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Pretending to Be Lincoln: Interracial Masquerades in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Twin Plays*¹

1. History Games at Play

Adrienne Kennedy was the first playwright of African descent who staged black imitations of white leaders as ghostly figures emerging from the American political unconscious. *The Owl Answers* features African-American impersonators of Shakespeare, William the Conqueror, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Anne Boleyn, whose authority haunts a dream-like stage dominated by the dramatist's distressed alter-egos (Sollors 30). Kennedy's anachronistic use of masquerade in whiteface was her parodic device to stress the subaltern identification of men and women of color with non-black icons.

Suzan-Lori Parks also confronts the loss at the heart of the black experience as "the great hole. In the middle of nowhere" (*The America Play* 158) and resurrects representative figures randomly selected from the Western literary canon and from the white political scene whose authority she questions without fearing. Digging into the pitch black of the African-American unconscious severely disrupted by slavery, Parks metaphorically resurfaces a burial heap of nameless bones that she identifies with her ancestry.² As a result, in *The America Play* (1994), which, in many respects, is a black parody of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, her alter-ego is neither the fool nor the Danish prince but a black undertaker who meditates upon Yorick's bones inherited from a white tradition lost to his memory.³ Like young Brazil in her first Lincoln play, the dramatist is "The Lesser Known ... a digger by

trade. From a family of Diggers” (160), whose Surrealist talent consists in reconfiguring American icons through black parody. As the nephew of Lincoln’s black impersonator, Brazil perceives himself as the illegitimate progeny of the abolitionist President, and speaks, as his name suggests, for all the dispossessed people of color in the Americas. He restlessly “remembers” traces of a white lineage, as the latest of a race of “foundlings” that no parent reclaims, while fighting a cultural amnesia which affects any man and woman of color whose broken genealogy remains a matter of endless speculations:

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theater, for me, is the perfect place to ‘make’ history that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to – through literature and the special strange relationship between theater and real-life – locate the ancestral burial round, dig from bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is play – something that through production actually happens – I’m working theater like an incubator to create ‘new’ historical events. (*The America Play* 4)

To make up for the absence of black authorities, the dramatist brings on stage a number of Lincoln’s lookalikes as hybrid formations produced by the juxtaposition of that white icon of undisputed importance in black history and the blackness of the actors who impersonate him. The fake masquerade of these colored imitators oddly displays, along with the distinctive markers of the white statesman (inclusive of frock coat, necktie, top hat, and fake beard), the black appropriation of his authority and emblems of power, redefined, in twin plays composed a decade apart, in whiteface makeup as benign substitutes for a cultural legacy brutally dispersed and altered by rape and illegitimate descent. In this way, the African side of American history becomes an arena of syncretic identifications with the national icons resumed from the graveyards of American culture.

Parks’s parodic manipulation of American icons aims to revise the past from an unexplored perspective and partakes of the diffused taste for interracial pastiche in Postmodern style. Especially in *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) – the drama which follows *The America Play* – Brazil’s biological father

is replaced with a “topdog” who makes his living as a Lincoln lookalike who performs the President’s death in the debased context of a carnival midway game.⁴ This article discusses Parks’s reconfiguration of the celebrated figure of Abraham Lincoln as a man of color, whose re-invention re-elaborates, in a media-conscious frame, the white models of cultural and political hegemony circulated by Kennedy in “Funnyhouse of a Negro” (1964). This interracial masquerade appears no less “trapped in Blackness” (20) and suspends the black actors on stage in a position of non-identity that Kennedy described as the result of a rotting condition of captivity. The spectacular emulation of a distinguished white figure adds to the dispossession of a distinctive history which makes the white DEAD MAN warn his black daughter: “You are filled with dreams of my world” (Sollors, *The Owl Answers* 35). However, Parks’s recent parody of white authorities is quite devoid of the tragic overtones of Adrienne Kennedy’s “hall of fame” and, though entrapped like her in the labyrinths of the black unconscious, is no schizomorphic product of subaltern minds and ironically relies upon the blues practice of repetition and revision (“Rep&Rev”) to offer an interracial variation on the imitated white models. This allows Parks to reject, from a Womanist perspective strongly adversed in the eighties, the dominant, ghettoized view of blackness and to illuminate in black domestic interiors the power relations and divisions operating in the African-American community (Ramsay 165-66). In more realistic tones, August Wilson equally resists the romanticization of the subaltern condition of his people and writes in a play:

You know what you are? It took me a while to figure it out. You are a Negro. White people will get confused and call you a nigger but they don’t know like I know. I know the truth of it. I’m a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God’s creation. Niggers got style. Negroes got blindyitis. A dog knows it’s a dog. A cat knows it’s a cat. But a negro don’t know he’s a Negro. He thinks he’s a white man. It’s Negroes like you who hold us back.... You make things hard for me. You go around kissing the white man’s ass then when they see me they think I’m supposed to kiss it too. (*Radio Golf* 76-77)

Wilson’s historical plays have nothing of Parks’s hip-hop experimentalism, whose dramatic writing is formally closer to the disruptive form of

Kennedy's monologues. Nevertheless, the young playwright from Nebraska, – who was also the appointed director of the version of *Fences* scheduled by the Public Theater in New York in 2009, – enthusiastically embraced the project of historical revisionism started by Wilson's cyclic dramatization of black history, and boldly resists the dominant narrative of victimization of her community.⁵ She gives center stage to a black hustler who works as Lincoln's surrogate in an arcade and, shunning any politically correct attitude, provides a honest account of her people's imperfect integration in America.

An instance of her revision of white myths from a black perspective is her 1999 play *In the Blood* which reconfigures Hawthorne's adulterous Hester Prynne as Hester Jones: a "welfare queen" oppressed by the subtle racism of welfare institutions in a black ghetto. In this parodic version of an American literary classic, the destitute black mother of five illegitimate children named after the five different fathers who deserted her before their birth reformulates the sexual transgression of the famous heroine in *The Scarlet Letter*, in a "twice-told" tale no different in nature from the Lincoln-esque masquerades here accounted for. As Jason Bush clarifies, the hierarchy suggested in the title *Topdog/Underdog* originates from a strategic use of the term "dog," as the marker of the social status bestowed upon the black man who makes a career by imitating a white leader, as opposed to his marginal brother who makes a living as a street gambler (76). Therefore, the term "topdog" becomes indicative of the power struggles within the black community and refers to the steady career of the "African-American man in white face" (Interview with Wetmore, Wetmore and Smith-Howard 138) through the low racial stereotype of black virility; although, in the play, it is the "underdog" brother Booth who challenges the status of his sibling named Lincoln with his sexual exploits in the attempt to compensate for his social inferiority.

The bravado of this "hot man" in need of "constant seuzal release,"⁶ which accompanies crime and deceit as the main tropes of hip-hop rappers (Grassian, *Writing* 177), is overtly deconstructed in the screenplay *Girl 6* (1996) which Parks wrote for a Spike Lee movie. In that script, Parks comes to terms with the myths of insurgency related to the black body and, no less than the film director who, in *Lola Darling* (1986), depicted

African-American urbanites from the standpoint of a black female emancipated from victimization, firmly rejects the rhetoric of marginalization which, according to bell hooks, has ghettoized many a generation of black artists. In the same iconoclastic perspective, President Lincoln assumes the “foundling” features of a black actor later engaged in a fatal fight with his rival brother, in a domestic revision of the Civil War in which a destitute man of color named Booth (after Lincoln’s assassin) opposes his sibling with middle-class ambitions who impersonates the President. In this bold re-enactment of Civil War as a brotherly fight over hierarchies which threaten to tear the black community apart, Parks reenacts the harsh dispute in the famous trial scene partially arbitrated by a prepossessing black judge in Zora Neale Hurston’s *De Turkey and De Law* (153-54).

Following Hurston’s Southern legacy, the young dramatist from Nebraska replaces the rhetoric of black subalternity with the internal critique of her community also attempted by August Wilson, who, in another play, casts a similar cold eye on the social climbers “going along” (*Radio Golf* 79) in a world which hires them as the “Black face in the enterprise” (89), to make sure that, once raised to power, they reproduce the same oppressive conditions which historically determined enslavement and segregation. After all, it was Wilson who polemically introduced the exquisitely anachronistic device to name his African-American characters after prominent white figures. Such is the case of the black administrator in *Radio Golf*, whose position of power does not exempt him from being morally defeated by an anonymous man of color emblematically called Roosevelt who is not bribed into demolishing an innocent’s home to make his business. In *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks moves exactly from the tenth and last play in Wilson’s 10-year cycle of African-American history in the form of drama to defy dominant ethnic categories and question the social emergence of blacks willing to internalize white models of power. Lincoln’s imitators in these plays have a similar allegorical function and show how the President, who was most cherished by people of color for coming in defense of slaves, is emulated by black men in his genteel attire who, in their private lives, perpetuate unbearable forms of torture and assume materialistic values traditionally rejected by their community in a bold “distortion of Blacks in White historical narratives” (Brewer 165).

In Parks's redefinition of the Civil War as a black domestic melodrama, the African-American actor who appropriates Lincoln's authority fuels the attacks of his disempowered sibling who accuses him of being little more than a "wax dummy" (44) of the "Great Emancipator." As much as Lincoln's impersonator keeps donning his presidential outfit at home as a permanent social "habitus" to patronize his Booth brother, the latter distrusts his make-believe personality and abstains from a ridiculous masquerade which he perceives more as a simulation than a real acquisition of the power position evoked by his appearance. The "underdog's" fierce attacks are directed to the clear contrast between the "public" costume that the "topdog" borrows from Lincoln and the black vernacular that he keeps adopting in order to communicate with his sibling. The awkward combine of white status and African-American dialect also operates at the lexical level in Parks's hybrid constructs whose stylistic virtuosism is clearly inspired by Zora Neale Hurston's literary re-elaboration of the vernacular, and relies upon an ingenious use of wordplay (or "bisticci"). Let us think of the mis-memorialized expression "Foundling Father" which, in *The America Play*, originates from the semantic slippage produced by an intentional misspelling of the attribute "founding" with the addition of the liquid consonant which shifts its meaning from the prestigious attribution typical of the heroes of the American independence ("Founding Fathers") to the mark of orphanhood and dispossession ("foundling") cast upon the African-American boys who are supposed to inherit their cultural legacy.

As a result, Brazil is a black kid caught in the paradox of being both a father and a foundling, since the phonetic assonance produced by the transformative power of Parks's wordplay conveys two meanings sonically akin but semantically disassociative, according to the discursive strategy of double entendre which dominates these plays.⁷ In this ambivalent light, once transplanted in the black community, the role of Lincoln as the quintessential "foundling father" (*The America Play* 158) makes of him a "foe-father" (178) which turns a parental figure ("father") into an adversary or opponent ("foe"), adding to the complexity of the verbal and visual juxtapositions created by the playwright. In his interracial masquerade, the would-be Lincoln undergoes a series of unpredictable morphic transformations similar to those which currently proliferate in digital environments and that

many a rap musician rely upon by insisting on the disjunctive encounter of rhyming verbal constructs whose perfect assonance and syllabic quasi-equivalence are radically contradicted by their actual meaning.

What descends from Parks's verbal games and puns is another expression of the opposite forces inscribed in the body of her Lincoln imitators, who recover a national icon widely perceived as a friendly rescuer of the black race to capture it in a sequence of dramatized verbal skirmishes. When the "good darkie" challenges his "ravenous" brother by eating "slowly and carefully" in the easy chair of his Presidential clout (Parks, *Topdog* 16), "Booth" replies to his genteel garb, reminding him that his lure of authority makes him no less vulnerable than he is. The two dangling brothers are indeed orphans abandoned at an early stage by their parents, failing to father each other no less than August Wilson's characters in *Two Trains Running* (1990). As the drama unfolds, the spectator learns that the black actor who pretends to be Lincoln has been a hustler himself and still mentors his brother at a card trick which he suspended after the shooting of his confederate, Lonnie, during a con. Thus, they keep fighting over that deceiving card game, their dexterity as card hustlers and shoplifters being no less fraudulent than the fake respectability of the empowering clothes assumed by the Lincoln-esque brother. Despite their different ambitions, the two competing siblings keep sharing a seedy rooming-house apartment with no toilet and running water that the wordplayer wittily redefines "jail-us" (Parks, *Topdog* 44). Their grotesque rivalry widens the gap between the spectacle of power provided by the elder brother and the irony of the younger one who ridicules his daily performance. In this respect, the Lincoln look-alike is entirely divested of the tragic tones of Adrienne Kennedy's displaced blackness, as his fake impersonation is constantly exposed to the attacks of the Booth copycat who eventually kills him, like the Confederate actor that he is strategically named after. Compared to the anachronisms of Adrienne Kennedy's modernist stage, Parks's parody embraces a farcical mode, in a drama of black domesticity which replaces the hallucinated figments of an oppressed shattered mind with a bitter masque of power deconstructed by the rhythmic, irreverent variations of the hip-hop cadence. Thus deprived of all the Freudian implications in Kennedy's dramatization of alienated blackness, Parks's treatment of the President's

myth resonates in the echo-chamber of the heightened media-consciousness of her generation.

It has been argued that this parodic re-enactment of tropes and images from the American archive is enhanced by the expressive possibilities of the black dialect and of the rhythmic structure created by the hip-hop dramatist to operate a massive revision of U.S. history within the arena of stars and celebrities who haunt the pop unconscious. In this larger frame, Kennedy's generative obsession with the "hole of history" turns into a carnival of emblems and symbols reprocessed and depleted like the American icon of Lincoln who is turned into a cartoonish figure and recirculated like the cherished "object of someone else's subjectivity" (Bush 74). Exposed to the torturing manipulations of the average arcade's visitor, the grotesque skit of the black imitator who mimicks Lincoln's assassination reformulates a topical moment of U.S. history as a cheap arcade joke offered to public consumption (Achilles 113-14). The reduction of the prominent statesman to a mere shooting target anticipates the domestic execution of the black replica who appropriates his name, clothes, and death, and cynically invites the crowds to "come and play at shooting him dead – like John Wilkes Booth shot our sixteenth president in 1865 during a performance at Ford's Theatre" (*Topdog* iii). In her iconoclastic remix, the dramatist samples Lincoln's emblems of power, like a hip-hop DJ who reshuffles the variety of soundtracks in hybrid assemblages that make the voice of minority cultures overlap with shared memories randomly selected from the American archive. In a reactualization of the Harlem Renaissance, Parks, – who is happily married to blues musician Paul Osher and also authored the score of *Ray Charles Live!* (2007), – revives, in hip-hop cadences, the "Rep&Rev" structure of blues gigs as a genuine feature of black music, which provides the sonic frame of the black parody dramatized on stage. Once abridged and "rewinded" in the double voice of "Rep&Rev," the historical trauma of Lincoln's assassination gets restyled within the "signifyin'" context of a domestic tragedy and rendered in a jazzy vernacular. Here, the persistent reference to "sampling" alludes to the "scratching" technique adopted by rappers who collect multiple recordings by different musicians, whose tracks they slightly modify. They stand as sonic equivalents of the verbal revisions modeled by Parks on the variations of one recurring theme made

by blues and jazz musicians (Persley 65). The principle of “Rep&Rev” is a musical variation on the parodic strategy which sustains the “signifyin” as “the black trope of tropes, the figure from black rhetorical figures” (Gates 51). The blues patterns of refrains and bridges suggest a reinvention of the original theme or phrase through an additional rapping beat⁸ which the dramatist fully exploits, relying on the transformative power of black dialect that makes of her works an extraordinary sonic environment transcending the referential purposes of the “history play.” As Parks declares, in conversation with Wetmore: “I’m a re-writer, a good re-writer. I think that’s my talent: re-writing.... I’m known for history plays, but actually, the plays were never ‘history plays.’ My plays often feature historical figures. But they’re all ‘now’ plays.... They’re all about the intersection of the historical and the now” (Wetmore and Smith-Howard 126, 133-34). As American history is “remixed” through the hip-hop, nonlinear style of the black vernacular, Parks’s dialogues get remodulated through her inventive use of word-play and of the bantering sequences of the “call-and-response.” It is around these blues patterns that, in *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks rhythmically conveys the impetuous contrasts between the two brothers, with the same jagged, churning effect called “groove” in the jargon of swing and bebop blues.⁹

2. Civil Wars and Brotherly Fights

The pace of blues repetition justifies the comparison of Parks’s plays to musical scores reaching their peak in the “topdog”/“underdog” physical and verbal confrontations. The squabbles of the two siblings engaged in these quarrels are one of the main dramatic features of Parks’s rhythmic use of the vernacular and, as they build up until they reach a “Brechtian” point of disjunction, their “doin’ the dozens” shows how deeply rooted the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance is in her plays; these word battles having been previously employed by Zora Neale Hurston in *De Turkey and de Law* and in the coeval sketch “Filling Station,” later collected in *Cold Keener*. Keeping the musical metaphor in mind, the interracial President conceived by the dramatist strikes as a hip-hop “embodied remix” (Persley 73), whose

hybridity resonates at the vestimental level since the Victorian attire of the President visibly clashes with the dark complexion of his impersonator, in the transhistorical encounter of “The Lesser Known” with the larger-than-life figure whose genteel clothes he inhabits. At stake in the allegorical force of Parks’s invention of a Lincoln of different color are, indeed, the overlapping of blackness and political power and the duplicity of his racial markers.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, Booth questions the abstract icon of authority impersonated by his “topdog” brother, in the imperfect assimilation of the black and white features produced by the juxtaposition of ethnic elements traditionally perceived as opposite, and oddly re-inscribed in his Lincolnesque reconfiguration. The masquerade of the Lincoln lookalike is an interracial formation which, in its fictitious combination, has nothing of the tragic mulatto figure and originates, instead, from the morphing mode which proliferates in cyberspace as part of the “hermaphroditic” imagination that George P. Landow situates beyond the range of any specific gender or race (31). Although Parks does not explicitly refer to the virtual domain of hypertext theory, *Topdog/Underdog* partakes of a domain of the spectacle, no less than the setting in which Lincoln’s murder historically occurred. She dislocates the opera house where he died in real life in the diminishing and commodified context of an entertainment park, reducing history to a video game’s arcade where a black imitator wrapped in clothes of white authority distorts and depletes the memory of Lincoln’s execution. Thus caught in the stolid loop of a shooting gallery, Parks’s parody exasperates the grotesque tones of the Victorian farce which was the actual context in which the President’s murder took place. The black humorous energy of this text originates exactly from the historical awareness that Lincoln’s assassination occurred during the third act of Tom Taylor’s *Our American Cousin* (1858): a popular farce that the dramatist does not hesitate to define a “bad play.”¹⁰ The crackling joke “You sockdologizing old man-trap!” (*The America Play* 160) produced a moment of general disarray and of uproarious laughter, enabling the Southern actor John Wilkes Booth to jump into the box where the President was sitting and shoot him dead. The stage as a murder scene is a detail of significance, as a premonition of the public spectacle of the murder of J.F. Kennedy, another white Presi-

dent cherished by black people and whose televised stardom anticipated the mediatized arena in which politics and spectacle are currently mixed and confused. The grotesque skit enacted by Parks's actors rhythmically transfixes in a ritualized loop the public execution of the abolitionist hero, which the dramatist aptly defines the quintessential "America play." In a hip-hop cadence, that semi-farcical context reactualizes a dark episode in American history doomed to be repeated by black characters and designed for the entertainment of a mass audience grown essentially impermeable to televised violence. In Parks's dramatization of the spectacular murder of the most celebrated anti-slavery advocate, the black actor in whiteface who lets himself be violated enacts a deadly sequence reiterated in the 1960s by the assassination of other African-American civil rights' spokesmen such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., whose deaths arrested, at various moments in American history, the process of black integration. Therefore, what is at stake in Parks's twin plays is the amnesia which surrounds the idol's black replica and his cheap simulation of that generative murder, since the black hustler who finally kills the Dandy Zip Coon is no different from the stalker who kills the video star he grows obsessed with. As the young dramatist "deftly navigates her way through the caricatures and myths that have been created by 'American' culture" (Anderson 72), Lincoln's replica enters the hectic domain of a video culture which electronically circulates simplified versions of American icons in a process of commodification that turns the incarnation of the Thirteenth Amendment into a pop replica whose murder is acted out for a small fee. Thus simplified as a Disneyfied pageant, the tragedy of Lincoln's death is "rewinded" to underscore the habitus of the brainwashed audience who lines up to mimic Booth's role.¹¹ The hypnotic appeal of such a morally objectionable performance draws the attention of the passing stranger to the convulsive moment of a public execution whose gruesome repetition absorbs its symbolic value, making of the "Great Emancipator" the target of a gesture of gratuitous violence caught in the "assassination routine" (Geis 106-07) of a repeated ambush. And since in real life, as Parks recalls in *The America Play*, the generative murder took the sensational form of a *coup de théâtre* in an opera house, the trauma of Lincoln's death becomes a *déjà vu* incessantly re-enacted as a self-consuming game and a play within the play inher-

ited by the hip-hop generation who sees this deadening chain perpetuate through the violent dismantling of the rappers' radical scene.¹²

Parks casts a preoccupied eye on the destructive instincts aroused by the context of simulated violence where the cheap mimicry of the shot that materially put an end to the President's life is currently reframed. The mechanical sequences and the cartoonish figures in that arcade game turn a brotherly fight, clearly allegorical of the Civil War, into a scenario of manufactured trauma as two black orphans direct against each other the suppressed violence derived from their subaltern condition. And since the tragic circumstances of Lincoln's death, as Achilles notices, enter the destitute interiors of the brothers' lodgings, the simulated murder of the impersonator eventually degenerates in a *grand guignol*, adding to the frustrated consumerism that turns any celebrity hunter into a natural stalker (114). As the "signifyin'" mode of repetition and revision suggests, the two marginals who live in domestic contiguity represent two opposite ways of being blacks in America, degenerating into fratricide. Interestingly enough, the plot of the farce *Our American Cousin*, which in real life provided the grotesque background of Lincoln's death, revolved around the lack of a recognizable parentage, casting a new, grim light on the issues of family and cultural legacy that have a role in the play, since the Booth brother – not ashamed to be an "underdog" and actually proud that he "aint into pretending Im someone else" (*Topdog* 92) – finally shoots his Lincoln-esque sibling dead in the attempt to regain his mother's inheritance lost for a bet in the rigged game of the "three-card monte." Noting how that cheap matter of contention eventually tears the brothers' home apart, Grassian has argued that their rivalry over legacy is perhaps also directed against Lincoln and his incomplete solution of the question of slavery.¹³ Leaving the conclusions on Lincoln's complex relation with slavery to historians, another aspect of this tragedy of borrowed memories is that Booth's violent rejection of his brother's values is a way of exorcising the individualism, money, and competition which are "threatening the very fabric" of their community (Grassian, *Writing* 181). Their contention over an abolitionist legacy that assumes opposite meanings in their experience contributes to the gradual depletion of Lincoln as a national icon in the play and to the discarding of his anti-slavery vestiges in the debased arcade, recasting the

white man most cherished by black America as a video game caricature ready to be hit by passing strangers. The hybrid features of the "topdog" originated from his superficial appropriation of Lincoln's garb are indeed quite divested of any promise of black emancipation. Lost in the funny-house of a simulated power, the copycat's gags of Lincoln's impersonator do not inspire the awe and respect granted to the anti-slavery champion, and make us wonder how civil rights can survive in an information society that reduces the public stage of history to such a sleezy spectacle of sensation.

The scratching rhythms of this hip-hop melodrama problematically allude to mediatised communication as a grinding machine whose depleting force essentially agglutinates cultural and racial categories. Parks's critique of the virtual domain that simplifies national icons and emblems of democracy as cardboard figures until they lose ground partakes of the radical use that the hip-hop generation makes of vernacular expressions such as "Dead Presidents," which nowadays stands for the dollar bills where the Presidents' faces are actually printed. Through the same morphing variations, the unsurpassed political legend of Abraham Lincoln enters a sphere of mass consumption in the "re-membering" process technologically produced by the act of "recording" or "re-playing" and its related distortions. Once electronically reconfigured with the commodified status of a logo, the American hero gets re-staged in terms of his murder rather than as the perennial emblem of the civil rights that he embodied, the latter being eroded in the mass-produced domain of a showbiz seriously afflicted by historical reductionism. In a reality increasingly remolded by the morphic tricks of computer graphics, the hermaphroditic vocation advocated by Landow seems to prevail, as the conflicted interpolation of different racial features in Lincoln's replica demonstrates. His combination of black and white signs dislocates the nature of conflict from the democratic values of the multicultural society to the inter-ethnic pressures of a globalized machinery which visually and verbally agglutinates a variety of histories and memories in the form of "battling images" until they reach a default state (Anderson 55).

Unlike the ghostly figures in Adrienne Kennedy's plays, the Lincoln lookalikes conceived by Parks do not originate from a subaltern perception of white models bigger than life but from their parodic self-stylization as

Warholian replicas whose authority is quickly dispersed and absorbed. The non-reverential approach implicit in Parks's strategic confusion of personalities and impersonators narrows the gap between the public spectacle of power and the desultory performance of the black marginals who re-enact the anti-slavery archetype of "the Savior of the Union" and the "Prophet of racial integration" in whiteface (Achilles 115). Their iconoclastic show does not redeem them from their schizoid identification with white icons, but proves their partial acquisition of their garb of authority a mere delusion. In this respect, Parks takes the standpoint of the new generation of black dramatists who makes a playful use of "signifyin'" to resist Adrienne Kennedy's victimized narrative of the subaltern mind and invests Lincoln's figure with the interracial reconfiguration of a hip-hop style which rings out the rappers' deconstruction against the racial stereotypes and the myths of integrity conventionally associated with the minority races in America. In the grain of Hurston's vernacular aesthetics, Parks does not perceive herself as part of a minority culture less exposed than the others to the vast domain of stardom which runs the hegemonic spectacles of power in late capitalism (Jameson 71). In her twin plays, black characters are never exempt from the seductions and the hybrid formations of video culture on the ground of their marginality,¹⁴ partaking as they do of a post-racial condition, making "the Last Black Man" offscreen constantly "aware of watching and being watched" (Garrett, "Figures" 3), being irresistibly drawn to the mythologized figures circulating in the "hall of mirrors" that nowadays negotiates the symbolic emblems of a nation.¹⁵

As Jameson points out, the "accelerated flow of mixed images" (82) oddly absorbs the "ghostly afterimage" of prominent historical figures and occupies an "imaginary fictive time" that constantly dislocates and subverts racial categories (76). Parks's gesture to re-mix a prominent figure selected from the American archive reconfigures the abolitionist President as a "detritus of historical time" (78), redefining the drama of the Civil War as the tragedy of black domestic interiors relocated, as she declared in an interview, at the "intersection of the historical and the now" (Wetmore and Smith-Howard 134). Her insistence on the mixed features of the actors who pretend to be Lincoln in her plays is deliberate in the way it replaces the historical narrative with the fractured hip-

hop drama of the black subjectivities who now interpret their dreams in technicolor with the new, interracial lingo of global culture. Parks clearly sees the risks of dispossession implied in these processes of cultural agglutination and, no less than Hurston and Wilson, stigmatizes the engagement of black Americans in power relations that often betray their cultural legacy. In this respect, the corrosive clash of black features and white emblems in her Lincoln-esque revisitation of the Dandy Zip Coon eternally opposed to the disempowered Jim Crow is representative of a post-racial aesthetic which critically appropriates white models in a "minstrel show in reverse" (Grassian, *Writing* 178). The brotherly fight resulting from the confrontation of the Lincoln replica and his "underdog" brother rearticulates racial interactions in a vernacular redefinition of the genres and attitudes conventionally associated with black heritage. In this respect, Parks's revision of American emblems and classics implies an iconoclastic approach which modifies the original forms starting from neglected sources and lost perspectives.¹⁶

If the Lincoln impersonators in her twin plays are cardboard figures that Jameson would define as "elaborate visual joke or hoax" randomly selected from an American archive, Parks recirculates them through the disruptive morphisms of hip-hop culture that preserves only the "dim memory of the original sign" and stands as a "partial resolution" offered to the voyeuristic consumption of a greedy crowd (82, 84, 83). The latter is the same stolid audience who consumes the "abnormal" body of the Hottentot Sarah Baartman, dissected and exhibited as a freak show attraction in Parks's 1996 play *Venus*. Heidi J. Holder situates her "works in the context of historical spectacle" (Wetmore and Smith-Howard 19), where the ultimate spectacle of power is perfectly attuned to "The Voice On Thuh Tee V" ("Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World," *The America Play* 120) and to the "strange legacy" of a society that reduces whatever enters the camera eye into redactable sequences and fading memories.¹⁷ No less than Parks, George C. Wolfe reprocesses this simulacra as *The Colored Museum*, which also reduces American icons and eminent historical figures to the ephemeral status of celebrities ravishly consumed by the arcade visitors invited, in *Topdog/Underdog*, to pull the trigger and kill their American hero (Achilles 114).

Notes

¹ This essay is based on a paper presented at the Conference “Between History and Myth. Politics and Political Uses of Abraham Lincoln,” organized by Marco Sioli at the University of Milan on November 16, 2009.

² In an interview with Kevin J. Wetmore, Parks borrows Adrienne Kennedy’s words to define her writing as a product of the tragic history of abolitionism in America, “like the hole in Lincoln’s head and the (w)hole of history, and they line up and all of a sudden, through that (w)hole comes the play” (Wetmore and Smith-Howard 130).

³ Parks’s tribute to Shakespeare in *The America Play* is acknowledged in her interview with Shawn-Marie Garrett (Kolin 183).

⁴ In the mise-en-scène of *Topdog/Underdog*, produced and directed by George C. Wolfe at the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival on July 22, 2001, the black man named Lincoln thus introduces himself: “I am uh brother playing Lincoln. Its uh stretch for anyones imagination. And it aint easy for me neither. Every day I put on that shit, I leave my own shit at the door and I put on that shit and I go out there and I make it work. I make it look easy but its hard. That shit is hard. But it works. Cause I work it.... I looked good in the getup and agreed to the white face and they really dug it that me and Honest Abe got the same name. (*Rest*). Its a sit down job. With benefits. I dont wanna get fired. They wont give me a good reference if I get fired” (52-53).

⁵ To clarify Parks’s debt to August Wilson, see “The Light in August,” her 2005 interview with the playwright from Pittsburgh, which took place few weeks before his untimely death. <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/nov05/wilson.cfm>

⁶ “LINCOLN ... you spunked in the pages and didn’t wipe them off. BOOTH Im hot, I need constant sexual release.... When I don’t got a woman, I gotta make do. Not like you, Link. you don’t got a woman you just sit there. Letting yr shit fester. Yr dick, if it aint falled off yet, is hanging there between yr legs, little whiteface shriveled-up blank-shooting grub worm. As goes thuh man so goes thuh mans dick. That’s what I say. Least my shits intact. (*Rest*). You a limp dick jealous whiteface whose wife dumped him cause he couldn’t get it up and she told me so. Came crawling to me cause she needed a man” (*Topdog/Underdog* 45).

⁷ As the playwright declares in her interview with Kevin J. Wetmore, the expression “Foundling Father” also refers to someone who “is following on someone’s footsteps – so we could assume that he’s thinking of someone who is *ahead* of him.... We would have to re-invent the wheel of time to figure that one out” (Wetmore and Smith-Howard 130).

⁸ “‘Repetition and Revision’ is a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc. – with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised. ‘Rep & Rev’ as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use I’m working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score.” Suzan-Lori Parks, “Elements of Style” (*The America Play* 8-9).

⁹ On the distinctive rhythmical patterns of African music developed by bop prosody see Amiri Baraka, *Blues People. Negro Music in White America* (1999).

¹⁰ The presentation of Booth as a stalker is announced as early as in *The America Play*: “the Great Man takes to guffawing guffawing at thin jokes in bad plays.... When someone remarked that he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot it was as if the Great Mans footsteps had been suddenly revealed: instead of making speeches, his act would not consist of a single chair, a cocker, in a dark box. The public was cordially invited to pay a penny, choose from a selection of provided pistols enter the darkened box and ‘Shoot Mr Lincoln.’ The Lesser Known became famous overnight” (160, 171).

¹¹ Jochen Achilles compares Parks’s unorthodox presentation of Lincoln’s death to the compulsive structure of digitalized multiplayer online games (105) in which the Great Man enters the loop of a mechanical process lazily performed by his body double.

¹² Quite significantly, in the Broadway production of *Topdog/Underdog*, which premiered at the Ambassador theater in April 2002, the role of Booth was played by the rapper Mos Def, who, as a hip-hop artist and like the black brothers in the play, adopted many an allegorical pseudonym.

¹³ “On the one hand, he is revered for helping to free the slaves and for becoming a martyr in so doing (at least in the eyes of others). However, upon closer look, Lincoln was not a fervent abolitionist, certainly not in the John Brown mold (a person who definitely gave his life in an attempt to help end slavery). After all, in the early days of the Civil War, Lincoln claimed that if he could end the war by not freeing any of the slaves, he would (and, conversely, if he could end the war by freeing all the slaves, he said he would). In the end Lincoln chose the latter as much, if not more, from a military necessity rather than a moral act. Although the emancipation of the slaves produced some immediate gains in civil rights for African Americans over the next decade or so, racial separatism and prejudice returned in full force after the North left the South in 1877, making Lincoln’s act somewhat of a hollow victory. Perhaps for these reasons, Lincoln in the play calls the historical Lincoln a ‘fool’” (Grassian, *Writing* 176). In Grassian’s line of thought, in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, Richard Hofstadter argues that, although Lincoln opposed slavery, he thought of black people as inferior beings. To a certain extent, Frederick Douglass influenced him otherwise but the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, freed the slaves only in the states at war with the Union but not in the four slave states (including Kentucky, Maryland, West Virginia and Louisiana) which had not seceded. Had he freed them, he would have risked losing them. Not until the declaration of the 13th amendment was slavery ended, and only a brief period of reconstruction passed before the South was turned over to white racists again (as part of the sinister deal of the Presidential election in 1876). These historical circumstances, clarified to me by Vincent J. Tirelli, perhaps explain Parks’s mixed feelings about a President generally revered by black Americans as the Great Emancipator.

¹⁴ As the Black Woman with Fried Drumstick remarks in Parks’s 1990 play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Entire World*, the Last Black Man “have uh head he been keeping under thuh Tee V. On his bottom pantry shelf. He have uh head that hurts. Don’t fit right” (*The America Play* 102).

¹⁵ As the playwright clarifies in Wetmore’s interview: “An essential part of human *being* is performance. So there’s a play about a brother who pretends he’s someone else in the daytime and he has the same name of the person he is pretending to be, and when he gets

home, he has to pretend to be someone else to hide his underhanded motives from his brother. All that makes for a hall of mirrors, or a wave pattern. The hall of mirrors is also a wave pattern. And in every wave pattern there is a spot where it goes quiet – where the mirrors go blind. But I don't intentionally write it in. It just happens because I'm writing a play in which the characters are trying to be – or, at least, figure out who they are" (Wetmore and Smith-Howard 135).

¹⁶ It is the case of the Broadway musical, *Porgy and Bess*, based by Parks on the neglected literary source of George Gershwin's opera: the novel *Porgy*, written in 1925 by the Southern writer Heyward De Bose.

¹⁷ In this context, it is worth recalling Adrienne Kennedy's stage direction "They all look like photographs" reported in *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (Sollors 63).

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