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THE PERFORMANCE OF RACISM IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN THEATRE:

FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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List of Abbreviations

A:       Angélique
        (Gale, Lorena. Angélique. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2000.)

AS:      Afrika Solo

HD:      Harlem Duet
        (Sears, Djanet. Harlem Duet. Toronto: Scirocco Drama, 1997.)

ABG:     The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God

DKH:     ‘Da Kink in My Hair
        (Anthony, Trey. ‘Da Kink in My Hair. Sears 2003b: 263-80.)
1 Introduction

“There is no official [Canadian] culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other. No citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian, and all should be treated fairly.” When Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau pronounced these words on 8 October 1971, Canada became the first multicultural state worldwide. Since this date, the official acceptance of multiculturalism has not only been reduced to a simple recognition of cultural differences and specificities of certain ethnic minorities. In contrast to the USA – a country which sticks to a “melting pot” concept that “compel[s] cultural minority group assimilation into an overarching American culture” (Singh 2004: 447) – the Canadian government has officially offered assistance for minority groups to develop their cultural particularities and thus contribute to the diversity of the country’s mosaic.\(^1\) One decade after this first proclamation, the government reaffirmed its support for the removal of all cultural or racial barriers to full and equal citizen participation in Canadian society by affirming its multicultural heritage in Section 27 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (cf. Department of Justice 1982) and again ratifying it by Parliament in the Multiculturalism Act of 1985 (cf. Oxford Reference Online: ‘Multiculturalism’). In the ensuing years, critical voices towards multiculturalism have found their way into academic discourse.\(^2\) Nevertheless, the official groundwork of Canadian society sounds egalitarian and tolerating. It may thus seem contradictory in itself to assume that there might be a significant amount of racism in a society which openly encourages ethnic identity formation within its borders.

However, massive waves of immigration seem to have shaken the population’s confidence in the concept of multiculturalism. Firstly, an increasing number of people from China and India immigrated during the middle of the 1990s (cf. Statistics Canada 2006a). Secondly, the number of immigrants of non-European origin has risen considerably since the 1980s (i.e. almost 84% of all immigrants were born outside of Europe in 2006 in contrast to 68.5% in 1981 (ibid.)). At the beginning of the new millennium, 200 different ethnic minority groups, that is more than 5 million people of Canada’s total population of

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1 Although Palmer is careful about a too clear-cut dichotomy between these two countries when comparing their immigration policies (cf. Palmer 1987: 96), the concept of the Canadian mosaic or kaleidoscope in contrast to the United States’ melting pot plays a major role for the Canadian self-perspective.

2 Palmer cites critics who argue that this policy will only perpetuate the ‘vertical mosaic’, thus cementing existing class lines in accordance to ethnical borders (cf. Palmer 1987: 93).
31 million, belonged to visible minorities. Against the background of the fast growth rate of visible minorities (cf. The Daily 2008: n.p.), some members of the nation’s white majority apparently seem to consider ethnic diversity as dangerous or even threatening (cf. Henry et al. 2000: 18). As a result, xenophobia and racism are by no means absent in Canadian society.

The results of the Ethnic Diversity Survey of 2003 support this proposition. 20% of all people belonging to visible ethnic minorities affirmed experiences of discrimination or unfair treatment because of their ethnic characteristics (cf. Statistics Canada 2003: 18). What is striking is that, even though African Canadians only make up 2.5% of the ethnic buildup of the nation – which is significantly lower than that of, for instance, Asian minorities – they feel more discriminated than any other ethnic group. It seems that race is such a dominant and excluding feature in Canadian society that it becomes “a pressing contemporary social concern” (Nelson & Nelson 2004: 18). As in every society that is founded on the acknowledgements of democracy and equality, any official, political or legal discourse “only authorizes and rewards racial dialogue that celebrates Canada as an anti-racist, multicultural state” (ibid. 21). Racist enunciations and statements are, consequently, absent from any official discourse. Thus, in order to analyze marginal or minority voices in a given society, a look beyond the scope of official documents might be of avail. If we set our focus on cultural products as a mirror of social tendencies, those voices which are generally silenced in the official discourse become audible.

Among the cultural publications accessible to academic research, theatre seems to be an especially promising approach. This claim is based on Manfred Pfister’s main assumptions on theatre as a social institution with public character (cf. Pfister 1993: 25). With theatre being a more public literary form than, e.g. narrative or prose, its success – at the box office as well as in the bookstore – depends much more on the audience’s

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3 The Census defines ‘visible minority’ according to the Employment Equity Act: “persons other than the Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race and non-white in colour” (Statistics Canada 2006b).

4 While 32% of Blacks reported that they experienced discrimination or unfair treatment because of their ethnic characteristics sometimes or often in the past five years, only 21% of South Asians and 18% of Chinese did so (cf. Statistics Canada 2003: 18).

5 Scholars such as Frances Henry et al. relate the concept of politically correct language to the principles of democratic liberalism. In their book on racism in Canadian society they state that “racism as a commanding force in this country is constantly challenged and denied by applying the arguments of democratic liberalism. In a society that espouses equality, tolerance, social harmony, and respect for individual rights, the existence of racial prejudice, discrimination, and disadvantage is difficult to acknowledge and therefore remedy” (Henry et al. 2000: 2).

6 In this context, Pfister speaks of the “organizational basis [of plays] that is twice the size of that of other literary texts, simply because they are not only produced as dramatic texts in the theatre, but also as literary texts by publishers” (Pfister 1993: 25f.).
(positive) reception of what is acted out on stage. Therefore theatre in general, due to its collective nature of response, relies much more on particular groups who acknowledge and (financially) support it. This is particularly true for the success of a specific ‘alternative’ or ‘marginal’ play that may challenge more traditional forms of expression. Thus, theatre is always influenced by the dominant politics within a society because it “by its very nature constitutes an essentially political form of art” (Maufort 2001: 1).

A look at the contemporary Canadian scene supports the idea of theatre being a popular form of creative expression for minority groups. Among the numerous emerging playwrights in Canada are several writers with Indian, Chinese, Korean or African origins (cf. Glaap 2003: 157). As mentioned above, African or black Canadians are recorded to feel most discriminated in Canadian society among these groups. This is why the study at hand will focus on theatrical expressions by black Canadians; a group, whose presence on the Canadian stage, although dating back to, at least, 1849 (cf. Breon 1988: 1)\(^7\) has only grown considerably since the 1990s. In spite of the long history of black theatre in Canada, a look into up-to-date Canadian literary histories supports the remark by African Canadian playwright Djanet Sears that “any informal examination into Canadian Theatre will likely reveal an absence of African Canadians as contributors altogether” (Sears 2000: i). Even studies on English Canadian drama indicate a significant imbalance of research in disadvantage of African Canadian theatre (cf. Maufort 2001: Table of Contents).\(^8\) If any African Canadian playwright is mentioned at all, the multifaceted Canadian scene is generally reduced to the works by the aforementioned Djanet Sears (cf. Groß 2005: 293; Nothof 2009: 418). Admittedly, she has a paramount role in the emergence of black theatre – thanks to her two-volume anthology *Testifyin’: Contemporary African Canadian Drama*. Yet, this study will show that she is by no means the only important Canadian playwright of African descent.

The definition of theatre by minority groups – such as African Canadians – as a (political) form of art addressed to the over-all domination of a specific majority group

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\(^7\) Breon gives a detailed overview on the history of black theatre in Canada (cf. Breon 1988).

\(^8\) Many more, similar findings could be recorded here. It is especially surprising that Birgit Schreyer’s thorough and up-to-date analysis of contemporary English Canadian drama does not mention playwrights of African origins at all (cf. Schreyer 2005). Even Coral Ann Howell’s research on the legacies of history in Canadian culture does not record any African Canadians even though the editor affirms that she undertakes “inquiries into Canadian history to recover the lost and silenced voices that have shaped contemporary Canada” (Howell 2004: ix).
shows significant similarities to postcolonial studies. Certainly, thinking about colonialism or postcolonialism in Canada, it is the country’s indigenous population that comes directly into one’s mind. It is true that in the wake of native theatre in Canada from the 1970s onwards and due to the immense success of First Nations playwrights such as Tomson Highway, Daniel David Moses, and Drew Hayden Taylor, many anthologies of plays have been published and scholars have conducted a significant amount of research on this topic. These plays demonstrate the postcolonial situation of an aboriginal people who has to define its place within a predominantly white society while trying to preserve traditional, often mythical elements of its indigenous culture.

Theatrical productions by First Nations playwrights have attracted postcolonial scholars among which Christopher Balme’s *Decolonizing the Stage* as well as *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins appear to be the most promising approaches. However, these studies narrow down their corpus of research to a very limited definition of ‘postcolonial theatre’ as they exclusively take into consideration theatre of aboriginal cultures, or the ‘Fourth World’ (cf. Balme 1999: 2), but do not go beyond this scope. In an otherwise thorough analysis of recurring performative elements in postcolonial theatre all over the globe, they do not take into account minority groups other than those directly concerned by the practices of colonialism.

Nevertheless, studying theatrical expressions by African Canadian playwrights reveals strategies similar to those of postcolonial theatre (cf. Moynagh 2005: xii). This is why, for the course of this analysis, it is necessary to widen the definition of ‘postcolonial’ as not only including groups directly involved in colonial practices but also those writers who “have an ancestral purchase upon […] countries with a history of colonialism” (McLeod 2000: 1) such as Canada’s black population. The productivity of African Canadian playwrights in recent years combined with a scarcity of academic research on the subject

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9 The orthography of this term will follow McLeod’s differentiation between “post-colonial” as referring to the time period after colonialism and “postcolonial” as denoting “disparate forms of representations, reading practices and values” common to postcolonial literatures (McLeod 2000: 5).

10 It is useful to mention Monique Mojica’s anthology *Staging Coyote’s Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English*, which was the first collection of native plays, offering nine plays by First Nations playwrights as well as a useful introduction to theatrical practices among Canada’s indigenous population.

11 A study on theatrical performances that takes this view into account is *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* by Brian Crow and Chris Banfield, which defines the common condition of “cultural subjection and subordination” (Crow & Banfield 1996: xii) as the basis of postcolonial theatre. This is why the authors also take into consideration black Americans due to their status of ‘quasi-colonial domination and oppression’ (cf. ibid. 3). Yet, although their study provides the reader with a wider range of plays as well as useful interpretations of specific plays, their work lacks the thorough comparative analysis found in the works by Balme, Gilbert, and Tompkins.
leads the interest of this study to common theatrical forms of expression by these playwrights. Even though their plays show similarities to postcolonial dramatic studies, these works cannot be reduced to a mere expression of resistance to a white-dominated society. This is why the approach undertaken in this study will follow a plea voiced by Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert: analyzing theatre within multicultural contexts under the combined propositions made by postcolonial and intercultural dramatic studies (cf. Lo & Gilbert 2002: 36). Such an approach will be driven both “by a political imperative to interrogate the cultural hegemony that underlies imperial systems of governance, education, social and economic organization, and representation [i.e. postcolonial theatre]” (ibid. 35) as well as by the artistic expressions of a “hybrid derived from an intentional encounter between cultures and performing traditions [i.e. intercultural theatre]” (ibid. 36; cf. Balme 1999: 16). This combined analysis will focus attention on the specific character of plays written by people formerly oppressed by the forces of colonialism as well as to cultural specificities of writers belonging to the African diaspora in Canada.

A representatively wide range of topics as well as a broad basis for comparison has guided the choice of the corpus that will be laid out in the following. The first play that is taken into account in this study is Djanet Sears’s *Afrika Solo* (AS) which was produced in 1987 and published three years later. The play is insofar of high importance as it was the first play ever staged in Canada by a woman of African descent. In an autobiographical account, Sears, herself the daughter of a Guyanese father and a Jamaican mother, explores the complex construction of her own identity by travelling back to Africa – not least because she feels constantly confronted by racist stereotypical representations of Africans in Canadian popular media. Sears’s second play, a prequel to a classical text in the canon of European literature, namely Shakespeare’s *Othello*, is *Harlem Duet* (HD) which premiered in Toronto in 1997 and was published in the same year. In contrast to Shakespeare’s play, Sears’s adaptation does not present the male hero but his first wife Billie, a black female figure created by Sears in order to emphasize the oppression felt by black women in a white society. With this play, Sears revolutionized the Canadian canon

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12 Due to the wide range of plays by African Canadians available, the selection for this study appeared to be a difficult task; it could have just as well included plays by e.g. Lisa Codrington, maxine bailey and ahdri zhina mandiela [sic.]. References to their plays will be drawn when they support the argumentation. Although the choice of plays stands in the legacy of previous studies by laying a major focus on the works by Djanet Sears – as explained above, she is the most successful female African Canadian playwright – this study draws attention to two further promising, less known playwrights, namely Lorena Gale and Trey Anthony. Especially research on Trey Anthony has been very scarce until today.

13 For reasons of clarity and comprehensibility, I will refer to the specific plays by the use of the abbreviations given in the List of Abbreviations (cf. ii).
as she was the first black playwright to have her work staged at the famous Stratford Festival, a prestigious, mostly white mainstream theatre festival that stands in a European tradition (cf. Kidnie 2009: 71).

Following a chronological order, the next play under consideration is Lorena Gale’s *Angélique* (*A*), a play set in slavery times in Montreal that was first performed in 1998. Gale expands the representation of racism by skilfully relating contemporary racial discrimination to its origins in colonial practices and the supposed superiority of the white colonizer. In contrast to this play, Trey Anthony’s ‘*Da Kink in My Hair (DKH)*’ exclusively deals with contemporary incidents of racism while, at the same time, maintaining a humorous tone. Only a short time after its initial success at the Fringe Festival in Toronto in 2001, this play has been turned into an equally successful television series. The corpus will be completed by Djanet Sears’s most recent play, *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God (ABG)*, first performed in 2001 and published in 2003. Besides portraying direct racist actions against a black community near Toronto, this play also deals with the silencing of minority voices in the official discourse of European historiography, thus tying in perfectly with the other plays in this analysis.

All three playwrights under consideration can be called postcolonial writers because they “have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism, or […] descended from migrant families, […] and] deal with diaspora experience and its many consequences” (McLeod 2000: 33). In order to unite these different identities rooted in the same origins, the term ‘African diaspora’ will reoccur throughout this paper. Robin Cohen tellingly describes ‘diasporas’ as

> communities of people living together in one country who ‘acknowledge that ‘the old country’ – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions […]. [A] member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background.

(Cohen, cited in McLeod 2000: 207)

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14 As mentioned above, Djanet Sears, who was born in England to a Guyanese father and a Jamaican mother, combines in herself the legacy of two former British colonies as well as a tradition of slavery. Trey Anthony’s parents are both of Jamaican origin. Little is known about Lorena Gale’s background, besides the fact that she is a black, bilingual playwright born in Montreal as the daughter of immigrants.

15 The concept of “diaspora” is insofar of paramount importance to postcolonial studies as it shows how “historically disenfranchised peoples have developed tactics to challenge their subordinate status” (Chariandy, cited in Cohen 2008: 14).
This means that, although the playwrights in question have not experienced migration themselves, they share a link to common ethnic roots and a history transmitted to them over generations. Moreover, they also share a legacy of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization, a fact that is fostered by Lorena Gale’s account of her own experience in theatrical institutions in Vancouver. Criticizing the assumption that all theatrical performance takes a European point of view as its vantage point, she states:

Black theatre, itself, would become marginalized to the point of non-existence. The black theatrical experience would be diminished to a few painful, negative, stereotypical representations, or an accumulation of appropriated images and issues filtered through Eurocentric perceptions, watered down for mainstream consumption [...]. The ethnic make-up of Canada has changed, but canadian [sic.] theatre has remained the same. Too cowardly to risk reflecting the cultural richness and diversity of post-modern canadian [sic.] society, it serves a dying, white audience a tasteless, unnourishing gruel of the same theatrical fare it dined on centuries ago.

(Gale 1995: 17f.)

This account shows that African Canadian playwrights find themselves in a manifold situation of diaspora as they are “[m]arginalized by the dominant culture of their adopted homelands, geographically distanced from their countries of original displacement, and forcibly wrenched from their land of ancestral origin” (Simm 2002: 77; cf. Balme 1995: 28). Moreover, Gale’s statement reveals the fact that, at least in the 1990s, the Canadian stage had not yet adapted to the features of a multicultural society. Yet, the positive reception these three playwrights have met demonstrates that ethnic minorities are laying claim to the contemporary stage after all.

In order to complete the definition of the underlying corpus, a word has to be said on the choice of exclusively female works. First of all, several male points of view about racism have already found their way into the canon. Plays by black Canadian playwrights such as Andrew Moodie or George Elroy Boyd met larger popular acclaim as well as more thorough academic research than plays by their female colleagues. Secondly, women in the colonial context are often characterized as being “twice colonised – by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too” (McLeod 2000: 175). According to postcolonial theorists, contemporary societies still perpetuate this legacy. Women apparently find themselves in a much more severe state of repression because of an “overlap between patriarchal, economic and racial oppression” (Ashcroft 2007: 94). One of the founders of postcolonial studies, the Indian-born professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, expresses this situation in a flippant though accurate manner: “Clearly, if you are
poor, black, and female you get it in three ways” (Spivak 2001: 1454). This assessment suggests that the analysis of plays by female playwrights – which often feature women as protagonists – may convey more intense instances of racism, discrimination and oppression. In any case, women “continue to offer creative defiance to a world in need of [their] particular vision, by virtue of a unique vantage point of race and gender” (Sears 1992: 63).

First, this paper highlights this “unique vantage point” with regard to the topic of racism that manifests itself, in some form or another, in each of these plays. To this aim, racism cannot only be reduced to direct, violent actions against ethnic minorities but should also include more subtle ways of discrimination and its even wider scope of mental traumas (resulting from colonialism) and the inability of vital (love) relationships within the black community. An analysis of these common topics will allow us to embed them into the much wider context of postcolonial theories and fiction as they point the finger at racist tendencies in contemporary ‘white’ Canadian society.

Chapter 3 will then relate these topics to the aforementioned postcolonial theatre and performance studies that will be analyzed with respect to the use of traditional enactments, language and music, body language, the concept of ‘writing back’, and the rewriting of Eurocentric historiography. However, a reading merely subsumed under the postcolonial headline of ‘resistance’ will quickly reach its limitations. This is why, within each subchapter, the analysis will frequently refer to the specific situation of Africans in the North American diaspora, thus taking features of intercultural theatre into account as well (cf. Balme 1999: 15ff.; Lo & Gilbert 2002: 36ff.).

Yet, the strategies provided by the analysis along the lines of postcolonial and intercultural theatre cannot fully explain how all of the five plays achieve their effective criticism of racism in contemporary Canadian society. Therefore, the fourth chapter will illuminate further theatrical elements by the help of which the playwrights approach their topics to the spectators and try to create an understanding for their cause without directly blaming them for their own eventual involvement in discriminatory practices. By treating serious topics with humour, and by using space and time structures as well as extra-dramatical references effectively, the playwrights bridge the gap between the spectators and the action on stage. Thus, they emphasize their preoccupation with contemporary Canada – including direct political and social allusions. Altogether, this study will demonstrate how the three playwrights combine strategies of postcolonial theatre, cultural specificities arisen from their diasporic situation, and conventional theatrical elements in
order to directly and politically criticize racism in contemporary society. After all, race does matter in Canada – even in the 21st century.

2 Racism as Central Topic

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, racism is defined as “[t]he belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races” (OED Online: ‘Racism’). Although debates about skin colour had already existed during the Renaissance, the idea of race as a biologically defining concept of human character and behaviour was given a pseudo-scientific foundation during the time of European colonialism and imperialism in the 19th century. To organize social hierarchies, i.e. to position themselves above the indigenous populations they met during their expansionist practices, white European colonizers had recurrence to allegedly biological and scientific proofs (e.g. skull shape or nose width) for the pretended weakness, ‘degeneration’, or ‘ugliness’ of darker skinned human beings (cf. Nelson & Nelson 2004: 11). Consequently, physiognomic traits were not only used to distinguish between ethnic groups but also to establish a hierarchical division of races. These ideas provoked various forms of discrimination against visibly different, i.e. non-white, groups. Although discrimination based on skin colour and ethnic origin has officially been de-legalized, racism has implicitly persisted in many modern societies – as for instance in Canada – until today.

Racial discrimination in contemporary Canadian society is a multi-layered phenomenon. As Nelson and Nelson persuasively argue, racism is not only expressed through direct (violent) actions against minorities but also implicitly in public institutions and everyday life,16 including stereotypical representations and prejudices conveyed by media and popular culture.17 The Department of Canadian Heritage adds useful points to this definition, namely that racism includes even such subtle forms as denying or silencing ethnic diversity in popular media, or the assumption of whiteness as standard in official documents, scientific discourse, and research (cf. Cassin 2007: 5). In each of these cases,

16 Nelson and Nelson list a number of explicit racist (violent and non-violent) measures that occurred during the last years. Their list begins with stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities in official campaigns and ends with racial brutalization and abuse committed by police forces (cf. Nelson & Nelson 2004: 15f.).

17 This broad definition of racism, which will be the basis of this study, is also in line with a report on racism and discrimination in Canada conducted by the Department of Canadian Heritage where racism is characterized “as systemic in institutions and practiced in culture, communication, (absence of) representation of diversity and assumption of dominant paradigms” (Cassin 2007: 5).
an opposition between Canada’s white and non-white population is made up, which leads to an exclusion of everybody who does not belong to the white majority.

All of the plays in this corpus bear witness to such instances of racism, thus rendering audible the marginalized and suppressed position of African Canadians in contemporary society. Understandably, racism cannot be exhaustively analyzed in all of its nuances here. That is why the paper will mainly focus on direct acts of racism, institutional discrimination, and biased representations in the media as well as on the origins of racial discrimination in the times of slavery and its consequences.

2.1 The Legacy of Slavery and Colonialism

Concerning the origins of racism against people of colour, the institution of slavery and its supposed justification by use of racial hierarchies plays a primordial role. Many historians agree that during the past decades, Canada has successfully denied the legacy of slavery within its own borders, a strategy based on a “dichotomization of Canada with the United States, which is made to bear the full burden of the collective racial sins of North America” (Nelson & Nelson 2004: 3). In this context, Sears speaks of Canada’s “historical amnesia” (Sears 2000: i) with regard to its own colonial past.

In a foreword to the novel The Hanging of Angélique, a book which fundamentally challenges the idea of Canada as a haven for fugitive slaves, the African Canadian writer George Elliott Clarke relates this attitude back to the self-definition of the Canadian people as “a nation of good, Nordic, ‘pure’, mainly White folks, as opposed to the lawless, hot-tempered, impure, mongrel Americans, with their messy history of slavery, civil war, segregation, assassinations, lynching, riots, and constant social turmoil” (Clarke 2005: XII). Thus, in order to set itself apart from the United States as “that country to our south with its awful racism” (Nelson & Nelson 2004: 3), Canada has silenced its colonial past by creating its own myth about the non-involvement in slavery practices – not least thanks to the Underground Railroad. This institution, that helped slaves escape from the United States, has consequently “become a legendary part of the Black experience in Canada” (Abdi 2005: 51). However, historians trace back slavery in Canada as far as to the beginnings of European settlement. This is why Clarke concludes that “because colonial

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18 As this short survey cannot fully attend to additional examples of discrimination, they should at least be mentioned here. For instance, the play DKH portrays internal racism within the African Canadian community as well as the irreconcilable struggles for racial and gender equality. Moreover, DKH addresses supplementary grievances in contemporary Canadian society such as homophobia (with a focus on the African Canadian community).
Canada held African slaves, its society fostered anti-Black racism – Negrophobia that persists in Canada today” (Clarke 2005: XVI).

The play A deals with exactly these origins of racial discrimination during colonial times. The protagonist, Angélique, a figure based on an actual slave woman living in Montreal during the 18th century, has to work in her white master’s household until she is accused of and hanged for arson in 1734. In order to portray this historical incident, Gale “begins with the simplest of facts [i.e. Angélique’s conviction] and then traces the way in which that ‘fact’ might have been constructed” (Borody 2001: 153), thus exploring the hardships of Angélique’s life. While having to work for her master François she is subject to sexual assault, racism, and discrimination by whites (Clarke 2005: XV).

To emphasize these discriminatory circumstances, the play points to the definition of black slaves within the settler society not as human beings but as property. It is clearly demonstrated that François and his business partner Ignace see an arrangement of paring their slaves Angélique and César purely as a profitable investment which will pay off as concrete monetary value. They merely consider Angélique’s baby as “profit” that will “fetch a good price when the time comes” (A: 18). This idea becomes especially prominent during François’s account of how he bought Angélique at a slave market, where she is described as a “luxury” good in the eyes of the slave trader (cf. A: 4).19 What is more, slaves are not only considered as property but are constantly compared to animals. During his testimony in court, Ignace even places the willingness to work brought about by horses above that of slaves while he states that “[s]laves are notoriously inefficient and unwilling. […] To kindness and forbearance they return insolence and contempt” (A: 62).

Even Thérèse, François’s wife, echoes her husband’s prejudices about white superior civilization when she accuses Angélique and Manon of “savage behaviour” (A: 26). It though becomes clear that Thérèse is not completely involved in her husband’s colonial practices but rather plays a biased role within this society: on the one hand being in a dominant position towards Angélique and Manon, on the other hand suffering from mental humiliation as well, considering that her husband seeks sexual pleasures with his black concubines.

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19 The most extreme form of reducing slaves to property instead of considering them as human beings is generally termed ‘chattel slavery’. “It was distinguished by a system of organized capture of individuals in Africa, transportation for sale as slaves, and subsequent treatment as items of personal property, which could be bought and sold” (Oxford Reference Online: ‘Slavery’).
As Gilbert and Tompkins point out:

The case of settler women exemplifies the multiple locations that the female subject can occupy within the discursive matrix of imperialism. Already complicit in the attempted containment – or even erasure – of indigenous peoples from the historical record, settler women are themselves frequently victims of patriarchal control. None the less, simply to position them as inferior to white men […] yet superior to indigenous men and women sets up a false hierarchy that threatens to reinforce the divisive categories and classes that imperialism institutes.

(Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 124f.)

Thérèse’s ambiguous behaviour stresses the fact that, although she feels connected to the two female slaves based on their common gender, she does not want to position herself on the same level because of her white race. Having decided to sell Angélique, she repeats the discourse dominating this imperial society: “You will lie with anyone. […] Gamelin is right. You are like animals” (A: 26). These words, once again, reduce Angélique to a non-human status – justified in a double sense: by her ethnicity as well as by her gender.

This attitude seems to give the white masters a right to penetrate into their slaves’ most intimate moments. While observing the first (sexual) contact between their slaves – an act that is compared to the behaviour of dogs – Ignace comes up with the idea of conducting a study on “[t]he unusual mating practices of the African in captivity” (A: 15). As such a study supposedly attributes a scientific basis to the ‘natural inferiority’ of slaves, this statement alludes to mechanisms briefly pointed to in the beginning of chapter 2.

During colonial times, this pseudo-scientific discourse was commonly mixed with religious stereotypes. Gale employs the native servant Manon, a figure which is close to Angélique in terms of social status, in order to sum up the popularly held belief about Africans as not being civilized because of their ‘heathen’ practices. She tells Angélique: “They say you come from the land of the devil. That the blackness of your skin is the blackness of your soul scorched by the fires of hell” (A: 55). This statement reflects the belief held by many colonizers that they were on a mission by God to conquer

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20 In her review of the play, Claire Borody emphasizes the power relations expressed by the male gaze when it comes to denoting ownership or possession of Angélique (Borody 2001: 154). However, Gilbert and Tompkins rightly point to the problematic fact that theatre perpetuates these power relations by subordinating the figures on stage to the audience’s gaze (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 248).

21 The protagonist of HD, Billie, adds a contemporary layer to this practice by naming books which, still in the 1990s, claimed to scientifically prove race-based differences in intelligence, e.g. the highly controversial book The Bell Curve (HD: 52). This book “echoed and gave academic legitimacy to many of the institutionalized beliefs about African peoples within North American society” (Codjoe 2005: 76).
“uncivilized” territories and spread Christianity. Nevertheless, even though Manon tries to distance herself from Angélique by insisting on the fact that she is a servant, not a slave (ibid.), it becomes clear that her social position is in no way higher than that of Africans. Angélique repeats stereotypical beliefs about First Nations by retelling: “They say that you are bloodthirsty savages. Pagan children, shameless in their nakedness” (ibid.). Historians confirm this attitude: “European settlers often expressed racist views toward the native population, reinforced by religious beliefs in the Indians' satanic nature and God's mandate to the colonists to conquer them” (Oxford Reference Online: ‘Racism’).

The most intense reference to racial discrimination is made towards the end of the play. Just before her execution, Angélique addresses a long monologue to her persecutors. In this monologue she accuses the representatives of this colonial society who arrest her and her brothers and sisters of “ebony colour […] for their difference” (A: 71). She laments that their screams fall “on deaf ears” (ibid.) and remain unheard. Thus, by exposing Canada’s colonial past, the play deconstructs the assumed non-involvedness in slavery practices by employing Angélique as a symbol of the position of black women in Canada.

Alan Filewod puts the achievement of this play in a nutshell by saying:

> Perhaps the most harrowing aspect of the play’s historical vision is the complexity of the slave system which it exposes – a system where aboriginal First Peoples and Africans are caught in a web of slavery, where commodity slavery and indentured servitude intertwine, where slavery is systematically enforced through rape.

(Filewod 2001: 32)

This complex slave system has had disastrous consequences and, still today, affects the lives of black people. This aspect is shown in HD with its three different subplots, one of which is set during the times of slavery in the 1860s. By introducing this subplot into the play, “Sears argues past histories and cultural memories of black / white desire haunt contemporary relations” (Elam 2008: 43). In line with the psychological studies of Frantz Fanon, the protagonist of the main plot, Billie, relates the legacies of slavery to the human mind. When she asks her landlady Magi: “Did you ever consider what hundred of years of slavery did to the African American psyche?” (HD: 103), she expresses her opinion about colonialism as “a disease that distorts human relations and renders everyone within it

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22 Gilbert and Tompkins even speak of the Bible in the postcolonial context as “a master narrative which has assisted and justified the imperial project” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 43).

23 Marginally, religion also plays a role in AS, where Djanet explains that the French colonizers in Benin, Africa, called the country “The Kingdom of Judas” because of their first impression of this, in their eyes, unreligious and thus uncivilized people (cf. AS: 53). Furthermore, she ironically criticizes the missionaries sent to the ‘dark continent’ to save the “sinners from an eternity of darkness” (AS: 57).
‘sick’” (Loomba 1998: 143). Her question also reflects Fanon’s assumption that colonialism “dislocated and distorted the colonised’s psyche. The colonised could not ‘cope’ with what was happening because colonialism eroded his very being, his very subjectivity” (ibid. 142f.). Demonstrating different mental diseases within a postcolonial context, Fanon stresses the fact that colonialism destroyed slaves not only physically but also mentally (cf. Fanon 2004). According to this theory, a constant repetition of the same arguments in favour of white superiority finally makes blacks believe in their own ‘inferiority’: they internalize the idea of belonging to an ‘ignoble’ race and thus agree to their oppressed status in society.

In an afterword to her first play, AS, Sears explains how this ‘mental colonization’ can still have dangerous effects on people of colour in contemporary society. Being constantly reminded of their assumed inferior status, Sears is convinced that black people develop “a type of internalized oppression [from which…] no black person in this society has been spared” (Sears 1990: 95). Yet, the consequences of slavery do not only have devastating effects on individual persons but also on relationships between people. After all, it is not surprising that Billie in HD, suffering from this oppressing relationship that still exists in white societies today, will find herself in a hospital for mental diseases at the end of the play.24 At this moment, she powerfully asserts her ancestral heritage as an inevitable destiny when she observes of herself: “Trapped in history. A history trapped in me” (HD: 101; cf. Kidnie 2001: 42). In psychological terms, Billie’s repressed past (and with it the whole history of slavery experienced by her ancestors) returns to her in order to haunt her present life; a suggestion that becomes most obvious in her relationship with Othello.

2.2 The Impossibility of Relationships

At least since the publication of Frantz Fanon’s book Black Skin, White Masks in 1952, postcolonial theorists have discussed the idea of an impossibility felt by blacks to enter into a fulfilled relationship with either a black or a white person. It is striking that broken relationships appear in all of the plays in this corpus; yet they are illustrated in different nuances. While Djanet in AS leaves her African boyfriend Ben behind by returning to Canada, and Lorraine (Rainey) Baldwin Johnson in ABG is about to divorce

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24 Although this study will not explore the topic of mental diseases in the postcolonial context any further, it is still important to note that this symbol frequently comes up in literature by black writers. The play Cast Iron by African Canadian playwright Lisa Codrington is one of many examples in which the ghosts of past, colonial times have been hunting descendants of slaves until today.
her husband and father of her dead child, the analysis will deal with the inverse case: black women being left by their partners as illustrated in the plays *HD, A,* and *DKH.*

As has already been hinted at in the previous chapter, the ideas laid out by Fanon reverberate especially in the play *HD.* The prologue, featuring the characters of Billie and Othello (yet simply called ‘He’ and ‘She’), introduces the story that is acted out over and over again by the same figures in all of the play’s three plots. In the 1860s, in 1928, and in the present, Othello abandons black Billie for white Mona.25 The first scene jumps right into the present action, where the audience learns that Billie has been devastated for a long time because her husband has left her after nine years of relationship. During this time, Billie had given up her private career plans in order to financially support him. Based on Fanon’s assumptions that the impossibility of vital relationships within the black community is a consequence of colonialism, the fact that Othello leaves Billie for Mona cannot only be read on an individual but also on a collective scale. Consequently, the reason for Othello leaving his black wife is similar in all of the three plots: gaining the respect of a white woman.26

Referring to his desire for white respect, Billie’s landlady Magi mockingly describes Othello as “Booker T. Uppermiddleclass III. He can be found in predominantly White neighbourhoods. He refers to other Blacks as ‘them’” (*HD*: 66). The fact that Othello white-washes his life by distancing himself from other members of the black community is summed up by the 1862 Billie: “‘The only way to become White’, the psychic said, ‘was to enter the Whiteness.’ […] He one with her, for a single shivering moment became… her. Her and her Whiteness” (*HD*: 91). By pronouncing these words, Billie places “the power dynamics in this particular love triangle within the larger schematic of contemporary American race relations” (Dickinson 2002: 199) due to allusions to Fanon’s studies. In the chapter *The Man of Color and the White Woman,* Fanon explains a black man’s desire for white love: “By loving me she proves me that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man” (Fanon 1967: 63). By being loved by a white woman, Fanon and Billie similarly argue, a black man himself becomes white. Consequently, a black man is not able to indulge in a self-completing relationship with a woman of his own ethnicity.

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25 Her name alludes to Shakespeare’s character of Desdemona in *Othello.* The implications of this rewriting of Shakespeare’s play will be dealt with in chapter 3.5.

26 The expression of respect depends on the temporal circumstances of the respective plot: In the 1860s plot, Othello gets the respect of his slave mistress because he “feel[s] like…a man” at her side (*HD*: 63), in 1928, Mona sees Othello’s gift as an actor and gives him his big role as a Shakespearean actor (cf. *HD*: 99), and in the present, Othello is respected by her within the academic circle (cf. Sanders 2000: 558).
This attitude is closely connected to Othello’s internalized inferiority complex. He explains: “The Black feminist position as I experience it in this relationship, leaves me feeling unrecognized as a man. The message is, Black men are poor fathers, poor partners, or both” (HD: 70). Therefore, “Mona comes to embody for Othello the promise of what he might achieve as something precisely other than a black man” (Kidnie 2009: 72). When Othello finally terminates his relationship with Billie, she expresses the overall impossibility of love between a black man and a black woman: “I had a dream. A dream that one day a Black man and a Black woman might find… Where jumping a broom was a solemn eternal vow” (HD: 56). Yet, as “racial separation now and past oppression have undermined the relations between black men and black women” (Bruckner 2002: n.p.), for the moment, Billie’s vision must remain unfulfilled.

Exactly as in HD, interpersonal relationships in A are completely reduced to colour. This becomes most obvious when Ignace’s servant César asks Angélique in a moment of rage: “You haven’t had enough of one white man [i.e. François, who raped her] you have to have another?” (A: 45). Despite the fact that, at the beginning of the play, Angélique and César agree that they are not really attracted by each other, César feels offended when Angélique chooses the white indentured servant Claude over him – Fanon’s inferiority complex resounds again. While it does not become clear if he only acts out of jealousy or if he really cares for Angélique, he pronounces a destructive judgment when he says: “You think you’re special. He loves you… Dream on. Haven’t you been a slave long enough to know that there is only one thing a white man wants from a slave woman” (A: 46). In César’s world, a black female slave can only be sexually exploited by a white man but never truly loved. According to his point of view, society is built on a deep opposition between black and white which will never be dissolved. He considers race a much stronger dividing line than social status; an idea that is expressed by the following statement: “There’s only one thing worse than a rich white master and that’s a poor white who wants to be one. You think he’s on your side now. But watch out. ‘Cause in the end they are all white together” (A: 47).

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According to this theory, black men have internalized an inferiority complex: “If [the black man] is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation” (Fanon 1967: 100).

‘Jumping a broom’ is acted out by Billie and Othello during a flashback moment in Act II, Scene 7 and refers to an ancient African wedding ceremony. Chapter 3.1 will deal with the significance of rituals.
In the end, after Claude and Angélique have escaped together, César’s pessimistic outlook on society proves true because the relationship between Angélique and her white lover Claude does not work out. Knowing that with Angélique he could never exhaust the possibilities laid out for him in the new world, he leaves her with the words: “I’ve done everything for you. I’ve burnt… I’ve burnt down my dreams for you. But with you, I’ll always be running. And I can’t run anymore. I can’t. I’m sorry. I just can’t do it. Please… understand. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.” (A: 68). This renders obvious that Claude “dreams of becoming another François, that his dream of power and wealth reiterates the conditions that enslaved her” (Filewod 2001: 36). Resembling his white master, profit means more to him than a love relationship; and he is willing to sacrifice Angélique for his personal dreams.

The next play under consideration, Trey Anthony’s DKH, does not discuss this deep historical legacy of broken relationships between blacks but rather moves this topic to a purely contemporary context. The play is set in Novelette’s hair studio in Toronto where a line of Black women have her hair done. The first black costumer taking a seat in Novelette’s chair is Shawnette. Through the intermediary function of Novelette, who can read her customers’ minds by simply touching their hair, the audience learns about Shawnette’s hardships. Having supported her (black) boyfriend’s career at medical school for years, he has now left her in favour of a woman with whom he will have “beige kids” (DKH: 267). Though not stated explicitly, this allusion to her whiteness is just all too obvious – and the parallels to HD are poignant. Exactly as in HD, whiteness dangerously hovers above the whole play, thus rendering fulfilled relationships within the black community completely impossible.

### 2.3 Direct Acts of Racism

After having considered the rather historical approach towards the topic of racism, the focus will now be laid on overt racist acts experienced by blacks in contemporary society. This most commonly accepted definition of racism refers “to physical assaults that have been perpetrated by bigoted individuals, racial slurs and harassment in schools or in the workplace, defacing property with racial graffiti, and similar overt acts” (Henry et al. 2000: 16f.). All of the plays share a common means of performance of these experiences insofar as direct acts of racism are rarely acted out on stage (except for the rape scene in A) but
rather retold by a character.²⁹ Two instances of racism in form of (verbal) attacks directed against people of colour should be examined in more detail:

The black protagonist of AS, Djanet,³⁰ recalls that her schoolmates called her “nigger” (AS: 36) and told her to “go back to where [she] come[s] from” (AS: 38).³¹ Not only her schoolmates but also her teacher displays racist attitudes: By comparing the riots which followed the ‘death’ of Martin Luther King to the reaction of the white population after that of John F. Kennedy, she sees her point proven that it is necessary to imprison African Americans because “[c]ivilized human beings do not act that way” (AS: 51). Furthermore, her teacher behaves as if seven-year-old Djanet was responsible for all the ‘misbehaviours’ of her ‘race’; a traumatic experience which still hunts the adult Djanet. Although she passed the first years of her school time in Great Britain and not in Canada, her experience there can be transferred to that of black children in other ‘white’ societies: At the age of 15, when her family moved to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, she was faced with the same problems. Being the only black child in the entire school, she was exotic to such a point that the other children even asked to touch her hair (cf. AS: 55).

Not only in school but also in a more private context, Djanet was subjected to direct acts of racism, e.g. during her search for a room to rent. While her ‘blackness’ could not be noticed when she called about the room in advance, the landlord told her that the room was already taken at the moment she arrived there (cf. AS: 40). This incident reflects the results of actual studies on racism in housing as experienced by members of visible minorities in Canada (cf. Henry et al. 2000: 109ff.). Although all of these examples include no physically violent acts, the many incidents Djanet has to face in contemporary society confirm her impression of Canada being a latently racist society. However, Sears exercises a rather moderate kind of criticism as Djanet never explicitly states this impression. After all, she never directly mentions the term “racist”.

²⁹ It remains debatable if these epic tendencies are just a coincidence or if they can be related to the general oral tradition in African plays. In any case, it is necessary at this point to stress the importance of orality and story-telling in indigenous cultures (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 126f.; Sears 2000: i). However, one cannot uphold the assumption of a general absence of violence in drama by female playwrights when considering, for instance, the plays by contemporary female Canadian playwright Judith Thompson.

³⁰ Actually, it is only during her journey to Africa that Janet changes her name into “Djanet” (cf. AS: 54). Changing one’s name can be read as an important act of taking on a new consciousness that relates a character to his or her ethnic heritage and can be found with other African American persons such as Le Roi Jones / Amiri Baraka or Malcolm X. For reasons of clarity, this paper will not differentiate between the two names.

³¹ This sentence confuses Djanet because she does not know if this place would be Jamaica, Guyana, or any country in Africa. The feeling of not knowing one’s roots is a typical motif in literature by and about people of hybrid identities (cf., e.g. the short story “So What Are You, Anyway?” by Lawrence Hill) and is thematized in postcolonial studies. Marc Maufort, e.g. points to the difficulties of identity formation in a multicultural society (Maufort 2003: 145).
The play *ABG* draws attention to everyday concerns of black people in a more overt way. Pastor Michael, Rainey’s husband from whom she is about to divorce during the course of the play, has to experience a sort of racism that touches his innermost realm: his church. Michael, almost unbelievably, tells: “They’ve desecrated the church – on the walls – on the outside…. They’ve scrawled ‘Nigger’ and ‘Niggers Go Home’ all over it, everywhere” (*ABG*: 81f.). In a sermon, Michael confirms what historians like George Elliott Clarke say about racism, namely that it is silenced by the majority of people as something that does not happen anymore – and, more specifically, that does not happen on Canadian soil. The dichotomy between Canada and the United States that has briefly been mentioned in the introduction of this paper is voiced by the pastor as follows:

‘This kind of thing never happens here.’ That’s what they think. That’s what we think. ‘Everything is fine here in this country.’ We’ve grown so comfortable that we believe racism, no, white supremacy is a phenomenon that only happens south of the border. Well folks, we live in the south of the north. (*ABG*: 82)

In a strategy of geographically approaching Ontario to the United States, Michael dissolves the imaginary border between discriminatory and multicultural states. Instead of giving up hope when faced with discrimination, Michael feels strengthened in his decision to fight for a more equal society. He says: “[W]e will continue to fight for our right to take up space on this earth” (ibid.). These words directly voice the hopes of playwright Djanet Sears for her niece, who expresses in the foreword to *HD* that she “wanted there to be no question of her right to take up space on this planet” (Sears 1997: 12).

### 2.4 Institutional Racism

Racism has various shades and does not only occur in direct actions but also in the more ‘covert form’ of institutional racism that occurs in “institutions such as government departments, educational institutions, corporate boardrooms, hospital wings, religious organizations” (Nelson & Nelson 2004: 32). The following interrogation of contemporary realities of African Canadians subscribes to this impression:

[I]t is clear that while legal racism and / or socially sanctioned exclusion from viable sectors of economic, political, and educational development have been neutralized, institutional forms of exclusion have not yet been completely overcome. (Abdi 2005: 49)
Thus, it is not surprising that examples of institutional racism occur in the five plays, more precisely racism in educational institutions – universities in particular – in state institutions such as the police, and at the workplace.

The most prominent example of racism in the academic field occurs in *HD*. When Othello tells Billie about his academic achievements, he complains that his white colleagues think that he got his post at university only due to measures of affirmative action and not because of his qualification (*HD*: 53). He feels that he has to prove the ability to do his job properly every day while “any error […] only goes to prove them [i.e. his white colleagues] right” (*HD*: 54). When racism ties in with gender questions, issues of oppression are even more poignant. On the one hand, Billie, exactly like Othello, feels that she constantly has to prove she can do as well as her white colleagues (cf. *HD*: 65). On the other hand – and this makes resound the theory of ‘double oppression’ – she as a woman “sacrificed so much. Gave up her share of the trust from her mother’s life insurance to send him [Othello] through school” (*HD*: 31). However, after their separation, Othello is not willing to pay the tuition for even one single university course for his ex-wife. This attitude shows parallels to the play *DKH*, where it is, once again, a black woman, Shawnette, who gives up her career and sacrifices her dreams in order to (financially) support her husband but is left alone in the end (cf. *DKH*: 267).

The play *DKH* shows further parallels to *HD* by addressing issues of institutional racism. Although the third episode starts out with a funny introduction of the businesswoman Sherelle, her problems directly point to questions of racial inequality. In Sherelle’s words, a black woman at university can either be a “hired help”, an “exotic lay”, or the “recipient of affirmative action, employment equity or some old white man’s guilt” (*DKH*: 273). As a result, behind her businesswoman behaviour, Sherelle feels desperately overworked, always having to prove to her white colleagues that she is capable of her university job (cf. ibid.). Her life puts her under so much pressure that, at the end of this episode, she commits suicide by taking pills.

Yet, the educational system is not the only state institution that displays racial discrimination. The play *DKH* shows that it also occurs, for instance, within the police, where it is expressed by a biased behaviour of policemen towards blacks. Patsy, the second woman who takes a seat in the hairdresser’s chair, laments her son’s death. Romey has been shot during a police control while innocently walking his way home from a school dance. In a very emotional speech, Patsy accuses the police of racism against black boys:
White men in blue uniforms, hunting them, stalking them, killing them! How come we protect animals in this country better than we protect Black children? You need a license to shoot a damn bird! You go to jail for leaving your dog outside! But you can leave my baby, lying on the ground for 25 minutes before anybody calls an ambulance!

(DKH: 270)

By comparing governmental behaviour towards black children to their behaviour towards animals, Patsy makes an impressive comment on contemporary society. Her ironic statement that black boys cannot grow up in this society because “there ain’t no sign posted ‘warning Black boys are in danger of becoming extinct” (ibid.) points the finger at a serious problem felt by members of visible minorities: “They [African Canadians] are more likely to be stopped, questioned, searched, and generally harassed by the police” (Abdi 2005: 57). Sociological studies foster the point of view expressed by Patsy, namely that “Black crime appears to be becoming the central focus of police activity that leads directly to the reinforcement of a racist ideology” (Henry et al. 2000: 184). As these two scholars go on to say, “[p]olice shootings of Blacks in major urban centres such as Montreal and Toronto in recent years have brought the entire policing system under increasing suspicion by the Black community” (ibid. 191).

This statement ties in with Billie’s (HD) belief that all realms of society are pervaded by institutional racism, a fact that leaves blacks with only one, desperate possibility, namely incorporating whiteness. Billie says:

[P]rogress is going to White schools…proving we’re as good as Whites…like some holy grail…all that we’re taught in those White schools. All that is in us. Our success in Whiteness. We religiously seek to have what they have. Access to the White man’s world. The White man’s job.

(HD: 55)

Although both Billie and Othello have to face racist discrimination in (academic) life, they respond in completely different ways. While Othello is convinced that “[j]injustice against Blacks can’t be cured by injustice against Whites” (HD: 53), thus challenging the whole concept of affirmative action, Billie is positive that these measures help create better opportunities for future generations.

This disagreement reflects the overall attitude towards ‘race’ as pronounced by the two figures. While Othello is “tired of this race shit” and searches for “White respect” (HD: 55) because he feels that Africa does not have anything to do with him anymore (cf. HD: 73), Billie is almost consumed by her anger towards white society. Whereas Othello has completely embraced popular American culture, e.g. “Wordsworth, Shaw, Leave it to
*Beaver, Dirty Harry* (HD: 73), Billie thinks “that Othello is selling out Black culture and heritage in a misguided effort to gain white respect” (Kidnie 2001: 42). However, Billie’s almost fanatic insistence on ethnic differences even alienates her closest friends. Pointing to the fact that racism can also mean overtly negative attitudes towards white people, Magi tells Billie: “Racism is a disease my friend, and your test just came back positive” (HD: 103). Billie has internalized her aversion against whiteness to such a point that even normally harmless things like sleep and night are connoted to her as being “white” because she associates them with discomfort (HD: 65). She almost feels personally attacked when she realizes that the majority of doctors in Harlem are white (cf. HD: 114).

Thus, in *HD*, “Sears explores two extreme responses to the racism faced in North American society – integration and separation – and finds each lacking” (Burnett 2002: 78). The intertextuality with Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and its inherent struggle between assimilationist and separationist strategies is obvious at this point.  

Similarly, the struggle between these two radically different approaches is never resolved in both of these plays. It is helpful to take up Kidnie’s argument that

this conflict might be seen as actually beyond resolution [because] Billie and Othello, not just exploring competing views within a shared conceptual framework, but trying to speak across incompatible paradigms of race relations, lack a shared ‘idiom’ by which to arbitrate this conflict.

(Kidnie 2009: 75)

In her next play, *ABG*, Sears again takes up these two contradictory, irreconcilable perspectives on racism by opposing the points of view of a father and his daughter. Portraying another incident of institutional racism – this time at the work place – the audience learns that Rainey’s father Abendigo was trained as a lawyer but that he “used to wash toilets, was a sleeping car porter on Canadian Pacific, for years before anyone would hire him as a lawyer” (*ABG*: 18).  

When he was finally allowed to work in his proper job, he had to make the cruel experience that his urge to assist black people in court without pay, was “an anomaly to [his colleagues]. A freak. A talking monkey” (*ABG*: 45). This realization “crush[ed] his faith in genuine change” (Sanders 2003:120).

Rainey, on the other hand, believes that times have changed and that Canada is not a racist country anymore. Her statements reflect the speech Michael pronounces after having

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32 In her introductory essay “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gI RL [sic.]” Sears acknowledges the heritage of black writers such as Lorraine Hansberry and Langston Hughes and the influence they have had on her work (cf. Sears 1997: 11ff.).

33 This statement reflects up-to-date sociological findings about “the existence of race-based barriers in the Canadian labour market” (Laryea & Hayfron 2005: 126).
found the derogatory scribbling on the walls of his church. Rainey’s words express what the majority of white people might think, namely: “This is not Detroit. We’re not in the sixties anymore. The struggle is over. What you fought for back then worked, I’m a doctor, was a doctor. I have choices. Things have changed. This is Canada. This is Canaan Land” (ABG: 44), thus even giving the country a biblical importance. To this, Abendigo responds that “[r]ight there in Ontario, in Dresden, Black tourists making pilgrimages to Josiah Henson’s grave […] would not be served in restaurants there” (ibid). For Abendigo, the struggle is by no means over. According to him, anti-racist programs are only “cutting down the weed and leaving the root” (ibid.). This conviction reflects Michael’s arguments in favour of a continued struggle for social equality.

Although Rainey confidently argues against this need, she has experienced institutional racism in the past herself. Being a trained doctor, she has to admit that “other doctors or patients assumed [she] was the nurse” (ibid.). She goes on to say: “Some patients didn’t even want me to treat them. But that’s changing too” (ibid.). Tellingly, Rainey has to experience that society has not really changed yet and that at least racial equality has not fully been achieved: When Doctor Radcliffe, the doctor in charge of Rainey’s father, greets Rainey and Michael, he takes it for granted that Michael is “Dr. Johnson” – and not Rainey (cf. ABG: 47).

2.5 Racism in the Media

As pointed out above, racial discrimination in Canada is “grounded within the privilege of whiteness as the unquestioned normative Western and Canadian identity” (Nelson & Nelson 2004: 3). By using a visual set of distinction, white Canadians construct themselves as the ‘norm’, thus positioning themselves above all non-whites. This process, which is called ‘othering’, was first described in the colonial context by Edward Said in his definition of the ‘Orient’. 34 He used the term ‘oriental’ to describe everything that was contrasted against the dominating (i.e. British and French) colonial power. Enlarging Said’s binary distinction between ‘occident’ and ‘orient’ to the general situation in a postcolonial world order, Spivak defines ‘othering’ as “the process by which imperial discourse creates its ‘others’ […]and] the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects” (Ashcroft 2007: 156). It is important to stress the power relations

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34 Said defines the concept of the ‘Orient’ as a process of European thinking with the aim of differentiating the occident from everything that it is not by means of talking, writing, and teaching. Therefore, ‘Orientalism’ as the process of embedding a concept of the ‘Orient’ into Western discourse means “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1995: 3).
that are transmitted through this process of ‘othering’, a process by which the colonial power positions itself as superior in relation to the dominated ‘other’.

Emphasizing racial differences (consciously or unconsciously) can therefore even today be seen as a consequence of ‘othering’ people due to their skin colour. This process often results in stereotypical representations that can be found in the media. Gilbert and Tompkins state that this dichotomy is still relevant in a neo-imperialist context because it is “exploited in Hollywood cinema and other forms of popular culture, as well as in the news media” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 259). Altogether, “racism perpetuates itself […] through the persistent representations of black and non-white peoples as ‘raced’, and white people as being neutrally ‘raced’, or not ‘raced’” (Oxford Reference Online: ‘Racism’). In sociological research, stereotypical representations in the media are discovered as being the most subtle, yet the most widely spread examples of racial discrimination. One could enumerate whole lists of negative character traits associated with visible minorities in the Canadian media according to which black people are generally portrayed as drug addicts, murderers, gangsters, savages, and primitives (cf. Henry et al. 2000: 301).

The play AS discusses the stereotypical representation of Africans in Canadian media in various ways. Already the epigraphs at the first pages of the play hint at this direction. First of all, Malcolm X is quoted, stating: “[T]he colonial powers of Europe projected the image of Africa negatively. They always project Africa in a negative light: jungle savages, cannibals, nothing civilized” (AS: 12). This epigraph allows Sears to put her core message in a nutshell: The play deals with the extent of stereotypical representations of black people in Canadian media. Nonetheless, with the help of the second quotation, namely “Beam me up, Scotty” (AS: 14), Djanet’s own dependence on media is emphasized because popular movies play an important role in her life. Although she clearly defines herself as part of this mainstream culture, Djanet criticizes the Westerners’ image of Africa from the beginning. Their idea of Africa as well as her personal perception of this country are not based on firsthand experience but on representations of it on television – a medium that more or less consciously reproduces common prejudices and stereotypes.35

Until her journey to Africa, Djanet’s knowledge was reduced to what she, herself, learned from television, namely that people in Africa were starving and that they were living in trees (AS: 17). She openly attacks popular movies which replicate portraits of “the stupid natives” who are turned into “either slaves, servants, or man-eating, savage,

35 With regard to television documentaries on Africa, Bennett speaks of “the National Geographic approach to the world” that is more concerned with African nature than its culture (Bennett 1995: 18).
Her favourite example is *Tarzan*, a film she highly criticizes for its ridicule, clear-cut distinction between good and evil and its all too simplistic and even false portrayal of African rituals. She remarks that “the Africans in every Tarzan movie [she has] seen to date, only know one song” (AS: 32). However, when she wants to impress the BaMbuti people she meets during her journey by singing this song they do not recognize it at all. Even the “actual BaMbuti chant that [she] learned in school” (AS: 84) is unfamiliar to this tribe; “Native as other is not only totalizing but, in this case, wrong” (Tompkins 1993: 36). This shows the biased and distorted image Western societies have of Africa as well as it reminds Djanet “of the ways in which cultural products are constructed to reflect an idealised appearance” (Nothof 2001: 206).

The whole dimension of this absurd process is reflected by Djanet’s visit to a cinema in Benin. She almost cannot believe Ben word’s that “[l]ast week they showed Tarzan. ‘Ivory in the jungle’” (AS: 74). This means that not only Western countries are confronted with stereotypical representations of ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilized’ Africans but the African population as well. While Djanet is surprised, not to say shocked, when she becomes aware of this distorted representation of her mother country in popular media, she does not place herself above the audience. Moreover, she expresses their mutual complicity within this system because, just like the audience, she has only had secondhand information about her native land during her time in Canada.

Altogether, the playwright accepts the fact that

irrespective of actual racial background, the spectators will experience the text as ‘white’ – that is to say, the apparatus of education […] has determined that ‘we’ […] do not know the historical and cultural specificities of African peoples. What knowledge we have has been seen through the lens of an imperialist white culture which has insisted on its superiority to countries over which it once held colonial jurisdiction.

(Bennett 1995: 19)

ASI, though at no point moralizing in tone, can therefore be seen as an attempt to raise the audience’s awareness that all representation of Africa as promoted in Western popular culture implicitly reproduces a stereotypical ‘European’ point of view. This concept of ‘Eurocentrism’ – “the belief in the dominance of everything European in origin” (Henry et

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36 The dichotomy between ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ fulfilled an important function in imperial and colonial ideologies. This differentiation takes “the West as norm and define[s] the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate, and sub-ordinateable” (Torgovnik, cited in Ashcroft 2007: 192). Moreover, “reason and civilization became almost synonymous with White people and northern-Europe, while unreason and savagery were conveniently located among non-Whites” (Dei, cited in Codjoe 2005: 74).

37 This example alludes to a statement by Beneatha, a character in Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*: “All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan” (Hansberry 1994: 57).
al. 2000: 47) – which is not only propagated through media but also with the help of history books, exhibitions in museums, and an overall European-centered discourse, plays a major role in all of the plays in this corpus. Due to the fact that Gilbert and Tompkins define the process of challenging this Eurocentric worldview as a typical strategy of postcolonial theatre it will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter.

### 3 Strategies of Postcolonial Theatre

When former colonized countries became independent during the second half of the 20th century, more and more works of literature from these specific regions of the world entered into academic discourse. We have already referred to the theories written by Fanon, Spivak, Rushdie, and Ashcroft which all provide useful strategies to analyze postcolonial writings. The examination of the plays by Sears, Gale, and Anthony has shown that these playwrights, even though they only indirectly belong to a once colonized people, are strongly influenced by the respective postcolonial theories. However, in dramatics, the analysis of the written primary text can only be a first step in approaching the full significance of a specific play. In contrast to narrative and epic forms of literature, theatre draws attention to additional channels and codes that transfer meaning.38 In this context, Pfister defines drama as a multimedial form of presentation, a ‘supersign’ which encompasses multiple visual and acoustic signs such as language, noises, music, mime, gesture, masks, costume, stage properties, setting, and lighting (cf. Pfister 1993: 6ff.).

As has been briefly mentioned in the introduction, the most important theorists who have undertaken the task of combining postcolonial studies with dramatic theory, are Christopher Balme with his study *Decolonizing the Stage* and Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins with their book *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. In their respective works, which include a preoccupation with the various semiotic signs conveyed by a theatrical production, Balme, Gilbert, and Tompkins provide a framework for interpreting different performance strategies used in a range of postcolonial plays. Their studies portray “ways in which theatre acts as a resonant site for resistance strategies employed by colonised subjects” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 294), thus bringing together an analysis of postcolonial topics with an interpretation of their means of performance.

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38 Dramatic theory defines theatre, inter alia, on the basis of its ‘communicative core situation’, the absence of a mediating communication system, and its inherent system of semiotics in order to set it apart from narrative or lyric texts (cf. Balme 2008: 60ff.; Nüning 2009: 24; Pfister 1993: 2ff.).
Analyzing various different ‘syncretic’ plays from postcolonial environments, Balme enumerates a total of seven recurring elements. These include the performance of ritual and carnival, the choice of language, orality, body language, masking, dance and music as well as theatrical space (cf. Balme 1999: 23). While Gilbert and Tompkins examine the strategies of ritualization, the use of language (including silence and music) and body language (including dance) as well, they add two more elements used by postcolonial playwrights in order to react to colonial oppression and to the empire in general. On the one hand, they illustrate the strategy of “re-citing the classics”, that is changing works of the European canon by altering its mode of performance or by rewriting the original work into a ‘counter-discourse’. This method questions certain aspects of the original – or, at least, makes them appear in a different light. This ties in, on the other hand, with the overall challenge to a Eurocentric worldview and historiography, an element that has been found to play a paramount role in all of the five texts under consideration.

As orality and masking only occur as peripheral elements, these two features will not be described in more detail; equally, the element of dance will only be touched upon. Instead, the analysis at hand will focus on the enactment of traditional elements as well as on the choice of language (including musical elements) and body language. Additionally, this study will show how the plays attempt to rewrite the European canon and challenge a Eurocentric historiography in order to dismantle the domination of postcolonial power relations as expressed through white racism against non-white minorities.

### 3.1 Enacting Traditional Elements

Being “markers of cultural difference and stability” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 55), rituals have always played an important role in the majority of indigenous cultures due to their communal and interactive character. Furthermore, as colonizers frequently banned rituals from everyday life, one can easily add a political dimension to the enactment of rituals during the time of European imperialism. This dimension leads to the symbolic character of rituals today as an expression of freedom and liberty in a postcolonial system (cf. ibid. 76). As Ric Knowles in his examination of the Torontonian theatre scene observes, rituals become even more important in the constitution of communities within

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39 For Balme, ‘syncretic theatre’ is the ultimate expression of (former) colonized people. This theatrical form “utilizes the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements” (Balme 1999: 2).

40 The enactment of traditional elements is called “ritualization” by Balme, Gilbert, and Tompkins. However, using the broader term of ‘traditional elements’ better serves the purpose of this study because it will include African clothing and African theatrical elements as well as traditional rituals.
diasporic environments due to their power of enacting intercultural memory (cf. Knowles 2008: 49). This idea is supported by studies on Africans who celebrate cultural traditions within the diaspora in Canada.\textsuperscript{41}

For some, these occasions [i.e. the enactment of certain cultural traditions] are an opportunity for anti-colonial resistance in the context of their new homes. It reminds them of the oppression, racism, and discrimination that their nations suffered under colonial rule and how that has shaped their circumstances in their contemporary locales.

(Tettey & Puplampu 2005: 154)

Based on the assumption that ritual and theatre both share certain common performative elements\textsuperscript{42} – hence the awareness that the European theatre tradition results from public performances of rituals in ancient Greek (cf. Baumbach & Nünning 2009: 22f.) – Balme, Gilbert, and Tompkins examine “how indigenous ritual forms can be incorporated into a Western dramaturgical frame” (Balme 1999: 66).

In contrast to many of the plays portrayed in these two theoretical studies, the five plays under consideration do not centre on certain rituals.\textsuperscript{43} Nevertheless, they enact single elements taken from the backgrounds of indigenous African peoples in order to stress a distinct heritage within a Western theatrical frame.\textsuperscript{44} As Gilbert and Tompkins persuasively argue, “[w]hen traditional performance elements are incorporated into a contemporary play, they affect the play’s content, structure, and style, and consequently, its overall meaning / effect” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 54). Such traditional cultural enactments help ethnic groups preserve their own culture and create a diasporic identity within a multicultural, yet white-dominated, society. With regard to Sears, Petropoulos states about her works “that race does, indeed, matter – even today – and that the theatre represents an important site for examining the social and historical significance of blackness as a site of cultural identity” (Petropoulos 2008: 73).

\textsuperscript{41} Sociological studies reinforce the impression that ritualistic enactments and traditional celebrations are still important among third- and fourth-generation immigrants (cf. Henry et al. 2000: 42).

\textsuperscript{42} Dramatic theorists and anthropologists working on the concept of theatricality define various parallels between theatrical works and ‘cultural performances’ like parties, executions, or political ceremonies” (cf. Scherer 2010: 21; Fischer-Lichte 2001).

\textsuperscript{43} It has to be noted that African Canadian plays that centre on rituals do exist, such as \textit{Sistahs} by sharon lewis & maxine bailey [sic.]. The action of this play evolves around the preparations of a traditional West Indian soup and is described as “a powerful testimony of black women’s potential to nurture, nourish, restore the self and the community through transforming rituals of healing” (Davis 2000: 279).

\textsuperscript{44} Certainly, the continent of Africa comprises ‘many cultures, nations, languages, tribes, socio-economic and political systems […]. The term] ‘Africa’ is therefore used […] in the cultural and political sense – as a point of diasporic reference” (Lee 1995: 3).
While rituals in *A* only play a subordinate role, they appear in various forms in all of the other four plays. The most prominent example of rituals occurs in *AS*, which is not surprising due to the play’s setting in an airport in Benin, Africa, rather than in America. This is why, besides telling the audience about certain rituals she encountered or even enacted herself during her journey to different African tribes, e.g. a washing ritual (cf. *AS*: 47) or the traditional meal at the BaMbuti encampment (cf. *AS*: 81ff.), Djanet alludes to further features of African cultures. For instance, she evokes the importance of religion for these tribes, not without stressing the particularities that set them apart from Christianity, such as animism (cf. *AS*: 61) or the worship of specific Gods in order to explain natural phenomena (cf. *AS*: 57).

When Djanet consciously, and in a ceremony-like act, wraps traditional Boubou clothing around her body before leaving the African soil to return to Canada, she enacts the most visible connection to her ethnic roots (cf. *AS*: 93). By embracing these rituals and taking them back to the country she has grown up in, Djanet defines her identity within a white-dominated society. However, these elements neither alienate the (white) audience from the play nor separate them from members of the African diaspora but, instead, provide no reason for racial discrimination. In order to gain acceptance for the fact that African rituals still have an important effect on the lives of members of the African diaspora living in Canada today, Djanet makes the audience familiar with certain of her African encounters. For instance, she compares African market places to sites that are important to a North American audience, such as Wall Street and Eaton Centre (cf. *AS*: 63).

The play *HD* undertakes a similar incorporation of traditional elements into an intercultural environment. Even though Billie’s family has been living in Harlem for a long time, all members have preserved parts of their African cultural heritage in their everyday lives. For instance, the family celebrates the traditional African Kwanzaa (cf. *HD*: 39) and Billie possesses a traditional cast iron pot (cf. *HD*: 48) as well as a boubou mask (*HD*: 64). Even Othello, who has cast off all cultural ties with Africa by the time of the main plot, wore a dashiki in the past (*HD*: 105). The fact that Billie’s niece Jenny goes to an African

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45 In *A*, the only allusion to the African tradition is made when Angélique recalls the happy moments with her family while they were slaves in Madiere, Portugal. There, they had been able to commemorate and relive their rituals (cf. *A*: 28ff.).

46 The intertextuality with *A Raisin in the Sun* is, once again, obvious here. Exactly as Beneatha, who stresses her African heritage by wearing African (Yoruba) clothing and headdress and by dancing a folk dance, these elements are primordial signifiers of identity for Djanet as well.
dance class (cf. *HD*: 41) shows that the family is eager to pass these rituals on to the next generation of African Canadians so that their cultural heritage is not lost.

However, in contrast to *AS*, this portrayal is not unconditionally positive: Various allusions to Jamaican charming and voodoo rituals (cf. *HD*: 28f.) and, above all, the poisonous potion Billie prepares in order to harm Othello (cf. *HD*: 75f) may alienate a white audience from the otherwise beneficial intercultural encounter. The same dangerous overtones resound in the play *A* when Angélique acts out a voodoo enchantment whereupon François really dies (cf. *A*: 36). These two examples show that, besides creating positive spaces of identification, rituals can also be used in an ambiguous way. While this portrayal might motivate the audience to have a closer look at that culture, it might also run the danger of scaring them off from a deeper involvement with foreign cultural practices.

Instead of primarily alluding to different African traditions – as is the case in *AS* and *HD* – the plays *ABG* and *DKH* act out such elements in the form of a chorus. Mixing an ancient Greek theatre tradition with the sound, music, and ritual of African tribal traditions, Sears and Anthony both stress the twofold groundwork of their plays. In *ABG*, the chorus serves as a “living set” (Sears 2003a: iv) which fulfills different functions: First of all, it creates and directs various atmospheres, soundscapes, and sets of lighting with the purpose of combining the single scenes with each other. Moreover, the chorus constitutes the woods, the farmland, and the waves of Negro Creek where it functions as the “CHORUS of ancestors” (*ABG*: 61). “Thus the chorus represents ‘the people’ both past and present, while also serving as the community’s living and breathing ancestral ties to the Canadian soil” (Petropoulos 2008: 78). In the introduction of her play, Sears explains the idea of the “living set” as follows:

The concept of the ‘living set’ came early in the writing process, and became fundamental to the inclusion of the West African theatrical tradition that I first saw in Benin, where music, story (text) and choreographed movement are presented as parts of one form. The chorus culturally connects the African diasporic tradition in Canada to those in Africa and opens the audience to the creation of both a natural and a mystical world. It also connected me to the many worlds in which I stand.

(Sears 2003a: v)

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*Sears acknowledges the influences of both Greek antiquity and African tradition for her chorus in an interview: “In a kind of Aristotelian way I wanted to create a vehicle not to advance the narrative so much in any neo-classical sense, but to advance the unity of action within the play. It really comes out of African story-telling techniques, which I observed over there. Constant movement, gesture, dance and sound”* (Breon n.d.: n.p.).
In an afterword to the play, Leslie Sanders describes the function of the chorus as a connecting link between past and present as well as between Africa and Canada:

Negro Creek reaches beyond the particular history and struggles that the play addresses. It evokes the river-crossing that saved escaping slaves and the Middle Passage that brought them into slavery [...]. Through voice, dance and spectacle, as well as in story, *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* situates the struggles of African Canadians within a national narrative, indeed, but also within the history and space of the African Diaspora, a larger imaginary and a deeper root.

(Sanders 2003: 121)

In addition to the communal performance of the chorus, another important ritual in *ABG* is the act of eating dirt. Attempting to connect her individual life story to that of her ancestors, who had come to that piece of land during the War of 1812, Rainey eats several morsels of earth during the play. While eating the dirt she says, she “hunger[s] for the soft sugary earth by Negro creek” (*ABG*: 19). In his analysis of the play, Rinaldo Walcott describes this important act, that is performed by both Rainey and Michael together at the very end of the play, as “one of the most central claims of making reparation. In this case, the reparation is made by claiming Canada as home, with no rejection of Africa” (Walcott 2004: 105). These various incorporations of traditional African elements into her Canadian play clearly demonstrate that the playwright Sears is indeed far from rejecting her African heritage.

The same function of connecting the diaspora in Canada to its African heritage is enacted in *DKH* by the chorus of “womyn” as well as by the ritual of touching black women’s hair (cf. Prince 2003: 259ff.). The chorus appears on stage between the different monologues in order to perform dances of healing and support. After Nia’s monologue, the ‘womyn’ of the chorus touch her stomach in order to heal her. As the stage directions indicate, they “offer […] to NIA, healing affirmation and the celebration of Blackness. They begin an African dance which celebrates life, healing, pride and self-identity” (*DKH*: 280). Thus, even in the setting of Toronto in 2005, certain African elements are used in order to provide support within an environment that is sometimes felt to be hostile and discriminatory.

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48 Trey Anthony uses this spelling which may be due to a feminist tradition of refusing the dependence of the word ‘women’ on ‘men’.
49 This chorus of healing and support functions in the same way as the chorus in Ntozake Shange’s play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, yet without its religious dimension. This play’s final collective healing process is equally an attempt to tie back African American theatre to its African origins that are rooted in ritual while at the same time expressing a specific female perspective (cf. Müller 2006: 175).
In line with various African American plays, the enactment of traditional rituals analyzed here can be read as an attempt “to identify and retrieve African traditions from the American social landscape” (Harrison 2002: 1), thus connecting the ‘new’ homeland in the diaspora with its roots. In contrast to the ideas postulated by Balme, Gilbert, and Tompkins, namely that rituals primarily function as acts of resistance within a (post)-colonial context, the five plays analyzed in this study rather display ritualistic enactments as a means of creating a distinct intercultural identity. The medium of language is yet another tool to imply the connection between the adopted and the real mother country.

3.2 Choosing Language in Drama

“We have created our own theatre from a language that was forced upon us, and we season it with our own sense of rhythm, ritual and music” (Sears 1992: 69). This statement reveals the difficult relation of a once colonized people to the language of its former colonizer. As language has always been an essentially powerful tool of domination and control, imperialist Europeans imposed not only their way of living, their manners, and their religion on the colonized subjects but also their mother tongues. In order to prevent any kind of resistance from building up within the colony, they sometimes even prohibited the use of the indigenous language altogether. This means that mastering a language is always related to power hierarchies. Consequently, according to the two dramatic theories, “[p]ost-colonial stages are particularly resonant spaces from which to articulate linguistic resistance to imperialism” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 166).

When choosing the appropriate language for their plays, postcolonial playwrights have to make a fundamental and, above all, conscious choice between their indigenous language and that of their former white master. Therefore, they often get in a dilemma: Writing in their native tongues, of course, means writing for an exclusive and very limited audience. In contrast, by choosing the language of the former colonizers, i.e. particularly English and French, playwrights achieve a much wider reception but they implicitly accept the superior position of the dominant language.

To meet these challenges, Gilbert and Tompkins enumerate different strategies employed by postcolonial playwrights who want to use language as a “cultural and political system” (ibid. 166f.) to their own specific aims without abandoning the imperial

50 Gilbert and Tompkins demonstrate how colonizers even achieved to destroy speakers’ autonomy and dignity by prohibiting the indigenous language: Linguistic adaptation to the imperial language was often established already in the second generation of colonized subjects (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 165).
language altogether. Playwrights can, e.g. adopt indigenous words into their overall English discourse or employ English words in a different context and to a different purpose in their own language. Furthermore, playwrights can alternate syntactical or grammatical structures in order to ironically demask the inappropriateness of English in their specific cultural and linguistic context. Finally, they have the possibility of creating and using ‘syncretic’ languages – their most famous occurrences being pidgin and creole – or of simply making use of a register of the standard language that is not the ‘heightened’ speech generally found in theatre (cf. ibid. 165ff.). In line with this definition, Julie Byczynski relates the use of a minority language to a strategy of power-shift. She argues that “dialogue spoken in minority languages can function in ways that upset the position of the dominant language as dominant” to the point that it calls “into question the seeming authority that the English language has in that theatre” (Byczynski 1995: 68).

One might argue that the playwrights Sears, Gale, and Anthony do not really have this absolute choice between two languages because they have all grown up in English-speaking environments (in Gale’s case additionally French-speaking). Contrary to this assumption, it is necessary to mention that whole plays written in non-standard Englishes do exist on the contemporary Canadian stage. One prominent example for this phenomenon of power-shift through language is the play Cast Iron by first-generation Canadian Lisa Codrington. Her play, although set in a mental hospital in Winnipeg, is completely written in the Bajan dialect of Barbados, thus pointing the finger at the former colonizer’s dangerous effect on the (post)colonial subject. However, although Sears, Gale, and Anthony do not fully adhere to the languages of their African heritage, they have at least inserted some African expressions into their plays; probably in order to keep a connection to their origins among an English-speaking majority.

While the use of language only plays a minor role in the plays HD, ABG, and A, various insertions of minority African languages into the overall Standard English text can be discerned in AS. The play’s opening lines sung by a chorus in an African dialect do not signify anything to the audience – besides the words “Senegale” and “Mali” (AS: 15) – and therefore may leave them in a feeling of bewilderment and maybe even uncomfortableness. The fact that this passage is not translated “establishes a gap between

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51 Gilbert and Tompkins refer to this practice as ‘indigenizing’ a language by changing words taken from the imperial language and adapting these new words into its lexicon (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 178).

52 In A, the question of language is primarily reflected by an occasional shift from English to French. Angélique’s African American vernacular only emerges during her performance of a traditional voodoo ritual. The words “Mistah buckra / he get sick / he tak fever / he be die / he be die” (A: 36) relate her to her own African heritage, by language as well as by act.
(white) viewers and (native) performers” (Ashcroft, quoted in Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 170). In contrast to this untranslated passage, the African instruments described in the opening stage directions are glossed in order to explain to the reading public what a “Mandiani” or a “Djembe” is (AS: 15). Certainly, theatre-goers do not necessarily need these explanations as they will see the instruments on stage. Such passages like this one that are glossed “seem to make them accessible to non-speakers but […] still refuse to provide all levels of meaning” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 172) as the unfamiliar instruments remain “signifier[s] for an exotic ‘other’” (Bennett 1995: 16). Thus, this practice of familiarizing the audience with the exotic African setting is not completed. It leaves the audience in some kind of estrangement.

For Djanet, language has a second function, namely an audible connection to her family roots. When imitating her mother, she speaks in a Jamaican accent, while using a Guyanese accent in order to imitate her father (cf. AS: 42). Besides establishing the impression of authenticity, language functions as a means of creating a distinct identity. It defines Djanet’s hybrid status between three different cultures: Canadian, Jamaican, and Guyanese. However, during this process of identity formation, language cannot bridge all gaps: Having grown up in a mainly English-speaking environment, Djanet does not understand the language spoken by the Dogon tribe she encounters in Africa (cf. AS: 62).

Similarly, Anthony inserts Jamaican expressions into her play DKH, either in terms of vocabulary or in terms of grammar.53 The hairdresser Novelette says, e.g. “In mi hair. Tings me hear is in mi hair” (DKH: 267), “this locks is growing” (ibid.) or “you na have nobody” (DKH: 274), thus displaying typical features of the Jamaican dialect such as phonological idiosyncrasies, plural-singular shift and double negation (Cassidy 1961: 26ff.). Therefore, in Anthony’s play, language equally serves as a means of connection between the black women in Toronto and their Caribbean origins. Anthony’s choice of creole ties in with Gilbert and Tompkins’s analysis of ‘Sistren’ playwrights in Jamaica, namely that it is “a reclamation of sorts, a political strategy designed to give back to Jamaican women in particular the ‘voice’ that slavery denied them” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 186).54

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53 Derived from linguistic contact situations between white colonizers and African slaves in the New World, creole has become a first language in some postcolonial cultures (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 184).

54 However, this decision can be problematic: “[T]he use of ‘dialect’ or ‘patois’ has in the past been associated with comic representations of black people in minstrel shows and in writing by white authors about black people” (Innes 2007: 28). The writer’s choice must therefore answer the question: “How then can one realistically represent their speech in writing or on stage without reinscribing that history of prejudice regarding their speech and character?” (ibid.).
The most effective instance of words transmitted in creole is the monologue pronounced by Stacey Anne, a girl of Jamaican origin who is sexually abused by her white stepfather, Mr. Brown (cf. *DKH*: 276ff.). Feeling that her family is financially dependent on this man, Stacey Anne sacrifices herself for her family’s sake. The fact that she speaks her monologue completely in a mixture of Jamaican creole and a childlike style of speech renders her words all the more empathic.

Although Sears and Anthony do not make exhaustive use of minority languages within their plays – which is certainly in part due to the fact that their dramatic works are directed at a mainstream (white, English-speaking) audience – the insertions analyzed above are definitely a conscious choice loaded with meaning. Thus, similar to the analysis of traditional enactments, language as well serves two purposes: resisting the white-dominated, partly racist discourse of Canadian society and creating a linguistic connection to Africa.

### 3.3 Music

While Balme only acknowledges the importance of song when connected to dance, Gilbert and Tompkins draw much attention to the function of chanted language in postcolonial theatre, acknowledging that “[s]ong also affects the agency of language, altering the way that it ‘means’” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 168). Already a first look at the stage directions of the plays under consideration reveals the importance attributed to musical expression – either with or without lyrics. A closer analysis of the various musical parts that are embedded in the plays will further introduce to the different functions music can fulfil in this context.

Due to the fact that “musical signification generates cultural meanings in its own right” (ibid. 193), music, first of all, functions as a link to the heritage culture, either through words or through the use of traditional instruments. This use of song emphasizes the action on stage. In contrast, music can also create an (ironic) distance to what is acted out in the play.

When song intersects with music in an otherwise non-musical play, it denaturalises the action and further increases the audience’s attention, diverting it from one discourse to another to corroborate a point of view, or offer an alternative perspective.

(ibid. 194)
Gilbert and Tompkins add that, in a postcolonial context, the use of popular or hybrid songs “often function[s] to protest the domination of the coloniser’s linguistic / musical tradition by liberally interspersing it with the words, forms, or musical structures of a less well-recognised and validated system of communication” (ibid.). Without making the play incomprehensible for a white audience, playwrights can thus create a certain sensitivity for their inherited culture while, at the same time, commenting on and even undermining the discourse that dominates popular culture.

This assumption stresses the idea that music plays a paramount role in postcolonial theatrical expressions. Petropoulos goes even so far as to say that “black musical expression […] remains the most important form of African diasporic cultural exchange” (Petropoulos 2006: 107). In the afterword to AS, Sears herself emphasizes the importance of music in her play, reflected in the form she has chosen for AS – the “Sundiata Form” – which she describes as follows:

Stylistically, AFRIKA SOLO, follows a traditional West African genre that I call, “Sundiata Form”. Traditional West African theatre consists of a story being told through narrative, music and dance […]. ‘Sundiata Form’ is inclusive and involves using all the performance mediums. We here in the diaspora have only begun to experiment with the fullness of this form […]. The score is organic in nature, in that it conceptually reflected the major themes and ethnographic concerns of the play.

(Sears 1990: 96f.)

In general, music in the play AS fulfils the first of the two functions, i.e. it creates a cultural link to Africa and emphasizes the action on stage. The play opens with a passage called “The Incantation” (AS: 15), a soundscape produced by different traditional African drums and a chorus singing in an African dialect. Thus, directly from the beginning, music relates the play to Djanet’s African heritage and “provides a cultural context for the narrative that will subsequently unfold” (Bennett 1995: 16). Certainly, one has to admit that this incantation may create an impression of distance or even estrangement on the part of the common Torontonian theatre-goer who is not familiar with African musical expressions. However, as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, this feeling is directly resolved in the prologue where Djanet does not start to speak in an African dialect but rather in Standard English.

Furthermore, music helps Djanet define her cultural identity in a diasporic context. Throughout the play, “Sears frequently relies on African American music as a means of inscribing her African diasporic point of view into the play” (Petropoulos 2006: 108).
When Djanet mentions her mother from Jamaica, “[r]eggae music floats above her” (AS: 38) while her father from Guyana is accompanied by a calypso (cf. ibid.).

As Bennett points out, music even reflects Djanet’s inner experience of identity confusion because, as the different tunes “muddle over each other, they create an aural explanation for Djanet’s frustration, lack of understanding, and anger” (Bennett 1995: 21). Fortunately, this confusion is resolved at the end of Djanet’s journey when she herself expresses her hybrid African Canadian identity by use of a piece of music: “After running the gamut from reggae, calypso, R&B, and rap to TV theme songs and traditional African music, she sings for her Bambuti hosts around a campfire in Zaire a ‘soulful gospel ballad’ version of ‘O Canada’ which triggers her revelation of identity” (Wasserman 2002: 86), namely “[t]he African heartbeat in a Canadian song” (AS: 88). As Glaap argues, “[t]his unique rendering encapsulates the impact that the journey has had on Janet’s self: the national anthem turned into a personal anthem” (Glaap 2005: 70). Celebrating the different musical traditions that constitute her own life as well as that of the entire nation, Sears’s play serves as a propagation of cultural hybridity and pleads for a peaceful understanding between cultures; yet it does not remain completely uncritical of North American mainstream culture.

When the African Mandiani overtune which opens the play, is suddenly “replaced by an explosion and the sound of human ‘beat boxes’” (AS: 17), Djanet starts rapping in a hip-hop style. The playwright may well assume that the audience is familiar with this popular element of North American mainstream culture. Presenting the personal address directed at the audience, namely “Let me tell ya’” (ibid.),

in the context of a popular ‘street’ form of music, makes the direct address more effective. It is not a distancing or even aggressive attack on the spectator, but instead attempts to get them involved in her narrative through the beat of the rap and marking of their shared involvement in a Western-produced and disseminated ignorance of other cultures.

(Bennett 1995: 19)

Sears hints at this ignorance probably shared by the majority of her audience by deliberately mixing different African and American styles of music. For instance, she employs the musical film GIGI as well as Carmen Jones – the musical of Carmen in an African American setting (AS: 65) – the famous jazz tune “A Night in Tunisia” (AS: 43), and the song “Young, Gifted and Black” (AS: 92) which she alters for her own purposes.

55 Besides creating a distinct identity, music can also serve as a means of political expression, especially calypso and reggae which are considered to be two of the Caribbean’s more political forms of music (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 197).
This selection makes it clear to the audience that African American culture is not as ‘exotic’ as it may first of all seem because, actually, it already is part of their everyday lives. As Shaw explains

popular American music is neither white not black, but a fusion, and the result of an interplay. That interplay has been at work since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Our popular American music is a blend whose designation should properly be Afro-American.\(^{56}\)

(Shaw 1986: viii)

Consequently, on a different level, the rap scene could especially be read as a critical reference to the foundations of white American mainstream culture. Sears possibly wants to raise the audience’s awareness that the origins of American hip-hop are rooted in African-American communities in New York City. Once an art form through which the black (youth) population of American cities expressed its social and political concerns (cf. Barksdale & Livingston 2005: 519)\(^{57}\) rap has today developed to be adapted by many white performers seeking financial success (cf. Oxford Reference Online: ‘Rap’).\(^{58}\)

This critical hint shows that music in this play follows the two functions laid out by Gilbert and Tompkins as methods of postcolonial theatre. Primarily, it points to the fertilizing cultural interchange or fusion of two cultures. In her performance, Djanet overcomes the racist stereotypes she has been confronted with via the media. However, musical elements in this play slightly criticize the attitude some white members of the Canadian population might perpetuate themselves: being part of a discriminatory white discourse while at the same time accepting the African tradition when it is in some way profitable to them.

While the plays \textit{ABG} and \textit{DKH} only make marginal use of music, and rather as a means of underlining the action or, in Rainey’s (\textit{ABG}) case, of providing comfort, music in \textit{A} is more complex. African drumming is present throughout various scenes of this play. In the stage directions, Lorena Gale emphasizes her wish to have this repetitive rhythm allude

\(^{56}\) In the course of his book, Shaw goes on to say that this profitable fusion is especially true for the jazz genre where “a pattern was established in which the adaptation and synthesis by white musicians brought a style, originated by blacks, into the mainstream” (Shaw 1986: 132).

\(^{57}\) Even though the sometimes racist and sexist contents of hip-hop music triggered controversial evaluations, scholars agree on its function as a counterculture movement. It is probably “the most visible expression of indigenous protest in the post-Civil Rights era” (Barksdale & Livingston 2005: 522).

\(^{58}\) In this context, Shaw even speaks of a ‘rip-off’ by white musicians who profited financially from black music and made blacks suffer economically (cf. Shaw 1986: viii).
to the “drumming of a slave driver” (A: 8), thus making the audience remember the origins of black people in Canada.59

This idea is supported in the fourth scene of the first act, which is characterized by the use of a boom box producing hip-hop music. Angélique’s rap-like monologue that succeeds these stage directions – “This time will be different” (A: 8f.) – makes the audience think of a rap song performed by a modern young woman looking into her future rather than of a lament expressed by a slave of the 18th century. This shows that the use of sound in A helps to connect the temporal thread set in the times of slavery to the present by constantly reminding the audience that racial discrimination in the 20th century can be traced back to Canada’s colonial past. The salient discrepancy between the use of rap music and the discriminatory discourse of white mainstream culture, that has already been discussed in the context of AS, serves as a means of criticism here as well.

Furthermore, and similarly to AS, music in A also creates links to the mother country Africa; however, not in the same celebratory way as it occurs in sad, melancholic moments. The dance scene between Angélique and Claude does not symbolize harmony but reinforces the cultural differences between the black slave and the white indentured servant (cf. A: 43). Moreover, as dance is a “form of spatial inscription [it is] thus a productive way of illustrating – and countering – the territorial aspects of western imperialism” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 239) – especially when it does not follow the rules of western dance, as is the case here.

When being left alone by Claude in the end, Angélique intones a native song of her homeland, which emotionally connects her to her African roots (cf. A: 68). Even though the stage directions do not indicate any of the song’s lyrics, the fact that Angélique does not resist the two men who drag her off while she is singing her song expresses Angélique’s melancholic nostalgia for her mother country. As music and dancing to drums are such integral parts of Angélique’s personality, it is not coincidental that her last word, just before she is about to be hanged, is “drums” (A: 72). Music in A thus serves, most obviously, as an expression of cultural belonging and identity formation as is also the case in AS. However, the play’s music also heavily criticizes Canada’s colonial past and implicates the audience – as members of the dominant white society – in the continuing racial discrimination in contemporary Canada.

59 Balme draws attention to the fact that drumming “conveys culturally specific and, for the various listeners, contradictory and conflicting information” (Balme 1999: 215) that are often misunderstood by a white audience. While this might be true for various postcolonial plays, Gale quite explicitly expresses what she intends her drums to signify and renders an interpretation rather straight forward.
At first sight, Sears’s second play, *HD*, seems to employ pieces of jazz and blues music to the similar purpose of identity formation. Yet, it soon becomes obvious that music in this play is by no means used in an unambiguous way but that it rather comments on the action and criticizes mainstream American culture in general. In this play, Sears conveys her criticism in a much more radial way than those discerned in *AS* and *A*. She creates this impression, first of all, through the choice of musical instruments:

> In *Harlem Duet* I wanted a tension between European culture and African American culture. I used blues music, but I asked Allen [Booth] to create blues music, for a cello and a double bass. But double bass and cello says chamber music. So the blues creates that tension, it’s beautiful and it has that drama implicit in it. (Sears 1998: 29)

Throughout the play, Sears questions the foundations of American mainstream by using various pieces of music that are part of the dominant white culture but that are actually rooted in the African tradition: “blues from deep in the Mississippi delta” (*HD*: 33), a stringed duet, and indigo blues. All of these songs, that are part of the African experience in America, “suggest the ambivalence of Billie’s situation in Harlem” (Thieme 2003: 86).60 Music therefore directly comments on what is happening on stage and “functions as a kind of counterpoint to the main action” (ibid.). This is demonstrated by the fact that the music gets more polyphonic when the characters cannot communicate properly and turns into a “distorted sound loop” (*HD*: 99) to accompany hurtful scenes.

Tension is not only transmitted through music but also through an omnipresent soundscape which constitutes “a litany of speeches” (Thieme 2003: 86). All scenes in *HD* are accompanied by the voices of famous black leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey. Besides affecting the characters personally – as this soundscape “suggests that her characters carry two centuries of African-American experience on their shoulders” (Murrow 2006: n.p.) – Sears uses these voices to “reinforce the complexity and elusiveness of so-called ‘blackness’ while linking the public with the private” (Joseph 2001: 135). Moreover, the playwright creates a contrast between African American music as part of mainstream culture and the situation of blacks still struggling for equal participation in this culture.

This contrast appears especially striking in the moment when the reading of the Declaration of Independence is accompanied by “a blues from deep in the Mississippi

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60 In a detailed analysis of music in *HD*, Thieme shows how one and the same song, namely Aretha Franklin’s “Spanish Harlem” can have different, partly ambiguous meanings in different contexts throughout the play (cf. Thieme 2003: 86).
delta” (HD: 33). The contrast between the words “all men are created equal” and the musical form of the blues, a melancholic music of black American folk origin (cf. Oxford Reference Online: ‘Blues’), could not be more poignant. Without having her characters make any statements on the inequality of races, Sears’s “juxtaposition of the blues and the reading of the Declaration of Independence immediately brings into question the founding principles of American democracy” (Elam 2008: 42).

Similar comments on racial discrimination and (in)equality of blacks and whites in American society are made in almost every scene of this play. The fact that Sears uses speeches that point far back into the history of African Americans demonstrates that she wants to make clear to the audience that the goal of equality and the end of discrimination are not yet achieved. In contrast to AS and A, which only slightly criticize North American mainstream culture, the use of music in HD makes a much more poignant political statement. Therefore, music can definitely be characterized as an effective strategy of resistance against racism as well as a political expression used to criticize a society in which the contribution of Africans is still far from being acknowledged.

3.4 Body Language

As has already been mentioned in the previous chapter, body movement often accompanies music. However, dance or other highly physical performances are not the only corporal expressions that can be acted out on stage. In fact, “the body in general [is] […] an important performative cultural text” (Balme 1999: 171). As theatre relies as much on body movement as on language, the significance of bodies as “visual markers of ‘identity’, race and gender” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 205) has to be carefully analyzed. In this context, body language can fulfil two contrasting strategies.

First of all, playwrights can verbally or physically emphasize racial differences on stage in order to make marginalized subjects more visible. By contrast, they can also dismantle racial categories by showing their constructedness (cf. ibid. 206). Thus, the pure presence of black (active) female actors on stage can serve to deconstruct presumed stereotypical roles and challenge traditional representations. Examples taken from the

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61 For the purpose of this study, the binary distinction by Gilbert and Tompkins seems more appropriate than the triple distinction proposed by Balme, who analyzes examples of the “effaced”, the “resemanticized” and the “mythologized” body (cf. Balme 1999: 169ff.). While the first two categories can mainly be equated with those by Gilbert and Tompkins, the third segment, namely “mythologization”, does not occur in any of the plays here.

62 This idea is fostered by the importance attributed to Sears by many reviewers as the first black female director to lead an all-black cast of actors (cf. Kidnie 2009: 71; Parolin 2009: 206).
five plays of the corpus illustrate how “the staged post-colonial body is one of the most malleable and resonant vehicles for subverting and problematising the roles of identity, subjectivity, and corporeality that colonialism has assigned to the colonised subject” (ibid. 253).

The plays *DKH*, *AS*, and *HD* all stress physical features of black women, either trough acts of speech or through physical enactments on stage. Already the title of *DKH* alludes to one of the physical particularities that distinguish black people from whites: ‘kinks’ in the hair. The play’s setting in an African Canadian hairdressing shop constantly reminds the audience of this visible difference. This impression is still emphasized in an almost expressionistic way by stage properties: “a tight coil” (*DKH*: 265) symbolizing the textures of black hair. Similarly to Novelette, who is doing the hair of her black costumers throughout the play, Amah in *HD* dresses up Billie’s hair as well. Although the two do not discuss any particularities of that hair, Amah stresses physical differences by act, thus making them visible for the audience. She “takes a new lock of BILLIE’s hair [and,] [t]aking a large dab of oil, she applies it to the lock, rubbing the strand between her palms” (*HD*: 42).

Djanet (*AS*) mentions further features that set her apart from her white school mates. While in the safe surroundings of her home her black hair is only subject to a game (cf. *AS*: 25), physical differences become targets of direct racial discrimination in public. Djanet’s school mate V.D. sums this up: “So, one: Your bum is way too big to be a movie star. […] Your lips look like – well, your lips are – way to thick. […] And three: Your hair. Yes, your hair…Well it’s just so…*She puts her hand in Janet’s hair, …so woolly*” (*AS*: 28).

In spite of these partly negative experiences, these particularities are turned into positive enactments during the course of *DKH* and *AS* in order to undermine the dominant representation of African Canadians. Nia, the last of the women represented in *DKH*, comes to terms with her own and her daughter’s black identity which is expressed by the fact that she bought her daughter “14 red ribbons and put all of them in her hair” (*DKH*: 279). This act brings to a peaceful end the discrimination her daughter had to experience from Nia’s own mother. The same positive approval of identity is emphasized in *AS*. At the sight of other black women like her in Africa, Djanet as well realizes that “she has internalized many Eurocentric precepts about female beauty” (Sears 1992: 68) which makes her begin to question European concepts of beauty and celebrate her appearance.
I began to notice that a lot of the women, well—had behinds that were just like mine—very well developed. Yeh, they had these voluptuously developed hips. And their lips, their lips were sensuous and full. And their hair—oh, you should have seen some of the coifs and the many intricate styles of head wraps. God, this is beautiful!

(AS: 63f.)

Djanet also visibly performs this transformation of her body conception by wrapping herself into traditional West African Boubou clothing (cf. AS: 93). This visible acceptance and proud display of her cultural heritage helps Djanet celebrate her hybrid identity with all its physical characteristics.

In a postcolonial context, this act has a wider scope, namely it “establishes the black body as a focal point not of curiosity or of lecherous desire but for the deconstruction of white culture and looking relations” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 249).63 By accepting her cultural difference while at the same time integrating it into her life in Canada, Djanet raises the audience’s awareness of the complex construction of ‘hyphenated identities’ and prevents them from an over-hasty judgement based on their white point of view. With the help of the features of her (black) body, Djanet challenges the stereotypical representations she has been confronted with in the media (cf. chapter 2.5.).

Female bodies get a further connotation in the (post)colonial context, namely as strongly sexualized objects. The play A confirms the assumption postulated by Elleke Boehmer that the “colonised subject’s body […] has been an object of the coloniser’s fascination and repulsion (and, in effect, possession) in sexual, pseudo-scientific, and political terms” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 203). François’ opinion on Black women reflects this idea. He asks Angélique: “Is it true what they say about African women? […] That you’re wilder? Freer? Hot like the sun that scorched you?” (A: 10). In this colonial environment, Angélique’s ‘exotic’ body is turned into an object of sexual desire that is exploited by the colonizer. Later on, François even states: “Everyone should get a taste of brown sugar” (A: 35), thus mixing misogynist attitudes with destructive racist and discriminatory statements.

Moreover, as Moynagh points out, “the history of slavery in Canada and throughout the Americas is a touchstone for representing both the violent scripting of black women’s bodies and black women’s resilience and resistance” (Moynagh 2005: xviii). It is true that

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63 For a detailed analysis of the ‘gaze’ which frames the theatrical subject and holds it in a subordinate position in postcolonial drama cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 248f.

64 The term “hyphenated identity” seems to be more useful than the term “hybridity” which is often used synonymously but which is, according to postcolonial theorists such as Robert Young, connoted in a negative way, implying a thinking in colonial designations of race (cf. Ashcroft 2007: 108ff.).
the scenes of sexual violence, such as the act of rape and sexual torture by François – further emphasized by the corset (cf. A: 31) – show “[i]mperialism’s attempt to exercise authority over the reproductive processes of its female subjects” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 218). At this point, one has to bear in mind that Angélique becomes pregnant several times – in all probability by her white master. Besides the fact that Angélique is sexually abused by François, her white lover, Claude, similarly treats her as a mere object of desire. The love scene between them makes reverberate César’s retentions that a black woman cannot truly be loved by a white man. Claude’s words ‘deep’, ‘rich’, ‘dark’, ‘ripe’, ‘mine’ which he pronounces when ‘conquering’ his lover Angélique (cf. A: 47f.) emphasize his desire of the black woman as an exotic ‘other’.

Yet, having been forced to give birth to several children, Angélique takes over action for the lives of her offspring through the only act of resistance left to her. In a moment of stoic desperation – making it an “almost routine incident of daily life” (Filewod 2001: 33) – Angélique smothers her only baby that has not been stillborn. Driven by her fear of transmitting the bounds of slavery – and with them the same life full of oppression and suffering she has experienced herself – onto her child, she commits this act of infanticide.

In the colonial context of A, it becomes clear that “women’s bodies often function in post-colonial theatre as the spaces on and through which larger territorial or cultural battles are being fought” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 215). This statement shows a close connection between black women’s bodies and the act of exploring new land, an idea that is also reflected in the contemporary setting of HD. Although Othello and Billie both desire the love act, they re-enact a typical settler scene in which Othello ‘maps’ out his wife’s body.

\[\text{(HIM kisses inside the crook of HER’s arm.)}\]

\[\text{HER} \quad \text{Oh-oh. You’re prospecting again.}\]

\[\text{HIM} \quad \text{I’m exploring the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.}\]

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65 François’ behaviour becomes apparent in the stage directions that accompany the rape scene. In an almost expressionistic act, François laces Angélique in a corset and holds her “like he’s fucking her from behind” (A: 31). This choice of words intensifies the scene, at least for a reading public.

66 This literary trope places Gale’s play into the tradition of postcolonial literature such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. This novel portrays a female slave who commits infanticide in order to save her progeny from the hardships of slavery and end the family line of suffering.

67 The connection between female bodies and acts of conquest is by no means a new phenomenon. Already the first portraits of European colonization in the new world depict the ‘virgin’ American continent as a woman ‘taken into possession’ by Vespucci and Columbus (cf. e.g. van der Straet’s image “Discovery of America” from 1589 in Engler & Scheiding 2005: 48). However, this idea has been reinforced by the slavery system and plays a paramount role in the postcolonial worldview.
(HIM kisses HER.)

The curvaceous slopes of California.

(HIM kisses HER.)

The red hills of Georgia, the mighty mountains of New York.

(HIM kisses HER again.)

I’m staking my claim.

(HD: 36)

In this scene, Othello behaves in the tradition of white settlers who explored the “virgin” continent of America and ‘stakes his claim’ to his wife’s body. However, by having Billie respond “I don’t come cheap, you know” (ibid.), Sears
challenge[s] the colonial metaphor of the American landscape as a passive, virginal territory to be possessed and cultivated by White European patriarchy [and] envisions America as a Black woman who asserts her right to evaluate the claim staked by Othello.

(McKinnon n.d.: 9)

Repeating the traditional coloniser’s scene in a contemporary context with Billie playing an active part, this scene challenges “the metaphorical link between woman and the land” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 213) as well as the submission of the black woman that is connected to this system.

Altogether, the examples cited above display the female body, first of all, as a means of affirming distinct physical African Canadian traits as beautiful. In a second step, the playwrights Sears, Gale, and Anthony employ postcolonial strategies in order to challenge traditional representations and power relations which create racial discrimination in a white society. Yet, besides employing different elements of postcolonial theatre like language, music, and body language, Sears goes a step further by calling the whole tradition of the European canon into question.

3.5 Rewriting the Classical Canon

Against the background of 19th century ideology which positioned Africans at the lower end of a scale of racial hierarchies, it is not surprising that colonial literature primarily portrayed black people in a negative light in order to reinforce the assumed superior position of white peoples (cf. McMillan 2004: 54). Some critics go even so far as to say: “In canonical literature, [Africans] have always been spoken for. Or have been spoken to. Or have appeared as jokes or as flat figures suggesting sensuality” (Chavanu,
cited in Codjoe 2005: 75). Consequently, a serious treatment of Africans in any acknowledged literary canon seems to be absent.

This is why “a prominent endeavour among colonised writers / artists has been to rework European ‘classics’ in order to invest them with more local relevance and to divest them of their assumed authority / authenticity” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 16). Therefore, the postcolonial enterprise does not so much focus on the writing of new texts as on “the rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record” (Ashcroft 1989: 196). In this assumption, Ashcroft and other postcolonial theorists follow Salman Rushdie’s famous proposition that “the Empire writes back to the Centre” (Rushdie 1982: 8) in order to demonstrate that postcolonial writers actively engage with classical texts of the colonial canon, revaluate them, and dismantle their power structures. With recurrence to the term ‘canonical counter-discourse’, coined by Helen Tiffin, Gilbert and Tompkins describe this act of rewriting the classical canon as

a process whereby the post-colonial writer unveils and dismantles the basic assumptions of a specific canonical text by developing a ‘counter’ text that preserves many of the identifying signifiers of the original while altering, often allegorically, its structures of power.

(Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 16)

In the realm of theatrical performance, a mild form of this process can be seen in the venture of altering single elements of the original script, e.g. “[r]ewriting the characters, the narrative, the context, and / or the genre of the canonical script [which] provides another means of interrogating the cultural legacy of imperialism and offers renewed opportunities for performative intervention” (ibid.). Admittedly, changing the meaning of a canonical text by offering a different performance is only one strategy. Creating a real ‘counter-discourse’ to the canonical original, however, signifies a conscious deconstruction and rewriting of the text’s original, thus changing significations of power relations. Therefore, the attempt of postcolonial theatre (or of postcolonial literature in general) is to give a voice to those people marginalized by the original canon of what is called ‘European civilization’ by inserting their specific history into the dominating discourse.

Two of the most famous examples of postcolonial rewritings of canonical texts probably are Aimé Césaire’s Une tempête – a rewriting of Shakespeare’s The Tempest – and Jean Rhys’s version of Jane Eyre, Wide Sargasso Sea. Césaire and Rhys relieve the two colonized subjects (the savage monster Caliban and Bertha Mason, “the madwoman in
the attic”) from the margins to which they have been confined in the respective original text in order to undermine the colonial representation of the colonized subject as being inferior to the white colonizer. Certainly, William Shakespeare is one of the most popular targets of postcolonial rewriting (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 19), due to his “long-sanctioned importance and prestige” (Salter 1999: 42) and his unmistakable place in the classical canon of European literature. Although Césaire’s text might be the most famous of these rewritings in postcolonial studies, Shakespearean adaptations can be traced back as far as 1878 (cf. ibid. 44).

With *HD*, Djanet Sears undertakes her own rewriting of a Shakespearean classic, namely *Othello*. While *Othello* starts out with Iago informing Roderigo that Desdemona has just married Othello, Sears’s play ends with Othello and Mona planning to marry and Othello leaving the stage, phoning his colleague, Chris Yago. Sears’s play can therefore be read as a prequel to Othello because it portrays a story that chronologically has to take place before Shakespeare’s original. What is yet more important is that Sears gives voice to the story of a woman that does not appear in the original text: Othello’s black first wife Billie. By creating this supplementary figure, Sears, instead of simply rewriting the story, draws attention to the social and political situation of black women in a racist North American society – a practice that Burnett calls “applied politics” (Burnett 2002: 82).

It is this detail that sets her play apart from similar attempts undertaken before hers. While Sears follows Ann-Marie MacDonald’s feminist rewriting of *Othello*, i.e. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* by not having a man but a woman as protagonist, she additionally introduces the dimension of race into her play. Thus it is appropriate to say that “*Harlem Duet* goes beyond its supposed original to create a discursive space that is uniquely its own” (Thieme 2003: 82). *HD* discusses the discourse of race relations in contemporary North America.

Sears herself writes about the impact Shakespeare, and especially his play *Othello*, “the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature” (Sears 1997: 14),

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68 This designation is borrowed from the title of a study by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar because it poignantly describes the role to which Bertha Mason has been limited in the original novel.
69 As Gilbert and Tompkins point out, “the circulation of ‘Shakespeare’s Books’ within educational and cultural spheres has been a powerful hegemonic force throughout the history of the British Empire, and is one which continues to operate in virtually all former colonies of England” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 19). Thus, Shakespeare has always had a prominent place in the extension of a colonial ideology that did not acknowledge indigenous cultural products at all.
70 Sears employs the symbol of the handkerchief and Othello’s famous line “‘Tis true: there’s magic in the web of it” (Shakespeare 1996: III.IV.71) when he gives this gift to Desdemona in order to connect her play to the Shakespearean text.
had on her writing. Due to the overwhelming significance of this play, she compares Othello to a ghost that haunted her since her first steps in the field of theatre (cf. ibid.). This is why she calls this process “exorcism” (ibid. 15): an attempt to expel the ghost of Shakespeare, who “is still widely seen as the measure of all dramatic art, the ultimate test for the would-be actor or director, the mark of audience sophistication, and the uncontested ‘sign’ of ‘Culture’ itself” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 20). By focusing on the female black protagonist Billie, “Sears breaks with a particular cycle of racial and sexual prejudice, destabilizing the action of Shakespeare’s work – literally undermining it – by excavating its narrative foundations” (Kidnie 2009: 71).

Against the background of Shakespeare’s play, the blackness of Sears’s Othello figure gets a supplementary connotation. The plot set in a theatre dressing room in 1928, which portrays black Othello while blackening his face in order to perform a black character on stage, points to the important element of the minstrelsy. During Shakespeare’s time – and still in the 1928 plot – an actor performing Othello had to cover his face with black paint. With reference to her attempt of exorcizing the ghost of Othello, Sears speaks of “Sir Laurence Olivier in black face” (Sears 1997: 14). Jerry Wasserman calls the fact that Sears makes her black character Othello blacken his face a racially enforced travesty of self. This performance of ethnicity as self-mockery seems to be an expression of Billie’s bitterness regarding Othello’s newly imagined cross-racial community. It suggests the historical frame within which blacks, in order to enter white discourse, have had to mask themselves. (Wasserman 2002: 87)

By portraying a black character in a black environment, “Sears overturns the white stage tradition of having Othello played by a white person […] in blackface” (Fischlin 2000: 286). Drafting a scene of minstrelsy in a contemporary play “at the turn of the millennium, ironizing on its historic associations with racist oppression, becomes a performative strategy that allows the possibility of ‘reclaim[ing] from white control the power of racial definition’” (Lhamon, cited in Wassermann 2002: 86). This interpretation can be read as a conscious attempt of dismantling the constructedness of all racial categories and thus ties in with the strategies of body language mentioned in chapter 2.4. Sears’s overall message seems to be a challenge to traditional representations of black

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71 Sir Laurence Olivier was a white British actor who became famous for his role of Othello in blackface still in the 1960s.

72 He further points to the importance of the “minstrel show model for performing ethnicity as a strategy of cultural appropriation and recuperation” for First Nations playwrights such as Daniel David Moses (Wasserman 2002: 88).
people on stage as well as the fact that people with African backgrounds, finally being admitted to the stage, are no longer silenced within the official discourse.

However, keeping the play’s open ending in mind, it remains to debate if Othello will be truly accepted by his white colleagues and whether he will really overcome racial barriers. Although Othello turns to his helpful colleague Chris Yago by the end of the play, the allusion to Shakespeare’s treacherous character Iago leaves Sears’s audience with the suspicious feeling that her Othello will perhaps meet a similar fate. As Othello is by no means the noble, heroic character of Shakespeare’s play, “the canonical Othello is greatly diminished” (Sanders 2000: 558) – regardless of how his story will end.

Nevertheless, *HD* cannot only be considered as a postcolonial destabilization of the canon. Sears goes a step further by positively creating a site for the self-identification of an African Canadian identity. Her adaptation “is to be understood in relation to a black community, a fundamental shift of focus from the Shakespeare original” (Fischlin 2000: 286) because it “returns to the issues raised by interracial marriage explored by Shakespeare but sets that debate in revised national and historical contexts, and in exclusively black communities” (Kidnie 2009: 73). With regard to the characters, the setting as well as the cultural references that are transmitted through the soundscape of music and political speeches, blackness is the default position in this play while whiteness is defined as the dangerous ‘other’.

This is in marked distinction from Shakespeare’s *Othello*, where Othello’s otherness from white culture is a prime feature of the play, and even from Aphra Behn’s rewriting of *Othello* in *Oronooko*, in which black protagonists adhere to the basic pattern of the play, in which the hero follows Othello’s example by killing his (virtuous) wife before colluding in his own death.

(Fischlin 2000: 286)

Altogether, Shakespeare’s text serves as a starting point for Sears to write her own play about race relationships. Yet, her plays can be considered as postcolonial attempts of rewriting in a more general way.

Even with respect to the genres of her plays she sets herself apart from the European tradition – at least in some points. In this respect, her plays question the ‘canonical’ division of theatrical forms that has been dominating the scholarly discourse since the

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73 McKinnon demonstrates how in Shakespeare’s text, where Othello is the only black character in a white environment, “the White / Black binary coding of the play invites the spectators to identify with the White society represented by Iago, Cassio, Brabantio, etc., and to view Othello as the Other” (McKinnon n.d.: 87).
Renaissance: Aristotle’s definition of the three major genres of tragedy, comedy and epic poetry (cf. Aristotle 1982: 45).

Predominantly for the study of works from Shakespeare’s writing onwards, classical distinctions have become blurred (cf. Baumbach & Nüning 2009: 24). Even though new mixed subgenres such as tragicomedy, satiric comedy, or melodrama have entered into the academic discourse, Sears goes a step further: She either invents new genre names to entitle her plays or mixes certain elements from different genres in order to render a clear-cut attribution to classical European definitions difficult. This act might be due to an insufficiency felt in the face of these more or less ‘traditional’ genres to comply with her innovative topics. Moreover, this procedure can even be read as a conscious act of setting her works apart from a Eurocentric theatrical tradition.

As Sears has also written theoretical texts to accompany her plays, her genre definitions can be assessed rather clearly. She defines her first play, *AS*, as an “autobio-mythography” in the tradition of the feminist African-American poet Audre Lorde because it is “both fictional and autobiographical” (Sears 1990: 95). Besides emphasizing the true character of the play as an autobiographical account – a strategy frequently employed by feminist writers (cf. Scott 2010: 214) – this term might also allude to Sears’s own role in the history of the African diaspora: “mythography” refers to “the recording of stories” (Oxford Reference Online: ‘Mythography’). Thus, *AS* is not only an individual account of a journey but represents the experience of a whole people. This definition in connection with the “Sundiata Form” (cf. chapter 3.3.) of the play points to the fact that Sears places her literary work in the African/African American tradition. Moreover, it reflects the idea that the playwright needs to transgress the established boundaries of traditional theatrical forms in order to find her own way of expression. The form of *AS* thus perfectly mirrors the play’s content, namely Djanet’s acceptance of a newly defined, hybrid identity.

The play *HD* indicates a similar close connection between the play’s message and its genre designation. Sears adds supplementary characteristics to the traditional genre of “tragedy” by inventing the term “rhapsodic blues tragedy” (Sears 1997: 14). On one side, this term emphasizes the importance of musical elements for the play (cf. chapter 3.3.) as well as it hints, due to the original meaning of rhapsody, at the loosely arranged time structure that will be discussed in chapter 4.2. On the other side, the term “blues” alludes to

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74 For a detailed chart of genre classifications see Baumbach & Nüning 2009: 25.
75 In the Greek tradition, “a rhapsody was a selection of epic poetry sung by a rhapsode or rhapsodist — literally a ‘stitcher’ who combined memorized passages with his own improvisations” (Oxford Reference Online: ‘Rhapsody’).
the play’s central topics – betrayal and loss – which can be linked to “the archetypal and classic provenance of the Blues” (Sanders 2000: 557). Thus, the genre classification Sears invents for her play emphasizes the atmosphere, which is full of feelings of melancholy, sadness, or depression (cf. Oxford Reference Online: ‘Blues’). Moreover, as Shaw points out in his definition of blues music, it is full of “hunger for the necessities and the pleasure of life in a free society” (Shaw 1986: 11). In this way, the “rhapsodic blues tragedy” mirrors the play’s central concerns of an emancipated participation of African Americans in society.

This tone, in connection to the play’s ending, makes it a tragedy. Although the ending of the main plot does not resolve whether the characters’ respective flaws will lead to a catastrophe, Othello meets his death in both of the other plots. This catastrophe fits the core definition of tragedy as resulting from an unsolvable dilemma caused by an irreversible character flaw (or mistake; cf. Aristotle 1982: 57), a wrong decision taken by the protagonist or an error in judgement (cf. Scherer 2010: 44; Baumbach & Nünning 2009: 27). However, the audience does probably neither completely identify with Othello trying to cast off the innermost characterisation of his identity, namely his blackness, nor with Billie’s exaggerated racism against white people. It therefore remains at least debatable if the play also breaks with Aristotle’s characterisation of tragedy as a ‘karthasis’ – a sort of purification – of the feelings of pity and fear felt by the spectators (cf. Aristotle 1982: 50).

Already in the title of her analysis of the play, “Seeing beyond Tragedy in Harlem Duet”, Kidnie alludes to this difficult classification. Due to the possibility that the next generation of black Canadians might be able to overcome racial discrimination, HD cannot unequivocally be defined as ‘tragic’. Thus, what makes the play step beyond tragedy “is its turn away from death towards hope and creative inspiration, particularly as embodied by children” (Kidnie 2001: 51). To prove this point, Kidnie draws attention to the role of Billie’s six-year-old niece Jenny, a character who, although never present on stage, is

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76 This atmosphere is reinforced by the modern sense of the word ‘rhapsody’ which designates “a work or passage expressing ecstatic or uncontrolled emotion” (Oxford Reference Online: ‘Rhapsody’).

77 In the all-black context, critics point out that “[w]hile the tragic flaw in Shakespeare’s character was jealousy of his Desdemona, Sears’ Othello is consumed with jealousy of white advantage” (Lingerfelt & Kershaw n.d.: n.p.). Billie’s flaw that leads to her confinement in the psychiatric ward is her excessive anger against whiteness.

78 Cf. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing magnitude; in embellished language, each kind of which is used separately in the different parts; in the mode of action and not narrated; and effecting through pity and fear [what we call] the carthasis of such emotions” (Aristotle 1982: 50).
frequently referred to in the primary text. Jenny wants to support her aunt in times of hardships by sending her self-painted pictures (cf. *HD*: 84). Thieme equally acknowledges the fact that Billie, although receiving psychiatric treatment from a white establishment that ignores the racially determined aspects of mental disorders, preferring to operate simply in terms of a supposedly pragmatic policy of trying to rehabilitate the socially dysfunctional has the resources to climb back to health, not only because, unlike the play’s three reconstructions of the Othello figure, she is not predetermined by the facts of the original play, but also because she has a community and an alternative body of discourse on which she can draw.

(Thieme 2003: 88)

As the original Shakespearean play does not feature the character of Othello’s black wife, Sears’s play leaves Billie’s fate open – in contrast to that of Othello. Billie, being able to rely on a supporting and comforting black community (and especially on her closest family relations expressed by Amah and Jenny) within a racially hostile reality, might overcome her depressing situation. If Billie is not able to do so, than at least Jenny’s future promises a positive coming to terms with her hyphenated identity by incorporating elements of the African tradition into her life in Canada. Although the term ‘tragedy’ inscribes her play into a European theatre historiography, Sears breaks with this tradition at various points. This renders a full identification of her play with a European tradition impossible; a fact that is also partly due to its positive outlook on the future.

Challenging the European canon cannot only be expressed through a conscious rewriting of texts anchored in the literary tradition of formerly colonizing countries but also through a revision of the Eurocentric way in which historiography has often been (and still is) written. Not only Sears but also Gale and Anthony undertake attempts to give expression to those voices that are often silenced in official accounts of historical events.

### 3.6 Challenging Eurocentric Historiography

Postcolonial critics frequently draw attention to the marginalization or even erasure of minority voices from the official historical discourse. This theory is based on Bill Ashcroft’s definition of “eurocentrism” as a concept which originally emerged in the science of cartography but which is also evident in anthropology, historiography, and even literary studies. According to Ashcroft, ‘eurocentrism’ plays a decisive role in every field

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79 Kidnie defines the “play [as] ambiguously positioned between comedy and tragedy” (Kidnie 2009: 88).
in which the European point of view is generally accepted and promoted as ‘the norm’. It is defined as

[t]he conscious or unconscious process by which Europe and European culture assumptions are constructed as, or assumed to be, the normal, the natural or the universal.[…] European colonization of the rest of the globe, which accelerated in the eighteenth century and reached its apogee in the nineteenth, actively promoted or facilitated Eurocentrism through exploration, conquest and trade. Imperial displays of power, both in the metropolitan centres and at the colonial peripheries, and assertions of intellectual authority in colonialisit institutions such as schools and universities, and through the civil service and legal codes, established European systems and values as inherently superior to indigenous ones.

(Ashcroft 2007: 84f.)

The African Canadian historian Afua Cooper supports this assessment when she says that, during her studies, she had to realize “that Black history has less to do with Black people and more with White pride. If a Black history narrative makes Whites feel good, it is allowed to surface; if not, it is suppressed or buried” (Cooper 2006: 8).

This is why postcolonial dramatic theory focuses on

how plays and playwrights construct discursive contexts for an artistic, social, and political present by enacting other versions of the pre-contact, imperial, and post-imperial past on stage. Aside from the basic reviewing of a fragment of history when new ‘facts’ come to light, post-colonial histories attempt to tell the other sides of a story and to accommodate not only the key events experienced by a community (or individual) but also the cultural context through which these events are interpreted and recorded. Reconstructing the past in this way usually heralds the emergence of new voices and new tools for understanding the past.

(Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 107)

Keeping this definition in mind, postcolonial dramatists can, first of all, alter the dominant history during the process of performance by foregrounding different aspects of a given story or by focusing on minority voices (cf. ibid. 108). Secondly, they can bring the histories of minorities back into the official Eurocentric corpus by giving different accounts of occupation and settler histories, by reclaiming lost heroes or by recuperating women’s histories (cf. ibid. 110ff.).

History as ‘facts’ written by the dominant white power that leaves no space for the histories of ethnic minorities can be discerned as a major preoccupation of the plays under discussion. Although Sears, Gale, and Anthony focus on different elements of this process and make use of varying strategies, their criticism of Eurocentric historiography is evident, both in the performance and in the textual groundwork of their plays. Assuming that a Eurocentric worldview can be perceived as a form of racism that discriminates ethnic
minorities by denying access to the official records, the reintroduction of lost or forgotten histories into the canon can be considered as a particularly powerful postcolonial strategy used to challenge the racist tendencies prevalent in multicultural Canada. Although all of the five plays feature female protagonists, the venture undertaken by the playwrights is not only the recuperation of women’s voices but, in more general terms, a readjustment of black people in history. All of the five plays focus on either a historical revaluation of female positions in the past or on an attempt of presenting contemporary situations of African Canadians in general (and especially women) in the proper light.

Djanet in *AS* serves as a paramount example of this procedure of revaluation. Although she is very much influenced by popular media herself, during her journey to Africa, she “discovers a rich, varied history that dispels the negative and limiting stereotypes” (Nothof 2001: 207). When she sees the beautiful rock paintings by indigenous people on the Tassili plateau (cf. *AS*: 49), she recognizes that Africans are by no means ‘savages’ or ‘uncivilized’ but instead have a culture of their own. Furthermore, by mentioning the information that one of the first universities of the world was built in Tombouctou (cf. *AS*: 56), she draws attention to the fact that Africans are not at all ‘stupid’ or ‘uneducated’ but in possession of an impressive knowledge and culture of their own. However, these contributions are not acknowledged by the dominant discourse. Djanet, though mockingly, states a deep truth: “Have you noticed that if an anthropologist goes out and studies an ancient ‘third world’ culture, he finds knowledge or traditions way in advance of his own, he always ends up speculating on visitations from outer space. I’ve noticed that” (*AS*: 49).

Djanet even gives an example of how history has always been written from a white point of view, namely the Victoria Falls in Southern Africa which only became famous after the Scottish explorer David Livingstone had ‘discovered’ them. She makes the point that the indigenous Zulu people had known this natural phenomenon for a long time until they showed it to Livingstone one day. Yet, it was at this moment that the Victoria Falls, how Livingstone called them, became famous.

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80 Gilbert and Tompkins avoid merging gender histories with the concept of race under the headline of marginality (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 120ff.). However, for the purpose of this study, it is appropriate to compare the situation of the black women in the five plays with each other because their cultural contexts and their situations of oppression or marginality are very similar one another.
Djanet concludes that “nothing exists until a white man finds it” (AS: 53), thus reminding the audience of the fact that colonial history,

under the guise of ideological neutrality, often replaced local, indigenous histories with a Eurocentric account of the past. In other words, a colony’s history frequently ‘began’ when the white arrived: any events prior to contact with European were irrelevant to the official record which became the history.

(Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 106)

At the end of her journey, Djanet has realized that, contrarily to what she learned in school, black history did not begin with slavery (cf. AS: 76). Thus, she concludes that “[w]e need to rewrite the history book” (Sears 1990: 18) in order to include the contributions of indigenous populations. This statement could be read as an account of the playwright’s own experiences in school:

My education, for the most part, taught me a history that suggested that African people were primitive savages or were placed here on the earth to serve, due to our inferior intelligence and natures. My parents can fill an encyclopedia with stories of their emigration to Britain in the 50s. People actually walked behind them to see if they in fact had tails.

(Sears 1997: 95)

However, although the journey “helps her to escape the imperial gaze and to situate herself outside that gaze” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 249), Djanet’s own perception is not completely unambiguous. At the sight of the Saharan rock paintings, Djanet herself seems to have internalized a white point of view; she almost cannot believe that African people are capable of achieving something beautiful like that. She says: “I had to keep looking around, just to remind myself of where I was. And these were African people” (AS: 51). This revaluation of Djanet’s own position attenuates Sears’s criticism, as she does not place her protagonist above the audience. Her critique of the Eurocentric worldview she has been confronted with since her school days is not too radical in AS, her first play. In contrast, she undertakes a much graver attempt of rewriting history in her play ABG.

In contrast to Djanet, who simply talks about the need of rewriting history, the figures in the play ABG act it out. The second scene of the play introduces a group of seventy-year-old African Canadian activists under the lead of Rainey’s father, Abendigo, who fight their personal battle against racism. In this play, the struggle for racial equality is

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81 Djanet’s personal evaluation of the school curriculum echoes research which finds that “the absence of Black knowledge in many Canadian school curricula is not a simple oversight. Its absence represents an academic instance of racism [...]. [T]he Canadian curriculum does not merely teach Western ideas and cultures, it teaches the superiority of Western ideas and culture; it equates Western ways and thought with Civilization itself” (Codjoe 2005: 65f.).
symbolized by the discussion about the name of ‘Negro Creek Road’. This name, which points back to the achievement of African Canadians fighting for Canada against the Americans during the War of 1812 and which therefore stands for the acknowledgment of blacks within Canadian history, has been changed by a council because “they’re not comfortable using the word Negro” (ABG: 23). Instead, the road was named Moggie Road, after “some white settler who hadn’t lived in this community but a few years” (ABG: 45). Superficially, this act looks like a means of political correctness against the overt discrimination of an ethnic minority. Yet, it is felt like an official erasure of this minority’s involvement in the foundation of the Canadian nation. For this reason, the group wants to change back the name in order to sanction the place of Africans in Canadian history. Abendigo explains:

Our blood is in this soil […] They can’t just erase us from nearly 200 years of history. It’s wrong. And for the first time in my life we were taking our own destiny in our own hands. Even if we don’t win the case, we’re not going to just sit back and take it anymore.

(ABG: 45f.)

In the end, the group’s lawsuit turns out to have been successful. By changing back the road’s name to its original designation, the township council officially acknowledges the contribution of black soldiers in the foundation of its country’s history. Therefore the play addresses not only the subject of overt acts of racial discrimination in contemporary Canadian society but

speaks to the much larger issue of the invisibility of Black Canada in the national narrative and the national imaginary. In Adventures of a Black Girl both that history and its invisibility are brought to light. The play lays eloquent and insistent claim to the soil of Grey County and to the place of African Canadians in the making of the nation.

(Sanders 2003: 119)

Yet, in this play, the renaming of Negro Greek Road is not the only symbol for an erasure of black Canadians from the official documents. First of all, national history is reflected by the personal history of Rainey’s family and the symbol of the uniform of Juma Moore. This black soldier, one of Rainey’s ancestors, had been granted the land at Negro Creek. After Rainey’s great grandmother had died in the creek during the annual ritual cleaning of the uniform, the “authorities returned her body but kept the uniform – said it was the property of Her Majesty’s army” (ABG: 20). Ever since, the uniform was kept in a museum. Being convinced that it belongs to the African Canadian community, the group of septuagenarians around Rainey’s father secretly steals the uniform from the museum.
because “[i]t’s part of the foundation of this land. It should be displayed with pride, not hidden away in a museum storage trunk” (ABG: 108). Through this act they symbolically recuperate the contribution of African soldiers during the War of 1812 and reinforce their place in the official Canadian historiography.

Moreover, their intrusion into the museum shows further similar incidents of how they rewrite a Eurocentric historiography by acknowledging the place of people of African descent. Darese, one of the septuagenarians, flippantly calls these acts “dusting out Canadian history” (ABG: 98). Girlene, another member of the group, rewrites the caption under a portrait of John A. MacDonald’s (i.e. the first Canadian prime minister’s) second wife. The stage directions indicate that she is “adding the appropriate corrections” (ABG: 99) by acknowledging that this woman was born in Jamaica, both of European and African descent; Gale’s own opinion about this act becomes obvious in these commenting stage directions. Furthermore, Girlene tells that her husband and she regularly bought up all National Geographics on the newsstands when they found “another one of those obscene articles dehumanizing African people” (ABG: 100) in it. Instead of talking about the need of rewriting history, this group of activists energetically tries to raise public awareness of the erasure of black people from Canadian history and the implicit as well as explicit Eurocentric worldview underlying Western historiography.

While at the museum, the group is confronted with allegedly scientific explanations on European missionaries, the non-civilized state of the ‘savages’ Columbus discovered in the New World, their non-religiosity, and their inability to produce anything of cultural value (cf. ABG: 101). This is why Girlene concludes: “I constantly have to remind myself what century this is, with all of society’s technological know-how, it amazes me the rubbish they still hold dear” (ibid.). These words emphasize the assumption that “historians are always implicated in the construction of their narratives” (Salter 1992: 120) and how history has always been deliberately created by the dominating power of a country.

Gale’s play takes a similar line in so far as it recuperates the fate of African slaves within the discourse of a Canadian history that has successfully silenced its involvement in slavery until the 20th century. With her play, Gale “attack[s] the white space – the opaque silence – that shrouds Angélique in Eurocentric histories” (Clarke 2004: 75) as the play “rework[s] a historical moment in order to challenge historical oppressions, exclusions and

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82 These experiences at the museum reflect the playwright’s own perception. In an interview, she talks about the exhibition “Into the Heart of Africa” that was mounted at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Even in 1989, this exhibition did not achieve a neutral stance towards indigenous cultures but “interpreted the artefacts through the voices of white missionaries of the period” (Breon n.d.: n.p.).
atrocities through enactments of cultural memory” (Moynagh 2005: xxii). By writing the story of Angélique, a slave “in a Canadian history book”, as the cast list indicates (A: 2), into the cultural memory of the Canadian society, the playwright restores the lost history of slavery on Canadian soil into the official historiography of the nation.

However, it is not only the story of slavery that is written into the canon but the story of “the radical prophet of a new, multiracial Montréal” (Clarke 2004: 82) because Gale creates her own story about the facts found in history books, thus blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. As Gilbert and Tompkins argue: “History has been generally figured as true, immutable, and objective, as opposed to fiction which is defined as untrue, changeable and subjective” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 107). Gale’s play consciously reworks this clear-cut distinction in order to make it difficult for the audience to know whether it is Angélique who has committed arson – as has been transmitted as fact in official records. In order to stress Angélique’s possible innocence, or, at least, to cast doubt on her conviction, the play presents five persons who might be responsible for the fire. Gale suggests that Thérèse (due to jealousy of Angélique), Manon (as César has left her for Angélique), César (because Angélique has left him for Claude), Claude (who wants to leave for New England) and Angélique herself might all have had plausible reasons for setting the fire.

During the trial, Angélique is accused over and over again without being granted any possibility of testifying in court herself. The fact that she is finally convicted on the basis of the testimony of the “four-year-old Amable Le Moine […] who testified that on the day of the fire she saw the negress, Marie Joseph Angélique, carrying a coal shuttle up to the attic” (A: 65) shows how easily people belonging to minorities can become victims of a dominating group in society. Above all, this strategy challenges Eurocentric historiography in general by showing how all apparently factual history can be read as a (fictional) construct that emerged in a certain social and / or political context. The “construction of history [appears] as a textual frame that can be manipulated to reveal or suppress” (Filewod 2001: 37).

In this way, all of the five plays follow a postcolonial tradition by undertaking attempts to challenge a Eurocentric worldview which has traditionally excluded the histories of people of African descent – both through their content and through the way of performance. These attacks directed against the flaws of a multicultural Canadian society can be read on a collective level with regard to the general institution of theatre in Canada.
Although the five plays analyzed in this paper cannot put an end to racism in contemporary Canadian society, they nonetheless make their contribution to an enforced awareness that a multicultural society should not take a ‘white’, European point of view for granted. Probably, challenging Eurocentric historiography can be seen as the postcolonial theatrical strategy used most effectively among those laid out by Balme, Gilbert, and Tompkins.

In the course of this chapter, it has been demonstrated that the plays by Sears, Gale, and Anthony show major parallels to elements found in postcolonial theatre. However, due to the exclusive focus of postcolonial theories on indigenous playwrights and on their overall goal of expressing ‘resistance’, the plays in question only partly bear comparison to postcolonial dramatic theory. Besides exposing racist strategies in Canada and challenging its official policy of multiculturalism (thus fitting the label of ‘resistance’ writings), the considered playwrights formulate and enact a place of identification for the African minority in the diaspora in Canada. Nevertheless, the playwrights do achieve an effective criticism of racism in Canadian society by appropriating more ‘conventional’ theatrical strategies which approach their concern to the audience.

4 Turning Racism into a Challenge to Canadian Multiculturalism

Certainly, postcolonial playwrights want to raise broad public awareness of ancient colonial power structures and their influence on modern societies, even with the goal of overcoming them one day. Yet, too overtly pronounced challenges to the dominant discourse in society can estrange the audience and limit the realm of reception of these plays to a very exclusive circle, i.e. spectators coming from formerly colonized societies themselves. By contrast, the many awards and positive receptions – by blacks and whites – of the plays under consideration show that they are not addressed to exclusively black audiences but speak to a broad Canadian audience. In order to demonstrate how the five plays, nevertheless, effectively perform racism as a major social concern, the analysis has to take into account more conventional theatrical elements that reach beyond the mere concept of ‘resistance’. Altogether, the playwrights make use of four additional strategies that approach their (partly radical) judgments on racial discrimination in contemporary Canadian society to the audience.

Firstly, all of the plays abandon a passive state of contemplation and lament but, instead, turn to positive, partially even humorous debates about their experiences. By
provoking laughs from the audience, the playwrights achieve a forceful, yet not moralizing, understanding of the problems of African Canadians. Secondly, a similar effect can be discerned with respect to the use of time and space structures as well as frequent extra-dramatical references. Yet, the necessity of discussing racism leads the playwrights to the tightrope walk of making their concern palpable without scaring their audience away. Thus, in order to raise the spectators’ awareness of their own participation in the (explicit or implicit) discrimination of ethnic minorities, the playwrights need to create a kind of sympathy for the difficult situation of African Canadians. Against this background, it appears to be necessary to examine the reasons for the strikingly bad success of the play *A* on the Canadian scene. After all, despite the huge popular acclaim of African Canadian playwrights, it is probably true that Canadian theatre culture is unable to accept radical revisioning, especially when it comes to their national history (cf. Filewod 2001: 29).

4.1 “It’s Not Black People against White People”

One way of portraying racial discrimination as a pressing concern in multicultural Canada could be didactic: pointing to examples of racism with a wagging finger in order to raise public awareness. It is, yet, understandable that persons who are too openly criticized of whatever behaviour will close their minds to this criticism. Accusing the audience or blaming them for explicitly or implicitly complying with racial discrimination could therefore run contrary to the goal of creating sympathy. This might be one reason why the playwrights Sears and Anthony follow a different approach by conveying their criticism in much more subtle terms. First of all, they do so by closing their plays on conciliatory terms and by offering hopeful future perspectives for their figures (and with it for the whole cause of racial equality) in order to spare the audience concrete feelings of guilt. Moreover, they even employ various humorous parts, showing that “truth told or a point made by comic means draws the reader / spectator closer” (Weitz 2009: 206). Positive identification and humour, at least in the plays under discussion, prove effective vehicles for transmitting social criticism.

All of the plays except for *A* (which will be discussed later in this chapter) offer similarly positive endings to that analyzed with regard to *HD* (cf. chapter 3.5.). Instead of excluding the white audience by declaring them guilty of the social hardships of Africans in Canadian society, they create a sort of solidarity between them and the figures on stage in order to plead for an understanding of their criticism. Sears explains this procedure as follows: “I hope it’s not read as black people against white people, as it’s more like this:
people fight for what’s important to them and pass it onto like-minded” (cf. Cosco 2011: n.p.).

The most obvious example of a positive ending that nevertheless emphasizes ‘what’s important’ can definitely be found in *AS* with Djanet celebrating her hybrid identity. Sears’s first play comes to a conciliatory closure with the words “I am beautiful” (Sears 1990: 93) and a mixture of different styles of music. Bennett argues that

> [at] the end of the play, Djanet does not discover one answer to the problems of identity but comes to terms with her hybridity and realizes it offers a site for celebration. She discovers the beauty of herself (her self) and this releases the incantation, enabling closure.

(Bennett 1995: 22)

Thus, “her journey concludes with her embrace of a diasporic hybrid, a border identity: ‘African Canadian’” (Wasserman 2002: 85).83 The symbol of her hybridity, this mixture between her deeply-rooted African origin and her ‘new’ Canadian identity, is Djanet’s singing of the Canadian National Anthem in a gospel style (cf. *AS*: 87). This act lets her conclude that she can best describe herself as the “African heartbeat in a Canadian song” (*AS*: 88). Djanet concludes that she “belong[s] to the African diaspora” (*AS*: 89), thus defining her place within her adopted home country. Therefore, when she flies back to Canada, she recognizes that her culture will be forever with her (cf. *AS*: 91) and that hybrid identities are a positive contribution to the Canadian mosaic.84

In spite of this positive, celebrating ending, it is true that “spectator[s] can not [simply] leave the theatre content that everything worked out for Djanet” (Bennett 1995: 22). Being active members of North American popular culture, they cannot discharge themselves from their own involvement with racial discrimination – be it in overt terms (reflected by Djanet’s schoolmates) or in a silent acceptance of the stereotypes represented in popular media. Though not moralizing in tone, the play’s overall message constantly

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83 With regard to the acceptance of hyphenated identities – a life ‘between the borders’ – the play bears resemblance with theatrical expressions by other minorities living in Canada, such as the plays *Fronteras Americanas* by Argentinean Canadian playwright Guillermo Verdecchia or *dark diaspora...in dub* [sic.] by Caribbean-born Canadian playwright ahdri zhina mambilza which both end with positive definitions of border identities without a denial of ethnic origins (cf. Maufort 2003: 145). Yet, a hyphenated identity formation can also be read as a challenge to multiculturalism. Nofhof says that the Canadian mosaic cracks exactly at the point where ethnicity, race, gender, and class meet and continues that “[t]hese cracks in the mosaic are particularly evident in a Canadian ethnic theatre in which self-representation challenges the characterisations of the cultural majority” (Nofhof 2001: 194).

84 Identity cannot be seen as defined once and for all but has to be practiced over and over again. In this context, Tompkins speaks of an ‘infinite rehearsing of performance and identity’ in the postcolonial context (cf. Tompkins 1993: 35).
reminds the spectators of their own implication in a social and cultural system that excludes others and renders intercultural comprehension so difficult.

The play *ABG* achieves a similar effect through its positive ending which recognizes Africans as part of Canadian society. Analogically to *HD*, hope in *ABG* is, first of all, expressed through the symbol of children. In contrast to other female characters in African American literature (cf. footnote 56), Rainey is determined to continue her family’s lineage (cf. *ABG*: 65). Although her and Michael’s first baby, Janie, has died of meningitis, and they are about to divorce, the play ends with a kiss. In an almost melodramatic ending, the divorce papers fall into the water, an act that can definitely be read as a first step towards reconciliation. Additionally, Rainey and Michael both eat a morsel of earth from the creek in order to show their rootedness in this place. The same shift of tone is valid in Abendigo’s case: Even though the old man dies right after the successful ‘liberation’ of the soldier’s uniform from the museum, the overall positive perspective is obvious in his case as well: he finally becomes one with the creek, uniting himself with his African ancestors. Although one might argue that the “final scene, which promises hope for both Rainey and Michael, does not ring true” (Greenberg n.d.: n.p.), it fits the overall light (and not at all accusing) tone of the play.

Evidently, it has to be kept in mind that the play starts out with a sad prologue, which stages the death of Rainey’s little girl. Ever since, Rainey has been burying herself in grief, not being able to see her daughter’s grave. Nevertheless, this desperate prologue is succeeded by a comic scene which takes place approximately three years after Janie’s death and whose comic tone contrasts fundamentally with the prologue. In this scene, the audience witnesses the five septuagenarians, led by Rainey’s father, who are about to prepare for some kind of secret operation about which the spectators are still in the unknown. Already the sight of a group of seventy-year-old people synchronizing their watches, recapitulating their plan and taking on code names, while at the same time talking about gas prices and Superman comics, provides comic relief. It is obvious that these humorous scenes are introduced for the purpose of setting off the play’s more serious contents (cf. Oxford Reference Online: ‘Comic Relief”). In this case, “humour operates

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85 The use of this term follows the definition by Weitz that “‘comic’, as a mode, designates a tone given to the text through the inclusion of textual elements – such as humorous dialogue – which have been imported without the structure [i.e. of comedy]” (Weitz 2009: 24).

86 Not to be confused with the genre of comedy (which the plays are definitely not because of their serious topics), humour is a “social transaction between at least two people – and, by extension, between a performer or writer and audience – through which one party intends to evoke amusement or laughter” (Weitz 2009: 2).
as a relief valve” (Weitz 2009: 202) for the grave, sometimes desperate, situation of African Canadians in a discriminatory society.

The play successfully holds up the initial comic tone throughout its course. Later on, the audience learns that the group’s missions consist of ‘liberating’ garden gnomes and other “enslaved lawn ornaments” (ABG: 41) which they hide in Abendigo’s cellar. Their muddled attempt of preventing Rainey from going down into the cellar certainly provokes laughs from the audience (cf. ABG: 38ff.). What is equally humorous are their acts of ‘covert resistance’ (as Michael calls them; cf. ABG: 41): transforming the gnomes’ stereotypical grinnings into real human smiles. Once again, the septuagenarians take over the task of altering the stereotypical perception of African Canadians. Hidden under a comical surface is their ideological mission not only to eradicate emblems of their racialized oppression and dehumanization at the hands of a white supremacist society, but it also goes about comically rewriting history to bring back into focus the absented presence of blacks in Canada.

(Petropoulos 2008: 75)

This shows that comic scenes perfectly serve the purpose of pointing the finger at serious concerns and of challenging the oppressive ways of racism without pronouncing any moralizing statements.

The playwright intensifies this effect by consciously breaking with the audience’s expectations: In their fight against racism, the septuagenarians, who call themselves the “Lotsa Soap Cleaning Company” – an acronym for “Liberation Of Thoroughly Seditious Artifacts Symbolizing (the) Oppression (of) African People” (ABG: 43) – compare themselves to Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks (cf. ibid.). These symbols of the fight for racial equality make the audience expect rather radical acts of resistance than the seemingly insignificant stealing of garden gnomes. Bert, one member of the group formulates this distance between what the audience expects and what is acted out on stage: “We want to change the world, and we’ve started with our neighbourhood” (ibid.). The play’s overall success confirms the suggestion that the rather humorous tone of the play is apt to convey the serious concerns about land ownership and racism felt by people

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87 Harriet Tubman, whose role in the liberation of Africans from slavery in the United States gave her the designation “the Moses of her people” (Turner-Sadler 2006: 62), is especially important in the Canadian context. Having herself escaped by the help of this secret system, she later helped several other slaves to escape via the ‘Underground Railroad’ to Canada (cf. Carty 1994: 202). Rosa Parks and her act of civil disobedience in 1955 can be considered as the symbol of “a new era in the black struggle for freedom in America” (Barksdale & Livingston 2005: 514).
confined to the margins of society. The huge popular acclaim of her plays (cf. Sears 2000: iii) seems to confirm that Sears’s tone does not restrict these concerns to a black audience but moves black and white spectators alike.

Employing an even more humorous tone, *DKH* can be considered as the best example of a play that makes its spectators laugh in order to sensitize them to the hardships of Africans in the Canadian diaspora. Assuming that “the comic is capable of working for or against the comfortable, accepted, even championed order of the world” (Weitz 2009: 202), Anthony’s comic treatment of difficult situations proves an effective means of subtly transmitting social criticism.

At the beginning, the hairdresser Novelette, first of all, establishes the serious, partly distressing topics of the play which deals with the innermost feelings of black women. She says: “[I]f you want to know about a woman, a Black woman that is. Touch her hair. ‘Cause that’s where we store all our hurt, our pain, our hopes, our dreams, every disappointment all in our hair” (*DKH*: 266). By adding that “Black womyn [sic.] we cry, cry a lot on the inside too proud to cry on the outside” (ibid.), she alludes to the hardships of black women in society, which will unfold themselves one after the other in the course of the play. At the same time, she already establishes the general comic tone. Alluding to the sexual connotation of the word “kinky” referring to black women’s hair, she mockingly asks: “Why do you think it’s kinky? We got all our sexual fantasies in there too!” (ibid.). Notwithstanding the difficult stories she is confronted with during the course of the play, Novelette maintains this light-hearted atmosphere. As the play’s comic, almost sitcom-like tone, distinguishes it from the other four plays of the corpus, it is convenient to examine one scene in more detail.

The first woman to take a seat in Novelette’s hair salon cannot be clearly identified because she is only called “Lady One.” From her businesswoman-like behaviour she could be white, even though neither the stage directions nor the dialogue explicitly state that. In any case, Novelette is not very compassionate with her but instead enumerates her flaws. Expanding her comic-like tone, Novelette makes fun of this woman, who, unconsciously, even intensifies it as the following short scene will illustrate:

**NOVELETTE:** She’s cheating on her husband. He’s lousy in bed. Viagra didn’t help him. And not only is she cheating she’s cheating with her best friend’s husband. Dirty little hussy!

**LADY ONE:** Excuse me?

**NOVELETTE:** I said I hope you’re not too fussy!
LADY ONE: Well could you hurry up I got places to go and people to screw, I mean do, and see.

(DKH: 267)

Assuming that this scene makes fun of a white woman, it could certainly distance a white audience from the play and from an understanding of racism as a pressing social concern. In contrast to this possibility, Novelette later on creates a general feeling of solidarity by making fun of her own position as a “busy busy career woman” (DKH: 265) as well as of her demanding clients (cf. DKH: 266). By treating black and white people with the same mocking tone, the play does not exclude white spectators at all. The short dialogue cited above, that draws its effectiveness out of wordplay / puns (cf. Platz-Waury 1999: 151), shows that Anthony, who premiered as a stand-up comic and actor, “uses her skill as a comedian to pull laughs out of the pain (and sometimes, out of the agony) that the women discuss” (Prince 2003: 259). This impression reflects Anthony’s personal attitude of encountering hardships with humour. Reflecting on her childhood and youth as an outsider in the white-dominated societies of Great Britain and Canada she says: “growing up, I always had my humour to fall back on” (DeMara 2007: n.p.). The play’s strategy proved effective to such a point that it has even been transformed into a Global Television sitcom in 2007 and, due to its success, already prepared the running of its second season on Canadian television one year later (cf. Global Television 2009: n.p.).

Similarly to AS and ABG, the play DKH ends with an image full of hope, namely the African chorus which affirms and celebrates Nia’s blackness – and with it the identity of all women of the African diaspora – through song and dance. The chorus reflects Nia’s own effort to overcome the oppressions laid on members of her race when she puts red ribbons in her daughter’s hair. Those red ribbons, which Nia’s mother refused to give to her daughter because she considered her “too Black to wear red” (DKH: 279), symbolize a better future for the next generation; a generation which might be able to be proud of its blackness. Besides addressing universal topics and creating sympathy for them, the play thus establishes a site of positive identification for members of the black diaspora. As Weitz says: “By virtue of the shared experience and feeling that humour seeks to validate between joker and laughers, comedy will always conduct its affairs with a conspiratorial gleam in its eye” (Weitz 2009: 86). Although humour might partly obscure overt criticism, it primarily functions as a ‘conspiratorial’ link between the action on stage and the spectators – as DKH perfectly illustrates.
Even though the corpus of plays underlying this study is too limited to formulate generalizing statements, the undertone of these plays indicates a specific strategy of coping with serious topics. The performance of these concerns is not reduced to an accusation of a discriminatory reality. Instead, the playwrights Sears and Anthony find a positive, partly even comic, artistic expression of coping with difficulties. In an interview, Anthony connects this humorous outlook to her ethnic origins. She says that the task of balancing serious contents with a lighter mood has not been difficult for her because of her Caribbean background: “Especially being Jamaican – we're sort of known for making light of very serious issues” (Hebert 2005: n.p.).

The production history of the play A reflects the idea that positive identification provides a more solid ground for understanding than an exclusion of white spectators by accusing them of being propagators of racism. Although Angélique expresses a kind of hopeful perspective for future generations in her poem (where she finds comfort in the idea that, one day in the future, the supremacy of whiteness will come to an end; cf. A: 23), the play does not end on positive terms but with Angélique’s hanging. Her final words, addressed to the audience, clearly designate them as responsible for Angélique’s personal fate and, accordingly, for that of black people in society in general (cf. chapter 4.4.). This accusation seems to leave no place for a white audience to feel included in a collective process of overcoming racism. The estrangement probably felt by a majority of spectators led to a rather adverse reception of the play in Canada.

Its vision of Canadian history is unsettling to those raised in the dominant myth of liberal multiculturalism, and its theatrical history signals alarms about the inability of Canadian theatre culture to accept radical revisioning. […] Since its Alberta premiere, Angélique has not appeared on a stage in Canada. […] This might seem to suggest that Angélique ‘speaks’ to audiences drawn from the African diaspora, but the fact that the play appears to have better chances of production in the United States than in Canada suggests as well that it summons an imagined audience in Canada, that the productions that it does not receive are as important to an understanding of the play as those that actually take place.

(Filewod 2001: 29f.)

The inability of Canadian audiences to accept the history of slavery within their own national borders as well as the resulting refusal to positively receive this play emphasize the importance attributed to more discreet forms of criticism, such as demonstrated by Sears and Anthony. They reinforce their criticism in equally subtle terms with the help of temporal and spatial connections between their plays and the hic et nunc of the audience as will be demonstrated in the following two subchapters.
4.2 Time Structures

Although Gilbert and Tompkins slightly allude to the importance of time spans in drama, their analysis of time structures in postcolonial theatre is mainly reduced to its function as a challenge to Eurocentric historiography (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 137ff.). They point out that indigenous playwrights can introduce conceptions of time which, by including native cultural phenomena, differ from European systems of time measurement. Moreover, “[b]ecause they question the simple correlation between history and time, plays which reconstruct empirical time as multi-directional, elliptical, fragmented, and even unpredictable loosen imperialism’s control over historical discourse” (ibid. 142).

Time structure in the five plays functions in more complex terms than mere resistance to colonial historiography. Quite contrarily, time in these plays serves rather as a means of approaching the dramatic enactment to a contemporary audience, thus turning racism into a concern of the 21st century. While the plays AS, ABG, and DKH achieve to bridge potential temporal gaps by setting their plays in a contemporary time frame (i.e. all of them indicate the temporal situatedness as “present”), the plays HD and A employ more complex – and in the case of A more radical – temporal layers.

Already the initial stage directions draw attention to the importance of time structures in HD as the audience expects to see three plots set in different times. First of all, there is a main plot set in the present, which features the student Billie and her English professor and lover, Othello. This main plot evolves chronologically, thus emphasizing Billie’s suffering which becomes more desperate in each scene. There is, however, one flashback in Act 2, Scene 7 which brings up Othello’s promise of marriage to Billie. This flashback is all the more cruel as the audience knows that Othello has not kept his promise but left Billie for another woman. Even though there is an imbalance of plot time in favour of this main plot (14 of the 21 scenes are set in the present), it is embedded in two historically relevant subplots featuring the same main characters.88 Sears uses these different temporal threads in order to show that “the Othello fabula is not an isolated incident […] but a trauma repeated countless times throughout African-American history” (McKinnon 2002: 3).

One of the subplots is set between 1860 and 1862, the time before the Emancipation of African Americans in the United States, where the protagonists are slaves. The plot also evolves chronologically in the course of three scenes; more precisely, it starts out with the

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88 For a detailed definition of plot time versus performance time cf. Platz-Waury 1999: 124. For the means of this paper, it suffices to stress the fact that the majority of scenes is set in the present.
two figures vowing eternal love to each other, portrays the moment of separation, and ends two years later. The second subplot is set in 1928, the time of the Harlem Renaissance, and stars Othello as a minstrel show actor. Contrarily to the other two plots, these four scenes do not display a chronological narrative. While the Prologue shows the exact moment of separation, the three scenes that are interspersed into the main plot go backwards in time. Although Billie has already killed Othello in the second 1928 scene, he is again alive in the third scene and even prepares for a new minstrel acting job in the last of these four scenes. This inconsistency in the chronological order of the play creates an alienating effect as well as it requires a concentrated mental activity from the part of the audience (cf. Kidnie 2001: 43). Time structure in \textit{HD} is thus a disturbing method of showing how all of the three time periods are inevitably connected to each other.

The bewildering conclusion to which spectators are led is that the various strands represent – simultaneously – a single transhistorical plot, and three independent sequences of events. The dramatic structure of \textit{Harlem Duet} fosters the unshakable belief that the scenic fragments can be reassembled as a narrative unity, while at the same time denying the satisfaction of seeing that goal ever accomplished.

(ibid. 46)

Sears comments on this time structure as follows: “It gave depth that I wanted. It supported many layers of the play, of the language, and of the contradictions around race” (Sears 1998: 25). Her use of time structures helps Sears express, through performance, the historical consequences of slavery on black people’s psyche today, in this way emphasizing the play’s main message. In a second step, the play forcefully criticizes contemporary audiences by implicating them in this process of discrimination against persons of African descent through their Eurocentric worldview. As a means of challenging racism as perpetuated by Eurocentric historiography, “[t]he peculiar structure prompts in the spectator an active engagement with the problems of writing history” (Kidnie 2009: 78). However, the play’s overall positive outlook on the future attenuates this criticism and makes it easier to bear for the audience than does \textit{A}.

The play \textit{A} employs a more radical strategy. “In its subject matter and its theatrical techniques alike, […] it works a ruthlessly effective critique of the naturalised fictions that historical narrative so often conceals” (Filewod 2001: 37). From the beginning, Gale blends different temporal layers under the overall motto “Then is now. Now is then” (\textit{A}: 2). This indication emphasizes her goal of connecting a contemporary audience to the events

\footnote{For a complete interpretation of the chronology underlying \textit{HD} cf. Kidnie 2001: 44ff; Kidnie 2009: 75f.}
during the period of colonialism and slavery. Gale turns the spectators into accomplices of her story by charging her play with anachronisms, therefore making it impossible for the audience to accept the action set during the times of slavery as ‘over’.

First of all, the playwright employs a constant change between contemporary and modern clothing in order to show that “the slaves are working in every scene in which they appear, either in a modern or historical context” as the stage directions indicate (A: 2). Furthermore, when the exploitative entrepreneur François, originally a figure of the 18th century, enthuses about his investments in the iron industry, the stage directions compare him to Donald Trump, a business tycoon of the 20th century. While this comparison occurs only implicitly (as Donald Trump is only mentioned in the secondary, not in the primary text), the motto of the whole play becomes more obvious in the words Thérèse addresses to Angélique when explaining her housekeeping duties:

Beds each morning, change the linen every other day or so. Bathrooms every other morning. Vacuum the main living spaces – bedroom, living room, stairs – daily… Don’t worry. We have a deluxe machine. I hear it makes vacuuming a breeze… Floors swept and washed every day. Waxing every third week. Are you getting all this? (A: 5f.)

The anachronism expressed in these words, not least through the reference to the deluxe vacuum cleaner, reverberates in further stage properties such as a BIC lighter (A: 13), a boom box (A: 8), a computer (A: 51), a microphone (A: 71); as well as in allusions to a Mercedes (A: 34) and to car keys (A: 35). What initially “emerges as if a slippage in language” (Rewa 2000: 4) approaches a contemporary audience to what they perceive on stage. By skilfully interweaving past and present actions, Gale implicates them in processes of ‘modern-day slavery’: direct and institutional acts of racism through which African Canadians are put at the lower scale of the social ladder. The many anachronisms and temporal contradictions included in this play probably have an unsettling and disturbing effect on the spectators to the aim that they are forced to reflect on their own role within a multicultural Canadian society.

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91 With regard to this scene, Filewod persuasively argues that “[t]he depersonalized nature of this work deceives Angélique. It promises a secure structure of duty which can be separated from the self and in effect disguises slavery as a ‘job’ (Filewod 2001: 34).
92 Afua Cooper, referring to black slaves seeking a better life in Canada, describes the situation blacks found there as “a new kind of slavery: working in white people’s home for starvation wages, being vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation, including the sexual, and experiencing racism” (Cooper 2000: 442).
The inquiry and testimonies following the incendiary are especially interesting to examine in this context. Already the stage directions comprise a comment that criticizes modern day television coverings of trials: “The testimonies continue. The following testimonies are doubled by the remaining cast. These are like the specious and ridiculous eyewitnesses often seen on many sensational programs” (A: 64). Not only are the (partially overlapping) testimonies rendered more intense by the doubling of voices, the whole trial is also covered by a modern reporter who conveys the “dramatic new developments” (A: 65). By the use of this scene, which “serves as an on-stage intrusion and casts great doubt on the record” (Rewa 2000: 3), the playwright indicates quite plainly how easily testimonies can be falsified and accused persons convicted – the more so if they belong to visible ethnic minorities. Angélique’s lament that she is arrested for her difference supports this idea (cf. A: 71). This suggestion together with the skilful use of time structures probably demands the audience to reflect upon their own involvement in processes of ‘othering’, racial discrimination, and exclusion in their living environment. Altogether, it is true that

\[\text{In the play, Lorena Gale restores Angélique in the historical narratives that supply the national imaginary with evidence of its origins; with the play, she challenges the theatre profession – and its authorising structures of value and critical reception – to recognise that ‘we’ are invested in the erasure of African-Canadian experience, and that like François, we take ‘particular notice’ of blackness for reasons we seldom choose to examine. Angélique […] calls on us to confront the sliding glances of racism […].} \]

(Filewod 2001: 38)

Such a radical criticism seems to be too hard to bear for a white audience that believes in the overall conception of its nation as ‘multicultural’ and in its history as free from slavery. Due to the irresolvable entanglement of temporal structures, Gale “challenges the absolution from guilt by distance as a tenable position” (Rewa 2000: 4), thus making it impossible for the audience to not feel responsible for Angélique’s fate (and for that of millions of other black people).

This clearly demonstrates that the use of time structures can definitely increase audience involvement. While \textit{AS}, \textit{ABG}, and \textit{DKH} render the audience implicit to what they perceive on stage by situating the plays in their respective “present” (i.e. the year 1990 in the case of \textit{AS}, 1997 in \textit{ABG}, and 2001 in \textit{DKH}), the examples of \textit{HD} and A show how such a temporal entanglement can be portrayed more effectively. Through their respective performative enactment of time structures, these two plays reflect what has been analyzed with regard to the plays’ contents: that past social structures, especially those in the times
of slavery, still have disastrous effects on African Canadians in contemporary society. Although never directly expressed by any of the figures on stage, the spectators cannot absolve themselves from their own discriminatory attitudes or, at least, from their tacit acceptance of them. Yet, not only temporal but also spatial indications can achieve this approach.

4.3 Space Structures

Admittedly, postcolonial theories recognize the strategy of restructuring space as a means of undermining the spatial division of indigenous land brought about by colonial endeavours. According to these theories, spatial structures challenge the overall inscription of a colonial history on a land that was perceived as ‘terra nullius’ by the colonizers (cf. Innes 2007: 42). In any case, the plays they analyze do not go beyond a postcolonial re-enactment of the settler myth and of past histories in general (cf. Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 145ff.). The only play that can be read along the lines of an attempt to “reclaim land [and] subvert the dominant society’s control over social space” (ibid. 154) is ABG. This play depicts the struggle of the African Canadian minority over a specific piece of land as expressed through the naming of Negro Creek Road (cf. chapter 3.6.). In this play, “the ground becomes a symbol of black Canadian history and ancestry in need of being remembered and re-marked” (Petropoulos 2008: 77).  

The other plays, though, rather employ space as a means of characterization of inner actions as well as a means of creating a link between the play’s content and its audience. This suggestion is based on a proposition made by Jurij Lotman, namely that the setting of a specific action is always more than mere scenery or decorative background; but that, instead, all spaces are culturally encoded and can be read as semiotic texts (Lotman 1993: 329). The setting of the play AS, i.e. the international airport in Benin, Africa, definitely allows a reading along these lines because it primarily serves as a means of identification and as a spatial expression of Djanet’s search for her roots. On top of that, space conveys the deeper meaning of this location as a reminder of “the prior historical crossings of her ancestors who were forced to ‘leave’ Africa for the New World after passing through the Door of No Return” (Petropoulos 2006: 199). Thus, the location of the airport can be read

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93 Cf. also the discussion about the “symbolism of the earth and water [which] relate […] not only to the reclaiming of national space but also to the diasporic legacy of the slave trade and, by extension, the protagonist’s connection to Africa” (Petropoulos 2008: 78).
as an actual setting as well as a symbolic one: it embeds Djanet’s personal search for identity in the communal history of her African heritage. Additionally, Djanet’s departure for Canada spatially approaches the spectators for whom the play is performed to the action. The recollections of her experiences of racial discrimination in Canada, though not voiced as obviously as Ben’s statement about France – namely “Les Francais [sic.], ils sont racistes” (AS: 78) – leave no room for the spectators to absolve themselves from their own implicitness in racist practices. Instead, this play turns racism, or at least discrimination based on stereotypes, into a Canadian problem.

Against the background of this rather obvious way of interpreting a setting, the concept of space in HD is more complex. As McKinnon points out, in order to analyze the subject of theatrical space in HD, it is useful to have recurrence to Michael Issacharoff’s distinction between ‘mimetic’ (onstage) space and ‘diegetic’ (offstage) space. Whereas ‘mimetic’ space is visible to the audience, ‘diegetic’ space is merely referred to by the characters on stage (cf. Issacharoff 1981: 215; Balme 1999: 250). McKinnon explains in detail how, while the mimetic settings of the play are clearly defined (i.e. a forge, a dressing room, Billie’s apartment), “Sears uses diegetic referents to reinforce the connections between these private mimetic spaces and the Black community to which they belong” (McKinnon n.d.: 6). This becomes most obvious in an analysis of the plot set in the present.

Although this plot takes place in Billie’s apartment, both she and Othello frequently refer to buildings outside of this confined mimetic space. By referring to the view out of the apartment, where the Schomburg Museum, Harlem Hospital and the Apollo Theatre can be seen (cf. HD: 7), Billie “establishe[s] Harlem as the centre of African American culture and achievement” (McKinnon n.d.: 7). Moreover, diegetic space symbolizes the contrary opinions about race held by the two protagonists: While Harlem with its black boutiques, bookstores, groceries, doctors, dentists and banks symbolizes to Billie a black “sanctuary” (cf. HD: 106), Othello merely denies it as a “reservation” (HD: 56). This fraction is emphasized by an even more direct construction of diegetic space when Amah verbally constitutes the apartment’s location “on the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards” (HD: 25).

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94 The setting of the airport perfectly fits Djanet’s search for identity. According to the anthropologist Marc Augé, all spaces of transition constitute a ‘non-lieu’ without history or identity (cf. Weiß 2005: 30f.).

the conflict that Sears does not leave it at a mere indication in the stage directions (cf. *HD*: 17) but has it pronounced by one of the characters directly at the beginning of the play.

The two street names establish a symbolic space for the differing opinions concerning race as displayed by Othello and Billie as they refer to a major contrast within the movement for racial equality. While Martin Luther King propagated non-violent methods in the advancement of civil rights (cf. Turner-Sadl er 2006: 170f.), Malcolm X is generally connected with a more militant stance (cf. ibid. 185). In contrast to King, who fought for an equal integration of African Americans in society, Malcolm X “did not feel that European Americans would ever, as a whole, live with African Americans on a basis of equality […] and] did not want African Americans to integrate into the American system” (ibid. 190). Similar attitudes can be analyzed for the figures on stage. Othello’s attempts of self-improvement and of getting (peaceful) access to the institutions of society bear resemblance to the politics of Martin Luther King while Billie, resembling Malcolm X, adapts a much more radical, even violent attitude – not to forget that she kills Othello in both of the past subplots (cf. Dickinson 2002: 200). Definitely, “Harlem as urban space and dramatic setting thus symbolizes the lover’s ideological differences about racial assimilation” (Kidnie 2001: 47).

Yet, space also conveys an ambiguous, more critical outlook on society. While whiteness is never present in the mimetic setting, it constitutes a prominent aspect of the diegetic space. For instance, landlady Magi reads a beauty magazine with a blonde woman on the cover (cf. *HD*: 24), and Billie’s sister-in-law, Amah, will only get her cosmetician’s certificate if she learns “how to do White people’s hair and make-up” (*HD*: 26). This clear-cut distinction between the confined, almost holy place of black Harlem and the dangerous, white world outside could create a fraction between the action on stage and a white audience. This shows that *HD* does not use space structures to the sole aim of approaching the play’s main topic to the audience. In any case, it serves as an effective means of dismantling racist tendencies in contemporary society because, in this play, “national space represents both a sense of cultural pride and an ongoing political struggle to belong in a country rife with racist ideologies of exclusion” (Petropoulos 2006: 118).

Admittedly, as the play is not set on Canadian soil, one might argue that for a Canadian audience such a depiction might reinforce the widely held opinion of Canada as certainly, one has to admit that Harlem also “is where the African diaspora gathers, where community is possible, where healing can occur” (Sanders 2000: 559). Such a reading, which displays a more positive prospect for the characters, indeed fits the ending of the play. However, considering the overall conflict of the plot, the setting serves rather as a means of denouncing racism.
being a non-racist counterpoint to the United States. At first, the play seems to support this impression when the slave Othello says: “Canada freedom come” (HD: 35) and together with his lover dreams about “a white house, on an emerald hill, in Canada” (ibid.). Keeping the historical evidence about slavery in Canada in mind, the idea of leaving the United States and going north cannot really serve as a solution, neither for the slaves nor for present-day Billie. For an audience that is aware of the fact that for blacks, “life in Canada was not simply free, but has demanded their struggle against prejudice and racism” (Elam 2008: 45), the slaves’ dream must appear as an ironic comment on the ideal of Canada so often conveyed by media and even by history books.

In spite of experiences of racism in Canada, Billie’s family, although living in New York, is deeply anchored in Canadian history and society. References to Canadian food (cf. HD: 26) as well as her father’s telling name “Canada” refer to the family’s roots in Nova Scotia. This is why, despite the fact that the play “is set in Harlem […], features African-American characters, and draws from time periods in American history, it was received as a brilliant Canadian play” (Scott 2010: 167). Yet, although the idea of going back to Canada, more precisely to Nova Scotia, mentally supports Billie in coping with the separation from Othello (cf. HD: 82), it does not serve as more than a spiritual solution. Billie’s father, Canada, is characterized by several flaws: “[He] comes to Harlem, but he’s unable to change her situation, he's unable to make things better for her. […] It's not this ideal father coming to save the day” (Buntin 2004: n.p.). Therefore, at the end of the play, the characters decide to stay in Harlem for the moment. As Billie’s father sums it up: “Oh, I don’t think I’m going anywhere just yet – least if I can help it. Way too much leaving gone on for more than one lifetime already” (HD: 117). This shows that the play does not so much deal with concrete spaces connected to African-Americanness (African-Canadianness, respectively) but with symbolic spaces for the African diaspora. In AS as well as in HD,

Sears’ foray outside the Canadian national context ultimately empowers her heroines to reclaim a space for blackness in the Canadian national imagination and they do so, in part, by drawing on African American culture as part of the larger project of rewriting and reclaiming blackness in an African Canadian and diasporic context.

(Petropoulos 2008: 80)

Sears’s next play, ABG, the first one set on Canadian soil, more openly discusses the relation between people of African heritage and the land. If we follow the approach proposed by Petropoulos who arranges Sears’s three plays in a chronological order, it is
right to say that “these changes in spatial perspective, from a narrative of return to Africa, to the US, and back to Canada suggest a gradual reclamation of the nation as a site of identity” (Petropoulos 2006: 118). Her plays seem to approach the action, step by step, to a Canadian audience; starting with the African roots and making a detour via the United States. Thus, spatial dimensions in Sears’s three plays serve as symbolic, almost spiritual sites of identification for an African minority in the North American diaspora while at the same time rendering obvious that the plays’ concrete settings are places characterized by racism and exclusion.

The plays DKH and A make use of dramatic space in more abstract terms. Although the stage directions indicate more or less concrete identifiable settings – which are close to a Canadian audience, namely a hair salon on Eglinton Avenue in Toronto (cf. DKH: 263) and Montreal in the 1700s (cf. A: 2) – space in both plays is rather created by lighting than by stage scenery. The episodic arrangement of DKH reminds the audience of structures used in expressionistic theatre. Similar to works by Bertolt Brecht, Eugene O’Neill, or Clifford Odets, the independent scenes are introduced by one figure stepping into the spotlight (cf. DKH: 267) and revealing a certain episode. The single scenes are connected by one central character – Novelette – and the setting that only changes for a brief moment to step from the hair salon to Sherelle’s apartment and back again (cf. DKH: 272). The rather simplistic scenery emphasizes the play’s major concern by drawing attention to the “tight coil” of hair (DKH: 265).

A portrays the same effective, almost expressionistic use of lighting. As the stage directions hardly give any indications as to stage scenery and properties, the play’s setting mostly relies on effects of darkness and light (thus, in a way, reflecting Angélique’s poem to her child). While the spotlight draws attention to certain figures as well as it reveals persons on stage (cf. A: 36), those characters witnessing specific scenes are concealed by shadow and darkness (cf. A: 41). The sharp contrast created by the division of dark and lighted characters becomes obvious in the following short scene:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{ANGÉLIQUE in light. CLAUDE in shadow.} \\
&\text{CLAUDE} & \text{Deep.} \\
&\text{ANGÉLIQUE} & \text{I want to be close. To feel love. Choose love. Give…} \\
&\text{CLAUDE} & \text{Rich.}
\end{align*}
\]

97 In her stage directions, Gale explains: “Although the specifics are not written in the text, what can be explored is the concept of witnessing. As servants and slaves are essentially invisible, experiment with who sees what, who know what” (A: 2). For a discussion of “witnessing” in the play cf. Rewa 2000: 4; Filewod 2001.
ANGÉLIQUE  Dare I? Trust? Hope?
CLAUDE  Dark.
ANGÉLIQUE  Dare I? Give?
CLAUDE  Ripe.
ANGÉLIQUE  Yes!

CLAUDE (coming into the light)

Mine!

(A: 47f.)

This ‘dialogue’ effectively demonstrates how light turns Angélique into an object of desire, thus emphasizing the role attributed to black, ‘exotic’ Africans in the context of slavery. The interplay of shadow and light equally highlights the power relations which are in force in this colonial, patriarchal society: Claude’s step into the limelight symbolizes his taking over of power.

Moreover, as the concept of ‘witnessing’ plays a major role in the play (cf. footnote 97), the spectators “as participants in the drama […] are constructed witnesses to the monologues, addresses and testimonies of her characters” (Filewod 2001: 37). The audience is, in a way, equated with the observing figures standing in the shadows of the stage. In the role of ‘witnesses’, the spectators are rendered equally culpable of Angélique’s situation as the characters in the play. Angélique’s final monologue (cf. chapter 4.4.) cannot but leave them with a bitter taste of their own guilt in processes of racism on their way out of the ‘shadows’ of the theatre. This obvious criticism of the audience’s involvement in ‘modern-day slavery’ through the symbolic use of light and dark might be a further reason why the play has not been too well received by the audience. By using a symbolic setting emphasized by lighting instead of a realistic scenery, Gale breaks the theatrical illusions in order to turn racism into a palpable concern.

**4.4 Breaking the Illusion**

In his *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, Peter Szondi formulates the proposition that theatre is an absolute medium that does not know anything beyond itself (cf. Szondi 2007: 15). While this is true for the majority of works of French classicism – the so-called ‘well-made plays’—playwrights from the beginning of the 19th century onward employed various strategies of breaking the illusion thus created (cf. Müller 2006: 20ff.). Especially epic theatre in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht consciously oversteps the boundary between

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98 Well-made plays traditionally followed the three (pseudo-)Aristotelian unities of place, time, and action. With regard to the artificial illusion these plays hold up, they display a tendency towards escapism and the denial of social realities. This is one of the reasons why realistic, naturalistic, and especially politically engaged playwrights introduced various methods in order to break that illusion (cf. Müller 2005: 20).
the action on stage and the spectators in order to make them engage with what they see in the play (cf. Szondi 2007: 115ff.). To this aim, they do not hold up the convention of the ‘fourth wall’ any longer, i.e. a kind of imaginary wall that separates the audience from the action on the so-called ‘Guckkastenbühne’ (proscenium stage or picture-frame stage; cf. Pfister 1993: 22; Müller 2006: 20). Therefore, ‘breaking the illusion’ can forcefully draw attention to social and political concerns due to the close connection certain plays establish between the stage and the reality outside of the confined theatre walls.

As has been shown in the previous chapter, lighting can serve as a first means of breaking the illusion of the dramatic work by laying bare the piece’s fictional character to the audience. All of the five plays under consideration display similar means: either direct addresses to the audience (cf. Platz-Waury 1999: 61) or extra-dramatical references to persons, objects, or events that are part of the outside reality. As spectators cannot completely understand these references when merely looking at the action on stage, they have to reflect on the social reality beyond the play. This element can possibly be considered as the most powerful of the well-established theatrical strategies in order to point the finger at racism in contemporary society while, at the same time, implicating the audience in this process.

All plays except for HD contain explicit addresses to the audience which function as mediating communication systems between the world established on stage and the spectators (cf. ibid.). When, for instance, Rainey in ABG in an almost confiding manner tells about her family history she directly addresses these words to the audience. This strategy makes her monologue, which begins with the words “You’d think I’d be used to this by now” (ABG: 51) all the more effective. Especially her last questions seem almost to expect an answer from the spectators: “Why do people have to die? It’s such a strange feature of existence. I mean, what is that?” (ABG: 52). By having her actors look at the audience (cf. ABG: 73), Sears makes the spectators part of what happens on stage. Moreover, she probably achieves feelings of empathy for her characters. This strategy renders all the more palpable the exclusion Rainey, the “black girl in search of God”, feels in a hostile environment as well as the racial exclusion Michael and Abendigo have to experience.

The same is true for A when the protagonist “directly addresses the audience as documentary” of her case (A: 5). Her last monologue, delivered just before her hanging and even emphasized by a microphone, directly accuses the audience.
My brothers and sisters… / Arrested for their difference. / Their misery / a silent
scream, / rising to crescendo / and / falling on deaf ears. /

There is nothing I can say to change what you perceive. / I will from twisted
history, / be guilty in your eyes. / If thought is sin / then I am guilty. / For I wish
that I had fanned the flames that lead to your destruction. / But though I am
wretched, / I am not wicked. /

Almost ecstatic.

Take my breath. / Burn my body. / Throw my ashes to the wind. / Set my spirit
free. / The truth cannot be silenced. / Someday, / someone will hear me / and
believe … / I didn’t do it.

(A: 71f.)

This “contemporary elegy by the character for her historical self” (Rewa 2000: 3)
criticizes the spectators who, like the characters on stage, pronounce her guilty and exclude
her from society because of her difference. The direct address thus turns racism in past
times as well as in the present into an issue to which the audience cannot turn a blind eye.
The fact that the play has not been staged in Canada suggests that Angélique’s “act of
rallying resistance” (ibid.) might be too direct for the audience because it makes the play
hard to bear.

Novelette’s direct speech towards the audience in DKH similarly breaks the
illusionary boundary; yet in more conciliatory terms. Phrases like “See what I mean”
(DKH: 265) and “I’m telling you” (DKH: 266) make the audience – black and white –
relive the women’s monologues of hardships, racism, and exclusion. Novelette’s words
serve as transmitters of information concerning the play’s content and its cultural
background. Yet, in contrast to A, these words do not scare the audience away. Quite
contrarily, Novelette’s addresses create a bond of solidarity between the black figures on
stage and the audience. Especially white spectators, who might at first be estranged by the
practice of reading a person’s thoughts by touching her hair, have to rely on these
information on cultural practices for a full understanding of the play. This might be one
reason for the successful reception of the play, even in popular media.

Finally, Djanet in AS, who holds the role of an epic narrator inside the action (cf.
Pfister 1993: 76f.), makes the most frequent use of directly addressing the audience.

Nevertheless, the creation of sympathy for the slave’s side is not unambiguous as also François directly
addresses the audience. His rhetoric questions shake his initial confidence and complicate a one-sided
evaluation of Angélique’s situation: “But do you think I can put a smile on my wife’s face? […] Do you
know how hard it is to get close to someone who breaks into tears every time you touch her? […] What
would you pay for your wife’s happiness? What would you pay for you own?” (A: 4f.). If a judgement of
François’s behaviour is at least ambiguous in the beginning of the play, the evolving action rather
positions the audience next to Angélique’s side of the story while, however, not sparing their own
involvement in ‘modern-day slavery’ at all.
Already her rap in the prologue – which is, similarly to the chorus, defined as a rather ‘classical’ form of bridging the gap between audience and characters on stage (cf. Platz-Waury 1999: 61) – creates a common groundwork on which to rely for an understanding of the play. Especially her words “Let me tell ya’” (AS: 17) and “I’m gonna tell ‘bout the journey and what happened to me / So relax and listen and you will see” (AS: 18) involve the audience in her personal experience. Besides frequently employing the personal pronoun “you”, she uses jokes and questions directed at the audience in order to make them susceptible for the action (cf. AS: 45; 56; 91). Due to the fact that Djanet is very much influenced by popular culture, direct references and questions addressed to the audience concerning television programs effectively create the link between her own person and her spectators.

She speaks directly to the audience.

I am a T.V.. nut, no, a T.V. addict.
Name that theme?

She sings the theme from a popular old sci-fi t.v. series. […]

O.k., let me give you another clue then. “Danger, danger. Warning, warning. This does not compute, this does not compute!”

You’re kidding? LOST IN SPACE! The adventures of the family Robinson on their supposed journey to Alpha Centuri. O.k., how about this one? […]

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh! Now this is the mark of true T.V. sci-fi-it is. ‘Name that theme?’ […]

Oh, come on!

(AS: 24)

This fictional dialogue between Djanet and her audience intensifies the intended message that both parties are involved in popular culture. The audience’s point of view depends on what they see on television, thus probably implicitly repeating themselves the racist stereotypes presented on television.

Although direct addresses powerfully involve the audience in the action on stage, this complicity can be further emphasized by allusions or direct references to things beyond the actual plays. Djanet in AS uses direct references in order to approach her experiences to the audience by comparing them to Eaton Centre and Wall Street (cf. AS: 63), as well as by making references to popular culture. In contrast to this rather positive means of creating sites of identification for the audience, the plays HD, ABG, and A use these extradramatical references in order to, on the one hand, anchor individual experiences in the
broader context of the black movement against racism. On the other hand, these references help to directly criticize contemporary racism in multicultural Canada.

As has been demonstrated with reference to music (cf. chapter 3.3.), the play HD uses a soundscape of voices in order to situate Billie’s and Othello’s individual positions of radicalism and assimilation in the tradition of leaders of the black movement. These voices, that often ironically distance the action on stage from the audience, make the spectators reflect on the situation of black people in contemporary North American society. Although dramatic illusion is held up through dialogues, references to actual places (Harlem, the Apollo theatre, etc.) and books like The Great Chain of Being, Black Psychology, and Bell Curve (cf. HD: 51f.), break the illusion of the stage as a closed world that does not know anything beyond itself. Allusions to these books, especially to Bell Curve, remind the audience that, still in the 1990s, racial equality and full participation of ethnic minorities in a society that praises itself as multicultural is by no means achieved yet. The play ABG follows this path as references to Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and the Black Panthers (cf. ABG: 43) situate the play’s message in the larger context of the struggle for racial equality.

The most poignant criticism yet is made in the plays A and HD with their references to actual legal cases involving blacks. Angélique’s trial can be read as a bitter and ironic comment on a ‘typical’ juridical interrogation where the accused person is of black descent. The reporter’s ‘slip of the tongue’ when talking about the “O. J. – I mean M. J. Angélique – case” (A: 65) is the most radical statement on racism in contemporary society. By “linking Angélique’s persecution for alleged arson with Simpson’s 1994-97 prosecution for murder […] Gale positions Angélique […] as a model for contemporary ‘marginals’” (Clarke 2004: 82).

In this scene,

Gale combines historically possible actions with modern legal thinking to create a careful blend that casts suspicion on six characters. Why was it the black slave woman who was punished? In the construction of Angélique’s story Gale casts not only shadowy doubt on the selection process by which an event or occurrence becomes a fact, but also on the belief that as a society we have made amends for the inequities of the past.

(Borody 2001: 155)

The reference to Susan Smith in HD fulfils the same function. By mentioning Susan Smith, a white woman who killed her children but “blamed some imaginary Black man for the murder of her two boys” (HD: 75), Billie draws attention to the unjust behaviour of
state institutions towards ethnic minorities. She explains that “authorities didn’t suspect her for nearly two weeks. Stopping every Black man with a burgundy sedan from Union, South Carolina, to the Oranges of New Jersey” (ibid.). The fact that the monologue is accompanied by a “rhapsody of sound [that] keeps time with Christopher Darden as he asks O.J. Simpson to approach the jury and try on the bloody glove” (ibid.) emphasizes the intensity conveyed by Billie’s words. The case of O.J. Simpson symbolically hovers over the whole play.

Certainly, as Sears’s criticism involving O.J. Simpson is equally poignant as that employed by Gale, her play could have met a similar fate. Yet, the overall structure of her play, and especially the positive outlook on the future, partly attenuate her criticism and guaranteed a huge popular acclaim for *HD*, also on Canadian soil. By referring to actual juridical incidents which legally discriminated black persons, as well as by directly addressing their audiences, the playwrights stress their view on racism in contemporary society. With reference to the overall message of their plays, namely exposing incidents of racism, exclusion, and marginalization in contemporary Canada, these direct references might even be discerned as the most emphatic means.

In defiance of the effective use of extra-dramatical references, one critical point has to be admitted. It appears problematic that these allusions are temporally conditioned: they rely on the audience’s understanding of the social discussions around them. As these plays focus so much on the contemporary situation and on clearly defined, fluid time and space constructions, these plays are not certain to maintain a persistent popularity. Although these plays are all comparatively up-to-date, the oldest play discussed here, namely *AS*, has already suffered the loss of relevance. One reviewer points out that “Afrika Solo is too comfortable and too sincere [so that the audience] can’t experience this piece in 2001 as if it were still the 1980s” (Barratt 2001: n.p.). Apparently, the various allusions to popular culture woven into the play prove difficult to understand, in case the audience is not too familiar with the history and culture of Africans in North America. Certainly, spectators at the beginning of the 21st century still make sense of *Tarzan* but it is doubtful whether they still know, for instance, Harry Belafonte or Dorothy Dandridge. As the years evolve, these allusions (and with them the plays’ overall criticism directed against the flaws of a multicultural society) might appear even more difficult to understand.
5 Conclusion

In spite of the positive acknowledgement of ethnic minorities and a celebrating formulation of multiculturalism as a defining pillar of Canadian society, the five plays analyzed in this study show various incidents of racism directed against people of African descent. On an artistic level, the theatrical works by Djanet Sears, Lorena Gale, and Trey Anthony reflect the results found by several sociologists: racism and race-related discrimination still exist in Canada even 30 years after the first official proclamation of multiculturalism and in spite of anti-racist legislation, various anti-discriminatory programs, and institutional policies (cf. Henry et al. 2000: 41f.). If we take drama as a mirror of social tendencies, equal participation of black people in a society that defines whiteness as its norm still seems to lie far ahead. Quite the contrary, biased treatment of ethnic minorities seems to be the order of the day. Everyday encounters in the street or in state institutions (which are officially free from discrimination) deliver the sad evidence.100

While the play A illustrates the roots of anti-black racism as founded in the Canadian slavery system, the other four plays are preoccupied with the consequences of this system as felt in contemporary society. All of the characters in the five plays bear witness to experiences of racism, either through physical or verbal acts or through discrimination in state institutions. Moreover, the majority of the figures seem to suffer from what postcolonial theorists have termed “internalized inferiority”: the acceptance of their own inferiority to such a point that they cannot indulge in vital (love) relationships with members of their own ethnic group. Although direct racist practices are not acted out on stage, all of the plays demonstrate how state institutions and popular media consciously or unconsciously convey stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities and therefore perpetuate racist attitudes.

In this respect, the contents illustrated by these five plays show obvious parallels to artistic expressions from people oppressed by postcolonial power relations anywhere else around the globe. Therefore, the subsequent analysis of performative elements along the lines of postcolonial dramatic theory has shown the effectiveness of theatrical strategies such as the enactment of rituals, the conscious use of language, music and body language,

100 Although this study focuses on plays by Africans, similar theatrical acts of resistance have been undertaken by white Canadian playwrights such as the famous Sharon Pollock, who in her play The Komagata Maru Incident “exposes the racist attitudes of a white society bent on maintaining cultural homogeneity; she thus debunks the myth of Canada as a democratic nation that has always encouraged cultural diversity” (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 262). Against this background, an analysis of drama by any other ethnic minority would have possibly proven equally productive.
as well as the challenge to the European canon and to a Eurocentric historiography. Due to their close connection to the African home continent and to its whole history of oppression, all of these elements, can, in a first step, be interpreted as postcolonial ‘resistance’. By inserting African rituals, expressions in minority languages, and symbols of body language, the playwrights undermine the omnipotence of the white discourse dominating Canadian society. The analysis of music has, furthermore, demonstrated the power of musical elements in order to criticize the popular, mainstream culture which still often marginalizes the contribution of African people altogether.

Yet, the playwrights go a step further by challenging the European canon, as becomes most obvious in Sears’s rewriting of Shakespeare’s *Othello* as well as through the invention of various genre designations for her plays. Furthermore, dismantling the hegemony of a Eurocentric point of view in the process of writing history can be discerned as a general strategy employed by the three playwrights. First of all, they write the histories of marginalized people into the official discourse in order to restore voices so far lost within the history of the Canadian nation. Secondly, the figures talk about the necessity of rewriting history (cf. *A, AS, and HD*) and, as is the case in *ABG*, even act out their ‘corrections’ of the historical canon. Thus, by embedding the plays in a net of power relations still in existence within postcolonial societies, it has come true that “[p]ost-colonialism provides an analytic key that enables us to look at problems of nation and identity as more than historical accidents” (Filewod 1993: 3). All of the theatrical elements examined in chapter 3 prove effective in laying bare the various flaws of multiculturalism and thus serve as challenges to Canadian multiculturalism at the beginning of the 21st century.

However, by considering these plays within their specific cultural context of the African diaspora in Canada, the analysis has departed from the mere concept of theatre as ‘postcolonial resistance’. Especially the use of language and music functions as much as a positive expression of an intercultural identity as it dismantles the power relations dominating Canadian society today. The plays are therefore not only examples of postcolonial resistance but also part of a “diaporic imagination” – to borrow a term proposed by Maureen Moynagh (cf. Moynagh 2005: xvi). By explicitly defining their place in society, Sears, Gale, and Anthony state that the presence of Africa is anchored in the concept of the Canadian nation. While this study was partly able to combine postcolonial and intercultural dramatic studies by taking into account certain cultural specificities of the
African homeland, much research has yet to be undertaken in the thriving field of identity formation within diasporic contexts.

Writing blackness in Canada requires a representational practice that goes beyond dualistic constructions of hyphenated Canadian identities in order to lay claim to the many multicultural and cross-cultural sites of signification that shape African Canadian diasporic constructions of the self.

(Petropoulos 2006: 122)

While the use of exclusively postcolonial methods of resistance would only speak to black Canadians, i.e. a minority within the Canadian mosaic, the playwrights under discussion approach the topic of racism to a broad multicultural audience.

While too openly pronounced criticism might lead to bad success on the Canadian stage – as has been demonstrated by the example of A – Sears and Anthony employ different strategies in order to draw attention to racism in contemporary society and to convey their concerns to the audience. By creating sympathy for the concerns acted out on stage as well as a kind of solidarity between figures and spectators, they stress their concerns without labelling the white audience as ‘guilty’. Among the various elements available for theatrical productions, the most effective are those which approach the plays to the hic et nunc of the audience. By use of temporal and spatial techniques as well as extra-dramatical references, all of the playwrights use “their work as a vehicle with which to express personal and political passions” (Sears 1997: 13). However, the production history of A shows that social criticism needs to be couched in conciliatory terms in order to meet positive acknowledgement. Although the Canadian state officially supports anti-racist programs, the population seems not yet prepared to accept the existence of slavery in the history of their nation. Social and political concerns need to be conveyed in more subtle, even humorous terms in order to gain broad acceptance.

Additionally, as the description of these five plays has shown, the playwrights achieve to transform their criticism into highly artistic expression and make powerful plays that bear witness to the thriving African Canadian theatre scene. For this purpose, the plays seem to follow the “three steps of transformation” identified by Sears in the introduction to her play HD:

First: identify the place of complaint. (This can sometimes be evident in the complaining we do in hiding, in conversation with friends, and / or in the privacy of our own minds.) Second: Say it out loud. Create a mantra out of it. (Give it room in the world). Third: locate a creative point of expression for this mantra.

(Sears 1997: 14)
All three playwrights have identified racism as the place of complaint and found their specific creative expression by the help of which they draw attention to their experiences at the heart of Canadian society.

Certainly, this study has only been a first step in the exploration of the wide field of black theatre within the Canadian diaspora. Yet, this paper has hopefully given useful insights into the “cultural explosion taking place in Black drama today, reflecting a diversity of voice, origin, form and tone with Blackness and affirming the vitality of the theatrical arm of what is coming to be known as a Canadian Black Arts Movement” (Sears 2003b: vi). The recent premieres of works of dub poetry by d’bi young and ahdri zhina mandiela as well as the various dramatic works written by black male playwrights such as George Boyd, George Elliott Clarke, and Andrew Moodie are still opening up the space for public acknowledgement and academic investigation – in theatres as well as in bookstores and university courses.

Together with the newly emerging works on the Canadian scene, the five plays of this study might contribute to what Djanet Sears, in the introductory essay to *HD* expresses as her ‘dream’:

I have a dream. A dream that one day in the city where I live, at any given time of the year, I will be able to find at least one play that is filled with people who look like me, telling stories about me, my family, my friends, my community. For most people of European descent, this is a privilege they take for granted.

(Sears 1997: 14)

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101 Jamaican-born artists like d’bi young, maxine bailey and ahdri zhina mandiela consciously eliminate capitalized writing both in their name and in their works. Through this choice, they do not only want to approach written English to the spoken language but overcome linguistic hierarchies (Gingell 2006: 4ff.).
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---. The entries respect maxine bailey’s and ahdri zhina mandiela’s choice to eliminate all capitalizing in their writing (cf. footnote 101).


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