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Performing the African Identity in Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ's *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977), and Athol Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* (1978)

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Abstract

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Through their work in the field of performance studies, J.L.Austin, Judith Butler, Richard Schechner as well as a number of other philosophers have examined the manners by which identity is passed or established through performance. Every dramatist, whether knowingly or unknowingly, contributes to the framework of identity that is assigned to a subject. Through applying Alan Deutschman's paradigm for reformation, dramatists may ensure the preservation and development of their people's identity.

Four authors from four countries which struggled against colonialism and are rising from the aftermath of the long years of being subjected to a culture, language, and constitution other than their own have been chosen to examine their resistance to an identity forced upon them. They implement performance to scrutinize an imposed identity, putting prominence to the negative aspects of the colonial identity and highlighting the possible potential of a novel identity that integrates the positive synthesis of both the novel and traditional identity.

The thesis examines how Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), Athol Fugard's *Lessons from Aloes* (1981), Ngugi wa Thiongo's *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982), and Wole Soyinka's *Death of the King's Horseman* (1987) perform the African identity through applying the methods of performance studies. It examines the African feminine identity in the plays through feminine performance theory. In addition, a thorough study of the African identity is also examined through postcolonial performance theory.

Key Words: Performance Studies, Identity, African Performance

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Introduction

This study demonstrates the manner by which identity may be projected, preserved, and reformed through performance in four postcolonial African plays. The first chapter entitled *Performing Identity in Performance Theory: Introduction and Background* examines the various meanings and applications of performance within performance theory and the relationship between performance and identity. The indications of the word performance within performance theory are contested and many due to many factors. Mary Strine, Beverly Long, Mary Hopkins, and other performance studies scholars argue that the reason is because it is established in an atmosphere of sophisticated, ongoing and developing research. Richard Schechner, the leading scholar in the field of performance studies, affirms that the reason for the ambiguity of the word performance and therefore performance studies is the fact that the field is expansive and wide-ranging, allowing for novel additions to its already vast interests. Peggy Phelan also asserts that performance studies is linked to various fields due to the fact that it is connected to postmodernism in which there is an overriding tendency to focus on integrating and overlapping various fields.

However, most performance studies scholars agree that performance is a reformatory tool that shapes identity. This transformational power of performance is voiced by intellectuals such as Kimberly Powell. She writes, "Performance conceived as an act of intervention or activism can be seen in the work of many scholars who study elocution, speech, and literature" ("Race

Performance" 617). Performance may be implemented as a tool to dynamically change societies as a whole and individuals separately.

This idea is also voiced by Jon McKenzie who states: "From the happenings, rock concerts, and political demonstrations of the 1960s to the drag shows, raves and Cultural Wars of the 1990s, cultural performance has been theorized as a catalyst to personal and social reformation" (30). Performances have been implemented as channels through which identities whether they are group or individual are reformed and reconstructed.

Although McKenzie only mentions cultural performances, which many performance studies scholars consider the main focus of the field, Richard Schechner also mentions theatrical performances as a means for the reformation of identity. He states that although the theater has been integrated for entertainment, it is not the sole reason for its embodiment. He asserts that the theater has been employed for reformation as well. He believes that this is the main target of theater. In fact he equals the theater to transformation when he writes the following equation: "theater=action=transportation/transformation" (*Between Theater and Anthropology* 150).

Schechner is not the only performance studies scholar who acquires performance with reformation and transformation of identity whether it be a social or individual identity. McKenzie believes in a definition which "identifies three functions which scholars have regularly attributed to cultural performance: 1) social and self-reflection through the dramatization or embodiment of symbolic forms, 2) the presentation of alternative arrangements, and 3) the possibility of conversion and/or transformation" (31). Every one of these three functions of performance that McKenzie highlights associate with identity. They include the

elements of reflection, presentation and transformation. The focus, as in postmodern thought, is on the action or effects of the performance and not on the content or history that facilitate it.

Many scholars have reflected on this particular entity of performance. “The promise of performativity therefore must also be that those who utilize it reflect upon how their interventions themselves perform within the contemporary context of power relations” (Bell 5). Hence performance is implemented to reform, but simultaneously those who implement it, must contemplate on the effects that the performance has on itself and on the environment in which it is applied.

Hence, scholars of performance studies agree to the fact that, “Social categories, such as race, gender, age, sexuality, and ability can be framed as performative, and according to the specific context, they can be challenged, reconstituted and transformed” (Powell, "Race Performance" 617). Identity, regardless of the category highlighted may be referred to as performance. It may be shaped according to the author, whether it is a speaker, writer, activist, author, dancer, or any other performer. Schechner asserts this when he writes, “Theories of performativity insist that all social realities are constructed. The construction of gender, race, and identity are but examples of an all-encompassing theory” (*Performance Studies: An Introduction* 141).

Most researchers agree that the terms performance and performativity are tied to the postmodern lexicon of identity. They have given various reasons for this declaration. “Performativity implies that identity is executed through behavior or action, carrying connotations of role-playing or script enactment. Of course, 'performance' is part of the vocabulary of theater or drama, carrying insinuations of 'acting'. The term also has associations

with linguistic utterances or action, implying a connection to the notion of textually” (Dunn 163).

Scholars have gone so far as to define performativity with the formation of identity. Kimberly Powell defines performativity this way when she writes:

Performativity refers to the ways in which subjectivity (i.e., one’s own personal views, experience, or background that can be thought of constituting the self) is constructed through the norms of society yet is also a constant process of reconfiguration within existing social institutions, cultural practices, historical traditions, and power relations according to a specific individual. ("Race Performance" 617)

Powell defines performance as an assortment of means through which subjectivity is constructed. It is never stable but rather in the constant dynamic process of re-enactment and reformation. It is influenced by social, cultural, historical, and powerful entities according to the subject’s place within these five elements.

This is especially true when the identity of Africans is discussed. “Much of African-Caribbean performance and literature deal with the question of identity, usually through a continuous re/negotiation of the past, in relation to cultural origin, geographic origin and the debilitating experience of transatlantic slavery, in an effort to come to terms with, and make sense of, present realities” (Igweonu 60). Identity is not an isolated entity, but rather interacts and changes according to the surrounding environment, whether that environment is from the past or the present.

All of the playwrights in this study exemplify attempts to overcome, deconstruct, and reinvent an identity that is proud of and true to their own heritage and culture. They all endeavor to underscore the agency of the colonizer in the shaping of their performance and identity.

Even though the playwrights may not have had in mind Alan Deutschman's paradigm for effective reformation when writing the play, they all efficiently apply its methods to call forth willpower in their people to gain confidence in their identity. The paradigm consists of three measures to reach reformation: relate, repeat, and reframe. He introduces them in a prodigious article first published in *Fastcompany Magazine* entitled "Change or Die". Later, he wrote a book with the same title and added the subtitle: *The Three Keys to Change at Work and in Life*.

Structure of the Study

This dissertation is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one introduces the concepts of performance and identity within the framework of performance studies. It examines the various meanings of performance and identity, inspects the reasons for the differences in their implications, and studies the possibility of reformation of identity within performance studies. In addition, an understanding of Alan Deutchman's theory of reformation which is introduced in his book *Change or Die* is also examined.

Each of the following chapters analyzes the plays in focus in this study in an attempt to find out the performance techniques that each of the playwrights implements to preserve and reform their people's identities. By applying performance techniques and Alan Dutchman's theory of reformation, the playwrights had a monumental influence on their people.

Chapter two examines *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) by Ama Ata Aidoo. It is a play that takes place in Ghana which centers on Ato Yawson, a Ghanaian who recently completed his

studies in the United States and returns home with Eulalie, an American bride. In the play, there are many characters that the audience may relate to: there are older characters and younger ones, there are male and female, native and foreign, and even imaginary and concrete characters. All of them are depicted facing the conflict of choosing an identity. Aidoo repeatedly mentions the importance of comprehending and embracing one's roots, for that is what unites the people of a nation by making them have the same past, the same values and the same vision for the future. Until one accepts and has pride in the culture and heritage of his people, it will be impossible to perform in the best interest of society and the individuals who make it up. Aidoo reframes the concept of understanding the past identity in order to form a better future. Aidoo's resilient attempt to cherish her people's heritage has gained her international recognition: "Professor Ama Ata Aidoo, née Christina Ama Aidoo is an internationally recognized literary and intellectual Ghanaian figure of ethnic extraction. She is an accomplished author, poet, playwright, academic, feminist, and beacon to writers the world over" (Kwekudee).

Chapter three is entitled "Transition in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975)". In this chapter Wole Soyinka's play is analyzed to demonstrate how identity is central to the playwright. The play initiates with a scene in the market place at the end of the day when the shop keeping women are putting away their goods and getting ready to go home. Elison, who is the deceased king's horseman, is preceded by his drummers and praise-singers as he makes his luxurious entrance. By providing role models with whom the audience may relate, Soyinka gives a glimpse of hope to the African people. They repeatedly reference the importance of willpower, contribute to confidence in the African people's identity, and encourage others to act in a proactive manner. They reframe the native people's concepts concerning themselves and their competence to proactively perform in a manner that ensures enhancement of their best interests.

Chapter four is entitled "Reviving Tradition in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977)." This chapter demonstrates how the playwrights provide clear answers to the questions that performance theory proposes of "What is performance?", "Why do people perform?", and "How does performance constitute our social and political worlds?". They demonstrate through their collaborative play that performance is an entry point for understanding the concepts of African identity and resistance. *I Will Marry When I Want* focuses on the minutest details of African identity and resistance in many aspects of African life whether it is language, personal relationships, national and international associations, domestic affairs, or even religion.

Chapter five is entitled "Resilience in Athol Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* (1978)." It demonstrates how Fugard teaches the audience that they must perform with a strong resilience which is the result of a permanent purpose and willpower that overcomes all hardships. Just as the aloe plant performs with a sturdiness that endures all adversities, humans must also withstand and overcome difficulties tolerating and triumphing to preserve their traditions, customs, and identities.

Finally, a conclusion is provided at the end of this study. A summary of main findings is given. In addition, the significant influence of the inspiring playwrights is examined.

**Chapter One: Performing Identity in Performance Theory:
Introduction and Background**

Identity, its assertion, composition, transformation, and reformation, is a key issue in current worldly affairs. For the sake of identity, wars have been fought, lives have been taken, and countries have been colonized. Identity stands for who people believe they are, the values that they claim to be most important to them, the standards by which they wish to be measured, and the memories that they treasure the most.

Nancy composes in his book *Being Singular Plural* an impressive list that he claims is very difficult to bring to an end:

Bosnia- Herzegovina, Chechnya, Rwanda, Bosnian Serbs, Tutsis, Hutus, Tamil Tigers, Karjina Serbs, Casamance, Chiapas, Islamic Jihads, Bangladesh, The Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, Hamas, Kazakhstan , Khmers Rouges, ETA Militia, Kurds (UPK/PDK), Montatiare, The Movement for Self Determination, Somalia, Chicanos, Shiites, FNLC-canal Historique, Liberia, Givat Hagadan, Nigeria, The League of the North, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Sikhs, Haiti, Roma, gypsies of Slovenia, Taiwan, Burma, PLO, Iraq, Islamic Front Salvation, Shining Path, Vaulx-en-Velins, Neuhof... . (xii)

He explains that it would be extremely difficult to finish his impressive non ending inventory “if the aim was to include all the places, groups, authorities that constitute the theater of bloody conflicts among identities, as well as what is at stake in these conflicts (xii).

Indeed, the race to empower an identity and establish its authority is the reason behind many of the global conflicts around the world. For identity to be recognized it must take shape in a “performance”. “It is telling that in both historical and literary studies the notions of performance and performativity are often used as framing devices in the process of foregrounding the mechanisms of autobiography, autobiographical analysis, and identity formation” (Gale and Gardner 1) .

What a performance is and how it is implemented as a tool to establish an identity have been discussed and researched by countless intellectuals throughout history and have recently been given distinctive consideration in the academic circles. “The construction of social, cultural, and personal identity, and the significance of performance to this process, became one of the most important concerns of both theatrical writings on performance and in performance work itself in the last decades of the twentieth century” (Carlson 51). Performance and identity are entwined entities which scholars have only recently begun to extensively examine due to the enormous impact they have on individuals and on global issues.

Many scholars such as Mary Stine, Beverly Long and Mary Hopkins in their article, "Research and Interpretation in Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities", point out that performance is “essentially a contested concept” (103). This notion is repeated by various critics when explaining performance studies (Mike Wagner 13), (Hamera and Madison xi), (Bell 15).

This notion of performance being a ‘contested concept’ is initially taken from W.B. Gallie’s *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* in which he explains that some concepts such as art and democracy have incongruity genuinely inscribed into their very fundamental nature. This means that attempting to pinpoint a precise definition would only result in undoubted failure. In Gallie’s terms: "Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself renounces) as not only logically possible and humanly “likely” but as permanent potential critical value to one’s own use or interpretation of the concept in question" (167).

Carl Simpson and Bruce Henderson portray the vast array of entities that include performance. They write:

The term performance incorporates a whole field of human activity. It embraces a verbal act in everyday life or a staged play, or a rite of invective played in urban streets, a performance in the Western traditions of high art, or a work of performance art. It includes cultural performances, such as personal narrative or folk and fairy tales, or more communal forms of ceremony – the National Democratic Convention, an evensong vigil march for people with AIDS, Mardi Gras or a bull fight. It includes literary performance, the celebration of individual genius, and conformity to Western traditions of art. (3)

Hence, it seems that performance is an all encompassing word that includes many acts of human activity and interaction. If performance ceases to be apprehended by a single definition, it is only logical that the field of study which focuses on performance to be also incapable of stability and consistency. The realm of performance studies is ever changing and dynamic in nature. This is