

The Revisionary Aesthetic of Suzan-Lori Parks: “Hear the Bones Sing, Write it Down”

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Abstract

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(Under the Direction of Dr. Trudier Harris)

This project examines how Suzan-Lori Parks’s works in every genre—not just her plays, but also her novel and screenplays—look back to literary and cultural artifacts in order to interrogate and to invigorate their legacies. Parks thus creates a new text that is both separate from and linked to its ancestor. The new text stands alone as its own story, but it also challenges the reader to see the old story again with new eyes, to re-envision its legacy, paying special attention to its impact on American history and African American identity. The project focuses on *In the Blood*’s relationship with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*; on how the main characters in *Venus* and *Topdog/Underdog* are molded by the histories that name them; on how and why the women of *Girl 6* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* challenge the film industry’s traditional female representations; and on *Getting Mother’s Body*’s quest to embody literary repetition and revision through its signification on William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*.

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Introduction

“Hear the Bones Sing, Write it Down”:

Reading Suzan-Lori Parks’s (Re)vision-ary Aesthetic

Suzan-Lori Parks is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, a mark of acceptance and a distinction that few dramatists share. However, there are currently no published book-length, single-authored critical studies of her work. The Pulitzer Prize alone seems enough to justify a monograph on her work, but even the play that won her this honor, *Topdog/Underdog* (2002), has received very little critical attention. While articles on Parks’s earlier plays—especially *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1992) and *The America Play* (1994)—and on what is perhaps her most controversial play, *Venus* (1996), are more common, they are by no means abundant.¹

My study pays particular attention to Parks’s newer, critically neglected primary dramatic, prose, and cinematic works—*Venus*, *Girl 6* (1996), *In the Blood* (1999), *Topdog/Underdog*, *Getting Mother’s Body* (2003), and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005)—and their importance not only to Parks’s corpus but also to the African American literary canon as a whole. This project is the first book-length study that addresses at length every genre in Parks’s body of work: her novel, screenplays, and

¹For a complete bibliography of criticism on Parks and her works, see Appendix A. *Topdog/Underdog* premiered at New York’s Joseph Papp Public Theatre in 2001 and on Broadway in 2002. The most recent published edition of the play’s text (and the edition cited in this project) also appeared in 2002. Therefore, I will henceforth use 2002 as the date for *Topdog/Underdog*. For Parks’s other plays, however, I will use premiere dates since the publication dates for these plays often come well after the dates on which they were composed or performed.

plays. Thus, it is one of the first studies to examine Parks as a literary figure rather than exclusively as a playwright and one of the first to examine her works as literature, written texts, rather than exclusively performance pieces.

Parks's corpus² includes thirteen plays (or collections of plays, one of which contains 365 one-acts), two produced screenplays, six essays, and a novel. Although it would be impossible to offer in-depth analyses of all of these works, this study forges connections between Parks's earlier, more experimental works and her more recent, and more mainstream productions. The works that I examine in detail—*Venus*, *Girl 6*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *In the Blood*, *Topdog/Underdog*, and *Getting Mother's Body*—are by far Parks's most narrative and linear texts. In addition, it is in these texts in which Parks most clearly engages history and problematizes white hegemonic historiography.

In this project, I explore the historically focused elements of Parks's aesthetic and position her as an author whose work seeks not only to write African Americans into history but also to challenge the ways that readers imagine and experience history and/or receive recorded accounts thereof. These texts make history more visceral and relevant by asking readers to see the past as more personal and urgent: history and identity remain ever intertwined, haunting each other while still seeking to redeem both the other and itself. Parks's texts represent this tumultuous relationship by revisiting, or, more accurately, by revising some of the most famous texts and contexts in literature and history. These include Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861); the exploitation of the woman known as the Venus Hottentot; *Carmen Jones* (1954), *The*

²For a complete list of Parks's works, see Appendix A.

Jeffersons (1975-85), and other films and television shows with questionable representations of African Americans; Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850); Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991/1993); Abraham Lincoln's assassination; and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Light in August* (1932).

Parks writes in her essay "Possession" (1994) that "the history of Literature is in question. And the history of History is in question too," and that she sees her work as "a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature" (4). The unifying theme of my project is Parks's attention to history and her signification on the texts, language, figures, and cultural events that shape our lingering and acquired perceptions of that history, from Abraham Lincoln to George Jefferson to the AIDS epidemic. Parks's works also explore the simultaneously formative and deleterious effects that these texts, linguistic structures, figures, and cultural events tend to have on identity, especially its racial, cultural, masculine, feminine, familial, and temporal components.

When I speak of the "revision" inherent in Parks's aesthetic, I by no means intend to include Parks in some potentially malignant versions of "revisionist" history or in any other agenda-based, power-hungry historical appropriation meant to silence rather than to let the silenced speak. Parks's aesthetic is so distinctly different that it could be read as the inverse of such an approach. While some may argue that Parks has a prescriptive artistic and political agenda, they would certainly not argue that she seeks to damage or destroy, but rather to create. Parks, then, belongs to the group of writers and historians who revise history with an eye toward putting absent or neglected groups back into it. Even when she "borrows" themes or characters from Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet

Jacobs, William Faulkner, or Tony Kushner, she does not tear these authors' texts apart, but she builds upon them, using them as foundations for a new text. And through these new texts, we see the old text again. Even when Parks is critical of a past work, as we see *Girl 6*'s questioning of black stage and screen representations, her revisions do not seem to advocate that we wholly dismiss these earlier representations. Instead, her new version of the story suggests that we see these works again with more modern, more critical eyes—eyes that see beyond the surface of the work to the contexts that inform its creation.

African American literature, of course, has no shortage of rich visual metaphors, from W. E. B. Du Bois's double-consciousness in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), to John Edgar Wideman's prophetic "Eye" Isaiah in *The Cattle Killing* (1996), to Pecola's Breedlove's wish for beauty and transformation through eye color in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). These metaphors link vision to identity, knowledge, history, and memory. Thus, we would be remiss to forget that "revision" literally means to "see again." The relationship between seeing and writing is mysteriously co-dependent, and is perhaps expressed best by E. M. Forster's often referenced quote from *Aspects of the Novel* (1927): "How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?" (108).³ Blind writers' composing processes, for example, can differ vastly from those of sighted writers,⁴ and

³In his section on "Plot," Forster writes of a story about an "old lady" who "for some time could not be brought to understand what logic was, and when she grasped its true nature she was not so much angry as contemptuous. 'Logic! Good gracious! What rubbish!' she exclaimed. 'How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?'" The woman's nieces, who were "educated young women," judged their aunt "*passée*," but according to Forrester, the old woman "was really more up to date than they were" (108). Forrester uses this story to suggest that with vision and revision comes true understanding that "all that is prearranged is false" (108).

⁴See Ely, R. "Writing, Computers, and Visual Impairment" in *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 83.5 (1989): 248-52.

Parks herself is notorious for insisting that she maintain control over the way her texts appear on the printed page, regardless of the effect on publishing cost and book prices (Lyman 86).

Literary creativity, it seems then, transcends normal vision. More than just seeing, it is “vision-ary” because there is inherit within it intent, hope, and the potential for transformation—for the creator and for the created works. The writer, the visionary, must create the sights, the sounds, the feelings of the imagined world so the reader can witness them anew with each reading, be it the first or the ninety-ninth. When an author revises a literary text, she asks us not only to see again, but hear again, feel again, experience again. The inevitable consequence of this re-vision, this “seeing again” of the literary world, is that the reader also “sees again” the world outside of the text, the “real world” that is the context for both the act of writing and the act of reading. When Parks takes a re-vision to the stage/screen and the page, we begin to see again that we took for granted, or that we perhaps never saw in the first place. At the same time, Parks’s efforts cannot be reduced to mere mimicry; they are still wholly innovative. With each re-vision, a new text is created that is both connected to and wholly distinct from the revised text. Such an aesthetic is best called (re)vision-ary because it is both a seeing again and a wholly new seeing.

I borrow the core meaning of this term “revisionary” from Kimberly W. Benston’s 1990 article, “Facing Tradition: Revisionary Scenes in African American Literature.” In this examination, Benston analyzes important scenes of seeing, reseeing, and reflection in some of the most oft-read African American texts, including Frederick Douglass’s descriptions of Sophia Auld in his 1845 *Narrative*, the protagonist’s moment

of racial awakening in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), Richard Wright's deconstruction of the father's image in *Black Boy* (1945), and Nettie and Celie's reunion in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). Benston argues that such scenes "present a simultaneous enactment and theorization of consciousness taking place at key textual moments" (99).

In the Douglass example, Benston focuses on scenes in which Douglass describes the changes he sees when looking upon his once-angelic mistress Sophia Auld, who at first showed a "white face beaming with the most kindly emotions" and "did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face [...] Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music" (Douglass 56, 57). Slavery, however, quickly undermines Sophia's goodness, and Douglass soon observes, "The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon" (Douglass 57).⁵ According to Benston, this seemingly unfortunate change actually proves beneficial for Douglass because "rupturing the illusion of reciprocity between Sophia and the hero implies the possibility of an unmediated confrontation with the face of mastery and the consequent liberation of vision from its framing apparatus" and moves him to "mobilize the narrative of self-perceptive emancipation" (Benston 101). The change and the growing difference between Douglass and Sophia Auld opens space for Douglass's identity and agency to exist outside of the influence of whiteness in general and the white gaze in particular.

⁵Also quoted in Benston pp. 100, 101.

In the revisionary experience, “African American identity looks on an image of being at once external and internal to itself, an echo or expression it must revise in order to see itself” (99-100). For the writer then, “writing and reading intersect *as* tradition, (re)envisioning blackness as an immanent locus of expressive emancipation” (Benston 99). Because white, male, hegemonic power structures have subjugated and marginalized the black subject in life and in art (text, stage, and screen), the very act of revising becomes a mode of revealing and/or complicating identity for the African American writer. The product of this revelation—the epiphany that accompanies the harmonious juncture of reading and writing, seer and seen—can signify the beginnings of a less oppressive literary tradition that will contain both what is read (both old and born anew) and what is written.

Parks, of course, goes beyond Benston’s (re)envisioning because she does not simply engage the history or legacy that a text or context creates; she literally brings another text into her own. Rather than (re)envisioning (responding to/altering a reflection or manifestation), then, Parks’s works are more directly (re)vising, seeing the thing/text itself again. Her works thus even more intensely foreground reading, writing, and their impact on identity.

While Parks’s texts can certainly stand as complete literary creations independent of their “ur-texts,” in order to most fully understand Parks’s revisionary agenda, one must read the history or the literature she is revising. The even deeper inherent call in Parks’s texts is not just to have read the relevant text and compare it in hindsight to hers, but to read the old text again with the new sight provided by her revisionary work. As a result of this re-reading, the old text, still intact, is actually left more whole, more complete, and

perhaps even more relevant than before it was subject to the revisionary impulse because the reader's vision is clearer, more inspired, and more informed.

This is especially the case in *In the Blood*, Parks's revision of *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne's text, required reading for high-school and college students across the United States, could very easily be wrongly dismissed as a primarily historical examination of American's puritanical roots with its only possible connection to a modern audience lying in its engaging debates about the inherent good/evil in human nature. But Parks's version of the story shows that the ostracism that white Hester Prynne experiences at the hands of her seventeenth-century, white, male oppressors does not differ vastly from that which twenty-first century African American women, especially those who depend on public assistance to support their families, encounter from black *and* white men *and* women. With this new perspective, *The Scarlet Letter* and its place in American literary and cultural history become much more interesting and relevant to a modern reader.

Such re-seeing channels Anna Julia Cooper's notion of "the darkened eye restored" in *A Voice from the South* (1892). Describing the effects of suddenly hearing and understanding the black woman's voice after centuries of silence, Cooper observes: "The world has had to limp along with the wobbling gait and one-sided hesitancy of a man with one eye. Suddenly the bandage is removed from the other eye and the whole body is filled with light. It sees a circle where before it saw a segment. The darkened eye restored, every member rejoices with it" (Cooper 107). Parks's revisionary works connect modern black playwrights with the ill-fated Venus Hottentot, question what became of the freedom promised in Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and bring Faulkner's dead back to life. Parks removes the bandage that we too often use to

hide or ineffectually salve histories or stories that are too complicated or too painful to engage, as well as the bandages we have used to cover the wounds that are gaping holes in history and literature—the stories that have not been passed on.

In “Possession,” Parks writes:

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to ‘make’ history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, disremembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. (4)

Considered alongside Cooper’s manifesto, Parks’s description of her artistic agenda, which also echoes Alice Walker’s description of unearthing her foremothers in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), becomes all the more imperative. In both Parks’s and Cooper’s writings, sight and sound combine to create a more complete story, to reveal the invisible, to resurrect the forgotten. For Parks, they also create an original text—a text that is simultaneously new and old. Parks asserts specifically of the bones in “Possession” that:

their song is a play—something that through a production *actually happens*—I’m working theatre like an incubator to create ‘new’ historical events. I’m re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events—and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human. (4-5)

This resurrection and creation Parks describes in her essay is especially notable because it follows a clear, step-by-step process. It begins with excavations—with finding and revealing the “truth” about those stories and people previously lost to history. Then, there is pause as we hear the bones, and finally, there is writing. This second step though, hearing the bones, is more complicated than first impressions might suggest.

Hearing the bones singing involves more than just listening, because “their song is a play,” and a play must be heard, watched, and ideally, read. Through this hearing and watching, Parks’s “new” history—as well as a broader understanding of historiography and its role in identity politics—is created.

But again, this watching and listening to “hear the bones singing” is not the last step in Parks’s revisionary process; the play as production is only the penultimate “stage.” Next, the writer/artist has to “write it down.” Once history is created and the baby is born, the witness to this history must record what she sees and hears. This brings me back to my ultimate privileging of Parks’s written texts as the primary locus of meaning for her works. This study in general, and the *In the Blood* chapter specifically, pays particular attention to the disjunctions between the written and the performed work.

We often assume that playwrights create a production to be staged, but Parks seems to be telling us in “Possession” that her aesthetic is more circular (and perhaps even infinitely so) than this traditional model of playwriting suggests. Her writing (the written version of the play) actually records an already staged event—historical or literary. In the case of Parks’s plays and screenplays then, when the written play is staged again, the original staging—the bones singing—is actually born again, thereby leaving room to another writer to pick up the story and make it their own old/new story, as if it were a kind of textual-dramatic call and response. For Parks’s novel, *Getting Mother’s Body*, such a theory of inherently dramatic composition opens countless new avenues for interpretation, most especially for comparative analysis with Parks’s earlier works, for even a prose narrative would, according the paradigm she establishes, be based on “a play” that was once the bones’ song.

Indeed, those scholars who are interested in the theatre and the spectacle of the stage have contributed the bulk of the criticism on Parks's work. Writers such as Kimberly Dixon and Aja Marneweck provide valuable insights into the role of spectacle and spectatorship in Parks's works. Erotics, language, and form are also recurring topics in the critical conversation. Jennifer Johung's "Figuring the 'Spells'/Spelling the Figures: Suzan-Lori Parks's 'Scene of Love'" (2006) and Elizabeth Dyrud Lyman's "The Page Refigured: The Verbal and the Visual Language of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*" (2002) offer particularly compelling analyses of Parks's linguistic and formal experimentations and their unique impact on performance. I turn to both of these scholars often in my discussion when a play's formal experimentations are integral to its textual significations.

Also of immense value is the work of Harry Elam and his frequent collaborator Alice Raynor. Their joint essays, "Echoes from the Black (W)hole: An Examination of *The America Play* by Suzan-Lori Parks" (1999) and "Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks" (1998) as well as Elam's essay on *In the Blood*, are especially useful when considering issues of agency and reform in Parks's works. This project often uses Elam and Raynor's work to link characters across texts as well as to help establish a work's potential social agenda. In my analysis of *In the Blood*, for example, I use Elam's observations about the protagonist Hester La Negrita's lack of "cultural literacy" as a springboard from which to launch my discussion of the importance of subtexts in this play (120). *In the Blood* in particular offers a wholly different experience to its readers and its viewers; thus, in order to accurately "read" the characters and their motivations, to experience full cultural literacy in the world of the

play, readers/viewers must read and watch, see and hear. Also, Elam's observations in "A Black Thing" (2005), his editorial preface to a special issue of *Theatre Journal* focused on black performance, provides a fascinating critical overview of trends in modern African American theatre and their relationship to black experience and black expression. This overview plays a critical role in my discussion of how *Getting Mother's Body* can be read as an important aesthetic shift for Parks.

Other critics, such as Elizabeth Brown-Guillory and Deborah Geis, have noted Parks's paring of revision and history—but these approaches primarily focus, again, on the staged product. In her article on The Red Letter Plays—*In the Blood* and *Fucking A*—for example, Geis nods to Parks's desire "to resurrect bodies" by excavating history and to her "revisionist approaches," but she posits that Parks's goal in such approaches, and in "her unconventional theater style" is to "get the audience to examine its own guilty spectatorship" (78). While I agree that Parks's re-imagining of theatrical elements, such as costumes in *Topdog/Underdog* and intermissions in *Venus*, do encourage audiences to re-evaluate their complicity in spectacle and its related commodification of the African American identity and art, my project suggests far broader implications for Parks's "plays" on history. Brown-Guillory, meanwhile, argues that Parks's works "repeat the hegemonic historical representations of blacks while simultaneously revising and reconfiguring those representations to include the souls of Black folk" (185). But again, Brown-Guillory emphasizes how "the playwright attempts to *dramatize* the struggle, the resistance to nullification," and she takes a postcolonial approach to interpreting the works, thereby focusing on "the African American experience of migration, racial memory, and remembering" (184, my emphasis).

In addition, before she was a novelist, Parks was an essayist, and these essays, as I explore throughout this project, not only provide important tools for reading Parks's works, but also for charting the future of African American drama and prose. Sandra Shannon's essay "What is a Black Play?: Tales from My Theoretical Corner" (2005) examines how Parks's observations about black experience in "An Equation for Black People on Stage" (1994), especially when read along side *Topdog/Underdog* and *The America Play*, demonstrate how she "has become a forerunner among contemporary black writers as she uses her plays to define blackness outside the white gaze" (604). But even Shannon's analysis is brief—quoting only one of Parks's many theoretical essays—and is still inextricably linked to Parks's primary texts. Indeed, no previous scholars have engaged Parks in detail in her more theoretical role or considered the corpus of her theoretical material as contributing to a larger agenda than Parks's own. While my work does build on Shannon's points about "An Equation for Black People on Stage," my chapters also include related and divergent discussions on all of Parks's essays, most notably her newest essay, "new black math" (2006), which is a revision of "Equation." This essay not only provides an entry point for examining the cultural and aesthetic relevance of Parks's more recent works, but it also shows, as I explore in the concluding chapter, that in addition to revising other writers' works, she often revises her own.

Aside from the aforementioned critics, however, scholarly analysis on Parks and her works remains surprisingly scant. An MLA bibliography search for articles with Parks's work as a subject yields fewer than sixty results, compared to slightly over 200 for contemporary novelist Gloria Naylor, who, like Parks, receives significant popular and critical praise, and who has been publishing just seven years longer than Parks

(Parks's first major play, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, appeared in 1989 while Naylor's first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* was first published in 1982). This comparison indicates that critics have had sufficient time to write and publish examinations of Parks's ever-expanding corpus, so a mitigating factor must be at work, somehow discouraging scholarly production on Parks, a writer whose experimental and historical approaches would seem more likely to draw critics to her works rather than discourage them.

Genre might account for some of this critical disparity, of course, but not all of it. The call for more critical focus on African American dramatists and their works is by no means new: Sterling Brown issued such a call in 1937 in *Negro Poetry and Drama*. Some playwrights—August Wilson in particular—have at least partially transcended these generic critical boundaries.⁶ Wilson yields nearly as many MLA search results as Naylor, and his first major play, *Jitney*, premiered in 1982—the same year as Naylor's first novel. We must also remember again that Parks is not exclusively a playwright. Her novel, *Getting Mother's Body*, appeared four years ago (2003), and while journals and publishers certainly contend with backlogs that delay criticism on novels until well after their appearance, the lingering lack of scholarly discussion, especially given the novel's overwhelmingly positive popular reception, remains puzzling.

Oddly enough, Parks criticism did not see a significant increase after she won the Pulitzer Prize in 2002. Just over a third of the articles listed in the MLA bibliography appeared in 2002 or later; the same number that appeared between 1998 and 2001.

⁶James Baldwin, Parks's mentor, and Amiri Baraka might also be included in this list, since their plays receive significant critical attention. Like Parks, they are not known exclusively as playwrights, but unlike Parks, playwriting would not be considered their primary genre. For more information on individual playwrights and their roles on the tradition, see Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch's *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge, 2003).

Doctoral dissertations follow the same general trend: graduate students have produced seven dissertations with Parks's work as their primary or partial subjects. The earliest appeared in 1997, and only two have been written in the past four years. Six of these consider Parks along side other writers, such as August Wilson, Carolyn Chute, and Regina Taylor, while the final and most recent (2005) examines motherhood in three plays, *Topdog/Underdog*, *The America Play*, and *In the Blood*.

Accounting for these critical trends and the relative lack of Parks scholarship overall can be tricky. One hypothesis blames form: The more narrative elements of the newer plays discourage the drama scholar from writing about Parks; meanwhile, the perceived dominance of the dramatic form intimidates prose scholars. Parks's earlier plays—especially *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1986), *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987), and the hilarious monologue *Pickling* (1988)—are indeed highly experimental, so much so in fact that one often has to read the plays aloud in order to properly grasp the details of the action. While a theatre scholar would likely prefer such a characteristic, a traditional literature scholar would probably pass the work along to their colleagues in drama, or even poetry, to decipher.

A second hypothesis blames the abundance of scholarship available for the texts on which Parks has chosen to signify in her revisionary works. *The Scarlet Letter*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Venus Hottentot scandal, and the Lincoln presidency/assassination are among the most written-about topics in their respective subject areas. Preparing to enter the critical conversation and thus the background reading about any of these topics may seem daunting at first glance. In addition, these topics/texts tend to polarize audiences. Since *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, is required

reading in most high schools, most writers come to the novel (and thereby also to its sister text *In the Blood*) with a long history of either loving or hating the text. Faulkner, it seems, has a similar effect on his readers, especially concerning racial representations. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*'s dialect and focus on folk traditions inspired debate when the novel appeared in 1937, and now, how both figure into Parks's version of the story has inspired similar controversy for modern viewers. The body of Saartjie Baartman, the Venus Hottentot, was only recently returned to South Africa, and the American Civil War and Abraham Lincoln's role in it remains a potent force in the American literary and cultural imagination, North and South.⁷

The third and final hypothesis to account for the lack of criticism on Parks—and that which I believe to be most likely—is that as Parks becomes more popular, her authorial voice becomes louder and more omnipresent, and that with this volume and presence comes a simultaneous silencing and absencing of critical voices. When an author is alive, critics and those that evaluate critics tend to look to the author for validation. Parks explains that one of her motives for writing “from Elements of Style” (1994) was to give those who staged or otherwise interacted with her plays “a way in.” She explains, “[...] instead of calling me up they can, with this ‘guide,’ dive into an examination with great confidence” (6). This sentiment not only encourages generally fallacious “intentional” scholarship but also encourages critics/readers to be monomaniacally focused on the “right” or “wrong” interpretation of a work, subtly undermining the very “confidence” Parks hopes to inspire. “Elements” works best when

⁷Baartman's remains arrived in South African for burial in May 2002 (Singer A1). More than a dozen books on Lincoln were published in 2007 alone.

considered as a style “guide,” a place from which critics/reader might more confidently begin a language-based analysis of Parks’s works.

Parks—seemingly paradoxically—warns in a section of “From Elements of Style” entitled *bad math*, “Don’t ask playwrights what their plays mean; rather, tell them what you think and have an exchange of ideas” (15). And indeed, such contradictions are common when comparing Parks’s observations. Her public comments on her work in interviews and popular articles seem to discount most possible interpretations of her texts, especially those interpretations that focus on historical or cultural criticism. Although Parks’s comments need not necessarily be ignored, they also certainly should not supplant more careful attention to her content.

Parks also asserts, “As a playwright I try to do many things: explore the form, ask questions, make a good show, tell a good story, ask more questions, take nothing for granted” (“Elements” 6). And why would she expect anything less from her readers/performers? The underlying message of “Elements” then is both inspirational and instructional: “This essay is intended primarily for the next generation of theatre makers,” she asserts, for she is both guide and sage to the up-and-coming dramatists. The critics—although they may hungrily hang on her every word—are merely an afterthought.

This dismissal, however, should not discourage critics, but rather encourage them to establish their undeniably vital role in uncovering new dimensions of and beginning new conversations about Parks’s works. In this project, I mimic Parks’s approach to playwriting in my approach to analysis: “explore the form, ask questions” then “ask more questions, take nothing for granted.” In so doing, my arguments at times collide with

Parks's assertions about her own work. But rather than hinder the discussion, I feel these moments of disagreement embody the beauty of Parks's revisionary aesthetic. Parks's revised works show that the texts and contexts on which she signifies are still relevant; their histories are still open to interpretation, and new ideas and new players can still be written in. So it is with Parks's own works. Their meanings are not fixed, but open to interpretation, questioning, and even re-envisioning/revising, allowing their importance and their relevance to remain undeniable.

In the chapters that follow, I explore Parks's revisionary aesthetic through detailed examinations of her later, more critically neglected works. I have chosen to proceed chronologically to show not only how Parks has consistently relied on this revisionary aesthetic throughout her most recent works, but also to best show how she has done so in every genre that she has explored.

My first chapter, "'With Deliberate Calculation': Money, Sex, and the Black Playwright in *Venus*," emphasizes how this play's revision of Saartjie Baartman—The Venus Hottentot—focuses on the historical construction of black female sexuality and black performance. Parks presents Baartman, who was part of circus-like spectacles in England and France in the early nineteenth century, as a complex woman who admits that she is complicit in her own exploitation. Most of the play's critics and reviewers have thus focused on Parks's motives for characterizing Baartman in this manner and whether or not Parks's revised version of *The Venus Hottentot* further exploits Baartman or helps to liberate her. Sadly, these discussions tend either to completely dismiss Parks and her *Venus*, arguing that they simply contribute to the white sexist and racist views about black women; or, they claim that Parks and her *Venus* are merely victims of these sexist

and racist ideologies, just as the original Baartman was when she was put on display in the nineteenth century.

I, however, see a middle ground and argue that in Parks's revised version of the Venus story, what appears to be complicity may be simultaneously read as subversive agency. Such an approach channels what Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* calls "deliberate calculation" (83), choosing a life that allows for some degree of agency over one that assures passive victimhood. Parks's revision of the story makes the idea of "calculation," or conscious agency, more central by giving money and economics an important role in Venus's story, especially the meta-performative elements thereof. In so doing, Parks's *Venus* shows how the nineteenth-century trials of Saartjie Baartman can be read as paralleling that of the modern African American playwright as he/she negotiates a world that demands both obvious (but not alienating) racial solidarity and substantial profit.

Chapter Two, "This Film Has Been Modified From Its Original Version: *Girl 6* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," examines film's role in the popularization of African American culture and history. Parks's first major film, *Girl 6*, portrays the trials of an actress turned phone-sex operator, Girl #6, as she struggles to work within and against the sexual stereotypes about black women perpetuated by nearly a century of racist and sexist film and television representations. The film revises scenes from television shows such as *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times* (1974-79) as well as films such as *Carmen Jones* and *Foxy Brown* (1974) with Girl 6 and other characters replacing the original actors. These fantasy clips supplement the main action, which in the end feels like a fantasy itself as Girl 6 walks into Grauman's Chinese Theatre to watch the film

Girl 6. *Girl 6* is a visceral film that blurs the lines between what is “normal” and what is unspeakable or taboo. As *Girl 6* becomes more engaged with her callers and their fantasies, she and the viewer are forced to confront their own fantasies and the roles these fantasies play in defining sexuality and identity.

Parks’s more recent screenplay adapts Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) for the twenty-first-century television audience. This film received harsh criticism from many critics for straying too far from Hurston’s text, and indeed Parks’s screenplay, like her other revised works, can be more productively examined as a new “text.” While Parks’s version does call attention to a few important elements of Hurston’s text, especially sexual expression, by recreating and emphasizing them, it is what Parks left out of and added to Hurston’s story in the revising that is most relevant to Parks’s revisionary aesthetic. Parks and her collaborators use this sexuality to draw the modern reader to Hurston’s text, but the story they find there varies so vastly from the film’s story that the viewer/reader must then consider why Parks chose to leave out scenes with undeniable historical and cultural relevance, such as descriptions of inter-racial sexual exploitation or redemptive black female community. Read together, *Girl 6* and Parks’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* raise challenging questions about the future of black community and the efficacy of film in healing the divisive wounds that Hollywood itself has created, especially for black women, through problematic stereotypes of black identity and sexuality.

Chapter Three, “The ‘A’ *In the Blood*: What Able and Angel Mean to a Late Twentieth-Century Black Welfare Mother,” goes back to Parks’s nineteenth century significations, specifically exploring how her revision of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The*

Scarlet Letter (1850) both celebrates and challenges this canonical text. *In the Blood* tells the story of Hester La Negrita, a black, single, mostly illiterate, poor mother of five children who is likely dying of AIDS. Hester's circumstances eventually drive her to infanticide, and she uses the blood of her fallen son to write an "A"—scarlet by nature—on the ground next to his body. While neither *The Scarlet Letter* nor *In the Blood* ever definitively name what their A's signify ("adultery" never appears in either text), *The Scarlet Letter* does strongly suggest two interpretations for Hester Prynne's mark: "Able" and "Angel." This chapter posits that when we look back to Hester Prynne's Able and Angel and consider both as possible interpretations/significations for Parks's A "in the blood," we find that both descriptors highlight key elements of Hester La Negrita's fragile and fragmented identity—an identity that both channels and challenges the legacy of Hester Prynne.

In the Blood thus shows how history, revealed by *The Scarlet Letter* to be a tragically haunting force, has retained its potency. The same ambiguous signifiers define Hester Prynne and Hester La Negrita, but the nuances of the significations are different, indicating how time and circumstances have made it impossible for Hester La Negrita's story to end with anything other than her destruction. Parks's repetition of Hawthorne's themes thus shows reverence and relevance; *The Scarlet Letter*, especially when read with Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, holds keys for understanding our modern world's treatment of women, sin, and penance. Yet, Parks's substantial revision of Hester Prynne and *The Scarlet Letter* also shows that America and American history have only become more malignant for America's present-day Hesters, especially if they are black and poor.

Chapter Four, “Folding and Unfolding History: Identity Fabrication in *Topdog/Underdog*,” examines how even the most superficial historical categories or labels can undermine individual racial identity. In *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks revises Abraham Lincoln’s legacy and assassination. The play follows two unfortunately named African American brothers, Lincoln and Booth, as they negotiate poverty, familial responsibility, and racial/historical determinism. Throughout the play, the brothers tangle with each other for dominance as they futilely resist taking on the roles that their historical names seem to prescribe for them.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks’s use of clothes and costumes highlights the fluidity, exteriority, and superficiality of identity, especially in its relationship to history and memory, for as Lincoln and Booth recall national history and even their own pasts, clothes play a central role in their discussions. For these brothers, changing one’s identity is as easy as changing one’s clothes, so throughout the play, clothes steal both the brothers’ and the audience’s attentions away from the interior self and shift it instead to the transient exterior self that is put on like a mask. This happens so often in the play that it becomes difficult to separate the interior from the exterior, the real from the superficial, and the two begin to merge, making the brothers doubt each others’ true identities and motivations. In the face of such uncertainty, Lincoln and Booth become the roles prescribed by their costumes and their names, Abraham Lincoln and his assassin/Topdog and Underdog, and live out the fates these names imply.

In Chapter Five, I look at how Park’s only novel, *Getting Mother’s Body*, marks a significant departure from the cultural and historical indictments of her previous work and can be read as almost wholly redemptive. This chapter, “As I Advance Living:

Getting Mother's Body's Parallel Journeys,” discusses the implications of a revision focused on reversal, both for the protagonist and the author. The novel signifies on the form of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) by reversing the trajectory of Faulkner's text. But Parks's characters are not only bringing home a body (rather than taking one away); they are also reversing their life trajectories and reversing the wrongs of their pasts. Billy Beede, the protagonist, sets out to dig up her mother's body so that she can find the “treasure” with which her mother is rumored to be buried and pay for an abortion. Along the journey to the gravesite, Billy reconnects with and embraces forgotten memories of her mother, learns to rely on her own wit and craftiness, and begins to trust those who truly love her, regardless of their superficial flaws. Whereas in Faulkner's story each character falls prey to his/her individual demons, in Parks's, most characters are fully redeemed—relationally and spiritually—by the end of the novel because they have both learned from and learned to appreciate their ancestors.

Overall, *Getting Mother's Body* also marks a kind of reversal for Suzan-Lori Parks, and while it chronicles Billy Beede's journey to revise her mother's legacy, it also chronicles the process that Parks herself may have gone through when revising Faulkner's. Just as the Billy Beede's journey transforms her, the revisionary process seems to have transformed Parks. Not only is this work prose, but also the tone, form, and voice vary greatly from Parks's previous works. Most notably, *Getting Mother's Body* has a happy ending. There is a resolution of the action without violence or death; there is love and salvation; and there is a strong black female protagonist who triumphs over adversity by way of her own strength and with the support of a loving black male partner. Since few other African American novels—and none of Faulkner's novels—end

as happily or even as tidily as *Getting Mother's Body*, we can read the novel as advocating an alternate historical trajectory or reading for African American history and culture.

Then, in my concluding chapter, I re-envision Parks, showing how her essays and her most recent collection *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006) position her as a new kind of literary theorist. The essays suggest an approach to all genres of literature that blends creativity, form, culture, and history, and her newest collection of plays puts this theory into practice by making playwriting, play reading, and Parks's revisionary aesthetic part of Americans' everyday lives. In *365 Days/365 Plays* Parks systematically revises her own works, proving that no history, no literature, and no identity is static or isolated, but that all must remain dynamic and democratic in order to remain relevant.

Overall, this project seeks to prove that Parks has been and will remain an undeniable force in the African American literary tradition, even if she never writes another word. For as long as Americans are haunted by their histories, they will continue to dig for the bones of their ancestors. For those willing to listen, the bones will always sing. Then, those who come to love the songs will write them down, and they will become revisionaries.

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Chapter One

“With Deliberate Calculation”: Money, Sex, and the Black Playwright in *Venus*

Some form of the word “complicity” appears in nearly every critical and scholarly examination of Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* (1996), the fictionalized life story of Saartjie Baartman, The Venus Hottentot, who performed in England and France in the early nineteenth century. *Venus* follows a young South African woman (The Girl) who agrees to go to England to make “a mint” as an “exotic dancer” who shows off her ample buttocks and perhaps her genitals (20). Not long after her arrival in England, however, The Girl’s “business partner” leaves her with the greedy Mother-Showman, who transforms The Girl into The Venus and puts her on display in a cage and charges admission to see her. The Venus is “rescued” by The Baron Docteur, a rich man with whom she has a love affair, but who eventually abandons her to die so that he can dissect her corpse and become a famous anatomist.

Most interpretive questions about the play and Parks’s motive for creating it center on whether Parks and her version of The Venus Hottentot contribute to black female exploitation as well as whether Parks and her Venus are working for or against what critics generally describe as some version of oppressor, exploiter, colonizer, or white sexist and racist hegemony (and to what degree). These critics generally engage this question of complicity in the play with an eye toward either completely indicting

Parks and her Venus or completely exonerating them. Yet, I argue in this chapter, the play suggests both.

In her essay “new black math” (2005) Parks presents a poetic manifesto on the nature of African American theatre. She writes, “A black play is simple./ A black play is COMPLICATED” (583). These lines—one of many paradoxical descriptions in the essay—indicate that, for Parks, theatrical work is inherently contradictory and messy. So, in *Venus*, she and her Venus can be working within, as well as against, the forces that oppress them. The seemingly illogical nature of this paradox does not destabilize the linear narrative of the play or its revolutionary implications, because, as Parks suggests, “A black play is double voiced but rarely confused” (“new black math” 576).

So, in *Venus*, what appears to be complicity may be simultaneously read as subversive agency. The play’s protagonist, The Venus,¹ acts with what Harriet Jacobs calls “deliberate calculation” (83), opting for a life based on personal choice rather than external force. Parks’s protagonist chooses potential fame and fortune in a form of exploitation she hopes she can live with over certain slavery as well as unknown and potentially unbearable exploitation. The play makes economics a central factor in this decision, and, significantly, in many of the meta-performative aspects of the play—including the greed that eventually leads to The Venus’ death and “scientific” display. As such, *Venus* parallels the plight of The Venus, as well as other characters in the play,

¹In this chapter I will focus exclusively on Parks and her created characters, separate from the real Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman. As such, I will refer to the play’s protagonist as she is called in the play: “The Girl” and “The Venus.” The play’s use of the definite article for most character names is interesting as it both universalizes and individualizes the character. In addition to fueling the paradoxical nature of the play, this definite article highlights the fluidity of the Venus Hottentot’s actual identity. Spellings of her real name varied almost ubiquitously across critical and historical sources, and as Elizabeth Dryud Lyman points out, “Saartjie herself, referred to variously as ‘The Girl,’ ‘Venus,’ and ‘The Hottentot Venus,’ is never named in a speech attribution or addressed by another character in her given name” (96).

with that of the modern African American playwright. The modern playwright must choose between catering to the paying public—white and black—and thus allowing her plays to be seen (and read); or, the playwright can hope to be miraculously discovered but will more likely face obscurity. At the same time, however, by writing Baartman's story for the stage, the original site of her exploitation, and by profiting from the presentation of this story, Parks maps the theatre as a productive and profitable (though still problematic) healing space for African American playwrights. *Venus* as a whole, then, reinforces Parks's descriptions of the paradoxical nature of black plays.

The Venus' agency on stage also reasserts and de-pathologizes the black female claim to sexual autonomy, a move that channels Jacobs's similar assertions in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs's description of her "deliberate calculation" comes after she has decided to choose a lover—one whom she does not love—rather than be raped by her master. Similarly, The Venus still faces sexual exploitation in private and public, but her influence over the Baron Docteur and other men in the play does allow her some power and economic advantage that she ordinarily would not have. When their sexual deviance and greed become too potent even for her shameless sexuality to overcome, her agency—as well as her life—are lost.

Parks comes under heavy fire from critics such as Jean Young, who objects to what she sees as *Venus*' ahistorical portrayal of "Baartman's complicity in her own exploitation" (699). Young argues that Parks's Venus "reifies the perverse imperialist mind set, and her mythic historical reconstruction subverts the voice of Saartjie Baartman" (700). *New York Times* theatre critic Ben Brantley agrees that Parks "doesn't present Baartman as just an uncomprehending victim," but he applauds this decision and

the play's accessibility to a broad audience (3). Anne Davis Basting, on the other hand, citing Parks's repetition of the phrase "Do I have a choice?" and the presence of a flashing "no" sign in the Public Theatre's staging of the play, sees the characters in *Venus* as caught up in "physical and economic threats and the weighty momentum of colonialism and sexism" (225). The *Venus* certainly engages the imperial/hegemonic/white power with innovative and creative tactics, but these tactics are not historically unique.

Jacobs provides a model of a nineteenth century woman who claimed agency through what some might call complicity—choosing a relationship with a white man. Complicity implies not only consent, but also, in its purest form, cooperation or collaboration in a completely malignant enterprise. Agency, on the other hand, most simply implies embracing the potential for action—with no moral judgment implied—that serves as an instrument to an end, especially a subversive end. So, in both Jacobs's and *The Venus*' case, we cannot definitely call their decisions complicity, for both the morality and the extent of their shares (monetary and otherwise) in the endeavor are questionable. Even if they were equal partners with their oppressors in an endeavor that might be judged evil, accepting this alliance could still be called agency and still be subversive if it brought them some measure of freedom.

The play addresses this agency/complicity at its opening and its closing. Near the beginning and the end of *Venus*, we find what can be read as the "bottom line," or the moral of the story. At the beginning of the play, the lines The Mans Brother, later The Mother-Showman, later The Grade School Chum—a conglomeration of three of the play's most despicable characters—speaks the lines. This conglomeration asserts, "Tail

end of r tale for there must be an end/ is that Venus, Black Goddess, was shameless, she sinned or else/ completely unknowing of r godfearin ways she stood/ totally naked in her iron cage” (5). But later, in her penultimate utterance of the play, The Venus herself delivers a slightly revised and expanded version of the same lines. She offers:

Tail end of the tale for there must be uh end/ is that Venus, Black Goddess, was shameless, she sinned or else/ completely unknowing thuh Godfearin ways she stood/ showing off her ass in her iron cage./ When Death met Love Death deathd Love/ and left Love tuh rot/ *au naturel* end for thuh Miss Hottentot./ Loves soul, which was tidy, hides in heaven, yes, thats it/ Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please/ visit. (161)

Both lines portray The Venus as an unrepentant sinner, standing before her spectators.

Yet, both lines also highlight her captivity. She does not cower or hide, but she is, after all, in an “iron cage.”

Considering the repetition and revision (what Parks calls “Rep and Rev”)² between the two passages, however, reveals much more complexity. The Venus asserts her individuality by changing the “r” to “thuh,” making it individual, rather than collective. At the same time, she resists letting the story define her, for she does not call it “my” tale. She makes a similar article change before “godfearin,” which she also revises with capitalization to “Godfearin.” This move not only channels The Venus’ conversion to Christianity earlier in the play, but also moves the locus of moral power away from The Mother-Showman and the spectators to a higher, more holy moral arbiter.

Also, both passages contain the word “shameless,” but the characters uttering this word have used it differently throughout the play. The Mother-Showman, for example, tells one of her customers that The Venus’ “heathen shame is real” and immediately turns to Venus to say, “Lets give these folks their moneys worth” (46). The Mother-Showman

²Defined in “from Elements of Style” (1994) as Parks’s method for “working to create a dramatic text that departs from the linear narrative style to look and sound like a musical score” (9).

assumes that the exposed Venus, who refuses to remove the small cloth covering her genitals because “its custom” (29) and whose “face was streamed with tears” (47) as she stood in her cage, expresses shame through her modesty and sadness. When The Mother-Showman says “shameless,” she asserts that The Venus has grown so accustomed to her shame, to being locked in a cage and stared at—or touched—by strangers, that she is numb to it. However, according to Harry Elam and Alice Rayner, “There is no moment, in fact, when Saartjie really does seem to accept her circumstances or her treatment as shameful. Terrible, filthy, miserable, brutal, but never shameful. In the refusal of shame, she maintains an innocence that is not complicity; if it is still within the systems of oppression, it is nevertheless resistant” (277). “Shame” implies that The Venus has complete control over the situation that puts her on stage and makes her a spectacle.³ Although she comes to find agency *within* her situation, she never has power *over* it. Like Harriet Jacobs, who regrets the actions to which the “demon slavery” drives her, The Venus, or at least the authorial voice behind her, also seems to claim—in the words of her contemporary—that those “whose homes are protected by law” and “whose purity has been sheltered from childhood,” should not “judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!” (Jacobs 83-84).

For The Venus, what would be truly “disgraceful” would be “to go home penniless,” and she finds her agency in the promise of economic prosperity (75). When The Man and The Brother present their scheme for an exotic exhibition in England to The

³The Venus does speak of her shame during her trial, in the following exchange: The Chorus of the Court asks, “[...] One more question, Girl, uh:/Have you ever been indecent?” The Venus responds (after a spell and a *Rest*): “‘Indecent?’” (Parks’s quotation marks); The Chorus of the Court: “Nasty”; The Venus: “Never./ No. I am just me.”; The Chorus of the Court: “Whats that supposed to mean?!?!”; The Venus: “To hide yr shame is evil./ I show mine. Would you like to see?” (76).

Venus, then The Girl, and tell her of her central role and her supposed share in the profits, she dreams “I would have a house./ I would hire help./ I would be rich. Very rich./ Big bags of money!” but then asks “Do I have a choice? Id like to think on it.” The Brother, like The Baron Docteur later in the play, only answers her question with a question: “Whats there to think on? Think of it as a vacation!/ 2 years of work take half the take./ Come back here rich. Its settled then” (17). From The Girl, he demands another answer and thus clearly establishes himself as master of the conversation, and indeed, the entire situation. Even The Brother’s comment that follows, “Think it over, Girl. Go on./ Think it all over,” is phrased more like an order than a reassurance of actual choice (17). This is relevant, of course, because The Girl does have a choice, but—like Jacobs’s choice—it is the choice between one evil and a lesser evil.

According to Young, one of the play’s harshest critics, “Parks frames the scenario around Baartman (The Girl) in this regard: She is a liberated and sovereign individual, capable, willing, and with the authority to control her circumstances and make choices,” and this is problematic because it minimizes The Girl’s oppression and makes her appear fully complicit in this oppression (700). But again, agency or choice and complicity need not and should not be equated. The Girl’s choices only include denying The Man and his Brother, which would likely have resulted either in her kidnapping or in her remaining a slave in Africa, or, willingly going with the men. If she signs their contract, she may get the fame and money (or at least a portion of it) they have promised in a country that might be more sympathetic to her oppression, for there, the men tell her, she could be “a Princess” and there will be “a whole street full” of women just like her (16). This, ultimately, is choice—though not complete freedom. When The Chorus of the Court

asks, “Are you here of yr own free will/ or are you under some restraint?” The Venus evades the question and responds only with “Im here to make a mint” (75). She has embraced what little agency she has and is using it to move toward the more hopeful and potentially more economically viable option, but she will not call this “free will.”

A look at Jacobs’s history shows that such an unattractive choice was sometimes the only option available to a black woman in the nineteenth century and thus, Parks’s depiction of The Venus might not be as ahistorical as Young alleges. Jacobs describes how she knew her situation was dire, for “The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world” (83). So, she writes, “I know what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation” (83). She goes on to hail the minor liberation, “something akin to freedom” that comes from choice, in that “it seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion” (84-85). Jacobs also admits to an economic element of her agency: “Of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported; and in this case, I felt confident I should obtain the boon” (85-86). In her white lover, Jacobs—who knew she was destined for sexual oppression—finds a way to use her agency to secure her children’s security, and perhaps even their freedom. Thus, in Jacobs, we find a model of nineteenth-century black womanhood that can help us understand *Venus*’ assertion of agency as subversive. In her version of “the bottom line,” The Venus revises the earlier description of her standing “totally naked” to one of herself “showing off her ass,” evoking the slang phrase for challenging authority with blatant

defiance.⁴ Elizabeth Brown-Gulliorly examines this moment in conjunction with The Venus' earlier "Do I have a choice?" line which, she maintains:

speaks volumes in identifying a woman, as figured in Parks's imagination, who conceivably could have chosen between subjugation by the Dutch colonizers in her native South Africa and exploitation with the possibility of some monetary reward in England and France. One way to read Venus—alias Saartjie—is as an insurgent female character who understands that though she remains an object of patronymic exchange, she also remains capable of resistance. Interestingly, borrowing from the black vernacular, Venus chooses to 'show her ass' as a strategy of resistance. (194)

As the play goes on, it becomes clearer that The Girl/The Venus knows the limits of her choices. For example, when The Brother declares his desire for her after they arrive in England, The Girl responds, "Home?/ Love?/ You outta take me shopping. I need a new dress./ I cant be presented to society in this old thing" (23). Here The Girl questions or problematizes the options that seem to be available to her—but ultimately are not—and speaks declaratively of the only certainties she has known: greed and economic or sexual exploitation.⁵ She uses her seduction for material gain, knowing that The Brother and The Baron Docteur will eventually abandon her. Problematizing the options also suggests that this material gain is not The Venus' ideal choice. "Scene 22: Counting the Take/ The Deal that Was" is one of the most obviously money-focused in the play as The Venus and The Mother-Showman count the money—The Venus in

⁴A Chorus member early in the play indicates that The Venus' is "An ass to write home about./ Well worth the admission price" (7), which further connects this subversion to Parks's creation and to economics as well as echoes Parks in "new black math."

⁵The Venus' relationship to "home" is another paradoxical element in the play. She first seems eager to leave. Then, near the middle of the play, she tells The Baron Docteur, "I dont wanna go back innny more./ I like yr company too much./ Besides, it was a shitty shitty life" (105). And finally, she ends the play thoroughly homesick: "I always dream of home/ in every spare minute./ It was a shitty life but oh I miss it." (158). Young's essay provides a thorough description of the political situation in Africa during Saartjie Baartman's lifetime.

multiples of ten, The Mother-Showman in hundreds. In this scene, The Venus mentions she could “spruce up” her performance by reading poetry. The Mother-Showman responds only with “Count!” indicating that The Venus’ desire to express herself through poetry and art will remain unfulfilled because unlike her, the oppressor does not see it as economically viable (51).

Venus also ends her “bottom line” with a poetic addition: “When Death met Love Death deathd Love/ and left Love tuh rot/ *au naturel* end for thuh Miss Hottentot./ Loves soul, which was tidy, hides in heaven, yes, thats it/ Loves corpse stands on show in a museum. Please/ visit” (161). Parks returns to the issue of being “tidy” in “new black math,” when she reflects on the changes that have shaped her understanding of black theatre since the publication of a previous essay on the subject, “An Equation for Black People on Stage” (1994).⁶ She writes that although there are some similarities in the conversations about the trajectory of the art and of her own aesthetic, there are also key differences: “I was tidy back then. And now Im tidier. Tidier today like a tidal wave” (“new black math” 576). What appears simple at first glance, this suggests, is actually overwhelming and potentially destructive or iconoclastic. The end of The Venus’ bottom line, then, is just another paradox. Even as The Venus dies, a victim of the exploitation of her spectators, she still craves more viewers.

Herein lies one of the most compelling connections between The Venus and the African American playwright: the playwright needs, perhaps even craves, an audience. But as with The Venus, questions arise about the lengths to which a black playwright must go to attract this audience, to fill the theatre seats with paying customers.

⁶This essay is included in *The America Play and Other Works* (Theatre Communications Group, 1995).

Ultimately, the black playwright must sell black life, black history, and the black experience to a predominantly white audience, and so like *The Venus*, the playwright straddles the line between complicity and agency. Again, Parks explains the situation in terms of a paradox: “A black play knows that racerelations sell./ A black play know that racerelations are a holding cell” (“new black math” 580). The very spectacle that makes “a mint” may be the spectacle that puts the writer and the audience in a metaphorical “iron cage.”

In creating these parallels between *The Venus* and the playwright, it is difficult to make distinctions between Parks’s agency, the historical Baartman’s agency, and the fictionalized Baartman’s agency. Young is one of the few critics who attempts to do so by drawing on court documents and other records. But so many critics insist on bringing Parks’s intent into the discussion of the play—even though authorial intent is so often dismissed or unknown—that the trend begs additional examination. In addition, Parks’s comments on the play are typically ambiguous. As with her other plays, her paradoxical and obtuse observations about *Venus* vary widely by interview and ultimately shed little light on interpretive issues, for they both discount and support nearly every possible critical perspective. Ironically, it is also in the context of discussing *Venus* that Parks denies her individual aesthetic. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1999) Parks writes, “someone once told me, ‘*Venus* isn’t really a Suzan-Lori Parks play.’ To which I responded: ‘There isn’t any such thing as a Suzan-Lori Parks play’” (28-29). Parks’s answer becomes more significant when we read *Venus* as a commentary on the theatre audience’s expectations, for here, Parks seemingly denies her aesthetic culpability in not meeting these expectations. In this essay, Parks goes on to criticize such fidelity in

economic terms. She claims that “once Miss X buys into the existence of an Xian style of writing and once that purchase keeps her simply and stupidly repeating her last best hit, well, then Miss X gets really stinky—no matter in what genre she writes or in what camp she parks, naturalists, realists, avant-gardists, or experimentalists” (29).

So, why forsake avoiding intentional fallacy and look so much to the author and her intent in *Venus*? Aja Marneweck asserts, “In contemporary African American theatre, there is a strong link between feminist critical intention in the work of playwright Suzan-Lori Parks and issues of race and stereotype” (53). Ultimately, Marneweck believes that “the play was criticized as racist because there was no authorial voice challenging the stereotypes presented in the play” (54). In *Venus*, audiences want to hear the voice of Parks, one of the most celebrated, most visible, and most challenging modern African American writers. Yet, this desire proves ultimately insatiable, for to do so would undermine the more creative, subtly subversive elements of the play and let the audience off the hook, for “in many ways, the story makes the racism and sexism seem too obvious; the circus sideshow aspect more subtly demonstrates our inevitable complicity in viewing the body” (Elam and Rayner 272). The plays and shows within the play make it impossible to deny that *Venus*, at least in part, is about the nature of spectacle and, by extension, the creation of that spectacle. Thus, the play can be read as about Parks and her contemporaries and the audiences they seek/need.

Yet, Parks clearly and willingly surrenders control of her text to the reader, actor, and director in her *(Rest)s and Spells*,⁷ which “directors should fill [...] as they best see

⁷Jennifer Johung, who examines “the intersections between the activities of writing and performing, as well as the interactions between the interpretation of the written marks on the page and the embodiment of the corporeal markings of performers onstage” (41), asserts that these “spells initiate a constant negotiation back and forth—a flickering between the absent subjectivity

fit” (*Venus* “Author’s Notes”), as well as the text she brackets for omission; at the same time, *Venus*’ form often feels very imposing. Her unique language, which Kimberly D. Dixon describes as “perfectly suited to act as a force on actor or audience” (54), evokes the politics of black vernacular—written and spoken—but Parks repeatedly denies that she is attempting to represent vernacular speech or the vernacular tradition. Brown-Guillory attributes this use of alternate word forms to Parks’s thwarting of hegemonic models of discourse. She writes, “[Parks] rejects any attempt at representing the unrepresentable in European-based discourse,” and “much of what her characters speak supplies a performative rendition of their splintered selves occupying a liminal space [...]” (195). Through her unconventional language and her ambiguous (*Rest*)s and Spells then, Parks actively rejects complicity with dominant power structures by rejecting those structures’ linguistic and dramatic forms.

Economics become a factor in these formal concerns because in order for Parks’s rejection to be its most potent, her art must find a wide audience and readership. And since in publishing, as Lyman points out, “cost, not nuance is of necessity a principal concern,” Parks’s very specific formatting stylistics may someday be edited out to trim the price of her volumes (96). In the meantime, though, these differences draw attention to her work, and situate her in a position of ultimate textual authority—she is the only one who can edit her manuscripts. From a nineteenth-century perspective, as Harriet Jacobs’s and other narrators’ histories remind us, this particular agency is precious. But from a Broadway perspective, a playwright who wants success must consider how to

of the historical figure and the present subjectivity of the figure in Parks’s play, and between the absent subjectivity inherent in figurative presence and the material presence of the body of the performer” (49). The spells thus give the reader/performer significant power over the production and its meaning.

create a play that appeals to the widest theatre-going audience. Parks writes in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that young and old writers are “both trying to write the next Broadway hit while not listening to the voice that wants to write that small, challenging downtown play” and that these compromises signify the “horrid dead ends of writing” (30).

But Parks’s most recently plays *have* been Broadway hits, and she has moved on to the other, perhaps even more insidious box office, the Hollywood box office, by writing screenplays for Oprah Winfrey and Spike Lee.⁸ She may be aiming for “challenging,” but she is certainly not aiming for “small.” Plus, Broadway audiences, polls show, are predominately white and wealthy, and according to the most recent research sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the percentage of the African American population that attends non-musical plays has actually declined since 1992.⁹ According to the 1992 data, “Participation rates for African Americans more than doubled from 5.8 percent in 1982 to 12.0 percent in 1992,” with most of the increase from non-profit theatre (2). However, according to the 2002 report, this participation rate had declined to 7.1 percent of the African American population (16). African Americans, in 2002, constituted 6.6 percent of the non-musical play audience, on and off Broadway. In contrast, white viewers constituted 84.1 percent of the non-musical play audience in 2002 (14).

⁸Parks wrote the screenplays for Spike Lee’s *Girl 6* (1996) and Oprah Winfrey’s movie adaptation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005). Both films met with mixed popular and critical reception. I will explore these films in detail in the next chapter.

⁹The surveys were modeled on U.S. Census Bureau surveys in which around 17,000 adult subjects described their arts involvement via various media. In “new black math,” Parks acknowledges the audience issues raised by such surveys, but subtly mocks the impact: “A black play takes into account that pollsters have found that black folks dont attend the theatres in numbers large enough to influence the selection of plays produced” (578).

In his 1937 *Negro Poetry and Drama*, Sterling Brown writes of the fundamental importance of the black audience to a black playwright. “Without their own audience,” he claims, “they are doubly handicapped” (139). In an interview with *Crisis* before the Broadway opening of *Topdog/Underdog* in 2002, neither Parks nor George C. Wolfe specifically mention the need to bring in black audiences, though both speak of a need for “new audiences” (Bryant 44). Wolfe points to the stars of the production, Mos Def and Jeffrey Wright, “both artists who have had success with popular culture,” as the main draw (Bryant 44). In so doing, however, Wolfe seems to be banking on an audience that comes to the theatre not because of an interest in the art on stage but because of an interest in the movie stars on stage. The audience that values “popular culture” will likely expect to see the stereotypes and distorted images of African Americans that popular culture perpetuates. This is exactly the kind of audience that Sterling Brown despised, the kind that “frequently wants flattery instead of representation, plaster saints instead of human beings, drawing rooms instead of the homes of the people” (123).

And this is just the type of audience, black and white, that *Venus* criticizes. *Venus* portrays them as a sex-crazed chorus who want their money’s worth, fueling The Mother-Showman’s greed and demanding “Gimmie gimmie back my buck!” when The Venus dies (5, 161). But rather than only indict the audience—though they do often transgress beyond the gaze—the play places blame on those who put The Venus on stage: The Mother-Showman and The Baron Docteur. Thus, the play seems to indict Parks, as she puts *Venus* on stage. Elam and Rayner question “Parks’s own use and display of Baartman’s story: for she too is making money from a repetition and spectacle of Baartman, exploiting her even as she tries to help” (269). As part of her work, Parks

makes *The Venus* and her own art the spectacle, and the success of the work is measured by box office returns, at least in some degree. The degree we choose determines the degree to which Parks and *The Venus* are complicit in their own exploitations.

Anne Basting is among a few critics who also parallel *The Venus* or Parks and *The Negro Resurrectionist*. She writes, “[...] *The Negro Resurrectionist*/Watchman faces a decision similar to *Venus*’ before him. Forced to promise delivery of her body for the autopsy, he ponders his limited choices: loss of his job and the certain ensuing poverty, or honoring the bones of the dead” (225). This decision is also reminiscent of the choices the black playwright faces, and indeed many black artists face, when choosing whether to write what will sell or what pays homage to what Parks calls “the numerous hard times” past and present (“new black math” 579). More specifically, Christopher Innes notes that “like her own character, the *Negro Resurrectionist*, [Parks] brings dead figures back to life on her stage in new configurations to liberate and re-appropriate history” (106). Neither Basting nor Innes, however, examines this relationship’s more problematic aspects. It is the *Negro Resurrectionist*, after all, who sells *Venus*’ body, damning her to an after-life of forced exhibition. To equate Parks and *The Negro Resurrectionist*, then, indicts Parks as one of *Venus*’ oppressors, damning her—through the written and performed word—to still more involuntary display.

However, Parks is also granting *The Venus* the fame she desired, and *The Negro Resurrectionist* can be read as a signification on *Negro Insurrectionist*, and therefore the character’s name may point to Parks “bringing back” a call for a revolution against conventional views of *The Venus* and the theatre. Parks obviously thwarts the standard form of the play both through her unconventional language and pauses as well as by

having the play run through intermission.¹⁰ Elam and Rayner align themselves with this more favorable perspective on Parks and suggest:

Her position as a playwright echoes the positions of her characters in the sense that any kind of representation or category, performative or otherwise, will tend to imprison the truth of experience, or history, or resurrection by the very act of representation. Those who look for strictly realistic ‘accuracy’ are unaware that such accuracy conceals the imaginary dimension of the story. It is easier to jail the truth than to resurrect it. (275)

They also read the intermission scene and The Baron Docteur’s call to the audience as “reminiscent of the audience participation initiative enacted by black revolutionary theatre of the 1960s and early 1970s” (276). Parks is clearly aware of this tradition for in “new black math,” her manifesto on the state of African American theatre, she includes a section entitled “The Intermission,” in which a militant character named Black Playwright tries to convince a Brother on the Corner and Sister on the Street to participate in her call to action, first by giving her money to make a literal call (on a pay phone) to John Brown, Nat Turner, and Sojourner Truth. The brother and sister listen, but again there is an implied paradox, for the section ends with Brother on the Corner asking “Whats she talking about now?” (581).

At the same time, Parks quickly indicates her desire to separate herself from the “holding cell” of “racereactions”; such a dependence, *Venus* suggests, is actually the burden of the oppressor, not the oppressed. Aaron Bryant highlights “Parks’ belief that ‘Blackness’ can be explored on its own—that African Americans’ existence is not defined by the presence of ‘Whiteness,’ that Black people’s lives and concerns can

¹⁰Parks breaks down the barrier between playwright, actor, and reader earlier in the play when The Brother speaks a description nearly verbatim (only the order is reversed) from the stage directions (10). Though this repetition would seem to align the writer, Parks, with The Brother (one of The Girl’s most prominent exploiters), the inversion actually positions her in opposition to him.

extend beyond issues of race” (44). In Parks’s words, “The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature” (“An Equation for Black People” 19). Yet, *Venus*—in an argument similar to Toni Morrison’s in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992)—makes it clear that for the oppressor the spectator-spectacle relationship is parasitic, with the spectators feeding off the spectacle’s otherness. For example, when trying to draw in audiences for The Venus’ show, The Mother-Showman shouts, “Ladies and Gents are you feeling lowly?/ Down in the dumps?/ Perhaps yr feelin that yr life is all for naught? Ive felt that way myself at times. /Come on inside and get yr spirits lifted./ One look at thisll make you feel like a King!” (45). Since this audience is a paying audience, The Venus’ otherness and the disparity between her and her viewers is the source of the show’s income, and it would have been the source of Venus’ fame and fortune if either The Mother-Showman or The Brother had honored her contract. According to Parks, “A black play knows that when audiences read it primarily through the rubric of ‘race relations,’ that those audiences are suffering from an acute attack of white narcissism” (“new black math” 578). If this audience’s needs parallel Broadway audiences’ needs, then Parks’s income also depends on giving the predominantly white audience the otherness they need for self-definition.

In *Venus*, a main component of this otherness is sexual, for the British and French audience—scientists and non—are fascinated by what they perceive as The Venus’ aberrant sexual organs. Yet, the play writes against this aberration, instead using The Venus’ sexuality to pathologize male sexuality. Both The Baron Docteur and The Chorus of 8 Anatomists expose themselves and masturbate publicly after looking at The

Venus, and, earlier in the play, The Brother reveals that his sexual fulfillment is tied to Venus' exploitation. He admits, "I wanted you then and I want you now/ That's partly why we've come here./ So I can love you properly./ Not like at home" (23). After promising her that he will buy her "the town" the next day, he begins groping her. She tries to protest but is cut off by his reassurances, which are couched in promises of fame.

The Venus thus uses her sexuality to achieve some degree of agency over The Brother and The Baron Docteur, but this agency also clearly has limits. Near the middle of the play, The Mother-Showman, especially remarkable because of her mixed-gender name, links money and sexual protection. When The Venus questions The Mother-Showman's accounting and threatens to "be [her] own Boss make [her] own mint" (55), The Mother-Showman convinces her that there is nowhere for her to go where people will accept her and her way of life and she that needs protection from drunken white men. We find out later, however, that these men still rape her—regardless of The Mother-Showman's "protection." In the end, it is The Venus' sexuality—more specifically, a sexually transmitted disease—that kills her. The Baron Docteur gives her Chlamydia, and seeing that her death is probable, he abandons her to imprisonment to hasten this death and his own fame since he will dissect her. The only power she had is rendered impotent by male sexuality and greed.

Sexuality, of course, is an important tool for the playwright because sex sells. The problem in Parks's case is that the sexuality upon which she capitalizes has traditionally been misrepresented. Sander Gilman calls representations such as the Venus Hottentot "icons." The problem with using these icons in literature, Gilman explains, is that "[...] when individuals are shown within a work of art (no matter how broadly

defined), the ideologically charged iconographic nature of the representation dominates” (204). The Venus Hottentot icon is so potent that “Sarah Bartmann’s [sic] sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks, serve as the central image of the black female throughout the nineteenth century” (Gilman 216). In the play, the anatomists’ emphasis on The Venus’ sexual organs post-mortem “reflects the general nineteenth-century understanding of female sexuality as pathological: the female genitalia were of interest partly as examples of the various pathologies which could befall them but also because the female genitalia came to define the female for the nineteenth century” (Gilman 216). This emphasis is so intense, however, that it becomes pathological itself.

In the play, *The Venus* suggests that staging her sexuality is the best way to remove its malignancy, although with complicated implications. She asks, “If I bear thuh bad mark what better way to cleanse it off?/ Showing my sinful person as a caution to you all could,/ in the Lords eyes, be a sort of repentance” (76). According to S.E. Wilmer, Parks’s restaging the Venus Hottentot icon is “ethical” and through it, she is “paying respect to those who have disappeared by re/making and staging their histories” (443). As such, she, like *The Venus*, is finding agency in a situation that traditionally denied agency to African American women. Again, however, this subversion is not simple, for immediately following the assertion of her desire to be on display, *The Venus* denies not only her shame, but also her blackness. She says, “[...] I could wash off my dark mark./ I came here black./ Give me the chance to leave here white” (76). This denial shows Venus engaging the white audience’s desire to find self definition in her, for she establishes herself as the opposite of whiteness and portrays racial definition as something that must be given by authority—in this case, the court. This denial also

resonates with Parks's rejection of her aesthetic vis-à-vis *Venus*. By denying her individual role in the art, she puts The Venus and her body on stage alone and reduces the play to only a spectacle with "genitals that people think about long after the curtain comes down" ("new black math" 577).

If we try to use *Venus* as a kind of crystal ball for the future of black playwrighting, the vision is cloudy. In her dying words, The Venus says, "dont look," but in the final chorus she asks us to "please visit" and screams "kiss me!"—a cry for adoration and affection (159). She both shuns our participation and embraces it, cooperates and subverts. Parks herself offers a similar paradoxical forecast: "A black play is on broadway, the great white way./ A black play is not on broadway, and furthermore, aint studying no broadway./ A black play is coming soon to a theatre near you" ("new black math" 577). The pitfall of the paradox is that in each of Parks's scenarios the play is either unseen, or seen by the wrong audience, so the black playwright—like the Venus—has no home, no love, and no "mint," but there are plenty of critics, white and black, waiting to dissect her and her work.

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Chapter Two

“This Film Has Been Modified From its Original Version”:

Girl 6 and Their Eyes Were Watching God

A film, at face value, may seem very similar to a play. A film script generally follows standard dramatic form, and many plays and musicals, especially those by famous figures such as Shakespeare and Rogers and Hammerstein, have become beloved silver-screen classics. Stage and screen also tend to share the same glamorous stars and starlets as well as to share the label, “spectacle.” But, as I will argue in detail in later chapters of this project, one of the most important elements of a play from a literary point of view is the written script, the text.

For stage productions, this text must be widely circulated to actors and directors to ensure the survival, let alone the success, of the production. These actors and directors must then re-create the spectacle for viewers, many of whom will have read the play themselves, and these viewers will ultimately judge the merits of the play and its producers within the context of each individual performance. The public, however, rarely has access to the script or screenplay for a film, and even when a text version of a film is available, it is generally in prose rather than dramatic form.¹ In film, the finished

¹ Among the more familiar examples of movies adapted into prose are *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Wilde* (a film loosely based on the life of Oscar Wilde). While the first two examples target younger audiences, other film and television spin-off prose, such as the series of novels related to Gene Roddenberry’s *Star Trek*, have much broader target demographics. A 194-page “novelization” of *Girl 6*, authored by J.H. Marks, is also available (Signet, 1996). The cover of the book *Girl 6* is essentially a movie poster for the film, with “A Novel by J.H. Parks, Based on

product, the spectacle itself, is circulated. Since the production elements are permanent, its success and survival depends solely on the audience's judgment of that spectacle alone. This is even true when the film comes from a novel, for the novel and the screenplay, predominantly due to length, cannot be the same text or even exactly the same story. The screenplay, like any text that has been revised, is a new text, related to the old but still wholly original. But unlike with most revised texts, the new screenplay's new text itself remains hidden, and thus the audience sees only the interpretation of an interpretation.

Suzan-Lori Parks's adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston's beloved *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a perfect example of such creative revision. The film *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005), produced and presented by Oprah Winfrey, has met harsh criticism for straying too far from Hurston's text. Critics have focused almost exclusively on what the film added or left out but paid little attention to the interpretive effects of this revision. Indeed, the changes to the novel are so significant that calling the film by the same name as the novel seems almost inaccurate, not only because Hurston's text deserves accurate representation, but also because the film has its own message, purpose, and, therefore, interpretive value.

Nearly ten years before her work on *Their Eyes*, Parks's first foray into Hollywood, *Girl 6* (1996), produced and directed by Spike Lee, also met with skeptical reviews. This earlier film, rather than engage a previous text, is an original script that looks instead to film, television, and even Parks's own history. As with *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this effort was born with weighty cultural inheritance: Parks's Obie

the screenplay by Suzan-Lori Parks," written in small print at the bottom. Print versions of the screenplays for Parks's *Girl 6* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are not available to the public.

Award (1990); Spike Lee's growing popularity and reputation as a black cultural critic and icon; soundtrack writer and performer Prince's undeniable fame and talent; and a well-known cast of Hollywood power players, such as Quentin Tarantino, Isaiah Washington, Theresa Randle, and Lee himself.

Rather than focus on how or why both *Their Eyes* and *Girl 6* fell short of audiences' and critics' (perhaps unreasonably) high expectations, a more productive examination of these films focuses on what both do *contribute* to African American literary and cultural history. In addition, since both films feature extraordinary female protagonists, both offer innovative examinations of black female sexuality and the stereotypes that have come to define it.

Girl 6

Parks's first major film portrays the trials of a phone-sex operator, Girl #6, as she struggles to find her identity while working in industries that traditionally perpetuate sexual stereotypes about black women, stereotypes she associates most directly with television and film representations of black female characters. The film recreates scenes from prominent and controversial racialized TV shows and films, with Girl 6 and other characters replacing the original actors. These clips provide a narrative backbone for the action, which is self-consciously meta-discursive, as the film ends with the character Girl 6 toward the Chinese Theatre, which is showing the film *Girl 6*. In this film, Parks focuses on the sexually taboo—the unspoken and the unspeakable elements of fantasy, desire, and longing; *Girl 6* is a visceral film that seeks to unnerve its viewers by making the private very public, forcing the viewer to confront the realities of sexuality. In so

doing, the film depathologizes “abnormal” sexuality and sexual fantasy, especially for women, while simultaneously questioning Hollywood’s sexualization of black women.

The film opens with Girl 6 (Theresa Randle), whose “real name” is never confirmed, beginning to recite a monologue for an audition with Q.T., a big Hollywood director played by Tarantino. She eventually storms out of this audition, however, after uncomfortably complying with Q.T.’s request that she show her breasts to the camera. Following fights with her manager and her acting coach about her dedication to acting, Girl 6 works as a free agent in a variety of odd jobs. Exhausted, she sees an ad for phone sex operators promising great pay and begins to pursue this field.

On her first interview, which she attends dressed as a school girl (complete with pig tails and round glasses), she meets the madam played by Madonna. The job requires girls to work from home, and Girl 6, finding this prospect intimidating, moves on to a second interview for a job as an “office girl.” The office hires her, and the film follows her through her training, her first call, and her quick rise to unparalleled success as the most popular phone sex operator in the office.

Soon, however, the job becomes too personal. Girl 6, who comes to take on her phone sex persona “Lovely” almost full time, falls for one of her callers and agrees to meet him. When he does not show, Girl 6 immerses herself in her “career,” working both as an office girl and an “at home” girl for the original Madonna madam. Girl 6 distances herself from her best friend and neighbor, Jimmy (played by Lee), and her still-in-love-with-her ex-husband (Isaiah Thomas), both of whom worry—despite Girl 6’s insistence to the contrary—that the “phone bone” job has distracted her from her dream of becoming a successful Hollywood actress. Girl 6 escapes her life by imagining herself as

famous black women from the screen (small and big), including Carmen Jones, Thelma from the *Good Times*, Foxy Brown, and even a little girl making headlines on the local news after falling down an elevator shaft in a housing project. She is later forced to find a more tangible escape, however, when one of her callers begins to stalk her and threatens her life. She leaves New York for California where she attends another audition. Again uncomfortable with the director's demands, she walks out of the audition, across the path of Dorothy Dandridge's star, and toward Grauman's Chinese Theatre.

At the beginning of the film, before she becomes Girl 6, Parks's protagonist has no clear identity. Lee says in the mini documentary "The Making of *Girl 6*," "[her] character is kinda schizophrenic." She not only has no name (at least for the audience), but she constantly changes her public appearance, especially her hair and clothes. At the audition with Q.T., she has long straight hair pulled off her neck in an elaborate twist, and she wears a plain, slightly low-cut dress. At her acting class, her hair is short, her clothes tight. When she passes out computer course flyers on the street, her hair is bobbed and red, but her clothes not flashy: white jacket, black pants, button-down shirt (buttoned conservatively). Later, when we see her checking coats at a club, she wears a saucy white dress, and her hair is long and blonde. According to bell hooks, Girl 6's "constant changing of outfits, hairstyles, and so on, reminds viewers that femininity is constructed, not natural" (14). Like Booth in *Topdog/Underdog*,² Girl 6 thinks she can change her self just by changing her clothes. To add changing hair—an important cultural and historical symbol for African Americans in general and African American women in

²I explore the relationship between Booth's clothes and his identity in more detail in Chapter Four.

particular—suggests that *Girl 6*'s black identity and especially her black female identity are fluid and exterior at the film's beginning.

The opening audition scene with Q.T. both reveals and unfolds the intricacies of this identity crisis. Parks takes the monologue *Girl 6* reads at this audition from *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), one of Lee's earliest films and a project that he wrote, directed, edited and produced himself.³ *She's Gotta Have It* takes the form of a documentary about a woman named Nola Darling who has three lovers who all know about each other and who all wish to be her only suitor.⁴ Nola unabashedly admits that she loves sex. She wears her hair natural and short throughout. She shares a birthday with Malcolm X. The audience meets Nola in the film's first interview. The camera focuses on a figure tossing and turning under a white sheet on a large bed. Nola emerges and gives the monologue repeated in *Girl 6*:

I want you to know the only reason I am consenting to this is because I wish to clear my name. Not that I care what people think, but enough is enough. And if in the end it helps some other people out, well then that's fine too. I consider myself normal, whatever that means. Some people

³In an interview with Charlie Rose, Lee claims that idea for the story that became *Girl 6* “really came from thinking about *She's Gotta Have It*, and how in that film Nola Darling has three loves at the same time. Man, people thought that was cute and stuff like that, but that was before AIDS, and now ten years later, that kind of conduct or behavior, is dangerous. And ten years ago the phone sex business was not a multi-billion dollar industry you see. So, [with] these two things, it's really a look at how things have changed in the past ten years” (Fuchs 117). And, in an interview with Joan Morgan of *Essence*, Parks talks about her experience as a phone-sex operator: “I actually was really good at phone sex. I have a very good phone voice and a very good imagination” (74).

⁴This film begins by scrolling across a black screen the famous opening lines of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, word for word with only subtle changes in capitalization and punctuation (the original form is noted in brackets): “Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide, for others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the [W]atcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by [T]ime. This is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember[,] and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly” (1). Including this quotation connects all three films and their explorations of black female sexuality.

call me a freak. I hate that word. I don't believe in it. Better yet, I don't believe in labels. But what are you going to do, this was the deal.

Nola clearly knows herself and wishes only for the world to know her as well. As *She's Gotta Have It* continues, we see men try to change her—we even see her briefly consider changing for one of those men—but she always comes back to her original, unapologetically sexual self.

Parks portrays Girl 6 as clearly longing for Nola's self-assurance, at least in her identity and possibly in her sexuality as well. When Girl 6 delivers Nola's monologue, her tone is painfully flat, un-engaging, and Q.T. cuts her off at "enough is enough." She is obviously trying to appear sexy and smooth but only seems nervous and stiff. She wiggles, fidgets, and over gestures with her hands. When Q.T. tells her they are looking for someone who can "ooze sexuality," Girl 6 puckers her lips and moves into an overdone pin-up-like pose. Q.T. then asks her to show him (and the black woman sitting with him) her breasts. Girl 6 hesitates, eventually complies, but then runs from the room. hooks convincingly argues that, through scenes such as this, "the film reminds audiences that women's bodies are subordinated to patriarchal pleasure in ways that are similar in the movies and on the streets" (12). But Girl 6's reaction also suggests, and the rest of the film supports, that Girl 6 can talk about sex and can even pretend to be sexual, but she is uncomfortable with the physical elements of sexuality and intimacy. Nola, of course, does not have this problem. Her breasts appear frequently in *She's Gotta Have It*, and shots focused exclusively on one of her suitors interacting with her breasts often signify more extended moments of sexual intimacy, just as Girl 6's breasts come to represent her fear of such intimacy.

Both Girl 6's acting coach and her manager criticize her for leaving the audition. While the manager's anger seems rooted in the lost commission, the acting coach sees the move as part of Girl 6's failure to understand herself and "her art." The scene with the coach opens with Girl 6 again practicing Nola's monologue. After Girl 6 finishes the first sentence, the coach hangs her head, sighs, and mutters under her breath. She asks, "Where is the pain? [...] C'mon! It needs a bottom. Where's the bottom? What's this shallow shit? A bottom!" When Girl 6 responds that she "can't think," the coach screams, and repeats three times, "Drop into the pain!" She goes on to say, "Acting is about doing and feelings. Drop into the pain!" When Girl 6 tries the monologue again, the coach stops her again and mocks the attempt. Girl 6, exasperated, tells her about Q.T. asking her to take off her shirt. Parks then provides the following exchange:

Coach: "So what! So what! Grow up! Grow up now!
G6: What are you talking about?
C: I am talking about you growing up. I am talking about you facing the reality of this business.
G6: Which is?
C: Which is . . . taking off your top ba-by.
G6: That has nothin' to do with the work. You've taught me about the work.
C: It has plenty to do with the work. That's the business honey-bunch. Make it art! Turn it into something...special. Do you get it?
G6: Yes, I get it.⁵

The coach's comments suggest that Girl 6 is so disconnected from herself that she does not even truly understand the implications of her chosen profession. While Girl 6, or any other actress, should certainly be allowed to choose roles that do not involve nudity, the coach's anger at Girl 6—and the skin-tight, nearly transparent outfit the aspiring actress is wearing at the time of the exchange—indicate that it is not modesty or morality that

⁵I will use the dramatic form throughout this chapter to more concisely represent dialogue from the films; this may not reflect how the dialogue appears in the films' written screenplays.

account for Girl 6's hesitation. Rather, Girl 6's limited understanding of the intricacies of identity prevents her from seeing the potential beauty and creativity in that which initially seems negative or even ugly. Girl 6 cannot see how Nola's frustration with being misunderstood can translate into a revelation about how committed she is to finding happiness in her life on her own terms, or really anything other than frustration with the rumors about her sexual perversion. And Girl 6 cannot see how Hollywood sexuality can be anything but perverted. While Hollywood certainly struggles with inappropriate representations of black female sexuality, as hooks's comments suggest, to claim that all Hollywood nude scenes are lewd or demeaning seems a problematic assertion.

For the rest of the film, Parks chronicles how Girl 6 tries to understand herself more completely and find a truer sense of identity while, ironically, working as a phone sex operator, exposed to sexual fantasies that even the most liberal ears might deem perverse. Phone sex, while certainly putting her on the path to such understanding, does so by showing her the effects of the absence of identity. On the phone, she is only Girl 6 and the alter egos she makes up to please her callers, and she can only be black "if they request it."

She enters the field as a way to make some quick cash and because she thinks it will help her with her acting skills. Girl 6 seems surprised to find that talking about sex is easy for her. She hesitates only momentarily at her audition, and at a training session with the other new girls, she describes her list of phone-sex alter-egos in startling detail, including hair color, eye color, and the fact that her "transsexual" is "pre-op." When she finally hits the phones, her first call goes so well that she attracts the attention of the entire office.

Girl 6 continues to excel, finding the success she never experienced in her acting career. Two weeks after her first call, she already has a regular caller—her “first request”—waiting on the line when she arrives at work. Soon after, Girl 6 tells Jimmy that Lil, the madam, “says she ain’t never seen nothin’ like it. We had thirty eight phone calls last night, seventeen requests were for moi.” This success seems to stem from her level of engagement with her callers. Most operators, even the new girls, distract themselves with drawing, reading, or smoking while they are talking to johns on the phone. Parks portrays Girl 6, however, as staying fully engaged in the fantasy. She is more creative and open in these scenes than she is in any of her acting scenes, and when one of her colleagues expresses concern about Girl 6’s level of participation, her response indicates that she may not only be focused on the callers, but also relying on them to fulfill her needs for attention, intimacy, and even sexual pleasure:

Doris: You know, you need to give yourself an activity of some sort, a magazine, a book, somethin’, or else you’re gonna get hooked girl.
 G6: No, I’m concentratin.’
 Doris: Concentrating . . . Well . . . You comin’ with ‘em?
 G6: (Laughs). Please.
 Doris: You sure about that?
 G6: I’m positive.

While she never explicitly answers Doris’s question, the film suggests that Girl 6 is not yet a good enough actress to fake it.

Yet, Parks seems to suggest that for Girl 6, being a phone-sex operator is not just about the sex. It is an opportunity to have a voice and for that voice to be heard.⁶ In the

⁶According to Lee biographer/amanuensis Kaleelm Aftab, “Perhaps Spike alone believed he was striking a blow for women’s rights with *Girl 6*” (208-09). Whereas Lee describes the protagonist as “having a hard time distinguishing fiction and reality, being pulled deeper and deeper into the world of phone sex, where it is almost consuming her,” Aftab claims that others, including Lee’s wife, thought it more likely “that the film was rooted in Spike’s own male sexual fantasy” (209). In her chapter, “good girls look the other way” from her collection *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and*

opening audition scene, Q.T. interrupts Girl 6 several times, snapping, “don’t talk . . . listen.” The acting coach also interrupts her monologue in order to criticize her performance. No one will stop to listen to her when she passes out computer fliers, and the extras coordinator on the movie set silences her pleas even to be allowed to use the bathroom. But in phone sex, her voice is all anyone wants to hear. At their interview, the Madonna madam tells Girl 6 she likes her “pipes.” Many of Girl 6’s callers, including her first, are just looking for “someone to talk to,” and she, of course, is looking for someone who will listen.

While her initial motivation to begin the work was predominantly economic and, she claims, vocational—because she could practice acting and save the money she needed to move to Hollywood—her devotion to the job is emotional. In the men that call her and request to spend time with her on the phone, Girl 6 finds intimacy and companionship without commitment and without depth. She can take what she wants from and give what she wants to her caller, and she need only reveal the parts of her self—real or fabricated—that help make this exchange more pleasurable for her and the customer. In Parks’s phone-sex world, then, Girl 6 can have what she perceives to be intimacy—which she cannot find in the real world—without confronting the shallowness of her identity or her fears of intimacy’s physical elements. She can even have a lover for each identity she tries on.

Relationships are available to Girl 6 outside of the phone-sex world, but these relationships are complicated and demanding. Her ex-husband, also like Booth in *Topdog*, survives and thrives off stealing. Her early interactions with him in the film

Class at the Movies (Routledge, 2002), hooks offers an alternate, more redemptive reading of Lee’s art, claiming *Girl 6* “shows that Spike Lee’s artistic vision regarding the representation of female sexuality has expanded” from where it was when he made *She’s Gotta Have It* (11).

suggest disappointment, that the relationship left her scarred and may have even contributed to the self questioning and fear of intimacy that plague her. Every time Parks brings the ex into the action he steals something; and before he steals, he touches, even caresses his mark, leading the viewer to wonder how the physical need to touch and possess what is not his might have manifested itself in his physical relationship with his wife. Even Jimmy, while seemingly a supportive friend, relies on Girl 6 financially. Also, his support challenges her. After she has told him how much she has come to like phone sex and how “fun” it has become and starts talking about Bob Regular, one of her favorite callers, he interrupts to ask, “So when was the last time you went on an audition?”—a question that she tries to ignore and a question that none of her regular customers would ever ask.

Girl 6 takes her boss Lil very seriously when she says during training, “It’s not just sex. You’re their friend.” As Girl 6 talks to Jimmy about the men, she recounts their stories as if they are her close companions, defending them against Jimmy’s criticism and describing their inner turmoil. The men become her surrogate friends, her community. Girl 6 works, of course, in a community of women, and these women—as seen when Doris expresses her concern that Girl 6 is getting too involved in the job—try to reach out to her and protect her. Parks shows these women laughing together, celebrating Girl 19’s engagement, and sharing meals. But Girl 6 alienates herself even from them, fearing the commitment that comes with this community. When Lil becomes so concerned about this behavior that she forces Girl 6 to take a vacation, Girl 6 goes back to the Madonna madam and becomes a “home girl.” She then becomes totally isolated, and her apartment becomes a microcosmic phone sex fantasy world. Jimmy tells her ex-husband that he

never sees her, and when the ex attempts to visit, she opens the door briefly—without interrupting her phone call—smirks at him disgustedly, and shuts the door on him without a word, establishing that there is neither room nor need for him and his complications in her new world.

However, her relationships with the callers demand more from Girl 6 than she realizes, for while she does get to change who she is for each man, Parks implies that the changes are not just about clothes and hair. Girl 6 must change her desires, her boundaries. This takes an emotional toll, and she begins to escape into her own fantasies, fantasies based on movies and television.

In the first fantasy, Girl 6 imagines herself as Dorothy Dandridge playing the title character in *Carmen Jones* (1954). Parks casts the ex-husband as Joe, Carmen's obsessed lover, and the two re-enact a vignette that combines dialogue from two scenes in the original film. Parks's choice of film is significant because in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), James Baldwin calls *Carmen Jones* "one of the most important all-Negro movies that Hollywood has produced" because "the questions that it leaves in the mind relate less to Negroes than to the interior life of Americans" (53). But Baldwin takes issue with the film's representations of sexuality:

The only reason [...] that the eroticism of *Carmen Jones* is more potent than, say, the eroticism of a Lana Turner vehicle is that *Carmen Jones* has Negro bodies before the camera and Negroes are associated in the public mind with sex. Since darker races always seem to have for lighter races an aura of sexuality, this fact is not distressing in itself. What is distressing is the conjecture this movie leaves one with as to what Americans take sex to be. (53)

By evoking *Carmen Jones*, then, Parks highlights *Girl 6's* connection not only to a history of sexualized black female stereotypes but also to a history of American

prudishness about sex. *Girl 6* raises the very same conjectures that Baldwin claims *Carmen Jones* raises. Girl 6 idolizes Dandridge in general, but in this role in particular because of her effortless sexuality and power over Joe, a wholesome American soldier.

Baldwin also notes that when watching Dandridge's performance in *Carmen Jones*, "One feels—perhaps one is meant to feel—that here is a *very* nice girl making her way in movies by means of a bad-girl part" (50). At this point in the film, Parks makes Girl 6 also struggle with this type of identity crisis, as indicated by her showing up to her first phone sex interview in pig tails and a Catholic school girl uniform. She, too, wants to be a "good girl" but she keeps attaching herself to, and seeking success in, "bad girl" roles.

In the next media fantasy, Parks casts Girl 6 as Lovely Brown in a scene based both on Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1974) and Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973). These films can be read as both liberation and exploitation films. Both are a part of the Blaxploitation genre, which names the group of films born from Hollywood's sudden interest in the 1970s in making money off black themes and black heroes/heroines. Looking at *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones*, critic Karen Ross notes that both "had bodies which were both athletic and sexually appealing and although they had to appear as powerful and threatening to accord with the conventions of the genre, they nonetheless remained vulnerable and feminine" (19). The women were thus the objects of both black and white male fascination, and in "the end," Ross argues, "the male gaze is more disempowering than the women's aggression is liberating, and in any case, their violence is usually directed against other women (as in *Cleopatra Jones*) so that the possibility of female solidarity was instantly closed off as potential threat. At the end of their labours,

our heroines always returned home to the reassuring arms of their lovers” (19). Girl 6, of course, longs for both personal strength and intimacy with a male hero. She certainly does not attack the women in her community, but her relationships with them are non-communal and somewhat adversarial: they are competing for callers, and she is winning.

While Girl 6’s fantasy life seems remarkably active, Parks is careful to establish that everyone in the film fantasizes and thus, far from being pathological, fantasy—even sexual fantasy—can be “normal,” if not healthy. This idea, of course, takes Parks’s message back to Nola Darling’s rejection of labels, particularly of the term “freak.” At first, Girl 6 plays with the term, saying that her “girl-next door” character “Lovely Brown,” the persona we see her put on the most in the film, is “kind freaky” during her training session with Lil and the other new girls. The more time that Girl 6 spends on the phone with her callers, however, the more she rethinks what it means to be a “freak,” and rejects its application to fantasy, as the following exchange with Jimmy reveals:

Jimmy: So what does that have to with your acting career? What happened to that?

G6: I’m still an actress Jimmy.

J: How are you acting?

G6: What?

J: How are you acting? You’re not on the stage, you’re not in front of the camera. You’re on the phone. How do you act talking on the phone to some—

G6: It is acting.

J: —some perverts? How is that acting?

G6: They’re not perverts Jimmy, OK?

J: Oh, they’re normal people right?

G6: Baby, let me tell you somethin’, you can continue to live in that little fantasy world with the baseball cards and the autograph bull shit or whatever the fuck it is you do, but me, I got to eat and I got to pay my rent. Phone sex is acting. And if you don’t like it, you can step.

If her phone sex clients are not freaks, she cannot be a freak for entertaining them, and her job can be considered acting.

But after her favorite caller, Bob Regular, rejects her, Girl 6 returns to accepting the label. When her ex-husband observes, “I never knew you were such a freak,” she curtly replies, “Maybe you just never brought it out in me.” This exchange suggests that Girl 6 does not yet understand sexuality in the non-phone world and provides further evidence that her sexual relationship with her husband was at the very least unfulfilling, if not unhealthy.

Indeed, the emotional impact of the phone sex career on Girl 6 becomes most evident when Bob Regular does not show up for their arranged meeting at Coney Island.⁷ While most of the callers’ faces are fully visible in the film, Bob’s remains obscured, suggesting that he represents potential—a type of man rather than any individual man. Parks never mentions Bob and Girl 6 having phone sex; we only see them talking about his mother. The loss of Bob Regular comes to represent the loss of Girl 6’s hope that she will ever find a fulfilling, “normal” relationship, one not always about sex, in the non-phone world. The loss also marks the beginning of Girl 6’s understanding that she needs more in her life than the sex-based phone relationships she has been experiencing. Here she reaches out to her ex-husband. The two go out to dinner; she demonstrates her sexy talk skills, and he tries to force his hand down her pants. As hooks observes, “Acting like the outraged Virgin, she sees no connection between her performance and his assumption

⁷The scene at Coney Island can be read either as a failed meeting or a rejection because the film does offer the possibility that Bob shows up but that he, upon seeing Girl 6, decides to leave. After she has been waiting alone for most of the scene, a man in a suit walks down the boardwalk toward her. He appears, at first to veer toward her, smiling, but he does not ever stop. After he passes her, Girl 6 calls out to him three times, but he does not turn around. While the film in no way confirms that this is indeed Bob regular, the tone of Girl 6’s insistent calls suggest she believes it is him. In either case, Bob disappears from the film at this point.

that she will do anything to please him” (16). She has not considered that a fantasy could have real-life implications.

Her reaction, however, is not to withdraw from the phone-sex fantasy world, but to intensify her phone-sex experience by becoming a home girl, a change that promises a more visceral experience with the callers. The Madonna madam explains:

If you do decide to accept this mission, you must realize that your own private line is essential. I suggest getting an unlisted phone number that is inaccessible to Caller I.D. Choose a phone with a lightweight receiver. I suggest getting a headset. That way your hands are kept free. While office-bound fantasy girls are restricted by what they can say, a fantasy girl who works out of the home, a home girl, can experience complete and total freedom. You can invite your caller to fully experience his deepest, darkest, strangest, wildest desires. No inhibitions. No restrictions. Total freedom. No taboos.

Girl 6 indeed pushes the traditional boundaries. She gives the men her address so that she can receive their fan mail, and she locks herself in her apartment, totally immersing herself in the fantasy and trying to make it more real. Yet, with only one exception, Parks never allows the audience to see or hear the callers Girl 6 entertains at home; we only hear Girl 6 talking to them, making this new aspect of the job more personal—less about Girl 6 participating in a caller’s fantasy than about her trying, now more futilely than ever, to fulfill her own need for intimacy.

During Girl 6’s time as home girl, Parks shows Girl 6 in her last TV fantasy. For this fantasy, Parks casts Girl 6 as Thelma from *Good Times* (1974-79). However, as in the other fantasies, Parks combines two media images, and Thelma actually becomes the daughter of George and Louise Jefferson from *The Jeffersons* (1975-85). In this fantasy, a man tries to seduce naive Thelma on the phone. Louise, played by Lil, helps her to see the man’s true intentions, and George, played by Jimmy, shoots the phone (“the tenth

phone this month”) with a shotgun. Thelma cries briefly after the shooting, but soon laughs and dances with her mother and father, seemingly carefree. This scene is particularly important at this point in the film because Parks uses it to depict Girl 6’s yearning for family and companionship as well as for protection. Lil and Jimmy look out for Girl 6’s well being more than anyone else in the film. However, she still closes herself off from both of them. In choosing to place herself with the Jeffersons, Girl 6 puts her character not in the Chicago ghetto, where Thelma and her family live in *Good Times*, but in a safe, affluent New York “deluxe apartment in the sky.”

The Jeffersons represents African American success in Hollywood with its nearly unprecedented ten-year run, but the show’s legacy is complicated. For Robin R. Means Coleman, the show is part of an era in Black comedy, spanning from 1972-1983, in which African Americans “remain in the separate Black world, one that is parallel to the White one. The characters, defined as assimilated hybrid minstrels, negotiate all of the situations whites do, yet separately and with overt references to their Blackness and difference [. . .]” (85). However, Donald Bogle argues that while George Jefferson “yearned for white signs and symbols of success and acceptance, and he lived by traditional capitalistic American values,” he also “never wanted to be white.” “For the African American audience,” Bogle explains, “it was refreshing to see a middle-class black man who asserted his racial identity at every opportunity” (212). This certainty of identity—both familial and racial—likely draws Parks and her Girl 6 to this character and scenario.

Intriguingly, Parks does not make the women in *The Jeffersons* the focus of Girl 6’s fantasy. When choosing a woman to play in the scene set on *The Jeffersons*, Parks

turns to Thelma and *Good Times*. Bogle calls Thelma “the most overlooked and perhaps saddest character on the show” (203). He continues, “Fortunately, she could exchange barbs but mainly her role was to react, not initiate much action. Mostly, the scripts called for her to stand around, looking sweet and vaguely yearning for something else” (204). Girl 6, trapped in a similarly stagnant role, connects with this longing for “something else,” and in her case, much like Thelma’s, that longing comes from a lack of identity and purpose. This fantasy is interrupted by Jimmy knocking on the door to—like his character in *The Jeffersons* fantasy—make sure Girl 6 is safe. Regardless of her attitude in the fantasy, however, Girl 6 lashes out defiantly at Jimmy for interrupting her work with his “bull shit.”

Yet, Jimmy’s concerns end up being well founded. The aforementioned exception to the home callers’ invisibility is Girl 6’s last caller, “Mr. Snuff,” who Lil cuts off in an earlier call to the office. As with Bob Regular, Parks ensures that Mr. Snuff’s face is never clearly visible; he is always in shadows. He, too, is merely a representation, not of hope but of fear—fear of loneliness, fear of intimacy, fear of self expression—the very fears that threaten to destroy Girl 6. He leaves a message on the answering machine for Girl 6’s unlisted phone number, and when they talk later, the scene is red. The camera stays on Girl 6’s face as she struggles with the conversation, appearing embattled and disoriented. When Mr. Snuff asks to come over, she tells him she would rather just stay on the phone. A very revealing exchange ensues:

Mr. Snuff: Don’t you fuckin’ perform.

G6: I’m not, I just—h

Mr. S: Don’t you fuckin’ perform me. I don’t want that bullshit. I do the performing.

G6: I’m not performing for you

Mr. S: What are you doing?

G6: I just want to... I just want to love you.

And he just wants to kill her. All at once, the calls are no longer fantasy, and her real longings are revealed. Once she realizes his threats are also real, she lashes out at him, screams that she'll kill him, and runs upstairs to safety with Jimmy, finally relying on a real person and a real relationship to help her when she needs it.

This successful seeking out of protective intimacy in a time of vulnerability seems to signal a significant change in Girl 6. Parks shows Girl 6 laying close to Jimmy the next morning, and she wakes him up to tell him that she is giving up the “phone bone” business and moving to Los Angeles. She even goes to visit the injured little girl she has obsessively watched on TV throughout the film and gives the child money and a kiss. And finally, as she is loading up the cab for the airport, she shares a passionate kiss—the only real intimate moment in the film—with her ex-husband, a signal that she will try to heal the wounds of the past.

However, the transformation is still not complete. We still cannot know for sure who Girl 6 really is, and ultimately she has left one superficial business for another—trading phone sex for Hollywood. Parks gives us only a glimpse of Girl 6's real identity when, after the kiss, the ex tells her, “Oh Judy, I'm going to miss you Judy.” And she replies, “Judy . . . I always did like it when you called me that.” As they kiss, phones fall from the sky. This oddity, combined with the Dandridge-esque audition fantasy that follows and the metadiscursive walk that reveals *Girl 6* playing at the Chinese Theater, give viewers the sense that the entire movie has been a fantasy—with the main character putting herself into the role of Girl 6 because she saw the story in the movie. In such a case, her true identity is completely unknown and wholly constructed.

In the final audition scene, when another director asks Girl 6 to show her breasts, she launches again into Nola's monologue, this time finishing it. The problem, of course, is that it is *Nola's* monologue, *Nola's* declaration of self, not Girl 6's. Parks never gives Girl 6 the ability to define herself in her own words, and she is thus still relying on media images to find her self definition. In "The Making of *Girl 6*," Lee says that "by the end of the film, [Girl 6's] feet are firmly on the ground. She is triumphant." But Hollywood will never be real, and as long as Girl 6 defines herself by Hollywood's standards rather than face what her coach called "the reality of this business," she may never truly find herself.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

The credits of *Their Eyes*⁸ list "Suzan-Lori Parks [new line] and Misan Sagay and Bobby Smith, Jr." as the authors of the film's screenplay, or teleplay as some call it since the film first appeared on television. However, many critics—even literary leaning critics such as Hurston's most recent biographer Valerie Boyd⁹—as well as the user reviews on Amazon.com and Internet Movie Database, focus more on Winfrey's or star Halle Berry's role in the project. In one of the most stunning examples, Sharon D. Johnson writes in a *Black Issues Book Review* feature on the film that Winfrey, "the most powerful woman in entertainment—black or white—will incarnate Hurston through the

⁸I shall henceforth refer to the film version of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as *Their Eyes*. When referring to Hurston's text, I will so indicate and will use the novel's full title.

⁹Boyd's preview of the film in *Essence* indicates that the film is "scripted by Pulitzer-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks," but this half sentence nod is the only mention of Parks (132). Meanwhile, The article, "Their Eyes Were Watching Halle," is subtitled, "Can Oprah Winfrey and Halle Berry turn Zora Neale Hurston's classic tale into a prime-time winner?"

television adaptation of her classic novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (42). It is certainly almost impossible to determine, even with first-hand accounts of the creative process, who is responsible for creating or including specific elements of the story, but since Parks is given top billing as screenwriter,¹⁰ including the film in her oeuvre seems appropriate. In addition, the film version of *Their Eyes* seems a fitting companion for Parks’s other works, such as *Venus*, *In the Blood*, *Fucking A*, and, of course, *Girl 6*—all works with extraordinary black female protagonists in situations that are simultaneously unique and ordinary, situating one woman’s compelling story within a complex history of oppression of which many women have been a part.

Their Eyes indeed differs significantly from Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but I will focus first on the elements that are essentially the same. *Their Eyes* opens with a bruised, dirty, and exhausted Janie hobbling into Eatonville under the critical gaze of the townspeople. Once home, she starts telling her story, beginning with childhood, to her friend Phoeby. She tells Phoeby about life with her grandmother, marrying Logan Killicks, running off with Joe Starks, helping to build Eatonville, living under Joe’s strict hand and watching him die, meeting and running off with Tea Cake, living in South Florida, weathering the storm, and finally, shooting Tea Cake. Parks’s *Their Eyes* shares with Hurston’s text, then, only the most basic plot structure and some of the broader themes that drive this plot: growth, love, and understanding individual identity.

The divergences between the text and the film are too numerous to list in their entirety, but there are among them particularly relevant changes in the treatment of race and community, in narrative voice, and in characterization (especially character

¹⁰A *Boston Globe* article citing Harpo Films President and *Their Eyes* executive producer Kate Forte notes, “Three writers worked on the script but the person who ‘cracked’ it [. . .] was Suzan-Lori Parks [...]” (S. Ryan D1).

motivation and character development) that combine to make Parks's *Their Eyes* a completely unique story with a particular emphasis on black female sexuality, specifically sexual autonomy and feminine identity. While these themes are certainly present in the text of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the film makes them more central to the story.

To do so, *Their Eyes* must downplay or leave out other elements of the text—with questionable results. Certainly, television time restraints play a role in some of these edits, as does considering what will appeal to the over twenty-four million viewers that tuned in to watch the film (de Moraes C07).¹¹ Yet, by revising *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for Hollywood/TV, and thus for a wider audience, Parks and her colleagues essentially revise African American literary history and change its scope and themes. The outcome can be read as paradoxical, for while they indeed introduce a valuable text and tradition to new audiences, they simultaneously question the historical value of that text and the tradition. While making African American literature more mainstream, such adaptation allows predominantly white power structures in the entertainment industry to control and re-shape its message.

This influence of whiteness manifests itself most clearly in a shift away from overtly racial content in the film. Gone, for example, is Janie's description of discovering her blackness when she sees herself in a photograph and realizes that she is the lone "real dark little girl" and explains, "But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought

¹¹ According to Lisa de Moraes of The *Washington Post*, "ABC's latest brought-to-you-by-Oprah flick was the most watched movie on any network since CBS's December-December romance 'One Special Night,' starring Julie Andrews and James Garner, more than five years ago. It's also Oprah Winfrey's biggest ABC flick audience since 'Before Women Had Wings' in November '97" (C07).

Ah was just like de rest” (Hurston 9). The film even trims Hurston’s much-valued signature use of the black vernacular, an element that has been one of the most controversial features of the story since her novel appeared in 1937, just six years after James Weldon Johnson’s preface to the *Book of Negro American Poetry* declared dialect “an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos” (4). Parks herself attributes this revision to audience, explaining, “We took a step from the brilliantly rendered dialect and split the difference, retaining something like the dialect but putting in a voice that is hearable for the 2005 ear” (Alexander Y06). “The 2005 ear[’s]” inability to hear and understand Hurston’s vernacular suggests that the 2005 audience, black and white, has become disconnected from black vernacular culture, the very culture that Hurston’s text seeks to celebrate.

By downplaying such racial elements, *Their Eyes* not only broadens its potential viewing audience but also narrows the focus of the story to the circumstances surrounding Janie’s romances—her motivation for beginning and either remaining in or leaving each relationship as well as the effects that each relationship has on her identity and sexuality. Parks’s film, for example, does not give the back story about the rape of Janie’s mother and Nanny’s encounter with the jealous white mistress, nor most of Nanny’s related racial justification for wanting Janie to marry Logan Killicks. Nanny tells Janie in the text:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see. (14)

Parks, however, includes only the last sentence of this justification, and in the place of Nanny's heartfelt and telling description of racialized and sexualized power imbalance appears instead a focus on economics—Logan Killicks's land holdings and position in the community.

In omitting this information, the film nearly vilifies Nanny¹² much as it does the other women in the story, portraying them as old-fashioned, closed-minded, and grasping at whatever power they can wield. Somewhat implied in this portrayal, of course—especially for the viewer who has read Hurston's text—is the exact sentiment that Nanny explains to Janie in her justification for the marriage to Logan Killicks: women are so stripped of agency by both white and black men that they must maximize any power they do have, even if it undermines their relationship with other women, as seen in Nanny's confrontation with her mistress in the novel. Without past access to Hurston's text, however, this implication is almost lost.

The film's massively altered depiction of Hurston's implied listener, Janie's friend Phoeby, only further separates the film and the text and de-textualizes the film's message about black female identity. In the text, Phoeby supports Janie and kindly offers to be her mouthpiece in the community: "If you so desire Ah'll tell em what you tell me to tell

¹²Nanny becomes a more complex character in *Their Eyes* when we consider the implications of Ruby Dee playing the role. Dee, a civil rights activist and pioneer in black cinema and drama, played Ruth Younger in the screen adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961). She also appeared in two Spike Lee films, *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989), both alongside her husband, Ossie Davis. By casting Dee, *Their Eyes*'s creators weave the complex history of a struggle for equality in the entertainment industry into Nanny's character, thus again reasserting the very racialized reading of literary and cultural history that the film itself seems, at first viewing, to undermine. Dee and Davis published a joint autobiography, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together* (William Morrow, 1998). Dee also wrote the foreword to the 1991 University of Illinois Press edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. For more on the history of black film and television, see Karen Ross's *Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television* (Polity Press, 1996).

‘em” (6). In Parks’s film version, however, Phoeby seems friendly at first, but quickly moves on to chastising Janie:

Phoeby: He dragged you down to his level and then—
Janie: You all think he did me wrong.
P: Janie, we all know he did you wrong.
J: Well, I ain’t studyin’ what they think.
P: You don’t care what I think neither, do you? You left this town,
 runnin’ off with that no count—
J: Me and Tea Cake had us a real love—
P: (the pitch of her voice rising) —And you got the nerve to come back up
 in here with no shoes on your feet and nothing but overalls on your
 back, making everything we believed in just look like dirt.
J: Me and Tea Cake had us a real love—
P: How could you do that?
J: But you all couldn’t see that—
P: (crying) I used to look up to you.
J: Phoeby, the only way you and this whole town ever seen me was as
 Mrs. Mayor Starks [...]

Rather than listen to Janie and offer to speak for her, Phoeby interrupts and speaks over her. The film’s Janie could never say “mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf,” as her textual counterpart does, for the film’s Phoeby is not a sister, but rather, is another adversary not unlike her first two husbands, the flood, or even her grandmother (6). By erasing this oft-quoted sentence, Parks’s film questions its value for the twenty-first century viewer and de-emphasizes the importance of the female community that Hurston’s text so obviously privileged.

Parks’s Janie finds community only twice in the film: during the brief time she spends building Eatonville with her neighbors—who as soon as the work is finished quickly refocus their energy on class-conscious jealousies—and then again much later in the film when she is in the Muck with Tea Cake. Even here, however, the people are generally kind to the couple, but the film does not explore any of these relationships in detail. The film also does not give any glimpse of the color-induced jealousies that drive

Tea Cake to strike Janie in Hurston's text, but rather portrays the two as soul mates, fulfilling each other spiritually as well as sexually. In shifting the focus away from Janie's relationship with Phoeby as well as the community in general, the film emphasizes feminine independence while nearly dismissing any possibility for redemptive female community. If audience is indeed the driving force behind the revisions from the text, then the implications for modern black community are troubling. The revisions suggest that class insecurity and fear distance women from each other, leaving only the occasional sexual partner for emotional support.

The production history of the film itself at first seems to contradict this message. Most of the primary players in the film are black women. Winfrey, of course, purchased the rights to the film (outbidding fellow executive producer, and the only prominent man on the project, Quincy Jones), then spearheaded and produced the project (A. Ryan 2). Berry, by all accounts, was Winfrey's first and only choice to play Janie.¹³ Director Darnell Martin, who established herself in television by directing episodes of popular shows such as the *Law & Order* franchise, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *The L-Word*, is more importantly a pioneering independent filmmaker who is most famous for her first film, *I Like it Like That* (1994), which follows "a woman in the Bronx waging war with the forces that would hold her back" (Lee 4). For Parks, *Their Eyes* came on the heels of a Pulitzer win (2002) and the release of her much-anticipated first novel, *Getting Mother's Body* (2003).

Such a group of women collaborating to bring Hurston's work to the screen embodies, at least at first glance, the type productive and redemptive community we see

¹³Berry's popularity, reputation, and influence are affirmed in *Girl 6*, as the protagonist watches news coverage of the actress visiting an injured girl in the hospital.

in Hurston's story. As Janie tells Phoeby both the story of her life before Eatonville and the story of the events that transpired after she left the town with Tea Cake, both women are transformed. Phoeby tells her friend, "Ah done growd ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you Janie. Ah ain't satisfied with mahself no mo'" (192). Both enjoy the "finished silence" in which "for the first time they could hear the wind picking at the pine trees," and both think of love (192). Janie then realizes that Tea Cake "could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" and she finds "peace" (193). Both telling and listening within the framework of this supportive black female community leads to healing.

While Parks's Phoeby also says she grows after listening to Janie, the two women do not then sit together as sisters to savor and share the communal experience. Instead, the film's Phoeby runs out to get her husband Sam so they can go fishing, just like Janie and Tea Cake. Rather than bond with Janie, Phoeby wants to copy her. In Parks's film, class seems to separate Phoeby and Janie. Phoeby, like others in Eatonville, idolizes Janie and sees her leaving with Tea Cake as a fall, a relinquishing of status. And even amongst the women who created the film, class issues arise. While Parks and Martin are certainly not as wealthy and famous as Winfrey or Berry, they are still established in the creative class; they are well-respected artists who have excelled in their respective fields. Even so, Winfrey admits that she was concerned that Berry would not agree to do the project since Winfrey's request came almost immediately after Berry's Oscar win.¹⁴

¹⁴Winfrey told AP Radio she was "very nervous" to make the call and said, "I don't know what happens to you once you win an Academy Award [. . .] I didn't know whether she was going to be, like, 'Now I have an Oscar. I'm sorry. I cannot talk to you'" (Toto B06).

Class, then, continues to undermine female community even among the most powerful American black women, and the product of their collaboration reflects this anxiety.

Parks's film does leave some hope for community in that Phoeby is not the only listener: twenty-four million other sets of ears also heard the story. But while the film goes out of its way to chart Janie's transformations throughout the film, it would be very difficult to measure such change in the viewer. Parks shows changes in Janie through moments such as her fixation on the caterpillar she finds on Logan's porch, a creature that will inevitably metamorphose into a brilliant winged creature, just as Janie herself hopes to find beauty and liberation. In addition, Parks repeats three times, once after each major loss in Janie's life, completely original baptismal scenes in which Janie swims and looks at the sky. In each scene, one following her betrothal to Logan Killicks, one after Joe's death, and one after Tea Cake's death, she washes away an old dream or an old burden and prepares to start again. In the first and third, a voice, Nanny's first then Tea Cake's from beyond the grave asks Janie what she is doing, to which she responds simply, "I'm watching God."

This adaptation of Hurston's novel's original title reveals another instance of Parks moving away from a focus on the community and toward a more independent or autonomous feminine sensibility. "Their eyes" are no longer watching God, but "her eyes," or even more specifically, "Janie's eyes" are watching God. The change not only individualizes Janie's role in the film, but the context for this "watching"—a baptismal swim surrounded by nature—also creates a parallel relationship between Janie, nature, and the divine. Even into the early twentieth century, the Cult of True Womanhood and its call for purity, piety, domesticity, and submission still dominated cultural norms and

expectations for women's behavior. In creating a balance between Janie, the natural world, and the divine, the film undermines these supposed standards governing a woman's behavior. Janie's sexuality and sexual desire are portrayed as perfectly natural. They do not evoke the wrath of God but instead allow her moments of quiet reflection upon, perhaps even with, Him.

These moments differ significantly from those in Hurston's novel when people overtly watch God. As the roaring storm approaches near the end of the novel, Tea Cake, Janie, and their neighbors sit in their homes, "their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God" (160). Earlier in the scene, when their "eyes were questioning *God*," Janie refers to God in very racialized terms: "Ole Massa," she says, "is doin' *His* work now. Us oughta keep quiet" (159). The text thus links God with patriarchy and unchecked power. Janie and others only watch Him to anticipate his wrath, not to anticipate any kind of redemption. In Parks's *Their Eyes*, Janie and Teacake never watch or question God; they only cling to each other as the storm rumbles outside.

Parks's emphasis on the natural world in the film also contributes to a privileging of the visual in ways even beyond that expected when a text is adapted for the screen. This privileging is most obvious in the merging of Janie and the narrator's voices as well as in a general shift away from any narration, regardless of voice. Janie's character instead participates in every scene, and the voice heard is hers—fully engaged in the action if not herself describing it. The first voice in the film is Janie's—not in dialogue, but as Janie turned narrator, speaking in subtle dialect. She speaks, as Hurston's narrator

does at the beginning of her text, about coming back from burying the dead. The voices from the porch soon swirl around her, and the new Janie, unlike her textual counterpart who speaks an unknown greeting to the women, tells the women to “go to hell” under her breath. And when Janie begins to tell Phoeby her story, there is minimal narration—again from Janie herself, before the action simply skips back to the past so that the audience can witness it first hand. The audience, then, is never distanced from Janie or her emotions. Parks allows her viewers to witness Janie’s sexual awakening, her disappointment and anger at being forced to marry Logan, her sadness at losing Joe’s affection, her relief when he passes, and her longing for Tea Cake. Such witnessing creates a much more direct connection between Janie and the viewer, literally bringing Janie to life on the screen and giving her a voice, the very voice, as some have argued, she is ostensibly denied in Hurston’s text.

Indeed, in her introduction to the Perennial Classics paperback edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Mary Helen Washington recalls a panel discussion about the novel at the 1979 MLA Convention. At this panel, she writes, “[Robert] Stepto raised the issue that has become one of the most highly controversial and hotly contested aspects of the novel: whether or not Janie is able to achieve her voice in [the story]” (xii). Stepto and others have looked to the Courtroom scene near the end of the novel and “found Janie curiously silent in the scene, with Hurston telling the story in the omniscient third person so that we do not hear Janie speak—at least not in her own first-person voice” (xii-xiv). They have found “that the frame story in which Janie speaks to Phoeby creates only the illusion that Janie has found her voice, that Hurston’s insistence on telling Janie’s story in the third person undercuts her power as speaker” (xiv). Washington,

however, concludes that Janie's "silence reflects Hurston's discomfort with the model of the male hero that asserts himself through his powerful voice," and goes on to explain that "when Janie says at the end of her story that 'talkin' don't amount to much' if it's divorced from experience, she is testifying to the limitations of voice and critiquing the culture that celebrates orality to the exclusion of inner growth" (xv). The lack of narrative voice and the privileging of the visual experience in Parks's *Their Eyes*, then, could also be read as a response to Hurston's declaration that "you got to go there to *know* there" (192).

Ironically, *Their Eyes* leaves out the very scene that led to so much discussion about voice at the 1979 MLA panel. The courtroom scene's conspicuous absence would seem to indicate that the filmmakers found it as problematic as Stepto. However, leaving it out contributes to the film's revised message about autonomy and independence and ultimately gives the viewer more interpretive agency by leaving Janie's motive, and thus her defense, for shooting Tea Cake totally ambiguous. As seen in some of Parks's plays, such as *In the Blood*, an audience's access to written narration can radically change its understanding of a character's motivation. Such is the case here: Janie with narration and Janie without narration are completely different characters. Neither is more correct, or less real, but their differences are revealing, for they show an inevitable disconnect between oral and written communication—between spectacle and page.

Hurston's narrator, for example, implies that only self-preservation drives Janie to shoot Tea Cake. After he tries to shoot her once, Janie aims her own rifle at him "instinctively" (183). Hurston's narrator portrays the two lovers as animals engaged in a primal struggle for existence, for "the fiend in [Tea Cake] must kill and Janie was the

only living thing he saw” (184). Here, and immediately after the shooting, the narrator, describing Janie as “just a scared human being fighting for its life,” the narrator refers to her with the gender-neutral pronoun “it” (184). Once Janie knows she is safe, however, she again becomes “her sacrificing self with Tea Cake’s head in her lap” (184); she is re-humanized. The implication here is that Janie did not have a choice to kill Tea Cake because if there had been a choice, her rational self would have chosen his life over hers. Instead, some external force, be it fate or God, drove her to experience “the meanest moment of eternity,” to choose survival and life over the “self-crushing love” she had for Tea Cake (128).

In the scene immediately before the shooting in Parks’s film, however, Janie tells Tea Cake, “Fight it. Fight it. I know you can fight it . . . Cause if you don’t fight it, they gonna tie you down, and I ain’t gonna let nobody tie you down.” This sentiment paints the shooting as a mercy killing. By leaving open the possibility for autonomy in Tea Cake’s shooting, Parks allows her version of Janie to actively choose life. The celebration of her life and the new beginning embodied in the baptismal scene that follows her return to Eatonville affirm this choice, making Janie’s love for Tea Cake self-illuminating rather than “self-crushing.” Hurston’s Janie finds this same hope for the future in the last sentences of the novel as “she pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it in from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called her soul to come and see” (193). Both Janies, then, come to this self-love and independence at the end of their stories, even if not by exactly the same path.

Janie's transformation, then, is clear. But what of the listeners, the audience? Although difficult to use as gauge of an audience's specific reactions to a film, viewer response—if available—is nevertheless worth considering in any revisionary experiment because it reveals the extent to which audiences are called back to, and reflect upon, the original text. This viewer response, in the case of a film adapted from a novel, could be best measured in two possible, but equally problematic, ways. The first includes reviews on public forums such as those available on Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and Amazon.com; the second is book sales. Forum user reviews are notoriously poorly written and often inaccurate, but are nevertheless revealing. Most who posted reviews of the film had not read the book. These reviewers loved the adaptation and felt its impact. Lillain Oliver from Tallahassee, Florida, wrote on Amazon, for example, "THIS MOVIE BROUGHT ME BACK TO WHAT TRUE LOVE IS REALLY ALL ABOUT" (4, capitalization original), and according to user "breesummit" on IMDB.com, the film "teaches that material things are all right in their place"; yet, they must sometimes be traded "for real living and true love" (7). Some fans of the text applauded Winfrey, Parks, and the other collaborators for bringing *Their Eyes* to a wider audience. Most who had read Hurston's text, however, were disappointed. In one particularly biting review on IMDB, a viewer named "QueenDiva2" explains,

I am a Black woman and I have read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* many times, most recently when I learned that Oprah Winfrey and ABC were presenting the television movie. [. . .] I watched the movie with four other Black people, two men and two women. No one had anything positive to say about the movie. I held on as long as I could, but after two hours, I had to agree with my fellow viewers: the movie was horrible. Shame on all involved who had any sort of creative control over this debacle. May Hurston haunt you until you know better. (4)

The film's goal according to Winfrey, however, was to encourage people to read the book. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains to *Black Issues Book Review*, "Some people come to a great novel through its filming, and some go to the film after reading the novel. [. . .] It doesn't really matter. More people overnight will know about Zora Neale Hurston and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because of Winfrey's telefilm" (S. Johnson 44). So the criticism of the adaptation by those who had already read the text might be irrelevant or perhaps, even encourage those who saw the film to read the original and judge for themselves. Book sales figures might reveal that this indeed happened, but these sales are also a difficult indicator to measure. Universities and high schools nationwide now incorporate *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into their curricula, so the exact impact of Parks's film remains difficult to gauge.

Yet, reviews from actual viewers again reveal interesting trends for book purchases. Shamontiel L. Vaughn from Chicago writes on Amazon that her first instinct was to buy the books after seeing the film; however, "after reading some of the reviews and finding out that so many readers didn't like the movie versus the book, I see that I never want to read the book. I was so content with that movie . . . and I don't want to let anything damper my satisfaction with it" (2). "Six days later," she posts an update to her review:

Curiosity got the better of me and I got the book. Now I'm really rolling my eyes because this book didn't have a THING on the movie. Tea Cake was a liar, a jerk, ridiculously macho, and he hit her . . . I wasn't feeling that at all. Even worse, Janie was a complete idiot in the book. Everything she did had to be approved by a man and she kept telling people she couldn't think well because she wasn't too smart. I like how much of the movie used the dialogue from the book, but I am so glad Oprah had a hand in this movie. She made Janie much stronger, intelligent, and got rid of that whole damsel in distress nonsense. If I had read the book first, I would've NEVER watched the movie. (2)

Vaughn's comments suggest that the movie was powerful for her, perhaps even transformative, and that she felt a connection to the new Janie that she did not feel with the old. Still, her comments also reveal the inherent dangers of the revisionary experiment: in attempting to revise Hurston's story in ways that would not alienate 2005 viewers from the story, Parks's *Their Eyes* may have alienated Hurston's original story from these viewers, nullifying a literary sisterhood that might have been created between Hurston, Janie, and a new, broader twenty-first century audience. While no other users on IMDB or Amazon speak with Vaughn's passion to elevate the movie over the text, others do say that they have not read the book without indicating whether they plan to do so.

Another important issue about Parks's revision, the downplaying of racial elements in *Their Eyes*, is also a recurring topic among the viewer reviews. Many users may complain about the absence of racialized content, and some, especially on IMDB, notice that there are very few white characters in the novel. According to "Soulbrotha67 from Urban America" on IMDB, for instance:

One example of the pure genius that characterizes Oprah Winfrey's and Darnell Martin's adaptation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was the utmost irrelevance of white people to the story considering the time period and the basic racism that surely existed. This adaptation of the story fully subverts white supremacy by rendering it inconsequential to the lives of the people in Eatonville. [...] I understand and even sympathize with those who think that this adaptation forsook literal authenticity, but I think this adaptation is really the beacon for future black productions of period pieces where black life is truly central to the story line. Where the fact of our 'blackness' is a factor that enhances the story but isn't used to create easy conflict. (6)

Indeed, there are even fewer white characters in *Their Eyes* than there are in the novel.

Only three white characters appear in the film: Mr. Eaton, who donates the land to start

Eatonville and then allows Joe to buy more and expand the town; the white boss in the Muck; and the white doctor, who tries to get rabid Tea Cake the medicine that may or may not save him. Neither these white characters nor the power structures they represent cause any problems for the protagonists. Rather, Parks's film, like Hurston's text, "affirms and celebrates black culture" (Washington xvi), even without exploring how this culture triumphed and flourished in the midst of the very real racial politics that Hurston includes in her text.

Again, the real-life story of *Their Eyes*'s production reveals a complicated relationship with racial themes and conflicting opinions about the role these themes play in the film. Parks, for example, claims, "This is not a story about race. Our people just get to be [. . .] It's a milestone, but what a milestone to reach" (F. Lee 4). Parks also points to what she perceives as the universality of the film: "Women, African-American women, African-Americans, we Americans as a people haven't freed ourselves from the burdens of our history [. . .] When you write about somebody trying to free themselves from the constraints of their society, it's what's going on next door. It's white guys trying to get free of the roles imposed on them too" (Lee 4). Winfrey, on the other hand, asserts, "I think it's really important for us to see African-Americans [sic] in a life that allows not only the history and legacy of the culture, but to show love [...] And that's often not seen in a way that people can relate to" (Guthrie 3).

Meanwhile, Berry also downplays the racial elements in the film while she simultaneously affirms that women in general, and black women specifically, face unique struggles in the film industry. She says of the film, "It's certainly not heavy-hitting. It's really a love story about a woman coming of age and finding love of herself and finding

love in other people. It's not really that huge of a political statement as one might fear. So, there's no need to be afraid of it" (Alexander Y06). Yet, she also claims, "I think the struggle for a woman of color to find good material is still very present and it's a struggle that I fight every day. [. . .] I think women have a hard time finding material in general, be you black, white, sky blue or pink. It's hard to find good characters to play, that really tell our story and embark on our journey in a real, full way" (Guthrie 3). Sadly, the light-skinned Berry seems to miss the ironic contradictions inherent in these two statements.

Each woman's approach to the film incorporates some element that can relate to black women, and each seeks only to broaden the audience of viewers for Hurston's story. Nevertheless, removing race seems an erroneous and dangerous method by which to do so. For Hurston's story is an American story because it is an African American story, not despite it. Furthermore, Hurston's story in which Janie faces inter- and intra-racial politics as a black woman in an all-black town reveals clear parallels to Berry's lack of scripts, Oprah's lack of positive media images, and perhaps even the entire movie's lack of serious critical investigation.

Conclusion

Parks's *Girl 6* and her made-for-television *Their Eyes* both inevitably challenge film's ability to represent and shape black identity, culture, and history in general, and black women's issues within these three topics specifically. Both also raise challenging questions about the future of black community and the efficacy of film in healing the divisive wounds that Hollywood itself has created, especially for black women, through problematic stereotypes of black identity and sexuality. Both films offer their

examinations within the context of promising collaborations: Lee/Parks/Prince and Winfrey/Parks/Berry/Martin/Jones. Even so, the films offer little to reflect the positive implications of the collaborations—perhaps because these films must still cater to predominantly white audiences and a predominately white industry or perhaps because new issues, such as class and creative politics, have brought new complications.

Parks lets both Janie and Girl 6, however, come out of their cinematic struggles stronger and more self-aware than when they began. While the films do not tell us exactly where the women end up, Janie will likely keep swimming and watching God, and Girl 6 likely will keep daydreaming and reading her monologue at auditions. Regardless of the politics of their creation—or how independent of politics the creation tried to be—the end of each story is left for the audience, and not Parks or even Hollywood, to determine. The women can still be only as free as the audience can imagine them to be.

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Chapter Three

The “A” *In the Blood*: What Able and Angel Mean to a Late Twentieth-Century Black Welfare Mother

In 1999, the year that *In the Blood* premiered at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre’s New York Shakespeare Festival, the United States Census Bureau reported that 39% of single black mothers (nearly 1.5 million families) were living below the federally established poverty line (Dalaker and Proctor v).¹ The Bureau also reported that while the poverty rate for African Americans as a group dropped to a record low that year, “the poverty rate for Blacks in 1999 [23.6%] was still about three times the poverty rate for White non-Hispanics (7.7 percent)” (v). To explore the causes and effects of this harsh reality, Suzan-Lori Parks blends this bleak back-story with another, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s dark romance *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), for her first “Red Letter Play,”² *In the Blood*.

In the Blood tells the story of Hester La Negrita, a poor, black, mostly illiterate, single mother of five children—all of whom are doubled with an adult character in the play. Each of these adult characters, male and female, confesses to a sexual fascination

¹This line, which the Census Bureau calls the “poverty threshold,” varies by the number of total people and the number of children in a family (Dalaker and Proctor v-viii). For example, a single mother with one child’s poverty threshold in 1999 was \$11,483. A single mother with four children’s poverty threshold was \$19,578.

²The “Red Letter Plays” are the two plays in Parks’s corpus that feature scarlet-hued letter A’s: *Fucking A* (2000) and *In the Blood*. *Fucking A* focuses on an abortionist named Hester Smith, who has an A branded above her left breast, and that brand will not heal. Her A “weeps as a fresh wound would” and thus remains red with infection (125).

for Hester as well as to sexually exploiting her in some way. The Doctor (the middle son) and the welfare lady (aka “Welfare” and the oldest daughter) are also trying to sterilize Hester, while her white “friend” Amiga Gringa (the youngest daughter) steals from her. Reverend D (the youngest son), her most recent lover, refuses to acknowledge her out of fear that it will damage his ministry and his status in the community, and her first lover Chili (doubled with the oldest son Jabber) finally returns after years of absence only to reject Hester when he discovers the children she conceived with others during their separation. Throughout the play, Hester’s health deteriorates, and she eventually has visions of Armageddon. Hester’s circumstances, coupled with the trauma of hearing Jabber call her a “slut,” drive her to beat Jabber to death, and she uses the blood of her murdered son to write an “A”—scarlet by nature—on the ground next to his body.

In the Blood’s main signification on *The Scarlet Letter* seems to be the parallel ambiguous meaning of the letter A. Hawthorne scholars note the novel’s “refusal to articulate that word for which the novel’s title presumably stands” and point out that the word “adultery” appears only once in his novel and that is in the form “unadulterated,” referring to the sun that shines upon Hester as she leaves her prison with Pearl (Ginsberg 13, Hawthorne 47). Over the course of the story, the text suggests multiple redefinitions of the scarlet letter as Hester Prynne and her community come to understand the A and its significance. In Parks’s other “Red Letter Play,” *Fucking A* (2000), the branded letter distinctly signifies “Abortionist,” but *In the Blood* follows *The Scarlet Letter*’s example more closely and makes its A multivalent. At the same time, these layers of meaning can all be linked to the two A’s that Hawthorne does explicitly offer in *The Scarlet Letter*—

Able and Angel. *In the Blood*'s A thus speaks back to a literary and social history fraught with oppression at the same time as it is wholly innovative and timely.

Hawthorne's clear emphasis on Able and Angel mandates that Parks's readers consider both as possible interpretations/significations for Hester La Negrita's scrawled A.³ This chapter will explore these two parallel A's in *The Scarlet Letter* and *In the Blood*, as well as the meanings that they suggest. Each possibility for what the A names, each layer of meaning, reveals elements of Hester La Negrita's fragile and fragmented identity—wearied by systematic attacks and her own shortsighted choices—as well as a new charge in the play's indictment of the forces that seek to undermine this identity.

While understanding Hester Prynne's A is indeed challenging, the quest is ultimately just a puzzle—not a matter of life and death—for Hester emerges from the text redeemed and strong. On the other hand, the near whirlwind of possible meanings for Hester La Negrita's A and for the play leaves viewers/readers to feel disembodied and disillusioned, because ultimately, the world of the play leaves Hester La Negrita similarly disembodied and disillusioned. Understanding Hester La Negrita's A is a matter of life and death. Jailed for infanticide, and likely dying of AIDS, she bears the burden of an amalgam of sins, identities, and interpretations of her self placed upon her by her oppressors; she emerges from her text unredeemed and broken.

The play thus shows how history, revealed by *The Scarlet Letter* to be a tragically haunting force, has retained its potency. The same ambiguous signifiers define Hester

³In John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing* (1996), Mrs. Trush teaches black children at the orphanage their letters. She says, "A. A for able. A for angel. A, children. Repeat after me. A for able. A for angel" (195). Wideman and Parks both looking back to the same meanings for Hester Prynne's A at nearly the same time points to the particular significance of these meanings for modern black writers and black culture.

Prynne and Hester La Negrita, but the nuances of the significations are different, indicating how time and circumstances have made it impossible for Hester La Negrita's story to end with anything other than her destruction. Parks's repetition of Hawthorne's themes thus shows reverence and relevance. As she did in *Venus* (1996), Parks presents us with a woman "who has been famously romanticized and mystified" and asks us to "consider her again through the lens of our cruel and continuing histories of oppression" (Gies 87). Yet, Parks's substantial revision of Hester Prynne and *The Scarlet Letter* also shows that time, and thus history, have only become more malignant for America's present-day Hesters, especially if they are black and poor. Indeed, time and history have only complicated Hester's plight. New oppressions (related, yet different) compound the old and ultimately leave her without hope or escape.

A is for Able

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester and those around her eventually "refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification" (Hawthorne 110). Instead, "the letter was a symbol of her calling," and "they said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne with a woman's strength" (Hawthorne 110). Most obviously, Hester is an able seamstress, "so skilled that even the community leaders call upon her to embroider their robes" (Gies 80). Hester's expertise as a seamstress allows her both artistic expression, as she adorns her mark, and financial freedom. Parks's Hester La Negrita, by contrast, cannot even thread a needle and appears to be illiterate. Hester Prynne is also "Able" because she is an effective philanthropist whose "nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by

the largest. Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one” (Hawthorne 110). Hester La Negrita, although she does bring sexual satisfaction to some of the play’s characters and does attempt to feed and comfort her children, more remarkably needs philanthropy than gives it. And in the end, rather than respond to her oppression with compassion, she turns to violence against her own child.

All of these differences serve to separate Hester La Negrita from her seventeenth-century counterpart and the nineteenth-century feminism that Hawthorne knew, proving again the difficulty of equating white and black women’s oppressions. According to Leland Person, Hawthorne’s Hester sits “on the dividing line between black and white feminism—the line that some white nineteenth-century feminists either ignored or erased. Objectified in a way that associates her with slave mothers, Hester retains some privileges of her status as a white feminist who, like [Margaret] Fuller and [Elizabeth] Peabody,⁴ presumed to occupy the subject position of women” (39).

For *In the Blood*, Parks makes this dividing line even more distinct. While Hester Prynne’s oppression is certainly real and relevant, Hester La Negrita’s, over two centuries later, is not only deeper, but also more pervasive. One of the first times we see the later Hester write the letter A, her son Jabber—who seems to be acting as her teacher—says simply “Almost” in response to her creation. Hester is almost happy, almost married, almost able to support her children, almost literate. But Hester does not move beyond “almost” because of the selfish opportunism of those around her—black and white, male and female. When A means Able, then, Hester La Negrita is left only with a negative

⁴Peabody was Hawthorne’s sister-in-law, and according to Person, she had “long irritated Hawthorne with her abolitionist views” (38).

identity—what she is unable to do and unable to achieve. We do not see what Hester La Negrita *is*, rather, only what she *is not*.

To reinforce the growing modern separation between black and white women, *In the Blood* gives us Amiga Gringa, the poor white woman who claims to share in Hester's oppression but actually participates in it. Amiga, who will make money by selling "the fruit of [her] white womb" without guilt, steals food and money from Hester and sets her up to be raped (71). Amiga also cannot thread a needle, but she criticizes sewing as a profession, implying that it is beneath her, even though she is also poor.

After refusing Hester's offer to find her sewing work, Amiga explains, "Thats not for me. If I work Hester, I would want to be paid a living wage. You have agreed to work for less than a living wage. May as well be a slave. Or an animal. [...] Wouldnt catch me doing that. Chump work. No no no. But its a good thing you are. Example to the kids" (66). Amiga's whiteness—doubly inscribed by her name, a racial marker that opposes Hester's—allows her the privilege to reject unjust labor demands. Having sold her white children, Amiga does not have the stigma of being a begging unwed mother like Hester, who admits: "no ones gonna give money to me with me carrying Baby around" (27). As such, Amiga will either find legitimate work with a living wage or will make more money from her illegal/illicit activities than Hester, allowing for at least the possibility that Amiga's poverty is not permanent or systematic. Also, by praising Hester for being an "example to the kids," Amiga implies that Hester will pass her economic dependence on to her children, who should accept this position in the social hierarchy.

The sewing scene also evokes a comparison of Hester La Negrita and Harriet Wilson. Wilson's autobiographical heroine Frado in *Our Nig* (1859) is an "expert with

the needle” and “soon equaled her instructress” (124). Frado, like Hester Prynne, can then use sewing as a means of support. This connection shows that the situation is perhaps even more dire for Hester La Negrita than for a nineteenth century black woman, for Hester La Negrita has no substantive means of survival. Parks, like Wilson, also links her protagonist’s domestic skill with written text; self-supporting labor and personal expression through literacy become parallel needs.

Frado’s sewing instructor “sought also to teach her the value of useful books; and while one read aloud to the other of historic deeds and names renowned, Frado experienced a new impulse. She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she has long felt, but could not express” (124). Similarly, when Welfare gives Hester La Negrita fabric to sew, she asks “Can I express myself?” (59), and when we see Hester at the beginning of the next scene, there are “Lots of A’s written in Hester’s practice place,” but she still cannot thread the needle (64). One key difference, of course, is that Frado discovers the expressive elements of literacy through reading—specifically reading history—while Hester looks to writing. Hester’s multiple attempts at writing “practice” combined with her frustrated sewing efforts show that she has not yet found the outlet for expression that Frado discovers, and literacy stands out as the most important skill Hester is unable to master.

Women’s writing, and literary mastery especially, also has a complicated history vis-à-vis Nathaniel Hawthorne. In an infamous January 19, 1885, letter to publisher William D. Ticknor, Hawthorne complained that the country was “wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women.” One cannot help but recall these words along with Hawthorne’s most famous novel as Parks’s Hester scribbles the letter A—the only letter

she writes over the course of the play—on the wall of her house and eventually “in the blood” of her murdered son. Reading this red A as a final and futile assertion of literacy invites a closer look at Hawthorne’s “scribbling women” comment in his letter to Ticknor. According to Michael Winship, this comment “has resonated through recent discussions of American literary history” for it begs us to consider issues such as “the relationship between popular success and literary quality,” the impact of “gender politics” in literary evaluation, and how “the economic factors facing authors and publishers fostered or discouraged authorship in the United States” (3). Applied to *In the Blood*, the comparison encourages us to challenge assumptions about women’s writing as well to as examine the boundaries of Hester La Negrita’s perceived illiteracy, especially as these boundaries may be informed by her social and economic influences.

For example, there is evidence in the play that suggests Hester is not illiterate, or at least not as illiterate as first impression and previous critics suggest she is. Only the chorus that mocks Hester at the beginning and end of the play explicitly calls her illiterate, as they shout on both occasions, “CANT READ CANT WRITE” (5, 108). The stage directions comment only that the “letters” of the word “SLUT” are “mysterious to her” (12), a description that potentially complicates the play’s definitions of language and literacy rather than excludes Hester from engaging them.

First and foremost, it is difficult to accept that Hester can only write one letter, just as we would certainly not believe that Hester Prynne could only embroider one letter. Most obviously, the letter A is itself composed of another letter, “V,” and a V very easily becomes a “W.” Hester La Negrita’s oldest son Jabber describes the letter A’s shape as —“legs apart hands crost the chest” (11). And Deborah Gies asserts that this sexualized

description of how to make the featured letter “reveals the extent to which for [Hester], too, it has become a kind of bodily marking” (86). Even so, we might still ask: why not V? Would not V, as the enormous popularity of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) has taught us, have actually been more sexual (just “legs apart”) and easier to make (fewer lines)? And why not W, the first letter of most interrogative pronouns as well as of words that could all be loci for Hester’s oppression—woman, whiteness, Welfare? Furthermore, Hester herself never admits to her illiteracy, and the play gives us no reason to distrust her. On the contrary, she adamantly declares to Amiga Gringa, “I can write my damn name. Im not such a fool that I cant write my own goddamn name. I can write my goddamn name” (32). Also, when the doctor asks her to read the SPAY eye chart, she claims that she needs glasses—wholly probable considering her poor diet—and likely makes out the A because it is the letter to which she is most emotionally attached and because its outline is one of the most distinct in the alphabet (42). These assertions meet with no contradiction from the stage directions, as we see when Jabber tells his literacy-related lies by saying he cannot read the SLUT written in Hester’s practice place.

Meanwhile, other parts of the play also suggest that Hester may have a better grasp of language than the chorus acknowledges. In some instances, readers encounter surprisingly elevated diction in the midst of dialect, such as when Hester tells Jabber, “You gonna disparage me I aint gonna practice” (10). In still others, much more common, we see the depths of Hester’s literary creativity. Gies suggests that “Hester has a gifted imagination” seen especially when “she helps the children to enjoy the meager soup that she feeds them for dinner by telling them that it has everything they love in it” as well as in the “fairytale” she creates about their fathers (83). These stories, asserts

New York Times theatre critic Margo Jefferson, are important because they help us “realize that those folk tales we love so would be narratives of misery and woe if poor and powerless storytellers hadn’t invented supernatural forces to save the day” (E5). Ultimately, however, Hester’s “fables,” almost entirely fabricated, are only happy for a time and eventually end in war and death, thereby poignantly reminding us that the ability to write happy endings—and even to write history—belongs almost exclusively to the rich and powerful.

If Hester can indeed read and write, then the obvious limits on her literacy—the forces that make some letters “mysterious”—must come from circumstance. Hester’s longing for self expression would compel her to express this literacy in particular ways to fit particular situations and would lead her to focus on the letter A because of its relevance to her. For instance, when she writes the A for Welfare, Hester does so in response to the woman’s instance that Hester reveal the name of Baby’s father:

Welfare: You dont have to say it out loud. Write it down.
She gives Hester a pencil and paper. Hester writes. Welfare looks at the paper
Welfare: “A.”
(*Rest*)
Adam, Andrew, Archie, Arthur, Aloysius, “A” what?
Hester: Looks good dont it? (58)

Although he is not given a first name in *In the Blood*, in *The Scarlet Letter*, “good Master Dimmesdale[’s]” full name is, of course, Arthur Dimmesdale (Hawthorne 79). The A simultaneously names the delinquent father and sexual abuser, allowing Hester to express her emotional angst, and protects his anonymity as prescribed by the patriarchal power structure, so that she might still hope to receive financial support from him.⁵

⁵Hester’s choice of A seems doubly important here since A is also the indefinite article, and thereby signifies further lack of specificity in the naming of her child’s father.

This discretion links Hester La Negrita not only to Hester Prynne but also to yet another nineteenth century African American writer and mother, Harriet Jacobs. Person explains of *The Scarlet Letter*'s Hester, "Refusing to name her child's father, resisting the efforts of the good masters to take her away, planning an escape to freedom—Hester resembles slave mothers like Harriet Jacobs" who were forced to do the same (44). The connection to Jacobs has threefold significance in Hester La Negrita's case. In addition to both women's forced adherence to patriarchal norms, Jacobs's narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), clearly withholds information from the reader both out of modesty and because it "is not 'a narrative of the life of a slave' but a presentation of 'incidents,' carefully selected and shaped" (Dorani 208). In addition, Jacobs, who is literate even while enslaved, withholds her literacy from her tormentor, Dr. Flint, who wants her to read the foul notes he writes in his attempts to seduce her.

Withholding literacy is also not unprecedented in *In the Blood*. In the opening scene of the play, Jabber does just this to spare his mother's feelings. He could literally read the text of the word SLUT that someone has "scrawled on a wall" near their home (9), but he cannot bring himself to do so. When he tells Hester he "cant" read it, the stage directions call his bluff and counter that "he knows what the word says, but he won't say it" (11-12). With Hester, we are not completely sure if she cannot or will not read the "mysterious" scrawl, just as we are not sure whether she cannot or will not read the Doctor's SPAY eye chart later in the play. Harry Elam asserts that the SLUT on the wall "marks a public branding and abasement, just as from the outset of Hawthorne's novel, Hester Prynne is humiliated and exorcized from the community as she exits from prison"

(119). In refusing to read it, both Hester and Jabber reject the stigma and create a clear distinction between written and spoken language.

The text of the play reinforces this distinction. The stage directions, which would go unspoken in performance, cannot go unread. Because these stage directions never explicitly affirm or deny Hester La Negrita's illiteracy, the ambiguous personified voice of the stage directions—a quasi-narrator—most prominently inspires incredulity about Hester's nearly complete inability to read and write. Again, this may be a trope that Parks borrows from her literary ancestor Hawthorne. According to Leslie Ginsberg, “the Janus-faced narrator of the novel—who is simultaneously reliable and unreliable, is a revealer and a concealer—is a narrative voice that ultimately invites us to read *The Scarlet Letter* as a primer for grownups, whose subject, like all primers, is the process of reading itself” (20). In the case of *In the Blood*, doubts raised by the quasi-narrator of the stage directions highlight not only reading (and writing, as explored above), but also what Elam calls “another form of literacy, a cultural literacy that [Hester] must learn to appreciate through the course of the play” (120). Both the audience and Hester must learn to “read” accurately situational subtleties for personal and social significance as well as “read” people for key verbal and non-verbal communication. Just as Hester La Negrita should not blindly trust the ex-lovers who promise to help her and claim to have only her best interests at heart, the theatre audience should not trust the dialogue of the play. Cultural literacy, then, is the ability to see and understand the value of the subtext inherent in every text, written and spoken.

An audience member at a production of *In the Blood*, hearing only the spoken words, would come away with a wholly different understanding of Hester La Negrita

than that of the play's readers. This viewer, for example, would not know until the end of the play that Jabber was lying about the word SLUT, nor would they see how the stage directions sympathize with Hester as she "continues trying to thread that damn needle" (67). More importantly, only the reader sees the textual clues leading up to Hester's final breakdown and Jabber's violent death. As Jabber confesses that he withheld his literacy, he explains, "I was reading it but I was only reading it in my head I wasn't reading it with my mouth I was reading it with my mouth but not with my tongue I was reading it only with my lips and I could hear the word outloud but only outloud in my head" (103). He tells Hester, "I didn't wanna say the word outloud in your head" because "it was a bad word" (103). He does not want his voice to be the voice in his mother's consciousness that calls her a slut, but his naïveté and the desire to play "a child's joke" are stronger than this impulse (106). When he finally does say it "outloud," it is in quotation marks: "I read 'slut.'" (104). The first four times he says the word it appears this way, but when he says, "You said if I read it you'd say what it means. Slut. Whassit mean?" the quotation marks disappear (104).

And at this moment, the reader and the speaker are audience to two different plays and two different Hesters. The viewing audience, when hearing this line read aloud—no matter the inflection the actor puts on each word—cannot help but hear Jabber call his mother a slut, and his murder, while still senseless, seems justified as this epithet links Jabber with all the other exploitive men in the play. Hester then becomes a Margaret Garner⁶ figure, killing her son to prevent him becoming yet another misogynistic patriarch like his father or Reverend D.

⁶Garner, the model for Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), killed her daughter and attempted to kill her other children to prevent them from being captured and returned to slavery.

The reader, on the other hand, sees that he is not calling her a slut, but simply saying the word. Still, the lost quotation marks on Jabber's fifth utterance of the word "slut" indicate a key linguistic shift that harkens back to an oddly mimetic conversation between Hester and Reverend D near the beginning of the play. Both scenes draw a clear distinction between mere repetition and Parks's "Rep & Rev"⁷—repetition with a hint of personal revision—thereby also reinforcing that Parks is making *The Scarlet Letter* her own.

In her first exchange with Reverend D, Hester repeats all of the minister's scripted words back to him as he tells her how to confront the father of her child:

Reverend D: You must go to him and say, "Mister, here is your child!"
Hester: Mister, here is your child!
Reverend D: "You are wrong to deny what God has made!"
Hester: You are wrong to deny what God has made!
Reverend D: "He has nothing but love for you and reaches out his hands everyday crying wheres daddy?"
Hester: Wheres daddy?
Reverend D: "Wont you answer those cries?"
Hester: Wont you answer those cries? (48)

The quotation marks here serve as a source of abstraction, a potential versus an actual speech. Outside of the quotation marks, the words are real, weighty, and demanding of action. In her unquoted repetition, Hester not only leaves out assurance of love, but changes Reverend D's meaning by delivering the words to an unexpected audience (himself).

The same is true in the closing scene with Jabber. "Slut" in quotation marks is simply an abstraction. Hester barely reacts when Jabber says it. Taken out of the quotation marks, however, the word changes for Hester. Jabber's voice now says it

⁷Parks describes her theory of "Repetition and Revision" ("Rep & Rev") in the essay "from Elements of Style" (1994).

“outloud in [her] head,” joining a chorus of others who have also done so. Like Hester’s earlier words to Reverend, this word—outside of the abstracting quotation marks—now demands action and justice. For the reader, then, Hester is more like Medea,⁸ killing out of spite and vengeance against a world that has unfairly branded her a slut.

Regardless of the motivation, Hester’s punishment for Jabber’s murder is the inevitable loss of her “womans parts,” the source of her “treasures” and the only ability granted her by the unsympathetic chorus who asserts, “SHE DONT GOT NO SKILLS/CEPT ONE” (43, 5, 7). Hester’s sexuality is her only significant source of money and sympathy, but unfortunately, theater critic Sarah Wilkinson explains, her “sexual acts are paradoxically both Hester’s saving grace and her downfall, her only way to acquire money and the reason why she has none” (27). Still, as in Parks’s earlier play *Venus*, sexuality is ultimately a site of agency for Hester. In choosing her partners, just as in choosing when to reveal or withhold her literacy, Hester asserts the small amount of control over her life that she can. Hester, unfortunately, tends to waste her agency on bad decisions, but she takes responsibility for this shortsightedness (“My lifes my own fault. I know that” [59]). Thus, Elam suggests that Hester La Negrita “is a victim, but also tragically complicit in her own oppression. Her tale offers a poignant, contradictory conjunction of suffering and survival, institutional neglect, and individual abuse” (117). She ends the play unable to express herself and also likely unable to bear more children and create the “whole army” of “Bad Bastards” that may have protected her from an antagonistic world (107). As in *Topdog/Underdog*, the curtain closes on a sorrowful murder with bloody hands and no hope.

⁸In the playwright Euripides’s version the mythical Medea story, Medea kills her children when her husband leaves her for another woman.

A is for Angel

Hester La Negrita's heavenward gaze, especially during her visions of Armageddon, evokes the second explicit meaning of A in *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel equates A with Angel in one of its most dramatic and memorable chapters, "The Minister's Vigil." In this chapter, Hester Prynne, Dimmesdale, Pearl, and Roger Chillingworth converge on the scaffold on which "evil-doers are set up to public shame" (108). Pearl chastises the Reverend, her father, for refusing to acknowledge her and her mother, shouting: "Thou was not bold!—thou was not true!" (108). Dimmesdale proceeds to preach one of his "richest and powerful" Sabbath sermons the following day, and he is approached by a sexton who hands him a glove found on the scaffold:

‘Satan dropped it there, I take it, intending a scurrilous jest against your reverence. But indeed, he was blind and foolish, as he ever and always is. A pure hand needs no glove to cover it. [...] And since Satan saw fit to steal it, your reverence must needs handle him without gloves, henceforward,’ remarked the old sexton, grimly smiling. ‘But did your reverence hear of the portent that was seen last night. A great red letter in the sky, —the letter A, —which we interpret to stand for Angel. For, as our good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night, it was doubtless held fit that there should be some notice thereof.’
(108-9)⁹

The sexton, in spite of his clearly erroneous reading of the event's meaning, subtly links Dimmesdale's sin and his guilty struggle with an intriguing sign in the heavens that undoubtedly points to Hester Prynne, the novel's best candidate to be an Angel, the agent of God.

Parks's characters also struggle with sin, and Hester La Negrita, like Hester Prynne, is an unlikely angel, but nevertheless acts as an agent of God. She becomes the avenue for the manifestation of the other characters' innermost sinful desires and

⁹John Winthrop (1588-1649), governor of Massachusetts and author of the widely anthologized sermon "A Model Christian Charity" (1630).

exploitative tendencies. Indeed, we hear about Hester's exploitation predominantly through each character's (including her own) "Confession" at the end of scenes. These confessions indict government and religion, as well as sexual dishonesty and double standards, as culprits in Hester's continued subjugation. Since the play's opening list of characters pairs each of her children with one of these sinful adults, it is clear that Hester must literally bear the burden of their sins, just as she bears the child who is the result of them. But unlike Hester Prynne, Hester La Negrita bears five symbolic children, rather than just one, so the sins and the penance are much more intense and pervasive—crossing race, gender, and class lines—than those in Hawthorne's text.

The first confession is the Doctor's. Parks's Doctor, like Hawthorne's physician Chillingworth, seems to care for Hester on some level, but he is ultimately self-serving and collaborates with the bi-sexual Welfare in Hester La Negrita's sterilization. Welfare's confession comes next in the play. Both the Doctor and Welfare "confess" to a breakdown or erosion of their philanthropic spirit and a need to separate themselves physically and emotionally from those they are committed to serve. Welfare says simply, "The balance of the system depends on a well-drawn boundary line/and all parties respecting that boundary" (61), but the doctor explains:

When I see a woman begging on the streets I guess I could/bring her in my house/sit her at my table/make her a member of my family, sure./ But there are hundreds and thousands of them/and my house cant hold them all./Maybe we should all take in just one./ Except they wouldnt really fit./They wouldnt really fit in with us. Theres such a gulf between us. What can we do? (44)

Elam posits that both the Doctor and Welfare can justify their exploitation of Hester because "sexual desire enables boundaries of class and propriety to be crossed, and therefore complicates constructions of identities and hierarchies of difference. Still,

while sex complicates these relations, the existent power dynamics and boundaries of identity remain intact” (123). Ironically, while Welfare and the Doctor seek an emotional and physical distance from Hester, they do not seek sexual distance from her.

This seemingly paradoxical distinction suggests that Hester’s sexuality is not, for these characters, in any way connected to her physical or emotional self, that is, to her individual identity. Hester “finds no sense of self, no freedom in these acts. Sex does not liberate her from but only imprisons her more in the system” (Elam 123). She is simply an agent through which the doctor and Welfare discover or express their own sexuality. The Doctor remembers that while having sex with Hester it was as if “she was giving me something that was not hers to give me but something that was mine/that I’d lent her/and she was returning it to me” (44-5). When Welfare finally works her way through half-truths and hedges to admitting her “sexual interest” in Hester, she claims merely to have been “swept away” by the moment (62).

Indeed, these “confessions” are devoid of the repentant spirit the ritual implies. Hawthorne, in both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Marble Faun* (1859), is clearly skeptical of both confession and even private penitence as adequate penance for sins. Even though Dimmesdale whips himself out of guilt related to his continuing silence about his affair with Hester, for example, he still has great “dread of public exposure” (Hawthorne 105). Critic Denis Donoghue writes, “To Hawthorne, it appears that sin is an act, a condition, a state of consciousness, such that I will not reveal to my community—or indeed to anyone. The sin consists in my refusal to come clean and to tell the neighbors what I have done” (221).¹⁰ By exposing each character’s exploitation of Hester La Negrita,

¹⁰Hawthorne was particularly critical across his works of those characters who committed the “unpardonable sin”—a separation of the mind from the heart that, F.O. Matthiessen describes,

Parks figuratively puts them on the scaffold to which *The Scarlet Letter*'s sexton refers. Thereby, the "evil-doers are set up to public shame." However, this "shame" is only revealed to the play's theatre audience, not to the "onstage" public, so the penance is essentially meaningless.

Also, Parks's sinners seem anything but sorry, and certainly show no desire to do penance for their sins. According to *Village Voice* theatre critic John Feingold, the confessions are not so much about characters repenting, or accepting shame, but speaking "in their own defense" (2). It is Hester, ultimately, who must literally bear the burden for each sin, by bearing a child that represents that sin. The Doctor gives her Trouble; Welfare gives her Bully. Philip C. Kolin suggests, "[...] for Hester, 'in the blood' symbolizes her offspring, whom she has physically and spiritually conceived" (247). As such, Hester is a very potent agent of God—a reverse Christ figure. Hester does not die for these sins, but gives birth to them, turning these "sins" into "her treasures," her children that she nurtures and again, for whom she sacrifices.¹¹

Kolin also believes that Hester "evokes the Blessed Virgin Mary cast as a welfare mother pushed beyond the limits of pain" (248). Indeed, Chilli—Chillingworth's more obvious double—imagines Hester La Negrita as a Virgin Mary figure. When Chilli takes back his proposal to marry her after meeting all her children, he explains:

"happened when a man failed to distinguish between time and eternity, between his fallibility and his longing for the ideal" and had no understanding of "the complexity of man's nature" (653). Hawthorne likely would have characterized many of *In the Blood*'s characters' sins, which objectify and dehumanize Hester, as unpardonable.

¹¹Elam's essay provides a compelling examination of the multicultural aspects of Hester's offspring, "an interracial progeny that natural selection could never replicate." He explains how "the multicultural casting stages the fluidity of race and underscores the problematic nature of racial categorization" (117).

I carried around this picture of you. Sad and lonely with our child on yr hip. Struggling to make do. Struggling against all odds. And triumphant. Triumphant against everything. Like—hell, like Jesus and Mary. And if they could do it so could my Hester. My dear Hester. Or so I thought.

(Rest)

But I dont think so. (96).

Chilli, who deeply fears that marriage will lead to his emasculation, wants to feel omnipotent. This becomes clearer each time Chilli takes out his watch to test whether or not he knows the time. His obsession with guessing the time reveals his desire to control it, to be the master to even the most minute details of his reality, to be God-like.

In imagining Hester as Mary and their child as Jesus, the miraculous Son of God, Chilli lives his God fantasy. His confession reveals that he “ultimately decides to find fault with her for being true to the same qualities that he once admired in her (passion and unbridled sexual freedom)” (Crockett 2). As in the miracle of immaculate conception, when young Hester and Chilli are together, they defy natural laws and “float weightless” because “gravity was a law that did not apply to those persons under the age of 18” (97). Hester is an agent of God here because she is the avenue through which God reminds Chilli that he is a mere mortal, powerless against time and circumstance. Her “fall” serves to prove that “times change” (97).

Hester is also an humbling force for Reverend D, who believes that God has sent Hester to punish him. He confesses, “And now the hate I have for her/and her hunger/and the *hate* I have for her hunger./ God made me./ God pulled me up./ Now God, through her, wants to drag me down/and sit me at the table/at the head of the table of her fatherless house” (79). Reverend D, a modern Booker T. Washington, takes ultimate pride in telling his audiences how he is “a man who has crawled out of the quicksand of despair” and “has pulled himself out of that never ending gutter” to become “the man on

the soapbox, telling you of a better life that's available to you" (46-7). A man of God, Reverend D should be a philanthropist, but Hester La Negrita tells us, "his heart is real hard. Like a rock." (30). Just as the women Gwendolyn Brooks describes in "The Lovers of the Poor" (1960) want "The very very worthy/ And beautiful poor," Reverend D "enjoys having the tired and the depraved come knocking on his door. Come gathering around his soapbox," but they must be "famous poor, not miscellaneous poor" (Brooks 287; Parks 47, 73).

Reverend D's failed philanthropy is especially obvious in Hester's case, not just because it includes sexual exploitation, but also because it is so easily juxtaposed with the successful philanthropy of Hester Prynne. As stated above, the people of *The Scarlet Letter* come to admire Hester Prynne for her philanthropy, dubbing her "Able," as there is "none so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty" and "none so self-devoted as Hester when pestilence stalked through the town" (110). This description comes in the chapter entitled "Another View of Hester," which immediately follows the sexton's equation of A with Angel. The text subtly suggests that this Angel label fits Hester as well as (or perhaps better than) Able, for she has become "a self-ordained Sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result" (Hawthorne 110). Hester La Negrita, similarly, has become an agent of God, also ordained by circumstance, but instead of giving benevolence, she desperately needs it.

And this is just the type of mercy that Reverend D, as a man of God who fashions himself as a Christ figure,¹² should give. But instead of helping Hester, he, Welfare, and

¹²In his first sermon (Scene 3), Reverend D, "preaching to no one in particular," alludes to Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) when he says, "There isn't a person on the street

the Doctor “use Hester for masturbatory, self-gratification, and self-indulgent fulfillment of their missionary desires. They justify their exploitation of Hester through the narcissistic celebration of their own charity towards her, the erotics of benevolence” (Elam 123). Yet, the last time we see the Reverend—like his double in *The Scarlet Letter*—his fear of exposure is gone. He dares Hester, “Tell on me! Go on! Tell the world! I’ll crush you underfoot” (103). But Reverend D, unlike Arthur Dimmesdale, is not repentant. He is ready to confront his sins, but he fears no wrath from God or the world. Therefore, Gies asserts, “Parks seems much more willing than Hawthorne to deny any sympathy for the Reverend; her vision of this character is an implicit critique of the way Hawthorne, by having Dimmesdale die at the end, leaves us with a somewhat more ambiguous set of feelings for his character” (85). Hawthorne even gives his reader evidence that Dimmesdale physically punished himself, through whipping, and may have even been marked by God with stigmata, in the form of “a SCARLET LETTER—the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne—imprinted in the flesh” (174). Hawthorne’s Dimmesdale also pays for his sin with his life, whereas in the cruel modern world of *In the Blood*, it is an innocent child—not even Reverend D’s own—who must perish.

The modern world of *In the Blood* also presents us with an interpretation of Angel that Hawthorne could never have imagined. Both Amiga Gringa and Welfare’s confessions suggest a homosexual aspect of Hester’s identity, thereby linking Parks’s *In the Blood* to Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*

that hasn’t passed me by at some point” (46). Later, as he is practicing his preaching, he quotes the famous passage, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). The last time we see him, the stage directions indicate that “he carries a large neon cross” (101).

(1991/1993).¹³ Kushner's two-part play follows a handful of characters as they confront AIDS and homosexuality in the late 1980s. The protagonist, Prior Walter, is dying of AIDS. An angel visits the ailing Prior and tells him that he is a prophet sent to make the world "stop moving," because the uninhibited progress of man has driven God away from heaven (179). Prior eventually ascends to heaven and confronts the angels, rejecting his mandate because he wants to keep moving, keep living, for it is human nature to "live past hope" (267).

Not only does Parks dedicate *In the Blood* to Kushner (and others), but her play suggests that Hester herself has been infected with "the ultimate disaster of modern times," which is not the single motherhood that Reverend D indicates when he speaks the line, but AIDS, a disease that travels "in the blood" of its victims (47). Welfare explains in her confession, "I was so afraid I'd catch something" (63), and in his, the Doctor admits to having unprotected sex with Hester. Since he is also a drug abuser, he may have even given her the disease. As early as the prologue, the chorus tells us Hester has "bad news in her blood" (7) and that "what she gots catchy" (7). They also claim that they can see this, "plain as day," just by looking at her, perhaps indicating that she already has the tell-tale Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, which Kushner's Prior Walter describes as another kind of "scarlet" branding: "The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death" (Parks 7, Kushner 27). The failing eyesight Hester describes to the doctor as well

¹³Hester is also impregnated during her sexual encounters with these women (both of which also involve men), and the play suggests, through its doubling, that the woman is the parent of the resulting child. In addition, when Amiga tells Hester she is pregnant again, Hester replies, "Dont look at *me*" (68), implying that a child as a result of a homosexual union is possible, just not probable in that case. This blending of the supernatural and the homosexual is yet another theme that *In the Blood* shares with *Angels in America*, and Parks returns to the possibility of a child inheriting traits from her mother's lesbian lover in *Getting Mother's Body* (2003).

as her paralyzing intestinal discomfort are also possible symptoms. And she is, after all, based on a “Prior” Hester.

In the Blood, then, unlike *The Scarlet Letter* and *Fucking A*, places importance not only on what the A *means*, but also on where the A *is*. This focus on location begins at the play’s opening when Hester La Negrita refuses to write her A’s in the practice place where someone has “scrawled” the word “SLUT”. Instead, Hester La Negrita tells Jabber, “I practiced. In my head. In the air. In the dirt underfoot” (10). The A can be both internal and external. Hester Prynne can, as we actually see her do in *The Scarlet Letter*, cast off her A, and Hester Smith’s brand, in theory, could be surgically removed or altered. When the A is “in the blood,” however, it is permanent and deadly. Parks depicts Hester La Negrita’s A as “catchy”: inheritable, communicable, and like a virus, invisible while still highly potent.

More important than whether or not Hester actually has AIDS are the characteristics she shares with AIDS patients. Kolin points out that “blood symbolizes Hester’s sexual sins and shame,” and because she is “a sexual outcast” her “polluted blood is her biological scarlet letter” (246). So it is with those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. HIV/AIDS, regardless of the source of infection, is often linked with sexual promiscuity. African American women, who like homosexuals are often stereotyped as promiscuous, have been and still are particularly at risk of HIV infection, especially from men who they believe to be their monogamous heterosexual partners. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “In a study of HIV-infected persons, 34% of African American men who have sex with men (MSM) reported having had sex with women, even though only 6% of

African American women reported having had sex with a bisexual man” (*African Americans* 3). The effects of this trend are obvious and devastating: The CDC estimates that in 2004, African American women represented 64% of the 123,405 women with HIV/AIDS, and were “approximately 23 times” more likely to be diagnosed with the disease than white women (48.2/100,000 black women versus 2.1/100,000 white women) (*Women* 1-2). These statistics point to yet another way that men, especially black men, have failed Hester La Negrita and her contemporaries.

By connecting *In the Blood* with *Angels in America*, we can better understand how an angel might be a useful symbol for understanding Hester and her modern world. According to Amy Schindler, “Angelic symbolism has been appropriated from traditional religious systems in order to shape new strategies of individual and collective behavior in a period of social transformation” and adds that “an Angel represents a spiritual but non judgmental sign of intervention to help people deal with the AIDS crisis” (49). If we examine Hester as a “spiritual but non judgmental” angel sent to encourage “new strategies of individual and collective behavior,” we see that she does not harshly criticize her oppressors; she simply expects “the worldll take care of the women and children,” not judge them and abandon them (32). She embodies a persistent yet embattled cry for health care and welfare reform as well as more honest sexual relationships and friendships. And finally, she asks, “Having made it next to impossible for the poor to survive, how do we expect them to do it?” (Feingold 2).

Angels in America links “a literal language of the diseased body and a metaphoric language of the body politic” as Prior’s “physical symptoms, particularly repeated references to blood and bleeding (fluid vehicles of transmission and infection) are

intended to function as a metonymy of the devastation wreaked upon the entire American homosexual community by AIDS” (Ogden 251). Hester’s symptoms function the same way vis-à-vis black motherhood and the welfare system, and thus *In the Blood* creates the same parallel. Hester is America—the new Republican mother—“treasures,” lesions, and all.

Hester La Negrita’s confession, the last of the play, reveals that she, like Prior, is a prophet. While Feingold argues that this final confession indicts Hester as “her own worst exploiter,” portraying “her devotion to her offspring as a kind of bipolar disorder, violently repudiated and the megalomaniacally embraced” (2), a more redemptive reading has Hester realizing that her inter-racial children were the army she needed to fight the great battle for her survival. Her visions of Armageddon—complete with eclipse, trumpets, and “the hand of fate with its 5 fingers”—foreshadow an epic holy war in which Hester will finally have the opportunity to vindicate herself after hundreds of years of misplaced judgment and oppression. The play also leaves us with this image as Hester repeats, three times, “Big hand coming down on me,” while “she looks up with outstretched arms” (109-110). Her link to Prior Walter would suggest that she is appealing to Heaven for another chance to prepare her army.

Prophets, of course, are not angels, but like angels, they are agents and messengers of God. Biblically, the prophetic and angelic are often paired. In *Angels in America*, for example, when Prior asks the Mormon mother Hannah Pitt what he should do to “reject the vision” the angel brings, she replies, “Grab her, say ‘I will not let thee go except thou bless me!’ Then wrestle her till she gives in” (250). So Parks’s prophet Hester La Negrita seems to say to her intertextual angel and ancestor Hester Prynne. The

Prior Hester has left her namesake a legacy that her circumstances will not let her fulfill. Hester La Negrita cannot be a “self-ordained Angel of Mercy” because she needs mercy too badly herself, just as she cannot be Able in a world that allows her no opportunities, no “leg up.” The reader too must wrestle with the Prior Hester and her scarlet letter because they both still haunt literary and cultural history with their persistent warnings about sin, sexuality, and patriarchy. Yet, Prior Hester and her letter are simultaneously inadequate, barely a beginning for expressing the hardships of our twentieth and twenty-first-century Hesters.

According to Feingold, *In the Blood* reminds us that “The Judas kiss of ambiguity is the only one that theatre knows how to give. If we go home tormented by the questions it raises in us, it’s done its social duty” (1). But what of the play that leaves its own characters tormented? And what of the audience’s social duty as they turn from the stage or put down the book and leave Hester behind looking up at the sky? Perhaps they should follow her gaze and look for a blazing letter in the sky or the five-fingered hand of fate darkening out the sun like an eclipse. Or perhaps they need simply look around at the real Hesters, prior and present, that tend to slip beyond and outside the gaze—the women living in poverty, dying of AIDS—since much of the world, *In the Blood* subtly reminds us, wears a bloody A that signifies “apathy.”

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Chapter Four

Folding and Unfolding History: Identity Fabrication in *Topdog/Underdog*

Gwendolyn Brooks's Satin-Legs Smith "sheds, with his pajamas, shabby days"; his closet is a "vault," personified as having "innards" that are his glorious "wonder-suits" (43-44). Satin-Legs Smith's clothes do not just influence his mood. They also help define his identity and express his emotions. They are at times "sarcastic," "cocky and determined as his pride," or even "hysterical" (44). Yet, Satin-Legs Smith is so much more than his clothes; he is also a lover, a dancer, and a man struggling, for "the pasts of his ancestors lean against/Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity" (46).

In Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* (2002), articles of clothing take on similar functions vis-à-vis characters' identities. Both Lincoln and Booth believe that switching identities involves merely taking off old or putting on new clothes, as an actor puts on a costume to get into character for a performance and then leaves that costume behind to return to his offstage life. Although this taking-off and putting-on approach to clothing applies most obviously to the Lincoln costume and Booth's "boosted" suits, other articles of clothing—such as the father's left-behind garments and the mother's money-filled(?) stocking—also influence the brothers' perceptions of themselves and each other. Even the "suits" of the cards in the brothers' 3-Card Monty game symbolize elements of the brothers' identities. As a whole in the play, clothes highlight the fluidity, exteriority, and superficiality of identity, especially in its relationship to history and

memory, for as Lincoln and Booth recall national history and even their own pasts, clothes dominate their discussions. Thus, clothes *un*-“make the man” in *Topdog/Underdog* because they distract audiences’ or characters’ gazes from the interiors of themselves or the other characters and take these gazes to the exterior, the superficial. Ironically, in *Topdog/Underdog* the superficial becomes so prominent in the characters’ lives that eventually, mask and wearer become hard to separate, and the clothes the brothers wear and engage actually come to irrevocably define them. So, clothes also “(re)make the man,” as the clothes and costumes in Booth’s and Lincoln’s lives come not only to signify elements of their identities but also to help them live out the fates their names—Lincoln and Booth, Topdog and Underdog—imply.

When considering clothes in the play, we must remember that Parks designed the text to be staged as well as read, and that in a play, clothes are not just clothes, but are also costumes, with all the implications that come with that label. “Costumes” are more complicated than mere clothes because they must both reveal and hide an identity. In any play, the costume-designer’s role “is not to give the actors ‘something to wear,’ not to ‘make them look pretty,’ not even to ‘dress the stage’; rather it is to aid in the interpretation of the play as a whole and of each character in the play. A good costume becomes part of the actor’s characterization; it clothes the character properly, so that the audience is never aware of the dress as separate from the character” (Barton 49).¹ A writer may use a costume to highlight elements of a character, and a character may put on

¹There is surprisingly little criticism on general methods of costume interpretation. However, work on costuming techniques provides a provocative bridge between the literary and the material. For example, in his essay “Research in Theatrical Costume,” Patton Campbell writes, “The costume business is one of subterfuge” because even in the creation of a costume, a designer must invent methods to make the durable look fragile, the bold look subtle, and the new look old (287). This type of subterfuge, of course, is at work in *Topdog/Underdog*’s Lincoln costume.

that costume within the play to hide or highlight elements of himself. Lincoln's Lincoln costume epitomizes this hiding and highlighting. As with many costumes, the pieces include both a clothing and a makeup, and/or mask, component. Although the make-up alone functions as a mask—a covering of the face—a costume as a whole is also a mask, covering an actor's identity with another in order to wholly obscure.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, the Lincoln costume moves beyond mere characterization to come alive with virulent or parasitic sentience, possessing or infecting the characters with which it comes into contact. This life grows both from the significance and meaning with which history has imbued the suit, top hat, and white face, as well as from the life that it usurps from its wearer, Lincoln. At the beginning, the play suggests that it matters not if the Lincoln impersonator at the arcade is white or black, so long as he wears the right clothes: the “fake old” Lincoln costume. This costume becomes an all-inclusive signifier of Lincoln-the-President and has a hypnotic effect on those who come into contact with it, charming them into believing that whoever wears the costume is actually Lincoln-the-President. For Lincoln, the costume's effect is internal; it distracts and disrupts his view of his true interior self. For others, the costume shifts the gaze away from Lincoln-himself and onto the merely superficial, the Lincoln costume.

This effect is most evident in Lincoln's interaction with the boy on the bus. Although Lincoln consistently asserts that he does not like to wear his costume outside of work, he decides to forego this preference in favor of not missing the bus home. On the bus, he meets a boy who asks him for his autograph. Lincoln explains, “I pretended I didn't hear him at first. I'd had a long day. But he kept asking. Theyd just done Lincoln in history class and he knew all about him, he'd been to the arcade but, I dunno, for some

reason he was tripping cause there was Honest Abe right beside him on the bus” (11).

The boy asks for Lincoln’s autograph without realizing the superficiality of the situation or noting the obvious paradox of a black man in whiteface dressed as Lincoln.

The kid has “done Lincoln” in his class so he “knew all about him.” He had even been to the arcade earlier that day to shoot the man he knew so well. Yet, he cannot separate Lincoln-the-President from a Lincoln impersonator—he does not know actual history from a disparate facsimile. The play thus problematizes conventional historical knowledge and the modes of imparting it upon or sharing it with others, especially youth. Through the deceptive effects of the Lincoln costume, *Topdog/Underdog* shows history to be fluid and unstable because it allows itself to be so easily transferred onto an unrealistic paradigm that borders on the absurd—a black man in white face dressed up as Lincoln-the-President. As the play will later explore again with the arcade shooters, the sole way to make this paradigm viable rests on the boy’s ability to focus exclusively on the Lincoln costume—time, place, and race must fade away. Subsequently, this boy’s fluid and unstable version of historical knowledge, sanctioned by his whiteness, renders Lincoln’s blackness—and thus a defining element of his identity—insignificant, or rather, invisible.

Throughout the play, with varying degrees of success, Lincoln himself struggles with this distinction between his own identity and that of Lincoln-the-President. At the beginning, Lincoln seems anxious to separate himself from the character that he plays. Like *Invisible Man*’s jaded Vet, who advises the naive protagonist to “play the game, but don’t believe in it” (Ellison 153), Lincoln believes that he can be Lincoln and Lincoln-the-President because he thinks the costume simply to be part of a con. When he realizes

that he can make money off the boy on the bus, he considers asking for five dollars “cause of the Lincoln connection” but, he says, “something in me made me ask for 10” (11). That “something” is the player or trickster Lincoln that is—at least at this point in the play—totally distinct from Lincoln-the-President.

This early separation between Lincoln-himself and Lincoln-the-President becomes even more evident as Lincoln continues his story: “All he had was a 20. So I took the 20 and told him to meet me on the bus tomorrow and Honest Abe would give him the change” (12). Lincoln knows that he is not honest nor is he Abe (Lincoln-the-President). Knowing that the next day he would ride the bus without his costume, invisible as Lincoln-himself (just a black man on a city bus), he completes his con of the rich boy to his own financial gain. Lincoln is making money from this scheme facilitated by the Lincoln costume, but the implications for black identity are grim. He is in danger of falling into the trap that Houston Baker believes characterizes Ellison’s *Trueblood*. In *Invisible Man*, *Trueblood* becomes a kind of minstrel whose masking leads him to be ostracized by his own community and embraced by the white because he “has indeed accepted the profit motive that gave birth to the mask in the first place” (Baker 193).

Yet, Lincoln imagines that, like his predecessor, he will leave his Lincoln costume behind one day and walk off the job. He says:

I said to myself thats exactly what I would do: wear it out and then leave it hanging there and not come back. But until then, I would make a living at it. But it dont make me. Worn suit coat, not even worn by the fool that Im supposed to be playing, but making fools out of all those folks who come crowding in for they chance to play at something great. Fake beard. Top hat. Dont make me into no Lincoln. I was Lincoln on my own before any of that. (30)

This early Lincoln provides a marked contrast to the Lincoln we see at the end of the play

who does not, or perhaps cannot, remove the Lincoln costume. Here, at the beginning of the play, Lincoln asserts his personal identity clearly and distinctly. He also points out the historical inaccuracies and paradoxes inherent in the suit and emphasizes that for him, the Lincoln gig is just another hustle. He mocks his shooters' notions of historical transference.

Of course, Lincoln is not wearing the Lincoln costume when he speaks these lines in Scene One. He is not under its spell. He realizes here that the clothes alone are insignificant. The clothes are "fake" and "not even worn by the fool that I'm supposed to be playing." These lines suggest that the characters in the play inscribe the clothes and costumes of *Topdog/Underdog* with the meaning, weight, and power that they take on in the play. Even if Lincoln wore Lincoln-the-President's actual suit, the suit itself would not carry meaning: the clothes themselves did not witness history; the wearer did. The clothes themselves are just empty signifiers; they are just cloth. Like a word, a name, or a mask, the audience brings the meaning to them and imbues them with significance based on experience. Historicized and racialized memory give the Lincoln costume both meaning and life.

Other African American writers, most notably Jamaica Kincaid (in her novels *Annie John* [1985], *Lucy* [1990], and *Autobiography of My Mother* [1995]), have exposed "clothing's ability to preserve within itself a sort of memory and to transmit that memory to successive wearers" (Matos 847). But, in *Topdog/Underdog*, the significance does not transfer from wearer to wearer—it is not the former impersonator that affects Lincoln. Rather, significance transfers exclusively from clothes to character based on the meaning put onto the clothes by that specific character. The character need not even put on the

clothes, just interact with them. This transference applies to Lincoln's costume as well as all other articles of clothing in the play. Neither Lincoln nor Booth wear their father's suits (Booth only imagines that he does) or their mother's money-filled(?) stocking, and the suits that Booth steals are new; previous wearers may have tried them on, but their influence on the imbued meaning of the boosted suits could only be fleeting.

The first time we see Lincoln, he has just come home from work wearing his Lincoln costume. The stage directions tell us that even though Lincoln sneaks up on Booth, "the presence of Lincoln doesn't surprise him, the Lincoln costume does" (9). In the lines that follow, Booth continues to express his revulsion, without explaining the root cause of it. Yet, Booth clearly, at least at this moment, does not express revulsion for Lincoln-himself—his past or present actions—but for the effects of the Lincoln costume, with all of its racial and historical baggage. In addition to calling his brother a "shiteating motherfucking pathetic limp dick uncle tom" (21), signaling not only emasculation but also racial assimilation,² Booth calls Lincoln "all spooked out and shit" (9), and tells him, "[...] take off that damn coat, man, you make me nervous standing there looking like a spook, and damn that face paint, take it off" (11). In African American culture and literature, the term "spook"—evoked most famously by Sam Greenlee's 1972 novel *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*—can signify spy as well as a more pejorative, racialized insult. It also implies ghost-like spectrality, the ghosts of Lincoln-the-President as well as the brothers' familial past. So, when Booth repeats the term "spook," he layers these various meanings onto Lincoln. Although Lincoln is only

²Booth uses similar language in Scene Three. Lincoln wears his Lincoln costume again, and Booth taunts, explicitly linking Lincoln's costume to his emasculation, "Yr dick, if it aint falled off yet, is hanging there between yr legs, little *whiteface* shriveled-up blank-shooting grub worm. As goes thuh man so goes thuh mans dick" (45, my emphasis).

wearing a costume and seems himself oblivious to its effects at this point in the play, Booth perceives that the costume completely demeans his brother. At best, Lincoln is a ghost, a shadow of himself who has given up his chosen profession as a card dealer and become reduced to the haunting image of a dead president and a dark era in American history. At worst, he is completely stripped of his identity, unrecognizable and undesirable even to his own brother; or, he is spy, a white man's pawn infiltrating his people. This conversation also foreshadows the merging of Lincoln and Lincoln-the-President later in the play as well as Lincoln's death at Booth's hand. Thus the play indicates early on the inevitability of the brothers' fates, fates anticipated by superficial, external elements—their names and Lincoln's costume.

Booth also expresses concern that seeing Lincoln in the costume will cause Grace to leave him. He explains, "She sees you in that getup its gonna reflect bad on me. She coulda seen you coming down the street. Shit. Could be standing outside right now taking her ring off and throwing it on the sidewalk" (10). The effects of the Lincoln costume are not limited to Lincoln and Booth. The clothes emanate an unpleasant aura, so powerful it can, theoretically, even negate the love of a woman. Yet, we never see Grace. Like the mother and the angry shouting housewives, she is always off-stage or remembered—a ghost or specter essentially invisible herself. If she indeed does not exist beyond Booth's imagination, then she can be read to represent the slippage of Booth's identity into insanity as well as his hope—for love, happiness, and, as her name implies, salvation. By claiming that the Lincoln costume has the power to negate Grace's love and her presence, Booth is essentially claiming that the costume—with all of its negative

connotations about the past and the present—chases away any hope that he might have for the future.

Lincoln himself alludes to the negative aura of the Lincoln costume when he awakens in Scene Four still in his costume after sleeping in it. Although the previous scene begins the same way with no mention from Lincoln, this time, he is upset. After relieving himself, “He claws at his Lincoln getup, removing it and tearing it in the process. He strips down to his t-shirt and shorts” (54). He explains, “Hate falling asleep in this damn shit,” and launches into an extended soliloquy in which he imagines killing his employer and reminisces fondly of his days as a hustler (54). Remarkably, in this soliloquy Lincoln oscillates, even within individual paragraphs, between the first, second, and third person, indicating that he is struggling with self-definition and perspective:

“Got yrself a good job. And when the arcade lets you go yll get another good job. I dont gotta spend my whole life hustling. Theres more to Link than that. More to me than some cheap hustle. More to life than cheating some idiot out of his paycheck or his life savings” (55). The shift in reactions to the Lincoln costume between the beginning of Scene Three and the beginning of Scene Four can be read as part of this struggle. The opening stage directions of Scene Three tell us only that Lincoln “is horrific, bleary eyed and hungover, in his full Lincoln regalia” (38). Thus, in this early moment, just one scene previous, Lincoln shows no fear or revulsion for the costume. So, we can assume that the events in the remainder of Scene Three catalyze some kind of change in Lincoln, change that brings him to the revulsion that we see at the beginning of Scene Four and the identity crisis that follows it.

Structurally, Scene Three is the center of the play. After Booth details his date with Grace, the action turns to Lincoln's description of his daily assassination at the arcade, and *(Rest)s* fill this description. Parks explains in "Elements of Style" excerpted at the front of the play that *(Rest)s* indicate "where the figures experience their pure true simple state" (3). Thus, in Lincoln's description of his daily assassination, we can assume that we are hearing the uninhibited thoughts of Lincoln, the "real deal" about his job as a Lincoln impersonator. He says, "Its pretty dark. To keep the illusion of the whole thing/ *(Rest)*" (49). We now see the emotional toll that Lincoln's job is taking on him. Dressed as Lincoln-the-President, he dies countless times a day, and he witnesses this assassination—his own assassination. But, he is a disembodied witness:

But on thuh wall opposite where I sit theres a little electrical box, like a fuse box. Silver metal. Its got uh dent in it like somebody hit it with they fist. Big old dent so everything in it gets reflected upside down. Like yr looking in uh spoon. And thats where I can see um. The assassins.
(Rest)
[...] Me looking at him upside down and him looking at me looking like Lincoln. Then he shoots.
(Rest) (49-50)

He sees his murder, but in reverse, up-side down, and in a costume. Lincoln's gaze is on the reflection of his would-be assassin, but the assassin's gaze is on Lincoln "looking like Lincoln" in the Lincoln costume. And even though he is dressed as Lincoln-the-President, the murder is real to him because it is he, Lincoln, who is alive, not Lincoln-the-President:

And there he is. Standing behind me. Standing in position. Standing upside down. Theres some feet shapes on the floor so he knows just where he oughta stand. So he wont miss. Thuh gun is always cold. Winter or summer the gun is always cold. And when thuh gun touches me he can feel that Im warm and he knows Im alive. And if Im alive then he can shoot me dead. And for a minute, with him hanging back there behind me, its real.

(*Rest*) (50)

The assassins rely on sensing Lincoln's life—the softness of live tissue, the reaction of warm flesh to the cold metal barrel of the gun—to recreate Lincoln-the-President's death for sport; they resurrect Lincoln-the-President, through Lincoln, just to kill him again. However, Lincoln's black body only appears to bring Lincoln-the-President back to life for the assassins, for, as Lincoln intuits in this scene, the historical incongruities—again time, place, and race—can only suggest that they are shooting Lincoln-himself.

To make the imaginative leap to Lincoln-the-President, the arcade shooters must rely on Lincoln's invisibility as well as a completely constructed and superficial historical reality. Lincoln's dress, his Lincoln costume, rationalizes this construction and their shooting. The Lincoln costume allows them to believe that Lincoln-the-President is not dead and they can remake history or place themselves within it by shooting a live version of him, even if that version is a black man in white face. Based on Lincoln's description, the dummy replacement of him *will* likely fail because the assassins will not be able to feel its life. The Lincoln costume truly functions here as a kind of possession or parasite; the suit feeds off the “historical” shooters but it needs a live host to thrive.

In this passage, Lincoln's descriptions of his assassins' clothes also deserve attention. The aggregate of these descriptions implies that a wide variety of Americans, young and old, male and female, comes to the arcade to shoot Lincoln, to participate in historical re-creation. Thus, the play explores a variety of motivations for shooting a black man dressed as Lincoln-the-President. The businessmen come in “dress shoes,” implying wealth and formality or power; killing Lincoln, for them, kills competition from African American businesses or businessmen (49). This wealth, formality, and power

also highlight the disparity between Lincoln's socio-economic status and their own. Children come too, but in "school uniforms"—implying education as well as conformity (50). Their presence not only re-affirms that children learn a skewed and corrupting view of history in school, as suggested earlier in the play by the boy on the bus, but also that white hegemonic views of race—indeed even the desire to kill a black man—are systematically instilled in American youth. The tourists in "theme park t-shirts" (50) add a disturbing performative entertainment element, reminiscent of Parks's use of another Lincoln impersonator in her earlier work, *The America Play* (1994). Through that Lincoln impersonator, Haike Frank writes:

Parks suggests that our image of America is only representation. We influence and distort our perception of reality with premade concepts that are handed down from generation to generation without being reflected upon. Consequently, it is easy to understand how Abraham Lincoln is reduced to the tall man with the beard and stovepipe hat who was murdered in the theater. (16)³

Fake or superficial history can be more easily packaged as fun.

The shooters sanction their desire to kill a black man by disguising it as the desire to participate in historical re-creation and by shifting Lincoln-the-President's identity onto Lincoln. The costume transforms him and allows the re-creation of history in addition to the rewriting of it with a new black victim. Even though Lincoln's blackness

³Frank also goes on to say more about the relevance of entertainment culture in general. Frank believes that, in *The America Play*, "The fact that the public shows greater interest in Lincoln's murder than in his political speeches and, by implication, his political deeds, points to the dominance of fragmentation and the power of sensationalism in society. Additionally, this implicitly criticizes television's instant replay, which allows and also forces us to view, for example, a NASCAR crash, the explosion of the Challenger, or the destruction of the federal building in Oklahoma City, over and over again. Thus, the image with its brutal and tragic moment, is engraved into our consciousness, yet it is also reduced by repetition into absurdity" (12). The play also "suggests that the next generation will only know Lincoln as an activity, as an element in an amusement park and thus, the life story of Lincoln risks being reduced completely to his death scene. This could be seen as a critique of the power of entertainment in modern American society. It could also be interpreted as the public's need to reduce historical figures to one dramatic item or movement, for instance, Julius Caesar saying 'Et tu Brute,' Adolf Hitler declaiming and mustached or John F. Kennedy being shot in the motorcade." (12)

removes the authenticity of re-creating Lincoln-the-President, the assassins indeed still participate in historical recreation because, by writing in this black victim, they are essentially becoming members of a lynch mob, lining up to kill a black man. Day after day, they lynch him, killing him by rendering him everyday more invisible to himself because of his invisibility to them; with each shot, they slowly kill Lincoln by contributing to his transition into the real assassinated.

For they can, of course, see Lincoln's blackness. He wears only white*face* and they come from behind him, in full view of his black neck. But this very blackness renders Lincoln-himself invisible and allows the assassin's gaze to shift exclusively to the costume to give meaning to their actions. As Ellison's narrator explains with the "tall blond man" with whom he fights in the street, there are two types of seeing—one superficial, that allows a white stranger to insult a black man that bumps into him, another more meaningful, that cannot *see* the same rage-filled black man kicking and punching him. Invisible man remembers, "One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name" (4). But as invisible man holds the stranger and starts "to slit his throat," he explains, "[...] it occurred to me that the man had not *seen* me, actually" (4). Similarly, Lincoln's assassins see him, but they don't *see* him. They see that he is a black man, and thus they reduce him to a set of superficial and pejorative stereotypes—a laborer or a minstrel—and render him expendable. They do not *see* that he is Lincoln, a brother, a poor man who is struggling to survive and who is allowing himself to be killed to do so.

But there is also a black man who comes to the arcade, a man who sees beyond the costume. The brothers' brief exchange about this man oozes with ambiguity. For

example, Booth asks Lincoln if the man is “a brother” and if the man knows that Lincoln is “a brother” (34). Lincoln answers both questions indecisively, highlighting the ultimate permeability of racial lines. Booth also calls this man Lincoln’s “Best Customer” and is careful to ask Lincoln whether this black customer actually shoots. “He shoot you?” Booth inquires; Lincoln replies, “He shot Honest Abe, yeah” (33-34). In his answer to this inquiry, complicated by the threat of intra-racial violence, Lincoln again seeks to draw a clear line between himself and Lincoln-the-President. He evokes the “Honest Abe” moniker he used when “hustling” the school boy on the bus, indicating a desire to inscribe his Lincoln arcade gig as just another con.

In his whispers to Lincoln, the black shooter captures the same essence of superficiality implied by the play’s use of clothing up to this point. He asks, “Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does thuh show go on?” and tells Lincoln, “Yr only yrself [...] when no ones watching” (34). These whispered utterances highlight the performative nature of identity in *Topdog/Underdog*—who the brothers are changes based on who their audiences want and/or expect them to be. Under the white gaze, wearing the Lincoln mask, Lincoln is invisible. When he is with Booth, he is the Topdog, and he must perform the guarded big brother role that the volatile Underdog expects.⁴ The only time we see Lincoln “when no ones watching” is Scene Four. Here Booth is onstage, but he is “fast asleep, dead to the world” (54). Scene Four consists

⁴Jeffery Wright, who played Lincoln both in *Topdog/Underdog*’s 2001 debut at the Public Theatre and in its 2002 Broadway debut reflects on the parallel relationship between Lincoln’s role at his job and his role in his family: “I do like the whiteface Lincoln wears. I like the inflection of this subsistence mask that is seemingly necessary and at the same time suffocating. I like this struggle to maintain a societal relationship that requires an amputation or a facade. That a relationship with your brother is predicated on the suffocation of yourself” (Tate 2).

entirely of Lincoln's monologue—or dialogue with himself—and as previously described, proves to be the most tumultuous scene in terms of Lincoln's identity.

Immediately before this scene, at the end of Scene Three, Booth and Lincoln practice adding “spicy shit” to Lincoln's death scene (50). This practice at first amuses the brothers, but the mood changes significantly when Booth yells, “I am the assassin! I am Booth!! Come on man this is life and death! Go all out!” (52). Although he has only just shot Lincoln, dressed as Lincoln-the-President, with a pretend gun, Booth has internalized his role as Booth-the-actor, the assassin. The brothers could have just as easily practiced this scene without the Lincoln costume. The action is not physically contingent upon it. Yet, Lincoln puts on his costume expressly for this practice, waits for Booth, and then continues to wear it for a full scene, indicating that the action must be at least emotionally contingent upon it. Booth screaming “I am the assassin!” breaks down a psychological barrier between Lincoln's life and Lincoln-the-President's life and makes the superficial costume very real. At this point, Lincoln cannot separate himself from Lincoln-the-President because of the overwhelming superficial historical similarities. Booth's taking up of the Booth-the-actor role for the first time in the play compounds the effects of the Lincoln costume; the dominating superficiality, inspired by the Lincoln costume itself, has completely obscured both brothers' identities—both for themselves and for each other. In essence, the costume “creates” a new Booth that is Booth-the-actor. By the end of the play, Booth, as he slowly makes his full transition to assassin, will be completely unable to separate himself from the legacy of Booth-the-actor, the assassin after whom he is named.

The last line of Lincoln's Scene One "Emancipation" proclamation—"I was Lincoln on my own before any of that"—although intended to assert independence from his costume, does leave room for this type of complication between the brothers. The grammar of this line suggests no difference between the first Lincoln and the second, and it creates a kind of equation between Lincoln and Lincoln-the-President. As Lincoln has been working at his job for some time, the equation could describe the cumulative effects of impersonating Lincoln-the-President; or, it could suggest something more historical. Simply by naming the brothers Lincoln and Booth (though the father meant it to be "a joke") (24), the play suggests interconnectivity within history and identity. Lincoln—as an American and especially as an African American—must have a set of cultural assumptions, though likely superficial or apocryphal, about Lincoln-the-President, "The Great Emancipator." The black Lincoln would have internalized those assumptions in some way because of his name and his brother's, even if only because of others' (such as the arcade owners' and perhaps even their parents') treatment of them. A brother and sister named Jack and Jill, for example, would likely have trouble not internalizing their nursery rhyme legacy, especially because of their peers' ruthless taunting. The Lincoln costume takes Lincoln further into the interconnectivity between himself and the historically loaded, yet still superficial, signifier "Lincoln," and the assassinations take him even further.

Indeed, when both brothers are disturbed by the reaction—the gruesome death scene—that comes after Booth screams "I am the assassin," Lincoln delivers one of the play's most poignant and memorable sets of lines: "People are funny about they Lincoln shit. Its historical. People like they historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold

the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming” (52). Although Lincoln is framing this metaphor with the image of a book, the language and the image do not match. We open and close books, not fold and unfold. The point, of course, conveys clearly: the history that we read in books is sanitized and superficial. But Lincoln’s “folding” and “unfolding” applies more aptly to fabric, specifically clothing and especially his Lincoln costume. The Lincoln costume highlights that audiences will believe in, if not wholly prefer, an unbelievable Lincoln impersonator, a black man in whiteface dressed as Lincoln-the-President who dies quietly, only to come back to life again for the next customer to kill. When Booth becomes the assassin at the end of the Scene Three, Lincoln can no longer fold history, or the Lincoln costume, back up and put it away the way he found it; he cannot leave the suit behind. He claws desperately at the costume in Scene Four because the history is no longer superficial; it is deeply personal.

The play itself nearly immediately implies the application of this “folding and unfolding” metaphor to costume. The next set of lines pertains explicitly to the Lincoln costume and Lincoln’s personal struggles with it. After a (*Rest*), Lincoln continues, “I am uh brother playing Lincoln. Its uh stretch for anyones imagination. And it aint easy for me neither. Every day I put on that shit, I leave my own shit at the door and I put on that shit and I go out there and make it work. I make it look easy but its hard. That shit is hard. But it works. Cause I work it” (52). Here Lincoln more clearly acknowledges the personal identity sacrifice and self-displacement needed to put on the costume. He realizes here that in “[leaving his] own shit at the door” to put on the Lincoln costume, part of his own identity is being usurped by Lincoln-the-President’s. He attempts to

position himself as a master of masking, a skill—at least in the form *Invisible Man*'s grandfather describes—that can be very powerful and subversive if used correctly, but the subversive elements and the fulfillment that comes therewith are missing from Lincoln's mask. Rather, he again points only to the detrimental effects. He acknowledges the toll that the Lincoln costume takes on him when he must leave himself behind in order to put it on, thereby rendering himself invisible. Also, in admitting that “a brother playing Lincoln” would be “uh stretch” for his audience, he shows he has recognized that the assassins cannot logically believe that they are killing Lincoln-the-President; they are there to kill him. Lincoln thus identifies the role he plays in his own assassination. He has willingly accepted the superficiality that defines his invisibility—a superficiality that only “works” because he works it, plays it like a 3-Card Monty game. Having achieved this realization, the next time we see Lincoln wake up in his costume, at the beginning of Scene Four, he tears it off—but not for long.

Lincoln's dualistic relationship with the Lincoln costume only deepens as the play draws to its close. When the arcade fires him, Lincoln comes home wearing part of the costume—the “frock coat”—and carrying the rest in a bag (60). He soon puts the entire suit back on so that Booth can take a picture of him in it, and he remains in the costume for the rest of his play, and as such, for the rest of his life (90). His co-dependence on the Lincoln costume shows in that he even ponders going back to beg for his job. To this, Booth responds, “Link. Yr free. Dont go crawling back. Yr free at last!” (62). By evoking the words of Dr. King and the Emancipation Proclamation, the play makes Lincoln's struggle timeless and equates his struggle with the Lincoln costume to a struggle for civil rights and personal freedom. But as in Dr. King's speech, these rights

and freedoms, at least for Lincoln and Booth, are still just a dream. The brothers are bound by all the costume signifies: revisionist history, slavery, racism, double-consciousness, poverty, and even their own personalities.

Lincoln coming home, fired, with his suit is especially significant because at the beginning of the play, as mentioned above, he insists he will leave it behind when he leaves his job. This gesture of leaving the clothes behind parallels both his father's and his mother's abandonments, both of which are memorialized in the play by the clothes each parent left behind. The play links the father especially almost directly to the Lincoln costume in Lincoln's mind. After talking about his "fake old" work costume, Lincoln—following a *(Rest)*—makes the connection to his father: "Remember how Dads clothes used to hang in the closet?" (29). Booth then adds, "Until you took em outside and burned em./ *(Rest)*/ He had some nice stuff. What he didnt spend on booze he spent on women. What he didnt spend on them two he spent on clothes. He had some nice stuff. I would look at his stuff and calculate thuh how long it would take till I was big enough to fit it. Then you went and burned it all up." Lincoln responds, "I got tired of looking at em without him in em" and after another *(Rest)*, returns to the Lincoln suit: "They said the fella before me—he took off the getup one day, hung it up real nice, and never came back" (29).

This connection between the father and Lincoln-the-President highlights the formative role that both have played in Lincoln's identity as well as Booth's. Booth thinks that he can grow into being a man like his father, simply by growing into his clothes—thus transferring his father's identity onto himself. Lincoln, on the other hand, complicates the father's legacy. In other works, as Nicole Matos explains in her essay on

the role of clothing in Jamaica Kincaid's novels, "The generic rebellion of destroying clothing often becomes paired with another, more specific rebellion, something absolutely, expressly forbidden [...]" (850). *Topdog/Underdog* adopts a similar paradigm, but revises it subtly. Instead of exclusively signaling rebellion, Lincoln's motives are more paradoxical. In burning the Father's clothes, Lincoln both affirms and denies clothing's ability to imbue identity. For example, when Booth asks, "Whyd he leave his clothes though? Even drunks gotta wear clothes," Lincoln responds, "Whyd he leave his clothes whyd he leave us? He was uh drunk bro. He—whatever, right? I mean, you aint gonna figure it out by thinking about it. Just call it one of thuh great unsolved mysteries of existence" (89). Lincoln's response takes the emphasis away from the father's clothes and transfers it back on to where it belongs, the father's actions. The clothes cannot stand for the father because they are just a shell. "Without him in em," they are just an empty signifier. Yet, the clothes hold some significance, for they still can signal his absence and the pain associated therewith. If the clothes were truly meaningless, Lincoln would not need to burn them or allow them to hang around for so long before burning them.

This paradoxical relationship with his father's clothes mirrors the duality Lincoln fights when putting on the Lincoln costume. Indeed, in turning immediately from the father's empty suit to the empty Lincoln costume, the play equates the two absences, suggesting that "The Great Emancipator" is also missing, or has left the brothers specifically and black America in general. Rather than reject and burn Lincoln's clothes, as he does with his father's, Lincoln steps into them and attempts to play the role of Lincoln-the-President. This more politically and socially minded motivation resurfaces

again at the end of the play when Lincoln puts on his costume and mask for the last time. In this final scene, Lincoln's whiteface mask signals impending civil war. He applies the white paint for Booth's photo in "two thin smears" that look "more like war paint than whiteface" (91). Although the play leaves his motives for such somewhat ambiguous, Lincoln *will* battle his brother in an epic clash of ideologies and battle for power. This historical resonance suggests that even more than a domestic father, Lincoln needs a political leader. He cannot leave the Lincoln suit empty because to do so has social as well as personal implications—it leaves America without an emancipator, and more immediately, it leaves him and Booth without the money to survive and liberate themselves from poverty.

At the same time as Lincoln discusses leaving his costume behind and the father leaving his clothes behind, the men are dressing up in Booth's boosted suits. Booth steals predominantly clothes and accessories, superficial items that can easily be exchanged for others. Booth is essentially shopping (or shoplifting) for new identities, and his true identity remains mysterious. The play identifies him, on the character list page, as the Underdog to his brother and tells us very little else about him outside of his relationship to Lincoln. He tries to steal Lincoln's wife, and the first time we see him on stage alone—at the play's opening—he is playing Lincoln's game, 3-Card Monty. The only other time we see him on stage alone, at the beginning of Scene Two, he "comes in looking like he is bundled up against the cold" in layers of boosted clothes (25). Booth proceeds to peel off the layers of clothing, and although we would expect to see Booth himself in this scene, since there is "no one watching," we see only layer upon layer of stolen clothes. And, his actions evoke humor, which "hides" him even more. As he peels

off each layer of stolen identity, we never see the true Booth, only more clothes. Under his coat “he wears a very nice new suit. He removes the jacket and pants revealing another new suit underneath. The suits still have the price tags on them” (25). It is clear that Booth does remove the second suit at some point, since he later “lays one suit out on Lincolns easy chair” and another “on his own bed” (25). But, the stage directions do not tell us what Booth should be wearing under the second suit with the price tag—what he was wearing underneath all the layers, what he was wearing before he put on the first item he stole—nor do they express how or when he should remove the second suit with the price tag still on it. Thus, the written text of the play leaves Booth’s final identity ambiguous, fluid—and essentially up to the audience or director to assign. Under the layers of superficial stolen identity, there is no deeper identity for Booth.

Also, since these actions are represented only in stage direction, this moment is a purely visual experience. Booth does not represent himself through language, but only acts. His identity then, can be read as strictly performative. This performance, however, reveals nothing beyond Booth’s deliberate and artistic shoplifting skills, for the stage directions’ disrobing description ends abruptly and without resolution when Lincoln enters the scene with his payload and they begin to role-play a Ma and Pa scene. The previous stage directions, then, serve only to highlight the superficiality of Booth’s identity: it is entirely stolen.

Booth also steals His and Hers dressing gowns for himself and Grace to wear on their romantic date. Again, whether Grace even exists or still has a relationship with Booth fundamentally does not matter. In either case, his fascination with her and his linking of her with an article of clothing indicates further slippage of his identity; he is

either faking wealth and privilege or falling further into insanity. When Grace fails to show up to the party that Booth has planned for them, and put on the costume that he has set out for her, we see, in essence, a failed fairy tale; Booth dresses up for the ball, but his princess never shows up. His vision of a perfect marriage to the woman of his dreams (whether she is make-believe or not) is thwarted. This fairy tale parallel allows us to situate *Topdog/Underdog* more firmly in the critical conversation about clothing's relevance in literature. Most scholars explore clothing's relationship to female characters exclusively, and, the "Cinderella Complex"⁵, as Mary Jane Lupton describes it, is a helpful paradigm through which to examine clothing's influence on women. Lupton defines the "Cinderella Complex" as "a dangerous cultural attitude towards women, digested early and constantly reinforced: By looking right, and dressing right, and attending the right dances, a woman can get out of working and be financially supported by, if not a prince, then at least a young male executive" (Lupton 409). Clothes then not only define identity, but also determine potential for success and marriage. In Booth's case, Grace signifies this success, and in failing to put on the identity he steals for her—thereby allowing him to put on the matching wardrobe—she thwarts his success.

So, although women are absent from the stage in the play, women's impact, influence, and valuation are not. Since clothing and the obsession therewith is typically socially defined as a women's concern, by making clothes a central concern for Lincoln and Booth, Parks not only challenges a stereotype, but also broadens—to include men—the scope of investigation into of the effects of society's image-consciousness on identity. Also, Parks consistently mentions in interviews that people think that the play is written

⁵Lupton borrows this term from Collette Downing's book of the same title.

by a man. Or, they question her credibility as a female artist writing about men.⁶

Through clothes, then, Parks proves that audience expectations and over-reliance on the importance of image can take its toll on any actor, male or female.

The play also foregrounds the feminine through the mother's money-filled(?) stocking, Booth's inheritance. This article of clothing, more expressly an undergarment and entirely feminized, becomes the fragile thread by which Booth's sanity, and perhaps his entire identity, hangs. In the Ma and Pa play, Booth plays the mother role, as he obviously identifies more with the mother in his family since she leaves him the inheritance despite the fact that he is the younger brother. Even at the beginning of the play, Booth threatens to gamble with this inheritance. However, Lincoln knows—at least at this point—that his brother is joking, and tells him, “Thats like saying you dont got no money cause you aint never gonna do nothing with it so its like you dont got it”—to which Booth retorts, “At least I still gots mines. You blew yrs” (17). Though on the surface the brothers are speaking of economic responsibility, they are also more subtly speaking of family ties. Lincoln, in spending his paternal inheritance, has at least started the process of dissociating himself from his father's legacy. Booth, in keeping the mother's money-filled(?) stocking, unsure of the monetary value of its contents, still defines himself in connection with this inheritance and, subsequently, his mother's abandonment. Therefore, when the brothers return to the subject a few pages later, Booth is again on the defensive as he describes the day his mother left and gave him the money-filled(?) stocking:

⁶In a *Christian Science Monitor* article, for example, Parks says, “It's also experimental as a woman to write a play that just involves two men and to write it so well that people think a man wrote it” (Fanger 2), and in the documentary *Topdog Diaries: An Intimate Portrait of Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks*, she claims to have been told, “You must have a dick.”

She was putting her stuff in bags. She had all them nice suitcases but she was putting her stuff in bags.

(Rest)

Packing up her shit. She told me to look out for you. I told her I was the little brother and the big brother should look out after the little brother. She just said it again. That I should look out for you. Yeah. (21)

Thus, Booth's bequest from the mother is not exclusively economic. This matriarchal inheritance also gives him license to feel superior to Lincoln, for despite the fact that he is "the little brother," the mother designates him as the Topdog. Also, in the lines immediately following this description, Booth attempts to emasculate Lincoln by calling him a "shiteating motherfucking pathetic limp dick uncle tom" and screams "Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!" (21). Contrary to any hopes that Lincoln might have of being a black "Great Emancipator," the mother's mandate, symbolized by the money-filled(?) stocking that accompanies it, binds Booth to Lincoln. Even though Lincoln actually supports his brother emotionally and financially, Booth, seemingly based on the mother's final charge, makes his life and his identity contingent upon his brother's. The money-filled(?) stocking makes Lincoln a link, un-severable—save by death—that ties Booth to his brother.

Indeed, when that tie is severed, Lincoln dies. After Lincoln wins the money, the stage directions read simply, "Lincoln brings the knife down to cut the stocking" (107). Booth, previously laughing, stops the action with, "I popped her" and goes on to describe Grace's murder (107). Again, Grace's existence, already established as questionable, is irrelevant here. In killing his "grace," Booth has killed his hope and his capacity to forgive. So, he re-defines himself again, telling his brother, "That Booth shit is over. 3-Cards thuh man now—" (108). By equating this murder and shift in personal definition

with the threat of the money-filled(?) stocking's destruction, the play links elements of Booth's personality—most obviously his sanity and familial responsibility—to the article of clothing.

Seemingly sensing Booth's break with sanity, Lincoln tries to return the money-filled(?) stocking. But Booth insists his brother keep it, and again, the stage directions read, "Lincoln brings the knife down to cut the stocking." But this time, "In a flash, Booth grabs Lincoln from behind. He pulls his gun and thrusts it into the left side of Lincoln's neck. They stop there poised" (109). Lincoln then only utters one more word—"Dont"—before Booth kills him. Booth's impulsive murder of his brother in reaction to the threat of, or actual destruction of, the mother's money-filled(?) stocking imbues this article of clothing with multivalent meaning vis-à-vis the brothers' identities. First, the play questions the brother's common paternity through its focus on the mother's affairs. Lincoln gives voice to this suspicion earlier in this scene when he asks Booth, "I know we *brothers*, but is we really brothers, you know blood brothers or not [...]" (103). By severing, or threatening to sever, the maternal tie, Lincoln removes any definitive familial tie to Booth. They are now just two *brothers* arguing over money and a con; there is no "link" connecting Booth to Lincoln or "standing in the way" of Booth getting his score.⁷ When Lincoln takes possession of and possibly destroys the money-filled(?) stocking, he simultaneously invalidates and destroys the mother's mandate to Booth to watch over Lincoln. Booth is now a self-appointed Topdog with no sense of responsibility to the one he views as Underdog; thus, his vengeance is swift and bloody.

⁷This reading also reconciles my interpretation with Parks's assertions about her play, reported in *Crisis*: "It ain't about the white man. [...] It ain't about the legacy of slavery at all. It's about these two men who are brothers and don't get along. They love each other intensely and have come through so much together, and are at each other's throats almost all the time. And that is worth talking about, too" (Bryant 44).

Ironically, it is at this point in the play, when Booth most vehemently and ruthlessly asserts his rejection of his name and of Lincoln, that he fulfills the elements of his identity that are most historically linked to Booth-the-actor. John Wilkes Booth-the-actor's words—"sic semper tyrannis" (as always to tyrants)—uttered upon shooting Abe Lincoln-the-President, suggest a power play; Booth now sees his brother just as Booth-the-actor saw Lincoln-the-President—as a ruthless demagogue poised and determined to destroy his identity and way of life. So, now he is Booth, killer of Lincoln. He is the assassin. Simply re-naming himself does not secure 3-Card the separation he had envisioned. In the penultimate paragraph of the play, he shows that he finally understands this and expresses a still unfulfilled desire to break free: "Watch me close watch me close now: Ima go out there and make a name for myself that dont have nothing to do with you" (110). Yet again, he is determined to do so with Lincoln's game: 3-Card Monty.

With these lines, Booth also brings attention to another set of important suits in *Topdog/Underdog*, the "suits" of cards in the brothers' 3-Card Monty game. Three-Card Monty play not only opens and nearly closes the play, but also provides the narrative backdrop for Lincoln's pivotal soliloquy in Scene Four. Card suits are divided into two groups, the red and black—clubs and spades versus hearts and diamonds. For the play's confidence men, Booth and Lincoln, these categories more precisely separate the winners from the losers. When Booth plays 3-Card Monty, the black card loses, and when Lincoln plays, the red card loses. These suits can be read as symbolic of each brother's identity. In trying to take on the role of "The Great Emancipator" by putting on the Lincoln suit, Lincoln privileges blackness and racial uplift. Lincoln is also the

mouthpiece for the play's most astute observation about racial dynamics, expressed in terms of a card game:

[...] You was in such a hurry to learn thuh last move that you didnt bother learning thuh first one. That was yr mistake. Cause its thuh first move that separates thuh Player from thuh Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. Taadaa! It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you. And when its thuh real deal, when its thuh real fucking deal, bro, and thuh moneys on the line, thats when the man wont want you picking right. He will want you picking wrong so he will make you pick wrong. (105-06)

In 3-Card Monty, Lincoln can win, but in life, he cannot. Racial discrimination has reduced him to poverty and lawlessness. White America, the play implies, is playing with a stacked deck, especially economically. Lincoln, then, looks for power wherever he can find it—even if it means playing the game, in Ellison's sense or in his own.

Booth, on the other hand, privileges violence—onstage and off—and looks to bloodshed and anger, both commonly associated with redness, when his brother and Grace do not fulfill the roles he has assigned them, or when, in Lincoln's case, Booth loses to a more worthy opponent. Also, in Booth's game, it is the heart that wins. The heart signals his dependence on the emotional, and perhaps even his complete rejection of the rational. The competition, and its bloody ending, links the 3-Card Monty play to the dozens tradition in which players must demonstrate verbal and intellectual prowess, and the competitor who first resorts to physical violence concedes to inferiority through his lack of self-control. Parks intersperses game play throughout *Topdog/Underdog*, and Booth loses the endgame, not only because Lincoln is better at 3-Card Monty—especially since he uses emotional distraction to manipulate his brother—but also because Booth escalates the game from mere play, predominantly vocal, to physical violence and ultimately death. Equating 3-Card Monty with the dozens makes the struggle between

Lincoln and Booth less personal and more essentially masculine and racial. When throwing the cards, Lincoln and Booth—on the surface just Link-the-stink and 3-Card, two street hustlers—compete to demonstrate their superiority. At the same time, they are also Lincoln and Booth, would-be assassinated and assassin, fighting to survive.

Overall, however, the play makes any analysis of identity difficult because the brothers, in many ways, seem be two sides of the same man. The stage then becomes a battlefield in which the two sides of his identity fight for dominance. Articles of clothing, in this interpretation, become intensely symbolic, linked to shards of fragmented and intense memory. As the stage-mind's players interact with these elements and are shaped by them, the overall identity—the aggregate of the stage-mind—evolves. When Lincoln dies, Booth initially claims his dominance through his unique possession of the money-filled(?) stocking—now called the “money-stockings” in the stage directions—his inheritance. But the play ends with screaming, an emotive release, rather than language. Only Booth and this money-stockings remain. There is no language, no card play, and no audience—just an insane, and perhaps unwilling, assassin alone with his left-behind article of clothing.

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Chapter Five

As We Advance Living: *Getting Mother's Body's* Parallel Journeys

In her *New York Times Book Review* evaluation of Parks's first novel, Laura Miller writes, "Obviously, William Faulkner's 'As I Lay Dying' is tangled up in the unconsciousness of 'Getting Mother's Body,' but it would take an analyst of Dr. Freud's caliber to figure out just what that means" (Miller 10). While certainly amusing, Miller's claim is only partially correct. Despite other critics' assertions to the contrary, *Getting Mother's Body* (2003) indeed has an "unconscious"—a deeply provocative set of contexts and subtexts—and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) is, of course, a part of it. But *As I Lay Dying* is not alone in this unconscious mind. After all, it takes more than one thread to be truly "tangled up." Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) primarily, as well as James Baldwin's *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1953) and *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Ralph Ellison's *The World and the Jug* (1964), August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* (1992) and other plays from his history cycle, and Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974), appear to provide important contexts for *Getting Mother's Body* (2003).

By no means need we call forth the spirit of the founding father of psychoanalysis to understand the meaning behind these texts' appearances—not only because they are often just as conscious as unconscious, but also because the novel itself attempts to teach its readers how to make sense of both the characters' and the novel's relationships with

the haunting past. *Getting Mother's Body* offers these lessons through its reflections of and upon the journey to revise and re-imagine history.

The journey of *Getting Mother's Body*'s protagonist Billy Beede is a reflection of the novel's journey to revise the literary past; specifically, Billy's process of engaging and revising her mother's legacy parallels *Getting Mother's Body*'s process of revising "Billy" Faulkner's novels. In addition, Parks's specific repetitions, revisions, and reversals offer a reflection on the journey's significance for both the one doing the revising and for the subject of her revision. Observations about Billy Beede's journey to revise her past and observations about the novel's journey to revise past texts complete the sentence that begins "On the journey, there is..." While not similar enough to be wholly allegorical, both of these parallel journeys nevertheless add to our understanding of what it means to revise, to be revisionary, and to avoid repeating the mistakes of a complicated and emotionally volatile past. When taken together, the outcomes of these journeys help complete the sentence that begins "The journey leads to..." demonstrating how the novel also reflects on, or critically examines, the very journey it represents.

Getting Mother's Body, which opens in late July 1963 in Lincoln, Texas, tells the story of an orphaned, pregnant, and unwed 16-year-old Billy Beede, who spends the first third of the novel traveling to Texahoma, Texas, to meet her lover Clifford Snipes (alias Clifton and Snopes), who has promised to marry her. When she arrives there, however, Billy does not find Snipes, but his wife. Billy decides to return to Lincoln, but first stops in Gomez, Texas, for a consultation with an abortionist. Once home, Billy works furiously to raise the money to terminate her now unwanted pregnancy and exorcise any trace of the treacherous Snipes.

Before leaving for Texahoma, Billy receives a letter from friends in New Mexico explaining that the remains of Willa Mae Beede, Billy's mother, are in danger of being paved over for a new grocery store parking lot. Billy initially claims to be apathetic about the fate of her mother's bones and the "treasure" rumored to be buried with them, but when lying and hair styling fail to raise the money she needs, Billy decides that Willa Mae's treasure is her next best option to fund the abortion. Still virtually penniless, Billy steals a truck from the transsexual Dill Smiles (Willa Mae's embittered former lover) and heads toward Willa Mae's grave in LaJunta, New Mexico. Billy's aunt and uncle, June and Roosevelt ("Teddy"), as well as her cousin Homer, end up along for the ride, but Dill pursues them in a hearse driven by Laz Jackson, the undertaker's son, who also happens to be hopelessly in love with Billy.

Laz and Dill arrive in LaJunta ahead of the Beede caravan, and Dill is determined to prevent anyone from disturbing Willa Mae's grave. It is only after a drunken late-night talk with her mother, Even, that Dill relents and helps Billy and the others exhume Willa Mae's remains. When the coffin is opened and there is no treasure to be seen among the bones, most of the diggers leave the graveside in despair, but Billy suddenly re-remembers one of her mother's old tricks; she asks Laz to check what remains of the hem of Willa Mae's dress, where she often hid her real jewels in the hem of her skirt, "just in case" (159). There, Laz finds the treasure: a diamond ring. Billy decides to bring her mother's body back to Lincoln for a proper burial, complete with angel headstone, near the other Beedes. On the way home, Billy feels a new connection with her baby, and does not to use the treasure to pay for an abortion.

The two journeys in the novel, the first to Texahoma and the second to LaJunta, parallel two of Faulkner's most famous fictional quests. Based on the form and structure of *Getting Mother's Body*, the LaJunta journey's parallel is the more obvious: the Bundren family's quest to bury their matriarch, Addie, in *As I Lay Dying*. Meanwhile, Billy's journey to Texahoma in search of the father of her child is more reminiscent of Lena's search for Lucas in *Light in August*.¹ *Getting Mother's Body* revises both novels by rejecting some elements of their legacies and recreating others. As in Parks's other literary and historical revisions, the resulting text is both innovative and historically aware, urging readers to embrace a new text while simultaneously seeing the old text again with fresh perspective. *Getting Mother's Body* is exceptional among Parks's texts because it is a novel. It is more unique still because it not only is revisionary (since it revises Faulkner's works), but it also provides a reflection of the revisionary process in the novel's main action: Billy Beede's journeys and her desire to signify on her mother's life in order to revise the trajectory of her personal history.

At the same time, the novel reflects *upon* this revision, offering insight into what is at stake in, and inevitably grows out of, the journey. This reflection upon the journey comes not only from Billy, but also the characters that accompany her. All of the novel's characters are on journeys of their own, all are haunted by their pasts, and all are looking to discover and understand their inheritances. As they reverse the trajectory of *As I Lay Dying*, they also reverse the wrongs of the past as well as the trajectories of their own lives, from paths of self-destruction or self-repression to paths of self-awareness.

Similarly, the novel marks an aesthetic reversal for Suzan-Lori Parks, as it shows her

¹More subtle narrative clues also reveal the connection to *Light in August*. The most significant is the name Beede itself, for Faulkner uses "a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road" to symbolize movement, or lack thereof, in this novel (8).

exploring a new genre, engaging her own literary ancestors, and writing a new kind of character—one that can be redeemed and find happiness.

Both Parks's novel's journey to revise Faulkner and Billy Beede's journey to revise her mother's "inheritance" begin by problematizing the legacy or inheritance with which the revisionary must contend. Looking at Billy's journey and the novel's journey side by side not only illuminates this pattern, but also helps underscore the importance of the rejection/questioning in the novel. Miller asserts that the "prevailing question of inheritance" in *Getting Mother's Body* "is whether Billy will turn out like her mother," an unmarried, abused hustler with unfulfilled dreams and a child she cannot support (Miller 10). Billy, of course, seems determined that she not end up like Willa Mae, especially since Billy's relationship with the married Snipes seems to have set her on the path to doing so. When Aunt June suggests that Willa Mae would have stolen the wedding dress she wanted, rather than buy it as Billy is planning to do, Billy flatly asserts, "I ain't no Willa Mae" (18). Later, when June wants "to bring her down a notch," she tells Billy, "The apple don't fall that far from the tree" (19). Billy, adding the emphasis of profanity, again proclaims, "I aint no goddamned apple" (19). Even in the opening post-coital scene with Snipes, as Billy seems as equally free spirited as her legendary mother, she is quick to "disown" Willa Mae when Snipes brings her up. Billy declares, "Willa Mae passed and it didn't bother me none. I was glad to see her go" (9). She calls her mother "a liar and a cheat" who was "getting locked up in jail every time she turned around. Always talking big and never amounting to nothing" (9). Snipes, initially taken aback by Billy's irreverent tone, reminds her that "Willa Mae's pockets of gold ain't nothing to

sneeze at,” but Billy simply replies that “any jewels she had was fake,” and “a good story’s all it makes” (9).

In each of these scenes, Billy describes her own identity exclusively as antithesis. She does not say anything about who she *is*, but only who she *is not*. Also, as Billy disparages her mother, she recounts, “I feel mad and then I laugh,” indicating that under this rejection lives not apathy, or even antipathy, but hurt (9). Laughing to keep from crying, Billy Beede, in short, has the blues, but unlike her mother, she has not—at this point in the novel—remembered how to sing them.² She has no productive release for her pain. Later in the text, Teddy “want[s] to tell Billy how she’s just like her mother” but fears “that would be like picking at a scab” (224), implying that Billy’s wounds from her mother’s loss are still fresh, so fresh that that are not scars, but scabs, able to be re-opened at even the slightest disturbance. The gory circumstances of Willa Mae’s death, which Billy witnessed first-hand, are undoubtedly the source of this pain. Attempting to abort an unwanted child, Willa Mae bleeds to death. The mother’s self-destructive, infanticidal hatred for one child would certainly lead that mother’s other child to question her mother’s love. Teddy’s observations about the impact of Willa Mae and her actions on Billy suggest that maternal affection is more than mere sentiment. Billy does not, for example, harbor such strong feelings for Son Walker, her father, who also “abandoned” her and who she does “favor” physically.

Billy directs her complex feelings toward Willa Mae into a rejection of her “treasure.” As seen with Booth’s money-filled(?) stocking in *Topdog/Underdog*, the mother’s “treasure” or “inheritance” signifies a complicated legacy that the beneficiary

²Parks has underscored the importance of the blues aesthetic in *Getting Mother’s Body* by releasing a companion CD (not mentioned anywhere in the front or back matter of the novel itself) of Willa Mae’s songs, performed by Parks and her husband, blues musician Paul Oscher.

often fears or cannot fully understand. When Billy, speaking of the “treasure,” tells Snipes, “A good story is all it makes,” the novel suddenly makes the legacy metadiscursive: finding and realizing the true value of this “treasure,” both for Billy vis-à-vis her mother and for the novel vis-à-vis Faulkner, is the most central element of *Getting Mother’s Body’s* story.

Although the novel does come to embrace much of the inheritance, or “treasure,” Faulkner’s legacy bequeaths, the novel’s initial rejection of Faulkner’s texts is equally as obvious and unilateral as Billy Beede’s rejection of Willa Mae. The form of *Getting Mother’s Body*, with each chapter told in the present tense from an individual character’s point of view, immediately indicates that Parks’s novel will engage *As I Lay Dying* through its narrative structure. However, *Getting Mother’s Body* begins with Billy Beede’s unforgettable question, “Where my panties at?” (3)—a stark contrast to Darl’s rather mundane, although equally vernacular, “Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path single file” (3). By beginning with Billy’s demanding feminine voice, the novel assertively declares its privileging of the feminine.

Billy Beede does have some thematic parallels with Dewey Dell, her *As I Lay Dying* counterpart—both are pregnant, un-wed, and angry—but Dewey Dell is largely silent in Faulkner’s novel, her voice limited to only a handful of chapters that portray her as a helpless victim. Even *Light in August* begins not with Lena’s words, but her thoughts, and they are told not in her own voice, but the narrator’s. And while the also un-wed and pregnant Lena certainly plays a more central role in her novel than Dewey plays in hers, her quest is not personal or maternal, but paternal. She is looking not for freedom or for self; she is looking for Lucas, her baby’s father. Since all of the women

involved in the novel's initial rejections of heritage are mothers or mothers-to-be, Billy's initial feelings about Willa Mae and the novel's initial signification on Faulkner both point to the importance of the feminine in general and the maternal specifically. So, *Getting Mother's Body* sets in motion a journey that leads to an expanded understanding of—and in many ways a privileging of—the maternal.

As Billy continues on her journey, she moves from rejecting Willa Mae's legacy to embracing it. Yet this acceptance does not mean that Billy becomes Willa Mae. Rather, *both* Willa Mae and Billy are transformed. Willa is “resurrected” literally and figuratively: her bones are moved out of the bulldozer's path and through her songs—which become increasingly pensive over the course of the novel—she comes back into Billy's life. Billy, healed by the catharsis that accompanies seeing her mother's bones and remembering her mother's songs, finds both the individuality and love she needs to allow herself to become a mother. As it charts Billy Beede's journey, the novel subtly revises key moments, characters, and themes from Faulkner's texts. Just as Billy Beede “resurrects” Willa Mae, Parks's revisions “resurrect” Faulkner's text, taking readers back to the original text and asking them to see this text anew, this time with more focus on the mothers.³ Meanwhile, *Getting Mother's Body* fills the space in between these revisions with its own text, thereby creating a story that, like a child, could not have come into

³In some cases, such a focus leads to a redemptive reading of Faulkner's text, as demonstrated by critic Marc Hewson in his essay, “‘My Children Were of Me Alone’: Maternal Influence in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 53.4 (2000): 551-67.

being without its mother, but like Billy Beede, can now exist independently of her, a new story.⁴

Billy Beede's first journey in the novel, her trip to Texahoma and Gomez and then home again to Lincoln, is significant because while Lena's journey in *Light in August* is linear, Billy's journey doubles back on itself; she ends up back home. Yet, Parks does not include the entire final portion of this journey. The novel only portrays Billy's trip to Texahoma, the heartache she encounters there, and the trip to Gomez to meet with the abortionist. The next time we see Billy, she is back home with no explanation of how she got there. When she arrives, she talks with Teddy "blood-to-blood" in hushed tones and then lays on her pallet for an entire day, not eating or talking, only staring at her name carved in the bottom on the counter (78). This suggests that the journey home was emotionally tumultuous for Billy, one of uncertainty, and questioning. Indeed, even after her return, it is June, not Billy herself, who describes Billy's actions, as if Billy's interior thoughts and feelings here are, by nature, unspeakable. Although we later learn that she takes a bus with the five dollars she did not give the abortionist, the absence of this information from the narrative action at the time is significant because it shifts the emphasis away from the journey itself and on to the effects of that journey. While the return to Lincoln means that there is no physical advancement for Billy, there is clearly emotional change in Billy after the trip home. Billy's mysterious "blood to blood" conversation with Teddy—also not detailed in the text—combined with her decision to return to Lincoln in the first place, point to an emerging re-connection with family and place.

⁴Ironically, in an interview with *Publisher's Weekly*, Parks describes herself as the novel's mother, and the book as child that would be born of her and that had its own will: "I'd been working on it for five years, and it was ready to be born" (Danford 131).

The return to Lincoln is also a move away from following her mother's path, for unlike Willa Mae (and Lena), Billy does not continue to wander in search of either her baby's father or some kind of escape. Since the first option is immediately dismissed by the burning of the wedding dress, thus severing Billy's connection to Snipes and to Lena, the second remains an option for Billy. In the chapter that immediately follows Alberta Snipes' description of Billy's visit and dress burning, the bus ticket salesman, Fat Junior Lenoir, recounts that the first destination Billy considers is LaJunta, Willa Mae's resting place as well as the place that she chose for her botched abortion (71).

When Billy does travel to LaJunta in the second journey of the novel, she does so with her family—her cousin Homer and her surrogate parents Teddy and June—and along the way, they visit every other living member of the Beede family.⁵ Like the Bundrens, the Beedes have had their share of bad luck, but unlike their Faulknerian counterparts, they seek to resurrect a body, not bury one. Anse Bundren travels because he has promised his wife that she will be buried with her people, and Teddy seeks the same for his sister, although he and June also cannot help but think about how resurrecting Willa Mae's treasure might change their lives for the better. Also like the Bundrens, the Beedes are a dysfunctional lot, plagued by insecurities, bitterness, and regret. Teddy, a preacher, can no longer hear the voice of God and lost his church because of it; June thinks her father left her with Teddy (without saying “goodbye”) because the family was unwilling to support a handicapped child; Homer wants to be a “race man,” but is ashamed of his family's poverty.

Yet, rather than be destroyed by these vices, as the Bundrens are in *As I Lay*

⁵ LaJunta, significantly, is Spanish for “reunion” or “gathering.”

Dying, each of *Getting Mother's Body's* characters is in some way recreated or renewed by the quest.⁶ Teddy, for example, figures out that God only speaks to men who treat women well. He recalls that, "God had been quiet from the moment I turned our borrowed car around, from the moment I put my foot down and reminded June that I was the husband, and the wife would bend to the husband's will because I'm my own man which means I didn't want to go to California and live under her daddy's thumb" (179). The church that Teddy builds is made of wood that is so superficial and weak that the structure, unlike his sister's repossessed furniture, does not even leave a mark on the ground that once held it after it is repossessed and then destroyed in a plane crash. But after they arrive in LaJunta, Teddy apologizes to June, who subsequently tells him they should "chance it" and go back to Lincoln so Teddy can try preaching there (238). Earlier in the novel, June describes feeling as if she "done fell into the river of Beedes and got swept along in they thick brown water" (172), but by acknowledging that the feminine is not subordinate to the masculine, Teddy helps release June from this anger and accept him as her husband, her partner. June soon after finds all that she has ever sought, children and a leg to replace the one she lost as a teenager, for when Billy acknowledges that her child is June's "grandbaby," she installs June as mother and matriarch (257).

The significance of the LaJunta journey becomes clearer when examining how Parks's title departs from Faulkner's. In her *New Leader* review of the novel, Roselle

⁶Also, while the Bundrens certainly face a host of obstacles in their trip to Addie's burial ground, these difficulties are predominantly natural: the river and Addie's decomposition. The Beede's obstacles are not natural, but social and personal. Ellen Flexman points out in her review of the novel, that "when you're black and poor in early Sixties Texas, every trip is hazardous—and even more so when your mother's lover is chasing you" (Flexman 116).

Brown asserts that *Getting Mother's Body* "could be called *As I Lay Dead*" (38). But such a name would do Parks's revisionary aesthetic, as well her novel's story, a grave disservice. The novel is not engaging Faulkner this closely, and no one in Parks's novel is really dead, or even dying. Even Willa Mae, like Addie Bundren, actually lives on in the text after her physical death. Addie herself even appears in Parks's text, re-invented as a hair shop client bent on sending Billy to beauty school.

Also, where Faulkner's title suggests passivity, Parks's title denotes movement, a process or a journey. The "I" in *As I Lay Dying* most obviously refers to Addie's state in the initial pages of the novel, but since a title by nature describes the whole work, and the novel continues after Addie's death, the title also suggests that each of the characters is approaching a spiritual or emotional destruction, or death. *Getting Mother's Body* substitutes "Mother's" for this "I." "Mother's" here names the dead as well as the living because only Billy calls Willa Mae "Mother." At the same time, because Billy explains "I calt her 'Mother' in my head, but not out loud" (173), the title centers itself on Billy and—like Faulkner's title—on both a physical, external journey and an internal, metaphorical journey.⁷ So, Parks's revision of Faulkner's title not only differentiates her text from his, but also links them by highlighting the simultaneously individual and communal nature of both.

⁷Billy's words here echo those of Hester La Negrita's son Jabber's in Parks's *In the Blood*. When trying to explain to her why he could not tell her what some profane graffiti says, Jabber tells Hester, "I was reading it but I was only reading it in my head I wasnt reading it with my mouth I was reading it with my mouth but not with my tongue I was reading it only with my lips and I could hear the word outloud but only outloud in my head" (103). Both Jabber and Billy Beede believe that speaking something makes it more real, and that speaking a description, such as "mother" (or in Jabber's case, "slut") actually makes that description more applicable to the subject being described. In both Jabber and Billy's case, not speaking the description protects them just as much, if not more, than their mothers, who are being described.

Individually, the text marks an aesthetic shift for Parks, a shift away from drama. When Homer and Teddy are arrested after Homer is caught speeding, Homer argues with the racist white sheriff. Homer then comments, “The Negro-College-Going Youth eyes the White-Just-Back-from-Fishing-Sheriff. If we was in a play these would be our parts. There’s plenty of times a man has, in a situation just like this, forgot himself and just played his part” (167). This seeming commentary on drama provides some clues as to why Parks may have shifted from playwriting to novel writing. As Booth in *Topdog/Underdog* demonstrates when he tries to change his name to “3-Card,” a character in a play cannot choose to change his name or identity in the middle of a scene. In the novel, however, Homer can choose whether he will play this “Negro-College-Going Youth” role. His choice to “remember himself,” and indeed the white sheriff’s choice to do the same, likely saves his life. Brown suggests in her rather critical review of the novel that *Getting Mother’s Body*’s characters are equally as stereotypical as those in Parks’s *The Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* [1990]; they just aren’t labeled as obviously. She writes that many of the characters “are so familiar that perhaps they are, in their way, analogs of the characters in Parks’ plays after all, who live under the titles of their archetypes as though they wore signs [...]” (38).

Yet, in many ways, this familiarity stems from a grounding in time, place, and tradition that Parks’s previous works do not generally have. *Topdog/Underdog* and *In the Blood*, for example, give their settings as simply “here” and “now.” *Venus* and *The America Play* (1994) provide some sense of a nineteenth-century context, but this context is quickly complicated by the appearance of anachronisms, such as mention in both of a

television.⁸ But *Getting Mother's Body* is set in late July 1963 in Lincoln, Texas, LaJunta, New Mexico, and a few places—all clearly named—in between. The narrative form of the novel allows place to be represented more thoroughly because each place need not be physically represented on the stage. As Faulkner demonstrates with Yoknapatawpha County, in a novel, a writer can even create a place that feels very real, with much of that reality being defined by the characters, even the seemingly stereotypical ones, that pass through that space.

In the novel, Parks can also give her characters more freedom, because she can remove herself, the writer, almost completely from the text. This manifests itself most obviously in the lack of authorial narration, which actually is often present in Parks's plays in the form of very specific, omniscient stage directions that go far beyond simply telling characters where to stand to include important textual information, impossible to represent on stage, for the play's readers.

Brown claims that in giving up this control, Parks has created a novel that is “essentially a series of monologues, ‘opened up’ the way films are opened up (this is to say, enacted by too many characters in too many places to be staged). There is no authorial voice or binding narrative thread, no conceptual complexity” (37). However, Parks does not give up authorial control completely. In adopting *As I Lay Dying's* chapter structure, Parks names her characters and their legacies.⁹ Also, her revision of *As*

⁸In *Venus*, the Baron Docteur watches an on-stage play within the play, the stage directions describe, “as if he’s watching TV” (25). In the *America Play*, Lucy and Brazil watch “The Lincoln Act” on a TV Brazil excavates from the Foundling Father’s re-creation of The Great Hole of History (194). *The America Play* further complicates its setting by listing the time of the Act Two as “the present.”

⁹Character’s names are not only printed at the beginning of each chapter in Parks’s novel, but also on alternating pages, where her (the author’s) name would traditionally appear, throughout the

I Lay Dying and *Light in August* not only provides a clear narrative thread on which Parks layers complexities, but also allows for the emergence of authorial voice as Parks writes both alongside of and against Faulkner's stories. If it is not his voice we are hearing, it must be hers.¹⁰

The novel also creates a space for the emergence of authorial voice that is distinctly different from the space created by stage directions in Parks's plays. Stage directions, as I have discussed previously, are only available to readers of the text, not to those watching the play in performance. In a novel, even a novel such as *As I Lay Dying* or *Getting Mother's Body* that is a "series of monologues" (Brown 37), every word on the page is available to all readers—even those listening to a reading of the text will miss nothing. Thus, the authorial voice in *Getting Mother's Body* does not problematize the disconnect between the seen and the unseen, but rather the disconnect between the novel's historical time and the author's. As Billy gets on the bus to Texahoma, Teddy

text. Parks, as noted in Chapter One, is known to exercise creative control over the printing of her texts (that is, the way they appear on the page), and the versions of the texts cited in this chapter were both published by subsidiaries of the same publisher, Random House. Even if this move was not deliberate, it nevertheless subtly equates each character's voice with the authorial voice.

¹⁰As for the charge that *Getting Mother's Body* has no conceptual complexity, one need only cite the basic plot errors in Brown's review and many others to prove that Parks's story is far from simple. Brown, for example, mis-attributes one of Estelle's quotes to Billy (Brown 38). She also writes that "half the family takes off toward the grave in Laz's hearse" (when it is really only Dill and Laz, neither of which is family) and that Parks's "most recent play" is *Fucking A* (2000) (38). But Brown is just one of many reviewers, some of which make similar judgments about the singularity and simpleness of the plot, to make such fundamental plot errors. The *Publisher's Weekly* review of the audio book version claims that it is Laz, not June, who has one leg (22); Roslyn Story, in *Crisis*, reverses two co-dependent actions and writes that Billy gets word of Willa Mae's need to be moved *after* she has been jilted by Snipes (51) and goes on to mis-read that Teddy "[lost] his tumbledown church to the ravages of time and demolition" (51). She also makes the very problematic assertion that "Billy had little love for her bawdy, loose-living mother" (51). Even Miller in the *New York Times Book Review* cannot keep up with Parks and her complicated math: Miller claims that Billy is five months along in her pregnancy (10). But Billy clearly tells us of her relationship with Snipes: "We been together since March, now it's July" (6)—four calendar months.

warns, “This is 1963 [...] It aint safe you going all the way out there by yourself” (121).

He later adds:

It’s 1963 and a Negro life is cheap. The life of a Negro man is cheap. The life of a Negro woman is cheaper. The price of everything is always going up though, so could be that the price of Negro life too will get high. Maybe the price’ll rise to reach the value of the cost we brought in slavery times. Not this year though. Not the next. Maybe by nineteen hundred and seventy. Maybe by nineteen hundred and eighty or nineteen hundred and ninety the price will go up. Maybe by the year two thousand, but surely, the world will end by then. (124)

Usually when a character in a novel mentions a year as a means of comparison he/she does so to show progress. Teddy, however, speaks with disappointment, not hope, seemingly knowing what he could not know unless the author let him know, that “not this year” and “not the next” and indeed not for many years would Teddy see the safety and value of black life for which he wishes.

This temporal disconnect in *Getting Mother’s Body* is reminiscent of one of Parks’s most famous locations, the “Great Hole of History” from *The America Play*. In this text, the mother figure Lucy describes the Great Hole of History (also called the “Great Hole”), the theme park where she honeymooned with her husband, The Foundling Father, the Abraham Lincoln impersonator. At this park, she explains:

[...] you could see the whole world without goin too far. You could look intuh that whole and see your entire life pass before you. Not your own life but someones life from history, you know, [someone who’d done something of note, got theirselves known somehow, uh President or] somebody who killed somebody important, uh face on a postal stamp, you know, someone from History. *Like* you, but *not* you. You know: *known*. (196)

Critic Haike Frank claims that through the Great Hole of History “identity is clearly defined as inauthentic” because “if history exists only in a void and our life is represented by the people in that void, do we then exist ourselves? All of history amalgamates in this

theme park; difference is erased by the all-comprising myth of greatness” (17-18). The Great Hole of History is a void in which history’s important moments, those that have had the most potent impact on the world, are contained. This void, like a twisted temporal mirror, allows visitors to put themselves into history in an attempt to experience it more immediately and personally.¹¹

In *Getting Mother’s Body*, we find what at first seems to be a smaller, more personal version of the Great Hole of History, “The Hole.” The Hole is a vulnerability that stems from a person’s experiences and circumstances, his/her personal history. The vulnerability can be a virtue or a vice and nothing can fill The Hole save the exact remedy for its owner’s personal pain. The first time we hear about The Hole in *Getting Mother’s Body* is Billy’s first time seeing The Hole for herself. Billy is describing what she sees in Mrs. Jackson as she is trying to convince the woman to sell her the “show dress” in the window of Jackson’s Formal for the \$63 Snipes has provided for wedding apparel:

I see something in her, something I’m not sure of at first. Something my mother might call The Hole. It’s like a soft spot and everybody’s got one. Mother said she could see The Hole in people and then she’d know how to take them. She could see Holes all the time but I ain’t ever seen one. Until now. Words shape themselves in my mouth and I start talking without thinking of what I need say. It’s like The Hole shapes the words for me and I don’t got to think or nothing” (27)

Later, speaking from the grave in her first chapter, Willa Mae sings a song called “Big Hole Blues” and then describes The Hole in more detail through prose narrative. The song describes a jealous man preparing a grave for his cheating lover. The Hole is “in my dirt” and although it is only “as long as I am tall,” it “goes down as deep as the deep

¹¹Under the heading “sex” in “from Elements of Style,” Parks writes, “People have asked me why I don’t put any sex in my plays. ‘The Great Hole of History’—like, duh” (16). This assertion suggests that the Great Hole of History has inherently feminine characteristics.

blue sea” (30). The man swears he is only kidding, but the singer is wary nevertheless and resolves to “leave this big old holey place” (30). Willa Mae goes on to explain that “to get the best of a situation you gotta know a man’s Hole. Everybody’s got one, just don’t everybody got one in the same place.” The Hole is “not just the lack” of something, but also the “craving” for it: “A Hole-in-the-heart person craves company and kindness, not no book” (31).

The America Play’s Great Hole of History and *Getting Mother’s Body*’s Hole share, then, an acknowledgement of absence as well as the potential for victimization. In *Getting Mother’s Body*, however, the concept becomes more personal and ultimately more maternal. A person’s Hole is not linked to the “story” of American History but to their own personal stories, just as in “Big Hole Blues,” the beloved’s Hole is in dirt that she identifies as her own. Since it is also a grave here, it represents not only the absence of life but also the culmination of a life’s events, the end of a journey. Whereas in *The America Play*, the Great Hole of History’s spectators see a false reflection—a self that is not really the self—in *Getting Mother’s Body*, The Hole seemingly only reveals information about the subject being seen. In fact, The Hole, rather than just passively revealing itself to the seer (Billy), actually possesses her. She explains, “The Hole shapes more words in my mouth, all I gotta do is let them out” (27). This possession suggests that The Hole is independent of both players; neither party involved actually has choice, and both are players in a scene masterminded by The Hole itself, implying that The Hole in *Getting Mother’s Body* is not a smaller version of its predecessor, but can actually be read as a bigger, more pervasive version of the Great Hole of History. Not just limiting itself to capital-H history, The Hole’s effects extend to both seer and seen.

Yet, the new, more general Hole might not be as malignant as its ancestor. Its visual connection posits its potential as a kind of second-sight, an opportunistic craftiness, or even a survival/defense skill. The Hole is also always linked, in some way, to the maternal. In the initial scene with Mrs. Faith Jackson, for example, The Hole prompts Billy to ask who made Mrs. Jackson's wedding dress, which was the model for the dress Billy wants. Mrs. Jackson responds that her mother made the dress, but then "she goes quiet" (27). Billy, following where The Hole leads her, goes on:

‘Willa Mae, you know, my uh—’
‘Your mother,’ Mrs. Jackson says, saying ‘mother’ out loud for me.
‘Yes, ma’am, well, she’s passed, but she sure woulda loved to see my wedding day, seeing how she was always jilted and never lucky enough to get married herself.’
We stand there quiet, both looking at the dress. (27)

In forging a connection between her own mother and Mrs. Jackson, solidified by Billy leading Mrs. Jackson to vocalize the word “mother” in both instances, Billy—or The Hole through her—finds Mrs. Jackson's Hole, the yearning to pass on matriarchal inheritance, the “treasure” her mother gave her.

The next chapter is the one in which Willa Mae sings her first song and describes The Hole. The placement of this chapter suggests that in discovering the nature of The Hole, Billy has also come to a new understanding of her mother. The chapter, however, begins with “The next song I’ma sing,” indicating that Willa Mae has been singing all along, but has only just now been resurrected for Billy Beede. As the novel continues and Willa Mae's songs follow Billy's life, Billy begins to hear and sing them herself. Remembering the songs leads to her remembering how to pull the very profitable “ring trick” and eventually, how to find her mother's treasure.

A closer look at the scene with Mrs. Jackson also reveals that finding The Hole can be interpreted as accurately interpreting a person's social and emotional cues. In Mrs. Jackson's case, silences—known as Spells and (*Rest*)s in Parks's plays—reveal the points at which she is most affected by Billy's story, the times at which she is most vulnerable. The Hole, then, is Billy's social and cultural literacy, which allows her to “read” this situation. Billy likely learned most of this skill from Willa Mae, but her surrogate mother, June, also demonstrates high levels of cultural literacy throughout the novel. It is June who “reads and know things” and who reads the latent dishonesty in “Ms. He-She-It” Dill Smiles's gender masking as indicative of an underlying untruthfulness in Dill's character and in her story of Willa Mae's death (25, 42). Ironically, it is these two mother figures, Willa Mae and June, who are equally responsible for Billy's more traditional literacy as well. Willa, very practically, teaches her to read using the signs along the road, but June, known for her “pretty words,” teaches Billy to write (41). Teddy, who cannot read and write, erroneously reads Dill as “the most honest person [he] know[s]” because she “don't open no mail that ain't addressed to her and Dill Smiles don't flout no dying wishes of the dead” (25). He also later misreads that Homer would make a good husband for Billy.

And ultimately, Billy rejects the more exploitative version of The Hole by questioning its morality after she and her family pull Willa Mae's “ring trick” and take advantage of the racist Rude's “Hole”-y pockets (that is, greed). This rejection suggests that even though The Hole is initially destructive, a certain degree of self awareness can lead the seer to overcome its influence, trading The Hole for a whole-ness, rooted in a truer understanding of maternal inheritance, that does not co-depend on others'

insecurities. In finding her whole-ness, Billy must confront and work within a complicated and painful past in order to heal.

While most of the action of *Getting Mother's Body* focuses on this familial and individual struggle, behind this personal narrative is the looming civil rights march of August 1963, which will prove to be one of the most important in American history. While the march is only of interest to the secondary characters in the novel, the fact that Parks incorporates the event—even just as a sub-plot—highlights the absence of similar social and political events in Faulkner's novels. While there are certainly racial tensions in *Light in August*, Joe Christmas does not ever consider joining the NAACP, and *As I Lay Dying* would be a completely different novel if Jewel Bundren were in the Klan.

Yet, even while it is engaging Faulkner's novels, *Getting Mother's Body* creates space for complementary and/or interconnected individual and communal histories to exist simultaneously, thereby creating a new history that is more accurate than either would be on its own. Parks concludes in "Possession," "Through each line of text I'm rewriting the Time Line —creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined" (5). In one of the best examples of such creation in *Getting Mother's Body*, Teddy, emerging from prison, explains, "I've heard men say that free air smells and feels different from the air of bondage. It's true. There is a lightness to it and a crispness and a willingness of the air. In the cell the air is hard like the cell is hard. The first breaths They breathed when They was set Free, back in the day, that musta felt different too" (177). Linking his story with the legacy of slavery makes the past more relevant and visceral while also connecting a personal, modern struggle with an enduring struggle against white racist power. And even the novel's white characters participate in

this new historical approach: Mryna—the “The Flashy Gal” Billy meets on the bus to Texahoma who has satchel of red, white, and blue beer-can pancakes—can be read most redemptively as a jaded white feminist, betrayed by the very Southern patriarchy that claimed to cherish her and finding her only chance for even the most subtle liberation in the reproductive choices granted her by *Roe vs. Wade* (59). Similarly, Birdie, who has lost her patriarchal inheritance through her marriage to Rude, finds her only outlet in promiscuous sex, *National Geographic*, and imagining how cremation “would burn up all evidence of what could be called [her] indiscretions” (207).

Parks further complicates the socio-racial and aesthetic issues in her novel by taking on yet another topic previously left relatively untouched in her plays: color prejudice. But more so than representing a particular political issue, skin color in the novel contributes to unlocking the complexities of *Getting Mother’s Body’s* creative inheritance, linking whiteness and blackness to literary “ancestors.” According to June, Billy really “don’t favor her mother”; “Willa Mae was light and fine featured,” whereas “Billy is dark,” supposedly like her father, Son Walker (19). When Homer looks at Billy’s picture of Willa Mae, he sees “a white woman, or what looks like a white woman” (146). And Billy recounts how the woman at the jail in Santa Anna did not believe that she was Willa Mae’s daughter (174). Accepting the whole of Willa Mae’s inheritance means accepting her mixed-race legacy.

This choice is reminiscent of the choice that African American writers face when engaging historical material and literary influences. Black writers, especially iconoclastic writers such as Parks, face tremendous pressure to write politically charged works,

clearly rooted in and engaged with African American literary and cultural tradition. But Parks writes in her essay “An Equation for Black People on Stage”:¹²

As there is no single ‘Black Experience,’ there is no single ‘Black Aesthetic’ and there is not one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted. As African Americans we should recognize this insidious essentialism of what it is: a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of being. We should endeavor to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety. (21-22)

Parks’s sentiments here echo Ralph Ellison’s words in “The World and The Jug.” In this essay, Ellison famously engages white critic Irving Howe’s assertion that Ellison and James Baldwin ungratefully underestimated Richard Wright’s influence on their work. Ellison responds, “I respect Wright’s work and I knew him, but this is not to say that he ‘influenced’ me as significantly as you assume. [...] one can do nothing about choosing one’s relatives, one can, as an artist choose one’s ‘ancestors’” (139-40). Accordingly, Ellison labels Wright, along with Langston Hughes, a “relative,” but includes among his “ancestors” T.S. Eliot and William Faulkner.¹³

Herein lie the more communal elements of Parks’s text; *Getting Mother’s Body* charts the difficulties inherent in revisiting a well-known text and the challenges that African American writers in particular face when evoking their white and black ancestors and a racist past. While Parks certainly seems to embrace Ellison’s right to choose his ancestors, she does not exclusively channel white male “ancestors.” Just as the novel

¹²This essay is wholly applicable to Parks’s prose as well as her plays because her mathematical paradigms appear frequently in *Getting Mother’s Body*. Examples include Billy adding up her potential income sources to fund her abortion (97) and Homer’s algebra (220). This math also connects *Getting Mother’s Body* back to Parks’s *Venus* and that title character’s focus on “calculation” (Chapter One).

¹³Reprinted in his 1964 collection, *Shadow and Act*, this essay, serendipitously, is included in the section entitled, “The seer and the seen.”

subtly engages *Light in August* alongside *As I Lay Dying* in its revision of Faulkner, so too does it engage other texts, specifically African American texts. In the previously mentioned scene with Homer and the sheriff, for example, Homer goes on to explain, “In the middle of the quadrangle at school there’s a little stone plaque dedicated to the memory of Randall Clay. I used to think it would be a fine thing to tell men like this Sheriff here just what I think of them and then end up killed and honored by a plaque with my name on it. Until now” (167). This scene recalls Richard’s murder in James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1953). Baldwin, of course, is not only a key figure in African American literature, but is also Parks’s beloved teacher, who once told her that she was destined for literary greatness (Als 2).¹⁴

Parks also borrows feminine models from another of her black literary fathers, August Wilson. Specifically, Parks’s supernatural Willa Mae parallels the supernatural Aunt Ester, who appears in Wilson’s *Two Trains Running* (1992), *King Hedley II* (1999), and *Radio Golf* (2005). According to Harry Elam:

By Wilson’s own admission, Aunt Ester is far from a static site of remembrance, but rather a living force, actively mediating for spiritual and cultural change. She not only embodies a collective history but a personal one, for she is a woman who has loved and lost, who has been married and given birth. Hers is an embodied knowledge that she shares with others, and her embodiment makes the metaphysical an element of the everyday.
(x)

While Willa Mae lives only a fraction of Ester’s years, she nevertheless fills these years with similar experiences that blend the personal and collective. She is a single mother, a

¹⁴Baldwin, like Ellison, wrote at length about the nature of literary influence. Baldwin asserts in the introduction to the 1984 edition of *Notes of a Native Son*, “My inheritance was particular, specifically limited and limiting: my birthright was vast, connecting me to all that lives and to everyone, forever. But one cannot claim the birthright without accepting the inheritance” (xii). Of the birthright Baldwin explains, “I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all” (xii). Meanwhile, “The conundrum of color is the inheritance of every American, be he/she legally or actually Black or White” (xii).

lover, a fighter, a lesbian, a criminal, a daughter, and a survivor of domestic violence. As with Aunt Ester, “history and memory commingle in her body” (Elam x), which eventually even appears in the text as brown bones. Elam also posits that Aunt Ester, “in a riff of aural signifyin’, sounds quite similar to ‘ancestor’” (x).

Combining Elam’s “aural signifyin’” with Ellison’s sentiments that there are ancestors we choose and relatives that we do not, allows Willa May to represent the tension between fate (will) and choice (may). In her final chapter, as Billy reflects on her journey to and from LaJunta and the time that has passed since, she concludes:

Folks take after they folks. That’s the law of nature. The thing about not watching my mother get old is that I wasn’t never sure what I was gonna get, cause if you don’t got yr folks to look at, if all you got to look at is a picture of a woman standing beside a cactus, a picture took by a man who weren’t ever really your daddy, then you don’t got a good idea really of where yr headed. When I seen her bones I knew what we all knew, that we’s all gonna end up in a grave someday, but there’s stops in between there and now. (257)

She has come to see the beginnings and endings as pre-determined, but all the points in between as potential choices. She can choose to embrace Willa Mae’s memory and to cherish her treasure without following, step by step, in her footsteps to the grave.

By merely suggesting a connection to the mother’s legacy, Parks shows her ties to a black literary mother, Alice Walker. Walker writes in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” “Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded” (240). Similarly, Billy Beede sees the urgency in protecting her mother’s bones. Immediately after Willa Mae sings of her lineage in a song called “Promise Land,” Billy announces to Dill that she will

not allow the bulldozers to “dig Willa up and scatter her all which way,” because, she asserts with a compelling reversal of language, “*My mother* don’t deserve to be scattered to the winds like that” (248, emphasis added). While Billy Beede does not literally want to write her mother’s story, like Walker, she understands that the bones are the embodiment of her mother’s legacy, the real treasure that must be preserved and honored.

Billy comes to understand embodiment through the help of Aunt June, her adopted mother. June, who lost her leg when she was Billy’s age, laments that she will never, even in death, be a whole self.¹⁵ The money Laz gives the family for Willa’s ring, however, is enough to buy June a new prosthetic leg, and although she must learn how to walk again, the accomplishment becomes doubly significant because “she walked her first steps the same day as her first grandbaby did (257).

This ending, part of a nearly unilaterally happy conclusion, is not only reminiscent of the similarly tidy conclusion to Walker’s *The Color Purple*, but it offers a final look at the future of white and black literary inheritance. In this closing chapter, narrated by Billy, predominantly in the past tense, we see that Billy has come to see her child not as a Snipes, but as its own individual self, completely separate from Snipes as well as both independent of and intimately connected to herself. She describes how:

Riding back to Lincoln, looking at my ring, I could feel the baby inside me. I hadn’t never really thought of a name for it, but riding home I felt like I could. Not pick out a name though, just let one come to me without thinking. Like it had a name already, and if it had a name already then it already was. And if it already was then it was always gonna be. (257)

Since in this novel a name in many ways describes a character’s essence, signifying at

¹⁵One-leggedness is actually a recurring motif in *Getting Mother’s Body*. In addition to June’s injury, the Pink Flamingo on the motel’s sign and Billy standing on one leg early in the novel also suggest a similar lack (14). Teddy and June refer to walking as taking the “eleven-bus,” with the eleven representing two legs/feet (42). One of these legs missing suggests a handicap vis-à-vis the ability to progress on a journey.

least part of what he/she is and will become, Billy realizes here that the role of the mother is to help discover this identity and pass it along to the child. We do not find out the baby's name or even its gender, because the child—just like the offspring of Parks's and Faulkner's combined aesthetics—can be anything we want to imagine it to be. The knowledge that informs this imagining comes not just from a single mother, but a continuum of mothers and of journeys those mothers have traveled. Billy represents this continuum as she links her baby, herself, and her mother to the road on the way home. She recalls, "My belly sat in front of me. In front of my belly, beyond the hood of the truck, was the back of Laz's hearse with Mother's body riding inside and the road unrolling out ahead" (257).

In this metaphor, the father—literal and adoptive—is important, but secondary. Laz, who by all accounts loves Billy and who was excited about her child even when he thought she was marrying Snipes, has literally resurrected Willa Mae and has given Billy and her family the financial and emotional support they need to heal. Snipes/Snopes, who could arguably represent Faulkner himself, has been rendered nearly irrelevant, save for whatever reflection of him can be found in his child, raised and nurtured according to the mother's choices. Since, however, Snipes's very light skin, signaling a mixed-race heritage, matched his "yellow shiny shirt" (16), at least part of this reflection will be of whiteness.

But the child, the repetition as well as the revision of the parents, is also free to reject any part of the inheritance, to make his/her own choices. In her discussion of such repetition and revision in "from Elements of Style," Parks suggests that "Rep & Rev are key in examining something larger than one moment. Rep & Rev create space for

metaphor & c.” (9). Thus *Getting Mother’s Body*, the metaphorical child of two literary imaginations, represents this type of Rep & Rev by twisting some of Faulkner’s most important metaphors to create space for new ones.

Many of Faulkner’s novels offer a metaphorical moment that upon first encounter seems insignificant, but later, when reviewed in the context of the narrative as a whole, provides a central interpretative lens for the work as a whole. *As I Lay Dying* offers such a narrative “key” through the mysteriously omniscient Darl, who, as the family advances toward a treacherous crossing, foresees that the human heart can be equally treacherous:

Before us the thick dark current runs. It talks up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad, the yellow surface dimpled monstrously into fading swirls traveling along the surface for an instant, silent, impermanent and profoundly significant, as though just beneath the surface something huge and alive waked for a moment of lazy alertness out of and into light slumber again. (141)

Parks revises this idea, of course, by giving each of her characters what Laz calls a “subterranean” identity, a true identity that can only be seen when a character is free from emotional bondage to reflect upon his or her own interior. The novel also, through June, calls the Beede family a current capable of sweeping her away and subsuming her identity.

Similarly, *Light in August*, a novel that considers the consequences of desperate movement as well as stifling stasis, contains the following reflection, offered in an unattributed authorial voice: “Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress. It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and ever, so infinitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road” (8). Parks revises this moment as well, both through multiple instances of Billy approaching as “a speck on the road” that gets shaped into her as she

gets closer, but also in the novel's nearly constant movement (21). As Willa Mae sings in her final song, "The Great Wheel keep rolling along," Parks's characters indeed progress steadily—by bus (eleven or otherwise), truck, car, and hearse—on their journey to resurrect Willa Mae and their complementary journeys to understand the significance thereof.

In between/along side her revision of Faulkner, Parks also creates her own new metaphorical moment. Multiple instances of reflection—including Laz shining the light from his mirror on Billy as he looks at her in reverse and Billy looking at herself in the car door mirror as she ponders Willa Mae's photo—culminate in a final observation about reflection narrated by Lazarus.¹⁶ While he waits for Billy's arrival at the Pink Flamingo Auto Court, behind which Willa Mae is buried, he notices the motel's empty pool. He remarks:

It's painted blue, so, from a distance, you would think it had water in it. If you passed the Pink Flamingo quick without stopping, you would, maybe in the heat of the desert, kick yrself for not stopping to take a dip. But there ain't no water in this pool. There's just a wooden diving board that looks full of splinters, sticking out like a dried-up tongue over the big blue-painted cement hole. I always thought the water made a pool blue, not the paint. (214)

When Candy, Dill's half sister, tells Laz that "only guests can use the pool," Laz insightfully (and humorously) responds, "The got to bring they own water too" (214).

Water in general and pools specially are naturally blue when they are reflecting the color of the sky. In the case of this pool, there is something beneath the surface that alters the

¹⁶Laz's central role as "resurrectionist" in *Getting Mother's Body* is reinforced by the biblical connections implied by his name. John 11:1-44 recounts the story of Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life after he had been dead and laid in the tomb for four days, an act that foreshadows Jesus's own resurrection, the central element in the Christian salvation narrative. In *Getting Mother's Body*, the first time we see Laz he is "rising from the dead" (13), and he later tells Dill's half-sister Candy that he was given his name because he was "born not breathing" (216).

reflection. Without any water, the “reflection” is fake. The pool is, in effect, a Hole. Guests who want to use the pool “need to bring they own water” and thus, their own vehicle for reflection to fill The Hole. But even then, the reflection will be a combination of the sky from above and the color below. This simple blue pool, then, is reflection of and a reflection on identity, just as Parks’s novel is a reflection of and on the journey to find that identity.

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Conclusion

Rereading Parks: The Revisionary Revised

When I began this project and someone would ask what it was about, my general response was, “Suzan-Lori Parks, the playwright. She won a Pulitzer for *Topdog/Underdog*, and she also wrote a novel and some screenplays.” But as I wrote myself into a clearer understanding of Parks and her revisionary aesthetic, I began to find the “what is your project about?” question more and more difficult to answer briefly. At the risk of losing my listener’s attention, I usually offered something such as, “the writer Suzan-Lori Parks and her relationship with history.” This satisfied the coffee-shop barista and the passenger next to me on the airplane, but when I had more eager listeners, those familiar with the African American literary tradition in general and with Parks specifically, I was free to expound. I could tell them about Parks’s revisionary aesthetic and its compelling combination of revision and innovation, and I could explain how this aesthetic informs and shapes each genre in which Parks writes. Most importantly, I would proclaim that readers must remember that Parks, beyond being a playwright or a novelist or a screenwriter, is a revisionary—a theorist with an ever transforming vision of literature, including her own literature, and its place in the world.

Parks’s essays, most notably those written in 1994 and collected in *The America Play and Other Works* (1995) as well as her 1999 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” demonstrate that she is ever aware of the literary, cultural, and historical

implications of her art and of art in general. Her revisiting and revision of these essays—especially “from Elements of Style” (1994), an abbreviated version of which is reprinted at the beginning of *Venus* and all of Parks’s subsequent plays, and “An Equation for Black People on Stage” (1994) revised into “new black math” (2005)—show that she believes art and its function to be vibrant, fluid, and eclectic. Her revision of her past literary creations, as seen in *Getting Mother’s Body* (2003) and *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006), proves her willingness to put her theory into action—a revolutionary act in itself for a writer or a theorist.

Like the famous theorists that came before her, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Barbara Smith, Houston Baker, bell hooks, and many others, Parks writes in her essays about the form and function of language (“from the Elements of Style”), about literary influence (“Tradition and the Individual Talent”), about the fine (or not so fine) line between protest art and “art for art’s sake” (“Possession” [1994], “An Equation for Black People Onstage,” and “new black math”).

It may seem at first glance that Parks is simply walking well-worn roads, but as she asserts in the first paragraph of “new black math,” some questions of aesthetics and poetics, especially those that are politically charged and intensely relevant to many artists’ and many audiences’ lives, are not ready to be left behind and classified as mere “literary history.” She writes:

10 years after writing the essay ‘the equation for black people on stage’ [sic] Im standing at the same crossroads asking the same questions. No sweat. Sometimes you can walk a hundred miles and end up in the same spot. The world ain’t round for nothing, right? What is a black play? The definition is housed in the reality of two things that occurred recently and almost simultaneously: 26 August 05, playwright scholar poet-king

August Wilson announces he is dying of cancer, and hurricane Katrina devastates the Gulf Coast. It feels like judgment day. What Im talking about today is the same and different. I was tidy back then. And now Im tidier. Tidier today like a tidal wave. (576)

This question, “what is a black play?” could just as easily be “what is black art?”—one of the same questions that defined the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. Parks asserts that this question is still relevant, perhaps for some of the same reasons as it was in the 1920’s and the 1960’s, but now also for very modern reasons: the racial disparity evident in New Orleans and elsewhere after Hurricane Katrina and, more importantly, the imminent death of August Wilson, who himself famously questioned the nature of black art and black theatre in his 1996 speech “The Ground on Which I Stand.”

As the above excerpt from “new black math” demonstrates, Parks’s theory is remarkable because it is relevant, accessible, and poetic. The essay goes on to list what a black play is and what it is not, sometimes with paradoxical results, confirming that literature and culture, even when approached from the most logical perspective, are never simple. In the first version of the essay, “An Equation for Black People on Stage,” Parks uses a similar quasi-mathematical style of reasoning and illustration, combined with her signature nontraditional type/format and iconoclastic diction. She writes, “Let’s look at the math:”

BLACK PEOPLE + ‘WHITEY’=
STANDARD DRAMATIC CONFLICT
(STANDARD TERRITORY)
i.e.
‘BLACK DRAMA’ = the presentation of the Black as oppressed
so that
WHATEVER the dramatic dynamics, they are most often READ to
EQUAL an explanation or relation of Black oppression. This is not only a
false equation, this is bullshit.
so that
BLACK PEOPLE + x = NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT

(NEW TERRITORY)

where x is the realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than the Oppressed by/Obsessed with 'Whitey state; where the White when present is not the oppressor, and where audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit. (20)

Similarly, in “from Elements of Style” Parks uses pictures combined with math problems to explain her theories. In one example, labeled “AMERICA” and meant to illustrate *The America Play* (1994), Parks draws a vertical line with arrows at both ends, an X, and a stick figure with a beard, bowtie, and hat. This is all set equal to parentheses that contain the basic outline of a house, marked “log cabin,” and a triangle resting across the top of three rectangles, marked “big town.” Also in the parenthesis are step-by-step directions:

1. Solve for X where X is the true measurement of the Great Man’s Stature
2. Express X in terms of The Lesser Known
3. Express X in terms of Lucy and Brazil¹ (14)

Outside of the parenthesis is another stick figure with a beard, bowtie, and hat (but no arms or legs). This figure also has a thought/speech bubble that contains the phrase, “4 score and 7 years ago...” (14). This innovative form of expressing a theory about unlocking the meaning of literature encourages non-traditional approaches to literary criticism as well as greater attention to literatures, such as Parks’s, that rely on non-traditional elements, including misspelled words, pictures in the text, characters with their own languages, or stage directions that overstep their dramatic boundaries. And even if a text is completely linear, Parks’s theories open up options for critical inquiries that

¹The Great Man, The Lesser Known, Lucy, and Brazil are all characters in *The America Play*.

challenge readers to more closely interrogate form, relationships among characters, and the role of the visual in a text.

Parks has not only revised traditional literary theory and some of the greatest literature in American letters, but she has shown also that her approach to revision is “equal-opportunity” by revising her own work.² In *Topdog/Underdog* (2002) she again casts a black Abraham Lincoln impersonator, just as she did in *The America Play*, and like its sister play *In the Blood* (1999), *Fucking A* (2000) revises Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne. Parks’s novel, *Getting Mother’s Body*, is particularly significant, though, because in addition to revising William Faulkner’s novels, it borrows and revises themes from multiple works in Parks’s corpus, including the woman scorned and abandoned from *Venus* (1996) and *In the Blood*, abortion from *Fucking A*, and the mother’s inheritance from *Topdog/Underdog*. In one of the most compelling examples of Parks self-revision in *Getting Mother’s Body*, Homer Beede, a student and an aspiring race man, confronts a racist white sheriff and thinks to himself, “I want to kill him right now but I don’t move. He might want to kill me too but he don’t move either. The Negro-College-Going Youth eyes the White-Just-Back-from-Fishing-Sheriff. If we was in a play these would be our parts. There’s plenty of times a man has, in a situation just like this, forgot himself and just played his part” (167). This moment speaks back to one of Parks’s earliest plays, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), which features characters with names such as BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON, BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK, OLD MAN RIVER JORDAN, and HAM. While

²This revision also extends to Parks’s personal life, specifically her name. Born Susan-Lori Parks, she decided to change her name to Suzan-Lori Parks. In an interview with writer John Marshall, Parks explains, “It was the result of a misprint. When I was doing one of my first plays in the East Village, we had fliers printed up and they spelled my name wrong. I was devastated. But the director said, ‘Just keep it, honey, and it will be fine.’ And it was.” (E1)

Parks's play certainly problematizes these stereotypes, it nevertheless demonstrates how casting—by oneself, by others, or even by a playwright—can subsume identity and force characters into racially determined and deterministic paradigms.³ In *Getting Mother's Body*, Parks creates a character that chooses whether or not to play his part and a narrative space that allows him that freedom of choice.

Parks continues this self-revision in her collection *365 Days/365 Plays*. In this text, Parks writes a play a day for a year, beginning with November 13, since the idea for the collection came to her on November 13, 2002 (365/365 i). Parks writes of the experiment:

The plan was that no matter what I did, how busy I was, what other commitments I had, I would write a play a day, every single day, for a year. It would be about being present and being committed to the artistic process every single day regardless of the 'weather.' It became a daily meditation, a daily prayer celebrating the rich and strange process of a writing life. (365/365 i)

The plays are dated, one a day, through November 12 of the next year. Sometimes they are relevant to actual events—such as the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003, or Gregory Hines's death on August 9, 2003—that took place on or around those days. Other times, the topic seems to come exclusively from Parks's imagination.

365 Days/365 Plays can thus be read as being about Parks as a writer, as it takes a literary journey through her daily thoughts—artistic, political, cultural, nonsensical, and various combinations thereof. Such a reading is underscored by the appearance of six pictures of Parks on the book's cover and spine. None of Parks's other works feature her picture(s) so prominently. Her name is also larger on the cover than the name of the text,

³Homer's reflections also recall the cast of characters in George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1986). Wolfe and Parks also enjoyed a productive working relationship during the production of *Topdog/Underdog*, which was well represented in the documentary, *Topdog Diaries* (2004).

thereby privileging her authorial role in the work over the work itself. Such a privileging need not be seen as negative, however, for this focus on Parks's writing highlights her self-revisionary work within the text as well as asserts the greater cultural importance of the text: demonstrating how art can play a vital and formative role in the everyday lives of individuals—writers and readers.

Although every day of *365 Days/365 Plays* does not show Parks engaging her own work, her revisionary impulse surfaces consistently throughout the volume. As early as November 15, in an entry called “The Good-For-Nothing,” we find a circus-like story reminiscent of *Venus*. A character called the Barker, much like The Mother-Showman, attempts to corral crowds to see The Good-for-Nothing, a woman who “dont work,” “dont reproduce,” “dont vote,” “dont complain,” and “dont even cause trouble” (7). As the crowd stands around watching her, a man laughs. The Barker then tells The Good-for-Nothing that her career is over, as talk of the laughing incident “will get around—its no use” (7). She then expresses concern about her future, and in a complete reversal of The Mother-Showman's attitude toward The Venus, the Barker responds, “Youve got a nice pair of legs. Maybe you could be a dancer. Yr also really good with numbers. You could be a banker or a loan shark” (8). Rather than deny the woman a creative outlet or a means of support, the Barker encourages The Good-for-Nothing, who is actually Good-for-Nothing “no more” (8). This new version of a familiar scene suggests a new trajectory for performance and performers. Whereas Parks's *Venus* grappled for her agency, this new character is encouraged to embrace the agency that she did not know she had.

This same entry, and many others like it, also employs Parks's use of stage directions as quasi-narrator, as seen in *In the Blood*. In "The Good-For-Nothing," the main action ends positively, the Barker tells The Good-for-Nothing, "Now yll make make something of yrself," and she replies, "Yes. Why not?" (8). Then, the stage directions explain, "The exit happily, going to dinner at the house of the Barker's friend: a woman he used to know, his ex-wife, actually, who after all these years is still very angry. She will slit his throat while he sleeps and spend the rest of her life in a woman's prison" (8). These stage directions add an element of tragedy and questioning: Will The Good-for-Nothing actually become "something" without the Barker's encouragement? What did the Barker do to his ex-wife to make her so angry? Was he not, after all, the benevolent man he appears to be in the dialogue?

While this section could be staged, the future tense suggests that it should not be since it would require showing multiple points in time: the dinner, the murder, the trial, the prison. Plus, all of this would be difficult, if not impossible, to represent without dialogue. As such, the director would likely either leave this section out completely or have someone narrate it, thus introducing a new "character" and a new monologue that Parks did not write. If the director left it out, the play would end like *Getting Mother's Body*, happily and without complications. In a narrated version, the director's choice of narrator would inevitably sway the audience's interpretation of the piece. If told by The Good-for-Nothing or the Barker, the story would become pure tragedy, the murder senseless. If told by the ex-wife, however, the action might become justified: the Barker's murder could be fitting revenge for the pain he caused a woman and thus prevent him from possibly doing the same to The Good-for-Nothing. "The Good-For-

Nothing,” therefore, even more so than *In the Blood*, is a completely different work on the page than on the stage. Parks seems in *365 Days/365 Plays*, then, to be further reinforcing the difference between the written and the performed and underscoring that to truly experience a play, one should both read it and see it.

In other segments, such as November 27th’s “Hole,” August 30th’s “Holey Moley,” and October 11th’s “Another Deep Hole,” Parks continues to engage and refine her idea of “The Hole” from *Getting Mother’s Body*, a concept she introduced in *The America Play*. In the *365 Days/365 Plays* segments, The Hole remains very abstract, but it does take on new characteristics. In “Hole,” for example, a man digs a hole from which a woman emerges. The man and the woman become lovers, and the play suggests they will be happy, for “a closeness will emerge between them” (30). Yet, the man, a hole digger by trade, finds his work problematic:

Woman: You’ve made a career of it. Hole digging.

Man: That’s the kicker. You think one would satisfy. Wrong. Digging holes creates the need to dig holes.

Woman: There’s a word for that. A psychological term.

Man: Don’t tell me the term. I just want to be.

Woman: I feel the same way exactly. (30)

This exchange suggests that creating or uncovering a hole, symbolic of vulnerability or desire in Parks’s previous work, simply creates more vulnerability or desire, and any attempt at understanding the “psychological” root of this “need to dig holes,” feels—at least to the hole digger—unproductive.

In “Holey Moley,” a man who seems to understand this tries to convince a woman that her obsession with a hole is ludicrous. She stares out the door of her house sure that the hole is “out there,” beckoning her “to cross the threshold” (304-5). After giving up his attempts to lure her away from the hole with talk of pie, the man tells the woman that

“inside” there is “a holey mole” (305). The stage directions then continue, “The Woman comes to look. He points to nothing. She smiles. He smiles too” (305), suggesting that a person can be freed of a hole’s hypnotic effects via love and creativity.

Then finally, in “Another Deep Hole,” two men encounter a hole that impresses them with its size. One measures the hole to confirm that “Its another deep hole,” and the other puts up a sign next to it that reads: “Another Deep Hole.” Then, in the following segment, “Analysis,” two unidentified characters talk about how one of them fell into “another deep hole” and is still in it. The one in the hole brought a sample of the hole, which is made of “Space.” In her descriptions of these segments in the Table of Contents, Parks writes that “every great gap should get a sign” (397), and “if you fall in, I hope there will be someone there for you” (398), respectively.⁴ “Another Deep Hole,” then, indicates that a person can be warned about a potential vulnerability, but even if her/she does give in, as in “Analysis” and “Holey Moley,” redemption can come through companionship.

While *The Hole* does receive much attention in *365 Days/365 Plays*, this attention seems minor compared to that which Parks gives to another of her favorite topics: Abraham Lincoln. Whereas in *Topdog/Underdog* Parks explores Lincoln’s legacy through two black brothers who eventually portray Lincoln’s assassination as the inevitable result of a familial conflict exacerbated by racial politics and unstable identities, in *365 Days/365 Plays*, she writes Lincoln himself and his family back into the drama.

⁴Parks puts the “Table of Contents” for *365 Days/365 Plays* at the end of the text and includes a one- or two-sentence description of each play.

In November 16th's "Mrs. Keckley & Mrs. Lincoln," for example, Parks explores racial politics through a humorous exchange between the mentally unstable Mary Todd Lincoln and her dressmaker Elizabeth Keckley as they get the first lady ready to see a play, the same play during which her husband (who is never named in the segment) is murdered. Then in December 2nd's "Abraham Lincoln at 89," Parks imagines what might have happened if the president had not been assassinated, but merely injured badly enough to lose his mind. Mrs. Lincoln, Mrs. Keckley, "a respectable representation of the Local Population," and a host of dignitaries come to the fake birthday party for the former president, who generally speaks in nonsense, save for when he announces, "Only when we cease to fight do we truly conquer," a sentiment that one of the locals finds "ridiculous" (37-8). This segment's overall feeling of ridiculousness and insanity suggests that had Lincoln survived the attempt on his life, his role in American history would have been altered drastically.

Lincoln comes up again in February 12th's "The Birth of Abraham Lincoln," in which Parks recreates a scene with a "colored midwife" and baby Abraham's oddly overly concerned parents (121), and then again in other segments that can be read as extensions of themes in *Topdog/Underdog*, including February 17th's "The President's Day Sale," where impersonators line up in hopes of being purchased by "A Woman, very rich" (128), and March 25th's "A Promise Made in 1863 Isn't Worth Much These Days," a commentary on the shortcomings of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Beyond these revisions of her own works, *365 Days/365 Plays* is a pivotal work in Parks's corpus because it reinforces her role as both artist and theorist. Through *365 Days/365 Plays*, Parks both explores and demonstrates the role of art in the everyday

lives of Americans, and ever revolutionary, she creates an innovative way to bring this theory to “the people,” to turn a personal project into a collective project, through the 365 National Festival, “a nation-wide grassroots festival—a geographically diverse relay race which invites each theatre group to produce one week’s worth of plays in its own style, creating a testament not only to the daily artistic process, but also to the incredible diversity and richness of the American theatrical landscape” (401). As Parks and festival producer Bonnie Metzgar explain in their afterward to *365 Days/365 Plays*, this festival “is not building a new community; it is revealing a community where it already exists—in theatres both grand and modest, in schoolrooms, storefronts, nursing homes, and alleyways” (401).

Parks and Metzgar suggest also that the festival might “encourage us to radically change the way that we produce/create/critique/enjoy/think about/talk about theatre and the world” (401). Such a grassroots effort is reminiscent of the rise of militant theatre and non-profit theatre groups, such as the Negro Ensemble Company, Black Theatre Alliance, and New Federal Theatre, during and in the wake of the Black Arts Movement.⁵ But rather than advocate the “for us, by us” aesthetic of their predecessor, Parks and Metzgar want modern audiences, who are often plagued by artistic apathy, to simply embrace any aesthetic that allows for open-minded, democratic, relevant creative expression—especially in the theatre.

Parks’s seamless melding of the literary, historical, political, and social in *365 Days/365 Plays* as well her essays, plays, novel, and screenplays, place her alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri

⁵For more on this era in black theatre history, see Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch’s *A History of African-American Theatre* (Cambridge, 2003).

Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and many other great writers in the African American literary tradition who have demonstrated that art can and will change lives and change the world. They and she understand, as Parks asserts in “Possession,” that literature does have the power to make and revise history, to write in those who have been forgotten, to take the “dis-membered” dis-remembered and “[put] the body back together” so it can sing and she can hear and capture its song in her texts (4-5). She writes, “Through each line of text, I’m rewriting the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined” (5), and thus she simultaneously creates her own well-deserved place in American history.

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Appendix A

Bibliography

Primary Works

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