



Blackness: The Color of Otherness in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and Genet's *the Maids*

But if I had not wavered in my opinion of myself, then my hair would never have fallen out

—Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse* (4).

The fall of your dress. I'm arranging your fall from grace

—Jean Genet, *The Maids* (10).

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ABSTRACT

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Adopting the perspective of critical race theory grounded in Black Existentialism, this article argues that we should consider Black Drama beyond conventional conceptions of author, identity, or content, expanding the category to consider abject human life and misery beyond the color line as exemplified by Kennedy's *'Funnyhouse of a Negro'* (1964) and Genet's *'The Maids'* (1948). The paper argues that both texts dramatize an existential conception of Blackness through the construction of essentialized *otherness*. The two plays present *otherness* as constructible rather than biological. By doing so, Kennedy and Genet contest the authenticity of the racial construction of identity. Consequently, Sarah's experience of absorbing the symbols of power in *Funny House* speaks to the existential experience that Claire and Solange undertake in *The Maids* as "Black" human beings. The paper shows that the Blackness portrayed in the works of Kennedy and Genet is a "trapped identity" which results from being entangled between two opposed ontological poles: being and non-being. Therefore, the failure of establishing balance between human agency and their new existential situation leads to an inauthentic identity and a false mode of existence. Oscillating between Blackness and whiteness results in fragmented selves, embodying the existential notion of no exit, but is the liberator that is necessary for the Black Existentialism.

Keywords:

Blackness, Existential Black Drama, Kennedy, *Funnyhouse*, Genet, *The Maids*

1. INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Existentialism pays great attention to the individual as a unique being in the world and it highly values the individual's choice in the process of emancipating the self. However, in the process of achieving one's true and authentic existence, one passes through different obstacles in life. Of course, racism and oppression are sufficient reasons to make the individual alien to her own self and, in turn, construct a forged identity.

In *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, the African American thinker Lewis R. Gordon (1995) reiterates that oppression presents extremes that limit human universality and characterizes the racial discourse:

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From the most light to the most dark, from the fullness of color (something) to its complete absence (nothing), from 'white,' that is, to 'black.' Yet there is a sense in which human beings are neither of these extremes. On the most banal phenomenological level, there are dark human beings. To *be* 'white' and to *be* 'black' then, involves a form of not being what we are. How is this possible? (p. 1)

The same ontological question of the relation of color to identity is rhetorically raised by the white French playwright Jean Genet on the dedication page of *Les Nègres (The Blacks: A Clown Show)*: "One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what is his color?" (Plunka, 1992, p. 3).

The 1961 St. Mark's Playhouse production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* was a key moment in U.S. theater history, in general, and for black theater, in particular. Despite the reservations that some critics, particularly African American critics and the cast in the show, held over its representation of

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African American characters and over its call “for the necessity of armed black revolt” (Warrick, 2006, p. 131), *The Blacks* gained fervent critical acclaim due to the ontological identity questions it raised. Gene Plunka (1992) argues, “The blacks perform a ceremony both to purge themselves of white autonomy and, at the same time, to establish their own sense of Being” (p. 226). However, Maya Angelou (1981), who played the role of the Queen, questioned the Blackness of Genet’s play, claiming that it is “a white foreigner’s idea of a people he did not understand” (p. 172).

The existential identity crisis that Genet’s play dramatizes appears in other black-focused drama of the 1960s, such as that of Adrienne Kennedy’s. During the 1960s, there was great concern in the African-American community about the question of black identity and the meaning of Blackness. This age could be characterized as an age of trapped identity; an identity trapped in skin color. A lot of radical black playwrights, like DuBois, searched for authentic blackness based on skin color. This call was contested by some black playwrights like Adrienne Kennedy, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and white playwrights like Genet, who tried to free blackness from its essentialism addressing a broader existential category. This contestation also entailed constructing representations of white characters by black playwrights. Marvin McAllister (2011) points out,

Black drama of the 1960s was very much rooted in theatrical practices of alienation and estrangement, as stage Europeans experienced a significant shift from white characters created by white playwrights to intensely dramatic white images constructed by black playwrights. (p.15)

In this book, McAllister dissects the history of playing white characters by black actors from colonial and antebellum times to the contemporary period. Significantly, McAllister contributes to the controversial question over the relationship between race and appearance, on the one hand, and identity and representation, on the other hand.

As existentialists and avant-gardists, Kennedy and Genet’s plays challenged the radical, conventional conception of Blackness and black identity. As Kennedy’s plays “demonstrate the traumatized psyche of the oppressed ‘racial’ identity” (Boucher, 2006, p. 85), Genet plunges into untrodden borders of Blackness and black identity as “a black whose skin happens to be white” (Sandarg, 1986, p. 270). Like Genet himself, Genet’s characters appear to have white skin, but are, as I will argue, Black. This is the case in *The Maids*, which does not fit easily the traditional conception of Black drama, but I argue that it should.

Similarly, Kennedy’s plays faced some opposing responses; her plays appeared at odds with the purpose of Black Arts Movement that aimed at agitating African Americans against their miserable situation and at asserting black nationalism. Like Genet, her characters fit uneasily in categories of “black” and “white.” Her plays that were written

during the 1960s, such as *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and *The Owl Answers* (1965), seemed controversial in terms of their drift away from conventional representation of Blackness featured in dramas written by such influential black playwrights as Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. Georgie Boucher (2006) argues, “Kennedy faced the difficulty of being a feminist in a period of masculinist black nationalism as well as a postmodern experimentalist in a period of realist political drama” (p. 90). In addition, Kennedy was criticized for presenting African American characters as schizophrenic as is the case of Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, who is presented as a fragmented character, rejecting her blackness and desiring assimilation into white society. In fact, Kennedy uses mixed-race characters as a trope to dissect the existential possibilities of such a tragic character (Al-Jarrah, 2018a, p. 73).

That said, the pariah class serves as a context for both *Funnyhouse* and *The Maids*. That is, oppression equates all the oppressed beyond the skin color. Graham Martin (1975) argues, “The Blacks are one in a long line of Genet’s underdogs, victims and outcasts, whether maids, criminals, Algerians, or Negroes” (p. 517). That is, as Oreste Pucciani (1963) puts it, Genet “turns the theatre into a Black Mass” (p. 44).

The paper argues that the “Blackness” of Genet and Kennedy’s work concerns less identity than situation. “Blackness” is presented as a trapped identity that trapped Genet’s and Kennedy’s audiences. It betrayed the audience’s preconceived, established meaning of identity and what they expected to see in plays about racial identity both by white-skinned and black-skinned playwrights. Plunka (1992) emphasizes, “The blacks exist only in relation to their mirror image, the whites; in order to recognize their own identity, they must exorcise the spirit of whiteness, just as Claire and Solange purged themselves of ‘Madness’” (p. 226). In fact, Claire and Solange in *The Maids* do not purge themselves of madness as Plunka claims, but they absorb their *otherness* very much as Sarah, the protagonist of Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, does.

In fact, Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and Genet’s *The Maids* present an existential crisis of achieving one’s authentic identity and a true self in the face of racism and oppression. This is what defines their authenticity and their “Blackness.” Despite being different in skin color, Sarah, Claire, and Solange fall into the same existential identity crisis and face the same destiny due to absorbing the symbols of power and falling in the mode of the existential *they-self*; the self which is projected for others. Sarah, Claire, and Solange develop what can be called in Black Existentialism *Black consciousness*, which is not authentic in looking at the world, nor does it signify an authentic mode of existence. These female characters themselves have become the oppressed and the oppressor, at the same time.

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Consequently, their *otherness* becomes their Blackness, which they reject and absorb at the same time.

Adopting a Black existential perspective, I argue that we can consider Black Drama as a drama of the abject human life and misery beyond the color line. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Maids* conceptualize Blackness through the concept of *otherness*. They present *otherness* as constructible rather than biological. By doing so, Kennedy and Genet contest the authenticity of the racial construction of identity. Consequently, Sarah's experience of absorbing the symbols of power speaks to the existential experience that Claire and Solange undertake in *The Maids* as "Black" human beings. I show that the Blackness portrayed in the works of Kennedy and Genet is a trapped identity which results from being entangled between two opposed ontological poles: being and non-being. Therefore, the failure of establishing balance between human agency and their new existential situation leads to an inauthentic identity and a false mode of existence. Oscillating between Blackness and whiteness results in fragmented selves, embodying the existential notion of *no exit*.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. *No Exit: Funnyhouse of a Negro*

In her interview with Wolfgang Binder (1985), Kennedy reiterates, "I took up being a writer because I wanted to break through barriers" (p. 108). Being a black female playwright means to deconstruct these barriers—the barrier of her color, the barrier of her gender, and the barrier of oppression—and to reconstruct her own identity and, in turn, to reconstruct the masculine, radical concept of Blackness, which caused the attack against her plays as I explained earlier.

Kennedy's female protagonists challenge their contemporary time by associating themselves with a society that rejects them. This shows that Kennedy had in mind a more far-reaching theatrical presentation of Blackness and Black identity than merely dramatizing black radical heroes and heroines. Her *Funnyhouse of a Negro* presents a new form of existential revolutionary play that tends to assert the protagonist's will and humanity in front of oppression and slavery. Michael Kaufman (1971) asserts, "[T]he black revolutionary theatre forcefully reasserts the freedom of human will, the freedom to act and in acting the capability to transform substantially the texture and tone of modern life" (p. 449). Kennedy presents Blackness as an existential struggle for identity, for freedom, and for an authentic mode of existence, which slavery hinders.

Funnyhouse of a Negro centers around a trapped identity of a mixed-race female protagonist, Sarah, who keeps oscillating between Blackness and whiteness. She was born to a white woman and a black man. Throughout the performance, Sarah expresses shame for being mixed-race. This shame makes her reject her black father who keeps

returning from the world of the dead to haunt her life and the stage. Sarah identifies herself with four historical characters: Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba. These characters represent Sarah's fragmented identity. This fragmentation leads to her suicide by the end of the play.

Sarah is caught between the problem of identity and identification. That is, as a mixed-race person, she identifies herself with white characters while she is still bound by her racial sign of identity; her body, her father, and her past, which is in conflict with her existential freedom and existence. Sarah's real conflict is not her alienation from both blacks and whites but her alienation from the *self* and not being able to achieve a balance between two opposing states. This is emphasized right from the opening scene through the clash between white and black colors. Across the Black stage, a white woman with a white gown, who is revealed later to be Sarah's mother, seems to be caught in a state of delirium and anxiety, holding a bald head and speaking to herself. Whiteness is emphasized through her dress, through the white lights, and through the white old curtain, which seem to be in conflict with "unnatural Blackness" (p. 12).

In addition to the use of colors, Kennedy uses masks to show Sarah's existential struggle with identity and identification; what she wants to be and what others characterize her to be. The erasure of identity is stressed through the performance. The audience does not see the faces of Sarah's selves: "They look exactly alike and will wear masks or be made up to appear a whitish yellow" (p. 12). Most importantly, under their headpieces springs "a headful of wild kinky hair" (p. 12). Kennedy here shows white masks on a black skin, to recall Frantz Fanon's powerful image. It shows the forged identities of these black and white characters and emphasizes the fact that their racialized identity is irrepressible. Deborah Thompson (1997) argues, "Metaphorical masks lie at the center of the play's understanding of racial identity; indeed, notions of 'black' and 'white' are themselves masks" (para. 8).

Thus, the play not only stages the construction of Blackness, but also shows how whiteness is staged, constructed, and potentially contested. As the play begins, the throne of the Queen's chamber is exposed, revealing a tomb-like bed. In the chamber dwell two of Sarah's inner selves: The Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria. They have conversations about the coming of Sarah's father, the black man. The Duchess of Hapsburg complains, "How dare he enter the castle of Queen Victoria Regina, Monarch of England? It is because of him that my mother died" (p. 12). It has become clear that the black man is considered the cause of the racial plague that leads to Sarah's and her mother's entrapment and destruction. As a result, Sarah's father always begs her for forgiveness: "Forgiveness, Sarah, is it that you never will forgive me for being black?" (p. 22).

Sarah's father, the black man, not only becomes a symbol of Sarah's entrapment with skin color but also with her racialized past. Sarah's father is presented as an outsider; an extended plague from past to present that may be recurrent in the future. Queen Victoria reiterates this idea clearly asking, "Why does he keep returning? He keeps returning forever, coming back ever and keeps coming back forever" (p. 5). The black man becomes a symbol of *bad faith* and trapped identity. Sarah's grandmother wanted Sarah's father to be Jesus and to go to Africa to search in Genesis to save race. She asked him to find revelation through Blackness, but he has been dazzled by whiteness. The Landlady explains, "He had married her mother because he could not resist the light. Yet, his mother . . . said: I want you to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race, return to Africa, find revelation in the black" (p. 22). Sarah's father wanted to escape his Blackness through marrying a white woman. In marrying a white woman, he not only wants to escape his Blackness, but also wants to "marry" whiteness and a white culture. He wants to be recognized as a white man, capable of loving and being loved.

Frantz Fanon (1967) addressed this issue in his seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon argues, in admittedly problematic fashion, that the black man loves and marries a white woman because "by loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am white . . . I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness" (p. 45). This is a moment of *bad faith* because the person who has a racialized body in a moment of *good faith* must not, according to Existential principles, deny the fact that she has a body; in this case, a body that is racialized. Naomi Zach (1977) explicates that skin color has two existential dimensions: *good faith* and *bad faith*. One is related to racialized people and the other is ascribed to those who racialize the human body. People of color, who are in *good faith*, do not evade the fact that they have a body and a skin that are racialized. On the other hand, those who racialize the body are in *bad faith* as they add false racial qualities to the physical characteristics of the person. Therefore, "race is not 'in the body' but 'in the minds' of those who perform racial identifications" (pp. 106-107).

Unless Sarah gets rid of her double consciousness that keeps her tormented and torn between Blackness and whiteness, she cannot achieve a true mode of existence, nor can she achieve a unified self. The Duchess of Hapsburg, who presents Sarah's racial Black consciousness, declares, "We are tied to him unless, of course, he should die" (p. 24). What makes things more complex is the fact that the Duchess's speech carries within its folds the white racist tone which reveres the issue here. That is, the Duchess is one of Sarah's *selves*, but she has a *Black consciousness*. In this case, whiteness is also seen as capable of producing the stereotypical Blackness that causes their estrangement. For example, as the Duchess of Hapsburg and Jesus talk about

their black father and how he contaminated their lives, in one very expressive moment by the end of their conversation, "they suddenly look up at each other and scream, the LIGHTS go to their heads and we see that they are totally bald" (p. 22). It is a moment through which the characters move from being unconscious of their situation to the state of being conscious of their estrangement.

Like her father, and as an existential protagonist, Sarah has a mission to carry out, which is the mission of saving the race and helping her people to get rid of their otherness; their skin color. Therefore, Sarah has become a missionary and nailed her father on the cross to redeem the race. The question that arises now is: which race is Sarah referring to here? Is it the white race or the black one? Obviously, Sarah's grandmother wanted her father to save the black race while Sarah has placed her black father on the cross to redeem and save the white race. She identifies herself with her white mother: "I clung to my mother . . . I wove long dreams of her beauty, her straight hair and fair skin and grey eyes, so identical to mine" (p. 20). Consequently, she wants to save her mother's beauty from being contaminated with Blackness; she wants to prevent her mother's hair from falling out. She sets out her mission and travels to the jungle with her selves looking for the black man to kill.

Funnyhouse of a Negro is thus an example of negative capability and a presentation of uncertainty as well as the dread of human existence. Sarah's dilemma makes her question her faith. Kennedy presents the character of Jesus to carry out the mission. Jesus reiterates, "Through my apocalypses and my raging sermons I have tried to escape him . . . all my life I believed my Holy Father to be God, but I know that my father is a black man" (p. 23). This shows that Sarah does not want to be bound by any ties that trap her identity. Jesus no longer believes in a black god. His *Black consciousness* makes him see everything as black. This is emphasized by the scene, "*In the jungle, RED SUN, FLYING THINGS, wild black grass . . . suddenly the jungle has overgrown the chambers and all the other places with a violence and a dark brightness, a grim yellowness*" (pp. 23-24). He complains, "He is a black Negro. They told me my Father was God but my father is black. He is my father. I am tied to a black Negro" (p. 20).

Sarah questions the ethical and the moral system that surrounds her. Every moral code has become of no use in relation to racism:

For relationships was one of my last religions. I clung loyally to the lie of relationships, again and again seeking to establish a connection between my characters. Jesus is Victoria's son. Mother loved my father before her hair fell out. A loving relationship exists between myself and Queen Victoria, a love between myself and Jesus but they are lies. (p. 7)

Living in a racist society, Sarah becomes anguish and cannot find meaning in the world that surrounds her. She only

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retreats to the meaning that she ascribes to the world as a set of lies. Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) explains, "In anguish I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to drive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself" (p. 40). Sarah is no longer a believer in human relations, nor is she a believer in her religion or in any other ties.

The uncertainty leads Sarah to search for other possibilities for her existence and identity. In one of her monologues in the play, she eloquently expresses her new existential possibility saying,

As for myself I long to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now; pallid like Negroes on the covers of American Negro magazines; soulless, educated and irreligious. I want to possess no moral value, particularly value as to my being. I want not to be . . . It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table. I will visit my friends' apartments which will contain books, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos and oriental carpets. My friends will be white. (p. 14)

In this monologue, Sarah casts light on the racial construction of identity. She expresses her fragmented state of *being*, which is trapped between whiteness and Blackness, between how people designate her and how she characterizes herself. She desires to be more pallid than she is now, but she could be still called a *Negro*. She seems to argue against racism as she expresses her confusion over her racial identity. Being whiter and still be called a *Negro* seems to be indicative. That is, she wants not to be racially designated. She argues against considering skin color as the designation of people. She wants to confirm her free will and to be in *good faith*, so she needs not to repudiate the idea that she has a body that is racialized by other people, the very idea that is not available to her and leads to her alienation.

Kennedy leaves her female protagonist to choose between two opposite states, Blackness and whiteness, to show that free will and determination are not sufficient to face racism. It concerns a dejected black educated Everywoman, who becomes convinced that inanimate white objects and situations encroach on her ability to define herself, on her intellectual and spiritual freedom, evoking in her a sense of turmoil. Naomi Zack (1993) describes this notion of mixed-race people to be doubly alienated. She argues,

The alienation of an American of mixed race is even itself alien. Normally, one is alien if one is different from one's present surroundings because one has been separated from another place and culture in which one had been not alienated or 'natural' . . . the American of mixed black and white race has no previous context from which he can be said to have

been separated, so he is even alienated from normal forms of alienation. (p. 142)

Therefore, these two opposing extremes, Blackness and whiteness, make her wish for annihilating herself: "I want not to be" (p. 14). In "An Interview with Adrienne Kennedy," Elin Diamond (1989) comments on these moments of being someone else: "each is an evasion of ontology" (p. 126). Sarah realizes that she is not free and cannot maintain her complete freedom as an individual. Assimilation and Black *essentialism* seem to be not the suitable solution for this human being who occupies a place of betweenness between whiteness and Blackness.

Georgie Boucher (2006) argues, "Kennedy's characters also portray an inability to find empowered identity by way of an 'Africanness', and thus, neither integration nor Black power remains an easy solution" (p. 89). By the end of the play, as Sarah comes to the realization of being caught in the limited nature of existence as a mixed-race woman, and as a result of self-evasion, she commits suicide. She finds no exit out of her dilemma, but only through death. She has to make a decision to get rid of her anguish. She is left face to face with her *self*. Lewis Gordon (1995) explains Kierkegaard's notion of the existential anguish that it "is a confrontation with the self. In anguish, we face the fact that we are the ones who must make the choices that continue our selves" (p. 40). This confrontation leads Sarah to take the decision of annihilating herself. Sarah fails to be someone else and also fails to achieve an identity, but she succeeds in achieving her wish of "not to be" (p. 12).

The uncertainty and the contestation of authenticity is emphasized by the end of the play. The last characters to speak in the play are the white characters: Raymond and Sarah's Landlady, who represent Funnyhouse Man and Funnyhouse Lady. The play ends with Funnyhouse Lady's comment on Sarah's suicide and her claim that she has killed her father. These two white characters show the unreality of Sarah's claims and the whole performance, which turns out to be a funnyhouse of a free play between Blackness and whiteness. Landlady reports, "The poor bitch has hung herself . . . Her father hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba dies" (p. 26). Raymond deconstructs these claims:

Her father never hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered. I know the man. He is a doctor, married to a white whore. He lives in the city in rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books and oriental carpets. Her father is a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table. (pp. 25-26)

Interestingly, Kennedy has built these characters—Sarah, her selves, and her father—to be deconstructed by the end of the play. Due to her trapped identity, Sarah commits suicide and, consequently, all of her white selves disappear. Sarah's confusion over her identity also creates confusion for

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spectators, especially by the end of the play. The audience cannot determine for sure which account of Sarah's story to believe: Raymond's account or Sarah's. Blackness and Whiteness in this play are presented as signs of contradictions and entrapment through the free play between the Black and White characters in Sarah's funnyhouse.

2.2 *Re-Appropriating Otherness: Jean Genet's The Maids (1948)*

Historically, Black Drama has been deeply concerned with the idea of identity. The question of what Black Drama is, to some extent, has been revolving around on what ground the definition should be placed. There float on the surface such disruptive terms as authentic, inauthentic, and genuine, more genuinely and disingenuous blackness as well as expressions like more black, less black, and not black enough. E. Patrick Johnson (2003) highlights the limitations and restrictions imposed on the concept of Blackness in America. Johnson argues, Blackness is appropriated by African Americans and the result was a political agenda. Therefore, it "excluded more voices than it has included" (p. 3). On the other hand, while the term "authentic" is inevitably contested, the term "Blackness" is more flexible, capable of being appropriated to include more voices. This does not make Blackness any less problematic. Johnson continues that authentic Blackness has been associated with the folk or the working-class blacks and, therefore, such art forms produced by the working-class, like the blues and folklore, are considered more authentic and genuine black pieces (p. 22). However, black middle-class people and their art have been regarded as less authentic and apolitical. The conclusion that Johnson reaches is that Blackness, as a social signifier, is "a site of differences" that are with conflict with one another (pp. 21-22).

One of the first thinkers to address the concept of Black Drama and to settle its rules was W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois (1926) established the Krigwa Players as a setting for what he considered authentic Black Drama. In his introduction to "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement," Du Bois specifies four rules for the play to be considered Black Drama. In 1926, Du Bois declared that the Black play must be about us, by us, for us, and near us. To some extent, the Du Boisian definition of Black Drama reflects the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, which featured in some African-American literary productions of the 1920s. Du Bois called for a positive, idealized, propagandistic vision of Blackness.

Others postulate that if the cast of the play is black-skinned, it can be classified as a Black play. James V. Hatch (2005) argues that many questions were raised about the identity of such plays as Jean Genet's *The Blacks* and Lorraine Hansberry's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. Such questions were raised because of the color of the cast in each play. The actors in the white French playwright Jean Genet's

The Blacks are all black-skinned whereas there is only one black-skinned character in the African-American Hansberry's play (p. 596). In fact, Alain Locke addressed this question in his "Who and What is 'Negro.'" Locke confirms the idea that the authorship of the work of art or literature restricts its universality whereas its idiom, style, and theme are what enable the work to traverse boundaries and transcend borders to achieve its universality. This certainly includes "Black" works written by white authors. Locke continues to aver that "important expressions of Negro material and idiom by white authors would belong as legitimately in a Negro as in a general anthology." (Harris, 1989, pp. 213-214). Leonard Harris (1989) comments on Locke's critical insight noting that these elements—style, idiom, and theme—"are not biological products and, unchanging social phenomena, or the necessary property of a race" (p. 207). In fact, the theme of oppression and the spirit of resistance by the oppressed are what characterize Black Drama.

As I mentioned earlier, I contend that Black Drama presents an existential experience of life, a life of confrontation, challenge, and triumph or defeat. George Bass (1983) points out, "Drama presents the conflicts and reveals the life meanings of a character in a specific situation, and shows how the character comes to make choices that are necessitated by confrontation and change" (p. 62). Perhaps we need to define what a "situation" is in existential philosophy since it is not always identical to dramatic situation. Jean-Paul Sartre (2007) defines the "situation" as the totality of subjective and objective limitations that mark human existence in a given era. These conditions may vary, Sartre argues, but what is stable and firm is the necessity of the individual to be among other people—to live, work, and eventually die—and to be in the world. In Sartre's argument, these conditions have both subjective and objective characteristics. Being subjective means that the individual experiences them and defines her existence in relation to them as a free agent. On the other hand, they are objective because they affect every human being and they function everywhere (p. 42).

That said, slavery presents an oppressive situation for the blacks as all different kinds of oppression present a situation for different oppressed groups all over the world. In this context, what I call the "Black" stage presents a distinctive experience of the oppressed in the world in response to racism, slavery, and oppression, which trap and restrict both the human subjectivity and agency in the world, as I showed throughout my discussion of Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* and will show through my discussion of Genet's *The Maids*. The existential situation that leads the visibly black characters in Genet's *The Blacks* to confrontations with whiteness and with the meaning of Blackness is the existential situation that leads Claire and Solange in Genet's *The Maids* and Sarah in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* to confrontation with their *otherness* in the process of

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confirming their identities. They have fallen in *bad faith* and in the mode of *they-self* due to internalizing *otherness* and absorbing the white symbols of power. They believe that white objects and symbols encroach on their ability to define themselves. Therefore, in this section I argue that Genet's *The Maids* is about Black human beings and, in turn, Blackness and Black Drama embody the drama of the abjected human life and misery beyond the skin pigment.

The search for identity and authentic mode of existence by Sarah in *Funnyhouse* speaks to the self-alienated protagonists in *The Maids*. Genet's play presents the trapped identity of two white female servants enslaved by their self-conceptions and absorption of the symbol of power represented by their Madame. Their Blackness stems from internalizing *otherness*. This new existential presentation of *otherness* participates in understanding the construction of Blackness. In "An Equation for Black People on Stage," African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks (1995) explains this existential notion that in each character there is an other (p. 19). It is very obvious that Genet would have agreed with Parks's idea that the presence of the other is not the problem, but the interest in and the absorption of the other is the source of lacking the authentic identity and living in the realm of trapped identity. Sartre (1956) emphasizes that the source of otherness is something stems from the inside. He points out, "Otherness is, in fact, an internal negation, and only a consciousness can be constituted as an internal negation" (p. 618).

In *The Maids*, Genet dramatizes the idea of *otherness* clearly through the Madame-maid relationship which, in turn, affects the interpersonal relationship between the two maids, Claire and Solange. These interpersonal relationships form the gest of Genet's Black theater. Jerry L. Curtis (1973) argues, "The theatre of Genet poses the basic question of man's existence—not with relation to the universe . . . but rather with regard to man's complicitous relationships to man" (p. 36).

This Black existential relationship is enacted through presenting the dilemma of two female housemaids, Solange and Claire, defining their identities. The two sisters keep trying to copy their Madame's personality onstage through role-playing. While Madame is absent, they put on Madame's dress, jewels, and her make-up and enact Madame's role. They keep swapping the roles as a mistress and a servant. Through this phantasmagoria, they develop several and contradictory feelings toward their own selves, toward their identities, toward each other, and toward their Madame. They abuse each other verbally and physically. They inform on their mistress's lover, Monsieur, by sending a forged letter, which results in him being imprisoned for a short period. Fearing that their mistress will discover the fact that they have been behind her lover's imprisonment, they collude in a plot to kill Madame, but they lack the strength to act upon their plan. By the end of the play, when the mistress

goes to meet Monsieur and leaves the two maids alone, Claire chooses to play the role of Madame and orders her sister to serve her the poisoned tea, which they have prepared for their mistress. Claire drinks the tea and dies, leaving her sister onstage celebrating this murder and their empty victory.

Through a series of transformational processes that the maids undertake, the play presents inferiority and superiority to be self-constructed. As Claire appears on the stage, the audience sees Claire's tragic situation; she is inside Madame's luxurious bedroom stripped of her clothes and "her gestures—arm extended—and tone are exaggeratedly tragic" (p. 7). Her nakedness reveals that she wants to strip herself off her inferior *self*. Like Sarah Claire tries to construct her identity in relation to place and objects of power. She likes to set in Madame's bedroom, putting on her jewels, make-up, and dresses, whereas the real Madame identifies the kitchen to be the maids' domain and kingdom: "It's your domain. You are its sovereigns" (29). Consequently, they tend to get rid of anything that reminds them of their inferior self. We see Solange playing with her kitchen gloves, which upsets her sister, now playing the role of Madame. Like her Madame, she confirms herself as a stranger in the kitchen, rebuking Solange, now playing the role of Claire the servant, "Those gloves! Those eternal gloves! I've told you time and again to leave them in the kitchen" (p. 7).

The play represents a kind of microcosm of human society crushed and oppressed by upper-class values. They are only allowed to what falls out of Madame's table; they are only allowed to Madame's trash—the trash of Whiteness. Solange expresses the oppressive reality of their life:

It's easy to be kind, and smiling, and sweet—ah! that sweetness of hers! when you're beautiful and rich. But what if you're only a maid? The best you can do is to give yourself airs while you're doing the cleaning or washing up! You twirl a feather duster like a fan. You make fancy gestures with the dishcloth. Or like *you*, you treat yourself to historical parades in Madame's apartment. (p. 16)

Thus, their abjected life and oppressive situation have turned Claire and Solange into Blacks; into oppressors and oppressed.

Madame's room as a stage contains multiple selves for the same characters which are achieved by Genet in similar fashion to what Adrienne Kennedy has done in *Funnyhouse*. That is, there is the maid who is Claire, who is Solange, who is the mistress. On the other hand, there is the maid who is Solange, who is Claire, and who is the mistress. This multiplicity leads these protagonists to be trapped between two opposing poles: the oppressed and the oppressor; the slave's *self* and the mistress's *self*. Claire admits to Solange, "I contain within me both vengeance and the maid and give them a chance for life, a chance for salvation. Claire, it's a burden, it's terribly painful to be a

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mistress, to contain all the springs of hatred, to be the dunghill on which you grow" (p.11). Being the oppressor and the oppressed entails oppressing herself and her sister.

Like Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, who associates herself with symbols of power and rejects her black father because he reminds her of her past and inferiority, Claire and Solange reject everything that reminds them of their inferior *self* and, therefore, deny each other. This rejection presents the negativity of the Black situation. Solange declares: "I know I disgust you. I'm repulsive to you. And I know it because you disgust me. When slave love one another, it's not love" (p. 21). In addition, they cannot stand seeing their image through Madame. Solange emphasizes, "Where's Madame? I cannot stand it anymore either. I cannot stand our being so alike" (p. 21). Solange becomes an *other* to herself because the person who accepts an inferior label or status as others see her becomes an other to herself, too (Dobrez, 2013, p. 204).

Claire is also swept by imagining herself possessing Madame's identity, so she abuses her sister: "You smell like an animal. You've brought those odours from some foul attic, where 'the lackeys visit us at night. The maid's room! The garret!" (pp. 9-10). The smell becomes the smell of her inferior self. It is the smell of *bad faith* as Sartre would describe it. Stuart Charme (1991) argues, "Sartre associates foul odors with those representing the inauthenticity and bad faith of the bourgeois world" (p. 39). Genet presents two kinds of odors in this play; the first one is Madame's odor and the second one is Solange's smell. Ironically, each of these is used by the maids to remind each other of their baseness and *otherness*. As a result, the nausea involves Solange, too; the smell of the perfume and flowers becomes the scent of disgust: "I hate your scented bosom. Your ivory bosom! . . . I hate you! (*She spits on the red dress.*)" (p. 12).

The two maids project and appropriate Madame's *otherness* against each other. They always appear guilty in front of each other and under each other's gaze. Sartre (1956) explicates the situation of being objectified by the *other's* Look:

I am guilty first when beneath the Other's look I experience my alienation and my nakedness as a fall from grace which I must assume . . . I am guilty when in turn I look at the Other, because by the very fact of my own self-assertion I constitute him as an object and as an instrument, and I cause him to experience that same alienation which he must now assume. (p. 410)

The gaze that Solange and Claire project towards each other is triangulated by Madame's Look, and they, in turn, see themselves through Madame's eyes. In "The White Gaze and Third Self in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*," Hamzeh Al-Jarrah (2018b) explicates the situation of the objectified person under the other's gaze: "between *I* and *myself* there is the self projected by others for

me. Being trapped in an identity projected by others is the source of their anxiety" (p. 259). This idea becomes very clear as Solange enters Madame's room to strangle her at night. Solange is perplexed and stiffed by Madame's expected awakening which will turn Solange into an inferior, the boarder that Solange cannot transcend. She admits, "It was because I couldn't see her face . . . I lost my strength" (p. 20). It is a moment in which Solange's strength and courage are tried and proved incapable of getting out of her inferiority. She does not consider herself as a free human being as she sees herself, but she looks at herself through the gaze of Madame. Dobrez (2013) explains, "To be a victim of the objectifying Look is to be enslaved . . . As object in the Look of the Other I am vulnerable because, *en soi*, I acquire an outside, something which gives the world a hold on me" (p. 204).

Claire, being caught in *bad faith* and a trapped identity, believes that she possesses Madame's body and, in turn, Madame's body gives her Madame's power. In the scene when Solange slaps her and hands her the mirror to look at herself, she only sees the slap and considers herself to be more beautiful than before. The slap that Claire receives emphasizes her *otherness* and it confirms Solange's *otherness*, too. When Solange slaps Claire, she treats her as an *other*; as a mistress. On the other hand, when Claire looks at herself in the mirror, she recognizes her *self* through her body as it appears to Solange as Madame's body. That is why she feels happier than she is before. Claire distances herself from her true body. She does not feel the strangeness of her body when she looks at her image in the mirror. Her *otherness* stems from inside and not something from the outside. Consequently, when she looks at the mirror, she continues seeing herself as Madame.

Lewis R. Gordon (1995) explains the status of the body in *bad faith*: "In bad faith I deny my body as *mine* through convincing myself that my real perspective is my perspective *beyond* my body" (p. 36). This disembodiment happens to Claire as she presents a new body while she wears Madame's dress and puts on Mistress's make-up. This appearance is self-reflective. That is, Claire does not create a new appearance and a new body just to deceive Solange but also to deceive herself as if she possessed someone else's body. Gordon (1995) explains the existential dimensions of cosmetics: "Cosmetics cover up the body and can be presented as the body. . . . But suppose the deception is self-reflected: I am as I am made up to be . . . I 'am' transcendence, that I 'am' not my body" (p. 37). Claire's imitation of Madame's appearance makes her believe that she has transformed into a mistress. Claire is completely immersed in Madame's identity and when Solange slaps her, she does not recognize herself to be an oppressed and as a slave, but, instead, she transcends her body to recognize herself as an oppressor and as a mistress.

Solange recognizes that her sister, Claire, is trapped and enslaved by the idea of being the mistress: "I wanted to free you. I couldn't bear it any longer. It made me suffocate to see you suffocating, to see you turning red and green, rotting away in that woman's bitter sweetness" (p. 18). Solange wants to free her sister from being an *other* and from falling in a false identity by killing Madame. At the end of the play, Madame goes to meet Monsieur and leaves the two maids alone. We see that Claire has failed to make Madame drink the poisoned tea. Solange is angry and rebukes Claire for her failure. To purge their anxiety, they agree to perform their usual scene. Claire tells Solange that she is going to put on the white dress and acts out Madame's role. Astonishingly, Claire goes behind the screen and puts on the white dress over her black dress "whose black sleeves show" (p. 34). The situation is highly symbolic: the white dress becomes a symbol of Madame's identity and the oppressor's identity whereas the black dress indicates the oppressed *self*. Indeed, this reveals Claire's and Solange's trapped identity. To encourage her sister to be engaged in the scene, Claire starts cursing the servants as being nonhuman, they are the distorted image of the masters, and they are the despised part of the whites. Martin Esslin (2001) argues, "What they hate seeing reflected in each other is the distorted reflection of the world or the secure masters, which they adore, ape, and lathe" (p. 127). Consequently, this play represents negative Blackness, Blackness that adores its oppressor.

Solange postulates that she is Madame's equal when she wears her "black dress" after fancifully believing that she has killed Madame. We know that she has not killed Madame, but what she is supposed to have killed is her sister; her *other self*; her Blackness; her *otherness*. On the other hand, by supposing that she has murdered the white Madame and by postulating that she is Madame's equal, she is confirming her relational existence. That is, she sees her existence through Madame's existence. By the end of the play, Solange appears wearing Madame's white dress, declaring, "Now, I have my own dress. and I'm your equal. I wear the red garb of criminals" (p. 38). By the end, she confirms her Blackness as opposed to Madame's Whiteness, "I pity Madame. I pity Madame's whiteness, her satiny skin" (p. 38). She questions her identity, "who am I? the monstrous soul of servanthood!" (p. 39).

Their *otherness* reaches its full circle and its completion when Claire drinks the poisoned tea. Their actions are based on their choices to define themselves, but they fail to choose freedom and they ironically embrace their maidenhood and their servitude. Although they look for another possibility to be free, they are trapped in their identity as servants and, therefore, they have chosen the wrong path of liberating themselves by absorbing their Madame's character. Both of them make a choice, but these choices lead to the same result and in the same direction. Slavery does not obliterate or annihilate the slave's ability to choose, but it

does limit her choices (Gordon, 1995, p. 17). Claire chooses to kill herself and becomes the slave saint and Solange chooses to be the criminal maid. Solange wants to be at peace with who she is. Her freedom stems from getting rid of her sister who always desires to be a mistress. Gordon explains that for someone to be with at ease with oneself, the person has to accept what she is, the very idea that ignores and obliterates the individual possibilities of what she can be (p. 9). That is, the individual cannot be other than what she is now. In this case, we see Solange evades what she attempts to confront and confronts what she is supposed to evade. They want to confront their Mistress and negate their servitude, but they confirm their servitude and tie to their Madame and her Whiteness. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1956) explains that even the choice of evading the *other* or committing suicide entails falling in the *other's self* (p. 410).

When Claire drinks the poisoned tea and Solange delivers the closing speech, Solange expresses that now they have become true maids, so they are happy and free as they imaginarily killed the hypothetical *otherness* in themselves. Solange concludes, "we are beautiful, joyous, drunk, and free" (p. 43). Ironically, they themselves become the *other* confirming their identities as maids! There are no other possibilities for them to exist beyond their servitude, their Blackness, and their relational existence.

3. CONCLUSION

Funnyhouse of a Negro and *The Maids* present Blackness to be not just a color of *otherness*, but an embodied condition of oppression and a potential, through struggle for authentic consciousness. Due to the absorption of the symbols of power, Sarah, Claire, and Solange develop an *other's self* and fall in an inauthentic mode of existence and in existential *bad faith*. As they cannot achieve their unity of the *self*, they keep oscillating between Blackness and whiteness, revealing the existential *no exit*. They believe that identifying themselves with white objects and characters would enable them to achieve freedom and live authentically.

In the same context of Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*, Genet's *The Maids* shows that the concept of *otherness* is a self-projection due to absorbing the objects and symbols of power and falling in the *other's identity*. Consequently, it presents Blackness as the color of *otherness*. Through multiple transformational processes undertaken by the two Black female servants and through enacting Madame's personality, the play details how their oppressive reality leads them to develop oppressor and oppressed identities. Ironically, these two female servants believe that developing an oppressor character and absorbing their Madame's identity is their way toward achieving freedom and it is an outlet out of their misery. This leads to their downfall by the end of the play as Solange kills Claire who represents her *otherness*.

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