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Postmodern Identity in Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*

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Abstract

The present paper explores the intricate construction of identity in Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*. Postmodern lens is used with particular attention to the play's published script. Situated within the liminal space between satire and social critique, the text dramatizes the fragmentation of selfhood as it intersects with race, gender, and performance in mid-century Hollywood. Nottage's dramatic style deliberately unsettles the boundaries between historical fact and fictional reconstruction, foregrounding the instability of identity in a media-saturated, image-driven culture. The play disorients traditional modes of storytelling by employing meta-theatrical devices, pastiche, and temporal shifts that challenge any singular reading of Vera Stark's life. Through this formal innovation, Nottage critiques the racist frameworks of the American entertainment industry along with the critical apparatus that retrospectively interprets and commodifies Black women's experiences. Identity, in this context, emerges as something performed, reconstructed, and theorized—rather than lived in fixed or essential terms. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Jean Baudrillard, Linda Hutcheon, and Judith Butler, this paper undertakes a close reading of the play's text to analyze how the self is fragmented, performed, and reimagined.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Identity Construction, Performance Theory, Meta-Theatre, Black Womanhood.

1. Introduction

In contemporary dramatic literature, the question of identity has been radically transformed by postmodern aesthetics, particularly within the work of African American women playwrights. Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2013) offers a compelling exploration of how identity is fragmented, performed, and mediated within the context of 20th-century Hollywood. Through a blend of satire, temporal disruption, and self-referential commentary, the play

challenges traditional notions of subjectivity and memory, especially as they pertain to Black womanhood in the American cultural imagination.

The narrative follows Vera Stark, a fictional Black actress navigating the stereotyped roles available to her in 1930s cinema. Rather than present her life in a straightforward or linear fashion, the play fractures time and genre—moving from naturalist drama to mock interviews and academic panels. In doing so, it resists a stable or singular interpretation of Vera's identity. Instead, the audience encounters a character refracted through media archives, public discourse, and speculative history.

This study examines how Nottage's script constructs Vera's identity as a postmodern subject—one shaped not by internal essence but by performance, repetition, and cultural reception. The analysis draws on the theoretical frameworks of Jean Baudrillard (simulacra), Linda Hutcheon (historiographic metafiction), and Judith Butler (performativity) to contextualize how identity in the play is continuously re-authored by others. Vera Stark becomes more than a character; she becomes a symbol whose meaning shifts depending on the lens through which she is viewed.

By closely reading the published text of the play, this paper argues that *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* dismantles historical realism and reclaims narrative control through postmodern technique. In doing so, Nottage intervenes in the politics of visibility, authorship, and self-definition—issues central to the experiences of Black women in both theatre and history.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of identity in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* is situated within the broader context of postmodern theory, where the self is not conceived as essential or unified but rather as constructed, performative, and fragmented. Postmodernism, as a philosophical and aesthetic mode, rejects grand narratives and fixed truths, privileging instead plurality, ambiguity, and discontinuity. In the field of theatre, this shift enables playwrights like Lynn Nottage to interrogate dominant historical discourses and to reimagine the representation of marginalized identities—especially those shaped by race, gender, and media.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra is particularly relevant in understanding the way Vera Stark is mediated through images and cultural reproductions. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argues that in postmodern society, signs no longer refer to an original reality but instead circulate as self-referential simulations (Baudrillard 6). Vera's identity, as constructed within the play, reflects this notion: she becomes a simulacrum, whose cinematic persona, scholarly analyses, and media appearances substitute for any "authentic" self. The audience never receives a coherent, first-person narrative from Vera; instead, she is seen through mediated fragments, which underscores the instability of her image and the impossibility of reconstructing a singular truth. The script thus foregrounds how African American women are subjected to a process of historical and cultural encoding that often renders their lived experience inaccessible.

Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction offers a second lens through which to examine Nottage's dramaturgy. Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as a postmodern narrative form that self-consciously questions the possibility of accessing historical truth while simultaneously constructing fictional histories (Hutcheon 5). Nottage employs precisely this strategy by presenting Vera's life as a layered archive—one composed of dramatized scenes from the 1930s, fabricated scholarly commentary from the 1970s, and satirical media representations from the early 2000s. Each layer not only contributes to Vera's mythology but also critiques the institutional mechanisms—film, academia, and

popular media—that shape and distort historical memory. The play thus refuses to present a definitive biographical account of Vera Stark, instead inviting readers to reflect on the politics of authorship and the absence of Black women's voices in dominant cultural archives.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity provides an essential foundation for analyzing Vera's racialized and gendered identity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that identity is not an innate quality but an effect of repeated social performances within regulatory frameworks (Butler 25). Vera Stark, as a Black actress navigating Hollywood's rigid typologies, is compelled to perform a version of Black womanhood that satisfies white expectations. Her casting as a maid in the fictional 1930s film *The Belle of New Orleans* is emblematic of the restricted roles available to Black women, both on screen and in society. However, Nottage also reveals how Vera resists and reclaims agency through her performances, subverting the scripts imposed on her. In this light, performance becomes both a site of oppression and a space for resistance, where identity is not merely imposed but strategically negotiated.

Through Baudrillard's simulacra, Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, and Butler's performativity, the paper situates *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* as a deeply postmodern text. The play interrogates how identity is formed and how it is circulated, erased, and reconstructed within cultural systems of power. These frameworks will guide the subsequent close readings of the play, focusing on the interplay between narrative form, media discourse, and the racialized body in performance.

3. Analysis

Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* employs a distinctly postmodern structure to explore how identity is constructed, fragmented, and refracted through layers of performance and cultural memory. Although the play is formally divided into two acts, it unfolds across three distinct temporal periods-the 1930s, the 1970s, and the early 2000s. Each part employs a different dramaturgical style. Through this structure, Nottage dismantles the notion of a unified or coherent self. Instead, Vera Stark's identity is rendered as a performative and contingent construct, shaped by intersecting forces of race, gender, and media reception. The play enacts this fragmentation both formally and thematically, aligning with key postmodern theories advanced by Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, and Linda Hutcheon.

In Act I, set in 1933 Hollywood, Nottage crafts a fast-paced screwball comedy, complete with overlapping dialogue, period references, and theatricality. Vera Stark is introduced as a maid to white starlet Gloria Mitchell, yet it is quickly evident that she is also an ambitious actress navigating a racially exclusionary system. Vera adopts a Southern accent to humor Gloria, "Miss', Mr. Lafayette here to see ya" (Nottage 7), a performance within a performance that underscores the inauthenticity expected of Black women in White-controlled spaces. Vera's linguistic shifts, emotional restraint, and calculated deflection all point to an identity under continuous revision. Even her expressions of solidarity and sarcasm are layered performances; when Gloria pleads for advice on a dramatic death scene, Vera replies dryly, "You're playing a dying virgin" (10). The line is both comedic and cutting, a meta-commentary on the narrow cinematic roles available to Black and White actresses alike.

By Act II, the illusion of realism collapses. The setting abruptly shifts to 1973, where Vera appears as a guest on *The Brad Donovan Show*, a flamboyant parody of daytime television. The tone is deliberately garish and disorienting, signaling a departure from the naturalistic world of 1933. Vera's persona is now transformed—she is elusive, reclusive, and enveloped in myth. Her responses are measured and strategic rather than confessional. When pressed to explain her disappearance from Hollywood, she deflects: "Call me old-

fashioned, but I like to know who I'm addressing" (Nottage 45). This line, delivered with theatrical poise, exemplifies Vera's refusal to conform to the talk-show host's reductive narrative. Instead of surrendering to a simplified portrayal, she carefully curates her own representation. In Judith Butler's terms, Vera performs gender and racial identity not through revelation but through repetition and rhetorical control. She has shifted from the compliant domestic figure of the 1930s to a multilayered, resistant subject of the 1970s, revealing the fluid, contingent nature of identity under postmodern conditions.

In the final segment of Act II, which stages a 2003 academic colloquium devoted to dissecting Vera Stark's legacy, the play entirely dismantles the notion of fixed authorial meaning. A panel of scholars presents conflicting interpretations of Vera's life and work, treating her not as a historical figure but as a site of ideological projection. Professor Carmen Levy-Green references the "coded silence" in Vera's performance (49), while Afua Assata Ejobo offers a counter-reading that emphasizes erasure and political radicalism. Vera's legacy becomes an object of academic performance, filtered through cinematic fragments, theoretical jargon, and institutional authority. This scene enacts Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, collapsing the boundaries between fact and fiction, past and present, interpretation and invention. The inclusion of a satirical quote from the fictional critic Grandford Ellis's *Subverting Blackness* parodies the ways in which academic discourse constructs identity retroactively and ideologically (43). In this final temporal layer, Nottage reveals how institutions shape and distort Black female identity for their own narrative ends.

The act of viewing Vera Stark thus becomes an interpretive struggle. Is she a subversive artist or a passive participant in racial stereotyping? The script refuses to resolve this tension. As Herb, the moderator, asks, "Did she take her own life... was she cannibalized by our culture?" (43). These questions are left unanswered. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra helps explain why. Vera, as a cultural signifier, has become detached from any original self. She is mediated through film reels, memories, TV appearances, and scholarly projections. The Vera who once lived is no longer accessible; what remains are simulations—performances of Vera, not Vera herself. Her identity becomes a hyperreality, constructed entirely through images and commentary that circulate without fixed meaning.

Vera's own voice, when heard, participates in this simulation. At one point, she performs an overwrought monologue for a director, saying: "My man he means and nasty... he said any man who dun treat me wrong, he a low-down dirty bastard" (33). It is a stylized, deliberate act of mimicry, designed to conform to white expectations of Black pain and struggle. But in its exaggeration, it also resists. The scene blurs sincerity and parody, showing Vera navigating a limited representational field with subversive intelligence. Her awareness of her performative role is itself a form of agency, albeit constrained.

Perhaps the most powerful articulation of Vera's condition comes near the end of the play. She reflects: "I've been performing since I was six years old. And I'm not done. I won't be done until time's up. I'll do it right, I'll do it wrong… I'll do it anyway. Just imagine if you had no place to blow your horn" (38). This monologue transcends biography; it captures the existential reality of being a Black woman artist in a white patriarchal industry. Vera's identity is not merely a product of oppression but of relentless labor—an ongoing negotiation between self and stereotype, visibility and invisibility.

The play also critiques institutional attempts to control or canonize Vera's story. Gloria Mitchell's final revelation, delivered live on a talk show, adds another unreliable layer:

"You're America's Little Sweetie Pie. I cleaned up after you, didn't I? I just quietly watched you do what you had to do" (59). The line is ambiguous, suggestive of both complicity and envy, and it exposes the entanglements of race, labor, and performance. Vera's identity is shaped not only by white directors and scholars but also by other women, including her former employer, roommate, and peers—each invested in narrating or silencing her.

Nottage's play-within-a-play format also complicates representation. The fictional 1930s film *The Belle of New Orleans*, repeatedly referenced and partially staged in Act II, offers a stereotyped southern melodrama where Vera plays the loyal servant Tilly. Yet even within this scripted film, Vera's performance is subject to re-interpretation. Some characters claim Tilly's final lines are a coded act of resistance; others see them as submission. The very ambiguity of the film's meaning becomes the heart of the play's critique. Vera's identity is not just what she performs but how she is read—and misread—by others across time.

In postmodern fashion, the script includes no final act of closure. Vera is neither exonerated nor condemned; her legacy remains plural, open-ended. The audience is tasked not with decoding a moral but with questioning the act of decoding itself. This refusal of resolution is itself a political statement. In resisting a tidy narrative, Nottage challenges the historical tendency to reduce Black women's lives to singular arcs of triumph or tragedy.

Through its layered structure, genre bending, and recursive narratives, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* stages identity as a postmodern puzzle. Vera's life cannot be pinned to a single story or decoded through a stable lens. Instead, it must be understood as a composite—a script performed, revised, erased, and rewritten by others, but never fully owned. In doing so, Nottage not only critiques the representational politics of race and gender in American culture but also reclaims theatrical form as a space for challenging and reimagining identity itself.

Conclusion

Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* offers a nuanced postmodern critique of how identity of African American women is mediated through performance, memory, and historical narrative. Nottage rejects linear storytelling and disrupts the traditional trajectory of character development. Vera Stark is never presented as a fully knowable subject; instead, she is constructed through roles, reflections, and re-readings that shift across time and genre. She is both present and absent, visible and interpreted, performed and theorized. Drawing from postmodern theory, the play illustrates how identity is not an essence waiting to be revealed but a site of ongoing negotiation.

The play also exposes the institutional frameworks—Hollywood, media, and academia—that produce and police identity. With postmodernist characteristics like parody and pastiche, the play calls into question who gets to author history and how truth is constructed. Ultimately, the play doesn't offer closure or resolution. Instead, it insists on complexity, on the refusal to reduce a Black woman's life to narrative clarity. In doing so, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* makes a profound intervention into how we read identity, how we remember performance, and how we recover voices that were never allowed to speak fully on their own terms.

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