

Clemson University

TigerPrints

All Theses

Theses

5-2022

“People Like They Historical Shit in a Certain Way”: The Civil War Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, or Commercialized Memory and Black Lives

Brandon Eric Fisher

Clemson University, BrandonF96@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fisher, Brandon Eric, "“People Like They Historical Shit in a Certain Way”: The Civil War Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, or Commercialized Memory and Black Lives" (2022). *All Theses*. 3779.

https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/3779

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

“PEOPLE LIKE THEY HISTORICAL SHIT IN A CERTAIN WAY”:
THE CIVIL WAR PLAYS OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS,
OR COMMERCIALIZED MEMORY AND BLACK LIVES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Brandon Fisher
May 2022

Accepted by:
Dr. Michael LeMahieu, Committee Chair
Dr. Kimberly Manganelli
Dr. Angela Naimou

ABSTRACT

Suzan-Lori Parks has explored the relationship between Blackness, slavery, and capitalism throughout her career. I argue that Parks's three works—*The America Play* (1995), *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), and *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2015)—should receive critical attention as her Civil War plays. By this phrase, I mean that Parks embeds her critiques of racial capitalism in historical narratives about America's bloodiest conflict. In these three plays, she takes up several white supremacist Civil War tropes—tropes like what scholar Cody Marrs calls the “Father Abraham” story and the “Agrarian Imagination” myth—and criticizes them as narratives that deny African American history. To do so, Parks uses her original historical approach called “Repetition and Revision” (or “Rep & Rev”) to stage various characters who struggle to break from commercialism's grip. In *TAP*, she portrays a Lincoln look-alike who cannot shake his obsession with a history theme park. *T/U* pits two brothers, named Booth and Lincoln, against one another, and their financial struggles lead the two to share the fate of their namesakes. Lastly, *Father* casts a Black Confederate soldier who cannot find a way to escape slavery; he remains unable to “own himself.” Together, these plays demonstrate Parks's concern for America's discourse about the Civil War and Blackness. If we are to indeed believe that Black lives matter, her plays argue, we must remove the symbolic price tags racist stories place on Black lives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	1
ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION	4
AN ECHO OF THE PAST: THE TWO LINCOLNS	10
“AND THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE / EVEN IF THE MASTER DONT”: FREEDOM AND THE BODY IN <i>FATHER COMES HOME FROM THE WARS</i>	26
CODA	37
WORKS CITED	40

INTRODUCTION

In her 1995 essay “Possession,” Suzan-Lori Parks writes, “The relationship between possessor and possessed is, like ownership is, multidirectional” (3-4). This tension between owner and owned informs Parks’s bibliography. She argues that the person possessed can hold a kind of power over what keeps them captive. Her work breaks from racist historical narratives that turn Black lives into simply Black bodies, and she gives new agency to people whom white supremacy has left “unrecorded, dismembered, washed out.” Parks seeks to “locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (4-5). Three plays in particular—*The America Play* (1995), *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), and *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2015)—provide unique examples of Parks’s desire to rediscover Black lives. These works, I argue, are her Civil War plays. In using this name, I mean that the three root their historical retellings in the myths America produces about its bloodiest conflict. To Parks, these narratives obfuscate the roles African Americans had in the creation of the United States—as well as in the gaining of their own freedom—and blur the Civil War’s ultimate cause: an unrelenting need to maintain the institution of slavery. In these works, Parks wants audiences to see how myths about both the war and slavery continue to oppress Blackness. She hopes they will cast such inaccurate stories aside and “hear the bones sing.”

As a white man that grew up in rural South Carolina, the white supremacist stories Parks satirizes and mocks are the stories my grandparents celebrated and the ones they made a point to share with me. My grandfather flew a Confederate flag in the front

yard. My grandmother kept old editions of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with Wind* in a glass collector's cabinet. In the living room, a Confederate-themed cuckoo clock would acknowledge each hour: its tiny cannon appeared and played a small exploding sound, and like that the Army of Northern Virginia continued their fight throughout the afternoon and early morning. These childhood artifacts, I later learned, were vestiges of the South's (and America's) continual rejection of Blackness. Yet many people I know from my childhood—high school classmates and church friends—have never felt burdened by the fact that their hometown in Greenwood County, like all the South, has deep ties with slavery and segregation. When I drive through Ninety Six, South Carolina, I inevitably see a Confederate flag attached to a pickup truck, hung over a porch balcony, or flying on a flag pole like my grandfather's. The message intended is clear: the place for Black lives is inferior to white ones. African American history, so that flag says, is subordinate to the stories told about Lee and Northern oppression and the so-called tyranny of Lincoln. The way white grievances are bound to Confederate iconography is deeply planted, but Parks insists that we remove these racist stories by their roots.

Indeed, her Civil War plays ask how readers of history might ethically represent the Black body in their (re)tellings of America's past. Specifically, though, she wants her audience to consider how white supremacist stories about the Civil War have maintained Blackness as something fungible. She stages characters whose bodies are up for sale, their flesh commodities. In *TAP*, the Foundling Father cannot escape his dream of creating a commercial theme park that contains cheap vestiges of the 16th president. *T/U*'s Lincoln (or "Link") performs in a side-show act, and Booth becomes obsessed with

the three-card monte scam. *Father's Hero* can recite his financial value and the factors that determine it. Simply put, the market causes Parks's characters to no longer know themselves; they lose their identities. Saidiya Hartman explains this cruel effect on the commercialized body in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997): "the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projections of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body" (21). The Black body that still bears the marks of the market cannot be wholly autonomous. That individual instead bears the characteristics of property. Therefore, if we are to permanently remove the commodification of Blackness, Parks's plays suggests, the U.S. requires a historical narrative that takes greater fault for its slave trade and the practice of chattel slavery. Without that assumption of responsibility, Americans further the harms of enslavers.

Those harms are inherent to the market. In his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1984), Cedric Robinson famously claims that capitalism's origin was not a "catastrophic revolution" in which the practices of feudal societies were thrown away and reimagined (10). Instead Europe's "racialism and its permutations persisted, rooted not in a particular era but in the civilization itself" (28). To Robinson, capitalism bears all the racist prejudices of the old economic order and owes its existence to the exploitation of racialized peoples, and because of this account—what he calls "racial capitalism"—Robinson's work informs a discussion of Parks's Civil War plays. Parks's characters suffer from a continuation of racism's relationship to the market. Some

like Hero are enslaved, but others like Lincoln, Booth, and the Foundling Father are simply caught in the wake of that bondage. They receive no reparations for their pain, no help to escape their situations. Furthermore, Parks's works argue that freedom for Black bodies begins with the breakdown of commercial forces. Her vision of emancipation would mean that the market no longer defines Blackness and the possibilities that a Black life can embody. Her audience's recognition that race and capitalism are inseparable historically is therefore necessary for the creation of this liberty.

In Parks's account, white supremacist narratives about the Civil War perpetuate racial capitalism. The literary scholar Cody Marris writes in his book, *Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling about the Civil War* (2020), that these lies render themselves in "several basic plots—primal stories that we tell each other again and again—[that] continually compete for cultural primacy" (7). Parks wants to tear apart myths like, as Marris calls it, the "Father Abraham" story—a complete infatuation with Lincoln as the central character in a long spite between an otherwise friendly North and South—and "The Agrarian Imagination," which portrays the treatment of African Americans on plantations as a paternal institution necessary for the maintenance of Southern civilization (30-41, 114-120). Additionally, Parks complicates a fiction that Marris terms "A Family Squabble" and the trope of the Black Confederate soldier. These narratives portray "the American nation [as] a family" and enslaved men as volunteers who sought to protect slavery (12-13). More generally, though, Parks deconstructs Civil War memory that makes absent Black struggle and instead emphasizes what the historian David Blight calls the "emancipationist" mode of remembrance, a remembering that foregrounds the

enslaved's push for their freedom, not the ruminations of a Lost Cause or unfair war (2). Doing so does not mean that Parks banishes all racism, but a Black view of the Civil War serves as a small act of resistance against centuries of enslavement and its contemporary effects. Parks's plays provide a self-proclaimed "blueprint" for escaping the market's influence over Blackness (4).

To criticize the Lost Cause, Parks uses the dramatic structure of "Repetition and Revision" or "Rep & Rev" when she stages a historical event like the Civil War (8-10). This original approach allows Parks to repeat the past onstage, like the Lincoln assassination in both *TAP* and *T/U*, but in lieu of providing a realistic recreation of April 14, 1865, she offers a revised version—a new history—of this crucial moment in American cultural memory. In both plays, a Black actor dresses as Lincoln, then allows mostly white customers to fire a gun blank into the back of the faked Abraham's head. In *T/U* specifically, the historical relationship between Booth and Lincoln, assassin and victim, plays out between two brothers who share the duo's names. Parks's plays come loaded with such allegory, and *T/U* specifically reveals a truth about the war's memory through the absurd image of a Black Lincoln and a series of pretend Booths who pay money to watch the president "die": Parks argues the overly simple understanding of the 16th president as a hero to Black people and a Christ-like martyr ignores the racial aspects of the war and Lincoln's own racist shortcomings. The Lincoln story, in this mythic form, centers the president's white body, or it implies John Wilkes Booth's act was the result of mundane political disagreements, not Booth's support for white supremacy. When America accepts that myth, to Parks, the country loses an essential nuance about the Civil

War and its racial history: our most destructive conflict originated in white people's wish to own Black bodies.

Parks's approach is entirely liberatory. She wants an audience to bring Black history into mainstream conversations about the Civil War. Yet Parks herself does not often speak so explicitly about the ethical importance of her work. Hartman, who approaches historical recreation like Parks, puts that process in stronger terms. In "Venus in Two Acts," she writes about representing the lives of enslaved people: "The dream is to liberate them from the obscene descriptions that first introduced them to us" (6). Parks takes up this moral power when in *TAP*, *T/U*, and *Father* she shows the damages of commodified Blackness: she portrays them through the clothes her actors wear, their struggle to acquire money in a structurally racist economy, knowledge of their financial self-worth, their life ambitions, and so on. Parks does not just set free those lost to history, those purposely left out of the historical record, however. She also wants to address how cultural narratives about the past affect lives lived in the present. Having gained emancipation from actual enslavers, her characters have no choice but to substitute these masters for a figurative one—money. She asks, what will be different about the contemporary moment if America contends with the commodification of Blackness? Parks wants to free bodies from the margins of the nation's memory and relieve them from the yoke of the market.

AN ECHO OF THE PAST: THE TWO LINCOLNS

TAP and *T/U* show how the adoption of Civil War myths like the historical canonization of Lincoln as god-man and the war as the result of a bickering family perpetuate the market's oppression of African Americans. Indeed, they also perform a literal and figurative cover-up of Black bodies. For example, both plays include a Black actor dressed as Lincoln. Like the president, Parks's characters suffer and die. Unlike the president, however, they die many times over. *TAP*'s The Foundling Father and *T/U*'s Lincoln or "Link" have careers at a theme park and an arcade respectively, and at those consumerist fun houses, (majority) white audiences approach them and shoot them "dead." Both Lincolns then act out the throes of suffering. They make their bodies toss on the floor, wail, and moan—anything to please a customer. Death becomes their livelihoods. Yet, after some time, Link's clearly fake performance no longer satisfies the arcade goers, and management fires him. His performance is not *real* enough. Eventually the customers' expectations for what the past should be—a history that brings them nothing but pleasure—bumps heads with the underperforming Black man, who is desperate to pay rent and avoid a fallout with his brother. Similarly, the Foundling Father, obsessed with becoming like Lincoln or the "Great Man," as he calls the president, never can succeed at this goal (159). That shortcoming causes him to grow increasingly unstable, and he feels that he must leave his family to pursue his recreation of Lincoln and the theme park. Thus two lives are destroyed before they reach their physical ends.

In *TAP*, Parks uses the phenomenon of an echo to describe how Civil War myths originate. For example, the play's first of two acts, a long monologue given by the

Foundling Father, ends with a shot from a gun, another customer satisfied. The sound of that blast does not just announce the arrival of intermission, however. As the second act starts, Parks's stage instructions say that "*A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes*" (174). The shot from the fake Lincoln assassination, which is itself an echo of the original assassination in 1865, becomes audible to Lucy and Brazil, the Foundling Father's wife and son. However, what Lucy and Brazil hear—indeed what the Foundling Father himself hears when he thinks of the "Great Man"—is not the actual historical event, but a new, hollowed version: an echo of an echo. As we know from the science of sound, an echo, when it reverberates, loses its force with every reverberation. A piece of the original sound fades and distorts each time, until eventually a noise devoid from the first remains. For Parks, the issue with our history is not that the past has no force, having lost its power through constant reverberation; rather our cultural narratives, particularly about the Civil War, have grown so distant from the original event, the first instance of sound, that we can only access the original through recreations and attempts to retell what happened.

According to Parks, we as observers of history are in a situation like Lucy's, who must use an ear trumpet to hear the echoes of the gunshots, as well as the distant mumblings of her husband's voice. Lucy tells the audience that the noise she hears contains three distinct parts. The first she calls "thuh sound. (e.g. thuh gunplay.)" The second she refers to as "thuh words." These words are themselves split into two categories: "Type A: thuh words from thuh dead" and "Type B: words less fortunate: thuh Disembodied Voice. Also known as 'Thuh Whispers.'" Importantly, Lucy tells

Brazil the second type is “Like your Fathuhs.” The third and final kind is “thuh body itself” (184). Through this complicated scene, Parks lays out for her audience how she sees truth become mythology and especially how this evolution happens with respect to Lincoln’s assassination. The event, the gunshot happens, but what comes after are the “words,” the telling. At first, “Thuh dead” deliver them. Perhaps Parks means those that witnessed Lincoln’s death or contemporaries who wrote about him, like Walt Whitman. For Parks, however, where historical narration really goes awry is when our stories about the past move beyond this first level. When the “Disembodied Voice,” the Foundling Father’s words, enter the equation a century and a half later, we no longer have an intimacy with the bang of the gunshot, but simply “Thuh whispers” of the event. Truth is now entirely “disembodied” from the past.

The most important of the echo’s three-part composition is this notion of “thuh body itself.” The Lincoln myth, in particular, places an emphasis on the 16th president’s whiteness and the body of the deceased. Because of his many grand speeches (some of which the Foundling Father recites incompletely) and perhaps the most famous document from Lincoln’s time in office—the Emancipation Proclamation—the president took on the role of a Christ-like martyr, a white savior, upon his death, as depicted in the elegies of Walt Whitman and countless books and films after the war (Marrs 30-41). Lincoln became synonymous with the end of slavery and Black freedom; thus his reputation as a hero of the enslaved overshadows the complicated history of Black struggle during Reconstruction and beyond. These past echoes are what the Foundling Father heard one day as someone told him that he “bore a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln” (159).

Far from a compliment, the Foundling Father's resemblance to the "Great Man" is an example of the Lincoln myth's exclusionary nature. Parks does not allow the Foundling Father to maintain his own identity—indeed, his own body. The fact that he is "foundling" stems from his desire, but failure, to live up to the historical fiction of the canonized white president. This aspect of his character is indicative of the way that the play "becomes a hall of mirrors in which various incarnations of the same character appear and change shape, thereby calling attention to the theatricality of the space and questioning the authenticity of the represented event" (Wilmer 446). Lincoln is reflected in the Foundling Father's Black body, but the irony of this fact allows us to critique how Lincoln arrives to us from the echoes of the past.

Historical fantasies like the obsession with the 16th president's body are what keep the Foundling Father tied to the market and the specter of slavery. That entrapment begins at The Great Hole of History, a theme park located in a steep hole where paying customers can see faked versions of actual historical figures, as well as characters that are entirely fictional. There, the Foundling Father first realizes how he can turn a profit off his Lincoln-like appearance. The people he sees include, as Lucy tells the audience, "Amerigo Vespucci... Marcus Garvey. Ferdinand and Isabella. Mary Queen of thuh Scotts! Tarzan King of Thuh Apes! Washington Jefferson Harding and Millard Fillmore. Mistufer Columbus even" (180). Such an eclectic bunch reveal the nature of the Foundling Father's historical education. He cannot maintain a distinction between a past that is real and one that is created. The market, no doubt, is to blame for this problem. The Great Hole of History's purpose is to put on a show that will entertain a paying

audience. Therefore, canonical and mythologized portrayals of Christopher Columbus, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington make an appearance, but also someone like Tarzan, a racist caricature of native peoples, arrives onstage. The purpose is to show the most convenient, pleasurable versions of history, its most harmful moments removed. Even the figure of Marcus Garvey cannot overcome this atmosphere. His powerful stances on Black liberation and separatism disappear under the other characters' presences. Black anti-racism falls into The Great Hole. What is left of the past are these likenesses, "Reconstructed Historicities," as the Foundling Father calls them, and that shell of the original is what he adopts as his own.

The absurdity of the Foundling Father's no-win situation provokes Parks's audience to laughter, yet her attempt to create humor about the market's oppression of Blackness does not interfere with the emancipatory ethic of her works. Indeed, Glenda Carpio, writing in her book, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, argues for the historical necessity of humor in Black discourse about racism,

Yet to confront the maddening illusions of race and the insidiousness of racism we may just need to laugh long and hard, perhaps in the tragicomic notes of the blues or in the life-affirming spirit of righteous insurgency. For centuries, in fact, African Americans have faced racism, in its various manifestations and guises, with a rich tradition that, instead of diminishing the dangers and perniciousness of racism, highlights them. (17-18)

The Foundling Father, as he vainly mimics Lincoln and creates a theme park, appears as ridiculous onstage as he sounds—"Uh Hehm: 4score and 7 years ago our fathers—ah you know thuh rest!"—but the absurdity of Parks's character should be read as an example of the way she "highlights," to use Carpio's word, the damage racist narratives cause (197). In other words, with respect to the Foundling Father, the Lincoln myth is so ingrained in

our cultural education about the Civil War that to point out the problems of this practice means that Parks must inure an audience with the strongest image she can produce: a Black man who dedicates his life to becoming the 16th president, a leader who was both white and held racist views of African Americans. In *TAP*, like in each of Parks's Civil War plays, gratuitous irony is the point.

After his life-changing experience at The Great Hole of History, the Foundling Father not only cannot break from the park and the market; he also furthers the damage the two cause. He leaves his job as a gravedigger and begins to embody their use of history as a commodity, becoming, eventually, that commodity himself. As Lucy says, "Diggin was his livelihood but fakin was his callin" (179). The distinction, though, between this livelihood as a digger and his calling as a faker is not all that disparate. As the Foundling Father waits for another customer to pretend to shoot him in the back of his head, he buries the past and, like the Great Hole, places it in a symbolic hole or grave. The affinity of one career with another is an example of what Konstantinos Blatanis says is Parks's "urg[ing] her audience to become aware of the multiple layers of inscriptions on bodies, presences, subjects deliberately left in obscurity, simply designated as the Lesser-Known ones" (178). The role of Lincoln impersonator allows the Foundling Father to escape some of the poverty and lack of dignity that came with gravedigging. However, fulfilling his "callin" does not mean that the Foundling Father undertakes a complete and fundamental change of self. Rather, throughout the play, he remains under the market's oppressive forces. He continues to live as the Lesser Known, even as he does his best to change his fate (159). The Foundling Father tries to perform the history

that The Great Hole and the market made attractive for him, but that realm of total unreality means that he is only further stuck in his foundlingness.

The internalization of the market does not just affect the Foundling Father alone, but his family, Lucy and Brazil, also must deal with the damage it creates. Parks uses them to show how our understandings of the past make their way to us through ancestral lineages; however, as history travels, its wrongful interpretations of the Civil War can continue harm toward Black people. The obvious result is that Lucy loses her husband and that Brazil grows up without his father. This absence means that Brazil and Lucy must themselves experience the past through echoes. Mother and son must sort “thuh real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay” (175). During the second act, “Hall of Wonders,” sounds of gunshots and of the Foundling Father’s voice reverberate into the play’s present. Over and over, Lucy tells Brazil to “Dig on, son” so that the two can uncover some artifact of the past, some evidence of the Foundling Father amidst the ruins of his theme park—his body. They must labor to understand and experience their family history. They toil, yet what remains of that history is the remnants of a theme park, a commercial enterprise. As Laura Dawkins writes, this moment between Lucy and Brazil is “a metaphorical journey of remembrance that connects them, through ritualistic ceremony, to a familial and ancestral history.” The digging creates a moment where Lucy and Brazil can “partially resolve their grief” (88). The two never have their sorrow completely alleviated, even after the Foundling Father comes back to meet them posthumously. The Lesser Known is unable to perform the role of father or consoler—only the same cheap version of Lincoln.

Yet Parks's first Lincoln character does not remain in the perpetual limbo between a search for self-realization and the commercialization of history forever; rather, Parks shows that the "disembodied" past that the Foundling Father adopts leads to the death of Blackness and African American history, the destruction of the Black body. *TAP* concludes with a second killing of the Foundling Father. Brazil stands over his father's coffin and delivers a eulogy, but Parks does not allow her audience to feel any kind of sentimentalism in the son's words. Brazil's monologue is instead delivered through the style of an auctioneer's speech or like a carnival barker. He declares, "Welcome Welcome Welcome to thuh hall. Of. Wonders." (198). At this final, yet crucial, moment in the play, Brazil has completely adopted his father's approach to history and the market. Indeed, Brazil practically sells the Foundling Father's dead body to the audience. Posing next to artifacts like a "Jewel Box of cherry wood, lined in velvet, letters 'A.L.' carved in gold on thuh lid," "Mr. Washington's bones," and "Uh medal for fakin," the Foundling Father sits dead. He is, says Brazil, "our newest Wonder: One of thuh greats Hissself!" (198-199). The closing moments of *TAP* do not end with a burial. Parks keeps the Foundling Father's body on perpetual display, even as "thuh great black hole in thuh great head...is bleedin" (199). That gunshot wound, present for the first time, not only marries the fate of the actual Lincoln to that of the Foundling Father, but the commercialization of history ends the faux Lincoln's life. The bleeding hole is emblematic of The Great Hole of History, of African American history's "death" and its removal from the stories America tells. This forced absence, Parks tells us, causes untold damage to individuals, families, and the U.S. itself.

In *T/U*, Parks's second Lincoln character finds himself within a similar dilemma, but in that play, Parks takes up the familial undertones of *TAP* more explicitly. Left by his parents when he was a teenager, poverty forces this other Lincoln to resort to scam—a three-card monte trick—to live, but when his wife leaves him, he moves in with his brother, Booth. This Lincoln decides to leave his street hustle, and he becomes a presidential look-alike, similar to the Foundling Father. He acts out the death of the 16th president at a local arcade, while fake John Wilkes Booths arrive to shoot a blank at his head. What differentiates *T/U*'s Lincoln from that of *TAP*, though, is his domesticity. The Foundling Father only returns to Lucy and Brazil through echoes, but Parks depicts the second Lincoln character with his brother Booth and at the latter's rented flat. In her introduction to *T/U*, Parks talks briefly about the play's creation and her reason for crafting a second work around the death of Abraham Lincoln. She writes, "So I was thinking about my old play when another black Lincoln impersonator, unrelated to the first guy, came to mind: a new character for a new play. This time I would just focus on his home life. ... This is a play about family wounds and healing" (Introduction). Ironically, the wounds that Lincoln suffers—much like the gunshot in the Foundling Father's head—never do heal. Overdetermined by the market and the myths of Father Abraham and the Family Squabble that define both their identities and fates, *T/U*'s Booth murders Lincoln, the brothers finding no way out of the financial pressures that American life places on their lives.

Yet the primary way that Parks criticizes faked history in *T/U* continues to be her Lincoln characters' pressure to perform commercialized history or, in other words, their

need to display their Black bodies to please the mainly white audiences who come to “shoot” them. They must make inaccurate historical narratives feel real. *T/U*’s Lincoln does so to maintain his relationship with his brother, who constantly harasses him about bills due, and to pay rent on the flat they share. Unlike the Foundling Father, however, Lincoln shows a constant dissatisfaction with becoming the 16th president. He does not possess the same urge to make himself into the “Great Man.” Parks’s second Lincoln understands that the owners of the arcade exploit him. At one point, he tells Booth, “All day long I wear that getup. But that dont make me who I am” (29). Indeed, they constantly remind Lincoln that he can be substituted for a fake Lincoln doll if his performance drops off, a move that they eventually make. Yet driven by financial considerations, Lincoln remains at the job. He must bow to the market and surrender his dignity. Lincoln’s resistance to his body’s commoditization—both through his attitude toward his job and his decision to take up a subversive form of money-making through the three-monte scam—does little to allay the economic structures that dominate his life. The presence of work makes its way into all aspects of existence. Lincoln becomes the faked version of his namesake, a fact that prompts Booth to remark about Lincoln’s work outfit, “You should take it all of it off at work and leave it there.” The distinction between his brother Lincoln and the arcade’s white-faced version, though, is not so clear. Lincoln responds, “I dont bring it home someone might steal it” (11). He must do all he can to protect this artificial self, whose fate is bound to his own.

T/U’s Link realizes that his enactment of a false past, his wearing the Lincoln costume, dehumanizes him and begins to obscure his own identity; however, Parks uses

her character's struggle to break from the commoditization of his body to show the difficult task of gaining freedom from the overdetermining nature of Civil War myths. In their book, *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks* (2012), Jennifer Larson and Linda Wagner-Martin write about the psychological hold that the Lincoln costume has over characters in both *T/U* and *TAP*: "This costume becomes an all-inclusive signifier of Lincoln-the-President and has a hypnotic effect on those who come into contact with it, charming them into believing that whoever wears the costume is actually Lincoln-the-President." Larson and Wagner-Martin point out, too, that the Foundling Father and Link approach the costume in separate ways—the Foundling Father makes the outfit "internal," they say, while Link keeps a distance between his work dress and himself (60). Ultimately because of his inability to convince arcade goers with his Lincoln act, Link loses his employment, but I argue there is reason to think that, despite Link's resistance to the Lincoln costume, he does internalize some of its qualities. At times, he worries that the distinction between the fake fit and the whiteface and himself, what is real, come dangerously close to one another. For example, when Booth calls what his brother does "a hustle," Lincoln responds, "People know the real deal. When people know the real deal it aint a hustle" (22). For the many people who come to shoot Link in the head, however, Parks does not make it so clear that they know or are able to obtain the "real deal." They eventually grow uninterested with Link's performance, and the arcade substitutes him with a doll. The consumers grow more convinced by the total fake, and this fact terrifies Lincoln.

Parks uses that fear to explain how her second Lincoln character and his brother bear the brunt of the market's harm. That harm falls heaviest onto their ideas of Black

family. As Myka Tucker-Abramson writes, “Both characters are in crisis—economically and with respect to their masculinity—and Parks’s notion of wealth is both a cause of and a metaphor for the crisis” (77). Lincoln and Booth are each distraught because of their inability to become heads of households. Without their parents and the women they pine for, they must rely on one another for survival, as neither can afford to buy their own living space. Here Parks makes a nod to the Family Squabble myth, but instead of using family as a symbol of a white nation at war, she satirizes this racist approach by making the family’s members Black and their financial struggles emblematic of the harm Civil War memory can cause. To emphasize this criticism, Parks has no other character physically manifest onstage; she only represents male bodies. Lincoln and Booth remain alone with one another, and the other characters in the play’s world are described to the audience. Despite the brothers’ loneliness, these other characters, along with the harsh and unforgiving America they represent, seem always present at the brothers’ door, always on the edge of invading their rented flat. The brothers grow terrified that someone will enter and take what little they have—symbolically castrating them. Most notably, throughout the fifth scene, Booth waits for his date, Grace, to appear. He does his best to make the apartment as refined as he can. Booth hides his porn magazines and throws a nice cloth over their ramshackle table. Yet Grace never comes. Instead, to Booth’s chagrin, Lincoln appears after having just lost his job. Parks has Lincoln become a kind of stand-in for the woman or partner with whom Booth desires to share his home, an arrangement that Booth hates. Throughout the scene, he tells Lincoln, “You gotta go”

(62). Yet there is no place for Lincoln to run. The only place that Lincoln has is the reclining chair at his brother's flat. Booth and Lincoln are stuck together.

Parks does not create a strong emotional attachment between Booth and Lincoln, despite their reliance on one another, although the ever-present threat of homelessness compels the brothers to maintain a strained peace. At root, however, Booth and Lincoln are antagonists, like their namesakes, and this dynamic becomes most obvious through the three-card monte game. The cards become a battleground where the two can compete, recognize their gendered feelings, and dominate the other, much the same way that the market seeks to dominate them. They can, as Booth succinctly puts it, “make money” (19). The game is a space in which they can repair the masculinity that their jobs and lived economic conditions have insulted. Such reparation, as Tucker-Abramson points out, does not happen, however: “[I]f masculinity is based on economic worth and economics become unhinged from their Real value, then that notion of masculinity itself becomes increasingly difficult to maintain” (77-78). In other words, as two men who must live out the echoes of historical narratives—narratives that no longer have any attachment to truth—especially in the case of Lincoln, they cannot embody the kind of masculinity that they seek to own. The only masculinity they can accomplish now is one where everything, even their house, can be pulled out from under them with one missed payment. To Booth and Lincoln, their situation feels impossible. At the conclusion of Scene 1, Parks provides her audience some insight into why the brothers are so ill-fated. Booth and Lincoln talk about their names and how they got them. Lincoln says about

their father's choice in names, "It was his idea of a joke" (24). The feeling of being a "joke" informs the brothers' lives.

Parks makes Lincoln and Booth love money more than each other and especially the money they receive when their parents leave. Their mother and father give the brothers each a tied sock stuffed with bills, what Booth refers to as their "inheritance," before departing indefinitely (17). That money is all the brothers have left of their personal and familial heritage. Parks substitutes the family's interpersonal bonds for cash; the sock is the brothers' intergenerational wealth. In this depiction of how money passes from parents to children, Parks wants to remove blame toward Lincoln and Booth for their financial and personal dilemmas, part of what Patricia Stuelke calls the play's resistance to "the American antiblack tragedy trap: a double bind that locks Black subjects into the recursive roles of universal tragic martyrs and pathological tragic victims" (755). Rather than portray the brothers as creators of their own fates, Parks has the economic and racist forces that govern Booth and Lincoln make three-card monte and the violence that results from it a necessity. Parks wants us to understand, too, that the financial humiliation Lincoln and Booth exist under is not detached from the racial regimes they battle. Lincoln says about his employment at the arcade, "They got a slew of guys working but Im the only one they look over every day" (54). His Black skin, even as it is buried under a Lincoln costume and the white face the arcade manager forced him to wear, always invites suspicion. Therefore, shut out from more traditional avenues of income, Lincoln and Booth begin to play the card game seriously. Restoring lost money

and lost opportunity is, after the market has thrown them aside, the only thing they know to do.

Parks has Booth and Lincoln desire to get ahead in the market system that holds them back, not destroy it. After Lincoln loses his job, Booth declares, “Link. Yr free. Dont go crawling back. Yr free at last! Now you can do anything you want. Yr not tied down by that job. You can—you can do something else. Something that pays better maybe” (62). Rather than console his brother, Booth says something sinister. Lincoln, of course, is not free; he desperately needs a source of income to survive and for the brothers to continue to lease their home. Booth’s desire, his reason for using liberatory language, is to convince Lincoln to play three-monte with him. Yet that game, with its high risks and its performative aspects (“Thuh moves and thuh grooves, thuh talk and thuh walk...”), is not unlike Lincoln’s gig at the arcade (75). Lincoln’s departure from his job and Booth’s theft of clothes and other items are not nails in the market’s coffin. To the contrary, these events are evidence that the market’s influence over them remains. During *T/U*’s climax, the moment when Lincoln wins Booth’s inheritance after beating him in a round of three-card monte, the desperation for money and the feelings of inadequacy reach their height. Booth, paralleling the actual Booth, shoots and kills Lincoln. However, after Booth performs this deed and says, “Ima take back my inheritance too. It was mines anyhow,” the pressures the market once had over he and his brother fade. Booth recognizes the absurdity of what he has done, and Parks ends her play with Booth wailing for his brother’s dead body. She leaves her audience with the ultimate harm the market can cause: Black destruction and death.

Audiences should interpret *T/U*'s ending, like that of *TAP*, as an allegory for what false narratives like the Lincoln and Family Squabble myth can do to Black history and Blackness, but readers should interpret Link's death differently than the Foundling Father's final moments. Parks uses the Foundling Father's demise to critique commercialized Civil War memory; however, his passing does not signify a break with myth and market. Brazil's performance throughout this last scene shows that the Father's obsession with selling a financially viable version of the Black self now passes to the son. In contrast, Booth's final wail, as he holds his brother's body, the body he murdered, represents a full disruption. History and the market no longer determine the brothers, even if Link bears their damage. *T/U*'s Booth does not flee like his historical counterpart. Instead, he accepts responsibility for what harm both the economic and historical pressures that surround his and Booth's lives have wrought. Parks's stage instructions remark, "*He bends to pick up the money-filled stocking. Then he just crumples. As he sits beside Lincoln's body, the money-stockings falls away*" (110). Booth is unable to reach for his "inheritance." In this horrible moment, market forces no longer attract him. He can only grasp his brother's flesh and blood, what is real, and Booth's masculinity, symbolized by the scrotum-like stocking, does not occupy his mind. The Lincoln costume and commercialized history no longer determine Link's Black skin. Yet the message Parks delivers in this powerful last scene is that, even in moments of escape, of freedom from the market, Black history will always wield commoditization's consequences and scars.

“AND THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE / EVEN IF THE MASTER DONT”:
FREEDOM AND THE BODY IN FATHER COMES HOME FROM THE WARS

Father is the only work of Parks’s three Civil War titles set during the conflict. *Father* tracks its central character, a slave satirically named Hero, through three short acts—before, during, and after the war’s conclusion—including the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. Therefore, in this play, Parks takes up her concern with certain Civil War narratives and their effect on Black bodies most explicitly. She challenges the falsehood of the willing Black Confederate soldier, who takes up arms to preserve the South and slavery, and the idea that white enslavers treated those they enslaved with dignity and respect. Parks also directs her audience’s attention to the failures of African American emancipation. She attacks oversimplified ideas of Black freedom and troubles a notion often found in mainstream American historical discourse: the false claim that history is linear, always headed towards some distant moral victory. Against this mode of thought, she uses a complicated protagonist who cannot fully comprehend a life free from slavery. Parks shows how the afterlife of the slave market and a life lived under white supremacist violence creates a perpetual obstacle to a genuine form of freedom. Indeed, she questions what real freedom *is* and whether the Black body can ever be fully liberated.

Parks makes almost all the enslaved who work for Boss-Master, the owner of the plantation on which Hero lives, accept that their bodies are property. This acceptance limits their ability to imagine emancipation. For instance, in the first act, appropriately titled, “A Measure of a Man,” Parks has these characters rehash their financial worth. The

enslaved gamble over whether Hero will follow Boss-Master to the frontlines of the war effort. As one Chorus member says, “There is a kind of sport to be had / In the consideration of someone else’s fate” (11). Boss-Master, in a moment of mock kindness, gives Hero the decision whether to ride with him into battle or not. If he goes, Boss-Master promises Hero emancipation. No doubt, that choice is a loaded one—we can imagine that Hero will suffer significant consequences if he says no—but The Chorus of Less than Desirable Slaves make their bets regardless. Michael P. Jaros writes about this striking moment in the play’s opening minutes, “These people, themselves property, are betting their own scant properties, reinforcing the system of exchange, property and assessment—of marking—on which they are themselves caught” (5). Far from challenging the absurd decision that Boss-Master gives Hero—come to the war’s front and possibly die or refuse and possibly die, too—the Chorus pushes Hero further into bondage. They legitimize this false dichotomy that the Boss-Master gives him. Yet, in the process, they also further their own enslavement. Parks gives each member of the Chorus a rank for their name: Leader, Second, Third, Forth. In other words, hierarchy composes the Chorus’s identities. They cannot help but to pass that hierarchy onto others, to maintain the captivity of all the enslaved.

Yet Hero is as willing as the Chorus to perpetuate slavery’s and the market’s harms. Parks crafts Hero in this way to avoid an audience’s sympathy for her protagonist. Throughout *Father*, she does not allow them to identify with or romanticize the mythic figure of the Black Confederate soldier. One such moment is the early exchange between Hero and another enslaved person, Homer, a character who continuously searches for a

way to escape. Parks reveals that the Boss-Master once offered Hero freedom in exchange for knowledge of Homer's whereabouts. Hero caved, but the Boss-Matter reneged on his promise. With respect to this betrayal, Homer acts as Parks's central critic of Hero, saying, "You're a dog what gets fed scraps from the table / A dog what gets kicked then stays around. / A dog what follows his Master no questions asked. / You're like that Hero" (47). Desperate to receive emancipation, Hero saws off Homer's leg at the Boss-Master's behest. He both punishes Homer and guarantees that he can never escape again. Through this act, Hero internalizes slavery's brutality and chases those "scraps" that Homer mentions. He reproduces the damage that slavery does to the Black body. Parks chooses that word, "scraps," to show the coercive nature of plantation life. She also wants to emphasize the lackluster nature of freedom and emancipation in *Father*. Hero himself mentions "scraps" when he describes the Confederate uniform Boss-Master gives him and the prospect that Boss-Master may finally grant him freedom after the war: "My Freedom. / Like a beautiful carrot. / Like a diamond. And those scraps of uniform and the / diamond Freedom glittered" (21). Parks has Hero view Emancipation as a gem, as something that has a monetary worth and the veneer of an attractive commodity. In *Father*, therefore, she takes away liberation's profundity, its pricelessness, and places it on discount.

Parks uses Hero's no-win situation to reject the overly simple narratives we tell about the Civil War and slavery. What first appears like a free decision to go fight or remain on Boss-Master's plantation quickly becomes a more complicated dilemma. Boss-Master offers Hero his freedom in exchange for his service to the Confederacy, but Hero

is aware of the risks and problems that come with this so-called choice. He worries that Boss-Master is lying about the possibility of emancipation, but he also says, “I was still thinking on the bald fact / that in his service / I will be helping out / On the wrong side” (21). Thus, Parks rejects claims sometimes heard from neo-Confederate corners about the willingness of the enslaved to pick up arms and defend their enslavers and their enslavers’ property. In the case that plantation owners did ever give Black men the decision to follow them to war, one can only surmise that such a situation would not be unlike the way Parks depicts the scene—in other words, there would be no decision at all. Additionally, the abject subservience that this myth assumes on the part of the enslaved Parks denies outright. In her opening act alone, the violence of the plantation becomes obvious. She makes the harm enslavers did to Black bodies and had Black people occasionally do to their fellow enslaved into a common, if not mundane, occurrence. When Hero confides to the Old Man, a fellow enslaved person who Hero treats as a father (his true father being, most likely, Boss-Master himself), that he does not want to go to the war, the Old Man’s first response is to say, “So you’ll have to harm yourself in some way” (34). The daily lives of these enslaved people—and, of course, the lives of the actual enslaved people they represent—is entirely defined by violence. To have a degree of choice, some moment of escape, requires that one bring an enslaver’s harms down on oneself. No idyllic pastoral, where the gentle master and loyal slave benefitted one another, ever existed.

Therefore, Parks does not allow an audience to simply condemn Hero’s decisions on a moral level. Like the Foundling Father and Link, commoditization makes Parks’s

character lost and torn. She thus limits his self-determination, and the words of his sellers (and his purchasers) define the way that he sees himself and others. His body suffers from the markings of the market or, to borrow a phrase from Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” its “overdetermined nominative properties... markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean” (257). The Boss-Master’s word for Hero, “slave,” is one such nominative property. That designation, without the Boss-Master’s permission, will not go away. Parks is aware of how the market and slavery performs this marking, both literally, like in the case of Homer’s leg, and figuratively, onto the enslaved. To her, the two—market and marking—are inseparable. Jaros points out that The Chorus of *Less than Desirable Slaves*, when making their bets on Hero’s fate, repeat the phrase “Mark it,” a phrase whose sonics again reveal Parks’s persistent argument throughout her Civil War plays (and beyond): to participate in the market is to bear its expectations, desires, and its use of the body (3). The moment at the end of “A Measure of a Man” when Hero must “harm [himself] in some way” shows the level of degradation to which he must stoop. To “take the edge off Boss’s anger” if and when he discovers that Hero cannot go to battle, Hero decides—in contrast with the encounter with Homer—to saw off his own leg (34). However, the sight of the knife becomes too much, and he cannot bear to continue the act. The Boss-Master, therefore, has his way. Hero goes off to war.

Through such coercion, Parks depicts slavery as a practice founded upon the belief in total white supremacy and the Confederacy as a state meant to preserve racist ideals. *Father*’s second act, “A Battle in the Wilderness,” is the play’s best example of

this element of her work. There, three men—Hero, the Boss-Master (now referred to as “Colonel”), and Smith, who is a captured Black Union soldier passing as white—remain in the woods, as the Colonel contemplates the award he will receive for capturing who he believes is a Yankee officer. The crux of this middle portion of the play, however, is that Smith is not an officer—a position reserved for white men—but is instead a light-skinned Black soldier. The Colonel sees his white color and assumes that Smith is Caucasian: “You’re a Captain serving in the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry. What’s it like leading them?” (61). Through this bit of irony, Parks has readers contemplate the fluidity of race, a characteristic owed to the fact that race has no biological foundation, and shows how the Colonel’s views—and, more generally, the Confederacy’s position as a whole—is grounded not in anything real or actual but in prejudice and the desire to keep stuffing one’s pockets. She has the Colonel mention the Southern policy for Union prisoners of war. He says to Smith, “You’re an officer in the Union Army. You’re a white man. Lucky you’re not a Union nigger. If you were, I’d be obligated to shoot you on the spot... Lucky for him that he’s worth something more than money” (59). In the Colonel’s mind, Black enslaved are worth what they get on the market and nothing else. They deserve violence if they rebel against white domination.

Throughout *Father* and especially in “A Battle in the Wilderness,” Parks mocks arguments that favor this white superiority. When Hero first describes Boss-Master’s uniform in the opening minutes of the play, Parks shows the absurdity—indeed the performative nature—of white enslavers’ beliefs in their own importance. She begins what becomes a rather long, descriptive lampoon of Boss-Master, “All the sashes and

belts and buckles and braids. If I hadn't of known, I'd think Boss-Master-Boss was decorating himself to join the circus." Hero also describes Boss-Master's "hat with a cream-colored feather that's as big as a fan" and his "new-tight" boots" (16). Parks's use of "Boss-Master-Boss," the only time that characters refer to the plantation's owner as such, mocks the Boss-Master's trumped-up authority and emphasizes the congruence between capitalism and slavery: "Master" and "Boss" are phrases rooted in one another. As property, the enslaved have a "master." As laborers, they must listen to their "boss." In "A Battle in the Wilderness," specifically, Parks gives Boss-Master, now Colonel, a powerful monologue about white supremacy, beginning with the lines, "I am grateful every day that God made me white. As a white I stand on the summit and all other colors reside beneath me, down below." However, as the Colonel gives this speech, he wears the massive feather Hero mentions. In having him do so, Parks undercuts his message, and when Smith and Hero look dumbstruck after the Colonel's racist words, she has him say, while deeply embarrassed, "Let's put the plume away" (83). Parks's subtle exaggerated depiction of the Confederacy makes the supremacist content of their arguments clear—an element of the Confederacy that is now sometimes lost or openly denied by those who romanticize the Civil War and the South—and deconstructs them with her humor and absurdity. The plume's removal breaks apart false notions of gallantry and chivalry.

Parks combines this critique of racism with her concerns about the market when the Colonel brags that Hero can recite his financial value, his worth as a slave. In this exchange and in Smith's escape afterward, she interrogates what the commoditization of Blackness means for an enslaved person's ability to gain freedom. He says to Smith,

“Hero knows his worth to the penny, and, well, the poor thing is honest. Meaning he won’t run off not now not ever. He told me one day: ‘Master,’ he said, ‘running off, well that would be the same as stealing,’ he said” (67). This concept of stealing oneself appears several times in *Father*. Hero, unlike Homer, Smith, and other enslaved characters, cannot justify running away for his liberty but instead relies on the Boss-Master’s false promises for emancipation. Parks keeps Hero caught in the market’s working, having him fully accept that he does not own his own body. After the Colonel forces Smith to guess Hero’s market price, Hero finally speaks a number: “800” (78). The internalization of that number—a price that the Colonel says would be “lower now” because of Hero’s age—is what Hero can never seem to rid, even after the war concludes and the Colonel dies in battle. Parks has Smith empathize with his situation, saying, “Maybe even with Freedom, that mark, huh, that mark of the marketplace, it will always be on us” (98). Smith reveals that he has slavery’s brand on his body, the burned scar in his skin to mark his belonging to a certain person, yet he wills himself to escape when the Colonel wanders off. Interestingly enough, Hero is the one who sets him free and the one who encourages him to run. Yet Hero does not follow Smith, even after the Union soldier gives him his coat and beckons his savior to follow. Hero simply remains, places the Union jacket under his Confederate one, and walks back to the southern army’s lines. This tension within the second act’s final image symbolizes the bind Parks creates in Hero: a character that understands some of slavery’s harms, but one, too, that is permanently held down by its commoditizing effects.

In other words, Parks wants her audience to question what life during and after slavery—the so-called freedom one gained after emancipation—looked like for enslaved and formerly enslaved people. She wants them to challenge false images of chains suddenly broken and liberation gained. Thus Parks makes a point to end her third Civil War play through a critique of Reconstruction’s lackluster attempts to secure rights for African-Americans. Her final act, “The Union of my Confederate Parts,” portrays Hero’s return home. Parks make sure that this return, though, is not a triumphant one. Boss-Master has perished in service to the Confederacy, but Hero, who now refers to himself as Ulysses (a quick jab Parks includes to critique, like she does with Lincoln, the way we unconditionally praise leaders of the Union), uses this sudden vacuum in the plantation’s hierarchy to further himself, without consideration for the other enslaved who await his return. Paula Barba Guerrero, writing about this scene, says,

Parks’s plays present how her characters internalize dominant colonial discourses, and how these discourses interact with their African heritage. In this way, the discourse of the master not only gets challenged and questioned through mimicry, but also in the protagonists’ ambivalence (for they worship and abhor both their inherited and assimilated traits) and in the ambiguity of the narrative itself. Parks’s plays neither condemn nor protect any of the conflicting ideologies of the Civil War. Instead, the plays annul the old binary of hero and anti-hero as epitomes of righteousness and sinfulness respectively, aiming to bring forth a new, mobile epic. (48)

Though Guerrero is right to suggest that when Hero returns home and attempts to become a version of the old Boss-Master he mimics the actions of his enslaver, Parks’s choice to craft the scene in this way is absolutely done to critique “conflicting ideologies of the Civil War,” not only to complicate Hero’s character. Parks makes her protagonist into a would-be tyrant—indeed, in *Father*’s final moments, Hero attempts to murder Homer for

suggesting that the plantation's enslaved should run away for good—to attack the notion of the always-loyal slave who protects the master's interests. Those interests now, embodied in Hero, are manifested through violence toward those who want liberty. Parks's protagonist shows why Boss-Master favored him and why the Colonel could never set Hero free. Yet, though Boss-Master has died, Hero still cannot receive emancipation. As he says, "I went and I cut out my soul. / I cut my soul out of myself" (156). The experience of being someone's property damages his body and psyche.

Parks does not mean, however, that if Hero were to somehow remove these mental barriers, he would be free. She makes a point in her play to show that larger, structural failures also prevent Hero from obtaining liberty. After his changed person, Hero's "misplaced" self, as one of the Chorus says, ostracizes the plantation's enslaved and Penny and Homer escape together, he is left onstage with a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, a hand-written version that he copied down. Hero says, "This paper. I never got to read it to them. / The Proclamation. I copied it down / (*Rest*) / It says we're free" (158). Importantly, Hero chooses not to read the Proclamation to the other enslaved, giving them gifts instead—a gardening spade for Penny, a white fake leg for Homer—both of which represent the labor and/or violence each of them experienced while on the plantation. In doing so, Parks shows her cynical opinion of post-war freedom for African Americans. The truth of the scene is that, whether Hero reads or does not read the paper to the others, each character remains practically in the same position. Homer, Penny, and the others will still need to flee, and Hero will stay trapped within the mindset of the market. Thus, the Proclamation, as it is presented in *Father*, is a useless document. The

exact nature of that uselessness, Parks argues, is founded in its inability to make appropriate reparations for centuries of cruelty before Lincoln authored it, and the country's choice not to move beyond the simplest acts of help for the former enslaved, a decision reflected in the Proclamation's origin as a Union war tactic. When Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation, he acted in a way like Hero, as Parks's protagonist gives Homer the ivory leg. The enslaved's rights were stolen, but then given back as if they simply misplaced their own liberty. As Homer says, "I didn't lose it / wasn't like I woke up one morning and couldn't remember where I put it" (146).

Father's conclusion makes the market's effects on Hero's body its final image, and the play's end treats its central Black character(s) not unlike *TAP* and *T/U* do their own. In each of Parks's Civil War plays, the work's finale draws the gaze to a Black body. As the stage lights grow dark, her first two linger on the dead characters of Lincoln and the Foundling Father or Booth and Brazil who must cope in the wake of those deaths. In *Father*, Parks focuses on Hero as he goes on to live with his pet dog, having become the stand-in for Boss-Master. Parks writes, "*Ulysses looks toward Boss-Master's house, ready to undertake his new life. Odyssey Dog holds the spade*" (159). Not only does Park suggest that Hero will go inside the home to take his place at the plantation's seat of power, but the spade held in Odyssey Dog's mouth implies that Hero may also remain a field hand, stuck in some of the most grueling work that enslaved people were made to do. These opposed images—that of the enslaver and the enslaved—Parks brings together in Hero to highlight the unnaturalness of slavery and the Black body. She makes clear that Hero's choice to return to the Boss-Master's mansion and work is due to the stories,

lies, and myths about his humanity and his body's worth that her character has absorbed. Hero's body, his actions, are still Boss-Master's, even after the plantation owner's death. The market, at the end of the day, is just too hard to shake.

CODA

Myths about the Civil War and its inaccurate retellings deny the history of African Americans. In accepting those myths, the country recreates the conditions of Black fungibility present during slavery and furthers the lasting, continual damages involuntary servitude has wrought. The slave market, whose ghost we refuse to banish, remains to cause harm.

According to Parks, the Civil War is always being fought. Thus she counters with her own repetitions and revisions. Her first two plays, *TAP* and *T/U*, address Lincoln's problematic place within American iconography. As well, *T/U* asks an audience to consider the negative effect of portraying the Union and the Confederacy as two infighting members of the same family. Her third Civil War work, *Father*, criticizes the lie of the willing Black Confederate soldier and depictions of enslavers as gentle and paternal. The violence of the market and slavery do nothing but create suffering, and that suffering has unfortunately followed America into the present moment.

In *Father*, Parks connects the violence of slave patrollers and the modern US police force in a scene between Hero and Smith. The two talk about their bodies when and if emancipation comes. Hero asks, "Who will I belong to?" and Smith responds, "You'll belong to yourself." Yet Parks's stage directions just after this exchange undercut

Smith's optimism. Parks has Hero act out an encounter with a patroller: "*Imagining being confronted by a Patroller, Hero holds up his hands. Reminiscent of: 'Hands up! Don't shoot!'*" (96). She includes a saying that has become prevalent at Black Lives Matter and anti-police protests throughout the country. The addition of "Hands up! Don't shoot!" reminds Parks's audience that the violence needed to maintain slavery and total control over the Black body still lingers in our contemporary institutions; however, Parks also uses the phrase to show the difficulty of—perhaps the feelings of helplessness that accompany—attempts to abolish structures that punish Blackness. Putting one's hands up and complying with the police, begging them not to shoot or to remove their knee, these actions do not stop the harm. All too often cops treat Blackness like a body on the run, like a body that is free and should not be.

Parks has Hero explore whether patrollers or police will ever stop looking at Black bodies as threats: "But when Freedom comes and they stop me and ask and I say, 'I'm my own. I'm on my own and I own my ownself,' you think they'll leave me be?" Smith's eventual answer may be Parks's own belief, as the Union soldier says, "I don't know" (96). In my reading of her work, such uncertainty about the future of Black lives and the prevalence of Civil War mythology should not be taken as total pessimism. After all, Parks fills her plays with Black bodies to demand Americans look at them and act on what they see. As things have stood, the kind of liberty that Reconstruction should have given emancipated peoples and their descendants has not, of course, come to total fruition, and Parks wants an audience to acknowledge as much. She wants them to honor

Black lives, not reduce them to Black bodies. She wants her audience to get their stories straight.

WORKS CITED

- Blatanis, Konstantinos. "Enacting History, Defining Wholeness: Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*." *The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature*, edited by Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, pp. 171–189.
- Blight, David. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Carpio, Glenda, et al. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Oxford University Press, 2008. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/clemson/detail.action?docID=415485>.
- Dawkins, Laura. "Family Acts: History, Memory, and Performance in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog*." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2009, pp. 82–98., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25681396>.
- Guerrero, Paula Barba. "Reformulating Freedom: Slavery, Alienation and Ambivalence in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (Parts 1, 2 & 3)." *Ex-Centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2018, pp. 42–60., ejournals.lib.auth.gr/ExCentric/article/view/6730.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 2008, pp. 1–14. *Project Muse*, muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.
- Jaros, Michael P. "Unhappy Is the Land That Needs a Hero: The Mark of the Marketplace in

Suzan-Lori Parks's *Father Comes Home from the Wars*, Parts 1-3." *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, no. 33, ser. 1, 2020.,
jadtjournal.org/2020/12/11/unhappy-is-the-land-that-needs-a-hero-the-mark-of-the-marke
tplace-in-suzan-lori-parkss-father-comes-home-from-the-wars-parts-1-3/.

Larson, Jennifer, and Linda Wagner-Martin. *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks*. Columbia:
University of South Carolina Press, 2012.

Marrs, Cody. *Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling about the Civil War*. Johns Hopkins
University Press, 2020.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Father Comes Home from the Wars: Parts 1, 2, & 3*. Theatre
Communications Group, 2015.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *The America Play and Other Works*. Theatre Communications Group, 1995.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Topdog/Underdog*. Theatre Communications Group, 2001.

Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. 2nd ed., The
University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *African
American Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier, New York University
Press, 2000, pp. 257–280.

Stuelke, Patricia. "Trayvon Martin, Topdog/Underdog, and the Tragedy Trap." *American
Literary History*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2017, pp. 753–778., <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajx029>.

Tucker-Abramson, Myka. "The Money Shot: Economies of Sex, Guns, and Language in
Topdog/Underdog." *Modern Drama*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2007, pp. 77–97.,
<https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2007.0027>.

Wilmer, S.E. "Restaging the Nation: The Work of Suzan-Lori Parks." *Modern Drama*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2000, pp. 442–452., <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.2000.0042>.