

A HOME YOU CAN'T LIVE IN:
PERFORMANCES OF THE BLACK BODY
AND DOMESTIC SPACE
IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Theatre is often an invitation to enter the black home subject to its violations and crisis; this thesis repositions the black home and body in contemporary American and British theatre as constructed by the narratives and transgressions of the moment they are in. I examine Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood*, Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* and Sabrina Mahfouz's *Chef* as sites of memory, nostalgia, and trauma where what is considered "home" resists the safety of concrete walls and a white picket fence. Instead, I argue the playwrights suggest, with their black female protagonists, that home transcends the material. Parks, Hall, and Mahfouz each meditate on what it means for black women to dwell in unsafe places, the home you don't want to return to. This is significant in that it encourages a respect for the lived experiences and cultural knowledge acquired in autonomous homes and bodies of black women whose narratives have often been made invisible.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Theatre can often be a form that provokes an empathetic response. It is a medium through which audiences may witness the ephemeral repetitions of trauma performed by women. Each performance, the audience bears temporary witness to an elusive wound that is not restricted to one time, space or body. Summarizing her trauma, the protagonist of Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* says, "That was the last day I lived in my body" (90). In an articulation of the traumas of war and violation, Heather Raffo's character Layal in *9 Parts of Desire* utters, "It's the worst feeling this occupation/ to inhabit your body but not be able to live in it" (35). What are we, the audience, to do with uninhabitable bodies, burdened with traumas that are permanently embedded in our cultural history? Witnessing these two quotes spoken by actors onstage became the impetus for my research. With two characters announcing the condition of post-trauma in such similar ways, but from extremely contrasting ethnic and cultural backgrounds, I began to wonder, where were the plays that told the stories of black women that could not "live" in their bodies? I am persistently plagued by the question of how we as theatre practitioners and scholars investigate the idea of uninhabitable bodies, bodies as homes or containers of trauma. It is in this way that this thesis is an interrogation of my own cultural history as much as it is an interrogation of the black female characters in the contemporary plays I examine.

This thesis looks at Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* and Sabrina Mahfouz's *Chef* in relation to Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood* as plays that uniquely explore a multifaceted relationship between the black body and home. Each of these plays is individually

constructed upon and subverts popular notions of home commonly formed as sites of nostalgia, where home operates as a place of safety. In these texts, we can also find how traumatic black identity and bodies are constantly in interplay with the temporary home. Subsequently, what does the home, as a residence reflect about the black body? Can this relationship be broken down into specific “rooms”? What is problematic about dramatic constructions of non-permanent or non-safe dwellings? For me, these questions come out of preceding performances and scholarly materials that attempt to make the realistic black home visible in the theatre.

Plays such as August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson in 1990* and Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun in 1959*, were once a novel opportunity for white American audiences to see into the homes of the working class Black family. These plays respond to a precise call in their time, to provide representations of stable Black American families. In these plays, it becomes clear how the home is reflected in the body. While the characters must endure conflict, there is a sense of place or place-making and stability found both in the home and within the characters’ bodies. Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, connects the body of the black family to a trans-generational piano, while *A Raisin in the Sun* negotiates the ability of the black body to thrive in (and make home in) a small, disintegrating structure; my own research of the black home and body grows out of these plays and my critical analysis of them.

Through the examination of three plays taking place in temporary and unsafe domestic spaces, my thesis draws connections between the black female body and black home in performance. I argue that performances of the black home and body are also not necessarily born out of a sense of cultural stability, but rather can be the result of

profound trauma and loss brought about by the displacing forces of slavery and ongoing racism. I employ close readings of three plays by contemporary female playwrights and apply theoretical frameworks of phenomenology and material feminism to draw conclusions regarding performances of black bodies and of what can be considered home.

While phenomenological discourse¹ is expansive and changing, it frequently combines philosophy and psychology in order to examine experiences (theatrical and otherwise) through the lens of the sensing, feeling body. I utilize phenomenology, as it does not rely only on semiotic interpretation that examines a closed system of meaning. Rather, analysis opens up these plays by offering perceptions, which can point in multiple directions. Similarly, phenomenology is useful in that it encourages an interplay or dialogue between the subject and the perceiver. Citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, theatre theorist Mark Fortier comments that:

In a manner different from literary or pictorial arts, theatre has a special relationship with the presentation of lived experience to the spectator.

Theatre appears to the spectator's senses as something to be seen and heard, and, less often as something to be touched, tasted and smelled. The sensory effects of theatre are central to the phenomenological concerns.

Furthermore, lived bodiness can be seen in the ways that theatre sometimes works through sensory channels for extreme effects (Fortier 36-37).

Ultimately, the experience of theatre is a sensory embodied one, which frequently engages the lived embodiment of the audience member in a way that is distinctly

¹ See also the works of Bert O. States, Stanton B. Garner Jr., and Martin Heidegger.

different from other artistic medium. I utilize phenomenology as a framework that examines the relationship and embeddedness of bodies and environment or space. Rather than using an approach that optimizes the examination of static signs and symbols to generate meaning, I instead choose to focus on the experience of such as culturally and historically informed and meaningful.

While Merleau-Ponty meditates on the experiences of the body, Gaston Bachelard similarly delves into the home in *The Poetics of Space*. He argues that “all really inhabited space bears the notion of home” which signals that a home is less constructed by the walls, but rather signaled by the experience of dwelling (5). He goes on to explore the phenomenologist impulse to categorize home as a safe place saying, “memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home” (6). My thesis applies this argument to further ascertain how the experience of an unsafe home and body are performed as a memory and a site of loss.

In the Blood, *The Mountaintop*, and *Chef* exhibit the phenomenologies of trauma and nostalgia as forms of loss, a topic that has been explored in psychoanalytic discourse, but less often applied theoretically to performance. This particular framework is the least pathologizing way of analyzing the politics of black bodies and homes as they are negotiated onstage. As a black feminist, my readings of the works are similarly filtered through this lens of my own cultural and gendered experiences. It is in this way that I attempt to negotiate the profound cultural relevance of this particular framework and these three works.

In my close readings of these plays, I also attempt to notice the relationship between subjectivity, identity and dwelling, in order realize to what extent a character’s

identity is related to or in dialogue with the places where she dwells or seeks sanctuary. Furthermore, if the home is most frequently performed as a place of safety and permanence, what is presented about the identities of those that dwell in transient or dangerous spaces?

Drawing upon Pierre Nora's idea of "sites of memory", this thesis maps out the home and body as sites to provide insight into the geographies of black identities and what ideas of inhabitation the audience projects onto the stage. Nora argues that we experience memory with a sense of place. He offers that a site of memory is where something "has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that a memory has been torn" (7). Furthermore, he suggests that a site of memory is only born out of the absence of a real environment. Nora argues "a process of interior decolonization has affected ethnic minorities, families, and groups that until now have possessed reserves of memory but little or no historical capital" pointing to the idea that in these sites a wealth of collective cultural memory may exist, but have little power to preserve it with (7). This "interior decolonization," I argue is a site of trauma and loss found in performances of black bodies and homes. I expand his idea to include body and homes as not only sites of memories, but also as containers of otherwise illegible histories, knowledges, and traumas. The body and home are not only projection sites for the experiences of the reader and audience, but also their own vessels of cultural memory and loss.

My focus on contemporary plays by non-white female cultural producers is purposeful. The first two plays, *In the Blood* and *The Mountaintop* are both written by black female playwrights; both Suzan-Lori Parks and Katori Hall identify as diasporic

black American playwrights. In my analysis of these plays, I hope to briefly acknowledge the implications of created and lived black American embodiment in their work. My analysis of the third play, *Chef*, written by an Egyptian-British playwright (who does not identify as black), applies the framework of the prior in order to consider how performances of blackness, black trauma and home can be responsibly crafted by a non-black playwright in the form of a specific identity. In this performance of the text, the one-woman show is played by a black female actor, whose racial identity is not specifically referenced in the script.

I recognize that I am entering into an already established scholarship that historically implicates the black female body as a domestic worker. While images of mummies, maids, and magical negroes have previously plagued the black and white stage, this thesis hopes to investigate the black body not only as site of domestic work but rather like home, as a site of memory and complex experience. This is not to conflate the boundaries of architecture and black body to essentialize either. Rather, I argue that in exploring temporary homes and traumatic bodies as sites of displacement, memory and trauma, we can illuminate the complexities of other everyday performances of multiply-signifying black diaspora. By establishing the validity of black performances of memory and nostalgia, it is my hope that we can further explore how these performances provide insight into or are an articulation of black lived experiences. While this thesis maintains a narrow focus on temporary, unsafe, and disrupted performances of home, this is not to reduce all black homes, lived or performed, to this category. Rather, I offer these observations of black diasporic homes and bodies on-stage as socio-historical reference points; the plays, like the homes within them, are containers of a cultural body fraught

with trauma and joy, celebration and resistance, memory and nostalgia. I contend that the black identities in these plays are informed by the given circumstances of the play and more so subsidized or made whole by the audience's understandings of home. Thus, the experiences of the audience, privileged or oppressed, situate them to be in dialogue with a performed lived experience, understood through the lens of their own. Furthermore, this project will hopefully illuminate the constant interchange of negotiating body and home that the audience brings to the text while moving toward a cultural stability and mutual respect for the body and homes of others.

Terms

In this project, I consider blackness as it has been defined by critical race theorists that maintain that race is socially constructed and reinforced (Delgado 7). Legal scholar Athena Mutua defines blackness as participatory in "a colorized system of racial oppression" in which it is substantiated only in opposition to structures of whiteness (1182). Critical race theorists acknowledge that there is nothing fixed about race and that racial boundaries are constantly emerging and dissipating in relationship to modes of power. I cite this definition, as it would be remiss to operate as if any of these plays occur in a post-racial or colorblind vacuum where the black body politic is not always being enacted. Furthermore, black performance theorists Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez argue that:

Black and African-American represent resistant, dissident self-namings that emerged in response to political activism of the latter part of the twentieth century. And by now, in the twenty-first century, black has stabilized an international identity of diasporan consciousness (2).

This definition is also useful in that it offers how, despite its unfixed nature, “black” is used as an umbrella term to represent resilient and marginalized bodies. Consistent throughout these plays is the idea that blackness exists —black female bodies exist— not in opposition to or wholly constructed by whiteness. While fluid, this definition does center in a Western post-colonial context. I specifically focus on black female identities in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, I foreground “the black female body,” in each of these chapters. While the terminology presents as clinical, it is perhaps the clearest way of discussing the phenomenology of black body politics that are enacted onstage. I agree that the phrase might seem needlessly reductive or complicit in essentializing black experience and identity to the corporal. However, I choose to use the phrase in order to make visible a body that has been historically erased, fetishized, and otherwise taken out of its own contexts. I contend that these plays offer a black female body, on its own terms, without eschewing a critical history of erasure, oppression, and objectification. I utilize “the black body” following the trend of established critical discourse on race and performance. bell hooks asserts that the black performed body is a site of resistance and opposition regardless of the position of the character within the text. Similarly, Black performance scholars such as Harvey Young and Lisa M. Anderson use the phrase “the black body” in order to explore embodied knowledge. In his book, Young highlights the black body as a contested site wherein the “playwright activates black memory and gives voice to embodied black experiences” (Young 121). I employ the term “black body” rather than something less tangible to further interrogate the phenomenology of the body as a visible, performing container of self and identity.

Scholar Deborah McDowell quoting Terry Eagleton, says that “the body is a “stubbornly local phenomenon’ marked by its specific history, bound to its particular time and place” (298). In each of these plays, I explore the body as marked or traumatized, each of which has reflective properties on the understandings of self and home for each of the protagonist. While I deconstruct many narratives of what constitute a safe home and body, the visibility of the body onstage, foregrounded in the texts, remains consistent.

Home is also a fluctuating definition. It is a formational site of identity, memory and relationships. Though house and home can be used interchangeably, I argue that home is something that is mutually constituted in and by the architectural structure of a house or domestic space. As home can be made or found in a house, the subject is both made in, of, and by the idea of home. bell hooks states, “African-Americans have a long history of struggling to stand as subjects in a place where the dehumanizing impact of racism works continually to make us objects” (*Belonging* 148). This thesis interrogates assumptions of home as a safe place by examining performances of the body as a traumatic subject within and formed by the home.

Finally, I will utilize the overarching framework of trauma and nostalgia as phenomenologies of loss. Psychological trauma is defined as a reaction to an extreme life experience. While the trauma is mentioned within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, predominately as it relates to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, I have found that using the American Psychiatric Association’s language in the contexts of this project is not very illuminating. Instead, I turn to psychologists and psychoanalytic minded theorists for a more comprehensive, applicable framework. Trauma as defined by

Cathy Caruth is “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth as qtd in Moss 2). In her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth examines how trauma is apparent in literature. According to Caruth, trauma is always referential, referring back to an experience or event that is not quite recognized. The physiological repetition of trauma is an act of contemplation, the body meditating on or reenacting that which is not fully known by the mind. Ultimately, Caruth’s ideas are directly tied to Freud who highlighted the relationship between home and trauma in his exploration of the “uncanny,” which he defines in opposition of that “belonging to the home,” or that which is familiar. He goes on to say:

In another set of experiences we have no difficulty in recognizing that it is only the factor of unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of ‘chance’
(*Uncanny* 144).

In these three plays, I examine trauma revealed as “unintended repetition” of historic events and losses in the lives of the black female characters. While each of the characters has faced some corporal threat or violation, I argue that as members of a diaspora, they must also survive with trans-generational wounds as well.

I also draw on scholarship that recognizes emerging symptoms and consequences of trans-generational trauma, a kind of displaced trauma that descends temporally through

families. In particular, trans-generational trauma² and cultural memory have been useful in illuminating the post-traumatic conditions of those who have been affected by specific widespread tragedies (notably the Holocaust, slavery, and Native American genocide). I argue that the continual effects of trauma remain ever present in the black cultural memory and home and consequently trauma persistently reverberates in the lives of diasporic people and contemporary corporal performances of blackness.

Ultimately, this thesis is particularly invested in the possibility that W.E.B. DuBois' idea of black double-consciousness exists in black lives and performances as a reactive attempt to negotiate often-invisible traumas. The realized "lack of" that is grappled with in this negotiation further produces a sense of marginalization and eventually loss. There is a lack of a specific identity that can operate without glancing at itself, outside of itself as well as a lack of embodied safety. It is out of this sense of traumatic displaced bodies and displaced homes that the black characters in the plays I examine are no longer able to inhabit their bodies and homes.

Methodology

As you will see, some of these analyses are based on my viewing and some on the reading of the text. I choose to solely focus on my readings of the texts and readings of critical responses to the works acknowledging that which each medium has its own experiential value. While plays are cultivated in the historical moment in which they are

² See Johnson, Odoi "Unspeakable Histories: Terror Spectacle, and Genocidal Memory." *Modern Language Quarterly* 70:1 March 2009; Schwab, Gabriele. *Haunting Legacies Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010.

written, performances are doubly embedded and held responsible by the moment in which they are written as well as the moments in which they are performed.

For the first two plays, I offer close readings that are solely informed by the text as it has been constructed on the page. Whereas for the third, I utilize the frameworks of the prior to investigate the performance of Sabrina Mahfouz's *Chef* as it was performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August of 2014. I make this distinction in order to foreground the ways in which play and performance analysis differ and can inform one another.

In my examination of the written word, bodies of the characters are only made visible in the text. This of course, results in a kind of mental gymnastics. How do you critically analyze the visibility of black bodies that you cannot actually see? Simultaneously, I grappled with the ability to suggest that (page) performances of blackness and home are subsidized by the audience's personal and cultural memories when only operating with the knowledge of an audience of one.

For the play *Chef*, I choose to examine it not only as a play but also as a performed product. Here I am only analyzing one performance of the text with the understand that which each performance, new interplay between the text and embodied actor can be discovered. The text does not suggest a black actor, and it is not my intention to suggest that as a product of critical analysis that this is the only way it could be performed. As a person of color, a reader and audience member, the text carried a kind of cultural phenomenological nostalgia for me; there was something in the lived experience of the character that I recognized to be an exploration of blackness. While her black body is never negotiated or named by the script, it is visible in the performance. Furthermore, I

use this play as a starting place to explore performances of black bodies as they are embodied and performed enmeshed with real space while attempting to privilege what can be seen and experienced in dwelling.

CHAPTER II

SUZAN-LORI PARKS' *IN THE BLOOD*

In Suzan-Lori Parks' 1999 play *In the Blood*, the black home and body are both unsafe and often traumatic spaces subject to a variety of violations. They are not interchangeable entities, but rather act in constant dialogue with one another. Parks' protagonist, Hester La Negrita simultaneously constitutes her home and her personhood. While theatre scholars such as Elinor Fuchs and Laura Dawkins have examined Parks' dramaturgy as examples of historian Pierre Nora's idea of "sites of memory," few have made the jump from the referential worlds that she creates to the bodies and homes she constructs as potential site. Utilizing cultural landscape theory as a framework for understanding Parks' *The America Play*, Fuchs states that sites of memory in the play are "cultural objects, and events on which to project stories that change with the needs of every generation" (40). Applied to the black body and home in *In the Blood*, it is easy to see how they each become the spaces for the histories and assumptions of the audience. I argue that in this play nostalgia for history, an impossible home, and an impossible body signal losses in the life of the black protagonist.

This post-modern work follows the life of Hester, a character that is abused and violated by almost everyone she encounters. Throughout the play, Hester, the mother to five illegitimate children, desperately tries to acquire money to sustain her family. Instead, she is subject to aggressive sexual advances and rejection. Eventually, Hester is unable to navigate the traumas that take place in both her body and home and she commits infanticide. Though most of the play takes place in various locations and abstract spaces, the house that Hester lives in with her family is located under a bridge. In

the end, neither her home nor her body, both consisting of complex and traumatic relationships, are unaffected.

In *In the Blood*, the body and home are mutually constituted, torn down and rebuilt. These cultivations of home and body though temporally fragmented are not completely ahistorical to negotiations of power within the black cultural narrative. In the world Parks creates, power serves to not only reinforce the ideals of an inconsistent and insidious government, but also draws attention to the relationship between black mother, child and home. Too often in the course of American history, the relationship between black mother and child has been considered faulty. The idea of the imperfect, yet striving single mother is clearly referenced in the play.

Historical Revisionism and Ways of Knowing

Historically, the strength of the black family has been depicted as negligible, in major part due to the 1965 Moynihan Report. The document written by Daniel Moynihan and commissioned by the United States Department of Labor openly pathologized the black American family. Author Daniel Moynihan argued, “The white family has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability. By contrast, the family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown” (Moynihan). Here, the government injected itself into the black family as similarly represented in cases of the 1940’s miscegenation laws that criminalized its implied impurity or lack of structural integrity. Ultimately, these texts continue to shape contemporary perceptions of what constitutes a black family and the way a black body is legally and socially constructed. The Moynihan Report and legislation have historically shaped and continue to inform American ideas of race in

everyday life and in framed performance. Theatre scholar Michael Bennett contends, “Parks makes use of deconstructed language and dramatic form to contest dominant discourses that have pathologized the black body” (141). As in society, Parks’ depiction of a black family is of one that has been historically categorized as never quite good enough while openly criticizing an established metanarrative of racial progress.

Parks also makes use of a kind of historical revisionism in order to underscore the visibility of black bodies in her construction of Hester. Hester is also an emergent character, acting as an “almost” considered person. Theatre scholar Jennifer Larson says that Hester is “almost happy, almost married, almost able to support her children, almost literate. But Hester does not move beyond “almost” because of the selfish opportunism of those around her—black and white, male and female” (Larson 43). This kind of egocentricity operates in opposition to Hester’s selfless giving to her family and attempts to maintain her humanity. Mutua goes on to say “White power, wealth, and privilege required both blackness as subjugation and black people as slaves; and therefore, black humanity could not be tolerated” (7). Multiple characters dehumanize and demonize Hester; her existence and treatment represent dominant opinions within the racial American historical narrative. Ascribed the worst qualities as a result of her position on the white/non-white binary, she cannot be considered rational, moral, or constructive in the eyes of the law. Similarly, Hester cannot escape hyper-sexualization and the other legally and socially immutable “facts” of her race. Her family is thus unified by their blackness, poverty and also an inability to acquire the language to transcend the disadvantages of race and “conglomerate of insidious forces” actively and historically

acting against her (Berkman 71). However challenged and oppressed, the blackness that Parks creates is not passive.

In an interview contained in an anthology of critical essays surrounding her work, Suzan-Lori Parks echoes Hester's self-effacing sentiments speaking of blackness. Parks says, "we each have a hand in our fate—even if it is just a small hand. And admitting that is part of the process of liberation" (Wetmore 137). She outright rejects notions of power that only place blame or fault on the oppressor and attempts to redirect the gaze of history to those who have participated in it. Parks states that she was inspired to write the Red Letter Plays which include *Fucking A* and *In the Blood* as riff off of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, despite the fact that, at the time, she had never read the book. Parks appropriates the name and imagery of Hawthorne's marginalized protagonist Hester Prynne. Though Hawthorne's and Parks' protagonists share the same name, the relevance of their "A's" act in contrast to one another. Hester Prynne is branded with the "A" as a punishment for her transgressions. Conversely, Parks' Hester is punished by society simply because she is guilty of being poor. Similarly, the "A" that is adorned by Hawthorne's Hester forces her to be a visible, albeit spurned, member of the community while Hester of *In the Blood* is invisible and suffers without any sort of real commiseration from society. The "A" in this work marks the end of a period in Hester's life, contrary to the letter "A's" beginning position in the actual alphabet. For Parks' Hester, her inability to get past the letter "A" is reflective of her inability to be recognized as a full human being. In Julia Kristeva's terms, Hester cannot pass from the semiotic into the symbolic, and so cannot transcend abjection and achieve subjectivity.

Palestinian-American theorist Edward Said has argued that knowledge is always regulated by those in power: “knowledge—no matter how special—is regulated first by the local concerns of specialists, later by the general concerns of a system of authority” (Said 45). If subjectivity is directly tied to knowledge, it becomes clear how Hester, as a black body, lacks agency in her own narrative. This “knowledge”—of reading, of the rules—is consistently withheld from Hester, systematically keeping her and her family only downwardly mobile. Both knowledge and subjectivity become inaccessible properties that are regulated by those in power. The abuses of power infiltrate the two realms we would assume the protagonist to have control over: her home and her body. It is in this way that they both become un-safe places rather than the nostalgic sites of comfort that often play out in the collective imagination. Thus, Parks makes visible and subverts a historical nostalgia that has been substantiated by those in power through the home and body of Hester.

Home as a Site of Loss

According to black cultural critic bell hooks, black homes have been a site of defiance for black women as they are sites where subjectivity, not otherwise possible in the hegemonic racist society, are established. She states that in the black home subjectivity could “be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation” (78). Parks constructs a world in which the black body and black home are interrogated and renegotiated as site. For Parks’ Hester, both her home and body emerge as sites of knowing, memory, and loss.

In the beginning of the play, Hester’s family home under a bridge is graffitied with the word “slut,” a word which neither she nor her children are capable of reading.

However, Hester operates with a different understanding, correctly interpreting that her house has been violated with foul language. She says to her children:

We know who writ it up there. It was them bad boys writing on my home. And in my practice place. Do they write on they own homes? I dont think so. They come under the bridge and write things they dont write nowhere else. A ugly word, I'll bet. A word to hurt our feelings. And because we aint lucky we gotta live with it (12).

She demonstrates that her illiteracy does not impede her contextual understanding of an assault and foreshadows the impending violations that she must endure.

In this first presentation of Hester's home, it is subverted as a safe-place. Though it is clearly a foundational site for her children and herself, with a "practice place" for learning the alphabet, it is clearly not a sacred site that clearly signals "home." The play shows Hester as capable of creating her own impossible domestic nostalgia in the form of the bedtime stories she tells her children. Parks demonstrates that although Hester may be technically illiterate, she is not without knowledge and is also capable of subjectivity. In an act of both resistance and nostalgia, Hester constructs her own semi-biographical fairytale that offers her children a hope for a new narrative in which they are able to have present fathers and Hester can be married. Theatre scholar Letitia Guaran emphasizes the power within Hester's storytelling by suggesting, "As a narrator and as the mother who tells the goodnight story, Hester is the ultimate authority figure and can legitimize whatever plot she sees fit" (77). Guaran identifies how both the body and home become sites of crafting narratives that constitute identity. hooks offers that:

Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. (77-8).

Here, in her act of domestic storytelling, we see Hester as able to legitimize her own personhood in a way that is not acknowledged in the outside world. In this new narrative, though Hester's body is consumed and abused, she still is able assert a kind of control over it and her family through most of the play. This act of agency however, is dampened by the multitude of losses and violations Hester sustains.

Hester is a mother that is capable of returning home to her children, but also capable of murdering them. Her son, Jabber seems to initially struggle with the decision to tell his mother what was written on their home, citing it as "a bad word" (104). Jabber seems, like his father and other members of the community, to grow more and more infatuated with the word after saying it aloud. Finally, Hester tells him to "shut up" to which he responds childishly, "Slut. Sorry." His statement gives way to immediate regret. His new acquisition of language precipitates both Hester's and her son's undoing. After a few sobering moments between them, Hester beats him to death with an officer's club, an object that is a reflection of the oppressive systems and the losses that have brought her to this point (106). The final event that takes place in Hester's home is in comparison the most traumatic and harrowing. The play bookends the final domestic scene by contrasting it to the first scene in the home. The illegible is made legible and Hester's son Jabber discharges his acquired language onto his own mother, repeatedly calling her a "slut." In

Parks' grotesque imagining, a black female body is one that is capable of consoling her children and also murdering them within the home. Once again the black home is directly tied back to the black female body, both subject to pejoratives and repeated traumatic violations.

The Visible Body as Uninhabitable

Parks explores how loss and trauma are manifested in the body of her protagonist. This is highlighted in Hester's understanding of her own body and the ways in which it is violated by representatives of institutions supposedly set up to help her. In the beginning of the play, Hester is introduced as a chorus of her community warns against the threat of an approaching Hester. As they encourage the audience to "MOVE ASIDE/ WHAT SHE GOTS CATCHY," the black body that Parks begins to build is instantly pathologized as disease-ridden and leaking of abject matter (7). The community or chorus is comprised of the multiply cast characters of the play, her children/oppressors. Our introduction is presented from the viewpoint of those that hold her and her family in contempt. It is in this way, that Hester's body becomes a home to communicable pathogen and a site of scorn.

Interspersed with the play's unfolding drama are confessions from those that suppress Hester in various ways. A character called the Doctor addresses his sexual encounter with her in contradictory terms of repulsion and attraction to her diseased, impoverished black body admitting:

At first I wouldn't touch her without gloves on, but then-
we did it once
in that alley there,

she was

phenomenal (45).

He posits her black corporeality as an experience. Hester's blackness consists of a fragmented identity and a body, each of which are doubly coded, deconstructed, and multi-signifying. In her essay, "Postmodern Blackness," bell hooks is suspicious of the possibility of a fragmented subject becoming popular just as "subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time" (515). As a black playwright, Parks seeks to make the often-invisible black female body more visible while not prescribing the protagonist as either the hero of her own domestic narrative or victim to the wrath of oppression. However, some scholars are also skeptical that visibility or hypervisibility of the postmodern black body is enough; they argue that subjects must not be rendered voiceless. Hester uses both her voice and body to procure help from multiple institutions and is met with mistreatment and ambivalence. Parks' construction of Hester as an attempting-to-thrive body, is deeply embedded in her name, her behavior, and the ways in which she make home.

It becomes clear that Hester must maintain a kind of multiple consciousness in order to survive. She quickly articulates her relationship to the world saying "I dont think the world likes women much" (59). As a black body enduring a repeated history of trauma, Hester operates in a liminal space within what W.E.B. DuBois terms "double consciousness," a site in which there is a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (12). This is not dissimilar to common descriptions of dissociative states that occur after trauma wherein the person experiences a kind of corporal removal—seeing oneself not connected or through the lens of the body. Consequently,

Hester is a fragmented character. It is perhaps in this inability to see herself through the eyes of her oppressor that she falls.

Interestingly, in the character list of *In the Blood*, Hester is not just called by this Hawthorne-reminiscent name; she is also listed as “La Negrita,” which literally translates to “the little black girl” or “the bold,” both of which accurately describe Parks’ Hester. What “la negrita” does not mean, is “the slut,” a name Hester is constantly called, and so begins to internalize. According to theorist Mark Fortier, materialist theory “rejects the belief that we are independent agents who are free to impress our ideas on the world—rather, the world impresses itself on our ideas” (153). Hester does not act as a free representative of and in her society, but insists that she is partially to blame for her status, saying “My lifes my own fault. I know that. But the world don’t help, Maam” (59). This brings into focus the idea that Hester, like the black women she represents, is not acting independently of power. Rather, she is shaped to be what she is often called, “a slut,” by the demoralizing racist and patriarchal institutions that surround her. Furthermore, her personhood is shaped by the excesses of her visible body.

Parks allows Hester to both embody and contest popular presumptions of black female bodies and excess. Characters such as Hester, Amiga Gringa and Welfare are constructed and deconstructed in their naming. For example, in her confession of her own sexual exploitation of Hester, Welfare says:

And I should emphasize that
she is a low-class person.

What I mean by that is that we have absolutely nothing in common.

As her caseworker I realize that maintenance of the system depends on a
well-drawn boundary line

And all parties respecting that boundary (62).

Legal scholar Athena D. Mutua contends: “White power created blackness, parasitically defining itself in opposition to it and seeking to oppress and suppress it in order to maintain the power it derived from blackness, in both tangible and psychological terms” (7). This definition of blackness in *In the Blood* presents a dialogue of power and oppression, functioning on a small level with characters such as Welfare and Amiga Gringa, Hester’s only friend, who manipulate her for their own benefit. However, this could be countered with Brandi Wilkins Catanese’s observation that Parks does not construct worlds of blackness that are situated in opposition to whiteness. Rather, blackness in *In the Blood* exists on its own terms, informed by its own history. Though she more accurately embodies a “welfare queen” stereotype, a master manipulator of poverty, Amiga Gringa is able to position herself hierarchically above Hester, a racially constituted body, because Gringa is white.

In her interactions with a sidewalk Doctor and Welfare, Hester is reduced to being the embodiment of the mythical “welfare queen.” They categorize her as a faceless, body-less, social burden that must be taken care of without authorizing the legitimacy of her needs. Consequently, the “well-drawn boundary line” that Welfare references is just as invisible as Hester and only serves to keep her oppressed and ignored by society. Hester is patronized and disregarded by those that possess the literal jobs that employ societal empathy. Similarly, the sidewalk Doctor Hester turns to for her medical needs rivals the minimal helpfulness of Welfare, who only offers her a piece of fabric to sew in

place of actual work. Rather than attending to her physical health, the Doctor is preoccupied with her reproductive organs, advocating that he should perform a hysterectomy so that she will be incapable of bearing more illegitimate children. He repeatedly emphasizes that it is a decision made by “The Higher Ups.” Yet, it is obvious that it is also in his best interests after he reveals that he has been sexually involved with her (43).

Parks clearly shows the manipulative and exploitative relationship between those and power and Hester. Hester seeks financial assistance and in return is sexually abused. It quickly becomes clear given the sets of sexual interactions that she has, how her position as a “slut” and has been solidified in the community. This is not to say that it is her fault. After asking the father of one her children, Reverend D, for money, Hester is declined the funds that will potentially save her from impending starvation. Instead, the good Reverend offers a sexual invitation, which she declines. The Reverend then pleads with her stating that “itll only take a minute,” to which Hester acquiesces and then is described as “ashamed” (77). This sexual interaction is in no way consensual and is most likely a situation that has become a repeated trauma. In this way, the Reverend only serves as a patriarchal figure that dominates Hester physically and financially. Afterward, she suggests that they see each other again to which he responds, “Go home. Go home” (77). This “expectant,” and “ashamed,” Hester is one that signals loss. In this moment, we see that as her material body is being used sexually, a decline in her autonomy and ability to practice self-care is reinforced. In her attempt to validate their relationship into something regular, she is instructed to return to her domestic space and her children. In Reverend D’s confession, he states “Suffering is an enormous turn-on,” revealing that

breaking Hester down physically and emotionally is not a side effect of his relationship with her, but an actual goal (78). He describes his attraction to her as animalistic magnetism, a constant factor in many of her relationships. He seems to not view her as a complete, whole person, but rather a body that can cater to his sexual dispositions.

It is important to resist reading Parks' bodies as texts; in this context, the body is not signaling one interpretation or set of understandings. It is possible to approach Hester's body in the same way that we approach a semiotic text. However, the black body politic is much more complicated as it signals multiple meanings, stereotypes and embodied histories. Instead, I consider the visibility of a diasporic body as phenomena pointing to many different intersecting narratives and histories. In her writing of these multi-faceted, fragmented characters, Parks is adept at navigating multiple narratives and regarding Hester through multiple viewpoints through choral interventions and character revelations.

In *In the Blood* both the structural quality of black relationships or family are questioned alongside the literal structural soundness and safety of their home under a bridge. Parks accepts Cornel West's black postmodern challenge to "illumine the internal complexities" of black culture and subjectivity (393). Yet, she does not apply an aesthetic of perfect, blameless postmodern black bodies or homes. Larson argues that Parks resists fixed determinations of blackness and offers stories as "open to interpretation, questioning, and even re-envisioning/revising, allowing their importance and their relevance to remain undeniable" (7). Consequently, Hester's black body, the context it is performed in, along with the assumptions and prejudices of the audience are constantly in dialogue with one another.

Parks presents the black body and home in her plays in order to make visible an abject postmodern identity—fragmented, constructed out of opposing narratives and the basis upon which a new narrative and vocabulary can be formed. While the home and body are in constant dialogue with each other, Parks' protagonist is not able to fully inhabit either.

In the context of this project, I offer this analysis of *In the Blood*, as theoretical groundwork that lays the foundation for exploring black bodies and homes as sites. Parks allows the black home and body to be multifaceted almost-subjects, where they are both transgressed as sites of safety or comfort. It seems the black female body is the access point for the home, as Hester attempts to navigate the complexity of both realms. This is not to position the home and outside as diametrically opposed spheres, rather to offer that the body exists as a container of memory and experiences and is shaped by both. Hester, like the other female protagonists provides a reflexive opportunity to highlight the implications of how and where we dwell.

CHAPTER III

KATORI HALL'S *THE MOUNTAINTOP*

Katori Hall's 2011 play *The Mountaintop* presents a "cussin', fussin', drankin'" maid named Camae at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee insists to an exceedingly troubled Martin Luther King Jr., "God said I gotta get you ready to come on home"(28). The maid invokes multiple tropes of performances of black women only capable of "cleaning up other folk's messes" (12). Unlike Parks' Hester, Hall's protagonist bears multiple responsibilities in and outside of the domestic as her trans-historical, post-traumatic body points multiple directions. In her article titled "Black Leadership at the Crossroads: Unfixing Martin Luther King Jr. in Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop*," Soyica Diggs Colbert asserts that *The Mountaintop* is an attempt to relocate King in the greater black cultural memory by making the narratives of women visible. She argues that the celebrity of male civil rights icons such as Martin Luther King Jr. has obscured the narratives of many influential women of the movement. In her interrogation of the work, the play serves as an historiographical document that allows room for the women who influenced the movement. She summarizes the play as "part Wilsonian mystical realism and part Parksonian play, Hall domesticates King—a larger-than-life figure—to recalibrate the movement he personifies" (262).

I argue that this active domestication of King is enabled by Camae, a site of memory, who cultivates the Lorraine Motel in the play as the temporary home for King and eternal house of the memory of his assassination. While King is central to this play and the assumed protagonist, I examine Camae, the maid and angel, as a central site of corporality and home. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Hall utilizes Camae in

relation to King to make visible the trauma and nostalgia in the black female body and the promise of “an eternal home” to dwell in. Though Hall presents Camae as a marked and traumatized body, she is able to return to the earth as an angel and serve in a multiplicity of roles, ushering King from his unsafe temporary home towards his eternal home with God. In this chapter, I argue that Camae’s body is a contained interplay of historical texts and cultural knowledge, signals an impossible nostalgia for the home and body, and illuminates traumas sustained on black female bodies.

Camae’s story unfolds inside of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s room inside the Lorraine Motel after King orders room service and she almost instantly delivers it. Their conversation begins innocently enough, talking about the storm that is persistent outside and the population that gathered to see the civil rights leader speak. Camae resists and calls out King’s flirtatious advances, inviting her to stay with him, talk and smoke. She is not enamored with him or his success and thoroughly criticizes everything from his facial hair to the way that he smokes. She performs a more radical King donning his jacket and shoes in a speech of her own in which she departs from King’s own historically pacifist ideologies to include her own more radical ideas. After King has a panic attack brought on by the storm, she attempts to calm him, calling him by his legal name, which alarms him. It is only after he accuses her of being a spy that she reveals herself to be an angel of death, sent to accompany him to the afterlife. The civil rights leader at first protests his untimely death and begs for another chance before eventually accepting his fate. In a poetic departure from the play, Camae ushers him into the changing tides of black American history.

The Mountaintop specifically addresses phenomenologies of loss in trans-generational and personal traumas that are corporally enabled and repetitive. Camae embodies the “wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3). Caruth argues that as a mental affliction, emotional trauma is not quite accessible in the way that a physical one is. As a “repeated infliction of a wound,” trauma makes itself apparent and lies somewhere in between knowing and unknowing, between the home and the body (3). Hall makes this apparent in the way that the traumas of the past and future are articulated by way of Camae. By re-presenting and revising the moments before a culturally traumatic event, Camae gains a kind of agency in the context of cultural traumas that have become a part of a shared memory while simultaneously subverting popular notions of them.

Impossible Histories

As one of the few critical theatre scholars investigating this new work, Colbert argues that *The Mountaintop* is an intervention into the historiography of the civil rights movement. In the play, Hall presents King’s life and efforts on a human scale. She removes him from the position of a trans-historical superficial icon, and places him in complex body and identity in the setting of a hotel room. It is in this way that she resists white supremacist historical revisions of King. She imagines him as simultaneous dichotomies: brave and fearful, holy and immoral, resistant and submissive. Colbert hypothesizes that Camae is a referent to the women behind the movement, often made invisible in revisionist history. She argues that Hall intervenes into a predominantly male-centric narrative with the inclusion of a female voice and body. If this is true, I also contend that she serves as a multi-faceted referent to histories and texts, which include

King's real life sermons and contemporaries, and the Bible, which act within and temporally outside of the constructs of common cultural knowledge and mythologies.

While I want to focus on Camae as a central figure, it would be remiss to not also offer that in many ways King is demoted from being an impossible (historical) body to a normal one as the relationship between him and the maid transpires. Camae is not a complicit character in the glorification of King. Rather, Camae deflates his ego and assaults the historical commodification of King's body as not quite God but "mighty close" (30).

Almost immediately, King attempts to charm Camae. She is less intrigued by his attempts but rather more interested in the discrepancies between King the icon and King the human being before her. However, the real King, the cultural icon has a history that is referenced and subverted in the play. In his famous last Memphis speech, King mentions an impending storm that also makes an appearance in the play. In his final speech delivered on April 3, 1968 to a group of sanitation workers, Martin Luther King Jr. says, "I'm delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning. You reveal that you are determined to go on anyhow" ("I've Been to the Mountaintop" 83).

Relatedly, King in Hall's play is visibly frightened by the storm, which Camae mocks. I argue that the appearance of the storm and Camae's irreverence for it connects black cultural history, body and ideas of home. King chides the maid asking, "Didn't your mother teach you how to be still when it's thundering and lightning" (20). This quote is an access point to a container of memories and generationally transmitted knowledge, which can be traced back to the Bible.

Part of my own history, as a black Southerner, includes sitting silently in the dark during a storm with siblings. This was strictly enforced by my father who was taught this same ritual by his mother and grandmother. It was only later, after engaging this play that I began to question the practice. After talking to my father, he realized that this was a part of a large number of rituals and practices in his childhood that had gone unquestioned. He remembered his grandmother coming home and insisting on silence and unplugging things during a storm, her age burdened body throwing rocks at crows, claiming that hair be removed from combs and burned, never allowing anyone to sweep under your feet. An investigation of these rituals revealed roots to Christianity, voodoo and other traditions. I was only able to find anecdotal (rather than academic) evidence from my own family and friends of Southern black mythology that dictates silence during a storm, as thunder is considered the voice of the Lord. The Bible, on multiple occasions references the voice of the Lord “thundering” down. Most often, biblical scholars also point to Revelations when the voice of God, as thunder, reveals that which cannot be written down. I offer these as examples of the oral historiographical practices present in Southern Black culture. The story of the voice of God in Revelations precedes simultaneously domestic and spiritual ways of knowing that have been orally passed down through my family and through Hall’s representation of King’s, never questioned nor written down. She foregrounds all of these histories in her re-imagining of King’s last night as a central event while successively claiming black women’s participation in a greater cultural and historical narrative.

These connections both personal and historical represent what Black performance theorist Nadine George-Graves calls the “spidering” of diasporic identity, engrained in

multiple traditions and constantly referencing back. For the real life King, a preacher, the Bible served as a central referencing point, a knowledge that dramatically changes the phenomenology of “the Mountaintop.” In the speech, he seems to acknowledge his own mortality and the future of a movement without him, stating that he has “seen the Mountaintop.” In Hall’s imagining, Camae, inaccessible through King’s sexual advances is the metaphorical “mountaintop.” In the context of the Bible, Moses is taken to the mountaintop and shown the land that his people will be able to cross into without him. The mountaintop and presence of Camae serve as visual imagery of King’s ability to see a hopeful future for an improved society while simultaneously seeing a future he will never inhabit. Camae, with her time-transcendent body, signals the cultural landscape that King is very much a part of, but cannot dwell in. She is the uninhabitable, metonymically as the future, and physically as she resists his persistent advances.

Colbert maintains that the play also utilizes the “call and response” mode of black expressive culture specifically citing how it appears within black churches. Interestingly, instead of King sermonizing, we are presented with a radical Camae, positioned on her domestic pulpit, a bed (17). Colbert maintains that while her sermon is preached to King, the audience is also present as part of the congregation. I maintain that this act of witnessing forces the audience to consider Camae as a vehicle of historical and cultural memory. This speech act is in many ways an act of resistance. She combines the public and private spheres, enacting what would be a public sermon in a temporary and private domestic space. King urges her on with his own interjections as she preaches at her pulpit. A relationship between public identity, masculinity, safety, and the domestic is foregrounded here. Later, King offers that the pulpit is a dangerous place, a site that he is

fit to inhabit. However, when Camae validates the strength of King's daughter's prayers, which assumedly take place within the safe confines of domestic space, the ability to ascend to the public pulpit is highlighted without question of safety.

As a site of history, Camae's presence also re-members dissention within the Civil Rights Movement. Often historicized as a cohesive demand for rights, the movement was broken up by those such as King who preached peace and those such as Malcolm X, who advocated for more violent practices as "self-defense." Camae introduces the contrasting voices of black civil rights leaders in her sermon. She echoes the historical voices of black separatists and artists within the movement insisting that rather than advocating for shared space at the white dominated counter, blacks should "build our own counters. Our own restaurants. Our own neighborhoods" (18). While Camae references the historic, she falls just short of repeating verbatim "for us, by us, near us," and instead ventures into the territory of "Fuck the white man" (Hall 18). Where she entertains a neo-Wilsonian aesthetic, Hall presents a radically different but consequential Barakian response. In the Wilsonian-aesthetic, we see blackness being made visible in and outside of the home for the purposes of historical intervention. At her pulpit, we are able to see Camae, an often-unheard female voice and invisible body, as a vibrant articulation of a greater storm. Hall directly references the work and thoughts of Malcolm X's. She seems to be pointing specifically to his speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet" which acknowledges:

The economic philosophy of Black Nationalism only means that we should own and operate and control the economy of our community. You can't open up a black store in a white community; the white man won't

even patronize you. And he's not wrong, he's got sense enough to look out for himself. It's you, it's you who don't have sense enough to look out for yourself (91).

Hall's intertextual interplay of history is clear. Here, we see Camae as a resistant black body, rather than as an ethereal angel. This moment is instrumental in articulating Camae as a human being with lived experiences and a body of cultural knowledges rather than as a magical negro-esque trope. Camae is the point of access for the past and the grounds upon which black culture has been built.

Consequently, Camae is a relentless referent to both King and the audience of what was, is, and will/could be. As a container of anachronisms, she makes it clear that she inhabits the world both in King's time and also well after it, speaking of cell phones and dropped calls. Hall also uses Camae to subvert the mythical King's religious suppositions by insisting that the God that he worships and that she is employed by is in fact, a woman. Unlike the other present and absent female characters in the play, God is not wholly tied to the domestic. She, like the other absent female characters, maintains an active presence in how she is described and accessed by Camae. She is called upon and reached directly by cell phone instead of prayer. Though possibly the most powerful, omniscient forces in the play, God is embodied as female, with its respective aesthetics and desires. Camae describes God saying: "She is more gorgeous than me. She the color of midnight and Her eyes are brighter than the stars. Her hair... well... well just you wait til you see Her hair" (37). In this moment, Camae expresses her awe of the embodied, beautiful, female God in a moment when her fate, to bring King home, is being sealed.

Finally, after Camae reveals King's fate, Colbert maintains that Camae plunges into a dimension of poetic revelations. Images of "Rodney King screams," "high paid slaves," and Hurricane Katrina paint a chronological portrait of the post-King black future, demonstrating how in the tumultuous black history that is yet to come the "baton" will be passed (38-41). Colbert maintains that it is in this way that Hall constructs a revision of history that forefronts the black female body that enables the future. I offer that the interplay between histories and times through Camae functions as a kind of nostalgic reminiscing that is triggered by the (future) loss of King as well as the losses of women that have been left out of history. By going back to a moment that can never quite be accessed, she makes accessible to women a history that has been memorialized as male dominated and orchestrated. Hall expertly uses Camae in order to revisit the black cultural archive and re-present an impossible history with an impossible transcendent home and body.

Impossible Homes

Since King's assassination, the Lorraine Motel has been transformed into a site of nostalgia as it is memorialized as the site of his death. The nostalgia for the site occurs not in the fact that it is a temporary and transitional home, but as a fixed historical site of loss: the loss of a life, the loss of a leader, and possibly, the loss of hope. I include it in this thesis as a foregrounded temporary and unsafe home which further demonstrates the phenomenology of nostalgia as an indicator of loss.

For the imaginary King depicted in the play, the motel is an in-between space, a liminal home. It serves in a similar capacity for Camae. However, she seems to be much more at peace with her temporary dwelling. One might also question if this is where she

“lives” as well. While Hall relies upon a shared history to construct the background for King’s character, she similarly uses a shared cultural history to allow us to fill in the narrative blanks for Camae. I argue that while Camae is not a placeholder for the women that have been left out of history, her lack of an identifiable nostalgic place to return to is representative of her transgressed home and ignored body.

In *The Mountaintop*, Hall reveals a nostalgia for an impossible physical home that King cannot return to, a home in the “Promised Land,” that neither he nor Camae will be able to inhabit, and an impossible home in glory awaiting King and Camae upon his death. Clearly, Camae is present to escort King to his “eternal home” in heaven. However, as a being on earth, Camae’s body is also a home for her own memories and loss.

Not dissimilar to its relative position in accessing multiple histories, the female body in *The Mountaintop* is the access point for ideas of home. As well as presenting an impossible black ethereal body in which home cannot be made, Hall also explores three different nostalgias for this impossible home through references to the home King will not return to, the home in the “Promised Land,” and the eternal home that Camae represents. In regards to King’s home-life, Hall makes an active intervention into the home with the King that she imagines. Her King does not have a happy home to return to. The absent women in the play connected to King’s life are only made visible in relation to his home. Early in the play, King attempts to call his wife, reaching her later on only to tell a trivial lie and get called out by the maid. Camae also makes visible the women of King’s home later in the play. She tells King that God has heard his daughter’s powerful prayers; she pleads that he not be forced to die alone.

After he fully realizes his fate, he insists that he must call his wife again. She does not answer. King emphasizes to Camae, “I always bought her flowers when I went away. Always with the mind that they would last long enough ‘til I made it home” (36). He goes on to say that upon his last departure, he left her with artificial flowers, a subconscious cue that he would never return. Immediately, we are forced to recognize the women in King’s life as tied to the domestic, whether it is historically true or not. King supports the movement, dwelling in temporary homes. In contrast, Hall constructs a narrative that insinuates his wife remains patient at the permanent home while he charms other women. As his death is prominently foreshadowed, a return to his home becomes impossible. It is in this way that Hall constructs the black female body as a safe haven. Unlike his daughter and his wife, King will not be able to step foot into the “Promised Land.”

Hall offers Camae as an angel “in the flesh” and presents King as being “of the flesh.” This embodied angel is both complicit and resistant to patriarchal assumptions of femininity. Camae acknowledges her position as a woman but resists a simplistic interpretation. Simply put, the angel that Hall presents is corporeal and complicated. She introduces herself as an angel in relation to her body. As an angel in/of the flesh, she uses her breasts instead of wings. She provides insight into a cosmology to which King is unaccustomed stating that Hell’s angels are more attractive (25). King later rhetorically asks, “Who knew death would be so beautiful? Almost make a man want to die” (26).

This demonstrates how Camae’s presence is not simply a metaphor for passing on, but that she has a significant impact on King. Just pages before, we see a King that is incredibly fearful. Throughout the play, King demonstrates ostensibly excessive fear

regarding thunderstorm that is taking place. He responds to the thunder frightened exclaiming “Wheew! Thought they got me!” Camae attempts to soothe him.

CAMAE: You alright! You alright!

KING. Yes. Yes. I am. (He tries to collect himself.)

CAMAE. Don’t tell me a grown man like you ‘fraid of lil’ lightnin’?

KING. No. (Beat.) No, that’s not what I’m afraid of.

CAMAE. Oh. The thunder?

KING. Yes, the sound. It sounds like —

CAMAE. Fireworks. (He contemplates this for a spell.) (13-14)

Later in the play, in the midst of flirting with Camae, the sounds of thunder and lightening trigger what reads as a full-blown panic attack. He repeats variations of “I can’t can’t can’t / breath.” Initially Camae responds playfully, insisting that she has “been known to have that effect on mens” until she registers the severity of the attack declaring, “Oh, my God. Oh, God! / Did I do something wrong?” (23) She then calms him by calling his name, which arouses his suspicion and anger. I draw attention to these moments in order to further illustrate how Hall calls into question the safety of this temporary home, both for King and Camae. The play is overshadowed by the threat of King’s assassination, both in the text and the historical knowledge that audiences bring to the script. What is less clear is whether this temporary domestic space, or if any, are a safe place for Camae. She immediately, in jest and earnestly, calls into question her own culpability in King’s panic. If as Colbert suggests, Camae’s body metonymically signals other black female bodies, what is articulated in Camae’s soothing, motherly response to King’s panic.

Camae is among many other things, a body at work. She serves as a maid, a motherly figure, and a messenger. Each of these roles invokes a certain kind of nostalgia for embodied black women on-stage turning our imaginations to the “good old days” of subservient women who are tied directly to the domestic sphere. However, this nostalgia is quickly subverted by Camae as an Angel. Camae’s role as the Angel of Death further is constituted by a relationship to home. After King insists that he is not ready to die and questions why she cannot thwart the assassination, she responds that it is not her job, saying that she is there to ensure that he is “ready to come on home” (28). Within Black Southern traditions, the idea of going home to God is frequently reiterated in funeral sermons and spirituals. Interestingly, over the course of the Bible, the home is often presented as a place to return to.

Within the black Christian tradition is a multiplicity of references to home as a spiritual landmark. Black funerals are often referred to as “Homegoings,” rituals that concurrently mourn the individual while celebrating their return to their eternal home, heaven. Home is also deeply embedded in black spirituals, which are doubly coded in their creation and reiterations as religious and political vehicles of hope. Over time, these spirituals speak to home as both a heaven and haven or an eternal home and a home outside of slavery or oppression. This can be clearly seen in call and response songs such as “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” which emphasizes a chariot “coming for to carry me home.” Songs such as “Go Down Moses” continue the allegorical legacy of the story of Moses shepherding his people out of Egypt and posit the phenomenological experience of longing in the context of black slaves seeking a safe home outside of the plantation. Spirituals of home were echoed later on during the Civil Rights Movement, as people

actively fought for an equal and safe home-place in the United States. Other songs utilized within the movement, such as “Oh Freedom,” connect the struggles of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and quest for an eternal home with the Lord:

Oh, freedom, Oh, freedom,
Oh freedom over me.
And before I'd be a slave
I'd be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free (15).

It is also important to draw attention to the home that King inhabits during the play. The temporary space of the motel is a liminal space for King. He is in between this world and the next, life and death, fear and bravery. It is only in this liminal space that he is able to see “the Mountaintop.” bell hooks argues that the home is the site in which “where we can heal our wounds and become whole” (“Homeplace” 49) Utilizing this definition of home, we can see how Hall’s King is able to make a home in the motel enabled by the appearance of Camae. Camae is invaluable not only as a visible black female body but also in that it is only through her guided exploration of his humanity, his wounds, and the future, that he is able to come to terms with his own death.

Impossible Bodies

Hall frequently plays with the value of “flesh” within the context of the play with Camae calling herself an “Angel in the flesh.” We see the aftermath of invisible trauma mostly as it is related to the flesh. Hall’s King confesses, in an attempt to substantiate his adulterous-like behavior, that his “flesh is weak” (12). However, Camae does not seem to suffer from the same weaknesses of the flesh as King. I make this claim while also

acknowledging that as she is technically deceased throughout the play, it could be argued her flesh is decidedly weak. However, despite the circumstances of her death, which she briefly meditates on, Camae is able to thrive through her appearance in the text and in the ways that she asserts an agency over her body. She may be a dead body, but she is a highly visible one.

Camae embodies both the traumas her body has endured and references those that have suffered similarly. At the end of the play, Camae reveals part of her own history as a traumatic subject. She tells King how she was murdered by a white man and subsequently became an angel the night before. She states that she has “sacrificed my flesh so that others might feel whole again” (37). She follows this statement with “I thought it was my job.” This lies in contrast to what she argues is her new job, to escort King “home.” In response, he prioritizes his own impending death over her already realized tragedies asking, “Will I die at the hands of a white man, too” (37)? While Hall authorizes the voices of invisibilized women in one of the lengthier monologues of the play, the experiences of Camae and also the violated women she represents are almost immediately contextualized by the inquisitions of a frightened man.

While Hall allows King to eschew the traumas of Camae, it is in the same way that we often explore the importance of male and white privilege without ever formulating a response to the perpetuation of patriarchy and white supremacy. The lack of an empathetic reaction from the historically compassionate King in response to Camae’s outpouring is symptomatic of the ways in which the lived experiences of women of color, particularly black women go unrecognized or unacknowledged in the light of other atrocities. The horror of Camae’s violations and murder can only be

presented in relation to King's own. This is to say that if Camae insists that "Black Lives Matter," King is countering and repurposing the value of her experience with "All Lives Matter." In an interview with George Yancy, Judith Butler comments

And when that becomes the situation, then the lives that do not matter so much, or do not matter at all, can be killed or lost, can be exposed to conditions of destitution, and there is no concern, or even worse, that is regarded as the way it is supposed to be ('All Lives Matter').

Similarly, it seems that the traumatic experiences of Camae, as a black woman, are taken for granted. Her death is posited not as the problem, but symptomatic of a greater problem that draws attention to black men. I draw this comparison as it brings greater attention to the violations and murder of women that have gone unnoticed or otherwise re-contextualized for the purposes of a greater movement that focuses on men.

In conclusion, *The Mountaintop* is not simply a re-imagining of King's history to include women as Colbert suggests. While it is definitely articulating a feminist response to the black cultural archive, she is also making visible a history of nostalgia and trauma. In *The Mountaintop*, she utilizes an entire history of blacks in the United States as a way of meditating on what it means to be at home and at peace while further realizing the body as a temporary home for the spirit. This play explores the ability of diasporic blacks to make their home in the aftermath of a traumatic history of violence and displacement, the idea of returning to a greater home, and how women specifically attempt to negotiate home in a body that has been violated.

As black female playwrights, both Parks and Hall place value on the primacy of the black female experience in their revisionist history; their voices as such are present

and acute. They revisit a past that has often made critical women pathologized or passive and return to them an agency that has been lost in the midst of cultural and personal trauma. They also signal a complex, often invalidated, kind of knowledge that is subsidized by black cultural memory and phenomenologies of loss. In the process of constructing a new kind of history, these playwrights call to attention to those that have been left out and silenced, possibly with the hope that the reader will continue with a critical eye for people and ways of knowing that are marginalized in the making of history.

CHAPTER IV

SABRINA MAHFOUZ'S *CHEF*

Sabrina Mahfouz's one-woman show *Chef* captivates the audience immediately with the Chef, an incarcerated narrator with a peach, asking an unframed and very intricate question about hope.

How do kids who want to be astronauts
and writers and singers and engineers
end up here?

In the dark corners of someone else's dream guarded by thick doors and clipboards playing with guns and fists and knives forgetting what it was like to be alive once, they knew once

before crunches of a system
made them the type of life others lived
but they would never be forgiven for not dying trying to live like them.

When

was it ever even possible for us to live like them? (12-13)

Mahfouz asks a complicated question. She posits the material body in the midst of an intricate narrative that contests the idea of safe homes and safe bodies. The Chef wonders about the trajectory of those around her, imprisoned and free, while she is also performing her path and her conceived value of lived experience. The answer, like many things in theatre is, for the audience, a meditation on empathy and it begins at home.

I was inspired by a Walter Benjamin who observes that, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to

seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin) By focusing on the dangers that “flash up” in the only domestic space the Chef has imagined as safe, we see how she struggles with how it “possible for us to live like them.” In this play, Mahfouz clearly demonstrates that the imprisoned black female body is constantly endangered both in and outside of institutional domestic space.

In August of 2014, *Chef* premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The play, set in present day England was conceived by Mahfouz, an Egyptian-British playwright, *Chef* combines theatre and spoken word to unravel the complicated life of an adroit culinary talent who goes unnamed. Through interwoven narratives and recipes, we see flickers of jeopardy and trauma in the corporeal history of the protagonist played by Black-British actor Jade Anouka. Where an audience or reader might seek the safety of a linear narrative and familiar box set of home which are often a recipe for empathy, Mahfouz provides only the stability of a black imprisoned body rendered simultaneously visible and invisible, visceral verbal imagery of trauma, and an impossible nostalgia for home. I contend that for the audience, who is only able to see the Chef, these elements are united by their relationship to the Chef’s body over time.

In her recounting of her history, we see that the Chef has gone from working in couture restaurant to heading a prison kitchen. The audience bears witness to the verbal reassembling of her domestic traumas and history. As an active spectator and projector of my own ideas of home, this play presents the intersections of a nostalgia for an impossible home, impossible relationships and an impossible sequence of corporal history. Bits of the narrator’s memory are lost in moments of danger. Alas, while the play calls attention to the implications of women’s prison reform, rates of incarceration in the

black community, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory, my project focuses on the two kinds of home that are simultaneously performed, the impossible nostalgia for the traditional house and the tumultuous institutional domestic site, a prison. In this chapter, I map sites of memory, exploring *Chef* as a performance of the phenomenology of trauma/nostalgia as forms of loss in the institutionalized home and body.

Structurally, the play appears as flickers of insight wherein the audience is delivered small pieces of the larger narrative at a time, alternating irregularly between the “THEN” and “NOW.” It is comprised of roughly 9 scenes, which resist ordinances of time. Four scenes begin with a food or menu item being written on a dry erase board. This is the entry point into Chef’s consciousness as she grapples with her own complicity in a relationship with a criminal, her abusive father’s death, and the implications of another prisoner named Candice’s suicide. Her cheating ex is summarized by the verbal tension present in their relationship:

I loved a man once
Who cut shapes into skin
Cos his words didn’t work.
Worst thing was I worked with words,
And so when I spoke he looked at me
like I’d hurt a part of him I’d never heard.
I never saw him do it, his work.
But I saw the blood, I wiped it (7)

Candice, a woman she befriends within the prison kitchen comes from an equally troubling background with complicated ties to the men in her life. The chef says of Candice:

She was fourteen so she went to homes and was one of many
who got groomed into becoming girls
who do things for boys
who will never be men (31).

Immediately, we gain the sense that the homes Chef and Candice are familiar with are not safe places to cultivate identity. Ultimately, the play climaxes with the Chef's slow non-linear build to an interweaving reflection on the deaths of her father and her only friend in prison.

The set is limited to a single metal counter and dry erase board in a smaller warehouse like space, a leaking roof providing a constant background noise. It is without compassion, nostalgia, or hominess. It is a functional space that draws little attention. Instead, focus is directed toward the playwright's words and Anouka's fast paced, but cognizant delivery of her character's history. The play overall was extremely well received by critics and went on to receive multiple Fringe awards. Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* concludes her review describing the performance as food stating that *Chef* is "small but nicely formed, and very piquant."

Body

The environment of the performance is cautiously informative, a relatively blank slate for the audience's assumptions. We first see Anouka's body costumed with the contemporary traditional white chef top coupled with grey sweatpants. It is here that we

get a sense of the space for an enacted body politic. The uniform connects through her body, her journey from an elite kitchen to a captive one.

The chef quickly connects her sense of her kitchen to her sense of her body saying:

Something comforting about the shiny clean surfaces too

The silver makes me feel safe.

Clean, ya know? I'm very clean, me.

I need to feel cleaner than usual today (6-7).

The black body seen in this play, is a container of both individual and cultural memory and projected assumptions. Her inability to feel clean or safe is characteristic of a traumatized body and foreshadows the circumstances of the narrative to which the audience will bear witness. In *Chef*, the body is represented as a site of spectacle, where the grotesque of humanity is visible. Chef's body is visually static but represents a large amount of change over time. The Chef's body, in its "moments of danger" in what she considers to be home, is able to flash between established binaries of materiality: present and absent, clean and innocent, victim and antagonist, and finally, free and imprisoned.

Home

In *Chef*, the home is recognized as a site of memory or nostalgia, but de-privileged from being sacred or stable due to the experience of trauma. As we have encountered, a sense of a "proper" or safe home can be easily questioned with those that have not been able "to be made whole" in the home or in their bodies. Chef is no different and is deprived of the safety and comforts of home. Instead, she attempts to

“make home” and process through food. Mahfouz thoughtfully grounds the narrative in the kitchen, domestic and commercial, enacting the politics of performing home. We are specifically placed in the kitchen, which is encountered as a place of transformation, conflict and danger. Chef imagines her future kitchen upon her release saying, “it’s going to be industrial chic” (22). Design essayist Akiko Busch in her book *Geographies of Home* opens a chapter titled “Kitchen” by commenting innocently on the relationship between home and body, recounting a quote from a former teacher; “Your mind is a house. And you’re just living in the kitchen” (39). For the protagonist in *Chef*, it is immediately apparent that she is only fully able to inhabit and thrive in her mind/kitchen. Busch details the kitchen as a historical site of transformation as it goes from abject space to a place to indulge in the multisensory experience of preparing food. Food and the process of cooking are also noted as a site of transformation, starting as one thing and ending as something distinctly different.

The play begins with a description of “the perfect peach.” Chef alternates between lyric descriptions of the perfect fruit and repulsive, almost vulgar imagery of its transformation from sustenance to waste. It is only after she romances the audience with her depiction of food that she chastises:

But don’t be all poncy prick about it,
Like you know things no-one else could ever know
About this dear sweet little peachy poo.
Cos after all,
a bit later on you’ll be saying a see you later on
to it all down the shitter. (2)

Immediately, we are comically forced to realize that the kitchen we will be encountering will not be a perfect site of misplaced nostalgia. Just as Anouka's uniformed black body signals a journey and intersecting experiences, the kitchen is a multi-signifying transformative site. In the first few minutes, the audience is invited to witness an emergent, but not quite comprehensible traumatic history in a liminal home.

Trauma and performance are both corporally enabled, ephemeral often reproducing experiences. In *Chef*, both the performance of trauma and the possible trauma of performing a history are both visible. *Chef* presents and re-presents the traumas of multiple characters through the perspective of one. Anouka's character clearly finds solace in the temporary flashes that enable her story, whether it is cooking food to be eaten quickly or befriending an inmate that attempts suicide "in a whole host of imaginative ways."

Mahfouz details a chronology of abuse in the form of flashes of traumatic bodies, forcing the audience to contemplate its impact on multiple characters. The Chef offers only brief, incomplete and often non-linear glimpses into her own narrative and how it has been shaped by those she loves. Theater theoretician Andrew Sofer contends that performances of trauma can appear as "various forms of unconscious repetition [that] begin speaking through him or her symptomatically" (121). *Chef* presents information always once removed while effortlessly minimalizing the impact of damage. Throughout the play, she revisits and reiterates the residue of harm, clearly focusing on the corporal such as with "the man who cut shapes into skin." The repetitiousness of the lines is particularly captivating in that it does not necessarily provoke immediate meaning making. Rather, the traumatic and graphic repeated imagery of a man artistically carving

skin is enough to elicit response.

More specifically, Mahfouz repeatedly invokes the body as she describes the skin as a site of memory and trauma. After her father strangles her for a petty mistake in the kitchen and eventually lets go, Chef states that:

And just like that Dad forgot
To keep doing those things to my skin
That made me remember
What it was like to have him as a live-in father (28).

In *Chef*, physical and emotional pains are also articulated through repetition. It is consistently performed as almost an afterthought, wherein the audience is never quite sure whether the trauma is currently happening or being re-inscribed as the audience witnesses. Theatre theorist Timothy Murray concludes in the staging of trauma that “the body becomes an involuntary rehearsal-machine, performing variations of a lost event that is not so much distorted as unavailable” (121). There is something simultaneously beautiful and devastating with Chef bringing the audience along for the traumatic admissions of her life found in the stylized delivery of lines. The revelation of information along with the use of metaphor ensure that the critical information is always distorted and elusive. Instead of a concise or linear recounting of events, Mahfouz repeats key information, each time adding a level of depth or evidence of a slightly different perspective that occurs through removed reflexivity.

As a black body combing through her own history of trauma, Chef exists within the liminal space deploying her own “double consciousness,” consistently experiencing the same corporal removal coupled with an ability to express and re-present the narratives

of other character in *Chef*. Anouka not only performs the chef's own multiplicity of identities, but as the sole actor, must give voice to *Chef's* other characters as well. While her body is present and visible, it also seems to be lost in her words and memories. She effectively sacrifices investment in her own material body in order to offer multiple lived experiences. Chef protects her own emotional stake through slow, non-linear revelations of information and meditations on the material: food, body, and home.

For Mahfouz's protagonist, food is a vital and valued part of her limited material culture. In the culture of food, its preparation and acts of consumption provide a connection between the material, the body and the home. From the beginning of the play, food and home are a source of nostalgia. As she loses her autonomy and ability to dwell at home, she also loses the ability to prepare the kind of food she sees fit. Both losses symbolically and literally point to a reduced agency that comes with being incarcerated. After the tragedy in the prison, she is instructed to prepare fried rice to keep the prisoners calm. This continues a trend for Chef of food being tied not only to joy of sharing and fellowship with family, but also the pain of loss and as a site of healing.

Consequently, the nostalgia for food that she has prepared is directly related to loss. Throughout the play, she gives voice to repeated traumas attempting to fully digest and embody her life story while coming to terms with her own faults and complicity in the destruction around her body. It is in the way that she describes food directly connecting it to the material body and home. She describes "the perfect peach" as "bleeding," She goes on to qualify and then anthropomorphize the peach:

Make sure you buy the right ones in the first place.

Organic and that, fresh, you know, no pesticides

Or flies finding their homes in its furry fleshy skin.

Put your face right up to its glow and let it know

That you will love it, respect it, think about how it grew (2).

Here we see the skin as site is not limited to the human body. Rather, she describes a peach as a metaphorical vehicle into her own embodied, lived experiences. She then earnestly offers that she gives pieces of herself to those she prepares food for, immediately amending the statement to insist that her recipes do not contain literal parts of her body. Finally, she ties the consumption of her food with the consumption of her self and her body, questioning if the ephemeral nature of food reflected back on her own mortality and value. It seems that she deduces, that if she places value on the temporary material of food, then she as a material body is of temporary value and consumable as well.

Mahfouz further explores the relationship between home, family and food as the Chef talks of her best friend Annie who brings her boyfriend “noodles gloomily looking through foggy containers / at a scene of all too common domestic distress” (21). Here she uses uneaten Chinese food in order to examine the abuse her friend experienced once again personifying the food as human body— this time as a victim.

Interestingly enough, the Chef, who takes pride in her work, always relates her cooking to other people. While she clearly enjoys the food that she prepares, she never seems to be preparing it to consume herself. Instead, when food is positioned in relationship to the Chef, it is the entry point into her own formative but traumatic experiences. Chef says plainly “the taste buds don’t deserve to be burnt / and my

memories of hot soup aren't ones / I want to pass on," showing the audience that for her food, her body, memory and sense of home are linked (23).

We usually conceive of food as a part of our material culture that is brought about and consumed in the home. In many ways, the restaurant that Chef places so much pride in is a reproduction of a domestic space where the public mimic the private sphere. For Chef, the kitchen in her restaurant is safer than the ones in the homes she has inhabited; it is the invisible traumatic place she always returns to and imagines. As more of her traumatic story emerges, the invisibility of trauma contrasts starkly with the visible body and space.

While her body is driven further into invisibility as she is imprisoned, unlike other characters in the play, she maintains the ability to represent herself. Chef is abused and endangered by the invisible characters and yet she still presents them as complex figures. Her father, whose death is preceded by a career as a salmon farmer, and Candice, an inmate who commits suicide, both maintain an active absence and presence within the play, which produces a haunting effect.

The Chef initially offers that her father was "definitely not much of a family man" before she delves into an extensive history of abuse. Through the play we learn that eventually he abandons the family, the chef and her mother. Regarding the impact on her mother Chef says that:

"He left her with not much more than a reshaped nose
and Scars that would make sure he was always around
Seen in a skin that recognized his touch even
When he hadn't eaten a meal with us for five years (24).

The spirit of her not yet dead father haunts her throughout the play. Textually these absent bodies are represented with italicized lines. Anouka switches between performances of other characters and the chef's reactions and reflections as seamlessly as she slips from memory to memory within her mind/kitchen. While the text does not offer a large amount of dialogue to the invisible characters, they are quoted or described just enough to begin to form a fragmented picture. Chef's estranged father appears in her kitchen and she ignores him:

I want to see you

I'm here, you've seen.

What do you want from me?

Nothing, I want nothing

you should leave.

I need you to see me (38).

The irony of course in this interaction is that, for the audience, only one party is actually visible. It is in this way, the audience is privileged with an aural distinction between the two characters, but is deprived of any visual representation of the father. He appears to ask her to help him circumvent his rapid medical decline through assisted suicide. She finally concludes that she cannot help him because she didn't love him but also could not help him die. She must similarly cope with the suicide of Candice, an inmate who uses one of her prison kitchen knives to kill herself. She laments:

My life has been made up of days waiting

to discover darker parts of myself.

Digging inside skin until I can pull out

exactly what is so bad about me that makes everyone leave (40).

Once again, for the chef the phenomenological experience of trauma and emotional pain is tied back to the flesh. Ultimately, through the revelation of her trauma and the traumatic experiences of those around her, the Chef's body emerges as an unchanged container. Like her home, her body is host to memories and she is no longer fully able to inhabit either. Furthermore, the loss of a nostalgic past haunts her in the form of the unseen characters she gives voice to. It is in this way, she is able to mourn the losses in her life: among them, a loss of any kind of interpersonal and familial stability, innocence, and finally freedom. While it is not clear whether the Chef had a sense of those outside of captivity, there is still a persistent lack of consistency, which we would assume to be present in her life. The invisibility of those that haunt her is synonymous with invisible traumatic events. Although I have interrogated this play and its institutional domestic site as a site of trauma, it is not a play without hope. Chef offers up her recipes saying:

But this recipe is to keep dreams alive.

For those who will write it down, memorise

And when they get out, cook it at home

For kids and relatives that haven't abandoned them (18).

The transmission of knowledge between performer and audience is a crucial act of hope in *Chef*, bridging the traumatic discrepancy between known and unknown events. Bodies and homes operate as central sites for trauma and resignation while simultaneously being containers of aspiration. If the body is home, *Chef* is an uneasy digestion of its violations and losses, if only just to move forward.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

These plays explore home and body as sites of safety and question how that sense of safety is negotiated in an unsafe world. If home, as one my colleagues³ eloquently suggested, is comprised of other people, what does the act of dwelling metonymically or metaphorically signal within the context of performance? None of the plays offer a clear oppositional antagonist upon which to heap blame; they each acknowledge their complicity in their own demise. The boundaries between us and them are made less clear in relation to the home. These plays seek to stabilize or reposition black women so that while their traumas may be profound but inaccessible experiences; they do not define them in the course of history.

Firstly, these playwrights recognize a connection between diasporic displacement and displacement that signify a lost ownership of the black female body. While I am not suggesting that the black female bodies represented in these plays are all encompassing metonymical embodiments of displacement, I do maintain that their visibility is important. Parks, Hall and Mahfouz present women that have been uprooted in some way either in their immediate history or historically. Throughout the plays, the characters occupy temporary, unsafe spaces as they attempt to move forward in their lives. Each of them is somewhat disconnected from the bodies they inhabit and at some point their corporeal agency is revoked. Instead, they each attempt to assert their agency over body and home in way that re-visits and re-contextualizes their pasts and presents.

³ Zeina Salame at my *a welcome home*, practice as research event

Parks, Hall and Mahfouz recognize the traumatic effects of revisionist history enforced by nostalgia. They use their protagonists as a means of investigating often overlooked histories. Parks, often considered a revisionist playwright, revisits the narrative of Hester Prynne as a social pariah positioning her black Hester as a material body who is also complicit in her downfall. Hall inserts the imaginary Carrie Mae into the already distinctly legible history of Dr. Martin Luther King. While it is contestable whether she is at the center of the narrative, she is definitely an entry point into multiple parts of King's lived experiences and impact. While Carmae's own history is touched upon, she functions more prominently as an interruption of the collective cultural nostalgia for King's life and legacy – a nostalgia which was triggered both by his assassination and the erasure of black female narratives throughout history. Similarly, Mahfouz's protagonist utilizes the visibility of her own body in order to re-present the narratives of others while also gaining insight into her own history. Each of these narratives is characterized by the protagonist's inability to transcend the circumstances of one's history. Rather, each character must re-present her history as part of a present and future.

Finally, each of these playwrights makes a case for the both transcendent and connective qualities engrained in what we call home while resisting the nostalgia for a perfect stable site of growth. Home in these plays is transcendent as site. It extends as an idea under a bridge to the institutionalized, from the temporary to the eternal. As a connective tissue, it is the place to which each character returns or desires to return. Central to that desire for return is the inherent nostalgia for a safe place that never existed. In their attempts to negotiate the value of their bodies, each protagonist must also

question the value of their home. As dwellers in unsafe sites of trauma, their bodies serve as marked sites of memory and return.

Their homes are the soil in which these women have grown, invisible to the societies of which they are a part. Each of these plays recognizes a system that is not set up to protect or ensure the thriving of, much less the survival of, women of color. They signal a loss that has been incurred on each black female body as she finds that police do not exist to protect her from harm or ensure justice for the violations of her flesh: the loss that occurs when she realizes that her body does not exist for her, but for the purpose of others to violate and inhabit.

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