

8-2008

# Reconsidering African-American identity: aesthetic experiments by post-soul artists

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## **Abstract**

The present study attempts to offer an overview of the Post-Soul aesthetic and its role in re-writing African-American identity and focuses explicitly on three authors: Spike Lee, Touré, and Suzan-Lori Parks. My premise is that Post-Soul art is a direct result of the sweeping changes brought by the post-Civil Rights era in the African-American mentality, which inaugurated a new age in African-American art. Thus, the Post-Soul generation represents blackness as diverse, free to define itself in its own terms; they promote a critical take on black nationalism, and new perspectives on slavery. Most of the Post-Soul artists consider themselves “cultural mulattos,” people able to navigate equally in the white and the black worlds, who programmatically explore the boundaries of blackness, and use non-traditional black cultural influences in their art works. Determined to (re)Signify on both black and white cultural references, Post-Soul artists challenge both stereotypical images of African-American promoted by mainstream culture and, the sometimes, sentimentalized iconic figureheads of their own community.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts/Master of Science.

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RECONSIDERING AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY:  
AESTHETIC EXPERIMENTS BY POST-SOUL ARTISTS

By

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Ph.D Comparative Literature, University of Georgia, 2005

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS in ENGLISH

August, 2008

Richmond, Virginia

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to express my deep gratitude to my professors, friends, and family without whose support and affection this study could not have been completed. I would especially like to thank Dr. Louis Schwartz, the Graduate Coordinator of the MA Program for his pertinent and always prompt professional help, which played such an important role in the advancement of my career. I am also very grateful to Dr. Suzanne Jones and Dr. Ilka Saal for their inspiring courses, which made me want to write this study.

Last, but not least, I wish to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Daryl Cumber Dance, Dr. Ilka Saal, and Dr. Bertram D. Ashe, for their careful and sympathetic reading of this manuscript and for their encouraging suggestions. Special thanks to Suzanne Blyer, the Program coordinator for the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, whose help in presenting my work at conferences was invaluable.

To my husband, Florin Tudorica and my family, I owe the most.

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## Introduction

*We should endeavor to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety.* (Suzan-Lori Parks, “An Equation for Black People Onstage”)

I decided to begin my inquiry into the most recent reconfigurations of African-American identity with the above quotation from Suzan-Lori Parks, not only because Parks is one of the crucial agents of this exciting, ongoing process, but also, in order to point out the inherent ambiguity involved in what reads as a direct, political statement for her generation of creation. The sentence, which sounds like a call to arms, implicitly evokes a history of (mis)representation, in which African-Americans have been portrayed anything but in their “beautiful and powerfully infinite variety,” and generally, have perceived themselves as the official discourse pigeonholed them. To revise these (mis)representations, Parks calls for, what I claim is, a radical action: the rewriting of the old image for the whole world and also for the self-deprecating community.

Nevertheless, Parks’ call to arms is not to be taken for a direct political manifesto, as the playwright speaks as a writer not as a political activist. To those familiar to Parks’ work, it is already clear that her plays, though political in their substance make use of a panoply of complex aesthetic means to convey their message<sup>1</sup>, and, more often than not, they accomplish their political goals by obscuring meaning and by baffling the readers. Briefly put, these plays challenge their audiences to reject the idea of African-American

identity encapsulated by the old equation of essential blackness and oppression and urge them to put something else instead. Something else, but what?

The answer to this question is provided not only by Suzan-Lori Parks, but by an entire generation of artists, identified by critics and commentators as the Post-Soul contingent of African-American letters. The present study attempts to offer a general view of the Post-Soul aesthetic and its role in re-writing African-American identity and will focus explicitly on three authors: Spike Lee, Touré, and Suzan-Lori Parks.

### **A New Era in Imagining “Blackness”**

To begin unfolding the radical implications of concepts like “Post-Soul” and “post-black” sensibility for contemporary American culture, one has to note that two decades ago phrases like “performing blackness,” “trafficking blackness,” and eventually, “portable blackness,”<sup>2</sup> which now are used to describe the recent artistic products and attitudes of African-American cultural market would have seemed out of context. In the past twenty years, however, things seem to have changed. As Harry J. Elam Jr. emphatically notes in “Change Clothes and Go,” “In today’s increasingly globalized world, the possibilities and performances of blackness have proliferated, and one can delve into a variety of different expressions of blackness, postblack or not” (“Change Clothes” 387). Among the most commonly cited examples of “portable blackness” are forms of popular culture ranging from rap and hip-hop music, to particular styles of dressing and of being “cool;” to non-traditional black attitudes like those exhibited by B-Boys, Buppies, Baps, and Bohos<sup>3</sup>, and finally, to the Post-Soul mentality and aesthetic.



Due to their diversity and non-concentric character, all these new forms of “being black” in the post-Civil Rights era amount to what Elam, Mark Anthony Neal, and others describe as “performing” or “trafficking blackness,” phenomenon which relates both to a de-essentialization/enriching/reinvention of African-American identity and to a commodification of the black body. These transformations and what Neal and Elam call “postsoul aesthetic”

emerge from and within the current conditions of black cultural traffic in which wariness about the burdens of blackness often exists in tandem with a nostalgia for sounds, figures, clothing from the past; in which historical images, music, politics are interrogated, repeated and revised in ways that acknowledge the different modalities, exigencies, needs, and desires of today. (“Change Clothes” 380).

A direct result of the sweeping changes brought by the post-Pre-Civil Rights era in the African-American mentality, the Post-Soul art is, according to Mark Anthony Neal, meant to “liberate contemporary interpretations of African-American experience from sensibilities that were formalized and institutionalized during earlier social paradigms”(*Soul Babies* 3) and thus to inaugurate a new era in African-American art. Predictably, some might regard this rather radical process of reinvention with circumspection, if not mistrust, given that “with the emergence of diverse representations of blackness, the question remains as to who is the arbiter of blackness and how we define black art” (“Change Clothes” 387). The debate takes us back to the postmodern quarrel with modernity centered on the crucial question of evaluation and assessment.

At the same time, this challenge in categorizing blackness opens the door for more marketability, intercultural dialogue, and self-development. As Elam says, “if there is now more access to a portable blackness, then there is more potential for it to be used,

mined for value, discarded, exploited by others, and even bought and sold on ebay.” (“Change Clothes” 387)

However, Elam’s seemingly optimistic conclusion is overshadowed by an inherent irony and criticism as the market success, the de-ghetto-isation, and the diversification of black identity amount not only to worldwide recognition, but also to a loss of a coherent, (more or less) homogeneous identity, and, at least at first sight, to a diminishing of the trademark anti-establishment, rebellious attitude of black culture. Predictably, the debate about the merit of this transformation of black art and identity vacillates between these two poles. In Elam’s words, which confirm the arrival of black popular post-structuralism, an approach predicted by Greg Tate since 1986,

[...Today, *my insertion*] blackness does function as a commodity for good or bad, and tests of black authenticity often do rely on what adorns the body rather than what is within it. In some ways, both black commodification and black authenticity are mythical sites for black cultural traffic. (“Change Clothes” 387)

The departure from “authenticity” as the only mode of black identity construction along with the embrace of the often criticized forms of commodification, which underscore what we more generally call “black cultural traffic,” confirm not only the existence of a new African-American sensibility, specific to the 80s generation, but of different critical sensibilities able to assess these new phenomena.

The Post-Soul aesthetic is only one facet of this salutary diversification of artistic takes on the black experience and, as Trey Ellis, one of its most enthusiastic proponents notes, it represents a new perspective on the African-American identity of the black middle class, which “borrows shamelessly and reassembles across both race and class lines” (“New Black Aesthetic” 234). Most importantly, this “post-liberated” approach,

distances itself from the traditional black attitudes and themes--and reflects predominantly the perspective of the black middle class on issues of race, black nationalism, slavery. As such—it intends to offer a voice to a significant contingent of young artists who could not find their place either in the rap or the ghetto worlds.

As “cultural mulattos,” as people who “can navigate both the white and the black world,” the Post-Soul artists, feel that the only way of affirming who they really are, is to try to draw the contours of a new, black identity profile, even if this means to challenge the old rules of black authenticity and to “explode the old definitions of blackness” (“New Black Aesthetic” 237).

The result is what a considerable number of writers, artists, and scholars have called or acknowledged as the Post-Soul aesthetic. Greg Tate was only among the first to note its appearance, when in his now famous, “Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke” (1986), he observed:

[...] the 80s are witnessing the maturation of a postnationalist black arts movement, one more Afrocentric and cosmopolitan than anything that’s come before. [...] The point is that the present generation of black artists is cross-breeding aesthetic references like nobody is even talking about yet, and while they might be marginal to the black experience as it is expressed in rap, *Jet*, and on *The Cosby Show*, they’re not all mixed up over who they are and where they come from ( Tate 206).

To prove his point, Tate provides a list of cross-cultural and also “non-contradictory” sources of inspiration for the young generation of black artists, a list which could easily baffle the unprepared reader. From Malcom X and Jimi Hendrix to George Clinton and George Romero, from Kareem Abdul-Jabar and Lisette Model to Zora Neal Hurston and Akira Kurosawa, William Burroughs and Romare Bearden, Barnett Newman and Sun Ra,

Jah Rastafari and Johnny Rotten, Toni Morrison and Laura Mulvey, [...] Antonin Artaud and Amiri Baraka (Tate 206-7) -- these artists helped the 80s generation to redefine black consciousness and culture.

The result of these “cross-breeding aesthetic references” is what Trey Ellis (“The New Black Aesthetic,” 1989), Greg Tate (“Cult Nats Meet Freaky-Deke,” 1986), Nelson George (*Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and BoHos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture*, 1992), Mark Anthony Neal (*Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, 2002) and Bertram Ashe (“The Post-Soul Aesthetic,” 2006) have designated as the “Post-Soul” sensibility. Though this very label and the contribution of the generation itself are still being assessed, there are a couple of characteristics that single out the artists that programmatically, or by critics’ decision, belong in this contingent. Apart from their cosmopolitanism, there is their ability to consider black consciousness and artistic freedom “not mutually exclusive but complementary,” and to “feel secure enough about black culture to claim art produced by non-blacks as part of their inheritance” (Tate 207).

As if to confirm Tate’s 1986 insights, since then a remarkable number of scholars and writers engaged the concept and the artistic products that relate to it. Nelson George who in his 1992 *Buppies, B-boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture*, coined the term “post-soul”, Trey Ellis who in 1989 defined the “New Black Aesthetic,” David Nicholson (1989), Terry McMillan(1994), Paul Beatty(1992), Lisa Jones(1994), Mark Anthony Neal (2002), and more recently Bertram Ashe (2006) added insightful and illuminating comments about the phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> Bertram Ashe, for example, observes

that, though certain notes that defined the Post Soul aesthetic in its early decade may change,

the core issues that PSA artists address—the peculiar pains, pleasures and problems of race in post-Civil Rights movement America; the use of non-traditionally black cultural influences in their work; the resultant exploration of the boundaries of blackness—these issues will remain as long as there are discrete cultural categories such as “black” and “white” and as long as there are Americans who live their lives believing separate and distinct cultural practices can be assigned to each. (Ashe 5)

Academic as this description may sound, when read carefully it reveals that the descriptive statement contains a couple of unsettled and unsettling concepts, which have made the recognition, read acknowledgment, of these artists’ contribution to African-American community rather problematic. Thus, the use of “non-traditional black cultural influences and the exploration of the boundaries of blackness” placed the allegiance of this generation of artists to the improvement of community and of race under doubt, especially due to the “critique [of] the events or mindset of the Civil Rights movement,” (Ashe 6) contained in many of their early texts. The reasons for this attitude are clear enough as Mark Anthony Neal<sup>5</sup> explains that

the generation(s) of black youth born after the early successes of the traditional Civil Rights movement are in fact divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movement’s legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing. (Neal 103)

Yet, if this rebellious attitude were not enough, these artists have made it their goal to “stir and trouble blackness,” and to portray this for so long essentialized racial identity as in flux, eclectic, hybrid, and, even tending toward, what Trey Ellis dubbed with an insightful concept, “cultural mulatto.”<sup>6</sup> Controversial enough to provoke debate, the

concept stuck, so much so that in 2006, Bertram Ashe included it among the three “points” of what he called a triangular Post-Soul matrix: “the cultural mulatto archetype; the execution of an exploration of blackness; and, lastly, the signal allusion-disruption gestures that many of these texts perform” (Ashe 8). For Ellis, though, the “cultural mulatto” is a concept meant to “answer back” and revert the traditional association of African-Americans with the “tragic mulatto” archetype, and thus to offer a counter-image of the contemporary, middle class, black individual.

Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing crop of cultural mulattoes that fuels the New Black Aesthetic. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto *Cosby* girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. Neither side of the tracks should forget that. (“New Black Aesthetic” 235)

Most importantly, a “cultural mulatto” is a person who does not forget that despite their ability to communicate and borrow from the white culture, they do not have to please both the white and the black worlds, but themselves. This guards them both against affecting “superblackness” in dreaming themselves back to the ghetto and against becoming “assimilationist nightmares, neutered mutations” (“New Black Aesthetic” 235) like Lionel Richie and Whitney Houston in some of their songs<sup>7</sup>.

Successful examples of cultural mulattos, according to Ellis’ programmatic essay, are Spike Lee, Lisa and Kellie Jones, Reginald and Warrington Hudlin, Terry McMillan, George Wolfe, Robert Townsend, Vernon Reid and his band, “Living Color”. To these names one could add Trey Ellis himself, Touré and Suzan Lori Parks,<sup>8</sup> on whom I will further focus in this study. Apart from them, there are other recognized Post-Soul artists

such as Paul Beatty, Danzy Senna, Mos-Def, Dave Chappelle, Me'Shell Ndege-Ocello, Colson Whitehead, Aaron McGruder, Ellen Gallagher, The Roots, Saul Williams, Kara Walker, and Darius James, but to these, the present essay will only make reference.

Overall, they are all representatives of a “disturbatory” black aesthetic, art that shakes you up and as such is not afraid to engage in parodies of black nationalism and in revisionist attitudes toward older productions of propagandistic black art. Following into Spike Lee’s footsteps they dare to practice controversial art-styles like parody and rewriting, and thus to show the world “their warts,” without eschewing inferiority.

As Eric Lott, one of those who responded to Ellis’s manifesto, points out<sup>9</sup>, up to a point, the latter’s enthusiasm for the extraordinary aesthetic fertility of the African American culture in the 80s, is infectious. Hip hop, the Black Filmmaker Foundation, The Black Rock Coalition and Defjam Records, Alva Rogers, Terry McMillan, Lorna Simpson, Vernon Reid might indeed be effecting a momentous transformation in the way in which the African-American middle class and together with it, African-American culture in general, gets to be represented. The fear that Lott and others express is that in the process, the political edge of black art which used to be “made in the ghetto” and give voice to those people in the community who experienced the worst consequences of a still persistent racism might start to fade away from the artistic discourse.

To this Ellis responds that due to their liberated attitude, today African-American authors can be more honest and critical of themselves than ever before, without rejecting their models among whom he mentions Amiri Baraka’s Black Arts Movement, Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major, Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman and George Clinton. By

claiming that “you don’t have to be black and poor in order to be black and angry,” Ellis’s “New Black Aesthetic” opens the door for a plethora of new cultural styles in the contemporary African-American community, styles which would be embodied by names such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Touré, Spike Lee, and Ellis himself, whom I intend to study as part of my project. All these writers express the diversity of black voices in America by using both black and white literary tropes, by mixing irony, parody and pastiche, with a plethora of other postmodern stylistic devices and practices (J. Martin Favor 695). In Lisa Jones’s words, since 1986 when the arrival of a new way of looking at the world by young black artists was signaled, the emerging aesthetic was described as

being wide enough to contain everything from Spike Lee’s Hollywood-financed dramedies, to Lorna Simpson’s photo-text and its landscape of female symbols, to the revamping of the classics by Armani-clad jazzbos who had no use for the avant-garde, to hip-hop’s deification of Malcolm. It was said to embrace, among other things, irreverence, profit-making, an elastic view of “black” art, ideas of integration and nationalism, a yen for tradition (or at least the apparel), and the usual questions about who we are and where is our home (Jones 134).

The question now, twenty years after the auspicious arrival of this generation, is how much of their program have they really accomplished and to what ends. This is what the present study intends to find out.



## End-notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Among many critical references, Andrea J. Goto's "Digging Out of the Pigeonhole: African-American representations in the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks," emphasizes that Parks' representation "challenges the oversimplified discourse on difference, which critics and audiences seem to expect and demand from African-American artists and their work" (107).

<sup>2</sup> All these concepts are used by Harry J. Elam jr. to describe "what happens as the connection between black bodies and black cultural expression becomes not only more diverse but more disconnected, when blackness travels on its own, separate and distinct from black people" ("Change Clothes" 379).

<sup>3</sup> These concepts designate character types and as such were launched by George Nelson in *Buppies, B-boys, Baps & Bohos. Notes on Post-Soul Culture* (2001). In the Introduction to the collection, Nelson claims that these four African-American types, which "began germinating in the 70s and blossomed in the 80s, have been crucial in shaping the country over the last 20 years."

<sup>4</sup> David Nicholson wrote "Painting it Black: African American Artists, In Search of a New Aesthetic" in the book section of the *Washington Post* in 1989; Terry McMillan wrote of a "new breed, free to write as we please, in part because of our predecessors, and because of the way life has changed" (xx) in her introduction to *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* (1990); Paul Beatty wrote the hilarious "What set you from, fool?" in *Next* (1992); and Lisa Jones the collection of articles, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex and Hair* in 1994.

<sup>5</sup> In *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> In "The New Black Aesthetic." *Callaloo* 12.1 (Winter 1989): 233-43.

<sup>7</sup> The two songs cited by Ellis are: Lionel Richie's "Dancing on the Ceiling" and Whitney Huston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" ("The New Black Aesthetic" 242)

<sup>8</sup> Warrington Hudlin was president of the New York based Black Filmmaker Foundation at the time of Ellis' manifesto. His brother, Reginald Hudlin, is a director whose work at that time consisted, according to Ellis' description, of comedy sketches (*Reggie's World of Soul*) and parodies of certain black cultural forms (like a black TV news magazine). George Wolfe is cited by Ellis as the author of Duke Ellington's jazz opera adaptation "Quennie Pie" and of the hit play The Colored Museum, in which he parodies both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *For Colored Girls*. Robert Townsend is the author of the filmic parody *Hollywood Shuffle*. Terry Macmillan is cited as part of the NBA in relation to her first novel, *Mama*. Lisa Jones played Clean Mama King in Spike Lee's *School Daze* and co-authored with the latter *Uplift the Race* and *The Making of School Daze*. She also co-founded Rodeo Caldonia, a black woman's performance group. Her sister, Kelli has graduated from Amherst, worked at the Studio Museum in Harlem and at the time of Ellis' manifesto was the Visual arts director of the Jamaica (Queens) Arts Center.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Lott. "Response to 'Trey Ellis's 'New Black Aesthetic' " in *Callaloo* 38:2 (Winter 1989) 244-46.

## ***Re-signifyin(g) Iconic Images of Black Identity***

If one agrees with Mark Anthony Neal that the Post-Soul era begins in the 1980's, with the "increased proliferation of mass-media, the corporate annexation of black popular expression, and the first substantial presence [...] of black images within mass-media" (Neal 102), the definition of Post-Soul aesthetic finds itself much widened as to encompass phenomena related to the general urbanization of black culture. From this vantage point, the African-American intellectuals, whose work was hailed by Trey Ellis, Lisa Jones, and to a certain extent by Nelson George and Greg Tate, appear to be just a component of a larger phenomenon, which includes the cultural production of African-Americans since the end of the blaxploitation era of the 1970s. Along with such writers and, clearly more visible than them, the hip-hop artists also represent an important source of oppositional black urban culture, which uses "mass-media and popular cultur[al forms] as vehicles for social praxis" (Neal102), and empowerment. The question is how does the production of such artists interact with the literary side of the Post-Soul aesthetic, granted that due to its success and internationalization, hip-hop has become the archetypical manner of "being black" in the four two decades, while also coming under criticism for the concessions it made to mass-culture.

Interested in giving voice to ever proliferating manifestations of black identity, the hip-hop artists were an important group of agents that broadened the understanding of

black identity, beyond its “sanitized and historically determined versions” (Neal 104), and engendered widely recognized oppositional discourses. All these characteristics made them perfect candidates for the Post-Soul label. Yet, at the same time, due to their unprecedented and unexpected success, some of them ended up falling prey to the allurements and benefits of capitalist economy, phenomena which subsequently dulled the edge of their critique. The debate about whether this amounts to an annexation of black popular culture and mass-media cultural forms by the wide capitalist interests, or still counts as oppositional culture is still unfolding.

Meanwhile, what is interesting about Post-Soul aesthetic, hip-hop culture included, is its capacity to blur boundaries between various types of discourses and to incorporate experiences across race and class lines. Absorbing some of the hip-hop attitude and manner, Post-Soul literature is a particularly good site for studying the cross-pollination of high literary forms with popular culture references, tropes and figures, and for assessing the anti-establishment potential such discourses may have. As such, in many Post-Soul texts and films, the use and critique of mass-media and popular culture “serves as a viable mode of social and political praxis for the post-soul intelligentsia , as they seek to liberate dated tropes and stereotypes of blackness in ways that venture to decolonize contemporary African-American thought process” (Elam 123).

Touré, Suzan-Lori Parks and Spike Lee (in “She’s Got to Have It” and “Bamboozled”) are examples of such Post-Soul initiatives, since they are “part of the first generation of blacks to perceive the significant presence of African-American iconography within mass consumer culture/mass media as a state of normalcy” (Elam

121). As a result, they were aware both of the possible commodification of black popular culture following the international success of hip-hop, and of the critical potential of such forms of expression. It is this double awareness that leads the Post-Soul artists to “endeavor beyond positive and negative interpretations of black popular culture to forge radical critical sensibilities that derive notions of subversion, resistance, and pleasure in a combined ‘meta-text’ of text and critique” (Elam 123).

One remarkable example of such an approach is Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*, which engages the racist stereotypes promoted by the blackface minstrel show in America, to challenge and disrupt its diabolical power of seduction, exerted even over those very people it demeans<sup>1</sup>. The movie pierces deep into the heart of capitalist entertainment industry with its endlessly increasing demand for shows that not only satisfy the consumers, but *enslave* them. To ensure record high audience, the producers are looking for cultural forms able to appeal to the public’s deepest instinctual drives, from scapegoating and racial-profiling, to deriving fun from mocking the socially weaker and the culturally disempowered members of society.

By having an African-American writer championing a minstrel show, which features black man performing in blackface a number of self-demeaning songs about slaves on a plantation, Spike Lee captures the very essence of an intriguing phenomenon: the lasting, mesmerizing power of aesthetically convincing negative profiling both over the general public and over its own authors.

When Pierre Delacroix, also known as Dela, launches his idea of a minstrel show to please his boss, Mr. Dunwitty, he seems to be aware of its negative potential to re-

impress stereotypes about black people on the large audience. Yet, at that point what counts for him and the producer are the audience ratings, the visibility, and implicitly, the money. As the show takes off and manages to drag an initially reluctant audience back into the old-habit of mocking the disenfranchised group of African-Americans as a way of self-gratification and self-empowerment, Dela himself becomes a full proponent of the show and, implicitly of the mentality it promotes. It is at this point that the power of pleasing aesthetic representations to engender and reinforce stereotypes proves stronger than any critical misgivings its own author may have. Interestingly, as the show gathers momentum, its success traps Dela as much as it “enslaves” the public to which it was destined. However, had it not been so “well-done” and also so keen to people’s worst social instincts, it might have failed.

Without Dela’s talent, which creates the ‘compelling’ script, without the wholeheartedly participation of Mantan, Sleep n’ Eat, and “The Porch Monkeys,” who put their gifts at work perform the demeaning gags, the show would not have passed the public test. As a matter of fact, when the pilot was tested, the audience was rather reluctant to laugh at the clearly racist jokes, irrespective of the race of the viewers. However, as the performances went on, the viewers found enough elements to which they could relate, to ignore the offensive content and to finally agree to participate in the production.

Moreover, as time went on, the public reached such a level of addiction that they put on blackface and, when asked by the presenter about their identity, claimed they were all “niggers.” Despite such alleged proof of the universal appeal of blackness, at this

point “race” has already become an immaterial category, a pure instrument of fun and entertainment, devalued of any social connotation. Despite its allegedly positive potential of general reconciliation beyond racial lines, the public’s embrace of blackness implies a deeper ingestion of the stereotypes put forth by traditional blackface minstrel shows, to the level where people revel in a simplistic, caricatured, commodified image of “blackness” and do not even realize its offensive potential.

For their part, the African-American author and performers of the show suffer from a similar form of blindness once their desire to practice their art, to earn money, and/or satisfy their need for visibility leads to a total compliance with the denigrating practices that re-inscribe stereotypes and deride the history of the very community/race to which they belong. This compliance is determined by Dela’s, Manray’s, Womack’s, and Honeycutt’s desire to make the best of their talent in a society that does not offer them (many) other niches for great popular success.

Once more, history proves that aesthetic excellence is no guarantee for social reform since ethics is not naturally embedded in all entertaining artistic forms. Quite the contrary. Often, what pleases the large public is perpetuating the most disturbing forms of racism, gender-hatred, nationalism, and intolerance. Going one step further than most critics in unveiling the causes that make racial stereotypes so successful, Spike Lee exposes the diabolical role of aesthetically pleasing representations in engendering and re-inscribing durable negative images about certain races, communities, genders, and/or individuals. Innocent as they may seem, such artistic forms like the minstrel show, and

performing in blackface are among the most enduring testimonies of the immense power of aesthetically pleasing manipulation.

Without the talent and complicity of its authors and performers, the stereotyping would have been easier to detect and maybe even to stop. Under the pretense of a joke/entertainment show it could last unencumbered. That is why the satirical engagement of such practices by contemporary artists like Spike Lee is a subtle form to draw our attention to their hidden potential to perpetuate stereotyping.

This approach goes along with similar critiques undertaken by other Post-Soul artists. Assuming that the critique of the most obvious forms of racist discourse have been generally mapped out, Post-Soul authors seem to consider that it is high time to proceed and examine the more subtle modes of stereotyping accomplished through aesthetically pleasing products and/or allegedly innocent restaging of popular shows. The resulting critical scrutiny of mass-media products and popular culture imagery for allegedly unintended racial slurring accomplished through the humoristic incorporation of stereotypes is one more singular characteristic of Post-Soul aesthetic<sup>2</sup>.

Touré's "Sambomorphosis," a Post-Soul re-writing of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* provides yet another example of satire that engages an allegedly harmless racist imagery<sup>3</sup> and effectively exposes its damaging potential. Where Spike Lee chose to engage the content of the minstrel show by bringing it back to life in today's world, Touré has a lovely child, called Nappy, turn overnight into a "Sambo," the perfect embodiment of yet another stereotype of African-Americans. The metamorphosis, disturbing as it may be, does not bother the victim, whose consciousness vanishes completely in the process, but

is a test for the parents and their group of friends, the Black Panthers from Chicago. Intent on challenging the manner in which African-Americans themselves might co-exist on a daily basis with an embodied stereotype, the short story follows the increasingly violent reactions toward the child of his parents and their friends/guests.

To complicate the equation, Touré turns Nappy not only into a “Sambo,” but into a racist one. The boy, thus, not only has “an oily beehive of six-inch pickaninny braids,” (218), chalkboard black skin, gigantic eyes, “bulging out like Baldwin’s,” snow white blob mouth, and is wearing a pair of denim blue overalls with a bright red long-sleeve undershirt,” (219) but munches constantly on a slice of watermelon and utters racist remarks. A character who would have fit perfectly the cast of Dela’ minstrel show, the “hellish creature” has the opposite type of public than the one portrayed in “Bamboozled.” Instead of a vaguely confused, but ultimately compliant crowd, the receivers of the racial slurring in “Sambomorphosis” are a group of Black Panthers. Their reaction, therefore reflects the values and ideology of this revolutionary group.

The parents themselves, though initially make an effort to find traces of their sweet child behind the “mask” of the strange apparition, little by little, find their patience and compassion overcome by *its* behavior. More worried by the embarrassment Sambo causes them than by their own escalating violent response, which leads them to shoot him in the end, the Man and Sistuhgirl prove to be not much better than the white racists who created and enforced the Sambo stereotype on them. As they themselves reason, if Sambo had been the “most monstrous-looking but best-behaved five-year-old anyone knew” (*Portable* 228), maybe they could somehow live with it. Yet, if he “still looked like



Nappy, [...] but every bit as rude and disrespectful as Sambo” (*Portable* 229), the only option they could think of, was to shoot him.

Such a reaction is perplexing and aggravating, even though the context of the story prepares the reader for a full critique of the nationalist black movement. Regardless of the cows, which need to be killed so that brother Huey P. Newton may wear his great-looking leather coat, Touré intimates that the increasingly violent response to the child’s behavior and the justification of such violence as the ultimate solution to intolerable rudeness was inspired and legitimized by the Black Panther movement. Furthermore, this story-line and especially this resolution pose a very serious question: how much does it take for African-American parents to turn into executioners once their child becomes a racist nightmare—and is that in any way acceptable behavior?

Despite the temptation to leave this a rhetorical question, Touré gives us a precise answer by the end of the story when Man and Sistuhgirl, the murderous parents, not only congratulate themselves on their deed, but pick up Sambo’s watermelon slice and start eating it, in a gesture that clearly signals their own connection/identification with the stereotype. As Sambo himself says before Man shoots him, “I’m unkillable. [...] I leave in the recesses of your mind! “You just think you see me! I am in your thoughts! I am something you believe in! You can’t kill me because I’m an idea in your skull! You can’t kill me because I AM...A PART ...OF YOU!” (*Portable Promised Land* 230)

As in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, the dehumanization of the family who gradually begins to see in the giant beetle only a disgusting insect, Nappy’s family sees in Sambo only the racist brat. With no concern over what might have caused the transformation in

each case, these families choose to eliminate the disturbing element, overlooking the fact that he might be an embodiment of themselves at their worst. Besides, exactly as Gregor's father intentionally hurts him with the apple, which subsequently causes Gregor's death, Nappy's/Sambo's father decides to kill him in cold blood. Confronted with an incomprehensible metamorphosis, which can be also interpreted as a metaphor for radical difference, in both cases, the "decent" family makes recourse to cruelty and extreme violence. This behavior raises a perfectly legitimate question: to what extent are these people different from the ones they "legitimately" eliminate and to what extent are they different from other intolerant individuals, races, nations, gender(s)?

Piercing into the texture of an average African-American family, which claims connections with a revolutionary movement, Touré suggests that in some cases such people are the perpetrators, not the victims. According to the endings of both *Metamorphosis* and "Sambomorphosis, Gregor's family celebrates his convenient disappearance with a group walk through town, while Nappy's/Sambo's parents discover that they themselves like to eat the watermelon left after Sambo's disappearance, thus becoming agents in their own Sambomorphosis. Ultimately, in a satirical reversal, in both texts the so-called offenders turn out to be the victims, while the righteous people unveil the "beast" that must have been in them all along.

The fact that Toure chooses to construct his text along such analogies proves that he is receptive to the power of "archetypal" stories if they fit the message he tries to carry across, irrespective of what tradition generated them. By borrowing across race, in an intertextual rather than a traditional *signifyin*<sup>4</sup> manner, he proves once again that he

belongs to a generation of writers that instead of being fully engaged in criticizing and rejecting white cultural influences, uses them naturally when he sees fit, even to criticize people of his own race.

Along with Spike Lee, Touré seems to say that if Sambo and/or the minstrel show are indeed part of even the most rebellious African-American's mind, the need to exorcise them is so stringent that they have to take immediate action. What both the film and Touré's texts in *The Portable Promised Land* and *Soul City* suggest, is that in order to counteract stereotypes about black identity, one needs to resort to other strategies than violent blowing-off.<sup>5</sup> Parody, pastiche and satire might be good answers, but, obviously, not the only ones.

Problematizing the lasting power of fictional stereotypical constructs and of iconic figures of black popular culture, which may take on a life of their own and impact the community, are other effective means of satire as is the engendering of fictional alternatives. In *Portable Promised Land* and *Soul City*, Touré explores both strategies, in an effort to go beyond typical representations of blackness and to search for new manners of categorizing black experience in America. To accomplish this, he engages some of the iconic images of African-American popular culture, such as the successful basketball player, the famous (woman) gangsta rapper, the great saxophone player, and the irreverent reverend<sup>6</sup> in narratives that challenge their "stability" as characters. The strategy leads to unorthodox, humorous, often satirical stories about these figureheads of the community, and in the end provides hints about their re-humanization. In the process

of unveiling/deconstruction they all turn from popular icons and quasi-mythical heroes into *real* people, and Touré's texts into *real* literature.

By challenging not only/mainly stereotypes imposed and perpetuated by the whites on African-Americans, but also popular/escapist self-representations of the black community itself, Touré turns the mirror toward the African-American community, which seems to need new, self-aware, and fair modes of representation, as any other. As stories about iconic popular figures prove,<sup>7</sup> the uncritical perpetuation of such manner of self-profiling causes the community significant, if not equal disservice by keeping it prisoner to old-fashioned mechanisms of image-making.<sup>8</sup> When Touré writes about Huggy Bear Jackson who drives his Steviewondermobile, blasting Stevie Wonder songs from his thirty-disc changer through Soul City, the story may look like an innocent, slightly humorous take on a picturesque character. Yet if one looks closer, Huggy Bear appears as a perfect candidate for the position of prisoner of the world of music. His unquestioning devotion to his musical idol, which makes him find a Stevie Wonder song suitable for *every* mood and circumstance of his life<sup>9</sup> amounts to a willing self-incarceration which grants him “wonderful inner visions,” but also makes him incapable of interacting with the world spreading outside Soul City.

Idiosyncratic worshipper, Huggy Bear, along with four other Stevites and a number of similar groups of music fans cannot probably exist outside the confines of Soul City, this alternative world, whose design Touré barely sketches in *The Portable Promised Land*, but whose full profile is developed in his homonymous 2002 novel. According to this latter narrative, the host of picturesque characters who populate the

imaginary city, manage to live a life of their own in their almost completely isolated community and thus to perfect an alternative existence to the life “in the City.”

Yet, their success is tainted by their reduced capacity of interacting with strangers. The fact that Cadillac Jackson, the narrator, manages to assimilate into the Soul City community after securing the affection of Mahogany, the only woman who could fly and still give birth to flying babies, is the result of his exceptional capacity of observing their habits and learning their “language,” not of their particularly welcoming behavior.

This sweet-and-sour portrayal of the quasi-utopian all-black city, which might be a replica to Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, suggests that Touré might be undertaking a critique of such an ideal community, at the very time he seems to champion its uniqueness. In an attempt to “to forge radical critical sensibilities that derive notions of subversion, resistance, and pleasure from a combination of ‘meta-text’ and critique” (Elam 123), in the novel as much as in his collection of short stories, Touré presents the reader with stories that are both sweet and sad. Inspired as they are by characters who are less than perfect, though undeniably sympathetic in their aspirations to escape their “human, all too human” condition, such texts have the merit of generating a perfectly credible image of the black community at the very same time when they critique some of its best known popular icons<sup>10</sup>.

Right Reveren Daddy Love, Sugar Lips Shinehot, The Black Widow, Falcon Malone, and, to a certain extent, Crash Jenkins are iconic images of popular black culture made to interact with the fabric of everyday American life and to *re-signify*. The resulting stories capture the often surprising unfolding of such interactions with a tinge of irony,

and, in the process challenge popularized representations of African-American culture. *Soul City* evolves out of such re-writings of reductive perceptions of black community to offer a full-fledged, non-stereotypical alternative.

In each of the above mentioned cases, Touré's favorite strategies of re-writing and *re-signifyin'* are ironic challenges of the reader's expectations through subtle subversions of traditional genres' conventions, meta-textual comments, and un-orthodox endings.

For example, despite his charisma, Right Reveren Daddy Love has a weak spot for women. This prevents him from being the exemplary and inspirational character he hopes to be. Due to this character flaw "he is destined" to burn with his own church in a fire set by one of his former, abandoned lovers. Moreover, as if this unorthodox profile were not enough, he preaches in a converted Kentucky Fried Chicken locale, which underneath its "saintly" surface still preserves traces of its old use. Thus, the pulpit is set over the greasy kitchen (13), the drive-thru window is turned into a confessional, and the "mountainous grease pit into the church" (13). Obviously, such associations are hardly meant to suggest a sense of holiness spiritual devotion, and bodily abstinence to the readers.

In good Post-Soul spirit, Touré makes the popular figure of the imperfect community minister re-signify by ironically exposing his flaws at the very moment he exalts his qualities. Set to impress his community by instrumenting a flying moment during one of his inspiring sermons about "Love," Reveren Daddy Love ends up trapped in his own trap. Not only that the mechanical contraption he uses to simulate levitation, allegedly sustained by the spirit of Love, backfires and he is left hanging close to the

ceiling of the church when the fire starts, but he is exposed as a false prophet. His inflammatory sermon about surrendering to the spirit of Love causes one of the former choir members to come forth and claim in front of the entire congregation that Right Reveren' own love was not as wonderful and dependable as he preached it should be. In a sense, no other counter-discourse could have had a more detrimental effect to the Right Revern's sermon. However, at this very point, Touré decides to give him one last chance to redeem himself.

Though ironically portrayed as “a force of nature” (*Portable* 9), whose love was “blind as faith and as democratic as the sun” (*Portable* 11), when challenged to really prove his love, the Right Reveren finds the necessary compassion which ultimately redeems him in the eyes of the congregation and of the readers. By finding the power to summon God to save the little boy, who allegedly is his son, at the very moment when his own life is in peril, Daddy Love substantiates his sermons, and builds a legacy. Yet, this does not make the readers and parishioners forget his trespassings, excesses, and flaws. Together they construct a less than perfect public figure; an icon which has gotten back some of its human characteristics. On a different plan, far from uplifting the race, such a story challenges this authority figure of the community, and together with it, the ideologized manner of legitimizing African-American characters in literature. Instead of an irreproachable reverend whose selfless deeds are being hailed or instead of his negative counterpart, Reveren Daddy Love is an irreducible combination between the two: a truly memorable African-American character.

Similar mechanisms of subversion redraw the immensely popular profiles of figures like woman gangsta rapper, Black Widow, and of exceptionally gifted basketball player Falcon Malone, whose destinies, like that of the Right Reveren take unexpected turns. Losing his magic sneakers to a boy from the ghetto, because he did not take the latter's challenge seriously enough, Falcon Malone embodies the 'archetypical' sad story of gifted African-American individuals, who fail to achieve wide recognition due to minor, circumstantial flaws. Yet, the story offers a redemptive mechanism in the figure of the little black girl who, apparently found Falcon's shoes and is going to fully enjoy the chance granted by having a rare talent/magic means and the ingenuity to make the best of it.

Though Falcon Malone is no Michael Jordan, he could have been one had he not lost his genuine passion for the game. His failure and the little girl's chance, though make the story even more worth telling, as it provides a new narrative line along which one can understand destinies in contemporary African-American communities. The atypical plot lines together with parody, pastiche, and a panoply of other devices that undermine predictable characters, narrative solutions, and conclusions, generates an aesthetic distance from which Touré ultimately challenges the old, quasi-mythical figures of the black community and, in the process, reinvents its identity.

### **Flyin', Mythologizing, Re-signifyin(g)**

Most stories in *The Portable Promised Land* coagulate, intentionally or not, into manifestations of a Post-Soul aesthetic, but among them "The Sad, Sweet Story of Sugar



Lips Shinehot, the Man with the Portable Promised Land,” stands out as a fictional synthesis of some of its main principles. Thematically, the text posits an alternative way of solving the conflicts between blacks and whites. An exceptional saxophone player, Sugar Lips Shinehot is prevented from following the ascendant line of his artistic destiny by a couple of white Navy soldiers who beat him badly just before he was to sign a contract with a big house of records. Up to this point, the story captures the typical narration of vexation and abuse. What follows is a complete surprise: instead of either engaging the perpetrators and being victorious or defeated, or letting the offense pass, Sugar Lips Shinehot is offered the unusual alternative of consulting a somewhat dubious doctor in Harlem. This man performs on him a sort of ritual, which renders Sugar Lips not only healthy, but *blind to whitey*, thus free from the burden of having to deal with white men anymore. The result is that all of a sudden Sugar Lips realizes that without that weight, he feels as free as to believe he can fly. In an ironic turn, however, Touré makes him take this metaphor of inner freedom literally and in a Don Quixotesque manner sets for himself the impossible task of proving his flying abilities to his community. The unprecedented deed is meant to inspire and empower the latter by transferring some of the weightlessness granted by freedom of thinking to it.

Though the average reader should have no difficulty seeing the metaphorical significance of such a story, this high point in its development requires a clear-cut authorial option: is Touré going to turn Sugar Lips into a mythical character, who can really fly or is he going to provide a realistic narrative solution? In line with what I would call the Post-Soul aesthetic, he chooses the latter. Though the metacommentary reads,

“For him to fly would be for somethin in all of them [people of Harlem—my note] to fly,” [...] “Jus for a Negro to believe he could fly was inspiration nuf. That a Negro could get that much good feelin bout hisself made them feel good<sup>11</sup>” (44), in the end, Touré chooses to explain what is *really* going on.

His solution is very much in line with the ironic re-signifyin’/demystification of figurehead characters advocated by the Post-Soul aesthetic. Thus, after he leaps into the air, Sugar Lips *does not fly*, but “hangs in there” for a few seconds, and then falls full speed to the ground like any regular human being. The only reason why he escapes a sure death is only because, accidentally, but also providentially, he lands on Fat Jimmy, a white passer-by.

The implicit irony of such a narrative solution is obvious and has an immediate effect on the readers. Along with the narrator, they come all back to reality, realizing that “Sugar Lips needed Fat Jimmy to be able to think that he could fly, jus like Harlem needs the rest ah the island called Manhattan to keep from fallin in the ocean” (46). When he chooses to ignore this rule and attempts to repeat the deed, Sugar Lips’s presumptuousness is sanctioned with his “untimely demise” and the authorial voice, which for most of the story was on his side, comments sarcastically “He knows better now. Trust me” (*Portable* 46).

The moral of the story thus reverses the traditional revenge narrative of the victimized African-Americans, which, at one level or another used to promote violence and/or escapism as the only means of solving racial conflicts. Instead Touré suggests an alternative and communal *modus vivendi*. No matter how inconvenient and difficult to

accomplish, blacks and whites (still) have to live together, because at this point they (still) need each other. Though some of them may be in possession of the “portable promised land” which makes them blind to each other’s presence, the fact of the matter is that such a situation could only be attained in black or white Heaven, not on Earth.

To imagine otherwise is to be self-deluded and, ultimately, intolerant. As many writers born after the Civil Rights era and raised in the post-60s age, Touré is aware of the trap of dichotomic thinking about race in the U.S. and thus can adhere both willingly and without effort to what I, following other scholars, call here, the Post-Soul aesthetic.

Borrowing easily across race lines, and acknowledging influences from both white and black cultures, he becomes a perfect illustration for this recent manner of thinking race through literature. Yet, this rather un-orthodox take on both does not make him blind to the specific contributions of African-Americans to the world. In texts suggestively entitled “The African-American Aesthetics Hall of Fame, or 101 Elements of Blackness (*Things that Make you Say: Yes! That There’s Some Really Black Shit*),” “My Favorite Things,” “My history,” and “Shout-Outs,” he lists events, artistic, and historic accomplishments, and alternative readings of African-American culture that place it naturally together with white similar elements of American and world culture. Thus, among the people to whom he feels indebted, he lists Ralph Ellison, Joan Didion, Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Also along with them is a list of rapper and hip-hop figures, DJ-s, song-writers, Village Voice contributors, and, ultimately just phenomena which inspired him such as

Voodoo, style, game, fine (as in foin), jive, jimbrowski, negritude, Chocolate City, the Willie Bobo, hype, flow in all forms, dopeness, tain’t, hustle, funk,

rhythm, soul, the blues, the wop, the prep, the smurf, the humpty hump, the doo doo brown, the bankhead bounce, the nth degree, all the people who've read this far, and, finally all the rogue gurus out there with enough self-love to curb their dogma and dedicate their lives to running bootleg mojo across zone lines..."  
*(Portable 255)*

Read in its completeness, the list contains clear signs of irony and self-irony, but also a certain pathos in promoting the exceptionality of underground artists, who, in their capacity of "style guerillas" and "real experimental players," invent the new dances and new slang, and ultimately, the new fictional worlds. Such artists, who stand free from stereotypical approaches of culture, race, literature, music or what-have-you, are Touré's ultimate heroes and companions, the ones for whom he feels solidarity, and with whom he is engaged in a complex cultural project.

As I hope to have proven so far, this project, which I called Post-Soul aesthetic, implies a turn toward irony and self-irony in interpreting real life and artistic events, intertextual re-reading and re-writing, which I called *re-signifyin'*, and a freedom of mind which allows the writers to blur the boundaries between cultures and races, and cross-pollinate. Furthermore, the aesthetic distance informing the narratorial position in Post-Soul texts makes such writers induce in their readers the desire to read critically and engage in critiquing stereotypical representations that pervade popular culture, mass media, and "high" cultural forms alike.

## End-notes:

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<sup>1</sup> The topic was pioneered by Robert Townsend in his 1987 “Hollywood Shuffle.” Townsend’s satire focuses on the stereotyping roles offered to African-Americans by Hollywood and on the derogatory images promoted by this industry. The critical arbiters, “Speed” and “my homie, Tyrone,” who use street dialect to review Hollywood movies, and thus subvert their pretense of high art, are in the end evicted from the cinema theater because they don’t have tickets. This end is symbolic of Hollywood self-protective strategies and, ultimately, of its impenetrability to criticism or ridicule emerging from non-official discourses and/or social groups.

<sup>2</sup> In *Soul City*, Touré engages in a similar type of satire when he has Hueynewton register for the one year “slavery experience,” an experience clearly reminiscent of current popular TV shows like “Survivor.”

<sup>3</sup> According to the etymological meaning of the term, “Sambo” is a racial term for a person with mixed indigenous and African heritage in the Caribbean, also for a Black, or South Asian person in the United States and the United Kingdom. It is considered a racial slur in the US and UK but not in the Caribbean. (Wikipedia)

<sup>4</sup> In his seminal study, *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. claims that Signifyin(g) has rather unique definitions in black discourse. One of the most useful is provided by Roger D. Abrahams, which he cites at length: “Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any of a number of things; in the case of a toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to a trickster’s ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to a point. It can mean making fun of a person or a situation. Also it can denote speaking with hands and eyes, and in this respect, it encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. (Gates 54) Yet, the concept as delineated by Gates’ study are only inspired by those singled out by Abrahams. Gates talks of four types of Signifyin(g): tropological revision or double consciousness, representing the speaking black voice in writing, exploring the black tradition intertextually, and ultimately, revising and echoing, or, repeating with a difference.

<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, in “Bamboozled,” Spike Lee explores the extreme reactions to the minstrel show. Along with the compliance of the public, of the performers and the producer, the film also offers the response of Mau-Mau, the radical, revolutionary group of rappers, who, in the end execute Manray live, on TV. Offended by his artistic and racial prostitution, they force Manray to dance for his life, and shoot him during the performance. Naturally, such a broadcasting brings the channel sky-rocketing audience, though the terrifying outcome is a wake up call to the bamboozled public. The irony is that simultaneously, with the end of this show a new highly successful kind of broadcasting is launched once the policemen come and shoot the Mau-Maus, and subsequently a bereaved Sloan kills Dela for the death of her brother (one of the Mau-Maus).

<sup>6</sup> The respective stories are “Falcon Malone Can Fly No Mo,” “You Are Who You Kill *The Black Widow Story*,” “Young Black and Unstoppable, or Death of a Zeitgeist Jockey *The Black Widow Prequel and Sequel*,” “Once an Oreo, always an Oreo *The Black Widow Finale*,” and “A Hot time at the Church of Kentucky Fried Souls and the Spectacular Final Sunday Sermon of the Right Revren Daddy Love.”

<sup>7</sup> Examples range from “the Steviewondermobile,” to “A Hot time at the Church of Kentucky Fried Souls and the Spectacular Final Sunday Sermon of the Right Revren Daddy Love,” “*Soul City Gazette* Profile:

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Crash Jenkins, Last of the Chronic Crashees,” the Black Widow cycle, and to “Falcon Malone Can Fly No Mo.”

<sup>8</sup> Following a similar deconstructive mentality, in “Bamboozled,” Spike Lee portrays black characters who fail to overcome worldly temptations or their own character flaws and thus do not qualify as struggling heroes. Under pretexts such as, lack of money, need to advance in their career, need to reform the world through extremely violent actions, they all call into question any project to simplistically uplift the race. Sloan seems to be the only exception in as much as most of the times she is the critical voice which reminds the protagonists (Dela, her own brother, Manray) of their compliance with the demands of various ideologies such as racism, capitalism, and gratuitous, “revolutionary” violence.

<sup>9</sup> “If he felt upbeat and wanted to groove, he pushed button number one and Stevie preached: ‘Very Supastish-uuus’... If he felt sad it was number seventeen: ‘Lately I have had the strangest feel-ing...’ [...] When thinking politics, number seventy-three: ‘Living for the City’; Every June first, as the sun sang out and the days got hot, number 129: ‘Ma cher-ee a-mour’...” (*Portable* 5)

<sup>10</sup> Possibly named to suggest the place where, metaphorically speaking the spirit of “Soul” never dies, *Soul City* is the epitome of the idiosyncratic, picturesque African-American culture, a complex fictional construct meant to do justice to the multiple aspects of blackness today and at the same time offer a critique of some of them. A Promised Land of its own, where people live to matusalemic ages, fly, and entertain a certain exchange with the Heaven, Soul City is the habitat for a gallery of memorable characters, and the pretext for constructing an anti-stereotypical, alternative world of blackness. To keep with this not so easy task, before proposing it as a self-sufficient universe, Touré tested the ability of some of its key “members” to survive within “the City.” Thus the Stevie Wonder fan from the “The Portable Promised Land” has his correspondent in the owner of the Bobmarleymobile; Revren Daddy Love is replaced by his son—Revren Lil Mo Love; Falcon Malone by King Sunflower, etc.

<sup>11</sup> According to African-American legends, there was a mythical tribe of flying people, who lost their ability once they were taken into slavery.

## Allowing History to *Perform/Re-Signify*

*BLACK PEOPLE + WHITEY= STANDARD DRAMATIC CONFLICT  
(STANDARD TERRITORY)*

*i.e.*

*“BLACK DRAMA”= the presentation of the Black as oppressed*

*so that*

*WHATEVER the dramatic dynamics, they are most often READ to EQUAL an explanation or relation to BLACK oppression. This is not a false equation, this is BULLSHIT.*

*so that*

*BLACK PEOPLE + X= NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT  
(NEW TERRITORY)*

*where x is the realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than the Oppressed/Obsessed with “Whitey” state; where the White when present is not the oppressor, and where audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than the same old shit. (Suzan-Lori Parks—“Essays”)*

Confrontational like everything she ever wrote, this quote from Suzan-Lori Parks’s “Essays” announces the playwright’s programmatic break with the stereotypes of perception and reception derived from what one may call, the “traditional black aesthetic,” i.e. the African-American artistic movements before the 1970s. Perfect as a motto of any Post-Soul manifesto, the rebellious, ultimatum-like decision clearly synthesizes a “black-and white” predicament of “black drama”: its alleged obsession with

“whitey” and more importantly, a certain tendency to present black characters one-dimensionally.

In response to this “standard territory,” Suzan-Lori Parks proposes a “new [type of] dramatic conflict,” where African-Americans are defined by a varied set of standards, preoccupations, traumas, predicaments, and accomplishments, and, surely enough, she delivers on her promise. Interested in self-definition, Parks writes a number of plays in which she “Signifies on the Signifyin,” meaning she assumes the task of making language signify in a different, non-majoritarian way, which is equivalent to making it sound adequate for a traditionally disenfranchised and disempowered ethnic group, which only in the last century has come to have a largely acknowledged voice of its own. As language, in its hegemonic usage has historically excluded African-Americans, Parks sees as her task to lend a non-mimetic<sup>1</sup> voice to this community, a voice, which will free it from the stereotypes perpetuated first by white and later by black writers and ideologues.

At one time in this country, the teaching of reading and writing to African-Americans was a criminal offense. So, how do I adequately represent not merely the speech patterns of a people oppressed by language (which is the simple question) but the patterns of a people whose language use is so complex and varied and ephemeral that its daily use not only Signifies on the non-vernacular language forms, but on the construct of writing as well. If language is a construct and writing is a construct and Signifyin(g) on the double construct is the daily use, then I have chosen to Signify on the Signifyin(g). (*The America Play* 45)

Symptomatically enough for what we may call a Post-Soul author, an artist detached enough from the power struggles of the Civil Rights era to be able to define her/his identity in her/his own non-mimetic, non-agonal<sup>2</sup> terms, Parks chooses to reshuffle stereotyping perpetuated through language usages by Signifyin(g)<sup>3</sup> on the



African-American daily manner of expression. This pool of raw linguistic facts is for her enough of a reservoir to draw non-linear characters, dramatic conflicts, resolutions, and ultimately, enough of an inspiration for a liberatory mode of Signifyin(g). Writing “specifically [about] Black experience from an explicitly Black perspective, she rejects the standard labels, and dismisses both the naturalism of Lorraine Hansberry and the violence of Amiri Baraka” (Innes 20).

After rejecting both the “race” issue and the “drama of victimization” as unidimensional approaches to African-American experience, Parks comes up with her own manner of relating to official history: she writes her plays as events that “create and rewrite history through the medium of literature” (*The America Play* 9). As such, she uncovers the performative power of language, which assists her in Re-Signifyin, and prevents her from falling into the trap of mimicking or responding in a victimizing voice to “official” accounts. *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* are two such examples.

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Suzan-Lori Parks conceives of theater as “an incubator for the creation of historical events,” within which “the (deceptively) simple distinction between the real and the mimetic, [which was] the obsession of naturalism is undermined by Parks’ dramaturgy” (Jon Dietrich) and the challenge of Re-Signifyin, fully assumed. Having at her disposal language as the main medium, Parks decides to focus on its ability to generate new events and perspectives on the latter<sup>4</sup>. This operation amounts to setting free the immense capacities of language to freely associate—and thus *signify*<sup>5</sup>, which ultimately accounts for Parks’ non-mimetic, non-referential, surreal style. Equally

inspired by white and black writers such as James Baldwin, Robert Creeley, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Toni Morrison, and particularly Samuel Beckett, Parks has no reserve in exploring the depth of African-American experience in non-traditional ways.

For one, in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the traditional black-white conflict is underplayed. Instead of confronting oppressive white opponents, in both cases, the protagonists confront one overarching figurehead of American and African American history: Abraham Lincoln. Destined to exist “in the shadow” of the white founding father, whose death was equivalent to an orphaning for the blacks, the protagonists have to grapple with the image and to make sense of the destiny of the “foundling father” at the very time when their jobs require them to continuously and mindlessly re-enact his death, in the tradition of black buffoons. Though, at first sight a typical act of mimetic desire, the performances of “good Abe’s death” in both *Topdog* and in *The America Play*, establish a non-confrontational, non-agonal relationship with the white “original.”

The fact that the “original” is concomitantly a *fore-father*, a *faux-father*, a *foe-father*, and a *foundling* father to his disenfranchised sons, proves that the typical agonal relation between blacks and whites in American history can be re-written from a fresh perspective, according to which the prototypical protagonists are no longer *the master and the slave*<sup>6</sup>. Parks’ way of achieving this alternative view of American history is to set language free to undermine entrenched stereotypes of perception and representation.

\* \* \*

If “language is indeed a physical act” as Parks claims in “Elements of Style,” if it is something that “involves our whole body” (18), then maybe writing and reading with our whole bodies is what we should be doing to gain access to the unique amusement show, provided to us by the “hole of history.” Still, what do we do when we do exactly that: read and write with our entire bodies? Do we “utter spells,” do we invent “foreign words” and phrases such as “iduhnt /id-ănt/, heud /he-ăd/, do-in-did-ly-dip-did-did-did-thă-drahp,” or do we dance as we write, do we make simple substitutions of language, do we “Rep. and Rev.” (repeat and revise)?

If, indeed to be able to walk along with Suzan-Lori Parks down the famous “hall/hole of history,” the dialogue between characters has to become “rich and strange,” as she says in “Elements of Style” (16) and the texts have to provide us NOT with symbols for some “obscured meaning,” but with “the thing itself,” then, how does she harness the words so as to unveil their multiple variations? After reading *The America Play*, one answer that comes to mind is: by addition, agglomeration, repetition and slight alterations of words, phrases, scenes until they bring to light unexpected undertones. Examples include the surprising sexual subtext in the “Great Hole of History,” the revisionist interpretation of “thuh hole thuh fatal bullet bored [in Lincoln’s skull],” (*America Play* 190) and the oxymoronic irony of *the hole* of Brazil’s [the Lesser Known’s son] inheritance. Another set of variations comes to light when the literal and metaphorical meanings of concepts such as history, genealogy, archeology as digging for bones are related to the location of the theme park, “*the Great Hole* [my emphasis] where Brazil’s parents honeymooned, [and from where] you could see the *whole* world without

going too far” (*America* 197). The phonic similarity between “whole” and “hole” in the context of their respective antagonistic meanings suggests right away an instability of meaning, a perversion of stable content, and furthermore a relativization of the values defined by such interchangeable concepts. From this point on, to fully come to light, history can and asks to be rewritten. Following this revelation, Suzan Lori Parks substitutes the “hole that the Lesser Known dug himself” (*America Play* 198) for *the whole world* in a perfectly legitimate process of metaphorization, which expands to repertory of legitimate representations of black and white interaction in America.

Based on this logic of infinite revelatory substitutions, the “perversion” of Lincoln’s death scene by the demands of popular culture can also account for the multiplication of interpretations and for the widening of symbolism beyond the traditionally accepted and consecrated limits. Also the representation of this landmark moment of official American history from the perspective of the lesser known individuals, who were an inherent part of the Great Man’s destiny, though never acknowledged as such, suggests that behind the officially recorded scenes of History of the “whole world” there is always an unrecorded story of *a hole*.

Yet, can one really claim that the exploitation of homophonies and homonymous senses of words is responsible for the multiplication of reality and for bringing out *new things*, specifically black voices into being? Does “Rep & Rev”—the additive strategy through which characters “refigure words and by doing so, refigure language and show us that they are experiencing the situation anew,” (“Elements” 9) amount to such an effect?

Granted that always between the two concepts at play there is a significant *qualitative difference*, I would like to claim that the ultimate result of Suzan-Lori Parks's ironic linguistic interventions is a performative employment of discourse, which ends up allowing language not only "to dance," as Parks claims, but to "do things with words"<sup>7</sup>. It is in this latter capacity that words manage to perform actions through their sheer power and thus, implicitly change not only the face, but also the course of history. On a different level, such a process of making language perform actions, could be associated with what Parks calls "uttering spells" in her stage directions, a process which, under different names has been attempted by other great innovators of the mind and of theater. One of them, who "philosophized with the hammer" but also attempted to make language *dance* in writing his aphorisms, proclaimed in, what I would like to claim *is* the spirit of Parks' poetics:

I would believe only in a god who could dance. And when I saw my devil I found him serious, thorough, profound, and solemn: it was the spirit of gravity—through him all things fall. Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity! I have learned to walk: ever since, I let myself run. I have learned to fly: ever since, I do not want to be pushed before moving along. Now I am light, now I fly, now I see myself beneath myself, now a god dances through me. Thus spoke Zarathustra." (Nietzsche 41)

Also thus spoke Nietzsche, Deleuze, Beckett, Artaud, and, thus speaks through her plays, Suzan-Lori Parks. For her, like for Deleuze, the movement which emerges from words "[is] capable of affecting the mind outside of all representation;" to "substitute direct signs for mediate representations, to invent vibrations, rotations, whirlings, gravitations, dances or leaps which directly touch the mind" (*Difference and Repetition* 8). Yet, to be able to accomplish such a radical feat, the dynamic within the words has to be liberated

so that language can prove through multiple variations that indeed, there is movement within itself.

“Rep. & Rev.,” repeatedly identified by critics as Parks’ unique stylistic signature, has been seen as a viable strategy for this kind of liberation, a strategy which embraces both levels of form and content. While the former is more self-evident, the latter emerges, as Ilka Saal notes, out of Parks’ effort NOT to recuperate, find, retrieve the truth, the authentic past, the History, but to bring forth “the eternal replay of our ideas and desires” within a history which is itself not a faithful representation (mimesis), but a simulacrum<sup>8</sup>.

This refusal to ground the writing of plays in any strong epistemology and revelatory paradigm of ultimate truth, connects ideally with Parks’ refusal to assign extra-“authorial” meaning to her texts, or to align them with any master-narrative, irrespective of how revisionist it may be. By contrast, Parks insists that the reader/spectator should MAKE of her plays what they consider fit, and, most importantly, what the words themselves guide them to make. It is due to this emphatic insistence on constant “making” and remaking through *Repetition and Revision* that I interpret Park’s language as performative in the sense given to the concept by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*.

According to Austin, speech acts can be divided into constative and performative, where the former concept refers to language that *describes* something, and the latter regards language employed *to elicit a response, to provoke and undertake an action, and to “get something done.”* Examples of performative utterances would be invitations, promises, naming, dubbing, acknowledgments (like the “I do” in a marriage

ceremony) all of which “bring about the thing they say” (Austin 72). Due to its double ability, language, according to Austin, can both describe/represent *and* enact, take agency in the world, respectively.

Oddly enough, the only limitation of the performative powers of language, apply to literature, since Austin considers that “nobody is going to believe that two actors who get married on a stage are married in real life” (Austin 73). Determined as they are by auctorial intention, right time and space, felicitous performative speech acts have to comply, in Austin’s view with the requirement of sincerity. “In order for a performative act to be felicitous, I must mean what I say and must know what I mean, and that I mean what I say, with no *arrière pensée*, no unconscious motives or reservations” (Austin 60). If said by an actor on a stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy, the words are obviously not meant to have any outcome outside the convention of the text/show they are part of—and thus Austin denies them performative power despite their performative intentions.

However, as J. Hillis Miller very perceptively notes in his study dedicated to Austin, “the performative must not depend on the intentions or sincerity of the one who speaks. If Austin’s theory is to be cogent, and if he is to attain his goal of securing law and order, the words themselves must do the work, not the secret intentions of the speaker or writer” (Hillis Miller 29). Language itself, and not the author should have the “autonomous power to make things happen” (Hillis Miller 32) and thus the ultimate agency. The author of the utterance would then be totally excluded from action, though s/he must have, at least, made the selection of the respective words and put them on

paper. By contrast, if we insist too much on the auctorial super-determination of any speech act, we end up negating language its “autonomous power to do unforeseen things, independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire that we might have” (Hillis Miller 32).

J. Hillis Miller himself does not attempt to posit a solution to this inescapable double bind, but to offer an interpretation for what causes such a paradoxical interdependence between the (autonomous?) workings of language and the intentionality of the writer. In a manner probably outrageous to Austin, Hillis Miller unveils the indestructible inter-connection between the so-called literal, grammatical use of language and its figurative employment. His explanation for the mechanism governing performative speech acts, but more generally, language altogether, stems from the tension between these two main types of usages, from their strong intertwining and co-dependence. “A performative utterance’s possibility of working, of *doing* something,” says Hillis Miller, “appears to depend on its [*literal*, my note] *impossibility*, on its being haunted by a ghost of poetry that cannot be exorcised” (Hillis Miller 37). Far from seeing in poetry an example of an infelicitous speech act, as Austin does, in good deconstructivist manner, Hillis Miller insists that the alleged parasitical nature of literature/figurative language is the very condition of existence for all speech acts, which depend on the tropological and rhetorical usages of language. Most convincingly, Austin’s own performative speech acts in *How to Do Things with Words* are based on tropes, irony, imaginary examples, and the use of fictional dialogues.



This inescapable, parasitical nature of the figurative sense of language that challenges and constantly deconstructs the claims of any “literal” sense is one of the most striking and, in my opinion, fully intended, characteristics of Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The America Play*. By allowing the figurative rewritings/alterations by African-American voices of the officially accepted ‘Lincoln story’ to replace this so-called ‘original’ grand-narrative of the forefather’s death, Parks manages to insert the black voice within the official discourse and thus, grant it an agency of its own.

### **Digging for History and *Making It* in the Theater-Incubator**

Because much of African American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out...one of my tasks as a playwright is to...locate the ancestral burial grounds, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down...I’m working theater like an incubator to create “new” historical events (“Possession” 4).

Like many of Suzan Lori Park’s texts, this *profession de foi* persuasively mixes a straightforward descriptive statement with an increasingly metaphorical definition of intention: from locating ancestral burial grounds, an action which can be easily taken in its literal sense, Parks moves to “digging for bones,” to “finding the bones” and ultimately to “hearing them sing”...Why sing? But then, also, why, literally put dirt on the stage, as Parks did in a number of early plays?

At a second thought, why not hear the bones sing, why not put dirt on the stage so that the audience may see what the playwright has found while digging the ancestral grounds? Why not unearth history in the most concrete manner as a way of pushing others to unearth it in their own ways? Why not renounce the linear plot, the mimetic

approach to art, the logical interpretation of the often illogical process that is history, why *only* imitate, render, represent, and *not*, create?

But how does one create new historical events? How does one persuasively add new facts to what everybody knows to be “the Facts”? How does one dig a hole which includes the whole world? In the wake of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s seminal study, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, Haike Frank claims that Parks’ method of bringing new facts into history is one of “re-signifying” by the usage of black vernacular:

Signification in the black vernacular differs from signification in white English. This results from the fact that one signifier can be made to carry more than one meaning as is the case when a speaker of the black vernacular consciously empties the white signifier of its original white signified, substituting it with a different signified that expresses the black experience. This African American Signification, namely the (re)doubling of the original(ly white) meaning that a term conveys, is a form of semantic appropriation. The double-voiced word retains its orientation while a new semantic orientation is inserted into the word.

The act of Signifyin(g) as conceived by Gates involves a clear revisionist intention and defines a specific kind of positioning toward Western and black traditions. While attempting to rewrite the latter, it regards the former with irony and often treats it in a parodic manner. Gates insightfully captures this tendency in his description of the act of Signifyin(g).

By supplanting the received term’s associated concept, the black vernacular tradition created a homonymic pun of the profoundest sort, thereby making its sense of difference from the rest of the English community of speakers. Their complex act of language Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially by middle-class white people. (Gates 47)

This process emphasizes the variation that is possible on the level of meaning, i.e. content. Starting from the premise that such “double-voicedness,” might inhabit Parks’ theater, at least in part, the question is what other processes of semantic variation does Parks employ in *The America Play* to manage to create and insert new meanings into history? Does the challenging of traditional forms through alteration and variation (Frank 4) and through irony manage to make the leap from the literal level to the tropological one and thus produce consequences that affect/reflect in reality?

One possible answer is that Parks’ radical, ironic linguistic intervention, her “rigorous amputation of History, the subtraction of structure, the deduction of dialogue, action, and text” (Deleuze 248) leads to the creation of what Gregory Miller, in the wake of Deleuze and Guattari calls *a minor language*, a language of continuous variation, which “always overflows, by excess or lack, the representative threshold of the majority rule” (“One Last Manifesto” 253). That such a language, which opposes the rule of the majority, is, by definition political and thus takes action against the *status quo*, is attested by this idiom’s subversive, revolutionary position with respect to the majoritarian usages, from which it consistently deduces elements of power. Yet, if we look at this method with Austin’s rigorous requirements in mind, we may discover that this special kind of performative speech is described by Deleuze and Guattari with the heavy help of metaphorical undertones, which may call into question its qualification as a felicitous performative act. By contrast, if we read the description of the minoritarian language with Suzan-Lori Parks’s attempts to graft new usages and/or liberate the potentiality for linguistic variation in mind, the similarity between the demystifying qualities of Deleuze

and Guattari's model language and Suzan-Lori Parks's rewriting and remaking of history through radical linguistic intervention become evident:

You begin by subtracting, deducing everything that would constitute an element of power, in language and in gestures, in the representation and in the represented....You will then deduct or amputate history, because History is the temporal maker of Power. You will subtract structure because it is the synchronic marker, the totality of relations among invariants. You will subtract constants, the stable or stabilized elements because they belong to major usage. You will amputate the text because the text is like the domination of language over speech and still attests to invariance or homogeneity ("One Less Manifesto" 245).

In *The America Play* such a subtraction is accomplished through the already mentioned replacement of major signifiers like "the Founding Father," "The Great Hall of History," "forefathers" with their altered, ironic variations: "the Foundling father," "the Great hole of history," the "faux-fathers," and by the diverse multiplications of Booth's words uttered before shooting Lincoln: "Thus to the tyrants," "The South is avenged," "Now he belongs to the ages," "Strike the tent." The majoritarian, uncontested, mystifying account of history is thus disrupted, and in the rupture instituted by irony, Parks can insert the story of the Lesser Known, the man, who, though the "spittin' image" of the great Man and an exceptional *digger* was not "allowed" to bring his humble contribution to the Great history by, at least, digging the Great Man's grave.

Continuing his work of digging, the Lesser Known's family, Lucy and Brazil, are trying to recover their own husband's and father's bones, if they cannot hope to recover anything that belonged to the original Great Man. By this action, the uncovering of official "white" history and of (hi)stories of African-American individuals go together and are inextricably linked. Remarkably, this epistemological and existential revelation is

brought about solely by setting free the multiple variations of language, and engaging into their play.

In this playful process of disrupting the major signifier's meaning by alteration and supplementation, the performative power of Park's language begins to manifest very early on, when she mis-names/renames Lincoln, "the Foundling Father," and locates the action of her play in a decrepit replica of a theme park, ironically named "The Hole of History." A cheap reproduction of what everybody knows to be the "Great Hall of History," this virtual space allows for all kinds of alterations and adjustments along parodic lines, which remind us of the similar techniques employed by other Post-Soul writers.

Still, if we agree with Austin that the act of mis-naming is a performative act par excellence, the question remains how effective can we consider such technique in this particular case, given that it *affects* a fictional text, performed on stage? What could these mis-namings amount to, according to Hillis Miller's interpretation of Austin's theory of felicitous performative acts? If, in a play the speech acts cannot be taken seriously since they are not uttered in earnest, can they still count as felicitous?

To answer this question, I would like to note that from the very beginning, Parks inserts at the very center of her play a new and fascinating "character": *a hole, a gap*, that needs to be filled with unearthed bones, artifacts, and, overall, *new facts*. Next, in a continuous process of subtraction and substitution, Parks replaces the literal meanings of *the hole* with as many unexpected figurative counter-parts, which consistently destabilize its presumed "main meaning," as one can imagine. What she finally chooses as the

foundational sense of the word ends up being part of an oxymoronic structure. Thus “the Great Hole of history,” replaces the typical metaphor for tradition--“the Great Hall of History”; “foundling father” replaces “founding father,” “faux-father” and “foe-father” takes the place of “fore-father”. This substitution of figurative meanings, consistently repeated and revised throughout the play, ends up *instituting the gap as the very center of the text*, as its foundation in the most philosophical sense, and as the process that controls both the movement of the text and defines the characters’ existence in the world. At this point, the world of theater really permeates historical existence and infuses/informs/intoxicates it with new senses.

The same process of performative re-signification through the alteration of form and content is accomplished by allowing Lincoln to be present in the play only as a re-enactment by an African-American double in a theme park, or as a character in a dubious TV production. Through these re-dubbings Parks rewrites Lincoln’s biography and transforms him into a ghost, while providing full body and life to the Lesser Known. Also, the symbolic action of digging for the latter’s bones (instead of Lincoln’s) performed by Lucy and Brazil-- emphasizes the fact that at this point in time, the search is not for Lincoln’s memory, which has an already stable locus in the public conscience (so much so that now it has become the theme of a theme show) but for the heritage of the Lesser Known, the less glorious double, whose life was probably always overshadowed by the Great Man’s persona.

Parks’ substitution amounts here to a full performative act, as the new context evidences the incompleteness of Lincoln’s life-story, which unknown to us all, includes

traces of the Lesser Known's own odyssey through life and, most importantly incorporates embryos of its undermining, ultimately accomplished by the act of mimicry/faking undertaken by the Lesser Known grave digger. To these undisclosed though always present virtues of language, Parks adds a second level of performative power by the act of bone digging/remembering performed by Lucy and Brazil, which provides grandeur and legitimizes the ignored life-story of the Lesser Known.

Ultimately, Parks' insistence on the various possible images of the Foundling Father, who, despite his multiple entrances in the play does never manage to fully return as a protective father figure, but exists mostly as a foundling, an orphan, who could infinitely change form, ends up enforcing/confirming the validity of the playwright's initial insight and performative speech act: that of naming him a Foundling father. The absolute success of this speech act, its felicitous nature, according to Austin is thus guaranteed by the fact that by the end of the play, no spectator wonders why Lincoln is thus "mis-dubbed" and why instead of living in the Great Hall of History, he survives only as a pitiful character in an amusement park, while his legacy is itself reduced to the final scene of his assassination; a public circus, which people feel happy to re-enact for a penny (ironically the coin meant to commemorate him).

Overall, I would say, the result of Parks' project of creating new historical events by rewriting one of the most traumatic episodes of American history, has been that of credibly inserting among the official artifacts exhibited in the Great Hall of Fame, their "lesser" appreciated replicas through performative speech acts which managed to carry through the playwright's intention of transforming reality. Whether the project was or not

accomplished depends now on the reader. But what reader could resist a well-conducted, persuasive style?

\* \* \*

Further exploring the consequences of a performative language, which generates reality, in *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks calls into question the very concept of “essential” stable identity. With Link performing the role of Abraham Lincoln based on a simple name coincidence, of which the public who pays to shoot at him is totally unaware, the sense that “race” and “identity” are *performed*, not *essential*, makes its way into the play.

Yet, for all the de-essentialization of “race,” the consequences of racism are not easily dismissed by Suzan-Lori Parks; quite the contrary. The irony of a black man having to perform in *whiteface* the death of a public figure who, historically speaking pleaded for the African-American cause, subtly alludes to the new, though maybe less obvious forms of racism perpetuated by American society. Enslaved by consumerism and easy entertainment, such culture promotes caricatured ways of experiencing history (African-American history included) and trauma, which empties both their self-revelatory and cathartic potential. From this kind of history-game to experiencing slavery as a one-year reality-show type of experience, portrayed in Toure’s *Soul City*, or to returning to performing in blackface like Manray and Sleep’ n Eat in *Bamboozled*, is only one small step, which people may take easily, when caught in the manipulating machine of the contemporary entertainment industry.

Conversely, Suzan-Lori Parks’s parodic, and often challenging way of approaching history and the roles of African-Americans in society, ends up opening the



door to a whole new range of perceptions of this ethnic group, which ultimately become the desired alternative perspectives to age-old stereotypes. Somehow, allowing language to perform, Suzan Lori Parks has made history perform for us not the age-old play, with the predictable ending, but a fresh and refreshing version of itself, which ultimately exposes its unexpectedly rich and unexplored nuances.

### End-notes:

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term in the sense given by Hommi Bhabha in *Location of Culture*. According to Bhabha, the discourses of formerly colonized African nations should try to free themselves from their dependence on the white, hegemonic voice of the colonizer. In *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*, Suzan-Lori Parks engages in a similar effort to de-colonize the African-American discourse, and grant it a voice of its own.

<sup>2</sup> The term “agon,” etymologically means “strife, struggle” and I use it here to suggest that a “non-agonal” African-American discourse is a one that does not answer back to the dominant, white voice—but one which affirms its own values, irrespective of other traditions/cultures.

<sup>3</sup> I employ this concept here in the sense defined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*. Like many of her illustrious precursors, Suzan-Lori Parks revises and echoes African-American tradition by bringing in lots of phrases from the oral narration, through intertextuality, and last but not least, by repeating and revising. This specific form of doubling is at a certain level the typical example of Signifyin(g) as repetition with a difference. (Gates xxv)

<sup>4</sup> In *Essays*, Parks says that “language is taken from the world, refigured, and set on the page, then taken from the page, refigured, and set loose in the world again” (...)

<sup>5</sup> in the “classical”, Saussure-ian sense.

<sup>6</sup> This may be read as a manner of abandoning the damaging “master-slave” dichotomy as a way of formalizing the relationship between blacks and whites, and thus of escaping the confines of the dichotomical, agonal master-slave mentality.

<sup>7</sup> This citation partially reproduces the title of J.L. Austin memorable study *How to Do Things with Words* (1975).

<sup>8</sup> Ilka Saal in “The Politics of Mimicry: The Minor Theater of Suzan-Lori Parks” in *South Atlantic Review*, 70:2 (Spring 2005): 57- 71.

## Conclusion

*[...] The end of the essential black subject is something which people are increasingly debating, but they may not have fully reckoned with its political consequences. What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category “black”; that is, the recognition that black is essentially a politically and culturally **constructed** category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transracial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature (“New Ethnicities” 166).*

The de-essentialization of black subject presented by this lengthy quotation from Stuart Hall’s compelling analysis,<sup>1</sup> brings to the fore some of the main issues which I have attempted to delineate in the present study. Foremost among them is the acknowledgment that the extreme diversification of African-American artistic production has been mirroring the wide expansion of black life-experiences in the past decades, and has been an implicit sign of the varied ways in which African-Americans have been representing themselves since the 1970s. In this context, “race” as a single, category of (self) definition is no longer enough to encompass the multiplicity and complexity of African-American identities, which can be better encompassed by “reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity” (Hall 167).

In Hall’s reading, such a process denotes the acknowledgment that, much like other types of identities, the “black” one is a politically and culturally constructed category, which inevitably engages in periodical processes of (self)-re-fashioning. Paramount among the means that reflects, documents, and analyzes this process of (self)

transformation is the history of African-American literature, art, and (mass-media) entertainment.

Not surprisingly, beginning with the slave narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, continuing with the poetics of the Harlem Renaissance, which legitimized the artistic relevance of black vernacular, and culminating with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, which conceived of literature as an identity-constructing tool, the trajectory of African-American letters shows a close connection between art and politics. One may even venture to say that for all its history, African-American art has been political, as it was meant to aid the cause of freedom and social justice by making the world sympathetic to the predicament of African-Americans, whose accomplishments and humanity it brought to light.

Like any other veritable nationalist discourse, until the 70s, when it diversified to give voice to various other sub-groups within the community, African-American literature focused on questions of black identity and the future of the community. From the 1970s on, when it witnessed the ascendance of black women authors and the creation of its own canon which was taught in the newly formed Black Studies Departments, African-American literature has diversified greatly and, concomitantly has become more engaged in debates about form and aesthetics.

The arrival of a new generation of middle-class, college educated, urban raised artists in the 1980s, led yet to another turn in African-American aesthetics, on which I chose to focus on this particular study. As Darryl Dickson-Carr remarks, when compared to previous generations, the authors identified as Postmodern and/or Post-Soul became

known for “scrutinizing, revising, or subverting popular or foundational genres, particularly the slave narratives and their narrators” (Dickson-Carr 17), for questioning the principles of the Black Art Movement, and the violent nationalist ideology of the Black Panthers.

Resisting “the temptation to romanticize black culture [Post-Soul artists] often parody black nationalism” (Dickson-Carr 18), and move freely between the black and white cultures. “Cultural mulattoes,” as Trey Ellis called them, these authors “find themselves with unprecedented access to middle-class privileges, employment opportunities, and cultural cachet,” (Dickson-Carr 18) and thus entitled to regard the world culture and their cultural tradition in intertextual fashion.

As I hope to have already proven in the previous chapters, parody, pastiche, satire, irony are the tropes they most often use to challenge stereotypes in the representation of African-Americans, in the widely-shared assumptions, and self-projections perpetuated by the community itself, and among the iconic images popularized by mass culture and entertainment industry.

Despite their alleged irreverent bent, such devices have the merit of undertaking an in-depth critique of entrenched mentalities and practices, which plague the existence and the image-making mechanisms of African-American communities today, and of *re-signifyin* them. Writing *over* allegedly inoffensive traditional and/or popular discourses in a satirical fashion Post-Soul artists call the ‘foundational’ legitimacy of such products into question, expose their manipulative potential and their fictionality, and engage into insiders’ critique of African-American community. As such, the Post-Soul texts and films

have the advantage of encouraging their audiences to always assess what they read/see from a critical distance and thus to become aware of the sometimes subtle stereotypical, univocal, and demeaning representations of African-Americans trafficked under alluring pretexts by popular culture, by the entertainment industry of mass media, and by Hollywood culture.

Closely in touch with recent manifestations of African-American culture, Touré and Spike Lee create characters, situations, and address issues related to the impact of urban cultures and sub-cultures on all of us, thus appealing to contemporary African-American audiences and the large American public alike. Without losing its edge, in these authors' works, *race* is contextualized to address the realities of post-Civil Rights era, viewed together with determinations of class, gender, and sexuality, and thus made to *resignify*. More metaphysically inclined, Suzan-Lori Parks re-imagines the African-American identity by deconstructing the discriminatory workings of language through drawing her readers into the arbitrary, free play of signifiers. This Derridean strategy has the merit of playfully unveiling the undeniable connection between the writing of history, identity, and community—while persuasively proving that there is always room for *re-writing* and *re-signifyin(g)* hegemonic discourses.

Overall, though one may find points of contact between the Post-Soul generation and the previous ones, what singles out the former is their emphatic self-aware, ironic, and critical approach to sensitive issues traditionally defining African-American identity. This approach makes their writings more, not less political, even though their main path of manifestation is the employment of aesthetic devices such as language games,

rewriting techniques, ironic presentations of iconic figureheads, and implicit unveilings of the traps of public entertainment.

If the political undertone and the staunch interest in the fate of the community connects them with tradition, the turn toward aesthetic games in a large sense, including word games, (re)signifying, but also irony, pastiche, are means through which Post-Soul artists engage serious ‘content’ issues that continue to plague the existence, representation, and self-image of African-Americans.

Aware of class, gender, sexuality differences and at the same time of the game of representation, which has led and will inevitably lead to culturally and politically constructed identities, African-American Post-Soul artists turn to parodic, intertextual, self-referential techniques in order to reshuffle the traditional “monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized and always ‘right-on’” (Hall 171) representations of the community. The result of this intense self-re-reading and re-writing is a complex, sometimes contradictory, many times non-complimentary mosaic of African-American identities, which gives a fuller measure of the multifaceted profile of this community today.

**End-notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Though Stuart Hall’s “New Ethnicities” article refers to the black experience in Britain not in the United States, his observations and conclusions apply perfectly to the situation of the African-American community, and as such I chose to use his insights in the present study.

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### **Brief Biography**

Letitia Guran was awarded a MA and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Georgia in 2001 and 2005, respectively. Her dissertation was about the functions of the aesthetic in 20<sup>th</sup> century East-Central European and North American criticism. To further explore aspects of multi-cultural American literature, touched upon in her dissertation and her teaching, she registered in the MA Program at University of Richmond, where she was offered the opportunity to focus closely on these topics. Her areas of expertise include East-Central European literature, theoretical approaches to comparative literature, 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics, comparative American topics, ethnic American literature, and mass media.

Her most recently published articles include: "Romanian Literature under Stalinism" in the *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe* (vol.1--Eds. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, John Benjamins, 2004); "Mapping East-Central European Literatures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" in *The New Central and East European Culture* (Eds. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek, Carmen Andras, and Magdalena Marsovszky, Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2006); "The Aesthetic Dimension of American-Romanian Comparative Literary Studies" in *The Comparatist*; "Aesthetics: a Modus Vivendi in East Central Europe?" in *State of Ideas*. Costica Bradatan and Serguei Oushakine (eds.). Berghahn Books, (forthcoming); "The Logic of Postmodernism in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Mircea Cartarescu's *Nostalgia*." forthcoming in *The Comparatist*; "Suzan-Lori Parks and the Aesthetic Turn in Ethnic-American Literature," selected to be published in an edited collection by Ohio University Press.