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**Making the Invisible Visible: Black Women, Broadway, and Post-  
Blackness**

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**Making the Invisible Visible: Black Women, Broadway, and Post-  
Blackness**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

# **Making the Invisible Visible: Black Women, Broadway, and Post-Blackness**

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Prior to the fall of 2011, only eight African American female playwrights had ever been produced on Broadway. In this context, the 2011-2012 Broadway season made theatre history when it featured the work of three black women playwrights: *Stick Fly* by Lydia Diamond, *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall and an adaptation of *The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* by Suzan-Lori Parks. This project, which focuses on Diamond's *Stick Fly* and Hall's *The Mountaintop* as Broadway debuts of new plays, seeks to situate these works within a post-black aesthetic that rejects narrow and limiting constructions of blackness. This project also recognizes the significance of Diamond and Hall as female African American playwrights whose texts allow for complex representations of black womanhood, and proposes that the relationship between post-blackness and black feminism is fluid and permeable, allowing us to better understand both the meanings of blackness and the experiences of black women.

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## INTRODUCTION

The notion of Broadway as the pinnacle of theatrical achievement persists, and a production in this space promises entry into the archive of great American theatre. Access to the Broadway stage is highly restricted, with the majority of those theatres owned and controlled by three families, and a relatively small “old boy’s network” of white producers with the finances and connections to gain access to those spaces. A white patriarchal capitalist space, Broadway has historically considered the work of racial minorities and women to be risky business.

According to Patricia Cohen, women write fewer than one in eight shows on Broadway, a figure that belies the fact that as recently as the 2010-2011 season, there were no Broadway plays written by women. Broadway audiences are also overwhelmingly white; demographics from the Broadway League show that 78% of all tickets were purchased by Caucasian theatregoers in both the 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 Broadway seasons -- an improvement over the 2010-2011 Broadway season where a whopping 83% of theatregoers were white. This disparity in attendance is routinely used to justify the exclusion of writers of color on the basis that there is no audience for their work, a logic which also assumes that white audiences have no desire to see plays by and about racial minorities.

In this context, the 2011-2012 Broadway season made theatre history when it featured three works by African American female playwrights: *Stick Fly* by Lydia Diamond, *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall and an adaptation of *The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* by Suzan-Lori Parks. Prior to the fall of 2011, only eight African-American women playwrights had ever been produced on "The Great White Way": Lorraine Hansberry, Ntozake Shange, Vinette Carroll, Whoopi Goldberg, Anna Deavere Smith, Suzan-Lori Parks, Regina Taylor and Sarah Jones. Lloyd Richards, who directed Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and was himself the first black director on Broadway, once said, "[Broadway] still has the connotation of Mecca. Who doesn't want to go to Mecca?" (qtd. in Ndounou 59). Following in Hansberry's footsteps, within the span of three months three more black female playwrights reached the Promised Land, making this a significant moment for both black women and black theatre in America, and certainly worthy of greater examination. This study will focus on *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall and *Stick Fly* by Lydia Diamond as Broadway debuts of new plays. Because Parks' Broadway debut came in 2002 with *Topdog/Underdog*, and *The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* is an adaptation, this show falls outside of the scope of my thesis.

This study seeks to situate *Stick Fly* and *The Mountaintop* as "post-black," a historiographical and aesthetic designation that marks "a departure from, though indebtedness to, the dominant ideological sensibilities and representational modalities of segregation-era and Black Nationalist cultural production, especially those of the



Black Arts Movement” (Elam and Jones ix). No longer beholden to racial uplift and/or liberation as the sole purpose for black theatre, the efforts of post-black artists are rooted in black culture but not restricted by it. Post-black is not meant to suggest the end of blackness, but rather “it points, instead, to the end of the reign of a narrow, single notion of Blackness. It doesn’t mean we’re over Blackness; it means we’re over our narrow understanding of what Blackness means” (Dyson, *Introduction Who’s Afraid* xv). To that end, these post-black dramatists reject limiting and limited notions of “authentic” blackness, and move beyond “positive” representations of black folk dictated by the politics of respectability, to embrace a fuller range of possibilities for black identity and challenge notions of what constitutes a black play.

This study also recognizes the significance of Diamond and Hall as female African American playwrights whose texts explore the experiences of black women and allow for black female subjectivity. I contend that both *Stick Fly* and *The Mountaintop* engage in black feminist theory, based on Patricia Hill Collins’ definition of black feminist thought as:

specialized knowledge created by African American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretation of Black women’s reality by those who live it. (22)

I propose that post-blackness has much to contribute to black feminist discourse and vice versa; as an aesthetic that calls for the embrace of all aspects of black identity, post-black drama becomes an important site for resistance against the elision of black women's racial and gendered experiences. As bell hooks asserts:

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group "women" in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white *women*. (*Ain't I a Woman* 7)

In effect, Diamond and Hall's texts use a post-black aesthetic to theorize about the politics of black women's lives. Sexual and racial politics, and black and female identity are intertwined in these texts, and contribute to a larger ongoing conversation about the meaning of blackness, the role of gender within this construct, and the theatre as a site for performing, complicating, questioning, and challenging these identities. Furthermore, Diamond and Hall take part in the larger project of reclaiming

black women's humanity through representations that resist popular tropes and stereotypes. The dynamic interplay of race and gender in post-black drama reflects that part of doing away with narrow, limiting, and restrictive conceptions of blackness is also doing away with black patriarchy and the sort of racial fundamentalism that suggests "[black] feminists need not apply for a Black card because they undermine the integrity of Black struggle unified around the implicit universality of Black masculinity" (Dyson, *Introduction Who's Afraid* xvi). This compelling relationship between post-blackness and black feminism is fluid and permeable, and allows us to better understand both the meanings of blackness and the experiences of black women. Furthermore, this duality is crucial to the success of these plays, and the fully fleshed out characters therein. It is the specificity of these works that accounts for their universal appeal across racial and gender lines, leading to their history making turn on Broadway, and newfound place in its archive of American theatre.

### **WHAT IS POST-BLACKNESS?**

In 1989, Trey Ellis announced the arrival of the "cultural mulatto" in his essay "The New Black Aesthetic." Ellis speaks of young black artists influenced by white and black culture saying:

Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing group of cultural mulattoes that fuels the [New Black Aesthetic]. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto Cosby girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. Neither side of the tracks should forget that. (235)

Curator Thelma Golden along with artist Glenn Ligon are often credited with originating the use of the term “post-black art” in the catalogue introduction to the 2001 exhibit *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum of Harlem. They defined post-black as:

a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness. (14)

Her text is a key declaration that black artists are more than ever afforded the opportunity to be individualistic, and no longer bound to the politics of other eras although acutely influenced by them. It also reflects a continuing need to expand and redefine blackness in ways that account for an African American community that is too

diverse, complex, imaginative, dynamic, fluid, creative, and beautiful to be restrained by the conventional limitations and restraints imposed on blackness and black art (Touré 12).

In its current usage, post-black is not simply an artistic designation, it also a way of understanding the politics of the post-modern era. In his semi-autobiographical text, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, cultural critic Touré shares personal anecdotes and interviews conducted with an elite group of 105 African American politicians, visual artists, recording artists, writers, and scholars. Touré states that the purpose of his text is:

to attack and destroy the idea that there is a correct or legitimate way of doing Blackness. If there's a right way then there must be a wrong way, and that kind of thinking cuts us off from exploring the full potential of Black humanity. I wish for every Black-American to have the freedom to be Black however he or she chooses, and to banish from the collective mind the bankrupt, fraudulent concept of "authentic" Blackness. (11)

To be clear, post-black is not the same as post-racial. As Touré suggests, "Post racial posits that race does not exist or that we're somehow beyond race and suggests colorblindness: It's a bankrupt concept that reflects a naïve understanding of race in America" (12). Post-black does not replace black or African American as a racial category

– one does not choose to be referred to as post-black rather than the aforementioned racial terms. Instead, post-blackness (also referred to as post-soul) “is a radical reimagining of the contemporary African American experience, attempting to liberate contemporary interpretations of that experience from sensibilities that were formalized and institutionalized during earlier social paradigms” (Neal 3). Post-blackness acknowledges that black America is experiencing increasing economic, geographic, educational, and vocational diversity (and has been for several decades) and “accept[s] the fact that we do not all view or perform the culture the same way given the vast variety of realities of modern Blackness”(Touré 12). Post-blackness recognizes that there is no one black experience, and no one way to be black. Echoing this sentiment, scholar Henry Louis Gates states, “My first line in my class, and the last line twelve weeks later is if there are forty million Black Americans then there are forty million ways to be Black” (qtd. in Touré 5). Post-blackness “points to the end of narrow, limiting notions of blackness” (Dyson, *Introduction Who’s Afraid* xv) and freedom from inter and intra-racial cultural policing. It embraces the diversity of the African American community and recognizes the infinite possibilities for black identity.

### **WHAT CONSTITUTES A POST-BLACK PLAY?**

One of the challenges of defining post-black art, literature, and culture, is that the aesthetic prides itself on rejecting categorization and defying labels. At the same time, there are some identifiable traits and practices of post-black literature and drama,

and a text might contain all, some, or perhaps just one of these features. In this study I make use of Bertram Ashe's essay "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction" which identifies the three primary features of a post-soul (or post-black) context as, "the cultural mulatto archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness; and, lastly, the signal allusion-disruption<sup>1</sup> gestures that many of these texts perform" (613). This project also engages with Douglas Jones and Harry Elam's post-black dramaturgy, found in the recent anthology *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-black Plays*, which identifies the four characteristics of post-black dramaturgy as homecomings and goings, post-blackness by non-black playwrights, re-imagining pasts, and re-imagining Africa. As Bertram Ashe asserts:

These artists and texts trouble blackness, they worry blackness; they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous-and necessary-preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity. Still, from my vantage point, this "troubling" of blackness by post-soul writers is ultimately done in service to black people. (614)

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<sup>1</sup> Ashe defines allusion-disruption as moments when the texts signify on earlier eras such as the Black Power or Civil Rights Movement.

Post-black artistic expression affords us the opportunity to examine black life from every vantage point and build community, while also operating as a means of survival and form of resistance to cultural hegemony. Post-black theatre provides a space for black culture to reveal itself to itself and in many ways, reflects that blackness is continually being constructed because of its status as a “fragile fiction” contingent upon the historical moment, and social and cultural landscape (Johnson, *Black Performance* 449, 460).

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWNS

Chapter One and Chapter Two of this project consist of close readings and critical analysis of *The Mountaintop* and *Stick Fly* that seek to demonstrate how these works operate within a post-black aesthetic and explore black feminist thought.

*Stick Fly*, Lydia Diamond’s ode to the “well-made play,” makes use of Ashe’s allusion-disruption strategy. As a black domestic drama taking place in the Vineyard vacation home of a wealthy black family, Diamond’s text is in conversation with, and signifies on, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. *Stick Fly* is a homecoming tale that highlights a seldom acknowledged segment of the African American community, and expands the representational possibilities of black family life. Many of Diamond’s characters fit the archetype of the cultural mulatto, negotiating and navigating class, gender, race, and cultural capital.



*The Mountaintop*, set the evening before Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, re-imagines the past and delivers a portrayal of a complex, charismatic, brilliant leader coming face to face with the omnipresent specter of death lurking in the shadows. Hall offers a rendition of King's home going that challenges us to consider his fallibilities as his greatest strengths, and recognize in his humanity our own ability to effect change. This text reflects post-black drama's deep investment in remixing history; *The Mountaintop* turns to the past in an effort to turn from the past because "it is this working through and against the past that allows its practitioners and audience to contemplate the present" (Elam and Jones xiv).

Chapter Three considers the aftermath of this exciting and historical moment for these playwrights and for Broadway, by examining the relationship between commercial theatre, post-blackness, and African American women.

Ultimately, what is at stake here is a greater understanding of blackness in this particular historical moment following the Civil Rights, Black Power and Black Arts movements and the national visibility of African American women as producers of this cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the particular location of their work (Broadway) allows for an investigation into the political and commercial consequences of post-black drama. To date there is no scholarship (that I am aware of) that examines this key moment in the representation of African American life onstage; my thesis is intended to

fill that gap. Furthermore, my contention that these plays are representative of a post-black aesthetic and deeply informed by black feminism, allows me to contribute to an understanding of their dynamic interplay.

## CHAPTER 1: *STICK FLY* AND THE RISING SIGNIFICANCE OF CLASS

### LORRAINE'S LEGACY

As the first successful African American drama performed on Broadway (1959), and the first play produced on Broadway by a female African American playwright, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is the literary, cultural, and artistic progenitor to Lydia Diamond's *Stick Fly*. *A Raisin in the Sun* is regarded as a definitive African American drama that responded to the truth of black life in Hansberry's era. According to acclaimed playwright Amiri Baraka, "When Raisin first appeared in 1959, the Civil Rights Movement was in its earlier stages. And as a document reflecting the *essence* of those struggles, the play is unexcelled. For many of us it was—and remains—the quintessential civil rights drama" (*Enduring Passions* 10). Raisin does more than simply document the issue of housing desegregation, which, according to Baraka, is the most limited form of realism. Rather, Hansberry is a "critical realist" who "analyzes and assesses reality and shapes her statement as an aesthetically powerful and politically advanced work of art" (Baraka, *Enduring Passions* 10). Hansberry's art was an extension of her activism, and as Baraka suggests, a form of political agitation:

It dealt with the very same issues of democratic rights and equality that were being aired in the streets. It dealt with them with an unabating dramatic force, vision, political concreteness and clarity that, in retrospect, are awesome. But it

dealt with them not as abstractions, fit only for infantile-left pamphlets, but as they are *lived*. In reality. (*Enduring Passions* 11)

*Raisin* spoke to the truth of black life for so many, because it spoke to many of the truths of Hansberry's life in particular and the political awareness and experiences of racism at a young age that helped shape her identity as an artist and activist. In her autobiography *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, Hansberry writes:

I was born on the Southside of Chicago. I was born black and female...I have been personally the victim of physical attack which was the offspring of racial and political hysteria... I have...on a thousand occasions seen indescribable displays of man's very real inhumanity to man, and I have come to maturity, as we all must, knowing that greed and malice, and indifference to human misery and bigotry and corruption, brutality and perhaps, above all else, ignorance—the prime ancient and persistent enemy of man – abound in the world. (qtd. in Brown-Guillory 35)

Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930, the youngest of four children, into the middle-class home of Carl A. Hansberry, a successful real estate broker and developer who served as a U.S. marshal, ran for Congress, and was active in the NAACP and Urban League, and Nanny Perry Hansberry, a former schoolteacher and Republican ward committeewoman (Carter 8-9). Their home was full of books, and the conversations

revolved around black politics, culture and economics. Black luminaries like Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington, Walter White, Joe Louis, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Dubois, and Jesse Owens visited the home, and Hansberry's own uncle, William Leo Hansberry was a Howard University professor and internationally renowned scholar of African history (Carter 8; Brown-Guillory 36). In 1938 the family moved to an all-white neighborhood near the University of Chicago in order to challenge Chicago's real estate covenants, which legally enforced housing discrimination. They were violently attacked by their white neighbors, but refused to move unless a court of law ordered them to. The case, *Hansberry v. Lee*, made it all the way to the Supreme Court where it was decided in their favor, and Chicago's restrictive housing covenants were ruled illegal.

Upon graduating from high school, Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison where she studied painting and writing. In 1950, after two years of college, Hansberry moved to New York City where she marched on picket lines, spoke on Harlem street corners, took part in delegations to rescue persons unjustly convicted of crimes, and helped to move the furniture of evicted black tenants back into their apartments in defiance of police (Brown-Guillory 37; Carter 10). It was during this time that Hansberry's commitment to civil rights and her obligation to write about the ills of society were cemented (Brown-Guillory 37). From 1950-1953, Hansberry worked for Paul Robeson's radical black newspaper, *Freedom*, where she wrote reviews of black

dramatists like Alice Childress, Loften Mitchell, and William Branch and essays on numerous subjects including:

The deferred dreams of African Americans, self-determination of African countries, the interconnection between Africans and African Americans, an appreciation of the beauty of things African and of things black, the evils of the slave system and its continuing impact on blacks, materialism, spiritual poverty, male chauvinism, homosexuality, bohemianism, middle-class values, nuclear holocaust, exile and isolation, women's rights, interracial friendships, the dilemma of black mothers, and the affirmation of dignity in a world that devalues integrity. (Brown-Guillory 35)

In 1953 Hansberry married interracially; her husband, Robert Nemiroff, was an aspiring writer and graduate student in English and history at New York University (NYU), whom she met on a picket line where they were both protesting the exclusion of blacks from NYU's basketball team. Around this same time, Hansberry determined that she could affect more change by focusing on her creative writing. By 1957, Hansberry had completed work on a play originally entitled *The Crystal Stair*, inspired by Langston Hughes' poem "Mother to Son." This play was later renamed *A Raisin in the Sun* after a line in another Langston Hughes poem entitled, "Montage of a Dream Deferred." Nemiroff, who by then had achieved some measure of success as a songwriter, arranged

for a play reading in front of his wealthy and influential friends, Burt D'Lugoff and Philip Rose. Rose optioned the play for Broadway, and raised the necessary capital, a truly remarkable feat that is a credit to both Hansberry's excellent writing as well as the "sheer luck and nerve that allowed *A Raisin in the Sun* – a play written by an unknown Black woman, produced by inexperienced newcomers, and directed by an untried young Black man – to reach the professional New York stage" (Wilkerson 442).

On March 11, 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway at the Barrymore Theater to great public acclaim, making Hansberry the youngest American, fifth woman, and first African American to receive the prestigious New York Drama Critics Circle Award. *Raisin* was not only a critical success, but a financial one as well, playing 538 performances over the course of nineteen months to mixed crowds. Although *Raisin* is not Hansberry's only play, nor her only work to be produced on Broadway, it is certainly the most well-known and most often produced. It is heralded as a classic not just for the way it represents three different generations of African Americans, and reflects the politics of the historical moment in which it was written, but also for the text's prescience regarding the black freedom movement, Pan-Africanism, and black feminism. Hansberry viewed activism and art as deeply intertwined, and believed, "All art is ultimately socio-political...The writer is deceived who thinks he has some other choice. The question is not whether one will make a social statement in one's work – but only

what the statement will say, for if it says anything, it will be social” (qtd. in Brown-Guillory 35).

Often lost in the conversation about Hansberry’s activism was her commitment to women’s rights. In the way she lived her life, and in her work, Hansberry refused to accept any of society’s limitations regarding a woman’s appropriate role. Her female characters are complex women with dreams, desires, strengths and vulnerabilities. Some of her other critical work explicitly addresses her feminist beliefs, such as this unpublished essay about Simone de Beauvoir, where Hansberry writes:

Woman like the Negro, like the Jew, like colonial peoples, even in ignorance, is incapable of accepting the role with harmony. This is because it is an unnatural role...The station of woman is hardly one that she would assume by choice, any more than men would, it must necessarily be imposed on her—by force... A status not freely chosen or entered into by an individual or group is necessarily one of oppression and the oppressed are by their nature...forever in ferment and agitation against their condition and what they understand to be their oppressors. If not by overt rebellion or revolution, than in the thousand and one ways they will devise with and without consciousness to alter their condition.

(qtd. in Carter 4)



In 1957, Hansberry joined the Daughters of Bilitis, a pioneering lesbian organization, and contributed several anonymous letters to *The Ladder*, the first national subscription newsletter for lesbians. In an August 1957 letter Hansberry wrote to *The Ladder* she asserts:

It is time that “half the human race” had something to say about the nature of its existence. Otherwise – without revised basic thinking – the woman intellectual is likely to find herself trying to draw conclusions – moral conclusions -- based on acceptance of a social moral superstructure which has never admitted to the equality of women and therefore is immoral itself.

Over the years Hansberry addressed a host of issues in her writings to *The Ladder*, including the issue of lesbians involved in heterosexual marriages (as she was for almost 10 years), the debate on butch lesbians being asked to assimilate into a more feminine mode of dress, and the sexism she saw in some gay men (Clements).

Hansberry was ahead of her time in seeing the relationship between homophobia, racism, and the oppression of women, and called for wholesale societal change that recognized and invested in those whose lives and humanity was most devalued. One could argue that Hansberry was a post-black artist before there was such a designation, “[refusing to be confined] to categories such as ‘black woman,’ ‘black playwright,’ ‘female playwright,’ ‘realistic playwright,’ and ‘comic playwright.’ She was

and was proud to be all of these things and more, of course, but she could never be exclusively defined by them” (Carter 17). She seamlessly moved from category to category, drawing strength from the multiplicity of her identity, rather than being confined or limited by these constructs. Hansberry’s art was deeply personal, and touched on the ways that the personal is always already political:

She was a fighter for her race who insisted on “the oneness of the cause of humanity”; the conceiver of a black theater that would “draw its main sources” not only from blacks themselves, but also from their “allies”; a creator of black drama who frequently adopted and adapted techniques and material from the works of nonblack writers; a promoter of her own people’s culture who drew strength and a sense of wonder from others and saw great value in intermingling ethnic as well as national cultures; a Pan-Africanist who wished to place the Western heritage of African Americans alongside the African heritage; a political -- indeed, revolutionary – dramatist as dedicated to the imperative of arts as to those of politics. (Carter 14)

### **REMIXING *RAISIN***

Lorraine Hansberry’s legacy as a feminist activist playwright serves as a model for today’s contemporary African American female playwrights exploring black women’s ideas and experiences. I contend that Diamond’s *Stick Fly* can be read as a post-black

text because of way it speaks to and signifies upon Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and repeats and revises the themes, dramatic structure, characterizations, and politics of Lorraine Hansberry's seminal work. "Lorraine Hansberry makes playwriting look simple," said Diamond, "but getting that well-made play down [*Stick Fly*] kicked my ass" (Preston 22). Both texts adhere to realism and offer a traditionally constructed play in the tradition of other American classics like *Death of a Salesman*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *The Glass Menagerie*. Both plays explore race, gender, class and a range of family dynamics including intergenerational conflicts between parents and their children, sibling rivalries, and complex romantic relationships.

At a time when black militant drama like Amiri Baraka's *The Dutchman* were becoming de riger, Hansberry upended fixed notions of African American theatre by writing a domestic drama with an eye on the racisms many African Americans experienced in the struggle for residential desegregation, a fight that in many ways is still ongoing. During its era, many members of the Black Arts Movement viewed *A Raisin in the Sun* as conservative, passive and accomodationist, failing to see that the play is radical in its own right as a reflection of the struggles of the black majority.

Baraka acknowledges:

We thought Hansberry's play was "middle class," in that its focus seemed to be on "moving into white folks' neighborhoods" when most blacks were just trying

to pay their rent in ghetto shacks. We missed the essence of the work – that Hansberry had created a family engaged in the same class struggle and ideological struggle as existed in the movement itself and among the people. What is most telling about our ignorance is that Hansberry’s play remains overwhelmingly popular and evocative of black and white reality-then and now. The masses of black people dug it true. (*A Wiser Play*)

Similarly, Diamond’s text speaks to the evolution of American racism and the insidious institutional racisms, post-racial rhetoric, and racial micro-aggressions that African Americans commonly experience today, particularly those who are members of the middle class. Following in Hansberry’s footsteps, Diamond has written a post-black play that reflects the diversity of the black majority and troubles narrow definitions of African American drama by choosing to “[deliver] plenty of beefy laughs at the expense of both the self-appointed guardians of black cultural heritage and well-meaning white liberal audiences who expect tales of sexual abuse, self-sacrificing women, angry young men and wise-if-randy grandfathers in plays about black family life”(Mandell 43).

In this chapter, I offer an examination of how Diamond remixes Hansberry’s text, a key feature of post-black dramaturgy because “it is this working through and against the past that allows its practitioners and audience to contemplate the present” (Elam and Jones, *Methuen* xiv). I ask: what are the dramatic tropes, cultural images, artistic

agendas and political paradigms in *A Raisin in the Sun* that Diamond is troubling? In particular, I focus on questions of gender and class mobility that arise in both plays; two issues that inform and shape the very meaning of post-blackness.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Younger family comprised of Mama (Lena), her son Walter Lee, daughter Beneatha, Walter Lee's wife Ruth, and their child Travis, are at odds over what to do with the \$10,000 benefit Mama has received in the wake of her husband's (Big Walter) recent death. Beneatha wants to spend the insurance money on her education, so she can pursue her goal of becoming a doctor. Walter Lee sees the money as a way of escaping his job as a chauffeur, and wants to use it to invest in a liquor store. Lena, the matriarch, wants to spend the money on buying a home, so they can escape their crowded, roach infested apartment in the South Side of Chicago. Ultimately, Mama spends a good portion of the money on a down payment for a house in Clybourne Park, a white neighborhood. Walter is crushed by her decision; realizing his hurt, Mama entrusts him to manage the remaining money, with a portion to be set aside for Beneatha's college education. Subsequently, Walter is cheated out of his money, but when approached by a representative from the Clybourne Park Association willing to pay a large sum of money for the Youngers to stay out of their neighborhood, Walter sees an opportunity to recoup his loss. After initially accepting their offer, Walter realizes that his family's pride is at stake, and ultimately he rejects the proposal. As the play ends, the family is moving into their new home.

In contrast, Diamond's *Stick Fly* is set over the course of a weekend in the Martha's Vineyard vacation home of the LeVays, a wealthy African American family. Dr. LeVay (Joseph) the family patriarch, and Cheryl, the housekeeper's hard working daughter, are there to receive the LeVay sons: Flip, a successful and arrogant plastic surgeon, and Kent, a sensitive aspiring novelist. Joining the boys at the Vineyard for the first time are their significant others: Kent's fiancée Taylor, described as "freakishly smart and maybe a little weird" (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 84), is an entomologist with a lower middle-class background but access to certain level of privilege and entrée due to her late father, a renowned public intellectual, and Flip's girlfriend Kimber, an intelligent white woman with a quick wit from a family whose wealth and social status matches the LeVays and who chooses to work with African American and Latino youth in the inner city. Over the course of the weekend, tensions about class, race, and gender politics bubble to the surface and a long held family secret is revealed -- Cheryl is Dr. LeVay's daughter out of wedlock with Ms. Ellie, the family maid.

### **OF MAMMIES AND MAIDS**

Diamond revises Hansberry's depiction of a black working-class family integrating a white suburb with a characterization of a wealthy upper-class black family that integrated white Martha's Vineyard several generations ago (their home is specifically not in Oaks Bluffs, the community of black elite on the Vineyard). In *A Raisin in the Sun*, "the idea of home ownership serves as a metaphor of the American Dream ...

a sign of success, security, and stability” (Hannah 156), and their move to the suburbs is a means of achieving upward class mobility that ensures the family’s children have greater access to opportunity, better school systems, and a safe neighborhood.

Setting both plays in the home is significant. It is an intimate space, and one from which you may temporarily escape, but seemingly always come back to. While Joseph and Mama are the leaders of their respective families, I would argue that in some ways that authority is contested. In *Raisin*, gender is a point of contention when it comes to determining the head of the household; Mama assumes leadership of the home in the wake of her husband’s death -- as the only adult male in the house, Walter Lee feels it is his responsibility and right to now take charge. In the LeVay home Joseph is the primary breadwinner and the head of the household, but his wife holds significant power because of her family’s class status. Joseph states:

I’ve been the head of this house, coming to this island for the last forty years, put in hundreds of thousands of dollars of renovations...But there’ll never be a sign out front that reads “LeVay.” This will always be the Whitcomb house, and I’ll always be the guy lucky enough to marry into the great Whitcomb dynasty...which for a long time was a dynasty built on very little liquid money.

(Diamond, *Stick Fly* 87)

Domestic labor is also a prominent theme in both plays. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, almost all of the adults work as maids and chauffeurs in rich white homes. Big Walter and Mama's search for opportunity in the North during the Great Migration has resulted in multiple generations of Youngers working as servants, certainly challenging the myth of meritocracy that promises that hard work will be rewarded. Walter Lee tells his mother, "I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, 'Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the Drive, sir?'" Mama, that ain't no kind of job...that ain't nothing at all" (Hansberry 73). Walter Lee, like his father before him, cannot move beyond his low-paying, menial job (Hannah 166). Unhappy with the domestic work they perform, the lack of opportunity it provides, and the perception that this is the only work African Americans are capable of, Mama declares:

My husband always said being any kind of a servant wasn't a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man's hands was made to make things, or to turn the earth with – not to drive nobody's car for 'em—or— (*She looks at her own hands*) carry they slop jars. (Hansberry 103)

In contrast to Mama and Walter Lee, Cheryl in *Stick Fly* defends her position:

CHERYL. I didn't touch nobody's shit. Why you always want to make what

I do shameful?

TAYLOR. I'm on your side.



CHERYL. No you're not. You spend the whole weekend up under me,  
apologizing to me, for me, overthinking me...like what I do embarrasses you.

TAYLOR. I'm sorry Cheryl.

CHERYL. I do good honest work that helps people. (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 116)

I would argue that some of this difference is because Cheryl is not the actual employee doing the work full-time (her mother is). Perhaps more importantly is the fact that her mother's work for the LeVay family gives Cheryl access to privileges of the sort that Walter Lee and Ruth Younger are unable to obtain for their son, Travis, even dating back before Dr. LeVay finds out that she is his child. After this revelation, Cheryl's access to privilege increases exponentially, and she is enrolled in a prestigious prep school with her tuition secretly paid by Dr. LeVay. In spite of Cheryl's defense of her mother's position, I would argue that in the context of the play, Ms. Ellie does fall into the mammy trope, associated with black women in general and domestics in particular (Johnson, *Appropriating* 155). This, coupled with Cheryl's invisibility to the LeVays and their guests, suggests a critique of the way the working class and domestics are treated as somehow less than human, and how this mistreatment can be both interracial and intraracial.

Ms. Ellie does not appear on stage and is never seen or heard from directly. What we know of her comes from Cheryl's side of telephone conversations or what

other people have to say about her. She is voiceless in the play, and in many cases it is her male employers who speak for her and reveal details about her. As a mammy figure and a member of the working-class, inferences are made that she is privy to “authentic blackness” in a way the other characters are not – one example being her collusion with Dr. LeVay to hide the pig’s feet and hot sauce from the rest of the house. In the same vein, Cheryl, her daughter, also functions to authenticate blackness as evidenced by her assessment of Taylor as “black, kind of” (Diamond 93). Depictions of mammy as asexual and unattractive are mirrored in the LeVay sons’ inability to imagine their father being sexually attracted to Ms. Ellie. Instead, they make dismissive statements like “He screwed around with anything in a skirt” (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 120) and imagine the scenario as “Mom’s a little chilly one night, Ms. Ellie’s down here looking, I don’t know, however she looked thirty pounds ago, a little flour on her forehead maybe (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 115).

E. Patrick Johnson identifies one of the key characteristics of the domestic labor experience as inadequate pay resulting in non-monetary forms of compensation that become part of the employer-employee contract (*Appropriating* 119). With regards to his grandmother Mary (a live-in domestic in North Carolina), and her relationship to her employer Johnson writes, “Mrs. Smith rewarded [Mary] with material gifts and hand-me-downs, a nice room, free reign of the house, and a seat at the family dinner table. In other words, for Mrs. Smith a ‘real mammy’ is or becomes ‘one of the family.’ And this

interpersonal 'reward' appears to be primary to the contract that Mrs. Smith and Mary 'negotiated'" (*Appropriating* 131). The way Dr. LeVay and Ms. Ellie negotiate Cheryl's relationship with her father replicates Mary's employer-employee contract. In lieu of child support and a relationship with her father, Cheryl receives a fake scholarship to attend an elite school and a room in the family's Vineyard, Aspen and New York homes. Although Ms. Ellie's "been so quiet about it all these years" (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 114) she strategically stayed in a subordinate position to the family so that she could make sure her daughter got the experiences Ms. Ellie felt she was owed (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 123).

Both Ms. Ellie and Cheryl occupy the position Johnson calls the "outsider-within." Their relationship with the LeVays is marked by a carefully constructed closeness, trust and familiarity --a dynamic that is desired by all parties. For the LeVays, this intimacy masks the fact that they are paying for servitude. For Cheryl and her mom, this intimacy offers the opportunity to sometimes say or do things that resist, or temporarily subvert, their subordinate position (Johnson, *Appropriating* 108-109). Because they are "like one of the family," but not actually family, there are still boundaries and unspoken rules Cheryl and Ms. Ellie must adhere to; both women are subordinate to their employer because their livelihood depends on it. We especially get to see Cheryl navigate this dynamic in her terse exchanges with Taylor, where she displays an attitude she would never show towards an employer, culminating in her assertion "I'm more a part of this family that you'll ever be" (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 117).

The irony is that Cheryl is a part of the family, but will likely always remain an outsider due to the circumstances of her conception.

### **ON CULTURAL CAPITAL**

*A Raisin in the Sun* speaks to the primary concerns of those whom sociologist Cherise Harris terms “first generation” African American middle-class, who strived for class mobility by integrating neighborhoods and workplaces. Mama is particularly attuned to the opportunities for class mobility that a life in Clybourne Park could provide – if not for her, Beneatha, Ruth and Walter Lee then certainly for Travis. The “second generation” middle-class, those who grew up in predominately White areas in the 1980’s and 1990’s and were forced to negotiate the gauntlets of racial integration and assimilation at very young ages (Harris xx), is the story of Cheryl and Taylor. They represent the children of African American parents who are trying to make certain their children are able to maintain or increase their class status by ensuring that they have greater access to opportunity -- be it through suburban exodus, Standard English or forging social networks with other upwardly mobile blacks. The goal is to provide them with enough cultural capital to transcend racial prejudices and discrimination, thus guaranteeing their children’s ultimate success (Harris 31). Cultural capital, defined as “the knowledge, skills, behaviors, or dispositions that can be converted into prestige and/or financial capital and transmitted through generations. In American society, [those] required are the ones valued by Whites as the dominant group” (Harris 30), is a

major force in the need to rethink the notion that there is one correct way to do blackness. Effectively becoming bicultural, they are Trey Ellis's "cultural mulattos," influenced by and able to navigate both black and white worlds.

Both women alternately wield and discount their privilege when comparing it to the elite status occupied by the LeVay family, other more wealthy black families, and each other. Taylor was raised in a lower middle-class home by a college professor single mother, and is the daughter of a renowned public intellectual. She enjoys a certain amount of privilege and social entrée by virtue of her late father, despite their estranged relationship, and it is Cheryl who notes, "Jesus, your dad's famous...That's a free pass to anywhere you wanna go" (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 121). At the same time, Taylor minimizes her privilege making claims like, "Entrée to what? Places I couldn't afford to go?" (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 66). Perhaps not, but she was able to attend Harvard and is now engaged to a Vineyard LeVay.

Cheryl, while working-class, enjoys a huge amount of cultural capital via her close relationship with the LeVays, beginning well before Joseph found out that he was her father, a mere four years earlier. Late in the play she informs Taylor, "I've had a room in this house, in Aspen, and New York for as long as I've been alive, I think you've confused me for you. We're very different, Taylor. I'm not trying to find my place...this is

my home” (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 117). It is Kimber who easily deciphers Ms. Ellie’s reason gives for staying on as the LeVay’s maid:

CHERYL. Says it was the only way she could think to make sure I got the experiences I was owed. So, I can ski. And snorkel. And ride horses. English and western...I suppose with that, the world should lay itself at my feet.

KIMBER. That’s cultural capital. (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 123)

At the same time, “while middle-class Blacks may enjoy a degree of privilege through their social standing, it is often tempered by the realities of being a racial minority group and the attendant interracial and intraracial expectations” (Harris xx). Taylor at Harvard and Cheryl at her elite prep school both experience racism and classism from blacks and whites, again reflecting the diversity of the black experience as African Americans position themselves to maintain or even elevate their class position in adulthood.

It is worth noting that while there is a connection between families like the Youngers and the experiences of Cheryl, Taylor, and even Dr. LeVay, Diamond does offer an alternate version of African American class mobility through the history of Dr. LeVay’s wife’s aristocratic family, the Whitcombs. As Joseph tells it, his hair wasn’t straight enough, nor was he light-skinned enough to pass the brown bag test at the cotillions for the black elite. Despite the fact that Joseph LeVay is a neurosurgeon, Flip

asserts “Ma went slummin’” (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 120) when she met and married Joseph LeVay. With her depiction of the Whitcomb family, Diamond references the original black middle-class that dates back to slavery and was comprised mainly of free blacks and the mulatto elite (Harris ix). Ever the pragmatist, Dr. LeVay assures Taylor, “Sweetie, if it wasn’t for all that dilution, you think my wife’s people would have this house? Don’t you know most of the black folks got anything now, got it cause somewhere along the way somebody got raped in a kitchen” (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 87). The Whitcombs, who were the first blacks to own land on the Vineyard, received it as a gift from the mayor when great-great-grandfather Whitcomb saved the Mayor’s son from a boating accident. Known as “The Great Sea Captain,” the Whitcomb forefather represents a little discussed aspect of African American history – those blacks who benefited from the slave trade. In speaking about his ancestor, Kent reveals:

KENT. He was never a slave. He was a shipper.

TAYLOR. Of What?

KENT. We don’t talk about that. (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 13)

The Whitcomb’s story of class ascension demonstrates that there is no one single path to a position with the black middle and upper-class.

## NEW BLACK WOMAN

While *A Raisin in the Sun* is certainly a play about the struggles and conflicts within an African American family as its members confront social and generational change (Hannah 156), it is also a black feminist text that “address[es] such controversial issues as abortion, sexuality, and female empowerment while challenging obstacles like sexism, patriarchal ideology, and gender stereotypes” (Mafe 31). In particular Beneatha, who embodies the “new” black woman (Mafe 40), prefigures the characterizations of Taylor and Cheryl; she is a part of their literary DNA. In Beneatha’s desire for a college education and a career as a doctor, there are shades of Taylor the scientist, and Cheryl, the aspiring college student. Through Beneatha, Hansberry addresses black nationalism, self-confidence, sexuality and even atheism. Furthermore, Beneatha’s enjoyment of activities like acting, guitar lessons, horseback riding, particularly in the 1950’s, defies the limits many try to place on the interests and abilities of African Americans through assertions like “black people don’t swim” or “black people don’t listen to rock music”. Like her post-black protégés Taylor and Cheryl, Beneatha demonstrates a desire to form her own identity, rather than be limited by narrow conceptions of blackness. According to Mafe, “Beneatha consistently distances herself from stereotypes of womanhood in general and black womanhood in particular throughout the play, advocating her “right” to a positive self-defined image of female subjectivity” (42):



BENEATHA. People have to express themselves one way or another.

MAMA. What is it you want to express?

BENEATHA. (*Angrily*) Me! (*Mama and Ruth look at each other and burst into raucous laughter*) Don't worry—I don't expect you to understand. (Hansberry 48)

Hansberry's legacy of complex and well-written black female characters lives on in Diamond's *Stick Fly* for reasons that are both personal and political. After studying theatre at Northwestern University, Diamond began a career as an actor in Chicago and spent ten years waiting tables, teaching and writing on the side. Diamond says, "I thought of playwriting as a means to write parts that I didn't see existing for myself. It took me a while to realize that I was a playwright, not an actor doing this other thing" (Preston 22). In a video for Theatre Communications Group entitled, "Stage Matters: A short video on why / how / if theatre matters in America," Diamond recalled, "I was frustrated by the dearth of roles...of complicated contemporary roles for African American women...I doubt sometimes the relevance of theatre as a form of activism." In response, Diamond committed to her own form of theatre activism, that was committed to "put smart, contemporary, multi-generational and multiracial people onstage together to look like the America I live in" (Preston 22).

By creating those kinds of roles in *Stick Fly*, Diamond's text echoes Hansberry's black feminist politics, and engages in activism by depicting black women's experiences and subjectivity on stage. Furthermore, this act highlights the connections between post-blackness and black feminism that merit further analysis. Taking into consideration that post-black art, literature, and culture emphasize the individuality of one's racial experience, I assert that black feminism and post-blackness are inextricably linked given that one's racial experience is always modified by gender, and one's gender identity is always modified by race. As The Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" declares,

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. (234)

Interestingly, Lorraine Hansberry also viewed racial oppression as inseparable from gender oppression, foreshadowing black feminism. In a 1959 interview with journalist Studs Terkel, she asserted:

Obviously the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, who are twice oppressed. So I should imagine that they react accordingly: As

oppression makes people more militant, women become twice militant, because they are twice oppressed. (qtd. in Carter 5)

The remainder of this chapter identifies unique moments of black female subjectivity in this text that challenge the history of silence, erasure, and invisibility surrounding black womanhood in public discourse and subvert controlling images of black women. I contend that these moments of resistance contribute to an understanding of post-blackness, and in turn post-blackness contributes to an understanding of these moments of resistance.

### **FREAKNIK**

My analysis here focuses on the figure of Taylor, who I argue disrupts the politics of respectability associated with black middle-class womanhood, by offering a counter narrative of black female sexuality that reconstitutes a Black female subjectivity (Hammonds 305). According to Evelyn Hammonds, silence, erasure, and invisibility are the key features of the dominant discourse surrounding black women's sexuality (304), one that "is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a 'void' or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible and where Black women's bodies are always already colonized" (305). Likewise, literary critic Hortense Spillers famously observes, "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb" (153). The project of

reclaiming black woman's sexuality is about recovering black women's humanity and agency in the face of sexual oppression that denies and restricts the possibilities for black female identity resulting in the "paradox of non-being" (Spillers 156) faced by many African American women.

In her book, *Beyond the Black Lady*, scholar Lisa Thompson conducts an in-depth study of representations of middle-class African American women that "theorize new and more expansive ways to understand race, class, and sexuality" (12). Thompson asserts,

The performance of middle-class black womanhood includes a particular set of precepts that determine how black woman may construct or present themselves. This performance relies heavily upon aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility as a way to counter negative stereotypes. Conservative sexual behavior is the foundation of the performance of middle-class black womanhood. (2)

From the play's outset, it is clear that the LeVay household upholds this bourgeois black sexual politics governing women's behavior. Almost immediately upon entering the home, Kent and Taylor have the following exchange,

TAYLOR. Wow. Ok. Well, I was gonna marry you for love. But now maybe

I'll have to marry you for money.

KENT. I thought you said yes so we could sleep together at family reunions.

TAYLOR. Only my mother is so provincial.

KENT. Honey Bee, that's not provincial, that's black. (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 11)

And moments later,

KENT. You know Ma's gonna have us in separate rooms.

TAYLOR. That's so black of her.

KENT. Honey Bee, give me a little sugar.

TAYLOR. OK, OK. I'm not having your mom walk in on me with my ass up in the air like some kind of bad urban legend or something. (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 14)

Their attitude towards proper black middle-class sexual behavior is flippant, offering some resistance to dominant constructions of black womanhood. However, when casual kisses become "dangerous" Taylor immediately ends the embrace. Noting her unwillingness to reinforce stereotypes about black women's sexual appetites (Taylor's reference to bad urban legends) in spite of their obvious attraction and desire for one another in the moment, Taylor ultimately reinforces notions of black middle-class women's sexual propriety, a performance that "is tied to impossible standards of

respectability” (Thompson 3). Ultimately, these performances are dehumanizing and rob black middle-class women of their agency.

At the same time, there are moments in the text when Diamond allows Taylor to be a transgressive figure who “rupture[s] the traditional boundaries of proper black middle-class behavior without playing into dominant constructions of black women” (Thompson 9). The end of Act One offers a powerful scene between Taylor and Flip, where it is revealed that they had met six years previously in Atlanta, and had a one night stand. Alone for the first time, verbal sparring turns ugly as Taylor confronts Flip about why he never called her after their night together. In response, Flip asks whether he was supposed to tell his brother “I fucked the brains out of our girl here in Atlanta six years ago” (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 70). Taylor, in shock, replies that she had thought their night together meant something. In response, Flip continues to lambast her for sleeping with him, saying, “You, you’re a beautiful, smart woman, and you’ll lay down with just anyone who’s a little bit nice to you for gumbo and a cheap glass of wine” (Diamond 71). Later in their exchange, Flip claims that contrary to his original impression of Taylor, he found that she was not special and “no different. Just so willing to lay down and give herself over, to someone as undeserving as I” (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 71).

Throughout the scene, Flip is unnecessarily cruel, but Taylor remains relatively calm and collected, refusing to take the bait, even when Flip attempts to emasculate his

own brother through his verbal attacks, and depict Taylor's sexuality as excessive. By refusing to internalize Flip's verbal assaults on her person and her relationship, Taylor occupies the scene's moral high ground, and affirms that black female sexuality is not deviant. She is in control of her pleasure, and it is on her terms. Standing up to Flip's verbal assaults is a moment of black female empowerment in the face of his attempts to "slut shame" her. I argue that race plays a significant role in Flip's verbal attack; his relationship with his white girlfriend, Kimber is very sexual -- in fact it is Flip who notes, "we fuck and get off on that people hate us for it" (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 85). In contrast, sex with Taylor, *even though he liked her*, eliminated any possibility of a future relationship because she failed to adhere to his rules (and society's rules) for a black middle-class woman's proper sexual conduct.

While historically "Black women have reacted to this repressive force of the hegemonic discourses on race and sex with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility" (Hammonds 305), Taylor is forthright and unashamed to talk about her sexuality, both acknowledging and owning her sexual self. I wholeheartedly agree with Thompson's assertion that "middle-class black women openly addressing sexuality rewrite their role in African American culture" (13) and propose that in many ways Taylor joins this new tradition of black middle-class figures "theorizing new and more expansive ways to understand race, class, and sexuality" (12).

## HIGHER LEARNING

Diamond also uses Taylor to explore the racial micro-aggressions and trauma that middle-class black women are particularly vulnerable to, especially those that are part of the academy. In the process, she offers a withering critique of feminist discourse that upholds white supremacy and classism by refusing to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways women of different racial and class backgrounds experience sexism and gender oppression.

In the LeVay household, Taylor tells the story of “the solitaire episode” her junior year of college. It began with a small woman studies seminar that primarily consisted of white women, one gay white man, an Asian woman, and Taylor. The class theorizes a “utopian society” free of men and therefore perfect, however when Taylor carefully asks whether the class has considered questions of race and class in their utopia, she gets the following response:

So one of the Beckys gets quite hostile, and then just downright ignorant, and eventually she was saying that if it was a utopian society, there would be only one dominant race, and the teacher is agreeing, and I’m trying to show them that this would not be a utopian society, that this would be the Third Reich.

(Diamond, *Stick Fly* 57)



When the professor calls Taylor to apologize because at some point “things may have become racist,” Taylor responds, “I think it started when you decided to teach a class called Feminist Voices of the Twentieth Century and include no women of color” (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 58).

Taylor’s experience reflects the exclusion of women of color from the canon of feminist theory, and the failure to address their specific histories and needs. In her essay, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” bell hooks offers:

White women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases, although there has been a greater awareness of biases in recent years. Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. (272)

Given the salience of education for African Americans in the post-black era, the combined effects of racial and sexual oppression in an academic setting often take an incredible physical, psychological, and emotional toll on women of color. As children and young adults, many middle-class blacks are burdened with intense pressure to succeed academically; the fear of underperforming is a factor in rising cases of suicide and

suicidal ideation for black adolescents (Harris 27). This kind of stress, in conjunction with incidents of racial micro-aggression by purportedly liberal colleagues in an academic setting, is a trauma for Taylor. Following the confrontation with her professor, faced with the unwanted responsibility of educating her white peers about cultural sensitivity and racism, Taylor turns on her laptop and plays solitaire for the rest of the semester, stopping only to occasionally sleep and eat. Harris asserts, “while these children may be living a life of privilege that is similar to their White peers, they must still deal with the salience of race in their lives by striving to achieve above and beyond Whites just to be considered equal” (43). For Taylor, this would also be in addition to the gender bias that runs rampant in the education system, for as Nellie McKay states, “To be black and female in the academy has its own particular frustrations because it was never intended for us to be here” (33).

The lesson that many African Americans in white schools are taught at home or learn in the classroom is that they have to be twice as good in order to achieve half as much. Even then, it is Taylor who observes, “Didn’t matter I was a straight-A student. No one missed me, the only raisin in the oatmeal, the only speck of nutmeg on the eggnog” (Diamond, *Stick Fly* 60). This indifference to Taylor and her experiences as a black woman is a systemic problem, as Gloria Joseph asserts:

Schooling in white capitalist America nourishes a system that helps to train/teach young white children to carry out their racist violence. It instills its white students with a cultural imperialism and intellectual ethnocentrism, which fuels them with a white superiority that implicitly and explicitly encourages racism, sexism, and heterosexism. This same educational system fails to educate nonwhites, who attend classes with regularity or irregularity. (471)

By making visible the psychic and emotional violence of the academy, Diamond facilitates a greater understanding of how the politics of race, gender, class impact our understanding of what it looks like to be black in the post-civil rights education system. Sometimes, a black parent's dream for their children to be educated at a prestigious white university can turn into a nightmare.

Iconic work like *A Raisin in the Sun* draws its strength from the specificity of the characters and the world they live in, and I would argue that Diamond follows a similar tack. The results of her artistic agenda are representations of complex African American women exposing the nuances and particularities of life among upwardly mobile blacks and the well-to-do. As a group, they are both privileged and underrepresented, an unusual combination that merits more scholarly consideration. As African Americans individually and collectively wrestle with issues of self-definition and belonging,

particularly those from the middle-class, texts like *Stick Fly* offers a reminder that the possibilities for black identity are infinite.

## CHAPTER 2: *THE MOUNTAINTOP*, REVISING HISTORY

Retrospection and the way past legacies help shape African American identities in the present are key post-black features of *The Mountaintop*, a text that seeks to reinterpret and reimagine the night before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. In *The Mountaintop*, Katori Hall deploys history and fantasy to redress her mother's painful regret at not attending King's last speech, and as a form of resistance against the iconicity of a figure known mostly for the "I Have a Dream" speech, rather than the complicated, brilliant, and radical man that he was. Sociologist, political analyst and King scholar Michael Eric Dyson asserts:

As things stand, "I Have a Dream" has been identified as King's definitive statement on race. To that degree it has become an enemy to his moral complexity. It alienates the social vision King expressed in his last four years. The overvaluing and misreading of "I Have a Dream" has skillfully silenced a huge dimension of King's prophetic ministry. (*I May Not Get There* 16)

There is little mention of the other 450 speeches King gave per year and the five books that he authored. Also obscured are the politics King espoused towards the end of his life including his belief that the "triple evils" of racism, economic exploitation and war are forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle. King hated poverty and called for a radical redistribution of wealth; he believed that capitalism had outlived its usefulness,

and his own economic theory leaned much more towards socialism. King also spoke of the need for systemic change to combat institutionalized racisms and other oppressions and wrote:

Justice for black people will not flow into society merely from court decisions nor from fountains of political oratory. Nor will a few token changes quell all the tempestuous yearnings of millions of disadvantaged black people. White Americans must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society. The comfortable, entrenched, the privileged cannot continue to tremble at the prospect of change of the status quo. (*Words 38*)

In short, King was a revolutionary. However, by excluding the fullness of his dream for America as too radical and too political, we lose sight of the complexity of his political and social vision.

I contend that King's death was a cultural trauma for black America, and in the aftermath his legacy has been manipulated in ways that contribute to narrow and limiting conceptions of blackness and black leadership while also reinforcing black patriarchy. In response, Hall explicitly seeks to humanize King, crafting a portrayal of the preacher as charming, flirtatious, and a bit vain; he is also wracked with self-doubt, and battling the depression, fear, and paranoia that plagued the real-life King during his final months. *The Mountaintop* challenges these limitations by creating a historical counter

narrative for King that is uniquely post-black in the way that it rejects King, the myth, in favor of King, the man.

Within this narrative, King spends his final evening with the mysterious maid Camae who turns out to be an angel sent from God (who happens to be a woman) to bring King face to face with his own mortality. In death, Camae occupies a position of power and authority over King that she likely would not have held in life, given her social position as a lower-class black woman. I argue that Camae represents the black women who valiantly fought for the liberation of black people, but were systematically excluded from leadership positions within civil rights organizations or denied recognition for their contributions to the movement. Their relationship highlights black women's struggle with black men against racism, and struggle against black men about sexism (The Cohambee River Collective 235).

### **THE ANTI-HEROINE**

The play opens with King in his motel room, exhausted from giving the "I've Been to The Mountaintop" speech. He is waiting for Ralph Abernathy to appear with his Pall Mall cigarettes, and room service to bring him some coffee. When Camae, a beautiful young maid, appears at the door with his order, King is attracted to her immediately. Feisty and witty, Camae is unafraid to go toe to toe with the preacher, gently making fun of his conceits, and the persona of "Dr. King" that he assumes for the sake of the

movement. Midway through the play we find out that Camae is keeping a secret; she is an angel from God (who just happens to be a woman) sent to prepare King for his impending demise and bring him to the other side. In life Camae was a sex worker who died violently at the hand of one of her johns; as a lower class female sex worker, the type of violence she is vulnerable to is generally deemed less important than that inflicted upon her middle class brethren, and her life is considered less valuable. Even as she died, Camae took up this man's brokenness, leaving little room for her own personhood, and her final moments are filled with his pain and trauma. She reveals:

CAMAE. [I] sacrificed my flesh so that others might feel whole again. I thought it was my duty. All that I had to offer this world. What else was a poor black woman, the mule of the world, here for? Last night, in the back of a alley I breathed my last breath. A man clasped his hands like a necklace round my throat. I stared into his big blue eyes, as my breath got ragged and raw, and I saw the hell this old world had put him through. (Hall, *The Mountaintop* 55)

The story of Camae's life reflects how black women are understood to be those who serve others; as house slaves, mammies, domestic workers, and even in relation to black men and the black family. This dehumanizing treatment is a key facet of the oppression they experience. As Barbara Smith observes:

There is not a black woman in this country who has not, at some time, internalized and been deeply scarred by the hateful propaganda about us. There



is not a black woman in America who has not felt, at least once, like “the mule of the world,” to use Zora Neale Hurston’s still apt phrase. Until black feminism, very few people besides black women actually cared about or took seriously the demoralization of being female *and* colored *and* poor *and* hated. (262)

Camae’s trauma makes the exploitation of black women’s labor and bodies, and disregard for their subjectivity and personhood, hypervisible. Poor, black, a sex worker, and a murder victim, Camae is the antithesis of the traditional western heroine. However, the narrative of *The Mountaintop* is as much about Camae as it is about King, and she stands in for a host of other black women who are unseen, undervalued and discredited. Hall’s dramaturgical choice to create the character of Camae, and insert her into the story of King’s last days, counteracts the violence of an archive that renders her death, and the death of others like her, unimportant.

In her text, *Troubling Vision*, Nicole Fleetwood theorizes, “the reliance on images of iconic blackness and spectacular blackness is wedded to binary modes of rendering black subjects through narratives of exceptionalism or deviance. This binary continues to pin visible blackness to the hypervisible and the invisible” (47). Hall challenges the binary that casts King as black exceptionalism and Camae as black deviance by portraying King as flawed and human, “a man who is much more interesting and useful when his blemishes and virtues are shown together” (Dyson, *Introduction The Mountaintop* vii), and Camae as God’s chosen one to send to King, one of Her favorites.

Fleetwood asserts, “the icon is a fixed image so immersed in rehearsed narrative that it replaces the need for narrative unfolding. In its singularity – as exceptional moment, individual, event – it calls on universality” (46). In *The Mountaintop*, Hall challenges King’s iconicity by imagining and inserting a new narrative, one that features a poor black woman at the center instead of the margins, and creates a level of visibility for a lower-class black woman in an overwhelmingly middle class black man’s movement; an intervention that comments on the classist, heterosexist, and patriarchal qualities of the civil rights movement. These politics cause us to lose sight of the contributions of the scores of other activists who worked tirelessly on these campaigns; particularly figures like radical grassroots organizers Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker or King advisor Bayard Rustin who were marginalized within the movement because of their class, gender and/or sexuality.

Fleetwood’s theory of the *visible seam* as a “technique and a discursive intervention to address narrative erasure and to insert a troubling presence in dominant racializing structures” (9) is useful in understanding Camae’s character and function in the play. Camae is a “troubling presence” not because in life she was a poor, black, prostitute but rather because she fails to adhere to the racialized scripts, scenes, gestures, and reenactments, both enunciated and tacit that she is expected to follow (Spillers 153). According to these scripts, Camae should be oversexed and promiscuous, yet she rebuffs King’s sexual advances; she should be unintelligent, yet her oratorical

skills impress King, who remarks “most maids don’t sound like professors” and declares that if she were a man, she’d be Malcolm X (Hall, *Mountaintop* 27). With Camae, Hall is able to tell a story of black womanhood that defies controlling images of poor and working class black women, those who are the most vulnerable and invisible among us, and offers an alternative to the trope of the middle-class black lady, personified by Coretta Scott King.

### **MY BLOODY HERITAGE**

“Defiantly southern” (Schulman 32), Katori Hall is unabashed about her love for the region, and particularly, for her hometown of Memphis, TN. “You cut me, and I’ll probably bleed barbecue sauce,” Hall states, “I am Memphis through and through” (*Plays One* IX). For Hall, Beale Street, the heart of Memphis and home of the blues, rockabilly, and barbecue, is “the place that shaped me. Even walking around Williamstown [Massachusetts], I’m as Memphis as can be. It’s a way to be at home” (Soloski 30). She describes her plays as “my way back home, my way to my ancestors, my way to my gods, my way back to Memphis (Hall, *Plays One* x). However, Hall’s hometown has a dark side; as a girl growing up in Memphis, she could not escape the knowledge that her beloved city is also the site of the Lorraine Motel, where, on April 4, 1968 at 6:01pm, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated as he stood on the balcony.

Hall's mother, Carrie Mae Golden, grew up one block from the Lorraine Motel. On March 28<sup>th</sup> when King came to Memphis to march in support of the sanitation workers strike, fifteen-year-old Carrie Mae was there. On that day, fifteen thousand people came out to march through downtown Memphis, many holding signs with the message 'I am a man' in bold red (Hall, *Plays One* xii). Golden was part of the throng. Shortly after it began the march turned into chaos, and amidst the rioting, looting, and teargasing, a sixteen-year-old black teenager named Larry Payne was shot dead by a policeman. Golden ran home, catching only a glimpse of King as he was ushered into a car leaving the scene.

The violent outcome led to intense criticism and scrutiny of King in the media, and among huge swaths of the black and white communities alike, as the march-turned-riot was deemed a failure and embarrassment for King and questions were raised about the validity of his antipoverty strategy. Deeply depressed about these events and with a wounded pride, King was determined to redo the march and restore the movement's reputation of peaceful means of protest; King's reputation as a nonviolent leader was at stake. (Dyson, *April* 32).

King returned to Memphis the next week, and was scheduled to give a speech on April 3<sup>rd</sup> at Mason Temple. Golden still had never heard the preacher speak, and was determined to go. However, "When she asked her mother for permission to go, Big Mama said, 'You know they gone bomb that church. Dem folks is out to get him'" (Plays

One xii). Even the Goldens' neighbor, Miss Ida, who cooked for a prominent white doctor, had overheard Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb (whose refusal to negotiate with the sanitation worker had precipitated the strike) predicting that King "wouldn't get out of Memphis alive" (Schulman 31). The young mother of two "thought about running down the street or going out the window or whatever" (Soloski 29) in spite of her mother's instructions and the fact that there was a severe storm warning (tornadoes killed seven people that night), but ultimately decided to stay at home. That night King delivered what was to become his final speech, offering words both powerful and prophetic. As he roared to a close, King said:

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out (Yeah), or what would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers.

Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. (Amen) But it really doesn't matter to with me now, because I've been to *The Mountaintop*. (Yeah) [Applause] And I don't mind. [Applause continues] Like anybody, I would like to live a long life – longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. (Yeah) And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. (Go ahead) And I've looked over (Yes sir), and I've seen the Promised Land. (Go ahead) I may not get there with you. (Go ahead) But I want you to know tonight (Yes), that we, as a people, will get to the

Promised Land. [Applause] (Go ahead, Go ahead) And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. [Applause]. (*Mountaintop*)

The following day, an assassin's single bullet shattered King's jaw and severed his spinal cord.

The collective fear that King's life would be cut short did nothing to alleviate the trauma of his assassination. Death was dominant in the last years of King's life, he fought it, faced it down, tried to exert control over it, joked about it, even used it to rally his followers (Dyson, *April* x). Dyson notes, "King was so preoccupied with his own death, so obsessed with its likely occurrence, that in the last years he could only relax in a room with no windows because he was tortured with worry about who might pull the trigger. His eyes fell on strangers, wondering if they were the messenger of death" (*April* 22). Golden recalled, "The ominous presence of death was hard to ignore. Palpable, it was. Everyone knew it was coming. They just didn't know when" (Hall, *Playwrights Foundation*). Despite the ways in which King's death was foreshadowed, it was still a traumatic event, "due to its essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*" (Caruth 154). The attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible is a driving force behind the repetition, revision, and renegotiation Hall employs in her text, and characteristic of a post-black aesthetic.

In an interview, Golden acknowledged, “There are certain things that you regret until the day you die, and that’s one of them” (Schulman 31). She says the assassination left her bitter, and surmises, “I think if I had heard that speech, that would have been my calming factor” (Schulman 34). For Hall, “My mother’s regret along with the reasoning as to why she did not go that night has always stuck with me. A native Memphian, I grew up with this history only a stone’s throw away. It is my bloody heritage” (Hall, *Playwrights Foundation*). Hall reveals, “[she] planted a seed in me so deep that when I got the skill and the desire and passion to write the story, I took it on” (Soloski 29) and decided, “Let me put this character based on my mother – her little sassy, mouthy self – in the room with King” (Schulman 32).

With *The Mountaintop*, Hall employs the post-black device of re-imagining the past in order to salve her mother’s pain and regret at not being present for King’s final oration and missing the opportunity to be a part of his/story. While Golden’s narrative about King is not included in the text, the representation of Golden as Camae is a public act of commemoration and healing that allows for a release of pain, loss, and mourning. Performance, in and of itself, “marks out a unique temporal space that nevertheless contains traces of other now-absent performances, other now-disappeared scenes” (Diamond 1). This is how we, the audience, bear witness to a trauma that is textually unspoken and unseen, but still a very real part of the world of the play. In her psychoanalytic approach to trauma theory, Cathy Caruth observes that trauma exists

outside of time, in “a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood” (153). It is fitting, then, that Hall uses performance to heal trauma, because performance, “even with its dazzling physical immediacy [also] drifts between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory” (Diamond, *Introduction* 1). Through the framework of a post-black theatre aesthetic, performance makes the unknown known, and addresses Hall’s mother’s painful story, that has, in many ways, become Hall’s “bloody heritage.”

According to Jeffrey Alexander, cultural trauma “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Cultural trauma is also continually being renegotiated as the membership group’s collective identity is reformed and memory is revised (Eyerman 1):

Cultural trauma articulates a membership group as it identifies an event or an experience, a primal scene, that solidifies individual/collective identity. This event, now identified with the formation of the group, must be recollected by later generations who have had no experience of the ‘original’ event, yet continue to be identified by it and to identify themselves through it. Because of its distance from the event and because its social circumstances have altered



with time, each succeeding generation reinterprets and represents the collective memory around that event according to its needs and means. (15)

The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr is a cultural trauma for African Americans with far-reaching effects for generations of black folks:

Black America mourned King's murder so deeply because it felt like *our* murder. King's death felt like the death of black progress, the death of black justice, the death of black hope, because its most passionate voice had been sniped into silence. (Dyson, *April* 49)

Post-black dramaturgy calls for the exploration of African American history with new eyes and through new perspectives (Elam and Jones xxiv); it only makes sense that Hall, as a post-black dramatist, is drawn to write about this cultural trauma and how African Americans' feelings of grief and loss inform collective identity. Hall notes:

I am a baby of the civil rights movement and have benefitted greatly from his legacy: I was the first African American valedictorian in 1999 of a Memphis high school that had been desegregated in 1973, I have been granted access to some of the world's best schools, and I can sit anywhere on the bus I damn well please. But more than forty years since King's death how close are we to the Promised Land? (*Plays One* xii).

This sentiment is echoed in *The Mountaintop* as the baton of history passes on, revealing the perils and promises of the post-civil rights era; from Mandela's freedom to

OJ Simpson's white Bronco, the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> to the exuberance of a black American President.

## **HUMANIZING A KING**

As a post-black dramatist, Hall's text reflects the post-soul generation's need for representations of King that resist his iconicity and embrace his humanity in order to challenge limitations, both internal and external, that narrowly define black identity and deny the fullness of black humanity. Furthermore, this text illustrates how the need to worship King obscures his radical and revolutionary politics in favor of a manufactured image that precludes future generations from becoming invested in King as a human being, and his model of political action.

The dominant narrative surrounding King is that of an idol, an icon, a national holiday. Dyson notes, "martyrdom also forced unto King's dead body the face of a toothless tiger. His threat has been domesticated, his danger sweetened. His depressions and wounds have been turned into waves and smiles. There is little suffering, only light and glory" (Dyson, *April* 54). King "has been idealized into uselessness for the poor he loved, immortalized into a niceness that dilutes the radical politics he endorsed. His justice agenda has been smothered by adulation" (Dyson, *April* 55).

Few wish to recall the criticism and anger directed towards King near the end of his life by blacks who considered him too passive, and whites who hated him enough to kill him—quite literally. When King spoke out adamantly against the Vietnam War at a time when many Americans were still in support, an infuriated President Lyndon B.

Johnson proclaimed:

What is that goddamn nigger preacher doing to me? We gave him the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we gave him the Voting Rights Act of 1965, we gave him the War on Poverty. What more does he want? (Dyson, *April* 163)

Johnson stopped speaking to him, and King never set foot in the White House again. The F.B.I. was harassing King, and even went so far as to send his wife recordings of King with other women, with a note attached that instructed King to kill himself before the affairs went public. Under these circumstances, it seems only fitting that Hall depicts King as a man with his fair share of frustrations, self-doubt, and fear of the death he knew was coming. Her text argues that there is strength in vulnerability by painting a portrait of a man who must pray for the fortitude to leave behind everything and everyone he loves. As Dyson persuasively argues:

Only a King, who has faced his own fears, nursed his own psychic wounds, stirred in private remorse at his own sins, and yes, reveled in defiant mischief, can possibly speak to the masses of folk who will never wear the victor's crown nor taste the sweet adoration of millions. Only a King who had descended to the

depths of hell and stared at his own mortality can possibly inspire the rest of us to overcome our flaws and failures and rise to our best futures. (*Introduction The Mountaintop* x)

Instead, we have chosen to worship a simplistic version of a complex man. The deification of King means that contemporary black leaders, or would-be leaders, are held to impossible standards and codes of conduct that ultimately limit our ability to affect change. Furthermore, making civil rights synonymous with Martin Luther King Jr. allows for the belief that the struggle for equality is over, and detracts from the civil rights failures of our time.

King's iconicity also furthers the fiction that social transformation is impossible without charismatic leadership (Edwards 3). In her book, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, Erica Edwards explores the charismatic scenario as a disciplining fiction and narrative of black political life, "a storytelling regime and a set of performative prescriptions, a compact of mythologies that covers over a matrix of liberatory and disciplinary impulses that both compel and contain black movements for social change" (Edwards 16). The charismatic leader is perceived to be an exceptional figure with a privileged connection to the divine, and he is granted authority and the right to rule (Edwards 16). Edwards conceives of the charismatic scenario as a cultural regime with three constitutive violences; the first violence of charisma is historiographical, and silences masses of historical agents in favor of "great men"

(Edwards 20). The second violence of charisma is the undemocratic emphasis on a singular authority (Edwards 21). The third violence of charisma is in its reinscription of gender and sexual normativities, “in which the attributes of the ideal leader are the traits American society usually conceives as rightly belonging to men or to normative masculinity: ambition, courage, and, above all, divine calling” (Edwards 21), leading to “the fashioning of black leadership as a distinctly modern trope of normative black masculinity (Edwards 6).

King is neither the sole example of the charismatic black leader, nor the first; Edwards notes, “charismatic black leadership was produced as a disciplining social fiction decades before the televisual spectacle of the civil rights struggle of the late 1950s and early 1960s and continues to be produced, in new and even more spectacular ways, in the twenty-first century” (11). However, in life and in death, the African American community is particularly complicit in his idolatry; black America’s exaltation of the fallen preacher exemplifies the African American investment in the charismatic scenario, in spite of the violences it inflicts.

At the same time, we must recognize that the performative structure of the charismatic black leader is part of a larger politics of respectability adopted by African Americans after Reconstruction in order to counteract their presumed inferiority and the violence continually inflicted on black bodies. Efforts to create “positive” role models were meant to prove black humanity, but ironically deny African American icons

like King that very same humanity. With *The Mountaintop*, Hall humanizes King in order that we might recognize just how remarkable his achievements were, and recognize our own abilities to affect change in the continuing fight for justice and equality.

Katori Hall challenges the politics of respectability and impossible standards of propriety that are applied to King's image and politics by painting the portrait of a flesh-and-bone man struggling with his own mortality. Hall restages black leadership in order to disrupt and redress the violences of charismatic authority, and intervenes in the fashioning of normative black masculinity as a trope of black leadership that hides and/or represses the diversity of black political movement. Additionally, the character of Camae subverts the invisibility of black women's trauma, and their erasure from the civil rights movement's archive. Ultimately, with *The Mountaintop*, Hall revises a storied past in favor of a more inclusive future, and shatters the myths about black leadership that no longer serve us.

### **TOO YOUNG TO PLAY MAMA**

Like Diamond, Hall was a performer before she became a playwright, and her experiences as an actor are key to understanding her investment in writing for and about black women. According to fellow African American playwright Tarrell Alvin McCraney, "It seems that Katori Hall's charge to add exciting and complex roles for black

females in the American theater is a perfect fit; a job that she's not only good at but fully enjoys."

As an undergraduate student at Columbia University (on a full scholarship), Hall took acting classes that steered her away from her initial interest in a journalism career. However, fairly quickly Hall became aware of the limitations placed on female African American actors. In a class on naturalistic acting, Hall and her scene partner, another black woman, were tasked with finding a scene appropriate to their type. They struggled to find material for two young African American women, spending hours at the library pulling down play after play from the bookshelves. Hall recalls that when they went to their professor for help:

She stood there perplexed. 10 seconds went by..then 20...then thirty...a whole minute flew by and she couldn't come up with one answer. 'Gee Katori, I'm so sorry, but I can't think of one... I mean, there is that scene in *Raisin* but the two characters are not young...maybe August Wilson? No...most of his characters are male...I'm sorry, Katori. I just can't think of one. She walked away. At that moment I said to myself, 'Well I guess I'll just have to write some then.' I wrote from an intense need to see myself and my experience reflected honestly onstage. (Hall *Playwrights Foundation*)

In school, Hall was relegated to mostly secondary roles, an all-too familiar experience for African American performers, and particularly, black women as a result of the dearth of plays for and about black women that get produced.

Like most black actors, Hall found ways to connect with texts written by white American and European playwrights, however her opportunities were still limited. When she auditioned for a production of Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at Barnard College, Columbia's sister school, Hall felt a personal connection to this classic European text. In an interview with McCraney Hall confided, "I saw their experience in my family; related on a human level. We had an Olga and a Masha. I wanted to be one of three sisters in Chekov's beautiful play." Hall auditioned for the role of the youngest sister, Irina, and told McCraney:

I was killing Irina. I thought I was tearing that audition up. And I confronted the head of the department who was directing the play and she said she wanted all of the family to look alike. Oh I get it, you don't want three "sistuh's."

Instead, Hall was cast as Ferapont the doorkeeper, and she said "every time I walked onstage I was so angry, because I was, like, 'I'm more talented than any of these fucking kids here. How dare I be playing the servant?'" (Schulman 33).

After graduating from Columbia, Hall was accepted into the prestigious American Repertory Theatre (ART) graduate acting program at Harvard University where she refused to listen to the instructors who told her she needed to "neutralize" her accent.



She also went to Moscow as part of ART's exchange program, "where her hair rendered her a novelty and where she would sometimes amuse herself by telling inquisitive Russians that she was Whoopi Goldberg's daughter" (Soloski). Meanwhile, in her spare time, Hall continued to write work of her own.

Hall returned to New York after graduating from ART, where she again found it difficult as a black woman, to establish an acting career. Besides booking a couple of episodes of *Law and Order*, her career was treading water. At the same time, those plays that Hall was writing on the side were beginning to gain her recognition, and in 2005 she won the Kennedy Center's Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award for her play *Hoodoo Love*. Were it not for the challenges she faced as an actor, Hall might never have begun writing plays, or applied to the prestigious playwriting program at Juilliard where she was accepted in 2007. It was while attending Juilliard that Hall began to write *The Mountaintop* and workshop the play.

## **A TRANSATLANTIC DELUGE**

In a strange twist of fate, were it not for one of the roles Hall did perform, *The Mountaintop* may never have been produced on Broadway. In an interview with *The Dramatist* Hall explains:

James Dacre, a young director in London emailed me and asked me what I was working on. You see, in 2006, Dacre had directed me as an actress in NYC when

he was on a Fulbright to study at Columbia. I remember meeting him in the basement of Riverside Church looking for rehearsal space so we could do my acrobatic interpretation of *Elektra*...In his email, he told me that he had a meeting with a theatre and that he wanted to introduce them to my work. I sent him *The Mountaintop*. Two weeks later he emailed me again and said he had convinced that theatre to do it. (44)

In 2009, *The Mountaintop* opened at Theatre 503, a small 66-seat theatre above a pub in South London. The play was extraordinarily well-received by the London press, and was eventually transferred to a theatre on the West End, London's version of Broadway. Despite its underdog status *The Mountaintop* pulled off an upset when it won the Olivier Award (England's version of the Tony award) for Best New Play in 2010, making Hall the first black woman to hold that distinction.

Without a doubt, the successful commercial run on the West End and the Olivier Award are the primary reasons why *The Mountaintop* made it to Broadway, and reflect a larger trend of transferring successful West End plays to The Great White Way. *New York Times* theatre critic Patrick Healey observes:

Transferring productions, especially plays, from London to New York is becoming more common, with the incentives increasingly abundant at a time when creating a Broadway production from scratch is growing more expensive. Moving a show often means saving money on sets, costumes,

rehearsal time and other production costs, not to mention the psychic savings for producers who transfer a hit, since they have reason to hope that a well-received London show will prove to be a hit on Broadway too.

It has become increasingly rare to find shows, particularly plays, purposely built for Broadway. *Village Voice* theatre critic Michael Feingold notes, “These days, most of what we call Broadway, good or not, comes ... from elsewhere: London, off-Broadway, resident theatres across the US. The era when Broadway meant a specific way of creating theatre, with its own attitudes and its own approach, is long gone.”

These transatlantic exchanges can be a source of anxiety for theatre professionals on both sides of the pond. Michael Billington, theatre critic for *The Guardian*, describes the American presence on British stages as an “unquestioning cultural enslavement to the United States.” In seeking to understand “why [London] theatre is so besotted with everything American,” Billington surmises:

A shared language is the most obvious: something which avoids the expense and awkwardness of translating plays. There is also the success of American cultural colonialism in dominating world cinema and television so that we all grow up knowing as much about Manhattan or the midwest as about our own geographic hinterlands. And the Europhobia which pervades much of the British media means that we look across the Atlantic rather than the Channel for our information and our values.

*The Mountaintop* finds itself squarely positioned at the center of this debate; were it not for the British theatre establishment's embrace of this play about an African American icon, it likely may not have found itself produced on America's most prominent stage. At the same time, this raises the suggestive question of whether a black female playwright has to leave this country in order to have a greater chance of being produced in this country.

Many members of the Broadway theatre audience were not interested in seeing depictions of King as a complicated man who battled depression, paranoia, vanity, and had affairs with women other than his wife, at the same time as he prophetically and purposefully led blacks in the movement for civil rights. Hall reports receiving criticism, particularly from older African American men, who find her depiction of King to be disrespectful, and recalls one particular email that called her a "confused child" (Schulman 32). There were also members of the artistic community who wanted nothing to do with Hall's depiction of King; the director she approached for the first workshop reading of the play at Stanford University refused to collaborate, and the actor originally cast as King in that production dropped out (Schulman 32). Many American theatre critics also took issue with Hall's use of fantasy, decrying her use of magical realism as bizarre, weird, preposterous and amateurish. Despite winning the Olivier Award in London, *The Mountaintop* received no Tony nominations stateside. Hall believes that American critics didn't respond as positively to the play as English ones did

because Americans prefer to see King as a saint rather than a man (Soloski 30). This post-modern, post-black era demands that we (re)define and (re)negotiate our relationship to familiar black icons in ways that some people are not wholly comfortable with. While this is no easy feat, I would argue that is a worthwhile one.

### CHAPTER 3: TOWARDS A NON-TRADITIONAL POST-BLACK FEMINIST BROADWAY

In a March/April 2011 interview with *The Dramatist*, Katori Hall was cautiously optimistic about the future for black women on Broadway:

...I must admit, I think something is afoot on Broadway, particularly these past seasons. *In the Heights* brought salsa and put it next to Sondheim. Not only is Suzan-Lori Parks coming back, but two more young black women – me and Lydia Diamond—are here. David Henry Hwang’s *Chinglish* is bringing a whole new lingo to Broadway audiences. It’s an interesting time, colorful, diverse and I pray the Great White Way keeps heading that way. A change is a’coming. At least, it betta be. (44-45)

However, a few months later in response to the 2012-2013 Broadway season, Hall’s tone of heady optimism about a more diverse Broadway had given way to skepticism. She claims, “I was always like ‘Careful, careful, careful – what will the next season be?’” (Sokoloski).

Indeed, the next season, and every season thereafter (to date) have not included the voices of contemporary African-American women playwrights. According to The Broadway League, of the twenty-eight new plays to be produced on Broadway during

the 2012-2013 season, only three were written by a woman at all, despite the fact that women steadily account for 68% of all audience and make the majority of the ticket purchases.

This season (2013-2014) features a revival of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, marking the only work written by an African American woman to grace the Broadway stage in the last two years. Like *The Mountaintop* and *Stick Fly*, this production of *Raisin* is directed by Kenny Leon, who also happened to direct the 2004 revival of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Leon is a well-regarded and respected director to be sure, however, even this hiring choice perpetuates the myth that there aren't many black directors capable of directing a Broadway show, highlights the virtual non-participation of female African American directors on Broadway, and establishes that only a select few African American artists get to participate . New contemporary post-black drama is also noticeably absent; in its stead we have *Motown: The Musical*. After the perceived breakthroughs of the 2011-2012 season, I ask: why aren't we seeing more post-black work by African American women on Broadway?

## **BROADWAY AND BIAS**

Gender and racial bias are the primary culprits; despite evidence to the contrary, the perceived low commercial value of female playwrights, African American playwrights, and therefore black female playwrights, remains relatively unchanged.

Diamond contends that there is a clear disparity in career opportunities for male and female playwrights, but theatre artists have a hard time coming to grips with their own biases. She notes:

As an African American woman, I have a hard time separating issues of gender from issues of race. They are similar, and equally difficult to articulate, to point out, but ever-present in my experiences in the world. While I believe that theatre exists to in some reflect our culture back to us, and so could be held to a higher standard, it functions in and for a culture still grappling with its own prejudices. (Diamond, *The Dramatist* 39)

In 2002, The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) released the “Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?” the result of a three year research initiative assessing the status of women in theatre. The NYSCA report suggested that “plays by women are considered ‘risky,’ regardless of their subject or form, [and] even conventional plays by women are perceived as unconventional.” Furthermore, “both women and men share the same consistent subconscious over-valuation of the work of men and under-valuation of the work of women” and “Plays by women, as well as plays about them, are perceived as less universal and less important.”

Another key study, “Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender,” written by then-senior Princeton economics student Emily Glassberg Sands (who was advised by a



cadre of economics experts) also suggests that there is still discrimination against female playwrights in the theater community. In an interview with NPR, Sands identifies several areas of bias including female artistic and literary managers who rate women playwrights lower than men, perhaps from a heightened awareness of the barriers faced by female playwrights, and fear that the play would be less well received.

These studies correlate to the experience, for both Diamond and Hall, of having a male director play a pivotal role in getting their plays produced on Broadway. This is particularly evident with *Stick Fly*, which had multiple regional theatre productions before reaching Broadway. After Leon directed a co-production of the play for Arena Stage and Huntington Theatre Company, Diamond notes, “Kenny then put it before people with the ability to make Broadway happen. Those people believed in the script and in our collaboration. So here we are now on Broadway” (Diamond, *The Dramatist* 39). This highlights the gatekeeper role men continue to play in the theatre, controlling access to the stage, and the necessity, at times, for a female playwright to have a man vouch for her work.

Sands also found that plays with female characters do not get produced as often, and in an interview with NPR, she offered that “In particular, female characters were seen as way less likeable when those characters were purportedly written by a woman than when exactly the same characters were purportedly written by a man.” In her

study, Sands also looked to Broadway, where women write fewer than one in eight shows. In examining Sands' study, Cohen notes that Sands looked at the 329 new plays and musicals produced on Broadway between 1999 and 2009, and discovered:

Plays and musicals by women sold 16 percent more tickets a week and were 18 percent more profitable over all...Yet even though shows written by women earned more money, producers did not keep them running any longer than less profitable shows that were written by men...the length of the run was clear evidence that producers discriminate against women.

That these studies do not examine the combined effects of racial and gender bias on female playwrights of color is telling, and unfortunately there are few others that do. One of the exceptions is a study by Brandi Wilkins Catanese, "Taking the Long View," which examines the relationship between African American women playwrights and the League of Resident Theatres (LORT):

a network of theatres that has a reciprocal relationship with Broadway (which is understood by some measure as the cornerstone of American theatrical culture), LORT member organizations offer a glimpse into the material and discursive mechanisms through which playwrights develop the national reputations that allow them to make a living at their craft. (*Long View* 548)

For her study, Catanese looked at 2010-2011 season announcements from LORT member theatres and determined the number of productions African American women playwrights enjoyed during that season. Her results indicated:

there will be at least 467 productions across seventy-three member companies, of which 360 will be plays written by men and 107 by women. Of those 107 plays by women, thirty are productions of plays written by women of color, and of those thirty, twenty-five are productions of plays by African American women.

(Catanese, *Long View* 548)

Based on these numbers, Catanese suggests that “black women are present within the LORT system in numbers roughly equivalent to or greater than their numbers in society at large” (*Long View* 549).

The problem with Catanese’s assertion is that it doesn’t take into account multiple productions by the same playwright; for example plays written by critically acclaimed playwright Lynn Nottage accounted for 36% of the plays by black women produced during the 2010-2011 season, clearly demonstrating that those twenty-five productions do not represent a broad cross-section of African American women playwrights. Based on these results, only a small number of black female playwrights are having their work produced and developed by LORT theatres, further diminishing the

likelihood that black women will be able to cultivate relationships with LORT theatres that could lead to the Broadway stage.

*Stick Fly* provides an example of the benefit of those relationships. The McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, New Jersey was home to the first major regional production of *Stick Fly* in 2007, and has also mounted staffed readings and workshops of Diamond's other plays, provided her with two artist retreats, commissioned new work, and in the words of Artistic Director Emily Mann, "built a strong bond with Lydia" (Mandell 41). The director of the McCarter production, Shirley Jo Finney (who also happens to be a black woman) directed *Stick Fly* again two years later at The Matrix in Los Angeles, where the play gained even more visibility. Were it not for the dramaturgical work Finney and Diamond were able to put into the play at the McCarter, and the relationship they forged, the life of this play may have been very different.

For those who may argue that there are only a small number of black women playwrights to begin with, thus explaining their limited presence on LORT stages, I would offer that we are dealing with a self-perpetuating cycle. When only a select few African American female playwrights have their work regularly produced, it serves as a barrier to participation that discourages other black women from pursuing playwriting as a paying career.

At the same time, I caution that for black women playwrights, off-Broadway and regional theatre success does not always equate to Broadway productions. Lynn Nottage is a prime example; despite being one of the most successful and acclaimed African American playwrights of our time, she has yet to have a play produced on Broadway. In an interview with Winter Miller regarding bias on Broadway, Nottage spoke of her 2009 hit play *Ruined* about the lives of women in civil war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, and for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, Nottage asked, “Why can this play sweep all the awards and be as popular as it has been – it was extended seven times – and still not find its way to Broadway...I think gender and race play a large part.”

During the 2011-2012 season, following a successful off-Broadway run at Second Stage Theatre, there were rumors that Nottage’s play *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* about a black 1930’s film actress would transfer to Broadway, joining Hall, Parks, and Diamond. However, producer Liz McCann was unable to secure the necessary funds for a Broadway run, a sequence of events that echo Catanese’s assertion, “Doubly valued in the numerical goals of diversity initiatives, Nottage is also doubly devalued in the logic of the theatrical marketplace, where plays about women and plays about blacks are perceived as niche, rather than universally appealing tales” (*Long View* 549).

Contrary to fears about the marketplace, most of the recently produced Broadway plays written by African American women have proven themselves to be

commercially viable; in a market where between one-third and one-quarter of Broadway plays and musicals recoup their initial investments, the 2004 revival of *Raisin in the Sun* was a huge commercial success, recouping its \$2.4 million initial investment in only nine weeks, faster than any other play or musical in 2004, and ultimately grossing \$7.9 million. Parks' adaptation of *The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess* and *The Mountaintop* both recouped their initial investments, and only *Stick Fly* took a financial loss.

## **BLACK CAT**

While the surge of post-black drama on Broadway written by African American women has seemingly plateaued, in its place we see an increasing number of canonical white American and European dramas being performed by black or multicultural casts. Elam and Jones identify non-black playwrights exploring issues of blackness and featuring black characters as a characteristic of the post-black era (xxvii); I propose expanding upon this notion to consider whether restaging and resituating canonical white American and European drama through non-traditional casting complicates our understanding of African American identity in ways that are productive and profoundly post-black.

Broadway's sole African American lead producers<sup>2</sup>, former Wall Street investment bankers Stephen C. Byrd and Alia Jones-Harvey, are responsible for recent and notable productions of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (2008) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (2012), Horton Foote's *Trip to Bountiful* (2013) and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (2013) that employed non-traditional casting. In several interviews, Byrd has claimed that these productions are aimed towards a black theatre audience between Tyler Perry and August Wilson that has not been addressed, and intended to fill that gap. While I would argue that Byrd is establishing a false binary between the two artists that also assumes that black theatregoers cannot be interested in both Tyler Perry and August Wilson at once, I do believe that these productions address a desire for post-black drama in the commercial theatre marketplace, which they fulfill through the use of non-traditional casting

In *Beyond Tradition*, Clinton Turner Davis and Harry Newman define non-traditional casting as: "the casting of ethnic, female, or disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender, or physical capability are not necessary to the characters' or plays development." Angela Pao asserts, "Among the various types of non-traditional casting, colorblind casting—like the model of a colorblind society it is supposed to exemplify – has been seen at once as the most idealistic and the most pernicious form"

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<sup>2</sup> There are other African Americans producer on Broadway, however they are what Byrd refers to as "passive investors" who are not responsible for conceptualizing and coordinating a project.

(*No Safe Spaces* 45). This particular practice aims to ignore ethnicity, gender, and physical ability in casting roles, and calls for the audience to ignore those categories as well – echoing the post-racial, colorblind rhetoric “I don’t see race” that obscures the real effects of racism and insinuates that “if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could ‘all get along’” (Bonilla-Silva 1). Colorblind rhetoric is also at odds with the visual economy of theatre, which demands recognition of what is seen onstage, and a processing of assigned meaning to the experience (Brown 27). As Oregon Shakespeare Festival artistic director, Libby Appel, contends, “There is no such thing as colorblindness. When people look at the stage they see the colors of the actors” (qtd. in Pao, *Recasting* 15).

When examining non-traditional casting it is important to note that aspects of what we consider “traditional” casting -- women playing women’s roles and racial minorities playing roles written for them -- are relatively recent practices dating back to Restoration and the mid-twentieth century respectively. From inception, professional American theatre has privileged whiteness and maleness; appeals in favor of non-traditional casting “[foreground] the fact that what American audiences were accustomed to seeing on stage before the era of multiracial casting was not a truthful correspondence to reality, as one might think from hearing many of the objections, but the application of historical conventions” (Pao, *No Safe Spaces* 5).



In *The Problem of the Color[blind]*, Brandi Wilkins Catanese proposes transgression as a framework for evaluating non-traditional casting. She makes a key distinction between transgression and transcendence, the latter being a key feature of colorblind discourse that calls for disavowal of the significance of race and racial categories even while these constructs continue to have a significant impact on our lives. In contrast, non-traditional casting that employs transgression “exposes the moral limitations of transcendence as a viable strategy for social change by acknowledging the histories of social location that people wear on their bodies and that inform all of our interpretive frameworks” (Catanese, *Problem of the Colorblind* 22). According to Catanese, transgression is an investment in violating racial boundaries and social norms in ways that have the potential to upend entrenched racial discourse that we are deeply invested in (*Problem of the Colorblind* 21-22).

Extending her argument, I would assert that transgressive non-traditional casting is quintessentially post-black. These “violations” destabilize notions of racial identity, gender roles, deconstruct Eurocentric and racist norms that privilege whiteness, and demonstrate the “portability and fecundity of blackness” (Elam and Jones xxviii) allowing for post-black cultural criticism to originate from *within* dramatic texts that preserve and perpetuate white American and European culture. Transgressive non-traditional casting becomes a method of (re)interpreting the black body on stage and

(re)imagining the black experience in expansive ways that support the multiplicity of African American identity.

In his essay, "The Black Performer and the Performance of Blackness" Elam notes:

The black performer, visibly marked and read by the audience as "black," enters the stage and negotiates not only the spaces between the stage representation and the social reality but also racial definitions and stereotypes, racial misconceptions, and ambivalences of race. My contention is that, through the productive ambivalence of the black performer, these racialized meanings can be destabilized and possibly even erased. The black performer can purposefully acknowledge and utilize her ambiguous status – as real person, as theatrical representation, as sociocultural construction – to explore, expose, and even explode definitions of blackness. (289)

This productive ambivalence has been a part of the earliest black performances in America, from strategic performances of the happy ducky on the plantation, stepping it up lively on the auction block, the pageantry of the coogle, and blackface minstrelsy and melodrama. Black performers' subversive agency and "the power of the black performer through his body and language to destabilize the visible" (Elam 302) allows them to "transgress, transcend, and even subvert established racial categories" (Elam 288).

Whether Broadway is invested in transgressive non-traditional casting that actively interrogates race and gender remains to be seen. For example, the all-black *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (affectionately dubbed black *Cat*) demonstrated that African American actors are as capable as anyone else at performing Tennessee Williams; however, the production focused on the visual aesthetic of black bodies on stage rather than the lived experiences of black people, and became trapped in its own narrative of transcendence. New York Times theatre critic Robert Simonson wrote that for *Cat* director Debbie Allen:

the race of the cast in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is the last thing Debbie Allen wants the audience to consider. “The idea of all-black really isn’t an issue,” she said. “The characters are so universal. I know them. We’re coming into it like an explorer, just discovering the lives of the people.

Interestingly, as evidenced by the critical reception of *Cat*, this failure to critically engage with race was actually seen as a positive aspect of the production, revealing a profound anxiety on the part of the predominantly white, male, reviewers that African American actors would somehow sully an American classic with any explorations of their race and culture. Ben Brantley, famed *New York Times* theatre critic, writes:

So there was reason to be excited when this latest incarnation, directed by Debbie Allen, was announced. And not, at least for me, because of the novelty of an all-black cast. (By transporting the play from the 1950s and the age of Jim

Crow to a later, unspecified decade, Ms. Allen wisely pushes past the issue of race.)

Here, Brantley trivializes the casting choice and frames himself as being above the racial fray, invoking colorblindness as his own, superior, world-view. His praise for Allen changing the era of the play so that race is not dealt with, despite the presence of an African American cast, is cringe-worthy; Brantley seems to suggest that this production is better off by not acknowledging the race of its African American performers. Race is a problem to be overcome, not a difference to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Temporal and cultural distance from classical European drama makes theatre makers and audiences more amenable to the use of non-traditional casting in these plays, whereas the non-traditional casting of (white) American realistic drama becomes a source of apprehension because it threatens to disrupt white cultural dominance. The real issue here is power – who has it, who wants it, and how we can share it.

With the non-traditional casting of canonical American plays, the Broadway stage becomes a site for African Americans to (re)define and (re)negotiate racialized scripts of national identity and belonging. At the same time, I caution that non-traditional casting should not be undertaken lightly, because of the danger of reifying narratives of transcendence, colorblindness and post-racialism that discounts the unique experiences of people of color. Every effort should be made to integrate a

performers' racial and cultural identity into a non-traditionally cast production, furthermore, the artistic community must continue to develop and produce the work of African American playwrights, lest we buy into racist notions that African American playwrights are inferior artists, and black performers would be better served doing white American or European drama.

Canonical American and European plays written by white men reassure risk-averse Broadway producers who are already convinced of their universality. However, the varying financial success of the aforementioned productions demonstrates that on Broadway there is no such thing as a sure thing. Neither *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *A Trip to Bountiful* nor *Romeo and Juliet* managed to recoup their initial investments. On the other hand, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* recouped its \$2.1 million investment in just 12 weeks, and ended its 19-week run with a gross of over \$12.5 million. The commercial (rather than artistic) success of *Cat* is directly related to the continuing interest in producing white American classics with all black casts, however, so far producers have been unable to duplicate the same box office success.

#### **CONCLUSION: BEYOND BROADWAY**

Both Diamond and Hall have expressed a degree of ambivalence about their newfound status as Broadway playwrights. Hard work and talent are clearly part of the reason for their success, however, timing and a little luck also come to bear. In response

to the question of how she feels about her show landing on Broadway, Diamond reported, "I feel humbled and a little messed up. The exposure, the buzz, is genuinely exciting, but it sits in a place that's a little bit uncomfortable." She continued, "I have been privileged to get my work recycled; I can see clearly how arbitrary and inequitable the system is. I have too many friends who are brilliant artists and wonderful people, who don't get the opportunity of multiple productions – or being on Broadway" (Mandell 40-41).

When asked what a Broadway play meant for her personally, Hall responded:

I never thought the term "Broadway Play" would define my success as a writer. I have my own terms. I think it's because I knew it was an exclusive circle (and still is). It ain't called the Great White Way for nothing. It's been predominantly male and white, and oddly sometimes British or Irish! So I looked at it and felt it wasn't for me. I couldn't afford the tickets unless I was a student. And I didn't see me, as a young black woman represented on that stage, on it or behind it as writer or as a director...So I say all this to say that though I know your question insinuates that having a "Broadway Play" is supposed to mean something big in one's career, but I think it's a chapter on my journey to being the greatest writer I can be, beyond Broadway. (Hall, *The Dramatist* 44)

Hall and Diamond seem to be taking their success in stride, understanding that Broadway is as much about politics as artistry, sometimes with a dash of luck on the side. Broadway is this country's, and perhaps even the world's, most visible and lauded site of artistic and cultural production, however, it is also an institution that preserves, promotes, and perpetuates white American culture (Wilson 495). Its history of systematically excluding women and artists of color puts forward the message that men's stories and white culture are universal while women's stories, and black culture only occupy a niche. Still, its racialized and gendered past make it a powerful site for reclaiming all facets of black identity, resisting patriarchy, and challenging white cultural and artistic hegemony. As both a performed construct and lived experience, on the Broadway stage and elsewhere, blackness is tied to performances of identity, community, survival, and resistance. These plays, with their post-black aesthetic and black feminist themes, challenge our conceptions of black theatre, black identity and black life by expanding the representational possibilities for black people on the American stage.

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