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Ifeta Čirić-Fazlija

THE REPRESENTATION OF SYSTEMIC RACIAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ITS EFFECTS IN PEARL CLEAGE'S *FLYIN' WEST* AND *BOURBON AT THE BORDER*

The overwhelming sense of instability and distress this causes, and the conspicuous rise in heinous crime and racial and gender chauvinism, harassment and bullying all around the globe demand a scrutiny of the insidiousness of violence. This is a moral responsibility of any contemporary author. The current paper analyzes images of systemic racial and gender-based violence in two fictional dramatic works created by African American playwright Pearl Cleage in the 1990s, while reflecting on post-Reconstruction Black American history. To inspect the surreptitious effects of systemic violence as portrayed in the two plays, the paper first discusses forms of violence. It is claimed that Cleage reminds modern audiences of the lengthy history of white violence ingrained in the formation of the United States and that the two analyzed plays illustrate the oppressive consequences of such systemic violence

Keywords: intersectionality; racial studies; gender studies; violence; Pearl Cleage; *Flyin' West, Bourbon at the Border*

INTRODUCTION

Any contemporary scientific discussion and scrutiny of violence in 2024 must necessarily reference the current geopolitical and social context. The extant world conflicts and spates of violent intra-state altercations have made the twenty-first century particularly unsafe and volatile, and have already left an indelible mark on the lives of many. The unfathomable persecution and ruthless murder of innocent people in

all corners of the world has perpetuated old and created new transgenerational traumas, spilling over the borders of countries both physically/literally, and in mind and heart. Sustained increased militarization has shaped such societies and communities in which interpersonal disagreements and differences in opinion are resolved through violent means, adding up to an overpowering sense of insecurity and fear, and leading to a significant rise in heinous crime and (documented and undocumented) cases of chauvinism, harassment, and bullying.

Since their dawn, theatre and the performing arts have reflected their immediate surroundings and commented on various internal social processes and/or wider geopolitics. Whether openly or obliquely political and regardless of their respective (sub)genre or stage conventions, plays (both scripted and/or enacted dramas) necessarily echo and examine various social mores and issues, including violence. Further, theater inherently takes human beings as its content and addressees, while the sense of immediacy that arises from staged actions occurring in the presence of their viewers inevitably engages audiences in the artistic scrutiny and criticism of real-life social actions.

In 1978, recently departed British dramatist Edward Bond claimed that "[v]iolence shapes and obsesses our society and if we do not stop being violent we have no future" (quoted in Billingham 2013: 38). Expressing a sense of urgency, Bond added that this was the very reason why "[i]t would be immoral not to write about violence" (ibid.). Not full twenty years later, in 1990, African American woman dramatist Pearl Cleage, whose works are the analytical focus of this paper, stated that she was "writing to expose and explore the point where racism and sexism meet" (quoted in Lisa M. Anderson 2008: 17); moreover, her reason for writing is "to help [herself] understand the full effects of being black and female in a culture that is both racist and sexist." (ibid.). Sadly, contemporary history and geopolitics strongly suggest that twenty-first-century societies are still "shape[d] and obsesse[d]" (Bond op. cit.) by violence and that the culture of such societies is still prevalently "racist and sexist" (Cleage op.cit.).

This paper takes an intersectional approach to examine the dramatic representation of racial and gender-based violence in two of Pearl Cleage's plays. It hones in on systemic racial violence and its effects as depicted in *Flyin' West* (1992) and *Bourbon at the Border* (1997), thereby broadly delineating different forms of violence, as informed by Bouta, Frerks and Bannon (2005), Gonzáles-Tennant (2012), Pierce (2016), and Walby et al. (2017). Since the analytical corpus of the paper is embedded in the history of the United States of America, which "has been tainted by the social construction of race and reflects the calamities and conquests of society's tribulation"

(Gaynor, Kang and Williams 2021: 50), the paper also provides a survey of segments of US and African American history as needed.

"VIOLENCE [THAT] SHAPES AND OBSESSES SOCIETY":[1] FORMS OF (RACIAL AND GENDER-BASED) VIOLENCE

In his text "Intersectional Violence, New Media, and the 1923 Rosewood Pogrom" (2012) Edward Gonzáles-Tennant identifies three categories of violence: intersubjective, structural, and symbolic (72–73). In the immediate aftermath of the Reconstruction era (1861–1900), these three forms of violence were frequently used in combination to keep Black Americans or other non-white racial groups subordinate to the white hegemony (Gonzáles-Tennant 2012). As Gonzáles-Tennant (ibid.) also points out, however, from 1915 to 1925, the old ideologies were being replaced by new violent ones, and structural and symbolic violence, therefore, increasingly replaced intersubjective forms.

The symbolic violence that Gonzáles-Tennant elucidates on pertains to images that vilify socially subordinate and marginalized communities and cultures. Gonzáles-Tennant (ibid. 72) claims that symbolic violence, which in the USA was created and legitimized through early cinema (e.g., the image of the "Black Beast" in D. W. Griffith'sfilm *The Birth of the Nation*, 1915) and the eugenics movement (particularly advocated by the Eugenics Record Office and Henry Herbert Goddard and his 1912 Kallikak study), conceals, upholds, and intensifies social inequalities. For most of the early 20th century, symbolic violence depicted African Americans as inferior to, or prone to vile crimes against, their white counterparts: "The encoding of Eurocentric values within early cinema created a powerful new form of symbolic violence casting minorities as simple children in need of protection or as dangerous hordes polluting a pure and superior White race" (ibid. 76).[2]

Gonzáles-Tennant uses lynchings, racial riots, and murders as illustrations of intersubjective (everyday) violence, which he claims is conspicuous and linked to a number of factors, including migration, prejudice, labour competitiveness, and a decline in Black political engagement (72). Lynching, a particularly heinous form of vigilantism and mob violence, targeted Black communities to induce fear, submission and subordination. As pointed out in "Trauma and the Legacy of Lynching: Con-

1 This citation references Edward Bond. For more information see Billingham (2013).

2 To retain its focus and scope, this paper will not elaborate on symbolic violence. For more information on the particularities of this form of violence and on the vilification of African Americans in *The Birth of the Nation* see Gonzáles-Tennant (2012), and Boyce and Chunnu (2019), respectively.

fronting the Legacy of Racial Terror" (Equal Justice Initiative 2017): "it significantly marginalized Black people in the country's political, economic, and social systems [… and] inflicted deep traumatic and psychological wounds on survivors, witnesses, family members and the entire African American community" (65). The mutilation and terrorizing of Black individuals accused of various alleged crimes against property and persons of the white hegemonic population exceeded "ordinary modes of execution and punishment […] It is the story of slow, methodical, sadistic, often highly inventive forms of torture and mutilation" (Litwack quoted in Equal Justice Initiative 2017: 68). Instances of lynching witnessed by Black families and communities, and in which white members of the community (regardless of age, gender or social class) directly and indirectly participated, had far-reaching and immediate effects on the American population as a whole. Immediately after each lynching, "Black survivors mostly strictly observed racial boundaries" and became "hyper vigilant around white people and taught their young children to do the same" (Ifill quoted in Equal Justice Initiative ibid.). Too terrified to speak about what they had witnessed or survived, African Americans were subjected to further trauma, their distress and dread intensified by "the culture of silence about racial violence that grew out of the same systemic terror that produced racial violence" (Equal Justice Initiative 2017: 69). Even if lynchings appear to be isolated murders perpetrated by vigilantes, in effect they were "targeted racial violence at the core of a systemic campaign of terror perpetrated in furtherance of an unjust social order […;] rituals of collective violence that served as highly effective tools to reinforce the institution and philosophy of white racial superiority [… intending to] ´emphasize the limits of Black freedom´" (ibid. 70–71). On the other hand, the (Southern) white community who perpetrated collective racial violence (whether as accusers or executioners), and who raised their children to partake in lynching and adopt the culture of traumatic racial violence with its underlying racist myths and narratives also inflicted psychological damage on themselves and (Southern) white culture. Through their participation "in collective violence […] perpetrators [were left] with their own dangerous and persistent damage, including harmful defense mechanisms such as 'diminished empathy for victims' [… and] for years afterwards [they] remain[ed] unable to acknowledge their actions […] socializing white children [… and] girls in such an amoral framework" (ibid. 70–71). The long-term effects of such horrendous racial prosecution and terror of African Americans are tangible even today. Equal Justice Initiative authors elucidate that this form of intersubjective violence ensued in those communities: "where African Americans today remain marginalized, disproportionately poor, overrepre-

sented in prisons and jails, and underrepresented in decisionmaking [sic] roles in the criminal justice system — the institution most directly implicated in facilitating lynching and failing to protect Black Americans from racial violence" (67).

Gonzáles-Tennant (2012) asserts that early in the twentieth century, structural forms of racial violence prevented Black Americans from fully engaging in American culture and society. One example of structural violence were the Jim Crow laws, which treated African Americans as second-class citizens. These were approved after the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in 1896, and upheld until its judgment in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and other cases involving educational and social segregation. The laws, whose outcomes were extensive, resulted from the growing concern among the dominant white population that resented the rise of a new generation of Southern African Americans who had no living memory of slavery. Grossman (2005: 81) depicts the white hegemony's sense of anxiety and fear, which led to the passing of Jim Crow: "Complaining of black servants referring to one another as 'Miss Johnson' or 'Mr. Jones,' one Louisiana newspaper identified the nub of the issue: 'The younger generation of negro bucks and wenches have lost that wholesome respect for the white man, without which two races, the one inferior, cannot live in peace and harmony together.'" In an attempt to re-establish their dominance, the white majority therefore at first resorted to intersubjective violence in the form of lynchings, and the (Southern) lawmakers initially turned a blind eye to it. Toward the end of the 1800s, however, because the random and overwhelming nature of lynch mobs undermined the credibility of the rule of law, and lynching damaged the South's image in the Northern press (Grossman 2005: 81–82), the practice was, at least on paper, replaced by Jim Crow. The laws and their "separate but equal" doctrine were embraced as these seemed to be a lot less messy than vigilante violence; as pointed out, they were a legal and systemic way of marginalizing African Americans, restricting the movement of African American laborers, and ensuring that African American farmers remained as dependent on white landowners and merchants as possible (Grossman 2005).

African Americans were also being steadily shut out of the political process by white Anglo-Americans nationwide, through literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and white primary elections, all done in an attempt to preserve white political superiority. Gonzáles-Tennant (2012) cites "sundown towns" as a further exemplification of structural violence. These areas, which appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but peaked in certain regions as late as 1970, were all-white enclaves that often developed as a result of white people evicting minority residents—

typically with great violence. The practice originated in the western states of Oregon, Washington, and California, then extended to the Northeast, Midwest, and, to a lesser degree, the Deep South. White privilege enabled bankers, police officers, real estate brokers, and local governments to maintain all-white communities by enacting and upholding constitutional regulations, forbidding leasing or selling real estate to racialized groups, and imprisoning minorities on false accusations.

Jason E. Pierce's article, which discusses the role of violence in the white conquest of the West (2016), supports Gonzáles-Tennant's propositions. Pierce (2016) claims that violence was essential to establishing and upholding white supremacy over non-whites as western settlements expanded (210). Before the Civil War, however, enslaved people in Texas had encountered less organized (structural) violence because of their significant economic value, although they experienced considerable physical and psychological personal (intersubjective) violence, as a means of maintaining their subordination. After the Civil war things drastically altered, and emancipated African Americans endured decades of horrifying systemic violence, which was intended to rob them of their newly acquired status and hard-won rights, and maintain the inferior position of African Americans[3]. In the decade immediately following the Civil War, the use of violence to attain these objectives extended far beyond Texas, although the ferocious conquest of the state, along with that of California, contained various forms of violence that changed the West and preserved white supremacy. These included the ethnic cleansing that led to the near eradication of Native Americans in both states; the denial of political rights to Chinese and Hispanic Americans; and the establishment of slavery and subsequently segregation in Texas. All three forms of violence therefore became essential weapons in the construction of the white American West.

African American women endured not only racial but also gender-based violence.[4] Walby et al. (2017: 47) indicate that violence against women is considered a form of "gender discrimination in international law". Gender is not external to violence and can construct and organize fundamental aspects of violent acts (which in themselves

3 According to Pierce (2016: 223), there were two key causes of this violence in post-Civil war Texas. First, white supremacist Democrats sought to stifle the Republicans' reconstruction efforts, which were aided by African Americans and a limited number of white Unionists. Second, violence gave white racists a means of maintaining the subordinate position of African Americans.

4 Grossman (2005: 76) points out that in early twentieth century African American women found jobs (predominantly as domestic help) more easily than their men, although they were paid next to nothing. The urban employment continued to inflict various kinds of oppression, including sheer disdain and disrespect from all members of white households; charges of professional neglect and the real risk of not being paid for services rendered; demands of longer than usual work hours; and even sexual harassment and assaults on Black women by white "madam's husband[s]" (ibid.).

are a form of social relationship between perpetrators and victims). Gender relations may therefore influence or partially form both "its core aspects" and the "wider context and causation of violence" (Walby et al. 2017: 42–43). Additionally, modern international law (the legal regime) has explicitly focused on increasing initiatives to end violence against women, and this has contributed to the perception of women as active political participants in democracy (ibid. 46–47).

Bouta, Frerks and Bannon (2005: 33) define gender-based violence (GBV) as: "physical, sexual, and psychological violence against both men and women that occurs within the family and the community and is perpetrated or condoned by the state". Bouta, Frerks and Bannon also point out that although GBV may occur at any point, it is frequently committed in circumstances of war, not as a coincidental byproduct of conflict, but as "a crime against the individual and an act of aggression against the entire community or nation" (ibid.). Despite the fact that GBV includes violence directed at all genders, women are more susceptible to it because of the ubiquitous and restrictive gender norms that exist both in peace and conflict (see Bouta, Frerks and Bannon 2017). The three authors distinguish between "physical, sexual, and psychological GBV occurring in the family"[5]; GBV that takes place in the community[6]; and GBV carried out by the state (systemic/structural violence). The authors also draw attention to the possible insidious effects of gender-based violence. Along with the immediate and long-term physical, sexual, psychological and social trauma experienced by GBV survivors, a community that has endured armed conflict and collective communal violence may adopt GBV in discourse and practice, even after the conflict ceases. Moreover, state-condoned or communal violence may shift to increased domestic violence because trauma can be internalized and transferred: "[i]n the aftermath of conflict, trauma that male combatants have suffered may be transformed into domestic violence." (Bouta, Frerks and Bannon 2017: 38) Domestic violence is not just personal and intersubjective to the GBV survivor, "it damages the fabric of society, creating fear in women's lives and socialising children into a culture of violence, which undermines social cohesion and transmits violence to the next generation" (ibid.).

5 That may range from sexual abuse and marital rape to non-spousal violence, dowry related violence, and "violence-related exploitation" (ibid. 34).

6 For example, sexual abuse, harassment, and rape occurring at work or other social institutions or walks of life, trafficking and "forced prostitution" (ibid.).

"HELPING [ONESELF] UNDERSTAND":[7] DEPICTIONS OF RACIAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN *FLYIN' WEST* AND *BOURBON AT THE BORDER*

The two plays in the focus of this paper echo the painful history of Black America and represent the diverse forms of violence the population suffered at the hands of the white hegemony before and after Emancipation. *Flyin' West* (1992) is embedded in the events of African American migrations to the Midwest at the end of the 1890s. It positions itself as a corrective to the dominant Eurocentric narratives of the West, thereby revising the racial and gender myths and historiography of white male supremacy in the American West. *Bourbon at the Border* (1997)[8] references the mid-1960s grassroots movements and organized non-violent attempts to enfranchise African Americans in the Deep South, who had been systemically and violently prevented from exercising their right to vote. This play attempts to recover from historiographic neglect and oblivion all those un-named African American activists of the Freedom Summer who endured prosecution and horrendous violent attacks by (state and local) Mississippi law enforcement[9]. A number of critics, including Benjamin Sammons (2007), see these plays *and Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1995) as a trilogy because they share a common thematic framework01 and identical structural design[11].

Flyin' and Bourbon both comprise two acts although the 1992 play is slightly longer: the former contains eleven, and the latter plays eight scenes altogether. Other differences include the number of characters, the language they speak, and the sub-

7 This references Pearl Cleage's *Mad at Miles*. For more information see Lisa M. Anderson (2008: 17). For more substantial information on the dramatist (and novelist) Pearl Cleage, see Beth Turner's "The feminist/womanist vision of Pearl Cleage" (2007).

8 *Flyin' West* and *Bourbon at the Border* will subsequently be shortened to *Flyin'* and *Bourbon*, respectively.

9 For more information on how Pearl Cleage uses her plays to foreground aspects of Black American (women) history and defiance to systemic oppression often unknown to the general public and neglected even by African American activists, scientists and historians, see Freda Scott Giles (1997), Lisa M. Anderson (2008), Julius B. Fleming (2014), and Kristyl D. Tift (2021). Cleage is a "resistant reader of history" (Scott Giles 1997: 709) who makes a conscious effort not only to educate her audiences but also to engage them actively in a continual re-examination of and resistance to (white and/or male) hegemonic narratives.

01 All three plays discuss various forms of systemic vilification, oppression and violence that African Americans have endured for centuries, and the ways in which this population has dealt with this traumatic history and memory.

11 Despite not having been devised or produced as a trilogy, each play ties its distinctive action to a decisive moment of African American history. In this manner Cleage foregrounds the complexity of collective Black history, and simultaneously saves it from utter effacement. Sammons (2007: 99) explains that in this way Cleage uses multiple texts to tackle the same issue – that of African Americans creating a haven in which they can seek personal emancipation by coping with and overcoming their "traumatic past".

genre and stage conventions used. Namely, *Flyin's* timeframe and locus of action mean it uses African American vernacular English (AAVE) to further characterize its six African American *dramatis personae* of both genders and different ages. In contrast, *Bourbon*'s four Black American characters of both genders (all in their forties) speak in fairly standard idiom, with only a few characteristics of AAVE (such as double negatives and particular verb contractions). The most considerable difference between the plays, however, is in the subgenre and stage conventions employed — *Flyin' West*, which among other things delves into the story of domestic gender-based violence, readily draws its structure from melodrama, and includes sensationalist intrigues and twists before culminating in a closing scene with a formulaic and predictable happy ending, in which the symbol of absolute good triumphs over that of ultimate evil.[21] Its action takes place inside and outside the prairie house of its main female protagonists, Sophie Washington, Fanny Dove, and Minnie Dove Charles over the course of ten days in September 1898, and on a day seven months later (in April 1899). On the other hand, *Bourbon at the Border* fully exploits the generic traits and stage conventions of realist drama. Its action plays out in the living room of May and Charles Thompson's Detroit apartment, where they are (almost daily) visited by their neighbor, widow Rosa St. John and her most recent suitor Tyrone Washington, a Vietnam-war veteran, over a period of two weeks in the summer of 1995. Moreover, the atmosphere in *Bourbon* is more oppressive, and the play ends on a more tragic note[31].

Flyin' West is set in Nicodemus, the oldest and longest-lasting Black landowners' settlement in Kansas. By that time[41] racist violence in the South escalated and the increase of terror and lynchings after the failure of the Reconstruction project in 1877 encouraged African Americans from the South to migrate west, to areas whose conquest had already relied on the prominent use of brutality:

> "Violence […] provided the most powerful tool for marginalizing non-white peoples and protecting the white man's West. […] As western communities grew, violence remained critical to creating and enforcing the dominance of whites over non-whites, marking both spatial and psychological boundaries in the process. From Texas to Washington State, Anglo-Americans

21 Benjamin Sammons (2007:100) claims that the play has received far greater critical reception exactly because of its "more optimistic" treatment of its thematic framework. For more information see Sammons' "Flyin'" Anyplace Else'.

31 For more information and an in-depth comparative analysis of *Flyin' West, Blues for an Alabama Sky*, and *Bourbon at the Border* within the theoretical framework of trauma studies see Sammons (2007). For a detailed reading of *Bourbon at the Border* that analyzes the playtext in light of the transmissibility of traumatic memory, see Fleming (2014).

41 At the end of 1898, when the play's action is set.

> employed violence to smother challenges to their control; and vigilante movements, in various times and places, targeted American Indian peoples, African Americans, Hispanics, the Chinese, and in rare instances even European ethnic groups." (Pierce 2016: 210)

Despite the embeddedness of brutality and savagery in the American West, a certain number of newly liberated Black Americans of the South still perceived it (particularly the part of the Midwest in which autonomous all-black settlements were being created) as a potential safe haven, endorsing autonomy and equality for Black people (Reeves 2013). Kansas was promoted as a promised land and a paradise for Black Americans, unquestionably contributing to the first wave of African American migration to the West. A couple of years later, in 1879, a more extensive migration of poorer African Americans, (the "Exodus of 1879", or the start of the "Great Migration") brought a large number of impoverished and disenfranchised African Americans from the southern states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas to the state, transforming the prairie demographic. According to Todd Arrington (2015), "[i]n 1870, Kansas had hosted a black population of approximately 16,250. Ten years later, in 1880, some 43,110 African-Americans [sic] called Kansas home. Between the earlier gradual migrations and the 1879 exodus, Kansas had gained nearly 27,000 black residents in ten years" (n.p.). Arrington reminds his readers that these 27,000 African-American individuals who moved to Kansas over a decade represented "27,000 individual dreams of a better life and 27,000 people that acted on their desires and their rights to enjoy the freedoms to which they supposedly had been entitled since the Emancipation Proclamation." (ibid). Although not all achieved personal self-realization or economic independence, many appreciated the West as a place to live free from the racial persecutions and terror that characterized the post-Reconstruction American South (see Arrington 2015)[51].

The dramatic story of *Flyin' West* is, as stated, the story of daily struggles and the toilsome life of Black American women in the Midwest; nevertheless, through its characters' slave narratives the play foregrounds not only the struggles of Black American women on the western frontier at the turn of the twentieth century but also

51 The Great Migration persisted as Northern and Western cities provided a release from the bigoted South (although violent race riots broke out in the North not long after migration accelerated), and a new opportunity for collective and individual economic and cultural growth. This brought together African Americans from different countries and backgrounds, with different ideas and ambitions. According to Alain Locke (1925), the internal migration from rural to urban areas was in reality a move "from medieval America to modern [one]," forcing African Americans to face "problems of adjustment" which were "new, practical, local and not peculiarly racial." (5–6). Grossman (2005) explains that "Robert S. Abbott called the Great Migration a 'second emancipation'" (108).

enslavement and the incomprehensible bouts of intersubjective and structural violence toward men and women before and in the aftermath of the Reconstruction Era. Its main action, however, narrows down to a case of intra-racial chauvinism and an instance of domestic violence, which the twenty-one-year-old Minnie Dove Charles suffers at the hands of her husband, the mixed-race Frank Charles. Frank, a light-skinned Black man in his mid-thirties who was born into slavery, abuses his pregnant wife emotionally, physically and economically, not ceasing even when the two visit Minnie's sisters. Minnie hides the abuse and makes various excuses for his vile behaviour, until the moment Frank's assault threatens her unborn baby. Although born a free woman, Minnie is not free: gender roles and racial relations implanted in nineteenth-century Euro- and phallocentric US society prevent her from being able to exercise universal human rights, even in her own home. Frank, on the other hand, is tangible, undeniable proof of systemic sexual exploitation and the abuse of enslaved Black women — his father, just like Sophie Washington's, was a white landowner, enslaver and rapist. Frank has internalized the structural and intersubjective violence to which he was exposed in childhood and the systemic and symbolic racial violence he continues to endure, as his white half-brothers deny his right to inherit part of his father's property and the court rules in their favour. Frank consequently renounces his Black origins and is quick to show hatred toward the African American community (including himself). Even his continued efforts at racial passing attest to Frank's susceptibility to symbolic racial violence.

Conversely, the traumatic experiences within the culture of violence that the white population created and upheld in slavery and upon Emancipation push thirty-six-year-old Sophie Washington, another mixed-race character born into slavery, in the other — internalized she strongly ties her identity to the black community of Nicodemus. Sophie does a lot of work in the community, and agitates for a law that would prevent white families from buying land in the autonomous black settlement. She expresses her distrust (and the over-vigilance) of white Americans: "I don't want no white folks tellin' me what to do all day" (Cleage 1992: 21). Sadly, Sophie was born and raised in a violent culture, in which organized state-condoned violence meant she could not exert control over anything in her life. Her means of taking power and protecting her autonomy are threefold: she migrates away from a community of collective violence; owns and fiercely protects her own piece of land (and that of the black community); and brandishes a shotgun. Through the character of Sophie, Pearl Cleage depicts the violence embedded in systemic racism during and in the immediate aftermath of the Reconstruction era (via black codes[61]and the Jim Crow laws):

61 The so-called black codes, which were state level legislative decrees issued in the aftermath of the Civil War,

> "[...] I kept trying to tell them it doesn't matter what it's like [out there in the wilderness.] Any place is better than here! […] Memphis was full of crazy white men acting like when it came to colored people, they didn't have to be bound by law or common decency. Dragging people off in the middle of the night. Doing whatever they felt like doing. Colored women not safe in their own houses […]" (Cleage 1992: 41–42)[71]

Moreover, through the figures of Sophie, Fanny Dove, Miss Leah, and Wil Parrish, Cleage reveals the effects of domestic violence on the community—each expresses great dismay, not knowing how to react at first, but eventually taking the same principled stand. As Parish states: "I don't understand how a coloured man can hit a coloured woman, Miss Fannie. We been [sic] through too much together" (ibid. 72). Witnessing the gender and racial abuse of one member of the family/community leaves all members shaken and retraumatized. It even pushes the oldest character in the play, seventy-three-year-old Miss Leah, who spent most of her life enslaved, to reveal all the forms of racial and gender-based violence she had experienced:

> "When they sold my first baby boy offa the place, I felt like I couldn't breathe for three days. After that, I could breathe a little better, but my breasts were so full of milk they'd soak the front of my dress. Overseer kept telling me he was gonna have to see if nigger milk was really chocolate like they said it was, so I had to stay away from him 'til my milk stopped runnin'. [...] So next time they put us together I told him [her husband James] that I was gonna be sure this time he got to see his chile before Colonel Harrison sold it. But I couldn't. Not that one or the one after or the one after the ones after that. James never saw their faces. Until we got free. […] They broke the chain, Baby Sister. But we have to build it back. And build it back strong so the next time nobody can break it. Not from the outside and not from the inside. We can't let nobody take our babies. We've given up all the babies we can afford to lose. …" (Cleage 1992: 73–74).

continued the disenfranchisement and control of the newly liberated Black American population as they "not only forced African Americans to work for free but also essentially placed them under surveillance. Their comings and goings, meetings and church services were all monitored by the authorities and local officials. Black people needed passes and white sponsors to move from place to place or to leave town. Collectively, these regulations codified a permanent underclass status for African Americans." (Kareem Nittle 2020).

71 Sophie's fictional words painfully echo those of famous African American journalist and activist Ida B. Wells. In 1892, after the lynching of three black citizens (including her friend Thomas Moss) in Memphis, Wells exposed the root causes of terror for African Americans in the South, and asserted that "[…] There is therefore only one thing left to do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts …" (Wells in McMurry 1998: 135–136). Living conditions and the interconnected quality of life were substantially poorer in the rural South, which at that time still embodied the account given three and a half decades before (a mere five years before the Emancipation Proclamation): there "blacks 'had no rights which the white man was bound to respect" (Grossman 2005: 68).

By the end of the play, all the members of the household take action to get rid of the abuser and his vileness by poisoning him, thus finally taking control over their lives and their community, albeit through violent means. Frank's "violent acts bring violent retribution" (Giles 1997: 710).[81]

Bourbon at the Border sets its plot in 1995 Detroit, Michigan. It reflects on more contemporary forms of systemic and symbolic violence against Black Americans of both genders: the marginalization, disenfranchisement, vilification and murder of Black Americans which continued well into the 1960s and 1970s. Racial profiling and *de facto* segregation in housing policies were often employed by real estate agents to prevent integrated communities.[91] Harding, Kelly and Lewis (2005: 225) point out that white citizens and real estate brokers maintained that their kind of segregation was motivated by economic reality rather than racism. They claimed they had nothing against Black people, but were concerned about the value of their properties decreasing.

Brutality in all forms and parameters exudes from the dramatic story of *Bourbon at the Border*. Despite the fact that the audience never once sees a terrorizing act on stage, the narratives of state-condoned violence told by May and Charles Thompson, and the allusions and direct references to the instances of sexism and racism experienced by Rosa St. John and Tyrone Washington make this play even more scathing in its portrayal of structural violence. The four African American characters in their late forties are depicted trying to make a living in 1990s border town of Detroit. The plot revolves around Charles Thompson's return from a psychiatric ward, and his and May's struggle with his full (social) reintegration. Simultaneously, Rosa and May try to get and keep jobs in a culture that has limited them through sexism and racism, and experience the effects of symbolic violence first-hand. Tyrone is a former Vietnam veteran who landed a job as a driver for a transport company only because he had allegedly saved the life of his (white) employer, and it is he who helps Charles become employed in the same company. Racial profiling means none of the characters live an easy life — they do not own homes,[02] and have trouble getting work; they are of-

81 Highly intriguing analyses of why all four of Cleage's women protagonists in *Flyin'* partake in Frank's poisoning can be found in Giles (1997), Sammons (2007), and Tift (2021).

91 As foregrounded by Harding, Kelly and Lewis (2005): "Sometimes white resistance to black neighbors turned deadly. In Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and several other cities (in both the North and the South), newly purchased homes were burned, vandalized, or had crosses burned on their lawns—a common tactic adopted by white supremacist organizations, notably the Ku Klux Klan" (225).

02 The Federal Housing Administration, the agency charged with providing mortgages for low-income citizens to regulate and improve US housing standards, perpetuated the institutional oppression of Black Americans by refusing loans to those who wanted to move to White areas. The agency claimed that African Americans were "poor risks for loans," and considered the future value of their houses unsure (Harding, Kelly and Lewis 2005:

fered menial jobs, given inadequate medical assistance, and are easy targets for (excessive) policing. May takes two jobs, one of which is a night shift in the cleaning industry; Rosa entertains the idea of becoming a phone sex worker; Charles is denied a low-grade blue-collar job in a warehouse, allegedly because of his age but actually because of his hospitalization. Tyrone is the only African American person in a transportation company and dreams big despite facing daily racial prejudice, nurturing the hope that he will soon move up the company ladder. Unlike Tyrone and Rosa, who, despite being marginalized and oppressed, show no interest in Black activism, both May and Charles were activists in 1964, and May joins a Black workers' union. In the background are instances of actual heinous race and gender-based crimes that occur at the time the play is set, and the consequent over-policing of the African American community, as well as symbolic gender-based and racial violence on film and in public discourse. Even if Cleage hints at the state-condoned racial violence May and Charles experienced in 1964, when they volunteered to fight the disenfranchisement of African Americans in Mississippi, it is not until the play's final two scenes that the audience fathoms the full range of intersubjective and institutional harassment, and physical, mental and sexual violence the pair experienced at the hands of the police which traumatized them for life. While attempting to explain Charles' latest spate of awkward behaviour to Rosa, May tells her of the horrors they survived:

> "And then they were shining their flashlights in our faces. They took us to the jail, the sheriff and two deputies, and they locked the front door, and they locked the back door, and they took us down in the basement. At first I thought they were just trying to scare us. [...] They told him [Charlie] he could beat me for having such a smart mouth or he could watch while they finished what he had started by the side of the road.12 [...] Finally, they said, "Okay. This nigger must want us to show him how it's done," and one of the deputies told me to take my clothes off. [...] They stood right there and made him hit me harder and harder. [...] So they made him beat me half to death and then that one who had told me to take my clothes off pulled my dress over my face and did it anyway. [...] Then one night, one of the volunteers called to tell me that Charlie had been arrested again, by the same ones who had picked us up before, [...] They held him at Parchman for two weeks and did everything they could think of to him, and never even charged him with anything …" (Cleage 1997: 261–262)

225).

12 Charlie and May were apprehended as they were resting and embracing not far from the road.

As a consequence of the brutality May details to her friend, she and Charles remain physically maimed and psychologically traumatized for life: May suffers from infertility, and Charles has a limp because his leg was broken in three pieces. Additionally, Charles has internalized the trauma and reveals that he murdered three white men because: "I ran for thirty years, May, and then I let it catch me, and I picked out three, just like those three in Mississippi picked us out, and I did what a man is supposed to do. And I'm sorry, May. Not for the killing. For all those years I didn't kill anybody" (Cleage 1997: 268). Neither May nor Charles can ever escape their past trauma, as it is inscribed on their bodies as much as it is embedded deep in their psyches.[22]

Through such tangible depiction of the *Bourbon* characters' daily struggles, and referencing the racial and gender-based violence they survived during this "American racial warfare" (Cleage 1997/1999: 191), Cleage foregrounds the effects of systemic structural violence stemming from centuries-long and widespread American myths and narratives of supremacy of one race over all others. Its implications meant that black communities remained underdeveloped even in the latter half of the twentieth century:

> "Specifically, segregation, caused by a racial caste system, has resulted in unemployment, underemployment, economic exploitation, and political disenfranchisement. […] The notion of blackness and the communities where black people lived became synonymous with dilapidation, poverty, and crime. Such racial stigmata persists today and operates to maintain customary segregation along racial, economic, and residential lines." (Gaynor, Kang & Williams 2021: 53)

Even nowadays, African Americans are forced to endure either the over- or under-policing of their neighborhoods, stereotyped "conflat[ions of] race and criminality. [... which] have led to associations of wrongdoing and criminality almost exclusively linked to racial identity and economic status, yet understood as truth." (ibid. 53–54). Gaynor, Kang and Williams (2021) explain that it is precisely because of the racist myths and stereotyping in the US, and the country's centuries-old intertwining of two simultaneous criminal justice systems, that "individuals living in overwhelmingly black and low-income communities find themselves interacting with police at much greater rates" (54). Moreover, violent incidents in which the police caused the deaths of Trayvon Martin (2012), Eric Garner (2014), Michael Brown (2014), Breonna Taylor (2020), and George Floyd (2020) brought to light the abnormally high death rate among Black individuals at the hands of on-duty police officers (ibid. 56), and spurred

22 See Fleming (2014), and Sammons (2007) for more extensive analyses.

the Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality (Encylopedia Britannica 2024: "Black Lives Matter"). Gaynor, Kang and Williams found that the disproportionately high rates of Black deaths at the hands of police (accounting for 25 percent of police homicides, although African Americans make up just 12.3 percent of the US population;[32] ibid. 58) are affected by the social construct of race; segregation policies; monitoring, policing and other forms of systemic disempowerment pre- and post-Emancipation; and the perceived association of blackness with poverty and criminality.[42] One must agree with the claim of Boyce and Chunnu that "[s]adly, US society is still mired in the message of D. W. Griffith's controversial film [The Birth of the Nation]" (144).

The analyzed two plays of Pearl Cleage vividly represent the repressive effects of systemic violence brought about by the intersubjective, structural and symbolic racial brutality embedded in the culture of collective violence against non-white Americans. By setting the actions of her plays at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Pearl Cleage references the root causes and circumstances of Black homesteading in the Midwest, and the Black Civil Rights Movement and the Freedom Summer of 1964 respectively, and reminds contemporary audiences of the long history of white violence embedded in the making of the USA. At the same time, Cleage resists the dominant historiographic narratives on the conquest of the American West and recovers from Civil Rights history all the unknown and unnamed survivors of "American racial warfare" (Cleage op. cit.). Moreover, by portraying domestic and state-condoned gender-based violence, fundamental reasons for its occurrences, and individual and communal reactions to it, Cleage, in the fictional representation of violence breeding further violence, cautions that a society that has systematically endorsed such a culture cannot expect anything but psychological damage in all its denizens.

32 Of the 330 million people currently living in the USA, about 42 million identify as Black, making the group the second largest minority, after Hispanic (USA Facts 2024). Today, although adult Black Americans live throughout the USA, almost half dwell in Southern urban and suburban areas, with only 2 in 10 (18 percent of the half) categorizing their residence as rural (Cox and Tamir 2022).

42 Contrary to expectations and deep-seated prejudices, the study denounces beliefs that this is only the case in former Confederate states; racial profiling and biased/racist theories on Black criminality which lead to excessive police force and homicides of African Americans are spread throughout the US (see Gaynor, Kang and Williams 2021: 58–62; Boyce and Chunnu 2019: 130–137).

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PRIKAZIVANJE SISTEMSKOG RASNO ZASNOVANOG I RODNO ZASNOVANOG NASILJA I NJIHOVIH POSLJEDICA U DJELIMA PEARL CLEAGE (*FLYIN' WEST* I *BOURBON AT THE BORDER*)

Sažetak:

Svijet koji je čovječanstvo stvaralo i u kojem živi barem par milenija danas reflektira kulturu nasilja. Preovladavajući osjećaj nestabilnosti i straha kojeg takva kultura izaziva, te upadljiv porast teških krivičnih djela, rasnog i rodnog šovinizma, uznemiravanja i maltretiranja širom svijeta zahtijevaju temeljito proučavanje podmuklosti nasilja i moralna su odgovornost svakog savremenog autora. Ovaj rad analizira slike sistemskog rasnog i rodno zasnovanog nasilja u dva fikcionalna dramska djela koja je 1990-ih napisala afroamerička dramaturginja Pearl Cleage, istovremeno se referirajući na historijat Afroamerikanca u SAD-u u periodu od konca devetnaestog stoljeća. Da bi se uspješno razmotrili prikriveni efekti sistemskog nasilja prikazani u dvije odabrane drame, u radu se najprije govori o oblicima nasilja. Smatra se da Cleage svoju savremenu publiku podsjeća na dugu historiju bjelačkog nasilja ukorijenjenog u narastanje Sjedinjenih Američkih Država i da dvije analizirane drame živo ilustriraju represivne posljedice sistemskog nasilja.

Ključne riječi: intersekcionalnost; rasne studije; rodne studije; nasilje; Pearl Cleage, *Flyin' West; Bourbon at the Border*

Author's address
Adresa autorice

Ifeta Čirić-Fazlija
University of Sarajevo
Faculty of Philosophy
ifeta.ciric@ff.unsa.ba