Adrienne Kennedy is a writer of unprecedented depth. Her seminal work, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, written in 1964, created a revolution. A revolution built on silence as much as words, allowing the stage to become a place of experimentation like never before. That she is not more widely known remains a mystery. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* won the Obie Award for Distinguished Play, and showed Kennedy to be a leading figure in American literary tradition. The one-act play focuses on Sarah, portraying her internal struggle with her racial identity, with the images of Patrice Lumumba, Queen Victoria, and Christ serving as ciphers into different aspects of her self. It is this profound relationship between womanhood, race and the psyche, that so distinguishes Kennedy’s work.

Born in Cleveland in 1931, she grew up on Hollywood movies, before moving to New York and then later Africa with her then-husband Joe Kennedy. Steeped in literary tradition – from Greek tragedy to English classics – and informed by the places she has lived, Kennedy’s writing offers a formidable richness and clarity of voice. Indeed, in 1995, the critic Michael Feingold wrote, “With Beckett gone, Adrienne Kennedy is probably the boldest artist now writing for the theatre.” She has written several plays including the Royal Court-commissioned monologue, *Sun: A Play for Malcolm X Inspired by His Murder* (1988) and is the author of the memoir, *People Who Led to My Plays* (1987). In 2003, Kennedy was awarded the Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Award, and in 2008 she won the Obie Lifetime Achievement Award. In a time when identity politics and divisive rhetoric dominate the mainstream media, threatening the support systems by which we live and pushing people further apart, Kennedy’s work is ever more urgent. Here she talks to Christopher Niquet about the breadth of her influences and the danger of prescribed labels.
Christopher Nagler. You grew up in Ohio, the home state of Dorothy Dandridge, Lillian Gish, Dean Martin, Clark Gable, and Doris Day. To my European ears, there is a particular purity and clarity to the English spoken in Ohio. Were you influenced by what you heard as a child, as much as by when and where you were born? Adrienne Kennecty. Language was always important, in all its forms. Firstly, both my parents were from Georgia and had Southern accents. It was the prime goal of the schools they went to that the Negro students speak perfect English. And it was supremely important to them, in turn, that their children speak perfect English. Often the dinner table was a place where you were corrected.

I grew up in a neighbourhood in Cleveland called Mount Pleasant, which was home to a plethora of nationalities and identities: Greek families, Polish families, Italian families, and Jewish families fleeing Poland. There wasn't much respect for people's speech. I heard flat Ohio accents you describe. 99 per cent of the students were from small towns. I found it jarring. I knew it was wrong, and in school, we were reading very simple plays published by Samuel French. I was influenced by what I heard as a child, as much as by what I learned at school. As I wrote in People Who Led to My Plays, it wasn't until I read Anne Faye that I encountered a story that seemed like my mother's stories. Like Anne, she had a dead mother, was sent away, became a teacher. I read Gaslight, I read A Streetcar Named Desire. People didn't like us and my father, a social worker, gave long speeches on race. I was connected to the wild moors of England. I listened to myself to those stories as a means to transport myself into another life.

CN: When did you realize that you could create your own stories?

AK: I remember in fifth grade we read Laura Ingalls Wilder. Our teacher was very enamoured with Wilder, and talked constantly about how she was American, not English, and just wrote about her life. I remember thinking, ‘I want to be like Laura Ingalls Wilder!’ I loved Little House in the Big Woods and used to imagine that our house was in the big woods, not on a street in Mount Pleasant. I started to write tiny fragments, two or three lines, starting at about age 12. Based on the conversations my parents had. At that time, in school, we were reading Gaslight, and I wrote about my mother reading it until she ordered me to stop writing down what was being said in our house. I obeyed her. I was about 16, and I forgot all about it. Two years later, a freshman at Ohio State – a boy that everyone said was a little crazy – took me to see Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller on tour in Downtown Columbus. That reignited my awareness that you could write about your life and your family. Away from home, in the dorm at Ohio State, I started again writing brief paragraphs. This method of writing is still the basis of my work. Plays were also a big influence on me. I was obsessed with Tennessee Williams. A Streetcar Named Desire in particular. I remember seeing him once on the Broadway subway – he was just two feet away from me but I was frozen speechless. I think I didn't really want to

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The playwright at her wedding to Joseph Kennedy, 1953

meet him – he was too mythic. It wasn’t until January 1955, when myself, my husband Joe Kennedy, and our baby came to live in New York that I concluded I could write my own play. I wrote *The Pale Blue Flowers* in 1956.

CN: Did you always know you’d become a writer?

AK: I was expected, like all friends, to become an elementary school teacher. And I think for a long time I subscribed to that ostensibly inevitable fate.

CN: How did you find your own writing voice?


I had been toying with stories about my cousin Sidney for years, but not until I saw the Palace of Versailles did he come into full focus, and I wrote the short story “Because of the King of France” in 1960, inspired by Marcel Camus’ film, *Black Orpheus*. I knew that in the story he would run away, as he did in real life, but I didn’t know where I wanted him to run to until I saw Versailles. I call that finding a voice.

CN: In your work, you weave the personal into the universal. When did you realise that you could make a bigger story out of your own obsessions?

AK: What happened was Lorca. Somewhere around 1957, when Joe and I were still living in Columbia, I read the poetry collection, *Poet in New York* by Federico García Lorca. Much of it centre around Columbia, Harlem, Morningside Heights. I studied the book, trying to see why my own lines on Morningside Heights were so flat. I also studied *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov. *Death of a Salesman*, the cellar and the boys’ past were tools. I needed tools. I needed deaths, suicides. These thoughts took place over years. A sustaining power was and always is *Hamlet*. I studied how Shakespeare used Hamlet’s father. I was always reading *In the Shadow of Doubt*, *Rebecca*, *How Green Was My Valley*. The characters have concerns of power, love, struggle, conflicts, hatreds. Families were in conflict over religion, love, history. Reading biographies was crucial: Van Gogh, Picasso, the Curies, Kwame Nkrumah, Frida Kahlo, James Baldwin, the Brontës. I yearned to meet historical people, and used to imagine that I knew them, or knew the characters in stories. All of this, over a long, long period, was teaching me how to bring my family stories to a level that was worthy of reading. I had tried for years to write about my mother and her half-sister. I found myself studying Blanche and Stella in *Streetcar*, studying the themes of poverty, class, perturbed, angry, full of hatred, feeling hated, feeling that white America was constantly trying to deprive me of my birth right. I was seeking metaphors, symbols. I could see that, in *Death of a Salesman*, the cellar and the boys’ past were tools. I needed tools. I needed deaths, suicides. These thoughts took place over years. A sustaining power was and always is *Hamlet*. I studied how Shakespeare used Hamlet’s father. I was always reading *In the Shadow of Doubt*, *Rebecca*, *How Green Was My Valley*. The characters have concerns of power, love, struggle, conflicts, hatreds. Families were in conflict over religion, love, history. Reading biographies was crucial: Van Gogh, Picasso, the Curies, Kwame Nkrumah, Frida Kahlo, James Baldwin, the Brontës. I yearned to meet historical people, and used to imagine that I knew them, or knew the characters in stories. All of this, over a long, long period, was teaching me how to bring my family stories to a level that was worthy of reading. I had tried for years to write about my mother and her half-sister. I found myself studying Blanche and Stella in *Streetcar*, studying the themes of poverty, class,
morality, love, loyalty, loss, devotion, time. I tried to imitate the fusion of elements. I can't pinpoint a time when I thought consciously about any of this. There is no big realisation. You just keep struggling in the dark.

CN: The thing I love most about your work is its diversity. Your monodrame, Sun: A Play for Malcolm X Inspired by His Murder (1968), is one of the most beautiful pieces of contemporary American literature I have read. Are you sometimes frustrated by being labelled a playwright?

AK: Funny you should ask that! I do not see myself as a "playwright." You may write plays sometimes, but what you are is a writer. Lorca is the kind of writer I aspired to be. Labels are so destructive. How about "black woman playwright"? Journalists seem to have endless categories.

CN: How do you feel about the millennial generation, which seems to forgo fixed identities?

AK: That is a profound question, and I cannot answer it. I only know that the people I loved from childhood were to me without these journalistic definitions. I was too naive to glue definitions to people. One of the things I owe to my public school teachers is that they defined all the writers, painters, musicians, by name. Enter the Negro entertainers: Dizzy, Billie, Duke, Negro, yes, but no further breakdown; they were described just by their names. It wasn’t until the 1970s that I heard all these definitions, and I recoil from them. I come from a political family. DuBois, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Marcus Garvey, were frequently discussed. We read radical and black newspapers The Crisis and the Pittsburgh Courier. The condition of American blacks was always being analysed. But as a young person with a pen, or a Remington typewriter, I needed to cast aside imprisoning definitions. I needed to enter all stories. Richard Wright and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon. Duke Ellington and Judy Garland. It was my natural instinct. In my twenties, if I had kept repeating over and over, “I am a black female writer.” I would have been frightened. What did that mean? I knew Gwendolyn Brooks was Negro, but I called her a “Pulitzer Prize writer.” I knew James Baldwin was Negro, but my New York friends called him a “great essayist.” If I had broken down all these people’s identities in the fashion of the last 20 years, I would not have been able to forge imaginary bonds and friendships with them. And forging imaginary bonds with everyone from Picasso to Joe Williams and Frank Sinatra is what gave me energy to see myself as a writer. And freed my mind.

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