

Inventing Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama

*Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in
African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama*

by Tejumola Olaniyan

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Tejumola Olaniyan's intervention into the recent scholarship on theatre and cultural studies, African Diasporic Studies, postcolonial studies, and gender studies orbits around five central questions:

a) Can a truly authentic black cultural identity be symbolised in European languages and according to European modalities? b) Why is the language question an issue at all for African-American and Caribbean dramatists, whose languages bear no such radically disjunctive relations to English as is the case with Africans? c) Do we need an epistemological shift from the West? d) How do Black peoples create/recreate/explore cultural identities through and in performance? and e) Who and what are these performances for?

Olaniyan insightfully explores the dramatic artistry of Wole Soyinka, Amiri Baraka, Derek Walcott, and Ntozake Shange for answers to these questions. This impressive study is a comparative exploration into the ways that African, African American, and Caribbean dramatists embark upon 'the black quest for cultural identity' (p. 140) using theatrical performance as their means of expression. As this quest coincides with 'the break up of Empire and the birth of political decolonization and general critical interrogation of European cultural hegemony', (p. 140) it is at the same time (as reflected by the title of the text) a scar and a mask: a scar of conquest and a mask of resistance (p. 140). Therefore, violence perpetuated on the collective historical, physical and mental bodies of diaspora Africans by the

combined history of slavery, colonisation, neo-colonisation, and decolonization has inscribed Black people with a mark of cultural *difference*. This difference is mediated by both Blackness and domination:

Blacks across the three continents studied are questing for cultural identity not because they are black but because they are black and dominated (p. 140).

This quest then reflects first, a critique of a Eurocentric understanding of difference that locates blackness as anathema, and second, a movement toward a resistant cultural identity that progresses toward an epistemological shift, moving from a Eurocentric space to a liberating Post-Afrocentric space.

In his investigation of the 'refashioning of the cultural self in the drama of English-speaking peoples of African origin cross-culturally and cross-continentially' (p. 3). Olaniyan begins with a discussion of the concept of discourse. He argues that one cannot begin to discuss 'African' or 'Black' cultural identity, drama, or theatre without examining the competing discourses out of which they arise and with whom they compete. Discourse is here defined as a multiple, dispersed and contradictory practice of constructing reality. At the level of discourse, battles over the framing and definition of reality determines which discourses become privileged or subordinated. The formation of societies is fraught with competition between discursive practices in a constant struggle over the power to name, and thereby define the parameters of subjectivity. Chapter one is an explication of the historical construction of African diasporic dramatic forms, broken down into three categories of discursive formations: hegemonic Eurocentric, counter-hegemonic Afrocentric, and emerging post-Afrocentric. Olaniyan situates these discourses within a history of contestation and struggle between themselves for mastery/destruction of the other. He also contextualises them, placing Eurocentric discourse in the context of the rise of empire, enslavement of Africans, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and ongoing imperialism, and Afrocentric and post-Afrocentric discourse in the context of slave rebellions, waves of decolonization/arrested decolonization and contemporary assaults on the hegemony of Western culture.

Olaniyan examines the dramatic works of Soyinka, Baraka, Walcott, and Shange through the lens of

the conflictual interaction of three discursive formations. a hegemonic, colonialist, *Eurocentric* discourse distinguished by its prejudiced representation of black cultural forms, an anticolonialist, *Afrocentric* counterdiscourse preoccupied with subverting the Eurocentric and registering cultural autonomy; and a budding, liminal, interstitial discourse that aims at once to be both anticolonialist and *post-Afrocentric* (p. 4).

The dramatists' work exemplifies the possibility of creating an empowering post-Afrocentric space, a space that critiques, challenges, and radically revises Eurocentric narratives of modernity. Olaniyin submits,

In showing us that the space and its attendant performative conception of cultural identity are possible, the question they ask, I think, is whether the space can really flourish without its own supporting structures, that is, within still Eurocentric institutions ... (p 139)

These institutions language, genre, artistic value, the theatre, Western-style education and its institutionalised modalities of canonisation continue to define the politics of publication of many articulations of Black subjectivity in all genres.

Chapter Three, entitled 'Wole Soyinka: 'Race Retrieval' and Cultural Self-Apprehension' takes us through what Soyinka understands as the process of claiming and registering 'the presence of a culture whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself' (p. 44). Olaniyin discusses how this process, called race retrieval is implemented in Soyinka's works, namely *Death and the King's Horsemen* and the essay 'The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy'. This essay, which Olaniyin argues might very well be Soyinka's greatest contribution to the philosophy of culture, contains the main motivational thrust of the dramatist's work:

the sources and roots of African literary creativity, even cultural and cognitive modes characteristic of a continuously changing and lived and critical criteria form African sources, epistemologies, cosmologies, and the general move away from European thought-systems except as illuminating analogies to concepts and principles locally derived.

To exemplify this point Soyinka's examination of the birth of Yoruba tragedy begins with the original Yoruba tragedy located in the myth of Ogun. Departing from the Western conception of the evolution of tragedy as discussed by Fredrick Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Soyinka writes that the study of tragedy must be culturally specific, with a knowledge of the world view of the culture out of which it was born. He forwards a theoretical approach to the philosophy of culture that displaces Western (Greek) dramatic traditions as the primary source of drama and tragedy against which all other traditions must be measured. Viewing Yoruba tragedy through the lens of Greek tragedy ignores the relationship between Yoruba notions of cyclical time, the simultaneity of language, music, and poetry, the manifestations of past and future in the lives of the living in the myth of Ogun. In this myth Ogun, the deity in the Ifa pantheon of gods who (among

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many other things) is the essence of creativity (urge and instinct), humane restoration of justice, and guardian of man ascends into the pantheon after having twice committed suicide in an act of penance for the crime of murdering his kin out of misdirected anger. Ogun sacrifices himself in an attempt to restore the harmonious balance between existences that he had disturbed in this act of desecration of nature. He then falls into a spiritual abyss, the 'transitional essence'. For the Yoruba, this is the original tragedy, which embodies the horror of disconnection from one's cultural and spiritual identity and the battle of the combative will to piece oneself back together. Unlike Nietzsche's representation of the Greek tragedy in which the Greeks created a fictional world on stage where real life tragic dilemmas were acted out and resolved, Yoruba tragedy reaches into the essence of the everyday experience of a people, out of a collective spiritual consciousness of the simultaneous existence of gods, men, and the cycle, of life death and rebirth. Whereas the Greek tragedy involves divine resolution from a god or gods who pass judgement on and deliver resolution to the world of man from above, the Yoruba tragedy is in essence the tragedy of the separation of god(s) and man from one another and/or estrangement from the harmony that exists in a complementary relationship between existences.

Olaniyan continues that another important aspect of Soyinka's philosophy of culture nee African cultural identity is his proposition of a heterogeneous, contradiction ridden modern African world. This proposition exists as a challenge to Black nationalist notions of a monolithic Africa, particularly against Senghorian Negritude. Committed to exorcising 'the boring romanticism of the negro', Soyinka's dramas provide complex portraits of African life in which characters struggle with themselves, one another, and the West. In giving voice to this struggle Soyinka contributes to the creation of a post-Afrocentric space.

The notions of contradiction and struggle with the self and the West in the post-Afrocentric West exemplify the work of Derek Walcott. 'Derek Walcott: Islands of History at a Rendezvous with a Muse' investigates what seems to be the best example of the contradictory nature of the struggle for cultural identity in the work of an artist whose work bears all of the markings of the tragedy and triumph of New World African identity. Walcott's quest for Caribbean cultural identity involves a rearticulation of history as myth, the struggle with the English language as both a tool of and weapon against European cultural hegemony, and the psychological battle of the colonised to resist the internalisation of the coloniser's definitions of cultural difference. His critique of the West revolves around an understanding of difference that does exactly what poet and essayist Audre Lorde warned us against in *Sister Outsider*—using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. Instead of deprivileging the English language as a tool of cultural imperialism,

Walcott instead embraces it in such a way as to honour his difference as a triumph of Caribbean cultural identity. Olaniyan writes,

For him, it is not so much the rage of Caliban that is important as the beauty of his speech—as if one could separate the speech from what it utters, as if rage necessarily corrupts beauty (p. 115)

As such, Walcott has offered strong critiques of Caribbean writers who came of age during the Caribbean Black Power movement such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite who attempted to locate and reclaim the importance of African culture, language and history in the modern Caribbean. Embodied in what Walcott calls mulatto aesthetics is the opposition between history and myth and history as politics, a distinction that Olaniyan doubts is even possible to make. Mulatto aesthetics involves a syncretism of history as myth and the Adamic vision, or the 'annihilation of what is known' (p. 101). For, according to Walcott, history has never mattered in the Caribbean; what matters is the recreation of history, the creation and development of the Caribbean *man* who has reinvented himself in spite of the violence of history (enslavement, Christianity, and loss of language). For Walcott, therefore, to lament (literarily) what the Caribbean *man* has lost is a thankless and pathetic exercise; what is much more important is the celebration of our difference in challenge of its degradation by the West.

Walcott's dramatic artistry entails then the process of renaming, recreating Caribbean identity that is always reflective of an unproblematised relationship with history and Europe. In so doing, he deprivileges, however aspects of Caribbean culture that are part and parcel of the process of identity recreation, namely carnival and calypso. These two cultural media have been indispensable to his dramatic art. Walcott reads carnival and 'folk culture' through the eyes of one whose worship of European culture has caused him to look with an ambivalent aristocratic scorn at aspects of his own culture. The spectacular performativity of class, racial, and sexual politics found in carnival and carnival culture in the Caribbean is according to Walcott vulgar and in need of refinement. For Olaniyan, Walcott's dramatic art involves what the latter understands as a refinement, an elevation of Caribbean cultural identity to a high art that rivals European culture in its greatness. In 'Leroi Jones/ Amiri Baraka: The Motion of History' (Chapter Four) Olaniyan moves into a discussion of just the literary enterprise that Walcott works against. For instance, in a review of *Dutchman and the Slave* in 1965, Walcott called Baraka's politically charged theatre 'The Theater of Abuse'. Despite this and numerous similar criticisms, Olaniyan argues that 'the vision governing Baraka's performative work is that of art as practice. Where Walcott's notion of difference is cloaked in a

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parallel notion of sameness, Baraka's representation of difference embodies an oppositional, confrontational, and polemical stance. Borrowing from Barbara Ann Teer, founder and director of the National Black Theater, Olaniyan uses the word-concept *decrudin* to describe Baraka's construction of an African American cultural identity. *Decrudin* is defined as 'the process of refusing subjection and reforming subjectivity, a conscientising (consciousness raising) pedagogy that is at once critical and visionary' (p. 71). Its primary purpose is to (ritually) cleanse the audience of the cumulative effects of forced marginalisation, the result of which is 'positive self-appreciation and reformed subjectivity'. Olaniyan continues that Baraka's participation in the decrudin process has placed him at the forefront of revolutionary theoretical interventions: Black Cultural Nationalism, Marxism, the development of a Black Aesthetic, and the development of a Jazz Aesthetic. In one of his most read essays, 'The Revolutionary Theatre', Baraka argues that the revolutionary theatre is a new theatre of the 'victim' who will confront their victimisers on stage. It will be a theatre that white people of any ideological character will hate, and that is fine, for the revolutionary theatre will hate them right back for hating in the first place. Language in this theatre will be transformed from a language that serves 'tired white lives' into one that creates a new world view from the bowels of Blackness and Black subjectivity.

It is interesting that Baraka's conceptualisation of 'The Revolutionary Theater' marks a movement away from a notion of art as disconnected from politics to an art that practices politics, a politics of the marginalised masses. After being labelled a 'cowardly bourgeois individualist' in Cuba by a Mexican delegate during the July 26, 1960 celebrations, Baraka deserted his colleagues in the Beat Movement and his white wife. He moved to Harlem, founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BART/S) where he began to put his theories into praxis. This move is the first implementation of his Black aesthetic project, which entailed a celebration/valorisation of Blackness, a denigration of whiteness, cultural nationalism, cultural and racial separatism, celebration of urban Black cultural forms and language, and a search for 'authentically black techniques' (p. 82). By 1974, Baraka's task as a Black revolutionary writer had changed. In true post-Afrocentric style, his work moved away from a preoccupation with binarisms based on white vs. black to a 'strategic performative identity articulating the complexities of gender, race, class, ... international solidarities', and history (p. 87). During this period Baraka became a devout Marxist, which he remains to this day. Olaniyan locates Baraka's work during his Bohemian and cultural nationalist stages as part of his expressive identity, whereas his current Marxism is illustrative of the performative. The corpus of Baraka's work is post-Afrocentric in its exemplification of the principle of change, of constant negotiation and renegotiation of boundaries, of ideologies and political

approaches. With each change in approach and politics, Baraka's practice plays out the principles of decrudin.

Despite his shifts in thought and politics, Baraka's post American/post-Afrocentric space makes little room for a complicated discussion of gender and sexuality. Though his most recent Marxist phase he alleges to examine the complexities of gender, race, class, etc., his theory of cultural identities fails to include a complicated exploration of constructions of Black male and female subjectivity. Each of the three dramatists aforementioned neglect, in their discussions of *difference*, to discuss gender. Olaniyan argues that each also never really escapes their preoccupation with difference and 'its affirmation against Eurocentrism's definition of it as deviance'. Difference becomes an unproblematised category that, when the West or the Euro-American world disappears, also disappears.

It is as if the multiple constitutive differences of the dominated cultures have little or no bearing on the great project of formulation resistant cultural identity against Western imperialism (p. 117).

In the works of Soyinka, Baraka, and Walcott, then, the politics of Black cultural identity is a masculine politics, in which women participate as 'Maidens, Mistresses and Matrons' (Carole Boyce Davies), the 'proper' black women (read servile), or clichés (Elaine Fido), respectively. Olaniyan, then posits Ntozake Shange as the only one of the dramatists discussed in the text whose work truly creates a post-Afrocentric space. Shange's work presents a gender-informed Black cultural identity, that simultaneously engages Eurocentric discourses and male dominated Afrocentric counterdiscourses.

Shange defines her contribution to the discourse on cultural identity as 'combat breathing'. Borrowed from Frantz Fanon's use of the term in an appendix to the essay 'Algeria Unveiled' in *A Dying Colonialism*, combat breathing is characterised as a weapon of the dominated that is used against 'the involuntary constrictions n amputations of their humanity' (p. 121). Olaniyan likens Shange's project of simultaneously challenging 'the hegemony of Western culture and interrogation of the subdominant, male-centred discourse of black difference' (p. 122) to that of Algerian women who during the struggle against French colonialism transformed the veil into camouflage and battle fatigue against French colonialism and challenged the traditional constructions of womanhood symbolised by veiling. Probably her most famous example of combat breathing is the choreopoem *for colored girls*. *for colored girls* makes room within the post-Afrocentric space for the voices of young Black girls in collective Black feminist and individual resistance to an external and internal environment that is often hostile to their very existence. The seven girls, named after each of the colours of the

rainbow, give testimony to the crimes of humanity and gender oppression committed against each of them, and join forces to struggle and heal themselves, collectively. Against the Afrocentric universalist notion of one monolithic Black cultural and communal identity, Shange posits 'singularity', the individual experience of one woman, whose difference as such is weapon against oppression.

As do Soyinka, Walcott, and Baraka, Shange uses language as a weapon against cultural hegemony. Much to Walcott's horror, she shatters the English language with her 'verbal gymnastics'. In rebellion against discursive rationalisation and a force-fed, dehumanising language, she refuses to use capital letters or standard punctuation. Unlike Walcott's Caliban who appropriates the master's tongue and uses it against him, Shange's Sycorax rises from the ashes to speak of an experience and history erased by masculinist cultural discourse in a language all her own. She argues,

i can count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n main
the language that i waz taught to hate myself in/ the language that perpetuates
the notions that cause pain to every black child as he/she learns to speak of the
world & the self. '... in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feeling i want
to think n communicate/i haveta fix my tools to my needs/ ... i have to take it
apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us a space to
literally create our own image' (p. 126)

Shange's art, dramatic and poetic, is wrapped in a politics of black feminist cultural identity.

Olaniyan presents an important intervention into the study of Afro-Diasporic drama. His comparative study of the four dramatists chosen provides valuable insight into the struggle of Black dramatists to fashion an empowered cultural identity. His own critiques of the authors coupled with that of scholarship of noted literary theorists provides a rich context and historical background for the works discussed. Most impressive is Olaniyan's ability to clearly convey the necessary tension inherent in Afro-Diasporic and post-Afrocentric cultural identity: the struggle to theorise around and away from the reality of one's relationship to the West with the knowledge of the immutable fact of one's Western-ness. Olaniyan argues that cultural identities are created and performed in socio-political spaces subject to constant contestation, confrontation, and changes. Black cultural literary expression and dramatic performance as exemplified in the works of Wole Soyinka, Amiri Baraka, Derek Walcott, and Ntozake Shange constitute mutually dependent sites of New World African resistance.
