

**THE  
AMERICA  
PLAY  
AND OTHER WORKS**

**SUZAN-LORI  
PARKS**

**THEATRE**

**COMMUNICATIONS**

**GROUP**

**1995**

## FOR MOM AND DAD

Editorial by the Board of Directors of the National Council  
of Negro Women, Incorporated, Washington, D.C.

For the second consecutive year, the Board of Directors of the National

Council of Negro Women, Incorporated, has selected the

following editorial which will be published in the "Yearbook of Negro Women," to be distributed to the

members of the National Council of Negro Women, Incorporated, and to the public at large.

The following editorial is presented to the public in the hope that it may be of interest to all who are interested in the

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# Essays

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## Possession

possession. 1. the action or fact of possessing, or the condition of being possessed.  
2. the holding or having of something as one's own, or being inhabited and controlled  
by a demon or spirit.

One day I was taking a nap. I woke up and stared at the wall: still sort of dreaming. Written up there between the window and the wall were the words, "This is the death of the last negro man in the whole entire world." Written up there in black vapor. I said to myself, "You should write that down," so I went over to my desk and wrote it down. Those words and my reaction to them became a play.

Writing I dance around spinning around to "get out of the way" like Zen sort of, the self simultaneously disappears *his bones cannot be found* and is revealed. The definition of possession cancels itself out. The relationship between possessor and possessed is, like ownership is, multidirectional.

*The leap demanded that I commit myself to the clear impossibility of becoming a writer, and attempting to save my family that way.*

—James Baldwin

Who do I write for? To answer "myself" begets another question; that is, "Who am I?" If I answered that "I write for the audience," I would be lying. I write for the figures in the plays: CHONA, MONA, VERONA, MRS.SAXON, MRS.

*the plays should  
have the half-life  
of plutonium*

SMITH, BUFFY & MUFFY & DUFFY, KIN-SEER, SHARK-SEER, US-SEER, SOUL-SEER, OVER-SEER, DARLY & JUNIOR, LILY, ODELIA & GEORGE, LUCI & MARE, HAM, PRUNES AND PRISMS, QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH, BLACK MAN WITH WATER-MELON, BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK, LOTS OF GREASE AND LOTS OF PORK, YES AND GREENS BLACK-EYED PEAS CORNBREAD, BEFORE COLUMBUS, VENUS, THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST, THE CHORUS OF THE LOVELORN THRONG, THE FOUNDLING FATHER AS ABRAHAM LINCOLN & LUCY & BRAZIL.

Theatre is the place which best allows me to figure out how the world works. What's going on here. So much of the discussion today in literary criticism by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and others concerns how the African-American literary contribution should be incorporated into the canon. The history of Literature is in question. And the history of History is in question too. A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.

The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is a play—something that through a production *actually happens*—I'm working theatre like an incubator to create "new" historical

*as a child I wanted  
to do something  
great like become  
a go-go dancer or  
a geologist or  
ascend into  
heaven.*

events. I'm re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. **Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events**—and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human.

*A person dies and yet continues to live: he is a living-dead, and no other term can describe him better than that. . . . The living dead are bilingual . . . and speak in nasal tones. They belong to the time period of the Zamani [past] and by entering individuals in the Sasa [present] period, they become our contemporaries. The state of possession and mediumship is one of contemporarizing the past, bringing into human history the beings essentially beyond the horizon of present time.*

—John S. Mbiti,  
African Religions and Philosophy

Through each line of text I'm rewriting the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined.

*memory  
un-remembered  
dis-membered  
re-member  
"his bones cannot  
be found"  
putting the body  
back together*

FROM

## *Elements of Style*

I'm writing this essay for 2 reasons. First: to talk about my work—to give those readers, scholars, directors and performers of my plays a way in—so that instead of calling me up they can, with this “guide,” dive into an examination with great confidence. Secondly, I want to examine what seems to me a real crisis in American dramatic literature. I'm hoping to form a sort of bulwark against an insidious, tame-looking, schmaltz-laden mode of expression that threatens to cover us all, like Vesuvius, in our sleep.

As a writer my job is to write good plays; it's also to defend dramatic literature against becoming “Theatre of Schmaltz.” For while there are several playwrights whose work I love love love, it also seems that in no other form of writing these days is the writing so awful—so intended to produce some reaction of sorts, to discuss some issue: the play-as-wrapping-paper-version-of-hot-newspaper-headline, trying so hard to be so hip; so uninterested in the craft of writing: the simple work of putting one word next to another; so uninterested in the marvel of live bodies on stage. Theatre seems mired in the interest of stating some point, or tugging some heartstring, or landing a laugh, or making a splash, or wagging a finger. In no other artform are the intentions so slim! As a playwright I try to do many things: explore the form, ask questions, make a good show, tell a good story, ask more questions, take nothing for granted.

This essay is intended primarily for the new generation of theatre makers. For those of us who

haven't yet reached the point where we can say we've spent  $\frac{1}{2}$  our lives in theatre. I've been writing plays for 11 years now; all along I've felt that the survival of this splendid artform—an art that is not “poor film” or “cheap TV” but an art so specific and strange in its examination of the human condition—depends not only on the older guard but also on those of us who are relative newcomers.

There are many ways to challenge ourselves as theatre artists. Here are some ideas, feelings, thoughts, takes on the world, riffs, ways of approaching the word, the page, the event, the subject, the stage, that **keep me awake**.

### *theatre*

Jesus. Right from the jump, ask yourself: “*Why* does this thing I'm writing *have* to be a *play*?” The words “why,” “have” and “play” are key. If you don't have an answer then get out of town. No joke. The last thing American theatre needs is another lame play.

### *form and content*

*Form is never more than an extension of content.*

—Robert Creeley to Charles Olson

A playwright, as any other artist, should accept the bald fact that content determines form and form determines content; that form and content are interdependent. **Form should not be looked at askance and held suspect—form is not something that “gets in the way of the story” but is an integral part of the story.** This understanding is important to me and my writing. This is to say that as I write along the container dictates what sort of substance will fill it and, at the same time, the substance

is dictating the size and shape of the container. Also, "form" is not a strictly "outside" thing while "content" stays "inside." It's like this: I am an African-American woman—this is the form I take, my content predicates this form, and this form is inseparable from my content. No way could I be me otherwise.

Playwrights are often encouraged to write 2-act plays with traditional linear narratives. Those sorts of plays are fine, but we should understand that the form is not merely a docile passive vessel, but an active participant in the sort of play which ultimately inhabits it. Why linear narrative at all? Why choose that shape? If a playwright chooses to tell a dramatic story, and realizes that there are essential elements of that story which lead the writing outside the realm of "linear narrative," then the play naturally assumes a new shape. I'm saying that the inhabitants of Mars do not look like us. Nor should they. I'm also saying that Mars is with us—right on our doorstep and should be explored. Most playwrights who consider themselves avant-garde spend a lot of time badmouthing the more traditional forms. The naturalism of, say, Lorraine Hansberry is beautiful and should not be dismissed simply because it's naturalism. We should understand that realism, like other movements in other artforms, is a specific response to a certain historical climate. I don't explode the form because I find traditional plays "boring"—I don't really. It's just that those structures never could accommodate the figures which take up residence inside me.

#### *repetition and revision*

- "Repetition and Revision" is a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or per-

as Louis  
MacNeice sez:  
"the shape is ½  
the meaning."

former will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc.—with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised. "Rep & Rev" as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use I'm working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score. In my first play, *The Sinners Place* (1983), history simply repeated itself. With *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (1986) and the others I got a little more adventurous. With each play I'm finding the only way that that particular dramatic story can be told. I'm also asking how the structure of Rep & Rev and the stories inherent in it—a structure which creates a drama of accumulation—can be accommodated under the rubric of Dramatic Literature where, traditionally, all elements lead the audience toward some single explosive moment.

Repetition: we accept it in poetry and call it "incremental refrain." For the most part, incremental refrain creates a weight and a rhythm. In dramatic writing it does the same—yes; but again, what about all those words over and over? We all want to get to the CLIMAX. Where does repetition fit? First, it's not just repetition but repetition with revision. And in drama change, revision, is the thing. Characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew. Secondly, a text based on the concept of repetition and revision is one which breaks from the text which we are told to write—the text which cleanly ARCS. Thirdly, Rep & Rev texts create a real challenge for the actor and director as they create a physical life appropriate to that text. In such plays we are not moving from A → B but rather, for example, from A → A → A → B → A. Through such

in X-vids the cumshot is the money shot. Yeah but it's not a question of the way girls cum vs. the way boys cum. I'm not looking at a single sexual encounter but something larger, say, in this context, the history of all sexual encounters all over the globe, all animals included from the big word "GO!" until Now and through the Great Beyond. Rep & Rev are key in examining something larger than one moment. Rep & Rev create space for metaphor &c.

movement we refigure A. And if we continue to call this movement FORWARD PROGRESSION, which I think it is, then we refigure the idea of forward progression. And if we insist on calling writings structured with this in mind PLAYS, which I think they are, then we've got a different kind of dramatic literature.

What does it mean for characters to say the same thing twice? 3 times? Over and over and over and oh-vah. Yes. How does that effect their physical life? Is this natural? Non-natural? Real? In *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987), the “climax” could be the accumulated weight of the repetition—a residue that, like city dust, stays with us. After years of listening to Jazz, and classical music too, I’m realizing that my writing is very influenced by music; how much I employ its methods. Through reading lots I’ve realized how much the idea of Repetition and Revision is an integral part of the African and African-American literary and oral traditions.

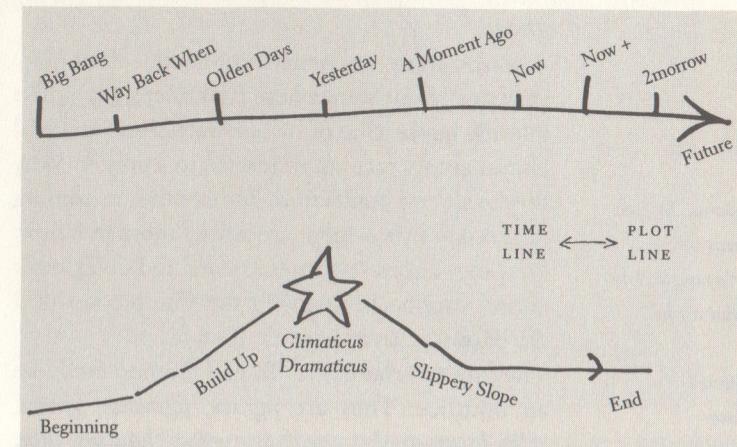
I am most interested in words and how they impact on actors and directors and how those folks physicalize those verbal aberrations. How does this Rep & Rev—a literal incorporation of the past—impact on the creation of a theatrical experience?

### time

“yesterday today  
next summer  
tomorrow just uh  
moment uhgo in  
1317 dieded thuh  
last black man in  
thuh whole entire  
world.”

I walk around with my head full of lay-person ideas about the universe. Here’s one of them: “Time has a circular shape.” Could Time be tricky like the world once was—looking flat from our place on it—and through looking at things beyond the world we found it round? Somehow I think Time could be like this too. Not that I’m planning to write a science book—the goofy idea just helps me NOT to take established shapes for granted.

Keeps me awing it. Attaches the idea of Rep & Rev to a larger shape.  
Also: lookie here!:



Standard Time Line and Standard Plot Line are in cahoots!

### etymology

I spend a lot of time reading the dictionary. The word “grammar” is etymologically related to the word “charm.” Most words have fabulous etymologies. Thrilling histories. Words are very old things. Because words are so old they hold; they have a big connection with the what was. Words are spells in our mouths. My interest in the history of words—where they came from, where they’re going—has a direct impact on my playwrighting because, for me, Language is a physical act. It’s something which involves your entire body—not just your head. Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests—and through digesting creates a performance on stage. Each word is configured to give the actor a clue to their physical

life. Look at the difference between “the” and “thuh.” The “uh” requires the actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack.

### ghost

A person from, say, time immemorial, from, say, PastLand, from somewhere back there, say, walks into my house. She or he is always alone and will almost always take up residence in a corner. Why they’re alone I don’t know. Perhaps they’re coming missionary style—there are always more to follow. Why they choose a corner to stand in I don’t know either—maybe because it’s the intersection of 2 directions—maybe because it’s safe.

*Shrink: Do you  
hear voices?*

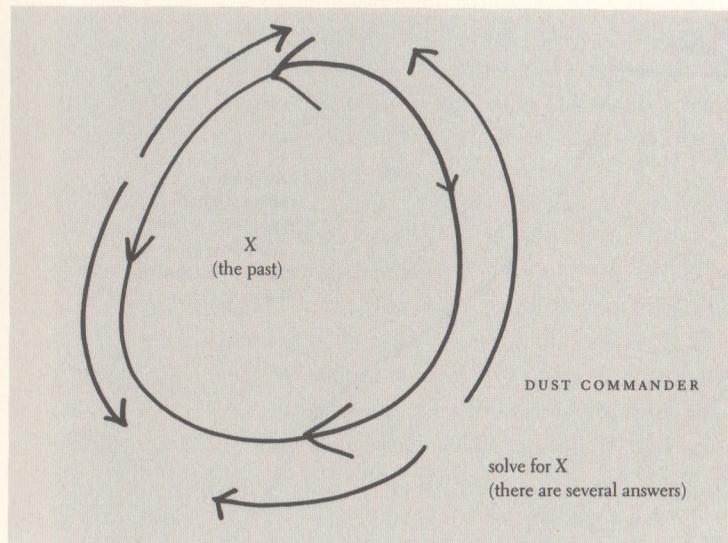
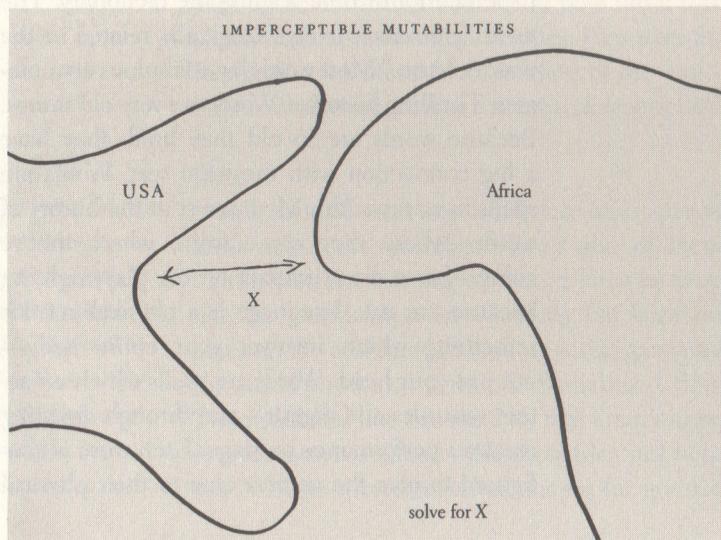
*Playwright: Isnt  
that my job?*

(time)  
love  
distance  
(history)

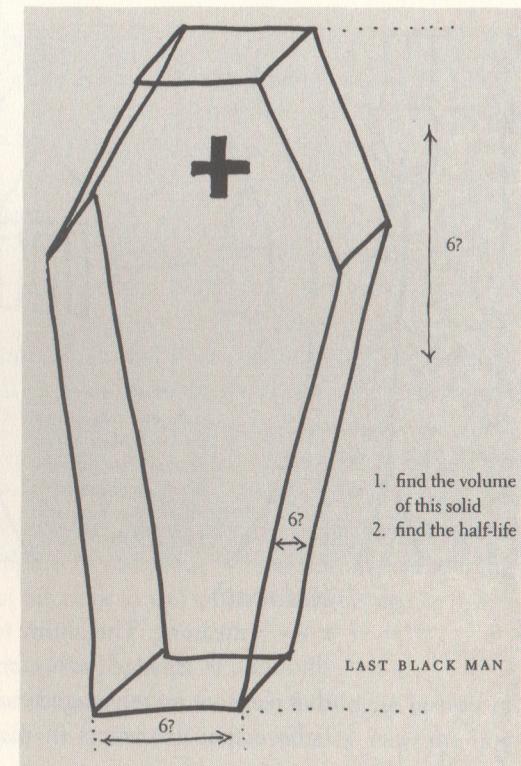
They are not *characters*. To call them so could be an injustice. They are *figures*, *figments*, *ghosts*, *roles*, *lovers* maybe, *speakers* maybe, *shadows*, *slips*, *players* maybe, maybe *someone else’s pulse*.

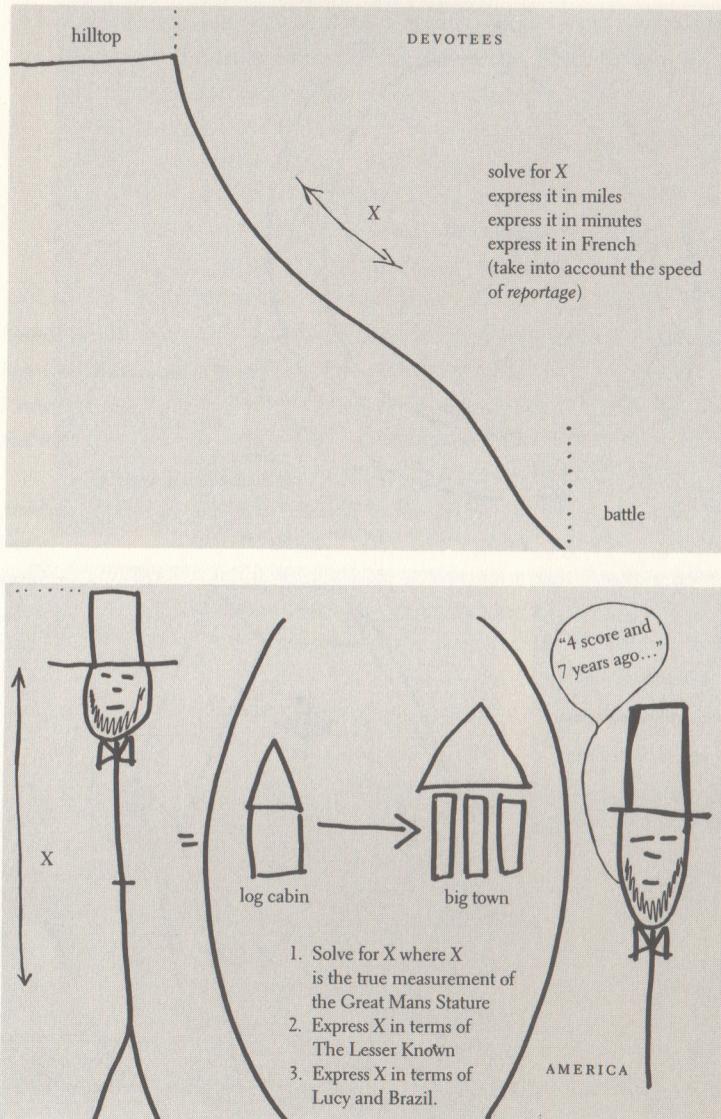
### math

The equations of some plays:



PICKLING  
the play iz trying to find an equation  
for time saved/saving time  
but theatre/experience/performing/  
being/living etc. is all about  
spending time. No equation or....?



*bad math*

$x + y = \text{meaning}$ . The ability to make simple substitutions is equated with *clarity*. We are taught that plays are merely staged essays and we begin to believe that characters in plays are symbols for

some obscured “meaning” rather than simply the thing itself. As Beckett sez: “No symbols where none intended.” Don’t ask playwrights what their plays mean; rather, tell them what you think and have an exchange of ideas.

*the NEA hoopla*

Overweight southern senators are easy targets. They too easily become focal points of all evil, allowing the arts community to WILLFULLY IGNORE our own bigotry, our own petty evils, our own intolerance which—evil senators or no—will be the death of the arts.

*history*

History is time that won’t quit.

*dance*

If you’re one who writes sitting down, once before you die try dancing around as you write. It’s the old world way of getting to the deep shit.

*humor*

A playwright should pack all five, all six—all 7 senses. The 6th helps you feel another’s pulse at great distances; the 7th sense is the sense of humor. Playwrights can come from the most difficult circumstances, but having a sense of humor is what happens when you “get out of the way.” It’s sorta Zen. Laughter is very powerful—it’s not a way of escaping anything but a way of arriving on the scene. Think about laughter and what happens to your body—it’s almost the same thing that happens to you when you throw up.

*action in the line*

The action goes in the line of dialogue instead of always in a pissy set of parentheses. How the line

should be delivered is contained in the line itself. Stage directions disappear. Dialogue becomes rich and strange. It's an old idea. The Greeks did it and Shakespeare too, all over the place. Something to try at least once before you die.

#### *sex*

People have asked me why I don't put any sex in my plays. "The Great Hole of History"—like, duh.

#### *a (rest)*

Take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition.

#### *a spell*

An elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look.

LUCY	LINCOLN
BRAZIL	BOOTH
THE FOUNDLING FATHER and	LINCOLN
LUCY	BOOTH
BRAZIL	LINCOLN
THE FOUNDLING FATHER	BOOTH

*and*

THE FOUNDLING FATHER  
THE FOUNDLING FATHER  
THE FOUNDLING FATHER

This is a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no "action" or "stage business" is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit.

The feeling: look at a daguerreotype; or: the planets are aligning and as they move we hear the

music of their spheres. A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It's also a place for an emotional transition.

#### *foreign words & phrases*

***iduhnt*** /ɪd-ənt/, a variant of *is not* or *isn't*. "We aren't from these parts. . . . Daddy iduhnt either" (*America*).

***heid*** /hé-əd/, a variant of *he would* or *he'd*. "Ssonly natural that heud come out here tuh dig" (*America*).

***do in diddly dip didded thuh drop*** /dó-in-díd-ly-díp-díd-díd-thə-dráhp/, meaning unclear. Perhaps an elaborated confirmation, a fancy "yes!" Although it could also be used as a question such as "Yeah?" (*Last Black Man*).

***ssnuch*** /snəch!/ (Air intake sound not through mouth or throat but in through the nose.) A fast reverse snort, a big sniff (usually accompanies crying or sneezing). "Snnnnuch. Blowings hard. For me." (*Dust Commander*)

***thup*** /thəp!/, (Air intake with sound placed in mouth; liberal use of tongue.) Slurping. (*Imperceptible Mutabilities*)

***uh!*** or ***uuh!*** /əh!/ (Air intake.) Deep quick breath. Usually denotes drowning or breathlessness. "Years uhgoh from uh boat I had been—UUH! Jettisoned" (*Imperceptible Mutabilities*); ". . . in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in the whole entire world. Uh!" (*Last Black Man*).

***thuh*** /thə/, variant of *the*. "Thuh ultimate battle of love requires uh good go between" (*Devotees in the Garden of Love*).

***chuuh*** /chə/ The polite form of the expletive "Shit!" (*Dust Commander*)

***k*** /kay/, variant of *okay*. (*America*)

***gaw*** (This is a glottal stop. No forward tongue or

lip action here. The root of the tongue snaps or clicks in the back of the throat.) Possible performance variations: a click-clock sound where the tongue tip clicks in the front of the mouth; or a strangulated articulation of the word *Gaw!* “gaw gaw gaw eeeee-uh” (*Imperceptible Mutabilities*).

### *language is a physical act*

Language is a physical act—something that involves yr whole bod.  
Write with yr whole bod.  
Read with yr whole bod.  
Wake up.

### *opening night*

Don’t be shy about looking gorgeous.  
I suggest black.

## *An Equation for Black People Onstage*

Simply this:

The bulk of relationships Black people are engaged in onstage is the relationship between the Black and the White other. This is the stuff of high drama. I wonder if a drama involving Black people can exist without the presence of the White—no, not the *presence*—the presence is not the problem. As Toni Morrison writes in her essay “Black Matters,” the presence of the White often signifies the presence of the Black. Within the subject is its other. So the mere *presence* of the other is not the problem. The interest in the other is. The use of the White in the dramatic equation is, I think, too often seen as the only way of exploring our Blackness; this equation reduces Blackness to merely a state of “non-Whiteness.” Blackness in this equation is a people whose lives consist of a series of reactions and responses to the White ruling class. We have for so long been an “oppressed” people, but are Black people only blue? As African-Americans we have a history, a future and a daily reality in which a confrontation with a White ruling class is a central feature. This reality makes life difficult. This reality often traps us in a singular mode of expression. There are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness onstage. The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature. Saying that “Whitey” has to be present in Black drama because Whitey is an inextricable

aspect of Black reality is like saying that every play has to have a murder in it, is like saying that every drama involving Jews must reference Treblinka. And what happens when we choose a concern other than the race problem to focus on? What kind of drama do we get?

Let's look at the **math**:

$$\text{BLACK PEOPLE} + \text{"WHITEY"} = \\ \text{STANDARD DRAMATIC CONFLICT} \\ (\text{STANDARD TERRITORY})$$

i.e.

"BLACK DRAMA" = the presentation of the Black as oppressed

*so that*

WHATEVER the dramatic dynamics, they are most often READ to EQUAL an explanation or relation of Black oppression. This is not only a false equation, this is bullshit.

*so that*

$$\text{BLACK PEOPLE} + x = \text{NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT} \\ (\text{NEW TERRITORY})$$

*where x is the realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than the Oppressed by/Obsessed with "Whitey" state; where the White when present is not the oppressor, and where audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit.*

An old acquaintance of mine, a somewhat revered theatre scholar, once suggested that a fabulous production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* would feature Black principals with Whites as the servants. This is NOT an interesting use of Black people. This is the thinnest sort of dramaturgy.

Ideas like these—equations featuring this lack of complexity—are again and again held up to us as exemplar, as the ultimate possibilities for Black people onstage. Black presence on stage is more than a sign or messenger of some political point.

#### 4 Questions

Can a White person be present onstage and not be an oppressor? Can a Black person be onstage and be other than oppressed? For the Black writer, are there Dramas other than race dramas? Does Black life consist of issues other than race issues?

And gee, there's another thing: There is no such thing as THE Black Experience; that is, there are many experiences of being Black which are included under the rubric. Just think of all the different kinds of African peoples.

I'm continually encouraging myself to explore The-Drama-of-the-Black-Person-as-an-Integral-Facet-of-the-Universe. This exploration takes me, in a very organic way, into new territory; because, in encouraging myself to listen to the stories beyond my default stories—because the story determines the shape of the play—the play assumes a new structure.

So. As a Black person writing for theatre, what is theatre good for? What can theatre do for us? We can "tell it like it is"; "tell it as it was"; "tell it as it could be." In my plays I do all 3; and the writing is rich because we are not an impoverished people, but a wealthy people fallen on hard times.

I write plays because I love Black people. As there is no single "Black Experience," there is no single "Black Aesthetic" and there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted. As African-Americans we should recognize this insidious essentialism for what it is: a fucked-

A black man from Nigeria asked me once "What is this interest with watermelon you Black Americans have? I do not understand." His not understanding does not make him non-Black/ White/an inauthentic Black man. His not understanding simply means that he grew up Black yes! but Black somewhere else.

up trap to reduce us to only one way of being. We should endeavor to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety.

## *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*

1986 - 1989