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The Necessity of Solidarity for African Americans in a Desegregated Society:

A Comparative Analysis of Amiri Baraka's "Dutchman" and Adrienne Kennedy's "The
Funnyhouse of the Negro" as Insights on Psychological Trauma

"*The Flying Dutchman*, condemned to sail the seas forever without reaching port [...] is said to be cursed either from an onboard murder or for being the original vessel of the slave trade" (Baraka 674) reads an annotation giving context to Amiri Baraka's 1964 surrealist play, "Dutchman", in which a 20 year-old African American named Clay goes toe-to-toe with a 30 year-old white woman named Lula. The play's title alludes to the subway in which Lula preys on young black men, a setting cursed by post-segregation delusions of cultural acceptance in the same way Adrienne Kennedy's 1964 surrealist play, "Funnyhouse of a Negro", takes place inside Sarah's imagination where she "encounter[s] skewed self-images" (Kennedy 620) that help her come to terms with her lack of place in high society as a half-black woman, ultimately culminating in her suicide. Upon recognizing how *Dutchman* and *Funnyhouse* punctuate African American solidarity as being of greater value than social acceptance in a post-segregation society because of the patronizing efforts to understand African Americans within an integrated society, the racist past that embroidered a social structure imbalanced against African Americans and the loss of one's solidarity being the death of their ego, one will have a greater understanding of how America is the Dutchman; cursed to irresolution for its

crime of once upon a time extolling human slavery. Noting the first of these points as a European Canadian writing about the nature of African Americans' culture within the nation that wronged them, this essay is an inquest on how America's racial divide is irresolvable, in spite of integration, through contrasting two surrealist plays penned by African Americans. Baraka and Kennedy don't recall an antebellum folktale or put an African American protagonist through America's urban jungles, rather they come to terms with America's divided class through the mental worlds of educated yet disillusioned and impressionable young black adults. Their impressionability makes them consider the cultural marginalization that dominant white figures feed them, but their solidarity stands tall to protect their dignity from those forces of disenfranchisement that threaten to sellout their integrity.

The patronization of African Americans is a serious issue tackled by both plays, one that compromises the safety and certainly the self-respect of many African Americans. "[Negro Sarah's] father hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba died" says the Landlady in *Funnyhouse* as the sight of a hanged Sarah, only to be corrected by Raymond who remarks "[h]er father never hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered [...] [rather he] is a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table" and brands Sarah, in all her forms, "a funny little liar" (631). The historic personalities of Sarah mirror *Dutchman's* antagonist, Lula, more than its protagonist insofar as they yearn to be accepted as members of the culture oppositional their own skin tones. Lula preys on black males two-thirds her age and when she is ultimately rejected; Lula takes out her frustrations violently by "bring[ing] up a small knife and plung[ing] it into CLAY's chest" (687), as does Sarah by hanging herself. Both

victims of these frustrations are African Americans who are degraded by prejudiced sentiments from people unable to connect with African American culture; the violence in *Dutchman*'s case stemming from Lula's failed endeavour to deceive susceptible young African American men into accepting her condescending means of garnering the approval of African Americans by and large while Sarah's belief that her father "is a nigger who drives [the Duchess/Sarah] to misery" (625) causes Sarah and her mother to have "[their] hair fall out" (624). The numerous contrarities Sarah is told by her historic self-images about her father such as him being "a black man who shot himself when they murdered Patrice Lumumba" (624) not only negate the Landlady's probably false claims; such claims fuel her self-hatred as a mulatto woman. Unlike Sarah, a victim of the trappings within her head, Clay has the audacity to retaliate against Lula, informing her that he "could rip that paper out of [the well-dressed man's] hand and just as easily rip out his throat" (686) and that when "the great missionary heart will have triumphed, and all of those ex-coons will be stand-up Western men, with eyes for clean hard useful lives, [...] they'll murder you, and have very rational explanations" (687). Lula then stabs him out of fear and makes him leave the subway as the next victim in *Dutchman*'s endless cycle of madness enters; an outcome that affirms the truth in Clay's prognosis; that "if Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music". At his most confrontational, Clay lets Lula know how there is a "whole people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane [and] the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder" (686). Considering the mulatto Sarah's demise, this neurosis very real and when Sarah's gone, the only voices left paradoxically conclude that Sarah's African American father is in fact a poised member of upper-class society. Sarah's Negro

personality's reasoning for patronizing her father is unlike that of her other personalities, being that "if [her] hair hadn't fallen out, [she] wouldn't have bludgeoned [her] father's head with an ebony mask" (622).

The voices that convince Sarah otherwise are embroidered in a colonial campaign to depose Patrice Lumumba and systematically keep that which they cannot understand oppressed. The psychological trauma seated within Sarah and Clay can be understood via V.F. Calverton's assertion that "Negro art and literature in America have had an economic origin [...] [because its works] can be traced to the economic institution of slavery and its influence upon the Negro soul" (xl). Calverton is right insofar as both these surrealist plays, surrealism being, unlike spirituals or Blues, a Dadaist European invention, having protagonists psychologically traumatized by the inhumanity laid upon their ancestors that pervades perceptions of Sarah and Clay as African Americans who sympathize to an extent with whiteness; Sarah with her mother and the historic characters who scrutinize her black father and Clay with the intellectual class. If Clay did not have the fortitude to draw from his solidarity, Lula would overpower him. To Lula's labeling of Clay as "an escaped nigger [...] [who] crawled through the wire and made tracks to [Lula's] side" Clay retorts to her misinformation and, as he corrects her, states "[p]lantations were big open whitewashed places like heaven, and everybody on 'em was [...] strumming and hummin' all day [...] [a]nd that's how the [B]lues was born" (684). When Sarah's personalities in unison assert her father "is in a grief from that black anguished face of his" and go on to repeat her Negro side's line about standing "before [her father's] face and bludgeon[ing] him with an ebony mask" as their roles end with the line "[f]orgiveness, Sarah, I know you are a nigger of torment" (630), it affirms "that

Sarah is black, and that blackness underneath the white masks of the Duchess and Queen is Sarah's blackness" (Thompson 1997). The tangible truth behind Thompson's statement is that *Funnyhouse* is indeed performed by black actors in whiteface and for the biased perspectives given by Sarah's "idol[s]" (622) to her, they are inevitably black on the inside and white on the outside. Sarah's torment is, as evidenced, rooted in her "haunted [...] conception" (624) in believing she is a child of rape and aggravated by conflicting reports of her father's involvement in Lumumba's campaign. Due to the inconsistencies and plain falsities in these testimonials, it is fair to deduce that the systematic attempts to make Sarah scorn her blackness via prejudiced generalizations are tormenting her to the point of suicide and that this prejudice has been created by America's slave campaign and Belgium's colonial campaign. Thompson interprets the characterization of Sarah's father as a "wild black beast [who] raped [her] mother" (624) as a suggestion "that the ideal of whiteness is achieved only through the ritual sacrifice of white women (and erasure of black women) through the mythic rape by a black man" (Thompson). This makes Lula's assertion that her entire conversation with Clay was "[a]bout [Clay's] manhood" all the more consequential, especially considering Clay "didn't know it was [about] that" (682). Such revelatory lines give credibility to the discussions with and about African American males that take place within these plays as being inherently related to African American masculinity; a brand formed in antebellum America. *Dutchman* revolves around a constant challenge to Clay's masculinity as *Funnyhouse* is a scattershot assessment of Sarah's father masculinity and how it defines his mulatto daughter. The relentlessness of this feeling in being bound to something that is inherent in their lives seeps into the

protagonists' respective psyches and causes them trauma, which dissolves Clay and Sarah of their egos, their purpose and themselves.

What is a hollow tree worth, no fibers and full of wind to move its lightness? Trauma eats those fibers like termites and when empty, the tree has nothing to shed; so no seedlings may grow around the fruitless trees and a forest full of hollowness is a dead one. "The rooms are my rooms; a Hapsburg chamber, a chamber in a Victorian castle, the hotel where I killed my father, the jungle" (623) says Sarah as she ties together her contradictory identities and establishes that, in her mind, her black father is dead. Patrice Lumumba's statement, "[m]y white friends, like myself, will be shrewd intellectuals and anxious for death" ties Sarah to the murderous forewarning Clay spewed at Lula and it seems that without the foundation of embracing what they are in the flesh, they fall into a lust for death, "[a]nyone's death" (626) as Lumumba concludes repeating the words of Negro (622). Without solidarity, these totems stand hollow. Lumumba, Sarah's voice of blackness, "dream[s] for [his] friends to eat their meals on white glass tables" and believes that these friends could only "be white" (626), a sentiment both confirmed and contradicted by the truth of Sarah's 'dead' father because by Sarah's personalities' accord, he "is a dead man" (628). Lula's request that Clay "scream meaningless shit in these hopeless faces" going on to blurt "[r]ed trains cough Jewish underwear for keeps" (685) exposes her general prejudice towards not only African Americans, but also Jews, and links these two ethnic groups by mentioning slavery in almost the same breath as the Holocaust which relays back into confirming the psychological trauma a perverse history holds against its peoples, especially when used by others to break them down. Perhaps luring anyone except the proudly African American Clay would provide a cathartic

opportunity for the prey to have superiority over another peoples by taut ignorance but if Clay were to ever be molded by abysmal influence, his spirit would be crushed and dissolved. Solidarity fends Clay and Sarah from the ugliness of others so they may discover the beauty within themselves as African Americans.

After accounting for the marginalization by patronization, by the past manifested into a society set against them and the death of the ego by these throes being the emptiest death, one can understand why the contemporary African American's solidarity is unquestionably more important than any strain of societal acceptance, as deduced by the surrealist plays *Dutchman* and *Funnyhouse*. The hollow forest is tragic for its fauna and meaningless to the coreless trees that constitute it, just as Sarah's death leaves her a "poor bitch" (631) in the eyes of the Landlady and meaningless to Raymond who knows that her father was not "a wild black beast" (624), rather he was a man who has not let the torment that did his daughter in destroy him and instead reached Lumumba's dream of "be(ing) white" (626) as a black man. Lula will continue to ride the subway long after Clay has dismounted it a wounded but whole man. As the hollow pit of purposeless bigotry she is, Lula is eternally bound to the *Dutchman*, forever pursuing the acceptance of young African American men.

Work Cited

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