Lucija PERIŠ
The Academy of Arts and Culture
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
Trg svetog Trojstva 3
HR –31 000 Osijek
lperis@uaos.hr

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REIMAGINING BECKETT IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN THEATER: THE ABSURD IN ANTOINETTE NWANDU'S *PASS OVER* AND DAVE HARRIS'S *TAMBO AND BONES*

Abstract

This article scrutinizes conventions of Absurdism in two African-American play-texts that draw on Samuel Beckett's tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot*: Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* (2017) and Dave Harris's *Tambo and Bones* (2022). Focusing on the intersections between the Theater of the Absurd and Black existentialism, the article strives to detect the sociopolitical potential behind post-Absurdist reiterations of Beckett's canonized play. Although the Absurdist theater emerged in the post-World War II period, its mechanics endured as a means of questioning human existence. Subsequent playwrights have resorted to it during the ensuing sociopolitical crises, including contemporary African-American dramatists who discard the established stage conventions, opting instead for non-linear plots, static situations, one-dimensional characters, and incoherent dialogues. By identifying the interface between the Absurdist discourse and Black existential thought, this study aims to shed light on the insidious nature of racism, which has been rooted in American society since its inception.

Keywords: African-American drama, *Pass Over*, *Tambo and Bones*, theater of the absurd, *Waiting for Godot*

1. Introduction

The theater of the absurd is a term that entered academic discourse amid the twentieth century subsequent to the appearance of a number of plays that represented a response to the chronic disillusionment that followed the Second World War. It was originally coined and theorized by Martin Esslin in his seminal essay "The Theatre of the Absurd" (1960), where he used it as an umbrella term for predominantly European dramatists who translated the sentiment of the postwar disenchantment into theater by annihilating traditional conventions and experimenting with dramatic form. According to Esslin, "[a]t first sight these plays do, indeed, confront their public with a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention" ("Theatre" 3). The most renowned play written in the Absurdist tradition is, arguably, Samuel Beckett's two-act tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot*, which premiered at a small Parisian playhouse Théâtre de Babylone under the direction of Roger Blin on January 5, 1953, and has since been (re)staged around the world to great acclaim. Although the piece initially generated controversy all over the Western European theaters as both the enraged audiences and critics "condemned the play for its lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense" (Esslin, *Theatre* xvii), it came to be one of the major accomplishments of the postwar theater with four hundred performances at the now defunct Théâtre de Babylone. Following its European box-office success, *Godot* debuted at Broadway's John Golden Theatre on April 19, 1956, where it ran for sixty performances, directed by Herbert Berghof. Seven months after its closing in June 1956, the play reopened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway with the same production staff, but this time with an all-Black cast. As Shane Vogel contends, "*The Village Voice* dubbed it 'Godot II,' and in almost every way it was an identical re-creation of the first production" (19). The trend of restaging, adapting and translating Beckett's *Godot* in the years that followed consolidated the play's position in the Western literary canon, and even continued into the new millennium, with new political undertones added to it, as attested by recent Black pastiches of *Waiting for Godot* such as Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* (2017) and Dave Harris's *Tambo and Bones* (2022), both of which center on two disfranchised African-American male figures who, akin to Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, "share the same deep sense of human isolation and of the irremediable character of the human condition" (Esslin, "Theatre" 4).

Whilst both Nwandu and Harris undeniably draw their inspiration from the canonized works of the European Theater of the Absurd, their dramatic output played a major role in (re)defining the American Absurdist tradition, which, ever since its advent during the mid-twentieth century focused exclusively on a handful of white playwrights and their anxieties, while simultaneously disregarding one of its most vulnerable populations—the African-American community. Thus, by reimagining Beckett's *Godot* for Black audiences, Nwandu and Harris do not merely engage with existential and Absurdist concerns of loneliness and isolation, which have been present in Black American life for centuries, but they advance the frontier of the American Theater of the Absurd, "embracing and extending its affective dramatic elements to resonate with the lives, perspectives, and realities of people of color" (Jew 399).

Antoinette Nwandu's one-act play *Pass Over* tells the story of two young Black men, Moses and Kitch, stranded in a ghetto neighborhood as their endeavors to reach the "promised land" (Nwandu 12), that is, freedom, are hindered by a domineering white passer-by, Mister, and a violent white enforcer of the law, Ossifer. Prompted by the tragic death of Trayvon Martin, an African-American teenager brutally shot by a neighborhood watchman in Sanford, Florida, in 2012, the play ponders on the entrenchment of U.S. systemic racism and the inability of the Obama administration to mitigate the perennial racial tension in the country. In fact, Emilie Morin argues that Nwandu "borrows from the dramatic structure of *Waiting for Godot* to reflect on waiting as a fundamentally dangerous and life-threatening activity for African Americans" (182).

Likewise, the first act of Dave Harris's play *Tambo and Bones* dwells on the imminence of the Black man's predicament in a racially polarized America as it focuses on two African-American dramatis personae trapped in a minstrel show, whiling away the time by musing on existential quandaries and plotting an escape from their unfortunate circumstances. Despite the fact that the action of the play shifts to present-day America where the two protagonists form a famous rap duo, and eventually to a futuristic society governed by humanoid robots, the play underlines the fact that the enduring legacy of racism remains buried deep within the American subconscious, determining the past, present, and future of African Americans. Taking into consideration the intersections between Black existentialism,[1] also termed Africana existential philosophy

[1] Black existentialism is a philosophical school of thought that researches the lived reality of Africana

(Gordon, 1997, 2000, 2023; Etoke, 2023), and Esslin's conception of the Absurdist theater, the article scrutinizes the sociopolitical role of antitheatrical discourse in African-American playwriting to show that, even at the dawn of the new millennium, racism remains entrenched in the idea of the United States and internalized by both Black and white Americans. It should be noted that this article focuses on the textual dissection of the plays and the emphasis is not on a performance-oriented analysis.

2. Toward the African-American Theater of the Absurd

Following the 2013 rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, anti-Black violence has been a pressing concern of African-American playwrights who resorted to antitheater in dramatizing the Sisyphean cycle of American racism. In discussing the growing phenomenon of multiethnic post-Absurdist theater, Kimberly May Jew asserts that "absurdism speaks both for—and to—people of color's experience in the United States" (399), thus pointing toward a subtle parallel between the battered Black America and the war-torn Europe, which spawned an array of postbellum plays that experimented with dramatic form to confront the audiences with "the harsh facts of a cruel world and his own isolation" (Esslin, *Theatre* 167). In his analysis of the European Absurdist poetics, Michael Y. Bennett likewise deciphers the sense of social isolation immanent to this school of thought implying that the canonized Absurdist dramatists, who were quintessentially migrant writers dwelling in Paris, "certainly had some reasons to feel like they were not a part of the *white-male hegemony*" (123). Moreover, World War II, followed by the Cold War, unsettled the pre-existing beliefs about rational human progress based on the principle of altruism, further generating an overall climate of incertitude in the Western world. This state of perpetual anguish was rationalized in Albert Camus's philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), wherein the French existentialist diagnosed the human condition as incurably absurd, arguing that "in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting,

people, and particularly their plight stemming from the long history of the transatlantic slave trade whose intangible but ubiquitous legacies continue to shape the American subconscious. Much like their European counterparts, Black existentialist thinkers profoundly influenced the dramatic production of their time, as shown by a plethora of African-American playwrights who emulate the theatrical tradition of the Absurd, including Antoinette Nwandu and Dave Harris.

is properly the feeling of absurdity" (5). In a similar manner, Eugène Ionesco contended that "[c]ut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd. in Esslin, *Theatre* xix).

Africana scholars have recognized that, analogous to European Absurdist dramatists, Black Africans perceived themselves as outliers in the New World due to their forced exodus to the Americas, where they were further denied the inalienable rights granted to other American citizens. Pointedly, Michael Jay Friedman suggests that "[e]ven as European immigrants found unprecedented economic opportunity and greater personal, political, and religious liberty in the New World, Black Africans were transported there involuntarily, often in chains, to be sold as chattel slaves and compelled to labor for 'masters'" (3). In line with this, American philosopher Cornel West reasons that "[t]he first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the Absurd" (40), outlining the basic premise of Black existentialism, a philosophical tradition that examines the existential realities of Black people yielded by their complex history. Although it shares similar preoccupations such as freedom, meaning, purpose, despair, angst, and isolation with the more extensively researched European existential thought, it arguably both precedes and supersedes it. In fact, as Vogel recognizes, "[i]n [Cornel] West's formulation, however, the absurd as a philosophical inquiry and lived experience occurs far in advance of its European enunciation," hence "[h]is capitalized *A* marks a form of time travel, a philosophical absurd that exists before its formal definition" (20) and coincides with the African arrival to the United States.

According to Lewis R. Gordon, scholarly research on Black existential reality traces its roots back to Africana theorists Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, Alain Locke, and particularly W. E. B. DuBois, who argued that the existential angst of African Americans stems from their double-consciousness, that is, from the vast chasm between their African heritage and the internalized white gaze, which fractures the Black man's psyche ("Existential Dynamics" 69). In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois thus suggested that "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (3). It is this vacillation between two immiscible but tenacious identities, argues Ellison, which keeps African Americans in a perpetual state of existential ambivalence: "Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions

of modern man but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in desperate search for an identity" (Ellison 297). Frantz Fanon adopted the same stance in autoethnography *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), where he outlined, among other phenomena, mental pathologies to be found in Black subjects navigating a dual identity, deducing that "[w]ithout a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned" (138). Similarly, Alain Locke discerned that Black Americans perform a precarious balancing act between their dual African and American selfhood, underlining that it is precisely this latter, ethnocentric lens through which the Black man "see[s] himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem" (4).

Despite their enduring efforts to eradicate the mentioned nihilistic threats in Black America, African Americans still face a theodicean challenge of the meaning(lessness) of Black ordeal—"the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, [and] the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property" (West 38)—which makes Africana existential philosophy as vital as ever. Namely, as West reminds us, "Black people have always been in America's wilderness in search of a promised land. Yet many black folk [even] now reside in a jungle with a cutthroat morality devoid of any faith in deliverance or hope for freedom" (41). More recently, thus, a new wave of Black existential scholarship that scrutinizes the lived reality of today's Black America has emerged, as is evident in the academic discourse of contemporary Africana luminaries from Lewis R. Gordon through to Nathalie Etoke, as well as to Danielle Davis, Devon R. Johnson, E. Anthony Muhammad, and LaRose T. Parris, among many others. Such a revised modern-day rendition of Black existentialism, as Gordon contends, morphs into pragmatism and existential phenomenology in the sense that it seeks to remedy the system(at)ic racial injustice by finding a practical (rather than merely a theoretical) solution to the pressing issues of Black community—the dire need for "black-affirming environments," "an antiracist philosophy," and "a livable mode of everyday existence" ("Black Existentialism" 125). Yet, Nathalie Etoke's study *Black Existential Freedom* (2023) suggests that it is precisely this latter, generational existential responsibility of protecting the Black life itself that should be the focal point of Africana existential phenomenology. In her book, the author thus evokes the case of George Floyd's violent murder at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2020, which triggered public protests against the white supremacist annihilation of Black life during the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown (Parris et al. ix), to illustrate both the pernicious effects of anti-Black

racism and the resultant liberatory action which epitomizes the basic premises of present-day Black existentialism.

Burdened by the perpetual degradation of Black citizens in "the land of the free" (Etoke 1), contemporary African-American playwrights found a foothold in the Theater of the Absurd, emulating the enunciation of post-World War II European dramatists. Similar to their Absurdist precursors, numerous Black authors nowadays discard traditional stage conventions, opting for non-linear plots, static situations, illogical events, undefined settings, flat characters, atrophied language, and, in so doing, "give expression to some of the basic issues and problems of our age, in a uniquely efficient and meaningful manner, so that they meet some of the deepest needs and unexpressed yearnings of their audience" (Esslin, "Theatre" 4). Namely, our age, as Gordon infers, is infested with "an epic battle of forces of dehumanization and privatization against the value of human and other forms of life on our planet" which ultimately proffers isolated bodies (Preface xi). Confronted with the ever-increasing erosion of human values, first encapsulated in Herbert Berghof's Black-cast Broadway revival of Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1957), African-American dramatists progressively invite Absurdist discourse and canonized texts into their own oeuvre, thus hinting at the continuing permeation of Africana existential philosophy and the Western Theater of the Absurd. In what follows, two recent plays that draw heavily on Beckett's *Godot* will be analyzed—Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* and Dave Harris's *Tambo and Bones*—with a view to delineating current relevance of the Absurdist poetics to African-American context.

3. *Godot* Revisited: An Absurdist Reading of Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over*

Antoinette Nwandu's politically charged play *Pass Over* premiered at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, Illinois under the direction of Danya Taymor on July 11, 2017, and fairly soon made its Broadway debut as the first production to reopen the post-pandemic August Wilson Theatre in August 2021. Penned by an African-American playwright in response to the murder of Black teenager Trayvon Martin (with both Black and white theatergoers in mind), *Pass Over* brings into focus the phenomena of systemic anti-Blackness, white privilege and power abuse, whilst simultaneously meditating on the pitfalls of today's American race politics and "the failures of the Obama administration to pursue an effective agenda for racial equality" (Morin 182). Faced with the meretricious myth of post-racial America, Nwandu dismisses the idea of narrating the

play through the prism of traditional dramatic logic, but instead probes into the realm of formal innovations along the lines laid out by the Absurdist writers, reimagining Beckett's weary but sanguine tramps Vladimir and Estragon as young Black men Moses and Kitch who spend time waiting for the moment when they will pass over into a better life and reach their full potential, far from the abiding peril of police violence. The African-American author, in fact, confirms that her narrative decisions and representational tactics are predicated on "the senseless killings of young black men" in the United States, since "[f]or every step forward the black community makes—specifically young black men—there is this equal and opposite violence that resists that forward progress. And that journey, that lack of unobstructed progress seems absurd and existential" (qtd. in Armour).

In line with Esslin's notion of antitheater, which reinforces the idea of a fluid spatiotemporal framework ("Theatre" 3), Nwandu's profuse stage directions imply that the action of *Pass Over* synchronously takes place on a present-day American ghetto street, on an antebellum plantation in 1855, and in thirteenth-century-BCE Egypt, built on the backs of slaves (Nwandu 5), thereby situating the play in what Michelle M. Wright has termed "Epiphenomenal time" or "the 'now,' through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted" (5). In terms of Black drama, such peculiar superimposition of manifold temporal strata points to the idea of Western racial logic as a rather rigid construct, which still takes its toll on the Black psyche, underscoring that "[t]he means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remains" (Sharpe 12). As the play progresses, it becomes clear that its ostensibly atemporal and geographically ambiguous setting of a barren ghetto street distinguished only by a salient lamppost emulates not only *Godot*'s locale but (given the biblical, plantation and urban tropes), it also echoes Black people's lived reality plagued by the lingering legacies of slavery. Depicted both as a site of isolation and an ongoing terror, the abysmal curbside where the protagonists hopelessly loiter ceases to be the locus of African-American socialization. Rather, it becomes emblematic of the Black man's existential angst inflicted on him by obstructionist ideologies aimed at preserving the *status quo* of "the hegemonic symbolic order of Western civilization(s)" (Gordon, Introduction 3).

In an effort to articulate the immutable nature of the Black condition through theatrical form, Nwandu appropriates a Beckettian mode of (anti-)narration and, in lieu of telling a story, paints a static world where nothing changes, thus epitomizing Esslin's idea that "[t]he Theatre of the Absurd has renounced argu-

ing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence" (*Theatre* xx). Insinuating that the Black protagonists might never depart from the ghetto neighborhood to which they have been historically condemned, Nwandu opens both acts of her play with the very same image of Moses and Kitch "frozen in a position of stalemate" (Esslin *Theatre* 39)—the former sleeping on the sidewalk, while the latter is keeping watch.

Much like Beckett, Nwandu pushes experimentations with language to the forefront of her play, ensuring that the atrophied speech emptied of significance yet full of "meaningless clichés and the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrases" (Esslin, "Theatre" 5) graphically mirrors the bleak, anxious inner state of her protagonists. Their prolix dialogues and repetitive, robotic speech patterns reflect and reaffirm the distorted reality in which Black people are faced with the lurking threat of violence and, even worse, death. To illustrate, at the beginning of the play, Moses jolts out of his sleep, hollering "yo kill me now" (Nwandu 9), with no real evidence of danger in his vicinity. However, we soon learn that this frantic shout is part of his and Kitch's absurd pretend play of being killed which they, ironically, invented while "trying to avoid being literally killed by a stray bullet or an overzealous police officer" (Herren 218). Although such an act epitomizes an archetypal Absurdist *non sequitur* as there is no discernible hazard for the men at the moment they enact death, it still corroborates that the racialized subjects in America live in a "state of traumatic stress" (Etoke 96). With some trepidation, Moses and Kitch engage in their day-to-day talk, which once more degenerates before the reader's eyes into a circuitous, verbose, and rambling verbal exchange, evincing that "[i]n a purposeless world that has lost its ultimate objectives, dialogue, like all action, becomes a mere game to pass the time" (Esslin, *Theatre* 45). Hence, when Kitch asks Moses "what's good," his reply "you know" (Nwandu 9) seems to get stuck in an interminable loop of repetitions uttered alternately by both men, ending solely because of Kitch's slip: "you know / i know / you know / i know / you know / you i – / you know – / you – / shit!" (Nwandu 10). Even though Nwandu's vagabonds do not spare their words, as demonstrated above, their agency seems to boil down to just that—words. Every day Moses asks Kitch "what'chu fixta do today" and he provides the same answer "i'on know man / what'chu fixta do" (Nwandu 11, 59). Then, by force of habit, they start plotting a plan to leave their neighborhood and reach "dat promised land" (Nwandu 12), a dream that ultimately never fruc-

tifies for the Black protagonists as "deez red white blues"[2] (Nwandu 76) keep passing them over. This circular structure protracts to the entire play, producing an almost uncanny sense of similarity between its first and second acts, thereby attesting that "[a]s with *Godot*, very little happens in *Pass Over*" (Rankine 191).

In their joint alienation from the society, the two African-American men form a close bond which resembles that of Vladimir and Estragon. They hatch plots, provide each other with care and emotional support, muse on religious matters, and even bicker. Like Beckett's wandering duo, Moses and Kitch have different dispositions—Kitch is the more volatile of the two, and Moses is absorbed in dreaming of a better tomorrow, both literally and figuratively. Analogous to Beckett's Estragon, he finds escape from the quotidian concerns in *sleep*, a state that has commonly been translated both as a form of passive suffering and "a numbing detachment from others" (West 40). In addition to turning to sleep, Moses seeks other methods of salvation from the existential limbo in which he and Kitch find themselves entrapped. As the title of the play suggests, the central focus of the prophetically named Moses is a fictitious promised land: a place that would allow him to indulge not only in material goods and services, but in personal freedom usurped by the white figures of authority represented by the characters of Ossifer (a white enforcer of the law) and Mister/Master (a white young man who assumes a privileged demeanor). Unlike Beckett's sadistic master Pozzo, this "Master materializes the promised land about which they fantasize" after he accidentally gets lost in the ghetto street and decides to share the contents of "his seemingly bottomless basket of food, wine, and treats flowing with Edenic abundance" with the two African-American men (Rankine 208). Nevertheless, this act of benevolence is soon overshadowed by Mister's implementation of plantation owner rhetoric, which reveals itself as he absurdly encourages Moses and Kitch to call him "master," adding that "it's just a name" (Nwandu 40) that runs in his family and was passed down through generations. With this, Nwandu evokes the ancestral trauma of slavery—otherwise known as post-traumatic slave syndrome—a condition that manifests itself within a demographic that has endured a prolonged period of enslavement and institutionalized racism, usually affecting the self-perception of that group as inferior or undeserving of any benefits society offers (DeGruy 105). Consequently, Kitch discourages Moses from pursuing his dream of a more hopeful future. He in-

[2] The term "red white blues" (Nwandu 77) stands for the United States of America in a metonymic sense.

itially refuses to join the journey due to his sore feet (Nwandu 18), a trope to be found in Beckett's play as well, but ultimately admits that such an endeavor could imperil their existence as numerous Black people already died attempting to exit their block: "what nigga damn / yo ass know good and goddamn well / ain't nuthin gon rile dem po-pos more / than a nigga don't know his place / and right now / you and me / nigga damn / our place right here" (Nwandu 20).

"[H]ands behind your heads" (Nwandu 53), Ossifer commands the Black protagonists early in the play. Indeed, Moses and Kitch's fears come to fruition when the violent patrolman enters the stage, perpetrating both veiled and overt maltreatment of the Black men while urging them to reaffirm that they are going nowhere. The hovering threat of violence is reinforced by the recurring sound of gunshots in the background, which unsettles, triggers and disables Moses and Kitch, further confining them to the ghetto block. As Chiara Patrizi explains, Black bodies have generationally been exploited, marginalized, criminalized, and what is more, reduced to "macabre" figures, commodities perceived and targeted as the antipode of humanity by the white race (256). Hence, Etoke infers that "[t]he black skinned human only exists in the world to be excluded from it" (iii), incarnating what Aimé Césaire termed "the famine-man, the insult-man, the torture-man you can grab anytime, beat up, kill—no joke, kill—without having to account to anyone" (12). It is precisely this white misappropriation of power that precipitated Nwandu into raising the existential question of Black death (and suicide) in the script's opening lines "yo kill me now" (Nwandu 9), uttered as part of Moses and Kitch's pretend play episode of killing and being killed, which almost materializes when the duo reenacts the notorious scene of suicide limned twice in Beckett's *Godot* (12–13, 108–09). Wearied by the anticipation, either of a better life or the death's arrival, the Black antiheroes contemplate suicide as the only route to escape the nemesis of being sentenced to the "purgatorial prison" (Snyder-Young 151) that is a lifetime's wait for racial equity. Nwandu's dispirited vagrants thus resolve to end their lives by hitting each other with a rock, not all at once, but "juss a little" (Nwandu 78), until both of them pass away, ensuring than neither of them stays alone. Despite its nihilistic significations, this scene carries a potential of resistance when observed through the prism of Black existential thought, which pinpoints that, for ages, the white race advocated the idea that Black Americans "lacked enough apperception or intelligence to understand the ramifications of their situation," and were therefore "incapable of committing suicide" (Gordon, Introduction 6). Seen through an Africana lens, the young men's suicide attempt

not only refutes such pseudoscientific theories that blur the boundaries between Black and subhuman, but it also, by default, reflects the dire need of African Americans to reappropriate control over their own existence, regardless of how grim or detrimental the outcome may be.

Nonetheless, their undertakings are once again obstructed by the ubiquitous bluecoat Ossifer who reenters the stage and abruptly "takes the rock" (Nwandu 81) out of Kitch's hand, initiating his usual interrogation that almost invariably begins with the question "you / going somewhere" (Nwandu 81). Although Kitch dutifully responds "no sir" (Nwandu 81), the plot takes a sudden turn as Moses, whom the patrolman believed would quail before his unlawful use of a "baton" (Nwandu 82) and a "gun" (Nwandu 84), summons up the courage to stand up to police brutality fixed on Black Americans. Much like his biblical namesake, Moses impedes his oppressor from further harassing him through divine intervention, purging the sin from Ossifer's bodily system which starts to spew "black bile" (Nwandu 86), a pain that makes him declare "you are free to go" (Nwandu 87) to Black protagonists. Moses' action, his deliverance from racial subjugation, is, indeed, a metareference to the biblical narrative of the Exodus, told in the eponymous book of the Pentateuch. Even though the tale of the Jewish liberation from Egyptian bondage remains a mainstay for the analysis of the aforesaid scene from *Pass Over*, as Nwandu herself confirmed that her text is "a mashup of the biblical Exodus story and *Waiting for* Godot in a modern urban setting" (qtd. in Armour), this segment has an Absurdist streak since it suspends "[t]he laws of probability as well as those of physics," leaving readers to decide "whether the action is meant to represent a dream world" or "real happenings" (Esslin, "Theatre" 3). The ending of the play, however, suggests the former. In Nwandu's exegesis of the Exodus story, the aftermath is lethal for the formerly enslaved African Americans when Mister reappears on stage, "pulls out a gun" (Nwandu 91) and kills Moses, thus attesting that America still oversleeps on the dream of racial desegregation. With such a resolution, Nwandu reasserts that the tenets of a somewhat outdated Absurdist theater are still highly pertinent, as the phenomenon of "racial absurdity" (Etoke 81) persists in the Western world, seeking a poetics that will properly convey it.

4. *Tambo and Bones*: Decoding the Absurd in Dave Harris's Theater

Directed by Taylor Reynolds, Dave Harris's play *Tambo and Bones* had its first production at off-Broadway's Playwrights Horizons Mainstage Theater on

February 7, 2022, in collaboration with Center Theater Group from Los Angeles, California. In his modern-day African-American satire, Harris's central foci are two Black thespians stuck in a never-ending minstrel show whose scheme to get out proves fruitless given that the outside world, that is, today's America elicits latent legacies of slavery, posing near-equal challenges to Black identity as it did centuries ago. With its triptych form, the play sifts the past, present and future of Black America, interrogating "what it is to still be in a cycle, performing identity for a white audience," notes Harris (qtd. in Duplan et al.). Besides evoking the infamous minstrel tradition, the cradle of racialized endmen Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, Harris's play, and particularly its first part, bears strong resemblance to yet another theatrical form—the Absurdist theater of Samuel Beckett—as the moral inertia of the two performers is akin to the apathetic nature of Vladimir and Estragon. Harris's buffoons, in fact, pass time on a bogus pasture musing on existential matters, "pondering" their "purpose" (Harris 8) in a racially stratified world, devoid of "faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will" (Esslin, "Theatre" 6). Consigned to the margins of American capitalist economy, with no home of their own, Tambo and Bones get a "newfound desire for quarters" (Harris 23), a synecdoche for material abundance that hitherto was not easily attainable to Black subjects, who, much like Beckett's duo, resorted to waiting as the only pertinent and procurable route to save their lives. Still, unlike Beckett, Harris asks what happens to the tired tramps once they escape the minstrel show, become popular rap artists, and step into a robot-led future. In trying to provide answers to the above question, Harris paints an equally absurd vision of the times to come, anticipating a nigh-cataclysmic scenario of the society led by racial hatred reminiscent of classic Absurdist writings.

As Esslin outlined, an archetypal anti-play does not provide the specifics of either the place or the time of the action ("Theatre" 3). In typical Beckettian manner, Harris sets the action of *Tambo and Bones* within the realm of Wright's fairly pliant concept of Epiphenomenal spacetime which sees Black past, present and future as intertwined temporal categories, divulging "all the multifarious dimensions of Blackness" (Wright 20). Harris's displaced minstrel tandem can first be found residing in "a fake-ass pasture" (4) imbued with artificial trees and bushes, a landscape that not only emulates the minstrelsy plantation setting but is also distinctly redolent of *Godot*'s locale. The Absurdist penchant of this feigned arcadian scenery is amplified by Tambo's futile irrigation of the imitation verdure, as is evident from the question "Why won't the fake-ass tree grow if you give it some real-ass water?" (Harris 5), posed by this exhausted endman

whilst he is desperately attempting to cultivate "a tall tree to cast a long shadow" so he can rest his "weary soul" beneath it (Harris 7). Tambo, nevertheless, remedies such a deadlock in a quintessentially Absurdist fashion, by uprooting the tree and installing it on top of a chair, thus getting a longed-for respite. Harris's juxtaposition of a serene pastoral ambience with the stage conventions of a bigoted, ill-famed performance genre such as minstrelsy (typically set in the abusive plantation environment) contributes to antitheatrical reading of this text, demonstrating that "the absurdity of [Black] dehumanization" (Etoke 4) cannot be captured by "conventional logic and unilinear conceptual thinking" (Esslin, "Theatre" 12). The onslaught on traditional, Aristotelian dramatic logic[3] is also discernible from the play's dissipated ternate structure wherein the three acts work as separate units in terms of setting. The second part, precisely, takes place in this day and age, at Tambo and Bones's rap concert, an event that designates the duo's capitalist success achieved at the expense of their ethical values, whereas the third part is set in the distant, racially-divided future, on a barren theater stage where Tambo and Bones, now transformed into the actors who previously played them, recite a treatise on race. This seemingly arbitrary, "abstract stagecraft," however, does not subtract from the text's "substantial content and meaning" (Esslin, "Theatre" 4); rather, it substantiates that "the formal meaninglessness—the incoherencies, paradoxes, and arbitrariness—of Western racial logic," which African Americans have experienced firsthand, can only be grasped by the Absurdist "aesthetic idiom" (Vogel 21).

In the play's first part, Harris consciously simulates the illogical universe of Becket's *Godot*, as he limns "a static situation" (Esslin, *Theatre* 13) in which a dejected male duo is left stranded in a desolate, alien land, and forced to rely on each other's amity and help. Similar to "Beckett's exhausted but ever-vigilant tramps steadfastly awaiting rescue by Godot" (Herren 219), Tambo and Bones yearn to abscond from this putative countryside, or rather plantation, a site evocative of the Black Americans' "profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair" (West 38) gestured by the

[3] The Theater of the Absurd annuls classical, Greek dramatic tenets theorized in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1895), which for centuries represented the pillar of Western dramaturgy. The prefix anti- in antitheater implies primarily the annihilation of three Aristotelian unities (action, place, and time), by which a play is required to follow a single plotline that unfolds during the course of one day in one particular locale. According to Saddik, "[t]he plays that fall under the heading of Theatre of the Absurd resist such conventions, distorting the surfaces of social reality in favor of a freer expression of human experience, one that suggests rather than delineates" (29). See also: Bennett (2015); Kirby (1971); Spanos (1971).

sight of a sham, barren tree, which unlike the one in *Godot* cannot bear fruit and herald hope, typifying Gordon's postulate that racism "freeze[s]" Black people by impugning their "self-value" ("Existentialism" 124). Having internalized such abject sentiments, Tambo spends his days "asleep under his fake-ass tree" (Harris 8), a pastime customarily interrupted by Bones, who, on the other hand, cannot "be happy [by just] napping" (Harris 14). Although the familiar trope of *sleep* is emulative of Beckett's play, this scene takes on new meaning in Harris's text, wherein it is used in antithetical relation to wokeness, as Tambo avers in the play's second part: "Cuz lemme tell you: once upon a time, a nigga was sleep. But now a nigga woke. No naptime. Never go night-night" (Harris 35). Pointedly, Christina Sharpe terms this alert state "wakefulness" or "consciousness" (4) and deems it as the antipode to "that Fanonian 'zone of non-Being'" inhabited by Black people "within and after slavery's denial of Black humanity" (20). In Harris's play, Tambo equally infers that Black Americans for centuries solely "wanted to be treated like real people. And not have to plan cotton. Or cut cane. But they was sad because they ain't have a choice" (17). Still, Sharpe discerns the residual afterlives of slavery in the present-day US as well and thus assigns its Black residents with the task of doing the "wake work" (14), which implies "be[ing] occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13–14), grasping how the quondam plight of chattel slaves still affects African-American lived reality.

In their isolation from the society, Tambo and Bones form a rather codependent relationship much like Vladimir and Estragon, but also Moses and Kitch, given that one member of the duo establishes himself as dominant, assertive, and adroit, whilst the other one is delineated as more puerile, meek, and fickle. Namely, Bones has "the curiosity to ask the tough questions," Tambo "the intellectual capacity to answer em" (Harris 15). Bones "question[s] everything" (Harris 8) and Tambo is pragmatic. Bones has a hard time trying to sleep (Harris 9), while Tambo is rarely restless. Bones is intent on profit, Tambo on remedying racial trauma (Harris 46). Besides their egregious disparities, Tambo and Bones's irrational, Absurdist (inter)actions, "devoid of logical motivation and unrelated to recognizable human characters, emotions, and objectives" (Esslin, "Theatre" 4) also echo Vladimir and Estragon's friendship dynamics. For instance, with a view to enticing the audience's attention and obtaining their money Bones performs a precarious skit with a knife, which he stabs into his hand hoping such a startling sight will yield profit. In brief, Bones "slaps his hand on the chair," "raises the knife without looking at it and slams the knife

into his hand for real" (Harris 12), all while tirelessly pleading the spectators for their "quarters" (Harris 12–13). Subsequent to this absurd venture, "Tambo wraps Bones' wound" in a "tender" manner (Harris 14), evincing that their relationship is grounded in mutual love and care, despite "[t]he opposition of their temperaments" which triggers "endless bickering between them" and "often leads to the suggestion that they should fall apart" (Esslin, *Theatre* 15). However, Harris's derelicts have one thing in common, they both seem to have no recollection of their past, homes or families, a nexus that binds them together, as Tambo concedes during a dialogue with Bones: "You ain't got no family. You got me" (Harris 6). Equivalent to Beckett's tramps, who lack a sense of identity owing to a peculiar memory lapse, Tambo and Bones cannot recall life before the minstrelsy, as Bones himself attests: "I don't know where I come from. And I don't know where I'm supposed to go" (Harris 29–30). What is more, after Tambo asks Bones "Who taught you to read?" he reciprocates with a similar inquiry "Iohnno, who taught you to speak?" (Harris 9), to which Tambo does not have the answer. In recycling Beckett's concept of memory, Harris goes beyond making a mere (meta)reference to *Godot*; he points to the destructive effect of the long-lasting slaveholding regime, which cultivated the annihilation of African cultural heritage, metaphorically rendered as Tambo and Bones's amnesia keeping them stuck in a minstrel show, blurring the memories of their African past and present American plight.

The incoherent, discursive dialogues of the two antiheroes anticipate a Beckettian, Absurdist theater piece, articulating their disquiet and discomfiture at being involuntarily plunged into a milieu that obstructs their self-actualization. It is no coincidence, then, that Tambo and Bones's parlance during their minstrel era "becomes divorced from the real happenings," or even worse, "put into direct contradiction with the action" (Esslin, "Theatre" 11), attesting that in an adverse environment speech becomes one's survival tool, a vehicle for the distortion of truth rather than a medium for the conveyance of meaning. To illustrate, Bones tricks Tambo into believing that he really met his family by fabricating a narrative of him and his mother living in penury, with the purpose of rationalizing his pursuit of riches and garnering Tambo's sympathy: "When my dad disappeared, uh, me and my mom ain't really have a place to go. We couldn't afford our home on just her paycheck so uh we lost our apartment. We slept in the car" (Harris 29). Bones, however, soon admits that he "just made that [story] up" to "explain" himself to Tambo (Harris 29). Similarly, his existential rhetoric imbued throughout the play turns out to be nothing but a facade

for his obsession with worldly goods, that is, money. Despite claiming that the extensive musing on his purpose led him to the realization "that happiness is just an illusion like sunlight" (Harris 8), by which he hints at his attunement with existential philosophy, it turns out that this endman is fixed on earnings, above all else. As in the case with *Godot*'s Lucky, Bones's "much vaunted philosophical wisdom is revealed to be a flood of completely meaningless gibberish" that not only "vaguely resembles the language of a philosophical argument" (Esslin, "Theatre" 11) but also camouflages his yen for pecuniary abundance, thus pointing to yet another pressing absurd, that of insatiable greed for profit fueled by the capitalist culture which alienates African Americans, shifting their focus from collective emancipation to cutthroat wealth accumulation (Etoke 46–47). Indeed, when Tambo and Bones first come into contact with money in the final scene of the first act, they feel "[h]appiness" and see "[s]unlight" (Harris 28), an illusion Harris probes into in the ensuing parts of the play.

Whereas Harris does not follow Beckett's pattern of repeating the plot from one act into the next one, he surely wrote the play with the Absurdist logic in mind given that its action abruptly shifts from the antebellum, minstrel era to the present age where Tambo and Bones make a rap duo, encapsulating Esslin's premise that in the Theater of the Absurd, "[w]ithin the same scene the action may switch from the nightmarish poetry of high emotions to pure knockabout farce or cabaret" ("Theatre" 3). The play's second part displays Tambo and Bones's sold-out national concert tour "The Escape" (Harris 31), in which the minstrels-turned-rappers set their erstwhile struggles into music, purposely monetizing the idea of Black plight and promoting consumerist ethos despite the persistent pauperization of African Americans. Although their stellar musical career seemingly challenges "the neoliberal, capitalist status quo" (Etoke ix) perpetuating white privilege and socioeconomic inequalities, Tambo avers that the living conditions and economic outlook for the large proportion of Black America are as bleak as ever, since "Black households have only ten cents of wealth for every dollar held by white households" (Harris 39). The ever-growing disparities between Black and white America in Harris's play culminate in the segment of racial civil war, which sows dissension between Tambo and Bones—the former being keen to see its end, the latter to prolong its course and profit from manufacturing military technology (Harris 59). In addition to elucidating how money breaks the bond of a lifelong friendship, this segment, with its capitalist innuendos, subverts *Godot*'s surmise about the existence of genuine, meaningful human

relations in times of crises, as it ends with the avaricious Bones "stabb[ing] Tambo with the same knife he used to stab himself" (Harris 67) because of Tambo's idea to rescue African Americans from bloodshed and thereby terminate Bones's exploitative war profiteering. Although in Nwandu's piece the duo's attempted suicide never materializes due to them having a hard time raising their hands against each other, the absurd in Harris's play stems from Bones's murder of Tambo following their escape from the minstrel show, a denouement that aligns with West's remark that the nihilistic threat, "feed[ing] on [the fear of] poverty *and* shattered cultural institutions" significantly "contributes to criminal behavior" (41). Hence, on Tambo's deathbed Bones declares "I'm a real person. This war made me real" (Harris 67), equating opulence with humanity.

Moreover, the timeless nature and dramaturgical malleability of the narrative of two outcasts questioning their life's purpose, first told in *Godot*, allows dramatists to delve into the different layers of meaning (re)produced throughout past, present and future. Following in the Absurdist footsteps of Samuel Beckett, the third and final part of Harris's play is set four hundred years in the future, long after the death of Tambo, whose technological innovations not only engendered white genocide (Harris 63), but also ushered in the reign of humanoid robots which, although initially used as weapons in this racist hate crime, infiltrated into the remnant, Black population, eventually turning against them as well. In envisioning such a terrifying prospect for humanity and plunging into the inmost recesses of men's minds, Harris establishes himself as a successor of the Absurdist theater, which denied the "superficial rationalizations" that sought to "hide the depth of man's predicament" (Esslin, "Theatre" 6), emblematic of the previous epochs, in favor of "the community of dreams and desires of a collective unconscious" (Esslin, "Theatre" 7). In fact, Etoke appropriates a Stoic concept of "*praemeditatio malorum*—meditation on a troubled future" (41) to describe the Black American tendency to anticipate unfavorable, fatalistic scenarios for their race as a result of a tormented past, which in this method serves as a frame of reference for predicting the (im)possibility of progress, preparing its implementers for potential setbacks. This practice, argued Michael Foucault, is not solely "a somber and pessimistic anticipation of future" but also a technique for "nullifying both the future and the evil" by living through them in advance (502). Likewise, Pierre Hadot argued that "we must engrave striking maxims in our memory, so that, when the time comes, they can help us accept such events" (85). Accordingly, after confronting and defeating the hazardous

robot in the play's last scene, for the first time in his life "Bones feels the power of the moment. His hands. His fists. Everything they are capable of. He feels what it is to not need anything else from the audience or the stage" (Harris 74), an image that symbolizes Bones's overcoming of the Black historical trauma of resurfacing history of racial subjugation, demonstrating his newfangled strength in the face of the oppressor.

5. Concluding Remarks

As noted earlier, in "Multi(Ethnic) Absurdist Theater," Kimberly May Jew posits that African-American drama provides fertile ground for the enactment of the Absurdist theater conventions. Indeed, a plethora of Black reiterations of Beckett's canonized play *Waiting for Godot* affirms such a surmise, including Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* and Dave Harris's *Tambo and Bones*, both of which focus on the duo of disillusioned African-American men searching for purpose in a white supremacist world that systematically isolates, exploits and abuses them. Situated at the margins of American society, both literally and figuratively, Nwandu's and Harris's destitute antiheroes are seeking a way out of the existential limbo to which they have been involuntarily condemned, while at the same time disrupting anti-Black stereotypes and testing the endurance of their friendship. In trying to identify the nexus between two autonomous dramatic traditions, African-American drama on the one hand and the Theater of the Absurd on the other, this paper employs the theoretical framework of Black existentialism or Africana philosophy of existence, a precursor of its better-known European equivalent. The analysis provided above corroborates that contemporary pastiches of *Waiting for Godot* echo the existentialist zeitgeist of the twenty-first century and consistently follow Esslin's theses on antitheater elaborated in his essay "The Theatre of the Absurd" and the eponymous book. As a result, both Nwandu's and Harris's plays annul traditional dramatic conventions and experiment with formal innovations along the lines of Samuel Beckett, settling upon vague settings, non-linear plots, fragmented narratives, static actions, irrational epilogues, absurd interactions, simple protagonists, and incoherent language inconsistent with the play's line of events. Yet, the revival of the Absurdist tradition by multiple African-American playwrights is by no means accidental. In their scripts, Nwandu and Harris draw attention to the persistent existential and nihilistic threats lurking over the Black community, which not only induce Black angst but also pose a life threat to African Americans. The rise of systemic

racism, addressed by the Black Lives Matter movement, proves to be one of the major factors contributing to the recent phenomenon of post-Absurdist multiethnic theater reclaiming Beckett's oeuvre. By engaging with it, African-American authors unmask the racist underbelly of contemporary urban society, underlining the ongoing socioeconomic crisis affecting Black America, which can only be solved by joint efforts of its Black and white citizens.

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REINTERPRETIRANJE BECKETTA U AFROAMERIČKOM KAZALIŠTU: APSURD U DRAMAMA *IZLAZAK* ANTOINETTE NWANDU I *TAMBO I BONES* DAVEA HARRISA

Sažetak

Lucija PERIŠ
Akademija za umjetnost i kulturu
Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku
Trg svetog Trojstva 3
HR – 31 000 Osijek
lperis@uaos.hr

Rad proučava konvencije teatra apsurda u dvjema afroameričkim dramama, *Izlazak* (*Pass Over*, 2017.) Antoinette Nwandu te *Tambo i Bones* (*Tambo and Bones*, 2022.) Davea Harrisa, koje se referiraju na tragikomediju *U očekivanju Godota* Samuela Becketta. Fokusirajući se na sjecišta apsurdističkog kazališta i crnačkog egzistencijalizma, radom se nastoji prepoznati društveno-politički značaj postapsurdističkih reiteracija Beckettove kanonske drame. Premda je teatar apsurda nastao krajem Drugog svjetskog rata, mehanizmi toga dramskog pravca opstali su kao sredstvo propitivanja ljudske egzistencije. Kasniji dramatičari pribjegavali su njegovim tekovinama tijekom narednih društveno-političkih kriza, uključujući suvremene afroameričke dramatičare koji odbacuju ustaljene scenske konvencije i odlučuju se za nelinearnu naraciju, statične situacije, jednodimenzionalne likove te nesuvisle dijaloge. Utvrđivanjem poveznica između apsurdističkog diskursa i crnačke egzistencijalne misli, rad namjerava osvijetliti pogubnu prirodu rasizma, ideologije koja je usađena u američko društvo od njegova osnutka.

Ključne riječi: afroamerička drama, *Izlazak*, *Tambo i Bones*, teatar apsurda, *U očekivanju Godota*