The Search for Identity in Black British Women's Drama: An Analysis of Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* and Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues*

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Abstract:
Black British women cannot be counted amongst those female playwrights who have profited from the "revolution" within British theatre – a development which Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge have attributed to the last decade. Many, especially feminist, scholars have pointed to the fact that black women are marginalized as well as silenced in British cultural and political discourses and regimes of representation. Consequently, the search for identity very often is an issue black female playwrights are concerned with in their writings about black women's lives. Drawing on African-American, but mainly British scholarly discourses of performance and dramatic texts as well as on theories of identity and representation, this paper analyzes the ways in which Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* and Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* represent black female identities. It will argue that both playwrights portray black women's search for identity as an ongoing process of becoming and depict black female identity as complex and simultaneously influenced by and interwoven with issues of race, gender, sexuality and belonging.

1 In 1997, Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge stated: "British theatre, in the last thirty years, has undergone nothing short of a revolution – from a point where the woman playwright was almost an anomaly, to the present, in which more women are writing for the stage than ever before (ix)." However, there are only a few black[1] women amongst the twenty female playwrights they have interviewed for their book. Even though black British women playwrights finally started to play a role in theatre from the mid-1980s onwards, this "revolution" did not include them as they still are at the margins of British theatre (Griffin, *Playwrights* 35). Contrary to white women's plays, few of black women's writings for the stage are actually published after their performance (Ponnuswami 218) and have only become the subject of scholarly attention within the last two decades. Then, theatre scholars, such as Elaine Aston (1995) or Lizbeth Goodman (1993), started to include chapters on black British women playwrights in their books on feminist theatre. It was only in 2003 that the first monograph to focus on black women's plays only, Gabriele Griffin's *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain*, was published.

2 Many, especially feminist, scholars have pointed to the fact that black women are marginalized as well as silenced and othered in British cultural and political discourse and

[1] In Britain, contrary to the United States, the term black refers to black and Asian people alike, subsuming people from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia under the homogenous category "non-white" (Dahl 52). Due to the lack of a term "that does not glorify 'race' yet acknowledges the existence of racialism" (Ifekwunigwe 130), this paper will use the term black as a political one, including all people from Africa and the Caribbean who suffer discrimination because of their skin colour or racial descent

regimes of representation (Mirza 3). Consequently, the search for identity very often is an issue black female playwrights are concerned with in their writings about black women's lives. Drawing on African-American, but mainly British scholarly discourses of performance and dramatic texts as well as on theories of identity and representation, this paper analyzes the ways in which Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* and Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* represent black female identities. It will argue that both playwrights portray black women's search for identity as an ongoing process of becoming and depict black female identity as complex and simultaneously influenced by and interwoven with issues of race, gender, sexuality and belonging.[2]

Black British women playwrights in 1980s and early 1990s Great Britain

3 While a distinct black British theatre emerged in the 1950s and various plays by male black playwrights were produced by the end of the 1960s, theatre work written by black women was only encouraged as well as recognized from 1986 onwards – the year the Second Wave Young Women's Project set up a National Young Women Playwright's Festival in South London and Winsome Pinnock's *A Hero's Welcome* was staged by the Women's Playhouse Trust for the first time (Croft 85-86). Nevertheless, as Meenakshi Ponnuswami argues, some black women already played "crucial infrastructural roles in shaping black British performance arts" during earlier years (218). Pearl Connor, for example, ran the *Edric Connor Agency*, established in 1956 to represent black artists in theatre, from 1958 until 1974 and founded the *Negro Theatre Workshop* in 1963 (218).

4 Various factors were responsible for the fact that black women started to play a more prominent role in 1980s British theatre. Firstly, many were discontent with the limiting roles they had to play as actresses and the general representation of black women in theatre at the time. Black women were now eager to represent black female experiences on stage from their perspective. Secondly, the second generation of immigrants, many of whom were either born or had been raised and educated in Britain, was more inclined to openly object to the values and discriminations of the Empire than their parents had been (Goddard, *Feminisms* 27). Young black women were especially politicized by the grass-root activism and the political as well as community work of the 1970s/80s. By 1985, there were approximately twenty women's groups, such as the *Black Women's Group* or the *Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent*, and a black feminist theory had developed out of a critique of the white

[2] Due to the limitations of space available, the plays are mainly read as dramatic texts, even though aspects of their performance on stage are sometimes discussed as well.

feminist movement and its failure to address racial difference (Ponnuswami 221, Starck 230).[3] Additionally, from the late 1970s onwards, several reports on so called ethnic minorities' arts, such as Naseem Khan's *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (1976), raised awareness and resulted in the government's funding of black – with no special attention paid to black women though – theatres, as the authorities were willing to act for equal opportunities after the urban riots of 1981 (Goddard, *Feminisms* 20 ff.).[4]

5Black and feminist theatre groups, the former originally dominated by black men, the latter by white (middle-class) women, also gradually began to be more open towards black women playwrights. In 1984, for example, the *Black Theatre Cooperative* staged Jaqueline Rudet's *Money to Live* (Croft 86) and one year later the *Women's Theatre Group* presented a multi-racial policy in order to include more non-white women into their company. Since it was not easy to fulfill such policies, the company only performed its first all-black production of Sandra Yaw's *Zerri's Choice* in 1989 (Aston 81 ff.). Black women's plays at the time were mainly produced in either black or women's companies which toured nationally or in off-West End venues such as the *Tricycle Theatre* in Kilburn. Amongst the white (male) led venues the *Royal Court Theatre* was the only one to stage work by black British women on a regular basis (Goddard, *Feminisms* 23).

6 However, black women started to organize their own theatre companies in the 1980s as well. Bernardine Evaristo, Paulette Randall and Patricia Hilaire founded the *Theatre of Black Women* in 1982, for example. The company's single policy guideline announced to focus on work by black women playwrights only, making them visible by putting forth workshops and summer schools in disciplines such as acting, writing, directing and stage managing (Croft 87). Even though the company is regarded as having been "crucially important […] in the history of the development of black women's performance in Britain" (Goddard, *Feminisms* 26), it had to disband in 1988 as it did not have sufficient money to stage its plays appropriately due to a stop in funding (Goodman 153, 155). Other theatre groups founded by black women, however, did not provide comparable opportunities for women playwrights. Talawa, for example, established in 1985 by Yvonne Brewster, who had become the first black woman drama officer in the Arts Council in 1982, did not produce a

[3] For a discussion of in how far theatre by black women can be considered as feminist and how black women regarded the issue themselves in the 1980s, cf. Aston chapter six, Goodman chapter six, and Goddard, *Feminisms* 1-13.

[4] For the problems the state's funding of black arts during that time posed for black British artists cf. Ponnuswami 222 f.

play by a female playwright until 1991 (Ponnuswami 218) and only had its first performance of theatrical work by a black British woman in 1998 (Goddard, *Feminisms* 25).

7 Therefore, and due to a relative lack of specifically black women's companies, the majority of black women playwrights was subsumed into the larger black male and/or white feminist organizations, and often had to choose between highlighting race or gender and/or sexuality in their plays (25 ff.). Lynette Goddard ascribes the absence of a sustained black women's theatre movement, inter alia, to Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal policies of the 1980s, which promoted individuality and thus a shift away from collective identities and organizations. The Thatcher government also immensely cut its subsidies for the arts and focused more on including black arts into the mainstream than funding black companies individually. The result was a decline of many formerly subsidized black theatre groups in the late 1980s and early 1990s and thus, again, reduced the opportunities for black women in the theatre business of the new decade (28-30). Furthermore, although the 1980s saw quite lot of productions of plays written by black British women in comparison to earlier periods, the scripts were often unlikely to be published. It was only in 1987 and 1989 that the first published collections of black British plays appeared (Ponnuswami 218). *Six Plays by Black and Asian Women Writers*, published in 1993, was the first anthology to exclusively contain work written by black and Asian women (George 5).

8 Black women's plays of this period dealt with diverse topics ranging from examining the effects of migration and history on women's lives to teenage pregnancies to notions of beauty. Many let black women tell their own stories and tried to undermine a focus on either race or class or gender or sexuality, challenging archetypical images of black womanhood (Griffin, *Playwrights* 15; Goodman 181). With regard to form, the majority of black British women playwrights resumed the realistic traditions of contemporary British theatre, but presented narratives rooted within a diasporic context which disrupted the conventional structures of realism and made women the central subjects of the play (Ponnuswami 224; Goddard, *Feminisms* 51). Nevertheless, some playwrights, such as Jackie Kay, also used alternative forms of theatre like the choreopoem, which combined poetry, music, dancing and theatre to disrupt the borders between stage and audience, reality and fiction or black, white and mixed-race (Goddard, *Feminisms* 52). Kay and others admitted they were influenced by the 1980 West End production of American playwright Ntozake Shange's for *colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf*, which, according to Susan Croft, was a "revelation for black women writers" (86) as it employed poetry and dance in its search for identity.

Concepts of Identity and Representation

9 This quest for identity very often lies at the heart of plays by black British women, too. Writer, activist and filmmaker Pratibha Parmar explains why the issue is so important:

> [T]he question of identity has taken on colossal weight particularly for those […] who are post-colonial migrants inhabiting histories of diaspora. Being cast into the role of the Other, marginalized, discriminated against, and too often invisible, not only with everyday discourses of affirmation but also within the 'grand narratives' of European thought, black women in particular have fought to assert privately and publicly our sense of self: a self that is rooted in particular histories, cultures and languages. (58)

Initially encouraged to come to Britain after the Second World War and the decline of the Empire, a diverse group of people from former colonies migrated into the country from the late 1940s onwards. Once in the metropolis, however, they found themselves categorized as one racially and culturally homogenous out-group and considered as a problem, "an alien presence disturbing the English peace" (Dahl 42). Several political measures and acts controlling and restricting immigration in the 1960s and 1970s served to institutionalize and further the racism found in white British popular discourse (42; Joseph 199). Likewise, Margaret Thatcher still invocated the notion of a unitary English culture not to be polluted by people from abroad even though by then "an increasing proportion of those who trace[ed] their descent to the ex-colonies […] [were] born [or at least raised and educated] in Britain" (Dahl 52). However, the predominant national British identity was built upon a hegemonic white ethnicity, so that black men and women necessarily felt displaced and doubly alienated – both from their 'homeland' and from the 'mother-country', where they permanently had to explain a continued presence as 'Others' (Griffin, *Remains* 199; Mirza 3; Dahl 46).

10 In the late 1970s/early 1980s, the wish for greater visibility and more equality led black men and women to form alliances and organize politically based on assumptions of shared authentic subjective cultural and historical experiences as black people. While these strategically applied identity politics had the power to mobilize, they nevertheless erased all cultural, historical and individual differences and discontinuities the diverse communities and individuals were marked by (Ang-Lygate 182; Griffin, *Playwrights* 10; Mirza 3-4). Claims for the recognition of multiple identities and differences amongst black people and the growing discontent with a hierarchy of oppression – race was mostly considered as the primary identity – highlighted the limits of an understanding of blackness as an essentialist, universal and homogenizing category (Ang-Lygate 173; Mirza 8).[5]

[5] It is important to point out, however, that "there is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black 'essence' and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the

11 In the wake of these realizations, black cultural critics began to re-theorize the concepts of identity and difference (Ponnuswami 223 f.). Whereas cultural identity has been regarded as fixed as well as rooted in a universal, factual past and culture before, it is now seen as a fluid matter of "becoming" and "being", transforming in a continuing process of positioning oneself and being positioned within discourses of history, culture and politics (Hall 393-395). According to the sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, the diasporic[6] identities of black British people are simultaneously framed by resemblances and continuity as well as by differences and rifts (395). This conception of identity "lives with and through, not despite, difference" (402). It is also closely connected to notions of meaning-making and the political and cultural construction of the social categories race, class, gender and sexuality as Hall defines identity not as an already accomplished fact, but as "always constituted within, not outside, representation" (392). Representations are generally understood to portray and constitute as well as uphold notions of what is assumed to be real and true about humankind. This means they can easily become positions from which identities are (re)constructed in culture (Brewer 1; Goddard, *Feminisms* 5). Moreover, as bell hooks claims, certain stereotypes about black women occurred in white imagination first, meaning that constructions of identities in society can be preceded by their representations (*Salvation* 50).

12 Black British women have historically been negated from Eurocentric popular as well as cultural and/or political discourse about race, class, gender and sexuality, inhabiting the empty spaces in-between and thus being denied an agency to speak for themselves and to be heard (Mirza 4). bell hooks' critique of black women's situation in the United States can equally be applied to their lives in Britain: "When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white *women*" (Woman 7). Lacking the subject position(s)[7] from which to derive the power to represent themselves and tell their own stories, black British women were racially and sexually othered, their identities being created inferior to the white (male) norm as well as to the ideals of (white) womanhood (Brewer 121; Goddard, *Feminisms* 5). According to Goddard, the concept of true womanhood "was construed in terms of beauty, femininity and

experience of exile and struggle" (hooks, *Blackness* 420).

[6] Stuart Hall equates diaspora with hybridity and difference and understands it as "recognition of necessary heterogeneity and diversity" (401 ff.). Similarly, Pratibha Parmar considers it a concept that embraces a plurality of differences and "a way out of essentialism" (59).

[7] This paper follows Mary Brewer's understanding of subject position(s) as "a material cultural space" allowing one to speak and to be heard as well as a "political standpoint from which one may […] define and interpret the meaning of one's own experience." The word position is set in the plural as subjectivities are conveyed as being "composed of multiple identities that often compete and conflict with one another" (Brewer 121).

morality that were only achievable for white upper-class women […]; black women […] were positioned as ugly, masculine, sexually denigrated and immoral in comparison (Goddard, *Feminisms* 5 f.). Just like blackness, black womanhood was perceived as a homogenous, given and stable category. This clearly opposed ideas about women's fluid as well as simultaneously multiple identities and subjectivities (Ang-Lygate 173-175).

13 Performance, Goddard argues, constitutes "an ideal space for explorations of cultural identity, holding within it the possibility of reconfiguring the ways that we think about each other and view the world" (*Feminisms* 1). Likewise, Brewer points to the "deconstructive mechanisms" of theatre which serve to dismantle and contest hegemonic representations of (black) womanhood (3). The following analysis will show in which ways Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* and Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* challenge and counter homogenizing representations of black female identities by portraying black women's search for identity and belonging.

Questions of identity and belonging in Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* and Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues*

14 Winsome Pinnock and Jackie Kay, who both grew up "in a [British] society which denies blacks a voice and constructs itself in an exclusion of blackness" (Godiwala 249), are deeply concerned about questions of black British identity and belonging. Jackie Kay is a poet, novelist and one of the "key writers of black lesbian plays", born of a Nigerian father and a white Scottish mother in Edinburgh and adopted by white Scottish parents as a baby (Goddard, *Feminisms* 105). In *Chiaroscuro*, written for the *Theatre of Black Women*, she explores matters of black lesbian and mixed-race identities, naming and belonging. Through the four female black/mixed-race (and lesbian) characters, Beth, Opal, Aisha and Yomi, and by combining theatre, poetry, music and storytelling, the play interrogates how communication between women can be made possible in a racist and heterosexist society. It also stages how past and heritage as well as categorizing assumptions about black lesbian women affect their perception of and search for identities. After going through several different versions in rehearsed readings and workshops, *Chiaroscuro* received a first full production at the Soho Poly on 19th March 1986, directed by Joan Ann Maynard, and was published in 1987 (Goddard, *Introduction* x-xi).

15 Winsome Pinnock was born to Jamaican parents in Islington in 1961. She has worked for radio, television and theatre and "is undoubtedly Britain's leading black woman playwright of the 1980s and 1990s" (xii) as well as "one of the very few black women

playwrights in this country [Britain] whose work has been recognized and celebrated by the mainstream" (Stephenson & Langridge 46). Her play *Talking in Tongues* was produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1991, directed by Hettie Macdonald, and published in 1995 (45). It deals with the effects of Eurocentric racist and sexist notions of black women's identity, examining black women's perception and fears of interracial relationships as well as notions of a homogenous black identity, issues of belonging and the importance of finding a voice as a black British woman. *Talking in Tongues* is set in London and Jamaica and is written, as Winsome Pinnock puts it herself, "within a tradition of European playwriting, but about subjects that take in my own heritage, my own past" (49). Both plays, *Chiarosucuro* and *Talking in Tongues*, even though different in form and specific subject matters, connect black female identity with issues of race, gender, sexuality and history, addressing the topics of multiple belongings, finding a voice to express one's identity as well as the way black female identity is affected by stereotypical assumptions about black, mixed-race and lesbian womanhood.

Living in diaspora: histories of multiple belongings

16 As pointed out earlier, black British men and women alike have struggled with double alienation. Being marked by a history of migration and constantly constructed as the 'Other' in opposition to a white British 'Self', necessarily led to a black British search for cultural identity. The experience of multi-locationality, a merging of various places and cultures, increased black British women's need for a sense of belonging and informed as well as (re)negotiated their fractured identities (Goddard, *Feminisms* 63). The four characters in *Chiaroscuro* all have histories of multiple belongings informed by migration. Yomi was born in Nigeria, but now lives in England. Beth's ancestors originally came from Africa, but were later deported to America as slaves. Her father, however, is from St. Vincent in the Caribbean and her mother is a white English woman. Aisha's parents came from Asia to Britain in 1953 "to work and save and work and one day return home" (Kay 71). She describes how her parents were "invited guests" and full of dreams at first only to be "treated like gatecrashers" later on (ibid). Being discriminated against, given the feeling not to belong to Britain, Aisha yearns for the "country of origin", "back home", where she can get in touch with her past and "be welcomed, not a stranger/ for who I am [...]" (72). As Stuart Hall explains, alienation from one's ancestor's homeland, such as Aisha has experienced it due to her parents' migration, necessarily gives rise to desires to return to "lost origins" (402). However, these can never be fulfilled nor requited and the original 'home' and community are no longer what

they have been before, as they, too, have been transformed by colonial politics, memory and/or desire (399). Thus, neither truly belonging to the one nor to the other place, Aisha dreams about a desired 'homeland' where she is valued for who she is but simultaneously knows she might be considered "English" there (Kay 72).

17 While *Chiaroscuro* only portrays the yearning for a return to the 'home country', the return itself is an important subject matter in *Talking in Tongues*. Pinnock takes up the problem of dual belonging by structuring the play around two acts and settings which are visibly different from one another. The first act takes place at a party in a house situated in rainy London. Pinnock stages how the black women characters' sense of not belonging in Britain is increased by black men's relationships with white women and the inherent racism of the white populace, who does not even expect white men to desire and/or get involved with black women. Claudette feels left behind by 'their' men, who, according to her, "are straining at the leash like hunting dogs on the scent of the fox" once a white women walks by (Pinnock 126). Curly, on the other hand, has to experience being presented with a gift for a woman with white skin and to be shunned by silence after her obviously non-approving, white boyfriend's parents discover she is black (131). In the second act, colourful Jamaica, "another world" (168), is constructed against the picture of racist England as Leela retreats to the island to recover from a break up. In Jamaica, men swarm around Claudette instead of white American women and Leela has the impression that the people "seem so at ease with themselves […] [and] have the confidence that comes from belonging" (172). There, both women think they can "walk tall" and "[s]od the angst, the wretchedness" (ibid). Likewise, Diamond tells a story of how she was "treated […] worse than a dog" in England, but now is a lady in Jamaica (175).

18 This simplistic and idealistic notion of the 'homeland', however, is slowly deconstructed within the play. Leela and Claudette have to discover what Aisha in *Chiaroscuro* is afraid of: that they are not part of a unified black identity, that they are considered as tourists, who only care about "sex and cocktails" (173), and that a white woman, Kate, feels more at home in Jamaica than they do (cf. Goddard 2007: 65 for a similar interpretation). Moreover, the inhabitants of Jamaica in the play have to face similar discriminations as black women in Britain since they are treated without consideration for their feelings. Sugar, who is sexually harassed by white male tourists and regarded as inferior by female tourists (170), says to Leela: "I can't give you what you looking for because I ain't got it meself" (169). She, too, struggles with finding her sense of self in a racist and sexist society. By opposing England and Jamaica in her play, Pinnock captures the feeling "of

belonging neither here nor there" (174), illustrating that "nothing's black and white" (179) and that simplistic notions of the 'home country' and a unitary black identity are just not true and won't help coming to terms with a diasporic existence of multi-locationality.

19 Both playwrights also touch upon similar simplistic notions of home and belonging as physical places. In *Talking in Tongues*, Jeff describes home as a place where one was born, but also states that this does not necessarily mean that one feels at home, too (134). Likewise, Jackie Kay portrays how a home can be a metaphorical site, especially when one does not know anything about one's past (cf. Griffin, *Playwrights* 181 for a similar interpretation). Opal does not remember her parents and always had to wait for "foster parents that never arrived" (Kay 82). When she meets Beth she feels wanted and safe, making her say: "You're the only family I have, Beth, the only one I can call home" (ibid). Thus, both Jackie Kay and Winsome Pinnock show how a history of migration and alienation fracture and shape black British women's identities. Never being able to feel "stateless, colourless" (Pinnock 175) in a society that marginalizes and categorizes black women as the 'Other', makes them lack a sense of belonging and evokes a yearning for a home, for putting "it all together/ these different bits" (Kay 72) of one's identity.

Struggling with (hetero)sexist and racist assumptions of black womanhood

20 In addition to a lack of rootedness that ruptures perceptions of identities, the black women characters in the plays have to come to terms with common assumptions about womanhood, which place them in a position inferior to white women. Both plays analyzed in this paper demonstrate how perceptions of feminine beauty affect constructions of black female identity. They work against simplistic notions of identity and counter stereotypical notions of black (lesbian) and mixed-race womanhood by pointing to the effects they have on black women's perception of their identities and consequently their lives. As mentioned earlier, Western cultural discourse mostly represents white women as being more beautiful than black women. According to Debbie Weekes, "[w]hiteness and its associated outward signifiers have been used as a yardstick by which difference has been measured" (114). She also argues that many black women have internalized racist and sexist notions of whiteness and the physical attributes that are connected with it, such as long, straight blonde hair, white skin and small lips as "a norm for feminine attractiveness" (ibid).

21 Leela and Claudette in *Talking in Tongues* are visibly influenced by perceptions of female beauty. Especially Claudette voices her anger about white women being regarded as more beautiful than black women. She feels like "every blown-up picture of her [the

stereotypical white woman] diminishes us [black women]" (Pinnock 128). Inter-racial relationships between black men and white women add up to her anger and her feeling to be invisible. She reproaches black men for dating white women in order to become white: to fit in and climb the social ladder, having been "brainwashed" to think that white looks are superior (165, 128). But even though she speaks her mind and denies the wish to fit in, she clearly has internalized racist and sexist assumptions about beauty herself. Claudette wants to feel beautiful and not "walk around with [her] head […] bowed" (172), but she cannot be herself because "you've always got to be ready to defend yourself" as there are "two different kinds of woman" (186). Hair, as "one symbol of the beauty of white women in Eurocentric discourse in opposition to notions of 'nappy' black hair as unruly, unmanageable and ugly" (Goddard, *Introduction* xiii), seems to be a particular sensitive issue for her. This becomes evident in her story about a white girl she knew when she was younger: "I envied her power. I used to pose in front of my mum's dressing-table with a yellow polo-neck on my head. I'd swish it around, practice flicking my hair back like she used to" (Pinnock 187). Claudette is not the only black woman in the play who desires long blonde hair in order to match notions of female beauty. Irma, too, seems to have tried to bleach her black hair, "undergoing one of those torturous hair treatments – […] the kind where they put some foul-smelling cream on your head […]" (153). However, the treatment did not work and she is left with a bald head. But whereas Irma seems confident with the new haircut and has no problem with people staring at her, Leela can never forget her black and female body (137) upon which certain subjugating notions of female beauty and identity are projected (cf. Goddard, *Feminisms* 74 for a similar interpretation).

22 In *Chiaroscuro*, Kay's black female characters have to cope with the same oppressing notions of femininity and beauty as the characters in *Talking in Tongues*. Beth tried to fit in with her girlfriends, "all white" (Kay 68), when she was six by "wearing bobbles in […] [her] hair, as if that would make […] [her] the same" (96). At eighteen, however, she started to buy black records and books to discover "a whole new world" (69) of similarities to other black people. In her attempt to define herself as a black woman, she rejected white culture and "dumped Dostoevsky, Dire Straits and Simon and Garfunkel" (97), pretending she never tried to match white standards and thereby, again, neglecting one part of her history that shaped her identity. She has not accepted her 'Otherness' yet and therefore is still not able to be "all of [her]self" (96; cf. Godiwala 257 for a similar interpretation).

23 Due to the construction of white beauty as superior, Opal hates her outward appearance. Discrimination and an internalized inferiority complex make her believe she is white in order to belong and escape self-hatred. She says:

> My face was a shock to itself. The brain in my head had thought my skin white and my nose straight. It imagined my hair was this curly from twiddling it. Every so often, I saw me: milky coffee skin, dark searching eyes, flat nose. Some voice from that mirror would whisper: *nobody wants you, no wonder. You think you're white till you look in me. I surprised you, didn't I? I'd stop and will the glass to change me* […]. (Kay 78)

The mirror that is talking to her seems to be a metaphor for white racist and (hetero)sexist society as stage directions at the beginning of the second act read: "*Opal stands at one end of the stage peering into her imaginary mirror (the audience)*" (96). Societal discourse, which classifies black women as ugly, permanently reminds Opal that she is not "all right" (69). The notions of what it means to be a black British woman "will always return" (97), they are Opal's "boomerang reflection" (ibid). Thus, Kay illustrates how her black women characters cannot escape the derogatory images that are perpetuated in white racist and sexist societal discourse, and that these representations consequently influence black British women to either define themselves in opposition to what they are not, such as Beth, or deny their true identities and come to hate themselves like Opal (cf. Brewer 134 and Godiwala 251 for similar interpretations).

24 However, *Chiaroscuro* does not only focus on how black women are affected by racist and sexist standards of feminine beauty, but also "stage[s] arguments circulating in the black community. […] Do some in the black community assume that those of mixed parentage face less discrimination in white society? How does homophobia within the community strain their common effort to resist racism?" (Dahl 47) In the play, the character of Yomi represents such racist and heterosexist tendencies. Her black doll, whom she called names like "Nigger. Wog. Sambo. Dirty Doll" (Kay 67) when she was younger, is presented as a symbol for her internalized racism at the very beginning of act one. Throughout the play Yomi voices stereotypical assumptions about mixed-race women as well as lesbians. With regard to mixed-race women, she draws upon the idea of a hierarchy of blackness, regarding mixed-race women as not truly black, but "half-caste", "half-breed", "mulatto" or of "mixed blood" and less likely to become victims of racial discrimination. (89-91) Following the belief that regards mixed-race people as struggling to choose between black and white roots, between subjectivity and alterity (Ifekwunigwe 127), Yomi pities Beth for having to decide who she wants to be. She clearly has internalized racial separatist ideas relying on

assumptions about racial purity in order to uphold boundaries of difference (Goddard, *Feminisms* 113). However, such perceptions of an essential and homogenous identity are challenged in the play. Beth, at least in this case, "know[s] where […] [she] belong[s]" (Kay 90). She identifies with blackness, "using the word black as a political statement" and not just as a phenotypic outward signifier for skin colour (ibid).[8]

25 Regarding black lesbians, *Chiaroscuro* shows how they are "prone to being subsumed under heterosexuality as black women" (Goddard, *Feminisms* 110) since homosexuality is stereotypically regarded as a "white thing" (Brewer 132). Thus, Yomi is shocked when she sees two women kissing: She "didn't think we [the black community] produced them [lesbians]" (Kay 76). Similarly, she always envisioned a lesbian to be "a tall angular looking woman/ white with men's things on,/ too much hair around the mouth/ and always on the prowl […]" (110). Again, Kay seems to point towards societal discourses and representations of sexuality as being responsible for such believes. "Wearing masks and walking like robots", Aisha and Yomi appear to represent a heterosexist society that constructs repressive structures like a machine (82; cf. Godiwala 256 for the same interpretation). The stereotypes the two women present in this scene are numerous. They voice that black lesbians "kill[…] off the race", lesbian relationships are not natural but sinful, "AIDS is God's vengeance on the men" and that homosexuality is an illness that "can be treated" by psychiatrists, diets and electric shocks (Kay 83). Assumptions about the reasons for being homosexual, such as wanting to be a man, having had bad experiences with men or being too ugly to attract men (100), and the general fear of the lesbian woman who transgresses the boundaries of gender constructions are presented as well (83, 99, 110).

26 Kay counters these stereotypes, inter alia, by revealing the effects they have on black women's identities. The tendency to see homosexuality as a "white thing" might lead black gays and lesbians to view their racial and sexual identities as antagonistic (Brewer 131), which consequently would make acknowledging multiple identities even more difficult. Beth "searched for boyfriends to cover her terror" (Kay 79) when she first realized she might be a lesbian during her school years. During the period portrayed in the play, she has already accepted her sexual identity – contrary to Aisha, who still struggles with it. However, she is hiding this part of her identity from others, such as her mother, because she is afraid of the consequences her coming-out might yield, which in turn makes her feel lonely and offensive.

[8] In her poem "So you think I'm a mule?" (1987), Kay highlights the same idea : "There's a lot of us/ Black women struggling to define/ just who we are/ where we belong/ and if we know no home/ we know one thing;/ we are Black/ we're at home with that" (quoted in Mirza 2).

Opal exemplifies best how having to struggle with both one's racial and sexual identity may lead to experiencing a crisis of self-definition, when she asks: "Which is me?" Presenting multilayered and complex female identities, the answer Kay proposes is necessarily: "Both" (100).

27 Pinnock, too, not only illustrates how difficult it is for black British women to be confident about their identities while sexist and racist discourse upholds notions that black women are inferior to white women, but she also "explode[s] […] stereotype[s] around the issue of [a distinctive] black identity" (Stephenson & Langridge 51) and shows that black women are not the only ones who are oppressed. The character of Leela challenges ideas about black women inheriting a certain natural rhythm as she is not a good dancer and does not like parties: "It's a kind of phobia, my fears of parties" (Pinnock 137, 139; cf. Goddard, *Feminisms* 74 for a similar interpretation). Additionally, in a revengeful attempt to diminish Kate's beauty by cutting off her blonde hair, Claudette and Leela have to realize that even white women have to conform to ideals of beauty as Kate's dark roots make it obvious she has died her hair blonde (Pinnock 188). Even though no one has ever told the black women in *Talking in Tongues* that they are "all right" the way they are (187), they are not the only ones who are affected by sexist discourse. Pinnock gradually unravels that the issue is not as simple as especially Claudette wants to see it, by pointing out the fact that white women are exposed to male repression as well.

Finding a voice to identify and name the self

28 As argued above, placing black women at the centre of a play is in itself an act of allowing women to tell their stories they way they see them and to give them the space to be heard by an audience. Furthermore, according to bell hooks, "speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us [black women] nameless and voiceless" (Talking 8). Both Talking in Tongues and Chiaroscuro create the opportunity for black women to represent themselves on stage. They also portray ways in which black women can find their voices and name their various identities themselves.

29 *Talking in Tongues* unfolds how deeply connected language and identity are for black British women. Winsome Pinnock has explained that it was liberating for her to use patois in her plays (Stephenson & Langridge 50) and that she sees it as "an act of defiance – to use it on stage within a play that could easily fit the confines of a traditional proscenium theatre" (Pinnock quoted in Goddard, *Feminisms* 69). Lynette Goddard demonstrates how English,

being the language of Western discourse, establishes identities via the postulation of racist and (hetero)sexist binary constructions of 'Self' and 'Other', thereby marginalizing and silencing identities that do not fit the norm. The words *dark* and *black* as well as female, she argues, are negative characteristics whereas *light*, *white* and *male* are regarded as positive features in the English language (Goddard, *Feminisms*)

> It's because this isn't my first language, you see. Not that I do have any real first language, but sometimes I imagine that there must have been, at some time. […] If you don't feel you belong to a language then you're only half alive aren't you, because you haven't the words to bring yourself into existence. You might as well be invisible. (155)

Even though Leela was seemingly raised speaking English and does not have another mother tongue, she still cannot express herself within this system of words as its racist and (hetero)sexist value system "tries to stifle" (196) her. She can only "*release[…] all the rage and anger that she has repressed for so long*" (ibid) when she starts talking in tongues, thereby rejecting the language system that has broken and repressed her and finally finding a voice for herself.

30 Leela's outburst in the second act is foreshadowed by an episode narrated in the prologue. There, Sugar tells how she followed a group of women to a gully when she was younger, expecting to see a "mystery of womanness" since these women were always leaving rather depressed and came back "skipping like children" (123). She discovers that Dum-Dum, "a woman who never speak[s]" (ibid), finds a voice in a place sheltered from racist patriarchal society and its rules for communication. However, she does not speak English, but in "a language [that] must be not spoken in a million years, a language that go[s] back before race" (124). Like Leela, Dum-Dum was silenced by a language premised on racist and sexist assumptions. She can only speak using another system of words; one that does not marginalize her. (cf. Goddard, *Feminisms* 66-69 for a similar interpretation). Thus, Pinnock illustrates very distinctively how oppressive a language can be for those regarded as 'Others' and how using an alternative system of words is a challenge against marginalization.

31 In *Chiaroscuro*, Jackie Kay touches upon matters of language as well. Aisha dreams about her "country of origin" in "another language" (72) and like Leela does not regard English but the language of her 'home country', which her parents did not teach her though, as her mother tongue: "They've even taken over my tongue" (ibid). Hence, Kay shows that she also recognizes language as something deeply connected with identity, as a system that denies black women their voice, keeping them yearning for a sense of belonging. Additionally, she portrays that there are more ways to express oneself than in the dominant

language. Aisha's mother stitched "all the words she never spoke" (71) into her "beautiful, angry" quilts (ibid), which lets Yomi wonder: "In what language are these threads/ Did the imagination of some strong woman/ hold this thing together […]?" (ibid) Yomi's grandmother and daughter were born silenced, but they came up with a new form of telling their stories by drawing and painting. These alternative ways of expressing the self empower Aisha's mother, who laughed "at them that treat[ed] her like a child" (72), as well as Yomi's grandmother, who "had powers" (86) and passed these powers of challenging racist and sexist language systems on to her grandchild's daughter.

32 Despite finding alternative ways of voicing the self, Kay argues for the importance of remembering ones (matrilineal) past in order to defy "misnaming, renaming or not naming at all" (Mirza 3) and to "make your own tales […]. Invent yourself" (Kay 115). In *Chiaroscuro*, she portrays what Naz Rassool has described as "a journey of learning to understand past experiences in order to clarify the present – and from that position of knowledge to find a voice – and, more importantly, to define a future" (190). This fluid process of self-identification starts right at the beginning of the play when the four characters remember the stories of their names as they have been passed on to them by oral tradition (Kay 64). Aisha was named after her grandmother who "was born in the Himalayas at dawn" (ibid) and encouraged her granddaughter to "[t]ake the risk" (67). Yomi, too, bears her grandmother's name (65). Beth was called after her "great-great-great-great-grandmother on […] [her] father's side" (64); a woman who had to experience slavery and rape but still was strong and "made change" (ibid).

33 The name *Beth*, however, is the name white people gave her grandmother after "whipping out" her original African name (ibid). Kay points out: "*[T]hat* history", that is, the shaping of black identity by and within white cultural discourse and institutions, "ha[s] to be remembered too" (65). It informs black British women's present identities as much as the histories of their female ancestors. This is evident in the fact that Aisha still struggles with the way her parents were treated when they first came to Britain, which in turn leads to her own sense of alienation (72). *Chiaroscuro* nevertheless puts more emphasis on remembering the histories of women, especially black lesbians, since they "are silenced as black and female and lesbian" (Goddard, *Feminisms* 110) and so many names and histories have been forgotten, withheld and "swept away" (Kay 113). Therefore, it is important for black British women to "never forget to remember/ all […] heres and theres", all the various past and present times and places that inform black female identity. "In order to change", Kay argues,

"we have to examine who we are and how much of that has been imposed" (quoted in Aston 90).

34 In *Chiaroscuro*, this examination is an ongoing process that "doesn't happen overnight" (Kay 114). Memories of the past, experiences and (internalized) stereotypes have to be negotiated reapeatedly to arrive at a place from which to speak. Each performance brings the four women characters closer to this place, closer to acknowledging and defining who they are.[9] "All this has happened before" (64), says Aisha at the beginning of the play and Opal describes the whole performance as a "Déjà vu vu vu" (115). Consequently, the play has no real closure and ends as it has begun: the characters sing the same song of time and change, tell the story of their names and the stage looks the same as it did in the beginning (117). Instead of seeing identity as a fixed construct, Kay describes it as a process of becoming that is open to change and shaped by both the past as well as the present and own perceptions of identity as well as societal ones (cf. Goddard, *Feminisms* 125 ff. for a similar interpretation).

35 However, in order "to find the words" (Kay 117) to express ones identity individually, the characters in both plays have to arrive at a place where they can communicate with others – despite differences within the group of black women and between black and white women. *Chiaroscuro* and *Talking in Tongues* propose that in order to find this place, the characters have to overcome internalized stereotypes first. In an afterword to the published version of *Talking in Tongues*, Winsome Pinnock posed the following question on how to bridge the gap between white and black women established by racism: "Do the brutalities of the past demand that we fight fire with fire, which leads to a vicious circle of violence, or should we be seeking other ways to heal the wounds that we have inherited as a result of historical trauma?" (quoted in Goddard, *Feminisms* 60) In her play, she shows Claudette choosing the first way. Angry and aggressive she concentrates on racial differences. She has come to hate white women for several reasons: "I hate her because she has never been my friend […], because she takes comfort in the fact that at least she's not bottom of the pile and delights in my oppression" (Pinnock 186 ff.). Claudette takes violent revenge for the wrongs she feels white women have caused her. The little white girl, who bossed her around when she was younger, was beaten "black" (187) and she cuts off Kate's blonde hair as she reminds her off the same girl and has slept with Claudette's love interest Mikie. While Leela usually does not

[9] In her understanding of gender and sexual identity as achieved through repeated performances, Kay predates the discussion about sexual identity in the 1990s and Judith Butler's ideas who similarly believes gender and identity to be "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo […]" (271).

express her anger the way Claudette does, she helps her this time. Pinnock, however, makes clear that this attitude does not support ending racism or bridging gaps. As soon as the two women realize Kate might be similarly oppressed, they cannot laugh about their prank anymore. The end of the play contains the hope that one day black and white women could focus on similarities and start communicating when Kate and Leela agree to take a walk around the island at some time (198 ff.).

36 Communication between black women is similarly important, Pinnock seems to argue. Sugar's assessment that there is "[n]o need now to go down to gully" (125), a place where women are free from rules patriarchal society poses on them, sing together "like in one voice" (124) and are able to express themselves in a language challenging the normative system of words, is contradicted by the play's end. *Talking in Tongues* is framed by two nearly identical scenes: at the end of the play Leela has the same outburst the silent woman Dum-Dum has experienced at the gully a long time ago. I would argue that Pinnock thus highlights the ongoing importance of female solidarity and communication, between both black and white women. They seem to be prerequisites for finding a voice and a space to define the self. Consequently, black women will recover and "be in touch" with their alienated bodies which prevents them from being "frightened of the pitfalls" that the racist and sexist discourse of society at large poses (199).

37 Jackie Kay, too, has emphasized the importance of communication in the afterword to the published version of *Chiaroscuro*: "My main interest has been communication. Can these four women communicate or not? […] I wanted to show how difficult communication is in a racist and homophobic society" (quoted in Goddard, *Feminisms* 128). Since there are no white women in her play, Kay's main focus lies on black women overcoming stereotypes and accepting differences in order to "find a place to say/ those words we need to utter out loud" (Kay 95). By these means, she acknowledges diversity amongst black women. She also clarifies that communicating is not easy: "We have to have arguments sometimes" (94). After the heated discussion about being mixed-race at the end of act one Opal suggests: "Maybe they're even good for us" (ibid). I would argue that because the women have discussed their different views on their black/mixed-race and lesbian identities, they have all come to terms with certain things about themselves they have not been able to acknowledge before. After seeing Opal's and Beth's relationship defy the stereotypes about lesbians Yomi had internalized, she does not "want to run anymore" (112) and even gives Beth her doll for the baby she would like to have (115). Beth, in turn, realizes that she was still hiding her sexual identity from others and has "locked the past […] away" (114). Opal has come to like herself

and Aisha at least starts to realize that she does not have to "chop [her]self into little bits" but "[b]e it all" (ibid). In a society where black/mixed-race (lesbian) women have to define their selves from a position of "chaos" (116), communication enables them to finally find a voice. Even though they are different from each other, the four women characters "still have something to share" (ibid), which made them find "that meeting place" (95) where communication holds them together and empowers them to finally find the words and the voice to define their selves (cf. Goddard, *Introduction* xii for a similar interpretation).

38 It has been argued that Jackie Kay and Winsome Pinnock stage black women's identities as shifting and open to change instead of being fixed constructs. Both playwrights show that identities are negotiated through time and space as well as equally influenced by culture, history, language and black women's present experiences. In *Chiaroscuro* the four female characters are involved in a cyclic process of performing their identities via remembrance and confrontation. Each performance (re)negotiates and transforms the women's identities and their acceptance of who they are. Leela in *Talking in Tongues* likewise undergoes a process of self-identification as she overcomes internalized stereotypes and encounters alternative ways of expressing herself.

39 Black women's search for identity, these plays argue, is necessarily connected to issues of belonging, race, gender and sexuality. Alienated from their 'homeland' and at the same time othered in the country they were born and/or raised in, Aisha in *Chiaroscuro* and Leela and Claudette in *Talking in Tongues* equally lack a sense of belonging which leaves their identities fractured. Derogatory assumptions about black and/or lesbian and mixed-race womanhood, constructed and upheld in cultural and political discourses of the Western world, further complicate the characters' search for identity. The plays depict how the characters are unconsciously influenced by stereotypes of black women as 'Others' and inferior to white women in their perception and formation of identity. They force an identity constructed in opposition to whiteness on some black women characters, such as Claudette or Beth, while they make others like Opal hate themselves and/or deny certain parts of their identities as black/mixed-race (and lesbian) women. Consequently, *Chiaroscuro* and *Talking in Tongues* defy homogenous notions of female and black identity. Winsome Pinnock contrasts Jamaica and England and thus not only contradicts a supposed all-encompassing unity between black people but also unravels that simplistic assumptions about 'home' are inadmissible. One of *Chiaroscuro*'s strongest features is the way mixed-race and lesbian women's struggles are never portrayed one-dimensionally. Each argument invites the audience to view the subject matter from different perspectives while Jackie Kay construes

racial and sexual identities as multilayered and illustrates that each plays an important role for being defined as well as defining the self.

40 Additionally, both plays demonstrate that finding a voice and a place from which to speak individually and as a group of women are prerequisites for positioning oneself rather than being positioned within predominant cultural discourses. Leela in *Talking in Tongues* encounters an alternative system of words, freeing herself from the racist and (hetero)sexist values transported by the English language. This also applies to Aisha's mother, Yomi's grandmother and daughter in *Chiaroscuro* since they derive their power out of representational forms other than spoken language. Jackie Kay and Winsome Pinnock both recognize diversity and differences amongst black women, but they also seem to argue for the necessity and possibility of inter-racial communication as well as exchange within the group of black women. In *Talking in Tongues* this is only implied through the framework of similar female expressions of anger and its promising ending of female bonding. The characters in *Chiaroscuro*, however, repeatedly voice the importance of a shared meeting place and seem to draw closer to finding it with each performance of their shared history as friends.

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