
African Border Crossings in Plays by African American Women

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Abstract

African American women playwrights have long shown a strong if conflicted interest in retracing the traumatic middle passage back to Africa. Plays by women of the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements were written in the context of cultural nationalist and pan-Africanist discourses as well as the anti-colonial movements on the continent. In works as diverse as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs*, Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness*, the idea of Africa is shown to beckon, tease, tempt, and otherwise interpellate young African Americans, but women playwrights of this era often appear to caution that heeding the call will entail losing sight of the struggle at hand for civil rights, black power, and self-determination within the United States. However, in more recent years, women playwrights appear to have become less hesitant to recross the border, approaching the continent in terms of its lived realities, past and present. Plays such as Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*, and Katori Hall's *Our Lady of Kibeho* and *Children of Killers* tackle a wide range of political and social issues, including gender, childhood, sexual violence, exploitation, and war. As black feminist texts, such plays are often expressions of solidarity, giving voice to disempowered and disenfranchised African women. However, I will argue that the playwrights are evidently also aware of their own subject positions as first-world writers: attuned to the politics of historiography (who tells the story and how) as well controversies concerning human rights, cultural relativism and neo-imperialism. My paper will begin by examining the representation of Africa in plays written and performed in the 1960s and 70s, and then proceed to a closer analysis of Parks's *Venus*, Nottage's *Ruined*, and Hall's *Children of Killers*. Drawing upon critical and historical analyses of the shifting contours of Africanist discourses in African American culture by James Campbell, John Cullen Grusesser, and others, I will explore how contemporary women playwrights challenge the long history of American narratives about Africa and Africanism.

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