SEVEN

This Black Body in Question

Amanda Denise Kemp

Originally performed in November 1994 and January 1995, This Black Body in Question: Contradictions in Black Identities in Johannesburg *is a one-woman show that might also be performed by an ensemble. Developed in response to my experiences as a graduate student living and conducting research in Johannesburg, South Africa, the piece uses performance both as a way of knowing and as a way of showing. It can be understood, on the one hand, as a critical record of "fieldwork"; on the other, it is a performative analysis of the contradictions of this "field" itself, analyzing not only the contradictions that shape the context through which "field research" is produced, but the contradictions through which the field, in turn, produces the researcher.*

In staging it, I chose to avoid natural realism and employed a hyperrepresentational style. For example, the Scholar begins by saying, "Backstage, the Scholar" and then her lines. During performances, I lectured almost all of the Scholar's lines from a podium, whereas the Player's voices were acted out. The Poet's words were always accompanied with movement, typically from the Katherine Dunham Technique.

(Backstage)

Scholar: I am prepared to lecture. We don't need your micro-conflicts *cum* anecdotes acted out. I would simply like to read my lecture and entertain thoughtfully conceived questions. Or perhaps an e-mail or two.

Player: You're not getting out of this, Scholar. You go, we go. Somebody's got to tell the truth.

Scholar: Truth? Be serious. No one makes a Truth claim anymore.

Poet: I am a Sister Outsider here. Inside Blackness and outside African-ness simultaneously. My secret is my secret.

Scholar: Would you please stop stretching and gyrating? Now James Clifford and Dwight Conquergood have already shown, quite convincingly, that identity is performed, processual, dynamic, and unfinished. Why do you insist on exposing me, this Body, to scrutiny? Is it not what I say rather than who I am that is most salient?

Player: Now who's clutching for straws? You only saw what this Body could see, what people let this Body see.

Poet: I am Sister Outsider here. Inside Blackness, outside African-ness simultaneously. If I say nothing I will belong.

Player: If I hadn't insisted on performing, would you ever have given these small incidents any further thought? Representing them here in the U.S., in the university, before a panel of your peers?

Scholar: Exactly, how can we possibly represent the accumulated experiences of fourteen months in twenty minutes? This is a flawed project, destined to falter.

Player: This project has forced us all to consider how this Black Body negotiated space in South Africa, a differently racialized and color-conscious country.

Scholar: Well, we could say a lot more if I lectured for, say, twenty-five minutes. Then the Poet could do a poem. That would be a nice combination.

Poet: I am a Sister Outsider here. Inside Blackness and outside African-ness simultaneously. My secret is my secret. If I say nothing, I will belong.

Scholar: I don't want to stretch. Will you stop doing that?

Player: If you just lecture, this Black Body would disappear in theories of identity performance.

Onstage!

(Onstage)
The Poet

I am a Sister Outsider
here inside
Blackness and outside African-ness
simultaneously.
If only I can avoid speaking
my secret is my secret.
I harbor it tightly to my chest.
Lips pursed.
Resolute in my silence.
If I say nothing,
I will belong.

The Player

Outsider: No. No way. I'm not going back.
Sister: We just need a little . . .
Outsider: No. We've done that before. There's already a beginning.
Sister: We don't have a beginning.
Outsider: Well, that's just the point. Beginnings are false. Constructs!
Sister: You're just scared to go back.
Outsider: Yes, I'm scared to go back. And, if you were me, you'd be scared too.
Sister: But I am you.
Outsider: No, you're not. You're some . . . thing else. I go back. I get hurt. And you, where will you be?
Sister: I'll be there.
Outsider: Why do you want to go back? Wouldn't you rather hang out with me in another ten years when my shit is together?
Sister: What exactly is you running to, girl? You think home is out there ahead of you?
Outsider: Yes! In Africa. My new beginning as an African.
Sister: African American.
Outsider: No. African period. As in Cleopatra, Nefertiti, Nzingha, Mandela . . .

Sister: No, African American as in Ida B. Wells. Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Yo Mama.
Outsider: I'm ignoring you.
Sister: Yo Mama.
Outsider: You're just trying to get me back there and . . .
Sister: How do you know she's not sitting in the audience right now?
Outsider: Stop!
Sister: Where?

The Scholar

Let us begin by titling this afternoon's presentation "Contradictions in Black Identities in Johannesburg: This Black Body in Question." Now that we have a suitable frame, let us proceed. Amanda Denise Kemp, social security number 8460852, U.S. national, recorded as negro (little *n*) at birth arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa, on the direct flight from New York at 4:30 P.M. local time.

The Beginning. Let us not delay and arrive at the beginning. On June 9, 1993, the Black Body in Question arrived at the beginning of a year-and-a-quarter stay in South Africa. Footnote: Of course, this is not the beginning of African American travel and exchange with South Africans. As early as the mid-eighteenth century African American sailors had landed at Cape Town. Moreover, the African Methodist Episcopal Church began its mission work in South Africa at the request of Black South Africans toward the end of the nineteenth century. The Virginia Jubilee singers began touring the country as early as 1890. However, by the end of World War I, South African officials generally kept a tight rein on visiting "American negroes." Even Ralph Bunche, a distinguished academic with all the right credentials—including a letter from Melville Herskovits—had difficulty getting permission to enter the country. Bunche ultimately had to promise not to speak, that is, avoid public speeches, and stick to science as his grant from the Social Science Research Council indicated.

The Beginning. The beginning is actually a journey, is it not? One has to choose where to start. Where? Is it a location, a flow, a time, a space? Paul Gilroy recommends that we shift from understanding space based on notions of fixity and place to understanding a space that is really flow.

Today's presentation re-presents a flow, the problematic space of Black-

ness from here to there. The methodology is quite simply this Black Body in Question. This Body's meaning in South Africa and the meaning it tried to grasp and project through language, silence, and rage. Blackness as a space and Blackness moving through space.

The Player

(Jan Smuts Airport, June 9, 1993)
Voice Over: Ladies and gentlemen, SAA flight #181 from New York has just arrived. *Dames and . . . (in Afrikaans)*
Outsider: I should have known there would be trouble when my arrival at Jan Smuts deeply stirred two Afrikaaner ladies. They had seen the sign "Welcome Amanda Kemp" and expected their heroine.
Sister: Imagine their surprise when an African American, darker than most South Africans with nappy hair and West African jewelry, appeared. Smiling widely.
Outsider: "I'm Amanda."

The Scholar

The Black Body in Question, Amanda Denise Kemp, passport number 861451964, U.S. national, recorded as negro (little *n*) at birth destabilizes social categories as soon as she arrives. "How did you get your name?" Apparently, Amanda Kemp is a common Afrikaans name, both Amanda and Kemp. On a number of occasions, she is asked which language she prefers: English or Afrikaans—this is by telephone, of course. When she indicates she is African American, invariably the response is, "Where did you get your name?" What's in a name? Quite simply, history.

Aspirations are embedded in a name. James Ngugi resurrected N'gũgĩ wa Thiong'o in a journey toward decolonization. Similarly, many Black South Africans have rejected their "Christian" names. One consultant told me that he had to "work hard to get rid of that name." Recently Ngugi recommended to an audience of African Americans at a Black literature conference to consider changing their names in order to give some indication of their Africanity.

But the very question of how/where did you get your name is a question of origins. Where does Amanda Kemp come from? It is amazing, but in South Africa the small detail of the Atlantic slave trade or slave raiding in the interior and trading at nearby Delgoa Bay is a blur. Thus, claiming and creating "African" names is a way to re-member that history prior to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively, for Black people on both sides of the Atlantic. Simultaneously, claiming Amanda Kemp as an African American name invades and destabilizes whiteness. In fact, in South Africa the name Amanda Kemp attached to the Black Body in Question went to the heart of Afrikaanerdom. "Are your parents from South Africa? Have you traced your roots?" In other words, "Are you one of our niggers?" as one consultant translated.

The Black Body in Question, Amanda Denise Kemp, American national, born negro with a little *n*, passport number Z7045196, was stopped at the airport.

"Where are you from?"

"New York."

"Are you South African?"

"No."

My passport clearly states that I was born in Mississippi and am a national of the U.S. However, something's not quite right. No matter. I'm used to it. Something was not quite right about me in a Korean grocery in New York. Something was not quite right about an African American riding a bike at night on Northwestern's campus. I'm used to being an alien, a transgressor of expectations and spaces.

Back to the beginning.

The Player

(Hotel suite, Braamfontein Protea Hotel, June 9, 1993)
Porter: What is your mother tongue?
Outsider: Embarrassed, I say, "English."
Porter: NO!
Sister: The porter laughs at our misunderstanding.
Porter: What language do you speak at home with your family?
Outsider: Should I say Black English? I read a book about the distinctions between standard American English and Black English.

Sister: You've already paused too long.
Outsider: "English," I say a little sadly, and offer the coins. "English."
Sister: The porter exits. I told you.
Outsider: Don't start. (*She is unpacking*)
Sister: Do you speak your mother's English?
Outsider: I don't know. Probably not. I'm always speaking the wrong language.

The Scholar

The porter's name was Russell. Soon after, the Body in Question resolves to learn Zulu. At the first class all participants are assigned Zulu names.

In South Africa, language often collapses into ethnic groupings. The Zulus speak Zulu. The Xhosa speak Xhosa. The Pedi speak Pedi. The English speak English. The Afrikaaners speak Afrikaans. Colonialism attempted to cement differences among Africans into fixed, stable categories. However, Africans are clearly multilingual. Moreover, so-called tribal identities were often consciously formed alliances between various clans to protect themselves from attack by stronger forces. Here I am thinking of the Zulus and Sothos, in particular. Thus, these groupings are historically conditioned and not absolute givens.

Nonetheless, language is a social marker. African languages indicate Blackness. Afrikaans and English indicate whiteness. Here I must also add that Afrikaans also marks off Colored. The soup thickens. As soon as one categorizes one must start listing exceptions. (*Cough, cough*)

Let us return to the Black Body in Question as a source of knowledge. The Black Body in Question needed an African language to assure herself of a home category in South Africa. Learning Zulu was my attempt to "pass," to be a part of Blackness. You see while this Body be's Black, without a "mother tongue" it is what Afro-American literature critics will know as the tragic mulatto. That is, too white for the Blacks and too Black for the whites. The Body in Question quickly perceives that three centuries and two score years of colonialism aside, Blackness is a performance.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* begins with a sermon on the fluidity of Blackness:

"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Black of Blackness' " And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black . . ."
"In the beginning . . ."
"At the very start," they cried.
"There was blackness . . ."
"Preach it . . ."
"and the sun . . ."
"The sun, Lawd . . ."
"was bloody red . . ."
"Red . . ."
"Now black is . . ." the preacher shouted.
"Bloody . . ."
"I said black is . . ."
"Preach it brother . . ."
". . . an' black ain't . . ." (9–10)

Ellison points out that temporal, slippery coast of Blackness that is and at the same time ain't. It is invented. And the codes of it vary from context to context.

So "passing." The Body in Question attempted to pass into Blackness by learning Zulu and shutting up. She is very effective at greetings: "Sawobona. Yebo. Kunjani? Ngikona wena unjani?" She smiles and nods. And nods and smiles until the would-be conversationalist looks at her oddly. Yes, a nod is not an appropriate response to "How long did it take to plait your hair?" She must confess.

The Poet

Ngibuya phesheya Amelika.
I come from America
Angazi okuningi ogwamanje
I don't know very much yet.
(This is repeated faster and faster until the English falls away and all that is left is . . .)
Ngibuya phesheya Amelika

The Player

(Book fair at the Market Theatre Precinct, October 1993)

Guard: The security guard eyes me with hostility. A Black woman alone in the Market Precinct, looking at books. Who does she think she is?

Outsider: I consider my strategy: to completely ignore or to go for defusing that pain. "Sawobona, buti." He grabs my arm and speaks. I look at him, shaking my head. "I don't understand."

Guard: "What language do you speak?"

Outsider: "English," I say, pulling loose and moving to the *feminist* book table.

Guard: He follows, stands too close behind me. "You are Black like me. You must speak an African language."

Outsider: I feel the slightly drunken antagonism in his voice. Yes. Black like him. Shall I say, "Listen, most Black people in the world don't speak Zulu or Pedi or Xhosa. We speak French, Spanish, Portuguese. Millions and millions of us lost our languages." Or I could say, "Fuck off." Not happy with either of these, I choose to move to the next table.

Guard: He follows. Now she's really bait. "Where do you stay? I want to come visit you."

Outsider: I try joking. Laughing loudly, I say, "My husband wouldn't like that!"

Guard: "I'm not scared of your husband. I've got a gun." He grabs her by the waist and pulls her close. "I like your accent."

Outsider: "Get the fuck off me, motherfucker!" The two whites at the cashier stare in shock. Should they interfere? Is it a Black thing? Taking advantage of his surprise, I break loose, running to my rent-a-wreck. "This place is schizophrenic. That motherfucker hated me and loved me at the same time because of my fucking accent. Fuck English. That's right, I'm not saying another word in English. I wish I coulda cursed him out in Zulu. I am your sister, motherfucker, your sister!"

The Scholar

English, like a BMW, is aspirational in South Africa. It is not the home language of the huge majority of the population; nor is it in fact the home language of the majority of the white population. Afrikaans is the home language of the majority of whites. Nonetheless, English is the most empowered language in South Africa. One can trace this to the preeminence of English speakers in business, international trade, the desire for acceptance into the international community, as well as the identification of Afrikaans with apartheid. English literacy initiatives predominate among adults and children. The National Education Policy Initiative report *Language* noted that "parents, learners, and some teachers often seem to believe that English has an almost magical power: 'If you know English well, desired things will follow.' The belief may be well predicated on its truer obverse: 'Not knowing English will keep many desirable things out of your reach' " (18).

The Player

(Zulu class number 10)

Outsider: Ngithanda ukwazi kabanzi ngomsantsi Africa.

Sister: Clumsy, lazy tongue. Practice those clicks.

Outsider: Xhosa, cha, Ngqawana.

Sister: Even children speak better than you. You'll never speak it right. You can't even hear the difference. *Ngithanda ukwazi kabanzi ngomsantsi Africa.* Smooth. Try again.

Outsider: No.

Sister: Try again.

Outsider: I can't try again.

Sister: Here you are in somebody else's country and don't have the decency to speak one of their languages. You want everybody to speak English?

Outsider: I don't just speak English. I speak Spanish.

Sister: Imperialist bastards, capitalist dogs, guns to Rhodesia, assassination of Lumumba, isolation of Cuba. Who gave them the right to rule the world? That's what it is, isn't it? You and the whole goddamned United States want the rest of the world to meet you on your terms. Read, write, think, make love in your goddamned terms. Fuck English.

Outsider: Fuck you.

Sister: Fuck you.

Outsider: Fuck you.

Sister: Fuck you.
Outsider: FUCK YOU.
Sister: Just cut the bullshit, Nefertiti.
Outsider: You cut the bullshit. You're supposed to be guiding me, not driving me crazy.
Sister: WRONG. I'm the voice of truth in the crowded dank space you call a mind. And till you're ready to deal with the truth, not this half-hearted, let me go back to Africa to belong bullshit, you are crazy.
Outsider: So you want the truth. I'm an Outsider here and an Outsider there. You want a little more? I don't understand people here even when they speak English. I keep correcting their accents in my mind. I don't know why they can't be direct. These people are too damned polite. And another thing. What's up with this men and women staying in different rooms at a party or on different sides of the same room? Why are African women sneaking cigarettes in bathrooms? And who am I to criticize anything? Who am I?
Sister: Why should anything be any less complicated because you're in Africa?
Outsider: I just wanna be a sister, that's all.

The Scholar

This Black Body in Question, Amanda Denise Kemp, American national, born negro (with a little *n*), passport number 861445196, did not fit into the existing categories. The Black Body in Question destabilized the salient categories in South Africa because they conflate race, nationality, and culture. Thus, this racially Black Body should have been African and a competent practitioner of African culture as indicated by local language facility. There was something disconsonant about American-accented English and Black skin because English is associated with progress, development, affluence, intelligence, and civilization, and Black, especially this dark Black Body in Question, is primitive, poor, illiterate, backward, slow, and stupid. Generally speaking, each racial grouping accommodated my presence in different ways: Afrikaaners tried to place me as one of "their niggers" because of my name. There are Coloreds darker than me. English-speaking whites declared me American, presuming that I had nothing in common with local Blacks and was completely outside their world. Africans demanded that I "get down" and speak one of "our languages."

The problem with Afrikaaner and African responses is that they don't appreciate Blackness as distinct from national boundaries and culture. Blackness is not African-ness. The problem with the English response is that it presumes no connection between Africans and me because I'm from a different nation, a first world nation at that. However, as Gilroy argues, Africans in the diaspora have to be understood both in terms of their current national contexts and within international circulations.

> An intricate web of cultural and political connections binds blacks here to blacks elsewhere. At the same time, they [Blacks in Britain] are linked into the social relations of this country [Britain]. Both dimensions have to be examined and the contradictions and continuities which exist between them must be brought out. (156)

> Analysis of black politics must, therefore, if it is to be adequate, move beyond the field of inquiry designated by concepts which deny the possibility of common themes, motives and practices with diaspora history. . . . To put it another way, national units are not the most appropriate basis for studying this history for the African diaspora's consciousness of itself has been defined in and against constricting national boundaries. (158)

South African liberation struggles have become part of the imagery and fuel of emancipatory struggles throughout the Black world. One need only look at the paraphernalia accompanying Mandela's visit to the U.S. in 1990. One very popular T-shirt bore the script, "Malcolm, Martin, Mandela and ME." I am suggesting there is a Black world, a space in which there are conversations, dialogues, adaptations, disputes, and conflicts across national and continental divides, where Blackness is constituted. The consumption of kente cloth or Mano Dibango or Salif Keita in Salvador, Bahia; Harlem, New York; or Kingston, Jamaica, is the constituting of Blackness. Blackness is a transnational space possible only because of global capital, attendant technology, and transnational discourses such as race and white supremacy. In other words, Whoopi Goldberg may be American, but she is indisputably Black and South Africans are using her to constitute Blackness.

The Black Body in Question spent the first six months of her stay trying to pass because the local categories did not accommodate her. However, about midway through her stay, she settled into a web of social relation-

ships with individuals who allowed for the space of Blackness alongside Africans. These tended to be Africans who had lived outside South Africa for a considerable amount of time or those who consciously consumed and invented transnational Blackness. Africans from other parts of the continent, Black Britons, and other African Americans rounded out this social network. She lived in a flow, where her English changed slowly to include expressions, inflections, and pronunciations of local peoples. I conclude with Ellison's sermon.

"Now Black is . . ." the preacher shouted.
"Bloody . . ."
"I said black is . . ."
"Preach it brother . . ."
". . . an black ain't . . ."
"Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"
"Amen . . ."
"Black will git you."
"Yes it will."
". . . an black won't . . ."
"Naw it won't!"
"It do . . ."
"It do, Lawd . . ."
". . . an' it don't."
"Hallelujah . . ."
". . . It'll put you, glory, glory, oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."
"Preach it, dear brother . . ."
". . . an' make you tempt . . ."
"Good God a-mighty!"
"Old Aunt Nelly!"
"Black will make you . . ."
"Black is . . ."
". . . or black will un-make you." (13)

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