Orpheus Ascending: Music, Race, and Gender in Adrienne Kennedy's "She Talks to Beethoven"

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Adrienne Kennedy’s recent play *She Talks to Beethoven* first appeared in *Antaeus* in the spring of 1991 and was subsequently included as the first of the *Alexander Plays* published by the University of Minnesota Press in 1992. Alisa Solomon’s observation in the foreword to the *Alexander Plays* that “Kennedy’s plays scare off theatre producers” (xiv) is unfortunately true regarding *She Talks*. First staged in an unnoticed production by River Arts in Woodstock in 1989, the play received a Kennedy-directed student reading at Harvard University in 1989 (Kolin, Kennedy interview)—and thus ends *She Talks*’ brief production history. Sorry to say, the play was not performed at the Kennedy Festival at the Great Lakes Theatre Festival in March 1992, despite the fact that the longest of the Alexander plays—the *Ohio State Murders*—received an exemplary production directed by Gerald Freedman (Kolin, “Adrienne” 85). In spite of its sparse stage history to date—one hopes for many spirited productions—*She Talks to Beethoven* is a central play in the Kennedy canon, since it marks a new direction, I believe, for the playwright and her work. *She Talks* has all the earmarks of earlier Kennedy plays, but this work offers healing consolation instead of the nightmarish world of fragmentation that has characterized Kennedy’s surreal theatre in the past. Unique in the Kennedy canon, *She Talks* assures happy conjugal closure and promotes racial reconciliation.

Set in “Accra, Ghana, in 1961, soon after independence” (*She Talks* 4), the plot deals with the forced separation of Suzanne Alexander, an American writer, from her physician/artist husband David, whom, it is feared, has been kidnapped or driven into hiding to protect his sick wife. As in so many other Kennedy plays, historical personages appear alongside fictional ones. Beethoven talks and travels with Suzanne, Kennedy’s heroine. As in other Kennedy plays, such as *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) or *The Owl Answers* (1965), a festering wound is associated with a decaying whiteness, a horrifying fistula of miscegenation. Suzanne suffers from a wound which results in “part of her arm and shoulder” being “wrapped or bandaged in gauze” (5), and the “color” of this “surgical” wound is deathly “pale white.” But the suffering of Kennedy’s black heroine/protagonist in *She Talks* is matched, if not exceeded, by the suffering of the great white composer Beethoven, with whom she communicates throughout the play. The characteristic betrayal and suffering of Kennedy’s black women characters are thus shared with a white male. Additionally, the wild hair that marks many of Kennedy’s own protagonists, and perhaps reflects her concern about her own personal appearance (Kolin, LeBlanc interview 308), is transferred to the
white composer—"The neglect of his person which he exhibited gave him a somewhat wild appearance. His features were strong and prominent; his eye was full of rude energy; his hair, which neither comb nor scissors seemed to have visited for years, overshadowed his brow in a quantity and confusion to which only the snakes of Gorgon's head offer a parallel" (8). This description of the white composer, with its emphasis on the gory and the exaggerated, would seem more appropriate to a Kennedy black female. The violence we have come to associate with a Kennedy play—for example, the bloody cleft in Patrice Lumumba's head in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* or the heinous tortures in *A Rat's Mass*—also occurs in *She Talks*, but it is in the background, not foregrounded with bloody props and graphic detail. We only hear about the violence in Beethoven's Vienna or Suzanne's Accra through reportage; it is not represented with gripping horror. For example, Suzanne reads from one of Beethoven's published diaries: "... the war with Napoleon escalated... the Russians have retreated as far as Saint Polten. Vienna is in great danger of being swept over by marauding Chasseurs" (6), and a little later we hear an account by Barron of events in Vienna before the premiere of *Fidelio*: "To make matters worse, [Beethoven's] lodging was next to the city wall, and as Napoleon had ordered its destruction, blasts had just been set off under his windows" (11). In earlier Kennedy plays, audiences would have heard such blasts, not simply had them recounted at second or third hand. For example, in *Funnyhouse* bats pound characters in a ferocious assault. Aside from some references to David Alexander's absence, the sounds of violence are heard through the poetry of David Diop that Dr. Alexander reads over Ghanian radio. Diop's lines are rich in allusions to the murder of Mamba and the Martinsville Seven, but, again, there is no extended or gory representation of such events. The modulated terror in *She Talks* stems not from physical violence but from the artists' imparted confrontations with a dangerous reality. The assaults issue from fears of separation—on Beethoven's part with his nephew Karl, who tries to commit suicide, and on Suzanne's part regarding the fate of her missing husband. In *She Talks to Beethoven* the fears are more subdued in anticipation of their dissolution.

Stylistically, *She Talks* also bears some of the marks of earlier Kennedy works, but ultimately this play veers away from extremes and toward a more controlled and reassuring direction. The bloody language and frenzied metaphors of *Funnyhouse, The Owl Answers*, or even Kennedy's adaptation of the *Orestia* give way to less vibrant though no less intense refrains of nyim and frankopenny trees found in *Funnyhouse*. In *She Talks* Kennedy offers quieter exchanges of dialogue focused on historical and aesthetically shared events. African stringed music, Beethoven's pianoforte music, and the lush and sonorous beats of African poetry read by David over the radio provide appropriate musical accompaniments and recitatives for Kennedy in *She Talks to Beethoven*.

Not surprisingly, music has been one of the abiding influences on Adrienne Kennedy's life and work, and is indisputably the main catalyst in *She Talks*. Interest in music of all types is one of Kennedy's greatest passions, and in *She Talks* music leads, as we shall see, to harmonious liberation, not terrifying cacophony. In fact, given her lifelong dedication to music, it is surprising that Kennedy did not herself become a musician. Music is a vital ingredient in her scrapbook autobiography *People Who Led to My Plays*, and this autobiography is an indispensable guide to her plays, espe-
cially *She Talks*, which was written only four years after *People*.

*People Who Led to My Plays* is pleasantly filled with reverent allusions to music and musicians of all kinds—classical, popular, spiritual. From start to finish in *People*, Kennedy lavishes fond attention on diverse composers. Schumann, Debussy, Chopin, Verdi, and Wagner coexist in the same world for her as do the spirituals, jazz ensembles, and the achievements of Billy Eckstine, Nat King Cole, Judy Garland, Billie Holiday, and Duke Ellington. Musically speaking, everything blends harmoniously for Kennedy; there is no valorizing of white or black music or musicians. All of these musical achievements contribute to her memories of being a child and young adult in a world of experimentation, learning, and celebration.

Nowhere is this more clearly articulated than in Kennedy's memories of her numerous music teachers—Mrs. Filetti in early grammar school (16); Esther Clements, her seventh-grade music teacher (42); and her high school Glee Club teacher Mr. Tucker (61). But the most influential of Kennedy's music teachers was Miss Eichenbaum, a woman of Polish descent, who taught her piano. As Kennedy recalls, "The top of her piano was filled with photographs of her family and statues of Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin. At the end of the year, at the time of the recital, she gave me another bust of a composer. It was because of Miss Eichenbaum that I went to see the movie *A Song to Remember*, the story of Chopin's life" (42).

The encounter between white music teacher/mentor and artistic black student forged a strong bond and created a formative memory filed away in Kennedy's imaginative rolodex. The bust that Miss Eichenbaum gave Kennedy was a gift of lasting importance. It was especially sig-

ificant for the development of *She Talks*, since it led Kennedy to associate, on both the physical and psychic levels, the image of family (the picture of the Eichenbaum relatives) with the great composers (through likenesses of them). Later in life, when she was a wife and a mother, Kennedy bought "a foot high ivory statue" of Beethoven "at Pellenbergs on Broadway and put it on my desk for inspiration and reread Sullivan's books on the life of Beethoven—his spiritual development, his music, his lukewarm Danube baths and his growing deafness—and I listened to the quartets" (108). The seeds of love of classical music (Beethoven's, in particular) that Miss Eichenbaum planted in the young Adrienne grew into her marvelous choral composition *She Talks to Beethoven*.

Thanks principally to Miss Eichenbaum, then, Beethoven became a powerful dramatic inspiration for Adrienne Kennedy. No other composer in *People Who Led to My Plays* receives more attention or earns fonder eulogia. In 1956, when Kennedy was 25 years old, she remembers, "I ordered all his string quartets from a record club. Each record was wrapped in delicate paper and the record covers were in romantic pale covers. How I treasured them" (86). The color which surrounded the music gave young Kennedy an education in synesthesia. In fact, music schooled Kennedy's own dramatic talents and gave her confidence to develop her own plays. As she recalls in *People*, those string quartets "taught me that dark, impossible, unbearable moods could be transposed into work. A creative person could capture what he felt in andante, allegro and molta bella" (87). Beethoven, therefore, supplied the model, the motivation, and the camaraderie that led to *She Talks*, Kennedy's most optimistic play to date. The dark moods she found led
not to profitless or idle despair, but lighted the way for her to produce works that were, like Beethoven’s, dark and mysteriously creative. Beethoven became Kennedy’s mentor, replacing by extending the influence of Miss Eichenbaum.

But even more important than introducing Beethoven’s works to the young Kennedy was Miss Eichenbaum’s encouraging her to incorporate art into a family context. Seeing Miss Eichenbaum’s family photos alongside the bust of Beethoven solidified for Kennedy the connection between the great composer and members of her own family. In fact, Kennedy appropriated/adopted Beethoven as a member of her family. In *She Talks to Beethoven* becomes her co-partner, the co-adjutor of memory, the co-legate with her of her own African heritage and culture. Kennedy recalls “often star[ing] at the statue of Beethoven [she’d purchased which she] kept on the left hand side of [her] desk. I felt it contained a ‘secret.’ I’d do the same with the photograph of Queen Hatshepsut that was on the wall. I did not then understand that I felt torn between these forces of my ancestry . . . European and African . . . a fact that would explode one day in my work” (*People* 96).

The secret that the statue of Beethoven may have concealed for Adrienne Kennedy was that the composer was believed to be black—a belief widely held by the poets and artists of Kennedy’s generation, who drew upon the works of J. A. Rogers for their evidence. In *Nature Knows No Color-Line*, for example, Rogers argues that

...Germans are not the pure “whites” many assert they are. Several German

writers agree on that, among them Frederick Hertz, Brunold Springer and Rudolf Rocker. Beethoven, for instance, is named by all three as showing Negro “blood” . . . . We need but think of Luther, Goethe, Beethoven, who lacked almost completely the external marks of the “Nordic” race and whom even the most outstanding exponents of the race theory characterize as hybrids with Oriental, Levantine and Negro-Malaysian strains in them. (131)

In *Sex and Race*, Rogers devotes his attention to the dark Beethoven sketched by Letronne and engraved by Hofel:

The color of the engraving does not necessarily correspond to the subject’s real color, though many seem to think so. A white man can be made to look black, and a black man, white, in a picture. A dark tint, however, will bring out Negroid features if there are any, as they do in this picture of Beethoven—reason, perhaps, why this one is often reproduced in a shade much lighter than the original.

Beethoven was described by one who knew him as “blackish-brown” in color. As for his features they have been so Nordicized that as Thayer remarks the dark-skinned, ill-favored little man that was Beethoven would not recognize himself if he were to return.

Every bit of evidence available from those who knew Beethoven indicates he was of Negro ancestry. (288-89)

While Kennedy does not directly mention the point about Beethoven’s being black, that does not necessarily invalidate her kinship with him and his dark moods. Kennedy has always attempted to keep and to resolve both the white and the black strains of her heritage. Seeing Beethoven as a man of color, “of Negro ancestry,” pre-opted and idolized by an adoring white world, would doubtless have affirmed and strengthened Adrienne Kennedy in her own familial reverence
for the composer. Intriguingly enough, a book by Frantz Fanon, the writer Suzanne’s husband David is studying, is Black Skin, White Masks (Kennedy, The Dramatic Circle, in Alexander Plays 85).

Psychologically and politically, too, Adrienne Kennedy acknowledges Beethoven as one of her ancestors, as significant as the legendary maternal African queen Hatshepsut. The tension between these two ancestors—black mother, white father—bursts into violence in so many of Kennedy’s plays of troubled heritage—Funnyhouse, The Owl Answers, A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White. But in She Talks Kennedy’s protagonist Suzanne becomes one with Hatshepsut and the white composer who may also have been black; ancestors of the blood join with ancestors of artistic spirit and imagination. The artful miscegenation here does not explode into the nightmare world of torture or disabling colonial dominance but flowers into aesthetic, spiritual, and even conjugal collaboration.

In She Talks, Beethoven and Suzanne are joined as members of the same family of artists, kindred spirits in the quest for creation. The interaction between them involves the commingling of self and memory. Speaking of the Alexander Plays in general, Alisa Solomon asserts that “these pieces offer . . . many means of accounting for memory,” and then, focusing directly on She Talks, Solomon adds that “the action . . . is made up not of the events of Suzanne’s life but of the process of turning memory into meaning” (xvi). While engagingly perceptive, Solomon’s interpretation touches upon only one of the truths of memory/meaning in this complex Kennedy play. Ultimately, She Talks turns meaning into memory, the relationship between memory and art, or the creation of the artistic self. The play is vitally concerned with the events of Suzanne’s life as a reflection of Adrienne Kennedy’s own discovery and recollection of her artistic self-fashioning. Beethoven thereby becomes the vehicle (the meaning) by which we enter Suzanne’s (and, by extension, Adrienne Kennedy’s) mind (or memory). By recalling Beethoven, Suzanne (Kennedy) reifies the family context of Kennedy’s own experience at school and later in life that associated musicians with family.

As members of the same family, Beethoven and Suzanne break all the color, time, and gender barriers that would fragment, categorize, or valorize art. Queen Hatshepsut and Beethoven—black and white, woman and man, African and European—coexist in the nexus of Kennedy’s memory/art. Beethoven exists in Suzanne’s Africa as she does in his Vienna, and vice versa. Suzanne accompanies Ludwig as he accompanies her. “It is well known that often Alexander jests with his wife about her continued deep love for European artists such as Sibelius, Chopin, and Beethoven, and indeed if anyone in Accra wants to hear these composers one only has to pass the windows of the delightful white stucco house among the fragrant flowers on the campus at Legon” (17). Beethoven lives in the same delightful white stucco house that Suzanne does, and she is there when he dies. Artistically and memorially, then, black Africa and white Vienna are really the same location; Beethoven and Hapshepsut are parents of the same process of artistic self-fashioning that created Adrienne Kennedy and her work.

As kindred spirits Suzanne and Beethoven read and generate their work in the same playing area—that is, in the same Kennedy play. We hear Beethoven’s music and Suzanne’s voice. The two artists share secrets, lament maladies, and inscribe ideas in
each other's works. Beethoven's diaries appear in *She Talks* alongside David's comments that appear in Beethoven's conversation books. "Ludwig, why is David's handwriting in your conversation books? This poem is in David's own handwriting" (19).

Through the medium of creation—the written word, or the written note—a familial bond of intimacy is struck between a composer of music and a composer of musical words. Beethoven is thus given renewed life through Suzanne's play just as she is given new life (hope, memory) through Ludwig's conversation books in which David, her collaborator, has appropriated space for her benefit. In effect, Beethoven and Suzanne as members of the same family of artists are collaborators or, perhaps put another way, co-liberators, each freeing the other from racial/sexual fragmentation.

Kennedy's play frees all artists who are prisoners of gender, too. Beethoven becomes Suzanne's other self or confidant, a role often supplied by another woman. An appropriate section of *People* reads:

> When friends asked me about my statue, my collection of postcards, my photographs of people, I always said they were inspirational. I did not see that they were so much more. Soon I would understand that I was in a dialogue with the photographs, prints, postcards of people. They were my alter egos. (96)

The two share self-engendering intimacies—whether it is Beethoven's love for his nephew Karl or Suzanne's fears about David. Beethoven emerges, finally, as both the subject and the object of Suzanne's collaboration.

The most compelling family connection between Suzanne and Beethoven as artists, however, surfaces when we consider the relationship of Kennedy's plays to Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*. Among the autobiographical references to Beethoven included in *She Talks*, it is the rehearsal, production, and problems of *Fidelio*, among Beethoven's most celebrated creations, that become the prominent and shaping force in Kennedy's play. Kennedy translates as she translocates *Fidelio*, making Beethoven's opera present in her African experience and vice versa.

At the beginning of *She Talks* we learn that "the production of *Fidelio* was anticipated by months of increasing tension as the war with Napoleon escalated" (5); later we hear "the orchestra rehearsing *Fidelio*" (18); and, finally, we are escorted to the opening night performance, where the composer's deafness, Beethoven's "permanent infirmity," prevents him from hearing the singers and orchestra or the audience's applause. But thanks to Adrienne Kennedy's memory and coalescing chronology, we again hear Beethoven's opera with its most (auto)biographical amplification. For through Suzanne's memory, *Fidelio* is inscribed into *She Talks* as the play is inscribed in the pain and ecstasy of Beethoven's opera. An umbilical cord of reciprocal influence connects the two works.

Kennedy poignantly yet subtly draws upon Beethoven's opera to shape and conclude her own play. Like *Fidelio*, *She Talks* is a work of great faith in human love and freedom, symbolized through a couple's unalterable fidelity. Beethoven's opera and Kennedy's play are based upon the power of love in the face of immense adversity. In both a couple is separated because of political treachery, sending one of the spouses into bondage. In *Fidelio*, Florestan, a Spanish noble, is unjustly imprisoned in Seville, bereft of any hope of rescue. David, Suzanne's husband, is also driven away because of "threats against his life" and to protect her from danger. Both husbands have been banished into absence. The
central concern of opera and play, though, is on the actions of the wives, valiant and faithful women who rescue their husbands. Florestan’s wife Leonore disguises herself as a young man, Fidelio, who works in the Seville prison. When Florestan is sentenced to death, Leonore/Fidelio intervenes, thwarts the execution, and frees her spouse from his chains. Similarly, Suzanne keeps David alive through her creative work, of which he remains a vital part. Suzanne in effect unshackles David from the shadows of death-like absence by bringing him into the forefront of her dialogue with Beethoven.

But Kennedy mutualizes the Fidelio mythos even further by having David disguise himself to enable Suzanne to continue, physically and artistically. His creative soul remains unharmed by being included in those of Beethoven’s works that Suzanne consults. As noted above, David’s handwriting even appears in Beethoven’s conversation book (19), reinforcing the powerful intervention of one spouse in another’s life. At the end of She Talks, Suzanne asks David, “You sent Beethoven until you returned. Didn’t you?” And David’s voice “(Not unlike Beethoven’s)” responds, “I knew he would console you while I was absent” (23). Kennedy applies Leonore’s disguise as Fidelio in She Talks by disguising Suzanne’s husband as Beethoven, the very creator of the opera, thus emphasizing the strong bonds of fidelity that exist between Beethoven and Suzanne, or, more properly, the character that reflects the memory of Adrienne Kennedy herself. She Talks is Adrienne Kennedy’s Fidelio, her family gift to and from Beethoven.

Another musician’s life is perhaps even more powerfully, more allusively embedded in the story of Suzanne Alexander’s conversations with Beethoven. Kennedy incorporates shades of the Orpheus myth into her play to celebrate the ultimate concord of true artistic community across space and time. While there is only one direct and conclusive reference to Orpheus (Black Orpheus) in She Talks, Kennedy primarily inscribes Orpheus into her play through an intriguing network of allusions and myths. Kennedy tells us that she came to identify intimately with myths, such as that of Orpheus, after studying “all [her] old books” (People 116), especially those of classical authors who made major use of Orpheus, the poet who descends into the underworld. Speaking of authors famous for telling Orphic journeys (“Dante and Vergil and the Bible”), Kennedy writes, “Over and over I copied passages from them, studying the language and the rhythms” (People 85).

In several significant ways, a comparison of She Talks with Jean Cocteau’s 1950 film Orphée further strengthens the Orphic context of Kennedy’s play. Given Kennedy’s keen love of the arts and the fact that she visited France before her arrival in Ghana in 1961, she doubtless knew of Cocteau’s work and more than likely saw his classic film Orphée, based upon his 1929 play. In both Cocteau’s and Kennedy’s works, the Orpheus myth is updated and ameliorated for contemporary audiences. One modern addition common to both is the use of the radio. In She Talks, the only news Suzanne has about her missing husband David comes from announcements over the radio. In Orphée, the poet Orpheus hears mysterious poetry and coded messages over a car radio. The transmissions come from “The Zone”—the land of the dead. The messages are a siren call from the Princess, Cocteau’s beautiful version of the Grim Reaper. Suzanne, like Cocteau’s Orpheus, must sift out and respond to messages about love and art from a world beyond her control or consciousness.
Both Suzanne and Orphée, then, hear the call of the dead—the poetry of the dead, so to speak. But as in Orphée, She Talks ends with husband (poet) and wife (a Eurydice figure) united in the land of the living. What one critic has said of Orphée could be said of She Talks: “With Orpheus, Cocteau demonstrated that there be no cinematic incompatibility between poetic presentation and an underlying realism.... Realism is maintained by a reliance on familiar elements as agents of the story’s fantastic events and a literal, straightforward depiction of these events” (Fox 2319).

The presence of Orpheus hovering over She Talks to Beethoven is both inevitable and necessary, given Suzanne’s power to change meaning into memory. Orpheus is the patron, the guiding spirit, for all musicians, for all artists. His achievements symbolize the quintessential transformational power of music/art. Having accomplished miraculous feats through his music—e.g., charming Pluto and stopping Sisyphus’s rock—Orpheus was honored by the gods, and his lyre “became one of the constellations in the heavens” (“Orpheus” 430). Kennedy could not have chosen a better patron than Orpheus to stand behind, yet within, the dialogue between Suzanne and Beethoven.

Orpheus is equally important for the light he sheds on the political message infusing Kennedy’s play. As the hero/artist, Orpheus and his quest continue to “represent new developments in the ongoing critical discourse between creative artists and the world in which they live” (Coen 23). In his battle against the forces of Pluto and his infernal/corrupt kingdom, Orpheus stands forever opposed to those who would enchain or in any way suppress socially conscious art and artists, one of the major themes of She Talks to Beethoven.

Kennedy incorporates an Orphic setting, quest, and loss into her play.

Most of She Talks is set at night with dark shades accompanied by varied musical scores. As in the classical myth, Kennedy’s couple of David (Orpheus) and Suzanne (Eurydice) are “inseparable” in their love and appreciation for each other. Yet, as in the classical myth, this couple is torn apart. Suzanne falls deathly ill, and David Alexander sits by her bedside awaiting “the results of his wife’s undisclosed surgery” (11). “While sitting at his wife’s side Alexander makes sketches of his wife’s illness and explains the progress and surgical procedure to her” (12). The source of Suzanne’s illness is undisclosed in Kennedy’s sparse plot, though during Suzanne’s recuperative period Beethoven supplies a Eurydician context: “Perhaps you might seek retreat in the woods.... It makes me happy to wander among herbs and trees” (9). Wandering in the woods led Eurydice to be bitten fatally by the snake, which imprisoned her in the underworld.

The idea of liberation that propels the original Orpheus story also motivates Kennedy’s couple, especially David Alexander, who can be heard on the radio reading aloud lines about “liberation” from famed author Frantz Fanon (6). The Orphic voice and situation is captured by David’s quoting the following lines from a “love poem of Senghor’s”:

Be not astonished, my love, if at times my song grows dark....
Listen to the threats of old sorcerers, to the thundering wrath of God!
Ah, maybe tomorrow the purple voice of your songmaker will be silent forever.
That’s why today my song is so urgent and my fingers bleed on my khalam. (20)

Expressed in an appropriate African context, David is likened in these lines to the legendary Orpheus, lamenting the loss of his wife and fearing her inevitable fate. Very concerned about his wife’s safety, like the legendary Orpheus, too, David is portrayed as “the revolutionary poet” (19) whose out-
spoken ways make him enemies. Bold and resolute like Orpheus, David challenges a political system that would destroy the truth he must utter: “Alexander was hated by many for his writing on the clinics and Fanon, and for his statements on the mental condition of the colonized patients” (11). The mental aberrations of the patients, whom David seeks to help, can, in Kennedy’s complex allusive universe, be likened to a heightened Orphic state. Being a physician further links David with Orpheus, who was thought to be fathered by the archetypical physician, Apollo. But though a doctor by training, David Alexander is repeatedly linked with music. He helps Suzanne “with all the scenes about” Beethoven in her play (9); his reading poetry on the radio functions as a piece of contrapuntal music recasting yet reinforcing the dialogue between his wife Suzanne and Beethoven; and David’s return at the end of the play is heralded by references to his association with musicians. Beethoven tells Suzanne: “I feel David will return by morning, perhaps on the road with the musicians, perhaps even in disguise” (15). And when David/Orpheus does come back, there is “music from the road, of African stringed instruments” (23).

But Kennedy does not replicate the details of the Orpheus myth unchanged. As she did in her response to Fidelio, Kennedy injects subtle variations upon the Orpheus myth in She Talks. She retells the myth from the perspective of a black woman; that is, from the viewpoint of her black Eurydice, Suzanne Alexander. Characteristically, Kennedy dissolves temporal sequences, patriarchal causality, and the traditional notion of character. As Alisa Solomon perceptively points out, “Character is frequently split in Kennedy’s work, her protagonists projected through myriad personae . . . .” (xiv). Kennedy’s characters are many individuals in her universe of simultaneously shrunken or expanded time. As Kennedy herself maintains in another play, The Owl Answers, “The characters change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves” (25). David is both Orpheus and Eurydice; Suzanne is both Eurydice and Orpheus. Within such fictional transformations, Kennedy reshapes and thereby recuperates the Orpheus myth.

Yet again this is accomplished through Suzanne’s shaping memory to create meaning. Altering the contour of the Orpheus myth, it is David (Orpheus) who is forced to flee in She Talks. Sitting at Suzanne’s bedside, “…he suddenly vanished two nights ago” (6)—in the dark, as Eurydice did. “It is now believed that David Alexander, learning of a plot against his life while he sat at his wife’s bedside, chose to vanish to protect her, his colleague and fellow writer. Professor Alexander still continues to speak about attaining true independence. So now it is believed he is alive and waiting for the time when he can return home” (14). Contained in these highly allusive words are the major Orphic themes—the separation of the lovers, the insistence on freedom for the wife, and the long-awaited return home.

However, the quest for the wife Eurydice, held captive by the forces of darkness, is here transformed from the Orpheus myth. In Kennedy’s Orphic play, David becomes Eurydice. It is David who is held captive, taken away from his wife because of hostile forces in Ghana, pressed into bondage by his political enemies. Later, Kennedy elaborates on this point: “It has been learned that the group who plotted to kill David Alexander has been discovered near Kumsai and has been arrested. It is safe for Alexander to return to Accra. And it is reported that Njrumak himself met with the revolutionary poet a few hours ago and reported to him with the details of his would-be assassins’ capture” (19). Quoting poetry from Fanon, David’s
voice on the radio sounds like that of a plaintive Eurydice, caught by her husband’s fatal gaze: “But just as I reached the other side I stumbled and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the others fixed me there. I burst apart…” (6).

Through the turn of her plot and the control of Orphic allusions, Kennedy has switched sexual roles, making the man vanish while his wife remains behind. Like Orpheus, it is Suzanne who waits for her David/Eurydice to return. Repeatedly, she tells Beethoven: “I must watch the road for David” (14). Later in the play, an Orphic stage direction reads: “Suzanne stands at the window writing. A shadow appears on the road” (21)—that of her returning husband David. Near the end of the play, she calls out “David,” and though we do not see him we know he has returned, for his voice is heard at the end of the play.

Equally significant is the gender shift as a result of Kennedy’s transformational strategies. While Suzanne/Eurydice is held captive by illness, she controls our perception of the action affecting her husband, a fundamental shift away from male dominance and the male gaze. It is Suzanne/Eurydice who offers us the female gaze, instead of our having to depend on the vision and the prejudice of the controlling gaze offered in the historically male-dominated story of Orpheus. It is for this reason that we never see David/Orpheus in Kennedy’s play. Our perception and reception are feminine, and even Beethoven himself is appropriated into that gaze, though it was David who sent Beethoven to Suzanne until he returned from hiding. Suzanne is Eurydice-become-Orpheus.

But Kennedy’s feminine retelling of the Orpheus myth does not simply replace male control with female dominance. Quite to the contrary, Kennedy substitutes female mutuality and collaboration for male single-mindedness. The Orphic quest and conquest are both David’s and Suzanne’s; Eurydice is valorized but not at the expense or exclusion of Orpheus. Kennedy is insistent about this, supplying the following background information about the Alexanders: “Although the couple are American they have lived in West Africa for a number of years and together started a newspaper that was a forerunner to Black Orpheus bringing together poems, stories, and novels by African writers as well as Afro-Americans, some in exile in England” (7). In founding a journal that was the “forerunner to Black Orpheus,” the Alexanders are linked to the classical musician/hero. Though split (fragmented) as male and female in terms of traditional characterization, they become one undifferentiated Orpheus hero/artist in founding the journal. In so doing, the couple became reconstituted as a black precursor of the legendary white musician. By predating the Black Orpheus, which was published in Germany, their journal acquires an almost ur-Orphic status: The couple are pan-nationals whose work extends across continents—Africa, England, America—and their journal is a home for those who are society’s exiles, as Orpheus was himself after returning from the nether world. Finally, the reference to Black Orpheus has rich biographical plus international significance in this Kennedy play.

Kennedy’s first work was accepted for publication by the editor of Black Orpheus when she, like Suzanne Alexander, went to Africa in the early 1960s (People 116). So, in a sense, Alexander’s experience, like her creator’s, should lead to a major body of work appreciated across continents. Stressing the fusion of male and female into the Orpheus experience, Kennedy repeatedly calls attention to the collaborative spirit of art. Like music, art is not a solitary venture.
leading to the glorification of just male or just female. The Alexanders exemplify such mutuality. David is referred to as Suzanne's "colleague and fellow writer" (14). This couple works as an undifferentiated team. Not only do they edit a literary journal together, they also "compose and write poetry together" (15). "The Alexanders, an inseparable couple, often read their works together and have written a series of poems and essays jointly" (12). Their collaboration in effect is responsible for She Talks. Suzanne's play on Beethoven began as a collaborative enterprise—"We set out to write it together years ago, then it became mine," claims Suzanne (15). But even though she may claim that it is hers, the script leaves no doubt that David's presence is powerfully infused through it, too. He gives her much advice about the play-in-progress—arguing effectively, judging by Suzanne's play as rendered by Kennedy, that she must consult more diaries and cautioning her that "many of [the] scenes are too romantic" (10-11). So deeply involved is David in Suzanne's work that even in his absence he sends her a message via Beethoven's conversation book: "Suzanne, please continue writing scenes. Please continue writing scenes we talked about" (20). The couple is indeed Orpheus undifferentiated by gender.

Like other Adrienne Kennedy plays, She Talks to Beethoven is a work of transformational brilliance. Kennedy dissolves the staid and restrictive boundaries of time, place, and linear plot to create a world in which multiplicity and authenticity are synonymous. We as her audience need trifocals, or even quadrifocals, to see the numerous story lines going on simultaneously. No character is one person in Kennedy's work; each person becomes many others. This is especially true in She Talks, in which Kennedy blends the lives of fictional, historical, mythological, and autobiographical characters into a mélange of selves fashioning. She Talks reifies the process of meaning turning itself into memory.

In this play, Kennedy draws upon her own fruitful and pleasant memories of musicians and music, transferring her love of music to Suzanne Alexander, Kennedy's fictional self. But, as in the past, Kennedy extends biography into aesthetics, magnifying the self into selves. By engaging in conversation with Beethoven, Suzanne Alexander becomes all artists searching for art. Their dialogue acknowledges as it incorporates the Black Diaspora. It honors the work of the Alexanders, David and Suzanne, as creative black artists; yet Suzanne's relationship with Beethoven demonstrates that art and artists, questing for the creative acts that save, transcend the dichotomies of white and black, male or female. On an even more allusive plane, She Talks expands the significance of the Orpheus myth to erase the taint of female marginality as well as racial and ethnic exclusivity. For Kennedy retells the Orpheus story from the vantage point of a black woman.

But unlike the protagonists of other Kennedy plays, Suzanne Alexander has no gender axe to grind. No less than his wife, David Alexander is Orpheus ascending in this new world Kennedy is constructing. The sickness, disease, pain, separation, and horror that war produces in Kennedy's earlier works have been de- and suffused here. Suzanne Alexander is one of the very few Kennedy heroines who has been healed and saved. And her redemptive closure is accomplished, and, in fact, fortified, through her allegiance to the mutuality of art.
Call for Manuscripts

Don Belton (P. O. Box 14124, Saint Paul, MN 55114-0124) is soliciting manuscripts for Speak My Name: African-American Men’s Identity and Legacy. Contributions might include: short stories unique to the experiences of African American men; essays on manifestations of Black male culture, spirituality, and/or activism; and personal narratives and portraits of remarkable Black men, celebrated or unknown to history. All submissions must be typed, should be approximately 2,500 words in length, and are due no later than November 1, 1994. Speak My Name is scheduled to be released by Beacon Press in the spring of 1995.