

Narrating Tarell Alvin McCraney's *The Brother/Sister Plays*

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Abstract

The Brother/Sister Plays is a trilogy written by the Afro-American playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney. The book includes three plays written in separate (*In The Red and Brown Water*, *The Brothers Size*, *Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet*). They can be read and acted either separately or collectively like many other trilogies. But unlike most plays, *The Brother / Sister Plays* bear a lot of narrative levels that relate them safely to the art of narratology. Although it is not widely accepted as a narrative form, drama lies at the core of narratological studies. Depending on the different definitions and degrees of narrativity, writers such as Manfred Jahn, Monika Fludernik, Seymour Chatman, Ansgar Nunning and Roy Sommer, to mention few examples, try to apply narrative elements to drama. Their steps towards a narratology of drama are three. First, they state the common literary devices used in both drama and novel (theme, plot, sub-plot, characters, conflict,

suspense, poetic justice, ending and closure). Second, they identify pure narrative or diegetic features that linger in drama (narrative agent, storytelling and point of view). Third, they clarify that even mimetic features that are totally dramatic (stage directions and metadramatic elements) can be studied as narrative. The present paper attempts to re-read *The Brother/Sister Plays* from a narratological perspective, selecting four narrative/dramatic elements – narrator, storytelling, stage directions and metadrama – to achieve two goals. First, that the mixture of narration and performance empowers both telling and theatricality and changes the purpose of narration and performance from mere entertainment and fascination to tackling serious issues. Second, the fusion of narrative techniques into dramatic actions helps the playwright dramatize the untold stories of West African Cosmology, involving the audience in all cases.

Keywords: Diegesis, mimesis, narratology

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Lacking the narrative persona, drama was seen by critics as a non-narrative form. Recently however, this proposition has been questioned by many critics such as Seymour Chatman, Manfred Jahn, Monika Fludernik, Ansgar Nunning and Roy Sommer, and many others. The aforementioned critics adopt a transgeneric approach to drama considering it as an art of narratology. They moreover contend that all elements in the dramatic text such as the plot, characters, setting, stories, space, and stage directions are considered narrative. They also regard drama as both narrative and theatrical genre because "plays do not just represent narratives (i.e. a series of events), they also stage narratives in that, more often than not, they make storytelling, i.e. the act of telling narratives, theatrical." (Nunning and Sommer 337). To theorize the narrativity of drama, these critics list the common literary elements of both drama and novel. Then, they argue for the narrativity of drama on the five grounds as stated below by Monika Fludernik. Finally, they maintain that even pure dramatic elements like stage directions and metadramatic features (prologue, monologue, epilogue, songs, dreams, direct address to the audience, etc.) can be considered narrative.

Concerning common features of narration and drama, Seymour Chatman, in his book *Coming to Terms*, states:

To me, any text that presents a story – a sequence of events performed or experienced by

characters – is first of all a narrative. Plays and novels share the common features of a chrono-logic of events, a set of characters, and a setting. Therefore, at a fundamental level they are all stories. The fact that one kind of story is told (diegesis) and the other shown (mimesis) is secondary (117).

To the same effect, Ansgar Nunning and Roy Sommer add, "Key terms and core concepts like scene, character, protagonist, antagonist, dramatic irony, suspense, comic relief, point of view, perspective structure, monologue, dialogue, exposition, sub plot, poetic justice, ending, and closure, to name but a few, are used in the analysis of both novels and plays" (338). Monika Fludernik stresses the point that both drama and novel are narrative forms, but in a different sense. "What I find much more interesting [...] is the way in which drama and novels can be shown to have adopted each other's techniques. In my view, this argues potently for the basic exchangeability of dramatic and narrative strategies in works of art having narrativity...Readers attribute narrativity to both plays and novels in comparable processes of aesthetic appreciation" (366-7).

The narrativity of drama, even the narrativity of totally dramatic techniques such as stage directions and metadrama, is also justified by several critics. In her article, "Narrative and Drama", Monika

Fludernik summarizes the corner stones of narrativity in drama. She distinguishes between five categories of narrative elements in drama:

- (a) elements that relate to drama 's narrativity, i.e. the existence of a fictional world, of characters, of plot; (b) elements in the fictional world of the play that relate to narration –messenger reports, characters telling one another stories; (c) elements in plays that introduce a narrator figure or narratorial frame into the play; (d) elements of plays that display a meditational function, such as prologues and epilogues or ,if one looks at the dramatic text, stage directions; as well as (e) metadramatic features... (367).

For purposes of scope and scale, only four elements from Monika's above quotation will be studied as most applicable to *The Brother /Sister Plays*. These elements are; the narrator, metadrama, stage directions and storytelling. Regarding the presence of a narrator in drama, Seymour Chatman states in different positions in his book, *Story and Discourse*, that the presence of a narrative agent is not a must in neither novels nor dramas; even some novels do not employ a narrator. It is up to the author himself to use it or not. Narration mainly involves a telling through time which can be achieved without the need of a narrator. Chatman adds that even if there is a narrator, it is not necessary for him/her to speak or have a voice at all. The narrator, thus, can be either "overt" or "covert". Chatman also adds that the importance of

the narrator depends more on his/her function than his/her physical presence.

To the same effect, both Manfred Jahn and Monika Fludernik define the narrator and its function. Manfred Jahn defines the narrator as the person "who manages the exposition, who decides what is to be told, how it is to be told...and what is to be left out. Of course, this is not to deny that a narrator will often overtly speak or write, establish communicative contact with addressees, defend the tellability of the story and comment on its lesson, purpose, or message" (670). A vivid example is Puck, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who ends the play with an epilogue summarizing, commenting, asking the audience about their opinions and promising them with better performances. Drawing on the function of the narrator in drama, Monika Fludernik comments: "Plays may introduce a narrator persona on stage who functions as a homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator figure". Monika illustrates that the homodiegetic narrator can take the function of the Greek chorus such as plot summary, action commentary and direct address to the audience. By addressing the audience, the narrator creates an ideal addressee and enables the audience "to see the actors as real people (367-8). Discussing the diegetic narrative elements in drama, both Ansgar Nunning and Roy Sommer add:

Functional characters and the representation of sequences of events are by no means the only regular elements of drama which can be classified as narrative...The latter include various forms of metalepsis...direct audience address by a narrator character,

prologue, epilogue, asides, soliloquies, and parabasis... verbal summaries of offstage action, the play within the play, mise en abyme, narratives embedded within dramatic action, all kinds of metanarrative comment, stage directions... (340-1).

Stage directions are crucial when discussing the narrativity of drama. Manfred Jahn insists that any dramatic text is a narrative one from the very beginning. "A play's text must be read and understood as a piece of narrative fiction before it may be used as (and possibly turns to) a recipe for performance containing "instructions" by the playwright"(672). Structurally, as Chatman states in his book, *Coming to Terms* "there is no difference between a sentence in a novel like "John left the room" and the playwright's instruction to an actor to exit, stage left" (118). Stage directions are, in their own turn, narrative pieces told on stage. Reading stage directions create another level of narration, "it can also be analyzed as the author's 'narration' that is to be realized in performance thanks to the medial narration effected by actors, director, costume designer, and so on" (Fludernik 363). Supporting this view, Claycomb states "the dramatic text is not only the story narrative we read in it; it is also a frame narrative that narrates its instructions for representation"(161).

In drama, narrativity has many levels. One of them is the storytelling, which is considered the main feature of McCraney's theatre. It is called intradiegetic level, as stated by Ansgar Nunning and Roy Sommer." The stories told by characters in both novels and plays represent intradiegetic narratives which can feature a

high degree of what we have called diegetic narrativity"(339). This is the core of the narrativity of drama-how to use theatre as a means of telling stories or how far drama is a narrative form on the ground of storytelling. In his book, *Coming to Terms*, Seymour Chatman speaks about drama and novel saying that "at a fundamental level they are all stories"(117). Ansgar Nunning and Roy Sommer state that: "The history of drama is also a history of representing narratives and communicating them to live audiences"(332). They add

Storytelling played a central role both in classical drama and in the medieval mystery plays... Long before the emergence of the novel as the dominant narrative genre, narrative experiments were a central feature of stage plays... More recently, both the emergence of narrative stage genres such as the memory plays and the continuing development of narrative visual media... have focused attention on drama as a medium for fictional storytelling (335-6).

Storytelling is, time and again, the focus of Tarell Alvin McCraney's theatre. His theatre, which can be easily described as a "story theatre," depends more on the idea of telling and narrating stories than performing them. Written as a trilogy- a device which is more common in novels than drama- the plays draw its fascination from both the continuity and diversity of stories rather than conflicts and interactions among characters. In the following section of the paper, the researcher attempts to show how the elements of the narrator, metadrama, stage

directions and storytelling are woven softly together like a plait in order to add a sense of narrativity to McCraney's plays.

Another level of narrativity in drama is the extradiegetic level, best represented in metadramatic epilogues and prologues. The characteristics of the narrator – as discussed by the transgeneric critics – can all be applied to the characters in *The Brother /Sister Plays* who both enact and comment on the story. Commentaries on stories are best expressed through prologues and epilogues – as their main function in drama. The point here is that these prologues and epilogues are considered, from the transgeneric approach, as narrative sections because they tell stories. "Prologues and choric narrations would be typical examples of extradiegetic narratives" (Nunning and Sommer 339). Both the prologue and the epilogue are the most remarkable elements of metadrama used in this trilogy. The three plays open with a prologue (song, dream, speech, etc.), paving the way for and summarizing the actions of the play. By the same token, the three plays end with an epilogue concluding the end of the play and giving more future insights.

Before moving to the application, a summary of the aforementioned theoretical section should be provided. At the end of his article, "Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama", Manfred Jahn concludes that:

Plays have a narrative world (a "diegesis"), which is not distinct in principle from any other narrative world. They have a story and a plot, and even if they do not literally "tell" their story, tellability and experientiality are dramatic criteria as well as epic

ones...The playscript itself can no longer be treated as a past or future projection of a theatrical performance; rather, it must be accepted as a "readable" "medium sui generis" (674-5).

In a word, narrativity of drama, as it will be discussed in this paper, is a square-like structure built on four corners-storytelling, a narrator, stage directions and metadramatic elements. When discussing these corners, the narrativity of the plays under study will be clearly recognized.

To begin with metadrama, McCraney makes a great use of prologue, epilogue, monologue and direct address to the audience all over the trilogy. In *The Red and Brown Water*, both the prologue and the epilogue use the same words which introduce and conclude Oya's tragic end. "The men all begin to hum, sad sweet hum,...Oya is left center stage...holds her head...sharp breath out...Oya in the air...that girl...sweet smiling...Oya in the air...sad in the eyes...that's what they say...that's what I know...beautiful girl" (McCraney 11-14). The epilogue, beside repeating the same words of the prologue, as a kind of unity, laments Oya's death. "Say she cuts it off. Say that's her mark. Say he left her there bleeding...she was not crazy. Just sad...on her back like a lake of brown...look like she floating somewhere...sweet sad Oya" (McCraney 126-9).

The prologue in *The Brothers Size* starts with an opening song: "The light come up on the three men standing onstage. This is the opening invocation and should be repeated for as long as needed to complete the ritual". During the song, the three characters- Ogun, Oshoosi

and Elegba, keep on repeating the same lines: "The road is rough...This road is rough and...It's rough and hard"(McCraney 137-8). The prologue sheds light on the rough and hard road of work, freedom and prison taken by Ogun, Oshoosi and Elegba, respectively. Instead of ending this play with an epilogue like the other two plays of the trilogy, McCraney ends it with a dramatic monologue. It is one of the longest monologues in the trilogy. Ogun Size, stands, as usual, giving his younger brother, Oshoosi, some warm-hearted pieces of advice in the following monologue. Besides, he gives him all his money in order to escape from the police and to search for his freedom anywhere else. This monologue, which goes for twenty-seven lines, reflects time and again the play's main concern - brothers bond:

Don't come back.
 Don't call here.
 Don't write...
 When the Law comes here for you...
 I'm going to deny you...
 Don't cry when you hear about it...
 Don't think I don't know you...
 Don't believe it...Hear me...
 You here with me...
 Always...
 But you gotta go fore you get caught..."
 (McCraney 237).

Ogun Size ends the second play only to appear at the beginning of the third, as a part of its prologue. Part three, *Marcus* or *The Secret of Sweet* employs a different device as a prologue – a dream. This play is regarded by most critics as a dream play. The play starts with, "A dream. The lights come upon Marcus in his bed sleeping and Oshoosi standing in a pool of water crying gently at first until he covers

his mouth doubles over and...". After his mother awakes him, Marcus' dream is followed by a processional: "*The cast forms a funeral processional led by Ogun Size and trailed by Marcus*"(McCraney 247-8). The prologue, thus, sheds light on the main theme of the play- Marcus' homosexuality as reflected both in his dreams and the death of all male characters, lamented by Ogun- the hero of the trilogy. The epilogue ends the play and the trilogy with Marcus telling Ogun about his dreams, which are interpreted this time as a sign of Oshoosi's death. The play ends as it begins with "Ogun Size marches a funeral processional by himself" (McCraney 361).

In addition to using the prologue and epilogue, McCraney uses another metadramatic /narrative device on stage – direct address to the audience. In *The Brother/ Sister Plays*, the playwright makes his characters address the audience directly reading their own stage directions. Most playwrights use framing devices to mark the stage directions off the text whether by using italics, brackets, bold letters or whatever. Tarell Alvin McCraney inserts his stage directions instructions within the text without any framing devices making the actors read them as part of their speech. The first play, for example, opens with these lines:

Mama Moja. Mama Moja enters the space...Where are you going Oya?

Oya. Gotta go. Track meet.

Mama Moja. No.

Oya . No?

Mama Moja. Moja looks at Oya like, "What I say"? What I say? (McCraney 15).

By the same token, the three plays all read in the same way in which characters

narrate their script." What makes this play narratologically interesting is that it also stages two narrative voices" (Dillen 79) – the voice of the character and the voice of the author himself commenting on the characters' actions and behavior. McCraney always repeats the same comment all over the trilogy. "How could he / [she] not?" Narrating stage directions serves another function in some cases where "the narrator of the stage directions characterizes the behavior of characters in evaluative terms..., often in a manner that cannot be represented on stage"(Fludernik 372). Examples are dreams, sex acts and Down Law behavior, among many others.

Characters' reading their own stage directions has two functions. The first is to achieve what McCraney himself calls "The call and response", which, for him, is the most performative device. David Rooney supports this:

In a device used throughout the trilogy, the characters speak their stage directions, tapping into a tradition of oral storytelling while feeding the rapport between actors and audience, which at times borders on call-and-response. During the performance of *Marcus* on the first marathon press day, when a character asked, "Do you see this coming? A whole clump of audience members answered "Mmhmm"(no.p.).

Part of the audience's response is to imagine whatever described on stage and believe what is being told to them. In an interview with McCarter Theatre Center, McCraney declares:" But above all the story is a story and we should not forget

that it is being told to us by talented artists who want us to feel for the characters and remember that we have all been to this place that they are evoking" ("The Brother/Sister Plays" 5)

Evoking the place is crucial in this trilogy where the place – San Pere is totally fictional. Here, the audience's role is great for they have to imagine and complete the visual picture, as Keir Elam calls it "virtual space"(67). When asked about San Pere, McCraney says, "It's like when they asked Alice Walker where the tribe she wrote for *The Color Purple* was:"There is none. I made it up. That world can only come alive onstage. It is what you make of it in that moment. If there are hills in San Pere [as there are in *The Brothers Size*], that's because you said so and not because there's some geographical [reason]"(Brodersen 38).

This setting forms a fourth level of narration or as Monika Fludernik calls it the 'discourse' level:

The main questions regarding the narratological analysis of drama ...touch instead on the level of what I call the 'discourse' level of drama...In drama, as in film, the setting is a visual 'given' and thus need not be evoked by means of description...It is therefore not necessary to treat the lack of 'description' for settings, or the replacement of description by visual depiction, as an aspect of drama's irremediable alterity (Fludernik 361).

This means that description (if there is any) adds to the narrativity of drama. Drama is mainly performative in that the audience sees everything on stage and

need not to be told. Yet; the dramatic text contains many passages of descriptions of both setting and characters as hints for stage directions. In some cases, description is a must where it is not possible to present the whole setting on stage like, for example, the wall in Edward Bond's *Lear*, or the sea in Henric Ibsen *The Lady from the Sea*. So, writers and directors depend on scenic metonymy where few devices are used to refer to the setting, besides description. In other plays, description and narration are used only instead of actions when there is no need of performance. The most remarkable example is Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*- a vivid example of using complete narrative sections in drama. The end of the play is narrated, as the playwright means: "The rest of the story need not be shown in action..."(Shaw 72).

Back to stage directions, another reason for using spoken stage directions is to create some sort of bond and community between the audience and the actors. To such effect, McCraney adds:

In *The Brother/Sister Plays*, I have tried through language, content and format, to invigorate the communal portion of the plays. The actors speak stage directions that invite the audience to remember that they are in a theatre and that the story that is being told is for them and to feel free to call and respond back. Truly, in a world where stories are told in many beautiful and spectacular ways, the live theatre still has the powerful construct of communal belief, community" (Brodersen 18).

Believing in the immediate impact of theatre, McCraney conveys his message relying on the power of the theatre. His main purpose is to tell untold West African stories to great masses of people to involve them more in what is being narrated. The author himself comments on employing such device saying:

It is a great practice of mine. The actors never forget that they are actors always, creating theatre, telling stories for an audience, and that they themselves must become their most vulnerable in order to become that character. Then we the audience will see them at their core and begin to watch them move in these extraordinary and sometimes foreign circumstances but understand and relate to them. (Brodersen 19)

To convey the sense of theatricality through telling stories, McCraney depends on the richness and power of telling. He uses theatre as a means of remembrance through driving stories from West African cosmology, full of rituals, spirits, Gods, contradictions, symbols, among many others. *The Brother/Sister Plays* is a telling through time. It covers the events of two or three generations, linked together by history and relationships. This what makes drama narrative, "Drama is narrative because there exists a 'dramatic composition device' that regulates anachronies, selection and juxtaposition of scenes..."(Fludernik 359). The beautiful Oya in part one, *In The Red and Brown Water* is Ogun's dead lover in part two, *The Brothers Size*. The naughty little boy, Elegba in part one is Oshossi's best friend in part two and Marcus' father in part

three, *Marcus* or *The Secret of Sweet*. Shang's unborn baby in part one is the heroine Osha of the third.

The presence of characters telling stories on stage is enough to account for the narrativity of drama. "All drama, in fact, needs to have characters on stage, and from this minimal requirement narrativity is immediately assured"(Fludernik 360). McCraney has peopled his stage with more than sixteen characters; each tells his / her story. The stories told in McCraney's trilogy are all driven from Western African cosmology, as he himself states:

I lived in the other America; the America that doesn't always get depicted in the cinema. The America that we are told to pretend isn't there. And in an attempt to create theatre that told untold stories, that gave voice to another half of America, I created *The Brother/Sister Plays*...I began to investigate how to use ancient myths, stories, to tell urban ones. I found that the stories are all still there (Brodersen 18-19).

These Yoruba stories rest on a triangle of three corners- symbols, dreams and images. Symbols cover a wide range of colors, places, names, among many others. From its title, the first play, *In the Red and Brown Water*, is full of symbols. "The color red for many Yoruba represents the supreme presence of color... [which] has a direct relationship to the Yoruba goddess OShun (or Osun), one of the wives of the powerful thunder god Shang, who when she died fell to the river and became the divinity of the rivers", as Harry Elam remarks (187). The red color refers also to

Oya's end when she cuts off her ear and gives it to Shang as a remembrance of her love, "Oya enters. Holding her hand to her head... Oya bleeds down her right hand" (McCraney 123-4) The same color echoes Elegba's dream about Oya's bleeding and floating in a pool.

The colors red and brown referred to in the title of the play reflect McCraney's fascination with the bayou, "The two portions of the earth meet in the Gulf of Mexico, and that gulf is a rich and fecund place. It's got old nasty stories about conquistadors and pirates, and French and Spanish and African blood mixed there to make this incredible hodgepodge. When you go to the bayou, it's this sort of reddish-brown water "(Rubin 8). Generally, as David Rooney states: "images of water run in a lyrical vein through the interconnected plays, which draw on West African myth to tell down home stories rich in cultural specificity, salty humor and portentous dreams"(no.p.).

This mixture of water and dreams lingers deeply in the trilogy. *In The Red and Brown Water*. Elegba visits Mama Moja to beg some candy or some money to buy candy. When Mama Moja refuses to give him any, he stays to tell her his dreams:

It's always about the water, my dream. Near it or around it. Sometimes I stand in the high tide and I can't breathe but I can breathe. And I walk on the bottom on the floor of the water and they's these people walk alongside me but they all bones and they click the bone people...top of water is Oya...Oya girl floating on top

of the water...but from her legs
 blood coming down and it's
 making the pond red...brown
 skin in the red water...And I
 wake up sweating on my face
 wet. Low down, like that water,
 between my legs, wet...
 (McCraney 22-4).

The power of telling speaks for itself here. The use of vivid images of water, colors and bones involve the audience in both the narrative and the description and arouse their suspense and anxiety to listen to what Moja is going to say next. Elegba himself knows that these dreams are meant to be messages, but he does not understand them, "I dream with messages I can't read yet...Need some help with. I know they messages, just don't know who they to, where they from, how to get them there" (McCraney 22).

When asked about the interpretations of these dreams, Mama Moja replies that both Oya and Elegba become mature enough, but she gets sure of Oya's tragic end. The dream also refers to Elegba's homosexuality (as referred to in the Down Low) –something that will be inherited by his son Marcus in part three. Elegba does give his baby the name Marc because both of them have the same black line of little black marks on their right thigh, as he tells Oya, "Same marks. The ones like nobody ever seen. Right here on me and my baby. You ever know something yours"(McCraney, 101). Later on, at the same scene, Oya reflects sadly upon having no babies, "I want my own mark. I wanna look down and see myself mirrored back to me"(105). Marcus is upset with the people calling him 'sweet'. He asks his friend Shaunta Iyun about its meaning. Shaunta answers:

They passed it down to us...Passed down from slavery, say the slave owners get pissed if they find out they slaves got gay love. That means less children; less slaves... Imagine it: how they got "down" back then? Round here niggas think they got it hard on the "down low"...Master tie and tether the lovers in front of e'rybody... when the wounds right he run down get some sugar.Prolly pour it on so it sting not as bad as salt but it get sticky. Melt in the singing Southern sun. Sweetness draw all the bugs and infection to the sores...Sweetness harder to wash (McCraney 257-8).

Storytelling gains another function here-telling about black people, generally. McCraney himself states that he writes such narratives because of the lack of "stories about men of color, especially poor men of color, that have to do with intimate relationships"(Rubin 7).

A vivid example of intimate relationships about black people is that one taking place between Oya and Shango. Despite being both blacks, Shango always reminds Oya of her dark skin. In one situation, he teases her saying, "I like you most of the time ...Cept you be acting all dark – skinned" (McCraney 46). In another situation, he addresses her saying:

Shango. I rarely look at dark girls like that, but you black and phyne. So I couldn't help it.

Oya . Huh?

Shango. Nah don't get all like that. Why dark women always got to get mad so quick?

Oya. We can't change color, like the yellow girls when they blush. So we get mad quick so you can see it in our face (McCraney 33-4).

The narration prepares the audience for Oya's tragic end. Shango will leave her at the end of the play for the sake of the fair Shun who will give birth to his daughter, Osha, the heroine of *Marcus*. The use of white and black colors, here, alludes time and again to McCraney's concern with the issues of blacks. By giving such examples, McCraney crystalizes that discrimination becomes no longer a persistent issue between the whites and the blacks, but among the black people themselves. Both Shango and Oya are black lovers, but Shango will marry the fair Shun preferring her to the black Oya.

For sorrow, Oya's love for Shangoo blinds her to the deeper and more true love of Ogun. Ogun tries time and again to draw her attention, but in vain. He once tells her about the difference between him and Shangoo:

He just a nasty old man been looking at you since you was a little girl. But I been loving you always. I been in love with your light and your sad eyes. And I got this home inside me I know I do...My outside seem like it's fragile but in here a big man that will wrap you in love, Oya. You come home with Ogun. Just come home. You let me take care of you for a while. I'll make it all right. I'll make it okay (McCraney 71).

Besides intimate relationships of the black people, McCraney tells stories about their suffering, especially with regard to the law. The three characters in *The Brothers Size* have recalled the bad treatment of the police man:

Oshoosi Size. Anytime he sees another black man in Town he acts like he got to chase him out.

Elegba: Sheriff act like he the only nigga can be seen in the town.

Oshoosi Size: He ask you questions too Og?

Ogun Size: Man you know he treat everybody like We guilty till proven innocent.

Elegba: Cept them white folks (McCraney 186-7).

For the same reasons, Oba is worried about her son, Marcus. She rebukes and warns him: "Shut up! Sitting round here walking the streets like your daddy! You wanna know about your daddy he used to walk around too and look what happened to him. Dead and in the ground. You want that do you?" (McCraney 314). Oba's orders to her son not to search for his dead father, "I don't know what all the Sudden got you on this search to find out your father...Some things are better buried. Some things left better Unsaid...Pick your face up off the floor, baby, and let's go" (McCraney 263), reminds the audience with Gertrude's words to Hamlet, "Good Hamlet, cast thy knighted colour off. And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. Do not for ever with thy veiled lids seek for thy noble father in the dust"(Shakespeare 21). Such similarity serves McCraney's notion of theatre as remembrance- that actors are telling

stories all the time realizing that they are in a theatre space.

Marcus opens with a dream where "*Oshoosi* Size standing in a pool of water crying gently at first until he covers his mouth, doubles over, and..."(McCraney, 247). *Oshoosi's* crying represents his sadness and regret about leaving his elder brother, *Ogun*. On a wider sense, the dream foresees *Oshoosi's* death. *Marcus'* other dreams are also about water. His repeated dream is about someone who always speaks to him in the rain, but he does not understand him. "The presence of water in [*Marcus'*] vision symbolically binds [him] to the importance of water as a regenerative force within African and African American rituals of conversion", Harry Elam states (189). When *Marcus* asks old *Elegua* for an interpretation of his dreams, she answers him that he resembles his dead father in having dreams that always come true. The man who is calling him is his father and the rain is a coming storm.

Stormy dreams about his father, homosexuality and love of water shatter *Marcus'* being. In a very sad dramatic monologue that runs for fifty-four lines, *Marcus* stands addressing the audience about his torturous dreams, "It's nice out here, you think? The Bayou. Maybe it's magic out here. I always thought so...Magic. "Secret of sight". More like the...more like the secret of sweet...And those who keep talking bout me saying things to me Man even my own dreams won't let me...these the times You wish for a daddy..." (McCraney 299). *Marcus* runs for *Elegua*, as *Macbeth* does with the witches, to tell him more about the future, but *Elegua* has left to avoid the coming storm, as *Ogun* tells him. *Marcus* tells *Ogun* about his new frightening dream: "In

this dream is your brother, *Ogun*...And he tell me to say, remind you, ask my brother...Ask my brother *Ogun*" (McCraney 359). The dream means *Oshoosi's* death because these words are the same farewell words uttered earlier by *Ogun* when seeing his brother off.

Narratologically, dreams serve as the play's mediation which is "presented in the "the reflector mode" rather than in the "teller mode": instead of being explicitly told by a narrator character, the play's story is offered from the reflector character's perspective"(Dillen 74). The dreamer, here, is a generative narrator since his subconscious that generates the actions of the play. This is a sixth level of narration, that of the space. In such scenes where there are visions, ghosts of the dead or memories, the author employs a dual space where the two worlds exist together on stage - reality and fantasy (Dillen 81).

The dreams interpreted by *Moja*, *Elegua* and *Ogun*, are viewed from African folktales. When *Marcus* asks about different subjects - his father, sexuality, dreams, etc., he is always answered that it is "Folks before your time" (McCraney 294). These folks are transferred and respected over generations. African folks believe that the dead always tell the truth. All *Marcus'* dreams about the dead *Oshoosi* come true, especially that of the storm which is said to evoke *Katrina* Hurricanes (Brodersen 39). Another example is *Ogun's* dead mother who has appeared looking at both her sons and the water. Aunt *Elegua* tells *Ogun*, "Your mama would have been disappointed in you ...Letting your brother go like that. *Yemoja* would have hated you failing her *Ogun*"(McCraney 214). All over his narration, McCraney uses the verb "say" time and again, not only for telling, but

also for ensuring the importance of what is being told orally. Most folks revolve around family reunion, respect and love. At the very beginning of the trilogy, Mama Moja rebukes Lil.Legba about calling her aloud, "What I told you about hollering fa me huh? Screaming my name like that!"(McCraney 19). Near the very end of the trilogy, when Marcus once interrupts old Elegua, she tells him, "I know Osha raised you better than to keep cutting off elders"(269).

Storytelling is used, thus, to weave oral traditions on stage. These traditions are frequently represented in *The Brothers Size*. Together with Elegba - Oshoosi's friend and Marcus' father- Ogun and Oshossi Size present a wonderful play about the brothers' bond, as Holder puts it: "The story is based on the brother bond on the mythology of West Africa's Yoruba culture, tales passed down from generation to generation, utilizing roughhewn poetry and pulsating rhythms to explore and identify the roots of familial love and devotion when faced with the reality of loss and the ever-present gleam of temptation" (no.p.).

From a narratological point of view, any text should have a plot in order to be narrative. It is the plot-oriented narrative level. "As for purely textual narrative, narrativity consists in the evocation of a fictional world focusing on one or several human (or quasi-human) consciousness whose experience of that world is the topic of the narrative. Most dramatic narratives have a prominent plot functions, as do most novels"(Fludernik 366). Thus, the plot of *The Brothers Size* rests on three dramatic / narrative situations to show friendship/brotherhood relations. The first is Ogun's sadness over his failure to be a role model for his younger brother, his

inability to act in accordance with his mother's will and his failure to protect his brother:

You was stealing from collection in a crap game. Everybody like, "he only nine" "If you would have been a better role model for him Ogun, he wouldn't acted like this" "If I would've ...If I...one image of my mama in my mind, ...She standing near the water, my mama standing out looking out, looking out the gulf ...I burned my chance at anything so that I didn't leave you behind... But no matter what I did...I thought you were gonna be okay somehow you would slip through and fuck up... (McCraney, 213-14).

Ogun keeps repeating the word "fuck up" for thirty times till Oshoosi stops him. The second situation is the confrontation between the two brothers in which Ogun confesses that he has done his best to protect his brother and blames Oshoosi for not responding. Oshoosi, in turn, confesses his mistakes saying it was out of his hand. The third situation is Elegba's confession that however hard he tries, he cannot replace Ogun –the brother. McCraney opens *The Brothers Size* with a proverb about friendship and brotherhood: "*A man that hath friends must show himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother*"(McCraney 136). In a very touching monologue that runs for forty-four lines, Elegba tells Ogun about Oshoosi's suffering in prison and how much he missed Ogun:

And one night, he ...call for you...one night he just says, "I

want my brother. Someone call my brother..."This grown man this man Crying for his brother...Sobbing into the night, "Og come for Shoosi now..."...He make us all miss our brothers, the ones we ain't neva even have...The guards stop like a funeral coming down the halls in respect of this man mourning the loss of his brother...I can't never be his brother like you his brother. Never...can't I stop you from being his brother. (McCraney 210-12)

Accordingly, dreams are used to express such brotherly bond. This bond is threatened by Elegba who pushes Oshoosi away from his elder brother. The two brothers dream of each other. In act one, scene five, "Oshoosi Size is sleeping, that night, dreaming. And in his dream is his brother Ogun. Oshoosi can hear him, in this dream, working...and in his dream, enters Elegba too. Singing a sweet song"(McCraney 170). Elegba reminds Oshoosi of his help and support when they are in prison together. By the same token, in act two, scene one,

Ogun Size is sleeping. Dreaming. And in his dream is his brother Oshoosi and his friend Legba...His brother Oshoosi and Legba are bound together. And they seem to want to part ways, to separate, but they can't...Ogun wants to tell his brother to call him ...But it's too late...Ogun's dream ends and Elegba is dragging his brother Oshoosi along with him and there isn't

nothing he can do about it!
(McCraney 197-9)

Telling dreams on stage shows self-reflexivity through the characters' search for freedom and identity. The two dreams above are self-explained. They echo such brotherly bond that is threatened with the outsider Elegba, who, here, symbolizes the search for freedom in the open world. *The Brothers Size* is about "The intangible quest for freedom in a society still racist at its core, a world that all too often drags the weak and vulnerable into a tangled web of bad decisions and inherited misfortune from which many will never escape"(Holder no.p). Elegba's search for freedom is echoed in his son's continuous search for him. Like Saber in Naguib Mahfouz's *The Search*, Marcus spends his life searching for his father. He asks everyone about his father -his habits, attitudes, manners, etc. "McCraney tenderly exploring the desire of black Americans to affirm their identity and reconnect with their cultural roots via Marcus' hunger to know more about his late father"(Rooney no.p.).

This search is always mingled with the image of the window as a gate of entering or/and departure. The image of the window is used three times in the trilogy. The first occurs in *The Brothers Size*, act two, scene three, when Elegba insists on interfering in the brothers' life, especially Oshoosi. The text reads: "Elegba standing the next morning; outside at Oshoosi's window...Ogun Size enters. He sees Elegba at his brother's window"(McCraney 207). Ogun tries hard to dissuade Elegba from his brother's way, but in vain. Elegba appears for the second time in act two, scene five. The two brothers have been happy singing together till Elegba appears. "Elegba appears at the

window, like a glimmer of moonlight... Oshoosi sees it. How could he not? He stops singing" (McCraney 233). Elegba's appearance means the end of happiness. Directly after, Oshoosi departs with Elegba, leaving his brother alone. Another departure is expressed by the use of closed windows at the end of *Marcus*. "Marcus stands on Elegua's porch wanting to knock but her windows are all boarded-up"(McCraney 358). Marcus has come to tell Elegua about his dream, but she has left to avoid the coming storm. It is the epilogue that ends the trilogy as well as Marcus' dreams.

Besides dreams, the author uses symbolic names enhancing his telling of Yoruba themes. "Practiced in various forms by millions today, Yoruba religious traditions embrace a rich pantheon of Orishas, or spirits, whose life forces animate and inspire their followers. Like Greek and Roman gods, each orisha corresponds to a particular element of life, such as war, marriage, or justice". In *The Red and Brown Water*, McCraney depends on a set of symbolic names to highlight the tragic end of Oya. The name Oya refers to "The Niger River, wind and storms, one of Shango's wives". Shango himself refers to the "Orisha of thunderbolt, dispenser of justice" ("The Brother/Sister Plays" 14). To Zachary Moull, Shango is "Violent, quick to anger, and associated with virility. He was a human king famous for his bravery and his womanizing"(43).

Oya's tragedy lies in her failure to be neither a world runner nor a mother. She is deprived of having a baby to keep Shangoo for herself, while Shun – Shango's other girlfriend does. Shun or Oshun refers to "The Oshun River, the most beautiful of Shango's wives" (Mckelvey 13). Zachary Moull adds:

Oshun is the Orisha of love, fertility, and erotic power. She has a double personality: as a river goddess found in fresh water, she moves with grace and fluidity and can heal wounds with a cool splash; but as a spirit of unpredictable passion she can be easily angered. She is the image of a powerful woman in Yoruba society and is sometimes characterized as a confident market woman who drives hard bargains (42).

Having failed to give Shango a baby, Oya cuts off her ear and gives it to him as a token of love. "I do this in remembrance of you ...I wished I could make a part of me to give you but I had to take what's already there...just give you what I got" (McCraney 123-4). The ear that used to be a sign of love when caressed earlier by Shango turns semiologically through 'metonymic deviation', as Keir Elam calls it (28), to a tragic sign of pain and sacrifice. Oya's sacrifice starts earlier in the play when she prefers the sexy Shango to the loving, romantic Ogun. Aunt Elegba herself notices it: "I know what you're like under Ogun Size. But it ain't nothing like that lightning from Shangoo, eh?"(McCraney 85). Ogun suffers from stuttering, something that Oya pities him for, at the very beginning of the play, "You hurt my heart. When you stutter like that...I know. It's like I know you...What you want to say and sometimes when it halts up like that when the words stuck in your chest, when they could come out so sweet I just...I get sad for you...that's all ". Shango, Ogun's rival, is used to tease him," I see you trying to woo the ladies Still which yo half-out words" (McCraney

31-2). Out of Shango's teasing, Oya's pity and his own insistence and love for Oya, Ogun is totally cured at the end of act one. "For the rest of my life. I won't skip another word. Another breath. Won't interrupt myself, you let me talk to you...Let's go inside. We can talk quiet in there. Come inside with me. We talk about starting something. Making a family one day"(McCraney 72).

Unfortunately, this day never comes. Oya dies because of Shango's neglect and Ogun remains single for the rest of his life. All over the play, Ogun does nothing but work. "Ogun is the orisha of iron, fire, and war, and in *The Brothers Size*, he manifests in the character of Ogun Size, who works with metal and fire in his auto repair shop". Unlike his brother Ogun, Oshoosi is "The orisha of hunting and scouting, the patron of people who seek, especially those who seek justice – a fitting association for a man seeking new life after his incarceration"(Coldurn 6). This is partly true of Oshoosi. Oshoosi's refusal to follow his brother's steps as an auto repair businessman reflects his deep desire for freedom and for leading a totally different life from that of his brother. The more he searches for freedom, the more Oshoosi endangers himself. Zachary Moull is versed in expressing it:

Oshoosi is the bow-and-arrow carrying Orisha of the hunt... According to a Santeria myth, he mistakenly killed his own mother after she borrowed a beautiful bird he had caught; thinking the bird stolen, he fired into the air and commanded the arrow to pierce the heart of the thief. It did. The grief-stricken Oshoosi became a repentant god dear to

those accused of crimes or imprisoned. Over the course of *The Brother/Sister Plays*, Oshoosi Size frequently runs into trouble with the law (43).

Actually, a great deal of Oshoosi's problems with the law is due to his playboy friend Elegba. The name Elegba refers to the "messenger who makes connections between the divine and human spheres possible. He is a go-between, a communicator and interpreter". In *Marcus*, Elegba leaves his son Marcus for his wife Oba, to raise him alone. "In patriarchal Yoruba society, she [Oba] was the model of a dutiful wife who bore silently the betrayals of her husband" (Moull 41-42).

Symbols are used, thus, as a means of both narrating Yoruba mythology on stage and creating a sense of unity among the three plays. Much emphasis is placed also on the unities of place and time as common factors in the trilogy. Tarell Alvin McCraney uses the same place in the three plays. It is San Pere; Louisiana. Most critics agree that such place is fictional. David Rooney states: "The plays depict life in the projects in the fictitious community of San Pere, where narrow prospects, poverty and crime are the norm, and where folks are always braced for tragedy"(no. p). Like August Wilson, who nearly sets his trilogy in San Pere, McCraney does, and although the place is the same in the three plays, "San Pere changes in every play, and it's important to us that it does that "(Brodersen 38).

Time is also the same in McCraney's trilogy. It is the 'Distant Present'. McCraney himself comments on using such technique saying: "If you tell a story you are already telling it in the past tense.

It is already happened. So it is in the distance. But you're telling it right now, so it is, therefore the present"(Brodersen 38).The narrativity here lies in the "narrativisation of drama in which the events, though historically past, are translated into the present of the (narrative) performance"(Fludernik 371). Using this mixture of the past and the present is one of McCraney's techniques of employing contradictions. He inserts hints about wars in Iraq and the Middle East when narrating African Gods and spirits. Talking about Shango's death, Shaunta declares," Shango was such a hero, you know? Going off to fight that fight in Iraq...They say that fighting in the Middle East ain't neva gon stop..."(McCraney 283). To this effect, David Rooney adds:

The three plays are set in the 'distant present' and appear to cover three or four decades. However, time is abstract and porous here, an aspect echoed in the freehand deployment of pop-culture references. For instance, neighbors party to a Beyoncé song in chronological opener "*In The Red and Brown Water*", while high-schoolers lip-sync to 1970s big-band disco in the closing part, "Marcus: or the Secret of Sweet"(no.p.).

Although McCraney's main concern is to tell about ancient African stories, he never gives the audience the sense of the past. The audience are always relating what happens on stage to their own lives, enacted before them, through the continuous references to current events. Playwrights always use such anachronism as a means of linking the past events with the present. Edward Bond's *Early Morning*

is set in the Victorian age, yet the audience are introduced to radio sets, headphones, earphones, factories and railways.

Contradictions cover a wide area of topics as well as the mixture of tenses. The use of both the old and the new is a vivid example of contradictions. McCraney declares:

These stories are complex, not good versus evil, but good and evil at the same time. Life is good, but so is death. Radiantly beautiful is bad, but so too is ugly ...I began to investigate how to use ancient myths , stories, to tell urban ones ...So I began taking old stories from the canon of the Yoruba and splicing them , placing them down in a mythological Housing Project in the South (Brodersen 19).

According to McCraney, thus, the combination of old stories with mythological backdrops adds to the power of the story as it made them "feel both old and new, as if they stood on an ancient history but were exploring the here and now (Brodersen 19).

Besides, contradictions are shown clearly in some character types as portrayed by McCraney. Talking about the complex character of Elegba, Ogun confesses that "Like every man we all got the ability of being a lot"(McCraney 302). The character of Marcus is the best example. He bears a lot of contradictions. In an interview, McCraney comments:

I always found that interesting because I've always felt like I've had duplicitousness about myself ...*Marcus* is a play that

says, "Well, I may be gay, but I also see dreams that tell the future". How magical is that? You can be more than just one thing. You can be a pillar in your community but also be something they disdain...I always found that interesting because I've always felt like I've had a duplicitousness about myself"(Rubin 16-7).

McCraney's last words about mixing different elements together for the best effect are in fact the best to end this paper with. This tendency to mix different elements in his daily life habits— eating, drinking, listening to music, wearing clothes, among many others, is manifested in McCraney's work. McCraney weaves both narrative and dramatic elements in his masterpiece, *The Bother/Sister Plays* in a unique way in order to narrate old African stories in a dramatic way. Rich and powerful stories about African cosmology, myth, folktales, spirits, gods, love, symbols, dreams, and familial relations are rarely presented on stage. Stories can be

told in many different ways using various literary genres, but McCraney chooses theatre for such end because he believes in the power of theatre, its ability to attract great numbers of audience and its direct and effective role in conveying messages. McCraney, thus, contributes to change the view to theatre from a mere means of entertainment to addressing serious issues.

Theoretically, the plays have been studied from a transgeneric perspective – an approach that argues strongly for the narrativity of drama on the ground of using many different narrative levels - plot, character, space, time, setting, storytelling, stage directions and metadrama. All these levels are applied equally to the three plays of the trilogy, but for purposes of scope and scale, only four levels are applied in detail as examples. These levels are the narrator, storytelling, stage directions and metadrama. By weaving these elements together, McCraney manages to set up narrative experiments on stage similar to those in fiction.

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