

## Ogun Size Enters; or, An Introduction



*Isaiah Matthew Wooden*

This book dedicates rigorous critical attention to the work of Tarell Alvin McCraney, one of the most significant writers and theater-makers of the twenty-first century. Featuring essays, interviews, and commentaries by scholars and artists who span generations, geographies, and areas of interests—and, importantly, who bring fresh and diverse perspectives to their observations and analyses—the volume reflects a particular commitment to engaging and interrogating the vastness of McCraney’s theatrical imagination, the singularity of his writerly voice, the incisiveness of his cultural insights and critiques, the creativity he displays through stylistic and formal qualities, and the unorthodoxies of his personal and professional trajectories. Contributors consider McCraney’s ingenuities as a playwright, adapter, director, performer, teacher, and collaborator. In so doing, they expand and enrich the conversations on his much-celebrated and deeply resonant oeuvre. They also provide springboards for further examinations of the performance texts they investigate, thereby enhancing and encouraging the growth of the emerging field of “McCraney studies.” As a way to introduce the volume and, indeed, McCraney’s broader artistic project, I will briefly trace some of the topics and themes that are already beginning to preoccupy and shape the field and, correspondingly, the substance of this book. In addition to supplying greater context for the work under consideration, I also contemplate its aesthetic, cultural, and pedagogical significance.

McCraney, in a wide-ranging conversation with fellow playwright-director-actor Kwame Kwei-Armah in 2014, offered the following response when asked about how he has negotiated some of the challenges artists perennially face: “I always look for the weird model . . . I always find the weird model . . . the outlier in the system that’s, you know, going to change and revolutionize things.”<sup>1</sup> It had been a desire to find and pursue “the weird model” that led the theater-maker and his classmates at the Yale School of Drama to present his play *The Brothers Size* as a part of the Public Theater’s Under the Radar

Festival some seven years earlier. Directed by Tea Alagić and featuring three budding actors who have since gone on to enjoy impressive performance careers—Gilbert Owuor (Ogun Size), Brian Tyree Henry (Oshoosi Size), and Elliot Villar (Elegba)—the stark, arresting production announced McCraney as one of the most daring and innovative artists creating new work for the stage. *New York Times* critic Jason Zinoman helped stir up excitement about the emerging writer when he declared, “Tarell Alvin McCraney, a third-year student at the Yale School of Drama, is one of the few playwrights in the Under the Radar Festival who is actually under the radar—but not for long.”<sup>2</sup> Zinoman’s unequivocal proclamation would prove prescient. Indeed, in the months following *The Brothers Size*’s triumphant New York premiere, McCraney would distinguish himself as a formidable “outlier in the system,” one distinctly committed to and capable of revolutionizing the theatrical and cultural landscapes.

It is not hyperbolic to say that McCraney has experienced unprecedented success since making his professional debut as a playwright in 2007. The various accolades that he’s earned—among them, the Steinberg Playwright Award, the Windham-Campbell Prize for Drama, the MacArthur Fellowship, the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay, as well as residencies at the Royal Shakespeare Company and New Dramatists—certainly attest to this and, moreover, to his ever-growing prominence and influence. McCraney’s greatest achievements, however, are the performance texts that he has written for both stage and screen, which evidence his investments in dramatizing the richness and complexities of black life, culture, and experience. To date, they include the plays *American Trade*, *Choir Boy*, *Head of Passes*, *Ms. Blakk for President* (with Tina Landau), *The Breach* (with Catherine Filloux and Joe Sutton), *Wig Out!*, and the critically acclaimed trilogy *The Brother/Sister Plays: In the Red and Brown Water*, *The Brothers Size*, and *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*; the Oscar Award-winning film *Moonlight*, which was based on his unpublished story “In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue”; the Steven Soderbergh-directed movie *High Flying Bird*; the television series *David Makes Man*; and adaptations of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*; as well as several other ongoing film, television, and theater projects.

McCraney’s dramatic texts have appeared on stages throughout the United States and internationally, garnering productions at an array of notable theaters. The success of *Moonlight* and *David Makes Man* has served to further expand the artist’s reach, acquainting new audiences across the globe with the suppleness of his storytelling. Powerfully, no matter when or where they have been presented, McCraney’s works have afforded an intergenerational mix of black performers vital opportunities to embody characters abounding in emotional, cultural, and symbolic meaning. They have also marked a disruption to the status quo, beckoning collaborators, spectators, and critics

to imagine and pursue new possibilities—for the performing and media arts, as well as for the world more broadly.

### An Outlier in the *Other* America

While it has become somewhat unfashionable for artists to openly discuss how much they draw on personal experiences for creative inspiration, McCraney has been rather vocal about his penchant for integrating biographical details into his work. Accordingly, it is useful to begin any examination of his artistic achievements and aesthetic sensibilities by exploring and understanding the ways particular life events and circumstances have informed their development. Born on October 17, 1980, and raised in Miami's Liberty City community, McCraney confronted myriad obstacles while traveling the path that would ultimately lead him to pursue writing and theatermaking professionally. Routinely shuttling between the homes of his father and grandparents, devoted Baptists, and the unit that his mother rented in one of the most impoverished housing project communities in the nation during his youth, he found particular solace in telling dramatic stories. These early made-up tales drew inspiration from his grandfather's dynamic Sunday sermons, the colorful figures he encountered while maneuvering the Liberty City streets, and his own pressing needs to better understand the world and the space he, his family, and his community inhabited within it. Importantly, they provided the aspiring artist a means to reckon with some of the questions and uncertainties that regularly seized his attention. As he explained in a 2009 interview with writer Patrick Healy, "Ever since I was young, I was writing plays, sometimes little ones, that were basically about how you fit with people, how they fit with you and how you fit in the world . . . These were questions that I always thought about growing up. And I'm still having a conversation with myself about them."<sup>3</sup> A flair for the dramatic cast McCraney as an outlier in his childhood communities, where people were more apt to privilege those activities and qualities—athletics and hustling, for example—that might help them escape or survive some of the perils that often plague inner city life. Of course, what he at times experienced as estrangement and alienation only further intensified his motivations to create and tell stories that spotlighted the lifeworlds of the overlooked, marginalized, disenfranchised, and the queer among them.

It was his collaborations with Teo Castellanos, the founder and artistic director of the Miami-based dance and theater company D-Projects, during his teen years that exposed McCraney to some of the transformative possibilities of creating socially conscious and politically engaged performance works. The projects that he and his peers produced under Castellanos's direction mostly served a pedagogical purpose. They would tour the devised pieces,

which covered topics such as HIV prevention and the hazards of drug use, to local youth rehabilitation and correctional facilities. In the “Backstage Pass” chapter of this volume, Castellanos recalls that, even in his adolescence, McCraney was a compelling performer: “Once we performed in a detention center . . . I asked him to walk up a stairwell, on some ‘site specific’ improvised direction. He went up there, and when he began to deliver his monologue, the inmates and the staff became so captivated you could hear a pin drop in that jail.”<sup>4</sup> As was the case with many of his cocreators, the stories that the ensemble developed and performed often resonated with McCraney personally. His mother’s battles with addiction and her struggles to manage HIV had supplied him with an intimate knowledge of some of the challenges facing many of the people he regularly encountered.

Coming of age in “the other America” amid the various epidemics that would wreak havoc on poor, black communities in the 1980s and ’90s endowed McCraney with greater empathy for those left out of the nation’s dominant narratives. He speaks to this point in the artist statement that he crafted for the McCarter Theater Company’s 2009 productions of *The Brother/Sister Plays*:

There were days I thought I was born into a third world country. Partly from overzealous imagination, but also from the scarce ability to keep running water in our home coupled with the battle to keep the rampant rodents that plagued our project from chomping into my baby sister . . . I was brought up near the tropic of Capricorn, hurricanes common as mosquito bites. Sea breezes strong enough to send you sailing and starry nights that made the voyages of Columbus seem distant and not yet present. Yet there in the midst of that beauty were drug lords who ran the street corner like Wall Street and Beirut combined. I lived in the other America; the America that doesn’t always get depicted in the cinema. The America that we are told to pretend isn’t there.<sup>5</sup>

It was a desire to, as he puts it, “create theater that told untold stories, that gave voice to another half of America” that compelled McCraney to direct his attention more fully to writing.<sup>6</sup>

Before entering the M.F.A. program in playwriting at the Yale School of Drama in 2004, McCraney, it is worth noting, mostly pursued opportunities to enhance his skills as a performer. He studied acting and dance in the high school theater program at Miami’s New World School of the Arts and, upon graduating in 1999, moved to Chicago to enroll in the Theatre School at DePaul University to receive his B.F.A. in acting. While at DePaul, he would meet several people who would become longtime mentors and collaborators, including the director Tina Landau, the playwright Carlos Murillo, and the actor Cheryl Lynn Bruce. Although he displayed considerable talent

as an actor, even catching the eye of influential director Peter Brook, who tapped him to do workshops of Can Themba's *Le Costume/The Suit* and Marie-Hélène Estienne's adaptation of *Tierno Bokar* soon after earning his undergraduate degree, he quickly discovered that he no longer had a passion for pursuing the profession. "I felt like I was going to end up in therapy, or in Lake Michigan when it's 32 degrees out. I had to stop [acting]. There are braver people than me. There are people who are hungrier for it than I am," he explained in an interview with Dan Rubin.<sup>7</sup> He transitioned to playwriting, in part, because he wanted to conjure up the kinds of worlds and roles for other performers that he himself had once desired to inhabit and portray. He would notably make a triumphant return to the stage in 2019, performing the role of Ms. Joan Jett Blakk, the drag persona of activist and 1992 presidential candidate Terence Smith, in the premiere production of *Ms. Blakk for President* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

McCraney began crafting several new pieces the summer after graduating from DePaul—most notably, "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue." The story featured many of the questions and themes that reverberated throughout the artist's early life and have since become hallmarks of his dramaturgy: namely, race, class, gender, sexuality, spirituality, geography, and family. Written in the wake of his mother's premature death, it also grappled with questions of loss, grief, and mourning. Its protagonist was, like McCraney, an outlier who lived in the *other* America. Its pages reflected the artist's deep commitments to exploring and interrogating both formally and narratively some of the existential and socio-cultural concerns and circumstances that those who identify with its central character negotiate in their everyday lives. It was an early entry into what has become a larger project aimed at "giving voice to the voiceless" and allowing "the light from the moon to shine on the privileged and the marginalized alike," as McCraney put it in the acceptance speech he delivered for the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) 2017 Visionary Award.<sup>8</sup> Though McCraney would table the project once he arrived at the Yale School of Drama, he would remain unwavering in his conviction to use his writing to bring nuance and texture to lives and stories often made invisible by dominant narratives, particularly the lives and stories of the black and queer.

### Ogun Size Enters in the Distant Present

Among the many remarkable things about McCraney's writing are the ways in which it often shrewdly repeats and revises what Harry J. Elam and Douglas A. Jones call "normative dramaturgical formations" to spin fresh stories about the here and now that consciously and provocatively blend the old with the new.<sup>9</sup> His engagement with what I have referred to elsewhere as an "aesthetics of recycling" dramatically opens space for him to wrestle with the pleasures and perils of contemporary black life.<sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly, in reading

or seeing any of McCraney's plays, it becomes immediately apparent that his influences are many—from Yoruba cosmology, black music, and Miami and bayou cultures, to the work of William Shakespeare, Alvin Ailey, Federico García Lorca, Reinaldo Arenas, Essex Hemphill, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Lynn Nottage, among numerous others. The writer that McCraney is perhaps most frequently likened to is playwright August Wilson, who had a tremendous impact on McCraney's artistic development early on in his career. McCraney notably served as Wilson's assistant on the 2005 production of *Radio Golf* at Yale Repertory Theatre, an experience, he told *Los Angeles Times* critic Charles McNulty, that gifted him with a profound understanding of “what it means to be a generous theater artist.”<sup>11</sup> From Wilson, who succumbed to liver cancer a few months after their time working together, he learned “the importance of collaboration, of talking it out, of fighting it out in the room . . . [that] it's important to trust the people you've gathered.”<sup>12</sup> He also got to see and experience up close the benefits of drawing on and synthesizing various expressive and artistic forms—among them, poetry, song, dance, storytelling, and ritual—in his dramaturgy. Of course, while many critics were rushing to hail McCraney as Wilson's heir apparent, audiences were recognizing and celebrating the distinctiveness and dynamism of his writing and artistic vision.

Central to that vision are the various dramaturgical strategies and theatrical devices that McCraney deploys to fashion his complex narratives. Beginning with *In the Red and Brown Water* and *The Brothers Size*, he has, for example, set many of his plays in what he calls “the distant present,” a queer temporal configuration that forges myriad possibilities to imagine, explore, and render lives, experiences, and stories that impede or refuse the logic and imposition of normative time. By situating his work in “time frames at once familiar yet somewhat removed,” McCraney “forces us to consider when the contemporary moves from now to then,” David Román argues.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, he uses distance to compel audiences to contend with the ways that, for far too many, the present is merely not enough—and, indeed, it does not necessarily get better, despite the progressive narratives that we are bombarded with purporting otherwise. Significantly, for McCraney, distancing the present serves as an important means to blur the boundaries between past, present, and future. It also creates space to worry the lines between the real, the fictive, and the mythic while, in many instances, throwing into sharp relief parallels between the worlds of his plays and the lifeworlds of their spectators.

McCraney's incorporation of a distinct form of dialogue that requires characters to announce their stage directions (“Ogun Size enters”) and, at times, communicate their intentions and emotions (“Oya sad, smiles”) in many of his scripts similarly serves to collapse divisions between performers and spectators. While this technique has been effectively employed by various cultural practitioners over the years—including the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English dramatists that McCraney often cites as influences, avant-gardists such as Samuel Beckett and Suzan-Lori Parks, and the

playwright's own grandfather, whose spirited preaching proved formative for the artist—it performs an especially vital and singular function in McCraney's dramaturgy. Most notably, it aids in reemphasizing and reinvigorating the artist's investment in an idea of "theater as community."<sup>14</sup> As Jill Dolan highlights in *Utopia in Performance*, a distinguishing characteristic of live performance—theater, in particular—is its potential and capacity to "provide a place where people [can] come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination" and to "feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than insurmountable obstacles to human potential."<sup>15</sup> McCraney suggests that theater is at its best (and, indeed, its most "holy") when "for the hour or so onstage the audience and actor are one, and all those people, though each seeing it slightly differently, are believing—following the same course or going on a journey."<sup>16</sup> In his dramaturgy, the spoken stage directions, then, serve to inspire what we might call, following Dolan (and anthropologists like Victor Turner), *communitas*: experiences in which audiences and/or participants "feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way" and, correspondingly, share a deep if fleeting sense of belonging.<sup>17</sup> According to McCraney, they also aim to engender call-and-response: "The actors speak stage directions that invite the audience to remember that they are in a theater and that the story that is being told is for them and to feel free to call and respond back."<sup>18</sup>

As the chapters in this volume powerfully illuminate, there is tremendous synergy between form and content in McCraney's work and, as such, the substance of his dramaturgy also tends to provoke a sense of *communitas* and call-and-response. His particular facility for finding and exposing the universal in the specific and, indeed, blending the epic with the intimate affords his audiences a number of entry points for engaging, understanding, and perhaps even empathizing with the characters and tales he plots. Whether he's sharpening focus on an older African American woman forced to confront difficult questions about righteousness, suffering, and faith while living amid the sinking lands of the Mississippi River Delta, as he does in *Head of Passes*, or dramatizing the struggles of a black youth coming of age and coming to terms with his sexual identity in a world that is persistently hostile to difference, as he does in *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*, McCraney fills his work with bold, honest, and sometimes painful reflections and representations of the human condition. It is perhaps because of the adversities he's witnessed and negotiated in his own life that McCraney does not shy away from exploring provocative or controversial topics and themes, always approaching them with acuity, curiosity, and generosity.

While there is rich evidence to substantiate the profound care with which McCraney contends with complex subjects throughout his oeuvre, I want to draw attention briefly to a subtle though especially illustrative example from

*The Brothers Size* that speaks to the thoughtful and sophisticated ways his dramaturgy takes on urgent issues and calls us to interrogate our assumptions about what we think we already know. Since its earliest performances, many have responded positively to the stirring portrait of black brotherhood and manhood that McCraney depicts in the play. Sandra L. Richards, for example, praises the drama for providing a “sensitive exploration of black men’s interiority in the context of a United States that imagines them primarily as strong, hypersexual bodies without minds or regard for social propriety,” while Jeffrey McCune commends the ways McCraney “makes black men speak as poets, masters of linguistic twists and turns—which allows the spectator/reader to not only understand these men as creators of new language, but also the architects of a new world.”<sup>19</sup> What, however, frequently goes unremarked in analyses of the play are the nuanced ways that McCraney recuperates and refigures the prison cell as a fecund site of queer possibility and as a space for rehearsing otherwise illegible forms of black masculinity.

Through a recurring dream marked by questions, hums, moans, unease, and ellipses, the play beckons spectators to ponder whether the bond between Oshoosi and Elegba might go beyond friendship and, indeed, whether the pair perhaps might feel greater freedom to express same-sex desire in a place—prison—that often circulates discursively as antonymic to any meaningful sociality. In so doing, it prompts considerations of the suppressions and repressions of difference, deviance, and delinquency necessary for the maintenance of hegemonic and heteronormative discourses—suppressions and repressions that the very existence of prison helps make possible. Simultaneously, the play presses audiences to contend with the conditions and realities of a racist prison system that not only incarcerates black people at astronomical rates in the United States but also labors to cast those who find themselves in its grip as unworthy of love and devoid of humanity. Ogun Size exposes the fraudulence of these latter suppositions when he declares to his younger sibling, who once again finds himself a fugitive of the law, in the play’s final scene: “You still my brother . . . I swear.”<sup>20</sup> It is a beautiful reminder that, despite any insistence otherwise, this brother, this black man, remains significant to somebody.

### A Beam through Darkness, Pure in Its Source

McCraney’s work abounds with explorations of the potential in forging and embracing different kinds of connections, networks, affiliations, and other forms of collectivity. Having been rejected by their relatives, many of the characters in *Wig Out!*, for example, construct alternative kinships and families through their participation in the houses, rituals, events, and cultural practices that animate the drag and ballroom communities that have provided refuge for many poor and working-class black and Latinx gay and



transgender people throughout the United States since the nineteenth century. The prep school protagonists in *Choir Boy* similarly build deep bonds by joining their voices together to sing in harmony. It should come as little surprise, then, that in addition to remarking on the form, style, and substance of his work, many of the artists whose voices we include in this volume echo Michael Boyd, former artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, in describing McCraney as a “consummate collaborator.”<sup>21</sup>

While writing is generally thought of as a solitary pursuit, creating new work for the theater is unique in that, at a certain point, it requires engaging a broader collaborative community. In her book *Playwrights in Rehearsal: The Seduction of Company*, Susan Letzler Cole describes a scene in which Suzan-Lori Parks, for example, gathers a group of actors in a room at the Public Theater to read her play, *In the Blood*. “During the reading of scene 2, the author picks up her pen, crosses out lines on a page of the script, makes a note on her pad, crosses out more lines, and makes another note.”<sup>22</sup> For Parks, assembling a group of people and absorbing how they give voice and definition to the characters, rhythms, moods, and events she has sketched on the page became crucial to the process of playmaking. For McCraney, that process sometimes also includes preparing a delicious meal for his colleagues, as Tea Alagici recounts in “Backstage Pass.”

I had a chance to experience McCraney’s graciousness as a collaborator firsthand when, while directing *In the Red and Brown Water* at Georgetown University in 2014, he visited the campus and spent two days in rehearsal with my students. In addition to the wise counsel and gentle mentoring he provided the aspiring performers, what stood out during the residency were the ways that, while hearing the play read aloud by the group, he felt inspired to make slight adjustments to the text. It became clear in those moments that McCraney understood his script as a living document, one with the potential to invite new worlds and an array of interpretations.

There is a line in *Head of Passes* that perhaps speaks best to how McCraney’s colleagues generally view him as a collaborator. After her family has met with unspeakable tragedy, Shelah takes to praying, asking God to plant grace and salvation in all who deserve divine pity. God’s grace and salvation, she remarks, “shines like a beam through the darkness, pure in its source.”<sup>23</sup> Surely, a similar thing might be said of McCraney’s writing, which, as the chapters, interviews, and commentaries in this volume illuminate, has fundamentally altered our dramatic and dramaturgical tastes and expectations. Most of the volume’s contributors have notably opted to approach their analyses with “critical generosity,” even while recognizing that there are aspects of McCraney’s writing, dramaturgy, and theatermaking processes that demand additional consideration or critique.<sup>24</sup> Our collective hope is that the readings, interpretations, reflections, and appraisals in the pages that follow will engender even more readings, interpretations, reflections, and appraisals—as well as critiques—of McCraney’s body of work, thereby opening up further

lines of inquiry for considering the significance of the artist's contributions to dramatic literature and theater history, as well as to the study of race, gender, sexuality, culture, and performance more broadly.

### The Dramatic Imagination of Tarell Alvin McCraney

We have organized *Tarell Alvin McCraney* into three parts to draw attention to some of the repetitions, revisions, resonances, and reverberations reflected in and across McCraney's oeuvre. The chapters in part 1, "Space, Faith, and Touch," explore how McCraney at once queries and queers spatial, spiritual, and haptic matters in his work, bringing particular critical attention to the ways these topics emerge in *Head of Passes*, *Wig Out!*, *Choir Boy*, *The Breach*, and *Moonlight*. The chapters in part 2, "Brothers, Sisters, and the Gods among Us," examine signal themes and dramaturgical strategies in *The Brother/Sister Plays*, probing the acclaimed triptych for fresh meanings and interpretations. Part 3, "Art, Creation, and Collaboration," centers the voices of some of McCraney's most important coconspirators, thereby creating space to contemplate the critical and/in the creative. The volume concludes with a short interview that the editors conducted with McCraney in which he further demonstrates the distinctiveness of his artistic voice and imagination. Evidenced throughout the volume's multiple parts is the rigor with which contributors, who deploy a range of methodologies to carry out their examinations and analyses, have approached their engagements with McCraney's work. I provide a précis of each chapter here to help orient readers to the volume's ample offerings.

In "Juxtaposing Creoles: Miami in the Plays of Tarell Alvin McCraney," Donette Francis explores the ways McCraney's work is informed by and infused with a distinctly "Miami sensibility." Turning attention to what she calls McCraney's "black southern hemispheric epics"—notably, *The Brother/Sister Plays*, *Head of Passes*, and *Moonlight*—Francis proposes that, even when they are not explicitly set in Miami, McCraney's works often draw from and comment on the city's unique geopolitical past and present. The foundational role that water plays in McCraney's "black southern hemispheric epics," she intimates, stems from the natural substance's importance to the social and physical ecology of Miami. Francis interrogates the ways that McCraney evinces a "consciousness of place" in his writing that is deeply rooted in his relationship to his hometown.

Patrick Maley meditates on McCraney's explorations of faith, spirituality, and religiosity in "Theodicy and Hope: Tarell Alvin McCraney's Scrutiny of Religiosity." Presenting *Head of Passes* and *Wig Out!* as signal examples, Maley directs us to think of the ways that McCraney's dramaturgy at once reveals a deep skepticism of religiosity's efficacy while, at the same time, exemplifying a "theodicy of hope." Even as McCraney's plays "interrogate divine care

for humanity (theodicy) without any conviction of affirmation (skeptical),” they remain “open to affirmation and productive aesthetic humanism (hope),” Maley argues. In this way, they allow for less conclusive, more ambivalent engagements with divine and spiritual matters.

In “The Distant Present of Tarell Alvin McCraney,” a revisiting of his 2014 *American Quarterly* essay, David Román suggests that McCraney’s work is emblematic of a new millennial “renaissance moment in African American theatre.” He proposes that what distinguishes McCraney from some of his peers in this “renaissance moment” is his persistent focus on the contemporary. Primarily analyzing the premiere productions of *Head of Passes* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company and *Choir Boy* at Manhattan Theatre Club, Román examines how, in rendering the present distant, McCraney creates opportunities for both his characters and audiences to grapple with some of the knottiness that often attends conversations on faith, education, spirituality, and sexuality. He demonstrates how both plays powerfully affirm McCraney’s commitments to experimenting with dramatic form while offering up fresh cultural insights.

Bryant Keith Alexander examines *Wig Out!*’s representations of “gendered becoming” in “‘My Grandmother Wore a Wig’: On Tarell Alvin McCraney’s Mapping of Queer Origins in *Wig Out!*” Sharpening focus on the “My grandmother wore a wig” soliloquies featured in the play, Alexander considers the space these “cameo” moments afford characters to reckon with past traumas and personal histories and, correspondingly, to negotiate their complex feelings about their own gender and sexual identities. A central effect of these soliloquies, Alexander asserts, is to prompt audiences to contend with the complexities of identity formation. Alexander reveals some of the personal insights that attending to these complexities can yield by engaging the principles of performative writing in the chapter.

Katherine Nigh maintains in “*The Breach: A Rupture in the National Narrative of Katrina*” that McCraney and his collaborators on the lesser known play *The Breach* (Catherine Filloux and Joe Sutton) render post-Katrina New Orleans in a more intimate, more empathetic key. Tracing the history of the play’s development and its earliest stagings in New Orleans, Seattle, and New York City, Nigh argues that the drama provides an important counter to the dominant narratives proliferated by the media in the aftermath of the devastating weather event, especially those that constructed New Orleans’s black and poor residents in pathological and criminal terms. The chapter draws particular attention to the ways that, through the plotline McCraney crafts, the play recuperates those queer people and communities erased from the official record on Hurricane Katrina.

While I. Augustus Durham gestures toward the ways matters of space and spirituality manifest in the Oscar Award-winning film *Moonlight* in “‘Certainly No Clamor for a Kiss’: When Black Men Touch,” his primary focus is “the work that the haptic does in the film.” The chapter explores what the film conveys about black men and touch in particular. Through touch,

Durham asserts, black men not only experience particular awakenings in *Moonlight* but also “the breaking of a world broken.” The concluding entry in part 1 of the volume, Durham’s highly intertextual and theoretically rich chapter opens up new lines of inquiry for studying Jenkins and McCraney’s much-celebrated film.

In “Scenes of Vulnerability: Desire, Historical Secrecy, and Black Queer Experience in *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*,” which shifts the volume’s focus in part 2 to *The Brother/Sister Plays*, GerShun Avilez situates *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* in a genealogy of works by black queer writers invested in conveying the nuances of black queer experience. Avilez demonstrates how, even as it renders black queer life as a “constant negotiation of serial loss,” *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* brings to the surface the power of intimacy to assuage loneliness and vulnerability, although not always enduringly. The chapter analyzes the experiences of connection—same-sex intimacy and linkages to a queer past—that McCraney affords the play’s protagonist throughout the drama. *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*, Avilez argues, reveals the ways that queer desire “can undo alienation, work against feelings of powerlessness, and bridge the past and present.”

Like Avilez, Freda Scott Giles also situates *The Brother/Sister Plays* in a genealogy of black writing in “Hip-Hop Nommo: Orishas for the Millennium Generation,” albeit one with more Afrocentric roots. Charting the ways that Pepe Carril’s *Shango de Ima*, August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and McCraney’s *In the Red and Brown Water* incorporate elements of Yoruba cosmology, Giles suggests that there is a continuum of “paradigms for representing and re-presenting the New World African in the postcolonial era.” McCraney, she offers, is an exemplar of a more recent iteration of this paradigm wherein connections to Africa are assumed and do not necessarily require explanation.

Soyica Diggs Colbert closely reads *In the Red and Brown Water* in “Black Movements and Tarell Alvin McCraney’s *In the Red and Brown Water*” to explore “how black performance moves through bodies, places, and time and, in that motion, extends black political movements.” One of the earliest scholars to critically examine McCraney’s work, Colbert returns to the epilogue of her first book, *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage*, to explicate further her assertions about the relationship between embodied and political movements.<sup>25</sup> The chapter investigates what insights *In the Red and Brown Water* exposes about what Colbert calls “black movements”—that is, “embodied actions . . . that further political movements . . . that in turn rearrange time and space.”

Omi Osun Joni L. Jones poetically contemplates the ways *The Brother/Sister Plays* elucidate what she theorizes as “The Black Real” in “*The Brother/Sister Plays* and The Black Real.” Jones outlines how the Black Real is manifested through three mutually supporting and influencing characteristics in the trilogy: notably, its engagements with self-naming/self-narrating,

indeterminacy, and interanimating diaspora. For Jones, “self-narrating/self-naming is understood as agency and community building; indeterminacy as ‘the break’ (space of creativity and spirituality), transtemporality, erotic autonomy, and choice; and an interanimating diaspora as a spiritually and politically driven experience.”

Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr. attends to the ways that *The Brothers Size* stages the everyday lives of black men in “One Size Does Not Fit All: Voicing Black Masculinities in a Pursuit of ‘Freedoms.’” McCune argues that McCraney carves out “rich, complex black masculinities through the deployment of new dramatic language, an emphasis on ‘brother-ness,’ and the use of a small-scale set that allows for spectators to activate their own imaginings” in the play. In so doing, he asserts, *The Brothers Size* elicits “reading practices for its audience wherein black men’s personal stories escape the metonymic trap and act as filters to the intersections of black men’s lives and their unique departures.”

The centerpiece of part 3, “Backstage Pass: An Artist Roundtable on the Work of Tarell Alvin McCraney,” features prominent artists and theater practitioners—Tea Alagić, Jabari Ali, Alana Arenas, Michael Boyd, Cheryl Lynn Bruce, Teo Castellanos, Trip Cullman, Oskar Eustis, Shirley Jo Finney, Tina Landau, Carlos Murillo, and Robert O’Hara—discussing their engagements with both McCraney and his work. Curated and introduced by volume coeditor Sharrell D. Lockett, the roundtable is thick with information about the theatermaking process and the transformational power of creating work in community. It is an invaluable resource for those interested in teaching and staging McCraney’s plays.

McCraney himself reflects on his personal and artistic journey in a brief interview with the volume’s coeditors in the book’s final chapter.

Significant throughout *Tarell Alvin McCraney* are the distinctive critical frameworks and analytical tools that contributors supply readers to approach, unpack, and analyze McCraney’s ever-evolving body of work. To be sure, the volume’s chapters not only augment conversations on the writer’s artistic contributions but also make a case for why his work will continue to remain relevant, resonant, and worthy of study for decades to come.

