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Persistence *in* and Persistence *of*
Contemporary African American Drama

Raphaëlle Tchamitchian

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One of the things African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks says most often in interviews and conferences is: "You gotta keep on keeping on." Usually, she refers to her own creative process as a means to give a piece of advice to younger writers. If you truly want to be a writer, you have to sit down and write no matter what, you have to *persist* no matter what. But it is likely that, behind her mischievous looks, she also refers to the state of theatre, particularly black theatre, in an age of mechanical reproduction. Whereas a lot of powerful and successful black narratives have recently flourished on cinema and TV, which remain the most popular art forms, Parks and other African American writers, notably younger writers, persist in choosing drama. Why do Jackie Sibblies Drury and Jeremy O. Harris (among others) choose theatre? Or to put it differently: what does theatre allow them to do, show and say that other art forms wouldn't?

Persistence *in* contemporary African American drama

While African American theatre has long been characterized by the staging of a persistent, coherent and often positive black identity in the form of the well-made realist play, there seems to have been some kind of inversion at the end of the 20th century. According to Ilka Saal, "while the emphasis on "uplifting the race" was foremost in African American cultural politics for much of the twentieth century (though never uncontested), starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s playwrights and other artists increasingly began to turn toward

precisely the negative images of blackness that the well-made realist play sought to leave behind[1]."

For almost four decades now, African American drama has contributed in shaping what scholars have theorized as the "post-black" era. The term does not signify an abandonment of blackness, or a moving past blackness, nor does it imply the switch to a post-racial era that, according to most, does not exist. Rather, to quote Bertram Ashe and Ilka Saal, the post-black aims to "trouble habitual notions of blackness" thanks to "a hybrid, fluid, elastic, cultural mulattoesque sense of blackness," which works alongside the playful, often humorous, and frequently iconoclastic Signifyin(g) on established narratives, tropes [and] images of blackness[2]." As an aesthetic and historiographical designation, the term "post-black" refers to artists who were "either born or came of age after the Civil Rights Movement[3]," such as George C. Wolfe, Suzan-Lori Parks, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Antoinette Nwandu… And it 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[4]."

With this break, the way persistence can be understood in relation to African American drama has changed. The staging of persistent black characters among a hostile white world refers to persistence as a positive attitude, a firm and obstinate action despite an unforgiving state of things. On the contrary, at the heart of post-black drama lies the persistence of white supremacy and the trauma of slavery—that is to say: the persistence of the past within the present. A second meaning of persistence has thus become prominent: persistence as a duration, as something continued in time, as "the continuity of the sensation after the cause was removed" (Evie Shockley on Friday). Persistence went from something the characters shape to something they are shaped by. This is well-exemplified by the title of the recent Broadway hit *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris, which refers both to the playing of

1. Ilka Saal, "Performing Slavery at the Turn of the Millenium", *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination*, ed. Bertram D. Ashe and Ilka Saal, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2020, p. 141.
2. *Ibid*., p. 6.
3. Bertram D. Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction", *African American Review*, vol. 41, n°4, 2007, p. 611.
4. Harry J. Elam, Jr., Douglas A. Jones, Jr. (ed.), *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012, p. ix.

slavery on stage and to how slavery plays the characters as well as the audience and, ultimately, the nation.

This shift has had deep consequences on theatricality. In the well-made play, stage and audience are separated as fiction and reality are separated; even if there are of course mirror effects and echoes with reality, any struggle we may witness on stage is character-based, therefore outside of us (by "us" I mean the audience). But with post-black theatre, the line between reality and fiction is disrupted, and the stage-audience relationship is reworked. Theatricality is used to trap the audience into realizing and confronting they are a part of the persistence of white supremacy.

To illustrate the post-black theatrical strategies, I propose to compare two plays recently published, *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury and *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris. These texts are characterized by an inner movement: at first quite traditional, the stage-audience line progressively blurs through three different dramatic strategies. The audience ends up being poetically integrated to fiction, and in one case even physically incorporated to the theatrical experience.

From separation to difference

Both *Fairview* and *Slave Play* open like traditional well-made plays. In *Fairview*, a mother named Beverly is making dinner for the whole Frasier family on the occasion of the grandmother's birthday. Around her: a devoted but quite useless husband, an annoying sister and a demanding teenager named Keisha. *Slave Play* opens on the MacGregor Plantation in *antebellum* Virginia. Three interracial couples have what feels like forbidden sexual encounters: an overseer and a slave in his cottage, the mistress and her slave in the main house, and a white servant and a slave in the barn. Especially with this last couple, Harris intersects race, gender and class as Dustin and Gary are both men, and Gary, the slave, is declared the "man in charge." [N.B.: I am using the word "slave" instead of "enslaved person" because this is how they are named in the stage directions.]

From then on, the two plays evolve into destabilizing the very foundations on which they made us believe they were built. As the stories unfold, we progressively realize that

nothing is as it seems. Whether it is built into the structure, the characters or both, a theatrical masquerade is gradually dismantled. This dismantlement bespeaks of the "fugitive spirit" of the texts. Here, I am drawing on a notion elaborated by Nathaniel Mackey[5] from the French word *marronnage*. Historically, *le marronnage* refers to the fleeing of enslaved persons from the plantation toward freedom, whereas *le petit marronnage* (the little *marronnage*) refers to small acts of rebellion inside the plantation, notably through performance, hidden satire and *Signifyin(g)* strategies —thus making "a way out of no-way", according to the phrase of Zora Neale Hurston. For Édouard Glissant[6], Nathaniel Mackey and others, both *le marronnage* has left its mark on black expressive culture, and the term is now used as a cultural and esthetic metaphor to read black literature. It seems to me that *Slave Play* and *Fairview* have a fugitive spirit.

The dismantlement of the masquerade happens in *Slave Play* and *Fairview* through a break. Both Acts One terminate suddenly (in *Fairview* the mother faints from panicking because the cake is burnt; in *Slave Play* Jim, the white man from the first couple, starts yelling "STARBUCKS" for no apparent reason and two women rush into the room) and the second Acts mark a *coup de théâtre*. In *Fairview*, the characters from Act One start redoing exactly what they already did, except this time their voices are drowned out—that is: erased—by a conversation between four white-sounding voices who ask themselves: "what race would you rather be if you could choose?". What's left of the black people is their bodies on stage, performing, which takes us back to minstrelsy. Moreover, slowly we come to understand these voices are watching what's happening on stage—that is, they are in the position of the audience, in our position. In *Slave Play*, Act Two sees all the characters from Act One dressed in modern-day clothes and gathered in a room to "process" everything they just went through. They are joined by two women, Teà and Patricia, who we understand are the counselors of their own "Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy", designed for black partners to be able to experience pleasure again from their white partners. Thereby, both *Fairview* and *Slave Play* literally break away from the realist well-made play.

5. Nathaniel Mackey, "Other: From Noun to Verb", *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing*, Univ. of Alabama Press, 1993.
6. Édouard Glissant, "Lieu clos, parole ouverte", *Poétique de la relation*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.

Of the three couples in *Slave Play*, the first one, formed by Jim and Kaneisha, is the only one we follow from Act One until Act Three. In Acts One and Two, Jim embodies what the audience might feel: he's the one stopping Act One by yelling "STARBUCKS" because, in the role play, his black wife is asking him to call her the "n-word" and to threaten to whip her. Horrified, he refuses to play along. During Act Two, he's also the one stepping out to denounce the absurdity and toxicity of the therapy. "Everything about this is sickening to me," he says. "It turns my stomach, and I personally don't find a turnt stomach to be hot." (82) Yet, in Act Three (entitled "Exorcism"), he ends up embodying the very things he was previously appalled at: in a sudden burst of extreme violence most probably unleashed by the therapy, he almost rapes his wife—"almost" not because he doesn't carry out but because she gives her consent at one point in the scene. After they both cried, the plays ends on Kaneisha's words: "Thank you baby. Thank you for listening." By making Jim a double of the spectator, Harris traps us into facing what lurks inside of us. Therefore, the therapy is a (paradoxical) success for the characters but a horrible defeat for the spectator. The traditional catharsis becomes indeed an "exorcism".

In Act Three of *Fairview*, the white-sounding voices which were embodiments of the audience in Act Two come on stage dressed as members of the Frasier family, and knowingly act as racialized stereotypes to disrupt the family peace from the inside. The dinner ends in a food fight, and it becomes suddenly clear this dinner is a metaphor for the play itself: as Beverly was trying to make a perfect dinner, Drury was trying to write a perfect play (*ie* a well-made realist play). But both of them are precluded from doing so because they are continuously watched. "What are you looking at?!" asks Beverly in the very first line of the play to her husband. "I can't hear myself think. I can't hear anything but you staring at me," says Keisha at the end of Act Three.

Ultimately, the meta-theatrical discourse of *Fairview*, which has to do with what Fred Moten calls the "essential theatricality of blackness[7]", comments on the fact that traditional drama is fundamentally unable to capture black life. Drury and Harris (and other post-black playwrights) *need* to break away from realism as a means to break away from imposed notions of blackness. Theatre is the perfect place to refract and diffract the onlooker gaze—

7. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 234.

after all, *theatron* in Greek means "place where we watch." What theatre allows Drury and Harris to do, then, is to trick the audience into thinking they are going to watch black performance, when really the black performance eludes in a "maroon" and "fugitive spirit" to make them watch themselves instead.

Coda: A breakaway from theatre itself

The post-black stage-audience relationship ultimately points to the blurring of the line between mimesis and reality that was called upon by the second definition of persistence. The relationship between stage and audience, fiction and reality, seem to tell these plays, is not so much a "*separation*" as it is a "*difference*" (here I am quoting Fred Moten). This opening up of the border between fiction and reality culminates at the end of *Fairview*, when the play breaks into reality.

As we have seen, *Slave Play* has a very unsettling and dark ending. *Fairview* would fall into the same category if it wasn't for its coda: after the white intrusion ruins the Frasier family dinner and possibly the family's future, the daughter Keisha definitely breaks the fourth wall (she had already done several cracks into it during the play) and asks white members of the audience to come up on stage.

> Hi, white people.
> Come here, white people. Come on up here. […]
> You can choose to come up here
> to where I've always been, where my family has always been.
> Sit on the couch.
> Make yourself a plate.
> Look out from where I am.
> And let me and my family go out
> to where you've always been. (102)

This is of course the ultimate beholder/object inversion, since Drury asks the (white) audience to *physically* exchange places with the (black) actors. Here, she literally *stages the audience*—if they let her. In *Fairview*, the fugitivity is fugitivity from theatre itself.