

## **African spiritual retentions and racial hybridity in Adrienne Kennedy's plays**

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines resonances of African ritual practice as staged in Adrienne Kennedy's plays *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*, and interrogates the complexities of racial hybridity as scripted in these works. Kennedy infuses these plays with African traditional epistemologies of cosmic order, cosmic retribution, and customary beliefs about healing, and connects them to the search for identity by African American mixed race characters. The article argues that epiphanies of self-consciousness in cross-racial encounters are reinforced by acts of blood-bonding and African indigenous technologies of healing. In these plays, identity and identification, the sacred and the political, the individual and the communal are intrinsically bound. The article illuminates how Kennedy deploys African ritual practices as a strategy to forge African/African American imaginaries and affiliations.*

**Key words:** African cultural memory, African-American ritual drama, racial hybridity, cosmic order, embodied experience

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## Introduction

The scripting of Africa in African American theatre is commensurate with the search for identity and acts of self-determination. This can be seen in Adrienne Kennedy's plays *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*. These plays remember and re-member the African spiritual past to underscore the relevance of ritualized performance to African American identity construction, mixed racial consciousness, and inter-cultural heritage. The two plays were originally performed in the late 1950s and early 60s at a time when African Americans were beginning to explore their African roots as part of the Civil Rights movement which sought to assert the rights of people of colour. The selected plays are examples of dramas that interlace African American theatre practice and identity performance with African beliefs about the unifying principle of metaphysical forces and traditional healing technologies. By invoking Africa, such plays underscore the essence of the characters' epiphanies of self-consciousness and their rootedness in African collective spiritual imaginaries. In her writing, Kennedy deploys African ritual practices as a strategy to forge African—African American imaginaries. This article reads African understandings of life, death, kinship bonding, and ancestral links as scripted in the two selected plays of Adrienne Kennedy.

Writing in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, Paul Carter Harrison argues, "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" (Harrison 2002: 5). Harrison theorizes this spiritualized aesthetics through his notion of *Nommo*—"the physical-spiritual life force" that animates the dramatic mode by demonstrating "the intersection between spiritual invocation and theatrical practice throughout the African Diaspora" (Harrison *ibid*: 9). This article explores African Diasporic performance rituals in the plays of Kennedy with a focus on the interconnections between biracial identity performance, cultural memory and African spiritual imaginaries. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*, Kennedy dramatizes the experiences of multiracial descendants embodied in the figures of Negro Sarah and Clara Passmore. These figures express a biracial, intercultural identity by conjuring a number of frontiers, Black and White, death and re-birth, entitlement and dispossession, violence and sacred healing technologies, and African and Euro-American encounters. The protagonists of these dramas interrupt the polarities between these frontiers and, through ritualized gestures and African-inspired sacred meanings, destabilize normalized discourses of racial belonging.

## Fragmented kin and cosmic healing technologies

Adrienne Kennedy's one-act play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is preoccupied with interconnections between ritual practice and the search for a sense of identity by mixed race characters. This play revitalizes African religious observances to underscore their significance and relevance to biracial experiences, specifically to reflect on how African American characters negotiate their African heritage. It gives insight into what theatre scholar and critic Sandra L. Richards calls an Afro-diasporic drama that is created to help African Americans to "more fully embrace the African side of their double consciousness"; a theatre that looks "*forward* to a return to Africa" (Richards 1999: 92). This kind of drama invokes resonances of African religious observances and practices of ritual and/or sacrifice to reinforce the link between Black spiritual consciousness and identity performance. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* demonstrates such resonances, and can be understood from the perspective of ritual performance, particularly through the performance of conjuring (Pryse &

Spillers, 1985). In these works, conjuring—understood as the performance of calling forth African ancestral power and metaphysical forces to instil a sense of assertiveness—animates African spiritual memory.

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* is a one-act play that takes the form of ritual performance. This Obie Award-winning play was originally produced in 1964 at the East End Theater under the direction of Michael Kahn. Tropes of cross-racial identity performance, mysticism, and the metaphysical pervade the setting of this play. It stages Sarah, a young ‘Negro’ woman who conjures several historical figures to incarnate her struggles with her biracial identity within a racist American society. It also casts the Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria who obsessively look at themselves in a mirror and are paranoid about their falling hair. There is also a hunchbacked Jesus, and the African liberation leader Patrice Lumumba, who walks about with a shattered head and carries an ebony mask. Sarah is a prismatic character whose incarnations are cast as “One of Herselves”—her inner ghosts who embody the contradictions of her racial experiences and highlight the desire to legitimate her gendered and racialized belonging (Sawyer 2006: 333).

Negro-Sarah conjures each “One of Herselves” in an attempt to repress memories of racism and miscegenation. She is the daughter of an African father and a light-skinned mother who “looked like a white woman” (Kennedy 1988: 8). In the play, Sarah’s “selves” narrate the history of trauma and violence that she embodies: her parents endured a loveless marriage; the mother was supposedly raped by her Black husband, and she later became depressed, mad, and eventually died. Her father, whom Sarah resents because he “haunted [her] conception” and “diseased [her] birth” (Kennedy 4) hanged himself in one story fragment, while in another Sarah bludgeoned him with an ebony mask, and now this dead father keeps returning to haunt her. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* concludes with the tragic and violent ending of Sarah’s life as she commits suicide. This play is a compelling engagement with bi-racial subjectivities and hidden transcripts that give insight into African metaphysical and cosmic forces.

Set against the backdrop of the 1950s racial situation in the United States, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* deploys African meanings to demonstrate the embodied experience of racism and Blackness. Kennedy, herself biracial, reveals that she received inspiration to write this play during a visit to West Africa, specifically Ghana in the early 1950s. In her memoir *People Who Led to My Plays*, she writes, “I learned that I belonged to a race of people who were in touch with a kingdom of spirituality and mystery beyond my visual sight” (Kennedy 1996: 122). It is quite significant that Kennedy wrote *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers* after a trip to West Africa. She remembers how the trip inspired and transformed her writing which began to show “a new power, a fierce new cadence” (*People*, *ibid.*). She was able to trace her ancestral roots to Africa, as shown in her newly-found kinship link to West African statesmen Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba. She writes about being inspired by the statue and photographs of Nkrumah and recalls wearing a skirt that had an illustration of his face, and declares, “I felt when I wore it that I had sealed my ancestry as West African” (*People*, 122). At the time of her visit, the Continent was mourning the assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. She writes, “Just when I had discovered the place of my ancestors, just when I had discovered this African hero, he had been murdered. Ghana was in mourning ... Even though I had known of him so briefly, I felt I had been struck a blow. He became a character in my play ... a man with a shattered head” (*People*, 119). African sights, (princesses, palaces, colours) objects, (statues, masks, cloths, musical instruments) sounds, (owls in trees) and literary writers (Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, Efua Sutherland, Lawrence Durrell) effected perceptible transformations in Kennedy’s writing. These figures, sights, and sounds emblematically reinforced her perception and depiction

of Africa and African-ness in her plays. She subsequently deployed them to assert a connection between herself and figures of African cultural, social, and political landscapes. This performance of memory and identification asserts African and African-American agency. Even more pointedly, it informs her dramaturgical strategy of intersecting identity performance with the sacred and the metaphysical.

The playwright thus combines lived experience with the fictional to show embodied memory. Such experience includes not only African ancestral history, but also recollections of the hostility, competitiveness, anger, and anxieties of growing up and living in a racist context. Specifically, she reveals in an interview with Suzan-Lori Parks (1996) the challenges of being a Black playwright at the time of her writing, and facing New York critics and audiences who considered her play *Funnyhouse* controversial because of the violence presented in the play. The monologues in this play, she says, were inspired by the stories that her mother told her—stories which “were loaded with imagery and tragedy, darkness and sarcasm and humour. She could describe a day when she was sitting on the porch in Georgia and what happened ... and my father always gave speeches about the cause, the Negro cause” (Parks 1996). Kennedy admits further in an interview with Wolfgang Binder (1985: 104) that *Funnyhouse* was “the cult play of the season until *Dutchman* came along.” The protagonists of her writing thus echo the temporal and spatial specificities of the racial context in the United States.

Arguably, *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers*, in spite of the aesthetics that alienated Kennedy from her audiences and critics, prefigured the Black empowerment movement that gained currency in the 1960s in the United States. Her protagonists demonstrate the anxieties, memories, trauma, and the embodied experiences of racism of the time. This is shown in the scripting of the fragmented psyche that the “selves” animate. For instance, Negro-Sarah reflects:

Victoria always wants me to tell her of whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones. For as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning (5).

She elaborates further:

It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table...My friends will be white. I need them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro. For, like all educated Negroes—out of life essential—I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself. (6)

These extracts illustrate Negro-Sarah’s dis-identification with her Black heritage. The symbols of Europeans cultural heritage (such as antiques and ruins) are juxtaposed with recollections of blackness as evil and repulsive. The juxtaposition underscores the character’s self-hatred, which is the result of her attempt to reconcile her racial identities. Negro-Sarah’s acts of memorialization and identification thus demonstrate the psychological pressure on biracial people in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century America who had to see the world with a racially bifocal vision.

Sarah’s “selves” perform Africa and recall African meanings to negotiate her biracial identity and establish a sense of belonging. They are obsessively preoccupied with connections between kin, ancestry, death, and the exegesis of human destiny. In *Funnyhouse*, biracial identity performance, cultural origins, and African spiritual economies intersect. Adrienne Kennedy stages Sarah as a character who does not know how to act on her legacy of “double consciousness,” to recall W.E.B. Dubois and Richards (1999: 92), as she struggles to contain the racial burdens of her

African and European heritage. *Funnyhouse* demonstrates a symbolist aesthetic in ritual dramas that invoke an African-centered conceptualization of belonging. This sense of belonging is anchored in rituals that reinforce kinship and blood-bonds. A recurrent theatrical feature of this play is the “hair-falling” rituals in which Sarah’s “selves” partake. “My one defect”, she writes, “is that I have a head of frizzy hair, unmistakably Negro kinky hair, and it is indistinguishable” (6). This sense of self-deprecation is reinforced through the stage directions and ritualized memorialization of the hair fetish:

*(She screams and opens her red paper bag and draws from it her fallen hair. It is a great mass of dark wild hair. She holds it up to him. He appears not to understand. He stares at it.)* It is my hair. *(He continues to stare at her.)* When I awakened this morning it had fallen out, not all of it but a mass from the crown of my head that lay on the centre of my white pillow (10).

The act is recurrent, the image repetitive, as in “It begins with the disaster of my hair. I awaken. My hair has fallen ... Yes. It is my hair. In the mirror I see that although my hair remains on both sides, clearly on the crown and at my temples my scalp is bare” (11). “If I did not despise myself then my hair would not have fallen and if my hair had not fallen then I would not have bludgeoned my father’s face with an ebony mask (13). And, “My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman’s” (20). Further, “Her mother’s hair fell out, the race’s hair fell out because he [her father] left Africa” (18). Sarah’s obsession with the hair is a metaphoric referencing of the trauma experienced by biracial subjects who had to contend with the irrational categories of racial imaging in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America. “The identificatory performances of Kennedy’s personae,” writes Elin Diamond, “bring to view psyches brutalized by racism” (1997: 112). The play shows this through Sarah’s compulsive enactments and obsession with staring at herself in the mirror, asserting “I want not to be” (5), and her morbid desire to kill her Black father. The brutalized psyche in *Funnyhouse* is violent and wishes not to recognize herself as Black, and alienates herself from her Black identity. This performance of identification is “a discourse that mingled private fantasy and colonial history” (Diamond, *ibid*: 116).

A number of readings can be made concerning the interplay of identity performance, life, death, and the cultural ritual of head-shaving, particularly with reference to African religious observances. Generally, as has been noted by a few scholars (Sieber 2000; Houlberg 1979), the ritual practice of head-shaving is common across a number of African societies including Ghanaian, Nigerian, and others. It is performed at birth to welcome the child into the world of the living and during naming ceremonies to ensure their protection. It is also done at the time of death to inscribe loss, and provide comfort in mourning. Head-shaving and curing are hence a significant part of African birth and funeral rites. The practice is also evident in the Southern African traditional *Peolo* ceremony of shaving the hair of the children of a deceased parent at the time of burial. This ritual is a cultural corporeal inscription that is done to deal with the trauma and loss experienced after the death of a parent, and it epitomizes a culturally specific healing technology and method of transmitting memory. The physical marking of head shaving symbolically reflects on the psychological release from trauma. In the case of *Funnyhouse*, failure to perform the necessary rites leads to the continued trauma, as seen in Sarah’s repetitive mimicking of her mother’s trauma:

Mother: Black man, black man, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me and now my skull is shining (4).

Landlady/Sarah: My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman's. And I am yellow but he, he is black, the blackest one of them all... I always did know she thought she was somebody else, a Queen or something, someone else (8).

The repetition of the trauma highlights the characters' experiences of alienation and underscores the need to perform the necessary rites of loss and healing.

Shaving, as Schapera (1938) reports is also done to protect the bereaved, who due to the procreative condition of "heat" associated with sexual intercourse poses a danger to themselves and those that they come into contact with. Kennedy appropriates the metaphor of hair-loss and head curing in *Funnyhouse* to shed light into the dangers of omitting these practices, and their relevance to acts of self-determination. The play corroborates this through the staging of the father's incessant knocking and return, whom although Sarah "hoped he was dead. Yet he still comes through the jungle" (8, 21). The father returns even after Sarah's attempt to kill her by bludgeoning "his head with an ebony skull that he carries about with him" (8). The staging of the father begging for forgiveness and reconciliation, "Sarah, I know you are a child of torment ... Forgive my blackness" (18); coupled with the plea to "return to Africa" to "heal the pain of the race, heal the misery of the black man" (19) all hint at the need for propitiation and reconciliation. This message is shown theatrically through two symbolic dramatic representations, firstly the staging of the father-cum-Jesus who appears at the end of the play adorned with a nimbus above his head (20) and secondly through the way the jungle covers the stage completely and envelopes Negro-Sarah's chambers (20). These images signify the possibilities of restoring previously severed kinship and the possibility of the redemption of a race by reconciling with the African spiritual heritage.

The embodied ritual practice of head-shaving is reminiscent of other African corporeal inscriptions of loss, such as the Ibo people's *Ogbanje* ritual that Nigerian author Chinua Achebe narrates in his renowned classical novel, *Things Fall Apart*. A West African ritual practice, the term *Ogbanje*, literally means "the come and go child", and it evokes the belief in the spirits of children who were stillborn or died young, who return to their mothers' wombs to be re-born. These spirit children are scarred at death to identify them as *ogbanje*. The *ogbanje* child's malicious cycle of birth, death, and re-birth can only be broken by the discovery of a buried object that ties them to the spiritual world. Both the *Peolo* and the *Ogbanje* ritual practices offer embodied inscriptions of African spiritual memory and identification.

For the pre-colonial Botswana people, the ritual of *Peolo*, or "go beolwa" [to remove hair] was a customary practice of curing the bereaved. Social anthropologist Isaac Schapera (1939: 94) explains that "*Fa motho a sa alafiwa morago ga loso, o a tla a senyege mmele le tlhaloganyo, a lwale a swe*". [Failure to heal the bereaved person often leads to psychic and bodily disintegration, and body ailments that can cause death.] Adrienne Kennedy uses the hair as a mnemonic device from the African cultural repertoire to underscore the power of kinship and racial ties, as well as the repercussions of estrangement from one's kin and culture. When it is read within the atmospherics of the *Peolo* ritual, Sarah's obsession with her "frizzy" hair, the ritualized calling forth of her mother's trauma, and her fantasy about her father's hairless skull characterizes her stupor and catatonia—the psychological marks of her memories of American race relations, cultural estrangement, and loss. Failure to resolve and assert her agency, to find identification with either her Black or White heritage, to reconcile with her Black African father—to "be cured" of her traumatic experiences of alienation—leads to her violent sacrificial act of suicide. Sarah's father is the sacrificial outlet for her anger and the trauma caused by the violence of racist

oppression. He is simultaneously the “sacrificeable” victim that she vents out on, to recall René Girard (1977: 4), and the lost object of identification from which she attempts to disassociate herself. To echo Diana Taylor (2003: 16), the hair—the indigenous ritual—is used to resist the colonial archival process of racial belonging, and functions as the repertoire that asserts ancestral and kinship affiliations between Sarah and her father. Kennedy appropriates the African indigenous hair rite as a theatrical strategy that functions as a vehicle of epiphany; it mnemonically reinforces Sarah’s attempts to assert biracial consciousness.

In the Botswana cultural imaginary, the *Peolo* ritual practice is also performed to make sure that the dead do not return improperly to the living. It is an act of ancestral veneration that sets them at peace in the world of the dead. The *Peolo* ritual illuminates the father’s incessant return in *Funnyhouse*. Without full cognizance of its significance, Sarah constantly asks, “Why does he keep returning? He keeps returning forever, keeps returning and returning and he is my father ... I am bound to him unless, of course, he should die ... Yet, he is dead, but dead he comes knocking at my door” (21). The returning father embodies the return of repressed memory. He is suppressed within her psyche, but he determines to be conjured into consciousness. The returning father is a contrivance that performs the spirit-world presence that resists erasure through “echoes in the bone”, to borrow from Joseph Roach (1996: 34). Roach reads echoes in the bone as “the cultural politics of memory, particularly as they are realized through communications between the living and the dead” (34). The notion of “echoes in the bone”, according to Roach, refers to a strategy of performance that empowers the living through acts of memory and forgetting. This returning body—another vehicle of racial and cultural epiphany—reinforces the spiritual energy that connects the dead with the living, calling forth the bonding essence of ancestral veneration and remembrance. The father keeps returning because he has not been properly venerated. He haunts Sarah not only to seek filial affection and remembering, but also to be re-membered into the larger cultural history of African-America in its recuperation of Africa:

They told me my father is God but my father is black. He is my father. I am tied to a black Negro... I am bound to him unless, of course, he should die. But he is dead. And he keeps returning. Yet, he is dead, but dead he comes knocking at my door (21).

Adrienne Kennedy tropes the ancestral remembrance tradition theatrically through the way the jungle engulfs the entire stage in the final scenes of the play. As the stage directions elaborate, “the jungle has overgrown the chambers and all the other places with a violence and a dark brightness” (20). Kennedy reverses the trope of a naturalized Africa by conjoining traditional knowledge—the animistic conceptualization of the unity between humans and the natural environment in African spiritual thought—with possibilities to transform subjectivities. Symbolically, the play concludes with the father rushing upon the dead hanging figure of Sarah, sealing their blood-bond. The stage directions state, “The Negro Sarah is standing perfectly still, we hear the KNOCKING, the Lights COME on quickly, her father’s black figure with bludgeoned hands rushes upon her, the LIGHT GOES BLACK and we see her hanging in the room” (22). She, like her father, commits suicide. Thus, Africa reclaims Sarah through sacrificial acts of death and kinship determination. Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse* thus dramatizes the autochthonous performance (Roach *ibid*: 42) that evokes Sarah’s cultural and racial belonging.

Another spiritual economy at work is the displacement of retribution. Kennedy connects Sarah’s violent act of shattering her father’s head to African meanings of embodied rituals of blood sacrifice. The blood ritual of shattering the father’s head and spilling his blood is an attempt to exorcise the bond between father and daughter. The father’s carved head and bleeding face

symbolically underscores Sarah's desire to rupture the connection to her African heritage. Blood sacrifice figures symbolically as a metaphor for Sarah's guilt, which can only be appeased or redressed by another sacrificial rite of bloodletting—her own self-sacrifice by suicide. The father's elimination is a grief that demands expiation (Roach *ibid*: 35). Blood-letting constitutes a breach in cosmic balance, according to African cosmological knowledge, and thus demands cosmic retribution. In the African ritualized traditions of human blood sacrifice, as Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka dramatizes in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), the sacrificial victim offers communal healing, resurgence, and continuity. The character of Olunde's ritualistic self-sacrifice in this play performs this belief about a sacred, regenerative death. This act offers René Girard's "act of violence without the risk of vengeance" (1977: 13); an act that restores cosmic balance in accordance with Yoruba cosmology. Accordingly, Kennedy's protagonist resuscitates the ritualistic act of redress by sacrificing herself. She sheds her own blood as a symbolic propitiatory offering for her guilt about the violence and severance of her ties to Africa. Sarah's violent self-sacrifice thus functions as a ritualized "curative procedure" (Girard *ibid*: 21) that displaces the obligation for retribution. Symbolically, this act of blood sacrifice re-connects Sarah to her father, African America to Africa.

Further, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* offers the reality of distorting mirrors that reflect and refract the experience of fragmentation and the debilitating discourses of racialized belonging on mixed race characters. Sarah's experiences of fragmentation and alienation become particularly poignant at the site of the mythopoetic space of the funnyhouse. The funnyhouse is the space within which the uncanny, the fantastical, and the "real" are summoned to negotiate Sarah's mixed race identity and multi-cultural heritage. For Sarah, "reality" exists most perceptibly within the funnyhouse because it "corporealizes" distortion, anxiety, and trauma—experiences that define her existence. The corporeality of trauma, estrangement, and fragmentation is expressed through the enclosed space of the funnyhouse, a space that is simultaneously carnivalesque, surrealistic, and symbolic. By trading in the metaphysical, the funnyhouse offers alternative modes of signification and enables the conceptualization of blended identities. Outside the funnyhouse, Sarah is confronted by constrictions of institutionalized racial borders in American culture. She is constrained from conceptualizing an alternative, reconstructed identity outside of the funnyhouse, leading to her internalized self-hatred and nihilistic repression of her father. Her experiences reveal the effects of a violent racist culture on biracial subjects in American history.

### **Identification and the politics of the occult**

In *The Owl Answers* Adrienne Kennedy elaborates on the insidious presence of the long lasting negative effects of a racist culture on mixed race characters. Specifically, she scripts biracial experience within the backdrop of spiritual and metaphysical landscapes. In this play, a young woman named Clara Passmore is barred from attending the funeral of her white father in London. Like Sarah in *Funnyhouse*, Clara has mixed racial heritage as she is the daughter of "The Richest White Man in the Town" and "somebody that cooked for him" (*The Owl Answers*: 34). Now adopted by Reverend Passmore, Clara is denied access to her father's funeral by Shakespeare, Chaucer, and William the Conqueror. Instead, they have her imprisoned in the Tower of London. The play scripts a chilling sacrificial event in which the figure of Clara's mother (who is part Black mother and part Reverend's wife) stabs herself with a butcher's knife on top of a burning High Altar in the Tower of London. Next to the dead mother, Negro Man tries to rape Clara and she

attempts to stab him with the blood-stained knife. Clara's dead Father rises as she transfigures into an owl.

The burning altar in *The Owl Answers* is a sacrificial rite that recalls the *Mogoga* ceremony, a traditional funeral ritual from among the Tswana peoples of Southern Africa. The *Mogoga* ceremony is emblematic of propitiation and conciliation rites. It occurs within a couple of days following the announcement of death, and it is the first of the funeral rites that the dead and immediate kin partake. This ritual deploys the sacrificial beast (a cow, goat, or sheep) from which special parts are offered to the ancestors as burnt offering, and buried on the ground to cleanse and heal the earth and/or environment. Other parts of the beast are fed to the bereaved to heal them of the trauma of loss. The bereaved partake in this ritual of healing by being present at the burial site, and partaking in the sacrificial feast. This process is called "*go rolwa puane*" ["to detoxify"] in the Setswana language. Read as a *Mogoga* re-remembering, purifying, and bonding ritual, the burning sacrificial altar in *The Owl Answers* serves as a metaphor for establishing kinship with the Victorian ancestors, thereby legitimating Clara's biracial identity and sense of belonging. She cries out desperately against the impending severance from her father: "Let me into the Chapel. He is my blood father. I am almost white, am I not?" (*The Owl Answers*: 29) The *mogoga* ritual practice illuminates Clara's experience of loss and rupture, and underscores the dangers of severed kinship ties, cultural loss, and the consequences of omitting necessary burial rites:

I called the Warder and told him my father had just died, that we had had been visiting London together, the place of our ancestors and all the lovely English, and my father just died (32)

I must get into the chapel to see him. I must. He is my blood father. God, let me into his burial (43).

Clara embodies the belief to be cured of trauma and to be sealed to her "blood" kin. Read as part of the preparatory sacrificial and ceremonial rite, the burning Altar suggests Clara's epiphany of biracial consciousness—symbolically shown through the protagonist's incessant invocation of the metaphysical power of the blood knot. Kennedy concludes this play with a sonic moment that reconnects Clara and her white Father, but also implicitly echoes a memory of her Black mother. This sonic ritual moment involves Clara's transformation and transfiguration into an owl. She communicates in owl sounds, "Ow ... oww" (45). Her ritual exhortation of God is heard by the owl, "I call God and the Owl answers" (43). God is silent, but the owl is an active presence. The owl's answer is a preparatory ritual that symbolically sets the stage for Clara's spiritual and material transfiguration. The owl embodies belief in ancestral worship and animistic coexistence. We read that Clara was given the name "Owl blood" (31), and:

BASTARD'S BLACK MOTHER: Clara, you were conceived by your Goddam Father who was The Richest White Man in the Town and somebody who cooked for him. That's why you're an owl. (*Laughs*) (30).

He told me you are an owl, ow, ow, oww, I am your beginning, ow. You belong here with us owls in the fig tree (35).

Animism in this play destabilizes the boundaries between the real and fantastical, the physical and the spiritual, human and nature, Black and White. This reading is enhanced by the playwright's actual experiences in Africa, which, she states, informed the drama of *The Owl Answers*. Adrienne Kennedy writes about her experiences with the owls outside a guest house in Ghana. "At night", she narrates, "I felt enclosed in their sounds. In the mornings I would try to find the owls in the trees but could never see them. Yet at night in the shuttered room, under the huge white canopied nets, the owls sounded as if they were in the very center of the room" (*People*

*Who Led to My Plays*, 121). Kennedy's memory of the owls and their potent sounds ritualistically connects her to Africa. Accordingly, Clara's acoustic ritual act of recalling and echoing the owl sounds links her to her Black African ancestor.

Moreover, *The Owl Answers* scripts a blend of religious rituals that legitimate hybrid racial identities. The play stages Christian rites and African retentions of sacrifice, violence, and incarnations of the sacred through figurations of the High Altar, sacrificial offerings, the sanctification of Clara as Virgin Mary, and the doctrine of transfiguration. For example, we read that she kneels and prays, "I call God and the owl answers... I am only yearning for our kingdom, God... There is a way from owldom" (43). This act of identity search indicates Clara's attempt to find freedom and redemption, and it takes place at the crossroads of Christianity and African spirituality. The search underscores the dilemma experienced by biracial subjects.

Like Jesus Christ who, according to the Christian doctrine, left his father's presence, became sacrificed, and later transfigured before re-joining his father, Clara is denied access to her father and she too transfigures and reunites with her father. Despite attempts by the Victorian Age figures to separate them, Clara and her dead father end up being united as transfigured, transcendental figures. Significantly, Clara's reunion with her father materializes only *after* she has embraced her African heritage, as emblematically depicted through the owl transformation—the symbolic act of "looking forward to a return to Africa", as suggested by Sandra Richards. In a ritualistic gesture that involves praying and sacrificing herself like her Black Mother who is also "Virgin Mary, Christ's bride", Clara falls at the side of the burning alter and partakes in the "cry for the deaths of Marys" (44). Like the sound of the owl, the cry of deaths signals ancestral memory and echoes the desire to assert her agency. This sonic event gives insight into the resurgence of sacrificial rites and their connection to acts of self-assertion. Correspondingly, *The Owl Answers* offers the link between spiritual apprehension and political agency (Richards 1999: 93).

## Conclusion

Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers* conjure the cultural links between Africa and African America by tracing kinship origins to Africa through mythic and metaphysical landscapes. The plays also offer a powerful theatrical articulation of African beliefs about the unappeased dead, the spiritual value of the mysterious, and the significance of recuperating African ancestral power. These plays script the presence of Africa in (African) America by re-memorizing African spiritual enactments and making them relevant to the search for identity by African American characters. They transact the bonding value of metaphysical forces to legitimate biracial identity. Embodied rituals in these plays revitalize African spirituality and ancestral culture in African diasporic contexts, offering insights into the notion of racial hybridity and experiences of biracial characters.

Ritualized observances in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers* corroborate arguments about the continuum of African spiritual values in these two plays. Specifically, they elaborate the relevance of the unifying principles of metaphysical forces and traditional epistemologies to characters' acts of self-determination. This includes negotiating biracial identity by overcoming experiences of anxiety, self-deprecation, and calling forth spiritual forces that bind and heal fragmented kin as part of the process of establishing and/or legitimizing biracial belonging. The plays examined here dramatize the redeployment of sacred violence and/or bloodshedding observances that do not evoke vengeance, as Girard (1977: 13) would have it, but privilege acts that express the connectedness between the individual, kin, the community and

nature to maintain cosmic balance (Soyinka 1976: 144). These performances underscore “the link between spiritual apprehension and political agency” (Richards 1999: 93). These and other African American ritual plays exemplify dramas that elaborate a symbolic *return* to Africa and appropriations of African spiritual practices to assert biracial agency. While these plays affirm the cultural heritage of African America, they also function to demonstrate the link between biracial acts of memory and self-determination in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America.

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