

Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to explore African American theatre through the lens of performativity and to show how the performative concepts of passing and entrenchment affected the writing of African American playwrights in the 1950s and 1960s. To this end, the first part of the work is focused on establishing performativity as a concept, starting with its origins in linguistics and then tracing its development. The main influences for this section are the works of Judith Butler, Nadine Ehlers, Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick. Butler's work on performativity is used as the main source for understanding performativity in its contemporary sense and to establish "passing" as a performative act. Ehlers' work serves to connect performativity to race and to show the use of "entrenchment" in performativity. Finally, Parker and Sedgwick's work provides a bridge between performativity and theatrical performance as they describe the "relations of spectatorship" necessary for the existence of theatre. Since performativity, in theatre or anywhere else, is based on discourse, the thesis will show the images and relations of spectatorship that defined African American theatre and performance since its inception. These include slave performance, black minstrelsy, but also the first attempts at quintessentially African American theatre. All these together served to create the ground on which African American theatre finally built in the 1950s and 1960s, when it garnered the most attention and when its performative aspects were the most profound. Therefore, the final chapter of this work explores first the era of African American theatre from 1950 to 1960, when passing and integration defined the course of African American dramatists, and then the thesis moves to the 1960s, a decade defined by the tumultuous social change in the public sphere, and entrenchment and the search for blackness in the theatrical sphere.