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FROM ADRIENNE KENNEDY TO SUZAN-LORI PARKS:  
(RE)CONSTRUCTING LIMINAL IDENTITIES THROUGH PERFORMATIVITY

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*The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.*

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examines the transition that African American identity undergoes in four landmark works of the magnificent playwrights Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks, namely *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*. To do so, I will explore the application of Arnold van Gennep's tripartite thesis on defining his rites of passage to show the evolution from a (pre)liminal, abject conception of blackness into a postliminal, performative definition of the self. Thus, these plays will analyze the notion of identity as a malleable flux bound to changing over time that is in search of subverting the sociocultural normative codes established by the (white and colonial) hegemony in control. In doing so, these playwrights aim to subvert and deflate normative configurations of the self so as to reach an open, hybrid space where a plural dialogue can take place. This notion is explored in depth by the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha who, in his book *The Location of Culture*, encourages the operation of the third space as a place to pact the non-constrictive standards upon which the reconfiguration of postliminal identity and culture is going to be based. Following his line of thought, African American playwrights will traverse the black lapse in history, rejecting condescending indoctrination so as to reconstitute who they actually are without encumbrance. Thence, whereas Adrienne Kennedy's drama exhorts the personal suffering of a hyphenated individual, the theatre of Suzan-Lori Parks moves towards a reconceptualization of identity closer to Bhabha's theories that sets the African American community free from oppressive history through the employment of collective memory.

**KEY WORDS:** African American, Drama, Identity, Liminality, Performativity, Space, Women Writers, Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks, History, Collective Memory.

## RESUMEN

El presente estudio examina la evolución del concepto de identidad afroamericana en cuatro de las obras más significativas de las magníficas dramaturgas Adrienne Kennedy y Suzan-Lori Parks, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, *The America Play* y *Topdog/Underdog*. Para ello, analizo la aplicación del sistema tripartita elaborado por Arnold van Gennep al tratar de establecer las diversas fases de un rito de paso. En consecuencia, se explora la transición disponible desde la concepción de identidad negra como una categoría degradada, hasta la reconstitución de la misma como performativa y postliminal. Así, en estas obras la noción de identidad se percibe como una entidad dúctil que persigue la subversión de los códigos socioculturales normativos (establecidos por una hegemonía colonial y blanca) para alcanzar un espacio abierto e híbrido donde acordar nuevas pautas socioculturales no restrictivas. Este lugar, también conocido como tercer espacio, ha sido estudiado por el teórico postcolonial Homi K. Bhabha en su libro *The Location of Culture*. En él, Bhabha pretende ejecutar una reconstrucción no normativa de la identidad y la cultura en pos de la multiculturalidad. En línea con esta concepción algunas dramaturgas afroamericanas han optado por explorar la ausencia de una auténtica historia negra, rechazando los discursos paternalistas del pasado para reconstituir su identidad libremente. Por ello sugiero que, en las espectaculares obras de estas autoras, se persigue una reconfiguración honesta de lo afroamericano. En consecuencia, mientras que las obras de Adrienne Kennedy expresan la angustia de una identidad dual, el teatro de Suzan-Lori Parks se mueve hacia una reconstrucción del ser más cercana a las ideas de Bhabha, liberando a la comunidad afroamericana del yugo de una historia colonial mediante el uso de la memoria colectiva.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Teatro Afroamericano, Identidad, Liminalidad, Performatividad, Espacio, Mujeres Escritoras, Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks, Historia, Memoria Colectiva.

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## INTRODUCTION

Why do we sacrifice so much energy to our art? Not in order to teach others but to learn with them what our existence, our organism, our personal and unrepeatable experience have to give us; to learn to break down the barriers which surround us and to free ourselves from the breaks which hold us back, from the lies about ourselves which we manufacture daily . . . to fill the emptiness in us . . . Art is a ripening, an evolution, an uplifting which enables us to emerge from darkness into a blaze of light.

–Jerzy Grotowski, “A Statement of Principles,” 1968.

The twentieth century has been considered one of the most prolific historical moments in terms of dramatic production. Not only did theatre undergo its largest aesthetical transformation from realist and naturalist configurations of performance to a distancing, non-representational and ritualistic rebirth, but also increased the number of stories being told and the variety of voices being heard. Such transformation, probably influenced by the wide range of formal possibilities that the new theatrical approaches opened to the public, becomes especially relevant when dealing with African American drama, for it has been the leader and promoter of the movements that, since the second half of the century, have been emancipated from colonial structures and leitmotifs.

It is because of the artistic melody played by this new wave of playwrights that the most profound and hidden emotions result of colonialism, those that we fear to articulate, emerge. Thus, African American drama gives way to a new interpretation of life under the scope of a different culture, equally rich, which asserts its independence. The rupture with the hegemonic patterns of expression and representation allows theatre to rewrite normative history, subverting the subjugation of space to time in search of a historical past that can be embraced. Therefore, space will be explored as a fundamental category in the configuration of identity, which will encourage a depiction of authenticity in which personal confusion, liminality and loss of balance are laid bare as instruments to embrace hyphenated selves.

Hence, imbued by echoes of the greatest dramatic theorists of the time, the theatre written by African American women grasps a genuine representation of black identity



symptomatic of the “radical erasure of the mnemonic myths and stereotypes obscuring black identity” available in some plays of this period, among which the contribution of Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks should be accentuated (Favorini 251). In this essay, I aim to explore the process of configuration and reconstruction that the black identity undergoes as seen from Adrienne Kennedy’s work to Suzan-Lori Parks’ drama. By detaching from colonial theatrical modes to seek a place of their own, these playwrights explore the void of black voices in history and, therefore, decide to revisit tradition through performativity<sup>1</sup> to promote a postcolonial approach to theatre in which the stage becomes a third space where everyone is included.

## 1. THE (RE)CONFIGURATION OF IDENTITY: LIMINALITY, PERFORMATIVITY AND THEATRICAL SPACE

This section explores the theoretical framework upon which I will construct my analysis of the plays by the African American playwrights Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks examined in this thesis. To do so, I will briefly inspect the most relevant African American movement of the literary panorama in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century (the Black Theatre Movement), which will lead me to consider space as an essential category in the process of racial identification. After that, I will proceed to analyze the progression that African American drama has undergone from Kennedy’s personal (non-)places (portrayed in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*) to later understandings of black identity in Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog* and *The America Play*. In doing so, I will follow Arnold van Gennep’s thesis on liminality, presenting the evolution

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<sup>1</sup> In using this term I refer to the depiction of identity as unfixed and malleable depending on the context to subvert normative notions.

of African American drama (written by women) as one of his rites of passage. To this I will append some notions on performativity and liminality that will lead me to explore the manner in which these playwrights reverse the *status quo*, trying to reach a multicultural society.

### 1.1 Decolonizing the Mind and the Stage: From Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker's Self-Space to van Gennep's Preliminal Stage

The need to find a space of one's own when conforming identity is a prerequisite usually taken for granted by the vast majority of the privileged society. However, such concern did not go unnoticed to the African American playwrights of the 1960s who, led by the rage resultant of racial abuse and creative repression, initiated the Black Theatre Movement. Aiming to recover their cultural tradition, the authors of this movement explored their African origins as root for their emergent self-definition, which was mainly seen as anti-white (Barrios, *Black Theatre* 27). Paradoxically enough, it was the playwrights belonging to the Black Theatre Movement who ruled the theatrical panorama of the second half of the century for reincorporating the audience into the dramatic performance (Barrios, *Black Theatre* 14). Opposed to the Western tradition of the fourth wall, which renowned theorists such as Bertolt Brecht clearly reject, black theatre emerged as an authentic expression of their true, *black* feelings that have been silenced for centuries. As a consequence, this theatre can be recognized as culturally and politically engaged for taking action against the passivity enforced by the Western world, both on stage and on the black community itself (Barrios, *Black Theatre* 14). This enactment of blackness as something positive can be translated into an adherence to a *ritual*, which aims not only to establish the new black identity, but to reclaim a space for it.

It is for its socio-cultural relevance in favoring the emergence of the black consciousness that the Black Theatre Movement becomes relevant for this study. However, the lack of recognition of its female playwrights indicates the double standards which locate

black female writers under a double oppression, in terms of gender and race (Barrios, *Black Theatre* 31). Seeking the inclusion of women on art, both Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker signal the need of a personal space in which one can express oneself freely. However, it is the excellent novelist Alice Walker who decides to shed some light into the black female panorama by encouraging women of color to reconcile themselves with art. She maintains that, despite a clear absence of referents, one must pursue a personal observation of life, making connections “where none existed before” (5). Besides, Walker regards the creatively oppressive situation that previous female artists endured; “muzzled”, “mutilated” and “anonymous” are some of the terms she uses to define the female creative spirit at that time, but not without recognizing it as “vibrant”, “powerful” and “radiant” too (239, 241). Hence, whereas these *mothers* were deprived of their own gifts and mentally colonized, their daughters, influenced by that hidden force, regained enough power to make themselves heard, even in an ambience that was not propitious for them to do so.

Because the Black Theatre Movement did not acknowledge or represent black femininity properly, some of these female playwrights chose to deploy their disparate sentiments on a personal environment, making use of highly innovative and experimental techniques.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it can be claimed that the actual shift from Western modes to the rise of a new dramatic diction was propelled by black women and their highly lyrical language. Among these playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy stands out for offering some insight into the psyche of her oppressed community by means of Surrealism. Kennedy writes *Funnyhouse of a Negro* in search of a space to debunk her complexities freely. Her self-exploration is done at a psychological level, exposing the agony of an African American that feels both of her

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<sup>2</sup> It was specially Ntozake Shange who, in her play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (a chorepoem), denounced the sexist oppression that black women underwent and restored the colored, female identity (Barrios, “Seeking” 617, 618, 619).

identities (African and American) incompatible while attempting to reconcile both poles into an enclosed space.

The impact that Kennedy's drama has on a later generation of African American playwrights leads one to think of her as referent and instigator of the *rite of passage* that black theatre has undergone up to the present time. The French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep assures that "every change in a person's life involves actions and reactions," which crystallize into a complete behavioral schema, undergoing three basic stages: the preliminal stage, the liminal and the postliminal ones (3, 11). According to his thesis on liminality, these phases respectively correspond to processes of separation, transition and incorporation (11). Therefore, one must get detached from its old identity to acquire a new social status.

This transition from the preliminal phase into the marginal one can be explored in Adrienne Kennedy's drama. The selection of a room as the stage of *Funnyhouse of a Negro* echoes Virginia Woolf's motto advocating for the need of women to have a room of their own if they are to write fiction (6). However, the dichotomous and unfolded essence of Kennedy's protagonist connected with the non-linearity of the play's plot transforms Woolf's self-space into an ambiguous locus with the appearance of a trespassed shelter. In view of her own duality as an African American, Kennedy abandons the existing definition of blackness aiming to find one that suits her better. It is this process of detachment what allows her to relocate her narrative into a threshold, where resistance to hegemony is promoted. Such conception is emphasized by the technical configuration of the play: Kennedy's disengagement with the conventional (realist) design of dramatic space is clarified by her use of surrealist procedures that underline the instability of the room she has built for her own.

Because this room belongs to an African American, its mere existence is questioned on stage. All along the play, the surrealist and symbolic devices govern the theatrical panorama casting doubts on the plausibility of such black space. The coming and going of the

protagonist's alter egos into her room present physically her constant flow of conflicting emotions and thoughts, which concludes on a tragic ending. It is because of the liminal kernel of the stage that Sarah is unable to decipher a way out of the margin, because only by leaving aside the internalized foundations of colonization could she find a new identity that made her free. Thus, the protagonist's downfall should be regarded as "the first step necessary to obtain rebirth and self-affirmation" (Barrios, *Black Theatre* 126). In other words, in order to reach a postliminal world and a redefinition of blackness with it, society must endure a deconstruction of the self.

### 1.2 The Duality of Liminal Space: Transforming the Stage into an Ambiguous Threshold

Essential to van Gennep's theory, the liminal space is a locus in between two statuses mainly signaled by duality and ambiguity which can only be overcome when one is integrated into a different social category. Yet, because this process of reconstitution of the self comprises various approaches to one's own identity, black theatre serves itself of certain theatrical techniques that parallel the confusion of African Americans while trying to discover their true identity out of an abject state.<sup>3</sup> One of the masterminds of this rising of abject liminality on stage is Adrienne Kennedy, who, intertwining reality and dreams, exposes a compound of symbolical images that underline her characters' absence of a sense of belonging.

In Kennedy's plays, the characters encounter a dual scenario that resembles their own confusion. As Olga Barrios suggests, resumed in the character of Sarah are the oppositions of race and gender that determine her confused identity (*Black Theatre* 126, 127, 129). Because these African American characters do not belong neither to the former, nor the future stage,

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<sup>3</sup> In her book *The Horrors of Power*, Julia Kristeva defines abjection as "a border," made of "ambiguity," which "while releasing a hold, does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it," reason why she affirms that abjection is "in perpetual danger" (9).

they impersonate a hyphen, “waver[ing] between two worlds” with an unknown identity (Genep 18). This marginal condition is emphasized by the real/oneiric realities’ clash, which casts doubts on the reliability of what is being staged. This process can be easily identified in two of Kennedy’s best plays *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*. In the former, Kennedy presents her protagonist as a woman with a multi-layered psyche that gets materialized into various characters. This reduplication into different personas serves as a device to show Sarah’s liminality: it does not matter how hard she tries to find her place in the world because it will be inexistent for her in that she rejects who she is. On a later play named *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, Kennedy’s previous scenario (a private room) expands into a racist society that shows African Americans as outsiders on their own neighborhood. In doing so, it enforces confusion and doubt by intertwining the apparently unresolved plot with oneiric instances that revive old tragedies.

Arnold van Genep’s notion of liminality has also been taken up by the Scottish anthropologist Victor Turner, who explores it in depth in his book *The Ritual Process*. Turner asserts that liminal identities are “neither here nor there; [but rather] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (95). Thus, these marginal identities escape what he calls “the structure,” “a set of classifications” which governs our daily lives dictating what is normative and acceptable, and unfold into an anti-structure (127). Turner’s conception of liminality as subversive becomes fundamental to comprehend the role this marginal phase has in black theatre, becoming a means for socio-cultural reversal.

Turner also maintains that, because of the symbolic charge of liminal transitions, they tend to be connected to rituals. Their connection cannot be ignored when referring to African American drama because of the enormous influence that African rituals have on it. This ritualistic aspect of theatre serves to make the audience meld with the actors and become part

of the performance, thereby integrating them into a dramatic dialogue that raises a sense of communion among equals. This final notion is very important in that Victor Turner refers to it (under the name of *communitas*) as the direct cause of liminality. According to his claims, only those who stay together in the “limbo of statuslessness” that is liminality will experience this feeling of connection and equality (95, 138).

However, even if he refers to artists as people on the limen (by mentioning certain *communitas* such as the beat generation and the hippie movement), Turner fails to mention the inestimable value of the emergence of black theatre as a promoter of racial pride. He assures that artists “catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure” and therefore is still unbiased (128). Yet, Turner’s positive conception of the threshold must be counteracted by mentioning the dangers that a liminal place conceals. Located in a space where identity is denied, a notion that Marc Augé explores under the name of non-place, the margin can become either a place for hope or fear. Indeed, this second possibility can be easily perceived in Kennedy’s drama in connection with the non-places that her characters inhabit. Even if Kennedy’s drama does not reach the postliminal phase of van Gennep’s tripartite structure, it provides a fundamental first step towards the realization of racist atrocities that are both in the mind of the oppressed individual and inherent to the colonizer. Kennedy’s theatre promotes the recognition of past pain and suffering, which will be recovered by later playwrights (among whom Suzan-Lori Parks is highlighted), who will find in that terrible past a driving force which will make them heal.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 Performing Identity to Constitute a Postliminal Third Space

For Arnold van Gennep the postliminal stage represents the final part of a process by which the self gets empowered. But, in order for that process to be complete, the African

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<sup>4</sup> Such procedure is not exclusive of Suzan-Lori Parks; in fact, as Olga Barrios contends, a similar “process of individual healing” is available in Sanchez and Teer’s writings (“African American” 220).

American community must overcome the dangers of the threshold and become aware of who they really are. Hence, a reconfiguration of identity is required. Yet, this redefinition must take into account not only the present, but also the past, revisiting history to recover the presence of black people in it.

Aware of the dangers of learning what Chimamanda Adichie calls a *single story*, the African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks attempts to recreate the past through a postcolonial perspective. This point of view allows her to observe certain key moments of history and rewrite them to incorporate a different truth, that of the black community. As a result, in her Pulitzer winning play *Topdog/Underdog* and in a previous one, *The America Play*, Parks explores the assassination of President Lincoln through a series of dramatic devices that allow her to incorporate whiteness into her speech through performativity. This characteristic is fundamental to comprehend the difference between Parks and Kennedy. Whereas Kennedy is focused on exploring liminality, Parks' plays are oriented towards the analysis of historical identity as a means for correction.

In order to revisit history, Parks explores identity as a performative category, in other words, as a malleable flux of emotions and thoughts liable to changing over time. Thus, through an apparently minimal nuance when considering identity, Parks manages to restore blackness in history, while incorporating (in the case of *Topdog/Underdog*) a revisited version of Western Realism. Yet, this postliminal society does not reflect the ideal *communitas* envisioned by Turner. Instead, it denounces the negative impact of the socially constructed category that race is, giving way for positive *communitas* in the dialogue started with the audience.

In Parks' mesmerizing drama, performativity is installed through performance, mimicry and naming. The characters tend to have names with allegorical meanings that provide information, not only about themselves, but also about their future. Besides, these



characters do not exclusively represent themselves as individuals, but are illustrative of a collective identity, unfolding in a redefined black consciousness. Consequently, one might claim that Kennedy's attempts to reconfigure the African American identity through a rite of passage culminate in Parks' drama, where identity is seen as performative and might therefore be enacted by anyone. Thus, in exposing mimicry, Parks' theatre becomes the open means by which a plural dialogue is reached enabling the transformation of the stage into what Bhabha calls a third space, a locus where the differences become a nexus within a horizontal arrangement, rather than an element that defines one's status in a hierarchy.

## 2. SHAPING A *BLACK* (NON-)PLACE TO DENOUNCE LIMINAL IDENTITIES IN KENNEDY'S PLAYS

The anthropological theories explored in the previous chapter become relevant in my interpretation of Kennedy's and Parks' works. The playwrights' formal structuring of their drama emerges as an innovative progression towards a different type of theatre; their experimental writings engage in an indirect conversation with spatial, anthropological and philosophical discourses, delineating a clear division between the rejected normative and the liberated self.

Because of her honesty in rendering visible the contradictions available within herself, Adrienne Kennedy stands for the perfect epitome of a personal quest for true identity and self-space. Such intrinsic dispute concludes in the elaboration of "a new language and a new style," which will transform Kennedy's protagonists into "battleground[s] of Black and White confrontation" (Barrios, *Black Theatre* 123). The introspective analysis of her own psyche and the subsequent rendering of her tormented self through surrealist techniques turn her plays into living proof of the racial struggle to find shelter that the African American

community endures. For such reason, this section will explore *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1988) and *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* (1996)<sup>5</sup> –two of Adrienne Kennedy’s masterpieces, to analyze the place of blackness as a liminal non-place.

## 2.1 Surrealist Techniques to Introduce Marginalization in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

Adrienne Kennedy was not initially understood by her contemporaries of the Black Theatre Movement because her drama, which certainly was too experimental for their cause, presented the duality of an individual trapped in between two categories: the uncontrollable desire of being accepted (therefore *white*) and the necessity to impersonate an authentic black identity. Yet, it is precisely in her unwavering attempts to examine and configure her true *liminal* self that she has become one of the major playwrights of her time. Her plays, suffused by the rhythms of Africa, respond to the extensive demands that certain twentieth century theatre theorists (such as Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Antonin Artaud or even Peter Brook) will extol as the essence of the great new theatre.

In view of the insufficient, straightforward drama that was created at the time, Adrienne Kennedy decides to formulate a new medium capable of meeting her needs. Thus, in her examination of black space, the playwright exposes the tragic truth of her people: they are denied a self-space to develop their creative talent while devising a genuine identity. The climax of such elaboration is probably found in her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, where the protagonist (Sarah) is compelled to confront her most profound fears and desires. Set in “*what appears to be a Queen’s chamber [with] . . . wine-colored walls*”, Sarah (through her many alter egos) embodies the desperation result of liminality to the extent of committing suicide (2). Kennedy’s peculiar employment of color and light is a technique utilized for its emphatic effect over one of the thematic centres of the play, violence.

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<sup>5</sup> *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* is a play that Adrienne Kennedy co-wrote with her son Adam after he was assaulted by a police officer; a fact that transforms the play into an avowal of such autobiographical event.

Kennedy's exploitation of original dramatic techniques is nothing but her organic response to the overflow of emotions that inhabit her, which results, as the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks beautifully asserts, in "a passionate odyssey into the psyche of post-Africa America" (qtd. in Kennedy, "Adrienne" 58). Through visual images, Kennedy offers her personal (and agonic) perception of the problem of race, and it is because of her vivid imagery that *Funnyhouse of a Negro* seems permeated by violence and death (Barrios, *Black Theatre* 121). The French writer Antonin Artaud assures in his book *The Theatre and Its Double* that modern theatre must contain an element of violence, of *cruelty* to "wake [the audience] up, nerves and heart" from their realist amnesia, a notion that clearly applies to Kennedy's drama (84). In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, this violence aims the spectators' empathic response while facing the personal struggle, suffering and final death of one of Kennedy's personas.<sup>6</sup>

The remembrance of blood that the *mise-en-scène* brings up, together with the room's unnatural light effect ("*a strong, white LIGHT* [lighting the center of the room], *while the rest of the Stage is in unnatural BLACKNESS*"), anticipates to the audience the gloomy mood of the play (*Funnyhouse* 2). Besides, the setting dimly lit evokes an oneiric scenario that questions the characters' consciousness and the room's existence. Moving "*in a trance*," Kennedy's characters are trapped into an enclosed environment that shifts from reality to dreams because, as the playwright herself assures, the discovery of Lorca's drama propelled her to reject the naturalist living room, "never again," she says, "would I be afraid to have my characters talk in a non-realistic way," abandoning tradition for her "greater dream setting" filled with "multi-layered" visual images (2, *People Who Led* 108, 98). Kennedy's engagement with her own style contrasts with her protagonist's rejection of her non-

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<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Suzan-Lori Parks, Kennedy stated that she embodies different people, describing herself as quiet and shy sometimes, but contending and strong in her drama ("Adrienne" 64).

normative idiosyncrasies, thereby suggesting that Sarah's *funnyhouse* is, in fact, one of Marc Augé's non-places.<sup>7</sup>

Her rupture with Realism and her insistence on reclaiming the audience's participation on the performance transform her drama into the kind of theatre suitable for Bertolt Brecht. "[Art] is an *object of instruction*" praises Brecht asserting the consequent "collaboration between participant[s] and the apparatus" that his theatre builds ("Example" 31). However, in writing *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy gets *emotionally* naked in front of her audience to show the ambiguity of her own self (Barrios, "Seeking" 612). The element of psychological nudity present in the play allows one to consider the influence of Grotowski's statements on drama.<sup>8</sup> Jerzy Grotowski argues that theatre must be free of artifice, it needs to be poor in ornament in order to become rich in experience or, as he blatantly puts it "always avoid banality . . . avoid beautiful lies . . . try to show the unknown side of things to the spectator" ("Skara Speech" 194-195). The effect aimed is to encompass every element of the dramatic performance (including the audience) into a sort of ritual and spiritual experience, an outcome achieved in Kennedy's masterpiece. After Sarah's death, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* can be easily read as the "utterance of a scream" coming from a tortured psyche (Barrios, "Seeking" 611).

Apart from the evident connections with Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Grotowski's Poor Theatre, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* also resembles what Peter Brook calls Holy Theatre, a type drama that "not only presents the invisible but also offers conditions that make its perception possible" (67). In such line the fact that violence is directed towards the self is a peculiar choice that somehow resumes Kennedy's method: To become the catalyst in which a social matter is studied, making *visible* her inwards struggle. Consequently, through drama, Kennedy establishes a conversation with herself, a method previously utilized by the Mexican

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<sup>7</sup> Augé contends that a non-place is "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (77-78).

<sup>8</sup> Please bear in mind that whereas Stanislavski encouraged the actor to put layers onto himself, Grotowski endorses the kind of theatre that gets rid of all those layers so as to expose authentic emotion.

painter Frida Khalo, who also transformed art into the means to achieve self-introspection as Olga Barrios thoroughly explores (*Black Theatre* 122).

Kennedy exposes the decisive influence of first Picasso's work and later the African masks per se in her journey towards "exaggerate[ing] the physical appearances of [her] characters" (*People Who Led* 121). For the playwright, Africa will be a constant in her harrowing drama, encouraging her to "break from realistic-looking" structures and modes (121). Her resistance to "the imposition of white literary structures" might be understood as a statement of self-affirmation *versus* white hegemonic patterns (Favorini 9). Thus, in the play the protagonist is entrapped into a reduced, delimited and separated room, haunted by a permanent "KNOCKING" that gets louder as time passes by (Kennedy, *Funnyhouse* 3). Such sound effect responds to Artaud's encouragement of "making a kind of alphabet out of . . . signs," opposite to traditional renderings (90). In the end, Sarah's egos serve Kennedy to explore her identity physically. Just like Sarah, Kennedy is locked up into the claustrophobic marginalization and subjugation to the white hegemony of her mind.

## 2.2 Dislocation and Expansion of Kennedy's Initial *Funnyhouse* as Depicted in *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*

In *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* Kennedy's perception of black space gets magnified, an apparatus that widens the play's thematic scope in search of the stolen power of the oppressed. Yet, once again, ambiguity leads the spectator to wonder if such space is actually available. Located in the threshold of Genep's liminality, the play revolves around blackness' duality, questioning the existence of an authentic black identity shelter in real life.

Adrienne Kennedy seeks to denounce the mistreatment that the black community undergoes in *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*. To do so, she favors the inclusion of her initial non-place (available in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*) into the real world. Ergo, racial assault and violence are the main themes revolving around the play. Henri Lefebvre contends in his book

*The Production of Space* that space is a politicized tool in the hands of those in power to impose and maintain the hierarchy they have created and of which they represent the top. Such a conception of space leads one to consider power imbalance in Kennedy's play as a direct result of an unfair system. Consequently, Kennedy must escape into a half-oneiric reality in which she can explore and debunk the complexities of race.

While in previous plays Kennedy turns to herself in order to analyze the matter of race, in *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* she expands not only her setting (which becomes "Antioch College," "Ohio Theatre," a "[h]otel [in] Washington" and a "courtroom" in Virginia) (5, 21, 41, 44), but also, as Brantley observes, her approach towards social issues, making her "fluid, free-associating style" more visible. By portraying her familiar suffering after the excruciating aggression committed by a policeman towards her son Adam, Kennedy is offering to her audience the opportunity to get into her personal psyche, while allowing for an external gaze to judge the unbalanced panorama. In a way, Kennedy's depiction of the trial process intertwined with the plot of *Hamlet* raises doubts on the veracity of the theatrical performance: Is the action real or is it one of the protagonists' dreams?

In Kennedy's play, black characters are designed in an abject state of being and because of the liminal place in which the black abject is located, African Americans are depicted as the inferior *Other* in the vertical system of power. "The letters have infuriated them. And they are going to teach us a lesson" claims Suzanne in the play, clearly differentiating between *us* (the abject Other) and *them* (the superior One) (*Deprivation* 39). Thus, the abject, or alter ego, is defined by the space he inhabits, which is "divisible, foldable and catastrophic" (Kristeva 8). In the play the black characters' abjection is disclosed both physically and emotionally; being excluded and deprived of their own identity, these characters tend to evoke an oneiric escape towards a more appealing reality.

Such feeling of detachment and exclusion leads the characters to behave in a (liminal) in-between reality and dream state, where the plot gets intertwined with the one of *Hamlet*. “Ophelia, betrayal, disillusionment” is the opening line of *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, aiming to establish a correlation with Shakespeare’s play (5). The fact that the very first word uttered is the name of a female character with a tragic ending such as Ophelia points out to the violence to be found in the play and to its connection with *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. “As one incapable of her own distress/ Or like a creature native and indued/ Unto that element” says Gertrude in *Hamlet* to introduce Ophelia’s death as outcome of her lack of sanity (Shakespeare 4.7). Such commentary, despite its literary beauty, establishes a correspondence between the inferiority of African Americans (that entraps them in a liminal, dream-like non-place) and Ophelia’s own site (apparently located among the insane, the abject too).

The continuity of violent and surrealist motifs merged with lyricism, as depicted in Suzanne’s sentence “I can’t stop thinking of the Ghost of Hamlet, his large head, slimy dried blood oozing from his skin,” becomes a driving force in this play (*Deprivation 2*). However, given that, as Brantley affirms, “Shakespeare’s play becomes an emblem of a world that is truly out of joint,” the relevance of their connection must be taken into account. Because it is *Hamlet*, one must be led to consider the importance of doubt, guilt, uncertainty and tragedy itself when dealing with *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* to comprehend the texts’ correspondences. Being in a liminal stage (similar to Ophelia’s madness), Kennedy’s characters are prone to be (mis)judged by the audience. Such witty theatrical device serves as a mirror for the spectators, testing their own biases when dealing with racial dilemmas.

Thus, the interrelation between both plays suggests instants of dramatic irony that transform the oneiric shelter into a living nightmare because, as Brantley postulates, “[u]ltimately, fantasy and reality meld into a prison of the mind.” *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* unravels, as easily anticipated by its title, moments of crisis and a profound sense of

desperation, which stems out of the characters' uncertainty. Such emotion is closely related to Hamlet's existential questioning of life's sense as portrayed in his "to be or not to be" soliloquy (Shakespeare 3.1). It is because of the autobiographical element that the play's structural basis can be considered an "exercise of scenic imagination" (Favorini 3). According to Attilio Favorini, at the end of the twentieth century, memory was considered "the nexus for the visceral, the cerebral, and the social," which explains Kennedy's conjunction of violence, remembrance and social critique (8). Hence, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* illustrates the memories of anguish and hopelessness of a mother in the form of a sleep deprivation chamber, where, as Favorini argues, "the spotlight of consciousness flickers uncertainty," enabling the traumatic sequence to enter an eternal loop of repetition and revival (217).

Entrapped in the retrospective of Teddy's beating, the characters win the trial under the gloomy note provided by "the sounds of his screams" in the taped film with which the play ends (*Deprivation* 72). Because, as Sarah anticipated in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, "[s]treets are rooms, cities are rooms, eternal rooms," and even in trying to create a place for themselves in cities, African Americans always find themselves enclosed in cage-rooms (7).

### 2.3 Liminal Duality as a Device to Question Identity in Kennedy's Plays

Despite having different formal approaches towards ambiguity and duality, both *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* make use of Kennedy's new aesthetic in order to define the black non-place (and, consequently, non-identity) while denouncing self-inflicted violence and racist brutality.

The relationships between blacks and whites are twofold, both in the mind and in the body of the oppressed, which emphasizes the importance of power and immobility in her plays. Such configuration results in a dichotomous rendering of both races as alter egos, which sees itself materialized through space, leading the protagonists to marginalization and liminality. As there is no space available for them, which is essential for the study of content,



Kennedy's examination of her characters' liminal idiosyncrasies when impersonating the hyphen could be seen, in words of Barrios, as a journey, moving out of extreme anguish towards a sort of spiritual rebirth of the author (Barrios, "Seeking" 611). Thus, in the plays, space and identity are inexistent and the protagonists are left in the limbo of *statuslessness* in which there is no sense of belonging, no home or shelter to protect themselves either from their colonized minds (*Funnyhouse of a Negro*) or from the superior and violent other (*Sleep Deprivation Chamber*).

Captured in a restrictive *heterotopia*,<sup>9</sup> Sarah exhorts her own duality. "[M]y father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest. I am in between," says she in an attempt to understand her idiosyncrasies (Kennedy, *Funnyhouse* 11). Such statement clearly recalls Frantz Fanon's words "[t]he white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness," underlining Sarah's in-between state (11). Having wondered about a place to belong to, Sarah concludes:

The rooms are my rooms; a Hapsburg chamber, a chamber in a Victorian castle, the hotel where I killed my father, the jungle. These are the places myself exist in. I know no places. That is, I cannot believe in places. To believe in places is to know hope and to know the emotion of hope is to know beauty. It links us across a horizon and connects us to the world. I find there are no places only my funnyhouse. (Kennedy, *Funnyhouse* 7)

Such a fundamental statement regarding her liminal state as one of Marc Augé's *non-places* signals the characters' impossibility to find shelter, also mirrored in Teddy's trial.

The characters' suffering comes from their inability to elude their liminal state, reason why, in the physical form of the Duchess, Sarah begs for shelter: "Hide me so the jungle will not find me" (10). The rejection of African roots is the direct outcome of the colonization of

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<sup>9</sup> This term, introduced by Michel Foucault in his well-known essay "Of Other Spaces" refers to the "places which are absolutely *other* with respect to all the arrangements that they reflect and of which they speak" (332).

her mind, because in a world where black means negative, Sarah is inevitably repelled from her origins. Such notion is explored more in depth by Frantz Fanon, who refers to “the epidermalization of [] inferiority” as the destiny of the black community (13).

In Kennedy’s theatre, the audience’s reaction is expected to work as in Brook’s Holy Theatre, “like the plague, by intoxication, by infection, by analogy, by magic” (58). Hence, the audience is supposed to get shocked, identify human agony and react to it. An idea close to Artaud’s consideration of the need to find “an *anarchic destruction* generating a prodigious fight of forms” in art for it to be meaningful (92. My emphasis). Thence, as Barrios suggests, the death of Sarah will represent the rebirth of the author, allowing violence not only to awaken an emotional response in the spectators, but also to become the author’s aid-device to heal, recover and find a true self (127).

Through the use of African strategies such as masking or repetition as a symbol for neo-colonial resistance, Adrienne Kennedy aims to find a truthful and valid definition for the black self, who is brutally tortured and excluded into non-places by the white *other*. Yet, despite her dual depiction of black identity as representative of the community’s inherent dilemma, Kennedy’s drama presents her inability to step out of the liminal cage in which she is trapped, becoming the epitome of Genep’s transitory stage in a rite of passage.

### 3. THE STAGE AS A THIRD SPACE FOR REVISITING HISTORICAL IDENTITY IN PARKS’ DRAMA

Suzan-Lori Parks is a contemporary playwright highly interested in the manner in which the past imposed by history shapes identity. Thence, she *produces* new history through theatre to fill the gaps of the actual African American past while correcting normative inconsistencies (Parks, “Interview” 317). In doing so, Parks eludes imposition of absolute truths in order to set up a conversation with her audience. The playwright aims to encourage

her spectators to select their own roadmaps and debunk their personal understanding of her plays, giving way to an open drama, which promotes the rise of different voices telling various stories (“Possession” 4). Such outcome is only reached because of her public configuration of theatre as one of Homi K. Bhabha’s third spaces, which can be appreciated in *The America Play* (1995) and in her Pulitzer-winning play *Topdog/Underdog* (1999), the works that I will examine in this section.

### 3.1 The Relevance of History in the Mapping of Space and the Construction of Identity

In her drama, Suzan-Lori Parks configures identity and space by means of history. Yet, in view of the imposed, normative definition of history that denies black presence, Parks decides to explore that enforced past as a complex tautology from which she needs to break free. To do so, she serves herself of mimicry and performativity in order to reverse standardized codes. Thus, in this section I will examine the articulation of memory as a site for historical resistance when configuring identity and space in *The America Play*.

Traditionally, history has been conceived as a closed category made of fixed codes, which only mentions the canonical side of the story. Indeed, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre argues that history seems to be a “reflection on the past,” *produced* and composed by “fragment[s] and segment[s] of temporality” subjectively selected by the elite in control of power (80, 68, 110). As a result, minority groups have been denied a proper historical identity, a configuration detached from Parks’ postmodern standards that leads her to explore the past as a forceful outburst seeking rebirth into the present.

In this line, Parks’ representation of history is that of a living entity that might be re-enacted (“Interview” 317). Reason why, aiming to solve “the riddle of the universe” (the mystery of time and space), her drama eludes fixity in search of an authentic transcendental connection with the African American roots (Parks, “Interview” 314). It is in fact through the process of past and present fusing together that Parks’ drama defies the retelling of pseudo-

normative black counter-narratives (Saal 58). The tenses get blurred to signal the characters' confusion provoked by their absent past, applying entropy to show their traumatic disorientation.

To reconstruct history, Ilka Saal contends that Parks utilizes mimicry as the means to counteract direct imitation (mimesis) of the normative codes of history (62). Homi K. Bhabha's defines mimicry as "a double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority," a dangerous process that threatens the colonizer's perception in that, through imitation, "the observer becomes the observed" (*Location* 88-89). Consequently, Parks' repetitive structures serve as a corrective-device, creating a rhythmical overlapping of revisions that goes in crescendo until it climaxes *ex abrupto* (in both plays) with a Lincoln's impersonator's death.

In *The America Play*, the process of mimicry is studied in terms of identity (and symbolically mirrored in space). Located in a "hole [that] is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History" (a mimetic representation of history in spatial terms), Parks' protagonist, The Foundling Father, relentlessly impersonates president Lincoln's assassination (7). Such re-enactment of traditional history becomes a mimetic strategy utilized to underline the passivity of normative historical codes and myths, a configuration that gains relevance on assessing Parks' metatheatrical elements, because, in *The America Play*, the characters' professional lives deploy identity as performative by means of mimicry.

According to Judith Butler performativity aims to disrupt standardized constructions using reversal in an almost identical manner to that of Bhabha when dealing with mimicry (136-137). A notion easily perceivable in *The America Play*, in which, by impersonating the killing of Lincoln, The Foundling Father embodies physically the open wound of African Americans, epitome of the bullet's hole in Lincoln's head (Dawkins 85). What is more, the very action of "digging" into the "whole Hole" of History underlines the absence of a black

past to stick to, reassessing that metaphorical wound and explaining the characters' need to exhume preceding events (*America Play* 17, 30). Thus, The Foundling Father's unfruitful digging proves his inability to overcome white historical myths, therefore becoming a victim of dramatic irony; for, as The Foundling Father<sup>10</sup> himself asserts, "[t]he Hole and its Historicity and the part he played in it all gave a shape to the life and posterity of the Lesser Known that he could never shake" (10). In other words, despite digging into history, The Foundling Father is unable to get through the biases of his normative, white (alter) ego, who disallows his black heritage, reducing him to a mere embodiment of a mythical white figure.

On the other hand, his wife Lucy and their son Brazil confront reality moving towards an honest expression of collective grief, which rewrites The Foundling Father's tragic ending. Despite initially following Parks' performative mimicry, both characters manage to outgrow the playwright's game reaching anagnorisis. As a professional "mourn[er]," Brazil spontaneously bursts into tears with the acceptance of his father's death, an epiphanic instant revealing performativity to the audience through the direct exposition of Brazil's shattered self (*America Play* 26, Dawkins 87). It is thereby in the recovery of traumatic memories, which have been obliterated by a white conception of history, that the inherited historical trauma is unveiled, causing grief and pain. Such retrieval of past stories is epitomized in the character of Lucy, who, communicating with "Thuh Whispers," contrives to tie the race together (*America Play* 28). So, by *digging* in her unconscious collective memory to, in words of Parks, "hear the bones sing," Lucy seizes her patrimony, giving voice to her ancestors rather than believing in the biased myth of Western history<sup>11</sup> (Dawkins 86, "Possession" 4).

As a result *The America Play* exposes Parks' thesis on history under an optimistic light, where The Foundling Father's burial stands for the healing of the race, the closing of

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<sup>10</sup> In the first act The Foundling Father plays the role of Abraham Lincoln serving, at first, as a sort of omniscient narrator to his own story, to which he refers as The Lesser Known's one.

<sup>11</sup> Please see Appendix 2, figure two for a further understanding of the configuration of black history in *The America Play*.

the wound and the recovery of every black story that had been kept silenced in the collective unconscious. According to Laura Dawkins, the Foundling Father represents the black ancestors (both entrapped into hegemonic history), reason why his burial should be read as a natural process of mourning in which trauma is overcome thanks to the community's most valuable legacy, their kinship bonds (88-90). Such conception of communal healing works as a centripetal force for the black community, leading the characters to find themselves while moving towards a postliminal understanding of identity, which perfectly fits into Turner's notion of *communitas*.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, however, the protagonists' absence of racial collective memory revisits the black impersonator's death, in which the history/memory dichotomy is recovered to explore the relevance of historical kinship relations in the construction of African American identity (Dawkins 90). In doing so, Parks questions the veracity of identity per se implicating herself in the matter of what is real, a question that, when dealing with African American drama, finds its answer in the collective.

### 3.2 The Configuration of Identity as a Performative Collective in Parks' Drama

Having overcome the dichotomy of normative history versus collective memory, Suzan-Lori Parks decides to revisit the Lincoln impersonator's matter so as to debunk the complexities of racial memory. Being kinship the solution upon which her dilemma delved in *The America Play*, Parks introduces in *Topdog/Underdog* a new familiar setting in which the ancestral kinship ties seem to be lost. The protagonists' lack of roots problematizes the issue of identity to the extent of incurring a very postmodern dilemma: Is identity real or forged?

In *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks' previous portrayal of communal healing shifts into the horrid scenario of Western capitalism and fratricide (Dawkins 90). The play examines the conflictive relationship of Lincoln and Booth, two brothers, whose names (result of a paternal "joke") seal their destiny accomplishing dramatic irony (*Topdog/Underdog* 24). Bereft of

parents to transmit them a racial heritage of communal values, Lincoln and Booth deploy the dangerous outcomes of assimilating the American hierarchical system that prioritizes individuality over the collective (Dawkins 91). Thus, abandoned into a “violent and exploitative street culture,” the characters are forced to perform in order to survive (92). It is precisely their different approaches towards performance what causes the tragic end. Whereas Lincoln earns his living portraying the deeds of the assassinated president with whom he shares his name, Booth gets immersed into a fantasy, which he confuses with reality.

Parks’ reproduction of the Lincoln impersonator motif stands for a clear instance of “Rep&Rev,” a formal procedure consisting of “repetition with *revision* . . . [where] characters refigure their words and . . . experience their situation anew” (“Elements of Style” 9). This atypical strategy is fundamental in Parks repertoire for recalling past and history into the present. Because of Rep&Rev Parks is able to question memory, rendering individuality unstable. For Lincoln the clothes of his presidential costume do not say who he is, advocating for a well delineated self-concept despite the white painting in his face; yet, for Booth “the symbol creates” what is real; in other words, he believes that “changing signifiers will change reality,” an instance of which is found in his claim “[a]nybody not calling me 3-Card gets a bullet” attempting to violently control how people call him (Dietrick 50, *Topdog/Underdog* 19). Therefore, Booth is absorbed into the illusory world of 3-Card, a Jean Baudrillard’s simulacrum<sup>12</sup> that leads him to commit fratricide.

The entire identity dilemma lies therefore on the characters’ absence of collective memory, which gets massively worsened by the intrusion of capitalism. The brothers’ reception of their inheritance right before being abandoned deploys their substitution of familiar bonds by money. A fact that, connected to Booth’s taste for the symbolic, explains his determination to hide his unopened “inheritance” from Lincoln (Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard considers that reality has been relentlessly substituted by simulacra, which are copies of the original, which might not be based on it because of the “liquidation of all referentials” (4).

105). Because of his fear regarding the “arbitrary and deceptive relationship between signs and the real,” or, in other words, the understanding of Lincoln as Baudrillard’s original, Booth discards him because he disturbs the meaning of his simulacrum (Dietrick 51).

In the end, it seems that the minute the ancestral kinship connection is lost, the traumatic experience gets buried under layers of appearances and ends up bursting, still unexplored, into a powerful wage of violence, a clear reminder of Sarah’s suicide in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Booth’s final reaction epitomizes his rage against everything that has stolen his *racial inheritance* as symbolized by the money his mother gave him. Indeed, Booth’s connection of his elder brother to capitalism and whiteness provides a postcolonial reading that goes beyond the characters themselves to refer to white colonial history. As Booth states “[y]ou stole my *inheritance*, man. That aint right . . . You had yr own. And you blew it,” a formal device that encourages the audience to read between the lines in order to grasp actual meaning (110).

### 3.2.1 From Resistance to Acceptance: The Inclusion of White Matters to Widen the Theatrical Spectrum

In her plays, Suzan-Lori Parks pursues an “open” articulation of performance, in which “theatre is confronted with [its] possibilities beyond drama” (Lehmann 6, 26). Thus, in *Topdog/Underdog*, she includes the essential formal elements of Western Realism to build a fourth wall that she progressively deconstructs through mimicry. In doing so, she subverts the realist conception of theatre in search of a more inclusive dramatic mode found in “the limbs or branches of a dramatic organism . . . [which] form the space of a memory that is ‘bursting open’ in a double sense,” a theatre “distance[d]” from “superfluous” illusion also known as postdramatic (Lehmann 27, Brecht, “On Chinese Acting” 131).

Following Hans-Thies Lehmann’s argument on the contemporary use of form as the theatrical subject matter, Parks introduces metatheatricality in her plays in order to unmask



the artifice of performance. Hence, whereas *The Foundling Father* exclusively re-enacts Lincoln's assassination as a means to reflect on his head wound (metaphorically located in the race's unconscious), which historical myths maintain wide open, in her Pulitzer-winning play, the metatheatrical elements revolve around the protagonists' fraternal dynamics.

In *Topdog/Underdog* metatheatricality disposes dramatic irony rendering the characters' anticipated fates true, a postmodern device that captures Parks' gripping essence in underlining performativity to enlarge the scope of her plays (Dietrick 60-61). For instance, Lincoln's unwrapping of Booth's inheritance, which is the trigger of his final shooting, is preceded by previous metaperformances of his assassination. Hence, it is in the fusion of content and form that one finds Parks serving herself of traditional, realist features with which she lulls her audience into believing in their own passivity, while engaging in "the production of situations for the *self-interrogation, self-exploration, self-awareness* of all participants" (Lehmann 105). Resultantly, Parks theatre utilizes innovative theatrical elements to covertly communicate with the audience (namely *Rest and Spell*<sup>13</sup>) because "[i]t is no longer the stage, but the theatre as a whole which functions as the 'speaking space'" (31).

Parks defines good theatre as the one dealing with "theatre itself", reason why she utilizes symbols to mirror the dialectics of her drama ("Interview" 313). In *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks uses mimicry to offer a layered symbolism that functions as a mirror, formulating a *mise-en-abyme*. Not only does she explore costumes, performance or embodiment of characters on stage, but also, through wordplay, she establishes a connection between 3-card monte and the play being staged. In the play, Lincoln tells Booth (and the audience) "you was in such a hurry to learn thuh last move that you didnt bother learning thuh first one," which is "there aint no winning;" as Lincoln argues, "it may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you" (106). Therefore, in

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<sup>13</sup> Please see Appendix 2, figure one for a better understanding of Parks usage of these elements.

questioning the theatrical basis of naturalist drama, Parks undergoes a deconstruction of such trend to show its illusory trap. Whereas *The America Play* presents an experimental scenario in which Western modes and white structures are clearly avoided, *Topdog/Underdog* expresses Parks desire to include and reverse them through direct exposure of their artifact.

### 3.3 The Depiction of a Third Space to Encourage a Re-reading of Historical Identity

Parks' formal reversal of previous theatrical (and illusory) modes results in her plays' manifestation of unresolved controversies. With this structure, Parks avoids indoctrinating her audience and, instead, provides an open third space in which they can talk about what they perceive freely. In doing so, Parks is assessing a social "transition" from liminality to postliminal identities, which is physically mirrored in space through formal mimicry, moving towards a new type of collective or *public* theatre (Bhabha, *Location* 220).

As a playwright, Suzan-Lori Parks constantly returns to her set of motifs, namely "memory and family and history and the past," and explores form as a fundamental element for the assimilation of the dramatic action while revisiting content ("Interview" 310). Hence, her approach varies depending on the play; for instance, whereas *The America Play* explores identity in terms of a mental, collective space that gets discovered allowing for an authentic rendering of historical identity, in *Topdog/Underdog* her motifs are accentuated by performance to open up space into a site for questioning the biases of our world.

Thus, one might argue that Parks moves from establishing the space of collective African American memory (*communitas*), to actually depicting a shared cultural place for everyone to go and discuss these matters subjectively.<sup>14</sup> Such locus is what Homi K. Bhabha knows as the third space, a site where "the pact . . . between the I and the You" takes place, ensuring that "meaning is never mimetic and transparent" (*Location* 36). In such hybrid

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<sup>14</sup> Please see Appendix 3 to comprehend Parks' articulation of both self-reflexivity and the inclusion of the audience with clarity.

space, “the binary division[s]” are rejected so as to subvert “the attempt to dominate in the name of cultural supremacy” (Bhabha, *Location* 35, 34). Thus, this cultural third space, “where the negotiations of incommensurable differences” occur, provides a set of tools to identify “object[s] of otherness” and to reclaim their cultural asset (Bhabha, *Location* 218, “Third Space” 211).

Parks affirms that “in encouraging [her]self to listen to the stories beyond [her] default [ones] . . . [her drama] assumes a new structure” (“Equation” 21). Because, as the storyteller Chimamanda Adichie argues, “stories matter, many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize.” And this is precisely the value that resides under the third space configuration, that of empowerment, re-reading and formation of a true self-concept, or as Parks beautifully asserts, to listen to

The bones [that] tell us what was, is [and] will be; and because their song is a play . . . [to produce] theatre like an incubator to create “new” historical events . . . [to] re-member and stage historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. (“Possession” 4-5)

In a postliminal ambience of acceptance and multicultural exploration, Bhabha’s third space could be found anywhere. Yet, as our social space has been reduced, an imminent need to produce new social spaces has risen. Therefore, in distancing from the illusory box realist conception of drama, postdramatic theatre moves towards a public configuration of space, enabling a cultural re-appropriation of the stage as a place for ritual and communication (which goes back to the origins of theatre). It is because of Parks’ opening of drama that theatre becomes a third space where other positions are bound to emerge, displacing normative history towards new structures of identity (Bhabha, *Location* 211). Consequently, one must argue that Parks manages to encompass form and content in order to grasp

postliminality by means of postdramatic theatre while offering her revision of the African American past.

Crossing through the threshold that “unite[s] oneself with a new world,” Suzan-Lori Parks offers a revision of history in terms of correction and re-enactment (Gennep 20). She rejects historical conventions (which she denaturalizes through mimicry) in favor of authentic, shared memory to configure identity as a fluid and dynamic category that undergoes constant metamorphoses, but is deeply rooted in the communal unconscious. Thus, she encourages the transformation of theatre into a third space where the colonial burden can be discussed and left behind, reaching postliminality.

## CONCLUSION

The dramatic transition from Adrienne Kennedy’s experimental drama à la Artaud to Suzan-Lori Parks’ postdramatic theatre accomplishes the tripartite progression delineated by Arnold van Gennep for his rites of passage. In articulating an authentic rendering of African American identity, the playwrights show a tendency to elude colonial discourse, translating racist patterns and their threatening outcomes into their own diction. Therefore, despite Kennedy’s desire to escape liminal abjection, her protagonists become victims of the sort of racial violence brutally committed either against one’s multi-layered self, or against a mere product of otherness. Thus, her haunting expression of identity is restricted both physically and mentally to a shattered persona, made of bits and pieces that actually cannot fit together.

However, it is thanks to Kennedy’s honest redefinition of blackness that later playwrights, such as Suzan-Lori Parks, manage to conform the black experience as an overflow comprised by a true historical identity grasped through collective memory and kinship (Turner’s *communitas*). In doing so, the application of innovative formal procedures,

such as extreme performativity, symbolic mise-en-abyme, wordplay or mimicry, allows for Parks' compelling drama to escape the containment of liminality seeking the positive reconfiguration of identity into a postliminal third space of sharing. Hence, theatre achieves the status of a public landmark for postcolonial discourse to be rendered without let or hindrance.

In the end, both Kennedy and Parks manage to perfectly design a cultural transition from a wrecked identity entrapped in between two worlds without belonging to none of them, to the performative mimicry deployed in Parks' historical explorations as a sign of the reproduction of social, hybrid spaces where identity can be explored as the post-race malleable turmoil of reflections and feelings that it truly stands for.

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## APPENDIX 1: Plot Summaries of Selected Plays

**Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro***

“For if I did not despise myself then my hair would not have fallen and if my hair had not fallen then I would not have bludgeoned my father’s face with the ebony mask” (13)

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* is a one-act play that tells the story of Sarah, an African American girl who is deeply troubled by her dual identity. Such dilemma is depicted in the play by the multiple characters that resemble Sarah’s multi-layered identity. The play opens in front of a closed curtain with the image of a woman who walks mumbling, in a trance, with a bald head in her hand, a clear example of Surrealism that, besides, sets the mood for the entire play. Once the setting is revealed, the audience is left to face Sarah’s room, a Queen’s chamber that epitomizes her desire to be white. This room, however, will change over time, giving way to multiple enclosed scenarios in which Sarah’s duality is examined through one of her alter egos. Apart from the room, there is another element permanent in the play, a knocking. The effect this sound produces brings to the spectator’s mind the calling of her blackness, haunting her despite her constant denial of it. As the play advances we learn that Sarah is in fact the daughter of the woman with the bald head in her hand and a man who committed suicide when Patrice Lumumba<sup>15</sup> was killed. Apparently, Sarah has not left her room since her father died, and she will not manage to leave it in that, at the end of the play, Sarah kills herself there. The play finishes with the apathetic remarks of Raymond and Landlady, the only white characters in the play, who harshly insult Sarah after her death implying that she committed suicide because her father, who had not died, abandoned her for a white family.

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<sup>15</sup> Patrice Lumumba, who led the movement of independence of the country against the Belgian, colonial oppression, was the first Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo. His opposition to imperialism led towards his execution in 1961, an event that turned him into a key historical figure due to the involvement of foreign countries (Belgium, US. and UK.) in his assassination.

### Adrienne Kennedy's *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*

“The Bay Bridge is fallen. We live near the epicenter” (64)

*Sleep Deprivation Chamber* is a play divided into three scenes that tells an autobiographical story of Adrienne Kennedy's life: The brutal beating of his son Adam (Teddy in the play) by a police officer. The play is co-written by Kennedy and her son offering a retelling of the real event merged with Surrealism and oneiric passages known as “Dream Scenes.” The play opens with Suzanne, a theatre professor, rehearsing *Hamlet* with her student cast in Antioch College. That day her son Teddy is joining the group to direct them. While he does so, Suzanne falls asleep and enters the oneiric realm of the play in which her son has been accused of murdering a French King and is sent to prison, where he gets dismembered. These dream-like scenes (together with what appears to be Teddy's memories) will be continuously intertwined with the play's plot as well as with the letters that Suzanne writes to various personalities trying to gain their favor so that they support the family in the real trial. The storyline can be summarized in the following schema:

Scene I: One night Teddy is unfairly beaten by Officer Holzer. After that he gets questioned by an unknown man and by different lawyers. Teddy is encouraged to plead guilty being assured that he most likely will go to jail. The audience learns of a video recording of Teddy's beating and Suzanne continues writing letters.

Scene II: The action moves to Ohio Theatre, where they are rehearsing *The Ohio State Murders*. Suzanne continues writing and Teddy keeps being questioned. The differences between Blacks and Whites are explored by the cast.

Scene III: In the courtroom, the trial progresses. Teddy is repeatedly questioned. In the end, he wins, but with the tragic tone of remembering a previous assault under the sound of his screams in the video recording.

### Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*

“At thuh Great Hole where we honeymooned . . . you could see thuh whole world without goin too far. You could look intuh that Hole and see your entire life pass before you. Not your own life but someones life from history, you know, somebody who killed somebody important, uh face on uh postal stamp, you know, someone from History. *Like* you, but *not* you. You know: *Known. (Rest)*” (41)

*The America Play* is one of Parks' most experimental works, divided into two acts. In the first one (Lincoln Act), the protagonist, The Foundling Father, an African American grave digger with a similar appearance to Abraham Lincon, re-enacts the president's assassination in a sort of amusement park where his shooters embody the figure of John Wilkes Booth and kill him shouting different cliché sentences. In the second act (Hall of Wonders), The Foundling Father's or Lesser Known's family (his wife Lucy and their son Brazil) get the floor to tell the story of this character, a man so obsessed with his similarities to Lincoln that spent his whole life trying to imitate him. This second act is divided into seven sections (Big Bang, Echo, Archeology, Echo, Spadework, Echo and The Great Beyond) in which Parks explores different notions (such as the Whispers, the Digging or the performed mourning) essential to comprehend both The Foundling Father and the African American community itself. This second act therefore offers some insight into the characters' psyche, allowing the audience to unmask the symbolic meaning of the play's elements found in The Great Hole of History.

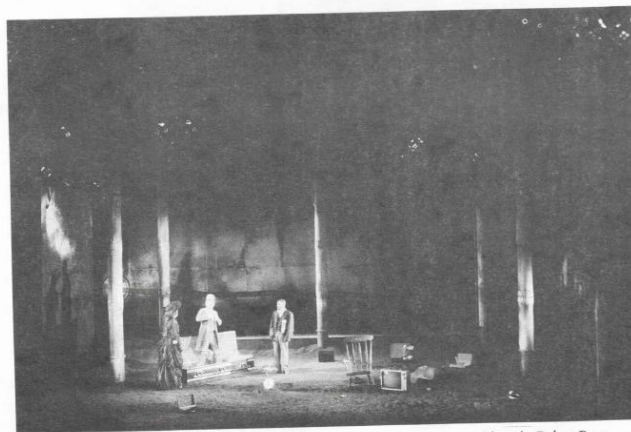


Photo by Robert Perry  
A scene from the New York Shakespeare production of "The America Play." Set design by Riccardo Hernández.

**Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog***

“People are funny about they Lincoln shit. Its historical. People like they historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming.” (52)

*Topdog/Underdog* is Suzan-Lori Parks' Pulitzer-winning play, which, in six scenes, explores the games of power between the white hegemony and the black community (as anticipated by the title) in a highly dysfunctional African American family. Abandoned by their parents at a young age, both Lincoln and Booth (the protagonist brothers) are forced to make a living out of themselves. As a result, Lincoln (known as Link back then) started hustling 3-card monte in order to support their family financially. Yet, because of a hustle that goes wrong ending with one of his partner's life, Lincoln decides to find an honest job and quit hustling. After that, everything turns sour for Lincoln and he ends up living in his brother's apartment (a room with one bed and no running water) and impersonating Abraham Lincoln at his final moments in an arcade. This is the point when the play starts, showing us how Booth, trying to beat his brother's record playing the cards, practices his hustler's speech (a speech that is indirectly addressed to the audience). Once the two brothers are together on stage the play revolves around their lifestyle, Booth's relationship with Grace and how, despite being Lincoln the only one working, they manage to get expensive items thanks to Booth's ability stealing. The play advances showing the brothers' fraternal dynamics until Lincoln gets fired, begins hustling again, recovers part of his money and gets challenged by Booth in their living room. Lincoln plays Booth and manages to win his inheritance (which their mother gave him wrapped in a stocking and Booth had never dared to open). In the end, urged by an uncontrollable rage, Booth shoots his brother, who dies while Booth repents.

## APPENDIX 2: Suzan-Lori Parks, "From Elements of Style"

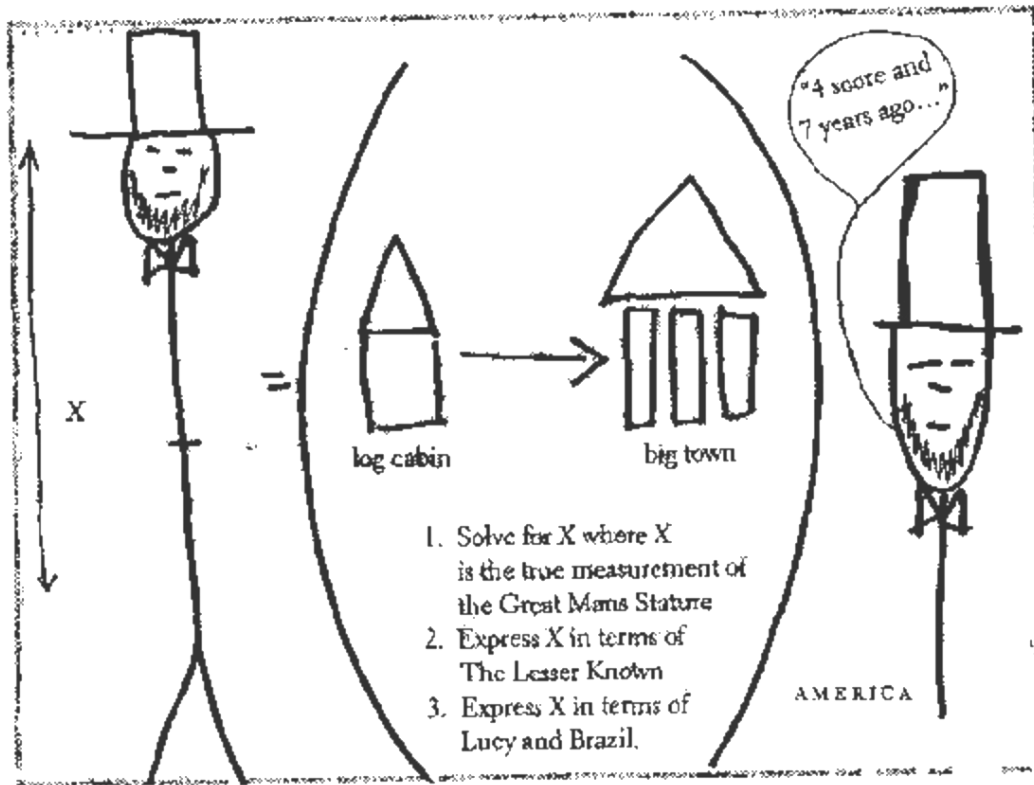
**Figure One: Author's Note of *The America Play*****AUTHOR'S NOTE**

**A Spell** — an elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of character's names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look.

LUCY.		LINCOLN
BRAZIL.		BOOTH.
THE FOUNDLING FATHER.	<i>and</i>	LINCOLN.
LUCY.		BOOTH.
BRAZIL.		LINCOLN.
THE FOUNDLING FATHER.		BOOTH.
	<i>and</i>	
THE FOUNDLING FATHER.		
THE FOUNDLING FATHER.		
THE FOUNDLING FATHER.		

These are places where the characters experience their pure true simple state. While no "action" or "stage business" is necessary, the director should fill this moment as they best see fit.

The feeling: look at a daguerreotype; or: the planets are aligning and as they move we hear the music of their spheres. A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It's often a place for an emotional transition.

Figure Two: Math and Equation of *The America Play**bad math*

$x + y = \text{meaning}$ . The ability to make simple substitutions is equated with *clarity*. We are taught that plays are merely staged essays and we begin to believe that characters in plays are symbols for some obscured “meaning” rather than simply the thing itself. As Beckett sez: “No symbols where none intended.” Don’t ask playwrights what their plays mean; rather, tell them what you think and have an exchange of ideas.

APPENDIX 3: Suzan-Lori Parks, Foreword to *Topdog/Underdog*

In January 1999 I was thinking about a play I'd written seven years earlier called *The America Play*. In that play's first act we watch a black man who has fashioned a career for himself: he sits in an arcade impersonating Abraham Lincoln and letting people come and play at shooting him dead—like John Wilkes Booth shot our sixteenth president in 1865 during a performance at Ford's Theatre. So I was thinking about my old play when another black Lincoln impersonator, unrelated to the first guy, came to mind: a new character for a new play. This time I would just focus on his home life. This new Lincoln impersonator's real name would be Lincoln. He would be a former 3-card monte hustler. He would live with his brother, a man named Booth.

My interest in 3-card monte began one day when my husband Paul and I were walking along Canal Street and saw some guys doing the shell game. I was fascinated because, while I'd seen the scam before, this time I had someone whispering a running commentary in my ear, a kind of play-by-play, explaining the ins and outs of the scam, what was really going down. Sure enough the commentator was my husband. Turns out that, back in the days when he played in the Muddy Waters Blues Band, Paul would, for fun, hustle 3-card monte between sets. So when we got home that day he sat me down and showed me how to throw the cards.

This is a play about family wounds and healing. Welcome to the family.

**Suzan-Lori Parks**  
April 2002