

A Racial Concern: Adrienne Kennedy's *Diary of Lights*

HARVEY YOUNG AND MEGAN GEIGNER

Adrienne Kennedy's one-act play *Diary of Lights* is a polyvocal collage comprised of young, culturally aware characters who attempt to find common ground with one another by talking about the arts in their 1950s society. At its centre stands Billie, a wife, expectant mother, aspiring artist, and recent transplant to New York City. Billie yearns to become a writer but, to her dismay, she only seems capable of producing babies and a series of diary-like personal reflections. Though her husband Eddie, a recently returned Korean War veteran, seems sincere in his devotion to Billie, she hides her new pregnancy and feels increasingly isolated from him after their reunion and move to Manhattan. Billie envies her friends, Margo and Aaron, for their "Bohemian" lifestyle; her brother-in-law Roy and his girlfriend Mavis, for their anger at institutional racism in the arts and the university alike; and Ellen, Billie's folk-dancing friend from writing class, who considers herself a Communist. Throughout the play, these characters reveal that their lives are far from enviable. Margo longs for a change and seeks a more traditional arrangement: marriage and children. Roy, a graduate student at Columbia, struggles with racism in higher education. Ellen alienates herself from the black community. As each character laments her or his difficulties, another responds by talking about the arts – expressing a desire to attend a concert, read a novel, or attend an exhibition. These references to expressive arts and culture may seem like efforts to escape the conversation, but they subtly gesture toward a frequently shared set of concerns about race and societal prejudice.

Set in the mid-1950s and giving the impression of being extracts from Kennedy's actual diary, drafted as a play in 1973, produced in 1978, and published in 2012, *Diary of Lights* can be difficult to locate in time. Is it a 1950s? 1970s? or new millennial (2010s) drama? Is it one of the first pieces that Adrienne Kennedy wrote or a contemporary play by an author who has had celebrity status within the theatre world since the 1964 debut of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*? The uncertainty that surrounds *Diary of*

Lights complicates efforts to place the play within a chronology of Kennedy's works and, by extension, to divine its influences. In an effort to ground the play in a particular socio-historical moment with the aim of reading its depiction of racial concern, this article emphasizes the representation of 1950s culture in *Diary of Lights*. It examines the artistic and cultural references made by the play's major characters – beginning with Billie and followed by Roy, Eddie, Aisha, Mohammed, Margo, Aaron, and Ellen – and chronicles how these references expose the tensions created by racism and prejudice in an integrationist (or post-segregationist) period. The article concludes with a discussion of how the play reimagines aspects of Kennedy's biography in order to more accurately capture the feel of living in the 1950s.

SCRIPTED CONCERN

There is evidence of *racial concern* within *Diary of Lights*. The key events that would inspire the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s occurred at the time of the temporal setting (1955–1957) of the play. In 1954, the same year that Kennedy and her husband Joseph moved to New York City, school districts throughout the United States were trying to figure out how they were going to integrate as a consequence of the Supreme Court ruling, which effectively banned segregation in public institutions. The next year, the dead, bloated body of a black boy was discovered floating in Mississippi's Tallahatchie River and a trial was ongoing to determine the guilt or innocence of two white men accused of murdering young Emmett Till. Frustrated not only by the boy's death but also by decades of white-on-black violence, a black secretary decided to enact her own, small-scale protest by sitting in the front ("white only") section of a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. These local events attracted national attention and press coverage. They would prompt a series of other acts – sit-ins and bus boycotts – which would give a sense of momentum to the Civil Rights Movement. Within the next few years, the other, more recognizable aspects of the movement would emerge: the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1957), the March on Washington (1963), and the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964). Although the significance of these events is clearer upon reflection – to see how Till's murder or Rosa Parks's refusal to move to the back of the bus were factors contributing toward the march – it is difficult to imagine that educated and racially aware individuals in the 1950s, people like Adrienne Kennedy and the characters who populate *Diary of Lights*, could have been unaware at the time of their import.

The protagonists of *Diary of Lights* – Billie, the character who most resembles Adrienne Kennedy, and her friends – are part of New York's

literati: well-educated and well-read Manhattanites whose conversations tend to centre on the latest cultural events. This is apparent in the play's opening line, spoken by the *entire* cast: "Everyone's reading *Catcher in the Rye*" (103). Indeed, the play itself is about reading and cultural literacy. It is about being conversant with the happenings of the present moment. Repeatedly, characters talk about which novelists and poets they are reading and which performers and visual artists they are looking forward to seeing. Throughout *Diary of Lights*, Billie and Eddie and their friends Roy, Mavis, Ellen, Margo, Aaron, Aisha, and Mohammed talk at length about art and culture. In a one-act play, they manage to mention the names of nearly sixty artists and novelists.

The arts referenced in *Diary of Lights* offer insight into the 1950s racial situation. In addition to saying what she is currently reading in her opening lines, Billie reveals the cultural limits on Black people: "No Negro women have ever had a play on Broadway and only two Negro men, Langston Hughes and Louis Peterson. /I read *Theatre Arts* every month" (103). This line locates the play between 1953 and 1959, between the premiere of Peterson's *Take a Giant Step* and that of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first drama penned by a Black woman to be produced on Broadway. Her words identify the period as a moment of transition – past racial barriers are being overcome and new opportunities are becoming available to black artists with each passing year. Furthermore, they recognize that the arts cannot be divorced from social reality. The racial situation informs and affects both the theatre and the street. In fact, the weight of racism and the existence of a racial concern prominently appear in the works of the playwrights cited by Billie. Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* (1931) tells the story of Robert, the mixed-race adult son of a white Southern landowner and his black domestic servant, who returns home to face his father and seek recognition as his son. Peterson's play centres on Spencer Scott, a black teenager who lives in an all-white New England suburb. These plays, much like *Diary of Lights*, gave a presence on the theatrical stage to recognizable and identifiable Black experiences. This racial awareness also appears in the plays that Billie attends. The protagonist recalls seeing a production of *Othello*, starring William Marshall (103). The reference gives greater specificity to the temporal setting of the play. The 7 September 1955 edition of the *New York Times* announces the opening of *Othello* that evening at City Center: "The title role of 'Othello' will be interpreted by William Marshall, previously seen on the local stage as de Lawd in the 1951 revival of 'The Green Pastures'" (Zolotow 35). Much like in Shakespeare's play, the tensions and anxieties relating to racism and integration were playing out in everyday life.

Other articles in the *same* edition of the *New York Times* comment on the racial situation within the United States. An assessment of the success of desegregation efforts in Southern schools on the first day of classes after the *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* ruling was offered in an article carrying the following headline: "Schools in South Stay Segregated" (27). Racial progress is slightly more evident in a separate article ("Negroes to be Jurors") on the integration of the New Orleans Parish Grand Jury, in which two black men were added to the previously all-white grand jury by prosecutors tired of having their convictions overthrown on the basis that the court cases were not being heard by a jury of the accused's, frequently a black person's, peers. The two men were the first black jurors to serve in New Orleans Parish "within the memory of man" ("Negroes" 18). Three weeks later, in a front page article, the *New York Times* covered the acquittal of the two men who were accused of murdering Emmett Till. On 26 September 1955, in a brief report on the public outcry at the acquittal, the newspaper quoted Rev. Dr. Gardner Taylor, a Baptist minister, telling his Brooklyn congregation "Darker people everywhere are watching" ("Race Neurosis" 26). Taylor's words foreshadow the actions of Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama. All of these events occurred during Adrienne Kennedy's first two years in New York City, the same span of time covered by *Diary of Lights*. With the exception of Marshall's performance, none of them appear within the play. Their presence in the popular press, frequently making front-page newspaper appearances, suggests that it would have been difficult for a member of an intellectual and culturally sophisticated community not to be aware of their occurrence. These events exist as part of the play's diegesis, its story world, and provide context for the society within which the characters live.

This racial concern appears more explicitly within the play through Kennedy's emphasis on the embodied experience of blackness. Billie actively seeks out the experiences of others, which allow her to recognize the similarities between herself and other black folk. A voracious reader, she reads *The Invisible Man*. She confesses that "*Maude Martha* is the best book/I've ever read about being a Negro girl" (107). In each book, the reader enters the story and travels alongside the protagonist as she or he encounters the everyday racisms, prejudice, and experiences of blackness. The form of the novel, which encourages identification with individual characters and more comprehensively (than theatre) immerses the reader in the world of the story, makes the articulation of black experience feel particularly intimate, like a confessional or diary. By citing these texts, Kennedy demonstrates that the arts can reflect the tensions and anxieties of the nation. They can capture what it feels like to be a black person living in a society before the Civil Rights achievements of the 1960s.

At the same time, the literary and visual arts offer positive role models and introduce heroes for the community to emulate. Billie desires the celebrity status and professional accomplishments of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks in order to feel less “inferior” and more confident (104). In praising the beauty of black celebrities – “I wish I looked like Dorothy Dandridge” and referring to Wallace as “the handsomest man I’ve ever seen” (104), she reveals how the arts present portraits of blackness that offer an alternative to the stereotypes and caricatures that were popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At first glance, Billie’s subscribing to the arts and her admiration of specific performers more closely resembles the reflections of a fan than of a person preoccupied with the racial situation. Closer examination reveals how the arts provide examples of black beauty, brilliance, and cultural survival in the midst of a society quick to discriminate on the basis of complexion. Beyond reading the writings of Gwendolyn Brooks and Ralph Ellison, Billie is passionate about music. She looks forward to attending concerts by Mabel Mercer, Wilbur de Paris, and Count Basie, among others. Black music, specifically jazz and gospel, are not recent passions but cultural elements that informed her childhood and, apparently, were popular with her parents and grandparents. They are tastes passed across generations, promoting the survival of black culture. She reveals, “My mother named me after Billie Holiday” (111) and fondly recalls her grandfather singing “Precious Lord” (119).

While an appreciation for the arts does not directly translate into a racial concern, it is important to note that the majority of the black artists named by Billie and the other characters in *Diary of Lights* explicitly engage with the racial situation within their work. Billie Holiday’s song “Strange Fruit” remembered the horrors of white-on-black lynchings that occurred within the US throughout the first third of the twentieth century. “Precious Lord,” a gospel song that gained widespread popularity after Mahalia Jackson recorded it in 1956, offered a relatable portrait of the day-to-day suffering and struggle that was descriptive of the black experience:

Precious Lord, take my hand
 Lead me on, let me stand
 I am tired, I am weak, I am worn
 Through the storm, through the night
 Lead me on to the light
 Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.

It would become one of the most prominent anthems of the Civil Rights Movement and would be sung, by Mahalia Jackson, at the funeral of

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The popularity of jazz, especially in post-war Europe and throughout the 1950s, offered numerous musicians, including Wilbur de Paris and Count Basie, opportunities to experience a society in which skin complexion did not serve as a barrier to social acceptance. The stories of de Paris, who performed regularly in New York City in the 1950s, could have inspired his audience to believe that the racial situation in the United States could change for the better. At the very least, he and other musicians, through their travels, demonstrated how black folk could move more freely abroad than they could within parts of the United States. Although the arts could provide an escape from the day-to-day experience of being black, they also could create opportunities to listen to the articulated experiences of others, engage with the racial situation, and celebrate black culture.

In addition to her subscribing to the arts, Billie expresses her awareness of the racial situation in her reflections on her childhood summer travels to Georgia, where her grandparents lived (as did Adrienne Kennedy's). She speaks eloquently and directly about the experience of segregation:

Every summer when I arrived on the train from Cincinnati the first thing I saw was the white and colored signs at the depot. At the depot white people had one waiting room and Negroes had another. And on that very train from Cincinnati the Negroes sat in two cars that were dirty and the white people had the rest of the train (121).

Billie reveals her embodied experience of blackness. Prejudice touches her body. It requires her to sit in a "dirty" and comparatively more crowded train car, to enter a building using a "side" door, to *not* drink a soda "at the soda fountain in the drug store," and to sit in the least desirable seats at the movie theatre (121). Although she does not explicitly critique or denounce the segregationist system, her criticism and complaints are evident in her descriptions ("dirty") and in the fact that she chooses to include these experiences "in my diary" (121). Her memories of the white sections of town having paved streets, sidewalks, and mail delivery, whereas the black sections did not have even these basics – "you had to go to the Post Office to pick up your mail" (121) – demonstrates her awareness that "separate but equal" was not just unconstitutional but also a fiction. Arguably, this fiction – and her desire to reveal it as a set of "lies" – motivates her artistic pursuits. At the end of *Diary of Lights*, Billie announces, "I want my poems to tell the utter truth about life as it really is" (125).

SHARED CONCERNS

Although Billie, as protagonist, is the character afforded the majority of lines within the play and, by extension, opportunities to express her

interests and concerns relating to race, other characters in *Diary of Lights* similarly share their perspectives. The most prominent voice of racial concern belongs to Roy, a doctoral candidate and university instructor. A mixture between the “race man” of the 1930s and a foreshadowing of the bold figures who would create the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, Roy is a figure who is decidedly *out of time*, not in sync with the comparatively more muted racial politics of the early 1950s. He speaks his mind and, more than any other character within the play, sees the world through the lens of race. The audience first encounters him through a comment made by Billie, who notes, “Roy says they haven’t let in a black director yet in the New York Theatre” (107). These words, which echo Billie’s earlier remarks about the limited opportunities for black playwrights on Broadway, carry a sharper critique. Roy’s statement, as paraphrased by Billie, points to the active racism and prejudice that exists within the theatre world and, as a result, keeps the door to employment possibilities closed to black directors. Societal racism exists as an obstacle to black achievement. His words also convey a sceptical conviction that, even when black directors are finally “let in” to Broadway, it will be at the discretion of a non-black community of producers and financiers. The entrenched effects of prejudice will be long lasting.

Roy speaks about and, perhaps more accurately, obsesses over the challenges and obstacles of race-based discrimination within society. Moments before his arrival on stage, Billie introduces him to the audience and prepares them for Roy’s and her husband’s, Eddie’s, tendency to speak about only three topics: “their childhood, the racial situation and their courses” (107). Roy does not disappoint. While he spends much of his time talking about teaching at Brooklyn College, he frames it through the lens of his racialized experience. He maintains that it is “impossible for a Negro to make full professor” at Brooklyn College (109). He notes that “They’ll do anything to keep us from getting our doctorates” (110). He criticizes his white colleagues and, more generally, non-black academics who work in the area of African-American studies: “Those white professors think they know more about Negroes than I do. And I’m sick of it” (111).

Compared with the other characters within the play, Roy emerges as an extreme and reactionary figure. Whereas the others discuss the arts and their affinity with artistic communities, he mostly limits his considerations to the present-day racial situation, in which the social ascendancy of black folk is repeatedly checked. Although Roy’s critiques of white academics, specifically identified as Jewish, could prompt charges of anti-Semitism (see 111) and, as a result, prompt readers to discount everything that he says, it would be a mistake to overlook or ignore the impact of Roy’s politics within the play. He prefigures the more aggressively political and rhetorically militant philosophies of the generation that would launch the Black

Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement. Despite appearing slightly outside of the mainstream within the play, he foreshadows the political awakening of figures like playwright LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka.

While Roy could be accused of racial paranoia, Kennedy redeems him by suggesting that his perspective on the world could be accurate. In one scene, Roy notes that "Eddie says Kleinman is nice but the prejudice is still there" (110), referring to his friend's assessment of their graduate school advisor. Later, after having attended a dinner party at the Kleinmans', Billie reflects, "They have a 'Negro' maid and Eddie says they are liberals. They talk alot about being Liberals" (115). There is a scepticism in her words. Although they talk a lot about being liberals, the impression left on the audience is that the Kleinmans really aren't liberal. Liberal-minded people do not talk about how liberal-minded they are. It is not clear why "Negro" appears within quotation marks when the maid is mentioned, especially considering that the word is deployed throughout the play without being set apart. One possibility is that the quotation marks suggest that the maid appeared in a way that stereotyped her. Did the maid, in either costume or manner, look like she could have lived in an earlier moment in time, when the only career path for a black person was domestic work? Did the Kleinmans, despite being avowedly liberal-minded, treat their maid in a manner that seemed to replicate white-black power relations from an earlier time period? Or, was there something about the way that Kleinman said the word "Negro" that troubled Billie and, perhaps, inspired the first thoughts that another name, a different identity (perhaps Black?) would be preferable? The suspicion contained within this single sentence not only redeems Roy but also reveals Billie as aware of and concerned by the racial situation.

Eddie, Billie's husband, is a man of few words. Nevertheless, Kennedy succeeds in portraying him as a person similarly concerned with the "racial situation." He accompanies Billie to see William Marshall perform the title role in *Othello*. Later, he announces, "I like Ray Robinson and Thurgood Marshall" (107). In 1955, boxer "Sugar" Ray Robinson had emerged from retirement to reclaim the middleweight boxing championship. Widely considered to be the one of the greatest boxers of all time, Robinson won multiple world championships at different weight classes in the 1940s and throughout the 1950s. During this period, Thurgood Marshall, as chief counsel of the National Association for the Advancement of Color People (NAACP), challenged legalized segregation and other discriminatory policies across the United States. He won twenty-nine of the thirty cases that he argued before the Supreme Court throughout these years, including *Brown v. Board of Education* (Hansen). With these three references, Eddie expresses an admiration for strength and resiliency in the face of racial limits and discrimination.

Aisha and Mohammed are the least vocal characters in the play; yet, their presence offers insight into the 1950s racial situation. They attend dinner parties and witness the conversations of others but maintain their distance, standing apart and speaking to each other in Arabic. Their limited dialogue makes them the most difficult characters to read. Unlike Billie, who speaks her mind and reveals her innermost thoughts in a way that resembles a diary entry, Aisha and Mohammed are quiet and reserved, almost silent. In fact, they do not share any biographical details. Limited disclosures pertaining to them emerge from Billie, who introduces Aisha and Mohammed as “neighbors from Egypt” and notes that Aisha dislikes New York because “she feels a lack of peace in the air” (109). In the production files related to the 1978 production – notes developed in consultation with Adrienne Kennedy – the following background information is given about the characters: “White people made them uncomfortable (they were dark ‘like Sadat’) and they were drawn to Billie” (Pyskacek). Although Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat would not become the Egyptian prime minister until the 1970s (he was a state minister in the 1950s), this note gestures toward the role of Aisha and Mohammed as representatives of another culture where darker complexioned people could possess political authority and autonomy. The presence of Africa within the play, as represented by these two characters, also points to the anticolonial, independence struggles of the 1950s. It is conceivable that Aisha and Mohammed’s political awareness could allow them to be particularly attuned to the simmering racial tensions in the United States – to be concerned with the lack of peace in the air. Arguably, they prefigure the arrival of more vocal and expressly political African characters in black drama like Asagai in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

In addition to Roy and Eddie, who serve as models of political and cultural militancy, and Aisha and Mohammed, who represent an international (and possibly a postcolonial) blackness, Ellen offers a third perspective on being black in the 1950s. Whereas the others identify with and covet black culture, Ellen views it as limiting. She urges Billie to embrace a bohemian lifestyle, abandon her race-based preoccupations, and denounce her Christianity. Ellen comes from a rust-belt black family but, thanks to her education at a mostly white liberal arts college, has transcended her working-class background and become an artist and novelist. Although enviable, her lifestyle is not easily attainable. It requires a significant sacrifice: a severing of ties with the black community.

As in Kennedy’s characterization of Ellen, the playwright scripts a slightly veiled critique of those who either can (or believe they can) avoid the entanglements of the racial situation in her presentation of Aaron and Margo. Aaron and Margo live a bohemian existence that anchors itself in their whiteness, a privilege that does not demand a daily

engagement with the racial situation or an explicit racial concern. Nevertheless, race and racism touch these characters. Identified as Jewish in a stage direction, Aaron and Margo are members of a historically oppressed minority, a group whose oppression climaxed in the previous decade. Within the play, they are indicted in Roy's accusation against the Kleinmans and, more generally, Jewish intellectuals. Although their friendship with Billie and Eddie mitigates any allegation of racism, they express an affinity for artistic creations by white artists with a fervour and passion that equals that of the other characters when they express admiration for the creations of black artists. At one point, Aaron challenges Roy to admit that "a lot of great artists are white" (120). Racial pride, as expressed through references to the arts, is not limited solely to the play's black characters.

CONCERNING KENNEDY

Kennedy scholars have long looked to the playwright's life for further explanation of her characters. Claudia Barnett contends that Kennedy "reveal[s]" and "conceal[s]" herself in her plays (158) and creates "alter egos" (166) of herself, which should not be mistaken for Adrienne Kennedy but instead be recognized as "evasions of ontology" that reveal more about the characters in the play than about the playwright's life. In interviews, Kennedy admits to being drawn to autobiographical work but expresses dismay when interpreters of her plays mistake her female protagonists for the playwright (Kennedy and Lehman 42; Barnett 157). Heeding the playwright's caution while acknowledging the value of noticing the overlap between Kennedy and her characters, it is possible to consider the similarity between the character and creator not as an autobiographical mirror but rather as a theatrical interpretation premised upon an actual life with the aim of relaying the "truth" of an embodied experience. Turning to Kennedy's biography yields a deeper understanding of the racial concerns of her characters.

In a number of interviews, Kennedy has said that she grew up in a middle-class family in Ohio in the 1930s. The invocation of class, which is necessary to gain an understanding of her upbringing, also offers a corrective, revising assumptions that middle-class status is a relatively new situation for black families. Kennedy was raised within a household and within a larger community in which black men and women were educated and, through perseverance, achieved beyond the limited roles – as labourer or domestic worker – prescribed for them by the nation. In a 1992 interview, Kennedy recalled,

There was something about the values of that time [the 1930s and 1940s]. It wasn't just middle-class blacks. It was in American society. These people were

working all the time . . . my parents' friends. The wife was either a social worker or a teacher, mostly a teacher. She was working. These people were keeping black culture alive. And they were forging ahead financially at the same time. They were doing both. And that is what is so amazing (Bryant-Jackson and Overbeck 11).

This passing reference to "keeping black culture alive" underscores Kennedy's rearing within an environment populated by race-proud people who were determined to ensure the survivance, "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion," of African-American culture, to quote Gerald Vizenor's characterization of Native-American culture (Vizenor 1). They worked hard – and their labour was noticeable to other members of their community, including their families – to *advance* economically and politically while maintaining their cultural roots. In addition, their class status allowed them to be the primary consumers and benefactors of black culture, supporting it and keeping it "alive." They attended concerts, purchased books by black authors, and matriculated at black schools. When Ellen expresses her dislike of black middle-class culture, she criticizes the background and being of both the playwright and Billie.

Kennedy's parents attended "historically black colleges" – Morehouse College and Atlanta University – and both schools had a "tremendous effect" on the playwright, who visited the campuses with her parents (Bryant-Jackson 11). The schools offered models of success: educated, cultured, politically savvy, socially aware members of the academic community whose presence on campus signalled a desire to champion the rights of black folk and dismantle barriers constructed on the path toward racial equality. They were microcosms of a future society filled with example after example of black achievement. As a child, the playwright was introduced by her father to ardent anti-segregationist and president of Morehouse College, Dr. Benjamin Mays. She recalls being told, by her father, that Mays was a "great man." In *The People Who Led to My Plays*, Kennedy remembers her childhood self thinking, "[W]hat is a great man and why is he a great man?" (15). Billie offers a similar sentiment when she recalls that her father "used to say John Hope Franklin DuBois and Benjamin Mays were fine men" (106). John Hope Franklin, the most prominent scholar of the Black experience in the mid-twentieth-century, was named Chairman of the Department of History at Brooklyn College in 1956. Roy's comments expose the obstacles that Dr. Franklin and black scholars like him surely faced throughout their careers. The DuBois referred to is the famed sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, author of *The Souls of Black Folk* among other texts, and chronicler of the black experience.

Kennedy's parents stressed the importance of having racial pride through their engagement with historically black colleges and social

organizations like the YMCA. Their efforts and beliefs influenced the content and political leanings of their daughter's dramaturgy. In a 1996 interview, Kennedy reveals the effect of her parents – first her mother and then her father – on the types of stories that she tells and the manner in which she relays them.

She would tell me the things that happened to her . . . her dreams, her past . . . it's like the monologues in my plays, it really is. Because her stories were loaded with imagery and tragedy, darkness and sarcasm and humor. She could describe a day when she was sitting on her porch in Georgia and what happened . . . and my father always gave speeches about the cause, the Negro cause. So, there is no doubt in my mind that I try to merge those two things. (qtd. in Parks 44)

In her writing, Kennedy presents autobiographical stories in a highly imaginative and visual manner with the aim of spurring readers and audiences to meditate on the racial situation within the United States. The "Negro cause" is an inherent part of her dramaturgy. In *Diary of Lights*, Roy and Eddie are its most vocal advocates.

This racial concern, which was cultivated by her parents, was heightened during Kennedy's college years (1949–53). Reflecting upon these years, which she spent at Ohio State University, the playwright remembers "the immensity, the dark, the rainy winters, the often open racial hatred of the girls in the dorm continued to demoralize me" (*People Who Led* 69). To escape the virulent racism of campus and dorm life, she "attached [herself to her] husband-to-be and seldom left his side" (69). Joseph Kennedy was her lifeline, telling her stories about the other places where they would travel and live, particularly New York City, and forecasting a world that would one day be more accepting of their presence (71). In 1954, they moved to New York.

Once in Manhattan, Kennedy, now a new mother, often felt that she was merely a wife and parent and was falling short of her father's aspirations for her. In addition to pointing out the greatness of others, Adrienne Kennedy's father also wanted his daughter to realize her potential and to become a prominent woman, like first lady Eleanor Roosevelt or opera singer Marion Anderson or educational reformer Mary Bethune (Kolin 11). Kennedy frequently thought of these women and of her own mother, who had worked *and* raised children. Kennedy, like Billie, sensed that she was not living up to the models of greatness that she encountered as a child. Adding to her malaise, her husband's friends at Columbia University, where he was pursuing a graduate degree, "never asked me about anything":

They said, how's the baby? They asked my husband about his graduate studies in Social Psychology, his opinion of the world and politics. As an afterthought they

most often, but pleasantly, asked me, how's the baby? How old is the baby? Do you like New York? (*People* 81)

Kennedy had moved from Columbus, where she felt isolated because of her skin colour, to New York, where she now felt isolated because of her responsibilities as a mother. She found comfort in the arts.

Much like all the characters in the play, Kennedy herself read avidly and attended theatre, concerts, dance, and art exhibitions in Manhattan. She wrote stories, a novel, and a play and acquired a literary agent but failed to get anything published during these years (94). Still, all of these influences were affecting her:

I didn't know it at the time but all these people mingling in my life, my thoughts and my imagination were leading to a strengthening of my writing and truer expression of it. All these people were presenting me with a form for my work as well as great inspiration. (110)

The arts offered Kennedy an escape from her unfulfilling existence as a mother and housewife. They granted the playwright access to an imagined life that was comparatively more "thrilling" (84). Within novels, plays, theatre, and operas, she could lose herself in the narratives of others and, for the duration of the story or performance, become someone else. The mingling narratives of Kennedy's friends and the characters in the narratives she read and saw performed seem to come to life in *Diary of Lights*. *Diary* is not Kennedy's diary but instead just that: a polyvocal mingling of the conflicting racial and class experiences of a young woman's life in 1950s New York.

Reading *Diary of Lights* not as an autobiography but as an imaginative interpretation of selected experiences that Kennedy had in New York adds context to the play. Kennedy's consumption of New York culture in the 1950s aligns with the activities of her characters. During these years, she saw artists such as Louis Armstrong, Eric Dolphy, Dizzie Gillespie, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Joe Williams, Charles Mingus, and Miles Davis. These same figures are praised in *Diary of Lights* not only by Billie but also by Roy and Mavis. Kennedy's interests were not limited to black artists. Like Margo and Aaron, she enthusiastically sought out the work of Impressionist painters and the writings of Dostoevsky, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. These many influences mingled in her life and, as a result, commingle in her play thus creating a dramatic piece that more closely resembles collage than a linear narrative. Speaking of the similarly disjointed structure of Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Rosemary Curb notes that "two characters speaking alternately do not seem to be conversing as separate consciousnesses but as alternate visions of the same divided

consciousness" (180). This description aptly applies to *Diary of Lights* as well: aspects of Kennedy's lived experience appear not only within the characters in the play but also in the tensions that exist between them.

In conclusion, a return to the idea of "truth" in *Diary of Lights* reveals Kennedy's subjective presence. The playwright notes elsewhere that a poly-vocal dramatic form enables a "truer expression" of her theatrical imagination (*People* 110). This link between theatre and veracity similarly appears in Billie's desire to employ the arts to tell the "truth of life." Across these lines, Kennedy seems to advocate a fusion of artifice and authentic experience. The multiple influences within everyday life can inform the creation of inventive art. The arts, more accurately than a diary entry, can capture and reflect the concerns of society. This blend appears in *Diary of Lights*.

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ABSTRACT: This article emphasizes the representation of 1950s culture in *Diary of Lights*. It examines the artistic and cultural references made by the play's major characters, beginning with Billie and followed by Roy, Eddie, Aisha, Mohammed, Margo, Aaron, and Ellen, and chronicles how they expose the tensions inspired by racism and prejudice in an integrationist (or post-segregationist) period. It concludes with a discussion on how the play reimagines aspects of Kennedy's biography in order to more accurately capture the feel of living in the 1950s.

KEYWORDS: Adrienne Kennedy, *Diary of Lights*, racial concern, black experience, segregation, racism, integration

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