Holler & Shout:
Sisterhood, Stereotypes, and Black Women in the Drama of Pearl Cleage and Kia Corthron

by

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Class of 2012

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in English and American Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2012
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Grace Alexandra Ross
for my Grandma, the playwright
Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Laurie Woodard for making this a “want” to project instead of a “have” to one, for hours-long girl talk, for the dream of a ‘36 hour day,’ and for gently guiding me through this process.

Special thanks to my Daddy (i.e my editor and best friend) who has mentored me as a writer since our first joint project about witches, who has instilled in me a love for nonfiction, and who never fails to answer my calls.

Special thanks to Emily Goettsche. Thank you my angel.

Thank you to Rashida Shaw for her theatre perspective and reassuring advice.

Thank you to Joel Pfister for helping me see beyond the stained glass.

Thank you to Amy Tang for suggesting I write about George C. Wolfe, without whom I wouldn’t have discovered my passion for African American drama.

Thank you to my friends and family, who listened to my passion and supported me along the way.
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Introduction

...the poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines; she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak...

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*

“I could not keep silent,” declared Anita Faye Hill in her statement to the Senate Judiciary Committee, “…I felt that I had to tell the truth.” On October 11, 1991, Anita Hill publicly voiced her experiences of sexual harassment while working under Clarence Thomas at the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. A graduate of Yale Law School and a law professor at the University of Oklahoma, Anita Hill raised legitimate and serious concerns about the candidacy of the newest Supreme Court nominee of President George H.W. Bush. In front of millions of prime-time television viewers, Hill spoke explicitly about sexual harassment in the workplace—Thomas’ descriptions of pornographic films and his graphic boasting of his own sexual prowess. In response, drawing on imagery of the lynching of black men by white men, Clarence Thomas painted himself as the victim of the white Judiciary Committee who interrogated him about his sexual intentions toward Hill.

In her testimony, Hill never represented herself as a victim and remained admirably poised, calm, and eloquent. However, the popular media, conservatives, and most organizations, apart from women’s groups, castigated and vilified Hill as a traitor to her race for jeopardizing the lifetime placement of an African American in the Supreme Court. During the hearing, Senator Orrin Hatch, Republican of Utah, accused Hill of fabricating the story as part of a plot by “slick lawyers” and “liberal
interest groups” to destroy Thomas’ credibility.\textsuperscript{5} Many women expressed little or no sympathy for Hill, blaming her for failing to avoid the harassment.\textsuperscript{6} Liberal, centrist, and conservative media pilloried Hill as either lying, promiscuous, or a bitch.\textsuperscript{7} All of these representations purposely pigeonholed Hill into one caricature—the promiscuous black woman, the traitor, or the victim—that could be easily distorted, defeated, and dismissed.

Hill had nothing to gain except honor, justice, and dignity once her previously anonymous report was leaked to the media. “I have not gained anything except knowing that I came forward and did what I felt I had an obligation to do,” said Hill, “That was to tell the truth.”\textsuperscript{8} Despite her rightful and legal position to comment on Thomas’ fitness for the position, she was silenced and the content of her testimony summarily dismissed. The incident epitomized how African American women have been silenced over the course of American history.\textsuperscript{9}

Crushed between racism on one side and sexism on the other, black women’s responses to the historical moment went largely unnoticed in mainstream discussion. Although the dramatic hearings thrust a black woman into the forefront of national consciousness like no other in recent decades since Marian Anderson had been denied the chance to sing at Washington’s DAR Constitution Hall in 1939, the event “simultaneously signified our collective invisibility,” wrote Barbara Ransby, a primary organizer of the grassroots initiative that published a petition to break the imposed silence.\textsuperscript{10} On November 17, 1991, \textit{The New York Times} and seven prominent African American newspapers published “African American Women in Defense of Ourselves,” a full-page statement containing 1,603 signatures of black women.\textsuperscript{11} (See
Appendix 1) A national effort designed to amplify the voices of African American women, this document challenged historical perceptions of the American public on race, gender, and class. It claimed a position for African American women within the national public sphere by declaring that “No one will speak for us but ourselves.”¹²

Two playwrights, Pearl Cleage and Kia Corthron, have embodied the statement’s call by elevating the voices of African American women in their plays in the early 1990s.¹³ They brought forward the thoughts of black women about subjects that intimately touch their lives, which included abortion, domestic violence, and poverty. Cleage and Corthron amplify these voices in Flyin’ West (1992) and Come Down Burning (1993), linking political issues with their practical consequences to the lives of ordinary women. Yet, they do not sing with a unified voice nor do their plays display some stereotyped version of “the black woman.” Neither playwright nor her female characters embody one-dimensional victims of patriarchy or racism. These plays offer an alternative vision of black women on the stage, revising popular contemporary constructions of black womanhood. They manipulate gender, race, and class boundaries to develop African American female characters with multiple identities—all without erasing class, geographic, and sexuality differences.¹⁴ The following analysis of Flyin’ West and Come Down Burning sets out to illuminate the specificities of these two author’s voices as members of a larger chorus of black women. Pearl Cleage and Kia Corthron not only complement this chorus but also open avenues for discussion of the complex, subversive, and emotionally intense resistance strategies adopted by those with whom they sing.
Gail Bederman, in her introduction to *Manliness & Civilization*, a cultural history of gender and race in the turn-of-the-century United States, offers a foundational conception of gender as a “historical, ideological process.” She disengages the notions of manhood and womanhood from “an intrinsic essence or a collection of traits, attributes, or sex roles.” Bederman then defines womanhood as a “continual, dynamic process,” whose subjects are culturally positioned and position themselves within the preexisting social category of “woman.” Gender is intimately linked to the body; it is the body that determines what kinds of authority and power women can or cannot claim. For example, the gender system constructs “woman” as inferior by associating women’s biological “lack” of a penis with an absence of power and normalizes this relationship as historically unchanging. In other words, the process of womanhood links female anatomy to female identity and connects both anatomy and identity to particular arrangements of authority and power.

Bederman’s conception of womanhood and gender allows for the existence of subversive strategies to counter cultural constructions of womanhood that seem natural, unchanging, and biological. By virtue of seeming “natural,” stereotypes—the promiscuous black woman, the Mammy, the angry black woman—effectively silence African American women and render them invisible within the national political discourse. Through corporeal representations of alternative black female identities on the stage, Cleage and Corthron (re)vision black womanhood as powerful, complex, and dynamic. The African American women in *Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* are represented as vocal, communal, and autonomous agents, active in their own self-definition and history. They negotiate the contradictions within gender, race, and
class representations. In doing so, they break the conventional relationships between the material body and the body in representation, presenting new ways of imaging the formation of black female identity and womanhood.

British cultural theorist Stuart Hall points us to the productivity of the “spaces of marginality” located on the periphery of mainstream popular culture. The rich scope of marginality has opened possibilities of a “cultural politics of difference” and “of the production of new identities” that move beyond essentialist binary oppositions. Daphne Brooks builds upon this idea to demonstrate how the peripheral spaces of performance culture offer sites for the reconfiguration of the racialized and gendered black female body. Her term “spectacular opacity” is useful for analyzing Cleage and Corthron as black cultural producers who manipulate the image of black women on the stage. “Spectacular opacities contest the ‘dominative imposition of transparency’ systematically willed on to black figures,” Brooks argues, revealing the potential for resistance within black art. Whether the product of the artists’ will or “a visual obstacle erupting as a result of the hostile spectator’s epistemological resistance to reading alternative racial and gender representations,” Brooks identifies acts of self-affirmation, self-making, and historical agency in the artistic work of black women. The “hostile spectator” is integral to understanding the efforts of these two playwrights. The inability of these spectators, regardless of gender and race, to read the alternative racial and gender representations on the stage does not negate their presence. In fact, Cleage and Corthron stand as potential “remedial reading teachers,” (to draw from Alice Walker) attempting to guide the reader to see beyond the “dominative imposition of transparency” imposed on the black female
body through the medium of drama. The female characters in *Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* (re)inscribe humanity, depth, and complexity over the stereotypical images of black women circulating through the consciousness of mainstream American.

Popular culture and entertainment, such as television shows, advertising, film, theatre, and literature, substantially reinforce white mainstream stereotypes about black women. In response to growing demands for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the early 1800s, blackface and traveling minstrel shows became popular forms of entertainment, which disseminated negative African American stereotypes across the nation. Despite the decreasing popularity of minstrel shows in the early 20th century, patronizing images of African Americans thrived in Tom Shows, Coon Shows, vaudeville, variety shows, and even Hollywood. The African American community fought back with positive portrayals of “essential blackness” during the Harlem Renaissance, Black Power, the Black Arts, and Black Nationalist movements of the following decades. African American artists expressed the contradictions of being black in the United States; yet black women were still excluded from participating with a significant voice. While the 1970s brought the feminist agenda into the national conscious in full force, white feminists repeatedly silenced and overlooked the black female perspective, refusing to acknowledge or failing to understand the differences between black and white female experiences. Meanwhile, Civil Rights and Black Power activists ignored and suppressed black women’s concerns about inter- and intra-racial sexism and classism.
In the introduction of *Words of Fire*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall defines the constants of African American feminist thought between 1831 and 1995. African American women experience a unique oppression in America, one simultaneously racist, sexist, and classist. This ‘triple jeopardy’ separates the issues, concerns, and needs of black women from those of white women and black men. The movement from recognizing “double jeopardy,” defined by Frances Beale in 1970, to “triple jeopardy” in the 1980s signaled the growing awareness of the diversity and singularity of the African American female experience among its subjects. Deborah King pushed the concept of ‘triple jeopardy’ even farther in her groundbreaking essay, “Multiple Jeopardy: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” arguing that the oppressions experienced by black women are intersecting, with multiplicative relationships rather than additive: “racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism.” She enunciates the theoretical invisibility of black women, emanating from the assumption that their experience is synonymous with that of either black males or white females, an ideological simplification that makes any discussion of black women superfluous and irrelevant.

It is important to acknowledge Guy-Sheftall’s point that there exists no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate the ‘isms’. African American women must face the challenging task of simultaneously fighting for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously. During the 1970s, white liberal feminists championed the idea of “common oppression” or “shared victimization” as the basis for solidarity between all women. Every woman experienced the same oppressions from patriarchal structures, thus sharing the same bonds. bell hooks forcefully denied
this essentialized vision of sisterhood, arguing that the idea of “common oppression” mystified “the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality” and excluded “assertive, self-affirming” women from having a place within the feminist movement. She argues that white liberal feminists’ definition of sisterhood dictated that sisters were to ‘unconditionally’ love one another and never criticize or disagree. This definition of sisterhood and the idea of “common oppression” disregarded the differences of class and race within the feminist movement, thus excluding African American women from participating fully or advocating for more appropriate changes. hooks characterizes the essence of a sisterhood that transcends race and class as a “bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the woman bonding the feminist movement should encourage.”

Yet, black women are still often forced to choose between race and gender interests. Jeers of “anti-black man-haters,” “traitors-to-the-race,” “evil bitches,” and “castrators” overwhelmed many of those African American women who publicly exposed sexism within the black community, as seen in the responses to Anita Hill in 1991. Conversely, white women vilified them if they defended male African American nationalists or men who displayed sexist attitudes and behaviors. Essentially, black feminists were attacked and silenced from all sides.

Womanism, another feminist movement of 1980s, provided an alternative terminology for black feminists, who were outraged about their erasure, to differentiate themselves from mainstream feminists. Alice Walker, the definitive authority on this counterdiscourse, defines a womanist as acting “womanish, i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior.
Acting grown up…Responsible. In charge. Serious.” Womanism advocated for a more essentialist view of women’s empowerment originating primarily from women’s culture. Playwright’s Cleage and Corthron offer a similar emphasis on women’s culture. The characters of *Come Down Burning* are all females; men are rarely mentioned. *Flyin’ West* marginalizes its two male characters. They privilege a female-dominated space, limiting the dramatic action to the domestic sphere. Both creative worlds centralize women as the protagonists, heroines, and survivors, excluding men from roles critical to the survival of the women. Furthermore, they challenge many of the obstacles facing black feminists in the 1990s, including essentialism, the loyalty issue, and invisibility.

Cleage and Corthron raised serious voices in the 1992-1993 theatre season, attacking the sophisticated stereotypes of the historical moment that muzzled Anita Hill. They feature ordinary African American woman, who survive on isolated frontiers and speak out about the contradictions of being black and female in America. These women are not extraordinary in and of themselves, but their stories are. Using the conventional theatrical forms of the well-made play, the melodrama, and the one-act, Cleage and Corthron discuss taboo subjects that, only in the case of a small group of black female playwrights, reached white mainstream theatres in the early 1990s. Focusing on themes of sisterhood, trauma, motherhood, and the body, playwrights Cleage and Corthron employ narrative and dramatic strategies that reassess the black female condition through linguistic and corporeal empowerment.
Chapter 1: ‘Silent’ Politics in Black Women’s Drama

As they crack open the stories that reveal shrouded truths, they unearth the voices that have dwelled too long in the canyons of silence.

Sydnée Mahone, *Moon Marked and Touched By the Sun*

African American female playwrights have been hollering into “the canyons of silence” for over a hundred years, conveying important cultural criticisms to their audiences. Overlooked and dismissed by theater and literary critics, these playwrights converse intimately with attitudes and issues of black women in America. Margaret Wilkerson, editor of one of the first anthologies of plays by black women, articulates a defining characteristic of the experience of black women: the existence of a politically informed perspective.¹ “Their characters embody a world in which the personal is political, in which something as intimate as one’s hair may indeed declare one’s politics,” writes Wilkerson.² With much of the public seemingly uninterested in what they have to say, the pure fact of living as an African American woman can be viewed as political. Like the satirical phrase “breathing while black,” which emerged in response to rampant racial-profiling, the simple process of surviving while black and female becomes political. In their plays, Cleage and Corthron embrace the idea that “the personal is political,” offering perspectives that enormously contribute to combating the subtle manifestations and intersections of racism, sexism, and classism.

Regrettably, for the majority of the late 20th century, women made little appreciable gains in authorship in theatre.³ By the 1994-95 theatre season women
wrote only sixteen percent of the plays produced on Off Broadway and in regional theatres. Even though women outnumbered men in 1990, representing 51.3 percent of the total population, women only represented a measly portion of total playwrights, and, of these, barely a fraction was African American. Therefore, the job of addressing the lack of diversity in theatre and elevating African American women’s voices fell on the shoulders of only a handful of playwrights. These bore a heavy mantle, needing to loudly and forcefully refute the racist and sexist images circulating in the white- and male-dominated theatre industry.

Pearl Cleage and Kia Corthron served as two seminal voices in this small sorority, using theatre as a vehicle to vivify subversive portraits of black women. The medium of theatre embodies a unique and particularly effective entryway into spaces where resistance can thrive and black womanhood can be (re)visioned. Theatre is a living, dynamic space in which many perspectives converge: playwright, director, actors, and set designers. Other creative forms, such as a novel or film, offer only a static vision that remains constant during the process of audience or reader engagement. In theatre, the bodies on stage, in conjunction with the presence of a live audience, generate a palpable connection between actors and spectators, fostering a sense of culpability within the spectator. Corthron describes her desire to emotionally affect the audience. “I hope that someone leaves the theatre thinking a little differently than they did when they came in,” she says.\textsuperscript{4} When successful, the audience cannot help but respond in the moment and acknowledge the corporeality of the characters and the veracity of the issues.
Kia Corthron’s own biography sheds light on the political content of *Come Down Burning* and imbues her commentary with insight about life in a rural, mountainous region. Born in 1961, Corthron grew up in Cumberland, Maryland, a valley in the Appalachian Mountains on the border between West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Blue-collar and almost entirely white, the factory town of Corthron’s childhood had few economic resources and a high unemployment rate. She recalls being one of 10 black students in her graduating high school class of 300.

Corthron’s mother was also born in Cumberland. Her father grew up on a farm in Virginia but moved to Cumberland where he worked at the paper mill for twenty-two years until his death of an aneurysm at the age of fifty-one. Although he considered himself fortunate to work at one of the only surviving industrial companies in Cumberland, “the reality is that he was miserable a lot of his life,” says Corthron. He worked ten hour days with little time off, and his frequent humiliation came from training “rookie white men twenty year his junior to be his supervisors.”

Although Corthron’s mother was interested in a nursing degree, she chose to stay home. Of the strong women surrounding her, Corthron writes, “I never felt that when women got together they only talked about men. They were too busy working or raising kids.” Unlike her mother, Corthron was allowed to attend the local high school and frequent the public swimming pool, but racism still lingered. “In some ways, being really the first generation post-Jim Crow, my generation probably took the brunt of growing up with hidden racism,” she says, “which was there but which no one was talking about as much.” Most people in her town feared unemployment; even minimum wage jobs were fiercely competed for. Corthron recalls a young
woman dying in a car accident about twenty miles from Cumberland, while commuting to her job at McDonald’s. “People talked about what a shame it was, because she was only twenty-three, but nobody talked about the irony and tragedy of dying while going to a job at McDonald’s.” Corthron’s working class roots are reflected in the rural setting of her 1993 play *Come Down Burning*, where she directly addresses the realities of racism and poverty that “no one was talking about as much.”

In contrast, Pearl Cleage grew up in the urban setting of Detroit, Michigan in the 1950s. Her father, Albert Cleage, was a radical Congregational preacher and staunch Black Nationalist. He preached activist gospel, organized political parties, ran for office, marched, picketed, and boycotted. He adopted an African name, Jaramongi Abebe Agyman. Cleage’s mother, Doris Graham Cleage, was also active in politics, but focused primarily on her work as a schoolteacher and raising the family. Cleage’s parents enjoyed talking about politics and religion rather than going out to nightclubs or hosting parties. She remembers watching her father prepare sermons on Saturday nights, “…he was able to take what he was reading and thinking and talking about and translate it into a sermon that regular working people could understand. He could take a very radical, sophisticated idea and get people to go with it…It was presented in a manner that gave them a way in.” It deeply influenced her work as a playwright, giving her a tangible understanding of how to express complicated ideas to an audience.

Both Cleage and Corthron are part of a larger tradition of female playwrights engaged in a century long literary and theatrical battle to (re)present black womanhood. Lorraine Hansberry, who wrote *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), is the most
renowned and often only African American female playwright known within mainstream American culture. Frequent theater-goers might also recognize the names Ntozake Shange, Anna Deavere Smith, or Suzan Lori-Parks. But, the majority of Americans remain largely unaware of the rich, vibrant African American female dramatic tradition that blossomed at the end of the 20th century into the 21st century. With the appointment of several African American men to artistic directorships at prominent white regional theatre companies in the early 1990s, black women playwrights, such as Cleage, saw much more of their work produced and staged. However, professional African American theatres still faced serious financial challenges, with only a few of them having “survived for more than ten years and maintained full, uninterrupted production schedules.” Despite the difficulties of reaching the mainstage of white theatre companies, African American female playwrights have raised their visibility and found ways to reach theatre audiences in African American theatre groups, women’s theatre groups such as New York’s Women’s Project, and regional festivals. Unfortunately, the paucity of black female voices in white mainstream theatres has led to the widespread assumption that black women didn’t write before the 1950s because they had no access to education, publishing opportunities, or well-paying jobs at the turn of the century. This perspective is incorrect. Black women published more than sixty plays and pageants and produced numerous unpublished scripts in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Although many of these plays are hard to find and were never presented to mainstream audiences, African American women were indeed writing and thinking critically, if not technically trained in the art of playwriting.
*Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* share many of the same dramatic and structural elements that characterize these plays of the early 1900s such as relying on domestic settings, valuing family structures, and excluding male and white characters. Kathy Perkins chronicles the characteristics of plays before 1950, identifying the differences between male and female writers, despite an initial acknowledgement that both also draw on similar content. While many black men set their plays in Harlem and metropolitan areas, black women tend to incorporate both rural and urban geographies in their work, diversifying perspectives of the black community. In addition, the action remains mostly within domestic settings, rarely transitioning outside or away from the home. Perkins observes that the main characters are usually females placed in major decision-making roles, usually regarding issues about child-raising and motherhood. Male characters are often removed from the household and the theatrical space; white characters are also significantly absent, although the effects of racism still deeply inform the worlds of the plays. These early plays assign great value to marriage and family as community structures that were vulnerable to racist institutional penetration. For example, Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel* (1916) depicts the psychological impact of lynching on the Loving family and the difficulties of raising children in a racist society. The first full-length play written, performed, and produced by black people, it was applauded as the “the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten million of colored citizens in this free Republic,” as documented in the playbill.
Perkins classifies *Rachel* as a “race play” from the 1920s “native drama” movement that emerged in Harlem as part of the Little Negro Theatre. Perkins differentiates the works of “native drama” into two categories: “race or propaganda plays,” which sought to effect social change through the depiction of racial oppression, and “folk plays,” which simply portrayed the black experience for education and entertainment purposes. These plays, while advocating different agendas, similarly aimed their rhetoric outward at a chiefly white audience in order to refute the images of black life put forth in the works of white dramatists “capturing” the black essence such as Eugene O’Neill (*The Emperor Jones*, 1920 and *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, 1924) and Marc Connelly (*Green Pastures*, 1930). Another “race play,” Mary Burrill’s *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919), handles poverty, reproductive education, and birth control. Burrill communicates a clear message that every woman should have access to birth control, offering an omen about the fate of women if conceptive knowledge is restricted. Protest play writers, such as Grimké, Burill, Marita Bonner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Georgia Johnson, concentrated on topics such as miscegenation, military service, lynching, the image of the tragic mulatto, poverty, and education.

“Folk plays” also constituted a considerable portion of the early corpus of black women’s plays. Many of them focused on the lighter and universal aspects of the black experience, turning to typically less serious forms, such as comedy and melodrama. History plays made up a significant portion of “folk plays;” May Miller’s *Sojourner Truth* (1935) and *Harriet Tubman* (1935) and Georgia Johnsons’ *William and Ellen Craft* (1935) and *Frederick Douglas* (1935) served as an important
means of educating audiences. May Miller’s comedy *Riding the Goat* (1925), which uses humor to challenge the values of the black middle class, and Marita Bonner’s melodrama *The Pot Maker: A Play to Be Read* (1927), a morality tale about infidelity, also exemplify the varieties of form employed. These early plays seriously challenged prevailing notions of women writers, gender roles, and representations of African Americans. They built a strong foundation for successive African American female playwrights navigating issues faced by black women in America.

The Great Depression and WWII caused a dramatic decrease in the production of African American dramaturgy. However, female playwrights found avenues to promote and produce their work. For instance, the District of Columbia George Washington Bicentennial Commission sponsored Mary Church Terrell’s *Phillis Wheatley: A Bicentennial Pageant* (1932). The Federal Theatre Project (FTP), which operated between 1935 and 1939 as part of Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration, produced Allison Hughes’ *The Trial of Dr. Beck* (1937). The play depicts the trial of Dr. Beck, a prosperous mulatto, who is accused of murdering his wealthy dark-skinned wife. One of the most popular plays of the FTP, this production went on to have a 24 performance run on Broadway in 1937. While she was enrolled in the Yale School of Drama, Shirley Graham had numerous plays produced between 1938 and 1940, including *It’s Morning* (1939), about a mother who kills her daughter to prevent her from being sold into slavery; *Dust to Earth* (1941), a tragedy in the West Virginia coal mines; and *Track Thirteen* (1940), the only play published during her lifetime. Several new plays received productions with the support of the Harlem Council on the Theatre and the Committee for the Negro in the
Arts. Among these were Alice Childress’ *Florence* (1950) and Gertrude Jeannette’s *A Bolt from the Blue* (1950) and *This Way Forward* (1951). Alice Childress’ *Trouble in Mind* won the Obie Award for best Off-Broadway play of the 1954-55 season. In *Trouble in Mind*, a black actress confronts the consequences of white supremacy in the theatre. *Wine in the Wilderness* was aired on National Education Television (NET) in 1969, and *Wedding Band*, also televised nationally in 1973, portrayed interracial love in a Jim Crow South Carolina. Her plays reflect her interest in the intersection of race and class, vividly portraying the traditionally invisible people in drama: “Black writers cannot afford to abuse or neglect the so-called ordinary character who represents a part of ourselves, the self twice denied, first by racism and [then] by class indifference.” The subject matter of Childress’ plays broke theatrical and social taboos, grappling with prejudices surrounding African American women.

In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry became the first black woman ever to have a play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, produced on Broadway for Broadway audiences. Hansberry embodied a role model for a generation of young women writers struggling for commercial production and theatrical success. The widespread popularity and financial success of *A Raisin in the Sun* within mainstream American theater raised hopes that African American playwrights could pursue a career in theatre. The 1950s witnessed a major change in the visibility, production potential, commercial success, and critical acclaim of plays written by African American women. In them, more aggressive and better-defined female voices were projected. They also turned their focus inward on the African American individual and community, addressing what Carol P. Marsh-Lockett terms “psychic dislocation.” In other words, these plays...
grapple with the internalization of racism, the cultural memory of the Middle Passage, and the violence and dislocation of slavery.

Growing out of civil rights, black power, and the women’s movement, a new crop of black female writers emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, delving into new themes with difference voices. The Black Theatre Movement emerged in 1964, advocating the use of drama as a weapon in support of black power. African American women asserted their voice even more aggressively, exploring themes of conflicting identities, ancestral heritage, and loyalty. Adrienne Kennedy won a Village Voice Obie Award and Stanley Award in 1964 for her surreal play *Funnyhouse of A Negro* (1963). The play depicts a young girl coping with psychological problems and identity questions as a result of racially mixed parentage. An avant-garde playwright, Kennedy focuses on alienated women with conflicting identities, reflected in her use of poetic language, disturbing imagery, and expressionistic drama. *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1968) portrays the traumatic experience of a girl’s sexual maturation, and *A Rat’s Mass* (1966) dramatizes human regression to the status of rats. Kennedy’s surreal style and expressionism offered a new gendered dimension to African American theatre—the internal suffering and pain of being a black woman in America—and moved women’s struggles to the forefront of the Black Arts movement, which before then had usually ignored gender issues.

In 1974, Ntozake Shange’s play, *for colored girls who considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, exploded into the national consciousness, receiving critical attention like no other play since *A Raisin in the Sun*. The choreopoem
explores the realities of seven black women who overcome the desire to commit suicide through self-affirmation and celebrations of that which is black and female. By synthesizing dance, song, poetry, prose, mime, and music into a nonlinear narrative form, the choreopoem conveys the real beauty and freedom of its female characters. Shange’s play originated from her concern with the status of oppressed women of color whose “existence is a political situation.”

Shange’s Spell #7: A Theatre Piece in Two Acts (1978) uses the minstrel mask to express the psychological limitations that a racist and sexist society imposes on men and women. Aishah Rahman similarly explores the anguish of the intersection of the personal and political through nontraditional forms in her play, Unfinished Women Cry in No Man’s Land, While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage (1977). In this polydrama, a plaintive saxophone captures the anguish of young black women who are deciding whether or not to keep their unborn children. Alexis De Veax broke new ground by writing about homosexuality and lesbianism as meaningful elements of black women’s experiences. Also reverberating with music and rhythm, The Tapestry (1975) presents a young woman preparing for the bar exam and coping with the demands of her lesbian lover. The play effectively explores the complexities of sexuality among black women and the richness of homosexual relationships.

Kathleen Conwell Collin’s one-act, The Reading (1984), focuses on the conflict between black and white women, articulating the alienation of black middle-class women who live on the outskirts of the African American struggle for civil rights. Rahman’s The Mojo and the Sayso (1987) examines the impact of racial profiling on the lives of a working class family. This new generation of black women playwrights
no longer conformed strictly to theatrical realism, instead revealing “the complex, interior landscape of black women’s lives while at the same time looking outward and commenting on the world which impinges on their existence.”

In the 1990s, playwrights such as Anna Deavere Smith, Suzan-Lori Parks, Glenda Dickerson, and Breena Clarke, continued to manipulate gender stereotypes and theatrical forms to free the voices of muzzled women. Anna Deavere Smith introduced a new method of representing the synthesis of the personal and the political through her one-woman shows, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1993) and *Fires In the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities* (1992). Smith wrote, produced, and performed these shows, giving new significance to the role of the female body in performance. *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* dramatized the brutal beating of Rodney King by four white Los Angeles policemen in April 1991 and the race riots that exploded the following year across L.A. in response to the acquittal of all four policemen. Glenda Dickerson and Breena Clarke aggressively attacked the stereotypical figure of the Mammy in *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* (1992), while Suzan-Lori Parks manipulated language and dialogue in her plays to signify on musical repetition and revision. 
Parks’ later plays deal specifically with contemporary issues facing black women in America such as poverty, violence, discrimination on welfare and reproductive rights, and vicious stereotyping. *Venus* (1996) returns to Saartjie Baartman, an African woman brought to England in 1810, as a carnival attraction, named the “Venus Hottentot” due to her large backside. *In the Blood* (1999) follows the tragic tale of a homeless black woman and her five children as everyone she meets exploits her.
Cleage and Corthron emerged in the early 1990s, along with these fellow well-produced female artists, “publicly exposing in a distinct female rhetoric the horrors of racism and sexism in America,” in the words of Carol P. Marsh-Lockett.  

*Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* offer a de-essentialized and de-idealized portrait of the experiences of African American women in America. The plays target social issues pertinent to women, especially black women, and cultivate a space to dramatize the fears, struggles, and celebrations of ordinary black women, who have continually had to resort to airing these conversations behind the cold, unyielding walls of racism, sexism, and classism. The elements of the two plays reflect what was on the minds of many black women of the time—domestic violence, abortion, poverty, violence, welfare, health care, and property ownership.

*Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* present a vision of sisterhood that challenges normative ideas of family and supportive relationships. The female communities do not discriminate by age or blood ties, but offer a supportive and nurturing environment to women who have bonded over “shared strengths and resources.” In the plays, family embodies a vital safety net and plays an integral role in the health and security of the female characters. bell hooks articulates the necessary existence of family as an important kinship structure within the black community: “We wish to affirm the primacy of family life because we know that family ties are the only sustained support system for exploited and oppressed peoples.” She argues that feminist activists need to recognize and affirm the importance of family as a foundation to nourish oppressed people and address sexist and racist oppression.

However, Cleage and Corthron represent family structures beyond the traditional
nuclear family. Their vision of family life incorporates female householders, single mothers, sisters, and non-biological friends—any close-knit, supportive community of women. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, almost half of African American families were maintained without a husband (43.7 percent). The median yearly income of these families with a female householder was $12,520, a salary less than half of that of a married couple and about five thousand dollars less than that for white female householders. Therefore, African American single mothers composed a significant portion of the population dependent on government public assistance programs such as welfare services, Medicare, and reproductive health resources.

Yet, the popular media projected African American women as undeserving of public assistance. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan popularized the myth that domineering black mothers were responsible for the deterioration of African American families. According to Moynihan, the matriarchal structure of the African American family “seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole” and is a “fundamental cause of the weakness of the Negro community.” While Moynihan empowered black women as the head of the household, he initiated a nationwide castigation of single black mothers. A few decades later, the myth of the welfare queen grew from the image of domineering and immoral African American mothers. Legal scholar Dorothy Roberts describes the controlling image of the welfare queen: “The American public associates welfare payments to single mothers with the mythical Black ‘welfare queen,’ who deliberately becomes pregnant in order to increase the amount of her monthly check. The welfare queen represents laziness, chicanery, and economic burden…” Welfare queens/mothers are typically
represented as failed Mammies whose inability to control their sexuality drains public resources from the state.

Although African American single mothers were far more likely to rely on public assistance because the poverty rate was significantly higher for them (44.5%) than their white counterparts (23%) in 1989, the African American unwed mother was popularly seen as a social problem.\textsuperscript{39} A 1990 study by the Chicago National Opinion Research Center found that 78 percent of white Americans thought that African Americans preferred to live on welfare.\textsuperscript{40} Roberts explains that poor black women became suitable prey of negative labels and reproductive penalties because “society does not view these women as suitable mothers in the first place.”\textsuperscript{41} In an effort to “cure” these welfare queens and “bad” mothers, states turned to coercive birth-control measures such as sterilization and long-term contraceptive implants.\textsuperscript{42} Mandating or using long-term contraceptives as a “cure” for poverty reinforced notions that women on welfare are sexually loose, economically incapable, and manipulative. However, labeling low-income black women as welfare queens also had tangible effects on the lives of real women, who were in certain cases denied public assistance without joining a birth control program.\textsuperscript{43}

African American female householders also faced diminishing access to birth control and reproductive health resources, placing a greater burden on low-income women. The protagonist of \textit{Come Down Burning} offers illegal abortions in a rural, mountainous setting to low-income women who have no other viable option. Often the birth of another child jeopardized the health of living children, especially when the average income for black female householders in 1989 was below the federal
The threat to sexual health rights reached a climax during the early 1990s when two cases offered the real potential to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the most controversial sexual health policy decision to date. With highly restrictive state parental notification laws, mandatory waiting periods, and the ban on Medicaid funding for abortions, all women saw their access to legal abortions severely threatened. These measures effectively excluded and discriminated against low-income women, teenage mothers, and women of color who were more likely to have an unwanted or mistimed pregnancy and who relied on federally funded abortion and birth control services. Many women resorted to illegal abortions that were often unsafe, unsterile, and potentially fatal to preserve their families.

Kia Corthron responded directly to these political debates in the early years of the 1990s. Corthron worried about how poor women would be affected by the legislation changes—the women who really relied on government safety nets. Lauded as an “issue-oriented” and politically motivated playwright by *The New York Times* critic Don Shewey, Corthron has had most of her seventeen plays commissioned by theaters across the country. However, Corthron’s work achieves far more than the display of political issues; it illuminates social ills by revealing real ordinary women grappling with the issues facing them in their daily lives. Many reviews of Corthron’s plays, however, find them too dense, political, and overwhelmingly “broad.” The *Philadelphia Inquirer* called her characters “frustratingly undeveloped,” and a review from *Newsday* laments that one of Corthron’s more recent plays was a “big-hearted but preachy drama” that “seldom transcends the broad intentions of its socially conscious storyline.” An outspoken playwright, Corthron defends her aesthetic
motivations to write about subjects such as abortion, women in prison, girl gangs, environmental racism, and police brutality, citing the inability to divorce politics from the realities of the black female experience. In a KET Arts interview, she explained, “And frankly I think it is hard to be a person of color in this country—particularly a female person of color—and not write politically. Your whole life is political. You grew up with racism. You grew up with sexism. How can you not address that?”

Corthron distinguishes her work from agitation-propaganda and purely intellectual or factual-based creation. Interviewed by Linda Winer, a theatre critic for *Newsday*, on the Television Program “Women in Theater,” Corthron said, “Agit-prop is completely intellectual and about the facts. Whereas with my plays, I start out with the political but then it grows to more an emotional attachment. Simply, agit-prop starts with the brain, and mine start with the heart.”

Pearl Cleage similarly strives to inspire her audience to think about issues through their emotions rather than their brains, calling herself a “poet” rather than a “politician.” In her 1992 play, *Flyin’ West*, Cleage vehemently addresses the political issue of domestic violence, elevating the voices of brutalized women, who as the stereotyped “strong black women” silently bear a man’s abuse. Cleage commits her work “to saying out loud what people have said to me, so that one who have been abused can say, ‘Thank God. I though I was the only person who this happened to.’”

*Flyin’ West* forces the audience to confront the destructive patterns that abound in family structures. In 1992, the U.S. Surgeon General and the Department of Health and Human Services reported that domestic violence was the leading cause of injury to American women between the ages of 15 to 44, more common than automobile
accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.\textsuperscript{55} Five women were murdered daily by men they knew, and more women were admitted to hospitals as a result of rape and domestic violence than women needing treatment for cancer and heart attack.\textsuperscript{56} Beth E. Richie addresses the challenge of bringing domestic violence out of the private sphere into the public in her essay, “Battered Black Women: A Challenge for the Black Community” (1985). She identifies the powerful force of loyalty, which she defines as a “trap of silence,” especially within the family, one of the only institutions able to nourish individual needs.\textsuperscript{57} Cleage directly censures the trap of loyalty, expressing the importance that mothers recognize the rampant violence in families in order to protect their daughters. “We have to give each other the right to talk about all of the horror that happens,” she says, “so that those of us who are not broken can stand between the next group and the abusers, who are overwhelmingly men.”\textsuperscript{58}

Cleage and Corthron dramatize taboo political subjects that intimately affected the lives of African America women in the 1990s. Marion McClinton, a well-known director, discusses the lack of recognition playwrights like Cleage and Corthron receive from theatre critics, saying they are “addressing stuff that frankly a lot of people in American theatre don’t have the guts to address.”\textsuperscript{59} These two writers translate the voices of broken women to audiences that have long been happy to ignore and dismiss difficult political issues from the stage. \textit{Flyin’ West} and \textit{Come Down Burning} break the trap of silence, centralizing the personal hardships that African Americans face everyday. Miss Leah, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie in \textit{Flyin’ West} speak out against abusers, declaring that domestic violence will not be tolerated in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and cannot be in the 20\textsuperscript{th}. Cleage depicts independent, autonomous
women who do not succumb to the status of victims but rise above subordination to triumph over prejudice with wit, intelligence, and power.
Miss Leah and Sophie Washington, two characters in Pearl Cleage’s play *Flyin’ West*, express the frustration of many in the African American community that efforts to combat racism and oppression have not been “good enough.” Anita Hill’s testimony in 1991 revealed the intensity of the hatred provoked when a black woman did not align her interests with those of a black man. The popular stereotype of the “the strong black women,” while empowering, still trapped women into the notion that they should be willing and able to endure physical violence to support their husbands, boyfriends, fathers, and brothers. Loyalty trumped dissent; female voices were suppressed. Moving beyond these ‘black and white’ binaries, *Flyin’ West* expands the concept of black womanhood to include the multifaceted intersections of strength, perseverance, triumph, weakness, and failure. Cleage’s characters show how multidimensional women can overcome stereotypes such as the “strong black woman” without sacrificing their independence, strength, and voice. In *Flyin’ West*, Cleage extends a transformative vision of black womanhood as powerful, complex, and dynamic, using narrative and dramatic strategies that create space for black women to occupy, recuperate, and reinterpret historical, gender, and racial landscapes.

With seven prominently produced and published plays, Cleage possesses an important dramatic presence in contemporary American theatre. Three years after its
premier at Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre in November 1992, *Flyin’ West* alone was produced in thirteen different theatres across the country.\(^1\) Cleage sets *Flyin’ West* in the American West at the turn of the 19\(^{th}\) century, finding many parallels between the concerns of black women then and in the 1990s. She highlights striking continuities of struggle and joy, focusing on issues of family, childbirth, power, domestic violence, and survival. “They were talking about family, they were talking about childbirth,” Cleage says. “They were talking about isolation and how to really make a place for themselves in a very male environment.”\(^2\) Although these pioneer women reflected on similar topics, they did not speak or write with one voice. Cleage does not reduce her representation of these women to a single voice or one-dimensional characterizations; instead, she offers four starkly contrasting women who find entirely different ways to navigate “how to really make a place for themselves.”

*Flyin’ West* chronicles how four pioneering women survive on the western frontier in the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas in the late 1890s. Following the Civil War, twenty to forty thousand African American men, women, and children left the South to settle in the West, a movement later known as the “Exodus of 1879.” The Homestead Act of 1862 initiated this westward escape from the postbellum South by offering 320 acres of land to any citizen willing to settle in the western states.\(^3\) By the late 19\(^{th}\) century, more than “a quarter of a million unmarried or widowed women were running their own farms and ranches.”\(^4\) The play also draws inspiration from Ida Wells-Barnett, a feminist journalist, one of the few black women to be published and publically known at the time. She was editor and part owner of the *Memphis Free Speech* in 1892. Wells was a pioneer in her own landscape as the first black woman to
speak out publicly and in print about the lynching of black men and to make connections between patriarchy, racism, and notions of white womanhood and black sexuality. In 1892, three of her male friends were lynched in Memphis, TN, spurring her to publish a blistering investigative report about the event. An excerpt from Wells’ journal about the lynching inspired the title of the play: “Sometimes I wish I could just gather my people up in my arms and fly away West. Because we need to leave a place where they don’t respect us and our lives aren’t worth anything.”

The two-act historical melodrama tracks a family’s attempt to hold onto their land and help save Nicodemus from white speculators. Sophie and Fannie own a large farm, working and living off the land. Fannie’s younger sister, Minnie, lives in London, England with her mulatto husband, Frank Charles. As a washerwoman, Sophie met Fannie and Minnie in Memphis, Tennessee, and the trio fled the South for Kansas at the urging of Benjamin ‘Pap’ Singleton, a charismatic leader. Sophie and Fannie joined forces and now together manage a farm acquired under the Homestead Act. Miss Leah, a 73-year-old ex-slave, owns a large farm neighboring Sophie and Fannie’s property. Wil Parrish, a friendly neighbor, woos Fannie. Miss Leah has come to stay with the sisters for the winter, leaving Sophie and Wil to tend her farm. As the play opens, Sophie and Fannie are excitedly awaiting Minnie and Frank’s visit. When the young couple arrives, the sisters become aware of Frank’s abusive behavior toward Minnie. Sophie battles to prevent white speculators from buying land in the all-black town. Minnie reveals that she is pregnant, while Frank receives a telegram notifying him that he has lost the legal battle with his white brothers over his inheritance. Frank physically forces Minnie to sign her portion of the family’s farm
into his control and, in a fit of rage, almost kills her. In order to save the family and
Minnie, Miss Leah, Sophie, and Fannie murder Frank with a poisoned apple pie. In
the final scene, Minnie stays on the farm with her sisters and has the baby. Sophie
triumphs over the white speculators.

I. The “Innocent” Framework: The Well-Made Play

In Flyin’ West, Cleage uses conventional dramatic structures to permit the
voices of the female characters to emerge with clarity and to keep the audience
engaged. The play unfolds along the traditional progression of the Scribean Well-
Made Play: exposition, complication, development, crisis, and denouement. The play
divides into two acts, with five scenes in the first and six in the second. Act 1 Scene 1
provides the necessary exposition, introducing the audience to Miss Leah’s history as
a slave, Fannie’s project recording oral stories, Minnie and Frank’s impending visit,
the distribution of the deed to the farm, Fannie and Wil’s romance, and the threat of
white speculators to community of Nicodemus. The arrival of Frank and Minnie in
Act 1 Scene 2, the family dinner in Scene 3, and subsequent interactions between
Frank and Minnie complicate the situation established in Scene 1. Direct verification
of Frank’s abusive behavior does not occur until the end of Act 1, when he hits
Minnie in front of her sisters. The act ends in a moment of suspense with Sophie
pointing a shotgun at Frank. Flyin’ West also heightens suspense through traditional
devices of the well-made play such as contrived entrances, misunderstandings,
secrets, lost papers, and intercepted messages. For example, a telegram arrives in Act
Scene 2 and reveals the loss of Frank’s inheritance, an action that precipitates the drama’s first crisis, Frank’s beating of Minnie.

The acts’ temporal trajectory also follows the form of the well-made play, proceeding rapidly from event to event in close succession. For example, Scenes 2-5 in Act 1 all fall within two days and Scenes 2-5 of Act 2 occur within twenty-four hours. The events follow a logical progression from the arrival of Minnie and Frank through the discovery of Frank’s abusive behavior, to his murder at the end. The straightforward temporal arc clarifies the movement of the play by concentrating the action and enabling the audience to focus specifically on these few days without unexplained gaps in time. Cleage captures the characters within a focused time and setting characteristic of the well-made play, thus heightening the tensions and conflicts. Since the exposure of Frank’s villainy occurs over the span of a couple of days, the couple’s problematic relationship imbues the action with urgency and suspense, which increases the importance of the issue for the audience.

Cleage’s choice of the mechanism of the well-made play underscores her use of a simple form to clarify and highlight the political and social messages that permeate the story. “Using traditional forms gives me more power in taking the audience’s defenses away,” she writes. The well-made play comforts the audience with its familiarity, thus making the painful depictions of the domestic violence and racist sentiments almost bearable. “It is my firm belief that exposing my audiences to these African American Nationalist Feminist Warriorwomen, innocently ensconced within the framework of the well-made play, will quicken the swelling of our ranks by creating an exciting alternative view of what black women—what free women!—
can and should be.” The “innocent” framework ensconcing the female characters sanctions the confrontation and deconstruction of normative and degrading stereotypes of figures like them by eliminating distractions from the audience. The non-conventional form and unusual portrayal of Sophie, a gun-wielding female orator, as well as the depressingly graphic stories from Miss Leah’s life as a slave more easily arouse sympathy from the audience because of the familiarity of their presentation, which mitigates the potentially alienating content. In Cleage’s opinion, experimental forms draw valuable attention away from content. “I like old-fashioned, well-made plays, where there’s a lot of talk,” she says, “I’m not an avant-garde kind of person.”

II. Subverting the Melodrama

*Flyin’ West* proved to be Cleage’s most popular play, acclaimed three years after its premier by the *Atlantic Journal/The Atlantic Constitution* as “one of the most popular plays of recent years in American theatre—with 15 productions and counting.” Reviewers frequently discuss the audience’s evident satisfaction with its neat moral outcome. For example, in *The North American Review*, Robert L. King discusses the play’s resolution as making Frank “deserve the death that the audience vigorously applauded.” Time and again, reviews allude to the audience’s “vigorous” applause and cheering at the murder in Act 2 Scene 5. However, theatre scholar Ester Beth Sullivan articulates the polemical reception of the play within the media. Newspaper critics gave *Flyin’ West* mixed reviews, conceding its interesting subject material and strong audience appeal while deploring its flat characters and
melodramatic style. Chris Jones exemplifies this conflicting perspective in his 1994 review of a production in Alabama, arguing that form obscures content: “The play’s little-known topic may be intriguing and worthy of exploration, but this predictable domestic potboiler has all of the subtlety of a bad Boucicault melodrama…the plot contrivances and manipulations utterly overwhelm the potentially fascinating characters.”

Sullivan attributes the critics’ disappointment to the genre’s lack of dimensionality and depth, which the content demands. In other words, the generic elements of the melodrama are just too simple to do justice to the issues of racism and sexism. However, the critics remain far too dismissive of the benefits of melodrama and Cleage’s dramatic choices. Melodrama strives to make the ordinary, the “real,” and the substance of “private life” interesting through heightened dramatic action and a theatricality that exposes the true stakes.

The melodramatic depends on the existence of a clear moral universe that rests on powerful emotionalism, moral polarization, extreme situations and actions, exaggerated expression, suspense, overt villainy, persecution of the good, and the reward of virtue. Flyin’ West includes many of these standard devices, including numerous climaxes, moralizing about drinking and gambling, the arrival of an upsetting telegram, and murder. Every scene in Act 2 concludes on a heightened moment of drama or conflict—Frank beating Minnie, the discovery of his attack, and his death. His murder in Act 2 Scene 5 offers moral satisfaction in the defeat of the “villain” and the victory of good over evil.

Sullivan describes melodrama as a genre that reduces everything to “black and white” and portrays a two-dimensional landscape at best. However, Cleage populates this black and white landscape with complex female characters and social
issues that emerge more starkly in contrast to the structural tone. Contemporary struggles over how to resist oppression, assert agency, and cope with traumatic memories govern the relationships and tensions between the female characters. For example, the different reactions of Fannie and Sophie to Frank’s treatment of Minnie illustrate the complexities of confronting domestic violence. In Act 2 Scene 1, Fannie convinces Minnie to try to work things out with Frank and to “give him the benefit of the doubt,” despite the blatantly abusive nature of Frank and to “give him the benefit of the doubt.”

FANNIE DOVE: Mama always said she was biding her time until we could get these white folks off our backs so she could get colored men straightened out on a thing or two a little bit closer to home, but until then, she said she’d give him [Mama’s husband] the benefit of the doubt.
MINNIE DOVE CHARLES: I’ve been trying to do that, too.
FANNIE: You love Frank, don’t you?
MINNIE: I used to love him so much…
FANNIE: You still love him. I can see it on your face. You two can work it out. I know you can. For better or for worse, remember?
MINNIE: I’ll try. I’ll really try. (82)

Fannie pushes Minnie to forgive Frank and to “try” to make the marriage work in the face of Minnie’s obvious hesitance and anxiety that is evident in her use of the past tense to characterize her love. Fannie obviously still places value in the absolute private and personal nature of the relationship between husband and wife because she encourages Minnie to bear Frank’s abuse. From her perspective, the wife shoulders the responsibility for working “it”—the physical violence—out. Fannie blatantly refuses to acknowledge the implications of the bruises and Frank’s threatening behavior at the end of Act 1 Scene 5. Fannie continues to believe in Frank’s potential for redemption until he nearly kills Minnie in Act 2 Scene 3. While Minnie lies beaten and undiscovered in the bedroom, Fannie says to Miss Leah, “I believe he is sorry about what happened, don’t you?” Miss Leah replies dubiously, “A man that will hit a woman once will hit her again.”20 Fannie is not the only person unable to
intervene in Frank and Minnie’s relationship; all of the women are ready to respect Minnie’s choice despite her subordination. By Act 2 Scene 2, Frank has been accepted, albeit coldly, back into the house by all of the women.

Domestic violence, an act not unlike rape, has ramifications beyond the physical, spilling into the realms of power and shame. Minnie’s femaleness positions her as an object for domination within patriarchal culture. The challenges of subverting this power relation emerge starkly as they seek a place within the extreme moral universe of melodrama. The audience questions how to keep a black woman safe rather than questioning Frank’s evil character. Peter Brooks, author of *The Melodramatic Imagination*, articulates the value of melodrama: “For melodrama has the distinct value of being about recognition and clarification, about how to be clear what the stakes are and what their representative signs mean, and how to face them.” In *Flyin’ West*, the stakes materialize clearly: the women are fighting for bodily security and survival against domestic violence, sexism, and racism. The frame of the melodrama and well-made play impart primacy to their struggles and dilemmas. With the stakes clearly defined by the dramatic forms, the women can claim the authority and power that patriarchal roles deny them.

Cleage’s choice of genre enables her to justify the murder of Frank. In this simple moral universe, Frank deserves to die; the women must remove him as a primary threat to their livelihood, safety, and autonomy. After they discover Minnie beaten nearly to death, Sophie decides to shoot Frank, explaining to Fannie, who vehemently resists the decision: “This morning…he beat her and did God knows what else to her in this house. Where she’s always been safe. We can’t let him do that, Fan.
All the dreams we have for Nicodemus, all the churches and schools and libraries we can build don’t mean a thing if a colored woman isn’t safe in her own house.”\textsuperscript{22} The women come to see that their future is predicated on Frank’s removal. Miss Leah steps in to propose a more subtle solution that would attract less attention: a poisoned apple pie. In Act 2, Scene 5, Fannie persuades Frank to eat a slice of the pie; he dies after reiterating his misogynistic views and his plans to sell the farm. The mode of the melodrama allows Cleage to advocate violence of a nominally higher level of criminality as an appropriate and successful solution to domestic violence and sexism. She explains her use of murder as the audience’s “way in” to women’s right to defend themselves: “I absolutely do believe that self-defense for women is critical in situations like that. If someone is going to beat you and your children to death, that you have the right to defend yourself shouldn’t even be a radical idea. It wouldn’t be a radical idea in any setting outside of people’s homes.”\textsuperscript{23}

Women should have a right to self-defense, especially in cases of domestic violence and abuse; however, \textit{Flyin’ West} advocates murder and justifies the women’s decision as moral and right. Although Cleage intends to illustrate the rights that should be accorded women, her intention dissolves in the individuality of the violence and the righteous satisfaction that the audience feels, evident within reviews. Although Frank’s murder is justified, Cleage’s overall message is problematic. Cleage surrenders to the limits of melodrama with Frank’s murder, sanctioning violence as a means of empowerment. Yet, within the theatrical space, the neat resolution, however melodramatic, projects a vision of the willed survival of a legacy of strong and autonomous black women. Miss Leah, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie take
their lives into their own hands to ensure their communal safety and strength in an isolated and harsh environment that offers little or no support. Like the iron muzzle, Frank had to be torn away in order to free the women, especially Minnie.

III. Sisterhood & An All-Female Dramatic Space

Cleage generates a female-dominated dramatic space and a space of sisterhood that reassesses the patriarchal conception of the domestic sphere. Sophie describes the powerlessness of married women: “You know as well as I do there are no laws that protect a woman from her husband. Josh beat Belle for years and we all knew it. And because the sheriff didn’t do anything, none of us did anything either. It wasn’t a crime until he killed her!” Sophie’s statement underscores society’s unwillingness to enact change or respond to domestic violence. In contrast, Flyin’ West centralizes the female characters and offers a space where they can counter the hegemonic social reality through (re)visioning family, home, and domestic life.

Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie leave Memphis for Kansas in search of a place where they can be “free women.” The portrait of freedom—the empowered and supportive home on the farm—presents an alternative view of family that does not require the presence of men. Sophie, Fannie, and Miss Leah have cultivated an all-female family.

Although Sophie cannot assert biological kinship with Fannie and Minnie, she can claim absolute inclusion within their family after the departure from Memphis. Minnie and Fannie treat Sophie as a true biological sister, almost exclusively referring to her as “sister” throughout the play. When the story of how Sophie met Fannie and Minnie arises around the dinner table in Act 1 Scene 3, Minnie describes
Sophie’s seamless transition into the family: “And once she came, it was like she’d always been there.”  

Similarly, Miss Leah smoothly enters the sisterhood when she stays at Sophie and Fannie’s farm during the winter. Sophie and Fannie subtly take care of her, preventing her from traveling or working on her farm. Despite Sophie and Miss Leah’s bickering, which mirrors the teasing between the sisters, Sophie’s actions show her concern for Miss Leah’s health. For example, in Act 1 Scene 1, the stage directions illustrate Sophie’s desire to help Miss Leah who cannot find her shawl and twice refuses to let Sophie tell her where it is: “While Miss Leah fusses, Sophie quietly goes and gets her shawl and gently drops it around her shoulders.”  

Although the dialogue remains antagonistic in Scene 1, this act of Sophie’s subtly conveys her affection, which she will explicitly express later. The women have built a loving and supportive family, their similar experiences representing a stronger bond than blood.

Cleage complicates this vision of sisterhood by including diverse female personalities. The sisterhood supports different visions of womanhood: Fannie exhibits more traditional feminine characteristics, while Sophie projects more masculine traits. Fannie, who enters the play carrying a basket of flowers, exclusively performs the household duties of cooking and cleaning (even her coffee tastes better than Sophie’s). However, she and Sophie run the farm independently of any male presence. Sophie executes all the necessary hard labor to keep the farm prosperous in addition to protecting it and her family. Sophie enters the play in Act 1 carrying a shotgun, a bag of flour, and a canvas bag of groceries, defining from the outset her role as protector and provider. At the end of Act 1, the audience sees her handle the
shotgun and Fannie’s evident reliance upon her as an authority figure when they suspect intruders. The stage directions read, “Sophie motions toward the candle, and Fannie blows it out immediately. Sophie gets her gun, clicks it quickly into place and loads two shells. She goes quickly to the window and peers out. Fannie stands motionless, watching her.”27 However, Sophie does not exhibit exclusively masculine qualities, and the play concludes with her heading off to a dance in a dress with her sisters. Miss Leah, Sophie, and Fannie create a family of sisters that not only secures their survival amidst harsh frontier realities, independent of men, but also enables them to challenge their traditionally ascribed roles.

While Flyin’ West includes male characters, Cleage offers a dramatic space that has been claimed by women. She relegates Frank and Wil primarily to the backstage and excludes them from the majority of visible action onstage. Although Frank essentially catalyzes the main dramatic movement and conflict, he exists as a one-dimensional and unsympathetic character. Although his mixed-race heritage throws light on his behavior, beyond the limits of melodrama, he always manifests a misogynistic and racist response to his confusing heritage. For example, Frank can pass as white, and he rejects anything associated with black culture. He remains viciously anti-black, defending the lynching of a black man in New Orleans, saying, “He pretty much brought it on himself…”28 He even explicitly wishes to never see another “Negro.”29 This visceral and blatant hatred for black culture and his misogyny combines poisonously to position him as the evil, immoral villain. Cleage draws a parallel between Frank and Sophie as both are of mixed race. However, Sophie’s character proves to be far less predictable than Frank’s. Immediately upon
his exit in Act 1 Scene 2, leaving his bags on the platform for Sophie to carry, the audience can perceive his arrogant, self-absorbed, and menacing personality, which will remain unchanged throughout the play. His extreme nature does not allow for any complexity or ambiguity; in contrast, the initial interactions between Sophie and Miss Leah signal a deeper communication and strong dynamic between the two.

In comparison, Wil hardly enters the action. Not even his positive temperament garners him any additional attention. His character remains as flat as the Kansas landscape, thinly representative of the “good” black man. In the first scene, he articulates his view of women: “…a colored woman is a precious jewel deserving of my respect, my love and my protection.” In pleasant contrast with Frank, Wil supports the female characters rather than dominating or claiming superiority over them, symbolizing a more appropriate relationship between men and women. For example, he offers to kill Frank to save Sophie from having to do the deed. However, Sophie asserts her power and her independence, stating politely, “I appreciate the offer, but the day I need somebody else to defend my land and my family is the day that somebody’s name will be on the deed. I need you to help me do what needs to be done. Not do it for me.” To which Wil replies, “You can count on me.” Although Sophie includes Wil in her plan, he remains assigned to the periphery and excluded from her “family,” an index of man’s overall place in the dramatic universe. Although Wil stands as a possible husband for Fannie, he does not belong within the deeply nurturing space of Sophie and Fannie’s home.

The normative example of a family represented in the relationship of Frank and Minnie only serves to uphold the power and authority of the female-dominated
space. Frank dominates, abuses, and manipulates Minnie, beating her physically and
abusing her emotionally. For example, one of the first interactions between Minnie
and Frank immediately upon their arrival exposes the relationship:

MINNIE DOVE CHARLES: That’s just what I told him [Frank]. We’re family! This
isn’t like coming for a visit. This is coming home.
FRANK: But we have a home, don’t we, darling?
MINNIE: Yes, of course we do. We have a lovely home.
FRANK: And where is out home, Minnie?
MINNIE: Frank…(He stares at her coldly.) It’s in London.
FRANK: So this is really a visit, just like I said, isn’t it?
MINNIE: (Softly) Yes, Frank. (37)

Frank forces Minnie to agree with his statement and bullies her into pledging her
allegiance to him. Frank has become Minnie’s “family,” and her “home” is with him
in London. Frank’s “cold” stare and his aggressive assertion of authority in his
guiding questions indicate anything but a happy or healthy relationship. Instead,
“home” takes on a negative connotation and marriage becomes a method of confining
women. Frank appropriates Minnie’s voice, literally forcing her to change her
language, and thus effectively rendering her speechless, powerless, and subservient.
On these terms, *Flyin’ West* positions the female dominated space as superior to the
traditional family structure and a male-directed one. Harris articulates the stronger
bond that exists between the sisters to create a true home: “This bond of sisterhood
and free womanhood is also stronger than the potentially unity-disrupting condition
of marriage.”33 Cleage’s representation of family gives primacy to the female voices,
empowering them to assert their power and agency in words and deeds. The females
literally occupy the text and the theater, exhibiting an authority over body and voice
as independent, powerful social agents navigating the world of the play. Cleage’s use
of the theatrical and textual space presents an alternative to existing gender relations and the marginalization of black women.

IV. The Wild West & the Voices of Women Pioneers

Cleage declares her deliberate assertion of female voices: “I purposely people my plays with fast-talking, quick-thinking black women since the theater is for me, one of the few places where we have a chance to get an uninterrupted word in edgewise.” Cleage peoples her historical play with strong, “fast-talking, quick-thinking” women who advance a different perspective of life on the frontier and western migrations from that of John Ford Coppola Western movies and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Cleage articulates the stereotypes confronted in *Flyin’ West*:

Historically what we’ve been taught about what happened in the Old West was from the white man’s perspective. So for us that meant John Wayne and white cowboys. Since then we’ve done a little digging into history and found out about the Buffalo Soldiers and Bill Pickett, the black cowboys. So now *Flyin’ West* can tell us something about black women in the West and what they went through and how they contributed to that whole pioneer thing.35

*Flyin’ West* offers an alternative view to the mainstream conceptions of black people on the frontier, in particular black women, traditionally excluded from popular representations of the “Old West” as a battleground for cowboys, savages, and John Wayne-archetypes. Cleage portrays strong-voiced characters on the Western frontier, representing the female pioneer within the first all-black community of Nicodemus, Kansas. Miss Leah’s description of her life as a slave exemplifies the silenced existence necessary for survival. An overseer’s self-satisfying prediction that her newborn son would become a strong cotton picker prompts Miss Leah to say, “I want to tell him that not what I got in mind for my Samson, but I kept my mouth shut like I
had some sense. I ain’t never been no fool.” Talking back to the overseer would have been foolish; in Miss Leah’s terms, the sensible and intelligent strategy was silence that appeared to be submissive. However, in the world of *Flyin’ West*, neither Miss Leah nor any of the other female characters are silent. Miss Leah constantly shares stories and talks candidly about her experiences as a slave, describing the horrible reality of losing children to slavery: “When they sold my first baby boy offa the place, I felt like I couldn’t breathe for three days.” Sophie similarly resists the subservient, obedient, and silent role assigned to women within the public and domestic spheres, declaring, “Two things I’m sure of. I don’t want no white folks tellin’ me what to do all day, an no man tellin’ me what to do all night.” Cleage insists on the importance of amplifying these suppressed female voices.

Not only a family leader, Sophie also functions as an outspoken leader within Nicodemus. She spearheads a bill to make the land selling process transparent to prevent secret land deals and the invasion of white speculators. Sophie single-handedly advocates for this rule within the community: “I’m writing my speech for Sunday. I’m going to single-handedly convince these Negroes they have the right to protect their land from speculators and save Nicodemus!” The very fact that the townspeople pay her close attention demonstrates her leadership and powerful influence within the community. At the end of the play, Sophie triumphs over the white speculators and pushes the bill through. Her character plays a vital role in unifying the community through her speech and propaganda efforts. She vocally (re)enters the historical narrative of the West, seizing a powerful physical space. *Flyin’ West* (re)imagines the frontier history, giving voices and stories to the
pioneering women invisible within dominant conceptions of the West. The play brings attention to the more powerful legacy of African American women. Miss Leah, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie embody independent, strong, and autonomous historical agents, thus depicting an alternative vision of black women on the stage.

The verbal exchanges between the female characters also illustrate an important method the women employ to regain their strength and maintain solidarity. Through sassy and supportive dialogue, the women create an unbreakable family bond. Joni L. Jones and Terri L. Varner analyze three communication strategies of African American women in Cleage’s plays—sass, silence, and support. Jones and Varner define sass as a verbal defense mechanism, or a “way of having voice when other means are not available,” and a “commentary designed to attack an other, protect the self and/or demonstrate verbal agility.” Beyond offensive and aggressive strategies, the women use sassy and playful language to subtly demonstrate their supportive and intimate relationships. For example, in Act 1 scene 3, when all the characters are gathered at the dinner table, Fannie, Miss Leah, and Minnie all tease Sophie.

FANNIE DOVE: Oh no! You two [Frank & Wil] can’t start thinking like Sister! One Sophie is enough.
MISS LEAH: Too many if you ask me.
MINNIE DOVE CHARLES: Has her coffee gotten any better?
MISS LEAH: Worse! And her disposition neither. I don’t know how I’m gonna make it through the winter with her.
MINNIE: She’s not that bad. You just have to remember to put cotton in your ears. (48)

The women’s sass toward Sophie remains playful and loving, an outward sign of their love and support. None of the comments are malicious in any way, and the humorous banter about Sophie’s coffee runs throughout the play. In the first scene, when Sophie offers to make Miss Leah coffee, she responds, “Can’t nobody drink
that stuff but you.” Throughout the scene, she continues to make snide comments about Sophie’s coffee. Sisterhood offers certainty and stability in a “wild” world dominated by uncertainty and danger. The sass between Miss Leah, Fannie, and Minnie acknowledges their intimacy, keeps their wits active, and creates familiarity and stability. Fannie’s initial playful comment, a response to Frank and Wil, also establishes a boundary between the men and women. The women joke together at the exclusion of the male characters, thus reaffirming the sisterhood bond and their independence. Miss Leah, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie’s empowerment through sass and linguistic interactions allow them implicitly to recall a silenced and traumatic past, presenting a richer vision of strong vocal female pioneers active in the community and surviving on the harsh frontier. Confident, willing to express their opinions, and unafraid to disagree, they speak with different voices and represent the complexity of black womanhood.

When the three women do unite their voices, it signifies a bond far stronger than that of either race or gender individually. While the play celebrates difference, the unification of the women’s voices forcefully emphasizes the black women’s position within the theatrical space. Like the petition “African American In Defense of Ourselves,” the call-and-response ritual conducted between Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie also significantly reaffirms and declares solidarity, sisterhood, independence, and agency. The three women hold hands in a circle outside the house, establishing a visual physical connection. Fannie and Minnie repeat the words that signify the bond between them, created upon their journey westward.

Because we are free Negro women...born of free Negro women...We choose this day to declare our lives to be our own and no one else’s. And we promise to always remember the day we left Memphis and went West together to be free women as a sacred bond
between us with all our trust…And all our strength…And all our courage…And all our love. (59-60)

The power resonating as the three voices combine, echoes on the page and stage, physicalizing the emotional force of this moment and dominating the theatrical space. This manifesto emphatically announces the power, independence, and agency of the participants. Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie vocally claim their lives and bodies as “our own and no one else’s” and physically reaffirm control and agency. The women have separated themselves from the rest of the dinner party to display their union in a connected circle onstage, a visible portrait of strength and solidarity. The sisters moved from the South to the West to achieve these freedoms, linguistically represented in the use of the phrase “free women” five times throughout the ritual. The combined voices along with the physical staging embody power and agency and evoke sisterhood.

The language of the ritual also illustrates a conscious recalling of memory to guarantee survival and self-preservation. The call-and-response uses language as a method of therapy to subdue the memories of their past in the South. Benjamin Sammons discusses the function of narrativization within the ritual, explaining, “Like Miss Leah, they revisit the trauma of racialized violence by a process of narrativization, making the trauma submit to an aesthetic form in which they can manipulate it to productive ends.” By this process, the characters pursue ownership and control of past trauma through bringing painful memory to light in artistic forms such as storytelling. Rather than transcending the memory of past violence, the protagonists position memories in a physical context (i.e. the ritual) that renders the harm done to them less intrusive and potentially useful.
The sisters purposely remember and memorialize the departure from Memphis as a way of gaining purchase upon their past and maintaining control of their present lives. The consistent restatement of the source of their bond, created amidst the racist South in the form of a collective physical action—the circle of held-hands with the call-and-response—structures the narrative to affirm sisterhood and the agency of the women. Cleage expresses the importance of this sisterhood bond and the development of liberating counternarratives: “As a woman artist, my cultural sheroes cross racial and national boundaries, joined together at the womb by a sisterhood based on the worldwide presence of sexism in our lives and the unbroken legacy of our struggle against it.”

The narrativization of the ritual vocally (re)inscribes and (re)interprets the powerless asexual black body as a heroic, powerful female actor connected to a larger sisterhood and legacy through voice and womb.

V. The Written Voice: Storytelling & Transcription

In a similar narrativization of traumatic memory, Fannie transcribes Miss Leah’s recollections as oral history throughout the play, a literal rewriting of history. Fannie’s (re)recording of Miss Leah’s stories from her time as a slave in the South offers the possibility for both women to redeem a shared traumatic past. Fannie serves as a blank canvas for the transcription of Miss Leah’s stories, an attentive and supportive listener. Cleage complicates the linguistic space by emphasizing the integral nature of the individual voice, in comparison to the glorification of unity in the call-and-response ritual. “I am about the business of bringing into focus all those faceless, nameless, nonspecific, usually asexual Black folks who are presented as our
ancestors, moving stealthily through history,” she says. “I want to make history more real, more alive, and, ultimately more useful, by making it personal.” Cleage’s portrayal of Fannie’s project insists on the possibility for multiple interpretations and perspectives within the black experience. The play showcases the power of unity and singularity. Although Miss Leah consistently makes disparaging remarks about the purpose of a written record, Fannie, Sophie, and Minnie reiterate the importance of the stories she has to tell. After being silenced and ignored for so long, Miss Leah cannot understand the importance of her individual stories, arguing with Fannie:

MISS LEAH: I keep tellin’ you these ain’t writin’ stories. These are tellin’ stories.
FANNIE: Then tell them to me!
MISS LEAH: So you can write ’em!
FANNIE: So we can remember them.
MISS LEAH: Colored folks can’t forget the plantation any more than they can forget their own names. If we forget that, we ain’t got no history past last week.
SOPHIE: But you won’t always be around to tell it.
MISS LEAH: Long enough, Sister Sophie. Long enough. (23-24)

Miss Leah accurately points out the continuing cruel burden of slavery on the lives of black people and the difficulty of overcoming this history, like forgetting one’s own name. Although she recognizes the intertwined nature of slavery and the history of “colored folks,” she fails to see the significance of Fannie’s project in promoting the voices of individuals so rarely able to speak out before. Miss Leah is a mother-like guide, sharing her stories and lessons to the younger generation; she tells the hard truth. She does not understand the purpose of recording these stories because in her mind, these stories bear their greatest relevance as intimate exchanges between mother and daughter. “[Theatre] is a hollering place,” stresses Cleage, “A place to talk about our black female lives, defined by our specific black female reality to each other first and then to others of good will who will take the time to listen and to
understand,” attesting to the power of voice and communication. The act of transcription becomes an act of remembering and understanding for the younger women. Sophie adds her voice to Fannie’s, concluding the discussion with an appeal to Miss Leah, “But you won’t always be around to tell it.” The physical documentation symbolizes a method of communication with future black women and the guarantee of the transmission of their place in history.

Fannie forcefully creates a space for the stories of black men and women to be heard, a movement parallel to Cleage’s larger intention of presenting a historical view of frontier life focusing on black women. Similar to her employment of the well-made play and melodrama, Fannie appropriates the literary, inserting her voice and the singular voices of the black community into a form predominantly white and male at the turn of the 19th century. Like the effect of the happy and hopeful conclusion of *Flyin’ West*, the stories that Fannie collects include both positive and crippling memories, thus complicating the representation of the black pioneer experience. In the dinner scene, Minnie takes up Fannie and Sophie’s argument against Miss Leah: “But you didn’t always talk about slavery. You talked about how blue the sky would be in the summertime…You used to tell me about how all your babies had such fat little legs, remember?…Who’s going to know how much you loved them?”

The action of listening also represents an important instrument of survival and empowerment by creating a safe space to expose deep psychological wounds. Miss Leah’s narrative voice infuses Fannie’s record with strength and the possibility for moving beyond a traumatic past. Both the act of telling and the act of listening with a recording ear mutually support the women as they navigate their internal conflicts and
the challenges of frontier life. Similar to the ritual between the sisters, Fannie’s project of collecting Miss Leah’s stories extends beyond them to the entire community of Nicodemus, part of an effort to save the town’s folklore and history. When Fannie asks Wil Parrish’s permission to include one of his mother’s sayings in her book, she responds to his protests: “It’s not just Miss Leah’s stories anymore, Wil. It’s sort of about all of us.” The stories speak to and capture the experiences of the entire community, serving to promote solidarity and a more inclusive record of the people of Nicodemus in history. Fannie names her book of collected stories, “The True History and Life Stories of Nicodemus, Kansas: A Negro Town,” a title which directly indicates the book’s communal quality. In fact, she even refers to herself as a “collector” rather than a writer. Her role is to preserve the voices of the “Negro Town” in order that future generations might know its “True History,” whether as a community or gathering of individuals. The material nature of the stories domesticates and minimizes the damaging influence of slavery and trauma on the current moment.

Benjamin Sammons argues that the strategies of Flyin’ West ultimately cause a breakdown of cultural binaries and categorizations. He insists that “…the storytelling and ritual memorialization of history in Flyin’ West serve to delineate such a ‘break’ between past and present, oppression and freedom, and so imbues the future with promise.” The play concludes on a positive hopeful note: the women have triumphed in their personal lives and within the community. Their survival strategies have been successful. Miss Leah speaks the final line of Flyin’ West to Minnie’s baby daughter cradled in her arms: “We got plenty to talk about, me and
you. I’m going to tell you about your mama and her mama and her gran’mama before that one. All those strong colored women makin’ a way for little ol’ you.”56 The final dialogue vocally connects the oldest woman with the youngest, extending the female strengths and histories into the future. Similar to Cleage’s complex gendering of sisterhood, the synthesis of the physical record and the oral legacy revisions the roles of women into multi-dimensional, complex, even contradictory historical agents of change. The women no longer occupy solely a physical space but a vocal and textual one as well.

By constructing a dramatic, historical, linguistic, and sisterhood space and successfully navigating it, Miss Leah, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie deliberately reassert their survival, safety, and freedom. The female characters that populate Flyin’ West represent an exciting vision of what free black women can be and do, and their future holds hope and possibility. Hearing Miss Leah, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie talk openly about their experiences, positive and negative, inculcates the audience into thinking about domestic violence, sexual abuse, and the concerns of African American women. Flyin’ West not only breaks down the opposition between the past and present and private and public, it snaps the iron muzzle silencing black women’s lives, stories, and voices. Cleage has built a nurturing environment where women can vocalize their concerns and struggles to each other and, more importantly, in the real world to the audience. The staging of fleshed-out, complex, and contradictory female characters on stage disrupts the popular constructions of black women as “strong women,” “traitors,” and “black matriarchs.” None of Cleage’s female characters can be packaged into a label. Corthron’s female protagonists, Skoolie and Tee, similarly
struggle against the packaging of “Mammy” and “welfare queen.” Isolated on a different frontier—the harsh landscape of rural poverty—Corthron’s characters must resort to strikingly different strategies to snap the iron muzzle and ensure their survival.
Chapter 3: Kia Corthron, *Come Down Burning*

Why then do the poor keep on having large families? It is not because they are stupid or immoral.

Shirley Chisholm, “Facing the Abortion Question” (1970)

Skoolie and Tee, the protagonists of Kia Corthron’s *Come Down Burning*, illuminate the plight of poor black women and challenge the labels imposed on them. Skoolie and Tee are indeed neither “stupid nor immoral;” they fully comprehend the limited choices available to them. Despite the tragic ending, the two African American women demonstrate strength and perseverance, proving themselves far more complex than ‘welfare queens’ or victims. *Come Down Burning* viscerally connects the political with the personal through the centralization of complex, contradictory, and singular women in the theatrical and narrative space, where the act of surviving is a political one. The portrayal of her characters elucidates the realities for a larger community of low-income women as well as the effect of abstract public policy on the lives of individual women. While purportedly commenting on the abortion debate raging immediately before and during the production of the play, Corthron describes her need to explore aspects of sister rivalry, charismatic spirituality, and physical versus social/emotional power.¹ Corthron reveals the plight of low-income women who have limited choices regarding health, children, and security, presenting the audience with the pragmatic consequences of poverty, disability, and abortion on their lives. Corthron removes black men and public
institutions as major players. Instead of a family that is father-lacking, Corthron presents a family that is institution-lacking.

_Come Down Burning_ was produced in New York at the American Place Theatre on October 28, 1993. Set in the modern day, the play illuminates the impact of poverty and prejudice on the lives of Skoolie, Tee, and Bink. Tee and her three young children have come to stay temporarily with her older sister, Skoolie, on the outskirts of a mountain town. Evicted numerous times, Tee, Evie, Will-Joe, and Jazzman have been in and out of Skoolie’s home every six months for the past five years. Skoolie supports the family with her income as a hairdresser and occasional abortionist. Paralyzed in a childhood accident, Skoolie navigates her house on a wooden cart. Periodically she rolls down the hill to the general store. Two of Tee’s babies died of malnutrition and are buried in the backyard. As the play opens, Tee has another baby on the way. Evie, Tee’s nine-year-old daughter, faces racist hostility at school from her white teacher. As the action unfolds, Skoolie’s childhood friend, Bink, visits her for a haircut and asks if she could perform an abortion. Bink carefully follows Skoolie’s directions and the procedure proceeds successfully. Tee also decides to have an abortion because she lacks the money to feed another baby. She attempts to abort her fetus alone and bleeds to death in the final scene of the play.

I. The Otherized Spectator

First produced in a large theater for a primarily white upper-middle class audience, Corthron identifies the difficulties presented by the large space and the negative responses of the white audience members. The American Place Theatre
handed out audience response forms. According to Corthron, only a few people filled out the form and one person wrote: “‘This isn’t what black English sounds like. I know people who speak black English, it doesn’t sound like this.’” This response reveals the stereotypical expectations brought to a theatre production and the resulting disappointment when the play fails to validate those racist ideas. In the *Village Voice*, Michael Feingold wrote about another production that “For middle-class white audiences, myself included, she offers a very tough listen, but one that pays off.” The reactions highlight the play’s upsetting ability to disrupt the normalcy of audience opinion and raise the question of the effectiveness of the play.

One of the reasons that caused reviewers and audience members to respond negatively may have stemmed from the size of the performance space. In order to best express its ideas, characters, and content, Corthron explains, *Come Down Burning* “needs an intimate space,” not a large stage. In an intimate, small theatre, the experience of the audience mirrors the private, small space of the stage. By isolating the female characters on a mountain in a private space, Corthron shifts her focus from giving voice to women within the world of the play to transmitting the voices of the voiceless to the audience. Removing the action from mainstream society, Corthron enables the audience to focus specifically on the world of the play and the lives of Skoolie, Bink, and Tee. Her structural and dramatic choices remove many potential distractions from the audience. Rather than purely considering poverty as an abstract state of being, the audience focuses on the complex, dynamic women on the stage, coping with the realities of poverty. The voices of Skoolie, Bink, and
Tee reach the audience without being overpowered, lost, or rendered inaudible by fantastical spectacles, multiplicity of characters and settings, or political debates.

Corthron excludes not only white patriarchal society, but also all institutions associated with it such as the postal service. Skoolie should be receiving disability compensation, Tee on welfare. The setting deep in a mountainous countryside requires them to be strong, self-sufficient, and independent. Corthron depicts a world where Roe v. Wade and reproductive health services are distant, entirely inaccessible ideas. Skoolie has adapted by crafting her skills as an abortionist, and she serves as a refuge for local women in need. The debates surrounding Roe v. Wade simply do not affect Skoolie, Tee, or Bink—or concern the play’s audience. The spectators, however, can no longer divorce themselves from the plight of these women; Corthron forces the audience to consider the real lives of poor women embodied by Skoolie and Tee.

More likely, the physical set of Come Down Burning caused many of the negative reactions. Corthron’s specific designations for the set fit powerfully with her emphasis on projecting the voices of the characters and on targeting the audience. Structured around Skoolie’s disability, the set shocks the audience and disrupts their point of view. Skoolie moves around on “a flat wooden steerable board with wheels.” The living space of the shack has been suited for Skoolie’s lower center of gravity. “All appliances, cupboards are floor level—a hot plate rather than a range, floor refrigerator, etc. From a standing person’s waist-level to the ceiling is completely bare,” she writes. (See Appendix 2) By visually disrupting the audience’s expectations, as well as introducing the jarring juxtaposition of the characters
standing within the lowered set and next to cart-bound Skoolie, Corthron challenges the normality of conventions in theater and day-to-day activities. If Skoolie owned a wheelchair instead, the visual effects would have been dampened if not completely normalizing the set and orienting the appliances to a person of normal height. This abnormal perspective positions Skoolie as “normal” within the environment and puts pressure on the audience to question assumptions of the disabled person as “abnormal” and “Other.” The set imbues physical discomfort and unfamiliarity, thus pushing the audience (through sheer visual effects) to consider the unconscious acceptance of their own bodies as normal. In addition, the use of a homemade cart instead of a mass-produced, steel wheelchair amplifies the distance between Skoolie’s world and that of a place where social assistance programs are readily accessible. Through defining the world of the play as such, the set otherizes the audience by placing them in an unusual point view.

II. A ‘Real’ Support System: Sisterhood, Siblings, & Family

In *Come Down Burning*, Corthron not only offers a portrait of sisterhood and family that deviates from the patriarchal nuclear family and its subordinating forces, but also one which (re)presents the complex bonds between black women. As the play progresses, a full-blown sister rivalry erupts between Tee and Skoolie, which complicates the vision of sisterhood through the depiction of the characters’ faults, hopes, and humanity. Despite their conflicts, the vision of family in *Come Down Burning*, like *Flyin’ West*, reiterates the importance of sisterhood solidarity for survival, a kinship structure that provides an indestructible support system. For
example, Skoolie continually allows Tee to stay with her despite the heavy financial burdens of feeding and housing four extra bodies. Skoolie describes Tee’s economic needs and her own response to Bink: “Out and in, out and in. Started when she’s twenty-three, me twenty-seven, Evie four, Will-Joe one plus a month, one a them sucks, Will-Joe’s daddy I think, cuts outa town. Wasn’t livin’ with ‘em but did help with the rent ‘til he gone. Didn’t know ‘til the rent due. Three of ‘em on my doorstep. She’ll stay awhile, leave, get evicted come back, leave, come back.”

For the past seven years, Tee has been “out and in” of Skoolie’s home, her only stable option. However, despite their contentious relationship, Skoolie remains a stable supporter of her sister. The absence of a father figure also highlights the importance of sisterhood and family support. Tee has had numerous affairs with men: the children all have different fathers. Yet, not a single man has stepped forward to contribute to childcare. Will-Joe’s father “cut outa town” and abandoned Tee to care for their child. The same pattern of abandonment seemingly played out in every other pregnancy.

Tee desperately wants economic autonomy, thus she works two shifts in a college cafeteria, while managing to drop off and pick up her two older children from school. Although Tee may not be able to meet even her most fundamental needs, she does financially contribute to the family structure. Repeatedly she attempts to prove her autonomy and the extent of her responsibility to Skoolie. After Skoolie raises the point that Tee has been living in her house for four months, Tee responds:

TEE: I the one pay for the lunch milk.
SKOOLIE: You stay here. I charge nothin’, you stay free, wanna make a point cuz you pay for the milk.
TEE: Not a point! Not a big point. Little point. (8)
Although Skoolie scolds her for making such a fuss over the lunch milk, Tee insists on the importance of her contribution, however small. Her “little point” about the money is an important justification for her stay with Skoolie and the possibility that she may be able to move out in the near future. Yet, Tee’s “little point” is unconvincing and only serves to emphasize her patterns of dependency. Shortly thereafter, Tee tries to assert her economic independence by claiming she will leave imminently.

TEE: Won’t stay long.
SKOOLIE: Four months already.
SKOOLIE: Hmm.
TEE: Gonna do it, maybe next week.
SKOOLIE: You ain’t never stayed here less n’ six months at a time.
TEE: Do it. (8-9)

She repeats the words “do it” in an effort to prove it to herself and to Skoolie, who remains unconvinced that she will leave anytime soon. Unable to persuade Skoolie or the audience, Tee fails in her desire to prove her independence. Skoolie embodies a critical support network for Tee and her children, who would be living on the streets without her.

The way that Corthron draws the relationship between the two women also refutes the one-dimensional portrait of sisterhood as “unconditional support” without devaluing the bond between women or the family structure. The two sisters neither speak or respond with a unified voice nor allow their differences to divide them. Both share an antagonistic relationship that often manifests in envy, condescension, reproach, and rivalry. Corthron refrains from sanitizing their interactions and delves into the differences between the sisters.
Tensions between the two sisters mount in the very first scene while Skoolie braids Evie’s hair before school. Tee enters while Evie compliments Skoolie’s hairdressing skills. A few moments later, Will-Joe appears with a fresh uneven haircut. The night before Tee gave herself and Will-Joe very short and uneven haircuts, visibly rejecting Skoolie’s professional skills in an attempt to demonstrate her own abilities and control over her children. Tee fights against Skoolie’s criticism:

SKOOLIE: Tee. What did you do to your mane?
TEE: Trim.
SKOOLIE: O my God lemme get me scissors --
TEE: It okay. I like it, Skoolie.
SKOOLIE: I don’t, and your boss gonna faint when she see it.
TEE: It okay.

(Children enter. Will-Joe with very short hair and thumb in mouth.)
SKOOLIE: Well good mornin’, Mr. Will-Joe, how’re—(To Tee.) Went crazy with them shears last night, didn’t ya? (4)

Skoolie does not conceal her opinion. Her immediate reflex to grab scissors and set things right illustrates the mother-like role she plays for Tee as the elder sister. In response, Tee stubbornly rebuffs any help from Skoolie and prevents Skoolie from changing Will-Joe’s cut. Despite Tee’s insistence that she “like” her new haircut, Skoolie makes clear how awful it looks, teasing Tee that it could present a problem at work. Through sass, Skoolie expresses support for her sister, as evident in such phrases as “O my God” and “Went crazy with them shears last night, didn’t ya?” But ultimately Skoolie disapproves.

This morning’s routine also differs from the usual one because Skoolie wants to talk about Tee’s pregnancy. Although Skoolie has this agenda, she first comments on Tee’s hair rather than articulating her desire to have “a word” with Tee.¹¹ She cannot stop herself from trying to “fix” Tee’s disastrous endeavor and finally bullies her into submitting to a repair job. After revealing her knowledge of Tee’s pregnancy,
Skoolie shifts to a milder issue: “Come here…Come on. I make it pretty.”

Therefore, their first moment alone together onstage reflects typical sister rivalries as well as Skoolie’s love for Tee. Rather than paint purely one-dimensional characters, Corthron’s dialogue demonstrates the full humanity that exists between the two sisters, including petty arguments and sassy behavior. Like the women in *Flyin’ West*, these sisters are neither unafraid to criticize nor to show their unconditional love for each other, thus refuting an essentialized vision of sisterhood.

**III. How to Reconstitute Selfhood and Wholeness**

Mainstream culture’s categorization of external markers like skin color and disfigurement as “Other” functions to reinforce the normality of the white male body. African American women can resist this classification with strategies that overcome the traumatic experiences, memories, history, and shame of living as an “Other” within society. Skoolie’s disfigured body marks her as abnormal and ‘Other.’ Disability theater scholar Joan Lipkin remarks on the physical embodiment of other social hardships, arguing, “the poverty that circumscribes its women throughout is embodied in Skoolie, as she is compelled to wheel herself about in a crudely fashioned cart.” Lipkin emphasizes the embodiment of traumatic wounds from Skoolie’s personal past and history. Although the audience might perceive the cart in this way, Lipkin does not account for Skoolie’s agency and choice to live away from the city and “wheelchair access, everywhere.” Skoolie’s disabled body may exhibit terrible injuries, but she does not surrender to them. In comparison, Tee does not exhibit a physical manifestation of her wounds; rather her body carries internalized
traumas that surface through her actions and voice. Jennifer Griffiths, a trauma studies scholar, argues that the body exists as a site of cultural inscription and traumatic experience, revealing the split between image, body, and voice. Griffiths argues, “The image of a damaged black female body enters the public consciousness without a voice, a silent object in the performance, and her body-as-text conforms to fit seamlessly within a cultural script that already marks her as ‘Other’.” The visual representation of Skoolie’s damaged body onstage initially isolates and alienates the audience, centering her within a preconceived category of difference and abnormality. However, Corthron will develop Skoolie’s character through such creative strategies as dialogue and movement that bridge the divide between body and power and challenge the cultural images assigned to the black female body. Skoolie’s support of the family, her hair-cutting business, and her confrontation of Evie’s racist teacher all exhibit her independence, mobility, and strength.

The action of Scene 2 revolves around a conversation between Skoolie and Bink, now a client but also a childhood friend of almost twenty-five years; the content of the conversation provides not only important exposition but an alternative woman-to-woman interaction to that of Skoolie and Tee. Skoolie and Bink’s relationship clearly stems from the deep mutual trust born of growing up together as equals. Skoolie reacts with openness that radically contrasts with her more protective attitude toward Tee. The conversation progresses toward the origins of Skoolie and Tee’s current situation with the death their father.

BINK: Well that’s Skoolie and Tee, Tee fall down, Skoolie pick her up every since thirteen and nine, Mr. Jim at the mill catch his arm in that machinery it pull him in, and yaw find out what that mill care ‘bout its employees…Mr. Jim work twenty years, die, and not enough pension to feed a flea.
SKOOLIE: Twenty-three.
BINK: Then here’s Skoolie, thirteen, full-time mama to her baby sister cuz suddenly their mama out cleanin’ this house seven to three, that house four to ten.
SKOOLIE: Twenty-three years my daddy work for ‘em twenty-three years. (15-16)

Bink captures the horrifying reality of the terrible death compounded by corporate indifference. At thirteen, Skoolie was forced to rapidly grow up in a maelstrom of violence, racism, and sexism. The brutal violence of Mr. Jim’s death in the mill machinery would have been unquestionably difficult for anyone, let alone an early adolescent girl stripped of economic and personal security. With Skoolie’s mother absent to support the family on an income certainly much smaller than a man’s salary, Skoolie became “full time mama,” the only available emotional support for her “baby sister.” However traumatic a transition this would be for a 13-year-old, Skoolie embraced the role. Bink describes how Skoolie cared for Tee while doing Bink’s hair for the high school prom: “But a forty-five minute ‘do hits a hour and a half cuz every five minutes you rollin’ next door to check on Tee’s junior high fractions and decimals.” Close attention and a hovering attitude may only enable Tee’s immaturity and irrationality. Skoolie’s power to transcend the trauma of enforced surrogate motherhood similarly manifests in her responses. She never responds to any of Bink’s comments about Tee, and she only refers to her father in terms of racism and the harsh white labor market. Her voice and her actions (re)inscribe her body as a powerful, independent social agent that breaks from the stereotypes of disability, welfare, and blackness. Although she skirts the label of “manless,” the loss of her father at a young and vulnerable age cannot be dismissed as insignificant. Skoolie speaks to her own issues, claiming her selfhood and her inclusion within womanhood.

Just before the end of the play, Skoolie tells Tee how she got her current name. The audience never learns Skoolie’s name before her accident, yet her
renaming represents a significant and symbolic reassertion of her selfhood and her body. The trauma of the accident and the resulting reshaping of her body and life haunt her childhood. Skoolie recounts her hatred of being carried everywhere and the painful struggle to attend first grade as a paraplegic. Everyday her father would drive her to school and place her at a desk. “All summer I bein’ carried. To the bed. To the couch. Out the door. Hate it,” says Skoolie. “September Daddy carry me to his truck, drive me, set me at my desk, leave. Everyone see it. No one play with me. Not come near, but watch all the time, point.”

The children alienate Skoolie’s “abnormal” body—refuse to play with her, point, and watch her from a distance. At school, Skoolie exists as a foreign object on display. With the loss of mobility, she also has no means of escaping objectification and otherizing. Her dependence on others to carry her represents a loss of her freedom, autonomy, and independence. In response, she starts to crawl out of the classroom everyday for a year even in the face of her father’s daily beating. After stubbornly taking control of her situation, Skoolie finally convinces her father to let her drop out of school.

…Daddy, say, “You done the effort, girl, guess it ain’t your pleasure. You ain’t gotta go back to school no more.” Round then I get my name. And he build me a cart, no more bloody cut legs from pullin’ ‘em, ugly for everybody else, I didn’t care. I couldn’t feel ‘em nohow. Now I go where I please, no more carryin’, I go where I want. So “Skoolie” ain’t cuza no school. Cuz I did taste school. Spit it out. (48)

Skoolie achieves both recognition of her independent spirit and control over her body. Her father constructs her a cart so she can “go where I please, no more carryin’, I go where I want;” she successfully attains agency. Leaving the public space of the school, she escapes the objectification and alienation from the other children.

Skoolie’s (re)constitution of herself emerges in the language she uses to identify her name. “Skoolie” does not signify a lack of schooling, but a powerful choice to reject
it. The action-leaden words, “Spit it out,” carry weight as a choice and an embracing of her new name. The disabilities studies scholar Rosiémarié Garland Thomson explores the “politics of self-naming” for a woman who claims the appellation “cripple”: “…she wants to call attention to the material reality of her crippledness, to her bodily difference and her experience of it.”

Skoolie also calls attention to her experience of her “bodily difference” and her rejection of school. She refuses to define herself by her disability and asserts her authority through claiming the name “Skoolie.”

Skoolie’s powerful voice challenges the suppression of the voices of disabled people and African American women, and her discussion of her accident and her father signify a form of testimony that reclaims her body and selfhood. Griffiths insists on the importance of developing a counternarrative to dominant racist and sexist images through testimony: “the reconstitution of the self through testimony provides an opportunity to challenge the dominant symbolic order and to challenge the ‘historico-racial schema’ or the cultural inscription that silences the voices of survivors.”

By transmitting painful experiences, Skoolie reconstitutes herself as a powerful, independent actor on her own terms without devaluing her past, body, or voice.

Skoolie, Tee, and Bink do not exist as silent objects. The setting of *Come Down Burning* within the domestic sphere allows the women to occupy the dramatic space as complex humans rather than as muzzled bodies. Griffiths illuminates the difficulties of transmitting traumatic experience within a racialized public space, and how difficult it is for a subjective voice of an “othered survivor” to emerge in a space
that aligns her with corporeality. The all-female private dramatic space enables Skoolie and Bink to transcend the otherness and silencing of the “racialized public space.” However, Tee ultimately cannot bridge the separation between body and language in either the public or private spheres and dies tragically at the end of the play.

Tee’s failure as a mother manifests in her desperate pleas for Skoolie’s approval and her irrational behavior. When Tee describes her confrontation of Evie’s racist schoolteacher, Skoolie reprimands Tee for not “finishing” the conversation. Skoolie matter-of-factly states that Tee “Did no good,” and that she will call the school to guarantee the teacher would not injure Evie again. Tee responds:

TEE: I done it myself! I done it myself!
SKOOLIE: What?
TEE: I can take care a my own kids, Skoolie!
SKOOLIE: Well who said you couldn’t, Tee—?
TEE: I can take care a myself, Skoolie, don’t need you, I can take care a my own kids, take care a myself! myself!
SKOOLIE: Okay—
TEE: Don’t need you! (27-28)

Tee irrationally asserts her capacity to “take care a my own kids” and her power to act of her own volition to protect her children. The multiple emphases on the first person illustrate a desperate need to prove herself to Skoolie. Tee belligerently rejects Skoolie’s help until Skoolie allows Tee to carry her to the school. Tee gains power from carrying Skoolie down the hill and from Skoolie’s fleeting dependence on her. In that moment, Tee powerfully contributes to the survival of the sisterhood; their union produces an even stronger bond that can overcome the racist forces symbolized by Evie’s schoolteacher. Tee’s idea to carry Skoolie embodies her single act as a rational adult. She even recognizes the power she gains, saying to Skoolie, “I could
do it again, ya need me. Ya need me. I could do it, ya want me to or not. You in my way, I could pick you up, move. Nothin’ you could do. You bother me, I pick you up, carry you, I carry you someplace else, carry you where you don’t bother me.”

However, Tee remains unable to act on her own claims of power and authority. Just before Tee lifts Skoolie in Scene 4, she gives dominance to her insecurity by begging Skoolie to “Pretend like…Pretend like all along I plan on bringin’ you, tell ‘em that. Pretend like we’s doin’ this together, pretend like you ain’t no bigger ‘n me.” In the next scene the audience discovers that Tee was not even present at the meeting with the principle, thus removing herself as a principle actor in the battle to protect Evie. Tee allows Skoolie to appropriate her voice as Evie’s mother—the role Tee should be playing and desperately wanted to play. Although on a few occasions Tee expresses her concerns and her authority, she ultimately has nothing useful to say or contribute.

Although Tee moves within the same space as Skoolie, she is consistently unable to express her true desires or haunting experiences. Tee internalizes the trauma of being unable to care adequately for her children, her economic dependency on her sister, and the racism at her job and at her children’s school. Skoolie describes the death of two of Tee’s babies:

SKOOLIE: Two girlies, Markie-Ann was fifteen months toddlerin’ and J.B. a week and a half, then Markie-Ann down and died and J.B. eight days behind her…
BINK: Them babies get fever? Or born sick.
SKOOLIE: Hungry. Markie-Ann was doin’ okay, three babies was in the budget. But we tried four. Not enough for the last one and put a strain on the other three. Oldest two could take it. Youngest two couldn’t. (11,17)

The loss of two babies would be agonizing for any young mother, and that it came about from starvation would have been even more devastating. Tee blames herself for being unable to save Markie-Ann and J.B. and even goes so far to accuse herself of
“killing” her babies by not being financially competent. When Skoolie confronts Tee about her current pregnancy, Tee agrees to have an abortion: “I love my babies, Skoolie, I can’t let it incubate, bring it on in here, nothin’ happen but it die, it die take another with it, I can’t kill my babies, Skoolie. No more.” The trauma of killing her own children haunts her throughout the play, and she cannot move beyond this idea to take proper care of those surviving ones. Without Skoolie’s help, she and her children would be living on the streets. But, Skoolie’s resources are limited. With two babies dead from lack of food, Tee and Skoolie cannot support another child.

SKOOLIE: Tee, ya can’t…not think about it. Jus’ can’t…jus’ can’t have another baby, not think ‘bout no options. We’s hungry.
TEE: I know, Skoolie. I ain’t thinkin’ ‘bout it cuz I know, cuz I know not much choice. I gonna pull it out. (21)

Poverty emerges as the women’s enemy, severely restricting their choice as a family. Tee desperately wants to prevent the death of another living baby, yet ironically must “kill” an unborn baby in order to ensure this. Skoolie and Tee’s economic situation gives Tee no other choice if she wants to preserve her family.

However, the internalized trauma of killing her children prevents Tee from behaving rationally about the abortion. Tee attempts the abortion without Skoolie, who was about to execute the procedure with skill learned from long experience. As Skoolie enters the living room in preparation, she untwists a wire hanger and sees to her horror that Tee pulls out “another straightened—and bloodied—hanger…Blood all over Tee’s groin, legs, the couch.” Tee’s irrational fear of letting the fetus “incubate” spurred her to attempt an abortion without Skoolie. However, in light of Skoolie’s successful abortion involving Bink in Scene 5, Tee behaves foolishly and senselessly, executing her own definitive silencing. Tee remains blind to the real
forces that constrain and oppress her life, and, unlike Skoolie, she cannot (re)constitute herself and her body separate from the internal conscriptions of hegemonic culture. Her inability to voice the cathartic testimony, necessary for the reconstitution of her self, is a product of her own failures as a character rather than the world of the play.

IV. ‘Fit’ or ‘Unfit’ Mothers

In the 20th century, the state’s welfare policies classified black women and disabled people as “abnormal” and “Other.” Rosemarie Garland Thomson contextualizes the function of the “Other” within society, writing, “Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority.”

The normate body is a constructed identity that wields power granted by the cultural capital of bodily configurations such as wholeness, normalcy, and maleness. Thomson describes the narrow profile that encapsulates the normate: “a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports.” Therefore, all women and disabled people embody corporeal insufficiency and deviance and serve as cathartic receptacles for social anxieties and fears. However, the “Other” can embody a site of historical (re)inscription of African American female subjectivity that celebrates difference, strength, and femininity. Skoolie’s disabled body challenges the cultural status quo, visually disrupting the spectator’s expectations.
through this centralization of an “abnormal body.” Balancing on the boundaries of oppositional constructed identities such as black/white, masculine/feminine, abled/disabled, Skoolie’s body becomes a site for the negotiation of womanhood, motherhood, and blackness.\textsuperscript{33}

As a paraplegic, the character of Skoolie signifies on the normative representations of the Mammy stereotype, offering a portrait of an abnormal, disabled body in the role of mother. Thomson explicates the frequent denial of motherhood for disabled women. Categorized as objects of care in mainstream culture, disabled women are often denied or discouraged from the reproductive role: “disabled women must sometimes defend against the assessment of their bodies as unfit for motherhood or of themselves as infantilized objects who occasion other people’s virtue.”\textsuperscript{34} Skoolie’s disabled body gives rise to the assumption that she will be “unfit for motherhood” or unable to functionally care for the children. \textit{Come Down Burning} offers an alternative vision of motherhood: Skoolie not only works and supports herself but ultimately is a better mother than the outwardly able-bodied Tee. Skoolie slowly takes over the responsibilities of caring for Tee’s children through the play. The play opens with Skoolie brushing Evie’s hair in the place of Tee. The very first line of the play negates Tee as a mother when Skoolie claims care over Evie, saying “Skoolie take care a ya.”\textsuperscript{35} She initially compromises when Evie questions her: “Skoolie. And your mama.”\textsuperscript{36} Tee enters a few lines later flustered, searching for lunch money for the children. The juxtaposition of Tee’s “fumble-searches” with Skoolie’s calm brushing of Evie’s hair visually alerts the audience to Skoolie’s primacy and her strength as a stable mother figure.
Skoolie also consistently bottle-feeds Jazzman, something that Tee remains unable and unwilling to do because she is desperately committed to breast-feeding. In Scene 5, Bink visits Skoolie for a post abortion check-up, and Skoolie recounts her victory over Evie’s racist white teacher. Throughout Skoolie’s story, Tee interrupts seven times about how Jazzman refuses to breastfeed with such phrases as “Won’t take my milk, Skoolie, I don’t know, won’t take my milk,” and “Skoolie, he sick! My baby Jazzman sick!” She hysterically repeats “Won’t drink me!” even after Skoolie has retrieved a formula bottle from the refrigerator. Her repeated pleas for Skoolie’s help illustrate her absolute dependence on her older sister for her own care as well as her children’s. Yet, when Skoolie intervenes with the bottle, Tee stubbornly whines about Jazzman’s reluctance to breastfeed and keeps offering her breast instead of the bottle, thus imperiling Jazzman’s health and safety in the process. Skoolie finally takes over and proceeds to feed him.

TEE: Won’t take it.
SKOOLIE: He’ll take the bottle, Tee! he’s hungry, give him some. (Pause, then Tee tries again to give him her breast.) Give that baby his bottle, Tee, ya wanna starve him?
TEE: Take mine.
(Skoolie grabs bottle and baby and begins to feed him.) (35)

Tee irrationally keeps trying to force the baby to breastfeed, and ultimately it is Skoolie who must take on the role of rational mother. Tee denies Jazzman basic care, thus revealing herself to be a “bad” mother. Later in the scene, Skoolie and Tee physically fight for control of the baby when Tee wakes the baby for selfish reasons:

(Skoolie looks at Tee. Tee looks at Jazzman whom she has laid on the floor and is rocking. She gradually rocks hard until finally roughly enough that he again starts crying, and she cradles him.)
SKOOLIE: Tee, stop that! what’re you doin’ to that baby?
TEE: He take my milk.
SKOOLIE: He don’t want it!
(Grabs Jazzman. Now both sister clutch baby.)
TEE: Gon’ take it.
SKOOLIE: He don't wantcher damn milk, Tee!
TEE: Yes—
SKOOLIE: No! he don’t wantcher damn milk, Tee!
TEE: Gon’ take it, gon’ take it, Skoolie, somethin’ wrong! cuz somethin’ wrong with baby don’t want his mama’s milk.
SKOOLIE: No—
TEE: Somethin’ wrong—
SKOOLIE: Not with him! Gimme that baby ‘fore ya kill him! (37-38)

Tee irrationally concludes that something must be wrong with the baby, “he sick,” since he will only drink from a bottle. More to the point, something is most definitely wrong with Tee if her actions threaten to kill the baby. Tee violently rocks the cradle, refuses to use a bottle, and cannot understand what she has done wrong—all indications of her inability to be a fit mother. Skoolie intervenes as the rational adult, who knows how to handle and care for the children, Tee included. As the play moves forward, it becomes increasingly clear that Tee cannot possibility be a “good” mother with the tools that she has at her disposal. Thus, Corthron removes her completely from the family with her death in the final scene, allowing Skoolie, as the rightful and “fit” mother, to take over full care of Evie, Will-Joe, and Jazzman, reversing the typical stereotype of the disabled woman as “unfit mother” and “dependent.”

Skoolie’s independence and success as mother refutes this categorization of disabled women in addition to offering an alternative vision of African American motherhood beyond that of the Mammy.

Corthron does not blame men; in fact her exclusion of male characters positions the females as the central historical actors. Tee’s death can be interpreted as a punishment for failing to be independent or to adequately care for her children. Corthron does not let Tee off the hook for her sexual choices and failures. Through her inability to transcend her patterns of dependency and her irrational behavior, Tee
becomes a “welfare queen” in a sense—innocent, naïve, irrational—a chaotic emotional mess who cannot take care of herself, let alone three children. Skoolie’s ability to perform safe procedures makes Tee’s death gratuitous and deeply unnecessary. On the other hand, *Come Down Burning* illustrates the choices—or lack thereof—that would press a woman to have an abortion and what these forces bring in term of consequences. Tee’s character dangerously reifies stereotypes of the ‘unfit’ mother, clearly unable to help her children or herself. In the final scene, Tee symbolically hands her children’s care over to Skoolie when she admits she cannot help Will-Joe with his reading. “Will-Joe do his readin’ last night, he come ask for help. I say better if he get Evie. Or you,” says Tee. Her own daughter, and ultimately Skoolie, are the better caretakers.

While Corthron challenges cultural constructions of motherhood and black womanhood, she reinforces problematic characteristics of disabled women as asexual. Skoolie has no children of her own, and the play gives no indication of her sexuality or her sexual desires. Thomson recalls Harlan Hahn’s term “asexual objectification” to describe the assumption that sexuality is inappropriate in disabled people. Nancy Mairs explains this disassociation of the disabled body from sexuality as a method of dealing with the discomfort and distaste that a “misshapen body arouses.” The play never makes reference to Skoolie having any love interests. Ever since her childhood accident and the death of her father, she has lived isolated in the mountains with only women surrounding her, in part due to her limited mobility. Therefore, the play reinforces the asexual representation of the disabled female body. Corthron similarly reifies problematic elements of the Mammy image. In the world of the play, Skoolie
exists as an asexual mother figure for Tee and the children, dangerously reifying conceptions of the Mammy as asexual mother, willing to take care of someone else’s offspring. However, the biological relation between Tee’s children and Skoolie mitigates Skoolie’s total embodiment of the Mammy. Corthron’s choice to make Skoolie disabled and without a wheelchair grounds Skoolie in her shack. Skoolie’s movements are limited physically, and thus she represents a guaranteed safe haven like the always-dependable Mammy.

*Come Down Burning* ultimately uses Tee as a sacrificial lamb on the social activism alter for the purpose of exposing the horrors of poverty and an isolated rural existence. Corthron also uses Tee as a foil to complicate Skoolie’s character. Tee embodies a gesture of human wretchedness that the audience simply cannot identity with. Instead, Skoolie assumes the audience’s empathy, projecting the complexity, depth, and power of black womanhood. Tee’s irrational, illogical, and nonsensical behavior normalizes Skoolie’s “abnormal body” and transforms Tee into the abnormal, disabled character. Tee functions as an embodiment of poverty, generating sympathy for plight of poor African American women. Thomson clarifies the purpose of this rhetoric of sympathy in highlighting nondisabled heroines: “Their disabled sisters, however, stay on the narrative margins, degraded by oppressive institutions and ultimately sacrificed to the social problems the novels assail.”

However, *Come Down Burning* both manipulates and challenges the normative representations of the welfare queen and the Mammy figures. The play highlights the different voices of Tee and Skoolie, while thrusting them to the center of the audience’s awareness. The glorious, contradictory, and complex voices of the
female characters break the muzzle of these labels, (re)imaging black women on the stage as independent, complex, and dynamic historical actors.
Conclusion

A recent article in the *Washington Post*, entitled “Peeling Back the Labels,” beautifully articulates the stereotypes imposed on African American women by reporting on a 2011 survey, the most extensive exploration of the lives and views of African American women in recent decades.\(^1\) Krissah Thompson begins her article, “Rich or poor, educated or not, black women sometimes feel as though myths are stalking them like shadows, their lives reduced to a string of labels. The angry black woman. The strong black woman. The unfeeling black woman. The manless black woman.”\(^2\) Add to that: the exotic black woman. The sensual black woman. The evil black woman. Not only are these myths haunting black women, they are choking them. For centuries, black women have been silenced and muzzled by categorizations like “the black matriarch,” “Superwoman,” “the hypersexual Jezebel,” and “the man-hater.”

In their plays, Pearl Cleage and Kia Corthron strip away the muzzle that has long silenced black women to reveal the ordinary women crushed between conflicting identities and stereotypes. *Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* wrestle with what it means to be black and female in the United States, confronting poverty, prejudice, and violence head on. Empowerment stems from sisterhood, voice, and shared memory; all their female characters rise up against the internal anguish from life in a racist and sexist society. The two plays complement each other in their portrayals of women surviving in isolated landscapes. Like the “native plays” of the 1920s, a
domestic setting functions as a nurturing space where the characters can interact honestly and openly. The private setting shields the characters from negative representations, judgments, and the shame of existing as the “Other” in mainstream society. Flyin’ West and Come Down Burning prove that the periphery is a place of identity negotiation and powerful resistance to deeply engrained sexist and racist society norms. Syndé Mahone remarks on this space within the plays of African American women: “…the margin need not be defined as a place that holds markings of less value; rather, for African Americans, it is a ‘site of resistance’ to racial and gender oppression, silence, despair, and invisibility.”

The ordinary women in the plays holler and shout, and they make themselves heard. They dominate the dramatic space, powerfully exposing the strength and complexity inherent in sisterhood. Cleage and Corthron’s characters evoke the complex, strong women from the earlier plays of Shange, Childress, Kennedy, and Rahman. The dark forces of racism similarly reverberate despite the lack of white characters. The plays centralize the experiences and struggles of the women, celebrating their internal resourcefulness and resilience. They cannot divorce their personal experiences from the political. In an interview, Cleage eloquently describes the power of the onstage female characters:

…I don’t often encounter women onstage like the women that I know and love and see every day. Regular women. They do admirable things within the context of ordinary lives. We’re either the strong one, the one totally focused on find men, or the one destroyed by men and race…Their stories are interesting to me. Their voices are interesting. I want women like that in the things I write.5

Both playwrights highlight the “regular women” who inspire awe, respect, and dignity; they become extraordinary by their survival in the face of unremitting hardship. Flyin’ West and Come Down Burning achieve similar ends in delineating a
clear sense of the larger world in which the female characters live and interact. By
virtue of the domestic space and isolated landscapes, the playwrights gain the
freedom to create characters who remove their unmuzzles, raise their voices, and
holler.

Despite strong similarities, the two playwrights pitch their character’s voices
differently. With the triumph of Miss Leah, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie over Frank
and the white speculators, *Flyin’ West* contains a hopeful and promising vision of the
legacy of sisterhood, family, and black womanhood. Miss Leah’s horrifying stories
about slavery, Frank’s brutalization of Minnie, and the threat to the sister’s land does
not detract from the overall positive tone of the play. In stark contrast, *Come Down
Burning* possesses a far darker tone, its tragic outcome embracing a certain
inevitability; Tee’s inability to care for her children and the sisters’ wretched poverty
taint the whole drama. Sisterhood and community do not triumph over malice and
slim resources as in *Flyin’ West*. This difference in tone is also reflected in the plays’
title. “Flying” expresses a sense of escape and change, and the use of the gerund form
indicates the action has already started; in this case, the women are already on their
way toward achieving freedom. In comparison, “come down burning” suggests with
ominous foreboding a dark end, the characters metaphorically falling down to earth
with wings on fire.

The radically distinct settings account for many of the works’ dissimilarities
and define the boundaries and scope of each. In comparison to *Flyin’ West*’s
historical setting, the contemporary setting of *Come Down Burning* imposes greater
financial and material pressures on Tee and Skoolie. The diverging views about
children in the play reveal the kind of economic realities facing the characters. Both Miss Leah and Tee have haunting memories of losing children to slavery, disease, and starvation. Yet, in *Come Down Burning*, children are a burden to Skoolie and Tee, who barely survive with what they have. Concern and anxiety surround Tee’s pregnancy, rather than joy and blessing.

Although Cleage and Corthron package their plays’ structures in different ways, they both signify on traditional dramatic forms: the one-act, the well-made play, and the melodrama. In contrast to experimental playwrights, Cleage and Corthron’s selection of familiar dramatic frameworks frees them to shape their content more creatively. By avoiding potentially controversial structures, they have the liberty to tackle such ugly subjects as poverty, domestic violence, abortion, premature death, and deep prejudice. The familiar framework comforts the audience, making them more pliable and ready to engage with the issues depicted, those the playwrights most want to communicate. Form does not distract from the content. However, the one-act structure of *Come Down Burning* ultimately does detract from the content, limiting the critical development of Tee’s character. The play does not deliver a fully dimensional portrait of Tee. She exists primarily as a foil for Skoolie and a sacrificial lamb for Corthron’s political messages about poverty and abortion. Tee’s character supposedly could be intended to “generate a rhetoric of sympathy,” but Skoolie earns this sympathy without irrational and juvenile behavior. Thus, the audience is left wondering about Tee’s inadequacies instead of thinking about the ugliness of poverty or *Roe v. Wade*. At the end of the play, Tee becomes the “disabled” sister, while Skoolie, although broken on the surface, demonstrates her
wholeness. Deprived of adequate space to delve into these complex issues in the one-act structure, Corthron’s political message gets garbled and ultimately lost. If her intention is to make the audience reflect on the implications of Roe v. Wade’s overturn on the lives of African American women, then she does not succeed.⁶ Skoolie and Tee’s isolation on a mountain, the domestic set, and the limited number of characters all invest the audience’s attention in the individual women, while simultaneously reinscribing the distance of Skoolie and Tee’s impoverished lives from the modern world of the spectator.

*Flyin’ West*’s vision of sisterhood and empowerment is more effective than *Come Down Burning*. Cleage creates a community of women and a larger family, encompassing not just the female protagonists but the entire town of Nicodemus, Kansas. The vision of sisterhood is more developed and contains many different voices, whereas the world of *Come Down Burning* centers on two sisters surviving alone and isolated. *Flyin’ West* builds a stronger portrait of community and connections outside the physical stage, linking the female characters to a deep tradition of women as historical agents. The birth of Minnie’s baby girl at the end of the play physically establishes the connection between present and future, reaffirming the strength of sisterhood. Miss Leah says to Minnie: “They broke the chain, Baby Sister. But we have to build it back. And build it back strong so next time nobody can break it. Not from the outside and not from inside.”⁷ *Flyin’ West* ends on a symbol of hope and the strengthening of that chain, while *Come Down Burning* concludes with the breaking of it symbolized by Tee’s death.
The female characters in *Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* are still fully corporeal and extraordinary, humanized through their voice, subjectivity, community, agency, and sexuality. Both playwrights “infuse the traditionally muted, static spectacle of otherness with voice, gaze, and power to act,” challenging contemporary representations of African American women without compromising their integrity. Their female characters actively create their own identities, which are multidimensional, contradictory, and complex. *Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* grapple with the crushing myths that suffocate and muzzle black women—the promiscuous black woman, the strong black woman, the angry black woman—demonstrating the ways in which individuals both transcend and (re)inscribe them. The stories of the women offer a blueprint for how to navigate the prejudices in American society.

Furthering the ideas that African American female playwrights introduced in the 1970s and 1980s, Cleage and Corthron explore the joy and anguish of female spaces and the profound and nurturing power of female communities. They capture the density of women’s lives and the personal suffering of being black and female within a hegemonic culture. Fannie is torn between her loyalty to her sister Minnie and her loyalty to the cohesiveness of the African American community. She tells Minnie to forgive Frank: “Sometimes we have to be stronger than they are, Baby Sister. We have to understand and be patient.” Only in the final scene of *Flyin’ West*, when Sophie leaves her shotgun at the house does she begin to step outside her role as the strong woman in the family, the protector, and provider. A mother at the age of nineteen, Tee has never fully grown up and yet must contend with harsh realities.
raising three children in poverty and isolation. Skoolie’s accident restricts her to a shack on the mountain and the disappearance of her sexuality in the play positions her solidly in the role of Mammy. Cleage and Corthron drew these female characters with intense personal struggles and linked them with larger struggles of women and the African American community in the United States. *Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* illustrate the power of female-dominated spaces for self-affirmation, positive identity formation, recuperation of traumatic experiences, and linguistic authority.

*Flyin’ West* and *Come Down Burning* jointly illustrate the viability of certain methods of resistance through performance and drama. Both successful and failed strategies of challenging stereotypical representations can be seen in the two plays. The alternative representations of black women offer insight into how to realistically navigate, recuperate, and reinterpret multiple identities. Engaged in the project of giving voice to the voiceless, exploring dramatic forms, and creating complex images of black women, African American female playwrights deeply challenge racism, sexism, and classism within American culture. Listening to the voices of these sisters will deepen understandings of how Americans can overcome prejudice in the 21st century, which so often dangerously lurks in popular culture, Hip Hop lyrics, in music videos, Broadway musicals, and film.

Cleage and Corthron are serious sisters speaking with serious voices. “I’m hollering as loud as I can,” says Cleage. “And those of us doing real creative work are hollering as loud as we can…”10 Our job then as politically conscious individuals, women, and intellectuals is to listen beyond the imposed silence, pull off the muzzles, and let African American female playwrights holler loud and clear.
Appendix 1

Appendix 2

Notes

Introduction

3 The adjectives black and white will be uncapitalized for the remainder of the paper. I use them as adjectives and not as synonymous with capitalized racial monikers like Caucasian or Negro.

Clarence Thomas turned the tables on Hill by using imagery of ‘lynching’ to describe his relationship to the situation. In his statement before the Senate Judiciary Committee on October 11, 1991, he said, “And from my standpoint as a black American, as far as I’m concerned, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas, and it is a message that unless you kowtow to an old order, this is what will happen to you. You will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate, rather than hung from a tree.” “Clarence Thomas: Statement before the Senate Judiciary Committee,” October 11, 1991, American Rhetoric: Online Speech Bank <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/clarencethomashightechlynching.htm>.

4 I privilege African American as the most current and accepted term within the African American community. But, for the sake of narrative flow, I use the terms African American and black interchangeably throughout the paper. In response to the belittling phrase, “hyphenated Americans,” that refers to minority groups in the U.S., I will omit the hyphen from “African American” for the remainder of the paper. Although some styles call for the hyphen when the term is used as an adjective, I will still omit the hyphen for the sake of consistency throughout the paper.
6 In an October 18, 1991 New York Times article documenting women’s adverse sentiments, one woman said, “It’s unbelievable that a woman couldn’t stop something like that at its inception.” Another said, “I was harassed, and I nipped it in the bud; I stopped it right then and there.” Felicity Barringer, “The Thomas Confirmation; Hill’s Case Is Divisive to Women,” The New York Times 1991/10/18 1991.
7 Time magazine ran an article entitled, “Sex, Lies, and Politics: He Said, She Said,” and The Bay State Banner stated that the case “demonstrates the vulnerability of all men in important positions to bogus sexual harassment charges as a power play by ambitious women.” Toni Morrison, ed., Race-Ing Justice, En-Gendering Power:
A few days before the hearings, Senator Strom Thurmond, Republican of South Carolina, said her allegations “have been found to be totally lacking in credibility and are without merit.” Roberto Suro, Isabel Wilkerson and Felicity Barringer, “The Thomas Nomination: Women in the News; a Private Person in a Storm: Anita Faye Hill,” The New York Times October 11 1991.


The Hill-Thomas controversy energized debate and discussion of sexual stereotypes, sexual exploitation of black women by white and black men, women’s rights, conflicts within the African American community and the feminist movement, white male political hegemony, and the role of African American women in America. For a more in depth discussion of African American women’s reflections and analyses of the Hill-Thomas hearings, refer to African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas, edited by Geneva Smitherman.

Although many subtle differences exist in the terms “woman” and “female” and their connotations, for the purposes of this project, I use the terms interchangeable to denote the female gender. However, I do not equate the terms “femaleness” and “womanhood.” I define womanhood as a woman or female engaged in the active historical process of being “historical agents of change.” I refer to Gail Bederman’s definition of gender, which I will discuss in depth later in the introduction.

E. Frances White, in her pivotal essay, “Africa On My Mind: Gender, Counterdiscourse, and African American Nationalism,” (1990) points out this criticism of the black nationalist movements of the 1960s and several contemporary black feminists who resort to essentialism. She states, “Black feminists do not have an essential, biologically-based claim on understanding black women’s experience since we are divided by class, region, and sexual orientation. Even we have multiple identities that create tensions and contradictions among us. We need not all agree nor need we all speak with one voice. As with all counterdiscourses, the assumption that there exists one essential victim suppresses internal power divisions.” Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought (New York: The New Press, 1995). 510-11.
In more intricate terms, “The ideological process of gender—whether manhood or womanhood—works through a complex political technology, composed of a variety of institutions, ideas and daily practices. Combined, these processes produce a set of truths about who an individual is and what he or she can do, based upon his or her body.”


19 Larry Stempel, in Showtime: A History of Broadway Musical Theatre, argues that “Tom Shows” shifted after WWI to showcase African American performers. The shows moved dramatically away from Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and included “specialty numbers by black performers (banjo players, dancers, even ‘jubilee singers’ in the slave auction scene) to animal acts.” Stempel analyzes this emphasis on black performances as changing the spirit of the piece to resemble entertainment verging on the minstrel show.

20 W.E.B. Du Bois, the preeminent African American theorist, even privileged race or gender. His definitive book, The Souls of Black Folk (1903), articulates the contradictory experience of African Americans in the United States, defining the “problem of color line” as the paramount problem of the 20th century. Du Bois describes the singular sensation of “double-consciousness” as a sense of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others…twoness,—an American, a Negro…two warring ideals in one dark body…”W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” The Souls of Black Folk, ed. Jr. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Oxford University Press 2007). 3. Du Bois eloquently articulates the existence of transparency, or the doubleness that comes from living as the other in the United States. Yet, he and many other African America male theorists, such as Franz Fanon and Ralph Ellison, failed to consider the even more complex nature of African America women’s experiences.


25 hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. 46.

26 hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. 45.
Although Will-Joe and Jazzman are technically male, I do not consider them “male characters” by virtue of their young age (under 6 years old). They function solely as children in the plays, not as men.

Chapter 1: ‘Silent’ Politics in Black Women’s Drama

The idea of “the personal as political” can be traced back to a publication by the Combahee River Collection, an important black feminist group, which was initiated in 1974 as the Boston chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). In 1977, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, wrote a statement describing the collective’s philosophy and activities: “A political contribution that we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political…Even our black women’s style of talking/testifying in black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political.” Guy-Sheftall, ed., Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought. 235.

The term “political,” here and throughout this thesis, refers to a broader connotation of power relations rather than its limited conception as electoral politics.

From 1969 to the mid-1990s, the number of produced female playwrights increased barely 11 percentage points, according to a report issued in the late 1970s that recorded the total number of professional women playwrights hired over a seven-year period from 1960 to 1975 as 7%. Denise I. Smith and Renee E. Spraggins, “Gender in the United States,” Census 2000 Brief Series (2000), <http://www.nationalatlas.gov/articles/people/a_gender.html>.


Greene, ed., Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists 84.


Greene, ed., Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists 84.
For more details about Cleage’s childhood and her process as a writer, read the interview of Pearl Cleage in Alexis Greene’s collection, *Women Who Write Plays*.

Here are a few professional black theatres that maintained full production schedules in the early 1990s: Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, New Jersey, the largest African-American company with a $3 million budget; Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota; St. Louis Black Repertory Theatre; New York’s New Federal Theatre; Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco; the Billie Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn; the North Carolina Black Repertory; and the Bushfire and New Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia. Sydne Mahone, ed., *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994). xx-xxi. Regional festivals such as the National Black Theatre Festival, an outreach program of North Carolina Black Repertory also provided opportunities for African American women to have plays produced.


For a more in depth look at black female playwrights before 1950 see Kathy Perkins’ *Black Female Playwrights*, Margaret B. Wilkerson’s *9 Plays By Black Women*, and Elizabeth Brown-Guillory’s *Their Place on the Stage*.


The idea of the race play was also applied to men and women. As Smitherman defines, “The term race man (also race woman) refers to a person who is devoted to and promotes African American culture and staunchly defends Blacks and Black causes and issues. The expression dates back to the early 1900s.” (Smitherman, ed., *African American Women Speak out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas*. 16)

Smitherman points out the tension in the Hill-Thomas issue that neither Hill nor Thomas, as political conservatives, represented liberal ideologies championed by womanists, feminists, and “race men or women.” (Ibid., 12) Thus, it is important to note that Anita Hill did not receive unified support from African American women, and in fact, support for Hill was lowest among black women. (Ibid.)

Some “folk plays” even disregarded race issues entirely in their content in an attempt to illustrate elements of black life beyond white oppression. Eulalie Spence chose to focus on universal themes, articulating her opinion that blacks shouldn’t be
burdened with race problems whenever they attended the theatre. In a June 1928 article in *Opportunity* magazine, she explains, “We go to the theatre for entertainment, not to have old fires and hates rekindled... A little more laughter if you please, and fewer spirituals.” Perkins, ed., *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*. 12-13.


25 Marsh-Lockett, ed., *Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage*. 8. Marsh-Lockett argues that “These plays can be read and viewed as works which encode the intergenerational dysfunction resulting from the deep, painful cultural memory of the traumatic middle passage and slavery and the often-pathological coping mechanisms in the absence of an alternative African spiritual centeredness amongst dislocated Africans.”

This introspection was reflected on a much larger cultural scale in the United States. For many Americans the 1970s were turbulent times. The strides in civil rights and women’s rights, the humiliated withdraw from Vietnam, Watergate, Nixon’s resignation, the Iranian hostage situation, and several economic recessions deeply challenged many American’s faith in the government. According to 1970s historian David Frum, between 1972 and 1980, the proportion of Americans who said they paid attention to public affairs ‘most of the time’ dropped 10%. With their trust in the government severely shaken, many Americans looked inward for exploration and an understanding of the world around them. John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2003). 269-70.


30 In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. analyzes the function of “signifying” within the African American vernacular tradition. He defines “signifying” as “repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference.” (xxiv) Gates concedes that all texts signify...
upon other texts, but he differentiates the black tradition as “double-voiced.” (xxv) In other words, all black American literature responds and relates to white vernacular forms, and “whatever is black…is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference.” (xxiv) Signifyin(g) is a trope, which encompasses several other rhetorical tropes including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, and hyperbole. (52) More importantly, signifyin(g) is the “language of trickery,” (54) a subversive linguistic strategy for resistance against white structures.

Gates describes his choice to write the term with a bracketed “g” to denote the black use of the term. “The bracketed or aurally erased g…stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkable sophisticated and fascinating (re)naming ritual…” he writes. (46) I apply this concept of bracketing to certain words throughout the text to highlight their signifying nature. Jr. Henry Louis Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

33 In the opening of her book Longing to Tell, Tricia Rose beautifully articulates the visceral to speak out. “We desperately need to hear and tell…We are looking not only for reflection but also for affirmation, advice, and a space to hear our side of the story told without taking into account someone else’s agenda, needs, or expectations.” Her book collects the oral stories of African American women in a similar manner to Fannie’s project in Flyin’ West. Rose permits the voices of these women to come through in all their glory, complexity, and conflict. Tricia Rose, Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003). 1.
34 bell hooks also expands her definition of family to include family structures beyond the traditional nuclear family. “We know from our lived experience that families are not just households composed of husband, wife, and children or even blood relations,” she says. hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. 37.
35 Census, We the American...Women. September 1993).
38 Bureau of the Census, We the Americans: Blacks. September 1993).
41 Sterilization was widespread form of birth control in the 1970s, rising from 200,000 cases in 1970 to 700,000 in 1980, and the sterilization of black women was heinously abused for research purposes. Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race,

In 1990, about 24 percent of black women had been sterilized, while only 17 percent of white women had had the procedure. Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty, 97; Charlotte Rutherford, “Reproductive Freedoms and African-American Women,” Yale Journal of Law and Feminism 4 (1992), 225, 273.

Class had no bearing on the racial discrepancy; another study found that 5.6 percent of college-educated white women had been sterilized compared to 9.7 percent of college-educated black women. Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty; Judith Levin and Nadine Taub, “Reproductive Rights,” in Carol Lefcourt, ed., Women and the Law (1989), sec. 10A.07[3][b], 10A-28.

Another form of birth control, Norplant, a cheap and highly effective five-year contraceptive implant, became commercially available in February 1991. Almost immediately, states introduced legislation that would have coerced women on welfare to use Norplant, including bills that offered financial incentives or substituting prison time with birth control. Norplant: A New Contraceptive with the Potential for Abuse, January 31, 1994, ACLU, Available: http://www.aclu.org/reproductive-freedom/norplant-new-contraceptive-potential-abuse, 1/25/12.

Dorothy Roberts cites that many of these bills “would pressure women on welfare to use the device either by offering them a financial bonus or by requiring implantation as a condition of receiving benefits.” (109) In February 1991, Kerry Patrick (R-KA) proposes legislation that would pay welfare recipients a lump sum of $500 to sign up for Norplant, and a $50 bonus every year following the woman kept the implants. Patrick described the plan as “reducing the number of children on the welfare rolls,” and thus saving taxpayer dollars. Matthew Rees, “Shot in the Arm: The Use and Abuse of Norplant: Involuntary Contraception and Public Policy,” New Republic (December 9, 1991). 16.

Donald Kimelman advocated the use of Norplant as a solution to inner-city poverty, saying that “the main reason more black children are living in poverty is that people having the most children are the ones least capable of supporting them.” Kimelman supported giving incentives to women on welfare to use the long-term contraceptive.

Anthony Neal describes the limited reproductive resources available to poor black women and the lack of public or community awareness of the issue: “reproductive rights are not seen as an issue for black women, either within the black community or among organizations who struggle for reproductive rights for women; thus, without access to inexpensive abortions, poor black women in particular have little choice than to be inscribed within the black community as economic pariahs.” Anthony Neal, Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic (New York: Routledge, 2002). 76.

The federal poverty threshold for a family of four persons with three dependent children was $12, 619, an income greater than the average yearly income
of an African American female single mother. With four children, the poverty threshold increases to $14,572, a considerably greater number for the average black single mother. Therefore, Tee, who already has three children to support, literally cannot afford to have another child. “1990 Definition of Poverty Status,” Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota <http://usa.ipums.org/usa/volii/1990Poverty.shtml>. 7

On January 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court empowered millions of women to have a legal abortion in the famous Roe v. Wade decision. The case marked an important step within the Feminist movement to achieve greater control of reproductive rights for American women. The Supreme Court stated that “right of privacy…founded in the Fourteenth Amendment’s concept of personal liberty…is broad enough to encompass a woman’s decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy.” The History of Abortion, ed. The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 1/25/2012 <http://www.feminist.com/resources/ourbodies/abortion.html>.

In 1980, the Supreme Court banned Medicaid funding for abortions unless the woman’s life was in danger with ratification of the Hyde Amendment. Medicaid was the most common type of health care among African American women in 1995 (48.3%). Therefore, African-American women were severely affected by the Hyde Amendment. Jacqueline Darroch Forrest and Jennifer J. Frost, “The Family Planning Attitudes and Experiences of Low-Income Women “ Family Planning Perspectives 28 (November/December 1996), <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/2824696.html>.

The Hodgson v. Minnesota decision of 1990 upheld one of the most restrictive state parental notification laws. The statute mandates a woman under 18 years of age cannot have an abortion until at least 48 hours after both her parents have been notified. Legal Information Institute, Hodgson V. Minnesota (88-1125), 497 U.S. 417 (1990), Cornell University Law School, Available: http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/88-1125.ZS.html.

The Court maintained another highly restrictive Pennsylvanian law in Planned Parenthood v. Casey (1992) that included mandatory waiting periods and mandatory anti-abortion counseling within clinics. Low-income mothers—welfare queens and baby mamas—are often denied access to abortions as a result of Webster v. Reproductive Health Services (1989), which denied the right to obtain abortions in publicly funded hospitals or clinics.

According the GI, in 1988 African American women were far more likely to report a pregnancy unwanted or mistimed than white women. 50% of pregnancies were mistimed and 16.1% were unwanted for African American women, compared to 32.4% and 4.9% respectively for white women. The number of black women who had abortions was also far lower than white women in 1988. Only 24.9% of black women had abortions compared to 62.6% of white women. Kathryn Kost and Jacqueline Darroch Forrest, “Intention Status of U.S. Births in 1988: Differences by Mothers’ Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics,” Family Planning Perspectives 27 (January/February 1995), <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/2701195.html>.
Septic abortions were one of the leading killers of African American women when contraceptives were unavailable and abortion was illegal. Loretta Ross says, “One study estimated that 80 percent of deaths caused by illegal abortions in New York in the 1960s involved Black and Puerto Rican women. In Georgia between 1965 and 1967 the Black maternal death rate due to illegal abortion was fourteen times that of white women.” Loretta J. Ross, “African American Women and Abortion,” Abortion Wars: A Half-Century of Struggle, ed. Rickie Solinger (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998). 1.

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52 Linda Winer, Interview with Kia Corthron, League of Professional Theater Women, June 9, 2006

53 In a comment for the magazine American Visions about Flyin’ West, Cleage said, “But it’s also a way to talk about contemporary issues, like race, gender, class, feminist issues. I’m a poet; I’m not a politician. My play is the form I use to get people to think about things through their emotions, not through their brains. It’s easier to get people to think about things that way.” Steve Monroe, “Black Women as Pioneers,” American Visions 9.5 (1994).

54 Greene, ed., Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists 53.


Chapter 2: Pearl Cleage, *Flyin’ West*


2 Catherine Rust, “‘Flyin’ West’ by Pearl Cleage: A Guide for Study “ (Montclair, New Jersey: Montclair State University 2005), vol. 16.

Cleage primarily used historical content for her first three published full-length plays, *Flyin’ West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, and *Bourbon at the Border*, which were all commissioned and produced by The Alliance Theater in Atlanta in the 1990s. The three plays span a considerable portion of 20th century history: *Flyin’ West* is set in Kansas in 1898; *Blues for an Alabama Sky* in Harlem in 1930; and *Bourbon at the Border* in Detroit in 1995, but with considerable historical content from the 1960s. *Flyin’ West* was produced in 1992, *Blues* in 1995, and *Bourbon at the Border* in 1997. Beth Turner, “The Feminist/Womanist Vision of Pearl Cleage,” *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A Casebook* ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York: Routledge, 2007). 100. The three plays were not packaged or produced as a trilogy; however, Benjamin Sammons argues that “these plays constitute a trilogy, as they employ the same formal structure to explore a common subject matter, namely the nexus of violence, freedom, and traumatic memory in African American experience.” Benjamin Sammons, “‘Flyin’ Anyplace Else’: Disengaging Traumatic Memory in Three Plays by Pearl Cleage,” *Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self* eds. Trudier Harris and Jennifer Larson (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007). 99.
11 Greene, ed., Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists

Puppetplay (1981), her first play, represents a woman’s psychic anguish by dividing her into two characters (Woman One and Woman Two), which share the stage with a seven-foot puppet that represents the male character. Her first published pieces of drama were two one-acts, Chain (1991) and Late Bus to Mecca (1991). Chain broke the fourth wall; the female protagonist talks directly to the audience for the entire act. Cleage uses projection screens as well to mark the passage of time. These projections also appear in Late Bus to Mecca, showing a short caption for each of the thirteen scenes. Cleage abandoned these experimental forms in lieu of the more familiar structures like the well-made play and the melodrama. Turner, “The Feminist/Womanist Vision of Pearl Cleage.”


In a review of the production in Alabama, Chris Jones cites the unusual number of productions in 1994: “Pearl Cleage’s tale of four strong women in an all-black Kansas town in 1898 is a popular choice at regional houses this year -- at least five major productions are already slated.” Chris Jones, “‘Flyin’ West’,” Variety 21-27 February (1994).
14 Alvin Klein writes in his New York Times 1994 review, “Ms. Cleage writes with amazing grace and killer instinct. Forgive the playwright her occasional soap operatic leanings and resolve for yourself her unhidden agenda. In a sudden swerve in the direction of a take-the-law-into-your-own-hands solution to a nasty plot turn, a

The Baltimore Sun wrote, “Yet when the opening night audience cheered the play’s affirmative speeches, those cheers weren’t merely for people who lived long ago and far away.” “African American Frontier Heroines Set the Course in ‘Flyin’ West’,” The Baltimore Sun September 16, 1994.


The Washington Post wrote, “By the second act the audience was unabashedly cheering on the good guys and applauding the downfall of the hateful Frank.” Lloyd Rose, “Theatre; ‘Flyin’ West’: Sweet Corn; an Old-Fashioned Story with Great Character,” The Washington Post September 15, 1994.


15 Jones, “‘Flyin’ West’.” 170.
18 Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess. 20. Brooks also characterizes the generic archetype as offering a cycle of “heroic confrontation, purgation, purification, recognition.” (205) Brooks defines the generic traditions as “the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breath taking peripety.” (11-12)
20 Flyin’ West, 94.
22 Flyin’ West, 102.
23 Greene, ed., Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists

In an interview, Cleage explains the decision was the right one based on the world of the play: “There had to be a little coda there that said [the killing] was a terrible moment but it was the right thing to do. And here’s how we know...They’re going to a party. The baby’s been born. The baby’s fine. Miss Leah is going to tell this child the story of its life. Sophie’s under the full moon, saying, ‘My land is safe.’” Personal Interview (9 August 2006) in Turner, “The Feminist/Womanist Vision of Pearl Cleage.” 107.

Cleage also discusses her opinion of women’s rights to self-defense, saying, “I absolutely do believe that self-defense for women is critical in situations like that [Flyin’ West]. If someone is going to beat you and your children to death, that you
have the right to defend yourself shouldn’t even be a radical idea. It wouldn’t be a radical idea in any setting outside of people’s homes.” (52)

In a commentary about the O.J. Simpson trial in 1994, titled “What Can I Say?”, Cleage outright advances her belief that everyone women should own a gun as a survival tool. Cleage statement applies directly to black men’s rationalization of domestic violence and women’s need to defend themselves against abusers. While her intention is certainly not to let all black women off the hook for their actions, *Flyin’ West* ultimately sends a problematic message (beyond the limited world of the play) that contradicts her statement here.

Cleage articulates her desire to show this reality of black women: “My intention is to accurately reflect contemporary African American female reality and in the process begin a collective redefinition of our sisterhood with an eye toward our survival.” Julia Miles, ed., *Playwrighting Women: 7 Plays from the Women’s Project* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992). 265.

*Flyin’ West*, 101.

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*Flyin’ West*, 49.

Ibid., 7. I use the stage directions from the original publication of the play, which I consider part of the definitive text. Therefore, I analyze them as part of the text.

Ibid., 30.

Ibid., 47.

In response to Miss Leah’s question about being lonesome for black people, Frank says, “To tell you the truth, I’ve seen about all the Negroes I need to see in this life.” Ibid., 55.

Ibid., 16.

As Trudier Harris states, “Undoubtedly Wil Parish is an admirable, respectable, loving, and supportive man, but this is not his story, so he is pushed into the background even when he is on stage…He can be an admirable character only as long as he realizes that his role is to support the women, not to be in a position of authority over them or to claim equality with them.” Trudier Harris, “New Territory, No Change: Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West*,” *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). 150.

*Flyin’ West*, 102.

Harris, “New Territory, No Change: Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West*.” 143.


Cleage continues to say, “There’s a million stories about what went on in this country. It’s not about replacing one vision with another, it’s about extending our visions.”

*Flyin’ West*, 21.

Ibid., 98.

Ibid., 23.

Ibid., 69.

Fannie says, “It’s been so peaceful around here since you pushed that vote through and the speculators went home…” Ibid., 112.

Jones and Varner also argue that “Sass also has the capacity to foster bonding between women as sass can reveal or deepen intimacy…it joins the communicators in a shared understanding of the relationship and the kind of communication appropriate in that relationship.” Jones and Varner, “‘Take Care of Our Sisters’: Communication among the Women in the Works of Pearl Cleage.”, 148.

The collective teasing also offers an opportunity for Fannie, Miss Leah, and Minnie to assert their power within the sisterhood through creating a bond independent of Sophie, who otherwise consistently holds the family together and plays the role of the strongest family member.

Flyin’ West, 4.

As Jones and Varner accurately highlight, the setting of Flyin’ West on the threshold of the frontier tenders another vital function of sass: “The ‘wild west’ calls forth notions of danger, mystery, and uncertainty along with freedom, independence, and strength.” Jones and Varner, “‘Take Care of Our Sisters’: Communication among the Women in the Works of Pearl Cleage.” 154. Pearl Cleage also explains her understanding of the frontier and “how isolated these people were. How isolated as women, trying to have babies and do all the stuff that we do. The harshness of the environment.” Greene, ed., Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists

Sammons, “‘Flyin’ Anyplace Else’: Disengaging Traumatic Memory in Three Plays by Pearl Cleage.” 103.

Sammons, “‘Flyin’ Anyplace Else’: Disengaging Traumatic Memory in Three Plays by Pearl Cleage.” 102.


Cleage explains in an interview the development of the fierce bond between African American mothers and daughters as a consequence of slavery. “…it starts in slavery, because the child would often be with the mother, and the father would be gone. They would separate people. They would mate them, and then the father would be sent back to his plantation…The mother became the parent who had to interpret the world…The mother became the one who would tell the hard truth.” Greene, ed., Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists 31-2.


Flyin’ West, 51.

Ibid., 16.

Ibid., 50.

Sammons, “‘Flyin’ Anyplace Else’: Disengaging Traumatic Memory in Three Plays by Pearl Cleage.” 103.

Flyin’ West, 114.
Chapter 3: Kia Corthron, *Come Down Burning*


Corthron cites her concerns in the late 1980s regarding the fragility of *Roe v. Wade* and the effects of its possible overturn on poor women as the impetus of the play. In another statement about her anxieties over the fragility of *Roe v. Wade*, Corthron stated, “I wanted to address that, because I feel that wealthy women can always get abortions, but the poor have to go to dangerous means.” Greene, ed., *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists* 89. However, *Come Down Burning* is not really about abortion. Skoolie and Tee are not the most affected women because Skoolie has sufficient skill at performing abortions. Corthron’s unspecified time also dissociates the play from the historical moment of the late 1980s and early 1990s when the threat of overturn was highest.


3 Although Corthron does not specific a time period, she includes small clues as to its modernity. In the stage directions for the set, the kitchen has “a hot plate rather than a range, floor refrigerator, etc.” In the final scene, Skoolie uses a telephone to call an ambulance for Tee, who is bleeding to death. In Scene 4, Tee wishes that she could have her abortion in a hospital: “Wish we could do it in a hospital, Skoolie. Make sure it done right.” (28) The appliances, telephone, ambulance, and hospital ubiquitously indicate the modern day setting.


7 According to Corthron, “When I wrote *Burning*, I was thinking a lot about *Roe v. Wade*, which was looking very fragile at the time. I wanted to address that, because I feel that wealthy women can always get abortions, but the poor have to go to dangerous means.” However, the play has no specific connections to *Roe v. Wade*. Greene, ed., *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists* 89.

8 Skoolie signifies on *Porgy and Bess* (1935), the African American opera by George Gershwin. Porgy, a crippled beggar, takes in Bess, a prostitute, abandoned by her previous boyfriend. The play concludes with Porgy riding off on a goat cart to New York to win Bess back. Skoolie represents a broken female head of the household, although, unlike Porgy, her disability does not define her. At the end of *Come Down Burning*, she is no longer the ‘broken’ one. Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* 84-88.

9 *Come Down Burning*, 2.
10 Ibid., 15.
11 Ibid., 5.
12 Ibid., 9-10.
14 Come Down Burning, 13.
16 Griffiths, Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women’s Writing and Performance. 7.

17 Skoolie’s bitterness at the failure of mill to offer any acceptable compensation or pension for Mr. Jim’s death illustrates the importance she accords to loyalty and work ethic. She repeats “Twenty-three years,” the number of years her father worked at the mill, three times during the exchange, implying that his time ultimately meant nothing within the white labor market. The violence of Mr. Jim’s death symbolically embodies the violence and oppression of the capitalist labor system on the black community. A link can also be drawn to Corthron’s own father, who died prematurely of an aneurysm. Corthron’s father, like Mr. Jim, died while working at the mill and was similarly exploited and mistreated by the white corporate labor market. See Corthron’s biography in Chapter 1.
18 Come Down Burning, 16.
19 Ibid., 48.
22 Griffiths, Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women’s Writing and Performance. 6-7.
23 Come Down Burning, 27.
24 Ibid., 38.
25 Ibid., 30.
26 Ibid., 21.
27 Corthron recounts a story about a family friend who died and left her children orphans as a consequence of an unsafe abortion: “At a time in history when my maternal grandmother had brought into the world a dozen offspring and buried three or four of them (my mother recalls being very little and sitting in the living room where a tiny casket was on view in the front), this woman [a family friend] made a decision for her family that, accidentally, killed her.” Perkins, ed., Contemporary Plays by Women of Color: An Anthology. 92. Again, poverty forces the hand of these women.
28 Come Down Burning, 46.
The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act required that disabilities be accommodated. This legislation marks a fundamental shift in perspective on bodily difference from compensation models to accommodation models. According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson, the logic of compensation viewed disability as “the violation of a primary state of putative wholeness.” In contrast, the compensation model “suggests that disability is simply one of many differences among people and that society should recognize this by adjusting its environment accordingly.” Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. 49. This shift radically changed the way American culture conceptualized disability and significantly improved the rights of people with disabilities. However, the accommodation model is still founded upon the association of difference with deviance, and popular views of disabled people remain incredibly prejudiced today. Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. 19.


**Conclusion**

1. The Washington Post and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a joint survey of a representative random sample of 1,936 adults, including interviews with 808 black women.
In an interview about her process as a playwright, Corthron explains, “My work starts from a pinpoint, the smallest thing that touches me in some way. It’s usually something negative in society that hits me in a way that I can’t believe it, it’s so ugly…The least I can do is try to make people think.” Mahone, ed., Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women. 37.


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