

5-1-2013

Review: Childress, Alice. Selected Plays.

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Recommended Citation

Burrell, Julie M., "Review: Childress, Alice. Selected Plays." (2013). *English Faculty Publications*. 10.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub/10

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enactments were met with a different reception when directed at black audiences. For example, hip-hop artist Lil' Kim also exposed her breast at the MTV Music Video awards (1999), yet neither her action nor Diana Ross's reaction (of explicitly touching her breast) induced the same public outcry. By Fleetwood's analysis, the difference in these responses depended on the cultural realm of circulation and the artist's position within it; in all cases, however, a self-authored exposure of the black female body disrupted normative figurations of female blackness.

Chapter 4 attends to the black male body, drawing on the work of Roland Barthes and Diane Crane to explore how fashion advertising strategically uses hip-hop iconography to "frame the black male figure of hip-hop as [the] possessor of a new American dream" (152). Tracing the growth of the hip-hop fashion industry, Fleetwood examines how advertisers use representations of the black male body to promote a racialized image of masculinity that has refashioned "Americana."

The final chapter engages psychoanalytic film theorist Kaja Silverman's notion of the "visible seam" to analyze how blackness in Western and non-Western contexts is produced in visual imagery and technological narratives. Fleetwood discusses the media art of Fatimah Tuggar, whose *Fusion Cuisine* (2000), for example, juxtaposes footage of women in idealized household scenarios in the United States with Nigerian women engaging in similar domestic activities. Situating Tuggar's work within feminist media practices that question the gendering of domestic space, as well as "technological fantasies on which the United States' concepts of citizenship, progress, and democracy are built" (205), Fleetwood concludes that her unique strategy of visual assemblage—deploying the visible seam and explicitly fusing images—exposes gaps in the dominant visual narrative and disrupts the interpellation of spectators while exploring transnational subjectivities of blackness.

In *Troubling Vision*, Fleetwood effectively engages multiple theories from across disciplines to offer fresh readings of cultural texts that question black visibility. She gives us a new language with which to disrupt narratives of blackness as overdetermined difference, as well as a new way of seeing black subjectivity and the black body in performance and visual culture. Scholars working in visual, feminist, performance, and racial theory, as well as African American studies, will appreciate her important contributions to these fields in her book.

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SELECTED PLAYS. By Alice Childress. Edited by Kathy A. Perkins. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011; pp. 272.

BLACK INTERNATIONALIST FEMINISM: WOMEN WRITERS OF THE BLACK LEFT, 1945–1995. By Cheryl Higashida. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011; pp. 264.

Alice Childress is one of the most important and least known of twentieth-century dramatists. Recently, however, she has come to prominence both in scholarship and in the professional theatre, culminating in the well-reviewed 2011 Arena Stage production in Washington, D.C., of her 1955 play *Trouble in Mind*, as well as the publication of her *Selected Plays*. As editor Kathy Perkins notes in her excellent introduction to the volume, Childress "has not received the recognition she deserves" (x). This lament is common among the small but dedicated cadre of scholars—Trudier Harris, Mary Helen Washington, and Elizabeth Brown-Guillory among them—who have made the promotion and critical examination of Childress's oeuvre a major component of their scholarship. *Selected Plays* will begin to redress her absence from the theatrical canon by offering the first authoritative collection of her plays in print.

As the editor of a number of indispensable volumes of plays by black women, Perkins has, with this collection, brought together works by Childress that were previously scattered among various anthologies, as well as a play, *Gold Through the Trees*, that has never before been published. Although the five plays included in the collection represent but a fraction of Childress's incredible output, including plays, novels, books for children and young adults, and journalism, *Selected Plays* is both a valuable introduction to and a representative sampling of Childress's dramatic work.

The volume begins with *Florence* (1949), which centers on a confrontation between two women, one black and one white, in a Jim Crow train station. Despite its brevity as a one-act play, *Florence* nevertheless masterfully conveys the complex physical and psychological barriers that prevent interracial understanding. One major stumbling block, the play reveals, is the stereotypical depiction of black women, which ranges from the tragic mulatta character to the presumption that all black women are maids. Childress's concern with stereotypical depictions of black women is also the focus of *Trouble in Mind*, in which the extraordinary African American actor Wiletta is cast in a stereotypical role in a play-within-the-play. Through an innovative use of metatheatricality, Childress exposes the dangers of African Americans

performatively embodying white-scripted, damaging caricatures of black people.

Wedding Band (1966), which is probably Childress's most renowned play, was controversial during its time for its portrayal of an interracial relationship, yet its political resonance was simultaneously underestimated. The 1972 Public Theater production was deemed "a sweet old love story" in the *New York Times*, but *Wedding Band* is in fact a searing allegory of the Black Power era and the need for black people to form strategically separate communities to preserve their bodies and minds in a white supremacist society.

Of particular importance is *Gold Through the Trees* (1952), a previously unpublished play that explores black revolution across the African diaspora. Perkins labels *Gold* a "dramatic historical revue" (xxi), but this designation does not quite fit its formal experimentalism and Brechtian epic style. The narrator, simply named Woman, threads together scenes from the beginnings of the Atlantic slave trade in Africa, to Harriet Tubman in the United States, and back again to the 1950s South African resistance to Apartheid. Woman is both an embodiment of the diaspora and a feminist icon. Perkins notes that *Gold* draws on Shirley Graham's opera *Tom-Tom* (1932), but the play also employs the black Marxism of Langston Hughes's agit-prop drama *Don't You Want to Be Free* (1937) and is a precursor to Lorraine Hansberry's revolutionary African play *Les Blancs* (1970). *Selected Plays* ends with *Wine in the Wilderness*, Childress's 1969 critique, and qualified support, of black nationalism. While not usually considered part of the Black Arts movement, Childress was nevertheless an important black feminist voice during this time. *Wine* is a major statement on, and revision of, the masculinist rhetoric of black nationalism.

Although a study of black feminist literature rather than theatre specifically, Cheryl Higashida's *Black Internationalist Feminism* is vital for scholars of African American theatre. In addition to chapters on Rosa Guy, Audre Lorde, and Maya Angelou, it devotes a chapter each to Childress and Hansberry. Higashida begins by defining "Black internationalist feminism" as a post-World War II phenomenon that drew on leftist politics and "challenged heteronormative and masculinist articulations of nationalism while maintaining the importance, even centrality, of national liberation movements for achieving Black women's social, political, and economic rights" (2). Such black feminism was international, Higashida maintains, in the sense that these women advocated a worldwide socialist revolution led by the working classes and the colonized, as well as a "fight against heteropatriarchy" (3).

Higashida's book enhances the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on the long civil rights movement, which seeks to widen the historical time frame of the movement and recover the radicalism, rooted in the Left, driving much of this movement. Scholars like Mary Helen Washington, Erik McDuffie, Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard have recently brought together the Left, feminism, and black nationalism. Higashida's contribution is to place these concerns within a transnational framework, or what she terms "nationalist internationalism." Defined here as the "Black anticolonial Left who championed self-determination for all oppressed nations, including African Americans" (19), nationalist internationalists sought not a traditional civil rights movement platform of desegregation, but a more radical, and interracial, working-class revolution around the world. Childress was a critical member of the postwar black Left who practiced radical feminist art and activism throughout the cold war period.

Black Internationalist Feminism serves as an apt companion to, and a useful lens onto, the works collected in *Selected Plays*. Higashida examines Childress's novel *A Short Walk* (1979) and the unpublished play *Moms: A Praise Play for a Black Comedienne* (1984), arguing that these two works "represent Black minstrelsy as a crucial site for revising heteropatriarchal gender roles precisely because it engaged with global affairs and foreign policy" (86). *Moms* is based on the life of comedian Jackie "Moms" Mabley, while *A Short Walk* centers on the mixed-race protagonist Cora James, who moves north to gain more freedom than the segregated South or her marriage allows. Higashida reads moments where Childress scripts African Americans reclaiming minstrelsy in order to critique white, patriarchal supremacy, suggesting that these critical reappropriations challenge the iterability of racial and gender performativity. She argues, for example, that "Moms's outfit and the mammy role it signified were denaturalized by Mabley's [real-life] cross-dressing, which exposed the ambiguities, contradictions, and crises of Black/American identity produced by U.S. racist imperialism" (98). Childress's concern with the manner in which black people, especially black women, are represented by the dominant white culture is apparent throughout *Selected Plays*, so Higashida's readings of the minstrel scenes in *Moms* and *A Short Walk* are critical to an understanding of Childress's work more generally. For instance, in *Trouble in Mind*, the protagonist Wiletta refuses to play a certain scene in the play-within-the-play that she deems untruthful to the black experience. Wiletta's character is no more than a mammy role, scripted by a white author. As Wiletta becomes more militant throughout the play,

she begins to resist this role. Rather than performing a spiritual as the mournful dirge that the white director requests, she sings it angrily, reappropriating the mammy role and directing it against whites who have distorted black lives for personal gain.

Higashida's chapter on Hansberry is also worth noting. The pairing of Childress and Hansberry within her framework allows the reader a fuller sense of the scope of radical playwriting during the cold war. Too often, for example, has Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* been misread as a liberal paean to the American Dream, rather than the critique of class and gender that it is. Higashida also examines *Les Blancs* and the lesser-known *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964), as well as two unpublished feminist plays with lesbian characters, arguing that these plays reveal "Hansberry's internationalist, queer, and feminist vision" (72). In Hansberry's work, "revolutionary Black nationalist consciousness opens onto plural sexualities and genders that defy the heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies through which colonial and neocolonial social orders have been secured" (80). Higashida

thus connects Hansberry to the black Left, but also usefully situates her lesbian identity and intellectual engagement with queer feminism within these revolutionary plays.

A major strength of Higashida's volume is the careful historical framework of postwar black Left feminism that it provides. Refreshing for those studying writers of the cold war era are Higashida's penetrating close readings of the "vibrant literary experimentalism resulting from Black women writers' Leftist commitments" (4). As with traditional readings of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the cold war-era theatre is too often seen as capitulating to McCarthyism (with perhaps the exception of *The Crucible*) or as insufficiently progressive in challenging heteropatriarchal norms. Taken together, *Selected Plays* and *Black Internationalist Feminism* demonstrate that black women were, in fact, advancing a socialist, internationalist vision during this time and paving the way for the second wave of black feminists.

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