die Aufmerksamkeit noch stärker auf diese spezifische literarische Tradition zu lenken, befasst sich die folgende Arbeit mit den Aspekten von Zeit und Gedächtnis als Basis kultureller Identitätsbildungsprozesse in ausgewählten Stücken afroamerikanischer Autorinnen aus verschiedenen Zeitabschnitten im 20. Jahrhundert. Der Textkorpus umfasst dabei sowohl kanonische Autorinnen, die zu einem festen Bestandteil der schulischen und universitären Curricula geworden sind, als auch Dramatikerinnen, deren Werke noch nicht die gebührende Aufmerksamkeit erhalten haben. In chronologischer Reihenfolge handelt es sich bei den behandelten Stücken um Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1916), Mary Burrills *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919), Zora Neale Hurstons *Color Struck* (1925), Myrtle Smith Livingstons *For Unborn Children* (1926), Mercedes Gilberts *Environment* (1931), Lorraine Hansberrys *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Alice Childress' *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), Notzake Shanges *for*

colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf (1976) und Judith Alexa Jacksons *WOMBmanWARs* (1992).³⁹⁴

Im Zentrum der Untersuchung steht die Frage, wie gender- und ethniespezifisch Zeit und Zeitlichkeit in den Stücken organisiert und wie in diesem Zusammenhang kulturelle Identität als Projektion sozialer Beziehungen und Verkörperung kultureller Muster geformt wird. Im Rückgriff auf Theorien aus der Kulturwissenschaft und der Erinnerungsforschung zeigt die vorliegende Studie, dass die Repräsentation und Darstellung der afroamerikanischen Identität der Figuren auf einer Kulturalisierung von Zeit, d.h. auf einer spezifischen, historisch und kulturell geformten Wahrnehmung, Darstellung und Interpretation von Zeit, basiert. Die Hauptthese dieser Arbeit ist, dass die in den Stücken dargestellte kollektive afroamerikanische oder ‚schwarze‘ Zeit als eine ‚erinnerte Zeit‘ gezeichnet wird, welche in und durch ein bewusstes Erinnern und Aufarbeiten einer gemeinsamen Vergangenheit auf Seiten der Figuren definiert ist. Durch den Fokus auf das kollektive und kulturelle Gedächtnis inszenieren die Stücke ein Kontinuum der Zeit, in welchem die Vergangenheit als sinn- und identitätsstiftende Orientierungsgröße für die Gegenwart und die Zukunft fungiert.

Aufbauend auf der Prämisse, dass die Stücke in künstlerischer Form als Vermittler von Geschichte und Gedächtnis fungieren, fokussiert die Arbeit dabei nicht so sehr auf den Moment des Erinnerns als vielmehr auf den Moment, der erinnert wird, indem sie untersucht, *was* erinnert und *warum* erinnert wird. Es geht weniger um Erinnerungsmodelle mit abtrennbaren Akten des Erinnerns wie wir sie beispielsweise von Marcel Prousts *À la recherche du temps perdu* kennen, sondern vielmehr um das Zusammenspiel zeitlicher Strukturen als Basis für die kulturelle Identitätsbildung im Rahmen der performativen Kraft des Theaters. Das verbindende Element zwischen den behandelten Texten ist die Darstellung verschiedener Generationen jeweils einer afroamerikanischen Familie, die sich durch den Rückgriff auf bestimmte Momente der amerikanischen und afroamerikanischen Geschichte ihrer kulturellen Identität versichern. Im Prozess der Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit integrieren sich die Figuren bewusst in eine genealogische Abfolge, um ihre afroamerikanische Identität zu begründen und sich ihrer zu vergewissern. Durch die Neubewertung des kollektiven Traumas der Sklaverei,

³⁹⁴ Soweit nicht anders vermerkt, handelt es sich bei den angegebenen Daten um die Erstveröffentlichung bzw. die Erstaufführung der Stücke.

durch das Wiederherstellen der Verbindung zur ‚Mutter Afrika‘ als Heimatland, durch das Feiern spezifischer afroamerikanischer Freiheitskämpfer und kultureller Leitfiguren und durch das Neuinterpretieren der Familiengeschichte als Überlebens- und Erfolgsgeschichte mobilisieren die Figuren gemeinsame Verbindungen zur Vergangenheit, um sich durch die bewusste Identifikation mit diesen kollektiven Erinnerungen als Mitglieder einer spezifisch afroamerikanischen Wir-Gruppe zu identifizieren.

Basierend auf der Überzeugung, dass die in den Stücken dargestellte Familie als Topos für die Gemeinschaft insgesamt gesehen werden kann, wird das Theater afroamerikanischer Autorinnen als wichtiges Medium und Träger des kulturellen Gedächtnisses gesehen, welches durch die Artikulation und Darstellung bestimmter kollektiver Erinnerungen an der Formung einer spezifisch afroamerikanischen Identität beteiligt ist. Der Fokus auf das Zusammenspiel von Zeit, Gedächtnis und Identität in den Stücken eröffnet einen signifikanten Einblick in Prozesse afroamerikanischer Identitätsbildung im 20. Jahrhundert, die im Theater abgebildet und verarbeitet werden. Damit bieten die Theaterstücke eine äußerst wertvolle Ressource, um Mechanismen der Bildung, Veränderung und Bestätigung kultureller Identität in und durch die kulturelle Formung von Zeit und Zeitlichkeit zu untersuchen und zu identifizieren. An der Schnittstelle von Literatur-, Kultur- und Erinnerungsforschung betont die vorliegende Arbeit die Notwendigkeit, das afroamerikanische Theater weiblicher Autorinnen in seiner wissenschaftlichen und kulturellen Signifikanz zu erkennen und (neu) zu entdecken.