"The Right Choice": Introducing Black Youth's Struggle as Protest in Katori Hall's *Hurt Village* and Bola Agbaje's *Gone Too Far!*[1]

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Abstract: *This study discusses the ways in which an African American playwright – Katori Hall – and a Black British playwright – Bola Agbaje – represent the obstacles young people face as they strive to make "the right choice" and not be put down by the places in which they live: a housing project in Memphis, Tennessee, and a council estate in London. The demonstration shows that both female authors, born in 1981, create forms of protest theatre since they explore contemporary race and gender issues in the American and British communities they tackle, insightfully pointing to problematic aspects, but capitalizing on hope, the potential for self-fulfillment and confidence in the youth's future. In* Hurt Village *(2007), Katori Hall's young protagonist is a thirteen-year-old girl, Cookie, who resists following the route of her predecessors and even her peers. In* Gone Too Far! *(2007), Bola Agbaje captures the troubles of two teenage brothers, Yemi and Ikudayisi, as they interact with each other and other people in their neighborhood.*

Keywords: *youth culture, protest, race, gender, anti-discrimination, Memphis, London, Katori Hall, Bola Agbaje, contemporary drama*

Both Katori Hall, resident playwright at the Signature Theatre in New York City, and Bola Agbaje, currently under commission to the Out of Joint Theatre Company in London, aim at reaching young audiences by identifying themes and techniques that are attractive to them. Trying to inspire black youth, both Hall and Agbaje are interested in showing, in two plays published in 2007, how young people from disadvantaged environments cope with everyday hardships and struggle to make "the right choice". The protagonists in Hall's *Hurt Village* and Agbaje's *Gone Too Far!* fight the negative influences and pressures connected to their places of residence: a housing project in Memphis, Tennessee and a council estate in London, respectively. The current study demonstrates that both women playwrights born in 1981 explore contemporary race and gender issues in the American and British communities they deal with, insightfully pointing to social inequity, inter- and intra-racial discrimination, institutional failures, but capitalizing on hope, the potential for self-fulfillment and confidence in the youth's future. Thus, the two artists create forms of protest theatre aimed at engendering change in society.

Both synchronic and diachronic approaches to theatre created by black women underline its close ties to protest and activism. A 2009 survey of African

[1] An earlier version of this essay was presented at the "Let the Sun Shine In: American Theatre, Protest and Censorship" international conference, organized by the American Theatre and Drama Society and the Eccles Centre for American Studies and held at the British Library, London (26-27 October, 2018).

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American women in the performing arts starts from the premise that "self and community have been inextricably linked to African American women's incessant search to find the place they needed, and, as black women, were not allowed to have in North American society" (Barrios 187) and continues by presenting artistic voices that struggled for visibility, justice and equality even before the turn of the twentieth century, various coherent movements gaining impetus between 1950 and 1980 (Barrios 187-203). In the closing section devoted to the period from 1980 to the present, the analysis of Suzan-Lori Parks, Anna Deavere Smith, and Pearl Cleage points to the continuing involvement of African American women playwrights with black nationalism and feminism into the twenty-first century (Barrios 203-206). This theatrical environment[2] shapes Hall's art and needs to be acknowledged.

Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, in a 2003 book-length study, Gabriele Griffin explains that "Black and Asian women playwrights prominently engage with historical and contemporary social and political issues that impact on their communities in particular ways" (16), proceeding to identify their major themes, among which "diasporic subjects" and "cultural clashes" receive special attention (Griffin 36-76; 138-169). These very concerns are revisited by Agbaje, who emerges in the context of a tradition of Black British women playwrights and carves her own path. Clearly, protest overtones of minority playwriting have often been discussed, but the specificities of Hall's and Agbaje's contributions to the debates are worth investigating, thus justifying the endeavor here.

In *Hurt Village*, winner of the 2007 New Professional Theatre Writers Festival and the 2011 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, Katori Hall's young protagonist is a smart thirteen-year-old girl, Cookie, who resists following the dead-end route of her parents and her peers. Even if her immediate environment offers little support for her ambitions, she empowers herself, on the one hand, through her capacity to reflect on what happens via rap as artistic expression and, on the other hand, through her focus on acquiring knowledge and education. Thus she tries to escape the limitations of her current position.

Katori Hall's play discussed here is very different from the more famous *The Mountaintop* (2009), even though both plays are set in Memphis. While *The Mountaintop* is a history play that focuses on a leading African American figure, Martin Luther King Jr., "conjecturing what may have been King's final thoughts, reservations, desires, and fears" (Colbert 98), *Hurt Village* introduces ordinary African American people and their contemporary problems. *Hurt Village*, directed by Patricia McGregor, opened at Off-Broadway's Pershing Square Signature

[2] Philip C. Kolin's introduction to a volume in the Routledge series Casebooks on Modern Dramatists also suggests the legacy of activism at the heart of the field, as he subtitles it "The Struggles and Triumphs of Staging Gender and Race in Contemporary African American Playwrights" (1-8).

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Center in February 2012. *The New York Times* review of the production compares it to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which comes to mind due to the two plays' subject matter, a black family's aspiration for a better home, and the prominent role played by the citadel of the family, the strong black grandmother, Big Mama, seen as a reincarnation of Hansberry's Mama, Lena Younger.[3] The same review remarks the young girl's central position in Hall's play as the first lines are entrusted to her as she is "rapping an exultant love-hate poem to Hurt Village, the apartment complex where she has grown up, on the eve of its demolition" (Brantley).

Indeed, from the very beginning of the play, Cookie becomes the voice of an entire community, when she declares defiantly:

> This is my ode to project people strugglin' /
> Mamas and fathers hold yo' daughters /
> I'm precocious / most here know this and they know
> I spit the illest shit /
> I spin ghetto tales that'll make you weep (Hall 1.1, p. 256)

Assigning herself the mission of speaking out and bearing witness to the harsh realities around her, Cookie, "the street storyteller" (Hall 1.1, p. 256), makes a commitment to politically engaged forms of art that place truth and social justice above all other concerns. Despite the controversies surrounding rap practitioners, reproached sometimes for reinforcing race and gender stereotypes, rap is used in the play as a liberating form of expression, a medium that a young girl can reinvent for her own purposes and in which she can use her talents freely, this being confirmed by the critical opinion according to which in the play rap functions as "both a weapon and a release, a brandishing of arms and of affection" (Brantley). When using rap, Hall builds upon a long tradition discussed by theatre historians such as Annette J. Saddik[4]: "The theatrical power of rap has not been lost on playwrights, many of whom have incorporated rap's poetic styles and themes" (99). It is Hall's merit to contest the notion that rap is a highly masculine form and to appropriate it for feminist purposes.

Cookie's dream is to become a rapper, and the reviewer notices that "Her gift with a swift comeback rhyme is what's kept her afloat in a world that threatens to drown her" (Brantley). In the case of this young artist, revolt sustains her and feeds her aspirations of bringing about change for herself and her community, but

[3] Even a reference material such as *Masterpieces of 20th-Century American Drama* emphasizes these traits that characterize Lena Younger: "Mama's key attributes are her strength and her clear sense of direction" (Abbotson 122).

[4] The last section of the chapter entitled "African-American Theatre: Voices from the Margins" in Annette J. Saddik's *Contemporary American Drama* gives a brief history of rap as African American multifaceted performative form (94-103).

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at the same time, revolt can also be dangerous. For the time being, at the end of the Prologue, she only gets in trouble with her mother because of ignoring the curfew, but the disclosures she occasions through her storytelling might eventually upset the gangsters of the Million Dollar Track as she testifies to the fact that on her street "You can get yo' crack, smack, dro, *and* you can catch a bullet" (Hall 1.1, p. 257). As a matter of fact, her immediate circle engages in the drug trade. As the play progresses, the audience finds out that both her surrogate father, Cornbread, and her biological father, Buggy, who returns home from the war and initially rejects such an occupation, resort to selling drugs as a way of making money fast, oscillating between giving up as soon as their financial situation improves and taking over the leadership of the enterprise in the area. The teenagers in Cookie's neighborhood, Ebony and Skillet, friends and enemies at the same time, are also involved in drug trafficking, while the activity that seems to embolden their emerging masculine egos and favorite pastime appears to be the war of the words through which they take insult to unprecedented heights and profess their rivalry creatively, their contest being performed in front of a crowd and several self-appointed referees (Hall 1.2, pp. 274-281).

Cookie's relationship with her mother, Crank, revisits the problems of black teenage motherhood, as Crank gave birth when she was thirteen. It is a relationship full of contradictions, which the playwright presents with tenderness and empathy, inviting the audience to refrain from judgment and dwell on the complex factors involved in the current situation. Crank does not have much formal education of her own, but she is supportive of her daughter's efforts in school. She is introduced as "three years clean off of crack" (Hall 254), but falls back into drug addiction by the end of the play. As a single mother, she feels infinite love for her daughter as well as guilt for not being able to express it. Even when formulating the "last thoughts of a druggie's / Cooked-out choked-out wired mind" (Hall 2.11, p. 345), Crank focuses on her daughter and the guilt of not having shown her more love.

While doing the best she can, Crank seems to feel inept at rising to self-imposed standards of competent mothering skills. Inimical circumstances that oppress individuals of her race and gender as well as personal flaws prevent her from being able to protect her daughter and from offering her everything she feels the child deserves. When talking to Cookie's father, she articulates her fear and rage:

> Sometimes I look at her and I hate myself. Yeah, I just can't believe I done brought another lil' black girl into this worl'. This worl' ain't built fo' beautiful brown black girls. The worl' ignore her, kick her when it's suppose to love her, bite her when it's suppose to kiss her, tell her she ugly when she really pretty, rape her and blame it on her, piss on her stomach, cum on her face and say that the way to make a dollar, shake what ya momma gave you, not knowin' that what her mama gave her can't be

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> bought. That her pussy is priceless. A lil' black girl got a hard load to carry. Sometimes I look at her and wish she ain't never been born. Not because I don't love her but because I love her with all my heart. Now is you gone be the worl' or her daddy? (Hall 2.12, p. 349)

Crank envisages the kind of life that is in store for her daughter based on her own experience and the projection is terrifying. Her sense of helplessness and defeat prompt her to bemoan the harsh fate that, according to her, awaits her daughter, while the lack of solutions for a brighter future makes her angry and bitter. Her language and attitude try to condemn patriarchal and racial prejudices, but end up reproducing them, pointing to the degree to which they have been internalized and demonstrating how hard, if not impossible, it is to escape them.

Incapable of identifying methods of punishment different to those she must have experienced herself as a child or a parenting style devoid of punishment altogether, she resorts to the belt when told that Cookie refused to say the pledge of allegiance rather than investigate the cause and try to understand and empathize with her daughter. Actually the refusal had been caused by the fact that there had appeared "a deep crimson red stain on her bottom" (Hall 2.12, p. 347), but Crank does not have the time or the clear-sightedness to look beyond the appearances of what seems to be yet another act of teenage insubordination.

Given her mother's instability and unreliability, Cookie's need for role models skips two generations: both her parents' and her grandparents'. Big Mama, her father's grandmother, had taken both Cookie and Crank in, on condition that the latter stayed away from drugs. It is this fifty-five-year old woman, "the matriarch of the family and respected hard-working pillar of the community" (Hall 254), as Hall describes her, who supports and inspires Cookie to adhere to values that her own parents seem to disregard. This elderly lady embraces self-reliance, work ethics and the willingness to serve others, especially one's family, struggling to pass on these tenets to the youngest members of her household.

The scene in which Big Mama has to go to the welfare office from which she received a note that they do not qualify for relocation to a new house since she earns a little bit over the limit is memorable (Hall 2.4, pp. 323-324). When talking about her responsibilities, Big Mama mentions her grandson, the war veteran suffering from a post-traumatic stress condition, his young daughter and the girl's mother. Big Mama's vision of Cookie's potential justifies her own sacrifice as well as the urgency for her to do whatever it takes to ensure a home for the child: "they gots a beautiful smart lil' girl – the best of both of them – and she gone be somethin'" (Hall 2.4, pp. 323-4). The older woman's belief that it is possible for Cookie to rise above her context, no matter how stultifying, is consistent with the play's own suggestion that there is hope for the young. Showing faith in the girl's future is an act of resistance coming from both Big Mama and the playwright.

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Big Mama is the perfect embodiment of the "othermother" concept discussed in Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*: "Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers, who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood" (194). As self-appointed caregivers who make a conscious choice of saving both young mothers and their children, othermothers contribute to community building and thus engage in political activism (Collins 205-207), which becomes empowering for women and for entire communities alike. Big Mama teaches through her own example and Cookie will probably follow in her footsteps, her own contribution being at least as important and inspiring, given the fact that her artistic aspirations have the propensity to be even more impactful than her predecessor's. Irrespective of their domain or age, strong female citizens can and should make a difference: "Black women's involvement in community work forms one important basis of power within Black civil society" (Collins 208). By creating such memorable female characters that help themselves, their immediate circles and larger groups of people, Hall does her own part in suggesting that she has confidence in the younger generation and makes a political statement meant to initiate societal changes that embrace anti-discrimination attitudes and measures. Her vision will reach larger audiences as soon as the film adaptation of her play, currently in development, is released.

The same need for black youth mobilization and political engagement is sounded in the Black British work to be analyzed here: *Gone Too Far!* by Bola Agbaje. In 2011 the play was included in an anthology that gathered texts by Mustapha Matura, Jackie Kay, Winsome Pinnock, Roy Williams and Kwame Kwei-Armah, the volume testifying to the fact that "Black British playwriting is thriving at the beginning of the twenty-first century, benefiting from initiatives to address institutional racism in the British theatre sector that have started to make the industry more culturally diverse and closer to truly reflecting the demographic of a multiracial society" (Goddard, "Introduction" xxv). Having important predecessors who were quintessential in creating visibility for a strong Black presence in the British theatre,[5] Agbaje does not shy away from putting forth delicate issues such as intra-racial violence.

Winner of the 2008 Laurence Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in an Affiliate Theatre, Agbaje's play looks at constructions of masculinity primarily as it captures the troubles of two brothers, sixteen-year-old Yemi and

[5] Further details about the history of Black British playwriting are provided in the fourth chapter of David Lane's *Contemporary British Drama*, as the author surveys terminology, definitions, strategies, debates, major representatives, and future perspectives of the field (108-132). Most usefully, Lane insists that "although theatre has a role to play in encouraging social diversity and intercultural tolerance, its most important function is to ask difficult questions of an increasingly divided society, through the highest quality artistic work possible" (115).

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eighteen-year-old Ikudayisi, as they interact with each other and their neighbors during a most eventful day on a council estate in London. The fact that Ikudayisi has recently arrived from Nigeria to England, where his mother and younger brother have lived for many years, facilitates the play's commentary on the contrasts between the perspectives coming directly from Africa today and those of black teenagers in Britain who, even if raised by African parents, have superficial knowledge of their roots. Furthermore, the play investigates the black youth culture priding itself for being of Caribbean descent and showing contempt towards peers of African descent.

Using the tools of social comedy and programmatically addressing young people as its target audience, *Gone Too Far!* was first staged at the Royal Court Young Writers Festival 2007 in the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, directed by Bijan Sheibani. It was the opening of an auspicious playwriting career for Agbaje, whose next plays also enjoyed success. In *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream*, Lynette Goddard considers Agbaje a leading voice among several British West African playwrights who launched their careers in the second half of the 2000s. Goddard's book reserves one full chapter for discussing Agbaje's council estate plays "in relation to debates about how millennial black British playwrights have extended identity politics narratives by focusing on complex social concerns that engender the wider social relevance of their work" (157). The critic's detailed analysis of *Gone Too Far!* shows that the play is grounded in immediate events, brilliantly contextualizing certain motifs in the play such as the 2007 banning of hoodie-wearing young people from entering a shopping center (Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights* 160) or the rising concern regarding knife crime the same year (Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights* 162). However, Goddard's commentaries on the use of Yoruba language on stage prove most valuable to those who have not had the chance to attend a production of the play. She explains:

> The loss inherent in Yemi's resistance to learning to speak Yoruba because he lives in England is emphasized by the bilingual element of Agbaje's play where translations are given for the Yoruba sections of speech in the text that are not spoken in the production. Audience members who are unfamiliar with the language would likely share Yemi's bewilderment about what is being said when Ikudayisi, his Mum, and Blazer speak Yoruba. In some cases, such as when Ikudayisi insults Armani, both Yemi and those audience members who do not understand Yoruba are slightly left outside of the joke. (*Contemporary Black British Playwrights* 161)

The director's refusal to find a way of providing the translation is intended to create discomfort for the misguided young man who has ignored his mother tongue for many years and to force the audience to get acquainted with an African

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language rarely heard on stage. Exposure to the foreign sounds is an intelligent staging choice consistent with the playwright's aim at affirming Nigerian identity and at creating awareness about African cultures in Britain.

Believing that he has acquired all necessary London norms of coolness, which correspond to urban Caribbean style, Yemi initially resists embracing his newly arrived brother, perceived as lacking the code that would allow him to fit in. The play capitalizes on cool patterns of speech and fashion choices, while the movie adaptation directed by Destiny Ekaragha in 2013 also includes rap and rap musicians' debates surrounding ethnic identity as markers of coolness. Consequently, the play implies that Yemi actually rejects his African heritage. However, as the play advances, his interest in Nigerianness grows. A turning point for his transformation is the revelation that Blazer, the gang leader, is Nigerian himself. The leader's approach to African culture, "It's not a bad thing to be African. Be proud to be different" (Agbaje 7, p. 439), instills in Yemi the need to learn Yoruba from his brother and accept his roots proudly.

While aware of the prejudices Londoners have about black youth and fully capable of avoiding misunderstanding, Yemi chooses confrontation in order to assert his dissatisfaction with the world and affirm his aggressive masculinity, revolutionary attitude and anti-discrimination stance. His clashes both with a Bangladeshi shopkeeper who would not allow him to enter the shop unless he takes off his hoodie (Agbaje 2 p. 392-8) and with two police officers who mistake the brothers' play fighting for enactment of street violence (Agbaje 7, pp. 444-451) demonstrate that he is articulate to the point of being disrespectful, and as his elder brother notices, he has the tendency to blow things out of proportion. In the latter scene, Yemi ends up on the verge of being arrested and defends himself as follows:

> You came up to me with nothing to say, nothing! Just tryna force me to get mad. TO GET MAD SO I WILL DO SOMETHING, SO YOU CAN DO ME FOR SOMINK. That's how you people are corrupt. When you should be out doing something constructive. You're bugging me cos I'm black. (Agbaje 7, p. 449)

Yemi is clearly upset at what he perceives to be racial profiling on the part of the two policemen. But rather than explain his objections neutrally and calmly, he resorts to offences and raises his voice, thus aggravating the situation. In Michael Pearce's interpretation of this episode in the play, Agbaje suggests that "black youth are often pushed into a position of social opposition as a result of systemic discrimination" (136-137). By representing this phenomenon on stage, Agbaje hopes to open up a debate and succeed in bringing about scrutiny at institutional level.

Besides inter-racial conflict, there is also intra-racial verbal and physical violence in London, which Agbaje engages with. The one character in the play who

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expresses the strongest anti-African prejudices is Armani, a young woman of mixed descent. Being raised by a white mother, but constructing her racial identity by clinging to an absent Jamaican black father, she exposes her ignorance and confusion when trying to defend her position. She makes hurtful remarks about what some associate with Africa: certain physical features, "big lips and big nose" (Agbaje 3, p. 402), a certain skin color, "black-black" (Agbaje 3, p. 403), a certain recipe, "jelly and rice" (Agbaje 3, p. 404), certain difficult names, "Adebabatunde, or whatever your name is" (Agbaje 3, p. 404). Her racism has been commented on as follows: "Armani's anti-African stance is revealed as an integral aspect of her constructed, and therefore lends authenticity to, her Jamaican identity" (Pearce 138). As a matter of fact, she only strives for authenticity, but the play exposes her racist discourse as ridiculous and unacceptable.

The intra-racial tensions, which Armani contributes to throughout the play, escalate in the penultimate scene. Yemi and Razer, a Caribbean gang member, get into a knife fight, which represents the worst consequence of the African versus Caribbean antagonism. Yemi believes that his Nike Air trainers, which had been borrowed and worn by his brother, were stolen by Razer; so he attacks the latter to get them back and prove himself, "I AIN'T BENEATH NO ONE" (Agbaje 11, p. 466). He refuses to listen to Ikudayisi who testifies that Razer is not the one who robbed him and that losing a pair of trainers is not a good enough reason to risk his life for. By casting Ikudayisi, "who is good-natured, polite, respectful of his elders" (Pearce 140), as a mature and rational young man who teaches everyone a lesson, Agbaje re-affirms her projection of a Nigerian upbringing as valuable. Ikudayisi reminds his younger brother and the others present at the scene that apparently insignificant choices count and represent steps towards a proper way of life. Furthermore, he defends the need for achieving intra-racial reconciliation and for focusing on self-fulfillment, which will ultimately benefit the whole community:

> We are all BLACK! WE ARE ALL BLACK AND YOU ARE ACTING LIKE WE ARE ALL DIVIDED! It needs to stop now. We need to stop this nonsense. Why are you always fighting each other? Why can't we just get along? I just want everyone to get along. Yemi, you tell me you are free, be free to make the right choice. Don't go down the wrong road. It's your choice, make the right choice. (Agbaje 10, p. 466)

Ikudayisi's memorable words at the end of his speech can be considered an inspiring motto for Yemi, his peers and the young generation in Britain, the United States of America and elsewhere in the world, and this is why the phrase "the right choice" is chosen to be part of this essay's title.

As it has been shown, despite the differences between *Hurt Village* and *Gone Too Far!*, the two plays share several characteristics that justify their comparison. Both plays project the possibility of bright alternatives for young men

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and women who come from disadvantaged environments as both plays confront street crime directly and expose their respective settings as places of combat, without replicating journalistic scandals that only portray the tragedy that lies at the tip of the iceberg, but going deep into the cultural milieu that produces such outcomes. Both plays incorporate ways of speaking and forms of cultural expression, such as rap music, which are palatable for young audiences. Both plays point to their authors' protest against certain current problems, engagement with social and political issues as well as commitment to contributing to public debates that would eventually bring about better opportunities for the type of black communities they present.

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