



## **Performing Racial Trauma: Fragmented Subjectivity in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* of a Negro and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview***

Ansam Riyadh Abdullah Al Maarooif <sup>(1)</sup> | Aseel Hameed Obaid <sup>(2)</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> College of Education for Women, University of Tikrit, Salah Al-din, Iraq  
Email: <sup>1</sup>[Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq](mailto:Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq), <sup>2</sup>[asil.hameed.obed@gmail.com](mailto:asil.hameed.obed@gmail.com)

Received: August 14, 2025

Reviewed: August 30, 2025

Accepted: September 12, 2025

Published: December 7, 2025

### **KEYWORDS**

Trauma;  
recurrence;  
fragmentation;  
dissociation;  
disorientation.

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes how trauma is aesthetically represented in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* (2018), focusing on the theoretical lens provided by Cathy Caruth. Trauma, as understood by Caruth, is marked by belatedness, repetition, and an inability to be fully assimilated into conscious experience. This paper asks three key research questions: How do Kennedy and Drury represent trauma formally and thematically in their plays? In what ways does Cathy Caruth's theory help illuminate the psychological and historical dimensions of these works? And how do these plays challenge theatrical conventions to embody the aesthetics of trauma? Kennedy and Drury use theatrical fragmentation, non-linear temporality, meta-theatrical devices, and psychological dissociation to embody these characteristics of trauma. In doing so, both plays confront the lasting effects of racialised violence, identity fragmentation, and epistemic injustice. This paper argues that the theatrical aesthetics of both plays do not merely portray trauma as a theme; rather, trauma structures their very form, rupturing realism and coherence to evoke the disorientation inherent in the traumatic experience.

### **Introduction**

As researchers examine how dramatists employ artistic mediums to depict psychological suffering and historical violence, the fields of theater and trauma studies have grown more closely related. Jackie Sibblies Drury and Adrienne Kennedy are notable for their creative approaches to identity, race, and trauma. Despite living in different generations, both playwrights use experimental theatrical forms to explore racial trauma, systemic racism, and

the psychological effects of racialized oppression. They force viewers to face the intricacies of Black identity and the long-lasting consequences of historical and cultural violence through their creations. The tumultuous racial and political atmosphere of the American Civil Rights Movement is reflected in Adrienne Kennedy's 1964 play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. The play examines the fractured mental state of Sarah, a young African American woman who bears the weight of her racial identity and internalized racism. Kennedy uses surrealist and fractured narrative techniques to show how Sarah's psychological breakdown is a reflection of the trauma caused by systemic racism and the difficulty of reconciling her Black identity in a world dominated by white people.

*Fairview* (2018) by Jackie Sibblies Drury challenges the liberal complacency of contemporary audiences and critiques the dynamics of white spectatorship within the framework of ongoing discussions about systemic racism, white privilege, and cultural appropriation. The play starts out as an apparently typical family drama but quickly deconstructs the genre, making the audience face their part in racial trauma perpetuation. The subtleties of systemic racism and the long-lasting psychological impacts of racial oppression are revealed by Drury's manipulation of form and audience

The study tries to answer some important research questions such as; how do both *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *Fairview* formally and thematically represent racial trauma? And how does Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma illuminate the structure of traumatic repetition and fragmentation in these plays? Finally, the study tries to show in what ways do the historical and political contexts of the Civil Rights Movement and contemporary racial discourse shape the plays' representations of trauma and identity?

Eventually, Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* both use experimental theatrical techniques, including surrealism, audience manipulation, and fractured narratives, to depict racial trauma as a result of historical and systemic violence. Based on Cathy Caruth's theory of traumatic repetition, this analysis contends that both plays challenge the audience's complicity in racial trauma perpetuation and critique the racialized construction of identity through the use of thematic fragmentation and formal disruption. This study illustrates how Kennedy and Drury reinterpret Black experimental theater as a means of addressing and reimagining trauma by placing these pieces within their respective historical-political contexts.

### **Theory: Trauma and Aesthetic Structure**

According to psychology and philosophy, trauma is defined as an overwhelming experience that is difficult to understand or commit to memory. It frequently results from traumatic or violent experiences, leaving psychological scars that show up as dissociation, repetition, and distorted time perceptions. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth, a pioneer in trauma theory, makes the case that trauma is characterized by its incomprehensibility and recurring return, saying, "It is not the direct experience of the event but its belated return that defines trauma" (Caruth, 1996). A crisis of representation accompanies this tardiness, as conventional narrative frameworks are unable to convey the disorganized, disjointed character of traumatic memory. Because it draws attention to the ways that form—disruption, fragmentation, and repetition—can perform the unspeakable of traumatic experience, Caruth's work is essential to theater studies.

Our understanding of trauma studies has been influenced by theoretical contributions. Dominick LaCapra makes a distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma,

stating that the former entails obsessive repetition while the latter offers a way to comprehend and integrate (LaCapra, 2001). a traumatic event is always incomplete since the psyche fails to sufficiently register it when it occurs—a person experiencing something traumatic is never fully conscious during the event's occurrence. And because it is never fully assimilated when it happens, the event may impose itself on the mind of the traumatized and be relieved with great clarity in the form of intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, nightmares, or hallucinations. (Jasim,& Almaarooif, 2024). A framework for analyzing how plays deal with memory, identity, and the prospect of healing is provided by LaCapra's focus on historical trauma and the ethics of representation. His ideas serve as a framework for analyzing how characters and performances vacillate between reflection and reenactment, and how audiences are involved in both.

Psychiatrist and trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk has demonstrated how trauma is stored in the body and can interfere with language, memory, and time perception (van der Kolk, 2014). His work highlights that trauma is experienced again rather than just remembered, which is particularly pertinent to theater's performative, embodied nature. According to Van der Kolk's research, theater can be used to enact the affective and physiological aspects of trauma, especially in somatic or nonverbal registers.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman emphasizes the political aspects of trauma, particularly in relation to oppressive structures and the fight for justice and public recognition. She contends that remembering is a political act and that healing from trauma requires both personal and societal acceptance. Herman's viewpoint highlights the political ramifications of trauma staging in the theater, particularly in plays that deal with racialized memory, systemic violence, and social silence.

These concepts are directly addressed in Adrienne Kennedy's and Jackie Sibblies Drury's plays, which fundamentally alter audience expectations and theatrical form. The psychological interiority of a young Black woman plagued by conflicting racial identities and familial trauma is examined in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Drury's *Fairview*, on the other hand, exposes and dismantles theatrical realism itself in order to critique white spectatorship and racial surveillance. Through disruptions, contradictions, and temporal fractures that reflect the psychological violence of living under racialized systems, both plays dramatize the conditions of racial trauma in addition to their content.

Specific trauma-related concepts will be traced in formal and thematic elements during the analysis of these plays. The plays' recursive structures and delayed revelations will be analyzed in light of Caruth's concept of belatedness. We will examine narrative rupture through abrupt perspective changes, incoherent timelines, and fragmentation. Character diversity, spatial dislocation, and surrealism will all be used to trace psychological and theatrical dissociation. By involving the audience in the confusing experience of seeing—and participating in—the systems that create racialized trauma, these formal techniques work together to both represent and enact trauma.

To elucidate the stylistic and thematic decisions in Kennedy and Drury's oeuvre, one must first comprehend Caruth's principal assertions. Caruth utilises Freudian psychoanalysis, specifically Freud's idea of traumatic neurosis, which emerges not from the initial incident but from its incomprehensibility at the time of occurrence. She asserts, "The traumatised, we might contend, harbour an unmanageable history within them, or they manifest as a symptom of a history that they cannot fully comprehend" (Caruth 5).

This concept presents the fundamental paradox of trauma: it is both a personal and historical occurrence, yet it defies incorporation into narrative memory. Instead, trauma resurfaces belatedly, frequently in disjointed or recurrent forms. In this situation, the conventional Aristotelian story, characterised by a linear plot and resolution, fails to appropriately represent the nonlinear temporality of trauma or its epistemic disruption. This theoretical paradigm establishes a fundamental foundation for comprehending how Kennedy and Drury aestheticise pain, both in their subject matter and in the structural composition of their plays.

### **The Aesthetic of Psychological Fragmentation in *Funnyhouse of a Negro***

*of a Negro* by Adrienne Kennedy is widely recognized as a landmark work of Black feminist experimental theater. The conflict between her Black identity and her desire for whiteness is the main source of psychological distress for Sarah, a young African American college student in New York City. Kennedy externalizes Sarah's internal trauma by using surrealist imagery, broken dialogue, and symbolic characters instead of a conventional realist story.

The most striking examples of trauma in art are found in Sarah's personas as Queen Victoria, Jesus, Patrice Lumumba, and the Duchess of Hapsburg. These characters are more than just props for the play; they are part of Sarah's mental "funnyhouse," a macabre psychological space that symbolizes the violent nexus of identity, history, and race. Their presence is a prime example of Cathy Caruth's idea of unclaimed experience, which holds that trauma is not fully understood at the time it happens but recurs frequently in forms that are incomprehensible. Sarah's personas are not just remnants of a past incident; rather, they are persistent expressions of unresolved trauma that are difficult to fully understand or explain.

As Sarah herself states, "My father was a nigger who hung himself in the hall, and my mother was light and beautiful" (Kennedy, 1964). Through the fluctuating performances of her alter egos, this haunting memory is not only remembered but also continuously reenacted, demonstrating the traumatic event's refusal to stay in the past.

### **Belated Recognition: Temporal Upheaval and Unavoidability:**

Caruth's theory of belated realization, that trauma manifests itself too late, frequently through recurrent symptoms or reenactments, is supported by Kennedy's use of repetition and circular structure. Sarah's trauma manifests as recursive identity breakdowns rather than a linear story, especially in relation to her father's suicide and her internalized racism. These recurrent memories and visions point to the continuous nature of trauma, which is never entirely comprehended or healed.

Sarah's death at the end of the play shouldn't be interpreted as a sign of closure. Instead, the culmination of trauma's persistence—what Caruth refers to as its "insistence in the present", is her death. Sarah's death does not mean that her trauma is over; it is still present in the broken identities and fragmented selves that made up her funnyhouse. Her passing symbolizes the unavoidable recurrence of the traumatic experience and the impossibility of completely comprehending or overcoming it.

### **The Embodied Character of Trauma and the Inadequacy of Language:**

The play's inability to speak coherently reflects the inability to adequately describe traumatic experiences. Often, dialogue turns into poetic monologue that is full of gaps, contradictions, and non-sequiturs. Caruth's claim that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, 1996) is consistent with this breakdown. In *Funnyhouse*, the weight of traumatic possession causes language to falter.

The main location of trauma for Sarah is her body rather than her words. When verbal articulation fails, trauma manifests itself physically, as evidenced by her obvious decline, hair loss, and eventual death. Thus, Kennedy's staging effectively conveys the essence of Caruthian trauma, not as a narrative, but rather as a wound that is repeatedly inflicted through silence, image, and the collapse of the body.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Epistemic Violence and Performativity in *Fairview***

Kennedy's play illustrates internalised racial pain through surrealism and symbolism, whereas Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* examines trauma as a consequence of surveillance, objectification, and epistemic violence. The play commences as a Black home drama, reminiscent of sitcoms or family melodramas; nevertheless, it swiftly deconstructs, revealing the pernicious nature of white spectatorship and the performative demands imposed on Black individuals within the white psyche.

### **The Racialized Gaze and Divided Realities:**

*Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury explores racial trauma by dissecting realism itself rather than using surrealism as Adrienne Kennedy does. With a structure akin to a sitcom or melodrama, the play initially presents itself as a traditional Black family drama. However, it gradually reveals the violent mechanisms of white perception. A more unsettling reality emerges from the setting's initial familiarity: Black life is constantly observed, analyzed, and misrepresented by an invisible yet pervasive white gaze.

This division between outward appearance and inner reality is an example of racialized dissociation. The voyeurism of invisible white commentators in Act II, whose voices superimpose objectifying speculation over the onstage action, undermines the family's reality. Parallel but opposing realities, one imposed, one lived are created by the contradiction between the Black characters' actions and the way the invisible white observers describe them. Reiterating Caruth's claim that trauma disrupts the mind's cohesive view of self and world, this bifurcation enacts a traumatic epistemic violence: "It creates a rupture in the mind's perception of time, self, and the world" (Caruth, 1996).

### **The White Gaze and Meta-Theatre**

At its core, *Fairview* is a meta-theatre piece. It questions the fourth wall's very existence in addition to breaking it. The audience's role as passive observers is actively undermined by the second and third acts. White audience members in particular are drawn into the moral conundrum of their gaze; they are implicated in the harm of looking and are no longer able to watch safely from the dark.

Hans-Thies Lehmann's post dramatic theory, which views modern theater as moving away from narrative and character and toward scenarios that emphasize theatrical presence and audience confrontation, is consistent with this tactic. Drury's dramaturgy exposes complicity by shattering illusion. As the white gaze is literalized through disembodied voices that determine how Blackness is viewed, consumed, and constructed, the audience becomes a part of the trauma's apparatus.

Additionally, in keeping with Brian Massumi's affect theory, which emphasizes physical, pre-conscious reactions over narrative logic, Drury dramatizes the affective charge of

surveillance. Affective dissonance permeates Fairview's atmosphere; laughter turns into uneasiness, and recognition turns into alienation. The abrupt changes in tone create a sort of vertigo in the audience that mimics the confusion caused by trauma, particularly racial trauma. The audience finds it difficult to shake the affective residues left by the emotional intensities, which are not neatly resolved.

### **Observation, Involvement, and the Morality of Gazing:**

Fairview ends with a direct address, in which a Black character approaches the white audience and begs them to leave. This rupture, a Caruthian moment where the trauma of racial objectification presents the audience with moral dilemmas, is more than just a theatrical gesture. "The listener to trauma becomes a witness, and thus a participant in the event," as Caruth observes (Caruth, 1996). Drury transforms the theater into a place where people actively participate in racial trauma, making viewing not neutral but implicated.

Drury embodies what Lehmann would refer to as the post dramatic imperative the requirement that the theatrical experience interact with the real by requesting that the audience make a physical decision to remain or depart. It is unsafe to use Fairview's trauma as a form of aesthetic catharsis. It compels an examination of privilege, power, and perception.

### **Collaborative Aesthetic Approaches: Fragmentation, Nonlinearity, and Performativity**

*Fairview* and *Funnyhouse of a Negro* both use formal disruption to reflect the psychological effects of trauma, especially in relation to Black womanhood and identity. However, they use different approaches that are indicative of their aesthetic priorities and historical settings.

Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* uses surrealism, fragmentation, and symbolic disintegration to internalize trauma. The play portrays trauma as a chaotic psychic space and rejects narrative coherence. In Sarah's mind, time and identity dissolve; her subjectivity is divided between mythical and historical personas. Her inner world, where Black womanhood is influenced by both colonial mythology and inherited racial terror, is reflected on stage. Kennedy's use of poetic language and abstract imagery highlights the incommunicability of trauma, which is a characteristic that distinguishes Caruth's theory of "unclaimed experience."

On the other hand, Drury's *Fairview* uses audience manipulation and theatrical structure to externalize trauma. The play shatters the audience's sense of steady reality rather than the protagonist's mind. Black female subjectivity is portrayed as being under siege, not by internal forces, but by the constant pressure of white perception. By involving the audience in this surveillance, Drury moves the trauma from character psychology to the stage. By directly addressing this gaze, the Black female character in *Fairview* breaks the cycle of objectification through meta-theatrical address and ultimately asserts herself.

To put it briefly, Drury stages trauma as a theatrical and epistemic invasion, whereas Kennedy sees it as a psychic implosion. Despite their starkly different aesthetic languages, both plays maintain that trauma is inextricably linked to Black female subjectivity.

### **Disintegration of Character and Identity**

In both plays, characters lack cohesive identities. Sarah's identity is fragmented into several historical personalities; Drury's characters are dislocated by external perspectives that distort their subjectivity.

### ***Nonlinear Temporality***

Kennedy offers a surreal, dreamlike narrative where the past and present converge. Drury uses repetition to reexamine identical images via novel interpretative lenses, demonstrating that trauma recurs rather than dissolves.

### ***Disruption of Realism***

Neither play conforms to Aristotelian unities nor psychological realism. They instead disrupt time and space to reflect the mental fractures of trauma.

### ***Audience Implications***

Drury directly addresses the audience, whereas Kennedy's surrealism engages the viewer in Sarah's deterioration. Both require that observers endure the agony and confusion inherent in trauma.

## **Conclusion**

Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* are seminal works of African American drama that defy traditional narrative structures in order to examine the profound psychological and cultural wounds caused by racial trauma. Both playwrights employ aesthetic disruption to represent the paradoxical nature of trauma, its inseparability from the present, its belatedness, and its compulsive return, when viewed through the prism of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Drury externalizes trauma, turning it into an act of objectification, surveillance, and epistemic violence, whereas Kennedy internalizes it, turning it into psychic fragmentation.

The plays employ surrealism, repetition, doubling, and fragmentation to stage psychological disorientation in response to the first research question, which asks how Kennedy and Drury depict trauma. Crucially, trauma is staged through formal rupture, temporal dislocation, and the collapse of character and audience stability; it is not just discussed or thematized. Because it explains both works' non-linear structure and resistance to resolution, Caruth's idea of trauma as an unclaimed experience that resists integration into coherent narrative proves particularly helpful in analyzing both pieces.

Importantly, both plays emphasize how irreversible the legacy of racial violence is. While *Fairview* exposes the continuous psychological toll of white surveillance on Black subjectivity, *Funnyhouse's* protagonist's internal collapse is the result of generational shame and racial self-loathing. Rather than providing catharsis, both plays highlight how difficult it is to overcome trauma and how racial oppressive systems make full recovery impossible.

By demonstrating that trauma exists not only in content but also in form, atmosphere, and audience complicity, Kennedy and Drury broaden the aesthetic vocabulary of trauma. By capturing the disorienting and repetitive effects of trauma in the very structure of their plays, their dramaturgical techniques subvert traditional storytelling.

This analysis's wider ramifications suggest new avenues for trauma theory in theatre, particularly in terms of how formal experimentation can more accurately portray psychological and historical trauma. These pieces serve as a reminder to Black dramaturgy of the value of theatrical innovation in expressing racialized experience outside of the bounds of conventional realism. Future studies could look more closely at how modern Black playwrights carry on this

tradition by employing theater to both narrate and enact the trauma's unresolved and continuing presence.

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