“LOVE AND DISTANCE”:
RACIAL SPECTACLES AND AMBIVALENT BLACK PERFORMERS IN SUZAN-LORI PARKS

By

Yeoniee Cho

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation rethinks a relationship between blackness and performance through black performers who compulsively summon themselves to the historical stages of black suffering and subjugation as featured in Suzan-Lori Parks's history plays. By engaging with lynching and minstrelsy, two exemplary racist spectacles from American/African-American history, Parks's drama foregrounds and problematizes the persistence of blackness as spectacle and reveals how theatre has been exploited as a form for negotiating race relations and facilitating the discursive control of the black body. To debunk the construction of blackness and unyoke themselves from its essentialized notions from the past, a group of postmodern black artists of the late 1980s and the 1990s –designated as post-soul or post-black— were beginning to deliberately reify blackness through various formal strategies and conceptual critiques. This thesis aims to show how Suzan-Lori Parks reflects, complicates, and revises this post-soul/post-black sensibility –an "attitude" or a "stance" toward black identity and art— particularly in terms of ambivalent ways in which her black performers do their bodies. Aligning herself with post-soul/post-black artists, Parks features black performers who deliberately assume the trope of blackness and appropriate the white appropriation of blackness for alienating the audience from what is performed by them. Rather than just inviting the audience for a distanced, analytical approach to their performances, I argue, Parks's black performers interrogate the border between the material and the epistemological as reified in historical racist spectacles by exposing blackness as a contestation

between authenticity and appropriation, theatrical illusions projected onto the black body and material living experiences of black people, through jarring moments in her plays blackness explodes performance and the performative. Turning racist spectacles into the occasions for discursive resistance and affective investment and thereby urging "love and distance" toward black bodies on the stage, Parks's drama rethinks the historical valences of performance and redeems theatre as a venue for enabling and complicating *doing* history.

A suggested reading of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* as a postmodern lynching drama in the first chapter reveals how Black Man with Watermelon envisions his body as collective and intimate, alienated and pressing, representational and presentational to challenge lynching as a form that imposes a closure on African American bodies, experiences, and identities in terms of temporality and symbolic working. The second chapter analyzes two black Lincoln impersonators in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* as black minstrels to examine the limited possibilities of whiteface's symbolic inversion and attend to the ways in which this thwarted endeavor paradoxically accuses a genocidal white psychology behind blackface as it serves to destabilize the border between theatre and reality. The third chapter examines how *In the Blood* updates the black mother's infanticide featured in early-twentieth-century lynching drama by reading Hester La Negrita's final refusal of the role of the *mater dolorosa* as an allegorical act of resistance to the politics of representation involved in spectacularization. As a reflection on the playwright's vocational ethics as "playwright-resurrectionist," *Venus*, as discussed in the last chapter, resurrects the Venus, a Khoisan woman who turned into a circus freak in early nineteenth century Europe, to discursively debunk the spectators' gaze and affectively challenge their fetishistic desire, altogether pushing them to "embrace[s] the unrecorded truth."

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INTRODUCTION

In 2001, a black artist Keith Obadike posted his blackness on sale via online auction site eBay. Introducing his article for sale as "an heirloom" which had been "in the seller's possession for twenty-eight years," his bidding parodies the commercial utility of blackness and plays with its portability. Shedding a light on the possibilities for re-interpreting a racist spectacle from the past as a liberating performance, his cyber performance evoking the auction block from slavery past reminds us that what is at stake in subversive performance especially in terms of identity politics is a sense of distance. By separating blackness from his body and again separating himself from his blackness transacted, he functions "as his own agent, a free man of color, willing to determine the worth of his blackness on the open market, unyoked by previous historical constraint even as he invokes history" (Elam, "Change Clothes and Go" 381).

As a playwright doing history, Suzan-Lori Parks says, "[e]very play I write is about love and distance. . . . And from that we can get things like history" (qtd. in Garrett, "The Possession" 25). Her plays are the expression of her loving, longing, and craving for what is "distant." Through her plays, she digs for, echoes, and mourns the past. And her characters are "*figures, figments, ghosts*, [. . .] *shadows*" from the past and "*players* maybe, maybe *someone else's pulse*" ("Style" 12). They impersonate the figures from the past, re-enact the scenes from the most painful experiences of African Americans, and perform blackness. As with Obadike, Parks's black performers cite racist spectacles and perform blackness "like a quotation" (Brecht 138) to emphasize what is theatrical about what is performed by them. However, Parks, who is often classified as "post-black" along with Obadike, would put her performers on the historical auction block rather than Obadike's cyber auction site to accentuate the ways in which their black bodies

are objectified and commodified as well as their blackness. The ambivalence of Parks's performers –highly discursive yet stubbornly flesh— sometimes renders it difficult and even impossible for the audience to take a distance from what is on stage –the suffering black body. By performing blackness and simultaneously opening up a space for empathic engagement with the audience –asking for "the audience's love" (Garrett, "the Premiere of Venus" 85)— Parks's black performers interrogate historical uses of blackness/the black body as a trope, a means, a metaphor, or a signifier, complicate a relationship between blackness and performance, and finally redeem the black body as a site for redressing the loss of history for black people.

Suzan-Lori Parks's (Re-)Constructive Historiography in a "Post" Era

Suzan-Lori Parks is "the most recognized and innovative" (Geis, *Suzan-Lori Parks* 1) figure in contemporary American drama. From the beginning of her career, Parks was hailed by the mainstream media and leading theatre critics. Having won an Obie for her first full-length play, *Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom* (originally produced at the 1989 BACA Fringe Festival), she was numbered among "30 artists under 30 most likely to change the culture for the next 30 years" by the *New York Times* in 1993 and "100 innovators for the next Wave" by *Time Magazine* in 1999. Having received another Obie and the Tony Award, she finally won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for *Topdog/Underdog* in 2002. *Imperceptible Mutabilities,* with its sense of language as physical act, "Rep & Rev" dramatics, use of choral voices, and innovative characterization, brought her immediate fame even in the world of experimental theatre while making her the "year's most promising playwright" in 1989. Indeed, the language and form of her earlier plays are "experimental," "working outside the aesthetic of psychological realism, its familiar settings of home and work, and its predominantly linear forms of narrative and dialogue," true to Ehren Fordyce's definition of the term (536). Blackwell edition of *A*

Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama aptly classifies Parks as the only "well-known and widely performed experimental" dramatist in the 1990s (546).

Experimental theatre practitioners were even more thrilled about the arrival of this "new experimental playwright" (Garrett, "Figures, Speech" 1) because she is an African American woman. Indeed, "a black woman writer of avant-garde plays" is "a most unusual addition" to the American experimental theatre and "an African-American play that values poetry over realism" is "a departure" from much of African American theatre (Brustein 29-30). Most Parks critics have strived to read her works less as "an example of African-American literature" than as "a postmodernist literary project" (Schmidt 180), thus proving her "as much a product of Western postmodernism as of black consciousness" (Brustein 29). The tension between experimentalism and a penchant for ethnic writing is not an urgent issue only to an African-American writer who sees her task in showing her command of postmodern theatrics not caught and inflected by her ethnic identity but to the critics who adhere to postmodern aesthetics yet cannot be unheedful of a political agenda: When Kerstin Schmidt discusses American postmodern theatre as "the theater of transformation," she also hints at a postmodern theatre's bifurcated commitment to formal innovation on the one hand and "those marginalized in society" on the other (173).

Parks maintains a dialogue between a commitment to "postmodernist literary project" and to her identity as an "African American dramatist with a political agenda" (Schmidt 180) in her engagement with history and historiography. For Parks, "the history of History is in question. . . . A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature." ("Possession" 4). Parks's plays recast and revise African-American history and the conventional historical representation of African Americans in the spatial imagination of

postmodern historiography[1]. Calling Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* an exemplary "postmodern landscape play" (48) in which "all times are simultaneously present," Elinor Fuch discusses how Parks's play presents black history not through a chronological presentation of it but "as a great space of simultaneous experiences.": With the repeated deaths of Black Man with Watermelon through beating, hanging, drowning, and electrocution dispersed, *Last Black Man* registers as what Fuch calls "a type of landscape" (48). S. E. Wilmer's "spatial" reading of Parks's drama, especially in light of the ambivalent meanings of space, the spatial co-presences and temporal displacement of characters, and her concept of monumental time in lieu of linearity also reveals that the experience of the postmodern is crucial to Parks's "re-staging" of nation. In a similar vein, Sanja Bahun-Radunovi reads "serial re-enactments" in Parks's plays in terms of postmodern theatre's "revision of the concept of history through the questioning of teleological stories and linear patterns" (447).

It is her signature technique of "Rep & Rev" – that is, Repetition and Revision – that most contributes to the multi-temporal "landscape" of Parks's drama. Indebted to the "Jazz aesthetic," this method employs its musical refrains played over and over with revision each time: "In such plays we are not moving from A to B but rather, for example, from A → A → A → B → A. Through such movement we refigure A. And if we continue to call this movement FORWARD

[1] In the second half of twentieth century, the concept of history has been dramatically revised in terms of the postmodern dissatisfaction with linear models of time and progression. If time was the epistemological determinant of modernism, "space provides the dominant category for the experience of the postmodern" (443), as writes Fredric Jameson. Such epistemological turn lead to the spatial/cartographic methodologies in the field of historiography as represented by Pierre Nora's monumental project of *Les Lieux de Memoire*. Tracing public objects, sites, and shared icons imbued with "memories" of the French when little was left of memory, Nora's project foreshadowed/exemplified the horizontal, synchronic, and pluralistic approach of postmodern historiography revolving around the notion of history as intersections between the present, the past, and the future.

PROGRESSION, which I think it is, then we refigure the idea of forward progression" ("Style" 9). The repetition observed in the movement from the first A through the third A to the final A speaks to the repetitive nature of history as embodied from Parks's first play, *The Sinner's Place* (1983), in which "history simply repeat[s] itself" ("Style" 9). The last A after passing through B implies a transformation or subversion for which Parks's repetition is ultimately meant: "[I]n drama change, revision, is the thing. Characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew" ("Style" 9). "Rep & Rev" defines the relations between A and B or A and the other A's as synchronic, horizontal, and interactive, thus problematizing and denaturalizing the progress from A to B.

While Parks's spatial re-imagining of narrative time and inevitable progress envisions "a different kind of dramatic literature" ("Elements" 10) that rejects traditional realist drama's allegiance to linearity, such "patiently incremental" (Cooke 22) refrains are primarily meant for "a literal incorporation of the past" ("Elements" 10) within the context of the present. As an allegory for American history, *The America Play* exemplifies Parks's uses of Rep &Rev for the deconstruction of dominant historical narrative. The Lesser Known's cross-racial re-enactment of Lincoln's assassination in an American history theme park of his own making "brings American history into collision with the absence of African-American history" (London 44). While "[a] great hole. In the middle of nowhere" (*The America Play* 158) on the stage visually embodies American history as lack, Parks's use of Rep & Rev materializes "the Great Hole of History" (*The America Play* 158) in the narrative dimension: If the Lesser Known who introduces himself as "the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln" is a "revision" of Lincoln as a Founding Father, his re-enactments are "repeated" seven times with "variation" each time, reinforcing "the notion of history as simulacrum" (Saal 63).

Parks's admiration of form paradoxically speaks to social expectations of a "black" writer or a "political" writer. In a post-performance audience discussion in Manhattan Theater Club's "Downtown/Uptown" festival, to a question from an audience member unhappy with the characterization of Mrs. Smith in the production of "Greeks" from *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, Parks retorted: "Why is it, that people assume that a black writer is only interested in race? . . . Why does everyone think that white artists make art and black artists make statements? Why doesn't anyone ever ask me about *form*?" (Solomon 73). Parks is an African American playwright who would not define blackness only in terms of oppressive race relations and consider black experiences mere as those of the oppressed. In her essay, "An Equation for Black People Onstage," she opines: "Can a White person be present onstage and not be an oppressor? Can a Black person be onstage and be other than oppressed? For the Black writer, are there Dramas other than race dramas? Does Black life consist of issues other than race issues? And gee, there's another thing: there is no such thing as THE Black experience; that is, there are many experiences of being Black which are included under the rubric" (21).

Parks's refusal to have her artistic works read as agitprop and her commitment to formal strategy which is largely marked by its performativity –repetition with difference –reflect what Mark Anthony Neal calls a "post-soul aesthetic." Neal regards as post-soul a series of ideas, movements, and ideological strategies to make sense of societal flux and ruptures on the part of the black community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements (3). Referring to artists and critical thinkers who "came to maturity in the age of Reaganomics and experienced the change from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness," Neal locates the core of the post-soul sensibility in their irreverent attitudes toward the legacies, traditional tropes, and iconicities

of the past: For Neal, the post-soul aesthetic implies "a radical reimagining of the contemporary African American experience, attempting to liberate contemporary interpretations of that experience from sensibilities that were formalized and institutionalized during earlier social paradigms" (3). As these artists and practitioners no longer have their imagination of blackness confined and limited by the essentialized notions and programmatic racist understandings, post-soul arts and practices open up a space for articulating and expressing multifaceted and specified dimensions of blackness and black experiences that are never to be subsumed by the wholesale designation of "THE Black experience."

This liberating moment is also captured by Thelma Golden as "post-black." Opening a show of twenty-eight black artists, titled as "freestyle" in 2001, curator Golden, coined the term to refer to this new generation of black artists with their own "free styles," yet also with a common agenda to respond to "vital activism of the 1960s, the focused, often essentialist, Black Arts Movement of the 1970s, the theory-driven multiculturalism of the 1980s, and the late globalist expansion of the late 90s" (14). Non-committal to any political ideologies or coherent political movements, these artists are invariably "adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work [is] steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness" (Golden 14).

Post-soul/post-black artists externalize and reify blackness to expose its hegemonic and essentialized construction. They are "repeating and revising" and signifyin(g) on tropes, figures, and discourses of the racist past without any veneration for the traumas and seriousness this painful history might entail. As shown in the case of Obadike's cyber auction, such a traumatized and tabooed history as the sale of the black body can only be an object of satire, humour, and playful mimicry. Stylized images from plantation stereotypes and minstrel caricatures in Kara

Walker's black-on-white paper-cut silhouettes attest to the artist's belief that these tropes and figures exist for artistic license and conceptual reworking, not to encumber the artist by their racist dictates: One of the post-soul/ post-black strategies is "to willingly 'bastardize' black history and culture to create alternative meanings," as Neal notes (22).

In this process for diverse artistic expressions and representations of blackness, however, these performances of racialized styles and gestures might disconnect blackness from the black body and dematerialize both, just reducing them to an idea or a concept. While acclaiming Obadike's signifying praxis as a move beyond "past definitions of blackness that delimit creations or that necessitate certain artistic expectations," Harry Elam also questions: "Can blackness ever travel light – free from the baggage of the past –or is black cultural travel always accompanied or burdened or even weighed down, by its history?" ("Change Clothes" 381, 382).

E. Patrick Johnson seems to answer these ambivalent questions with his understanding of blackness's ambivalence. As Johnson notes, blackness is more than just visual imagery, theatrical styles, or commodities culturally trafficked, "nor is [it] always consciously acted out" (8). Recapitulating blackness and its history as contestations between theatrical illusions and "the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people," appropriation and authenticity, Johnson paradoxically exposes "authentic" blackness as a contested notion and debunks the "visual, spectacular" performance that is not in the service of racial identification (3, 8). In a way, Johnson's acumen is penetrating—rather than just updating— the post-black dynamic in its binaried yet interrelated commitments to the quest for "ongoing changes in the African-American art and ultimately to ongoing redefinitions of blackness in contemporary art" (Golden 15).

This dissertation locates Parks's historical plays at this dialectic juncture with which the post-soul/post-black art is confronted. While provocatively proclaiming, "The Klan does not

always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature" ("An Equation" 19), Parks evinces that her playwriting is meant for the black "figures" in her plays: "If I answered that "I write for the audience," I would be lying. I write for the figures in the plays: CHONA, MONA, VERONA, MRS. SAXON. . .THE FOUNDLING FATHER AS ABRAHAM LINCOLN & LUCY & BRAZIL" ("Possession" 3-4). Parks's aim, in my view, lies in propelling an understanding of a more complicated and multifaceted connection between form and content. Refusing the "programmatic ties of black art to politics" (Elam, "Change Clothes" 381), Park nevertheless asserts that form is not indifferent to racial identity: "I am an African American woman-this is the form I take, my content predicates this form, and this form is inseparable from my content. No way could I be me otherwise" ("Style" 8).

The dialectic tension between an aesthetic freedom and a political agenda Parks should handle as post-black artist can be also located in her engagement with postmodern historiography. Approaching American/African-American history through Rep & Rev, Parks deploys her theatre as a site for "rewriting" history, whose meta-sensibilities evoke the historiographic metafiction of the postmodern era that recasts historiography and rethinks the project of history.[2] While "the domination of spatial logic in contemporary culture has generated a 'crisis in historicity'" (Bahun-Radunovi 465) and postmodern culture has been often accused of rejecting history (Gitlin 347), spatial imagination in postmodern historiography does not deny a sense of history *per se* but rather urges historical consciousness by awakening an awareness of the simultaneous existence of heterogeneous *histories*, not just revising the notion of history as simultaneous existence of heterogeneous temporalities. Through Rep & Rev

[2] For the discussion of postmodern "historiographic metafiction," see Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 105-123.

technique, Parks is also engaged in "creating" African American history that has been "unrecorded, dismembered, washed out" ("Possession" 4) and finally, in turn, "rewriting" American history that has been deployed around the false myth of white supremacy – that of white Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator," for example – altogether rectifying "fabricated absence" (Drukman 67) of African Americans by newly inscribing the Africanist presence in American history. Deeply ingrained in collective experiences of African Americans, Parks's plays work as "incubators" to give birth to African-American history, which is yet to be fully included and understood in the dominant discourses of American history ("Possession" 5). Against the "pessimistic forecasts concerning historical understanding in a postmodern age" (Peterson 17) and along with Parks's belief in theatre as a site for rewriting and creating history, this project approaches Parks's theatre as a significant cultural site for "remembering." Parks's endeavor to "right and rewrite history in a postmodern culture that has dismantled the idea of history" (Elam and Rayner 179) is not just deconstructive but (re-)constructive.

Parks's unique way of characterization plays a crucial role in this "theatrical midwifery" (Malkin 158). The people in her plays are "not characters. To call them so could be an injustice" as Parks says ("Style" 12). As exemplified by *Imperceptible Mutabilities* in which the five actors take turns playing all twenty roles in the play throughout the four sections, they do not represent fictional individuals but become the shadows of other figures. Calling them "*figures, figments, ghosts, roles*" ("Style" 12), Parks offers them more collective/poetic than individual/psychological attributes. Quoting from John S. Mbiti's *African Religion and Philosophy*, Parks hints at how this "ghostly vessel of the actor" (Garrett 8) serves as the aqueduct through which the past is relayed into the present: "A person dies and yet continues to live: he is a living-dead. . . They belong to the time period of the Zanami [past] and by entering

individuals in the Sasa [present] period, they become our contemporaries" (5). Black Man with Watermelon in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is a representative "living-dead" among Parks's figures: Repetitively dying the deaths of the black men from the past, the present, even the future, throughout the play, this "figure" brings together the historical time of African American people and the performative present of the theatre. If "[a]ll of Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of the black presence in America" as Kimberly W. Benson has pointed out (152), Parks's figures also gesture towards this "genealogical poem" by disclosing the ruptures and discontinuities and realizing themselves as "the performative continuum of African American experience" (Rayner and Elam, "Unfinished Business" 450) in which the past, the present, and the future intersect.

In Parks's archaeologist and recuperative project, theatre settles in as an alternative and metaphoric space to *dramatize* the resurrection of black subjectivity and the restoration of black presence that is not/has not been possible in reality, history, and historiography. Parks's theatre serves as an alternative medium for making up for the paucity of black historiography: "I take issues with history because it doesn't serve me –it doesn't serve me because there isn't enough of it," as Parks professed in an interview with Michele Pearce (26). In her theatre as an incubator, the histories not quite fully born from the past are nurtured into existence through the metonymic materiality of black presence. Parks's imaginative and restorative use of theatre as a venue for deconstructive engagement with History and (re)constructive engagement with African-American history challenges and parodies the demeaning power—acting in specific socio-cultural theaters whether on and off stage— that has been wielded over the black body and person in American history. While resorting to theatre's reconstructive power to break into reality

in its abstract, artistic, and aesthetic dimensions, Parks's theatre also engages with specific theatres in the past– historicized and even traumatized – by having its characters cite them through their performances.

In terms of the metatheatrical sensibilities embedded in Parks's theatre, the five plays chosen here feature black *performers*. Black Man with Watermelon (*Last Black Man*), The Foundling Father and his son Brazil (*The America Play*), Lincoln and Booth (*Topdog/Underdog*), Hester La Negrita (*In the Blood*), and the Venus (*Venus*) act out historical spectacles of black subjugation and stereotyped images associated with African Americans. If Black Man with Watermelon and two black Lincolns, compulsively or strategically, mount the spectacle of the black man's lynching over and over, Hester and the Venus offer their bodies only to be made into voyeuristic and fetishistic spectacles. On the other hand, the stereotyped characterization and stylized antics of Black Man with Watermelon, the cross-racial performances of the Foundling Father and Lincoln, and the prosthetic costume of the Venus constantly evoke the minstrel form. Parks's black performers vigorously engage with two historical theatres –lynching and minstrelsy. If blackface minstrelsy is a chief cross-racial theatrical performance wherein the black character is appropriated and parodied by white actors, lynching is extra-theatrical socio-political theatre in which the utmost forms of corporeal violence was perpetrated on the black body. If minstrelsy, as a foremost entertainment in the antebellum era, was sustained by the spectacle of blackness, and thereby contributes to the dissemination of racist derogatory images, spectacularization of black outlaws and their executions became a politically deliberate and disciplinarily effective strategy when it comes to the practice of lynching in the segregation era. The historical contextualization of lynching and minstrelsy would help privilege theatre as a site for engaging with the ways in which the physical and discursive violence has been afflicted on

the black body as they intersect with each other: Even the lynching's corporeal violence is predicated on and simultaneously serves for the ideological production of blackness; and the blackface's figurative sacrifice of a black character debunks the genocidal motivation to obliterate the black body behind the mask.

"Two Deadly Amusements": Lynching and Blackface Minstrelsy

The word "lynching" traces back to the late 1700s, derived from the name of a frontier judge – Charles Lynch – in light of his penchant for hasty extralegal hangings at the expense of judicial trials. While initially referring to the various forms of punishment including "beating, whipping, tar-and-feathering, and only occasionally, killing" by "semiregular public authorities," –the so-called "mob" – mostly directed at whites like criminals and Tories (Markowitz xxiii; Goldsby 16-17), it extended to abolitionist, Mormons, Catholics and blacks during the antebellum period. With more and more executions of slaves in large numbers during the Civil War, lynching began to be decisively "racialized" in the wake of the Civil War: "[I]t was not until this time" that lynching came to be "almost exclusively associated" with the punishments for African Americans, especially corporal punishment (Wiegman 93). Between the 1880s and the 1940s, more than three thousand African Americans fell victims to extralegal executions by white vigilante mobs through hanging, burning, shooting, or drowning. Since then, "[l]ynching was always intended as a metaphor for, or a way to understand, race relations," as historian Jonathan Markovitz argues in *Legacies of Lynching* (xvi).

The racialization of lynching played a critical role in affirming white supremacy during the great social changes at the turn of the century. As Harvey Young writes, lynching campaigns were "post-emancipation backlash" against "the perceived threats of increased social rights and property ownership by African Americans" ("Lynching Souvenir" 646). While this extralegal

punishment –mainly targeted at black males— anchored itself in the myth of "black beast rapist," "lynching [was] much more an expression of Southern fear of Negro progress than Negro crime" (White 3). Robyn Wiegman notes, it is the "transformation from chattel to citizenry" of the black body that the whites tried to "control" through lynching "as a disciplinary practice" (82).

Expanding and deepening the socio-political understanding of lynching as manifestation of "white fears of the political power of newly enfranchised black men" (Markovitz xxiv), Grace Elizabeth Hale interprets lynching as an integral part of segregation in the South, which served to reaffirm and (re)produce the color line the white southerners had drawn between themselves and the blacks. Desired by the segregationist South, a white collectivity across regional and social differences posited "new grounds of difference to mediate the ruptures of modernity" (3) in the aftermath of the Civil War and the practice of lynching offered such "grounds of difference" for creating "whiteness as a modern racial identity," the only race entitled to citizenship. Locating the regime of lynching in the contexts of economic and cultural changes, Hale presents an interesting dynamic of lynching in which the emphasis on "visibility, the act of looking, and the authority of the eye" (8) in consumer culture converged with whites' desire to make blackness conspicuous as a way of "making whiteness": Lynching practices provided the white southerners with "the means to create and circulate the spectacle" of African American otherness (8).

Lynching became modernized as a form of "spectacle lynching," settling itself as "a new and yet grisly form of southern amusement" for white spectators (Hale, *Making Whiteness* 203). As spectacle, lynching came to approximate contemporary cultural performance: Lynching was "prepared for and often publicized in advance" within limited time frames and spaces "marked off" (Fuoss 5-6). Most of all, they were "communal" occasions with audiences gathering to

witness murder within "a more or less structured order of activities" (Fuoss 7).[3] Streetcar and railroads brought the crowd to the scenes of lynching spectacles and the telegraph, newspaper, and postcards transmitted the stories of execution events and images of lynched bodies. Disseminating the images of black criminality and degradation, these "modern" media made the whole nation a "theatre" for barbaric acts of violence. "[T]he intended message" of this nation-wide theatre was clear: "Blacks are not citizens" (Mitchell 13).

Amy Wood also stresses the cultural force of spectacle within the regime of lynching: "Lynching assumed this tremendous symbolic power precisely because it was extraordinary and, by its very nature, public and visually sensational" (1). With lynchings becoming more "public" and the images of lynched black bodies more "terrifying" and "exposed," they could carry out their "educational" functions more efficiently. The scenes of their fellows being tortured, mutilated, hanged and burned by white executioners were so "haunting" to blacks as to engrave in their minds that "the color bar was still firmly in place" and its transgression is "deadly" (Wood 1; Markotivz xxviii; Hale 230): "It was the spectacle of lynching, rather than the violence itself," Wood says, "that enforced black acquiescence to white domination" (2).[4]

[3] As Markowitz aptly summarizes, the spectacle lynchings are composed of fore-lynching ceremonies, the main event, and its aftermath: "The standard sequence of events included a hunt for the accused, the identifications of the captured African American by the alleged white victim or members of the victim's family, the announcement of the upcoming lynching, selection of the site, and the lynching itself, which involved torture and mutilation, often including castration, followed by burning, hanging, shooting, or a combination of all three" (Markotitz xxviii). Fuoss also discusses such three phases of "performance" involving what he calls "the lynching cycle" as "preminary, embedded, and subsequent" (9-23).

[4] While public executions legally banned by the end of nineteenth century, albeit for fear of potential disorder among crowd rather than "out of humanitarian sentiment," public hangings continued well into the twentieth century as "legal versions of the spectacle lynchings" (Wood 27, 29).

Witnessing lynching practices, black people experienced alienation from their own bodies. Lynching victims had their bodies physically forfeited, mutilated, annihilated, and dismembered. Perpetrating the material and literal violence on the black body, lynching "stages the transformation of the living body into a set of lifeless parts. . . . the spectacle becomes materiality. . . lynching enacts his [the victim's] disappearance," as Harvey Young remarks ("Lynching Souvenir" 655). As intimated in Young's use of the words related to performance and theatre, the bodies displayed and staged while being lynched remain at the realm of representation as they become vulnerable to symbolic and metaphoric violence. Lynching "stages" and "enacts" the white supremacist ideology by using the black body as "muse, antagonist, and stage prop" for its "theatre of mastery" (Mitchell 3). As instanced by the emblematic image of lynching, "strange fruit,"[5] – the black dead body hanging from a branch after lynching – the lynched body was chiefly the object of white voyeuristic gaze but it also became "the inscribed surface" (Jackson 18) as the victim was hoisted and displayed as a symbol of aberration, transgression, and disloyalty.

[5] "Strange fruit" refers to a famous song about lynchings, performed by Billie Holiday. It was originated from a poem written by teacher Abel Meeropol and published in 1937. The lyrics runs as the followings:

> "Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
> Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
>
> Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
> The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
> Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
> Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.
>
> Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
> For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
> For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
> Here is a strange and bitter crop."

The bodies displayed during and after lynching sessions were charged with its semiological and ideological values mostly stemming from the myth of the black rapist. Lynching was believed to be the inevitable and most appropriate punishment for the (alleged) black rapist who transgressed the sexual and racial line prescribed and stipulated by white society. The charge of rape was a remarkably effective strategy for lynching apologists since white womanhood was at stake and "Southern white men had a special haunting uneasiness about leaving their homes unprotected" (Chamlee). Lynching's public executions were "dramas that performed grave tales of crime and punishment" and "created public displays of bestial black men in visible contrast to strong and commanding white men" (Wood 34, 8). Lynching justified and perpetrated racial violence by associating black men with excessive, unbridled sexuality and treacherous criminality. While "reducing the black male to the body, and further to the penis itself" (Wiegman 463), whites inscribed on the black male body the image and the idea they created to contain blacks socially and politically. As Trudier Harris writes, "The issue. . . really boils down to one between white men and black men and the mythic conception the former have of the latter" (20). While being exposed to the utmost physical violence— dismembered, tortured, burned, and hanged— this actual physical body being lynched mysteriously becomes invisible and misrecognized as the idea of black criminality, obscenity, abjectness, and hyper-sexuality collapses onto it.

The slippage of abstraction into materiality even becomes stark and defamiliarized through another historical racist spectacle from the nineteenth century on –blackface minstrelsy. Performing in corked-black-face (what is perceived as) African American speech, behavior, lyrics, and songs, blackface minstrelsy exemplifies the ways in which the whites negotiate their repressed desires and psychic instabilities by replacing actual black bodies with the imagined

ones. Noting the interracial politics of the form, Eric Lott's brilliant analysis of blackface minstrelsy in the antebellum era in *Love and Theft* illuminates that it primarily originated from white envy of black folk culture and black body: If white men's fascination with black culture lead to exploitation, what Lott calls "theft," their fascination with the black body engendered a mixed erotic economy between white and black men, shedding a light on what Lott means by "love." Thus, the exploitation of the minstrel industry cannot be explained just as "a static and reified 'black culture's' removal into the pocketbooks of white imitators" (Lott 39). Attributing the clownish, childish, and bawdy images of minstrels to "black face" rather than white skin behind it, the antebellum white working class men projected their imagined blackness onto imagined black bodies. By displacing conflicts with their masters into racial conflicts, they could defuse their social and sexual insecurities. With its racist blackface stereotypes, the minstrel show constitutes a crucial phase of racial violence. If white mobs in spectacle lynching witnessed utmost physical violence committed against black body, mimetic and symbolic kinds of violence were inflicted on black skin/body/identity through such conventional stage figures as Jim Crow, Zip Coon, and Dandy Jim: "[B]lackface performances can be considered a symbolic rite of scapegoating, the flip side of lynching," says Susan Gubar (78). Blackface minstrelsy "provides insight into the culpable mental condition of genocidal society" (Gubar 56) and exhibits a "more pervasive and subtle 'social' death[s] of black Americans that do not look like lynching" (Norman 14) on the other.

Eric Lott's analysis of minstrelsy demonstrates how the color line ambivalently operates in the regime of minstrelsy. While the minstrel show constantly violated the color line "[u]nderwritten by envy as well as repulsion, sympathetic identification as well as fear," the ambivalent emotional valences white spectators harbored toward blackness – envy and repulsion,

sympathy and fear— paradoxically provided whiteness with a collectivity, thus contributing to formation of a white working class in the antebellum society (*Love and Theft* 8). In blackface minstrelsy, as in a lynching, "the fashioning of whiteness in large measure" was only possible "by way of the subjugation of blacks," as Saidiya Hartman points out: "The illusory integrity of whiteness facilitated by attraction and/or antipathy to blackness was ultimately predicated upon the indiscriminate use and possession of the black body" (32). Lynching and blackface minstrelsy are deeply engaged in the process of embodiment in which the black body, apparently extra-social matter, is paraphrased as a social process – particularly the process what Judith Butler calls "subjection"— as it becomes subordinated to power (*Psychic Life* 4). Within the wide contexts of the civil rights agenda and in the wake of emancipation,[6] lynching and minstrelsy can be considered as whites' efforts to challenge "the decommodification of the African American body that accompanies the transformation from chattel to citizenry" (Wiegman 446) by returning black body to its former status as "the object of property": both practices vigorously resorted to "coerced spectacles orchestrated to encourage the trade in black flesh" (Hartman 22), which leads to the forfeit of the black sentience or figurative possession of blackness.

By clashing these two racist theatres with each other, Parks's meta-theatrical project serves to debunk how the black body has been appropriated, exploited, and abused for the whites' symbolic struggles for self-fashioning. As spectacles, lynching and minstrelsy separated blackness from African-American bodies and circulated the representations of blackness as

[6] While blackface minstrelsy arose during the latter days of slavery and gained mass popularity through post-Reconstruction era, its caricatured and stereotypical depictions of blackness still exerted compelling influences in Hollywood films in the early twentieth century.

object or commodity. Parks's plays cite and rehearse various spectacles that evoke historical lynching practices in varying extents over and over, reenacting racial violence and social death on stage on the one hand and revealing how blackness itself has become spectacularized throughout American history on the other.

To engage with the construction of blackness and the politics of representation in such racist spectacles, Parks makes her stage theatricalized space by presenting her characters as self-conscious performers who deliberately assume stereotyped blackness. Evoking the legacy of minstrelsy, such characters as Black Man with Watermelon, two black Lincolns –The Lesser Known and Lincoln – and the Venus tend to exaggerate the physical features, gestures, and dialect of African Americans, often incongruent with realistic characterization. By exaggerating racial features attached to their bodies, Parks's performers seem to prove as false the racial differences the blackface or any prosthetic device to it embody. The fact that black performers, not white minstrels, assume the caricatured images of blackness and sell their images and bodies subverts the structures of historical exploitation and revises past trafficking in blackness and black body. These black performers who are all paid workers – except for Black Man with Watermelon— become their agents, free men/women unyoked by the rigid hierarchical relationship of the African-American past. As her plays feature these performers that no longer feel pressured by earlier racist paradigms, Parks get to liberate her art from the exigency of relating to and addressing the racial politics. However, Parks's satire and humour still remain ambivalent: Their stereotypical antics provoke laughter, yet form an uncanny harmony with the threat of violence pervading the plays, foregrounding and defamiliarizing the physical and material violence on the black body.

Performing Blackness/ Black Performing Body

The subversive or resistant gestures of Parks's performers are notably detected on the level of form. Parks's idea of Rep & Rev does not just refer to linguistic or aesthetic experiment but constitutes a chief discursive and performative strategy for her deconstructive historiography. For example, Steven Drukman explains Parks's use of Rep & Rev in light of her refusal of narrative closure which enriches and vibrates spectatorial/reading experiences: "The 'rep and rev' strategy keeps the spectator/reader ever vigilant, looking for something missed in the last repetition while scrutinizing the upcoming revision. Closure seems just on the horizon. . . where it remains" (57). However, repeating Black Man with Watermelon's death and resurrection, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* suggests haunting as a form to shatter a closure that lynching, as a secularized ritual, imposes on African American bodies, experiences, and identities in terms of temporality and symbolic working.

Parks's performers also "signify" on historical instances of racist spectacularization by repeating them with "a signal difference" or echoing the dominant discourse implied in them.[7] Two black performers impersonating Lincoln assassination insert black presence in the white history or invert the symbolic hierarchy of blackface, riffing on the historical and cultural stages that have been dominated by the white presence and myths. Rehearsing historical commodification and objectification of the black female body, Hester La Negrita's pornographic performance and the Venus's freak show employ their bodies as the site for grounding dominant discourse, reifying "theatricality" in their assumption of the "literal or figurative position of

[7] As Henry Louis Gates Jr. defines, "Signifyin" means "repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference" (xxiv). Tracing it back to early African culture, the black vernacular culture, and jazz, Gates theorizes "Signifyin" as a chief discursive strategy of African American literature. By capitalizing S and omitting or bracketing the final g, Gates accentuates its "free play" differentiated from the "order and coherence" of its normative usages (46, 49).

appearing as a spectacle before spectators" (Marshall 5). Having their citational capacities pushed to the utmost by employing their own bodies for revelation of various discourses on the black body and blackness, these performers' repetitive reenactments of racist spectacles mimic the ways in which the black body has been appropriated as a receptacle for myths, beliefs, and constructed ideas about blackness.

The critical distance these performers have toward what is staged by their performances is revealing, yet this conceptual approach remains a problematic or limited strategy when considering the medium of these performances is the black body. While reviving and resurrecting black bodies as signs of oppression, racist exploitation, and dehumanization for the purposes of critique and resistance, the reenactment of stereotypes might conversely inscribe its racist ideology by circulating its damaging images. The racially marked body on stage locates both the difficulties and potentials involved in making anti-racist performances out of historical racist spectacles. Shannon Jackson cautiously suggests a possibility that racialized performance might reinscribe the effects of racist spectacle: "If there is ever a time when the tolerance for ambiguous address is low and the quest for literal representation high it is in instances of explicitly racialized performance. In anti-racist performance, audience members often forgot whatever they once knew about theatrical irony" (191). By incorporating racial spectacles whether ontological or transhistorical– featuring black ancestors as spectators or commercial spectators set in a theme park, an arcade, a private house (for private lesbian show), or historical freak show stage – Parks's plays also become vulnerable to their possible reproduction of historical racial oppression and abjection, replicating in the present theatrical experiences the power relationship between the blacks on historical stages and those who made them into spectacle. Even The Foundling Father's and Lincoln's whiteface performances do not just

debunk the portability of whiteness but inversely re-spectacularize black bodies as objects of abuse, resonant with the images of lynch victims. Indeed, black performers might be doubly consumed: by spectators within and without.

On the other hand, however, in the process of imitating and parodying whites' distorted representations of blackness, these "citational" racialized performances might render black bodies mere critical signs and reduce them to their "dephysicalized readability," unwittingly replicating the racist ideology of "the purported immunity of blacks to pain" (Hartman 51) the "theatrical darky" type endorses. For instance, the customers of Lincoln's arcade show who "don't want it [Lincoln's suffering and dying black body] looking too real" (*Topdog/Underdog* 52) rehearse the self-deception of white slaver masters. By having their slaves performing singing, dancing, and instrumental recreations on the Middle Passage ships, on the auction block, and on plantation, white masters worked out a strategy of containment on the black sentience and relieved their guilt by erasing black suffering, pain, and discontent (Hartman 23; Harris 4). Problematizing and foregrounding the "spectacular nature of black suffering and, conversely, the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle," Hartman interrogates a fine line between theatre and reality as cherished by the white masters (22).

Parks's black performers reveal that the transformative power of subversive black performances also can be operative only in a *sanitized* version of theatre. All of these performances end up with deaths. If the deaths of Black Man with Watermelon and The Foundling Father connote a sense of resolution with the established version of history marked by the absent presence of blacks, the deaths of Lincoln, Hester La Negrita, and the Venus reveal that their performances fall short of escaping from their social, historical, and commercial determination. Parks's performers embody the playwright's ambivalent vision for theatre's power

to engage history: While The Foundling Father could "insert it [theatre] into real life and sort of make history" (Sellar 52) through his imaginative flight, the clash between theatre and reality in *Topdog/Underdog* leads to a final outcome –namely, death –only leaving Lincoln to replicate the violent history in reality.

My analysis of Parks's history drama aims to show how Parks's black performers critically engage with the limitations and complexities involved in their formalistic approach to African-American history and experience. Picking up on such a dilemma in which the subversive performances in terms of identity politics are inherently implicated, I argue that Parks's highly cited and signifying bodies paradoxically resurrect and re-member black embodied subjects by mobilizing liberating possibilities of the performing bodies on stage on the one hand and triggering affective spectatorship on the other. The utopian possibilities attributed to material presence of bodies on stage began to be envisioned with the experimental theatre in 1960s. Stressing movement and sound, the avant-garde artists in 1960s and early 1970s tried to liberate the body on stage from traditional communicative functions imposed on it: They envisioned the actor's body as "an auto-referential sign" (Krysinski 154) referring to itself. The "poor" actor, stripped of all theatrical affectations and the stage as a space "emptied" of everything but the actor's flesh and gesture served as "an alternative model of social interaction and political structure" (Auslander 37) by triggering the "unmediated" relationship between performer and audience.[8]

[8] Seeking for a cure for what is pathological about drama in his era and Western culture in general, Artaud tried to connect people with "a secret psychic impulse which is speech before words" (Artaud 7), an orality that he felt had been lost in Western culture itself, including its drama. Indebted to Antonin Artaud and his Theatre of Cruelty, the experimental theatre in 1960s considered the actor's presence before the audience as the medium for politically activating the relationship between actor and audience. Such avant-garde artists in the 1960s and early 1970s as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Joseph Chaikin tried to radicalize and politicize theater: As

If avant-garde theatre practitioners tried to materialize and corporealize their performance theatres, phenomenological theatre critics in 1980s located corporeal presence at the heart of dramatic theatre as well as performance theatre. While focusing on the plays themselves, either written or imagined as staged, rather than on the practitioner's experiences in the processes of creating plays as performances, such phenomenologists as Bruce Wilshire, Bert O. States, Stanton Garner, and Alice Rayner succeeded to the avant-garde problematic with the bodily presence. States tries to replace "what the text loses in significative power in the theater" (29) with what it gains in "corporeal presence" by foregrounding stage images retaining "a high degree of en soi" (30) or an "exceptional degree of self-givenness on a stage" (31). Garner takes up this dialogical and complementary relationship between phenomenological investigations and semiotics, "to counter the signifying body in its dephysicalized readability with what we might call the 'embodied' body in its material resistance" (*Bodied Spaces* 50).

Attending to this dialogic and dialectic relationship between semiotic and phenomenological capacities of a performing body, this project investigates how black performers' self-conscious re-enactments of racist stereotypes problematize the black body as a site charged with the tension between its bodily and material presence and its semiotic fungibility. While inviting the audience for a distanced, analytical approach to their performances of blackness on the one hand, Parks's black performers also destabilize such a stable viewing position of the spectators alienated from the stage spectacle by affectively implicating them in the performance and simultaneously reminding them of their contingency as a viewer. By

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homage to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Brook's "Holy Theater" envisions theatre as a space in which the invisible can appear only through the medium of the actor's flesh (42). Grotowski's actors should be "poor," giving up everything except for their own bodies to achieve the "holiness" of theatre.

locating their performing bodies between their semiotic capacities and phenomenological manifestations and mobilizing a dialectic relationship between each, these ambivalent black performers expose blackness as a contestation between appropriation and authenticity, theatrical illusion projected onto the black body and material living experiences of black people. Turning racist spectacles into the occasions for discursive resistance and affective investment and thereby urging "love and distance" toward black bodies on the stage, Parks's drama rethinks the historical valences of performance and redeems theatre as a venue for enabling and complicating *doing* history.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One reads *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* against the practices of lynching and the tradition of lynching drama in the early twentieth century when lynching was at its height. Lynching is both the past preserved through black testimony and the form through which Black Man with Watermelon, as black collective self, negotiates the collective experiences of black suffering. Inflicted with various forms of violence evoking lynching – hung, chased by dogs, drowning and electrocuted – Black Man with Watermelon has died the death of every black man: "Yesterday today next summer just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in the whole entire world" (102, 129). While anti-lynching drama in the early twentieth century stuck to realistic images of African Americans in defiance of the representational politics of the minstrel tradition, the "figure" of Black Man with Watermelon leaves little room for personal representations rather serving as "the powerful stereotype of folk tradition" (Goto 113). This chapter investigates how such (anti-)characterization employs Black Man's body as a locus for collective experiences of the oppressive history of lynching. Greek

tragedy and religious rituals punctuate the Black Man's experiences of violence and suffering in this play. Among these forms, I single out Black Man's haunting as a form that would shatter and dissipate the aesthetics of closure and cathartic resolution lynching promoted as a secular ritual for white spectators. As a "survival" strategy and also as the playwright's dramaturgy, haunting performs the alternative temporality of African culture –circular, conflated, and collapsed— against the teleology of History. The latter part of my discussion demonstrates how the clashing between the forms –lynching and minstrelsy – serves to destabilize passive spectatorship. Distanced from his own body through minstrel caricaturing, Black Man's execution scene paradoxically heightens the visceral effect on the part of the audience, thus debunking and interrogating the politics of pleasure that served for the institution of slavery.

Chapter Two contextualizes/problematizes *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* against the tradition of the minstrel show, what Suzan Gubar calls "blackface lynching" (53). The historical relevance of Parks's two "Lincoln Plays" has been discussed mainly in light of the problematic image of Abraham Lincoln in American/African-American history, vacillating between "the Great Emancipator" and "a white supremacist" (Foster, "Lincoln Myth" 31). I locate the historical relevance of Parks's two black Lincoln impersonators in the antebellum cultural iconography surrounding blackface minstrelsy. Considering the history of the white "ripoff" of the black minstrel tradition, this chapter regards these "black minstrels" as Parks's attempt to reclaim what Harry Elam and Alice Rayner call "the inverted minstrels show" (183), including the provocative and problematic tradition of black blackface. If blackface minstrelsy inflected an "Afro-American-inspired artistic form" (Traylor 50) for the psychological and economic gains of the white working class in the years leading up to the Civil War, the inverted cross–racial dynamics of whiteface performance in both plays serves the economic profits of

black impersonators, revealing how they buy into the system that buys them. The Foundling Father's calling of "acting out" Lincoln, his resemblance, however, dwindles into Lincoln's unavoidable means to make a living when it comes to *Topdog/Underdog*. The black male subjectivity depicted by Lincoln and Booth is fragmented and feminized within the symbolic system of blackface minstrelsy and lynching, leaving their appropriated form of theatricality –the liberating potential of their performative reenactment – as a problematic possibility. Evoking the cultural tradition of blackface minstrelsy and simultaneously bringing in its historical contexts, Parks's two whiteface impersonators build their identities upon and exercise them against the stereotypical renditions of African American masculinity worked out by blackface portrayals. The virtual death each black Lincoln, The Foundling Father and Lincoln, faces in a theme park or in an arcade, with whiteface on, does not only reference symbolic violence inherent in blackface minstrelsy but also stands for the social deaths of these characters, culminating in their literal deaths at the end of each play. The Foundling Father and Lincoln are confronted with death every night, embodying the metaphor of lynching penetrating the African American past and present.

Chapter Three analyzes *In the Blood* as Parks's critical meditation on spectacularization of the black female body through its heroine, Hester La Negrita, a problematic black mother who ends up killing her own child. *In the Blood* is deeply engaged with "generic and allegorical history" (Fraden 436), tackling the racist and sexual exploitation and commodification of the black female body in the modern welfare state, uncannily evoking the antebellum America. If this play has been often read against murderous mothers such as Medea and Sethe, my reading of *In the Blood* adds the ambivalent mothers –nurturing and murdering –of early lynching drama. If early lynching drama negotiates black citizenship through Christian ideal motherhood to anchor

black belonging, this idea/ ideology becomes thwarted when it comes to Hester, a black mother who is not allowed any claim to her private sphere –her abode and body. Parks demystifies the ideology of black belonging by featuring the ways in which Hester is constantly being made a spectacle by each representative of the society. The latter part of this chapter is invested in revealing how human relations of this allegorical society are articulated and negotiated through the form of spectacle –power relations between spectator/consumer and the spectacle/commodity – hinting at a possible linkage between the epistemic violence of racism and the postmodern ontological crisis. In this Debordian "society of the spectacle," Hester's killing of her son at the end of the play registers as a resistant and defiant act on the symbolic level, redressing the alienated relations between the black body and the words/ideas/symbols inscribed on it. By returning his son to the blood, thus disrupting the collapse of the symbolic into the literal in the institution of lynching and racism in general, Hester, a black mother, reclaims the son's body as her own in defiance of the role of the *mater dolorosa*, finally aligning herself in the lineage of black defiant mothers who kill their children.

Chapter Four discusses *Venus*, a play on a Khoisan woman named Saartjie Baartman who turned into the Venus Hottentot, a circus freak in early nineteenth century Europe. I read this play as a reflection of Parks's vocational ethics as "playwright-resurrectionist" (Sellar 52). Dubious and ambivalent characterization of The Negro Resurrectionist parallels the part Parks plays in both re-exposure and restitution of Baartman. Reading *Venus* as a part of racial spectacle surrounding this diasporic black female body, this chapter refers to *Without Sanctuary* exhibition and anti-lynching crusade –its forerunner— for their strategic employment of racist spectacle as a site for critical contests and political awareness. *Venus* does not just resurrect the Venus's body but the racist mythologies revolving around black female body for the audience to confront,

reaffirm, and consume through the Venus's body as a discursive site. *Venus* thwarts, disrupts, and refracts the white gaze on the black female body by constantly calling up the Venus's body only to foreground its absent presence. However, my reading also shows that the performative use of the Venus's prosthetic costume – featured in the play's premier and many productions – paradoxically implicates the audience in the play, rendering difficult their distance-taking from her body on stage. As the audience begins to perceive their spectatorship contingent and vulnerable, they are finally ushered to the resurrection of the Venus as a feeling subject and palpable embodied being, who invites them for affective communion with her.

CHAPTER 1

The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World (1989) as Lynching Drama

While Suzan-Lori Parks provocatively comments that "[t]he Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature" ("An Equation" 19), an imperative to preserve black testimony lies at the core of her dramatic world, constituting *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*'s main concern as well. Parodying the daily routine of the husband's coming home from work and the wife's welcoming him, *Last Black Man* depicts Black Man with Watermelon who died "yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317," yet always "comed back" from each death,[9] and Black Woman with Fried Drumstick who embraces these ghostly visits and always gets herself ready to feed him while being perplexed by them. Black Man must shuttle between his wife and other dead ancestors, the being and the un-being, until he has successfully carried out his mission, assigned by African American spirits from various historical, literary, and mythic sources: "You should write that down and you should hide it under a rock [. . .] because if you dont write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist," as Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread notes (102, 104).

Black Man's "unfinished business," as Harry J. Elam and Alice Rayner explain, is not just inherited from their mystic ancestors but from literary and dramatic predecessors who contributed to the genesis of lynching drama during the heyday of lynching. In the first full-length black-authored lynching play, *Rachel* (1916), Angelina Weld Grimké features the

[9] Suzan-Lori Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World,* in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: TCG, 1995), 102, 105.

memorable black heroine who refuses her suitor's proposal because she has decided not to bear children, whom she fears will become lynching victims. It is her mother's stories about the deaths of her father and brother that turn this would-be affectionate mother who feels sorry for the "mothers whose little babies –grow up –and –are *bad*" (32, emphasis added) into an outraged black mother committed to protecting her adopted and future children from mob violence. Not until ten years have passed since her husband's death, can Mrs. Loving tell Rachel and her brother Tom that their father and brother were lynched. While acknowledging that she was one of the mothers who have their babies lynched, thus can't "parade their faults before the world" (33), she reproaches her living children, "Did you think –that –perhaps –the reason –I –I –wouldn't talk about them [. . .] was because –I was ashamed –of them?" (39). Both for Rachel and Tom, who fumble for an answer, and for Mrs. Loving, who laments that "I never dreamed until today you could take it this way," lynching is the truly unspeakable, something they might well be ashamed to talk about. Mrs. Loving's recount of the day Mr. Loving was "dragged out" by "four masked men" (41), however, attests to how black mothers took part in the generation, shaping, and transmission of the collective memory of this traumatic history of African Americans. By imparting her lived knowledge of this painful family history to her surviving children, she fulfills her obligation to articulate and stand as a witness to racial violence and the collective past of the race: "I believe it to be my duty," she sternly says to her son who is aghast at her horrific disclosure (40).

Critics may find historical reference ambivalent in Parks's history plays but *Last Black Man* repeats a concrete history of black persecution and racist violence. The play repeatedly revisits a period of American history – from the 1890s through the 1930s – mottled with savage violence, as is visually and aurally intimated in its references to execution. Repeatedly emitting a

choking sound, Black Man moans: “Gaw. Gaw. Cant breathe” (117). While Black Woman says, “Let me loosen your collar for you you comed home after uh hard days work” as if welcoming the husband coming home from a day’s office-work, his day’s work “aint like any others day work,” nor is the collar around his neck simply worn by a white-collar worker (118). Through Black Woman’s metonymic associations, the seemingly conventional scene from an ordinary modern family is revealed as a historicized and racialized scene of persecution and oppression: “Let me loosen thut tie let me loosen thuh neck-lace let me loosen up thuh *noose* that stringed him up” (118, emphasis added). As a compelling historic relic, the noose evokes the horrific American history of lynching as it reveals the seemingly benign necklace’s euphemistic slang meaning. Although he desperately wants to break from the choking grip around his neck and take a whole breath, Black Man asks his wife not to take the noose off from his neck but to just loosen it. He even wants the tree branch he brings home along with the noose left as it is around his neck. Resonating with lynching’s iconic image of “strange fruit” for the body hanging from the tree, the noose and the tree branch from which it hangs serve to remind Black Man of his hanging scene at the railroad platform and his running from it, which amount to Black Man’s “[d]ays work”: “It had begun tuh rain. Now: huh. Sky flew open and thuh light went ZAP. Tree bowed over till thuh branch said BROKE. Uhround my necklace my neck uhround my neck my tree branch. In full bloom. [. . .] Feet hit thuh ground in I started runnin. [. . .] Draggin on my tree branch on back tuh home” (119). Throughout Black Man’s surrealistic, mystic journey, the noose visually and discursively serves as a leitmotif interlacing his seemingly ahistorical and nonsequential narratives with a phase of post-Reconstruction racial violence. As Adrienne C. Macki explains, the noose was more than just a stage prop in early-twentieth-century black-authored lynching drama. Standing in place of the actual lynching scene on stage, “the mere

presence of the noose" can have "the potential to inflict the pain that accompanied the actual act of violence" (70). Violence was too near for African Americans at that time: "All blacks lived with the reality that no black individual was completely safe from lynching," (Shapiro 32).

With its significance as an iconic stage prop, the noose and its "deadly" grip serve as a reminder of vulnerability to racial violence in *Last Black Man*. In its premier at Brooklyn's Downtown Cultural Center in 1990 directed by Beth A. Schachter, Black Man appeared most of the time with a noose around his neck and a piece of wood attached to it, pointing to the role lynching has played in shaping the collective consciousness of violent history[10] and rendering quite unambiguous the play's reference to this racist institution. A sense of abruptness and bewilderment surfaced in Black Woman's depiction of the moment her husband is taken away from her echoes the poignancy of the scenes from early lynching dramas in which lynch victims are dragged by lynch mobs: "Coming for you. Came for you: that they done did"; "They comed from you and tooked you. That was yesterday. Today you sit your chair where you sat yesterday and thuh day afore yesterday afore they comed and tooked you" (105, 107).[11] The presence of the audience with "their picnic basket" at Black Man's hanging also invokes lynching practices as they became "grisly form of white southern amusement" (119; Hale, *Making* 203).

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[10] As Schachter recollects in "The Birth of *The Death of the Last Black Man*: Recollections of the First Staging," the playwright collaborated with the director "on all major production decisions" including casting, costume and setting design, even from their conceptual stages in the BACA production (197-199).

[11] In earlier lynching dramas that usually unfold against the domestic setting of black homes (which I will discuss later in this chapter), lynching's ramifications for the black family begin with and are symbolized in the physical intrusion of white mob or executioners into black homes: "They *broke down* the front door and made their way to our bedroom. . . . They *broke down* the door. . . . Four masked men fell –they did not move any more –after a little. (pauses) Your father was finally overpowered and dragged out" (*Rachel* 41, emphasis added). Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* illustrates how a peaceful mundane life of black home is broken by the abrupt entrance of the two officers and a white girl who are sent for Tom, a grandson of this house, as a victim of their lynching ritual.

Despite the overwhelming presence of the noose onstage and other slyly inserted scraps of the lynching narrative, few studies have read this play against the legacy of lynching drama. This can be largely attributed to the playwright's stance toward black experience as a major source for black literature. Parks is an African-American writer who resists the idea that African American dramatists are supposed to reflect black experiences in everything they write: "It's insulting. . . when people say my plays are about what it's about to be black – as if that's all we think about, as if our life is about that" (qtd. in Solomon 74). Parks does not repudiate the notion of historical reference altogether; she only warns that too much focus on oppression might sacrifice "many [other] ways of defining Blackness." While she asks "We have for so long been an "oppressed" people, but are Black people only blue?" on the one hand, she admits to "a daily reality in which a confrontation with a White ruling class is a central feature" on the other ("An Equation" 19). Her misgivings firstly come from a concern that the diversities and multiplicities in which black people and experiences can be artistically rendered might be forfeited.

Partially taking up the form of an (anti-)lynching drama, *Last Black Man* is confronted with the reality of oppression at hand and the no less imminent task of decentralizing the defining position of racial identity for black art. As a representative African-American post-soul playwright, Parks faces up to the potential dead end of negotiating the relations between the text and the social, literature and context, art and politics. Parks gropes for a breakthrough through the ways in which *Last Black Man* reflects and refracts the collective experiences of black suffering by clashing aesthetic and social forms, without privileging either. While succeeding to the imperative to preserve black testimony, *Last Black Man* "seeks out patterns over meaning, the intricacy of relations over interpretive depth" (Levine 23) in its approach to the form of the collective experience of lynching, distancing itself from early-twentieth-century lynching

dramas' attempt, through realism, to portray the effects and aftermaths of lynching on black family and community.

Anti-Lynching (or Lynching) Drama in the Early Twentieth Century

In *Strange Fruit,* a seminal anthology of the genre of lynching plays, Judith L. Stephens, provides a concise definition of lynching drama as "a play in which the threat or occurrence of a lynching, past or present, has major impact on the dramatic action" (3). Limited to early-twentieth-century dramas by women, the anthology's selections reflect women's initiative in the anti-lynching movement and their contribution to the tradition of lynching drama. Such African American women playwrights as Angelina Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Mary Powell Burrill were dedicated to The Anti-Lynching Crusade, and set out to "record the injustice of lynching" (Perkins and Stephen 4). Most of works written by black women in this early phase are set in the domestic spaces. Rather than presenting the actual violence onstage, these playwrights depict how the black family or community copes up with the lynching event that happened, is happening, or will happen offstage. However, the clashing between such domestic and communal environment of everyday routine as home, church, school, or workplace and the brutal reality of lynching is so dramatic as to accentuate the ruthlessness and inhumanness of this racial violence.

For these jarring moments of contrast, particularly in terms of the structure lynching is featured offstage, the role of verbally recreating and relaying the incident of lynching becomes vital in these plays. It is more so when considering the importance of lynching drama as an archival testimony. Aligning themselves with other artistic forms of protests against lynching by African-American women such as Deliah Beasley's articles for the *Oakland Tribune* in 1915,

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's sculpture *Mary Turner* (named after a real woman lynched as pregnant), and Billie Holiday's monumental "Strange Fruit," these African American women playwrights continued the protest tradition by creating "dramatic record of racial history in the United States and a continuously evolving dramatic form that preserves the knowledge of this particular form of racial violence and the memory of its victims" (Stephens 4). As represented in the detailed and painful confession of Mrs. Loving in *Rachel*, these African-American women pioneers in theatre mainly feature black women as the messengers of lynching incidents in the past or in session, with the exception of Regina Andrew's *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* featuring a black male messenger. In *A Sunday Morning in the South*, Matilda tersely yet appallingly breaks the news: "They –they done lynched him" (109). In Johnson's other two anti-lynching dramas *Safe* (1925) and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930), a trio chorus of female characters –Liza, Mandy, and Hannah, and Pauline, Rebecca, and Hester – relays and comments on lynchings happening outside. And it is the sister Millie who imparts the tragic new of their father's lynching to her brother Lonnie in Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919).

However, these dramatists did not just fight with lynching's injustice and brutality or its material and emotional aftermath in black families and communities. Lynching does not just point to physical, extralegal mob violence against blacks but it is a battle waged over symbol, image, and representation. The myth of the black rapist who violates a white woman was always at the center of pro-lynching rhetoric although less than a third of those lynched were reported to be guilty of actual rape according to the NAACP's statistics. In most cases, lynching was not sparked by black crime but rather served as a theatre that perform black barbarity and white righteousness by "creating public displays of bestial black men in visible contrast to strong and commanding white men," as Amy Wood contends (25). Black-authored lynching plays were one

of the cultural means available for proving and confirming African Americans' right to full citizenship against the lynch mob's extralegal "real-life" theater of alleged crime and punishment that robbed its victim of that right. In this context, Koritha Mitchell prefers to call these "lynching drama" rather than "anti-lynching drama" in that lynching plays written by black authors "served as mechanisms through which African Americans survived the height of mob violence" rather than "simply respond[ed] to violent injustice" (2-7). According to Mitchell, the ideological strife surrounding black citizenship was waged over black domesticity. Inasmuch as domesticity provides the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, lynch mobs tried to deny domesticity by relegating black men to brute rapists and potential threats to white families, and, as a result, in turn, destroyed black homes by lynching black men. Black-authored lynching dramas, conversely, strived to emphasize that lynched victims were "loving respectable men" capable of successful homes by using domestic settings and featuring black characters who "behaved in these family-centered ways" as "archival" evidence for black domesticity (Mitchell 14).

However, the mainstream stage at this era was propagating the distorted, caricatured, and mocked representation of African Americans. On top of the unfavorable legacy of the "stage negro" as depicted in white-authored dramas since the eighteenth century—associated with malapropisms, cowardice, and lack of common sense (P. Young 17-9), – the minstrel show, "the first formal public acknowledgement by whites of black culture" (Lott, *Love and Theft* 4) which arose during the latter days of slavery and gained mass popularity though post-Reconstruction era, played a critical role in defining and consummating the black theatrical type, the so-called "theatrical darky" (Huggins 251). Grinning with large lips, rolling and bulging white eyes, jerking in motion, and shuffling in gait, the black minstrels with burnt cork masks performed the

version of music, speech, dance, and behavior that whites perceived as black identity. While pandering to whites' interracial desire for black culture and body, minstrelsy illuminates the ways in which whites chose to perceive African Americans, and those distorted and appropriated images were further disseminated in American literature, theater, the arts, and popular culture. Nathan Huggins offers a detailed description of this stereotyped image on stage:

> The theatrical darky was childlike; he could be duped into the most idiotic and foolish schemes; but like a child, too, innocence would protect him and turn the tables on the schemers. His songs were vulgar and his stories the most gross and broad; his jokes were often on himself, his wife or woman. Lazy, he was slow of movement, or when he displayed a quickness of wit it was generally in flight from work or ghosts. Nevertheless, he was unrestrained in enthusiasm for music –for athletic and rhythmical dance. . . he was insatiable in his bodily appetites; his songs and tales about food would make one think him all mouth, gullet and stomach. . . .The stage Negro went into ecstasy over succulent foods –pork, chicken, watermelon –"lipsmacking," "mouthwatering." (251)

This kind of characterization rid blacks of the qualities required of citizens –an ability to think for themselves, solemnity, integrity, moral dignity, and self-sufficiency; thus, dismantling these stereotypes became an imminent task for such black dramatists as Grimké, Johnson, Burrill, and Dunbar-Nelson. Disrupting the legacy of the "stage negro" as carefree, slow in intelligence and movement, only guided by instincts and appetites, which is deep-rooted in the American stage tradition and the whites' minds, these serious black writers substituted realistic images of blacks as they manage their lives gracefully in well-organized homes, engage in activities in schools and workplaces, cultivate their familial, religious bond in homes and

churches, not different from whites. For instance, Grimké confesses that she chose her characters from "the best type of colored people" for appealing to white audiences: "They are many of them well educated, cultivated and cultured; they are well-mannered and in many instances, more moral than the whites; they love beauty; they have ideals and ambitions, and they do not talk – this educated type –in the Negro dialect" ("Reason" 425). Grimké presents Rachel as an example of this sophistication: a "highly strung girl, a dreamer and an idealist" who reacts to "race prejudice" ("Reason" 424-26).

Collision of Rituals and Performative Mediumship

Like these black women characters who preserve collective memory through black stories, Black Man's repetitive, interlaced, and circular recitations of his various predicaments also answer the ancestors' call to preserve the narrative of the past (102). If Mrs. Loving's narrative succeeds to the "unfinished business" of his husband, an innocent black man who were aware of his innocence and tried to publish it through his own newspaper before he was dragged and lynched by "the respectable people in the town," Black Man's ghostly visits are meant to complete the ancestors' unfinished business of making a place for black experiences in history by linguistic inscription, whether spoken or written. If *Rachel* portrays the ways in which family members surviving lynching come to terms with the tragic death of their father that has remained unclaimed for their consciousness, *Last Black Man* has been also read through the lens of trauma theory in which Black Man "'work[s] through' the trauma of loss by remembering, repeating and 're-experiencing' that loss" (Malkin 172).

Last Black Man is invested in redressing Black Man's "lonely death and lack of proper burial" just as Lucy comments on the death of his husband in *The America Play* (175): Heading toward the ceremony of "proper burial" in the Final Chorus, this play, as a whole, constitutes and

performs a performance of a "ritual and communal act of remembering" (Kolin, "An interview with Director Liz Diamond" 209). As "all kin" to Black Man (112), such historical and mythic ancestor figures as Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork, Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, Before Columbus, Old Man River Jordan, And Bigger and Bigger and Bigger, Prunes and Prisms, Voice on Thuh Tee V. have gathered together to re-member, resurrect, and re-enact the history of Black Man, finally to lay him to rest. The structure orchestrated by an overture, five scenes, and a final chorus, gives the play a ritualized rhythm, paralleling that of Greek tragedy whose narrative episodes are separated by choral *stasima*, enclosed by opening *padados* and closing *exodos* (Malkin 168). Parks also heavily resorts to religious rituals for structuring *Last Black Man*: As she mentions in an interview, the five scenes titled as "Thus Holy Ghost," "First Chorus," "Thuh Lonesome 3some," "Second Chorus," and "In Thug Garden of Hoodoo It," which are called "panels," are structured after the Stations of Cross, a series of fourteen tableaus depicting the passion of Christ (Jacobus 1372). Parks confesses that she conceives each of her plays as "a religious pageant": "My plays are like passion plays where the community comes together to reenact the passion of whomever" (Ong 47-50).

The structure and rhythm adopted from Greek tragedy and religious rituals "afford" a template for Black Man's experiences of violence and suffering. While the association with the Stations of Cross accords his repetitive deaths a mock-heroic and mock-religious quality, the movement toward each death tends to become fatalistic as well with this association. Paralleling Jesus's fate, condemned to die, carrying and dying on the cross, Black Man charges toward his destined death every time with a large watermelon –that is, his cross— marked by racial stigma. Black Man's multiple deaths by diverse means revisit the death of each black man in the past,

resonating with "the historical and statistical mortality rate of the African-American man," as Deborah E. Geis suggests (*Suzan-Lori Parks* 62). The compulsive rhythm of repetition propelling Black Man's many deaths eerily reflects the ways in which lynching became "an increasingly routine response" to any transgressive attempts of blacks to make an entrance into white American society, whether on the socio-political, economic, or cultural dimension (Wiegman 12).

This recurring, circular, routinized cadence of death is brought to an end by a final, proper death Black Man seeks for in the end. This concluding death enables Black Man to break free from the cycle of killings and mutilations from which he has suffered, thus yielding among critics a tendency to accentuate a sense of resolution. Parsing *Last Black Man'*s ritualistic elements against voodoo rituals devoted to the Petro loa, Glenda R. Carpio detects a cathartic movement from the play: "The movement [. . .] is, first, toward the release of anger and pathos through testifying and witnessing" (218). In a similar vein, Louise Bernard interprets the Final Chorus "as an act of celebration" in which all the stage figures "take their rightful place in the eternal struggle for representation" (696). Elam and Rayner also understand the play's "ritual remembrance" as a gesture of symbolic closure: By retelling the past, writing it down, and securing it under a rock, as commanded by mythic, historical black ancestors, Black Man can "place the past symbolically" and thus "end the haunting" ("Unfinished" 458). In the Final Chorus, Black Woman once again repeats the eulogy resounding throughout the play, "Yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world." This time, however, she confirms the death of her husband for herself and for the chorus figures for the last time by adding, "He diediduh he did, huh" (129), giving a flavor of finality to his death and the structure of the play as well. Elam and Rayner even elicit a

narrative of "the real pragmatism" from this poignant parting scene in which husband and wife exchange the last words[12] with each other, arguing that Black Man and "living" Black Woman can "move on" only by "writing it down and putting it under a rock" ("Unfinished" 456).

It is indeed the finality of death that affords/serves for such a cathartic ending, enabling laying the dead and the past of racial violence to rest. However, the finality of death deserves special consideration against the backdrop of lynching as a rite of exorcism. In terms of the punitive system of lynching, death is obviously the ultimate punishment afflicted on the body of a victim. In terms of the representational politics of the regime of lynching, physical violence inversely serves symbolic and metaphoric ends. As Trudier Harris's brilliant analysis of lynching shows, lynching constitutes a ritual specific to American society, consummating its racial relations through its ceremony and performance (1-19). As ceremony, lynching performs white supremacy and black inferiority as vital to the society. While the representational politics serves to endorse and offer a rationale for the physical violence of lynching as instanced by the myth of the black rapist, death, in turn, works to reify the symbolic punishment needed to "exorcise the evil and restore the topsy-turvy world to its rightful position" (11). As a backlash against the decommodification of blacks in the wake of emancipation, lynching, as a form, affords to "limit and fix the African body in a particular place, where it could be seen and contained" (Lewis 95). When "the negro had ceased to be valuable as property and was looked upon as a dangerous political factor in community," as James E. Cutler aptly recapitulates, "to take his life was

[12] BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Miss me.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Miss me.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Re-member me.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Re-member me. Call one me sometime. Call on me sometime. Hear? Hear? (131)

thought to be the easiest and quickest way to dispose of him" (135). Lynching is a form of closure imposed on blackness in two ways: it puts an end to black body and stunts blacks' transformation from chattel to citizenry. As black individual bodies were physically dismembered with lynching practices, they were also collectively dis-membered from the body politic of America.

The aesthetics of closure lynching harbors as a physical and symbolic form of violence is hinted at in the title of this postmodern lynching drama: "The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World." Heralding the enigmatic, dismal journey of the last black man toward/through (recurring) death(s), the title presents the play as equivocal: Does the death of the last black man imply the termination of black people or does it set them free from the circular history of violence? The catharsis or the celebration his final death might endorse is undermined by the repetitive appearances of Black Man with the noose around his neck. Voice on thuh Tee V's broadcasting of his death suggests that the catharsis might be others':

> Good Evening. I'm Broad Caster. Headlining tonight: the news: is Gamble Major, the absolutely last living Negro man in the whole entire known world –is dead. Major Gamble, born a slave, taught himself the rudiments of education to become a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement. He was 38 years old. News of Major death sparked controlled displays of jubilation in all corners of the world. (110)

Emphasizing the death of "the absolutely last living Negro man in the whole entire known world," Voice on thuh Tee V. relays the biographical information about Black Man including his name. The revelation is quite new and even abrupt against the ways in which the play negates its protagonist any features of a realist character. This biography, however, is far from a

conventional characterization: Born a slave, spearheading the Civil Rights movement, and dying in the present at the age of 38, this figure has lived across an impossible time span, more than a century, contracting and transpiring through African-American time and history, straddling the personal and the political. The furtive allusion to phenomenal black figures from the actual history of Civil Rights movement, –Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X, both of whom died at the age of 39 – works to further connect the personal history of Black Man to the Civil Rights Movement. Within the wider context of the Civil Rights agenda, "controlled displays of jubilation" becomes suspicious, divulging whites' clandestine desire to get rid of African Americans who were not any more their property, to forestall their movement toward full citizenship, and to maintain white collectivity by annihilating those it perceives as not entitled to citizenship. The clandestine bliss "the absolutely last living Negro man in the whole entire known world" brings to whites evokes and parallels the catharsis lynching might provoke as a secularized exorcising ritual: "The conduct of the whites who participated in murdering and lynching blacks suggests that these grisly events served as a catharsis by purging the evil the whites feared in themselves and "projected" onto the blacks," as James P. Comer comments on the perverted scapegoating of lynching (134).

As such, the ritualized structure of *Last Black Man* is encroached upon by the temporality of a pagan ritual of lynching as the presence of the noose on the stage constantly evokes. In terms of the "cathartic" ending –on the part of the white participants –this secularized ritual is intended for, Black Man's plural deaths also can be reconfigured in terms of linearity: "The perpetual dying of Black Man, almost like clockwork, creates a sequential order predicated on his demise" (Colbert 200). When regarded as a rush toward the final destination of his actual demise, his repetitive deaths represent the rhythm of actual practices of lynching as repeated,

ritualized death. Yet, Black Man is caught between lynching's annihilating force and the counterpart resurrecting momentum, as emblematized by the peculiar mode of haunting. If lynching's temporality is marked by its linear progress towards annihilation of the specific race, Black Man's haunting works out a rupture reversing and dissipating this deathly flow: "In order to die over and over, the Black Man also has to be resurrected," as Geis reminds us (60).

When Black Man's repetitive narratives and performances of the past are only meant for his reconciliation with its traumatic loss in the end, the performative dimension of Black Man's haunting might be disregarded. Signifying his existential quandary *per se*, haunting operates as an ambivalent mechanism for Black Man, who is a victim, thus already deceased, and yet at the same time a witness to his own deaths. He can bring an end to his haunting and thereby successfully cross over to the land of the dead only by fulfilling his testimonial acts. Haunting becomes the only form to which Black Man can resort for sharing the circumstances of his deaths with the living. Black Man's ghost is not just conjured to exorcise the wrongs of the past committed against him and his race. By retelling, re-enacting, and re-experiencing the scenes from his executions, Black Man calls up and lays bare all the violence afflicted on his body so that it can be perceived not just as past but present. The choral refrain reminds once again the temporal ubiquity of the "death of the last black man" in the final funeral rite of the play: "Yesterday today next summer tomorrow . . . died thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world" (129). As Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork's announcement in the overture, "This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world" (101), resounds as chorus throughout the play, this leitmotif paradoxically reveals there can be no death of the last black man in this world.

Not just a thematic and structural leitmotif of this particular play, haunting holds a special position in Parks's dramaturgy in general. Parks depicts playwriting less as an authorial or

compositional activity than as a state of being *haunted*: "A person from, say, time immemorial, from, say, PastLand, from somewhere back there, say, walks into my house" ("Style" 12). Black Man is also one of the ghosts who would "take up residence in a corner" of the house, one which accommodates the playwright's imagination.[13] The return of these ghost figures to the present enables the expansive temporality in which conventional historical temporalities are shattered. Parks depicts these mystic, diachronic moments of her figures as *possession,* quoting John S. Mbiti's meditation in her essay "Possession": "A person lies and yet continues to live: he is a livin-dead, and no other term can describe him better than that. . . . [The living dead] belong to the time period of the Zamani [past] and by entering individuals in the Sasa [present] period, they become our contemporaries" (qtd. in "Possession" 5). In the bodies of such figures, multiple spirits are intermingled with each other, forming a transhistorical collective. "The power of the ancestral, spiritual force," condensed through this orphic transgenerational fusion, renders possible what is called the African Continuum, which envisions, as Michael S. Harper explains, "the cosmos as a totally integrated environment where all [African] spiritual forces interact" (qtd. Jones 54). "Mediated" through the form of haunting or possession, Parks's dramaturgy is predicated upon an alternative temporality of African culture as conceived by Mbiti, denying any sense of linear or teleological resolution.

Black Man's transgenerational "mediumship" can feature itself as a counter-force against the teleology of History as conceived by white oppressors and the impulse of Othering embedded

[13] Parks also explains the moments she got inspired to write *Last Black Man* as dreaming or possession. One day she woke up after napping, she got suddenly caught by the words written between the window and wall: "This is the death of the last negro man in the whole entire world." As she reminisces (or pretends to do), she felt a strong urge to "write that down," so she went over to her desk to write it away. "Those words and my reaction to them," as Parks says, "became a play" ("Possession" 3). While revealing how she got "inspired," Parks tends to situate the source of her artistic inspiration not as individual but communal.

in lynching. Along with the playwright who sees herself visited by people "from time immemorial, from. . . PastLand, from somewhere back there," and is possessed by them and channels them through writing, Black Man gets visited by other "livin-dead" who try to possess him to commune with the living in the contemporary world. Black man is not just haunting the living–Black Woman-- but is haunted by other living-dead. The chorus figures, these mythic, literary, religious black ancestors, have not just gathered to re-member Black Man's tragic life but to tell their own stories distorted by or erased from the dominant history. The anxiety of erasure prevailing in this dramatic world is attested to by the choral refrain, "You should write that down and you should hide it under a rock," as articulated by two historical chorus figures, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hapshepsut and Before Columbus. One of the few female pharaohs to rule in Ancient Egypt during the eighteenth dynasty, Queen-Then-Paraoh Hapshepsut built monuments which were destroyed by her stepson and nephew, Thutmose III, after her death: "I left my mark on all I made. My son erased his mothers mark" (116). On the other hand, the name "Before Columbus" testifies to the African voyages to America "before Columbus" that have never been accepted as legitimate history. Before Columbus vividly recollects "the first time" he arrives on the continent: "Thuh first time I saw it. It was huge. Thuh green sea becomes uh hillside. Uh hillside populated with some peoples I will name. Thuh first time I saw it was uh was-huge once one. Huh. It has been gettin smaller ever since" (117). The image of the huge Land he first discovered getting smaller connects to a critique of division and differentiation brought by modern knowledge systems. "Before Columbus," the world was still "roun":

> QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT: Before Columbus thuh worl usta be *roun* they put uh /d/ on thuh end of roun makin roun*d*. Thusly they set in

> motion thuh end. Without that /d/ we couda gone on spinnin forever. Thuh /d/ thing ended things ended. (102)

Differentiating "roun" from "round," Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut uncovers the violence of the grammatical finality /d/, which "ended things ended." By completing the word, "round," in theWestern way, /d/ paradoxically put an end to "roundness" of the world, "set[ting] in motion thuh end." Such a linguistic control for closure parallels/extends to the discursive and political desire to put discordant values and ideas into a containing whole. The world "before Columbus" and its change after the Western conquest, as witnessed by Before Columbus encapsulate the imperialist intent latent in the desire for enlightenment and closure:

> BEFORE COLUMBUS: The popular thinking of the day back in them was that the world was flat. They thought the world was flat. Back then when they thought the world was flat they were afeared and stayed at home. They wanted to go out back then when they thought the world was flat but the water had in it dragons of which meaning these dragons they were afeared back then when they thought the world was flat. They stayed at home. Them thinking the world was flat kept it roun. Them thinking the sun revolved around the earth kept them satellite-like. They figured out the truth and scurried out. Figuring out the truth put them in their place and they scurried out to put us in ours. (103)

Putting /d/ at the end of roun is a symbolic act that stands for the Western realization that the world is round, not flat, and this knowledge triggered their colonial voyage. This process explains how the word "round" becomes violent and destructive despite its implied circularity contesting any fixation or closure. When "thuh worl usta be roun," there didn't exist any barriers

between “them” and “us.” Before Columbus slyly sets up an analogy between scientific knowledge and colonial epistemology, intimating how both operate by grouping, classifying, and differentiating. Queen, Before Columbus, and even Black Man got their stories omitted and distorted in the process through which those in power “put them[selves] in their place” and “put us in ours.” To “right” this history, they need to go back to the world “before Columbus” when the world is “roun,” open to any changes and possibilities, not contained yet by those in knowledge and power. As the play proceeds, the chorus figures come back to a question over and over: “Where he go now now tha the done dieded?” And the answer resounds inanely: “Back tuh when thuh worl usta be roun” (114).

Bodily Transmission of Collective Experiences

Early lynching drama’s realistic rendering of solemn, dignified, and self-reliant black figures was not just meant for belying, thwarting, and reconfiguring the false images of blacks the “theatrical darky” had ingrained in whites’ minds. More than anything else, these dramas provided the brilliant African-American “individuals,” who the Anti Lynching Crusade needed to prove the race is virtuous, dignified, and autonomous, altogether so equal to citizenship. Such virtuous, smart, and upright individuals as exemplified by black soldiers, lawyers, and mothers/wives could serve as a counterpart for the “theatrical darky” as *type*. To avoid, shatter, and debunk wholesale derogation, early anti-lynching dramatists tried to establish each character as an individual impervious to such a stereotypical rendering.

Marking its discontinuity from the realistic characterization of modernist lynching drama, *Last Black Man* lends the figure of Black Man little room for personal representations, rather featuring him as “every black man.” Bearing the names that mark themselves as *type*, Black Man

with Watermelon and Black Woman with Fried Drumstick have been identified as "potential stereotypes, archetypal," representing the simplified lives of African Americans on plantations and the devotion of the married black couple (Fuchs 48). Yet, the play does not provide any familial or social background for figuring out why Black Man has to die repeatedly. The characters are not psychologically grounded and realistically rounded, amounting to nothing beyond what they signify or embody. Less as an individual than as a collective self, Black Man takes over the role of revealing and recording what is generic and prototypical about African American experiences. Rather than featuring a single death of a black man, *Last Black Man* depicts how African American history is saturated with death and the memory thereof.

Embodying a plausible shift from the personal to the communal or the political, Black Man serves as a signifier for the collectivity of African American experiences, as he realizes himself as "a deep perception of a (collective) memoried being" (Malkin 170). Particularly, the death of the last black man reenacts and represents the death of each black man transpiring through American history: He has fallen from "23 floors from uh passin ship from space tuh splat on thuh pavement" (102) and has been electrocuted in "thuh Chair in thuh middle of thuh City. Outdoors, In thuh square" (107) and "put [me] on uh platform tuh wait for uh train. . . hands behind [my] back" to be hanged (118). Throughout the play, he requests: "Make me uh space 6 feet by 6 feet by 6. Make it big and mark it . . . uh mass grave-site. Theres company comin soonish" (109). The spatial symbiosis between Black Man and his black company is not just limited to the locale of their burial. Black Man also imparts his body to those who "comin soonish" as a mass corporal-site in which the physical maltreatments of those countless black men have been registered and engraved. Through his body, personal memory, cultural memory, and history are intermingled and crisscrossed with each other.

The advent of the concept of collective memory and the performative turn went hand in hand in the 1980s, when *Last Black Man* debuted. As Jay Winter aptly recapitulates, "the performance of memory" serves as "a mnemonic device" in itself: "Through performance, we move from the individual to the group to the individual," ascertaining "the social framework of remembrance" (11). Especially because lynching is concerned with the embodied history of African Americans, theatre can be an optimized venue for dealing with such a kind of collective memory in which the experiences of the ancestors' bodies are transmitted to the body in the present. It is the circular, conflated, and collapsed temporality of the play that contributes to casting Black Man's body as a locus for collective experiences:

> BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON:
>
> There is uh Now and there is uh Then. Ssal there is. I being in uh Now; uh Now being in uh Then; I bein, in Now in Then; in I will be. I was be too but that's uh Then that's past. That me that was be is uh me-has-been. Thuh Then that was be is uh has-been-Then too. Thuh me-has-been sits in thuh be-me; we sit on this porch. Same porch. Same me. Thuh Then thats been somehow sits in thuh Then that will be: same Thens. I swing from uh tree. You cut me down and bring me back. Home. Here. I fly over thuh yard. I fly over thuh yard in all over. Them thens stayed fixed. Fixed Thens. Thuh Thems stays fixed too. Thuh Thems that come and take me and thuh Thems that greet me and then them Thems that send me back here. Home. Stays fixed, them do.)
>
> BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK:
>
> Your feets. (126)

Black Man and Black Woman's porch is a place where Black Man's "be-me," "me-has-been," and even his me-will-be co-exist, conflated with each other. He exists simultaneously in "uh Now," in "uh Now being in uh Then," and "in Now in Then; in I will be." The ways in which the present, the past, and the future interfere with and intrude upon each other through this locale also point to a spatial imagination at the height of postmodernism. Jeanette R. Malkin reads Black Man's simultaneous being against Henri Bergson's pure memory: "[H]e remembers this porch as the one they have sat on throughout time –compounding all the memories into a single intuition of being" (169). While I agree with her reading of Black Man's intuitive being, I also note in this monologue the ways in which his musings on his simultaneous, transhistorical being seamlessly move on to his memory of being lynched. It is Black Man's corporeal sensations as well as intuitive feelings that compound all the disparate times into a performative continuum in the present. He feels his body swinging from a tree and his feet hitting on the ground after "you [Black Woman] cut me down," remembering and experiencing the past experience of lynching as present: He uses the present tense for describing how he "sw[ung] from uh tree. . . . fl[ied] over thuh yard all over" (126). It is not just in the porch Black Man sits on but through his body that Parks's spatial imagination is actualized, in which African American experiences of the present, the past, and the future intersecting with each other. The temporal elision in which the past, the present, and the future are compounded and collapsed into each other leads to Black Man's acute sense of his bodily presence in the present— his being "here and now": "I: be. You: is, It: be. He, She: that's us (that's it.) We: that's he in she: you aroun me: us be here. You: still is, They: be. . . ." (126). Indeed, *Last Black Man* is ultimately about the greatness of "being present," as Parks herself opines:

> In *Last Black Man*, heroism is being there and seeing it through. I guess I have a greater understanding of the small gesture, or the great act that is also very small gesture, or the great act that is also very small –like being present. He [the Black Man with Watermelon] is present and trying to figure out what's wrong with him; she's present and trying to figure out what's wrong with him and what's wrong with her, and the spirit people come to visit and their presence is helpful. ("Women of Color Women of Words")

"The Closures of Sentiment" and Reclamation of the Black Body

When we approach lynching as collective memory that is transmitted through body, the following passage from Richard Wright's *Black Boy* is particularly illuminating:

> I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings. The penalty of death awaits me if I made a false move and I wondered if it was worth-while to make any move at all. The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness. The actual experience would have let me see the realistic outlines of what was really happening, but as long it remained something terrible and yet remote, something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment, I was compelled to give my entire imagination over to it, an

> act which blocked the springs of thought and feeling in me, creating a sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived. (203)

Wright's passage is a vivid testimony to the reality that African Americans are terrified by the threat of death looming over them at every move they take. For African Americans, lynching is an experience which has exerted a visceral effect, even if it is remote. They can feel this terror through their bodies with its "horror and blood [which] might upon [them] at any moment," paradoxically inasmuch as it remains in the realm of representation whether as narratives or images. While being a bodily sensation and horror experienced by them personally, lynching strengthens its damaging power in proportion to its representational praxis. The imaginative experiences of lynching and its horror lead to African Americans' alienation from their feelings, thoughts, and the world itself as can be seen in Parks's rendering as well.

The Black Man's fraught relationship with his own body also reflects the ways in which the body has been experienced as collective and intimate, alienated and pressing, representational and presentational as African Americans have gone through thousands of lynchings whether individually experienced or culturally traumatized. Early-twentieth-century lynching dramatists tended to leave the aspect of lynching as the experience of flesh unattended, leaving it offstage: Lynching was rather familial and communal matter that their members had to handle and cope with by their mutual affection, intelligence, and human dignity, not inferior to those of whites. *Last Black Man* does not present the actual lynching scene on stage, either. Black Man seems detached from his own body and his bodily experiences: As an African American collective self who is used to "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 11), Black Man always perceives his body as seen by others –by "[f]olks [who] come tuh watch [his electrocution] with picnic baskets" (109), or those who "summoned uh laughed" before his

lynching (119). *Last Black Man* suggests this traumatized relationship with the body is due to the discursive and symbolic violence Black Man, as a collective and transhistorical self, has gone through. Focalizing the complicated and contradictory ways in which African American experiences of lynching got inscribed in the flesh, this play shows how Black Man finally reconstitutes himself as an embodied subject by affectively engaging the audience in the process through which he is tortured and dying. *Last Black* Man recounts and revives lynching as a flesh event, even from the beginning.

Last Black Man's first Panel, "Thuh Holy Ghost," features a reunion of wife and husband who "been comed back 9 years" (106). Ironically, Black Woman's first word when receiving her husband is "Hen." She welcomes him, "You comed back. Comin backs something in itself" and reminds him of "uh good big hen dinner in waitin," emphatically repeating, "Hen. Hen?" (105,106). While reminiscing about the circumstances in which they "[c]oming for tuh take you. . . They told and told and told: proper instructions for thuh burial proper attire for thuh mourning" and complaining of her having "not even heard from thuh neighbors uh congratulation" about his coming back (105, 106), she obsessively tells him to "[g]obble it[hen] up," rambling how she prepared this meal for her resurrected husband:

> Strutted down on up thuh road with my axe. By-my-self-with-my-axe. Got tuh thuh street top 93 dyin hen din hand. Dropped thuh axe. Tooked tuh strangling. 93 dyin hen din hand with no heads let em loose thu run down tuh towards home infront of me. Flipped thuh necks of thuh next 23 more odd. Slinged um over my shoulders. Hens of thuh neighbors now in my pots. (106)

While inheriting and parodying black mothers in early lynching dramas who engross themselves in such family chores as sewing, ironing, cleaning, and food preparation with the belief that the

black home is an important place of education and resistance, Black Woman's graphic description of how she carried her axe by herself, strangled and flipped the necks of so many hens, and finally fried them in her pots, evokes the ways in which the lynch mob slaughtered black men ruthlessly and brutally for nothing. Addressing the exact number of the hens she killed to no purpose, Black Woman once again obliquely refers to the institution of lynching grisly reflecting the ways in which it is often remembered by the large number of the victims – approximately more than 3200 black men between 1890 and 1930. The resonance between hen and lynch victims is reinforced by the remarks she makes nonchalantly at the end of this panel: "Oh. –. They eat their own yuh know. . . Hen do. Saw it on thuh Tee V" (109). The analogy with hens points to *cannibalism*.

Horrifyingly yet seamlessly, the image of hens slaughtered and fried is transferred onto that of Black Man "fried," through the medium of the chair in their porch: "Woulda fried you right here on thuh front porch but we don't got enough electric" (107). Despite the gruel reality that man is fried just as poultry, Black Woman's focus indifferently shifts to the shortage of electricity to fry him: they "[p]ut thuh chair in thuh middle of thuh City" since "[n]o onessgot enough electric" (107). While Black Woman explains the middle of the city just as "[o]utdoors," it turns out to be "square," an "outdoor" theater where "[f]olks come tuh watch with picnic baskets" for the spectacle of Black Man electrocuted.

Ensued is Black Man's acting out his execution scene, verbally and figuratively. Taking over Black Woman's casual manner in dealing with the "frying" of her husband, Black Man's language seems also detached from what's happening around him. While beginning the depiction of his persecution scene with such incendiary expression as "Fry uh man," Black Man deflates the gravity and acerbity of the subject he touches upon by making a distracting fuss about "uh

extender": "Fry uh man in thuh town square needs uh extender tuh reach em thuh electric" (108). As if excited about setting up his own persecution, Black Man continues to enumerate the particular procedures of execution: "Hook up thuh chair tuh thuh power. Extender: 49 foot in length. Closer tuh thuh power I never been. Flip up on thuh go switch. Huh! Juice begins its course" (108). By his words, the brutality and cruelty of the moment get reduced and dissipated to the trivial and mundane technical problems of the portable chair "they take. . . from county tuh county" (107) or the length of the extender. "[T]huh power" he's never been closer to is synecdoche for the hands who controls the power, not just the physical one but the power of policing the body.

Such a detached posture toward his own persecution scene can be aligned with his alienation from his body witnessed throughout the play. From the very beginning of the play, Black Man refers to himself in the third person: "The black man moves his hands" (101). Also this description of his own action does not bring about any tangible changes in his movement, which once again accentuates Black Man's loss of control over his body. The disintegration between language and body is also attested to by his words that begin to fall apart. As he attempts to move his hands in the third time, declaring in vain "The black man move. His hands –," Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut condescendingly offers him a favor: "You are too young to move. Let me move it for you" (102). Associating Black Man with his stepson, Thutmose III, for whom she served as a regent, Queen connects his alienation from his body with the stereotype of blacks as children who cannot see, rule, and write for themselves[14]: Black Man refers back to the

[14] Black Man's loss of control over his body extends to his inability to see, rule, have, and write by Queen's willing concern: "We are too young to see. Let them see it for you. We are too young to rule. Let them rule it for you. We are too young to have. Let them have it for you. You are too young to write. Let them –let them. Do it. Before you" (104). Interestingly, the pronoun she uses for the subject that is characterized by these immature traits has changed form you to we. By

tradition of the stage darky who "was childlike. . . [l]azy. . . was slow of movement" (Huggins 251).

Parks attributes Black Man's troubled relationship with his body to the stereotypes that have been assigned to black people. In this play, the stereotype that has been assigned to the black self is embodied and materialized by a watermelon that Black Man with Watermelon holds onto physically. Black Man opens his first reunion with his wife with a negation of his possession of this foreign object: "Saint mines. Saint mines. I duhnt it. Nope: iduhnt" (105). While denoting Black Man's possession of watermelon on the one hand, his name suggests that the juxtaposition of two entities might be taken for a possessive relationship with the preposition, "with," between them. The arbitrariness of this pairing becomes articulated and defamiliarized by the physical juxtaposition of Black Man and watermelon. On the stage, he carries this plant, but does not have any organic relationship with it: "This does not belong tuh me. Somebody planted on me. On me in my hands" (105). Any kinship is denied between them either in terms of lineage ("Who gived birth tuh this I wonder" (105)) or visual affinity ("Was we green and stripedly when we first come out?" (107)). Parks debunks the stereotyping by replacing the figurative addendum to Black Man with the literal watermelon, and thereby making the best of the medium of theatre in which the literary, the textual, and the figurative can be actualized, physicalized, and materialized. The enthrallment Black Man feels about the stereotype of "watermelon lovers" – often associated with gluttony, simple-mindedness, and childishness— is literalized and externalized by the weight of the watermelon he holds.

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handing over the right to see, rule, have, and write for "us" to "them," Queen transfers the stage of surrogation from ancient Egyptian history to modern American racial history.

Among the chorus characters, And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger also points to this revealing analogy between the figurative and the literal of being stigmatized. As his name evokes, he is drawn from *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas. As the image of Bigger Thomas has grown bigger and bigger as "the prototypical, angry, savage, and dangerous black brute" (Rayner and Elam, "Unfinished" 453), so And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger has grown "too big for my own name" (115), too big "tuh be fit in back in thuh storybook from which I came" (116). As an "overembellished stereotype" (Carpio 209), this figure succeeds to Black Man's feeling of suffocation and alienation from his own body, tossing it around with him throughout the play. As if he would be a mouthpiece for Black Man who can express his pain just with an intermittent choking sound, "Gaw," And Bigger vicariously feels and articulates the pain and the anger he might feel: "WILL SOMEBODY TAKE THESE STRAPS OFF UH ME PLEASE? I WOULD LIKE TUH MOVE MY HANDS" (110).

If Black Man is the obedient, docile, and pastoral type, And Bigger/Bigger Thomas represents an angry young black man from an urban area. This contrasting pair of stereotypes, Black Man and And Bigger, illuminates the ambivalence with which the Other is conceived, imagined, and signified in colonial discourse. As Homi Bhabha discusses: "It is recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, and articulation of multiple belief. The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces" (82). Under this epistemological violence that envisions the black as a collective yet split, schizophrenic self, Black Man, an obedient, dignified, simple-minded servant, can be associated with Bigger

Thomas, savage, rampant embodiment of sexuality. This intertextuality with *Native Son* once again contextualizes *Last Black Man* around lynching discourse and narrative: Bigger Thomas's adversity begins with his accidental killing of a white woman; the combination of the black male criminal and white female victim triggers a lynching scenario when Bigger is falsely accused of raping this white girl before killing her and is sentenced to death physically and socially: "They kill you before you die" (Wright, *Native Son* 327). Definitely, it is the mythology of the black rapist and the dissemination of the images associated with it that play a *deadly* part, making And Bigger "[r]ise up out of uh made-up story in grown Bigger and Bigger. Too big for my own name. Nostrils" falrin. Width: thickly. Breadth: fire-laden and smellin badly" (115). As a stand-in for any stereotypes to which black males are vulnerable, Black Man's watermelon also encompasses the fated life of Bigger Thomas, an alleged black rapist. Malkin also might consider such an intertextuality with Wright's novel, eliciting the image of death from watermelon: "The melons, which he doesn't recognize as his own, are symbols of his death, and they accumulate during the play –one for every death he's endured. . . thus embracing those collective deaths as his own" (168). The stereotype of the black rapist works to reduce the African American subject to the corporeal by investing the black male with hypermasculinity and excess sexual prowess. While serving as a practical ground for propelling mob action, the accusation of black men of uncontrollable sexuality and extreme corporeality sustains the regime of lynching at a more fundamental level: "With the advent of Emancipation and its attendant loss of the slave system's marking of the African American body as property, lynching emerges to reclaim and reassert the centrality of black corporeality, deterring the now theoretically possible move toward citizenry and disembodied abstraction," as Robyn Wiegman observes. (455)

Black Man's suspicion of and resistance to what is imposed on and assigned to his self/body result in a fundamental questioning of the sense of belonging: "I kin tell whats mines by whats gots my looks. Ssmymethod. Try it by testin it and it turns out true. Look down at my foot and wonder it its mine. Foot mine?" (106). He continuously moves on to his other bodily parts to make sure if they are "mine": "Move on thuh uther foot. Foot mine? And uh nother "yes Sir" so feets mine is understood. Got uh forearm that's up for question check myself out teeth by tooth. Melon mines? –Don't look like me" (107). Not just once again affirming the melon's foreignness to him, he also seems to be distanced from his own body by engaging himself in its dismemberment – cataloging, dissecting, and scrutinizing each part.

This oscillation between self-identity and self-negation continues even in the moment they strap him all over the body for electrocution. In the course of his almost failing and eerily humorous attempt to claim his body parts through querying them, he comes to affirm the possession of his body in an abrupt and unexpected way, as "[j]uice begins its course" (108):

> Thuh straps they have on me are leathern. See thuh cord waggin full with uh jump-juice try me tuh wiggle from thuh waggin but belt leathern straps: width thickly. One round each forearm. Forearm mines? 2 cross thuh chest. Chest is mines: and it explodin. One for my left hand fingers left strapted too. Right was done thuh same. Jump-juice meets me-mine juices I do uh slow softshoe like on water. Town crier cries uh moan. Felt my nappy head go frizzly. Town follows thuh crier in uh sorta sing-uglong-song. (108)

Black Man ascertains that the chest belongs to him even before casting the existential question, this time. His chest responds with its involuntary physiological reaction, "exploding," and he "feels" his chest and his possessing it. The physiological turbulence gets sustained and even

amplified paradoxically by his terse statement: “Jump-juice meets me-mine juices.” While he seems so detached from his body that he even treats himself as an inanimate object such as fruit that can be “juiced,” – this time he becomes melon himself – his mock-biochemical treatment of the moment of electrocution paradoxically lets the audience imagine and feel the visceral effect of “the merger between the electric current and his bodily fluids” (Colbert 208). Indeed, however, at a surface level, Black Man keeps trying to cut off himself from his bodily sensations by bringing up the specter of minstrelsy. The utmost physical pain inflicted on his body to an extent that would make him shuffle and scorch his hair to tight crisp curls is mediated by and dissipated through the caricatured images of minstrel antics. Concerning Parks’s adoption of minstrel elements in this scene, Carpio contends that minstrelsy foregrounds theatre as an innately violent space compared to the spectacle of electrocution (220). However, Suzan Gubar’s reading of the connection between the blackface minstrel and lynching victim reveals that the clownish expressions and motions of minstrels also point to the physical violence the punitive society inflicted on the black body, not just a mimetic one on blackness or the black character: The blackface grinning cannot be distinguished from the grimace of pain; Expressions of “astonishment, stupidity, fear, and pleasure,” such as bulging eyes, can be associated with “strangulation and terror” (83); Moreover, stiffness of the limbs can be easily regarded to stand for rigor mortis, the frantic, yet spasmodic motion which symbolizes “death throes or convulsions that recall bodies hung, burnt alive, or dismembered in lynching performance” (84).

This alienating disparity between the denotation and the connotation of these gestures and facial expressions of blackface reveals the politics of pleasure that served for the institution of slavery. Within the institution’s psychological economy, the blacks should be –or, at least, look, -- always happy, contented, and jolly. The stereotype of the contented darky served as a self-

defensive delusion for the white masters. Although the slave owner knew that "the slaves were not really in love with working for nothing," this illusion was really important "to his peace of mind to believe that slaves were indeed content" (Trudier 4). Saidiya Hartman locates the political containment of black sentiment in the slave dancing in the Middle Passage ships, performance on the auction block, and instrumental recreations on plantations. These performances were the instances of "the simulated jollity and coerced festivity. . . to dissimulate the extreme violence of the institution and disavow the pain of captivity" (23). Black Man's soft-shoe "like on water," "defamiliariz[es] the negro's enjoyment," to borrow Hartman's words, by equivocally pointing to both the racist imagination of "Negro as carefree, infantile, hedonistic, and *indifferent to suffering*" (24 emphasis added) and the involuntary movements of the frenzied body in actual pain. By featuring himself in the images invented by the white masters and clashing them with the sheer violence attested to by his shuffling feet and frizzled hair, – which are also accompanied by town-resounding moaning – Black Man unveils "the closures of sentiment" behind "negro's enjoyment" (52-59). Exposed to diverged affective loads of pleasure and pain, the audience cannot maintain their passive spectatorship any longer, let alone being given to indulgence in this degenerate tradition or complacently sentimentalizing the body in pain. This jarring combination of hilarity and cruelty prompts the audience to speculate and *feel for* what is behind "the purported immunity of blacks to pain" (Hartman 51), and Black Man is re-membered as an embodied subject through this affective spectatorship. Black Man's seemingly insensate, indifferent, callous tone switches into an affective, visceral awakening as indicated by the verb he chooses for the first time in his testimony: "*Felt* my nappy head go frizzly."

The most engaging moment in terms of atrocity and affective rapport with the audience in the play takes place in Black Man's account of his lynching:

> Swingin from front tuh back uhgain. Back tuh –back tuh that was how I be wentin. Chin on my chest hangin down in restin eyes each on eyein my 2 feets. Left on thuh right one righ one on thuh left. Crossed eyein. It was difficult tuh breathe. Toes uncrossin then crossin for luck. With my eyes. Gaw. It had begun tuh rain. Oh. Gaw. Ever so lightly. Blood came on up. You know: tough. Like riggamartins-stifly only –isolated. They some of em pointed they summoned uh laughed they some looked quick in an then they looked uhway. It had begun tuh rain. I hung on out tuh dray. They putting uhway their picnic baskets. Ever so lightly gaw gaw it had begun tuh rain. They pullin out their umbrellas in hidedid up their eyes. Oh. (119)

Black Man's recounting reproduces his own lynching spectacle. He is depicted more helpless and vulnerable than ever. In the theatre he verbally set up, however, Black Man becomes his own agent by modulating the distance between himself and his body, his body and his audience. Black Man does not see himself through the eyes of others any more, but looks down from his own eyes as he is swinging to and fro from the tree over the yard. "Eyein" from the dropped chin through the chest to the feet, Black Man's narrative coaxes the audience into following his perspective. Around when his left and right eyes visit his right and left feet, the audience might even feel nauseated by having their imaginative eyes also crossed. The visual nausea synesthetically leads to a disturbing sound, "Gaw." The feeling of being strangulated is evoked with this "glottal stop" sound, and this onomatopoeic association finally explodes into a

vicarious feeling of "[b]lood [that] came on up" through the audience's visceral imagination. Through this empathetic identification, the audience can exempt themselves from those who "summoned uh laughed they some looked quick in an then they looked uhway," the audience in Black Man's framed theatre of lynching: Black Man's "toes uncrossing then crossin for luck" evoke a perplexing complexity of feelings, grief, sorrow, horror, and pity, rather than giving rise to a reflexive – or, unreflective – laughter.

Along with the presence of his body with the noose around neck and the "bodily" sound of choking, Black Man's oral memory constitutes a bodily theatre that affectively engages the audience. Verbally re-enacting his past persecution, Black Man debunks and disrupts the closure of sentiment whites impose on the black body. In the concluding panel, "Final Chorus," reminds, the ancestors' exhortation throughout the play is to "write it down": "You will write it down because if you don't write it down then we will come along and tell the future we did not exist. You will write it down and carve it out of a rock" (130-31). An imperative to "record" stories, memories, and histories in the written language seems contested with Black Man's actual mode of re(-)membering, his oral and bodily transmission of the past plight. As she reveals in "Elements of Style," however, Parks is a playwright committed to the "physicality" of language:

> "Language is a physical act – something that
> Involves yr whole bod.
> Write with yr. whole body.
> Read with yr. whole bod.
> Wake up." (18)

Primarily, on the part of the actor, language is definitely a physical act that "wakes up" bodily organs for exact articulation as shown in Parks's own guide to some vernacular words used in her plays, what she calls "foreign words & phrases" in "Elements of Style" (17-8). At a more fundamental level, language as a physical act enables the intersubjective bodily transmissions of affects and emotions. Given that language is integral to retrieving the past and turning it into history, this language is not just to be located in the rational and intellectual faculty of man, but in the whole bodily existence shared across disparate subjects. Parks's quest for an alternative language, more associative, more flexible, more spontaneous, is hinted at by the metaphor of spittle as poetically wrought out by Old Man River Jordan in "Panel II: First Chorus": The last words of the last black man "dribblin down his lip" becomes spittle, and the spittle becomes "the puddle in his lap," starts "sproutin. . . growin leaves off," and finally forms "uh jungle" (112). Charged with the vital, regenerative, and connective images, the spittle casts his words as a physical act that resists his "last" ordained by the whites. Black Man's "text was writ in water," as he says himself (116). While Queen-Then -Pharaoh Hatshepsut warns him against its ephemeral, unstable, non-lasting features ("Down tuh float drown tuh float down. My son erased his mothers mark" (116)), this "watery" language enables the affective contagion between feeling subjects by its associative and adhesive power, disrupting the constraints on blackness, black body, and the black sentient being.

CHAPTER 2

Theatricalizing History/ Historicizing Theatre: Blackface Lynchings in *The America Play* (1994) and *Topdog/Underdog* (2001)

The America Play realizes Suzan-Lori Parks's belief in theatre as "the perfect place to 'make' history" and a play as "a way of creating and rewriting history" ("Possession" 4). Featuring the Lesser Known who acts out the assassination of Lincoln in a theme park every night, *The America Play* summons, revisits, and recasts one of the important moments of American history. Playing such a white history in *blackface*, this play suggests that the kind of history Parks wants to create through her theatre might lie elsewhere than simply in the figure of Lincoln. The Lesser Known who calls himself the Foundling Father virtually creates and re-possesses his place in history by including his black presence in the performance rather than just revolving around the white iconography of Lincoln. While the contribution of the theatrical apparatus to Parks's historiography has been widely discussed on its meta-level, especially in terms of the citational and iterative quality of the Foundling Father's re-enactment, its cross-racial structure suggests its engagement with a specific historical performance genre: blackface minstrelsy. The whiteface makeup of Lincoln –another Lincoln impersonator in *Topdog/Underdog* with the *proper* name – renders more pronounced these two black performers' reference to blackface minstrelsy and the inversion hinted at in their performances.

What is often addressed but curiously left unattended in the discussion of Park's two Lincoln plays is their adoption of this highly historicized and racially conscious form of American theatre. And scattered critical comments on blackface minstrelsy's relevance to these plays tend to locate the kind of subversion Parks envisions in an inversed cross-racial performance of the black minstrel – its disruption of the symbolic structure of white dominion

embedded in blackface donned by the white minstrel.[15] This chapter reads blackface minstrelsy as a form for mediating and negotiating formal structures of racialized experiences and history of African Americans. Two black performers' appropriation of this cross-racial performance form bring up racial and racist contexts to this play, the milieu in which minstrelsy has been nationally located as a socio-cultural institution. With a prospect of subversive agency epitomized in the Foundling Father's "joke" of a black Lincoln on the one hand, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* remind us that these two black minstrels are not free to escape from the cultural, symbolic, and economic system epitomized by blackface minstrelsy, which they try to destabilize, appropriate, or subvert. Each black minstrel's confinement leads from his compulsive replication of the suicidal and genocidal structure embedded in minstrelsy as a historical and racialized form: The Foundling Father and Lincoln are exposed to virtual deaths over and over by the customers, each finally contained by the "actual" death which is evocative of both the symbolic and allegorical death and the literal and physical violence to which African Americans have been historically vulnerable behind blackface.

Whiteface as Symbolic Inversion

When contextualized against minstrelsy, the black Lincoln's cross-racial performance registers as a form of inversion from the outset. Reversing the racial/racist dynamics of the

[15] In the first essay published on this play, Harry Elam and Alice Rayner read *The America Play* as "the inversed minstrel show" drawing on the play's premier at the New York Public Theatre:

> The actor Reggie Montgomery as the Foundling Father performed certain behaviors traditionally associated with the minstrel tradition. Montgomery's repetition of those behaviors and his tails, the costume of the minstrel players, stands as a consciously racialized performance. ("Echoes" 183).

Montgomery's behaviors and costume lay a ground for contextualizing the Foundling Father's performance within the legacy of the minstrel show.

minstrel show, the black performing the white can serve to debunk and rebuke the exploitative intentions inherent in blackface masking. To locate a ground to discuss the possibilities beyond the colonial and subjugating structure of cross-racial appropriations such as blackface minstrelsy, E. Patrick Johnson asks: "Have not there been instances of where the colonized has made use of the colonizer's forms as an act of resistance?" (6). The Foundling Father's reversed trans-racial performance appropriates the colonizer's appropriation of blackness in its transformation of white forms into resistant acts. Envisioning Parks's theatre as a representative postmodern drama embodying and materializing "a release from control, a collapse of boundaries, a rejection of centre and hierarchy" (Malkin 19), critics have located *The America Play*'s liberatory potential – unchained from any dominant discourse or the imperative of closure – through the ways in which the Foundling Father's iterative performances displace History onto "'Rep&Rev' variations of history" (Schmidt 207).[16] Along with continuous simulation, echoing, and iteration throughout the play, the performativity of the black Lincoln opens up a variety of perspectives on the historical facts surrounding Lincoln's death. By producing "the historically white incident of the assassination of Lincoln . . . in blackface" (Schmidt 199), this play radically invites the audiences to rewrite, renegotiate, and reimagine the white myth of Lincoln as a founding father and America as a nation embracing the ideal of equality and freedom. While focusing on the play's "instability, complexity, and layered-ness of meaning," Haike Frank points out that Parks's "re-reading" of history and "re-defining" of the idea of the world is conducted around "a black

[16] Reenacting the historical shooting scene time and again with the customers, the Foundling Father riffs on the historical incident with slight variations each time, such as when the customer as Booth cries "The South is avenged" ("Allegedly, Booth's words"), "Now he belongs to the ages" ("The words of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton"), or "They've killed the president" ("The words of Mary Todd"). The variety of possibilities of interpretations offered by iterative performance primarily puts into question the received truths about the history of Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln look-alike who disturbs and challenges the white-defined Lincoln myth" (4-6). By staging a black Lincoln impersonator, Parks plays with the presence and absence of American history, ultimately debunking and overhauling the "Great Hole of History" (*AP* 159): As "the calculated misfire that does things" (Schneider 69), the black Lincoln "ostends . . . the absence of African Americans from their own history" (Foster, "Lincoln Myth" 32), "draw[s] attention to – and correct[s] –the elision of an African American presence in mainstream American history" (Dawkins, "Family Acts" 83), and "displaces the connection of black liberation to benevolent whiteness" (Elam and Rayner, "Echoes" 182). Within the wider historical context of slavery, war, and emancipation, the Foundling Father's transracial impersonation is directed toward decentering whiteness as a privileged racial identity. If "the purpose of white blackface is to become and displace black bodies on stage" (Norman 92), then the assumed whiteface this black Lincoln might don reversely posits the existence of the black body behind it. By having the black body "purposefully and explicitly included" within the performance over and over, the Foundling Father's cross-racial impersonation realizes his desire to insert his own narrative within the governing narratives of the nation (Elam and Rayner, "Echoes" 194). The Foundling Father's theatre is envisioned as a performative space for African American's struggle to be what Houston A. Baker calls "Black and Whole" in the literal and figurative dimension: "Parks's theatrical project is to discover a particularly black wholeness within the hole of history" (184).

While whiteface is not directly mentioned or visualized in *The America Play*, Parks renders more unambiguous and even conscious the allusion to blackface minstrelsy in *Topdog/Underdog* by mentioning "a little makeup" Lincoln should wear for his job: Lincoln confesses to his brother, the ironically named Booth, "They offered me thuh job, saying of course I would have to wear a little makeup" (*TD* 29). If blackface caricatures, mocks, and lampoons

blackness, the whiteface donned by the Foundling Father and Lincoln might suggest that whiteness can also be the object of mockery and spoof. While evoking the tradition of Pierrot, an age-old familiar image of whiteface, whiteface becomes defamiliarized in the historical context of the American stage which was overwhelmed by blackface. Such an uncanny doubling of blackface might work to de-privilege and re-negotiate whiteness, especially whiteness revolving around one of the venerable and righteous founding fathers of America, Abraham Lincoln.

The critical discussion of the liberatory potential of the inversions crafted by the Foundling Father and Lincoln is reinforced with a recent surge of studies on embodied whiteness performances. In her contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*, Faedra Carpenter reads Parks against the cultural and literary tradition of using whiteface, a long-lived theatrical practice which has yet just begun to constitute a critical subject. Aligning *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* with the spectacular uses of whiteness in such contemporary African American dramas as Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, and Lydia Diamond's stage adaptation of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Carpenter shows how Parks foregrounds and renegotiates whiteness, the relationship between whiteness and blackness, and the notion of racial difference (175). Considering various live performances such as antebellum cakewalks, weekly promenades, and stand-up comedy and solo performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Marvin McAllister also examines three centuries of "whiting up" as "the "tour-de-force" reversal of blackface minstrelsy" (16). In the last chapter of his *Whiting Up*, McAllister discusses how Parks's two black Lincolns appropriate this white form and fashion their identities against it, tapping into the possibilities and limitations of performed whiteness in the twenty-first century (249-51).

These whiteness studies critics have mapped out the kind of subversion Parks envisions around and against the black Lincoln's disruption of blackface. I find this approach problematic in two ways. First, even whiteface is "risky" since whiting up still means entering into a tabooed tradition. Given the playful and satiric energy and spirit of postmodern pastiche whiteface performance harbors, these two black Lincolns show "that irreverent postmodern irony is insufficient to counteract the stain of Jim Crow's signature act," as Brian Norman said of Ted Danson's donning blackface for a Friars Club roast of Whoopi Goldberg in 1993 (82). The Foundling Father's sideshow might re-traumatize the painful history of African Americans by reproducing the black body as spectacle. Second, the prospect of subversive agency in the black man's impersonation of the white in the pursuit of symbolic emancipation is implausible in the the day-to-day reality of *Topdog/Underdog*. While Lincoln's whiteface seems to inherit and even reinforce the satirical and subversive elements of the Foundling Father's cross-racial mimicry, the imaginative and symbolic flight sanctioned by the Foundling Father's parodic presentation of whiteness seems irrelevant in the realistic/naturalistic world of *Topdog/Underdog*. This play depicts a grim and disturbing reality in which the characters have lost access to any social uplift and performativity as a symbolic force to redress their social oppression. They are alienated from a positive outlook *The America Play* nourishes as a historical meta-drama.

As an attempt to fill in the gap between Parks's two black minstrels, this chapter approaches blackface minstrelsy not just as a theatrical but a socio-cultural apparatus that has regulated black male subjectivities since the antebellum era. An exploration of the historical contradictions and social conflicts held within "one of our earliest cultural industries" (Lott, *Love and Theft* 18) can help explain the dilemma the Foundling Father faces as a black minstrel and the world inhabited by Lincoln and Booth, two black minstrels here and now. If the Foundling

Father seems to purge the culpable legacy of minstrelsy through the symbolic power of his assumed whiteface and his voluntarily integration into its industry, Lincoln and Booth have their subversive potentials complicated and undermined not just by being subsumed into the industry as underclass workers, but by becoming the con artist and modern "Dandy Jim," appropriated into the social roles prescribed and reinforced by minstrelsy as a socio-cultural system.

The Foundling Father as a Black Minstrel

The Foundling Father's impersonating business rises from the legacy of "whiting up," launched by musical pioneer Bob Cole and becoming tradition by the time of the hip hop innovator Busta Rhymes, particularly in their "comedic, highly commercial appropriations of whiteness" (McAllister 4). While being "an aspirant to become a *real* Lincoln" (Malkin 176, emphasis added), the Foundling Father does not aim for verisimilitude in his impersonation business. Rather, he "does" Lincoln to alert the audience to the gap between the original and the simulation. Under his theory that "some inaccuracies are good for business," he sometimes wears a stove pipe hat indoors – as would not be the case with the historical Lincoln – and a yellow beard just for his fancy. Presenting a caricature of Lincoln's assassination, the Foundling Father's sideshow deemphasizes and deflates the gravity of the figure and the event:

> (A Man, as John Wilkes Booth, enters. He takes a gun and "stands in position": at the left side of the Foundling Father, as Abraham Lincoln, pointing the gun at the Foundling Fathrer's head)
>
> A Man: Ready.
> The Foundling Father: Haw Haw Haw
> (Rest)
> HAW HAW HAW HAW
>
> (Booth shoots. Lincoln "slumps in his chair." Booth jumps)
> A Man (Theatrically): "Thus to the tyrants!"
> (Rest)

> Hhhh. (Exits)
> The Foundling Father: Most of them do that, thuh "Thus to the tyrants!" –what they say the killer said. "Thus to the tyrants!" The killer was also heard to say "The South is avenged!" Sometimes they yell that.
>
> (A Man, the same man as before, enters again, again as John Wilkes Booth. . . .). (164-65)

Setting aside the stage direction, "Theatrically," demanding the histrionic tone from A Man, an unnatural staccato flow of actions – as best exemplified by the rhythm of Lincoln's laughter, "Haw Haw Haw Haw" –is based on a skeletal history. The strange and crude atmosphere pervading the scene gives an impression that the Foundling Father purportedly theatricalizes the scene for pleasure of himself, the customer, or the spectator of *The America Play*. The visitor-as-the assassin should choose a pistol and wait for the Foundling Father's guffaw as a cue for putting his shooting exercise to practice.[17] He/she is given "lines," "Sic Semper tyrannis" ("Such is always the fate of tyrants"), which Booth proclaimed in Latin in the historical moments as he "leapt from the presidential box to the stage of Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. on 14 April 1865."[18] Such patterned and mannered actions forfeit the intensity and precipitancy of the original assassination, presenting a defining scene of American history as penny-theatrical. Through the Foundling Father's infelicitous theatrical citations amounting to "bad" acting, history is dismissed as a theatre, particularly concerned with a debased kind of

[17] Lincoln's guffaw also serves as a cue for turning the customer into the actor of this show. With the momentum of his laughing, the Foundling Father becomes Lincoln and A Man becomes Booth as manifested in the stage direction: "Booth shoots. Lincoln "slumps in his chair." Booth Jumps" (165).

[18] The context the words were shouted in the actual historical moment is explained in the footnote at the bottom of the page by the author. For Parks's use of the footnotes, see Foster, Malkin, and Schmidt.

theatricality which "has no access to things, acts, or events in themselves, but only to holes – hollow copies, void versions, ineffectual errors of acts" (Schneider 69).

However, *The America Play* also problematizes what is not to be encompassed by the Foundling Father's assumed whiteface. The Foundling Father, as a black minstrel, is confronted with the complexities and contradictories within the wider social, cultural, and economic contexts of minstrelsy as a system, not just a color-specific racial performance. Despite whiteface's subversive gesture, "[o]ne irony" about the Foundling Father's performance is "that he makes money from it" (Elam and Rayner, "Echoes" 189). Although he voluntarily enters into his impersonating job, he is economically integrated into the industry. "Digging was his livelihood but fakin was his callin," repeats Brazil about his father (*AP* 179), offering an ontological flavor to the Lesser Known's impersonating job in which he pretends to be the other man who is not "lesser" but far much "greater" than him. As the play goes on, however, it turns out that faking is not just his calling but his livelihood as well. In a way, the Lesser Known was an entrepreneur from the time when he was newly wedded: "Lucy kept secrets for the dead. And they figured what with his digging and her Confidence work they could build a mourning business. The son would be a weeper. Such a long time uggo. So long ugho" (*AP* 162). Lucy is gifted with hearing and holding the secrets of others and mourning is Brazil's specialty. The Lesser Known planned out a family business of mourning long before his son was born and carried it out. "On thuh day he claimed to be the 100th anniversary of the founding of our country," when his son was "only 2 then," the Lesser Known taught him the first technique of the mourning business: "the Wail." And a year after then, on the same anniversary, he taught his son other mourning gestures, "the Weep," "the Sob," and "the Moan."

Brazil practices until his father finally teaches him the final fatal skill, "the Gnash" (*AP* 182). As a "professional mourner" (Malkin 178), Brazil succeeds in faking, performing the legacy of his father. As his father replicates the "Great" Man with the "Lesser" Known, his son is engaged in simulating grief with of wailing, weeping, sobbing, and gnashing. Linking Brazil's *faking* to black cultural traditions, Elam and Rayner suggest that this strategic disingenuousness clears out a space for African American subversion in the American theatre tradition: "The showmanship in acting out mourning parodies rituals from the performative black church tradition as well as from the minstrel tradition of stereotype, exaggeration, and exploitation. . . . African American minstrels could both mock and profit from the dominant culture. Brazil's skill in imitating kept the money pouring in" ("Echoes" 189-190). Brazil's performance of mourning appropriates the ways in which African Americans are stereotyped, exaggerated, and exploited by the dominant culture. A more fundamental meaning of faking becomes discernible here: Through the performance of mourning, this black professional mourner willfully misrepresents his people to profit from the cultural system in which they are misread, misconstrued, and mistaken. It cannot be denied that Brazil's showmanship, as a form of self-parody, still reduces an African American capacity for empathetic identification to some marketable gestures: "There's money init," as Brazil quotes his father (*AP* 162).

As a professional mourner, Brazil parallels his father who was a black minstrel, buying into the system through which "the money came pouring in" (*AP* 182). Such a questionable positioning toward the white supremacist culture illuminates the predicament of blackfaced black minstrels in the second half of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, such black actors as Bert Williams and George Walker presented themselves as the "strutting dandy" and the "shuffling darky," imitating the white minstrels who mimic African American dialect, music, and

dance (Alkire 36-37). And the twenties witnessed even more black actors on stage with the popularity of such Broadway musicals as *Shuffle Along* (1921), *Dixie to Broadway* (1924), *The Chocolate Dandies* (1924), and *Africana* (1927). Visually and economically consumed on a large scale, this first generation of Black Broadway stars could not help "tapping. . . minstrel and vaudeville stereotypes" with their blackened black faces (Gubar 114). Blacks impersonating whites impersonating blacks might replicate the white appropriation of African American cultural forms, reproducing themselves as a "self-glamorizing iconography of negritude" (Gubar 116).

As a black minstrel, the Foundling Father straddles two variants of blackface minstrelsy: black whiteface and black blackface. When aligned not only with the tradition of black whiteface performance but with the provocative and problematic tradition of black blackface, the Foundling Father's performance might have its liberatory potential re-negotiated and complicated. An interesting adaptation of true stories about the origin of Jumping Jim Crow, Wesley Brown's *Darktown Strutters* (2000) offers a relevant portrayal of a blackfaced black minstrel against the historical evolution of blackface minstrelsy from slavery through just after Reconstruction. This novel features a famous traveling minstrel, Jim Crow, and his adopted son, Jim Too, who straddle the fictional and the real. It is particularly interested in blacks' reclamation of the ownership of the form. The protagonists are alienated from the form originating from their cultural tradition in its evolution as a white form. The story of the father who tries to hand down his moves to his son and the son who finds that these "moves have become a part of white culture and divorced from their origins" (Norman 88) brings out this irony. By performing unmasked, unlike all the other blacked-up minstrels whether black or white, Jim Crow tries to "perform as truth a self that is not a performer, a self that is pure," as W.T. Lhamon points out

(177). Scoffing at his mistaken belief in his autonomy, however, his lover tells him: "It don't matter that you never blacked up. You made a name for yourself from it, same as those who used it" (184). What matters, as she aptly reminds him, is whether he is bound to economic systems of minstrelsy, not his refusal to black up. Jim Crow's efforts to sever himself from the industry leads only to failure. Although he does not consciously agree with its racist thrust, but rather defies it, he is making a living and a name by participating in the institution of minstrelsy. Whether blackened up or not, his performance registers itself as an entertainment for the audience mostly by evoking inferior, naïve, and bawdy images associated with African Americans.

As Brown's mock-documentary suggests, the legitimate reclamation of this black cultural tradition is possible only when black blackface minstrelsy is (re)defined less as blacks' accommodation of white projections to contain blackness by uncritically acting them out than as black agency to construct and negotiate black identity through consciously performing it. Indeed, the Lesser Known and Brazil are also implicated with the dilemma of *Darktown Strutters*' father and son. Although Brazil is not ignorant of the ways in which his own black qualities are consumed within the cultural economy of minstrelsy and consciously participates in its economic system, he is still complicit with it, circulating the cultural images projected onto blackness. Neither is the Foundling Father's inversion free from the suspicion about the attempts at destabilizing, overthrowing, or subverting the system by someone who is already vulnerable to its symbolic structure. In her sequel, *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks delineates a less favorable, even somewhat deterministic reality for two African American men to negotiate their self-determination and autonomy. Although the tragic, fatal confrontation between Lincoln and Booth at the end of the play seems to be historically ordained by their ridiculous historical names, it is

rather the beliefs and ideologies circulated by the minstrel regime that regulate and doom the subjectivities of Lincoln and Booth, two modern black minstrels.

Two Modern Dandies

Making his first appearance on stage "in an antique frock coat and wear[ing] a top hat and fake beard" (*TD* 8) and *whiteface*, Lincoln seems to succeed to the Foundling Father's performative gesture to defamiliarize the (in)visibility of whiteness in the construction of American history. In terms of critical whiteness studies, Carpenter particularly pays attention to Lincoln's daily routine of wearing and taking off whiteface makeup: Featuring "[T]ak[ing] off the frock coat and appl[ying] cold cream" (*TD*11) on stage, Parks suggests that the racial boundary can be melted and finally removed along with whiteface on Lincoln's face. If *The America Play* focuses on "highlighting the construction of race," playing with/riffing on the signifiers of race, *Topdog/Underdog's* blatant use of whiteface carries this scheme a step further, "emphasizing the deconstruction of racial identity" (Carpenter 190).

Carpenter's positive outlook on the trajectory from a latent/assumed whiteface to a blatant one leaves room for reexamination. Whiteface's deconstructive potential tends to be undercut, if not closed off in *Topdog/Underdog's* naturalistic world. Rather than serving as a symbolic exit from the devastating conditions of life, whiteface is associated with debasement and humiliation throughout the play. Lincoln even feels disgraced about whiteface:

> Lincoln: They said thuh fella before me –he took off the getup one day, hung it up real nice, and never came back. And as they offered thuh job, saying of course I would have to wear a little makeup and accept less than what they would offer a –another guy –

Booth: Go on, say it. “White.” Theyd pay you less than theyd pay a white guy. (*TD* 29)

Whereas it is clear that Lincoln should wear a makeup and be paid less than his predecessor because he is not “white,” he hesitates to admit that this “little” makeup and “thuh fella before [him]” is white. Conversely, Booth has the nerve to articulate such a clear yet stern reality since he is not the one who experiences “the shit” of changing costume and playing Lincoln to “make it work” (*TD* 52). In Scene 3, Lincoln explicates the desperate circumstances under which he ended up with this job: “I swore off them cards. Took nowhere jobs. Drank. Then Cookie threw me out. What thuh fuck was I gonna do? I seen that “Help Wanted” sign and I went up in there and I looked good in the getup and agreed to the whiteface. . .” (*TD* 53). With the access to any means for social, economic, and emotional maintenances precluded, literally in the situation “Help Wanted,” Lincoln impulsively decides to undertake the first job available at the moment. While he admits that it is “a sit down job. With benefits” (*TD* 53), he is mortified to have to “agree to” the whiteface. The modicum of the liberating vision that is granted to the Foundling Father’s cross-racial play is missing from Lincoln’s whiteface. Much like the black minstrels who were often encouraged and even coerced to don blackface to mock themselves in late nineteenth century, Lincoln has to don whiteface only to mock himself as a commodity.

Practically and symbolically, Lincoln’s whiteface features as a masking ritual to be admitted to white society as epitomized in Lincoln’s inevitable choice to agree to it. Abandoned by their own parents and left only with the inheritance of 500 bucks for each, Lincoln and Booth stick to the utilitarian view of the world. While Booth, a younger brother who is more emotional and spontaneous, still takes issue with the historical and racial disgrace his infamous white

namesake brings to his name, Lincoln's world revolves around the more practical, financial concerns, as shown in his obsessed interest in employment prospect:

> You gonna call yrself something African? That be cool. Only pick something that's easy to spell and pronounce, man, cause you know, some of them african names, I mean, ok, Im down with the power to the people thing, but no ones gonna hire you if they cant say yr name. And some of them fellas who got they african names, no one can say they names and they cant say they names neither. I mean, you dont want yr new handle to obstruct yr employment possibilities. (*TD* 14)

Unlike Booth who "never did like to work" (*TD* 94), Lincoln may well know that African names might disqualify them as job applicants given that they might empower "the people." Market logic is evident: "no ones gonna hire you if they cant say yr name." Employment means an admission to white society for these black brothers. Evoking the process of interpellation as defined by Louis Althusser, Lincoln suggests that African Americans can only be employed in white society, and, only summoned as subjects when white society can discern and articulate their names.

"Shango," an African name Lincoln suggests to Booth as an easily spelled and pronounced one, is curiously resonant with "Sambo," one of the most familiar minstrel figures, not just in terms of its pronunciation but in that both serve as a compromise between African American lineage and its commodification in a white racist system.[19] The industry that can be

[19] Shango is a God of thunder and lightning in Yoruba religion. In *Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois introduced Shango as exemplifying the preponderance of African gods over European and Semitic deities. When it comes to the capitalist and consumerist society Lincoln and Booth belong to as underdogs, this indigenous African deity has its mythic power deflated only to be reduced to a cultural commodity.

recapitulated by Lincoln's whiteface indicates that the exploitative structure of minstrelsy is still effective in contemporary American society. While "they really dug it that me and Honest Abe got the same name," it was not more than just a coincidence that justified their hiring Lincoln at a cheaper price than they paid to "another guy" who "took off the getup one day. . . and never came back" (*TD* 53, 29). While the Lesser Known gets self-employed by his desire to follow the Great Man, Lincoln becomes commodified as a lucrative property and cheap replacement of his white predecessor, who himself was a cheap replacement of Abraham Lincoln. By agreeing to whiteface, Lincoln *anachronically* sanctions the basic tenets of minstrelsy in which black body is used for the other's economic and affective gains. As a major trope for white appropriation of blackness in the antebellum era, minstrelsy marks its fundamental exploitation by selling the black body and blackness as financial goods. Blackface minstrelsy is the first "marketing" throughout U.S. history that sells blackness as property, as Eric Lott points out (39).

Saidiya Hartman regards both minstrelsy and slavery as forms of possession of the black body, drawing an analogy between their figurative and literal ways of possession: "[Minstrelsy's] punitive pleasures yielded through the figurative possession of blackness cannot be disentangled from the bodily politics of chattel slavery" (32). Whiteface's evocation of minstrelsy re-inscribes Lincoln in the racial economy of minstrelsy, in which the black body is still being commodified as property and returned to its chattel status before emancipation. Among "a slew of guys working" in the arcade, he is "the only one they look over everyday" to see if he's "presentable" (*TD* 55). Lincoln's *capacity* as property is paradoxically proved by his employer's threat that "they gonna replace me with a wax dummy" (*TD* 44): such "replaceability and interchangeability [is] endemic to the commodity," as Hartman remarks (21).

Eric Lott contends, however, that the intricacies of minstrelsy's racial dynamics can only be partly apprehended when explained as "a static and reified "black culture's" removal into the pocketbooks of white imitators" (*Love and Theft* 39). In this bodily traffic called the minstrel show, the "economy of pleasure" works both in literal and figurative senses: "The fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (Hartman 21). Emptying himself or Lincoln-the-president as a signifier, the whitefaced Lincoln serves for his customers, their undigested feelings, repressed rages, and hidden desires. Lincoln carries out his duty faithfully as a customized target for each customer including his "Best Customer," "Bunches of kids. . . in school uniforms," "businessmen smelling like two for one martinis," "tourists. . . trying to catch it on film," and even "housewives with they mouths closed tight" (*TD* 48-50). For them to "get so into it," Lincoln rehearses his assassination over and over, "rolling and wiggling on the floor," which once again evokes the exaggerated expressions and behaviors of the blackface actors that have appeared on minstrel stages (*TD* 50-51).

While urging Lincoln to practice his impersonation on the one hand, Booth charges him for his assimilation into his impersonating job on the other. From Booth's view, Lincoln gets alienated from Booth's ideal of masculinity as he becomes set in his arcade performance. Defending his masturbating to cheap pornography, Booth inversely turns on Lincoln, accusing him of a passive and lethargic manhood:

> When I don't got a woman, I gotta make do. Not like you, Link. When you don't got a woman you sit there. Letting your shit fester. Yr dick, if it aint falled off yet, is hanging there between yr legs, little whiteface shriveled-up blank-shooting grub worm. That's what I say. Least my shits intact.

(Rest)

You a limp dick jealous whiteface motherfucker whose wife dumped him cause he couldnt get it up and she told me so (*TD* 45).

As Booth intimates, Lincoln's impotence leads to the breakup between Lincoln and his wife, which again leads to his agreeing to this whiteface job. In this line of reasoning, Lincoln's emasculation is easily paired with his whiteface in Booth's mind. The metaphor of the leg for the penis and that of the limping gait for impotence that work in above passage resonate with the limping gait of "Jumping Jim Crow," T.D. Rice's first blackface performance in Pittsburgh in the antebellum period[20]. Within the racial economy of minstrelsy, the limping gait served as a compelling metaphor for deprived masculinity, or castration. Conflating racial difference onto sexual one, such an emasculating narrative worked to affirm white supremacy against a potent threat posed by black masculinity. It was the whites' strategy to discursively contain the sexuality of black males they envied and at the same time they feared.[21]

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[20] In the early 1830s, Thomas Dartmouth, alias "Daddy Rice," a white showman, came to witness a black youth named Cuff perform a jump dance. So impressed with his performance, Rice tried to imitate his dance onstage, "having shaded his own countenance to the "contraband" hue" (Nevin 609). Onstage his grotesque imitation made a great success and as it became popular, he named his dance "Jumping Jim Crow". Since then, Jim Crow came to be used as interchangeable with "negro" and serve as a prototype for "theatrical darky" (Huggins 251).

[21] In his monumental discussion of blackface minstrelsy in *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott discusses blackface minstrel show in the decades before the Civil War in its relation to "white racial subjectivity" (38) rather than blackness only, showing how white working class audiences of blackface minstrelsy projected the conflicts with their masters into racial conflicts. He tries to complicate the widely-received assumption that minstrelsy developed out of "aversion" by uncovering the equivocal emotional valences the white audience harbor towards "blackness": celebration and exploitation. If white men's fascination with black culture lead to exploitation, what Lott calls "theft," their fascination with the black male bodies engendered mixed erotic economy between white and black men, shedding a light on what Lott means by "love". While his expansive and dense explorations of blackface

The antagonism between whiteface and the ideal of masculinity becomes stark through Booth's words: "I don't like you wearing that bullshit, that shit that bull that disguise that getup that motherdisfuckinguise anywhere in the daddy-dicksticking vicinity of my humble abode" (*TD* 9). This outrageous rhyming of Booth's cursing reveals the extent that his world is bifurcated according to his misogynistic view of the world. If the masculinity emblematized by his father's role secures him an authentic identity, the world symbolized by Lincoln's whiteface poses a threat to an ideal of masculinity. Quite superstitiously, Booth abhors Lincoln's whiteface disguise lest it should dispel the memory of his father: It was "Dad's clothes [that] used to hang in the closet" (*TD* 29) that makes this abode their father's; it was also when Lincoln finally burnt them and threw them away that he left his hustling career and in its stead undertook the impersonating job:

> He had some nice stuff. What he didnt spend on booze he spent on women. What he didn't spend on them to 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. (*TD* 29)

Their father's clothes served as the barometer against which they measure their masculinity to see if they are "big enough to fit it" (TD 29). For Lincoln and Booth, "some nice stuff" hanging on the wall means "some nice stuff" their father would do in it: boozing and womanizing. For Booth, what Lincoln burned and deserted is not just the father's clothes but all the masculine ideals attached to them partly as a memory. Quitting hustling and getting into the white industry

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minstrelsy successfully locate this form in such a broader context of antebellum American society as the formation of popular culture and class strife, he admits that it is such "cross-racial desire" (6) as "fascination" and "derision" that mobilizes the socio-political structures and movement of this era at the bottom.

as an *underdog*, Lincoln becomes distanced from this ideal of masculinity as implied by his father's nice stuff and his previous job as a hustler. While Lincoln's taking of such a demeaning yet legitimate job points to his disillusionment from the ideal of black masculinity as exemplified by their father, Booth's repudiation of any solid jobs is not groundless, either: "You don't see me holding down a steady job. Cause its bullshit and I know it. I seen how it cracked [Mom and Pop] up and I aint going there" (*TD* 68). The picture of masculinity and the sentimentalized image of family and childhood form an incongruous harmony in Booth's traumatized memory. Herein, the question at issue is less why their father bequeathed such a distorted masculinity to his sons than why black males cannot but envision their masculinities as such.

While not being employed in reality, Booth engages himself in re-incarnating his father in his own way. What he contrives as an alternative for the legitimate form of employment is shoplifting. At the beginning of Scene 2, Booth enters with two suits he has stolen from a department store that day. Bragging about stealing these two suits, two shirts, two ties, and two pairs of shoes, he imagines how "Gracell see me in this and and she gonna ask me tuh marry her" (*TD* 28). In Scene 3, Booth pompously enters again after spending a night with Grace: He "swaggers about, his moves are exaggerated, rooster-like," as the stage direction says (*TD* 38). Such an exaggerated way he wears, walks, and brags about his allegedly "biggest night of my [his] life" connects him not just to his father but to the dandy figure of the minstrel show. Among the dandy figures, Booth can be classified specifically as the "roarer," a type that "symbolized the masculine urge for gratification but sheltered the moral doubts associated with the exercise of such behaviors by exaggerating the qualities performers displayed" as William J. Mahar defines (201).

According to Mahar's classification of types of minstrelsy, the figure of the northern dandy –namely, the roarer type –constitutes the most representative subjects of the male display and boasting songs (195-228). The chief dandy figures often satirized are "a pretender, a charlatan, a confidence man," and they are marked by sexual prowess. Lincoln and Booth brothers are also marked by their fraud and pretense: Lincoln was a con-artist and Booth aspires to Lincoln's glamorous past as a "hustler" by "pretending" to be a good one himself; The portrait of Booth who, engrossed with his courtship and intercourse with Grace, believes that he is "hot" and "need[s] constant sexual release" and claims that he is "thuh man," "thuh champ," fitting well with the dandy type characterized by "courtship, sexual aggressiveness, narcissistic self-indulgence, and male boasting" (Mahar 210).

These qualities were applied to urban dandies regardless of race between 1840 and 1870, when they were most popular on stage. In opposition to Jim Crow who represents the comedic, the rural, the common, and the *black*, Dandy Jim is regarded as the dramatic, the urban, the elite, and the *white*. The defining character of the type was less race or class than its social aspirations: To be more attractive to females, they needed to excel themselves; Yet with any means for social uplift precluded, they could not but pretend to be what they are not. Whether the "middle-class American desire to set himself or herself apart from the democratic masses" or the vulgar's aspiration to the middle class, these transgressive desires are vulnerable to the audience's disdain and derision (Mahar 227).

Although the urban dandy was a racially stereotyped figure, often associated with the white rather than the black, its repetitive presentations by the actors in blackface on minstrel stages served to attribute these pretentions and duplicities to blacks. Discussing not only dandy types but characters like Sambo Johnson, Doctor Quash, or Merky who aspire to "something

greater than they were," Hartman takes notes of the conservative narrative of such songs as "Dandy Jim from Caroline," "Pompey Squash," "Jim along Josey," and "High Dandy," in which the characters are invariably punished and contained: "When Zip Coon slipped out of place, he was brutally returned there. When 'Meriky converted to Episcopalianism, she was beaten by her father until she regained her senses. . . . Doctor Quash, the sham physician and mangler, is beaten, murdered, revived, and forced to run a gautlet" (31). While Mahar says that the dandy stereotype has been criticized because it misrepresents "all those industrious African American men who, condemned by racism to work in menial jobs, attempted to support their families in northern urban centers" (210), the type can fit well with African American laborers who reflect dandies' vain aspirations in their striving for self-promotion in a society that has a very low tolerance for any social and racial transgression. Within the racial dynamics of blackface minstrelsy, their ambitions are regarded as a threat posed to white terrain, and thus registered as an impossible aspiration.

More than just presenting the despicable traits of these black male types and characters for amusement – or, attributing those to them, – the minstrel narrative reflects or mediates the conservative and punitive structure of their society. Booth's bluffing, swaggering, and braggadocio are lampooned and finally lead to the final fatal confrontation in *Topdog/Underdog*, suggesting that the world of Lincoln and Booth is still affected and regulated by such a punitive narrative. Representing the uncertain positions of African American men in America, Lincoln and Booth negotiate the variegated social uncertainties through their masculinities. The bifurcation of masculinity into emasculated and nonsexualized impotence on the one hand and fully sexualized promiscuity on the other is expressed by the binary of Booth and Lincoln, or Lincoln's own self torn between his past and present, his new job and former one. Masculinity

functions in two ways: While the black males ought to be feminized within the racial dynamics of the minstrel show, masculinity is the only way to make up for their lacks as a social being with any other opportunities for social-uplift precluded.

Blackface Lynching

In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng scathingly questions about the possibility of political agency granted to *underdogs* within the system: "What can political agency mean for someone operating in a symbolic, cultural economy that has already pre-assigned them as a deficit?" (7). Guarded against the easy narrative of progress, Cheng identifies a tendency to disregard "racism's profound, lasting effects" on America's black subjects. In his review of *The America Play*'s premier at the Yale Repertory Theatre, David J. DeRose asks a revealing question about the psychic impacts of domination: "What sort of culturally induced masochism compels a man, particularly a black man, to take upon himself the person of Abraham Lincoln in order to be shot again and again? And what cathartic function does he fulfill for the many shooters who enter the mock-up of Ford's Theater in the personage of John Wilkes Booth?" (409-10). The suicidal structure of Parks's two Lincoln plays in which these two black minstrels perform their daily rituals of self-annihilation, exposing themselves to being shot by their customers, does not just confirm to minstrelsy's punitive narrative but informs the feeling of deficiency. Behind these undecipherable psychological impulses on both sides, whether masochistic or cathartic, lies the collective memory of historical practices of lynching. The traumatic scar of the collective experiences of being hanged, shot, and mutilated over and over by racial violence engraved on African American minds ought to drive him to reenact this self-destructive execution over and over.

While being the ultimate form of physical and corporeal retribution, lynching operated on the symbolic and performative levels to engrain in African Americans' minds that "the color bar was still firmly in place" (Markovitz xxviii). Robyn Wiegman says, "Above all, lynching is about the law. . . . In the circuit of relations that governs lynching in the United States, the law as legal discourse and disciplinary practice subtends the symbolic arena, marking out a topos of bodies and identities that gives order to generation, defines and circumscribes social and political behavior, punishes transgression" (445). The Foundling Father's cross-racial theatrics crisscrossed W.E.B. DuBois's "color line" by taking on the white performer's prerogative to control racial representation, and thereby he gets persecuted by these mock-assassins. His signifyin(g) on the signifiers surrounding the white iconography of Lincoln is marked by its transgression within the symbolic system of minstrelsy and the "integrated spaces" he enters "could prove deadly" as Hale comments on the lynching's socio-symbolic economy.

In *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, Susan Gubar suggests a parallel relationship between blackface minstrelsy and lynching. If violence is afflicted on the black body on the physical, material, and literal dimensions in lynching practices, it works on the symbolic, mimetic, and figurative dimensions within the cultural regime of minstrelsy. If minstrelsy is a chief cultural form disseminating spectacle of blackness, lynching also staged spectacle of blackness to terrorize and discipline the black audience. If lynching is capital punishment, blackface metaphorically sacrificed the black body. Gubar locates the kind of the white psychology intervening in such cross-racial practices as blackface movie star, minstrel show, and vaudeville acts in "Western civilization's genocidal determination to "Make White!"

(107)[22]. Behind blackface lies the white men's sub-conscious desire for "obliterating the black body, substituting in its stead not only the white body but also the white man's parodic imitation-of-black-body" (56). As "a symbolic rite of scapegoating," blackface performances are compared to "the flip side of lynching" in Gubar's anatomy: "blackface becomes the secular rite by which a surrogate (black) victim is hung in effigy by the white community" (78).

Resonating with blackface's scapegoating, each black minstrel in Parks's plays performs a rite of death every day. Grounded on the fact that the customers could see the real skin color of the fake Lincoln behind his whiteface especially in *Topdog/Underdog*, Jennifer Larson aptly suspects that they might dissimulate their desire to kill a black man by pretending to participate in the re-creation of history. Rather than just re-writing the mythos pertaining to Lincoln-the-President, the mock-assassins "are essentially becoming members of a lynch mob, lining up to kill a black man" (190). By their mock-assassinations, the customers are engaged in physicalizing and materializing the symbolic, representational, and emblematic violence that has been afflicted on the black body, identity, and blackness itself within the wide symbolic system of blackface minstrelsy. Pointing to the blackface's metaphorical sacrifice of blackness, the ritual of black man assassinated every night serves as an eerie yet revelatory site for intersections between two American racist institutions.

Such an indictment of blackface's exclusive and exterminating intentions, however, runs the risk of reproducing the spectacle of the black body lynched, persecuted, and tyrannized, tapping on the collective memory of an African American traumatic past. Despite its reversed

[22] While encompassing two kinds of "racial masquerade" –white performances of blackness and black performances of whiteness, what is called, "passing," – by *racechange*, a term coined by herself, Gubar particularly finds interesting and problematic a tendency that "(w)hen white people portray African Americans, they embody (and displace) them" (xx).

appropriation, the black Lincoln still presents his black body as "the virtual puppet of the white male body" just as it is consumed and circulated within minstrelsy and lynching (Lewis 97). Harvey Young argues that "the spectacular abuse of the black body" contributes to discursive constructions of blackness by fomenting "potentially racist associations of blackness with poverty and criminality" and thereby forging an easy connection between blackness and suffering (*Embodying* 201). In her 1995 essay, "Can You Be Black and Look at This?" Elizabeth Alexander says: "Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries" (82). Singling out the Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police officers as a representative instance, Alexander traces such instances of violence from physical abuse on plantations through lynching spectacles through televised beatings of African Americans. Tackling these images of pain, Alexander foregrounds and problematizes the ways in which black bodies are publicly consumed, as surrogate sites for dramatizing other national traumas such as "sexual harassment, date rape, drug abuse, AIDS, racial and economic urban conflict" (83). The Foundling Father's body serves as such a surrogate. While accusing lynching and minstrelsy of their racist corporal containment, his repetitive performances of "the Death of Lincoln" do not just spectacularize the whiteness surrounding this historical figure and event but feature his body as an object of abuse. While it is "the power of theatrical performance" that allows the Foundling Father to cross racial lines, the Foundling Father's framed theatre allows him to be doubly consumed once by his customers and then by the *The America Play*'s audience, whether for thrill or sadistic desire.

The spectacle of suffering becomes more problematic considering the demographic that would consume these traumatic scenes. Around the 1840s, so to speak, in its own times, blackface minstrelsy was a chief entertainment form for a northern white male working-class at

first, and then extended its target to a broader population of white middle- and working-class across the nations. Although white men were "the primary stagers and consumers" of such historical spectacles as the minstrel show and lynchings, "but in one way or another, black people also have been looking, forging a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict" as Alexander pointedly remarks (83). As black people have been violated, impinged upon through bodily display, the black audience of *The America Play* is further exposed to the violent, repetitive consumption of the black body visually and even aurally as gunshots echo.

At the end of *The America Play*, the Foundling Father returns from his grave and performs his actual death: "A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes. The Foundling Father slumps in his chair" as he always does in his arcade show (198). Even if the assassination seems a theatrical repetition, the spectators are potentially traumatized by the repeated witness, exposed to the Foundling Father's black body violated once again. Aligning "a great hole" in which *The America Play* is set with a "Beckettian void," Geis discusses how the repetitive assassination scenes drive the act into *mise-en-abime* in which the protagonist eventually must perish (105). In a similar vein, Kurt Bullock regards the Foundling Father's continuous repetition of assassination as a "ritual" only to "find the assassination simulation empty" (77). But then again, Una Chauduri suggests that such a spiral movement of the acts does not just head toward the existential void: "As person after person goes through the murderous motions, the ludicrous script they follow is gradually transformed through repetition into a ritual, in which what is being celebrated, we realize, is the violence at the heart of American history" (*Staging* 264). While this violence might be waged against the Foundling Father as a "leader" or a "father" as Chauduri suggests, it is yet undeniable that the black man who impersonates this white leader or father

"also allows himself to be violated" (Geis 105), leading finally to his self-destruction. The Foundling Father's *sanitized* presentation of violence, as it is played over and over, paradoxically accuses American history and society of its violence, which is emblematized in the Foundling Father's bleeding "great head" at the end of the play (*AP* 199). The Foundling Father's ritualistic *celebration* of violence parallels and reverses the ways in which the lynching, as a ritualistic behavior, reinforces white, sovereignty over blacks with its repeated practices: "Ritual and ideology go hand in hand, and ideology is given vent in ritual" (Lewis 94).

Transferring the Affects

While both Lincoln plays feature a black Lincoln impersonator, the way each conveys its black Lincoln's re-enactment diverges from each other. Whereas *The America Play* features the assassination scene several times directly on stage, *Topdog/Underdog* resorts to Lincoln's description of the arcade gig at second hand. This difference chiefly comes from the extent that each impersonator identifies with Lincoln. For the Foundling Father, impersonation is more like "the summoning" that "gave a shape to the life and posterity . . . that he could never shake" (*AP* 163, 162): It is "the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln" who opens Act One with his speech (*AP* 160). In contrast, Lincoln asserts his own identity as distinct from his impersonating job and the historical figure represented by his performance.[23] Whereas the

[23] Lincoln regards his historical namesake just as a signifier he can signify on, which is divulged in the episode of his encounter with a kid in the bus. Seeing Lincoln in his arcade costume and with his whiteface on, the kid mistook him for "Honest Abe" and asked him for his autograph:

> 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. I wanted to tell him to go fuck hisself. But then I got a look at him. A little rich kid. Born on easy street, you know the type. So I waited until I could tell he really wanted it, the autograph, and I told him he could have it for 10 bucks. (*TD* 11)

Foundling Father seems so enthusiastic about his impersonation that he showcases and plays the assassination scene over and over, it is only when Lincoln rehearses it with Booth, practicing with exaggerated gestures, that the audience witnesses the assassination scene on stage in *Topdog/Underdog*. While the repetitive execution scenes might lend themselves to an empathetic identification with the executed, *The America Play* is curiously reticent about how the Foundling Father perceives the moment he gets shot. The other way around, *Topdog/Underdog* presents Lincoln's realistic depiction of the moments when he sits waiting for his customer-assassins:

> All around the whole and arcade is buzzing and popping. Thuh Whirring of thuh duckshoot, baseballs smacking the back wall when someone misses the track of cans, some woman getting happy the barker talking up the fake freaks. The smell of the ocean and cotton candy and rat shit. And in thuh middle of all that, I can sit and let my head go quiet. Make up songs, make plans. Forget. (*TD* 33)

Seemingly numb and deadened, "[s]taring straight ahead," yet not "really look[ing]" (*TD* 33), Lincoln is vulnerable to all the "buzzing and popping" of the arcade and immersed in its air in which sea smell, sweetness, and stench are mixed. He is so transparent that everything around goes through him. Having all his senses thrown into outer stimulations, he paradoxically gets

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Taking the 20 bucks the kid got and telling him "Honest Abe would give him the change" (*TD* 11), Lincoln exploits this little kid's ingenuousness to conflate Lincoln as a historical figure and his representation of it. This kid is rather the type of the audience the Lesser Known should aim at in *The America Play*: He wanted people "to think of him and remove their hats and touch their hearts and look up into the heavens and say something about the freeing of the slaves. That is, he wanted to make a great impression as he understood Mr. Lincoln to have made" (*AP* 166). Taking advantage of such a great impression as Lincoln-the-President might have left on this kid who might learn about him in his history class and his inability to tell "thuh real thing from thuh echo" (*AP* 175), Lincoln extorts his money and buys drinks at Luckys with this money. Lincoln seems engaged in his role-playing more playfully than ever without any remorse, ascertaining his psychological, ethical, and ontological detachment from "Honest Abe."

displaced and alienated from them and even from himself. Against the whirlwind of emotions and feelings around himself, he seems numb and deadened. It is almost as if he is dreaming.

The physical environment of his working place also works to "keep thuh illusion of thuh whole thing." When he sits as Lincoln in the arcade, he perceives everything through the dent in a little electric box made of silver metal on the opposite wall. Its reflection makes everything seem upside down and "thats where I [Lincoln] can see em. The assassins":

> Not behind me yet but I can hear him coming. Coming in with his gun in hand, thuh gun he already picked out up from when he paid his fare. Coming on in. But not behind me yet. His dress shoes making too much noise on the carpet, the carpets too thin, Boss should get a new one but hes cheap. Not behind me yet. Not behind me yet. Cheap lightbulb just above my head. And there he is. Standing behind me. Standing in position. Standing upside down. . . . Thu gun is always cold. Winter or summer thuh gun is always cold. And when the 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*. (*TD* 49-50, emphasis added)

Through Lincoln's poised diction surfaces the fear he felt when he witnesses his own assassin coming over behind him. The feast of images, sounds, and odors wrapping up Lincoln's self while waiting leads to the nauseating images reflected on the dent in the metal box, everything upside down, which altogether demonstrate his inability to assert control over the external situation. It is Booth's teasing question that precipitates and gives shape to Lincoln's vague fear: "You ever wonder if someones gonna come in there with a real gun? A real gun with real slugs? Someone with hu axe tuh grind or something?" (*TD* 48). Shattering the absolute boundary

between what is real and what ain't, life and death, performance and reality, which Lincoln labors to disregard with his blunt answer, "No," Booth's question reveals that the terror Lincoln feels in each mock-assassination session could be indeed mortal, deeply grounded in material and affective reality. He is keen on everything at this moment: the "assassinator's" dress-shoes, the thin carpet, and the noise they collaborate on; the light of cheap lightbulb; the coldness of the gun, most of all.

It is ironical yet revealing that Lincoln experiences the threat to death "real" in the penny arcade show, a doubly mediated theatrical form, both historical re-enactment and commodified artifact. While it was "the Historicity of the place the order and beauty of the pageants which marched by them" that impressed the Foundling Father as their calling "became louder not softer but louder louder as if he were moving toward it" (*AP* 162; 163), the historical relevance seems to have faded away in its transition from the first to the second black Lincoln. Lincoln sees himself just as "uh brother playing Lincoln….uh stretch for anyones imagination" (*TD* 52). Denied his access to the historical past, he enters into a relationship with his ancestors in an unexpected way. The tactile sensations evoked by the contrast of the cold gun and his warm body foreground what is bracketed and sanitized by the Foundling Father's theatricalized presentation of the persecution. Through these affective sensations, African American collective memory of racial violence can be awakened and summoned. Synthetic images conveying bodily sensations at the threat of death render possible the empathetic transfer to his audience, including the murderously responding Booth: The audience imbibes his experience by mobilizing their capacity for empathetic identification and with the nerves and senses –whether Lincoln's or audience's – on edge, the play builds up to the final death of Lincoln, which is a physical and material reality.

"The Twenty Feet": When Theatre Meets Reality

While Lincoln is not committed to grand history, history still "catches up with" Lincoln. Sharing metatheatrical structures, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* indeed resort to different theatrical forms. In the part "D. Echo," which begins with the staging of a scene from *Our American Cousin*, the Foundling Father suddenly begins to relay the very moment of Lincoln assassination, quitting his metatheatrical cross-racial role-playing as Mrs. Mount in *Our American Cousin*:

> And now, the centerpiece of the evening!!
>
> (Rest)
>
> Uh Hehm. The Death of Lincoln!: --. The watching of the play, the laughter, the smiles of Lincoln and Mary Todd, the slipping of Booth into the presidential box unseen, the freeing of the slaves, the pulling of the trigger, the bullets piercing above the left ear, the bullets entrance into the great head, the bullets lodging behind the great right eye, the slumping of Lincoln, the leaping onto the stage of Booth, the screaming of Todd, the screaming of Keene, the shouting of Booth "Thus to the tyrants!," the death of Lincoln! –And the silence of the nation. (*AP* 188)

Reminding of the broadcasting tone of Voice On Thuh Tee V announcing the death of Black Man with Watermelon in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, the Foundling Father's highly detailed— almost hyperrealistic – description of how the bullets were discharged from the gun and pierced through Lincoln's head paradoxically serves to distance the audience or the listener from the assassination scene rather than precipitating a thrilling suspense. Presenting

the summary of the assassination without so much as acting it out this time, the Foundling Father hints at his own displacement from the Great Man whose steps he would follow. His mock-broadcast captures the standard American history as "a new nation conceived," "The Death of Lincoln," "the freeing of the slaves," and finally "thuh great black hole that thuh fatal bullet bore" (*AP* 188-189) in a detached and even playful manner. It turns out that the Foundling Father is capable of separating the Lesser Man from the Great Man, not falling short of "know[ing] thuh real thing from thuh echo" (*AP* 175).

When the Lesser Known familiarizes himself with the existence of the Great Man in his youth, "[w]hat interested the Lesser Known most was the murder and what was most captivating about the murder was the 20 feet –," "those feet where the Great *Blonde* Man sat" (*AP* 166, 168). The twenty-foot distance between the stage upon which *My American Cousin* was performed and Lincoln's presidential box stands for the line between reality and stage, history and theatre, and the real thing and its echo, that the Foundling Father and *The America Play* tries to maintain and sometimes playfully erodes. When "that expanse" (*AP* 168) was violated by Booth's slipping into the presidential box and again leaping from it back to the stage, that fine line was lost, leading to the fatal outcome.

The *theatre* of a black man enacting the Great Man of American history originates from a black gravedigger's desire to be included in the *history*. After watching the historical parade at the Big Hole on his honeymoon, the Lesser Known was so mesmerized by the "the Historicity. . . the order and the beauty of the pageants which marched by them the Greats on parade" that he "[h]oped he'd be of interest to posterity" (*AP* 162). As with a fairy tale, folklore, or legend in which magical events and imaginary figures become real, this play resorts to a meta-theatrical/theatricalist magic whereby theatre effects, changes, or turns into a medium for

realizing the Lesser Known's dream of belonging to history with its "order" and "beauty." Mimicking the Foundling Father who "conflates history and his own representation of it" (Foster, "Lincoln Myth" 32), Parks pretends to mistake his "fakin" for what is real: "When I did *The America Play*. . . people said "did it really happen?" and I could say "yeah, it happens every night." That's as real as anything else. That's why theatre's interesting to me because you can insert it into real life and sort of make history" (Sellar 52). Parks's remarks might be misleading yet revelatory: "[I]t happens every night" since his performance does happen every night at the theme park in the world of the play. Shattering the boundary between theatre and real life, Parks's seeming ingenuousness locates the potential to "make history" in theatre's destructive/deconstructive power to break into real life. A play named *The America Play* turns into playing with America, "creating and rewriting" its history: The Lincoln Act featured by a "black" Lincoln reimagines and reframes American history which has left out the black in its privileging of the white, realizing performativity as a reenactment that transforms what it cites.

If *The America Play* resorts to theatrical power to insert itself into reality, *Topdog/Underdog* suggests another way "that expanse" is breached. When theatre draws near reality and the copy envisions its consummate correspondence to the original, they inevitably head towards death. When someone remarked that "he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot" (*AP* 164) to the Lesser Known who was launching his recitation business, it was not just a revelation about his future career but about the ontological status of the Foundling Father as an impersonator or a simulation. And as a sequel, *Topdog/Underdog* encapsulates the confrontation between theatre and reality, the original and the copy by its fatal ending.

Disheartened by his lover's rejection and also momentarily agitated by his brother's (probably mistaken) intention to forfeit his "inheritance," Booth shoots Lincoln: Lincoln "slumps

forward, falling out of his chair and onto the floor" (*TD* 109) just as he did over and over in the arcade show as Lincoln-the-president. Playing out the historical scenario when Booth killed Lincoln, Lincoln's actual death can only amount to historical representation. As his theatre approximates the real with his actual death, however, it loses its ontological ground as "the negation of the real" (Power 17). When the copy has its distance from the original minimized, it cannot but be put to death. Conversely speaking, it is only when Lincoln reaches his death that he can approximate the identity with the original. With his own death at the end, Lincoln also put into actuality the theatre of his father's making, triggered by his joke of naming his sons as Lincoln and Booth. Unwittingly rehearsing his own death, Lincoln practices the arcade gig over and over with his brother to make it look more real. While Lincoln "goes all out," cursing, rolling and wriggling and screaming in accordance with Booth's own instructions, Booth says to Lincoln: "I dunno, man. Something about it. I dunno. It was looking too real or something" (*TD* 52). Lincoln's realistic rendering of dying Lincoln-the-president is not at all a success since the customers "don't want it looking too real" (*TD* 52). Accusing Booth of getting him fired, Lincoln says: "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" (*TD* 50).

Unlike the Foundling Father's theatre, however, Lincoln's theatre does not just involve the ontological dimension. The fine line between theatre and reality, history and its representation, the original and its simulation the first black Lincoln has maintained by theatricalizing/sanitizing history begins to fall apart with the bodily affects awakened by the real threat of death the second black Lincoln experiences. His theatricalized and commodified assassinations are indeed overlaid with the possibility that "someone who hates [him] come in there" with a *real* gun and

invaded by “an awareness of the threatened black male body in American culture” (Geis 125). Presenting a dying black man “too real,” *Topdog/Underdog*’s final scene is once again revealing on what is tragic about the moment theatre meets reality. Lincoln’s death does not just point to the ontological glitch or the symbolic clumsiness, but registers as a stark reality that the audience have to confront. Presenting the historical “shit” of racial violence “raggedy and bloody and screaming,” building up to his actual, material, physical death, *Topdog/Underdog* lays bare the homicidal and genocidal desire the audience could dissimulate by theatricalizing it, frustrating their expectation to watch “historical shit in a certain way.” The relevance of the two black Lincolns’ performances to the historical theatre of blackface minstrelsy is located in the fatal clash between theatre and reality which leads to the messiness of death as a reality. By representing two black minstrels who are lynched every night, Parks’s Lincoln plays de-familiarize and problematize “that expanse” between the symbol and the literal death implied in these historical racist spectacles.

CHAPTER 3

Thwarted Motherhood and Reclaimed Body of Son in *In the Blood* (1999)

While not featuring any lynching scenes or any performers acting out being lynched, *In the Blood* engages with the legacies of lynching and lynching literature. Hester La Negrita, a nurturing and cherishing mother who ends up killing her own child, simultaneously evokes two types of black mothers from early-twentieth century lynching drama, one that aggressively embraces Christian motherhood and one that rejects it. Tracing the ways in which Hester departs from and aligns herself with each type, this chapter reveals how *In the Blood* intervenes in the discourses of lynching on a more fundamental way—through its meditation on the nature of spectacle, particularly spectacle of the black female body. Read against the ways in which early-twentieth-century lynching drama negotiate the relationship between the private and the public through the domestic ideology of ideal motherhood, *In the Blood* demonstrates that the myth of ideal motherhood can only be thwarted when it comes to this contemporary –or transhistorical – black mother who has no right to her private area: her place and body. This black Hester's "[h]ome under bridge" is less a space of safety, protection, and privacy than that of exposure, vulnerability, and publicity, often invaded by policemen, welfare officials and vandals. Having what is private about her made public, she is constantly made a spectacle by the representatives of the society: The public exposure of the private culminates in the ways in which her female body is exploited as a sexual commodity by the Doctor, Welfare, Amiga Gringa, and Reverend D, as revealed in their "confessions." Making spectacle of Hester's racialized and gendered otherness, the discourses performed by these exploiters feature Hester alienated from her own body as she is used as a vessel for their desires and pleasures.

Hester turns her body from a racist spectacle into an occasion of discursive resistance by employing it in the spectacular performance and presenting it in the images the audience is ready to consume. While revealing her sense serving the capitalist system, Hester's Brechtian performance in the lesbian pornographic show which is "very sensual, very provocative, very scientific, very lucrative"[24] mimics the ways in which her lived body and experiences are abstracted and displaced as exploitable and lucrative images. While she seems to be conscious of a gap between the symbolic and the literal, capable of being manipulative for economic ends, she might also replicate the white supremacist scenario of lynching by *physically* obliterating her son, Jabber, to shut off what is *meant* by his accusation of her as "Slut." Ultimately, however, I locate her killing of her son as her active and positive maternal intervention in the "society of spectacle" in which human beings are interchangeable, exchangeable, and instrumental, to reinvest and counterinvest in the black body as a locus of decommodification. As a mother who rejects the role of the *mater dolorosa* in the lineage of black mothers who kill their children, she reclaims his body as her own, redressing the alienation between her body and the word representing it and nullifying the inscription of language/ideas/symbols on the black body.

Black Mothers and the Christian Ideal of Motherhood

The first scene of *In the Blood* begins with a question penetrating the world of the play. About the word scrawled on the wall of their "[h]ome under the bridge" (9), Hester La Negrita asks her oldest child Jabber: "Zit uh good word or a bad word?" (9). Hester is doubly alienated

[24] Suzan-Lori Parks, *In the Blood*, in *The Red Letter Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Groups, 2001), 72. Subsequent references to this volume in this chapter will be given parenthetically in the text.

from the word. Addressed to Jabber, her alphabet teacher, this question reveals that Hester "CANT READ CANT WRITE" (5), "literally" denied an access to the word. Also addressing the audience implied or actual, Hester's question foregrounds the instability and arbitrariness of the sign system as regulated by the dominant class/gender/race and moral platitude and absolutism entailed by it. Prefiguring many hesitating moments of the play, Jabber cannot answer this question right away, but rather decides to "have [his] mouth shut" (9). While Hester corrects Jabber's "Naaaa—" as "no" lest people should think he is "slow" and "got no brain," Jabber is the character who "got brains," not just knowing what this specific word, "SLUT," means, but having a sense of the violence of the symbolic, the power of language which demarcates and differentiates.

The difficulty of telling the good from the bad is foregrounded and even exacerbated by Parks's provocative portrayals of black motherhood in *In the Blood*. Hester La Negrita is a caring, sacrificial, and responsible mother who *kills her child*. Her affinities with Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, often recapitulated and symbolized by the letter A, whether worn on her dress (Hester Prynne), or written on the wall or in dust, even with her son's blood (Hester La Negrita)[25], is not just located in her ostracization by society but her living up to ideal motherhood

[25] In an interview with Dinitia Smith, Parks neither admits to nor negates the relevance of *Red-Letter Plays* to *The Scarlet Letter*: "I only read the book once, just so I could riff on it." To some critic, this remark is "rather predictable" since Parks omits the central plot of Hawthorne's novel which seems uninteresting to her: "The adultery is gone, there's no former lover of any great importance, no cuckolded husband returned to wreak revenge, no daughter of sin to protect" (Fraden 437). However, it is not that Parks rejects what the "scarlet letter" stands for but buys into the novel's "refusal to articulate that word for which the novel's title presumably stands" (Ginsberg 13). The loose linkage between Hawthorne's and Parks's plays in terms of the plot does not just intimate that *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* are no less than Parks's "fucking joke" on the canonical text, but attest to how Parks vigorously participates in Hawthorne's original project to open up possibilities for figuring out a mysterious text named Hester for which the letter A serves as a symbol.

despite all the economic hardships and socio-cultural denials with which she is confronted. As a homeless, black, illiterate mom, Hester La Negrita tries to nurture their fatherless, illegitimate children physically, emotionally, and morally. She starves herself to feed her children, whom she calls her "5 treasures. 5 joys" (12). In this economic distress, she even cares about their clothes and shoes, shining their shoes and pressing their clothes. While trying to fill their empty stomach with imaginary foods, pumpkin and cherry pies, steak, mashed potatoes, and milk, she even imbibes her made-up stories into their impoverished souls. And she also takes care of their moral and ethical behaviors, teaching them not to say or do bad things.

This "good" black mother ends up as a murderous, criminal one by the end of the play: In a frenzied rage for the word finally popped out from Jabber's mouth, "slut," and his refusal to stop repeating it, Hester batters her own son dead and bloody with her club. Two archetypal models of motherhood have been invoked to make sense of this abrupt, tragic, and unnatural pattern from nurturing to murdering, from devoted to defiant motherhood: Medea in Greek myth and Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). If Medea prefigures the rages and revengeful fury of Hester, her killing of her son is a variation of Sethe's desperate and inevitable infanticide in that she tries to protect children from a hostile society.

While Sethe is an archetypal, memorable black slave mother who kills her own child, it goes often unheeded that *Beloved* is preceded by black mothers' infanticide in early-twentieth-century lynching dramas. With lynchings happening/having happened in the familial past or in the present right outside their homes, African American mothers get scared of delivering their children in this inimical society, and thus assert their motherhood paradoxically by repudiating it. As she discovers the tragic secret of her family that her father and brother were lynched, the heroine of Grimké's *Rachel* (1916) withdraws from her motherhood by declining her suitor's

proposal, bewailing her cursed destiny as a would-be black mother: "Why –it would be more merciful –to strangle the little things at birth" (42). If Rachel commits murders of her future children on the symbolic level by tearing apart the rosebuds Strong sent her and grinding them under her feet, Douglas Johnson's *Safe* features a black mother who puts Rachel's belief into practice. This short one-act play juxtaposes Liza's preparation for labor in her home onstage with a lynching of a young black man in session offstage. Liza faces the tragic end of this victim just before she goes into labor, and she finally strangles her new-born boy to keep him "safe –safe from the lynchers! Safe" (115).

These murdering mothers accuse and challenge the racist society that would regard their children as potential victims for lynching by transgressing the Christian ideals of motherhood and femininity cherished by their own mothers. To Liza's sarcastic yet desperate longing that "I don't want no boy baby to be hounded down and kicked 'round," her mother Mandy chides: "Hush, honey, that's a sin. God sends what he wants us to have –we can't pick and choose" (112). Along with her friend who also recommends Liza a submissive resignation to "swaller the bitter with the sweet," Mandy seeks for a delivery from their plight in their faithful submission to Christian model of motherhood. Rachel also was once fascinated by the idea of being a mother and the motherhood she embraced was modelled after an idealized Christian mother: "Once I dreamed, and a voice said to me –oh! It was so real –"Rachel, you are to be the mother to little children." Wasn't that beautiful? Ever since I have known how Mary felt at the "Annunciation" – God spoke to me through someone, and I believe" (34). Disillusioned from "this white Christian nation" (42) and enlightened about the cursed destiny of black motherhood in this nation, Rachel turns down "a little flat on 43rd Street," "the prettiest, the most homelike little flat," her suitor

Strong furnishes elegantly and luxuriantly with "Turkish rug," "comfortable leather chairs, . . . and a beautiful piano. . .and lovely pictures of *Madonnas*" (75, emphasis added).

The "picture" of black Madonnas depicted in these dramas, however, does not necessarily lead from the uncritical accommodation of Christian ideology of feminine reticence and submissiveness. The figures of black mothers/wives devoted to home maintenance and child-care were employed to challenge and thwart such antebellum plantation stereotypes as mammies and promiscuous wenches. If whites deny black women domesticity, purity, and piety by imposing such stereotypes as Jezebel or Sapphire, anti-lynching dramas showcase ideal Christian black mothers as a corrective to these stereotypical ideas and negative interpretations of black femininity implied in them. Mainly set in domestic intimate spaces, anti-lynching dramas fervently attempted to prove that African Americans are husbands, wives, sisters, and brothers, no different from the white, and at the core of this ideological strife surrounding black domesticity lies the feminine virtues of black women as successful home-builders. Juliet Mitchell explicates the ideological implication of the portrayal of black belonging in terms of the civil rights agenda which was at stake in lynching discourses: "Because denials of their citizenship within the nation often hinged on insisting that blacks were homeless brutes, whores, mammies, and uncles, the first task became affirming themselves that they were citizens of their own smaller communities; then, blacks could certify for each other that they belonged in the nation" (39). An obsession with black domesticity posits that self-possession in the private sphere leads to an upstanding citizenship in the public: the black women writers in the early decades of the twentieth century resorted to "motherhood as a literary and political trope through which to gain national agency," as Allison Berg has pointed out (7). Without so much confining

black women or mothers to limited domesticity, the ideal motherhood urged them to find a public voice through their maternal roles.

In the Blood shows how the self-possession of the private is not possible for a black, single mother as Hester La Negrita, interrogating both the ideology of black belonging and the cult of true womanhood that only applied to white, middle class women. Hester is alienated from her private space, her body, and her agency. While idealized black mothers in early lynching dramas are the theatrical characters and literary devices to make sure that successful black homes exist and that blacks belong, Hester, a black mother who tries to emulate the ideal motherhood cannot belong by having her claim to the private realm denied.

The Private Made Public, or Spectacularization of Hester La Negrita

In *In the Blood'*s prologue, the reader/audience encounters Hester La Negrita, the heroine of the play, even before she makes an appearance on the stage. The chorus of the characters verbally makes her a spectacle by evoking her imaginary presence: "THERE SHE IS!/ WHO DOES SHE THINK/ SHE IS/ THE NERVE SOME PEOPLE HAVE" (5). From the vantage point of moral righteousness and social superiority, the chorus use social clichés to judge and condemn Hester's impoverished conditions, moral degeneracy, and intellectual inferiority. Hester is an unmarried mother of five children, all of whom had different, unknown fathers. She has no access to means to provide for her family since she "DON'T GOT NO SKILLS/ CEPT ONE/ CANT READ CANT WRITE" (5). The chorus members who, in their own delusions, are purportedly legitimate, moral, and civilized are engaged in drawing a line between themselves and this morally depraved and intellectually disabled woman with five illegitimate children. Indeed, Hester seems the more illegitimate, immoral, and uncivilized because she is a stereotypical welfare queen, a parasite on the society: "SOMETHINGS GOTTA BE DONE TO

STOP THIS SORT OF THING/ CAUSE I'LL BE DEAMNED IF SHE GONNA LIVE OFF ME" (7). Castigating Hester's parasitic existence, each choral member by and by moves beyond his/her positioning as "an impartial commentator, objective and omniscient" (Arnott 30), betraying their role as the chorus in Greek tragedy and situating himself/herself as an interested, biased member of the imagined community in the play

Along with other structural affinities to classical Greek tragedy in this play, the chorus in *In the Blood* is much indebted to the Greek chorus as such critics as Harvey Young and Carol Schafer point out. While straddling the role of the character and that of the narrator within the play, the Greek chorus performed the citizenry and were actually constituted by citizens. For the audience, theatre was a place for participation and intervention, albeit vicariously, since the chorus members on stage were also citizens just like themselves. Evoking the role of the Greek chorus that mediates and negotiates between the world in the play and that outside of it as such, Harvey Young discusses how each choral member in *In the Blood* tries to work out an identification with the audience by their devices called "confessions" ("Choral Compassion" 30-39). However, I argue that the chorus of in *In the Blood* is designed to reflect biases, interested relationships, and implied hierarchies latent in the concept of citizenship, as well as providing a ground for the communal bond between the chorus and the audience.

While featuring eleven characters, including Hester's five children, this play only requires six actors. The five actors except for Hester play dual roles, each playing one adult character and one of Hester's children. And again all these five actors, in a group, serve as the choral members. Parks's triple casting is not pointless. Chili, Reverend D., The Welfare Lady, The Doctor, and Amiga Gringa who comprise the chorus are not just individual characters who assert their prestigious standings within the society – even Amiga, a woman in lower class just like Hester, is

"white," – but the allegorical figures that stand for the institutions and systems of the society: The Welfare Lady and Doctor mechanically "treat" Hester, uncritically accommodating and applying the principles of the systems to which they belong, that is, the social welfare institution and the medical service; Reverend D exemplifies and personifies the hypocrisy of the religious institution, blinding himself to Hester's plight to which his salvation and charity should reach out. Parodying the representative citizenry for which the Greek chorus serves as a stand-in, *In the Blood*'s chorus, as a caricatured microcosm of the society, reveals its violent tendentiousness and exclusiveness: "The Social Chorus is far stronger in Parks's plays," says Rena Fraden in her comparative reading of Hawthorne's original and Parks's revision (440). At the end of the play, it turns out this Prologue depicts Hester's imprisonment after slaying her own son. The chorus, who just "clustered together" at the beginning, now "circle around Hester as they speak" (108). Rather than serving as a physical, psychological fence for protection, safety, and defense, the chorus circling around Hester makes her an object for their specular desire and punitive gaze.

The image of a disclosing enclosure becomes stark in Hester's home. The stage direction that opens Scene One, "Home under bridge," does not just feature home as the main setting of the play but hints at how this pivotal center, spatially and psychologically, becomes decentered and marginalized within the world of the play. Hester's home's deviance from the normal domestic space is accentuated by the bareness of the stage: "The setting should be spare, to reflect the poverty of the world of the play," says the author's note. While the bareness of the stage can be regarded to point to the physical conditions of Hester's impoverished, unfurnished home, which cannot provide the family members with a proper shelter and the necessities of life, this void and unoccupied space paradoxically contextualizes the world of the play as the existential arena in which the symbolic workings of alienation, marginalization, and

stigmatization is manifested and foregrounded through spatial perception and imagination. Hester's home "under" the bridge parallels her status within the society. She is marked off from other community members who are impersonally represented by the chorus figures in the Prologue. The bridge serves as a horizontal borderline between Hester below and the others above. An analogy between spatial configuration and social relationship is indebted to Nathaniel Hawthorne's original. Hester La Negrita's secluded dwelling invokes the condition of Hester Prynne's home to which she "retreated" after being released from prison: "On the outskirts of the town, within the verge of peninsula, but not in close vicinity to any other habitation, there was a small thatched cottage" (55). The location of this cottage, marginalized yet not completely segregated from the town, metaphorically points to Hester's position within—or, rather outside of – the community: "Its comparative remoteness put it out of the sphere of that social activity" (55). Hester is "abandoned" just like this thatched cottage, which was originally built by an earlier settler and regarded to be "too sterile for cultivation" as the toil (55).

Secluded, abandoned, and marginalized, Hester does not give in to the containing environment, which is also hinted at through spatial figures: "A clump of scrubby trees, such as alone grew on the peninsula did not so much conceal the cottage from the view, as seem to denote that here was some object which would fain have been, or at least ought to be, concealed" (65). The scrubby trees shadowing the cottage does not reinforce a sense of seclusion and containment which might lead to Hester's helplessness, but recasts Hester as an object that challenges its objecthood by deciding to conceal itself by its own will. Hester makes this deserted, sequestered space a private space of her own: It is indeed "in this little, lonesome dwelling," that "Hester established herself, with her infant child" and with her skill at needle-work (65).

If Hester Prynne voluntarily "retreated" to this isolated dwelling for self-possession and self-sufficiency, Hester La Negrita is "kept under" in her home, which is allegedly private, yet invaded by vandals, as visualized by their scrawling on the wall. Inscribing her Otherness, the word "SLUT" on the wall exposes Hester La Negrita to social prejudice and contains her within social stigma. Still having no idea of what the word exactly means, Hester intuits being violated and argues for her right to her own space: "Go scrub it off, then. I like place clean" (12). While she calls this space "under the bridge" her own home, she also knows very well she is technically "homeless":

> We know who writ it up there. It was them bad boys writing on my home. And in my practice place. Do they write on they own homes? I dont think so. They come under the bridge and write things they dont write nowhere else. A mean ugly word, I'll bet. A word to hurt our feelings. And because we aint lucky we gotta live with it. 5 children I got. 5 treasures. 5 joys. But we aint got our leg up, just yet. So we gotta live with mean words and hurt feelings. (12)

Hester Prynne's home makes the children who steal near enough to see her "scamper off" with "a strange, contagious fear," driven by the "mystic shadow of suspicion" (65). Rather than warding off outside intrusions, however, Hester La Negrita's home is defenseless and vulnerable to the forays of little vandals who would fain come under the bridge to "write things they don't write nowhere else." The word on the wall trespasses Hester's private sphere in two ways. If the scrawling occupies actual space Hester might use for her own use, this "mean ugly word" violates a more fundamental realm of the private: Hester's feeling. Hester gets dispossessed literally and metaphorically in this space of private possession—what we call home. While she argues for what rights to possession she has by reminding that she has five children, her "5

treasure. 5 joys," they only add to her financial adversities that might force her into this unfavorable residential environment.

"Circling around" her only to contain her within, the representatives of society also engage themselves in uncovering what is intimate about Hester. The society violates and intrudes upon her private sphere while seeming to provide her with the protection and care to which she is entitled as a citizen and a welfare target of this society as epitomized by the check-up episode. In his first entrance in the play, the Doctor reminds Hester –and the audience— that she is "due for a checkup" (24). Temporarily postponed, this check-up is performed in the next scene, beginning with Hester's teeth. This dental inspection, during which Hester stands on the street "with her mouth open" and lets the Doctor look "up into her privates" recapitulates the nature of the "check-up." The Doctor's examination is not limited to taking the temperature or asking the patient about her dietary habits and bowel patterns. He asks her if she hasn't had any more kids than her "5" and insinuates that she "could" and "might" (38). His inquisition into her sex life and private area turns out to be a part of his duty as mandated by "The Higher Ups" not just his personal pervert curiosity: "Word from The Higher Ups is that one more kid outa the likes of you and theyre on the likes of me like white on rice" (38). As symbolized by a "thin curtain" set up to secure private space for his roadside office, Hester is vulnerable to the Doctor's inquisitive questions and hands and, through them, to the surveillance of "The Higher Ups" as well. The audience is even made to witness the gynecological exam that takes place at the "road-side" in the broad daylight:

> Hester: Sometimes. My gut –
>
> Doctor: In a minute. Gimmie the Spread & Squat right quick. Lets have a look under the hood.

> Standing, Hester spreads her legs and squats. Like an otter, he slides between her legs on a dolly and looks up into her privates with a flashlight. (39)

The readiness and willingness of the doctor and the patient to engage in this intimate "treatment" is quite striking. With its hilarity and a sense of familiarity evoked by its cartoonish image, the scene uncannily delivers a stark image of violence inflicted on Hester's body and self, paradoxically heightening its visceral effect. The Doctor's check-up epitomizes the ways in which the system of society places the black female body in its place by unveiling it.

Indeed, this pattern of drawing a boundary between self and the other by intruding upon and inquiring into what is private about the other is repeated throughout the play. Every character is engrossed in keeping a distance from Hester literally and figuratively. "[D]raw[ing] a line in the dirt, position[ing] her behind it" (41), the Doctor does not just make Hester prepare for an eye exam but urges her to be cautious about the line between them she needs to observe. However, it is the Doctor who "[a]t first. . . wouldnt touch her without gloves on" (44) that crosses the line he himself draws: "we did it once/ in that alley there,/ she was/ phenomenal" (44). Although their sexual intercourse in the "alley" is for his emotional and sexual gratification, he deceives himself into believing that the act is an extension of his medical service and attributes it to his penchant for "compassion" as "a man of the people" who bothers himself to give a "streetside practice": "Each time she comes to me/ Looking more and more forlorn/ and more and more in need of affection" (44). He deliberately *misreads* her needs to project his sexual desire onto her. He is not disturbed at all by his crossing the line, since the border, as he thinks, is voluntarily crossed by Hester, or never crossed at all. Since Hester, as he premises, "was giving [him] something that was not hers . . . but something that was [his]" (45), their hierarchical relationship – in terms of gender and class difference – still remains intact. Indeed,

even the sexual intercourse never makes any difference to their relationship as he still perceives and communes with her body in an abstracted and mediated way. While he confesses that this sexual act reminds him of what is "motherly," "obliging", "understanding," and "phenomenal" about Hester, this does not mean any change –a mutuality or reciprocity— in their relationship but "places this relationship in the idealized realm of the symbolic" (Elam, "The Theater of the Gut" 208). At the moment of its climax, he culminates his exclusionary penetration of Hester's person and sexuality, punctuating the relationship he has had with her: "Let me cumm inside her Like I needed to./ What could I do?/ I couldnt help it" (45).

The Welfare Lady, "a woman. . . a black woman too just like" Hester (60), is not unconscious of the sense of boundary, either. As a pompous representative of the institution who believes that "[t]he welfare of the world weighs on these shoulders" (54), the Welfare lady well understands that the system is sustained by and maintained through differentiations and demarcations in a hierarchical chain:

> I walk the line
> Between us and them
> Between our kind and their kind
> The balance of the system depends on a well-drawn boundary line
> And all parties respecting that boundary. (61)

The ground for drawing a line between the Welfare Lady and Hester is not just the latter's "low-class" but the fact that the former is "a married woman" (61). On top of her orderly life, healthy diet, economic stability, and decent offspring, of which Hester is in lack, her marriage guarantees a dominant position over Hester in terms of moral and sexual integrity. Paradoxically, however, it is the Welfare lady, not Hester, who reveals her sexual "difference" and invites Hester to a

menage-a-trois with her husband and her. For the Welfare lady, the boundary is still firmly in its place as she sees Hester as "a little spice" to their boring sex. She momentarily blinds herself to her "perversion" by sticking to other kind of authority—the patriarchal one. Her husband is associated with the phallic image whose authority to which she and Hester must succumb: "Hubby sat opposite in the recliner/ hard as Gibralter. He told us what he wanted and we did it./ We were his little puppets" (61). Revealing to the audience that this sexual adventure is her husband's idea, she negates her leading role in this sexual transgression and pretends to be only a "part[y] respecting that boundary" (61), who only acts upon the idea and scenario of her husband. However, she reaches a point when her performance is not possible any more. The fine line she manages between herself and Hester finally breaks down: "but I was swept away and couldn't stop. . . . She let me slap her across the face/ and I crossed the line" (62). The slap brings home to the Welfare lady the sadistic power and pleasure she has over Hester. With its tactile and visceral thrills, she "has crossed the line" (62) as she admits. Like the Doctor, she commodifies and exploits Hester, while opening up a possibility of disturbing the system by crossing the line and experiencing Hester's body beyond/below the symbolic realm. To an extent that it is threatening to the system in its transgressing of the boundary, this opening faces the destiny of soon closing. With/after her short "rest" (a Brechtian technique designed by Parks to inform the audience of a transition within the drama and at the same time to distance her with its abrupt and theatrical turn), the Welfare lady swiftly redeems her status as a venerable citizen, relegating the *menage-a-trois* to a fleeting excursion or a momentary relapse: "It was my first threesome/ and it wont happen again" (62). The social order disheveled and disturbed for a moment of corporeal communion is re-asserted and restored much more strongly than ever: The

Welfare lady "*should emphasize*/ that she[Hester] is a low-class person" (62, emphasis added). She assures herself that "we have absolutely nothing in common" (62).

The Doctor's street practice on Hester's body and the Welfare lady's regular visits to Hester's place reveal that this African American woman is not allowed any privacy or intimacy. What is private about her sexual organs and stories gets laid bare before the Doctor and the Welfare lady, satisfying their voyeuristic gaze and desire. Hester's body is made into a spectacle both visually and discursively. Just as the Doctor's gynecological examination of Hester in which she succumbs to his request of "right quick" "Spread & Squat" subjects her to physical exposure, the Doctor's and the Welfare's detailed description of their sexual exploits in their confessions forces the audience to unwittingly join in their fetishizing and objectification of Hester's body. Their confessions verbally and theatrically replay or reenact the black female body as an object of desire, paradoxically foregrounding the position of the audience as "voyeur," not just as eavesdropper. The society these characters represent employs spectacle as a form of surveillance and discipline, not just as a stimulant for prurient curiosity. While the Doctor and the Welfare are supposed to provide a salvation for Hester who is one of the "neediest case," what they are really engaged in is forfeiting her command of the private sphere to offer her up to public eye, which is disciplinary and regulative. The Doctor and the Welfare need to check out and look into the private territory about Hester to secure her person and body within their grasp. The words on the Doctor's sandwich board, which serves as an eye chart, reveal an unexpected, horrific truth about these regular "exams": "The letters on the first line spell "SPAY"" (41). To relieve themselves of the anxiety about the unruly body and being of Hester, they eliminate what is the most private about her. Having her "womans parts" (43) taken, Hester stops being a parasite that lives off the society with her reproduction of "ALL THEM BASTARDS" (109). This society denies Hester

any sense of privacy or intimacy and outcasts her in terms of race, gender, and sexuality by "sew[ing] safety nets, rub[bing] harder, good strong safety nets" lest she should "slip through the weave" (54). Hester becomes alienated from her own body and subjectivity as she has her private area exposed, publicized, and eliminated: "Where the private becomes completely public," as Josette Feral demonstrates, "the subject disintegrates, replaced by the spectacle of [herself]" (63).

"The Society of the Spectacle"

The sense of distance remains integral and really problematic in defining these relations that are negotiated through the form of spectacle. Indeed, the viewer's detachment from the object viewed is crucial to maintaining of the spectacle's illusions, and these illusions, in turn, enable and facilitate the appropriation, objectification, and commodification of the object. That is, through the form of spectacle, one can distance oneself from the object of spectacle and simultaneously violate it. Although the Doctor's and the Welfare's sexual desire might seem threatening to the maintenance of the system, "enabl[ing] boundaries of class and of propriety to be crossed," thus "complicat[ing] constructions of identities and hierarchies of difference" (Elam, "The Postmulticultural" 123), the sense of distance momentarily cancelled out is soon to be recovered. The characters justify their sexual exploitation of Hester by replacing their experience with her with the representation (the Doctor) and consciously and deliberately regaining the sense of distance from her, which has been minimized through their corporeal contact (the Welfare). Transferring his lived experiences of/with Hester's body to the mythic or the symbolic, the Doctor is not just engaged in sublimating the vulgar and profane pleasures he got from it but justifying his turning away from her pained body that invites his empathetic "treatment," more than just giving a dollar to buy a sandwich with. The Welfare lady's

preconceived idea of Hester, who is an unmarried and poor, saves her from any hesitation in activating her scheme to use Hester as a sex toy. The curiosity of this "Bi-Curious Wife" fixates on Hester's body, a fetishized and commodified sex object, never reaching out to what is beyond it. Such relationships as the Doctor and the Welfare have with Hester sum up what Guy Debord calls "the society of the spectacle" in which "[a]ll that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Thesis 1).

In Debord's critique of contemporary consumerist culture in *The Society of the Spectacle*, the spectacle reifies the inversed relation between direct experience and mediated representations. In a society in which the spectacle constitutes the dominant mode of human perceptions and social relationships, appearance supersedes reality: "Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance" (Thesis 10). The real life is negated and displaced by "the images which detached themselves from every aspect of life" (Thesis 2), whose illusions feed passive spectators. When Debord says, "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation," he is pointing to the omnipresence and the absolute power of the image in contemporary society. However, the spectacle is not reduced to images, but rather engages with how the images inform "relations among men and among classes": "The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images" (Thesis 4). As "all that existed in human activity" is congealed into commodity which is marked by being the "negative of lived value" (Thesis 35), this commodity fetishism leads to "the estrangement of men among themselves and vis-à-vis their global product" (Thesis 36-7).

In the Blood depicts a world in which human relations are articulated, mediated, and negotiated through the form of spectacle. This play grapples with a power relation between the

spectator/consumer and the spectacle/commodity through the relationships between Hester and each character,[26] in which Hester's lived experiences are abstracted and displaced as the images that are profitable and lucrative. While Debord accentuates how images overwhelm the spectator, leaving them passive, uncritical, even hypnotized, he is also interested in the ways in which "the spectacle. . .is in fact produced" (Thesis 8). The spectator is relocated as the locus of desire, as well as relegated to passive individuals as shown in characters eager for consuming images of Hester for gratification of their sexual urges and economic ends. Revolving around the form of spectacle, their oppressive relationships with Hester are located at the conjunction between antebellum slavery and postmodern anxiety. The "world of the commodity dominating all that is lived" (Debord, Thesis 37) *In the Blood* features shows how Hester is vulnerable to the fetishized desires and exploitative intentions of the characters, not unlike the antebellum black female slaves while foregrounding the contested and inversed relations between reality and appearance, being and seeming, and the real and the symbolic. The spectacle is a manifestation of the epistemological violence involved in "oppression" in terms of race, gender, and class as well as the postmodern ontological crisis.

While the Doctor and the Welfare lady resort to the form of spectacle for rationalizing their sexual mistreatment of Hester somewhat unwittingly, Reverend D and Amiga Gringa, the heroes of the third and fourth confessions, are the characters who consciously *profit from* the images of

[26] The play solely consists of each encounter (or liaison) between Hester and each character. The five adult characters who visit Hester or Hester visits throughout the play never meet with each other, much less building any momentous relationships between them (only the Welfare and the Doctor are presented to be in rapport in the "birth control" of Hester, but they neither meet with each other) except for when they form the chorus collectively and anonymously at the beginning and the end of the play. While somewhat schematically foregrounding the subjugated status of Hester each time, these repeated spectacle of subjugation in each encounter "riffs on" the imbalanced power distribution of this society.

Hester or deliberately abuse them. They know how to make the most of the images they want to contain her within. After refusing Hester's petition for financial aid for his child with Hester and abruptly asking her for a blow job, the Reverend confesses:

> Suffering is an enormous turn on. . .
>
> She had that look in her eye that invites liaisons
>
> Eyes that say red spandex. (78)

Rather than eliciting compassion or vocational/ethical responsibility from the Reverend D., Hester's suffering only arouses and gratifies his perverted sexual appetites. Reminding him of his days in the "never ending gutter of the street of the world" (79), her destitute condition paradoxically reaffirms his rehabilitated life in the present. His exultation at and strong will to break from the "life in the gutter" are perversely expressed through his sadistic treatment of Hester to "[a]dd insult to injury" (78). Hester's suffering constitutes the spectacle which only nourishes his sexual fantasy, and he never sees Hester apart from this fetishized imagery for sexually arousing him. For this mountebank preacher, everything is all about the image. While Hester gets nothing for "running [her] mouth," the Reverend D. is having his own church built from his "talking" – "saying the right things" (99) as Hester guesses: Even the mouth sells better for its figurative operation in this world. He tells Hester to come around to the back next time she comes to meet him and tries to deliver money to Hester through a lawyer. He is afraid of being *seen* with Hester since his "backers" (75) don't like the "the likes of [her]" (102). Although he explains to Hester – who and whose child he would not "back" at all – the meaning of a backer as "a person who backs you. . . believes in you," it turns out that his backers are the "backers" who "get behind you. . . .to make sure they haven't been suckered" (75). He confesses: "they watch you real close, to make sure yr as good as they think you are" (75). His backers are

vigilant about the possibility that they might be betrayed by what the Reverend D. seems. Yet he has the audacity and sagacity to prove his integrity and authenticity, that is, "how good he is," by the "good" images of his poor and himself on tv:

> I want my poor on tv. I want famous poor, not miscellaneous poor. And I don't want local poor. Local poor dont look good. Gimmie foreign poor. Poverty exotica. Gimmie brown and yellow skins against a non-Western landscape, some savanna, some rain forest some rice paddy. Gimmie big sad eyes with the beriberi belly and the outstretched hands struggling to say "Thank You" the only English they know, right into the camera. And put me up there with them, holding them, comforting them, telling them everythings gonna be alright, we gonna raise you up, we gonna get you on the bandwagon of our ways, put a smile in yr heart and a hamburger in yr belly, baby. (Rest) (73)

Displacing the ethical into the aesthetic, the Reverend D. is obsessed about the exotic images of his poor that would sell as "product of colonialism" (Geis, " 'Hawthorne's Hester' " 80) along with his own image as a benevolent missionary who reaches out to those impoverished bellies and hearts on the dark continent. As the Reverend D. is paid for "saying the right things," so the poor pay when they look poor in the right way. He captures a stereotypical, fanciful moment of colonial encounter, enacting and embodying the representational politics implicated in the cultural logic of spectacle, which is "tautological" (Debord Thesis 13): "It [Spectacle] says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears" (Debord Thesis 12). While he devotes himself to taking the racist, colonialist sting out of this tableau by resorting to the glamorous, aestheticized, natural(izing) images ("some savanna, some rain forest some rice paddy," "big sad eyes with the beriberi belly" (73)), he is also unwittingly hinting at an analogy

between his local and exotic poor, a parallel between class and color discrimination. What makes the poor or the indigenous desirable and consumable is a sense of distance: "that is how we like our poor. At arms length. Like a distant relation with no complication" (74). And unfortunately this is also how the Reverend D. likes Hester: He reacts to, consumes, and profits from her suffering by displacing it into the image of exotic sexualized otherness to "turn him on" without being caught up in any emotional and visceral turbulences her suffering might cause.

While the Doctor, the Welfare lady, and the Reverend D. use Hester for their sexual gratification, Amiga Gringa, Hester's friend, literally commodifies and exploits Hester for money-making. Asking the audience, "what do you expect in a society based on Capitalizm" (72), she reveals without reserve that money means much more than anything to her. She always looks for what to sell while she says she's "looking for work" (66). When Hester is "working," engaged in sewing a nice dress out of the fabric the Welfare gave her, Amiga wonders how much that "pretty" fabric costs "on the open market" (67). Amiga knows better than to do "chump work" like Hester, only to be paid "less than a living wage" and treated no better than "a slave. Or an animal" (66). Amiga, who does not understand how "a woman like Hester. . . most often chooses to walk the straight and narrow" (71), makes her living by selling Hester's "Mans watch" and her nice fabric. For her, even her babies become the commodity to sell: "Do you have any idea how much cash I'll get for the fruit of my white womb?" (71). As a white woman, she well knows about the exchange value of her racial identity and her fertility, which she schemes to exploit by turning her lived bond with her child into financial terms: "Grow it./ Birth it./ Sell it" (71). It is not just in her babies' bodies but in Hester's, in Hester's sexuality as well as her own, that Amiga finds possible profit, as revealed by her suggestion of the lesbian show with Hester: "Girl on girl action is a very lucrative business" (72). Hester's and Amiga's bodies on

display before the male spectators debunk and accuse the consumerist commercialism of "the society of the spectacle" in which the specular economy is translated into the actual economy: "for an invited audience./ For a dime a look./ Over at my place./Every cent was profit. . . ./ The guys in the neighborhood got their pleasure" (72). This sexual performance becomes the more enticing to the audience (of the performance within the play) because of the exhibition of color contrast: "Chocolate and Vanilla get down and get dirty" (71). Amiga does not just commodify Hester's body and sexuality but the audience's fear of and furtive fascination with interracial and same-sex intercourse.

Hester is not in the least engaged in this performance against her will. She situates herself as a professional performer acting like "she like the idea of sex" (72). She is conscious of a gap between appearance and reality and even exploits it: "Shoot, Miga, . . . that's just the way I look," Amiga quotes Hester (72). Hester's statement is revelatory in two ways: She is belying that African American females are sexually promiscuous, transgressive, and immoral; Thus/nonetheless, she is differentiating her self from her own actions, employing her own body in the spectacular performance and providing the image of a black female the audience is ready to consume. Her pornographic performance embodies "theatricality" in terms of her "literal or figurative position of appearing as a spectacle before spectators," as explained by David Marshall (5). She presents her black naked body tangled with Amiga's white naked body as an object for the spectator's gaze. Posing as a Jezebel for the audience, Hester pretends to accept the conventional terms of spectacularizing while exposing the spectator's scopophilic desires. Objectifying her own body, Hester reveals her sense serving the capitalist system without being uncritically subsumed by it. Hester is true to the Brechtian notion of the actor by performing her part of a hyper-sexualized black woman "like a quotation."

“The Bad News In Her Blood” or Red-Lettered A

Hester is associated with the imagery of blood time and again throughout the play. Although it is a preview of the last scene titled “The Prison Door,” which depicts Hester before getting imprisoned, the Prologue does not include Hester’s murder of her son in the catalogue of her sins. She is castigated since she is illiterate, unmarried, shiftless, slutty, and she is “BAD NEWS, BURDEN TO SOCIETY” (7). As she finally makes an entrance through the chorus who split like “the Red Sea,” they articulate a final accusation of Hester: “BAD NEWS IN HER BLOOD/ PLAIN AS DAY” (7). This statement presents a weird yet central image of the play, the letter/words carved onto the body, a spectacle that compellingly conjures lynching. Herein, I read Hester’s body against the representational politics of lynching as a punitive institution and a racist spectacle as Hester’s body becomes the words (bad news), shifting and straddling between the physical and the semantic, the material and the symbolic. Philip Kolin also foregrounds an arbitrary yoking of the form and the content, the body and the letter/word/idea in the essentialist condemnation of Hester in the Prologue by noting that Hester’s blood is “her biological scarlet letter,” which “*symbolizes* Hester’s sexual sins and shame” (“Parks’s *In the Blood*” 246). As in a lynching, the chorus inscribes their interpretations and meanings onto Hester’s body. Biologically determined and racially judged, Hester’s sexual culpability is implied and built in her blood already, which becomes the very “bad news” the chorus is supposed to decode. As a material evidence for stereotypical ideas they conceive and construct for the black female body, Hester on the stage –or, scaffold— constitutes the spectacle specific to this particular society, the welfare state which purportedly belongs to the present yet uncannily evokes antebellum slavery and lynching, revealing Parks’s dystopian view of American society.

The modernist Othering implied in the choral voice exclaiming "BAD NEWS/IN HER BLOOD" paradoxically indicate the postmodern ontological anxiety about the gap between the experience of authenticity and representation and signifying violence to fill in that gap. While a belief in biological determinism or essentialism might articulate the chorus's desire for authenticity in which appearance and reality, the substance and what it represents are not alienated from each other, they do not realize that they are only colonizing Hester's body by locating "the bad news" in the "blood," committing a semiotic violence which leads to the mediated experiences and the representational gap. Rather than guaranteeing any authentic experiences, "BAD NEWS/ IN HER BLOOD" conveys, literally and figuratively, the negative, immoral, and pathological languages/ideas/symbols inscribed on Hester's lived body. While presented as if it were a given text that should be read onto, Hester's body is indeed produced and generated as a text in the act of reading it.

The desire for what is authentic and the violence that desire presumably entails are personified by Chilli in this play, Hester's first lover and the father of her oldest child. In their reunion after being separated from each other for fourteen years, Chilli dresses Hester in a wedding gown he prepares himself and says: "This is real. The feelings I have for you, the feelings you are feeling for me, these are real" (92). His obsession with what is real is revealed by his denial of what changes (his obsession with time), what seems ("Im looking for someone to lose my looks with"), and what can be exchanged ("Ive been fighting my feelings for years. With every dollar I made"). Even from the first moment he appears on stage, he is seen to obsessively check his pocket watch. This is how he figures out "how close I am [to] or how far off [from]" (89) the objective reality his "big gold pocket watch" guarantees. Incongruent with his subjective perception, however, his relationship with Hester is saturated with the "images" which are

changeable, ostensible, and representable. Jabber, who is a bloody tie between them, is depicted as Chilli's "spitting image" (89). It was a "picture" that helped maintain Chilli's emotional attachment to Hester during those years apart: "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" (96). Here, Chilli does not depict Hester as she is in the picture, but embellishes her image with his conceived ideas of what the mother of his child should be like. Indeed, such expressions as "sad and lonely," "struggling," and "triumphant" do not betray the actual mother Hester. These adjectives indicate that his reading of the picture is informed by his cherished picture of Christian motherhood as Mary with Jesus, the very ideal he has of Hester and their son. Hester is his first love, the cornerstone of his life, which would provide a foundation for his quest for the real, the authentic –whether it is the relationship, or the person who can embody it. He believes he can contain her within the ideal of the Virgin Mary as he locks her up in a white wedding dress. He sings, "The Looking Song," dances with her, and finally asks her to marry him (92). Rather than appreciating and celebrating Hester's black maternity, Chilli aligns Hester with the maternal model of Madonna, one usually reserved for white mothers, thereby setting himself on a par with the white patriarch: "I would rule the roost. I would call the shots. The whole roost and every single shot. Ive proven myself as a success. You've not done that. It only makes sense that I would be in charge" (93). While he "gets down on his knees, offering her a ring" (94) to "make the picture perfect" (Schafer 192), the idealized images of Hester as a black Madonna and the marriage with her get thwarted and shattered as the four children, whom Hester calls "the neighbors kids" (95), make their appearance.

Finding out that Hester has more illegitimate children than Jabber, Chilli withdraws his marriage proposal. He neither admits the reality in which she has had "few options other than to use her body in an attempt to change her socio-economic circumstances" (Elam "The Postmulticultural" 123) nor accepts a rupture between his idealized vision of his first love and the actual Hester as a black single mother. Despite his life-time longing for the real, "the real is the last thing Chilli is prepared to face" (Dietrick 93). Or he mistakes the self-imposed ideas and images for what is real. For him, Hester changes with time and is thus not real any more, much less able to serve as a source to which he can turn to for authenticity and integrity. While his gold watch serves as a reliable source for verifying his subjective sense of time, Hester, due to her "fall," falls short of validating his idealized images. The watch called Hester is now out of order and the title of this malfunctioning timepiece is "slut." In the ensuing scene, Jabber calls Hester "slut," uncannily doubling his father.

Indeed, the doubling of Jabber and Chilli offers a clue for Hester's killing of her son. This murder, according to Elam, registers as "an act of indirection and transference," in which Hester is indeed fighting against Jabber's father, the other fathers of her children, and ultimately the "patriarchal hegemony" represented by them ("The Postmulticultural" 127). In light of the play's socio-political critique, Verna A. Foster also reads Hester's murdering not just as impulsively committed but as "psychologically and sociologically almost overdetermined" (80). Jabber's behavior is just "a catalyst" for Hester's venting of rage which she transfers onto his body for all the "trials" and the "abusive man/men" she has gone through (76). This happens right after Hester has been deserted by Chilli and physically and verbally abused by the Reverend D. While I agree with the contention that she kills her own son for what he represents (Foster 75), I argue

that it is not just any father or specific social institution but the socio-symbolic structure behind such oppressive relations as implied by the word Jabber comes to articulate.

This climax scene of the play begins by revisiting the word on the wall in the first scene. After hearing the Reverend D. calling Hester "slut," Jabber confesses that he already knew how to read the word "[t]hem bad boys had writing" on the wall: "I could I can read but I didnt wanna" (103). Since he knew "it was a bad word," Jabber "was only reading it in my [his] head," not "say[ing] the word outloud in your [Hester's] 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). Having a sense of the power of language and image which demarcate and differentiate, Jabber would not convey the word to Hester. He is not *saying* the word but only *reading* it *aloud*, transferring it from the realm of the socio-symbolic and the intersubjective to that of sheer physicality. Shifting the organs of articulation from the tongue through mouth to lips, Jabber exports the word to its most surface level of orality and vocality so that he "could hear the word outloud but only outloud in his[my] head." Through this act of sheer articulation that is non-signifying and non-matrixed, Jabber expresses his negation of the father figures' racist and patriarchal projections onto his mother's body and paradoxically realizes his father's desire for the authentic in a different and resistant way: As a word divested of its meaning, a sign emptied of its signified, the word "slut" becomes a sign of itself, resounding *hollow* in Jabber's head. Parks marks this moment Jabber was testing out such an alternative communication by writing down each name in the text without any dialogue between them:

> Hester. . . . Read that word out to me, huh? I like it when you read to me.
>
> Jabber. Don't wanna read it.

Hester. Cant or wont?

Jabber. –Cant.

Hester
Jabber

He knows what the word says,

but he wont say it.(11)

"Denotated by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue," such a moment constitutes what Parks calls "a spell," that is, "an elongated and heightened (rest)" ("Style" 16). Rather than mere dramaturgy facilitating the switches between scenes and the changes of topics, the spell points to an "experience" wherein the figures confront "their pure true simple state" ("Style" 16). Marking the failure of language, the spell discredits words as expressive and communicative media, rather foregrounds what cannot be expressed through words in its stead. It was in this non-verbal, elevated, and purified state of mind that Jabber might "hear the word. . . only outloud in his[my] head," thus that he could work out a "pure, true, simple" relationship with Hester, which is uninflected by the semiotic violence of the word. Jabber and Hester come across each other as a "state of mind," instantiating a kind of encounter that happens during the spell Parks compares to planetary movements: "the planets are aligning and as they move we hear music of their spheres" ("Style" 16-7).

Any signifying operation stops, the language dwindles into its physicality, and only the presence of each figure's body is foregrounded in this moment. The spell renegotiates and reconfigures the relationship between the language and the body ultimately by its specific mode of traffic between the page and the stage. The writing on the page presents the material presence of the body of the performer on the stage rather than representing the figurative presence of the characters: "The spell operates as a moment where language absents itself in an effort to evoke a

physical, visual presence" (H. Young, "Touching History" 142). Jennifer Johung also captures how Parks reimagines an unmediated, unalienated, and unabstracted relationship between the language and the body by employing the spell as a moment for exploring "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).

As the meaning of the word presides over and the symbolic process intervenes in the relationship between mother and son, however, the play heads toward its violent and tragic catastrophe:

> Jabber. You said if I read it youd say what it means. Slut. Whassit mean?
> Hester. I said I don't wanna hear that word. How slow are you? Slomo.
> Jabber. Slut.
> Hester. You need to close yr mouth, Jabber.
> Jabber. I know what it means. Slut.
> Hester. (Shut up.)
> Jabber. Slut.
> Hester. (I said shut up, now.)
> Jabber. I know what it means.
> Hester. (And I said shut up! Shut up.)
> (Rest)
> (Rest)
> Jabber. Slut. Sorry.
> *The word just popped out, a childs joke. He covers his mouth, sheepishly. They look at each other.*
> Hester
> Jabber
> Hester
> Jabber
> *Hester quickly raises her club and hits him once. Brutally. He crises out and falls down dead. . . .* (105-6)

When we put a word or a phrase in the quotation marks, we usually indicate they belong to a specific context. For example, when I use "slut" rather than slut, I mean the slut as written on the specific wall of Hester's place in the play or as spoken by the specific characters such as the

Reverend D. or Jabber. In the above passage, the first four sluts in the quotation marks imply that Jabber is quoting or citing the word. Although he is taking the word out of his head this time, he is not still meaning it to Hester: He is not calling her as slut. He just lets her know that the word on the wall is "slut." Out of the quotation marks, however, the word is meant by Jabber[27], having a practical and substantial effect on Hester and his relationship with her. It effects since it acts out the society's prejudiced conventional belief about the black female body. Calling her slut, Jabber himself begins to be abstracted, having himself contained by the symbolic frame of the society. Through his going out with Amiga, he actually steps into the symbolic web of the society. His slow brain becomes smart, armed with the knowledge about women like Hester and how they are trafficked between men.

Abstracted and alienated from what she is, this sexual –and racial—epithet, "slut," exemplifies the language that the society uses for representing such a black female as Hester as racial, gendered, and sexual other. This moment is revelatory about the discursive construction of representation, that is, how "the machineries and "regimes" of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role," thus giving "the scenarios of representation –subjective, identity, politics –a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life," to borrow Stuart Hall's terms ("New Ethnicities" 443). Putting the word, slut, out of the quotation mark, Jabber does not just cite but speak for the

[27] When Jabber says slut the fifth times, there's ambiguity: "You said if I read it youd say what it means. Slut. Whassit mean?" In the context, Jabber seems to be just referring to the word, not calling her that. However, the word slut on the written text is already without the quotation mark. Pretending to be inquisitive about the meaning of the word, he is actually forcing her to painfully admit her position within the symbolic system of the society. By articulating the word without the quotation mark, Jabber does reflect the representation of her race and sex within the society, bringing in the conventions and prejudices of the society that would brand this black female as a slut.

"regimes and machineries" constitutive of a socio-cultural narrative that prescribes Hester's identity. Gaining literacy of the symbolic system of the society, Jabber, Hester's son, the body separated from that of his mother, becomes the Word.

Since Jabber's word stands for the social Law preordaining her position as a social outcast, Hester needs a weapon not just for a physical blow but for symbolic resistance. To beat Jabber, she uses the club, which was stolen by her middle son, Trouble, from a policeman. Hester always "wears it. . . for most of the play" (17) especially in every encounter with the men for protecting herself against their patriarchal violence. While this phallic weapon does not go well with the wedding dress Chilli tries to put her in ("Hester rearranges the club . . . to get the dress on more securely" (90), it becomes her last resort when the Reverend D., a representative patriarchal figure in this play, denies her any financial aid and even physical access to him. Wielding this club, Hester mimics the governmental authority and public power to fight against the socio-symbolic violence they inflict on her body and person.

Rena Fraden reads this moment as revealing how the physical violence takes over when language is misunderstood, losing its power as a mediator: "language itself breaks down. . . . Violence occurs in the aftermath of its breakdown" (449). Indeed, Hester attempts to resolve the glitches in the symbolic realm by physical and literal violence. Punishing Jabber's verbal taunting with the ultimate form of corporeal violence, Hester might replicate the violent logic of lynching practitioners who annihilated the black bodies to stunt the black man's socio-political progress toward the disembodied citizenship: Hester decides to *physically* obliterate his son to shut off what is *meant* by his words, pitting her physical violence against Jabber's symbolic one. However, I argue that Hester's killing of her son is her initiative act of defiance on the semiotic level rather than a reflexive violence that takes place in the moment cognitive and rational

faculties fail or a momentary confounding of the symbolic and literal violence. Hester resists this discursive violence by reclaiming the body of her son. Her act is not just a physical destruction of Jabber's body but a retrieval of her flesh tie to her son. She wields her discursive power by redressing the dislocation between her body and the word representing it.

As a mother who kills her own child, Hester is located in the lineage of black mothers who argue for their motherhood paradoxically by denying it in the form of infanticide. Laura Dawkins explains the motif of maternal infanticide that frequents in Harlem Renaissance literature less as the failure of maternity or "unmothering" than as a rebellion marking the failure of Christian maternal ideal as a model to explain out and embrace the cultural experiences of African American mothers. Such feminist psychoanalytic scholars as Simone de Beauvoir, Marina Warner, and Julia Kristeva have scrutinized and critiqued the Virgin Mary as a feminine and maternal model constructed by Western patriarchy and at the core of this cultural construct lies the model of the *mater dolorosa*: sorrowing mother or mother of sorrows who "renounces the flesh tie to her son and relinquishes him into the world" (Dawkins, "From Madonna" 226). While the white mother-child separation can be a preparation for the child's initiation into society, the black mother-child separation means "pure loss" of the child, literal "blood offering" of the child to this secular, hostile, racist world. Thus, such black mothers as Rachel in Grimké's *Rachel*, Lisa in Johnson's *Safe*, Cissi in Grahams' *It's Morning* refuse to take the role of the *mater dolorosa* by reclaiming their children through infanticide: They take back the bodies of their children rather than delivering them to the society that would devour them.

In *In the Blood*, Hester's child is also vulnerable. Since such an imminent danger as lynch mob does not exist as in the plays and novellas in Harlem Renaissance, however, it might not be feasible to read Hester's murder as an act of protection. In this play, "a division of the flesh"

between mother and son takes a semiotic turn. The scene Jabber calls Hester "slut" registers as the moment of separation between Hester and Jabber, which is translated into separation between the lived body and the abstracted idea of "the black body," between the individuated lived experiences and the mediated representation thereof. Once being Hester's own flesh, Jabber becomes now "regimes and machineries" of the society that defines Hester as slut after his initiation rite into the cultural and symbolic realm: "he's [once] out with Miga" (95). As like other black infanticidal mothers, however, Hester refuses to see her son as a separate and independent being. By returning him to the blood – and the blood serves as a metonymy for the body here, – she reclaims his body as her own. To make this reclamation complete:

> Hester beats Jabbers body
> again and again and again. Trouble and Bully back away.
> Beauty stands there watching.
> Jabber is dead and bloody.
> Hester looks up from her deed to see Beauty who runs off.
> Hester stands there alone –wet with her sons blood.
> Grief-striken, she cradles his body. Her hands wet with
> blood, she writes an "A" on the ground.
>
> Hester. Looks good, Jabber, dont it? Dont it, huh? (106)

"In the blood" of her son, Hester traces an A in the ground. Unlike the epitaph on Hester Prynne's tombstone that says "On a Field, Sable, The Letter A. Gules," Hester La Negrita's "A" gets "red-lettered" with real blood. Through this *embodied* sign, Hester and Jabber, the body and the part of the body separated from it, the body and the language born of its abstraction, are reunited, having their dislocation from each other redressed. "A" has been always with Hester in her pained experiences as a black single mother: She can only read A from the Doctor's eye chart that says "SPAY."; She can only write A when asked by the Welfare lady to write down the name of Baby's father. Jabber suggestively associates this letter with bodily –even sensuous— images when he teaches it to Hester: "Legs apart hands the chest like I showd you" (11). "[W]et with her

sons blood," Hester does not just write an "A," but writes out her body as a bloody A, thereby rewriting her story and identity which have been mistreated and misrepresented so far. Also through Hester's "red-lettered" body, the black mother's infanticide gets rewritten as an allegory of resistance to the politics of representation involved in racist spectacle.

CHAPTER 4

Black Body as Remains/ Black Body Remains: *Venus* (1996) as a Racial Spectacle

It is not until near the end of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* that the audience is enlightened about why The Negro Resurrectionist is named as such. While he serves as "her [the Venus's] Watchman," even professing himself as her death watch who would "put her safely in the ground when she dies too,"[28] The Grade-School Chum reveals that The Negro Resurrectionist is originally specialized in disinterment rather than interment: "You used to unearth bodies/for my postmortem class./ An illegal craft as I remember" (150). He turns out to be – or have been, as he himself insists – engaged in "resurrecting" dead bodies by unearthing them. The Negro Resurrectionist's filthy job of unearthing dead bodies easily yet uncannily evokes and parallels Parks's self-professed job of "unearthing" as a historical playwright. The motif of unearthing, digging, disinterment penetrates Parks's dramatic career. Her first college play, *Sinner's Place,* which "had all of the things in it . . . Like memory and family and history and the past" and also "a lot of dirt on stage which was being *dug at*" (Jiggetts 310, emphasis added), was not allowed to be staged by the theatre department: "You can't have dirt on stage. That's not a play," they believed (Jiggetts, 310). Yet Parks would go on to "put dirt on stage" in her first full-length play, *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World,* digging up and resurrecting Black Man with Watermelon. Her stage is filled with actual "diggers," from father and son of *The America Play* who excavate The Great Hole of History to an entire family in the novel *Getting Mother's Body* (2003) who are engrossed in digging for the remains of their mother. The Negro

[28] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York: Theatre Communications Groups, 1997), 150. Subsequent references to this volume in this chapter will be given parenthetically in the text.

Resurrectionist is aligned with these diggers, key characters to Park's archaeological project to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing" ("Possession" 4). Unlike other diggers, however, the kind of digging The Negro Resurrectionist is engaged in is classified "illegal." In his final confession to the Venus, he expresses a repentance for his shameful and outlawed career in the past, trying to bury his unearthing craft in the ground of the past:

> I used to dig up people
> dead ones. You know,
> After theyd been buried.
> Doctors pay a lot for corpses
> But "Resurrection" is illegal
> And I was always this close to getting arrested.
> This Jail-Watchmans jobs much more carefree. (158)

The past he tries to revoke is not just digging up the bodies but selling them. As was the case with The Foundling Father in *The America Play*, "Diggin was his livelihood" (AP 179) for The Negro Resurrectionist, yet in a more literal sense. The Grade-School Chum tersely turns down his rehabilitative gesture: "Once a *digger* always one" (150). And The Negro Resurrectionist finally takes gold for the body of the Venus he will dig up for The Grade-School Chum once she dies, attesting to The Grade-School Chum's sarcastic insight into his moral recidivism.

Parks's exceptional "much ado" about the digger's vocational ethics in *Venus* reflects her self-consciousness as "playwright-resurrectionist" who is "digging around in the Great Whole of History" (Sellar 52). Anchored in the real story of a Khoisan woman named Saartjie Baartman who was brought from South Africa to England and France in the first decade of the nineteenth

century to be presented as a human curiosity because of her abnormally developed buttocks – steatopygia – *Venus* is Parks's history play *par excellence*. Parks got caught up with an idea of making Baartman a subject of her play when overhearing her director and collaborator, Liz Diamond, discussing her at a party: "I didn't know anything about her and I had to go to the library and dig and dig and dig," confesses Parks (Chauduri, "Posterior's" 55). Her excavation of Baartman's history and its dramatization parallel The Negro Resurrectionist's excavation of the Venus's dead body in that both put her body on display after her death and even profit from it. Parks's digging up of dead bodies invariably leads to restaging the black body in her theatre – which has now become so mainstream and lucrative. She is not ignorant of the financial gains of the black body, black life, and black history on stage and unhesitatingly admits to this sad truth: "A black play knows that racerelations sell. / A black play knows that racerelations are a holding cell" ("New Black Math" 580). This chapter interrogates Park's digging as a viable act of engagement with history which is not reduced to a commoditized spectacle of the black body, and presents how Parks's and the Venus's *faking*, their imaginative investment in history opens up a possibility for envisioning the playwright's *digging* as a subversive force for resisting dominant discourse on the black female body and thus as a legitimate way for engaging with history, blackness, and corporeality.

"Exposure iz what killed her": The Venus as a Racist Spectacle and *Venus* as a Racial Spectacle

Theatre is "the perfect place to "make" history" as Parks opines, especially history that has been "unrecorded, dismembered, washed out" ("Possession" 4). Theatre, derived from the ancient Greek, *theatron*, which implies seeing place, renders visible what is not seen, and presents what is absent, thus making a history. Indeed, the specular economy of theatre lies at the

center of "the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life" ("Possession" 4), a rapport Parks tries to activate through her agenda of theatre as a regenerative space, "like an incubator to create "new" historical events" ("Possession" 5). Parks's theatre is performative: it effects a fabricated and reconstructed presence of those who has been disregarded, overlooked, and omitted in the dominant historical discourses. By putting on stage the bodies that have been erased, fragmented, and disjointed from history, it can carve out a space for their historical presence.

As the performing body is exposed to a viewing public, its material presence on stage is translated into discursive one in history. By figuring Black Man with Watermelon who dies several times with a rope around his neck, Parks re-members the horrible history of lynching; By mounting a black Lincoln over and over, Parks reminds of and reclaims black presence neglected in the white myth of Abraham Lincoln. By performing subjects who have been marginalized and dispossessed by dominant discourses, Parks's theatre debunks history and fills in its blank spaces, thereby rewriting the history that has written those subjects off: History is not a "Persian carpet that's been Unrolled Across the Floor of Eternity so that all its Splendors are Revealed," as Parks suggests (qtd. in Chauduri, "Posteriors" 56). Parks's theatre operates as a recuperative and generative space for those who have had their voices muffled and their presence stifled. Parks says somewhat triumphantly: "Putting it out there can make it O.K." (Chauduri, "Posterior's" 56).

Parks's re-viving and re-staging of a phenomenal figure from actual history in *Venus,* however, has been interrogated for its misuse or abuse of "the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life" ("Possession" 4). The problem lies in the spotlight on this diasporic black female performer who became a transnational phenomenon. The highly visible

Venus sparked much popular and academic interest even in her life time. Her history exists in various forms of entertainment such as a vaudeville play, various folksongs, and satirical paintings. And primary historical sources are textual – "court proceedings, newspaper accounts, advertisements, political cartoons, memoirs, and Baron Cuvier's anatomical treaties" (Worthen 9). By incorporating into *Venus* the lectures, court transcripts, and eye-witness accounts she dug up from historical documents and archived records that pertain to Baartman, Parks reveals her awareness of "the way in which history inscribes [the] individual within its discourse" (Lee 13). It cannot be dismissed either, however, that Parks and her theatre also get implicated in that very discourse. Rather than just serving as a site for recognition of an indigenous subject and thus affirming an analogy between theatre-making and history-making once again, Parks's recreation of Baartman enters into the discursive arena which is already saturated with the various forms of records of Baartman's (hi)story and representation. Parks's intention to put on stage Baartman again in/through her play becomes more questionable when considering the story of real-life Baartman, her continued status as a stage commodity.

As the historical narrative goes, Saartjie Baartman was born into the Grinqua tribe, a part of Khoi-Khoi (or Khoisan) in South Africa. A twenty-year-old worker on a Dutch colonial farm with enormous buttocks, Baartman drew the attention of William Dunlop, an ex-medical officer in the British army who was planning on launching an ethnographic show in collusion with his manservant Hendrick Cesars. He persuaded her to return to England with him and make a profit by exhibiting herself. After arriving in London, she was exhibited as a human curiosity, "the Hottentot Venus," in the popular carnival circuit at 225 Piccadilly Circus. On a "stage two feet high," she was exhibited "like a wild beast, being obliged to walk, stand or sit as [the keeper] ordered" (Altick 270). After parading as an exhibit in Piccadilly, Bartholomew, and Haymarket

in London for four years, she was sold to a Parisian animal trainer named Réaux, taken to Paris, and continued to be exposed in both public and private viewings from eleven in the morning until ten in the evening for the next fifteen months until she died in 1815. The cause of her death remains unknown. During her exhibition in France, Baartman's body came to the "scientific interest" of George Cuvier who was Napoleon's surgeon and a naturalist at the National Museum of Natural History. He assembled a team of scientists and artists to collaborate on nude paintings of her that were allegedly "scientific." A year after her death, with the French government's permission, Cuvier performed a dissection of the corpse, made a plaster cast of it, and presented his findings from the autopsy in publications and lectures all around the world. He preserved her brains and genitals in a jar, which were kept outside the entry doors of his apartment in the museum, and the plaster cast was put on display at the Musée de L'Homme in Paris until 1975. Baartman was on display both in life and death.

When *Venus* begins, the Baartman character is already dead. Parks's play diagnoses the mysterious cause of her death as "exposure":

> The Negro Resurrectionist:
>
> I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead.
>
> All:
>
> Dead?
>
> The Mans Brother, later Mother-Showman, later The Grade-School Chum:
>
> There wont b inny show tonite.
>
> The Chorus:
>
> Dead!
>
> The Negro Resurrectionist:

Exposure iz what killed her, nothing on.

And our cold weather. 23 days in a row it rained.

Thuh doctor says she drank too much. It was thuh cold I think (3).

The Negro Resurrectionist contends that she died of cold weather and long days of rain. The fragmented knowledge of her death presented in the Overture riffs on the nature of the exposure that killed her: "Venus, Black Goddess, was shameless, she sinned or else completely unknowing of r godfearin ways she stood totally naked in her iron cage" (5). "[B]y not wearing a scrap/hiding only the privates that lipped in her lap" (6), she was not just exposed to the elements but to the gaze and touch of the spectators who are eager to consume her as a sexual object.

While the play seems to accuse those who exposed her to the elements, drink, or the gaze, the re-exposure of Baartman might be the one and foremost accusation that has been directed at Parks, a "Show-Woman"[29] of the show called *Venus*. *Venus* takes the form of a pseudo-historical report on a real figure, heavily resorting to archival materials from newspaper articles, broadsheets ballads, and personal diary entries, as well as excerpts from the anatomical notebooks and autopsy report. Yet what constitutes the play, except for these texts quoted by The Negro Resurrectionist as footnotes, are the scenes from the theatrical performances in which the Venus is staged as an exotic oddity by The Mother-Showman along with the other "abnormal" bodies of the 8 Human Wonders. The Overture frames the entire play as a freak show by "showcasing" the Venus who is revolving as if she were on a display stand:

The Venus facing stage right. She revolves, counterclockwise. 270 degrees. She faces upstage.

[29] In an article on Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays* in *The New Yorker*, Hilton Als calls her as a "Show-Woman." While he uses this designation as an acclaim, Philip C. Kolin takes note of the "multifaceted" meaning and "expansive ambiguity" it has for her career and canon ("Puck's" 7).

The Negro Resurrectionist:

The Venus Hottentot!

The Mans Brother, later The Mother-Showman, later The Grade-School Chum:

The Venus Hottentot!

The Man, later The Baron Docteur:

The Venus Hottentot!

(Rest) The Venus revolves 90 degrees. She
(Rest) faces stage right. (1)

As the characters call the name of the Venus Hottentot by turns, the first scene of the play recapitulates the ways in which the Venus Hottentot is cast as a body to be gawked at. The Chorus to whom "[s]hes thuh main attraction she iz" (5), is described as greedy for pleasure, loyal to its own desires, and even versed in the logic of capitalism in which Venus's body and sexuality are commodified. The more you pay, the more pleasure you can get as a Chorus member explains: "They say that if I pay uh little more/ I'll get tuh look uh little longer"/ "(And from there if Im really quick I'll stick/ my hand inside her/ cage and have a feel)" (5). Switching around such spatial backgrounds as the sideshow, the courtroom, and the medical laboratory, with their specular dynamics, the Venus is staged as a spectacle over and over. The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders turns into The Chorus of the Spectators, The Chorus of the Court, and The Chorus of the 9 Anatomists to look, touch, poke, prod, measure, probe, and interrogate the Venus, serving as an audience-within-the-play. The play's productions have often collaborated to reinforce the sense of exposure. In the play's premiere at New York's Public Theater in 1996, director Richard Foreman created a combination of "circus, sideshow, and pre-Victorian theater" (Elam and Rayner, "Body Parts" 272), in which Adina Porter, as the Venus, was costumed in a bodysuit that artificially exaggerated her backside. As the body of the actress is subjected to the

voyeuristic gaze of the audience, a historical Baartman is revived and re-exposed as a racist and sexual spectacle. Many critics suspected that Parks's authorial decision to bring Baartman's body to the stage and Foreman's directorial choice might arouse prurient curiosity, thus "repeating the original violation" (Chauduri, "For Posterior's Sake," 30), "replaying Baartman's spectacular abjection. . .[and] duplicat[ing] Baartman's historical oppression" (Worthen 9) in an "uncritical restaging of the racist and sexist legacy of Baartman's display" (Warner 191). The invariable occurrence of "re" in their critiques raises a fundamental question about the redundant nature of Parks's drama as an act of re-surrection: "What more, then, could Parks's play add to the obviously objectionable racial sexual exploitation of Baartman?" (Elam and Rayner, "Body Parts" 267). Why should this over-exposed body be given again to the visual and sexual desires and satisfactions of an audience whether within and outside of the play? Is Parks's exposure differentiated from other exposures to which Baartman was historically vulnerable? If so, how?

The controversy surrounding the respectacularization of the black body sparked by the performance of Parks's *Venus* anticipates and reverberates with the controversy over the public exhibition of racist images in the US in early 2000s. In 2000, James Allen, an Atlanta antique dealer, published his collection of 145 lynching photographs from 1870 to 1960 as *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. The publication led to exhibitions in numerous venues including the Roth Horowitz Gallery, the New York Historical Society, the Andy Warhol Museum, and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Site. The images taken during the actual lynching sessions invite the viewer to bear witness to violence. Allen had a good reason for the publication and exhibition: "We have to know our history." However, most of the photographs Allen collected were originally trafficked as trophies to celebrate the white mob's successful extralegal murder and their exhibition might be "too close to the spectacle

created by the lynchers themselves" (Hale, "Exhibition Review" 993). Allen's re-presentation of the images might replicate the ways in which this vigilante violence became a public spectacle and parallel the transformation of lynching events "into secondhand spectacles" (Hale, "Exhibition Review" 992). The problematics at the heart of these "secondhand spectacles" lies in their reproduction of the power of lynching participants in their spectatorship: "One irony of such pictures is that while they are taken by and for (and sometimes of) white people, their terroristic value depends on their being seen by black people," as Eric Lott comments on the role of the lynching photos to disseminate terror ("A Strange and Bitter Spectacle").

The *Without Sanctuary* exhibit can be traced back to the NAACP's anti-lynching efforts to appropriate the cultural power of spectacle in service against lynching. Photographs and motion pictures popularized and naturalized lynching and their graphic realism magnified lynching's disciplinary functions by "convey[ing] to black persons in this country that they had no power and nothing else whites were obligated to respect" (Harris x). However, such visualizing and sensationalizing strategies were not exclusively dedicated to pro-lynching propaganda. By the 1930s, the NAACP began to assiduously employ spectacles of lynching for their anti-lynching crusade. Elizabeth Hale discusses the lynching of Claude Neal that took place in Marianna Florida in 1934 as the event that triggered this shift. While the white press, whether local, regional, or national, dealt with the lynching without going deeper into the details about by whom and how Neal was tortured and executed, the NAACP determined to enter into an investigation into the case and, as a result of investigation, circulated over 15,000 copies of a pamphlet entitled *Lynching of Claude Neal* which included a graphically detailed narrative and a picture of the dismembered body. The lynching of Claude Neal, which mark the end of "gruesome southern practice of spectacle lynchings," paradoxically offered a momentum for the

NAACP to "capture the culture power inherent in sensationalized, gruesomely voyeuristic stories and even more grisly pictures for the anti-lynching crusade" (Hale, *Making Whiteness* 222). The NAACP used these images to accompany petitions for the passage of anti-lynching legislation and a fundraising drive, and continued to sponsor anti-lynching art exhibitions.

The ways in which the cultural force of spectacle operated in a double-edged way in the anti-lynching crusade –by mobilizing the empathic reactions of the viewers and simultaneously threatening to re-inscribe black degradation– can also be found in Parks's re-exposure and respectacularization of Baartman. I argue that the NAACP anti-lynching campaign and the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit parallel Parks's attempt to resurrect Baartman through the representation of spectacle of the Venus Hottentot as a ritual that involves audiences to challenge the cultural logic of the spectacle without risking its affective power. Parks's respectacularization of this much-exposed body inherits the anti-lynching efforts to envision anti-racist spectacles out of racist spectacles without uncritically replicating them.

Reading lynching as a template for later racial spectacles, Jonathan Markovitz shows how antilynching efforts foregrounded a possibility of recreating racial spectacles as "sites for political struggle" (*Racial Spectacles* 6-10). While the meanings and stakes of spectacle lynchings and their representations were not uniformly embraced, rather fomenting critical unrest, such contests and debates contributed to an examination of, for example, "the myth of the black beast rapist"[30] that fueled lynching's ideology of black otherness, thereby contributing to weakening of its potency by the mid-1930s.[31] Reading Parks's *Venus* as another racial spectacle

[30] On the rise of the myth of the black beast rapist, see Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics." On the questioning of this myth based on thorough historical investigations, see Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South.*

[31] The assessment of the anti-lynching activists' use of lynching photography diverges. Hale is pessimistic about anti-lynching crusade's attempt to use lynching pictures with sensational

for anti-racist struggle, I argue that what Parks's exposure aims to both show Venus's vulnerability, but to critique her objectification for a racialized, fetishistic desire. Parks does not just stage Venus as spectacle but presents *Venus* as a racial spectacle for re-negotiating collective memory surrounding this iconic figure, ultimately raising essential questions about gender and racial dynamics surrounding this historical scandal. Indeed, *Venus* is located in the midst of an ongoing history. In 1994, the same year Baartman's remains were re-exhibited after being discovered in France, Nelson Mandela, newly elected president of South Africa after twenty-seven-years' imprisonment, requested that Baartman's remains be returned to South Africa. The French government objected to the idea of repatriation at first and the negotiation took much time and political/diplomatic effort. Until the repatriation was finally approved by the French government and Baartman's remains were buried in the town of Hankey near her hometown in 2002, scholars and artists had tried to awaken attention to this historical figure. Parks's play was firstly performed in 1996 and published in 1997. The disputes over the play's treatment of Baartman played a significant part in creating a racial spectacle surrounding this African diasporic figure by foregrounding, interrogating, and problematizing the ways in which she had been (mis-)understood and (dis-)remembered. *Venus* contributed to recasting of her body as a site for arousing a renewed sense of machineries of racial production in order to finally put this body to rest. The Negro Resurrectionist who employs himself as a death-watch for Venus within the play illuminates a role the play plays in the process of a repatriation of Baartman. *Venus* watches over and attends to the Venus as she is disengaged from the legacy of the Venus Hottentot as a

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descriptions of them: "the NAACP's capture of the lynching narrative, its impact on national interpretations of lynching's meaning, did not disrupt the cultural work of the spectacle" (*Making Whiteness* 226). While Hale deplores the image of the black rapist still remained despite the anti-racist spectacles deployed by the anti-lynching movements, Markovitz puts more value on their providing "parts of foundation" for disrupting the power of "still powerful" myth.

signifier of alterity and buried as Saartjie Baartman in "a powerful symbol of cultural and political restitution" (Warner 185). Taking the role of "Watchmans job[s]," The Negro Resurrectionist's new job which is "much more carefree" (158), Parks reminds the audience of "a responsibility to look every time, again" (Moten 72), pushing them to take that responsibility with more readiness and awareness.

In *Venus,* Parks suggests two kinds of spectacle –racist and anti-racist– that memorialize the Venus Hottentot, echoing archival and embodied historical practices. Such ambivalent –repressing and resisting— uses of racial spectacles inform the difficulties and complexities the body poses as a medium and agent of history: the body serves as the remains of white colonialist history, and yet black history remains through the body.

The Venus's Body as Remains and Thwarted Presence of the Black Female Body

Venus originates from Parks's engagement with *what remains*. Initially, curiosity about and exploitation of the Venus were prompted by "what remains behind" –Baartman's protruding buttocks. Her remains were also left behind. Unless paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould stumbled upon the jar labelled "la Venus Hotentote" and found the bodily "remains" in it in the 1980s, Baartman and her story never would have been exposed to the light of day. Triggering a heated debate among anthropologists and sociologists regarding ethnographic display,[32] Baartman's

[32] Due to these renewed interests in Baartman, the remains of her skeleton, brain, and genitalia was exhibited again in 1994, this time not as a freak or oddity but as a testament to "the harsh, racist, portrayal of aboriginal peoples by nineteenth century painters and sculptors" (Ragahaven A33).

rediscovered remains also attracted artists who felt for and found problematic her subjugated experiences as a colonial subject.[33]

Venus addresses an ironic and horrific truth that Baartman could remain as the remains of history due to her bodily remains which had been kept in the archives of the Musée de l'Homme:

> When Death met her Death deathd her and left her to rot
>
> au naturel end for our hot Hottentot.
>
> And rot yes she would have right down to the bone
>
> Had not The Docteur put her corpse in his home.
>
> Sheed a soul which iz mounted on Satans warm wall
>
> While her flesh has been pickled in Sciences Hall. (9)

Indeed, Baartman's bodily remains frustrate and complicate Diana Taylor's conceptualization of means of "storing and transmitting knowledge," which she designates as archive and repertoire, each respectively resorting to written/textual and embodied/performed practices (18). Georges Cuvier, dubbed The Baron Docteur in the play, recorded Baartman's history both through text –his autopsy report— and flesh –Baartman's pickled brain and genitalia. While being a transmission through the "corporeal" means, pickling body parts registers as a form of archival gesture since it depends on the "material" evidences that are not prone to ephemerality and corruption any more – kept in formaldehyde— as with texts and documents, the types of historical record hitherto prioritized by historians.

[33] *Venus* is numbered among such recent artistic renderings of Baartman as Renée Green's mixed-media installation *Sa main Charmante* (1989), Elizabeth Alexaner's poem "The Venus Hottentot" (1990), and Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2003).

Specimens from Baartman were preserved to support scientific racism, an invention of the period in which scientific knowledges supported the subjective belief in hierarchical racial subjects, such as the mythology that Africans are the missing link between humans and apes. As discussed by Sander Gilman, the autopsy and display of Baartman's body were part of the effort of the time to biologically and anatomically ground a connection between blackness and bestiality, savagery, and degeneracy. Baartman's physical "differences" located in her buttocks and genitalia supported the stereotype of the sexually avaricious black woman, also reflecting "the general nineteenth-century understanding of female sexuality as pathological" (Gilman 216). When "preserved for an anatomical museum," the specimens were "seen as a *pathological summary* of the entire individual" (Gilman 216, emphasis added).

Preserving body parts for science disrupts and impedes the due course of an organic entity by freezing its time and thus turning it into inorganic components. While keeping it from being corrupted and decomposed, pickling stunts any ongoing changes and prevents any biochemical reactions: as a specimen for historical, scientific, and anthropological research, the body is fixated as it is presented for chemical treatment. Such biochemical fixation parallels, or is less problematic than the mnemonic one, a reductive way of remembering this black woman the preservation of her bodily remains are meant for. The fundamental violence of Cuvier's project lies in *fixing* Baartman's person and history onto her biological traits even as they are *fixated* with sexual fantasies and racial pathologies, thus rendering corporeality the only measure of blackness. Not just securing the physical remains of Saartjie Baartman but containing her within the fixated images, those of primitive, inferior, oversexed Hottentot Venus, Cuvier's archival project enacts its implied violence. What is indeed pathological about the "pathological summary" less consists in its contents than in its imperialistic intent to keep their meanings and

values under arrest, "solidification of value in ontology as retroactively secured in document, object, record," to borrow Rebecca Schneider's words (*Performing Remains* 103).

Baartmans' naming recapitulates the process she is transformed from an individual flesh-and-blood girl in South Africa to an ethnographic type in Europe. While designating its heroine as "*Miss Saartjie Baartman*, a. k. a. The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot" as shown in the cast list, the play is curiously marked by the striking absence of *Miss Saartjie Baartman*. After the overture scene, she is first captured as a girl scrubbing a shiny floor in South Africa while being unknowingly nominated by the Man and his Brother as a dancer for "Dancing African Princess," the Freak Act the latter is launching in England:

> The Brother:
>
> Big Bottomed Girl. A novelty.
>
> Shes vigorous and meticulous.
>
> (Watch this, Brother!)
>
> (Oh, whats her name?)
>
> The Man:
>
> Her –? Saartjie. "Little Sarah."
>
> The Brother:
>
> Saartjie. Lovely. Girl! GIRL!?
>
> The Girl:
>
> Sir?
>
> The Brother:
>
> Dance. (13)

Although The Man reminds The Brother that she is "the Hottentot" The Brother "[was] at one time very into," The Brother fails in recognizing her as his past crush, let alone as an individual. She is never called by anyone as "Saartjie," "Little Sarah," or "Miss Baartman" in the play. She becomes just "Girl" to The Brother and is trafficked and traded as one of "Big Bottomed Girls" – one of "their breed" – that would "make a splendid freak" (13, 10). As she is not called by her own name any more, her identity as "Saartjie" is dismissed, erased, and nullified.

She continues as The Girl until The Mother-Showman gives her a new identity as the Hottentot Venus, a naming that does not lead to redemption but to further reduction. The Mother-Showman's language advertising her side show reveals that more than an individual freak is being marketed:

> What a fat ass, huh?
>
> Oh yes, this girls thuh Missin Link herself.
>
> Come on inside and allow her to reveal to you the Great
>
> And Horrid Wonder
>
> of her great heathen buttocks.
>
> Thuh Missing Link, Ladies and Gentlemen: Thuh Venus
>
> Hottentot: . . .
>
> Plucked her from thuh Fertile Crescent
>
> From thuh Fertile Crescent with my own bare hands!
>
> Ripped her off thuh mammoth lap of uh mammoth ape! (43).

The Mother-Showman does not just sell Baartman's buttocks for visual pleasure and sexual stimulant but for the exoticism, primitiveness, and heathenness her physical shape evokes for her spectators. The Venus is "presented to society" (29) with The Mother-Showman's other 8 Human

Wonders. Along with such human freaks as "The Bearded Gal," "Flame-boyant child," "The Spotted Boy," "Thuh Fat Man," "2 ladies joined . . . at thuh hip," "Mr. Privates" who carries his sexual part in his face, and "the Whatsit," a woman with a cyclops eyes (32-4), the Venus Hottentot constitutes "The 9 lowest links in Gods Great Chain of Being" (31). The Mother Showman's version of Great Chain of Being is racialized and secularized. While other human wonders tend to be treated as individual freaks or misfits who are deserted "[b]y [. . .] Mom and Pop" (32), the Venus's deformity is received, read, and interpreted in terms of her ties of kinship: "With an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty, she was said by those to whom she belonged to possess precisely the kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots" as The Negro Resurrectionist cites from Robert Chamber's *Book of Days* in his footnote (36). The aberrance and degeneracy often associated with the Venus's protruding buttocks become the traits generic to her tribe, which helps endorse and legitimize a white audience's narcissistic superiority.

The Mother-Showman suggests – or, even prescribes – how to use the body on display: "Ladies and Gents are you feeling lowly? / Down in the dumps?/ Perhaps yr feeling 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). In other words, the white audience, feeling a sadistic pleasure and attributing the abnormal, degenerate, and obscene images to the objectified body, can defuse their social and sexual insecurities by displacing the conflicts with their own lives into racial ones. When perceived less as an individual than an ethnographic type, the Venus implies more than just prurient pastime or psychological relief. The Venus's body is consecrated to the (re-)fashioning of the white audience's "civic, legal, professional, masculine, white, erotic self" (Worthen 14) as a spectacle of racial and sexual alterity.

"For the Love of the Venus," a play-within-the-play that proposes a framework for the whole, delineates the ways the black female body is craved only to have its presence thwarted, remaining as an empty vessel through which to mediate and negotiate desire and subjectivity. Adapted from *The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of Frenchwomen*, a vaudeville play staged in Paris in 1914, this play recapitulates the colonial relations between Europe and Africa by featuring a love triangle between a white couple and a black woman. The Young Man, with his marriage impending, suffers from the boredom of his Bride-to-Be, which he sentimentalizes as a crisis in his manhood. He is seen to be "in uh pickle. . . an absolute pickle," his father and uncle say, yet what is indeed in a pickle is his notion of manhood, at once fantasized and romanticized: "A Man to be a Man must know Unknowns!" (48). Deflating and betraying his initiative and determined mindset ("I am all decided" (48)), his lust for conquest of what is unknown is transferred and reduced to an amorous adventure ("I wanna love/ something Wild" (48)), even a compromised one with a domesticated version of the Wild. He tells his uncle to "procure" in his presence "something called "The Hottentot Venus"" he read about in the newspaper (49). As Bride-to-Be asks for a workable plan for the way out, the Mother antically suggests multiple ways of committing a suicide as dramatic as Cleopatra's, Phaedra's, or Ophelia's, until she finally comes across a solution which is no less dramatic: "We'll get you up, make you look wild/ Get you up like a Hottentot" (122). Due to this "artifice," The Bride-to-Be is presented to The Young Man disguised as "The Hottentot Venus" and he gets infatuated with the apparition. The play ends as The Bride-to-Be finally removes her disguise and reveals her own body before The Young Man and he "gives her a red heart box of chocolates. Love Tableau" (154). The abrupt conclusion of the play, sacrificing a plausible characterization and narrative –The Young Man's passion for the Wild too easily gets abandoned—, intimates that closure can be achieved when the possibility of

an unruly black presence is contained by a union with the legitimate, socially approved white female, only serving as an imaginary site for negotiating the sexual conflicts and power dynamics between the white man and woman.

Once The Girl joins The Mother-Showman's freak show and comes to be designated as the Venus, however, she dreams of her presence – albeit on stage – with her newly acquired identity:

> The Venus:
>
> We should spruce up our act.
>
> I could speak for them.
>
> Say a little poem or something.
>
> The Mother-Showman:
>
> Count!
>
> The Venus:
>
> You could pretend to teach me and I would learn before their very eyes.
>
> The Mother-Showman:
>
> Yr a Negro native with a most remarkable spanker.
>
> That what they pay for.
>
> Their eyes are hot for yr tot-tot.
>
> Theres the poetry. (51)

The Venus, who is capable of counting, reading, and even acting, believes her reading of poetry can add zest to her "performance." Parks's Venus has now become empowered as an entrepreneur who can capitalize on her body and performance. However, her suggestion is immediately dismissed by The Mother-Showman who is versed in the needs of her patrons. While still being implicated in colonialist prejudices and fantasies, "a negro figure" gifted with

learning, reading, and appreciating skills is not intriguing to their "eyes." The Venus exists less as a novelty that invites their (intellectual) curiosity than as an affirmation that the African native females are bodily, earthly, and salacious beings that await their wasting gaze and touch. What fantasy, inspiration, and pleasure her black presence could evoke for the white audience come from her "remarkable spanker" –and the sexual fantasies and racial pathologies associated with it: "Theres the poetry." Translating her material specificity into "poetic" –figurative and metaphoric –presence, they consummate "a pathological summary" in which a girl named Saartjie turns into the exotic sexual icon.

Tracing Baartman's abstraction and reduction to the ethonographic Hottentot Venus, Parks shows how the gazes that covet and squander the body parallel Cuvier's attempts to archive and enshrine it as an emblem of black inferiority. With its Brechtian strategies, however, the freak show in *Venus* does not just represent the subjection and exploitation of the Venus but reveals the discursive processes of erasure and reduction which parallel Cuvier's archival project. While the Venus's freak shows provide the main stage for resurrecting her body, Parks is more interested in revealing how they reiterate, reflect, and perform the racist mythologies revolving around the black female body. The Venus's body becomes a discursive site in which the spectators confront, reaffirm and consume their prejudices, fantasies, and false myths about blackness, the black body, and black female sexuality. While Cuvier's archival project was conducted by digging for the actual body of Baartman, *Venus* presents the Venus's body as discursively reconstructed and fetishistically captured by the spectator's gaze and desire, whose presence is invariably fleeting and elusive.

Venus constantly summons the Venus's body before the gazing eyes only to thwart their expectations of its presence. The play opens exactly at the point such an expectation has been

frustrated: “I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead./ There wont be inny show tuhnite” (4). The Chorus of the Spectators who “came miles and miles and miles and miles and miles/ Coming in from all over to get themselves *uh look-see*” (4, emphasis added) exclaims: “Outrage! Its an outrage!/ Gimmie gimmie back my buck!” (5). While the white man in “For the Love of the Venus” tries to secure and fashion his identity by grounding the difference in and projecting the otherness onto the black female body, the body he seeks to secure in his presence finally turns out to be bogus, effigy, and fabrication. He calls upon the body of the Hottentot Venus, which would give materiality to fictive otherness he conceives, only to find out its absence. While he is indoctrinated by The Bride-to-Be, who must now “shrug her old [false] self off” (153), that “your true love stands before you” (154), he fails in attaining the object of his initial desire, what he calls “thuh core,” – the body of the Venus.

The absent presence of the Venus’s body is also foregrounded by Adina Porter’s prosthetic buttocks in the New York premier of the play. The disparity and discontinuity between the actress’s real body and the padded prosthesis reveals the Venus’s body artificial and constructed rather than serving for its seamless representation. Jennifer Johung reads from Porter’s padded bodysuit, “writing of performing bodies,” an extension of Derridean conceptualization of writing. The actress’s artificial/prosthetic body is supplemental in that it reveals “Porter’s lack of a huge posterior as present,” thereby foregrounding that “the black body as the object of the desiring gaze” is mere an “imaginary construction” (49). Porter’s prosthetic costume becomes a significant meta-theatrical gesture, suggesting a parallel between the audience members within and without *Venus* particularly in their frustrations to locate the presence of the performer’s (the Venus’s/ the Porter’s) body. Indeed, meta-theatricality is a built-in element of *Venus* on the textual level. Throughout the play, Parks teases the audience with an intimation –sometimes too

overt –that someone stands for the role of the Venus. As revealed in the *dramatis personae* list of this play, a group of characters are supposed to be interchangeable with each other, played by the same actor. One of the central ideas that fascinated the playwright at the stage she conceived *Venus* is that of "someone getting up on stage pretending they are someone that they are not" (Chauduri, "Posterior's" 56). For Parks, "it's all about the Show" (Chauduri, "Posterior's" 56) since it is ultimately "a play about show business –the business of showing yourself" (qtd. in Drukman, "A show Business Tale/ Tail" 4).

While most critics agree on the Brechtian use of the large prosthetic bottom, Harry Elam and Alice Rayner are concerned about the impact it will have as a part of the performing body rather than "uncritically" celebrating its performative register: The butt, which does not belong to the actress, "nonetheless gave the effect of total exposure" and is "not outside but literally inside contested display of the body" ("Body Parts" 271-72). Elam and Rayner astutely encapsulate the political predicament that Parks's resurrection of the body of the Venus –particularly in "the liminal space of theater"— inevitably might end in: "On the one hand, Parks's stage presentation recuperates and refigures her body as a sign of opposition to colonial exploitation and dehumanization. On the other hand, the play represents and reinscribes these systems of oppression and degradation by putting her once again on display before the gaze of an audience" (267). Foregrounding the difficulty of telling apart the represented body from the real one ("Where does the costume end and the real body of the actress?" (271)), Elam and Rayner point to the sense of exposure and the affective tumults the sight of the Venus's profile would bring to the audience: "When Venus stands alone in profile for the audience, the paying spectators of the Public Theater, no one can escape the discomforts of the Mother Showan saying "What a

bucket!/ What a bum!/ What a Spanker!/ Never seen the likes of that, I'll bet./ Go on Sir, go on./ Feel her if you like" (50)" (271).

Parks seems aware of the ideological limits of her performative use of the spectacle of the Venus's exploitation and subjugation. Rather than de-emphasizing the affective impacts of the actor's performing body, however, Parks actively works on the sense of exposure on the part of the audience to interrogate the audience's implication in the colonialist consumption of the Venus's body along with the audience onstage. The courtroom scenes mark a watershed in the play, in which the reversal of the spectatorial position occurs. In the Scenes 20A-J, the Venus's body is convened to the court to determine whether she is indecent or not since her presence on the freak show stage is accused of being "offensive to decency and disgraceful to our [their] country" (64). By reinforcing the essentialist linkage between the Venus's bodily traits and her alleged sexual appetites and moral depravity, these interrogations also work out the ideological resolution embedded in the "archivist" gaze of the freak show spectators. However, "[A] writ of *Habeas Corpus*"[34] The Chorus of the Court prepares to "[b]ring up the body of this female" conveys the irony of these trial scenes. While The Venus "should have the body" to be brought before the law as granted by this writ, the dynamic between the Venus and her spectators captured in the court scenes renders the idea of *Habeas Corpus* questionable and duplicitous: Who possesses her body or the right to (re)present this body? While asking two questions "Is she or was she ever indecent? And at inny time held against her will?" (64), the Chorus of the Court seems to be not so much interested in the second question as the first. The disarrayed and

[34] In Scene 20C, the Venus, who are "sit[ting] in a jail cell. . . apart from the courtroom," sarcastically expounds the "literal" meaning of this legal term by quoting from *Wester's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*: "*Habeas Corpus*. Literally: "You should have the body" for submitting. Any of several common-law writs issued to bring the body before the court or the judge" (65).

desultory questions that shower upon her presence demonstrate that an illegitimate and unwholesome curiosity rather than truth, justice, and fairness serve as arbiters of judgment in this legal space: “Were you ever beaten?/ Did you like it was it good?” (74). Projecting to the Venus their own voluptuous desire that led to and fed on her exhibition and yet still mesmerized by her body, The Chorus of the Court asks once again:

> The Chorus of the Court:
> . . . . . .
> (Rest)
> One more question, Girl, uh:
> Have you ever been indecent?
> . . . . . .
> The Venus:
> (Rest)
> “Indecent?”
> 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).

No compunction intervenes in the Venus’s showing her body since it is not shame to her. When she poses to goad the spectators (in the courtroom) into looking at her body, it is their own desire –and the shame of dissimulating and projecting it –noted at the sight of her body. With stark realness of her/performer’s body and provocation implied in her tone, the Venus is even addressing the audience of *Venus*, summoning them as complicit in the discourses that put the Venus’s body on display.

The play makes the audience willing participants in a voyeuristic dismemberment of the Venus. In the scene “Several Years from Now: In the Anatomical Theatre of Tubingen: The Dis(-

re-)memberment of the Venus Hottentot, Part I," The Baron Docteur reads from an anatomical report on Baartman by Georges Cuvier published in 1817:

> The height, measured after death,
> was 4 feet 11 and 1/2 inches.
> The total weight of the body was 98 pounds avoirdupois.
> As an aside I should say
> that as to the value of the information that I present
> to you today there can be no doubt.
> Their significance
> will be felt far beyond our select community. All that in mind
> I understand that my yield is
> Long in length.
> And while my finds are complete compensation
> for the amount of labor expended upon them
> I do invite you, Distinguished Gentlemen,
> Colleges and yr Distinguished Guests,
> If you need relief
> please take yourselves uh breather in thuh lobby.
> My voice will be surely carry beyond these walls and if not
> my finds are published. Forthcoming in *The Royal College*
> *Journal of Anatomy.*
> Merely as an aside, Gentlemen.
> (Rest) (91-2).

This scene is presented much like an event given during the intermission of the play: "House lights should come up and the audience should be encouraged to walk out of the theatre" (91). The Baron Docteur is giving a lecture on the anatomies of the Venus's body and the audience members of *Venus* are unwittingly cast as his colleagues in the anatomical theatre. Reading out the autopsy documents, The Baron Docteur figuratively dismembers the Venus by verbally fragmenting her body into the parts. Her postmortem dissection and display are re-enacted here as the graphic details of her body parts are delivered to the audience in such a length as spanning the nine pages of the text. The audience are invited to participate in a vivisection performed on the text and the Venus's body is recreated as a spectacle even as it gets dismembered and disjointed. The sense of spectacle or display becomes more horrific when we consider the

onstage presence of the Venus before and after this intermission: "the autopsy has been performed on a living being," as Elam and Rayner remark ("Body Parts" 276). The audience offstage are made to participate in this performative dismemberment, awakened to the alienating reciprocity of physical and figurative violence on the Venus's body. Through this process, they are torn from the detached, thus privileged position –paradoxically sustained by the presence of the Chorus of Spectators within the play as Brechtian device– which has allowed them an analytical approach to the mechanism of voyeurism and consumption of this racialized and sexualized object. The audience members perceive their spectatorship vulnerable and contingent.

"*Kiss* me *Kiss* me *Kiss* me *Kiss*"

In terms of the structure of the play, the intermission marks a great shift. In the scene right before this intermission, The Baron Docteur suggests leaving for Paris to the Venus who has by then just one month to go for the two years "she signed on for" with The Mother-Showman, saying "you look like you need a vacation" (85, 87). The Baron "takes The Venus from her cage" (89), promising her a higher payment, nice clothes, a clean room and a better circle to mix with. The Baron Docteur's suggestion means to her the end of her captivity to be displayed in the freak show:

> The Baron Docteur:
>
> Well.
>
> Lets have a look.
>
> Stand still stand still, sweetheart
>
> I'll orbit.
>
> Don't start Ive doctors eyes and hands.

Well.

Extraordinary.

(Rest) (86).

Unlike The Mother-Showman who tells the Venus to "turn to the side. . . ./Let em see! Let em see!" (43), The Baron Docteur orbits around her so that she can just stand still. While she expects him to be a "planet" for her, a would-be rising "star" in Paris –"The City of Lights" (87)—, his eyes and hands that he bothers to attribute to the profession of the medicine turn out to be no better than those of "a crowd out there. . . fresh from the pubs" (89) who would rush for the Venus any minute, both of whom are eager for using, abusing, and exploiting her body. While moving from London to Paris and being handed over from the Mother-Showman to The Baron Docteur, the Venus just switches from the object of voyeuristic curiosity to the subject of anatomical studies. Coaxing the audience to consuming the Venus's body both as an object of voyeuristic curiosity and scientific inquiry, postmortem anatomy verbally performed in the intermission punctuates the structure of the play, in which the Venus's posing for the audience of the freak show in London and her modelling for anatomical experiments and sketching in France are counterpointed with each other. While the Venus dreams of being promoted from "a splendid freak" to "a splendid wife," she only ends up as "a splendid corpse."[35]

[35] Throughout the play, the Venus is considered by male characters as *good material* out of which they can make something. The Brother brings the Venus over to London to make a mint: "[s]he'd make a *splendid freak*" (14). Meanwhile, convinced of his love for the Venus, The Baron Docteur professes to The Grade-School Chum who is concerned about his fame as an anatomist and reputation as a man with the wife: "She'd make uh *splendid wife*" (140). However, The Grade-School Chum, who is also casted as The Brother and The Mother-Showman, urges The Baron Docteur to send the Venus into jail and leave her die there to obtain her body for his autopsy as soon as possible: "She'll make uh *splendid corpse*" (144) (emphases added).

As the Venus becomes The Baron Docteur's lover, however, she becomes more conscious of the value of her body as a resource she can capitalize on. Although she asks "Do I have a choice?" to The Baron Docteur's proposition, she has good reasons for her *choice*: "He is not thuh most thrilling lay Ive had/ but his gold makes up thuh difference hhhh/ I love him" (135). She fantasizes about having her "big buttocks" perfumed and sprinkled with gold dust and dreams of replacing his wife one day, who is "all dried up" (135).

The Venus's decision not to feel ashamed of her shame also remains problematic. By laying bare her shame –her body as it is displayed and commodified— before the audience, the Venus mirrors back the audience's unwholesome desire projected onto her body. While one might detect some innocence from this refusal of shame, which renders possible her escape from the accusation of complicity, her body, whether she feels ashamed about it or not, is still implicated in the system that consumes and commodifies it. For the Venus, shame is not a matter pertaining to such values as morality, ethic, or human dignity. What is disgraceful for her is "to go home penniless" (75). To secure her agency as an economic subject, she even dares to negotiate her racial identity: "I could wash off my dark mark. / I came here black./ Give me the chance to leave here white" (76).

More often than not, it is not less the Venus's agency than her captivity that displeased the critics. As a representative, Jean Young castigated Parks for falsely portraying Baartman "as a sovereign, consenting individual with the freedom and agency to trade her human dignity for the promise of material gain" (699). Young argues that Parks re-objectifies and re-commodifies her by inculcating the illusion that the Venus is "free and liberated" enough to be complicit in her own exploitation (703). For Young, *Venus* only amounts to "fictitious melodrama" betraying historical records that say Baartman was a complete victim (699). However, Parks said in an

interview that she "could have written a two-hour saga with Venus being the victim. . . She's multifaceted. She's vain, beautiful, intelligent and yes, complicit" (Williams). Parks admits that "[m]ost of it's [*Venus'*s] fabricated" (Sellar 50). By leaving out and including some things from historical records, she tried to "embrace[s] the unrecorded truth" (Sellar 50).

The "unrecorded truth" lies in the redemption of the Venus's presence as a feeling subject. The Venus, who helplessly burst into tears with the salacious touch from the spectator who "pays some more" (45) in The Mother-Showman's freak show, now accuses the anatomists who "touch me[her] sometimes" of being "lascivious" (137). Assured of her lover's attachment to her, she becomes capable of differentiating among "touches." With her awakened sense of agency, the Venus begins to re-fashion her relationship with the Baron Docteur as intimate and empathic. Now she knows how to appropriate and even consume touch to please herself and claims her body as her own as she *feels* being touched: "Touch me./ down here./. . . . / That feels good. / Now touch me here" (104). She even trains her lover into becoming a feeling subject as she lets him know that she is pregnant:

> The Venus:
>
> Put yr hand here, Sweetheart.
>
> The Baron Docteur:
>
> Drink this first.
>
> The Venus:
>
> No. Feel me.
>
> The Baron Docteur:
>
> Fine.
>
> . . . . . .

What am I feeling? (128)

As Parks comments on the Foundling Father, however, the Venus also "falls in love with the wrong person, falls in love with the wrong dream," a dream to be loved (qtd. in Garrett). While the Venus consistently asks, "Do I have a choice?" throughout the play, the question she asks more often is "Love me?" Not just foreshadowing her objectification and exploitation in Paris as a replay, the intermission scene also presages the destiny of the Venus as a deserted lover. While The Baron Docteur is reading his report on the anatomical findings of the Venus, The Bride-to-Be from "For the Love of the Venus" inserts the sentimentalized narrative of love epistle: "My Love for you, My Love, is artificial/ Fabricated much like this epistle. / Constructed with mans fines powrs/ Will last through the days and the years and the hours" (94). Intersecting science with love and literature as man-made binaries, The Bride-to-Be seems to convey a hostile truth that love is a fabrication rather than affirming love's power defeating that of science. Significantly, however, all of Parks's fabrication in *Venus* lies in loving relationships between the Venus and The Baron Docteur, the Venus and her own body, that is, how she becomes his mistress and how she comes to have agency over her body through her relationship with her lover.

The conflicting narrative of the Venus's death at the ending demonstrates that the final redemption that the Venus, as a forlorn lover, seeks for lies in affective communion:

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 her ass off 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, that is

Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please

visit. (161)

In the very last speech allotted to her, the Venus repeats and revises the "tail end" of her tale once delivered by The Negro Resurrectionist in the Overture. In her version of the tale, her soul rests in heaven rather than being "mounted on Satans warm wall" (9) and her corpse waits for the visitors to the museum rather than being forced to be placed there as pickled. She implores: "Please visit."

This last appeal sounds even quite striking for the girl who has been consumed by spectatorial gaze all along in her lifetime. The Venus's daring gesture to solicit the spectators with the knowledge of how much further objectification and commodification they would bring up, however, hints at the reciprocity between spectatorship and historiography Parks sets up as a playwright engaged in history. Harvey Young regards "[l]oves corpse [that] stands on show in museum" as a metonymy of history, one that "has been paused but has not passed" ("Touching History" 145). While *Venus* might "reobjectify and recommodify" the historical figure, the Venus's plea urges us to "encounter our paused passed/past" (H. Young, "Touching History" 145) through her staged/displayed body. Collapsed onto her corpse in the museum that "has not passed but remains paused in the moment of the exhibit" (H. Young, "Touching History" 145),

the standstill image of the Venus in the last scene of the play once again invites and simultaneously defies the spectators' gaze through a pose implied by it.[36]

The kind of communion the Venus desires through her plaintive yet provocative invitation is evinced in the last line of the play she utters: "*Kiss* me/ *Kiss* me/ *Kiss* me/ *kiss*" (162). One would say "The Venus has to seduce because she has been abandoned – by the carnival world, by the Docteur, and, in a sense, by herself" (Lahr 96). If The Baron Docteur's love is a fabrication predicated on his desire to abstract, measure, and appropriate her body, the Loves corpse's posing transfixes the hierarchical, teleological, and cathartic relationship between her and her lover, rending it horizontal, reciprocal, and uninflected. Only true to sensual experiences fleshy communion allows, the Venus, the goddess of love, wants her visitors/audience to return the kiss. This is also the level of disciplined relationship of unalloyed reciprocity Parks finally reaches through her unending engagement with the nature of spectatorical desire and experimentation with a number of forms to approach the historical/racialized object as its own referent.

[36] As Craig Owens aptly recapitulates, posing is a Lacanian mimicry. By exhibiting oneself as already "frozen, immobilized" as "induced by the gaze," the pose returns the immobilizing gaze to the spectator. As the gazed represents oneself as the representation, the gaze to locate the object of spectator's desire is paralyzed, immobilized, and "brought to a standstill" (Owens 198).

CONCLUSION

This dissertation investigates a relationship between blackness and performance through Suzan-Lori Parks's plays, which repeatedly summon, restage, and recast spectacles of historically subjugated African Americans for contemporary audiences. The plays chosen for my discussion feature black performers who repeat, re-enact, and rehearse racist spectacles from the past along with essentialized images of blackness these spectacles disseminated and circulated. By self-consciously performing blackness, Parks's black performers locate their performance not just as a performative praxis for discursive resistance to institutional racism but revive it as a visceral practice for working through trauma inscribed on black bodies. While foregrounding the hypervisibility and constructedness of blackness, the black performers in Parks's plays call attention to a paradoxical foreclosure and dissimulation of the sentience of the black body through their performances.

By re-enacting spectacles of racial subjugation and persecution, Parks's black performers locate racist violence in the spectacularization of the black body, blackness, and black suffering. Their performances foreground and problematize figurative violence – spectacle of blackness *per se* – while disclosing literal violence to which the black body has been vulnerable in spectacularized persecution and dehumanization. As a self-conscious ethnic playwright, Parks focalizes racial spectacularization in her commitment to form. She evinces that her artistic works are less about race than about form and again that her identity as an African-American woman is the form she takes. Parks does not just concern herself with the form of the literary dramatic text but also reveals a keen sense of the form of experiences she has as an African-American woman – that is, the "patterning, shapes, arrangements" (Levine 13) of African-American life, the ways

in which the boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies are imposed and enforced in racialized experiences. Spectacularization affords a form for the collective experiences of African Americans by informing how racist violence –alternating between the literal and figurative – has been perpetrated through the form of theatre and how this "theatre" of violence exploits the spectacle of blackness to endorse and simultaneously dissimulate physical, material, and corporeal violence. Parks's engagement with the formal structure of racialized experiences and her commitment to a historical agenda come across in the citation of such historical "theatres" as lynching and minstrelsy, seemingly disparate kinds of historical theatres, yet both prominent instances of racist spectacles that reveal how US society has negotiated and mediated race relations and inscribed social norms through the visualization and spectacularization of the black body.

Parks's plays interrogate and intervene in the historical legacies of racial representation by engaging the ways in which the black body has been appropriated, exploited, and abused for the whites' symbolic struggles for self-fashioning in lynching and minstrelsy. Through the oppressive history of African Americans, they have been often (deliberately) defined solely in terms of their corporeality. Parks's male performers discussed in the first two chapters, who are engaged in enacting horrific lynching scenes over and over uncannily through the minstrel antics or with whiteface makeup on, foreground the ways in which these two regimes served to relegate and confine African Americans in a corporeal sphere. Through Black Man with Watermelon's intertextual association with And Bigger And Bigger and Bigger and Lincoln and Booth's transhistorical evocation of the figure of northern dandy, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* and *Topdog/Underdog* reveal and interrogate the master narrative of lynching and minstrelsy which contributed to the hyper-sexualized notion of black masculinity

culminating in the myth of the black rapist. Black-authored dramas in the early twentieth century tried to dismantle these racist stereotypes by creating African American characters who are entitled to *disembodied* citizenship and bestowing upon them an ability to think for themselves with solemnity, integrity, and moral dignity. Parks's black performers feature themselves as Jim Crow, Dandy Jim, the welfare queen, and the iconic figure of African female sexuality, all true to the distorted, caricatured, and mocked representation of African Americans.

Pushing their citational capacities to the utmost and employing their bodies for revelation of various discourses on the black body and blackness, the performers' repetitive reenactments of racist spectacles foreground the ways in which the black body has been appropriated as a receptacle for myths, beliefs, and constructed ideas about blackness. Parks's black performers employ theatre as a consciously racialized form, citing historical figures as sociocultural construction for their conceptual critiques. They do not just rehearse racist spectacles or resurrect historical figures but revive racist mythologies—i.e. stereotypes— revolving around the black body for the audience to confront, reaffirm, and consume.

The subversion of and resistance to the notions of authentic blackness often lie in the formal inversion as attested to by these performers strategic ways of "doing" their bodies. Through his ritualistic haunting, Black Man with Watermelon disrupts the aesthetics of closure and climactic resolution that lynching applied to and imposed on the black body as an archaic form of scapegoat ritual. Two black Lincolns' whiteface performance is an exemplary formal strategy of symbolic inversion: By performing white and thereby making whiteness conspicuous, the Foundling Father and Lincoln appropriate the blackface's spectacular uses of blackness and work out the reversal of the representational politics of this white form. By turning their bodies into whatever the customers/spectators want, Hester La Negrita's pornographic performance and

the Venus's freak show pose their bodies as cultural signifiers and represent themselves through the highly sexualized black female body. They return the gaze of the spectators of their performances and expose their racist and scopophilic desire by pretending to accept the conventional terms in which their bodies are trafficked among men and consumed by their desires.

Such an indictment of racist representational frames through formal inversion, however, runs the risk of replicating the spectacle of the black body lynched, persecuted, and dehumanized. While reviving and resurrecting the black bodies as signs of oppression, racist exploitation, and dehumanization, the reenactments of stereotypes might conversely reinscribe a racist ideology by circulating the negative images they cite. On the one hand, Parks's figures – invariably evoking minstrel characters through stylized acts, (whiteface) makeup, and prosthetic costumes – imitate and parody whites' distorted representation of blackness. On the other, however, they might not escape the perpetuation of the stereotypes they try to subvert through their performances by putting the black body once again before the gaze of the audience any way.

Rather than disregarding or eluding such a dilemma in which subversive performances are inherently implicated, Parks vigorously engages with it by problematizing the black performing body as a site charged with its semiotic fungibility and ontological stability. Along with the blatant Brechtian style of acting picked up by these self-conscious black performers, the metatheatrical structures and the presence of the spectators within the play endemic to Parks's plays seem to place the contemporary audience of the plays in a privileged position from which to distance themselves from what is performed and the conventional ways this built-in audience react to it, inviting them for critical and disillusioned musings on the spectacle of blackness on

stage. Parks's black performing bodies, however, also serve for destabilizing the stable viewing position of the spectators alienated from the stage spectacle by affectively implicating the audience in the performance and simultaneously reminding them of their contingency as viewers by foregrounding that the black body on stage –whether theatrical or historical – is a combination of material and discursive elements and mobilizing a dialectic relationship between each.

Parks's black performers challenge the border between the material and the epistemological, as reified in historical racist spectacles, by revealing that blackness is more than just visual imagery, theatrical styles, or commodities culturally trafficked. Parks problematizes the metaphorical politics of race and racist performance in the institution of slavery and racism, particularly the metaphoric use of the black body in racist spectacles, through the jarring moments in her plays in which blackness explodes performance as living, material experiences of racial oppression and subjugation. By performing blackness, Parks's black performers paradoxically expose blackness as a contestation between authenticity and appropriation, "theatrical fantasy" and "inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people" (Johnson 8). Distanced from his own body through minstrel caricaturing, Black Man with Watermelon's execution scene paradoxically heightens the visceral effect on the part of the audience, thus debunking and interrogating the political containment of black suffering, pain, and discontent inherent in the stereotype of the "contented darky," which served for the politics of the racist spectacle and the institution of slavery. By presenting a dying black man "too real" and thereby compelling the audience to confront the messiness that the death of the black Lincoln entails, *Topdog/Underdog* accuses the audience of not liking history unfolding "raggedy and bloody and screaming." And the performative use of the Venus's prosthetic costume

paradoxically implicates the audience in the affective impacts of the actor's real body, rendering difficult their distance-taking from her body on stage. As the audience begin to perceive their spectatorship contingent and vulnerable, however, they finally get to participate in the resurrection of African Americans as feeling subjects and palpable embodied beings, responding to their call for affective communion with the reactions from the gut. Through its unending engagement with the nature of spectatorial desire and multifaceted experiments with the form, Parks's theatre envisions a *disciplined* relationship of unalloyed reciprocity between the bodies seen and the viewing bodies, stage and audience, and history and performance.

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