

“The blood remember don’t it?”: The Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure of Katori Hall’s *The Blood Quilt*

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Abstract

The Yorùbá influenced Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure of Katori Hall’s *The Blood Quilt* is an example of the enduring philosophical permanence of African aesthetics within the tradition of Black Theatre. Within *The Blood Quilt* is the manifestation of a Yorùbá traditional divination system and body of orature, the Odù Ifá. Hall acknowledges exploring Yorùbá cultural expressions, yet she refutes any dramaturgical intention to locate the play within the Odù Ifá. Thus, the incarnation of verses of Ifá in the text evidences her belief that a playwright’s consciousness and her work are often phenomenologically informed. This analysis argues that recognizing, understanding, and manipulating the Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure of a play offers an approach to dramatic analysis and play production.

Audiences witnessed a “flash of the spirit” in the midst of Arena Stages’ 2014-2015 season with *The Blood Quilt*, an expressive manifestation of Katori Hall’s eye into attributes of the Yorùbá of Nigeria and their descendants in the Diaspora. The play’s Yorùbá signifiers glorify the African roots of the southern American landscape. Hall repeats and revises mythologies of the Òriṣà, rituals, and most notably the sacred orature of the Odù Ifá. As Hall muses about “forgiveness . . . and [letting] things go,” (Beete 2015, n.p.) she reaches back into the Africanist past, retrieving, and weaving cultural modalities within the play’s fabric. Hall’s inclusion of such modalities—through research and/or as she posits, “blood’s memory” (Hall 2015b, personal communication)—suggests the enduring permanence of African aesthetics within the tradition of Black Theatre. What implication do the ciphers of the Africanist past in a contemporary play have on the present? How does the expression of Africanist aesthetic patterns in text and performance, clandestine as they are in *The Blood Quilt*, speak to the terms on which this particular Black play is constructed and evaluated? My research enters amidst these questions and the current limited scholarly analysis of Hall’s oeuvre.

During her inaugural playwriting residency with Arena Stages’ American Voices New Play Institute, Hall returned to a 2009 draft of *The Blood Quilt* she had begun while working with the Royal Court Theatre in London. In support of her task to study the retention of Yorùbá culture in the Diaspora, Hall made site visits to Oyotunji African Village in Beaufort, South Carolina, and Gullah communities in South Carolina and Sapelo Island, Georgia (Penrice

2015, n.p.). These areas are saturated with Africanist retentions due to importation patterns of enslaved Africans to the coastal Sea Islands and their low-country settlement in a post–Civil War era. In *The Blood Quilt*, Sapelo Island, “the only intact Gullah community” in the United States (CNN 2013, n.p.) becomes the fictional Kwemera, a place that embodies the concepts of “to last, endure, withstand” (Hall 2015a, 46).

As in Sapelo Island, long-time Kwemera residents are being forced off their ancestral land through increased taxation. This state-sanctioned form of gentrification for purposes of development forces some owners to sell their property for far less than its value because they cannot afford the taxes. Mama Redell, Jernigan family matriarch, challenges these threats to her home by encasing notice of her debt—127 past due tax notices totaling \$256,527.04—inside a quilt and “working the mother” in the material practice of her weaving. A form of spiritual activism, “working the mother” includes a number of rituals that will engage the fertile feminine power and intuition of the human psyche and effect personal and social change (Love 2012, 83–87). Mama’s “spirituality . . . so intense, so deep, so unconscious” (Walker 1983, 231), she sings “a meditation, a prayer” (Hall 2015, 98) while weaving “heart to hand” (Hall 2015a, 98):

*Needle up, needle down,
Needle up, needle up, needle down,
Bury your knot lady, bury your soul,
Rock that needle, girl thread your gold . . .* (Hall 2015a, 107)

Chanting over her quilt, she uses her *àṣẹ* (power to make things happen) to transform the circumstances of her family and self. Mama’s “working [of] the mother” becomes a pseudo-practice of Yorùbá spiritual customs. Her metaphysical intervention signifies on Ifá divination or processes by which augers in Yorùbáland access sacred patterns and the messages of the corresponding orature to uncover and gain control over the challenges manifesting in the material realm.

How does this inter-rituality, the relationship between “working the mother” and Ifá divination, enable the Jernigan sisters to retain the family home in the face of imminent liability and property seizure by the state? The answer is found and more fully understood in an analysis of the Yorùbá sacred orature Mama invokes in her “working” the Odù Ifá. The odù referenced within the work serve as what I term the play’s Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure (EDS). In an ethnocultural dramatic structure, organizational markers of Western dramaturgy within the play—exposition, inciting incident, conflict, climax, and resolution—are inspired, shaped, and/or informed by distinct cultural and/or temporal Africanisms (Green 2016, 156). The plot of *The Blood Quilt* read through the lens of the Odù Ifá becomes a cosmically organized series of happenings which work together to “. . . illuminate the path” of the Jernigan sisters toward revelation (Harrison 2002, 247), and ultimately elevate the play as a ritual event. Failure to

investigate the underlying discourses permeating the text will leave readers and witnesses with only a portion of the message.

Theoretical Framework

Two familiar Yorùbá significations emerged around \$256,527.04, the total amount of tax arrearage and 127, the requisite number of tax notices. There are 256 divinatory oracles of the Odù Ifá. Thus, I continued my study with the 127th oracle, Ìrosù-Òbàrà. Consequently, it was determined that the play bore evidence of this oracle as well as three additional oracles—Òbàràméjì, Ìrosùméjì, and Èjìogbè.[1] The odù reveal themselves through the quilts. In Yorùbá philosophy, the universe is a divine womb containing 256 bodies of sentient binary patterns or letters through which the unborn, ancestors, and other divinities speak. Each pattern links to a numerical oracle associated with a single or series of verses that illustrate the main idea of the pattern. The patterns are cast through processes of divination that can involve the use of, but are not limited to, sacred palm nuts, a divining chain, cowrie shells, and coconut/kola nut. After a series of castings and notations of the corresponding patterns, the diviner will arrive at the particular odù governing the individual and their situation. The diviner recites the associated verse while the individual for whom Ifá (the oracle of Òrúnmilà, the òrìṣà of wisdom and Witness of Fate) is speaking contemplates their situation and its relationship to the narratives being spoken. The odù are summarizing symbols that can give one agency in determining their future because “there is no single event that cannot be forecast and, when necessary modified” (Epega and Neimark 1995, xiii).

In *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjé in Africana Literature* Teresa Washington offers an insightful model for contextualizing both the concepts of “working the mother” and divining Ifá in *The Blood Quilt*. The Àjé, both a power and a representation of the source from which it originates, is her three-tiered conceptual frame for interpreting the “cultural and spiritual properties in Africana texts” (Washington 2005, 2). First, there is “the matrix potentiality” (Badejo qtd. in Washington 13), Ìyánlá Odù or the womb from which the Àjé derive. Secondly, this womb gives birth to Odùduwà/Odù or “oracular utterance (16-17)”—the word. Thirdly, there are the Àjé, the Mothers of spiritual vision and divine authority, who possess both òrò, the power of the word, and àṣẹ, the power to make it manifest. Collectively, Ìyánlá Odù, Odùduwà/Odù, and the Àjé are central organizing symbols that can simply be described as the Mothers—the source, the power, and the manifestation. Thus, as Mama “works the mother” on the quilt, her personal power invokes the àṣẹ of the Mothers and the manifestation of the word or the odù itself. According to Washington, humans as ritual agents can use their àṣẹ to conjure the word in:

Ritual dramas, proverbs, divination texts, healing rituals, and other forms of artistic and spiritual expression, including contemporary literature, music, and visual arts, that honor the Mother's original utterance and sustain, flavor, and structure society. (17)

Hall's dramaturgical references to *odù* within the play—the original utterance of the Mothers—was not premeditated (Hall 2015b, personal communication). She acknowledges researching Yorùbá cultural significations and performance traditions, and she credits those manifestations within the play to her exploration. However, the marking of the *odù* evidences her belief that:

Being African American and growing up in the south, there is an acceptance of spirituality that I don't think a lot of people necessarily understand. They [...] dismiss it. But, for us it is real and it's not just God, it is haints, it is spirit, the fact that our ancestors are always with us. . . . that reality to some people is a magical reality but, for you this is the truth—it will bleed into your work [It's] something that I lived, something that is in my blood memory, [and] something that I know exists. (Signature 2014, n.p.)

In “African Signs and Spirit Writing,” poet and scholar Harryette Mullen validates the prescient artist by positing that:

The writer as well as the artist can become “an inspired device for the subconscious spirit,” the African-ancestor spirit whose black yearning, unleashed as glossolalia, would be regarded in the dominant culture as mumbo jumbo. Through the visionary artist or writer, who serves as a medium, it is possible for the surviving spirit of African cultural traditions, “to manifest itself on the physical plane” through the artists' materials or the materiality of the writing process. The work of such individuals, while resonating with ancient traditions, “is conceived out of [a] deeply intuitive calling and spiritual need.” (Nasisse qtd. in Mullen 1996, 674)

In an interview with the National Theatre, Hall discusses her inspiration stating, “This [“black people on stage”] is going to be my life's work. I am going to try to put not only myself onstage but, like my ancestors, my mother, my father, and my gods” (National 2011, n.p.). The social justice aspect of her “spiritual need” to excavate the experiences of Black people, especially women, serves to revise and rectify matters of race, class, gender, and sexuality, illuminating the fullest revelations of Black humanity on American and transnational stages.

The spiritual consciousness in *The Blood Quilt* emerges in the tapestries created by the Jernigan women. The idea of textiles as oracles is not without precedent. The Dogon, a tribe of people from the plateau region of Mali, consider woven material as “the spoken word (Joseph

1978, 34).” The process of weaving or sewing cloth is akin to speaking, as the “movement of the shuttle across the warp thread of a loom is likened to breath passing between teeth” (34). Thread and needle piercing cloth is as to “breath passing between teeth,” and what is sewn becomes “the spoken word” (34).

The African American quilting tradition includes a practice of wefting symbolic terminology and secret signs within quilt designs. It is believed (and debated) that such textile codes—prearranged and orally transmitted among enslaved populations and abolitionists—were used to indicate escape routes and safe houses on the Underground Railroad (Benberry 1999, 1). *The Blood Quilt* references this tradition of quilting semiotics through the story of Matilda Jernigan and her lover Sal:

GIO

. . . Our great-great-great grandma Matilda Jernigan made this She caught wind that [Sal] was about to get sold out West . . . She stayed up all night and stitches a top sheet that had a sign embedded in it. Laid this quilt on the clothesline so he could see it. You see this moon. It’s red. *A warning*. And this black mark that looked like a snake? It was a symbol telling him that somebody was out to get him (Hall 2015a, 47)

Building on Mullen’s idea of visionary objects, religious scholar Vincent Wimbush, posits that any inanimate entity can be read or seen as a transmitter of speech. Coined a “signifying scripture,” such an item can include “elevated object[s] [“imbued with “spiritual and metaphysical meaning”] as well as a:

[symbol], ritual, place, person or activity that helps focus attention on issues critical to the human experience: explore where they came from, deal with lack of knowledge or power, address the unknown, [and] manage trauma and pain and the other ongoing challenges of their existence.” (Wimbush 2016, n.p.)

The wisdom of the divine Mothers invoked through Mama’s “work” descends to the family by way of the quilts. Mama’s activism converts these ordinary objects into visionary, oracular textiles which signify on scriptures that offer recourse against the attempt of the tax assessor’s office to take the family home and land, as well as heal the intra- and interpersonal suffering of the Jernigan sisters.

Ìrosù-Òbàrà: The Tax Quilt

Clementine discovers what I call “Tax Quilt” in the aftermath of Mama’s death. Her subsequent request to her younger sister Amber, an entertainment lawyer, to review its obscure contents is the play’s inciting incident and reveals Ìrosù-Òbàrà. This odù carries a message of profound simplicity and holds the key to addressing the dilemma of the Jernigan sisters. The ethical teaching of the oracle is that requisite sacrifice will lead to wealth and contentment. Consequently, the odù speaks directly to the solution proposed by the most pragmatic sister.

Having recently learned that she has inherited all 100 or so Jernigan textiles, Amber says, “I DON’T NEED THE QUILTS. In fact. I don’t *want* them. I think there should be a sacrifice. And I’m willing to be the sacrifice... We can sell the quilts. We can sell the quilts to pay off the tax lien against the house...” (Hall 2015a, 66). Her sisters, most particularly Clementine, fervently disagree, arguing that no monetary gain could supersede the worth of Mama’s quilt, the living embodiment of her àṣẹ. However, the fiscal republican of the sisters, Amber believes that the folk art can be used to broker a deal with the Smithsonian Institute. In the manner of Harriet Powers who sold her “Bible Quilt” because of hard times and others who, during the Depression, paid debts and even church tithes with their textile art (Cooper and Allen 1999, 105), the funds generated from the family collection could resolve the lien and provide the family with a nest egg.

Amber’s sister Cassan, named after a fictional hurricane, Cassandra, whose characterization parallels that of Oya, the òriṣà of transformation, offers the clearest explanation of Redell’s reasoning stating, “Maybe she gave [the quilts] to Amber because she knew she was the only one that would put them to good use” (Hall 2015a, 69). In Oya’s connection to the ancestors (she is the guardian of cemeteries), Cassandra speaks prophetically as Amber’s sacrifice has the power to significantly transform the lives of her siblings and niece. Amber’s Òṣun-like disposition—resourceful, conciliative, and diplomatic—enables her to “hear” the scripture Mama’s quilt signifies upon. As an embodiment of the Òṣun archetype, Amber acts with diplomacy, and urges her sisters to choose logic over emotion in improving their lot. Amber’s role in the family as the “lil bird” (54) affords her an elevated view of the bigger picture. As such, she proposes using common and economic wisdom to re-design their futures.

The economic health of the family is poor. No one sister can contribute to the arrearage, and each of them is already in debt for one reason or another. Clementine, who has inherited the house and has not worked in years, will be homeless. The sisters will have to forgo the tradition of the annual quilting bee in the Jernigan family compound. Amber’s rational and socially harmonious role is truly in line with the message communicated by the textile through Ìrosù-Òbàrà. She reasons that choosing possibility over poverty would be in everyone’s best interest,

her niece Zambia's in particular. Amber tells Cassan, "Look we can hold on to it and be poor or share it with the world for a fee. Either way Zambia gone be inheriting something. Whether you want her inheritance to be poverty or possibility is up to you" (88). As the women contemplate the conundrum of Mama's legacy, this choice becomes the overall motivation that drives the characters through the play.

Hall raises a broader consideration under *Ìrosù-Òbàrà*. What has more value, the ancestral quilts or the home? In Amber's modern mind, Mama's inheritance is a burden and the quilts are an ancient entity. For Clementine, there is no price that can be attached to "the sky, the moon, and all of God's light" (91). Amber's solution to enter the heirlooms into the marketplace of institutional art facilitates the possibilities *Ọṣun* compels her to seek on the family's behalf. In light of *Ìrosù-Òbàrà*, this transaction allows the sisters to maintain the land and preserve the site of cultural memory. John Mbiti affirms that "African peoples are particularly tied to their land . . . the land provides them with the roots of existence, as well as linking them mystically to their departed" (Mbiti 1991, 26). Through Amber, Hall asks us to revisit how African thought is woven throughout the cultural fabric of the New World and its problems.

Dividing *Ìrosù-Òbàrà* into singular interpretations results in *Òbàràméjì* and *Ìrosùméjì*. The first *odù*, *Òbàràméjì*, addresses the inner crises and complications which fuel the dramatic conflict in the play.

***Òbàràméjì*: "Change or decay" . . . deconstructing the knots**

The obstructions and dissonance which characterize *Òbàràméjì* are evident in the secrets or knots which plague the family. *Òbàràméjì* speaks of blockages—temporal, spiritual, financial, and emotional, as well as discord between one's inner and higher self. In *Òbàràméjì* the individual is placing her ego over the well-being of the community. The prescription of the *odù* is, as Clementine suggests to Gio during one of the play's terse moments, to "study yuh head frum" (Hall 2015a, 72). Appeasement of the *orí*—the seat of the soul—will open the crown of the head and restore balance between the inner and higher self. *Òbàràméjì* admonishes the individual to liberate oneself by speaking the truth.

The secrets buried within the fabric of *Blood Quilt* originate with Mama. In addition to the tax notices, she conceals years of correspondence from Cassan's father, and lies about his absence. She also forces Clementine and Gio to suppress the account of Gio's rape by Teak, Amber's father. These knots—sources of conflict within the play—are the blockages of which *Òbàràméjì* speaks. Under the energy of *Òbàràméjì*, *Ògún*, the spirit of iron, chisels away at these impasses. In the play, the quilting bee is his workshop. Before the spiritual restoration of the family as a cohesive unit can begin, the ideas which constrain and divide the sisters must be

removed. Ògún's strength is necessary for the family's self-reflective process, to straighten the crooked stitches of the sisters' inner selves so that intra- and interpersonal harmony can be restored. Ògún's work creates light by hammering away at that which inhibits spiritual evolution. "Change or decay" is necessary (Obafemi 2014, n.p.).

Mama's exclusion of Gio from the will leaves her feeling loathed and hollow as the geode implied by her name. At age fifteen, Gio was raped by Teak, Mama's boyfriend and Amber's father. Clementine, complicit in Gio's emotional knotting, carries the weight of guilt and shares with Amber the difficulty of protecting her sister from Mama's subsequent abuse, a woman who "boxed with God the whole day" (Hall 2015a, 141). In Clementine's view, Mama was God (136B). Because Mama and Gio were like ". . . two tornadoes in an alley . . ." (84), Mama instinctively knew that her decision to deny her an inheritance would catalyze the unraveling of their shared complicated history and force the unraveling of Gio's burden. In her death, she gifts Gio with permission to speak her truth.

Another knot unraveled in Mama's death is the mystery of Cassan's father. Although Cassan inherits her mother's costume jewelry, the real value of her legacy is the knowledge of her birthright—the correspondence buried at the bottom of the box of trinkets. Her father's expressions of love and most importantly his name, a marker of identity and status, are the genuine "family jewels."

The frayed edges of the family quilt further unravel after these revelations as Gio and Cassan threaten to leave the nest before reconciliation and understanding can be achieved. The only thing holding this sisterly cloth of knotted and crooked stitches together is the fact that the ferry has stopped running due to inclement weather. Yet, the three-day period of seclusion provided by the annual quilting bee serves the same purpose as Ògún's self-compulsory isolation after moments of devastation (Fá'lokun 1992a, 10), to unravel the internal knots. The numerous interpersonal conflicts complicate Amber's ability to act within the fullest capacity of Òşun's harmonious diplomacy and find the consensus she desires among her sisters before selling the family heirlooms.

Gio suffers from an Ògún Complex (Green 2015, n.p.). The Ògún Complex is the result of emotional imbalance and/or psychological alienation from the regenerative aspect of one's higher self. When methods of self-correction to restore balance are not imposed, the complex subsequently leads to acts of destruction either to the self or extensions of the self. Rather than utilizing the essence of Ògún in the service of disentangling the knots that would encumber one's spiritual development, the warrior energy is misplaced in temporary gratification or misused for appeasement of suffering. Clementine's Irish twin, Gio is Mama's fraternal sibling in demonstrating Ògún's unbalanced cycle of trauma followed by destructive acts. She redirects her

anger, vindictively striking out on the closest representation of her mother—her sisters. She credits the fathers of Cassan and Amber with ruining Mama and fashioning an abusive woman in his abandonment. Gio begins her undoing by dismissing Cassan’s paternal affinity. The mere presence of the letters from Cassan’s father are another reminder of how motherless and abandoned she feels:

GIO

SHE LEFT ME NOTHING!!!! NOTHING!!!! Nothing but this big black feeling. She hated me. Loathed me, really. Ain’t nothing more pitiful than a woman that ain’t been loved by her own mama. That why I ain’t gone never bring no child into this world. I promised God I’d do Him a favor, and I have refused to bring that kind of hatred into this world. (Hall 2015a, 134-135)

Gio chooses to remain a victim of Mama’s mistakes, denying herself spiritual liberation, and the experience of engaging in one of a woman’s most selfless and empowering acts—childbirth. Clementine, bringing attention to Gio’s refusal to take full ownership of her life experiences, states, “. . . You a grown ass woman . . . and at some point you gotta take responsibility . . . For yo own life. Yo own mistakes. You can’t carry somebody else mistakes into life and call ‘em yo own . . .” (136). This admonishment drives Gio more agitatedly into crisis mode. After turning on Clementine for defending Mama instead of protecting those whom she hurt, “Gio leans into Amber and . . . releases . . . her last verbal knife into the heart of her youngest sister” (138A) with the intent to eviscerate whatever holy memory remained of Mama:

GIO

I told mama what he [Teak] had done to me, but I think she already knew. Perhaps it was a test cause as soon as I got home. She beat me so black and blue, I thought I heard God calling me home . . . She made him leave. Not because she wanted to, but because she had to. When her poet left, all she could do was carve me with her regret.

Amber looks around wildly. Imploding.

AMBER

. . . This is not my mama. My mama would never. Could never. . . [138A-139]

Like Mama Redell before, Gio’s undoing comes at the expense of those closest to her. Gio relinquishes the opportunity to leverage the constructive aspect of Òbàràméjì’s energy and “do the critical analysis [of her own experiences] . . . for the development of her character” (Obafemi 2014, n.p.). Instead, under the heat of Ògún’s workshop, Gio’s ego drives her to lash

out on those around her. Her unwillingness to use the courage Òbàràméjì prescribes and admit that her blockages—unfulfilled career, failed marriage, and substance abuse—are due to her own choices and not those of Mama, expose her emotional imbalance, hence the dissonance between her inner and higher self.

The power and wisdom of the Mothers prevails in *Blood Quilt* despite the friction revealed through Òbàràméjì. The climax and resolution of the play come under the energy of Ìrosùméjì, the third and final odù that pertains to this family.

Ìrosùméjì: “Day Cleaning Time”

Under the presence of Ìrosùméjì, ancestral reverence and caring for children are of utmost importance. The odù discusses the need for peace within the family, particularly between children and their fathers, and concerning domestic inheritances. The odù also speaks of an internal malignancy; something eating away at the individual like a termite feeds on decaying wood. The individual must acquiesce, review past mistakes, and move forward with the intention to do the right thing, whether or not it feels good. Some of the prescriptions of Ìrosùméjì include patience, positive thinking, and sacrifice to overcome any challenges. The odù also calls for an annual family ritual.

Collectively, these contemporary women are the recipients of generations of ancestral narratives archived through oral and cultural practices. The matrifocal stories are cross-cultural, replete with morals, lessons, and depictions of heroic “unruly” women such as Yahaya, the Muslim, and laced with spiritual realism—“Remember yo great great great great grandmama Ada?” Clementine says to Amber, “They say she was soooooo tall could pull stars down from they perch in the sky and stitch them in like threads one by one” (Hall 2015a, 91).

In keeping with the force of the odù, the Jernigan gal quilting bee occurs every first weekend in May, and as the new matriarch center, Clementine continues this tradition in Mama’s absence. At the bee’s conclusion, a ritual washing occurs, and the corners of each quilt are signed in blood drawn by a maternal family heirloom, Ada’s needle. As Yorùbá mythologies credit Ògún with carving the finishing touches into human life forms (Lawal 1996, xvi), the use of one of his tools of creativity, the needle, adds the defining touch on a Jernigan quilt and fuses it with a “life force” (54). Afterwards, the names of their ancestors are invoked through song and the quilt is hung in the home. Before her transition, Mama devised the final pattern she would ever decree for the annual bee, the Blazing Star Quilt. Penned on a sheet of old newspaper “to confuse the devil” (12), the textile Mama’s daughters would fashion from the pattern is purposed to help them “[put] the past behind them [and piece] together a new tomorrow” (156).

Aspects of Ìrosùméjì speak to aesthetics of the Blazing Star Quilt which elevate it as a signifying scripture. In “I ro Osun,” the elision of Ìrosùméjì, the òriṣà Òsun descends from heaven to earth to accompany an individual transitioning through birth. Known as “The Sounding Osun” (Fatunmbi 1992b, 135), this òriṣà is the guardian who protects the orí or “the place where consciousness stores memory (135).” Òsun is also marked on the head of certain initiates through painting concentric circles of red, yellow, indigo, and white on their crown—a signification which was visually indicated through the top sheet of the Blazing Star Quilt in production. Its parallel star pattern mimicked the visual symbol of Òsun.

The bottom sheet of the quilt recalls another spiritual instrument relevant to Ìrosùméjì—Iyerosun, the yellow wood dust used in divination. It is a sand composed of termite residue which diviners use to inscribe text of Ifá. The stage directions of the script indicate that the Blazing Star Quilt has a dark yellow binding (although in the production an indigo backing was used). The incongruence aside, the yellow binding of the Blazing Star Quilt as described in the text, given its similarities to Iyerosun, positions the quilt as a mediatory site for divine transference. Although the indigo backing used in performance underscores the Gullah belief that indigo abates the presence of evil spirits, the water that the blue color evokes is also ceremonially significant in Yorùbá cosmology. Water is the earth’s blood, the plasma of the òriṣà Yemoja, the Mother of the Fishes and grand matron of all Mothers. To bathe in her waters is to metaphorically re-cross the blue river traversed at one’s birth and reconnect with one’s higher self (97). It is Yemoja’s blood likened to Irosun,^[2] the blood that cleanses the womb in preparation for birth. It is the water which spiritually renews the Jernigan women during the play’s climax.

To support this ritual of remembrance, purification, and rebirth, Mama Redell possesses Zambia by inhabiting the Blazing Star Quilt as Clementine drags it down from the sky and drapes it over her niece. The embodiment—a type of Egúngún masking—suggests an intervention of the ancestors to “cleanse the society of disease” (Lawal 1996, 36). The youngest and last of the line, Zambia represents the future of the community. She is Cassan’s daughter by birth, yet the entire community has a responsibility towards Zambia. Despite her initial reluctance, she joins the bee where she takes in cultural lessons far beyond the scope of her tenth grade World History class. As she dances with the ancestors during her possession, Zambia becomes a landscape where spirit, history, and culture converge, and her dance a performance of memory. The “ancient song on [her] modern lips” (Hall 2015a, 146) unlocks the floodgates of ancestral memories for her future retention. When the drama of the domestic inheritance is resolved in the denouement and it is understood that the quilts will be sold to the Smithsonian Museum, Zambia receives the gift of Ada’s needle. Amber declares, “. . . [This] is *your* inheritance. For the next time” (165). Officially initiated into the circle, Zambia is now in

possession of the instrument many Jernigan women before her have used to infuse their quilts with àṣẹ.

While “life force” may be present in the blood, this vital fluid also carries the trauma of previous generations. In *Psychology Today*, Mary Castelloe writes, “Psychic legacies are often passed on through unconscious cues or affective messages that flow between child and adult. Sometimes anxiety falls from one generation to the next through stories told (Castelloe 2012, n.p.)” Zambia remarks, “Niggahs on Kwemera sho’ll got a habit of drowning theyselves” (Hall 2015a, 96). *The Blood Quilt* details the accounts of at least three suicides by drowning—Yahaya, Matilda and Sal—and an almost fourth, Gio:

GIO

They say drowning is a sweet suffocation

Gio steps closer to the shores.

GIO

That you struggle at first but then you find so much peace. Peace...

ZAMBIA

Peace is not found. Peace is brokered.

Gio looks at Zambia. All impressed-like.

GIO

What you said. (Hall 2015a, 94-95)

Nicknamed “Lil’ Iyanla” (80), Zambia hugs her auntie, and talks her off the edge in this uncertain moment. However, her personal tapestry is shaped by a fabric as intricate as the women who precede her. At times wise beyond her years, she vacillates between Ìwà Pèlẹ́ (gentle character) and “acting out” (7). She is ọmọ Ọya, child of the òriṣà of change and transformation. Despite her recreational drug use, school struggles, and paternal abandonment issues, her sense of freedom and weariness with the limited perspectives of others make her more susceptible to change and transformation, and the least “afraid to reach for the stars” (87). As the only child of the family, she is predisposed by default to “carry and communicate the grief of [her] predecessors” (Castelloe 2012, n.p.). Her internal balance and healing under the influence of Ìrosùmẹ̀jì is crucial. Possessed by her grandmother, draped in the Blazing Star Quilt with its multi-colored fabric evoking Ọya’s skirt, Zambia dances in the wind and becomes the pivot—the ending of what no longer served the family and the beginning of something new.

Holding tight to the corners of the Blazing Star Quilt, they leave the house under Clementine's direction and immerse themselves in the blue blood of Yemoja. It is at this time that Redell beseeches her daughters to get the lesson and become their own she-roes. "Mistakes," Zambia says, "can be good. They done led [us] here. To this now" (Hall 2015, 128). They let go of the textile signifying on the rebirth and transformation that comes from ripping Oya's cloth. Gio is the last to surrender, and she does so reluctantly. All eventually submit to the will of their mother (and The Mothers) however, and relinquish their personal grievances. The Great Mother liberates them from their emotional impasses and Redell "dances on home" (155) to her final rest. Under the midnight moonlight, the Jernigan women make the necessary sacrifice, and come to understand that not only peace, but reconciliation and possibility are also brokered, not found (94).

The play concludes on Sunday, Ojó Àìkú, a day characterized by long life and tranquility, ascension, immortality, and settling disputes (Neimark 1993, 50). Under the energy of Ìrosùméjì, "day cleaning time" (Hall 2015a, 140) has arrived. Clementine, more susceptible to change, leaves Kwemera to stay with her boyfriend for a while on the mainland. In contributing Mama's favorite yellow dress to the quilting bee (a dress Mama wished to be buried in three weeks prior), Clementine makes peace with her mother's passing. Gio releases "the scratches, hits, and wrong mistakes," (161) lest she be consumed by the same physical cancer that plagued Mama until her death. The end of the play finds her with a coffee cup and not a beer in her hand. Although Cassan's metamorphosis is not expressed as clear in the text as that of her sisters, she will ostensibly, with the assistance of Oya, make a radical change and be more selfish for her own good. Within the boundaries she makes clear—the stability that she wishes to provide for Zambia through her marriage. She does so by working the winds she's been traveling in following her husband to create more space in her life for her personal needs.

Amber, "small, good, silent, and smart" (71), who "never lost control" and "never [made] mistakes" (127); Amber, who became overzealous in her sexual life and contracted HIV (through unprotected sex); Amber, who flew home with "broken wings" (91) and a broken-heart in search of a healing, loses the Brazilian weave, the make-up, and the Louboutin shoes. Previously "overscheduled, overworked, overtired" and operating at the edges of herself (33), Amber remains in the land of her ancestors for a while, standing on the water's edge. The play's closing tableaux finds her burying knots into a new quilt that she and Gio create together from the only piece not sold to the Smithsonian—Ada's Block. It is the centerpiece of a quilt dissected through the dislocation of Ada's children sold into slavery all throughout the south. Each of them were given a block of the textile with which to "keep warm until [they returned home]" (48). Renewed and determined to cease transporting their trauma into the future (Castelloe 2012, n.p.), Amber and Gio use the remnant to weave a new beginning built on their individual mistakes and collective ancestral past.

Though the Jernigan family home and land are under threat of the mainland's attempt to recolonize the island of Kwemera, Hall, through Mama Redell's spiritual activism, thwarts such dominance and becomes a literary diviner. It is within the play's materiality—the blood quilt[s]—that Hall reveals the forces at play in the lives of the Jernigan women and brings forth the guidance of the Mothers. The quilts also become the catalyst by which the Jernigan sisters are renewed and the home is maintained, as well as the sacrifice which affords the family a future full of possibilities.

Implications

It is the Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure of *The Blood Quilt*, informed by the Odù Ifá and other Yorùbá spiritual practices and aesthetics, which make it a fascinating site of dramaturgical investigation. The metaphysical meanings mined from interpretations of each odù divined within the textiles of *The Blood Quilt* contain the substance of everything situated between the inception and catharsis in the play. Discussing *The Blood Quilt* through the lens of its Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure offers an approach to dramatic analysis which challenges western epistemologies of textual production and analysis. An investigation of the play, instructive or otherwise, does not have to begin with Aristotelian terminology (i.e. exposition, inciting incident, conflict, crisis, climax, and resolution) but, rather, a consideration of the “primeval spirit” (Harrison 2002, 6) that shapes artistic expression. While justifiably privileging Yorùbá orality in this survey, an ethnocultural dramatic paradigm established on indigenous orature, contests the primacy of theatre and theory in literary form. Consequently, the Odù Ifá, a system of understanding which reflects the engagement of the cosmos with the drama of the human condition, is THE beginning, the WORD, the utterance which informs *The Blood Quilt*—the play, its dramatic structure, and the materiality within the text.

This investigation demonstrates the need for cultural competency and diasporic literacy, as they are the tools by which “mythologies, cosmologies, social organizations, rituals, sacred systems [and] synergistic relationships in languages” (Harrison 1972, 77) can be illuminated. Furthermore, this analysis argues that recognizing, understanding, and manipulating the “primeval spirit” which underlies the play offers a methodological approach to play production. For example, the Arena Stage production extended Hall's use of Yorùbá-based aesthetics within the text to the costume design and set. Dede Ayite's costume design included color palettes of the Òrìṣà for each Jernigan sister and Michael Carnahan's environmental architecture evoked an Egúngún shrine in its memorialization of the Jernigan family history. In the manner of a traditional Egúngún masquerade, generations of patchwork quilts fashioned with items belonging to their ancestors and fused with blood signatures of their foremothers, encompassing and veiling their àṣẹ, adorned the space.

The art of and power within *The Blood Quilt* lie behind the veil of its realistic attributes, which arguably bears similarities to other narratives such as Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, and Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*. However, the distinction, art, and power of Hall's work is in the symbolic meaning of its Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure which codifies a specific cultural, ethical and sacred code within the Black experience, the Odù Ifá. Her instinctive marooning of Western dramaturgy through the use of African sacred orature, supports an aesthetic tradition within Black Theatre and the ways in which the blood does indeed remember.

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[1] Èjìogbè manifests in "Mama's favorite quilt" (Hall 2015, 90). Clementine explains to Amber that the quilt was constructed with 4,267 pieces and threaded with stars Ada pulled from the sky. Even within the magical realism of this narrative (the quilt shines, moves and talks), when 4,267 is reduced to a whole number, one, it has a parallel odù signification in Èjìogbè. This odù is characterized by light, spiritual awakenings, peace, balance, long life with good health. In its contrary state, Èjìogbè notes reckless behavior due to sightlessness and the need for wisdom and

good judgment to overcome the effect of the force. This *odù* speaks directly to Amber's given circumstances discussed in *Ìrosùméjì*.

[2] *Irosun* translates to blood and is also known as Red Camwood Powder, a spiritual catalyst for cleansing and healing.

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