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# The Traumatized/traumatizing Subject In Anna Deavere Smith, Suzan-Lori Parks, And August Wilson

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**THE TRAUMATIZED/TRAUMATIZING SUBJECT IN ANNA DEAVERE  
SMITH, SUZAN-LORI PARKS, AND AUGUST WILSON**

by

**CHRISTOPHER J. GIROUX**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2014

MAJOR: ENGLISH

Approved by:

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Advisor

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Date

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## **DEDICATION**

*for Sally and Grace*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication _____	ii
Acknowledgments _____	iii
Chapter 1 “Trauma and Drama—A Rationale” _____	1
Chapter 2 “Trauma, <i>Twilight</i> , and <i>Fires in the Mirror</i> : Negotiating the Literature of Dispossession with Anna Deavere Smith” _____	40
Mirroring Society, Mirroring Identity: Smith’s Means and Methods _____	44
Revisiting the Past _____	52
Disconnection and Dispossession, Textual Organization, and the Subversion of Time _____	55
Moving Outward: Rodney King and Beyond _____	62
Similarity through Difference, Mimesis through the Antimimetic _____	73
The Other, the Audience, and Fostering Truth _____	82
Fragments of/Fragmenting the Text _____	88
Minding the Gap _____	96
Invoking Trauma, Invoking Diaspora _____	101
Chapter 3 “Suzan-Lori Parks, the Failure to Heal, and the Traumatization of Viewership” _____	121
Toppling the Topdog _____	126
<i>Venus</i> : A Touch of Diaspora _____	133
<i>The America Play</i> —A Play on America and the Knowing of the Traumatic Past _____	144
Trauma, Repetition, Revision, and History _____	147

Audience as Agent and Object of Trauma: Destabilizing Distance _____	155
Audience as Agent and Object of Trauma: Continuing to Weaken the Fourth Wall _____	165
Bracketing the Audience: Bringing Them In _____	170
From the Page to the Stage, the Stage to the World: Audience as Continued Collaborator, Audience as Sufferer _____	176
“I’m your Venus / I’m your fire / At your desire” _____	185
Chapter 4 “August Wilson, Aunt Ester, and the Physicality of Trauma” _____	190
The Gist of <i>Gem</i> _____	197
Citizens in Name Only _____	203
Aunt Ester and Slavery: Trauma as Visiting and Vanquishing the Past _____	209
Aunt Ester’s Bill of Sale: Texts, Trauma, and Choosing, Then and Now _____	219
Citizen, the City of Bones, and the Physical World of Trauma _____	226
Healing in <i>Gem</i> _____	239
Chapter 5 “Concluding Thoughts” _____	248
References _____	270
Abstract _____	291
Autobiographical Statement _____	293

## CHAPTER 1 TRAUMA AND DRAMA—A RATIONALE

Despite the layman's belief that trauma is purely a medical problem, the study of trauma belongs squarely within the humanities. Because of the obvious and outright connections between trauma theory and literary study, studying trauma in the literature classroom allows students to engage with various theoretical ideas and schools of thought. Trauma first and foremost obviously has ties to psychology,<sup>1</sup> and bringing trauma theory into literature programs highlights both subjects' focus on history and historical power struggles.<sup>2</sup> Literary study, trauma, and history singly and collectively emphasize issues of historiography and the making of knowledge through the reclaiming of experience.<sup>3</sup> With its focus on the relationship between perpetrator, victim, and bystander and on the relationship between the individual, the majority, and cultural institutions, trauma additionally affords students the opportunity to engage with aspects of sociolinguistics, communication theory, and cultural studies.<sup>4</sup> An approach exploring

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<sup>1</sup> Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* capture basic ideas about trauma, and Lacan's story of a grieving father in "Tuché and the Automaton" becomes an entry point to discuss trauma within deconstructionism, as does Derrida's centered/centerless circle; each of these authors have inspired various trauma theorists and influenced discussions about mimesis, antimimesis, repetition, revision, temporality, gaps, lack and a lack of absolute truths, and narrativization and master narratives. See Caruth, Radstone, G. Hartman, Leys, and Belau among others.

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for instance, Janet's claims about female hysteria as outlined in Leys's *Trauma: A Genealogy*, studies about Holocaust survivors (e.g., Laub and Auerhahn, Kidron, and Langer), or studies of those affected by the various armed conflicts of the twentieth century (see Leys's *From Guilt to Shame*, Tal, Farrell, and Strejilevich).

<sup>3</sup> See Caruth, Eyal, Nora, de Certau, and LaCapra.

<sup>4</sup> Herman as well as Alexander, Eyerman, and Smelser all focus on relational aspects of trauma. Although she is not denying the biological consequences or legal/political ramifications of trauma for the subject—she is, after all, writing about human rights issues in her native Argentina—Strejilevich situates trauma fully within the realm of the



literature and trauma theory in tandem is productive and necessary because studying trauma in literature allows us to see more readily trauma's ties to identity politics and power dynamics, especially as applied to members of traditionally disenfranchised groups. Because healing from trauma—if indeed healing from trauma is a possibility, for many argue it is not—is about learning and transformation, and because trauma is defined through historical albeit (re)imagined moments, we can realize the degree to which writers have the opportunity to affect (and ideally educate) large groups of people in an instant. Indeed, if we consider Felman's stories about teaching texts concerning traumatizing events, using trauma theory in the literature classroom has personal, social, and cultural ramifications for students.

Instructors who incorporate trauma theory in the literature classroom also offer correctives to current trends in English education. Contemporary drama, which undergraduate and graduate programs in literature typically and unfortunately ignore, effectively captures issues of trauma and tales of disenfranchisement in ways other genres cannot. Teaching trauma theory in the literature classroom thus becomes a means to address drama's "orphan" status. Additionally, teaching drama in the literature classroom recognizes that, as a collective and communal forum, modern theater has long reflected issues of those who lack power because of their social standing as it is shaped and informed by issues of race, gender, socioeconomics, and sexual orientation. Consider, for

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linguistic and the literary. Aware of the political need for courts to recognize trauma and the ways in which traumatized individuals gain (or lose) credibility politically and legally, Strejilevich specifically foregrounds the literary aspects of trauma by concentrating on the performative speech act, *testimonio*, and the relationship between speaker and audience.

example, how the Krigwa movement, the twentieth-century theater initiative that W.E.B. Du Bois and the N.A.A.C.P. promoted as a means of promoting ideas and authors struggling to find a place in mainstream society, provided opportunities for African-Americans to see plays by and about them, a strategy reinvented later in the twentieth century during the Black Arts Movement; the manifestoes regarding drama that Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka penned speak directly to this call for change. Similarly, the early twentieth-century stage of the Provincetown Players, where Susan Glaspell and others strove to put on solely American works, became a venue for playwrights to discuss gender roles.

Besides being a venue that captures the violence and trauma that disenfranchised groups have faced, the theater and plays (unlike novels, short stories, and poems) have the potential to foster deeper insights into trauma—its nature, its effect on individuals, the ways in which it manifests itself in an individual’s behavior, and the fact that it is tied to the larger group and processes of cultural negotiation. Of all the genres, drama has the potential to affect its audiences differently, both in terms of means and ends, and the reason for this is uniquely tied to the physical and emotional effects trauma can have on audiences and to the fact that trauma and drama are both collectively situated. Trauma by its very nature is communal, and although many reduce trauma to one specific act of violence inflicted on an individual—a specific wound—we must remember trauma does not just arise from a single moment of violence, loss, or pain. It can occur across time, space, and generations. Alexander, for example, reminds readers of the danger of viewing trauma as merely an event rather than a social construct (8). After all, an event, he claims,

is not necessarily traumatic, but individuals' reactions to it indeed deem it so. Thus, for an individual or group to create a master narrative of a traumatizing event, there needs to be an understanding of the nature of the pain and the victim's situation, and of the connection between the victim and a larger group; the traumatized individual must also identify some guilty party to whom responsibility gets attributed (12-15). More specifically, in the instance of the group, there is a "ripping" of the social fabric, and the creation of a new master narrative, written and affected by such cultural mainstays and institutions as religions, the arts, laws, governments, academia, and the popular media (15-21).<sup>5</sup> Using the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center as an example, Smelser also reminds us that trauma is historically situated. He explains how cultural trauma gains validity, citing that the following conditions must occur for an event to be recognized as collectively traumatizing, rather than marked as "just" collective coping or grieving: "[a]n initial reaction of shock, disbelief, and emotional numbing"; "[w]idespread collective mourning, both spontaneous and officially scheduled"; "[a]n immediate sense of the indelibility of the trauma"; "a sense of natural brooding over the events, akin to a repetition-compulsion that generates something like a feeling of illegitimate neglect, if not guilt, if we do not attend to the memories and their meanings"; "[a] collective endowment of the events with a sacred character"; "deliberate efforts to remember"; "some contestation among politically interested groups over *how* the remembering should take place"; and "[a] culminating sense that [national] identity ha[s] been altered fundamentally" (266-67).

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<sup>5</sup> Other critics who focus on the relationship between trauma and the larger group include Herman, Hesford, Vickroy, Stocks, Solnit, Farrell, and Lambek.

Because trauma is collectively, communally, and historically situated, modern-day dramatists have the unique opportunity to open a window onto others' experiences of trauma that might otherwise go unnoticed and thereby inflict trauma (both past and present) onto audiences. With their ability to break the fourth wall in ways traditional and obvious as well as in more subversive ways, dramatists no longer engage audiences in moments of catharsis and a return to wholeness. Instead, dramatists promote a greater awareness of situations and stories that the status quo works to ignore, silence, and repress, tales that reflect the plight of disenfranchised individuals and communities. In terms of form and content, stylistics and thematics, drama has the ability to convey the experiences of traumatized peoples virtually and viscerally to its audience members in ways other genres cannot. Furthermore, the work of historically minded dramatists enables audiences to remain aware of both the immediate and long-term effects of suffering in ways historical writings, like a newspaper article, a diary, or a W.P.A. interview, cannot.

In the following pages, I thus explore how drama, particularly the works of three contemporary African-American playwrights, effectively captures aspects of trauma experienced by African-Americans in response to specific moments of violence and loss. Because these three dramatists—August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Anna Deavere Smith—recognize the past as an outgrowth of historical racial discrimination, these situations on which they focus become transformed into a political tool challenging those (often in the ruling class) who work to distance themselves from disenfranchised groups. The writings of Wilson, Parks, and Smith thus provide an opportunity for contemporary

audiences to understand better the racialized traumas of Americans past and present, as well as the traumas of the present that are linked to the past. Challenging the grand narratives of America and American literature through plot, theme, and aesthetics, Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities*, and Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*, *Venus*, and *The America Play* allow modern-day audiences to hear from silenced and marginalized peoples suffering from the traumatizing legacies of slavery and diaspora. To those who would argue that the effects of slavery and diaspora belong to the past, I counter that Wilson, Smith, and Parks do not just focus on some elusive "blanket trauma." Instead, they are exploring the future that was created by slavery and the ways in which the past is manifested and manifests itself in daily life and the modern world.<sup>6</sup> As such, these playwrights demonstrate how drama is uniquely situated to portray trauma and to show audiences how healing from trauma occurs as well as what prevents it from occurring.

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Literature, like trauma, as Caruth maintains, presents an event needing to be understood and mastered. By extension, literature itself has the potential to *be* traumatizing. Granted, people write for a variety of reasons, but the desire to remind readers of past horrors and of the fact that the past is alive and well is admittedly the goal of many authors. Consider, for example, the work of contemporary African-American

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we should also view Wilson, Smith, and Parks as responding to contemporary studies that reiterate the degree to which racial bias exists on the level of the subconscious and manifests itself in perceptions of others' and the Other's pain (Trawalter, Hoffman, and Waytz; "Unconscious' Racial Bias...").

writers; teaching of the trauma of slavery and racism is, after all, a significant component of the work of authors like Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, or Charles Johnson, and their writings depicting the Middle Passage stand as an effort to remember, memorialize, and (by extension) to heal.<sup>7</sup> The dedication of Morrison's *Beloved* simply reads "Sixty Million and more," but healing obviously is not a choice for them. That option is available only to contemporary readers. In Morrison's (and others') works, the horrors of the slave trade are kept alive because, as recent studies assert, individuals are often unable to assess and imagine accurately others' pain (Trawalter, Hoffman, and Waytz) and because the terrors of slavery were not only a matter of the whip, shackles, or physical separation from Africa. These horrors also involve issues of power, control, and racist thinking, issues that continue to plague modern American society. Furthermore, if these writers' works are not merely concerned with the preservation of (historical and collective) memory, I maintain these texts highlight, at the very least, Herman's claim that bystanders (even those separated by time and place) must actively and purposefully choose to side with either the victim or the perpetrator of a crime. Contemporary readers who stress that the past is dead or that they are innocent of wrongdoing can be reminded of their implicit, if not explicit, involvement with ongoing issues of discrimination and racism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Vickroy specifically notes that Morrison has called *Beloved* a text dealing with a case of "national amnesia" regarding slavery and racism (173).

<sup>8</sup> Farrell's use of "cultural trope" to describe trauma also resonates within literary studies and with trauma's social dimension. Trope, itself a literary term, gets to issues of what a culture deems important, which is doubly relevant when discussing works of historical fiction. In the case of *Beloved*, for example, its cultural significance involves different

This reminder, however, is not just limited to works by African-American writers. Indeed, literary texts that highlight traumatic situations actively involve audiences by foregrounding the concept of intellectual and emotional complicity attached to trauma in two specific ways. First of all, a text focusing on traumatizing situations (or potentially traumatizing ones) or traumatized individuals can emphasize greater awareness in and of the Other. If members of a majority group are unable to identify fully with the members of a minority group (or vice versa), they can, empathetically or sympathetically, implicitly or explicitly, emotionally or intellectually, at the very least gain insight into both their and another's role in a given power situation. Moreover, textual trauma can make audience members complicit by actively engaging them in the moment of trauma. In other words, they become traumatized themselves; they become more than empathetically unsettled, as philosopher and historian Dominick LaCapra might term it.<sup>9</sup> To this end, no matter the genre, in works of literature dealing with trauma we see authors actively striving to capture the reality of traumatized characters as they work through the processes of compromising, negotiating, and making knowledge.

Thematically, trauma texts concern victims of natural disasters, of military strife, and of abuse. Whether that abuse is physical, mental, emotional, or sexual and whether that abuse is linked to gender, race, sexuality, or class, these causes are all the purview of

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times in the nineteenth century (the time of the novel's action, both pre- and post-Civil War) and the twentieth century (the time of its publication).

<sup>9</sup> Obviously, some individuals resist interacting with texts and even viewing the world from others' perspectives. The fact of these individuals who resist change, however, reiterates that trauma involves social negotiation, for an unwillingness to recognize another's traumatized state is a political act. Authors forcing audiences to recognize traumatizing situations thus are engaging in forms of protest and education.

trauma theorists and the focus of literary trauma texts.<sup>10</sup> We see, too, individuals subjected to one-time acts of catastrophe, violence, and degradation, as well as those suffering from the cumulative effects of hardships that often stem from imperialism, racism, and sexism.<sup>11</sup> We encounter individuals who suffered the violence and loss themselves, as well as those who have merely heard of it, but continue, as a new generation, to feel its effects.<sup>12</sup> We see characters who withdraw, become hypervigilant, or go on rampages of their own (i.e., who engage, per Farrell, in “berserking” [7]). We confront individuals who lack control and ultimately remain frozen in time, for “repression and suppression may bring temporary comfort but carry their own destructive

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the traumas linked to natural disasters, see Solnit’s *A Paradise Built in Hell* and Erikson’s *Everything in Its Path*. Scholars who focus on the trauma of war and military conflict include Leys, Lifton, Tal, and Strejilevich. Laub, Felman, Langer, and LaCapra continue this focus, paying particular attention to the Holocaust. Sexual abuse is covered in Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*.

<sup>11</sup> Erikson’s *A New Species of Trouble* pays particular attention to the traumas resulting from long-term exposure to environmental dangers, poverty, graft, corruption, and discrimination; Farmer also reminds us of this when he argues that “large-scale forces [can] crystallize into the sharp, hard surfaces of individual suffering. Such suffering is structured by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire—whether through routine, ritual, or as is more commonly the case, these hard surfaces—to constrain agency. For many, ... life choices are structured by racism, sexism, political violence, and grinding poverty” (282). Farrell visits this idea from another perspective when he provides an overview of the various cultural uses of trauma in *Post-Traumatic Culture*.

<sup>12</sup> Vickroy, for example, discusses the interplay between trauma and family dynamics, using the works of Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras to explore how mothers’ traumas affect their children; Morgenstern also notes the relation between trauma and family in Morrison’s *Beloved*. Kidron, in comparison, talks of how survivors of the Holocaust have reflected on the effects of the past on their children, but denied their spouses that same recognition. Vlasopolos, too, in her *No Return Address*, talks of how female survivors were relegated to kitchen duties when Holocaust memorials were under discussion (80). Although not focusing on family dynamics, Felman also recognizes trauma’s potential for transference within the classroom in her “From ‘The Return of the Voice.’”



costs: further victimization, lost human connections, and unresolved anguish” (Vickroy 4). As a result, readers encounter traumatized individuals who struggle with anxiety and an awareness of their mortality, feel detached and isolated from the larger group, and wrestle with issues of power, control, bias (even when the larger group does not admit to or even recognize its own biases), intimacy, and identity. Stylistically, readers of trauma find their senses directly engaged, as the authors of these texts tell their tales antichronologically and allow the past to intrude on the present. Ghosts of former times, whether literal or figurative, haunt the traumatized individual, and fragments, gaps, and a variety of voices often confront readers. Recognizing the tensions between past and present, then and now, sickness and wholeness, the traumatized individual frequently suffers from breaks within his conscious memory, unable to relive and remember the traumatizing event at will. His remembering is filled with gaps, with the past intruding upon the present through flashbacks that can occur as waking dreams or nightmares.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, in ways both stylistic and thematic, literature provides a fertile ground and literary analysis the appropriate tools to engage with and interrogate representations and theories of trauma. Because trauma encompasses the body’s desire to forget thoughts of fear and mortality, and because the traumatized individual now recognizes death everywhere, trauma becomes an issue of learning, of gaining knowledge, rather than merely claiming experience, as Caruth’s groundbreaking texts *Unclaimed Experience:*

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<sup>13</sup> See Laub and Auerhahn and their discussion of fugue states (291-92) as well as McNally’s refutation of their work *Remembering Trauma*, where he asserts that the problem is not a matter of forgetting but of remembering all too well. Consider, too, Kirmayer who explores issues of memory and remembering, gaps and dissociation, and narrativization as they relate to trauma, as well as Schwab.

*Trauma, Narrative, History and Trauma: Explorations in Memory* suggest. It is instead a matter of making “an experiencing ‘I’ ... present as a subject” (Laub and Auerhahn 289), of making the traumatizing moment understood and lived.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, as I noted earlier, despite the ready connection between trauma and drama, those who study trauma in and through literature pay little attention to works for the stage. Instead, literary scholars that examine trauma focus almost exclusively on the novel. Farrell, for example, writes of turn-of-the-century Victorian England, viewing the science fiction of H.G. Wells and the mysteries of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as reflective of trauma and collective fears about the zeitgeist and the Other, whether race, class, or sexual orientation defined that Other. Whitehead brings in novels by Pat Barker, Toni Morrison, and Caryl Phillips. The art world enters with Bennett—and Farrell, who writes of visual depictions of St. George—and although film gets acknowledged by Farrell, as well as by Caruth in her reading of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, trauma scholars continue to ignore drama. As Shakespeare is one of the only dramatists who gets covered in literature programs, perhaps this explains why, in one of the few instances where a trauma scholar considers drama, Farrell in his *Post-Traumatic Culture* focuses on the bard. Regrettably, this occurs over a mere five pages, and on those few pages, he references *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Henry VI*, and *The Tempest*, among others. However, if trauma is about complicity and if healing from trauma requires surrendering

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<sup>14</sup> Das similarly describes it as a moment of “articulation of the world in which the strangeness of the world revealed by death, by its non-inhabitability, can be transformed into a world in which one can dwell again, in full awareness of a life that has to be lived in loss” (“Language and Body...” 327), an idea that also points to the impossibility of healing from trauma. Morris likewise notes the relationship between voice, voicelessness, and trauma (29).

one's self to the Other, drama continues to lend itself to the experience in ways that poetry, fiction, and the cinema do not.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, I am not arguing that individuals do not engage with novels, short stories, poetry, or films on an emotional and intellectual level, or that readers are not, cannot, and do not find themselves engrossed in, moved by, or haunted by stories recorded in a novel, poem, short story, film, or film script. Any creative work requires that the audience submit to the author's vision, but when it comes to trauma, drama builds bridges differently.

First, beyond the potential for catharsis the ancient Greeks ascribed to drama, a play is meant to be a collective experience. Yes, nowadays people can read or view a play on their own—just as a group can collectively listen to an author at a poetry reading—but the expectation is that the experience of a play is first and foremost, by its very nature, communal. Granted, all literature necessitates the willing suspension of disbelief, but the audience of a play surrenders that power to the writer, director, cast, etc., in a way that the reader of a book does not. A reader can put down that text at her choosing, and people watching a film at home or on personal electronic devices can pause or stop as they like. To a large degree however, the playgoer surrenders that autonomy. Much as a traumatized individual lacks control, he remains there physically, acquiescing his sense of agency, for walking out of a theater, as a public act, is very different from putting

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<sup>15</sup> It is interesting that even traditional film gets more attention than drama especially if, in this age of electronic reproduction, film no longer has to be viewed in a communal space or public gathering area (i.e., the theater), but can be enjoyed by audiences of one. Perhaps the greater emphasis on film occurs because film allows for a fixed (i.e., stable) mimetic representation and repetition of trauma that a live performance does not. Directors' cuts or restored versions aside, films remain stable; a stage performance is always subject to change. However, if trauma is antimimetic, this logic fails.

down a book, tablet, or electronic reader; from stopping a DVD; or from walking out of the cinemaplex. Furthermore, because of trauma's communal nature, the viewing audience of a play engages in power relations differently than a reading group. For example, a playgoer has the ability to shape the play in a way that a reading audience does not; her emotional response—laughing, not responding, crying—has the potential to impact that particular performance, to affect the way in which the actors deliver their next lines, something that does not and cannot occur in a novel or film. In this way, the theater recognizes that process of negotiation central to trauma.

The contemporary playwright, unlike his ancient Greek predecessors, may also have greater opportunities to traumatize and affect a viewer given the physical intimacy of today's theaters and the physical closeness between audience members, as well as between the audience and the actors. The power of the Greek theater was in the masks, the stilts, the chanting, all of which made it a quasi-religious ritual; in addition, the extraordinary acoustics of ancient theaters allowed even those seated in the last rows of a 3,000-seat arena to hear perfectly. Nowadays, the power of theater involves the intimacy of small spaces; excepting commercial works (and musicals) done in large concert venues, contemporary playwrights recognize the relation of one body to another in the intimate space of the theater. Modern dramatists stress the role of the individual and make concerted efforts to engage average citizens by asserting the plight of all peoples—how trauma can affect all peoples—rather than just the nobility. There is more of a focus on the disenfranchised, on those on the fringes.

Today's dramatists also have the ability to engage audiences, literally and physically, in other ways, ways that are not completely imagined. Yes, the novelist and poet can write to the readers' senses, but they do not have the ability to involve the senses in the same way. Even when a novelist is describing a color, sound, or smell, the reader of the text still has to engage in that act of pretense; his memory and imagination create the situation only within the mind's eye. In the theater however, the senses can literally be engaged, physically, in the moment. Audience members are not imagining a character is dressed a certain way, has a certain physique, or speaks in a certain tone of voice; they actually see that character's costume, features, and build. Audiences hear her fear, sarcasm, joy, etc. as the actress speaks her lines. As with reliving a traumatizing event, the engagement of the senses becomes an actual, physical experience rather than something a reader remembers intellectually or imagines. Moreover, it is not just a matter of the physical set, props, or costumes used to involve the audience in the story. Consider the flashing lights and rumbling noises Amiri Baraka uses to create a subway in *Dutchman* (2504), the effects he elicits by asking directors to engage the audience's sense of smell and motion in *Slave Ship* (251), or his request in some productions of the latter that audience members be seated in planks, as close together as possible, rather than in traditional theater seats, to convey even more fully the experience of the Middle Passage. The short play even ends with jubilatory dancing in which audience members are encouraged to participate (259).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Again, film fails to engage the audience fully in a similar manner. Unless one is pointing to the "feelies" of Huxley's *Brave New World*, film does not stimulate the tactile, olfactory, and gustatory senses. Even 3-D is limited to just the visual and auditory.

Likewise, there are the expressionistic techniques of Tennessee Williams that can engage and direct the viewer's attention and emotions in ways the printed page cannot. At one point, audience members see Laura Wingfield frozen in a pool of light during an argument in which she is not partaking (*The Glass Menagerie* 3.38-43) to show both her role in the family and the effect Tom and Amanda's disputes have on her; at other times, spectators view Laura through a gauze curtain (1.21) or "as through soundproof glass" (7.114) to highlight the haziness, distance, and emotional nature of her brother's memories and memory in general. These visual moves affect viewers differently than they do readers. Similarly, just reading about Blanche DuBois's "hallucinations" has a different effect (and affect) than actually seeing the undulating shadows and "lurid reflections" (*A Streetcar Named Desire* 10.158-59) or hearing, along with her, the "inhuman jungle voices" (10.161) as well as the Varsouviana and the gunshot that marks her late husband's suicide and her resulting feelings of guilt (9.139-41).

The immediacy of the performance also reinforces the effects for which Williams (and playwrights in general) strive. A viewer is unable to ignore the shadows, reflections, and voices, indeed any stage directions, in a way that a reader can. There is also no opportunity to stop, reflect, or reread; the show, as the old adage proclaims, must go on. Likewise, when Williams has the back of the Kowalski apartment fade out to reveal street drunks or prostitutes (10.159) or when Arthur Miller has characters walk through the walls of the Loman home when they find themselves caught up in memories, for "in the

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Also, with on-demand services and the ability to view a film (or play) outside of a theater, the audience's relinquishing of control to the director, cast, author, etc., is once more minimized and the physical communal experience denied.

*scenes of the past these boundaries are broken*” (1.12), the audience is engaged, viscerally and mentally, in this split sense of time and reality. By extension, merely reading about Aunt Ester conjuring up the City of Bones and the boat *Gem of the Ocean*, in Wilson’s work of the same name, can never have the same impact as seeing her actually resurrect them on stage (2.2.62-69). After all, these sights never physically appear before the audience, but only in the collective imaginings of Aunt Ester, Citizen Barlow, Black Mary, Eli, and Solly Two Kings. Similarly, readers of Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* can never fully imagine Boy Willie’s belief in the spiritual world without actually seeing him physically wrangling with a ghost (2.5.106). Individuals who speak only English and read Rajiv Joseph’s *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, to use a more recent example, can likewise never truly get a sense for scenes in which Arabic is spoken. Readers are given a translation and transliteration of the words spoken by the Arabic couple whose home is raided (1.3.165-74), the prostitute one of the characters procures (2.1.199-210), and the female victim of leprosy (2.3.224-35), whereas the reading audience’s counterparts at a live performance only hear the lines in Arabic. They are asked to process this information in the moment in a completely different manner.

Additionally, it is only on the stage that an author like Paula Vogel can fully convey the sense of detachment still felt by the protagonist of *How I Learned to Drive*, when she recounts being molested by her uncle for the first time. The play begins with a middle-aged woman, Li’l Bit, stepping back into a scene when she was seventeen. The incestuous relationship she has with her uncle is gradually revealed, such that the audience is first led to believe that what they are viewing is an inappropriate May-

December romance (8). Furthermore, the sexual contact between the two characters at this point in the play is merely pantomimed; no physical contact occurs (8-12). Compare this to one of the last scenes in the play, where Uncle Peck physically molests Li'l Bit, aged eleven, and the actors actually touch each other. Here, however, Li'l Bit has to have another character, the Teenage Chorus, voice her lines; she still remains unable to remember and place herself fully in these events as an individual with agency (88-90).

Even something as “simple” as overlapping, simultaneous conversations, as found during the Grand Rounds scene in Margaret Edson’s *W;t* (35-40) or the funeral luncheon in Act 2 of Tracy Letts’s *August: Osage County* (77-81), affect audiences differently when performed live. Whereas viewing audiences can simultaneously experience, hear, and follow those multiple conversations when performed for them in a theater, it is a physical impossibility on the printed page. Those lines *have* to be read sequentially. Moreover, the lack of control that traumatized individuals feel once again becomes emphasized and realized because readers have the luxury to stop and reexamine a passage; viewing audiences of a play must simply “go with the flow.” Drama, as a genre, thus, is capable of rendering the intrusiveness of memories (whether in the form of flashbacks or dreams), the tangible physical reaction, and the concept of simultaneity in ways that other genres typically are not able to achieve.<sup>17</sup> Even scene breaks, or the lack of them, lend themselves to traumatizing audiences—these breaks point to how trauma disrupts linear storytelling and stress the lack of control the audience exerts over an

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<sup>17</sup> Some prose writers do accomplish this—I think of a text like John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse”—but by and large, I would argue this sense of alienation is achieved more easily on a stage.



onstage event; conversely, the lack of act and scene divisions in many plays points to the extensive intrusiveness of trauma and the ways in which it permeates all aspects of an individual's life. Even older plays that do not rely as heavily on stage directions or give an indication of the tone that is to be applied to a line can be disruptive to readers in that they have to stop, deliberate, and actively piece the action together and apply the appropriate emotion.

In these ways, drama has greater potential to involve viewers, to engage them physically, cognitively, and emotionally, and it is this potential for communal involvement that mirrors contemporary thinking about trauma. The collective defines trauma: trauma only gains recognition through the larger group, a fact possibly experienced and reinforced by the communal performance.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, drama highlights trauma's ability to be relived and passed on, as well as denied. A character still working through a traumatic past is doomed to repeat it, just as the actor portraying that individual must relive that situation during another performance. Not only does the actor become

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<sup>18</sup> Beyond the triad of perpetrator, traumatized, and bystander in cases of man-made trauma, Tal reiterates that “[r]epresentation of traumatic experience is ultimately a tool in the hands of those who shape public perceptions and national myth” (19). It thus falls to critics of trauma literature to identify “the composition of the community of trauma survivors; the composition of the community of perpetrators; the relationship between the communities of victims and perpetrators; and the contemporary social, political, and cultural location of the community of mourners” (17). Stocks and Lambek, however, force us to step back further. The former stresses that trauma as we typically configure it may merely be a Western construct. Non-Western societies may link devastating events to karma, divine retribution, and/or a potential for spiritual enlightenment. Lambek, on the other hand, in his study of the Malagasy, views trauma as a form of cultural possession. Solnit too recognizes the issue of the larger group's perspective by noting the potential for positives after disasters; other “positives” that arise when trauma is studied as a cultural marker include “communality” (Farrell 18), “heroic value” (23), and “survival magic” (23).

complicit, so does the audience, and it is this idea of transference that particularly lends itself to trauma—and differs from other theoretical frames.<sup>19</sup> Consider the idea of reading a text through feminist theory or from a postcolonial perspective. One can view the text through a given lens and believe he remains innocent of any of the crimes described in the text, for that was not he. As Louise Clifton writes, in her poem “in white america,”

1800's in this town  
fourteen longhouse were destroyed  
by not these people here.  
not these people  
burned the crops and chopped down  
all the peach trees.  
not these people. not these people  
preserve peaches, even now. (11-18)

*That* was another time, another place, another group in power that committed that crime, that looked the other way, and that allowed it to happen, and yes, despite the heavy irony of the phrase “not these people,” on some level, the logic holds. The theater, though, makes that logic even less tenable because of the role of the audience, particularly if we remember trauma is not just an event or a physical wound. Danger exists in merely linking trauma to an event and locating trauma in the realm of the physical wounded body. We must instead recognize trauma as a physical and mental place, a site, and not just a “simple” event.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, reliving trauma involves being between boundaries and entering the contact zones of memory and culture (Bennett 8), and surviving trauma means recognizing the power relations between the individual and society, manifested

<sup>19</sup> Again, see Kidron and Herman among others for discussions of transference.

<sup>20</sup> Again, we must remember Erikson's and Farmer's claims regarding the traumatizing potential of long-term suffering.

through the latter's various cultural institutions. Trauma, in other words, functions "as an indicator of social injustice [and] oppression" (Vickroy x), and because trauma is an experience negotiated between people as well as a process, by surrendering oneself to the performance, the viewer of trauma in the case (and space) of the theater allows it to take place.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, with drama, the audience member has the potential to be traumatized, to assume some of that horror experienced and relived by the actors on the stage.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In addition to Strejilevich's claims about trauma and testimony, Alexander also openly espouses this focus on the processes of communication—on the performative speech act (11-12) and active communication—as does Geoffrey Hartman, who writes, "both in literary studies and in the field of public health a new awareness arises which is ethical as well as clinical. There is more *listening*, more *hearing* of words within words, and a greater openness to *testimony*" (541).

Using the image of the wound, or cut, Belau similarly argues that trauma belongs firmly in the realm of linguistics and communication theory. For example, in writing about semiotics and the processes of signification and identification, she reminds us that [t]he signifier marks the subject twice. It marks the subject as the primordial cut where the signifier carves the subject out of the body, and it also marks the subject in its failure to cover the void opened by that very cut. The paradox lies in the temporality of these marks: that is, the first mark, the primordial cutting up of the body, can only be produced by the signifier. However, this signifier doesn't actually "exist" (or function) until the symbolic space opened up by the second marking—the failure of the signifier—can produce the functioning signifier. (par. 5)

Although her focus is on individual identity, as created by a foundational lack as well as by absence, her emphasis becomes the process through which meaning and knowledge are made, mediated, negotiated, and represented. Furthermore, she concludes that there is danger in reading trauma as about content (and not merely process) and in collapsing the relationship between temporal modes and temporal selves when it comes to trauma. LaCapra echoes this emphasis on process, particularly the communication process, and the ways in which we manufacture knowledge and history, asserting, in his *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, that "[w]orking through [trauma is] an articulatory practice" (21-22).

<sup>22</sup> Some believe that this is the reason Vogel created her tale of pedophilia and incest, *How I Learned to Drive*, without an intermission. She did not want to provide audiences

Although he is not speaking specifically of drama in the following statement, I would argue LaCapra presents us with another rationale for linking drama and trauma: “The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness... involves a kind of *virtual experience* through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (qtd. in Vickroy 21; emphasis added). However, on the stage, is the experience still virtual? Obviously, to the degree that the actors are merely playing characters, it is virtual, but on another level, is not this performance now real? The audience indeed allows events to occur by being present, by fulfilling that role, in the process of testifying, of being a witness. The variety and number of voices that Vickroy argues empathic unsettlement requires (27) are, also, more readily available on the stage. Yes, readers of the novel can supply a different voice for each character, but only if they are willing. The staged presentation automatically provides those voices—and witnesses—in ways more tangible than film, a tangibility that is further heightened every time a character breaks the fourth wall.<sup>23</sup> In these instances, addressing the audience becomes a formal acknowledgment that drama—and trauma—requires a witness and that trauma involves testimony and

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with the opportunity to escape what is an unsettling viewing experience. Similarly, it can be argued that her decision to tell the play non-chronologically was a concrete way to acclimate audiences to the initial instance of abuse between the protagonist, aged eleven, and her uncle. The shocking violence of plays like Baraka’s *The Toilet* or *Slave Ship* compromises the audience in similar ways.

<sup>23</sup> Again, by film I mean traditional cinema. Obviously documentaries approach the fourth wall differently.

social negotiation.<sup>24</sup> Granted, actors can break the fourth wall in films, but this medium does not allow for a conversation or audience participation to occur. Though rare in serious drama, two-way interaction *can* happen.<sup>25</sup>

This focus on physicality, on the body, of actors, characters, and audiences recognizes why reading a play versus seeing one still offers a different experience than that posed by reading a novel, short story, or poem. An individual reading a play, rather than viewing a performance, should on some level be in the same predicament as the reader of a poem or novel. I argue, however, that merely reading a play still lends itself to discussions of trauma and has the potential to be traumatizing in ways other genres do not. First of all, even reading a drama yields a sense of splitness, of severing, of rupture. Beyond reminding the audience that the play, like trauma, is ever in process, the reading of its script always elicits a sense of detachment and fragmentation, a recognition that wholeness, in and of itself, is an impossibility.<sup>26</sup> The reader, like the traumatized individual, must always grapple with the fact that there are alternate visions of the work out there—the actors', director's, producer's—that, like trauma, contrary to Caruth's assertion, may never be claimed. Similarly, the reader must realize there is yet another preferred way to experience the text: as a live performance. In these ways, the reader is engaged in that process of double consciousness described by Herman as "existing

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<sup>24</sup> For other discussions of audience, testimony, and the physically present and physically receptive community as they relate to trauma, see Erikson (*Everything in Its Path*), Langer, Felman, Laub, Herman, and Eyerman.

<sup>25</sup> Although the audience members who join in the conversation are actually cast members, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is one work where a two-way conversation technically occurs (1.21-26).

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the impossibility of healing, see Tal.

simultaneously in two realities, in two points in time” (90).<sup>27</sup> The fact that plays continue to be performed—are meant to be performed again—reinforces the repetitiveness of trauma and the fact that if healing is to occur, it must be communally sanctioned. The very presence of stage directions, which interrupt the dialogue, likewise prevents the reading experience from being seamless and thus highlights the act of imagination. These directions point to the artificiality of reading a play and to trauma’s mimetic, re-created qualities.<sup>28</sup> The insertion of stage directions also points to the separation of audience from character, as well as character from situation. Characters and audience members are not in control; the author is. (Or is he? Again, trauma’s fragmented nature continues to be replicated if we move beyond the author’s vision to include that of a director, producer, and actor.) Similarly, the mere appearance of stage directions or author commentary interrupting lines of dialogue reflects trauma’s dissociated and dissociating, fragmented and fragmenting nature.

Building on the fact that the theatrical world has been neglected in discussions of trauma, and that drama (whether seen or read) engages its audience with and in trauma in ways other genres cannot, numerous plays spring to mind as ripe for discussion. David Rabe’s *Sticks and Bones*, with his focus on Vietnam and the way in which he collapses past and future in the opening and closing scenes, highlights the intimate and long-term connections between war and trauma. This is to say nothing of Rabe’s focus on the issue of negotiation, skillfully captured by dropping the returning vet, David, with his

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<sup>27</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois’s definition of double consciousness also resonates here.

<sup>28</sup> For a fuller discussion of the debate surrounding trauma’s mimetic and antimimetic qualities, see Caruth and Leys.

disabilities and disturbing memories into the perfect, nuclear, suburban home of Ozzie and Harriet Nelson. Plays about grief and mourning (like David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole*, Letts's *August: Osage County*, and Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project's *The Laramie Project*), plays that hinge on guilt and suffering (like Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, and *After the Fall*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*), and plays about illness and anticipatory grief (like Edson's *W;t*, Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz*, and even Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*) all are thought-provoking pieces relevant to discussions of trauma.<sup>29</sup> If our focus is on the long-term effects of addiction, abuse, or military conflict, we can turn to texts like Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, and Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, for all of these works seem to follow the arc along which trauma theory has progressed: that trauma has been become integrated into and accepted by popular culture by being aligned to current events and issues related to women, children, and war.

Many of these plays also serve as a reminder that trauma is an ongoing condition that does not necessarily get resolved.<sup>30</sup> The focus of these plays, after all, is not just on

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<sup>29</sup> *Angels in America* could fit in the category of anticipatory grief as well.

<sup>30</sup> As one character in *Rabbit Hole* says, when describing her feelings for her adult son who has been dead for several years, "At some point it becomes bearable. It turns into something you can crawl out from under. And carry around—like a brick in your pocket. And you forget it every once in a while, but then you reach in for whatever reason and there it is: 'Oh right. *That.*' Which can be awful. But not all the time. Sometimes it's kinda nice... Not that you *like* it exactly, but it's what you have instead of your son, so you don't wanna let go of it either. So you carry it around. And it doesn't go away..." (Lindsay-Abaire 2.129-30). Although this character's focus is on grief and loss, these

the visible, physical wound, but also the emotional and mental effects of trauma, and several of these dramas tie trauma to a specific loss or event. It is essential, however, that we recall that trauma is not necessarily the response to a single occurrence, but can be related, per Erikson's *A New Species of Trouble*, to the long-term sufferings of groups, to hardships linked to racism, economics, and inequality.<sup>31</sup> We must remember that poverty, racism, and overt and covert discriminatory practices inflicted on certain segments of the American population, namely members of minority groups, can be traumatizing and yield moments of pluralized double consciousness. What happens, though, if we step back and recognize that, in the case of all the plays mentioned in the prior paragraph (save Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*), their authors are white and that with few exceptions their characters are written (or traditionally cast) as white?

I argue that by studying trauma and drama in tandem audiences can see the output of twentieth-century African-American playwrights as working through a much larger tradition, one requiring the authors to trace their way back to and through slavery and the diaspora. Thus, the struggles presented onstage by contemporary African-American playwrights point to ongoing, systemic problems linked to racism, its effects on contemporary audiences, and the fact that many modern-day viewers (no matter how they self-identify) still find themselves caught between the binary of victim and victimizer. In other words, many of the issues discussed in plays by African-American dramatists allow audience members to see the ongoing, traumatizing effects of diaspora, namely that

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lines serve as an apt description of the ongoing pervasiveness of a traumatizing event (if not the desire to experience trauma).

<sup>31</sup> And that it can be imagined?



dispossession, disconnection, and the myth of the homeland *and* hostland are continuing problems of contemporary American life; that this dispossession and disconnection, like all collective traumas, are socially mediated, negotiated, and constructed; and that dispossession and disconnection can be viewed as foundational sources of trauma.

LaCapra's work is particularly relevant for projects linking trauma and diaspora. LaCapra distinguishes between historical trauma (i.e., trauma linked to a specific event) and structural, or foundational, trauma.<sup>32</sup> "Historical trauma," he writes, "is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice and subject position" (78). Foundational trauma, however, does deal with transhistorical loss that gets marked as absence or lack (76-77) and that "paradoxically becomes the basis for collective or personal identity, or both" (81). LaCapra thus argues that "[t]he Holocaust, slavery, [and] apartheid—even suffering the effects of the atom bomb in Hiroshima or Nagasaki—can become founding trauma" (81), and it is this recognition of slavery and apartheid as forms of foundational, structural trauma that reminds us of our duty to look at contemporary works by African-American dramatists in conjunction with trauma theory. In other words, aspects of diaspora and elements of slavery can be read as foundational moments of trauma that can be handed down from generation to generation. Separation from loved ones, rapes, beatings, lynchings, these all take their toll on and over generations, as can ongoing exposure to racism, discrimination, bigotry, corruption, and hardship, and although it is

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<sup>32</sup> Farrell uses, as an alternate term, "originary trauma" (44).

problematic to argue that occurrences affect all members of a group similarly (or even to argue definitively the impact of events across generations), we must recognize the effects of ongoing racialized violence and discrimination, that structural violence becomes, as Das argues in *Life and Words*, “folded” over lives.<sup>33</sup>

Beyond the concept of the pervasiveness of “folded” violence that affects many peoples of color, particularly African-Americans, within the United States, we must additionally consider the ready connections and overlap between trauma and diaspora. The latter, William Safran writes in the inaugural issue of *Diaspora*, involves positive memories and visions of the homeland, which stands as a site of wholeness; a sense of not belonging to the hostland of the present; and the desire to return to that prior past “home” of wholeness (83-84). Like many people of diaspora, traumatized individuals see themselves as having experienced an abrupt break in and with the past, and their unintegrated memories foster the desire to return to that former state of physical and mental well-being. Such persons, as they attempt to overcome their trauma, are perpetually dealing with ideas linked to diaspora, notably feelings of alienation (Clifford 247), as well as the desire for connection (250). Patterson and Kelley similarly stress the idea of displacement, noting diaspora theorists’ use of “metaphors for alienation, outsidersness” (20), and the desire to be included—ideas that resonate with readers of trauma theory. These emotional responses to events all frame the experience of diaspora, however indirectly, in terms of trauma.

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<sup>33</sup> As Farmer likewise reminds us, “not all suffering is equal, in spite of pernicious and often self-serving identity politics that suggest otherwise. One of the unfortunate sequelae of identity politics has been the obscuring of structural violence, which metes out injuries of vastly different severity” (288).

Moreover, just as traumatized individuals continue to relive the traumatizing event in an attempt to heal but may never return to some former state of innocence (Tal 119), actually returning to a prior state of wholeness or place of origin may be an impossibility for people of diaspora: “the present [is] constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed, future: a renewed, painful yearning” (Clifford 264). The yearnings for acceptance and home within diaspora are physical and abstract places, just as trauma resides in a site both physical and mental, as well as past and present. As Saidiya V. Hartman describes in *Lose Your Mother*, her trip to Ghana is alienating on multiple levels. At one point, she views Ghana as a true home for Africans, but then wonders whether she as an African-American, with the U.S. being both her home and birthplace, can “fit” into Ghana. Likewise, the attitude of locals who do not know of the horrors of El Mina—who have never even visited this site of the slave trade—and who question the credibility of Americans who boast about being descendants of slaves surprises her. By emphasizing the myth of the homeland, she and other scholars of diaspora argue that going back is often an impossibility. Although the homeland may exist as a physical place (although, sometimes, it does not), feelings of loss and displacement—linked to those individuals who forced the people of diaspora into moving or prevent their return—forever mark this previous site of residence and origin. In this way, like those trying to overcome trauma, many individuals in diaspora are always involved in issues of simultaneity (Clifford 251-52) and, per Gilroy, of double consciousness and difference (1-3). They may never be able to return to the homeland just as traumatized individuals may never return to a pre-trauma state of wholeness.

This overlapping vocabulary between trauma and diaspora is not just a matter of coincidence, and even if scholars of diaspora do not identify themselves as being so, they are heavily invested in the work of trauma and continue to create overlap between these two areas of study. Additional connections between trauma and diaspora surround the repetitive, messy process of healing and the individual's need to impose order on his situation. If we assume that healing can even occur, moving forward for the traumatized individual involves mastering memories such that they can be recalled, at will, and accepted as narratives.<sup>34</sup> This nonlinear and recursive process of moving between past and present, as several trauma theorists have noted, also resonates in discussions of diaspora: "In diaspora experience, the co-presence of 'here' and 'there' is articulated with an antiteleological (sometimes messianic) temporality. Linear history is broken" (Clifford 264). As a result, people of diaspora find themselves engaging with "a network of partially connected histories, a persistently displaced and reinvented time/space of crossings" (268). Gilroy also acknowledges the pain of trauma in his discussion of diaspora; just as healing from trauma includes reliving that moment of terror, diaspora, he says, is involved in the "ugly" processes of progress (129) and maneuvering through the gaps and disjunctions of interrupted space, time, historicity, and narrative (190-91). He specifically mentions the need for blacks to establish roots and "[be] in touch with them" (112), and much like the traumatized individual claiming a traumatizing experience, they can accomplish that by moving those "eruption[s] of space into the linear temporal order"

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<sup>34</sup> For further discussion of the relationship between trauma, healing, and narrative, see Laub and Auerhahn, McNally, Phelan, G. Hartman, Belau, and Caruth.

(198). Patterson and Kelley, among others, also point to these connections between memory, time, and space in diaspora (11-17).

Another idea that Patterson and Kelley discuss that echoes in the work of scholars who study trauma is the tension between process and condition; they stress that diaspora, like trauma, remains firmly grounded in the present, continues to be relived and reinforced in the here and now, and stems from current and past events, trends, and social conditions. Thus, “[a]s a process,” they write, diaspora “is constantly being remade through movement, migration, and travel, as well as imagined through thought, cultural production, and political struggle. Yet, as a condition, it is directly tied to the process by which it is being made and remade” (20). In *The New African Diaspora*, which refers to the African diaspora produced through voluntary emigration from Africa in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Zeleza continues the focus on process and condition, expanding it to include space and discourse (32), as does Clifford, who likewise emphasizes Patterson and Kelley’s idea of political struggle. Consider these various claims from Clifford:

- “For black Atlantic diasporic consciousness, the recurring break where time stops and restarts is the Middle Passage. Enslavement and its aftermaths—displaced, repeated structures of racialization and exploitation—constitute a pattern of black experiences inextricably woven in the fabric of hegemonic modernity” (264).
- “Diaspora cultures are, to varying degrees, produced by regimes of political domination and economic inequality” (265).

- Stories of diaspora point to “long-standing structured inequalities of class and race” (258).

In recognizing its “repeated structures of racialization and condition,” Clifford—and his peers—reinforces the idea that diaspora, like trauma, is linked to unequal distributions of power manifested as both events *and* conditions. Additionally, that these imbalances of power are long-standing for many people of diaspora (and many minorities and peoples of color in the West in general) and continue to have repercussions in contemporary life reinforces that trauma can be handed down from generation to generation.

Other contributors to *The New African Diaspora* likewise make observations about diaspora that connect to trauma as a manifestation of social and cultural negotiations concerning the treatment of bodies during the slave trade as well as during more recent migrations. Given trauma’s connections to generational transference, the problems of cultural dispossession and displacement remain ever current. Ademoyo notes that, ultimately, theories of diaspora stand as theories of culture (500-01), much like trauma stands as a cultural trope and marker of power dynamics. Additionally, Jackson-Opoku recognizes the communal aspects of diaspora—that it is defined as and by the following: group experience; communities’ willingness to identify feelings of exile, displacement, and suffering; and the relations between smaller groups and larger ones wielding power. Jackson-Opoku’s description of the new diaspora as involving the need to “[give] voice to silenced characters and experiences, [to conjure] ancestral memories, and [to foster] linkages” (479) likewise reiterates the idea that trauma concerns communication, language, and testimony; trauma, in other words, remains tied to the

processes of and problems of “articulation,” a term that Patterson and Kelley also bring up and attribute to Hall (19) as they discuss diaspora. This emphasis on language and the symbolic—as Palmer’s essay “Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora” asserts, “diasporas are not actual but imaginary and symbolic communities” (29)—points back to trauma’s link to the processes of linguistic signification, the need for receptive audiences and witnesses, and the ways in which trauma gets negotiated, validated, and valorized as an aspect of group relations and identity politics.

We can even find echoes about the potentially generative and productive consequences of trauma in writings of diaspora. Beyond the fact that reliving trauma is itself an attempt at healing and besides the various references to the (e)utopic (Safran 94; Gilroy 198; Clifford 263), there are the claims that in diaspora there is potential for fulfillment and transfiguration (Gilroy 37), that “[d]ifference [i]s articulated through connection, not separation” (Clifford 274), and that diaspora may break new cultural ground by disrupting traditional gender roles and offering women more opportunities (258-60).

Now, obviously, in combining trauma and diaspora, there is the danger of assigning the status of victim, of someone who is damaged, lacks power, or is thus “lesser,” to African-Americans or any peoples of color (individuals who have historically been the object of racism and discrimination) in the United States. Those who suffer from trauma or its after-effects, whether they are first- or subsequent-generation sufferers, should not be viewed as lesser by any stretch of the imagination. After all, trauma is a socio- and psychocultural construct in which *all* members of a group, to a degree,

participate.<sup>35</sup> It affects—diminishes—both the perpetrator and bystander particularly when they refuse to acknowledge the negative consequences of attacking, belittling, and depriving others of their rights, of Other-ing others as a means of promoting their own advancement and feelings of superiority. Moreover, it is just as problematic to assert that all members of a group experienced the same events or reacted to them similarly. Obviously, it is an overgeneralization to say that all African-Americans who endured slavery and Jim Crow were traumatized. Additionally, not all individuals who experienced or were exposed to rapes, beatings, or acts of discrimination necessarily succumbed to these events; obviously, some people overcome hardships, and some resist, rebel, and revolt to end them or prevent them from occurring. There is indeed danger in overusing and overemphasizing trauma or in ascribing it to all members of a particular group. Indeed as Williams notes in her *They Left Great Marks on Me*, individuals who were subjected to traumatizing events were often frequently and purposely silenced. However, because trauma and racist thinking can be handed down from generation to generation and because conflicts over power define the human condition, looking at trauma as it applies to a particular group of writers who themselves did not live during the initiating, foundational event of slavery and the Middle Passage emphasizes the ethical obligations that literary scholars have to consider the long-term effects of historical hardships on minorities and marginalized groups as a contemporary issue. Such

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<sup>35</sup> Perhaps rather than use the word “victim,” as Herman frequently does because she is often discussing individuals who have indeed been the victims of sexual violence, we should follow the lead of Holocaust scholars and employ the term “survivor.”



an approach helps explain the degree to which the problems of the past remain a continuing threat in the present even when they appear to be resolved.

To that end, in the following chapters, I focus on three prominent African-American playwrights of the late twentieth and early twentieth-first centuries—August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Anna Deavere Smith—who provide opportunities to examine the ways in which modern subjects can be seen as actively grappling with racial discrimination and the diaspora as sources of past and present trauma. Because their works are so stylistically different, I argue that these three playwrights, all of whom largely established themselves and found success in the last decades of the twentieth century, provide particularly thought-provoking texts that challenge our ideas about trauma, trauma theory, trauma’s uses in the literature classroom, and drama’s heightened potential to traumatize audiences. Wilson, Parks, and Smith enable reading and viewing audiences to make connections between trauma theory and diaspora theory, particularly in light of trauma’s social nature, LaCapra’s claim that slavery is a foundational trauma, and the fact that long-term suffering (in this case tied to racism, discrimination, secondary citizenship, and diaspora) remains a source of trauma in American society. Moreover, we may also view Wilson, Parks, and Smith as addressing criticisms that the effects of slavery and Jim Crow are nonexistent today and that trauma has no limits, that everyone and thus no one is traumatized. Wilson, Smith, and Parks, in fact, are particularly relevant in addressing these concerns because they specifically ground their work in historical events, the everyday, the quotidian. As Das says in *Life and Words*, “notions of ghostly repetitions, spectral presences, and all those tropes that have become

sedimented into our ordinary language from trauma theory are evoked too soon—as if the processes that constitute the way everyday violence is engaged in the present have little to no say on how violence is produced *or lived with*” now (205, emphasis added). We must see Wilson, Parks, and Smith as working to rectify this because their focus is not always on the historical slave trade per se, but modern times—even when writing of characters born in bondage or living in the 1800s. Their emphasis is on riots, killings, and betrayals informed by racism, poverty, and social injustice, all of which are problems that transcend but remain linked to diaspora and slavery and with which we continue to struggle—or, as Das says, live with.<sup>36</sup> In this way, the writings of Wilson, Parks, and Smith demonstrate the pervasiveness of trauma—how it affects everyone—provided, of course, that audiences are receptive to acknowledging these traumas, their role in them, and thus their willingness to be moved and thereby shoulder some of the blame for these events and/or sympathize with the suffering individuals.

Additionally, because these three dramatists are so radically different in their approaches to writing plays, they provide us with the opportunity to see the various strategies writers employ to convey the traumas of their characters—and those of Americans throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For instance, by dealing with recent events, Smith shows readers what trauma, particularly as a manifestation of racism and discrimination, looks like today. Smith’s best-known works represent a marked departure from those of Wilson and Parks in that her focus blurs the distinction between individuals and communities. Her most famous plays, typically

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<sup>36</sup> As Taussig argues, we live in “a chronic state of emergency” (270).

exercises in perspective and calls to community building, are docudramas, and thus characters, who are all performed by Smith, typically appear once and then vanish although Smith herself never leaves the stage. Drawing on the hours of interviews that she conducts about a particular event, situation, or topic, Smith mimetically performs each character, selecting only the most salient aspects of the interview, and stripping out her own questions, reactions, opinions, etc. In her work, Smith demonstrates what healing from trauma (at least in part) requires: compassion, a willingness to listen, and a willingness to allow oneself to identify with others and the Other. Thus, in Chapter 2, I examine how Smith works to manipulate her audiences in *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities* and in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, two pieces in her *On the Road: A Search for American Character* series. In these plays, Smith strives to traumatize her audiences and jolt them into action. She does not show what healing looks like but what must happen within communities (whether the community of a theater or communities at large) for healing to occur.

If Smith is known for works that are composed of speeches by real people (rather than conversations between characters), that are about recent events, and that lack the one individual who serves as the traditional protagonist and who appears onstage throughout most of a play, Parks's writings by comparison develop through the unfolding of events involving fictional characters whose names themselves are obviously historical and symbolic: Lincoln, Booth, The Foundling Father, Hester and Reverend D., The Venus Hottentot, Black Man with Watermelon, Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, and Before Columbus. Parks's works follow their own rules, what she calls her "elements of style,"

relying heavily on repetition, spells, and rests. Although, like Smith, she incorporates monologues, conversations about the past and interactions between characters abound in Parks's works, and these exchanges, even when she manipulates chronological time, ultimately drive the narrative arcs of her plays forward through a series of causes and effects, all of which culminate in a (somewhat) more traditional plotline than Smith provides. Experimental in technique in terms of language and even as to how time is presented and manipulated, Parks's plays, specifically her *Topdog/Underdog*, *Venus*, and *The America Play*, on which I will focus in Chapter 3, maintain an emphasis on issues of race and racism for contemporary American audiences. Her works, unlike Smith's, are not about leading audiences to a place within the theater itself where conversation can occur as a step towards healing. Instead, in these plays she demonstrates what happens when healing is specifically denied to suffering individuals.

Wilson, whose *Gem of the Ocean* I will discuss in Chapter 4, stands as the most traditional of these three playwrights. Admittedly, there are fantastic aspects to his works—one character in his oeuvre dies at the ripe old age of 366, and his plays often feature a larger-than-life “spectacle” character—but Wilson's dramas remain firmly grounded in specific times, places, and persons. The scope of his project after all was to capture the history of African-Americans in the twentieth century by creating a ten-play cycle, with each play in the cycle devoted to one decade. *Gem of the Ocean*, which opens that cycle, has an identifiable protagonist, antagonist, and climax, and although this work incorporates nonrealistic elements, it does not engage with the more unconventional means of storytelling and chronological maneuverings that Smith and Parks employ.

Costume changes occur offstage, and background information arises naturally through conversations, in what one critic would describe as both high- and low-context exchanges (Sweet 67-68). The fourth wall is, at least on the surface, maintained, and the play comes to a clear, unambiguous conclusion. In *Gem of the Ocean* though, unlike the plays by Smith and Parks that are under discussion, Wilson's audiences are given one glimpse of what healing from trauma—what progress—actually looks like: a chosen act of physicality.

With these three dramatists, we cover, in short, the full spectrum of trauma. We witness characters' traumatizing pasts, the effects of those traumas in the present, what trauma looks like, and what characterizes healing and failures to heal. With Smith, Parks, and Wilson, we can also see how these writers, whose work initially seem so different in terms of style and content, collectively manipulate audiences. By playing with the fourth wall in various ways, these writers show how modern-day American authors, and specifically playwrights, work to involve audiences of fellow citizens and manipulate their understanding of the recent past (even, in the case of Parks, when the play is set outside of the United States and does not necessarily involve American characters). These dramatists thus involve audiences in such a way that they educate them of the traumas of America's past but also work to traumatize audience members—at least those individuals who are willing to go along for the ride. We must thus view Smith, Parks, and Wilson as more than historians who tell the tales of silenced minorities; we must view them as political activists who are not just purging audiences of the fear, terror, and pity attached to tragedy, but as agents of the fear and terror of trauma. Their plays stand not as

a safety valve but ask audiences to engage actively with the trauma of racism and discrimination in the modern moment by experiencing these horrors as perpetrator, bystander, and traumatized individual; they force their audiences, both reading and viewing, to engage with the means and manifestations of trauma, thereby highlighting the relevance of drama to trauma.

**CHAPTER 2 TRAUMA, *TWILIGHT*, AND *FIRES IN THE MIRROR*:  
NEGOTIATING THE LITERATURE OF DISPOSSESSION WITH ANNA  
DEAVERE SMITH**

Unlike Suzan-Lori Parks's and August Wilson's reputations, Anna Deavere Smith's is shaped by her work as both writer *and* actress, but her writings, like theirs, still prove challenging for audiences, if for no other reason that there are those who question whether she is indeed a playwright versus a maker of documentaries. This debate has followed her throughout her career; in fact, although *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* received an OBIE award for best play in 1994, the work was ultimately disqualified by the Pulitzer Prize committee because its members deemed the play producible by Smith alone. They argued that having access to the interviews that she produced—indeed having been the interviewer—was essential to being able to stage *Twilight*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> By emphasizing her focus on interviews, the committee essentially classified Smith as a journalist. To call her that, however, proves troublesome. Besides the largely accepted idea that all of Smith's monologues are verbatim transcripts, with which Reinelt disagrees (611), Smith claims no training as a journalist (Reinelt 611) even though, in 1996, years after she debuted and published *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, she did cover the presidential election (Guiner 177).

Issues of journalism aside, the committee reasoned only Smith could perform the work because she was the one who conducted hours of interviews with nearly 200 different people (Smith, *Twilight* xvii); likewise, she was the one who worked with dramaturge Merry Conway to learn these speeches and capture, mimetically, the exact inflections and mannerisms of each speaker. No one else, her detractors maintained, could perform this work. Theoretically, one could argue that *Twilight*'s lack of a fixed script is another reason to disqualify it as a work of art. However, is any script ever truly fixed, if directors superimpose their own vision onto a play and if actors, whether purposefully or accidentally, ad-lib or tinker with lines or a character's mannerisms?

A more persuasive argument supporting that only Smith could stage *Twilight* and that there is no fixed script is that, despite (or, perhaps, because of) Smith's overarching control, the script remained malleable even after its debut, in that, typically, she would perform some twenty-five to thirty speeches a night—one review cites her performing

I maintain that the members of the Pulitzer Prize committee who chose to disqualify *Twilight* and the many Tony voters who likewise questioned whether Smith, though nominated for best actress and author of best play, had indeed written a drama (Mitchell 272-73), are actually emphasizing the uniqueness of Smith's work.<sup>38</sup> Rather than acting as a journalist, Smith works to elicit specific responses from her audiences, particularly if we remember *Twilight* is part of a larger initiative. Viewed in this way, *Twilight* and its counterpart *Fires in the Mirror* are less of an anomaly in terms of both content and genre for readers of contemporary drama, specifically because these two works by Smith are not, like journalism, about objectivity. Instead, these two plays are devoted to shaping audiences' opinions, beliefs, actions, and attitudes, something Smith achieves by exploring issues of trauma and diaspora.

As Alexander notes, trauma creates new master narratives affected by cultural institutions and standards involving religion, the arts, academia, the sciences, legal

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forty-six "characters" in an evening (Brustein, "P.C.—or Not P.C." 271) and another as many as fifty-three (Bernstein 123)—with her choice of monologues determined by the demographics of her audience.

The problem of *Twilight*'s fluid identity is further compounded by its multiple incarnations; beyond the interviews and the various performances, there is the book version published by Doubleday and the PBS film version, which is as much a documentary about the play's inception as it is a performance of the play.

<sup>38</sup> Smith herself has rejected definitive labels. In the introduction to *Twilight*, she argues that, being diary-like, "[t]he book is first and foremost a document of what an *actress heard* in Los Angeles" (xxiv). Elsewhere, in an interview with Barbara Lewis, she has asserted "it's also community work in some ways. It's kind of a low anthropology" (56). Beyond Smith's own, at times, contradictory attempts at definition, the docudrama has been categorized by critics as "regional theater" (Hornby 268), "monopolylogue" (Dolan 498), "history-telling" (Favorini 89), and "theater for development" (Richards 46). Award-winning playwright Wendy Wasserstein, however, maintained that "[i]t's documentary theater but it's different from "docudrama" because she's dealing with character. It begins with character, which is what it has in common with a lot of other plays" (qtd. in Mitchell 273).



systems, bureaucracies, and mass media (15-19), and in *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith creates alternate (and more accurate) narratives—trauma narratives—about recent events in U.S. history. Granted, her texts recognize it would be presumptuous to argue that all individuals who participated in the riots found them traumatizing, just as it would be misleading to claim that all members of any one (racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, etc.) group viewed the Rodney King beating or the subsequent trials in exactly the same manner. Her work, however, is about ensuring that multiple voices get heard. Moreover, we must remember that Smith also makes specific references to the Watts riots in *Twilight*'s introduction and through the various speeches she includes in the text. Thus, even though she does not use the term trauma, if trauma is about reliving a past moment, Smith indeed sees a connection between these events and time periods. After all, in *Fires in the Mirror*, her focus is on the “long-standing tensions” between groups in a particular area—blacks, Jews, police—thus arguing that the Crown Heights incident of the early 1990s is another case of the past repeating itself. Smith's views about theater and in particular her brand of theater likewise point to issues of trauma. Recognizing the connection between the spoken word and the body (*Fires in the Mirror* xxvi), as well as the physicality of speaking (xxv) as a means of conveying the truth, Smith points to the relationship between the body and the psyche, the physical and the cognitive, the physical and the emotional, the outer and inner, all of which is central to trauma.

Moreover, although she may not be making explicit decisions to portray aspects of trauma, to tell these truths, Smith draws upon various aspects of trauma theory, namely playing with chronology, making extensive use of repetition (both thematically and

stylistically), and capturing how a traumatized individual struggles with issues of memory loss and fragments. Among other things, Smith also illustrates how numbing, dissociation, and hyperarousal plague the traumatized. These symptoms skew individuals' ability to read, understand, and even talk about their reality. Moreover, such symptoms force the traumatized individual to relive these unclaimed experiences, although whether that reliving occurs mimetically or antimimetically remains up for debate. Even if Smith does not view her work as about trauma, she acknowledges that her project is about representing events (*Twilight* xxii) and communal growth (xxiii). Thus, I maintain that *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* serve as companion pieces that hypothesize aspects of collective trauma, and by reading *Twilight*, *Fires in the Mirror*, and trauma theory in combination, we can gain greater insight into how communities' and individuals' willingness to support—or deny—traumatized individuals' experiences operates as a tool of political and social control and change. Additionally, by engaging in performances that highlight and play with genre, Smith works to blur distinctions between self and Other (and the self in the Other),<sup>39</sup> encourages audiences to puzzle through these categories, and asks audiences to witness *and* experience the trauma linked to racialized American society. As she sketches out the traumatizing nature of racialization, as manifested in the riots of 1991 and 1992 (and the events and conditions that led up to them), Smith's plays challenge ideas found in trauma theory regarding the interaction between the group and the individual.

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<sup>39</sup> Noting in *Fires in the Mirror* that “[t]he spirit of acting is the *travel* of the self to the other” (xxvi), Smith acknowledges that her method of writing demands that “[t]he frame of reference for the other... *be* the other” (xxvii).

### **Mirroring Society, Mirroring Identity: Smith's Means and Methods**

Alternately described as Brechtian in her aims (Hornby 268; Richards 36; Sun and Fei 130), in that she attempts to alienate the reader, as well as non-Brechtian, in that she does not stop and comment on the action (Martin 51), Smith has complained in an interview with Steve Proffitt that contemporary theater is not an accurate reflection of society and needs to better reflect the voices of the unheard (267). To that end, her monodramas (for lack of a better word) are part of Smith's *On the Road: A Search for American Character*.<sup>40</sup> In the works in this project, the most accessible being *Twilight*, *Fires in the Mirror*, and *House Arrest*, Smith focuses on re-presenting key moments in U.S. history.<sup>41</sup> Her art begins with her interviewing subjects and then excerpting the interviews down to that moment when Smith feels the speakers move away from what they have been taught and subsequently reveal their true identity.<sup>42</sup> Smith then groups the excerpted monologues according to theme or subject matter.

Critics have praised Smith for what she does within each monologue, namely refusing to edit out an individual's pauses and stammerings, their search for the right

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<sup>40</sup> A recent "traditional" play by Smith is *Piano*. Set in Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Piano* examines issues of colonialism during a time of political unrest on the island nation. The character list includes individuals from North America and Spain, patriots and expatriates, those of mixed blood and those of "pure," as well as individuals from a range of socioeconomic classes.

<sup>41</sup> In this chapter, I focus exclusively on *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight* because of their similar emphasis on riots in the 1990s. Although an event from that time also inspired *House Arrest*, and although *House Arrest* incorporates some of Smith's trademark moves, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair (and the American presidency, which is the larger subject of the drama) does not qualify, in my mind, as a traumatizing event—polarizing perhaps, but not traumatizing for the nation as a whole.

<sup>42</sup> I would argue the subject reveals his identity *and* values, as well as his thoughts on the topic at hand.

word, and their use of qualifying information (or even sentences that start out one way and end up going another). Part of this is an attempt at verisimilitude—this is how people talk—but this devotion to accuracy and authenticity stems from Smith’s beliefs about the relationship between words and identity. Smith maintains, as noted in *Talk to Me*, that one of her breakthroughs as a student and actress involved a homework assignment for which she was told to keep repeating twelve lines spoken by a Shakespearean character. The rationale was that this would be a way for her to arrive at a deeper understanding of that speaker (35-37). Later she tried to incorporate this belief into her writing when she began the research process that is at the center of *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*. After all, “[w]ords,” she says in the introduction to *Twilight*, “are not an end in themselves. They are a means to evoking the character of the person who spoke them” (xxiii-xxiv). As the work of an “earwitness” and “oral memorialist” (Favorini 92), Smith’s original interview approach, which a linguist helped her devise, involved asking her subjects three specific questions.<sup>43</sup> This strategy has evolved over time, and although Smith claims she no longer relies on these three questions, it is these breaks from group and individual identity that determine which excerpts will “make it” into the text and onto the stage. The moment of revelation, the moment when the individual struggled with her taught identities and with her true identity (as fluid as those may be), occurs, according to Smith, when there is a shift in an interviewee’s normal way of talking—in Smith’s words, when there is a break in rhythm, a move, say, in Shakespeare’s plays from iambs to trochees

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<sup>43</sup> Per Smith’s *Talk to Me*, these questions were “Have you ever come close to death?,” “Do you know the circumstances of your birth?,” and “Have you ever been accused of something that you did not do?” (54).

(*Talk to Me* 36). In the end, through this process, Smith aims to provide deeper insights into each interviewee's, the larger community's, and, given the subtitle of her larger project (i.e., "A Search for American Character"), the nation's cultural identity. This selection process also allows Smith to challenge how we define drama and art. Her stylistic choices demonstrate a concerted questioning of what it means to be traumatized and disenfranchised in contemporary America. Smith's choices are particularly appropriate given her subject matter, for Smith explores dispossessed and disenfranchised populations at a historical moment when the larger population often denies these subgroups' very sense of dispossession and disconnection; in other words, Smith works to counter modern-day efforts that deny the pervasiveness of racism in contemporary American society. As she says in her introduction to *Twilight*, "[t]here is little in [our] culture or education that encourages the development of a unifying voice" (xxv).

Closely linked to her skills as a writer are Smith's abilities as an actress, which are likewise governed by this allegiance to verisimilitude. Critics readily recognize Smith's ability to disappear onstage—there are no act or scene breaks in *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*, and all costume changes are done before the audience as she deftly transitions from one monologue and character to the next—and this disappearing is indeed one of her aims, because she fears, as she has related in an interview with Proffitt, that including her voice may mean superimposing her views and making other characters (and their opinions) seem "smaller" (267). It is for this reason that Smith allegedly relies on a faithful, mimetic representation of each character (even lapsing into stereotypes and caricature when that is what the interviewee engaged in), never passing, onstage or in her

script, a judgment on the character's lines or ideas. Instead, Smith's aesthetic aim calls for audiences to make this judgment. By using the monologue format and breaking the fourth wall, Smith forces audiences to become part of the play, to join in the conversation after the play has ended. Because she breaks the fourth wall, but does not allow audiences to engage in a conversation with her, Smith works to ensure audience members engage in self-interrogation, questioning how they respond to issues of race, discrimination, disenfranchisement, and disconnection, and then, ideally, how they will talk with others in the community on these very topics. For Smith, characters are not catalysts to drive plot, but opportunities to develop and actively affect audience members' ideas and perceptions about the world at large as a means of engaging people in larger communal conversations.

Despite this emphasis on conversation, Smith's focus on character and verisimilitude may be what ultimately overshadows the fact that her aesthetic sensibilities are always working, literally and figuratively, behind the scenes. Gregory Jay, for example, sees Smith's choice of speeches in *Fires in the Mirror* as a concerted effort to make connections between past and present. By choosing to include monologues that reference the Holocaust, he maintains that Smith forces her audiences to question larger patterns and connections between events and people (131-39). Likewise, Smith explodes stereotypes about members of Black nationalist movements and civil rights leaders to show another side of their personality and the ways in which their pasts and beliefs have shaped them (*Fires in the Mirror* 19-22). In these ways, reviewers have recognized how Smith's artistic hand drives her choice of which stories of loss to include. We learn of

children being killed, families torn apart, illusions shattered, and we hear speeches that display ignorant thinking and a complete lack of empathy for others. Thus, critics claim, Smith works to provide an ever-expanding canvas; she includes individuals from all walks of life, the downtrodden and the upper class, those who are able to see the good in a horrible situation (103-12) and those who remain haunted by their loss, brought to tears as they narrate their stories (*Twilight* 37, 55, 147).<sup>44</sup> Her aim, though, is not merely to condemn or condone, but to show the complexity of any one situation and force her audiences, like traumatized individuals, to reconcile and make sense of the unexpected. Reinelt, however, questions this focus on accuracy and objectivity. In her essay “Performing Race,” she maintains that a comparison of Smith’s script with the PBS Playhouse version of *Fires in the Mirror* shows that Smith does *not* offer a verbatim account of her interviews. She argues Smith tinkers with lines to emphasize a point or achieve a more theatrical effect (611), and this observation emphasizes that Smith, particularly because she is an artist actively making choices rather than a trauma victim subconsciously attempting to heal, is actually doing subversive work. Just as the reliving of trauma works to upset an individual’s ability to function in time, Smith aims to question and subvert the realities of American life, particularly when it comes to assumptions about majority rule and minority rights.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Smith’s *House Arrest* works to show how the Clinton sex scandal was just one event in a long history of sexual escapades surrounding the White House.

<sup>45</sup> This subversiveness and focus on the majority versus the minority (something that exists even within minority groups) may also explain the lack of intraracial diversity, or what may be perceived as a lack of coverage, in her texts. In *Twilight*, she does not include speeches by those who supported the L.A.P.D.’s claim that Rodney King was on drugs at the time of his arrest. There are also relatively few pieces by those who

Whether real or perceived, this reputation for complexity, dedication to verisimilitude, and allegiance to multiple perspectives explains why some scholars view Smith as a postmodernist, describing her work as that of a *bricoleuse* (Drake 159-60). They identify her as someone who examines the existence of simultaneous realities, as well as how the distinctions between self-identity and perceived identity become blurred (Modleski 58). Smith's own persona, they assert, even capitalizes on this idea of blurred identity and borders so prominent in the works of James Clifford and Arjun Appadurai.<sup>46</sup> Both scholars' views relate to Smith in that she actively negotiates the gray areas between sociocultural borders, with several critics noting that Smith effectively crosses groups because her identity as an African-American woman, and a light-skinned one at that, works to her advantage. She has even stated that, as an interviewer, her skin tone has

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supported the police. Even the former president of the L.A. Police Commission questions the department's allegiance to eliminating gang warfare (14-15), just as a weapons and defense expert asserts that the L.A.P.D. was trying to send a message to members of local government about recent changes in policy that prevented officers from doing their job (61-65). By extension, in *Fires in the Mirror*, although her introduction recognizes the intraracial diversity among inhabitants in Crown Heights, as manifested in dialect, dress, and custom, the groups continue to be solidified into Jew and black. Thus although one Lubavitcher woman acknowledges the different Hasidic groups in the area (23), the community that Smith paints references primarily Jews and blacks, and shows these two groups as typically pitted against one another, mirroring the ways in which individuals think in generalities as a way to find meaning and patterns in the world, ignoring inconsistencies and exceptions to discover "truths."

<sup>46</sup> Clifford, for example, appreciates the term "contact zone," claiming that it recognizes the permeability of boundaries and that diaspora, too, is a space for potential growth in that diasporized individuals have the opportunity in the hostland to break away from restrictions and social conventions imposed upon them in the homeland. Appadurai, too, also uses terms like border lands, border zones, and his various "-scapes" (i.e., ethnoscape, technoscape, etc.), all of which allow for an opening up of anthropology's aims and ends (to say nothing of the effects they have on individuals).



allowed her to enter into radically different groups.<sup>47</sup> Her focus on identity and (self-)representation, critics maintain, is also shaped by how truth gets coded through visual cues in her work (Reinelt 613-14) and the fact that we must recognize how representation is manipulated by both race and gender (Pellegrini 77), as well as color, class, religion, and nationality. In these ways, Smith asks audience members to engage in that process of narrativization linked to trauma. Rather than providing them with a traditional linear plot, she asks them to connect the dots between the speeches and to consider the larger issues her plays raise, as well as the audience's roles in those issues. By stripping out her interview questions and using only excerpts from each interview, she forces audiences to engage in trauma's act of making meaning. Thus, if the audience members cannot identify with the issues with which the speaker is engaged, they can feel the cognitive loss and confusion attached to claiming experience.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Dolan finds Smith "always stand[ing] outside of the communities she enters" (512)<sup>48</sup> and that scholars describe her as an ethnographer who questions whether there are fixed cultural centers, particularly within competing subcultures, within larger American society (Dolan 512; Sun and Fei 130-31). For some, traditional ethnography means privileging a home culture in the First World over some other "primitive" group, and although this assertion may be true, it obscures claims that Smith is utopian in outlook and devoted to creating an imagined whole community

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<sup>47</sup> Some, however, use her "blended" features as a way of alienating Smith and positioning her as a subject who, having a mixed heritage, has been diasporized and no longer fully belongs to any one group. See Jay's essay, which claims that Minister Conrad "Mohammed casts Smith herself as a lost child of rape and miscegenation" (131).

<sup>48</sup> Or do we read this, more narrowly, as realizing that Smith, too, is alienated from these communities in that she was not in either locale when the riots erupted?

(Dolan 496-97) in the First World where differences are de-emphasized. By eschewing make-up and elaborate costume changes, by making audiences see everything through one body, Smith forces audience members, who frequently include the people she interviewed, to come to terms with their own ideas about similarity and difference, as well as repetition and “repetition with a difference” (Modleski 72), in a globalized world. I contend that, in essence, by using the events that took place in L.A. and Crown Heights in the early 1990s, Smith offers performances that encourage audiences to consider how the Other and trauma get constructed through and in conjunction with one another.

Not only can we see *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* as part of the healing process, a goal to which Smith freely admits, but I argue that these plays provide greater insights into the literature of collective trauma, of the trauma caused by cumulative hardships, and of two culturally significant events of late twentieth-century America. Additionally, such an approach allows readers to see Smith as having more in common with other “more traditional” African-American playwrights like Wilson and Parks than previously thought. Despite detractors’ claims that she is neither a playwright nor creator of original texts, through an engagement with trauma theory, we can see her, like many other contemporary African-American playwrights, focusing on issues of disenfranchisement and dispossession. Through her works’ structure and her conscious manipulation of text, Smith becomes what Lavie and Swedenburg, referencing the work of Coco Fusco, would call a “chronicler ... by involving ... herself in making culture, both by producing ethnographic texts and by engaging in political activism” (21).

Reading Smith as a writer of trauma, thus, shows how the literature of trauma is itself political work and how America is a site and source of trauma.

### **Revisiting the Past**

*Fires in the Mirror*, which debuted in 1992, deals with events in August 1991 surrounding the death of a young child in Brooklyn's Crown Heights. Born in Guyana, seven-year-old Gavin Cato died after being hit by a car in this neighborhood. The vehicle in question was part of an entourage belonging to local Jewish leader Grand Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, who, because of his influence in the community, was perceived by many African-Americans living in the Crown Heights community as having special privileges, such as receiving police escorts (as he was on that summer night) and being able to commit various traffic violations (as a member of his entourage did, again, on that night). These double standards further manifested themselves that August evening, when a Jewish ambulance conveyed the driver and passengers of the car involved in the accident to the hospital but left Cato, dying, and his cousin, severely hurt, behind in the street. That same night, allegedly in retaliation for Cato's death and the preferential treatment given to these Lubavitcher Jews, a visiting Jewish scholar from Australia named Yankel Rosenbaum was attacked and knifed in Crown Heights, and he ultimately died from his wounds in the hospital. Police arrested a black youth for Rosenbaum's death,<sup>49</sup> whereas Yosef Lifsh, the driver of Schneerson's car, left the country rather than

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<sup>49</sup> Officially, the cause of death was linked to the care Rosenbaum received in the hospital and not the knife wounds themselves. It was for this reason that a jury acquitted Lemrick Nelson, Jr., the individual originally charged with Rosenbaum's homicide (Jay 127).

face immediate arrest, in what was perceived as another instance of New York City officials giving preferential treatment to the Jewish community. Over the next week, violence erupted between the African-American and Jewish populations of Crown Heights, and protests continued over the course of several months, during which time the Cato child was buried, trials about Rosenbaum's death took place, and various members of both the African-American and Jewish community accused New York City politicians and offices (including the mayor's) of ineptness and discriminatory practices.

*Fires in the Mirror* attempts to shed light on what Smith perceives as a watershed moment in twentieth-century American society, one that offers insights into larger American identity. Rendered as a series of monologues, the speeches that comprise *Fires in the Mirror* range from one to several pages in length, and Smith has grouped them into the following categories: "Identity" (3-12), "Mirrors" (13-15), "Hair" (16-25), "Race" (27-32), "Rhythm" (35-39), "Seven Verses" (40-66), and "Crown Heights, Brooklyn, August 1991" (67-139). Most of the speeches included in *Fires in the Mirror* (which was, like *Twilight*, also captured on tape for PBS) are excerpted from interviews with individuals from the black and Jewish communities of Crown Heights, including the father of the Guyanese boy who was killed and members of the Jewish Lubavitcher population. Additionally, Smith includes those outside this particular locale, such as established members of the theater world, like Ntozake Shange and George C. Wolfe, and civil rights leaders, like Angela Davis and the Reverend Al Sharpton.

Although *Twilight* (which was commissioned in May 1992 and debuted the following May) leaves New York for California, it uses a similar format as *Fires in the*

*Mirror*. Dealing with events that took place almost a year after the Crown Heights incident,<sup>50</sup> the play finds its origins in the L.A. riots sparked by the acquittal of the four officers involved in the Rodney King beating: Theodore Briseno, Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, and Timothy Wind. Unlike *Fires in the Mirror*, the book *Twilight*, published in 1994, is much more comprehensive in its coverage of the riots. Here, Smith includes fifty excerpted monologues and arranges them somewhat chronologically. The opening monologue by a sculptor and a former “zoot-suiter” of the 1940s thus does not talk about the riots explicitly. Instead, through Smith’s artful excerpting, the focus of the speech “My Enemy,” the only piece comprising the section titled “Prologue,” is the historical (and some contemporary) practices of discrimination and racism practiced by the police (1-7). Nevertheless, as in *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith continues to group monologues into categories, but they tend to follow events, at least to some degree, in chronological order. As a result, after the prologue, she includes speeches that work to provide background on events leading up to the riots (Smith places her interview with the aunt of Rodney King in this section [51-60]), as well as immediate responses to the verdict. Former Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley relates, for instance, how his office prepared four different statements, each responding to a different verdict (85-86), and his speech is juxtaposed against the monologues of those who experienced the riots firsthand, some of whom were victims of violence. The sections “Twilight” and “Justice” round out the collection, providing more meditative observations about the riots, their impact, and their larger

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<sup>50</sup> Eerily enough, the riots of April 1992 captured in *Twilight* began on the night before *Fires in the Mirror* was to be previewed in New York. In fact, Smith’s New York venue was shut down that evening for fear that the violence in L.A. would erupt elsewhere in the country (Jay 127).

significance (though I do not mean to imply that speeches in other sections are any less moving or thought-provoking). Furthermore, as with *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith includes individuals from all walks of life in *Twilight* and incorporates speeches from individuals who were not immediately involved in these civil disturbances (i.e., were not in L.A. when a verdict was handed down in the Simi Valley trial).<sup>51</sup>

### **Disconnection and Dispossession, Textual Organization, and the Subversion of Time**

This focus on presence and absence is one way in which both *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* can be seen as theorizing and expanding aspects of trauma and be categorized as trauma literature. In particular, I view these plays as showing how traumatized individuals deal with dispossession. One way in which Smith works to create this disconnection and dispossession in both *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* involves her organization of the various speeches. Because she orders the monologues thematically and not completely chronologically, Smith demonstrates the ways in which trauma plays with time and eludes the present, or at least affects the traumatized individual's ability to live fully in (and thus control and possess) the present. When subjected to intrusive memories or flashbacks, the traumatized individual is removed from the present moment, "forced" to remember and relive the moment of trauma. Conversely, the traumatized person can dissociate from the present moment, unable to react appropriately to his surroundings; he becomes numb or suffers from hyperarousal, perceiving or exaggerating danger where there is none or little. Just as trauma

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<sup>51</sup> Again, Smith is one of those individuals who was not in L.A. at the time of the riots, but she refrains from including a monologue of her own.

manipulates an individual's memories and concept of time, Smith shows how the past infringes on the present and how having control over time and one's memories remains out of the grasp of the (still) traumatized individual. To capture trauma's ability to elude chronological time and to disorient the reader by stripping, or "dispossessing," her of culturally sanctioned ideas regarding race and race relations, Smith can be seen as employing a few key strategies.

First, Smith specifically includes a timeline in each book to highlight that she is departing from traditional, linear modes of telling history. In *Fires in the Mirror*, the timeline begins on "August 19, 1991 8:20 P.M." with the accident involving Grand Rebbe Schneerson's entourage and young Gavin Cato, and it ends, several pages and almost two years later, with a reference to the office of the U.S. Attorney General investigating New York City officials for possible legal misconduct (xlvi-lviii). The chronology is even preceded by a prose summary of the event and commentary on its larger significance, including the Jewish community's comparison of its treatment by the media and judicial system to the pogroms of the past (xliii-xlv). It is only *after* the timeline and summary that Smith's audience is presented with the "meat" of the book, the monologues themselves. Many of the monologues, however, remain "out of time" in that they do not even reference the riots or Gavin Cato's death. For example, in Minister Conrad Mohammed's piece, which talks about relations between black people and Jews, comparing the Middle Passage and the institution of American slavery to the Holocaust, he never mentions the Crown Heights affair per se (52-58). Leonard Jeffries's piece, "Roots," likewise mentions African-American-Jewish relations, but his focus is largely

on the filming of Alex Haley's *Roots* and the establishment's reception of Jeffries's work as a multiculturalist (40-49). By laying bare these connections, Smith actively works to bring history into the present and to show audiences that slavery's effects continue in the late twentieth century. In fact, Jeffries's story shows how the white establishment still "owned"<sup>52</sup> *Roots* in that Hollywood demanded textual changes to palliate white audiences who might be threatened by a show of African-American solidarity (45-46). Although the scene in question took place on a slave ship, Smith works to highlight that divisions between whites and African-Americans continue in late twentieth-century America. Jeffries, in particular, feels as if American historian Arthur Schlesinger and *The New York Times* singled him out as a target for his stance (48).

By showing these various connections between past and present, Smith offers not just a search for American character, which initially I read as a positive, or at least as accentuating the positive, but very often explores the more negative aspects of American character. Her aims as an artist are largely to promote healing, to show the similarities between groups, to render a change in some Americans' thinking, but that goal involves emphasizing that American character is not always something to which Americans (or anyone) should necessarily aspire. As she says in her foreword to *Twilight*, rather than search for solutions, she is "looking at the *processes* of the problems.... [and] for the humanness inside the problems, or the crises" (xxiv). She recognizes individuals' proclivity to see race relations through their own ethnicity, but the necessity of recognizing others' perspectives (xxv). Passages such as those by Jeffries and Minister

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<sup>52</sup> Haley had literally sold the rights of his story to Hollywood.



Conrad Mohammed, then, are potentially divisive and incendiary because they continue to foster an “us-versus-them” mentality on both sides of the racial divide as many of the individual speeches ultimately emphasize greater solidarity within subgroups rather than within the larger community. Even within the African-American community, Jeffries and Mohammed remain controversial for their views on Black nationalism and Afrocentrism. As such, although Smith’s aim may be to build bridges, sometimes that effort first involves refiguring the foundation on which those bridges are built, which occurs by jolting her audience out of traditional ways of thinking. As Guinier observes, Smith is a translator (177)—Drake terms her a mediator (167)—and Smith’s goal is to move readers and viewers from one point and perspective to another, to recognize the accuracy *and* limitations of their worldviews as a prelude to recognizing the views of others. In short, Smith works to make her audiences think and feel differently, other-ly, Other-wise, by recognizing differing perspectives, and I maintain she does this by working to traumatize her audience.

As a result of this desire to move audiences, Smith should be read as being actively subversive. By showing radically competing views of American society and by challenging the idea that America is a cohesive whole, Smith dispossesses audiences of the notion of a stable American identity that promotes freedom, equality, and protection from violence. In other words, the values America espouses and with which it is associated, she claims, are myths. The idea of an American nation-state as an imagined, utopic, praiseworthy community no longer exists (if it ever truly did). Moreover, Smith acknowledges that not all members of her audience would even embrace the notion of a

stable American identity. Smith reminds her audiences that not everyone believes in or benefits from these mythical values. This is where Smith's decision to engage with her topics as and through drama becomes important, in that audiences are at once experiencing her plays collectively and from their individual experiences and social identities. Some members might be traumatized by Smith's focus, whereas others might recognize the trauma they endure daily. Thus, Smith recognizes that America is becoming increasingly fractured as the divisions between people, as evidenced in *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*, become more apparent. We must remember, after all, the subtitle of the larger project to which *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight* belong: "A Search for American Character." From this perspective, Smith is trying to define America's character or argue that, at times, America itself lacks (a redeeming) character.

Moreover, Smith's work portrays America as defined by gaps, disruptions, and fragmented groups, suggesting that to be American is to be traumatized and that America itself is frequently traumatizing. To convey this link between America and trauma, to make audiences thoroughly comprehend, rather than just rationally recognize, this connection, Smith has to find ways to subvert the audiences' normal ways of experiencing drama (whether read or watched), and, although potentially less obvious on the surface in *Fires in the Mirror* than in *Twilight*, that subversion does occur. For example, the monologue in *Fires in the Mirror* about rap music by Monique "Mo" Matthews, a former student of Smith, originally took place in 1989, two years *before* the Crown Heights incident (35), a detail that is buried in Smith's headnote preceding the speech. Smith's focus must thus be recognized as the problems of racialization and not

the race riots themselves. Another of the most obvious instances in *Fires in the Mirror* where Smith chooses to manipulate time involves the monologue by Gavin Cato's father, Carmel. His speech, tellingly, is the very last one in the book (135-39). Obviously, from a dramatist's perspective, using Carmel's speech as the final word presents Smith with an opportunity to create a greater emotional climax for her audience; this is, however, also an opportunity to emphasize how trauma often defies time, how unresolved traumas intrude without warning on the present, and how the issue being investigated here is really the collective nature of trauma, racism, and discrimination. In these ways, if the reliving of trauma marks the body's attempt to heal, *Fires in the Mirror* stands as part of the healing process and also warns of the need for social change. It becomes preventative medicine designed to eliminate future acts of widespread violence. Smith can thus be seen as showing that the repetitive nature of trauma is a way of resolving future re-enactments of it. Per trauma theory, the subconscious forces individuals to return to the event as a way of learning to master and claim it. Being able to articulate that trauma consciously in a specific narrative form that makes sense to the traumatized individual and to his audience requires that both parties recognize what constitutes the event in question, the full impact of its consequences, and its significance in terms of the individual's place in the world. We need, then, to read *Fires in the Mirror* as having specific ramifications for the nation, communities, families, and individuals: Smith encourages audiences to feel Cato's racially motivated pain and to forestall future episodes of it in their own communal and national lives.

In *Twilight*, we can find Smith likewise manipulating chronology to unsettle audiences. Here she also chose to include a timeline, covering March 1991 through October 1993, but in this instance she plays with the relationships between time and trauma by placing the list of events at the *end* of the book (257-65). Given that Smith was commissioned to create *Twilight* based on her work with *Fires in the Mirror*, we can see her actively trying to upset audience expectations and asserting that we must *always* be reading differently. By jumping straight into the monologues, Smith works to immediately unnerve and unsettle her audiences, to make them question what they know about the world and the ways in which they make knowledge. Something as “simple” as the placement of a timeline and the arrangement of monologues has the potential to become traumatizing to followers of her work because she conditions them to expect one format (in *Fires in the Mirror*) and then provides another (in *Twilight*). Granted, we can attribute this variation to a mere desire to do something different, but I argue Smith is purposely trying to subvert audience expectations. Indeed, the choice of where to place each timeline (before the monologues in *Fires in the Mirror* and after them in *Twilight*) speaks to audiences’ awareness and understanding (or lack thereof) of these two events. Smith is arguing that because the larger U.S. population knows less about the events that inspired *Fires in the Mirror*, more background information is required. The riots of L.A., however, were truly a national event, and Rodney King’s beating was already a part of the American psyche. Thus, in terms of claiming knowledge of a traumatizing event, she needed to focus on the back-story, the precipitating events that led to that beating, and the larger unrecognized trauma of racialization afflicting those who rebelled in Los Angeles.

As one speaker in *Twilight* says, it never was about “Rotney King, Rotney King, Rotney King. / It’s not Rotney King. / It’s the ghetto” (101). By choosing to structure her books in different ways, Smith continues to make her audiences question their understanding of American society and recent events in U.S. history.

### **Moving Outward: Rodney King and Beyond**

If the placement of the timeline at the end of the book becomes an opportunity to unsettle readers of *Twilight*, so does its content, which emphasizes racial violence repeatedly inflicted on minorities. Although the first entries in the timeline begin in 1991 (covering March 3 through 15) and concern Rodney King’s arrest, its broadcast on television, and the police’s and the community’s response to the event (including the charges brought against the arresting officers), the timeline’s fifth entry, March 16, introduces a different situation altogether: the killing of an African-American girl by a Korean store owner (257). The court case surrounding Soon Ja Du, whom the courts ultimately sentenced to “five years probation, four hundred hours of community service, and a five-hundred-dollar fine for the shooting death of Latasha Harlins” (259), is interspersed throughout the timeline to emphasize the repetitive nature of the conflict between minority groups, and the systematic favoritism often shown to one minority group over another.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> There may also be a focus on the ways in which all minority groups find themselves at odds with government superstructures; for instance, in *Twilight*’s timeline, Smith tells of government employees throwing items out of upper-story windows, their target being Asian-Americans protesting outside City Hall (263).

Throughout the text proper, Smith thus subverts the notion that the L.A. riots were just a black-white issue, emphasizing instead the conflicts between whites, African-Americans, Koreans, and others in the Los Angeles area. Thus Smith features the words of Mrs. Young-Soon Han, who emphasizes the inequities suffered by Korean immigrants:

What is our right?  
 Is it because we are Korean?  
 Is it because we have no politicians?  
 Is it because we don't  
 speak good English?  
 Why?  
 Why do we have to be left out?  
*(She is hitting her hand on the coffee table)*  
 We are not qualified to have medical treatment.  
 We are not qualified to get, uh,  
 food stamp  
*(She hits the table once),*  
 not GR  
*(Hits the table once),*  
 no welfare  
*(Hits the table once).*  
 Anything.  
 Many Afro-Americans  
*(Two quick hits)*  
 who never worked  
*(One hit),*  
 they get  
 at least minimum amount  
*(One hit)*  
 of money  
*(One hit)*  
 to survive  
*(One hit).*  
 We don't get any!  
*(large hit with full hand spread). (245-46)*

By focusing so specifically on Han's movements and gestures, Smith punctuates the seriousness of the speaker's claims and concerns. Her speech, because it offers a comparison of two groups at odds, resonates with Booker T. Washington's Atlanta

Exposition Address. Just as his references to the hand speak to issues of solidarity (i.e., we are all part of one hand [888]) and to difference and veiled violence (we can pull you up or we can pull you down [889]), Smith's decision to capture Han's gestures becomes a marker of anger, urgency, and past and future violence and division. Oftentimes, readers ignore the tension between division and unity that is part of Washington's speech—of belonging versus feeling alienated, of peoples working together or against one another. (Thus he talks of how African-Americans' opinions about the speech changed once they read a printed version of it in newspapers, as well as of dissenting opinions that arose after his investigation of African-American churches [891-92].) Smith and Mrs. Han, however, recognize this tension, and we find that the above comments in Han's monologue and her repetition of "Is it because we" and "We are not qualified to," combined with her gestures, collectively communicate the utter loss she felt (and feels) in the aftermath of the riots. The physical gestures, in particular, emphasize the continued effects of the riots on the body, and the connection between the physical, social, emotional, and psychological in trauma. However, it is essential to note that Mrs. Han also describes the shared happiness she felt for African-Americans in the subsequent trials of the officers who attacked King (*Twilight* 248), as well as her preference for Martin Luther King, Jr., over Jesse Jackson as a political leader (247). A more simplistic reading of the situation as an instance of "us vs. them" ignores the complexity of her situation.

Similarly, Han's speech, as well as the plethora of perspectives Smith includes, also works to acknowledge the diversity of opinion and conflicting ideas that surround

the riots within groups. Consider, for example, that Smith includes the speech of Harland W. Braun, who represented police officer Theodore Briseno. Instead of blindly supporting his client, Braun references Pontius Pilate and wonders whether the officers were indeed guilty or whether justice merely meant avoiding another instance of rioting (243). This questioning comes, however, after he tells of police officers threatening his own son with violence, with “a screw put through his chest” (240). This awareness of the tension between and within groups and perspectives also appears in *Fires in the Mirror*. As an M.I.T. physicist explains in that text, scientists require gigantic mirrors in their telescopes to escape “the circle of confusion” (14), a fact that Smith “mirrors” in her own large canvases. As she writes in the foreword to *Twilight*, she understands the complexities of these situations and distortions firsthand; she specifically notes that she attended the subsequent trials of the officers who attacked King and admits to understanding how jury members could conclude that King’s beating fell within the parameters and “guidelines of the LAPD’s use-of-force policy” (xx).

In addition to her structural placement of the timeline in *Twilight*, Smith’s inclusion of experiences outside of the riots thus continues to reflect the ways in which traumatizing violence and racialization of America is individualized, communalized, and historical. As noted earlier, if readers are expecting only a discussion of Rodney King or April 1992, they are in for a rude awakening. Instead, in the prologue, Rudy Salas, a Hispanic artist, pointedly tells of his own experiences with racism and police brutality, and the effect they have had on him physically and mentally:

As a result of the kicks in the head they fractured my eardrum,  
and, uh,



I couldn't hear  
 on both ears.  
 I was deaf,  
 worse than I am now.  
*(He pulls out one of his hearing aids)*  
 So  
 from that day on  
 I, I had a hate in me,  
 even now.  
 I don't like to hate, never do,  
 the way that my Uncle Abraham told me that to hate is to waste  
 energy and you mess with [the] man upstairs,  
 but I had an insane hatred  
 for white policemen.  
 I used to read the paper—it's awful, it's awful—  
 if I would read about a cop shot down in the street,  
 killed,  
 dead,  
 a human being!  
 a fellow human being?  
 I say,  
 "So, you know, you know, so what,  
 maybe he's one of those motherfuckers that,  
 y'know..."  
 and I still get things like that.  
 I know this society. (3-4)

Salas goes on to talk about stereotypes held by whites about Hispanics, and vice versa, as well as about gang violence and the way racial profiling continued in late twentieth-century America (4-7). He specifically mentions a son's run-ins with cops because of his dark skin, but never does he explicitly reference Rodney King's beating or the riots that ensued after the verdict in his case. Moreover, Smith's deft handling of Salas's interview works to emphasize issues of alienation, dispossession, and trauma. When he interrupts himself, claiming "it's awful, it's awful," and describes a downed officer as "a human being! / a fellow human being?," Smith highlights his struggle to accept unpleasant aspects of himself and the negative toll that his own experiences with racism have left on

him. The break in commentary and recognition of his own “insane hatred” makes him question his own humanity, as well as dark aspects of his personality, highlighting an unwillingness or inability to get over his past suffering. His physical and emotional inability to hear also points to the traumatized person’s separation from the larger world and trauma’s effects on the physical body. By focusing on these details about a person who is an artist, allegedly someone more in tune with the ways in which the world operates, and who remains stuck in the past and unable to move forward, Smith highlights the emotional and physical dissociation Salas feels, which she attempts to pass along to her audiences. Likewise, Smith’s decision to include Julio Menjivar’s speech, which claims members of the L.A.P.D. actively encouraged individuals to riot, by telling them to “[g]o for it. / Go for it, / it’s your neighborhood” (124), allows her to highlight the degree to which violence and discrimination define American history and in particular its minority populations.

Similarly, in the next section of the book, to highlight the gaps and breaks that define trauma, Smith expunges all explicit references to King just as she does in Salas’s monologue. Smith instead includes monologues from the following: Michael Zinzun, a member of Coalition Against Police Abuse, who, in his “When I Finally Got My Vision/Nightclothes” tells of his own experience with police brutality (16-20); a former gang member who tells of his reputation on the streets and the means through which he bolstered that reputation (24-27); and the founder of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers R.O.C.), who tells of her own encounters with the legal system and one occasion in which she struggled to get police officers to release her son from their

custody for fear that he would be dead by morning, after being dropped off in a rival gang's territory (32-40). Although some may argue that these facts point to physical and structural violence, I maintain that Smith's focus on these reoccurrences also marks an attempt to make her audiences "co-owners of the traumatic event" (Laub qtd. in Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me* 6).<sup>54</sup>

That neither Rodney King nor the riots are ever mentioned in these particular monologues points to another aspect of trauma, namely that it involves gaps and that it circles around experiences that are unclaimed and not fully "owned" by an individual. No other "character" in this section talks of knowing King and is thus unable to relate or claim, fully, the experience—at least as King knows the experience. Multiple characters are, obviously, affected by the larger issue that King represents, but they remain disconnected and dispossessed from his actual experience—as well as the larger power structure that is attempting to control King's situation and the response it generated. Moreover, in comparison to the coverage of King's case, the stories of these particular individuals remain unknown, and unpossessed by larger American society. By sharing the experiences of Zinzun, the aforementioned gang member, and the parent who founded Mothers R.O.C., Smith continues to dispossess her audiences of their complacency, to make them question why they are not protesting the abuses endured by these people. In

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<sup>54</sup> Although she is speaking of another place and time, and focusing exclusively on African-Americans who testified about acts of racial violence, Williams's comments in *They Left Great Marks on Me* are just as appropriate in terms of Smith's focus on violence and oppression directed towards minorities and her goal of generating greater awareness among those who are in the majority or part of some other racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group: "making white citizens and elected officials bear witness to black people's suffering from racial violence was a critical part of African Americans' efforts to recruit allies to their campaigns to end violence and advance civil rights reform" (7).

this way, Smith shows that trauma is not just a series of losses, but opportunities for individuals to become more engaged in their world.

Moreover, by focusing, in the first sections of *Twilight*, on the long history of violence between minorities in general and the American majority/status quo (which privileges whites and is, in the play, represented by the L.A.P.D.), Smith highlights the repetitive nature of trauma and the way it affects all aspects of an individual's life. For example, Theresa Allison, the founder of Mothers R.O.C., breaks into tears when retelling her story, which is, in part, a repetition of earlier events; her defense of her son is not just parental instinct, but a learned behavior in response to a Los Angeles police officer shooting her nephew, Tiny (*Twilight* 32-40). In this way, beyond highlighting the repetitive nature of trauma, Smith once again invites audiences to grapple with America's long history of double standards.<sup>55</sup> She is working to demonstrate the degree to which Jim Crow is thriving more than a hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation and decades after the Civil Rights Voting Act, and that citizens still remain stripped of rights because of skin color and blood lines. Smith thus shows how historical discrimination and the imbalances of power in American society have been and remain traumatizing. Rioting in L.A., after all, did not erupt when Rodney King's beating aired on television. The rioting occurred only after the officers who attacked King were acquitted, the officers who stood as a symbol of white privilege and representation of racialized violence that is institutionalized and state-supported.

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<sup>55</sup> Perhaps *House Arrest* could, after all, be seen as part of this conversation. In addition to using the monologue format, this piece definitely considers the moral double standards often attributed to politicians.

Seeing Smith's America as a site and agent of collective trauma raises other important questions regarding who is actually traumatized. In terms of collective trauma theory, the traumatized individuals are always the recipients of the act of violence and deprivation. They are the ones forced to repeat the event. Thus, it makes sense that Smith includes Salas's, Zinzun's, and Allison's stories to convey that King is not alone. However, this focus on repetition, as found in Smith's work, can also be seen as highlighting that the agents of discrimination may, on some level, be suffering from trauma. In terms of power dynamics, Smith questions whether members of the ruling classes, by continuing to conserve their power, also reveal themselves as traumatized individuals who keep returning to the same (violent, disruptive, and debilitating) behaviors in response to past moments of humiliation and (fear of) loss. In this way, Smith's work highlights that, in the U.S., the ruling class, in trying to maintain the status quo and the current balance of power, acts out of an awareness of potential threats to its power base. Members of that class are the ones who are "ill," exhibiting a desire to remain in control; they are acting in response to historical efforts to wrest power away from them, to the fear of losing the proverbial upper hand, and to the belief that another's progress translates into a loss for them. In this way, Smith's vision of the American character gets decidedly darker and darker—and muddies the distinction between victim and villain. Smith's goal is obviously not to excuse the behavior of the oppressors, but can she not be seen as showing the similarities between people and that suffering affects all, both agent and object of violence? Moreover, the threat of violence as a result of institutionalized suffering is the work and problem of all Americans. In this way, Smith

recognizes how no one is exempt from trauma and how everyone is implicated, as Judith Lewis Herman says, at the very least as a bystander and thus, by extension, as either victim or victimizer (7).

Smith highlights this long history of violence most explicitly in the first of Congresswoman Maxine Waters's monologues, the only monologue in *Twilight* that was *not* an interview conducted by Smith but a speech that Waters delivered at Los Angeles's First African Methodist Episcopal Church. In this passage, Waters makes specific references to the past and history, like trauma, repeating themselves:

We had a Kerner Commission Report.  
 It talked about what was wrong with our society.  
 It talked about institutionalized racism.  
 It talked about lack of services,  
 lack of government responsive to the people.  
 Today, as we stand here in 1992,  
 if you go back and read the report  
 it seems as though we are talking about what that report cited  
 some twenty years ago still exists today.  
 Mr. President,  
 THEY'RE HUNGRY IN THE BRONX TONIGHT,  
 THEY'RE HUNGRY IN ATLANTA TONIGHT,  
 THEY'RE HUNGRY IN ST. LOUIS TONIGHT. (160)

These particular quotations, too, point to repetition in yet another way. Consider the repeated phrases in these speeches and the ways in which they build in a sense of reinforcement. If Julio Menjivar's "go for it" succinctly drives home the L.A.P.D.'s total lack of concern for particular members of their community, Waters's use of lead-ins like "It talked about..." and "THEY'RE HUNGRY IN..." resonate with sermons in the call-and-response tradition. Smith's decision to include this repetition highlights what comes next in the sentence, ensuring her audience hears both her and her characters' messages.

Additionally, Waters's speech, that of a U.S. Congresswoman no less, is remarkable in that it was delivered in Los Angeles, but references New York, Atlanta, and St. Louis. She moves between coasts, cities, states, and boroughs, between the East, the South, the Midwest, and West, to emphasize how widespread these problems of racialized inequality are. Waters *and* Smith—we must remember it is Smith's decision to include a speech that was not the result of her interviewing, let alone this speech—highlight how the potential for violence and uprisings lurks everywhere, intimating that the problems of race are not limited to particular urban areas, but are part and parcel of mainstream U.S. society.

Smith's decision to include two works by Waters in *Twilight*, breaking with her tendency in this play of having a character speak only once, is in and of itself particularly telling. Again, given that Waters's first monologue, titled "The Unheard," is the only premeditated speech in the book, the only speech that was not prompted by Smith's interviewing, alerts readers to the importance of Waters's thoughts. It is significant, too, that Smith places Waters's speeches back to back, and that "The Unheard" appears before "Washington." In the latter, Waters tells Smith of how she crashed a White House meeting about urban planning and blatantly informed the President and his cabinet about the need for jobs and programs for disenfranchised youth and minorities in America's inner cities (163-69). Through these two very different speeches, we can easily see the ways in which Smith is manipulating her text and audience. She is not just doing "hard" journalism, a genre purportedly governed by a dedication to objectivity; instead, through her alleged focus on accuracy, it becomes more apparent she is actively working to move

her audience by determining what gets included in the text and performances of it *and* what does not. Smith's manipulation can also be glimpsed in *Fires in the Mirror* when she asks one interviewee, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, to read a specific passage from her memoir [59] *after* having already delivered one monologue [50-51] or in the multiple monologues by the Reverend Al Sharpton (19-22, 113-16). That all these repetitions involve renowned members of the African-American or Jewish communities speaks to a specific political agenda on Smith's behalf. Rather than hear two speeches by the average citizen, Smith references Waters, Sharpton, and others with political clout to let their words and reputations carry the weight of their ideas. Like Mrs. Han banging on the table in *Twilight*, Smith needs to ensure that her audiences hear her point: that the U.S. is frequently traumatizing to the disenfranchised members of society and that those who complacently allow that trauma to occur need to stand up and fight for change. Additionally, by using figures who are in the public eye, Smith emphasizes that the riots of L.A. and Crown Heights are truly national issues. These events may be seen as aberrations unique to the communities in which they occurred, but Sharpton, Waters, and Pogrebin point to the national origins, consequences, and ramifications of these events.

### **Similarity through Difference, Mimesis through the Antimimetic**

Smith's use of props likewise lends itself to discussions of the repetitive nature of trauma. As previously stated, Smith is known for staging her productions with relatively few props and costumes. By never altering her makeup and changing only a few items of clothing, Smith instead relies on voice, accent, syntax, and mannerisms to morph from



one character into another. In doing so, Smith highlights the universality of her characters (they are more alike than normally believed) and reminds audiences that differences typically manifested through a single sensory cue are meaningless. The focus thus becomes more on the characters' words, and less on the outward trappings of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.<sup>56</sup> This may explain why, as one critic notes, Smith uses the same shrillness to present the thoughts of both a Hollywood wannabe and the former leader of the Black Panthers, forcing audiences to consider "they could obviously live in one community, who put so many barriers between them?" (Feingold 270). Moreover, through her subversion of time and use of repetition, Smith actively works to disorient and dispossess the members of her reading and viewing audiences by denying them many of the traditional markers of drama and making them question any preconceived notions they have about either of these riots-rebellions-civil disturbances. By providing an experience that upsets the status quo, that forces individuals to question how stories get told and events interpreted, Smith robs her audience of the traditional reading/viewing experience. Smith demonstrates that Americans need to consider radically different viewpoints other than their own. Like traumatized individuals, Smith's audience members must work to integrate a multitude of perspectives (including their own) to arrive at and possess the "truth" of any given situation—at least to the degree to which that is possible. At the same time, audience members must see Smith behind, embodied in, and separated from each character who speaks onstage all the while noting the similarities between individuals and peoples.

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<sup>56</sup> This statement is not meant to imply that vocabulary and speech patterns cannot be markers of one's socioeconomic background.

Recognizing the ways in which Smith capitalizes on the repetitive nature of trauma as a way to talk about race relations also alerts us to the mimetic/antimimetic controversy that is central to trauma studies. The argument regarding the mimetic nature of trauma questions the ways in which a traumatic injury is repeated. One school of thought claims the traumatized individual relives the moment of trauma exactly as it happened—whether through dreams or flashbacks, or in response to triggers—as a means of mastering the event and, in the language of Caruth, claiming the experience. Others argue that if an event remains unclaimed and unintegrated into the conscious mind, the repetition has to occur differently; it is repetition with a difference. This debate manifests itself in *Twilight* in that nowhere does Smith include a monologue by Rodney King himself, purportedly the individual whose run-in with members of the L.A.P.D. started the riots. Although this omission may have occurred for legal reasons—as King was involved in various civil suits with the L.A.P.D., he was in danger of either revealing information related to his case or of incriminating himself—the actual, detailed story of his beating surfaces only in a few speeches, such as the one that his aunt Carmen King delivers (51-60) or that of Josie Morales, an individual who viewed King’s beating from a nearby apartment but was never called to testify (66-69).

In the case of Carmen King, she only experiences her nephew’s beating vicariously and through the medium of television, but she breaks down in tears during her monologue, remembering the event largely because the right triggers are in place

(*Twilight* 55);<sup>57</sup> however, it is essential that we recall that because she (like all the characters in *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*) is now separated in time and space from the event, that moment of reliving, must always, by definition, be different. How interesting, too, to compare Carmen King's awareness of the events with that of the jurors in the first trial. As mentioned earlier, Smith relates that

a juror in the federal civil rights trial against the officers who also heard King's reaction to the police blows told me that the rest of the jury had difficulty hearing what she and King's aunt had heard. But when, during deliberations, they focused on the audio rather than the video image, their perspective changed. The physical image of Rodney King had to be taken away for them to agree that he was in pain and responding to the beating. (*Twilight* xx)

The jurors' behavior—spurred by the need to identify their physical response to the event, to learn to understand the event by using two different senses separately and disjunctively—may also point to the dissociating, fragmenting, non-integrating characteristics of traumatizing memories.

Although she was closer to the actual scene of King's arrest, Josie Morales, too, is removed from the event in that she is prevented from telling her story. Not only does her husband fear being a witness—aware of the possible dangers of police retaliations based on his experiences south of the border, he called her away from the window from which she witnessed the beating—Morales tells how prosecutors did not ask her to testify in the courtroom (Smith, *Twilight* 67-68). The ability to recall the event is denied her, much as

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<sup>57</sup> Consider, too, Smith's decision to mention in her stage directions that Carmen King decided to reschedule the interview (*Twilight* 51) based on the unexpected presence of one of Smith's assistants. In other words, King actively worked to maintain control over her memories and when and how she would relate them; by including this detail, Smith is highlighting, through King, that the healing of trauma involves storytelling and that the telling of trauma remains socially negotiated.

traumatized individuals are unable to recall events at will.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, Smith's inclusion of Morales's story conveys how America as a site and source of trauma frequently isolates those who do not belong to the majority or the upper classes. As a Hispanic, indicated by the marker of her surname, and as a woman, Morales shows how minorities are traditionally excluded, separated, and disconnected from governing bodies and thus dispossessed of power.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the witness with the more Anglicized name that attorneys would call to testify instead of Morales was Melanie Singer (68).<sup>60</sup> Obviously, not being allowed to recall an event is not the same as being physically unable to do so, but I would argue that symbolically this points to the antimimetic aspects of trauma in that the witnessing of neither Carmen King nor Josie Morales is, as Leys says, "an experience of hypnotic imitation or identification" (*Trauma: A Genealogy* 8). Moreover, the stories of these women, like many other speeches included in the book, are interrupted by tears, questions asked of Smith, and the need for reassurance from Smith and by extension Smith's audiences. The latter are the ultimate recipients of King's and Morales's messages; it is Smith's audiences who need to hear and respond to King's and Morales's queries and tales of trauma, loss, and injustice.

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<sup>58</sup> Smith's story of Reginald Denny in *Twilight* (103-12), the trucker who was attacked during the riots, attests to trauma's effects on memory as a biological and physical system in that he suffers from partial amnesia.

<sup>59</sup> Because Smith does not explicitly identify Morales in the script as Hispanic but only supplies information about her job, one can argue Morales herself is not Hispanic, but that her husband is, which serves as yet another reminder that Smith tries to disorient her audience and show the degree to which minorities remain disconnected and that individuals are often alienated just by being associated with a minority group.

<sup>60</sup> And in another telling move, Smith chooses not to include Singer's story in the script.

If Morales's piece speaks to the disenfranchisement, disconnection, and dispossession of minorities in the U.S., her speech is just one way that Smith works to destabilize audiences' preconceptions. Smith also highlights the competing views of various speakers to create a continued focus on fragmentation and separation in *Twilight*. Offering so many versions of events, and perspectives on those events, Smith shows our world in greater complexity. This becomes a way through which she can impose a larger framework—as fragmented as it may be—on a single event, just as this particular local event became part of the national consciousness and the purview of the federal government with the President choosing to send in federal troops and declaring L.A. a disaster area (261), the L.A.P.D. choosing to collaborate with the I.N.S. (261), and mayors advocating for federal funds for America's urban cores (262). In essence, Smith works to show how man-made trauma does not occur in a vacuum. Smith has claimed in an interview with Paula Zahn that her more recent work on death and dying, also a part of her *On the Road* series, is partly a response to the fear that audiences of *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* could excuse their role in the riots by claiming geographic distance, by asserting they did not reside in California or New York. However, Smith's focus on the role of the federal government in these events asserts the degree to which these events affect the entire nation. Moreover, her inclusion of interviews from people outside of Los Angeles and Crown Heights emphasizes the false logic of audience members who claim (geographic) Other-ness as means of maintaining their innocence and lack of involvement in the riots. We can similarly view the lack of coverage in *Twilight* that Smith devotes to dissenting opinions about Rodney King's allegedly illegal behavior as

another attempt on her part to move audiences to think critically and deeply about the various perspectives people held about these events and situations. Smith demonstrates that, as audiences, as Americans, indeed as humans, we are always linked to, if not part of, the problem.<sup>61</sup>

Essentially, Smith forces audience to consider other aspects of trauma, namely the tension between the self and the larger group. For instance, by including Josie Morales's speech "Indelible Substance," which emphasizes her desire to testify, Smith reminds us that the "history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another" (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 11). Moreover, because she does not merely point to "another," and thus to issues of plurality and multiplicity, we should view Smith as actively working to engage her audiences in conversations about the Other, to see themselves as part of the Other. We should likewise see Josie Morales as subject to this idea of the Other, to being an Other to herself and her husband, because she is drawn to the need to testify and ensure that the beating inflicted on Rodney King become an opportunity for "good," for justice, to occur. Laub, although he is referencing the Holocaust, would link Morales's desire to talk to the need to be "a witness to oneself" ("Truth and Testimony" 61), as well as to others. Smith, too, as interviewer, is obviously another potential Other, and her audiences likewise become, indeed are always, Other-ed when they are on the receiving end of Smith's monologues, thus granting trauma the potential to be a never-ending event.

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<sup>61</sup> These moves also reinforce that Smith continues to promote a specific agenda about race and racism in America.

This emphasis on difference and Other-ing also surfaces in the final monologue of *Fires in the Mirror*, which is that of Carmel Cato, the father of the young boy who was killed by Grand Rebbe Schneerson's limousine in Crown Heights. Cato conveys this sense of difference as it applies to his changing notions of fatherhood and the significance and evolving nature of his feelings for his family. Even Smith's decision to incorporate various monologues in *Fires in the Mirror* about hairstyles—whether the focus is on Lubavitcher rules regarding the use of wigs (23-25), the competition between girls surrounding how hair is worn in high school (17), or the link between Al Sharpton and one of his personal heroes, the singer James Brown (19-22)—shows this sense of Other-ing, of how physical features are used to divide and separate individuals. No matter who the audience is, it is this idea of Other-ing and audience that is likewise crucial to trauma, as well as to Smith's artistic sensibilities. As one writer maintains, "Smith's impersonations do justice to each character's interpretations of events by grounding that individual's world view in exquisitely rendered details of locality and personality.... [H]er performances make reconciliation into a problem at once emotional, epistemological, social, and political" (Jay 120-21).<sup>62</sup> Jay's use of the word "reconciliation" is particularly enlightening if we view Smith as challenging Caruth's assertion that trauma is about claiming experience, as advocating that trauma is about reconciling experiences. Beyond claiming the event, the traumatized individual must

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<sup>62</sup> Consider, in this light, Michael S. Miller's speech from *Fires in the Mirror* in which he tells of black people yelling "Kill the Jews," "Heil Hitler," and "Throw them back into the ovens again" (85-87) or Katie Miller's story of an unsympathetic white newscaster's commentary on the riots in *Twilight* (131-33). By including such speeches as these, Smith shocks the reader into recognizing how deeply seated are the tensions between some groups.

integrate it into his understanding of the world and his place in it; trauma—and culture—thus become learning experiences.

There is, of course, the danger that trauma does not result in growth, that exposure to trauma, as occasions of emotional and psychic transference, can lead to more trauma. This dilemma, for example, is at the heart of Felman's stories about teaching the Holocaust in a graduate seminar and the cognitive, emotional, and psychological effect the material had on her students. There is also the danger that recounting trauma may result in distancing audiences from the traumatized individuals and thus lead to ostracism. (As the saying goes, "there but for the love of God, go I.") After all, as Bennett recognizes, "trauma studies presumes to place itself at the heart of events that are, in fact, fairly removed from the lived reality of many of its proponents" (6). It is for this reason that we need to accept Smith's decision, with *Twilight*, to vary the contents of each staging based on the location of her performance venue (and the socioethnographic make-up of that community). In other words, given these moves, we must acknowledge that Smith is actively speaking to these issues of Other-ing, for, as one critic reminds us, Smith's art and focus on the Other are radically different and meant to disorient her reading and viewing audience. This is because Smith refuses to represent the Other by traditional means. Instead, she reads, and encourages others to read, Other-ness otherwise, refusing to represent Other-ness in relation to a fixed center simply because it is impossible to understand any one culture in its entirety (Drake 165-66). Smith's recognition that the ownership of events is frequently questioned (*Twilight* xxiii) also explains why she chose, at least with *Twilight*, to work with dramaturges of various



ethnic backgrounds.<sup>63</sup> It may be commonplace, now, to recognize the dangers of simplifying “American” to geographic location, but in the early 1990s, when Smith’s work debuted and the events that inspired them occurred, multiculturalism was still a relatively new idea being introduced into schools. Smith shows then that trauma is truly about understanding and claiming multiple perspectives and working to reconcile them accordingly. This further explains Smith’s exploration of Other-ness, use of few props, and her minimal costume changes. She, in other words, is actively questioning what defines the Other and asks audiences to focus on similarities rather than differences.

### **The Other, the Audience, and Fostering Truth**

When performing, Smith puts the audience into *her* initial position (i.e., as the listener of these tales) by destabilizing the fourth wall. Because some of the characters are aware they are testifying and wondering whether Smith, as interviewer, is “getting” him or her or whether Smith really knows “what happened,” they address Smith directly (*Twilight* 57, 94) or consistently use the second person in their monologues (15, 45, 125, 157). By regularly recognizing Smith as author *and* audience and by Smith maintaining this construct, the interviewees, interviewer, actress, and playwright all break the fourth wall. As such, Smith stresses the orality of these speeches, and the embedded questions that acknowledge Smith’s possible need for clarification or background information

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<sup>63</sup> Smith writes in her foreword to *Twilight* that “Among the people I asked to join me were Dorinne Kondo, a Japanese American anthropologist and feminist scholar; Hector Tobar, a Guatemalan-American reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* who had covered the riots; and the African American poet and University of Chicago professor Elizabeth Alexander. Oskar Eustis, a resident director at the Taper, also joined the dramaturgical team” (xxiii).

emphasize that “testimony is a form of endless remembering, a direct challenge to us to convert our ignorance of the unknown into some appreciation of the disparate, half-articulated tensions that inhabit the former victims’ narratives” (Langer 159). Smith ensures that this awareness of audience likewise appears in *Fires in the Mirror* as a way to unsettle audiences, and in at least one instance makes her goal of audience unsettlement and audience participation pointedly clear. Consider the speech by Letty Cottin Pogrebin. Hers is the heart-wrenching story of her uncle Isaac who survived the Holocaust by pretending to be a Nazi and killing his entire village, including his wife and children, and Pogrebin worries that audiences may become desensitized if Holocaust tales are “trotted out” too often (59-62). By including this speech, despite the speaker’s concern, Smith highlights the need for audiences to become emotionally involved. Therefore, this awareness of the potential for fragmentation, separation, and ultimately rejection reiterates, paradoxically, that the healing of trauma requires that traumatized individuals feel connected and accepted—that they no longer feel disconnected from their audiences.

Smith’s allegiance to verisimilitude also evokes Strejilevich’s belief that, with *testimonio*, more than words are at stake: “survivors who wanted to transmit their stories had to ... create, for themselves and their listeners, a language that could make sense for the outside world[,] that could be understood. They would engage in ... not only the language but also ... the gestures, the nuances ... to provide a subjective dimension to collective trauma” (703). The inclusion of sight, sense, smell, and sound, which can all be part of *testimonio*, and which, per Strejilevich, dictates the need for a poetic voice to

capture testimony (704), also explains why Smith chooses to incorporate PowerPoint slides, video images, audio, and news footage into her performances of *Twilight*. Furthermore, the inclusion of this material in her performances is not only another example of Smith's allegiance to verisimilitude, awareness of the repetitive nature of trauma, and recognition that a traumatizing memory can be mimetic (i.e., an exact duplication of an event); their inclusion also works to engage (and possibly traumatize) audiences on various levels. For those who were not in Los Angeles during the riots and experienced them as breaking news stories thousands of miles away, as well as those who were in L.A. at the time, this footage forces them to reconsider the way in which they view the riots in light of the various monologues. The news footage, in other words, provides still more opportunities for Other-ing and reiterates why we must view Smith as an artist rather than a journalist. Her focus is not merely on reporting, but the emotional impact she has on her audiences. In other words, even now, some twenty years after the riots occurred, the aesthetic effect remains the same for audience members who were not alive at the time of these events. This is because Smith demands her audience actively participate in the (re)construction of the event (Bernstein 124-25) just as a traumatized individual does.

The news footage also shows, per Reinelt, how Smith works to code her work as that of "a journalist or a documentary filmmaker," as that of a teller of truths (612).<sup>64</sup> The photos and slides reiterate Alexander's claim that (re)imagined events can be just as traumatizing as an actual event (8)—or that an event in itself is not traumatizing, but that

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<sup>64</sup> "Code" is the operative word, because the work in which Smith engages is not reporting but an artistic attempt to move audiences.

the act of recreating it (if not remembering it) is. In other words, from an aesthetic viewpoint, the trauma is (re)lived by the reading/viewing audience and becomes a catalyst through which Smith continues to create art that forces audiences to grapple with American history and what it means to be an American. Smith thus asks audiences to question the participatory role that all individuals play in (racialized) American society by explicitly or implicitly working to maintain or upset the status quo. Audience members are literally, if not figuratively, witnessing and experiencing a re-enactment of the riots and their physical and emotional consequences on people, and Smith's use of video, PowerPoint, photos, etc., in *Twilight* is a dedicated effort to force reluctant audience members to engage with the events described in the texts, to experience the riots and their causes as traumas, and to recognize the ways in which many individuals remain disconnected from (and traumatized by) larger U.S. society and culture. This, again, is why I argue drama is so crucial to representing trauma. This genre depends on and emphasizes the importance of the Other and testimony in allowing traumatized individuals to heal from and overcome their pasts.

This focus on audience and *testimonio* as related to trauma and Smith's work also elicits LaCapra's ideas about empathic unsettlement. "As a counterforce to numbing," he says, "empathy may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others. Empathy may also be seen as counteracting victimization, including self-victimization" (40), and, indeed, Smith's work is, in part, an examination of the difficulties involved in

the process of working through versus acting out trauma.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, this emphasis on empathy and on the Other aligns with Smith's aim: "to make theater a more responsible partner in the growth of communities" (*Twilight* xxiii). Noting that her focus is not on solutions but "the *processes* of the problems," Smith reminds us that hers is "a call to the community" (xxiv), a call to community, and a call to and an act of witnessing.<sup>66</sup> As Jay claims, "Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* belongs to this genre of the testimonial and—along with the transcripts of the Anita Hill, Rodney King, and William Jefferson Clinton cases—documents how the literature of testimony accumulates in proportion to our inability to arrive at a widely accepted verdict" (124). Additionally, Smith purposely works to disorient her audiences by repeatedly and explicitly asking them to consider the riots as more than acts of hooliganism, greed, and revenge—by showing them that the riots were the logical outgrowth of and response to systematic and institutionalized repression. For example, if we view the riots as acts of civil disobedience, as political maneuverings designed to gain power and to work against a hegemonic power structure, rather than individually motivated acts of rage and greed—and again this is debatable<sup>67</sup>—the attempt to gain power can be seen as an imitation of the violent, power-driven behaviors historically used by members of the superstructure to maintain the status quo.

<sup>65</sup> LaCapra defines "acting out" and "working through" in relation to grief, and more specifically the related ideas of melancholy and mourning. In the case of melancholy, an individual is "stuck" in this emotional state. An individual in mourning, however, is in the process of working through his grief (65-67).

<sup>66</sup> While these words come from Smith's preface to *Twilight*, I argue that they are just as applicable to *Fires in the Mirror*, particularly if we remember that the Mark Taper Forum in L.A. commissioned Smith to create the former based on her reputation established with *Fires in the Mirror*.

<sup>67</sup> We must remember, too, that trauma, as Vickroy notes, "forces us to face difficult human issues: vulnerability and our capacity for evil" (18).

Also, if we recall that reliving a traumatizing event is an attempt to master it, Smith asks us to view the ensuing events (despite her use of the word “riot”) in the same way. Whether we are discussing events in New York or Los Angeles, and whether either happening was planned or an immediate, instinctual response, Smith wants her audience to see both sets of events as acts of revolution and revolt attempting to address distinct civil wrongs (rather than mere violence and proof of man’s capacity for evil).<sup>68</sup>

There are still other dimensions of Smith’s work that highlight the relationship between trauma and the larger community in which traumatized individuals find themselves. Unlike other authors examined in this study, Smith does not engage, in these two works, in the more traditional aspects of most contemporary drama. Although we can see her as incorporating elements of the traditional plot line—clearly, she identifies a point of attack; she works to incorporate exposition and rising action; she builds to a climax of sorts—hers are not plays in the sense that all of the aforementioned plot elements consistently circle around the same characters. Indeed, with a few exceptions in *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*, the speaker of a monologue appears once and then vanishes. From this perspective, however, it can be argued that Smith is recognizing the social nexuses that surround trauma and the ways in which trauma is negotiated (and, ideally, accepted) communally. The plethora of voices in *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* thus points to the idea that trauma must, per Farrell, Herman, and others, be accepted and designated as such by the larger community. The payoff, again, for Smith, is that her work actively asks audiences, literally a group of bystanders, to take sides and, ideally, to

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<sup>68</sup> Although acts of evil and mere violence were indeed part of these events.

realize the necessity of taking the side of those who are disenfranchised and victimized.<sup>69</sup> She needs audiences to engage actively with minorities' feelings of disenfranchisement, of allowing minorities' stories to be brought front and center. Perhaps Smith's success is linked to the fact that as an African-American storyteller, she works to hear from other minorities. By speaking and re-enacting the words of Asians, Jews, immigrants, and non-naturalized citizens, as well as whites and African-Americans, she explicitly models what it means to hear and embody the Other literally and figuratively. She refuses to let either play deteriorate into the simple binary of black and white. Instead, she layers on races, religions, classes, etc. to show what it means to be outside of the larger group and the need to see and hear differently and other- (and Other-) wise. We must therefore recognize that Smith's plays, although directed toward healing, can also be seen as subversive in nature. She works to make those with power actively consider their role in events, to make them fully comprehend the degree to which they may have encouraged or allowed social inequities to occur.

### **Fragments of/Fragmenting the Text**

No matter whether she considers herself a journalist, anthropologist, or playwright, Smith's work borrows from multiple genres and fields, and the ways in which she plays with—or fragments—genre is another method by which she stylistically

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<sup>69</sup> The attempt to make an audience member realize her outsider, Other-ed status gets weirdly configured when we remember that Smith routinely asks her interviewees to her performances—they literally get to see themselves in and as the Other on stage. In this way she can be seen as challenging audiences that trauma may never be a collective experience.

captures and highlights the idea of dispossession and acting out (rather than through) grief. To elicit further this sense of fragmented traumatic knowledge in both *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, Smith only supplies a title to each interview and a few words as stage descriptions to inform about character and setting. Although in *Twilight* she avoids specifically noting a subject's race, in both works she employs a shorthand way of supplying background information about the speaker, the time and place of the interview, and the speaker's mannerisms, frequently piling up sentence fragment on sentence fragment (*Fires in the Mirror* 9, 23, 74, 79, 94; *Twilight* 21, 32, 83, 134, 188, 201, 218). This fragmentation is necessary because “[n]arrative organization is constitutive of diachronic time, and the time that it constitutes has the effect of ‘neutralizing’ an ‘initial’ violence” (Lyotard qtd. in Whitehead 87). Smith works against this neutralization and wants readers to recognize all the losses equated with violence—not to be like the newscaster who merely lamented how looters had ruined the department store he frequented as a youth (*Twilight* 132). Yes, this represents a loss to him, but Smith is more interested in “real” collective losses, ones that are long-term and cumulative, that motivated the looting and rioting. On some level then, though Smith claims otherwise, she is creating a hierarchy of loss, and if we consider that theatergoing audiences are largely of the privileged upper class, Smith therefore works to create empathy for those who are most disenfranchised.

Fragments also manifest themselves in Smith's decision to break with contemporary dramatic tradition by presenting the speeches on the page as poems. This move is related to Smith's belief that speech reveals personality and an individual's true



identity and background, not just through words but through delivery; these line breaks, however, also force the reader to be on edge and participate in the making of meaning. In this way, her work can be seen as showing where group and individual identity begin, blur, and (possibly) end in an effort to unsettle audience members, and if her work remains dedicated to showing the tension between mourning and melancholia, between working through versus acting out grief—which for LaCapra, as noted earlier, are intricately related to healing from trauma, indeed are two options when responding to historical trauma (65-70)—audiences must learn to work through the fragments semantically and syntactically. Smith models these tensions in two ways. No matter whether the texts engage audiences in models of mourning or melancholy, audiences must follow closely—and circle back—in their attempts to make meaning as characters stumble, interrupt themselves, and wander from their main point. Audience members must guess where a character is going and then self-correct accordingly, all the while trying to fit the experiences related in each monologue into their own histories. Thus, in *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith includes the monologue “No Blood in His Feet,” where the speaker, Rabbi Joseph Spielman, stumbles in his thoughts while working to provide background information on events in Crown Heights:

Um,  
 seeing what happened,  
 he jumped out of the car  
 and, realizing  
 there may be a child under the car,  
 he tried to physically lift  
 the car  
 from the child.  
 Well, as he was doing this  
 the Afro-Americans were beating him already.

He was beaten so much he needed stitches in the scalp and the face,  
 fifteen or sixteen stitches  
 and also  
 there were three other passengers in the car  
 that were being beaten too.  
 One of the passengers was calling 911  
 on the cellular phone.  
 A Black person  
 pulled the phone out of his hand and ran.  
 Just stole the—stole the telephone.  
 The Jewish community  
 has a volunteer  
 ambulance corps  
 which is funded totally from the nations—  
 there is not one penny of government funds—  
 and manned by volunteers—  
 who many times at their expense—  
 supplied the equipment that they carry in order to save lives. (68-69)<sup>70</sup>

Another example of this fragmented narrative style, from *Twilight*, is scholar/historian  
 Cornel West's piece, which begins with some observations about profits, moves to a  
 discussion of the frontier myth, and segues into commentary on the Black Panther Party;  
 throughout his speech, he additionally peppers his thoughts with "um"s, "uh"s, "like"s,

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<sup>70</sup> This monologue becomes even more jarring when placed up against the following  
 passage from *Fires in the Mirror*, which likewise introduces gaps on a syntactic and  
 grammatical level, but also introduces the claim that the driver of the car that killed  
 Gavin Cato was under the influence of alcohol. This assertion thereby allows Smith to  
 problematize the idea of guilt, the preferential treatment given to the Grand Rebbe and  
 his entourage, and the ongoing disenfranchisement of African-Americans in this part of  
 New York (and, by extension, larger American society): "Everybody just stood / there  
 [at the scene of the accident], / and that made me cry. / I was cryin' /so I left, I went home  
 and watched the rest of it on TV, / it was too lackadazee / so it was like me, man,  
 instigatin' the whole thing. / I got arrested for it / long after / in Queens. / Can't tell you  
 no more about that, / you know. / Hey, wait a minute, / they got eyes and ears  
 everywhere. / What color is the Israeli flag? / And what color are the police cars? / The  
 man was *drunk*, / I open up his car door, / I was like, when— / I was like, he'd been  
 drinkin' / I know our words don't have no meanin', / as Black people in Crown Heights. /  
 You realize, man, / ain't no justice, / ain't never been no justice, / ain't never gonna be no  
 justice" (83-84).

“eh”s, and other vocalizations that Smith retains (41-48). By refusing to edit the speeches for clarity, Smith highlights the gaps and fragmentary nature of trauma; her “characters” are not only demonstrating the chaotic nature of the thought process, but, from the perspective of trauma theory, they can be seen as grappling with the process of making meaning, of imposing a narrativized structure and logic on ideas and events that are larger than themselves and of which Smith’s audiences may know nothing. This mirrors the experience that Smith is creating for her audience who likewise must engage in the process of making meaning. When audiences are unable to fill in the blanks on someone else’s experiences, they have to wait for the next word and then admit to themselves, “Oh, yes, that makes sense too.” In these ways, Smith can be seen as getting her audiences to agree with her characters. This mirrors Laub and Auerhahn’s claim that trauma “overwhelms and defeats our capacity to organise it: facing real acts of massive aggression, our psychological abilities are rendered ineffective” (288). The speakers’ stammerings and syntactical wanderings point to the problems of disruptive memory and the desire and inability of the traumatized self to create continuity and a smoothly rendered chronicle (Langer 1).

Beyond mimicking her interviewees’ thinking process, Smith uses fragments and line breaks to unsettle audiences in other ways. In Smith, enjambment most often represents a natural pause and those moments where individuals collect their thoughts and search for the best word. However, there are also those instances where Smith specifically works to challenge audience expectations linguistically and syntactically. At times, in *Twilight*, she separates adjectives from nouns: “a different / way” (70), “done

caught him a big old / trout” (53), “white / upper class / upper middle class” (135). Prepositions and articles are divided from their nouns: “in the / restaurant” (135), “If you saw an animal being beaten, you would go over and help an / animal” (95), “when she was like / a prostitute” (51), “I looked, could see three people, they looked at me, and they pointed the / guns at me” (88). To continue to unsettle audiences, subjects are also separated from verbs and verbs from objects: “it / was palpable” (135), “He sit there like, ‘It ain’t no big thing, / and I / will do it again’” (58), “This is / a live broadcast, by the way” (94). Smith forces readers to pause and consider why she uses a break in these spots. In these instances, there is no natural pause or need for an individual to self-correct or search for the right word. The use of “an” before a word that begins with a vowel or correctly conjugated noun-verb construction shows the speaker is aware of what comes next. Instead, by inserting a break, Smith works hard to create a disruptive reading experience. Smith thus uses expectations about the printed page as a way to disenfranchise and disorient her readers, to make them question what they assumed what would happen next. By highlighting these reconfigurations, and by forcing readers to pause and question unneeded breaks in the poetic line, Smith asks us to consider how we know what we know and what it is we omit when looking at the world from our own perspective. Moreover, line breaks, digressions, and incomplete thoughts allow Smith’s work to become performative (as defined by J.L. Austin) on the part of her audience. Consider once more Maxine Waters’ “Washington” monologue, which ends abruptly in this way:

So when this gentleman  
from the Department of Labor supported

what I was saying and looked at the President  
and said,  
“This country is falling  
apart.” (Smith, *Twilight* 169)

The reader is left wondering what was said—and happened—next; because there is no independent clause attached to this “when” statement, the payoff, for Smith, is that the ideal audience member continues to be jolted out of complacency by being asked to fill in the blanks and make meaning out of tragedy and then, ideally, learn to accept others’ perspectives.

This elliptical, fragmentary approach linked to trauma writing also manifests itself in at least two other ways. First, Smith’s overall practice of making meaning from disparate perspectives and a range of backgrounds highlights, once again, how meaning and trauma, as previously discussed, are socially negotiated and how “recovery is based on a community of witnesses” (Whitehead 88). To that end of creating a community of witnesses, both figuratively in the nation and literally in the theater, in *Twilight*, starting from the top down, Smith includes interviews from high-ranking officials in local and national government. She reproduces the words of the former mayor of L.A. (Smith 85-86), its police chief (180-87), its district attorney (74-76), and members of Congress (159-69, 214-17), as well as lower-level civil servants, like weapons expert Charles Duke (61-65), and political activists who are concertedly working to reform the government (16-20, 32-40). As a point of comparison, she also includes the criminal element, represented by gang members (24-27, 253-56). In terms of class and education, Smith likewise runs the gamut: speeches from members of the working classes, from truckers (103-12) and cashiers (118-23), are juxtaposed with those of the middle class (there are

office workers [66-69], accountants [129-33], and store owners [83-84, 143-45]) and the upper class, represented by Hollywood agents (134-41), producers and directors (199-200, 204-13), writers and members of the media (90-93, 94-98, 218-23)—the famous (214-17) and infamous (150-55). To capture various views from academia, Smith includes such scholars as the aforementioned Cornel West (41-48), Homi Bhabha (232-34), and Mike Davis (28-31); those just beginning a college career (156-58); as well as those who seemingly have been deprived equal opportunity to education. Similarly, in *Fires in the Mirror*, she includes the full spectrum, those in government (63-66) and the “average Joe” (88-93), both Jews and African-Americans, American-born citizens and those from abroad (97-99, 135-39), the known and the unknown, as well as both more and less reputable (79-84, 100-02) members of the community.

One of the most jarring social “extremes” Smith includes to make the majority of her audiences feel fragmented, isolated, and disenfranchised is when she offers, in *Twilight*, the speech “Riot,” by storeowner Chung Lee, rendering the excerpt first in Korean phonetically and then in English (83-84). With this speech, she distances speakers of English, minorities for whom English is not their first language, as well as speakers of Korean from the text. Because Smith relies on phonetics, the latter no longer read the text as they normally would; they have to reconstruct sounds and meanings to make words and make sense of the world. Similarly, although to a lesser degree, if one takes into account issues of individuals who speak with accents, readers of both *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* must bridge that gap of knowing how to read a text and how a text must be heard. There is always a reconciling of stereotypes and reality. Thus, readers must

imagine Carmen Cato’s inflections and mannerisms and how they color the delivery and pacing of his emotionally charged lines—and whether Smith’s version truly reflects the original interview. Through all these voices, Smith emphasizes that all perspectives must be heard and validated if community building and healing are to occur. By holding to a more expansive view of society and community, Smith’s writings emphasize the complexity of any given situation or mindset for that matter. Comprehending an event involves much more than being able to supply a list of dates and facts, in the way that Smith’s timelines themselves fail to convey an understanding of events in Los Angeles or Crown Heights in their entirety. Yet, when it comes down to it, Smith shows people as more alike than different. Grammatically, semantically, syntactically, stylistically, the testimonies by people from all these different walks of life sound similar—stilted, repetitive, confusing, and incoherent, yet utterly comprehensible.

### **Minding the Gap**

Smith’s reliance on excerpts and fragments additionally speaks to the need for reconciling multiple perspectives and the necessity in community-building activities to step back and ask whose perspectives, what perspectives, and what pieces of information are missing. Because she does not give us the full interview but only what she deems relevant, we know that Smith is always at work behind the scenes, manipulating the text and performance, and depriving audiences of control over the text. Despite her claims of verisimilitude, bias becomes an issue because we are not privy to what has been excluded. We do not know whether there is a standardized set of questions from which

she operates and to which all interviewees are subjected to create a “level” playing field, a tactic used in most interview projects. However, is that not exactly what Smith wants to achieve—to get audiences to recognize where biases (if not biased reporting) originate, to recognize what we choose to ignore by privileging the viewpoint of larger society?

Even if we see Smith giving a performance of documentation, on some level, it would be just as instructive for audiences to hear those taught identities to understand how (or at least where) community identity is built and how governing superstructures influence their constituencies to accept the view of the ruling classes. If audience members can recognize how the hegemonic manifests itself in others, perhaps they can recognize it in themselves and thus identify when they are not thinking for themselves. A recognition of the tension between the ruling and the ruled, the majority and minority, the empowered and the disenfranchised also manifests itself in another gap in the text in that each monologue, as an excerpt, has been manipulated. To be fair, Smith has claimed in a conversation with Carol Martin that she tries to use continuous, or self-contained, portions of her interviews, claiming a “chopped-up” monologue would be too confusing for audiences (57). Additionally, we must recognize Smith does occasionally use ellipses, but we do not definitively know whether those ellipses are pauses showing the speaker lapsing into thought—they are the speaker’s ellipses—or Smith following the conventions of academic writing (i.e., ellipses mark a deletion). Even something as simple as the use of the academic convention “sic” serves as a challenge to readers and forces them to question the manipulative aspects of Smith’s work. In “A Bloodstained Banner,” a speech in *Twilight* from respected academic Cornel West, Smith renders the



word “political” as “plitical [sic]” (41) but renders “frontier” as “fronteer,” “man” as “mayan,” and “than” as “thayan” (42-43); however, very rarely does she work to correct or excuse the idiosyncrasies in the speeches of those with less education. As a result, Smith makes her audiences question what is acceptable and what differences are worth noting. Her refusal to correct the speeches of the less educated is a means of getting audiences to identify with those individuals. There is no intrusive, hypercorrect editor who wields her authority over grammatical errors and omissions. Mistakes instead are valued, valorized, and admitted, just as the pains and sufferings of traumatized peoples of Los Angeles and Crown Heights must also be validated, recognized, and understood.

Moreover, through these various practices, Smith actively strives to make audiences respond emotionally. Smith works to pull out the proverbial rug from under audiences by making them recognize how socioeconomic status drives thinking. By breaking down and brokering in stereotypes, Smith provides the means for the members of one group to hear from someone with whom they can identify by race or class, but then she often works to undercut those individuals’ authority. Thus, for white audiences, the perspective of Reginald Denny (*Twilight* 103-12), seen by most as a victim of the riots, is diminished because they have already heard another “character” talk of Denny’s traffic violations that led him into harm’s way (99-102). In contrast, some former gangbangers come across as insightful and devoted to helping the less fortunate, and others, though still devoted to a life of crime, are shown as politically savvy (*Fires in the Mirror* 101-02). Those who viewed the L.A. riots as about black-white tensions are asked to see it otherwise. Thus, Smith similarly explodes racial and socioeconomic stereotypes

and journalists' alleged dedication to a lack of bias to rattle audiences, to make them think differently, and Otherwise; she works to make audiences question exactly who is "we" and who is "Other" through the speeches she includes in the script and performs in the theater, as well as those she chooses not to include in either venue. She makes us question how people (and in particular white audiences) interpret, react to, understand, and contribute to issues of race and racialization. Furthermore, even when she is seen as being more journalist than artist, documenting people's comments exactly, by duplicating accents, mannerisms, and even phonetics, she also works to step out of this mode. Within the speeches, she frequently avoids the traditional journalistic basics of who, what, where, when, why, and how. She jumps right into the middle of interviews, questions whether those events described in that particular interview really capture the happenings of April 1992 and August 1991, and shows the interconnectedness of time and similarities between people who, on the surface, seem radically different.

In the same way, if journalism is about quotes and research, Smith obviously succeeds in those areas through her dedication to objectivity and accuracy. However, she strips out the transitions—her words—between the quotes and researched information. Obviously they are still there, especially given her physical presence on the stage, but on some level she is asking audiences to question the media's role in shaping the news.<sup>71</sup> Smith consistently eliminates herself from the interview,<sup>72</sup> and nowhere do we hear Smith's questions although they are obviously being asked. One of the more obvious

<sup>71</sup> This focus on similarity and difference also forces the public to question the ways in which they help to create events based on their own assumptions.

<sup>72</sup> Again, Reinelt claims costuming choices and set changes are precisely one instance where we should realize Smith's presence and subjectivity (611).

examples of this in *Twilight* occurs in the speech from the former gang member identified as “Anonymous Young Man.” He offers a chilling tale of gang life, relating his notion that attacking someone in broad daylight, rather than the dark of night, worked to his advantage; his logic was that although there was a greater chance of being identified during the day, the payoff was that his reputation as a menace to society was solidified (24-27). Tacked on to the end of his speech though, and obviously prompted by Smith, are five lines in which he talks about his favorite song, “Am I Dreamin’?” (27). Nothing in this monologue preceding these lines has anything to do with music. Granted, ellipses are used in this case, but we do not know what else has been excluded, only that things have been deleted, which effectively forces audiences to grapple with fully understanding the complexity of this gang member’s existence, with recognizing that he is no different than they are, having likes, dislikes, opinions, etc., and that he is not some hoodlum whom they can immediately and summarily dismiss.

One of the most disturbing instances in *Fires in the Mirror* of these deletions meant to hide the author and disorient audiences, highlighting their lack of knowledge, is in an interview with another “Anonymous Young Man.” In the speech “Bad Boy,” he admits to killing, or at least being an accessory to the murder of, Yankel Rosenbaum after Smith prompts him to clarify how he knows who killed the Australian scholar. Her request for this information, her “How do you know that?,” which has been excised from the text, would occur at the line break between sentences in the following: “I know for a fact that that youth, that sixteen-year-old, / didn’t kill that Jew. / That’s between me and my Creator” (102). In both of the speeches from these anonymous young men, this

cutting accentuates the disorienting nature of trauma for the individual, and in doing so Smith provides the opportunity for her audience to feel that same sense of being disoriented, unsettled, and off balance. Like the traumatized individual, the audience finds itself faced with an unclaimed experience, one that it does not, and cannot, fully know.<sup>73</sup> In this manner, Smith engages in linguistically performative (again, as defined by J.L. Austin) work, asking audiences to supply the question for her, and in doing so, she works to make audiences to identify their opinions in relation to others' and to see things from others' perspectives.<sup>74</sup> Though not engaged in a traditionally performative linguistic act, audiences must also ask what this knowledge means, ethically, for the young man and for Smith, as both artist and individual, if they possess information related to a crime, notably the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum. Audiences must ask, too, what they must ethically do with this knowledge or with the knowledge of the day-to-day tensions and inequities (both perceived and actual) felt and experienced by those in living in Crown Heights—and elsewhere.

### **Invoking Trauma, Invoking Diaspora**

Through all of the aforementioned ways in which Smith succeeds as a writer of

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<sup>73</sup> For a point of comparison, we can look at Smith's *House Arrest*, which incorporates Smith's trademark (allegedly) verbatim interviews. In this work, however, she frequently interrupts her characters' talking by supplying a tape-recorded voiceover, often in her own voice, of selected interview questions (12, 29, 48), as well as quoted material from additional interviews, transcripts, and historical documents (30-32, 44-47, 62-63).

<sup>74</sup> And, disturbingly, in the case of the "Anonymous Young Man," perhaps from the perspective of a murderer? Smith, after all, works hard to suggest that this young man is sincere. Although he could of course be boasting, Smith stresses that the speaker "is soft-spoken, and [he] has a direct gaze. He seems to be very patient with his explanation" (100).

trauma, we can also see her shedding light on diaspora as a marker of contemporary American life. With *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith's focus is, to state the obvious, on two very specific groups associated with diaspora studies, namely African-Americans and Jews, but a more substantial connection is that the tension between the two groups points to the lack of acceptance—the detachment and fragmentation—often ascribed to diasporized peoples as a whole (Safran 83). In other words, people of diaspora suffer from a lack of acceptance; they are accepted by neither their homeland nor the people of their hostland, and when two minority groups come into contact within a host culture, their members are often found being at odds with one another (and some would say encouraged by the dominant group to be so). Thus, as Katherine McKittrick notes in her *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, “diasporic struggles can also be read, then, as geographic contests over discourses of ownership” (3), and although the focus of this quote is on African-Americans, and more specifically the contest between the dispossessed and those in power, McKittrick's larger emphasis on ownership and dispossession, on home and homelessness, and on visibility, invisibility, and unvisibility applies to African-Americans and Jews (and all minority groups), particularly when members of one minority group see themselves competing with those in another group. Moreover, and more to the point for this project, this concept applies to Smith's work. For instance, in *Fires in the Mirror*, Minister Conrad Mohammed makes the connection between the horrors of the Holocaust and the slave trade explicit:

We didn't just lose six million.  
 We didn't just  
 endure this  
 for, for

five or six years  
 or from '38 to '45 or '39 to—  
 We endured this for over three hundred years—  
 the total subjugation of the Black man. (Smith 55)

Jay notes that this monologue is particularly important because of its focus on diaspora. In addition to the explicit allusions to diaspora in this speech, Jay points to the monologue that immediately follows that of Minister Conrad Mohammed, Letty Cottin Pogrebin's "Isaac," noting that her monologue is essentially an excerpt from Pogrebin's book *Deborah, Golda, and Me*, and that this selection was specifically chosen beforehand by Smith as a point of conversation. In other words, Jay claims that although these two passages appear to work as "found poetry," the pieces ultimately emphasize Smith's presence in her work and her specific desire in *Fires in the Mirror* to juxtapose stories of diaspora (131-39). Recognizing that this emphasis on diaspora occurs beyond these two passages, Jay reminds readers that "a psychoanalysis of mourning and melancholia helps delineate the experience of racialized minorities in America. The effects of racism and the demand for assimilation to the dominant white culture often mean a series of losses both psychic and cultural, often accompanied by physical and material losses and griefs, including mourning for a lost homeland" (144). Although Jay's emphasis in this quote is on *Fires in the Mirror*, the statement is just as applicable to *Twilight* because Smith's focus remains on minorities and dominant white culture. Indeed in *Twilight*, Smith works hard to show that the racialized violence was not just an issue of black-white tensions and that the effects of this violence were widespread.

Moreover, these individual stories in *Twilight* collectively work to remind audiences that within a week's time, in addition to local law enforcement officers and

firefighters, the government deployed some two thousand National Guard members and almost five thousand federal troops to the area (Ellis). In fact, Smith points out that, in the end, there were, according to *The Los Angeles Times*, “58 deaths; 2,383 injuries; more than 7,000 fire responses; 12,111 arrests; 3,100 [damaged] businesses” (*Twilight* 261); all of this, according to Clark Staten, of the Emergencynet News Service, resulted in more than \$200 million in damage. However, as the various speeches in *Twilight* attest, the cause of the trauma was not necessarily the beating of Rodney King, just as it can be argued that Smith is actively working to show that neither Gavin Cato’s nor Yankel Rosenbaum’s deaths themselves were the cause of the riots in Brooklyn. Instead, in both cities, the riots were a response to long-standing grievances and social injustices, and not necessarily a reaction to one specific event involving one specific person; these incidents (i.e., Cato’s death and the acquittal of the officers involved in King’s beating) were merely the proverbial straws that broke the camels’ backs, and the riots ensued as individual after individual resorted to violence to challenge the verdict and the status quo. Mob mentality ruled in Los Angeles, but it was no longer about Rodney King, as most individuals in either L.A. were not personally connected to him, but about a larger tradition of abuse.<sup>75</sup> Thus, individual after individual participated in the rebellion because they knew or perceived themselves as a subjugated people, a people disenfranchised by their minority status, racism, the politics of diasporic exile. Additionally, the beating of Rodney King by members of the L.A.P.D. triggers audiences’ memories of their own

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<sup>75</sup> The video and photographic images used in stage productions of *Twilight* likewise reinforce the far-reaching effects of these events, as well as their long-term financial and emotional consequences for the larger national community. No one was exempt from this violence and the breaking of ties to larger social structures.

experiences with police and reminds them of their own power (or lack thereof) in the eyes of the state, depending on their socioeconomic (and frequently racially determined) standing in the community.

The sense of a diasporic identity, as portrayed in Smith's works, is further complicated by that idea of the lost homeland, or, to be more specific, per Safran, the *myth* of the homeland (83).<sup>76</sup> Smith is quick to point out that a fixed homeland and a cohesive group identity are indeed illusions and myths, ones that she explodes in a few key ways. First, she troubles the concept of community by making no distinction between insiders and outsiders—those who reside in L.A. or Crown Heights and those who do not. Thus, again, as mentioned earlier, she includes the opinions, in *Fires in the Mirror*, of the Reverend Al Sharpton (19-22, 113-16) and a former student of hers (35-39), as well as the story of an ancestor of one of the founders of *Ms.* magazine (59-62), none of whom lived in Crown Heights at the time of the events. Even Yankel Rosenbaum highlights this idea of not belonging: he was not a member of Crown Heights' Jewish community but a visiting academic, not even from "the" homeland but Australia. In *Twilight*, Smith similarly includes speeches from individuals who were not present for the riots, like foreign national and critic Homi Bhabha (232-34) and a former head of the Black Panther Party, who phones in her interview from Paris (227-31). In *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith also points to how there were various sects, with different traditions and customs within

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<sup>76</sup> This is another way in which Dolan persuasively argues that Smith's work is utopian in outlook (514). Although Dolan identifies Smith's work as being optimistic and looking for the good in people, when coupled with the myth of the homeland, this reference also reiterates that the homeland, if a myth, is "no place." It is, in other words, eutopic and utopic.



the Jewish community of Crown Heights, complicating the idea of how one defines a community. Smith's interview with the L.A. County coroner in *Twilight* also highlights this sense of division when he talks of how he had to distinguish between riot-related and non-related deaths in late April and early May of 1992 (190-93) and, more tellingly, when he then breaks down for Smith the numbers of riot-related deaths by race (195).

If we broaden the word "community" beyond the immediate geographic confines of L.A. and Crown Heights, moving towards the level of the nation-state or larger segments of the American populace, there are still rifts shown in both *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*. Smith's choice to include Angela Davis's speech in *Fires in the Mirror* relates this sense of disconnectedness to the larger African-American community when Davis discusses her shock at being unable to support Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court (28) and, thus, be what she terms a good "race woman" (27). In both texts, too, Smith brings into question the ideas of America, American, and African-American. For example, to use the descriptor "African-American" to discuss *Fires in the Mirror* becomes problematic in that Gavin Cato and his father are not "African-American" in the traditional, colloquial sense, but immigrants from Guyana. Similarly, in *Twilight*, Smith includes the perspectives of others of non-native status. Thus, she recreates the moving speech of a Panamanian woman living in Compton who tells of being shot during the riots and the bullet lodging between the bones of her unborn daughter's elbow (118-23). On some level then, Smith extends and expands diaspora to include disenfranchisement due to race and nationality—to non-White status.

Nationality is not the only marker that gets problematized. To use the term “Jewish” to describe the Crown Heights neighborhood becomes problematic given the various sects in the neighborhood, the distinctions made between them, and the different customs practiced by each. As Rivkah Siegal comments, in *Fires in the Mirror*, something as basic as hair styles becomes a marker of identity and difference within a group:

there's different,  
u h m,  
customs in different  
Hasidic groups.  
Lubavitch  
the system is  
it should be two inches  
long.  
It's—  
some groups  
have  
the custom  
to shave their  
heads. (23)

However, as Siegal notes at the end of her monologue, this issue of her identity even within the community is problematic in terms of how this larger custom defines and obscures her (25). By juxtaposing Siegal's speech with those by Reverend Al Sharpton (19-22) and an anonymous African-American teenager (16-18), who also use hair as a springboard to talk about issues of identity, Smith emphasizes the ways in which identity and one's sense of belonging to a larger community are internalized, externalized, and shaped. Consider, again, Mrs. Young-Soon Han's speech from *Twilight*, in which she discusses the ways in which Koreans have been denied rights in the United States (245-46), or Mrs. June Park's speech about her husband. She wonders why her husband, an

upstanding member of the Compton community and a generous business owner, had to get shot, seeing disparity between his philanthropy, personal values, and the way others treated him (147-48). Through Han and Park, and many other speakers, Smith highlights that alienation is the issue, the emotion, that continues to haunt her characters.<sup>77</sup> There is the trauma of diasporic alienation in that they still do not belong to—they remain disconnected from and dispossessed of and within—their community and America. By questioning issues of nationality and racial solidarity, Smith continues to unsettle audiences emotionally by asking them to consider what is America, who is American, who is we, and who is Other. On some level, Smith even questions popular metaphors of crucibles and tossed salads used to describe the nation. America is not about conforming (and burning off differences), nor is it about retaining individual markers of culture to create a new whole. America is instead about alienation and is itself traumatizing.

With certain characters, Smith highlights these feelings of diasporic alienation on both the macro and the micro level. For instance, Carmel Cato tragically feels as if he belongs neither to his homeland nor to American society, let alone Crown Heights or his immediate family. The culminating piece in *Fires in the Mirror*, which is titled “Lingering,” points to feelings of “fragmentation” at the level of the nuclear family in that Carmel felt separated and distanced from his children even when Gavin was alive:

You know it’s a funny thing,  
if a child gets sick and he dies  
it won’t hurt me so bad,

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<sup>77</sup> Again, if showing this is Smith’s agenda, it explains why she chooses not to include speeches by African-Americans who looked down on and were appalled by the rioters just as many non-Blacks did. Nor does she include speeches by those—and they undoubtedly existed—who supported King’s attackers.

or if a child run out into the street and get hit down,  
 it wouldn't hurt me.  
 That's what's hurtin' me.  
 The whole week  
 before Gavin died  
 my body was changing,  
 I was having different feelings. (136-37)

Beyond the distance Carmel feels for Gavin, Carmel's speech manifests issues of separation in other ways. There are the line breaks themselves as well as Carmel's continued use of the indefinite article before "child" and the generic "it" he uses to refer to a hurt child.

As Smith emphasizes through Carmel's speech,<sup>78</sup> whether these "splits" represent a move from the specific to the general, from the physical to the abstract, from the real to the imagined, these separations and ruptures involving filial obligations and markers regarding nationhood, statehood, and individual identity point to issues of diaspora and the rupture in the psyche so central to trauma theory. As Freud says, traumatizing events are those "excitations from outside [the individual] which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield.... a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli" (23). Likewise, McKittrick, although she is focusing on black subjects in diaspora, emphasizes how splits and separations, how disconnection and dispossession, occur both on the level of the symbolic and of the real: "Through symbolic-conceptual positioning, the black subject... is theorized as a concept (rather than a human or geographic subject) and is consequently cast as momentary evidence of the violence of

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<sup>78</sup> And, again, that Carmel Cato's speech concludes *Fires in the Mirror* is a matter of conscious and deliberate emphasis on Smith's part. In an interview with Carol Martin, Smith admitted to originally placing his speech earlier in the script (52).

absent space, an interruption in transparent space, and a different (all-body) answer to otherwise undifferentiated geographies” (19). This focus on the conceptual is another link to trauma theory; in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud specifically discusses trauma’s relationship to perpetual consciousness (Pept-Cs), “a position in space” (16) rather than a locatable physical entity/place.

Because Smith does zoom out to take a larger, panoramic view of American society, recognizing that many minority groups remain detached and separated from their host culture, that they are restrained from being fully integrated into that culture, and that said host culture includes other groups that are often competing for opportunities, resources, and fair treatment under and by the law, her work acknowledges that many diasporized people are doubly disconnected in that they remain physically distanced from both their homeland (or the racially marked bodies that represent a homeland) and emotionally distanced from their hostland (Safran 83). Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” argues that the “New World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (67), and although that separation between will and desire obviously manifested itself very differently for slaves, that thwarting of desire and action still remains problematic for many minorities, especially given that people of color make up the majority of the world’s population. To ascribe minority status to a people of color within the United States thus imposes, maintains, and perpetuates a U.S.-centric perspective. Whether that minority status is tied to a gangbanger from Compton, a grass roots civil rights activist, or

immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, or Asia, these individuals can be seen, as depicted by Smith, as suffering from a continued sense of “metaphoric displacement” (Spillers 73) from America.

This displacement also applies whether America serves as their hostland or homeland (in that individuals may be born in the U.S. but still be treated as non-native, second-class citizens having fewer rights).<sup>79</sup> After all, as Eyerman notes, slavery functioned as a source of trauma long after 1865 (60). Perhaps this metaphoric displacement and the subsequent loss of hope for the future occur because

racism and sexism produce attendant geographies that are bound up in human disempowerment and dispossession. This can be seen, most disturbingly, in locations of racial and sexual violence—dragged bodies, historical and contemporary lynchings, rape—wherein the body is not only marked as different, but this difference, precisely because it is entwined with domination, inscribes the multiple scales outside the punished body itself. Bodily violence spatializes other locations of dehumanization and restraint, rendering bodily self-possession and other forms of spatial ownership virtually unavailable to the violated subject. (McKittrick 3)

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<sup>79</sup> If theft of the body equals loss of control over the body, Spillers’s focus on the thwarted body specifically connects to *Twilight* in the case of Rodney King and the opportunities denied many minorities. Feldman’s essay on King, Desert Storm, and “cultural anesthesia,” especially resonates in this matter concerning bodies and control, even going so far as to reference the events that surround *Twilight* in theatrical terms; Feldman claims the Rodney King hearing involved a disappearance and replacement of King’s body that is inextricably tied to issues of race: “Rodney King was the absent, the invisible man at the trial that exposed his body to the exhaustive optics of advanced technology and racial conclusion. This established his sensory kinship with the Iraqis [in Desert Storm], whose deaths were electronically deleted from the American conscience. King not only disappeared, but was also replaced by a surrogate, a stand-in, through the mirror dynamics of racist and cinematic fetishism. The defendants and their counsel transformed the Simi Valley courtroom into a transvestite minstrel theater, where whites armed with special effects and archetypal narratives, donned black face, wore black masks, mimed a black body and staged a shadow play of domination and law” (214). In the case of *Fires in the Mirror*, the death of Gavin Cato (i.e., the loss of his body) connects to Spillers’s focus on the separation of child and parent.

It is this awareness of dispossession and disconnection that is readily recognizable throughout Smith's works and connects back to issues of trauma. For example, Smith uses a monologue in *Twilight* from the director of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, Gladis Sibrian, to reference these notions of dispossession and disconnection, seeing them manifested as despair over a lack of opportunity and optimism:

Every day  
 in this Los Angeles  
 so many people die  
 and they didn't even know why they die.  
 There is no sense of future,  
 sense of hope  
 that things can be changed.  
 Why?  
 Because they don't feel that they have the power  
 within themselves,  
 that they can change things. (252)

In the speech that immediately precedes that of Sibrian, who describes the L.A. riots as a "social explosion" (251), the speaker likewise talks of the potential need for some minorities having "to suffer more / by mainstream" (248) and recognizes that

[t]he fire is still there—  
 how do you call it?—  
 igni...  
 igniting fire. (249)

As noted earlier, the riots in both California and New York, in this light, were acts of resistance, rebellion, and social protest, particularly for members of the African-American communities, against the larger power structure (Jews and Asian-Americans holding a more favored status, respectively, in New York and Los Angeles) and the past

and present crimes committed under that structure.<sup>80</sup> So although Spillers's emphasis appears to be on events of the past, she moves readers into the present by focusing on the implications of the Moynihan Report; McKittrick brings us even closer to present day, for she likewise notes the connection between civil rights and diasporic people, and the way in which a denial of full access to opportunities in the hostland and to the processes of assimilation and acculturation manifests itself in

uneven geographic processes and arrangements: a city plan, for example, can (and often does) reiterate class distinctions, race, and gender segregation, and (in)accessibility to and from specific districts; the flows of money, spaces, infrastructure, and people are uneven, in that the built environment privileges, and therefore, mirrors, white, heterosexual, capitalist, and patriarchal geopolitical needs. (6)<sup>81</sup>

The focus on “white, heterosexual, capitalist, and patriarchal geopolitical needs” explains Smith's inclusion in *Twilight*'s timeline of the fact that some politicians requested the White House deport, immediately, any illegal immigrants arrested during the violence (262) without necessarily studying the charges or hearing their cases. Smith, in this way, supports Vickroy's claim that collective trauma can expand beyond the immediate site of

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<sup>80</sup> As Scheper-Hughes notes, “For the popular classes every day is, as Taussig (1989) succinctly put it, ‘terror as usual.’ A state of emergency occurs when the violence that is normally contained to that social space suddenly explodes into open violence against the ‘less dangerous’ social classes. What makes the outbreaks ‘extraordinary,’ then, is only that the violent tactics are turned against ‘respectable’ citizens, those usually shielded from state, especially police, terrorism” (177).

<sup>81</sup> McKittrick's use of the word “mirrors” here seems particularly ironic if placed in the context of *Fires in the Mirror*, as Smith's text asks just exactly who is (looking) in the mirror. Although Smith is obviously offering a comparison of the African-American and Jewish communities of Crown Heights, these two groups, as a reflection of larger American society, are also showing—and thereby distorting—representations of whiteness, majority, and minority in the United States. *Twilight* extends this by adding even more perspectives (from both minority and majority groups, classes, etc.) to the discussion. Perhaps we *always* need to read *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight* as companion pieces in the larger whole of Smith's oeuvre.



an event (as in the case of the attacks on the United States and the World Trade Center on 9/11) by disrupting social bonds (13).

Additionally, the connection between past and present continues to reiterate the repetitive nature of trauma and that diaspora is not necessarily a one-time event but can produce an ongoing condition. Because diaspora is a source of trauma, it can have, as Kidron and Hesford note, consequences across generations. Events of the past continue to be experienced because the wounds arising from racism and discrimination have never fully healed and because those wounds and crimes continue to be inflicted on younger generations. These recurrences thus represent an individual's (and community's) thwarted desire for narrative linearity and acceptance, or wholeness. Moreover, these issues have yet to be resolved because truly dealing with them in terms of moving past them rather than merely accepting them—there are echoes of LaCapra here—is dependent not just on the actions of the minority but of the majority to change the unfairness of its laws.<sup>82</sup> Thus, although there is a danger of reading this as a pathology of blackness, of structured violence, I would argue we must still read this condition as a source of trauma, of Erikson's and Farmer's claims that cumulative suffering breeds a ongoing sense of loss, isolation, and dispossession. This sense of "splitness," of separation, echoes in the last speech of *Twilight*, which belongs to a former gang member

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<sup>82</sup> Laws, actions, and attitudes! It is, unfortunately, not just a matter of recognizing and responding to the most barbarous crimes inflicted upon members, individually and collectively, of a minority group. As Saidiya V. Hartman claims in her *Scenes of Subjection*, "the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved; by the same token, the failures of Reconstruction cannot be recounted solely as a series of legal reversals or troop withdrawals; they also need to be located in the very language of persons, rights, and liberties" (6).

who brokered a gang truce in Los Angeles in 1992 and whose name gives Smith's work its title. I quote from his speech at length because I think it offers many ideas applicable to trauma and diaspora, most notably the idea of two-ness:

I was writing my name  
and I just looked at it and it came ta me:  
"twi,"  
abbreviation  
of the word "twice."  
You take away the "ce."  
You have the last word,  
"light."  
"Light" is a word that symbolizes knowledge, knowing,  
wisdom,  
within the Koran and the Holy Bible.  
Twilight.  
I have twice the knowledge of those my age,  
twice the understanding of those my age.  
So twilight  
is  
that time  
between day and night.  
Limbo,  
I call it limbo....  
So to me it's like I'm stuck in limbo,  
like the sun is stuck between night and day  
in the twilight hours.  
You know,  
I'm in an area not many people exist.  
Nighttime to me  
is like a lack of sun,  
and I don't affiliate  
darkness with anything negative.  
I affiliate  
darkness with what was first,  
because it was first,  
and then relative to my complexion.  
I am a dark individual,  
and with me stuck in limbo,  
I see darkness as myself.  
I see the light as knowledge and the wisdom of the world and  
understanding others,

and in order for me to be a, to be a true human being,  
 I can't forever dwell in darkness,  
 I can't forever dwell in the idea,  
 of just identifying with people like me and understanding me and mine. (254-55)<sup>83</sup>

Although he doesn't mention W.E.B. Du Bois, the speaker is evoking the latter's concept of double-consciousness, of always seeing the world from two perspectives, that of an American and that of a (disenfranchised) African-American.<sup>84</sup>

For members of each of these various communities examined by Smith, the diasporic split moves readers beyond double-consciousness and into hybridity, serving as the ultimate reason why we can read *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* as texts of collective trauma.<sup>85</sup> Smith's multicultural approach works to eschew mere duality, to explode "an absolute sense of ethnic difference," and to avoid the "cultural insiderism[s that...] construct the nation as an ethnically homogenous subject" (Gilroy 3). However, such a focus on explosions and avoidance emphasizes the negative and ignores the fact that Twilight Bey's speech also recognizes the opportunity for growth that the revisiting of a traumatizing event promises, hence his stress on the positive, on light. And ultimately, that optimism is crucial to understanding Smith's plays, for *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, like trauma, are an attempt to achieve wholeness and to bridge

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<sup>83</sup> Interestingly enough, this idea is highlighted in another monologue, called "Twilight #1," that appears a few pages earlier in Smith's book. Scholar and critic Homi Bhabha delivers "Twilight #1" and likewise describes twilight as a "moment of dusk," "ambivalence / and ambiguity," "inclarity," and "fuzziness" when people can "begin to see ... boundaries in a much more faded way" (232-33).

<sup>84</sup> In his insightful essay on *Fires on the Mirror*, Jay likewise notes a "buried" allusion to Du Bois and his idea of double consciousness. Jay relates that the book from which Pogrebin reads in her monologue opens with a reference to Du Bois's ideas (132).

<sup>85</sup> After all, "double" can keep increasing if we consider all our various "selves."

differences. Rather than merely highlight what separates people, *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*, like Twilight Bey's revelation, are focused on community growth. In channeling all these different stories through one body, Smith shows audiences the self in the Other and the Other in the self. By imitating allegedly unbiased journalistic practices, striving for verisimilitude, and working to disorient her audiences through the selection and manipulation of interviews on the printed page as well as the stage, Smith works to disorient and "dispossess" her audience, to make them actively participate in America's national traumas long after they have supposedly ended, and to make them aware of the possibility (if not the probability) for a greater sense of wholeness, inclusion, and well-being.

Moreover, *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* as trauma texts also help us to challenge theories about collective trauma. Undoubtedly both plays speak of collective experiences that rip apart the social fabric. Additionally, Smith demonstrates that speaking, negotiation, and compromise are aspects of healing,<sup>86</sup> and she explores the relationship between the individual and the larger group. However, Smith problematizes that interplay between the collective and the individual. Although she recognizes that the healing process requires engaging (with) the Other, that the Other permits healing to occur (or not) through valorization, and that her very performance is dictated by the presence of the larger group, Smith reminds us that trauma ultimately resides only on the level of the individual. As much as the traumatized individual needs group acceptance, that acceptance does not guarantee a return to wholeness. The group may acknowledge

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<sup>86</sup> Or, assuming that healing is a possibility, speaking, negotiation, and compromise are required if there is even a potential for healing.

suffering occurred, that change is needed, that compensation (whether financial, emotional, or judicial) is due, but none of that necessarily results in emotional or psychic healing. Ultimately, only the suffering individuals themselves can confer and convey that return to wholeness. They are responsible for their own healing, but do not necessarily have control over the time that process requires. Moreover, when collective trauma occurs, even when it is recognized as having affected the larger group, healing can never happen in a wholesale fashion; diasporized peoples may be exiled *en masse*, but healing occurs only at the level of the individual. Despite memorials, monuments, and reparations, individuals must continue to work through their pain and suffering on their own. In essence, Smith debunks the myth of the collectivity and commonality of large-scale trauma.

Paradoxically, by studying Smith's work, scholars of trauma can also see the need to question trauma's potential for growth. Essentially, Smith begs the question of whether understanding can occur without trauma. In other words, she asks whether there is a necessary evil attached to trauma, one that gives individuals a better understanding of their role and outlook on events or society in general and that gives communities and individuals pause to examine their identities, the ways in which they interact with others, and the underlying precepts that govern why communities and individuals function in the way they do? After all, Smith does not see her work as offering solutions but as merely participating in the process of discovering solutions. As a result, all perspectives must be heard, and although she is not writing in support of violence, discrimination, or racism, she is advocating that audiences see her plays and engage in the conversations that these

events evoke even if communal conversations do not necessarily translate into a collective cure, even if cures are impossible. This view is indeed something we must consider as another challenge to trauma scholars who see healing and a return to some prior state as the end goal. After all, Smith's audiences leave *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* with no concrete resolution of the problems being discussed.

Whether healing remains a possibility, there is no denying that Smith is arguing for a broadening of America's collective consciousness, a better understanding of those who are disenfranchised by the ruling classes, and a deeper awareness of how individuals use events to distinguish between themselves and the Other. To do that, she reminds us that we need not be traumatized to grow; that instead is precisely the role of art. Smith makes us go through the pseudo-trauma of her artwork, makes us identify with characters with whom we feel at odds in "real life," and thus she steers us toward living their trauma and empathizing with it.

Lastly, for scholars of trauma, Smith questions how trauma always remains both a political process and an individual one. Reliving moments of trauma, thus, is not about a surrendering of agency, but an assertion of it. I do not mean to be overly optimistic and naïve, or even privilege Solnit's claim that trauma brings opportunity for community spirit, but scholars should recognize that Smith questions whether trauma must be equated to a loss of agency. Instead, the subconscious reliving of harrowing moments is not just an attempt at healing but an assertion of power and dominance. The healing must occur within a social context, but Smith shows that the individual strives to reign supreme. As a result, we must ask whether that need for dominance and control is a

hardwired aspect of what it means to be human. If our lives are characterized by loss and the need for control, trauma is what defines us; it is an attempt at a self-definition as well as a marker of the human condition—and the individual even before the individual exists.

Perhaps this is ultimately why neither *Twilight* nor *Fires in the Mirror* offers happy endings; community healing remains a possibility for which we strive but that often remains out of reach. Obviously, Smith includes speeches that end on a note of resolution and hope, but because her focus is ultimately on individuals, we can never fully witness that return to wholeness. Furthermore, that return does not occur at the level of the group, but only at that of the individual. Thus, despite Twilight Bey's closing thoughts on hope and growth, we remain, like Carmel Cato, alone; we collectively experience the traumas of racism, Los Angeles in 1992, and Crown Heights in 1991, only to leave the communal space of the theater and the potential safety of the group, to return to our individual lives, lingering in a continued state of limbo and liminality. Smith disrupts genre and makes us individually uncomfortable. It is only when we return to our private lives that change, that healing, may occur—if the art worked, if the individual viewer was receptive to it.

### CHAPTER 3 SUZAN-LORI PARKS, THE FAILURE TO HEAL, AND THE TRAUMATIZATION OF VIEWERSHIP

If Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* are meant to open the channels of communication, create a venue for healing to occur (although audiences never witness that healing), and offer insights about trauma at level of the group, fellow African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks narrows her focus even more. Although, like Smith, she has written a drama largely in verse form (i.e., *Venus*), similarly employs a structural technique that aims at creating a musical, collage-like effect (i.e., what she calls Rep & Rev), and worries that voices traditionally silenced on the American stage be heard, namely the voices of African-Americans, Parks eschews Smith's explicit focus on opening the channels of communication among groups in larger society. Instead, she emphasizes betrayals that occur between individuals, whether those involve siblings as in *Togdog/Underdog*, parent and child in *The America Play* and *In the Blood*, or lovers in *Venus* and *Fucking A*.

Beyond showing how betrayal traverses interpersonal relationships, Parks demonstrates how the fourth wall acts as a site of border crossings, symbolic of those breaks that occur between past and present, homeland and hostland, and narrative order and disorder that characterize the traumatic state and the situation of many diasporized peoples. Parks's plays thus offer unique opportunities to see that trauma when depicted in the theater is about intimately experiencing a horrific event, like diaspora, rather than just rationally claiming knowledge of it. Because she works in a middle ground, Parks negotiates the distances between audiences and players; these distances are both



maintained and broken in ways that force audiences to remain simultaneously traumatized and made whole. Healing is not just reclaiming an experience; it is an act in which individuals consciously and subconsciously assume the role of the Other, and as with Smith, Parks does not actually show that healing occurring. Indeed, frequently her characters remain trapped in, even recreate, moments of pain and suffering. Per Aristotle, audiences are no longer moved to fear, terror, and pity merely by hearing a story; in Parks's hands, audiences participate in the creation of those events that lead to these emotions. In this way, Parks's plays remind students of trauma that healing from trauma is a socially and individually controlled performance. However, she throws into question the idea that society sides with either the perpetrator or victim after the traumatizing event occurs. According to Parks's plays, that alignment occurs in the traumatizing moment itself, something Parks makes evident by exploring the relationship between actor and audience as defined by the presence of the fourth wall. Thus, if Smith works to lead the larger group—L.A., Crown Heights, America itself—to a place where conversation can occur by working to make her audiences feel others' perspectives, Parks offers a much darker view of healing. She too strives to alienate and traumatize her audiences, to make them aware of their complicity in the social trauma linked to racism and discrimination, but her plays end on moments of pain, sorrow, and suffering, rather than opportunities for healing and hope.

The first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, Parks has generated much controversy with her writing. When an early drama written during her undergraduate career won a school award—she turned to playwriting after a creative

writing class with James Baldwin, who noted her talent for bringing voices to life in their workshops—administrators said it could not be performed because the script dictated that a hole actually be dug on stage, that dirt be brought into the auditorium.<sup>87</sup> Controversy also surrounded the request of editors at *The New York Times* that she change the name of her *Fucking A*, one of her “Red Letter” plays, so called because of its allusion to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*; the editors claimed that they could not publish the titular obscenity on their pages. Beyond Parks’s use of off-color language, characters who engage in prostitution, abortion, blackmail, rape, and sexual extortion are also a source of discomfort for some conservative audiences. For others, her tongue-in-cheek naming of characters like The Foundling Father, Lincoln and Booth, Black Man with Watermelon, Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, and Before Columbus is just as problematic, as is her use of nonstandard spelling and examples of nonstandard English dialect. She is also known for her stylistic techniques, which include the use of elongated rests and spells,<sup>88</sup> and even, as outlined in her essay “from *Elements of Style*,” the creation of unconventional “foreign words and phrases,” like “***do in diddly dip didded thuh drop*** /dó-in-díd-ly-díp-díd-díd-th[e]-dráhp/ meaning unclear. Perhaps an elaborated confirmation, a fancy ‘yes!’ Although it could also be used as a question such as ‘Yeah?’” (Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* 17). Her recent work on the 2011–12 revival of *Porgy and Bess*, despite the awards it garnered, also generated controversy for adding back-story to the text and a happier ending; for some, it is the

<sup>87</sup> Although not necessarily seen as controversial for this same reason, later works still demonstrate an ongoing obsession with holes—and Abraham Lincoln.

<sup>88</sup> Critic Greg Miller claims these are just more holes (131).

combination of these thematic, structural, and stylistic moves that unsettle audiences and may explain why almost a third of her viewers at one performance of *Venus* walked out of the theater (Hartigan) or that a Michigan school district considered ripping out pages of new literature textbooks because the books included the allegedly inappropriate *Topdog/Underdog* (Murray A8).

Audiences however need to look beyond the controversy and to view Parks as actively working to change the system and status quo. As Parks bluntly asserts in her essay “An Equation for Black People Onstage,” published in 1995 in *The America Play and Other Works*,

The bulk of relationships Black people are engaged in onstage is the relationship between the Black and White other. This is the stuff of high drama. I wonder if a drama involving Black people can exist without the presence of the White—no, not the *presence*—the presence is not the problem....

Let’s look at the math:

BLACK PEOPLE + “WHITEY” =  
STANDARD DRAMATIC CONFLICT  
(STANDARD TERRITORY)

*i.e.*

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

*so that*

WHATEVER the dramatic dynamics, they are most often READ to EQUAL an explanation of relation to Black oppression. This is not only a false equation, this is bullshit.

*so that*

BLACK PEOPLE +  $x$  = NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT  
(NEW TERRITORY)

*where x is the realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than the Oppressed by/Oppressed with “Whitey” state; where the White when present is not the oppressor, and where audiences are*

*encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit. (19-20)*

In terms of content, structure, and (the lack of academic) language, Parks continues to court controversy but also new ways of writing about African-Americans on the American stage, something to which she herself aspires and to which many argue she has devoted her career. Indeed it is in this larger context that critics have come to an appreciation of Parks's works, prompting Una Chaudhuri to claim,

In recent decades an alternative American drama has thrown wide the doors of traditional psychological realism to let in an expansive vision of American history, geography, and speech. Suzan-Lori Parks is perhaps the leader—certainly the exemplar—of that drama.... [and] has come to represent the hitherto untapped poetic potential of the American stage. (289)

Chaudhuri then continues on, discussing Parks's place in the American canon, by saying that Parks's "characteristic vision—that of a totally unsentimental eye viewing a dauntingly wide vista—puts her in the tradition of Mark Twain and William Faulkner, while her faith in the power of poetry to unearth historical truths buried beneath sedimented layers of racial prejudice and other lies recalls the exuberant politics of Walt Whitman" (289).

For Parks, new ways of writing equals new ways of alienating readers—and for individuals studying drama and trauma, new ways of traumatizing audiences. If Smith's writing is about engaging the audience directly, by eliminating the fourth wall, Wilson strives, at least on the surface, to maintain it. By invoking a middle ground that both breaks and preserves this boundary, Parks engages her audiences in ways that challenge ideas about historical events; she thereby demonstrates how the past continues to traumatize contemporary audiences and how contemporary audiences are implicated in

traumas both past and present. In this chapter, I will look at three plays by Parks—*Topdog/Underdog*, *Venus*, and *The America Play*—that foreground individuals struggling to overcome the long-term effects of slavery and racism. I argue that in these dramas Parks works to make audience members complicitly and implicitly involved in her characters' varying states of (emotional) bondage. Beyond destabilizing the fourth wall, Parks involves audiences, as I will show, through the use of repetition, gaps, and embedded (and sometimes optional) performances that force audiences to participate in her texts and actively question their role in contemporary instances of suffering. *Topdog/Underdog*, *Venus*, and *The America Play*, all of which focus on characters who are in literal and figurative states of slavery, collectively demonstrate that drama is a ready-made vehicle not only to depict issues of trauma, but to make audiences engage in performances of trauma as both perpetrator *and* victim.

### **Toppling the Topdog**

The two-actor play *Topdog/Underdog*, which debuted in 2001, tells the story of brothers who were abandoned by their parents as children and left to fend for themselves. A tale of Cain and Abel, envy, and greed, the play is defined and governed by a specific allusion to American history; Parks's siblings are named Lincoln and Booth, and like their nineteenth-century counterparts, the latter kills the former in the play's final moments albeit over a gambling debt and a fight over who has the upper hand in their relationship rather than power issues linked to states' rights, slavery, and Southern secession. The events of the play revolve around Booth's desire to establish himself as a

conman specializing in the game of three-card monte. Though a gifted shoplifter, Booth links economic advancement and financial stability to the mastery of this street-game. To reach that goal, he repeatedly practices his patter and manipulation of the cards in the brothers' rundown one-room apartment. Moreover, he consistently begs Lincoln to teach him the game's finer points. Lincoln, the elder brother and a former cardsharp, refuses to participate, allegedly content with the meager earnings he brings home from his arcade job; it is, after all, as he proudly remarks, a "sit down" job (2.31). Upon applying whiteface and dressing up in the garb—complete with beard, stovepipe hat, and black coat—of America's sixteenth president, Parks's Lincoln settles into his chair at work, prepared to watch a play, as his presidential counterpart did at Ford's Theater on the night John Wilkes Booth shot him. Parks's topdog then repeatedly "dies" at the hands of the customers who visit the arcade and pose as his assassin.

Throughout *Topdog/Underdog*, which is set in the here and now, Parks's brothers engage in a give-and-take power dynamic; although Booth is the younger brother who freeloads off Lincoln, the apartment belongs to Booth, who threatens Lincoln with eviction when he does not get his way. Booth also "borrows" money repeatedly and reneges without any warning on decisions he has made (1.14). Lincoln appears to submit to Booth's demands and offers little resistance but can be seen as manipulating his brother on multiple occasions, such as when he encourages Booth to switch ties with him (2.28-29). The biggest form of manipulation involves Lincoln's alleged dislike for the cards and the dangers that lifestyle brings, for at the end of the play, we learn he has returned to "flipping" the cards, but he withholds this information from Booth for the

majority of the scene (6.82-95). Moreover, many critics read Lincoln's reluctance to teach his brother his moves, as well as Lincoln's losses to Booth during their practice sessions, as merely part of a scam. The losses are attempts to bolster Booth's confidence and encourage him to bet a large sum of money, the \$500 his mom left him when she deserted the family, a wager that he loses in the drama's final moments and that then drives him to kill his brother.

Even though Parks claims the play is not about slavery's legacy (qtd. in Bryant), *Topdog/Underdog* is rife with descriptors associated with the ongoing effects of the African diaspora and slavery in contemporary society, most notably the emotional and financial hardships placed on individuals and families. For example, Parks points to the destruction of families through the disintegration of the brothers' parents' marriage—both mother and father engaged in adultery—and the fact that both parents ultimately abandoned Lincoln and Booth when the latter were children. Likewise, the brothers find their adult lives marked by severed relationships, violence, and economic hardship. Parks heightens her focus on the brothers' isolation and separation from others by never allowing the action to leave the apartment, such that the audience's experience is curtailed by and confined to the brothers' cramped living quarters. Also, the characters find their lives defined by a lack of stable family relations, particularly as they involve women. Beyond their problematic relationship with their mother, Lincoln has separated from his wife, and any encounters with women that he recalls involve only casual sex (6.83). Booth, on the other hand, claims to be in an on-again-off-again relationship with a woman named Grace. After she stands him up in Scene 5, he creates excuses as to why

she did not come (5.60 and 6.85). He also plans to trap her into marriage and fidelity by shoplifting for her a “diamondesque” engagement ring that is too small and once placed on her finger would thus prevent her from removing it (1.8). Booth’s comments regarding Grace, like Lincoln’s about the women he “had” during his hustling days, reduce their relationship to sex, and if we are to believe Booth—given that no other characters appear in the play besides Lincoln, we cannot verify either character’s assertions—Booth’s relationship with Grace ends badly. He admits, in the final moments of the last scene, that he has killed her (6.107).

Unlike Wilson’s characters in *Gem of the Ocean*, Lincoln and Booth do not regularly speak of slavery. Their situation in *Topdog/Underdog*, however, mimics that of Wilson’s characters. Lincoln and Booth are essentially homeless—they have few possessions, they lack running water, the few possessions they do have are falling apart—just as Wilson’s protagonist in *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen Barlow, lacks a home of his own and the basic amenities of modern living. Moreover, though he never appears in the play, the brothers’ father consistently links his problems to “thuh white man [who] done sabotaged him again” (Parks 5.64); even conflicts about civil rights and states’ rights, evident in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, remain on his mind, which explains why he names his sons Lincoln and Booth. Although he claimed “[i]t was his idea of a joke” (1.22), it is a premeditated and deliberate one, given that the brothers were born three years apart. The situations of all these characters—Lincoln and Booth, their dad, Citizen Barlow—stand as markers of the continuing effects of slavery and diaspora in America, namely racism, discrimination, and a lack of opportunity. After all, diaspora



cultures, as Clifford argues, are “produced by regimes of political domination and economic inequality” (265) and point to “long-standing structured inequalities of class and race” (258), something with which Lincoln, Booth, and their father are obviously familiar. Parks thus works to involve audiences of *Topdog/Underdog* and her other texts by making them feel the losses that are attached to diaspora and the trauma of racism and racialization. Her plays are meant to force contemporary audiences to engage in problems of knowing and of claiming knowledge and experience. As Shafer says, Parks “sees history in a phenomenological manner that insists that the present exists in the future and that the past exists in the present” (182), a sentiment Parks echoes in interviews (Jiggetts 317).

*Topdog/Underdog* also focuses on the repetitive aspects of trauma, both in terms of flashbacks and the suffering that is handed down from generation to generation. Critics, like Jon Dietrick, argue that despite their failures at fostering strong family ties, the brothers are desperate to create these connections; this explains their living arrangement, the raggedy photo album they hold on to, and the payday scene. In this scene, the second in *Topdog/Underdog*, when Lincoln enters with his wages, the brothers engage in a comical bit of playacting in which they refer to themselves as Ma and Pa (Parks 24). Through this exchange, Parks demonstrates that their failed relationships (with each other as well as with Grace and Cookie), the focus on extramarital affairs, and their emphasis on money are, to some degree, learned behavior. Both parents taught the boys to focus on monetary concerns (Dietrick 60), and each boy learned of sex and infidelity through their parents. According to the brothers, Booth saw his mom having

sex with one of her lovers (Parks 6.99), and their dad actually took Lincoln with him to visit the women with whom he was sleeping (6.88); unbeknownst to his dad, Lincoln even began to have a relationship with at least one of these women (6.89). In essence, the brothers are merely repeating traumatizing knowledge, events, and suffering that have been passed on to them.

The game of three-card monte also underscores the repetitive nature of trauma. Beyond the recurring pattern, there is the game's circular nature. The dealer must delude his opponents into the illusion that they are winning, lulling them into a false sense of security that prompts them to continue playing and to make larger and larger wagers. By buying into the game, the marks attempt to make sense of the larger set of rules governing three-card monte. Like individuals attempting to overcome trauma, they are trying to impose order on an event that they have yet to master. They are trying to wrest control from the dealer, to narrativize this larger event by learning, by gaining knowledge, by claiming an experience that is not yet part of their personal history. To do that, the marks find themselves forced to engage multiple times in this scam.

Because of Lincoln's experience with the game, the cast list of *Topdog/Underdog* identifies him as the "topdog," the master dealer who rules the game of three-card monte, but Parks works to upset that idea. She goes to great pains to show him losing battle after battle. For example, Booth frequently threatens him with eviction (1.12-13) and commandeers Lincoln's wages (2.30). Booth also gets the only bed, mandating that Lincoln sleep in a dilapidated recliner. Furthermore, emotional losses and betrayals dictate Lincoln's life. Audiences learn that his best friend died on the street (2.33) and

that Booth has slept with Lincoln's wife (6.92). Additionally, his boss is threatening to replace Lincoln with a mannequin (3.48). Granted, none of these losses is planned, and we must acknowledge that Lincoln does experience some small victories—he talks of successfully returning to his confidence games (6.82-83), getting a new job and moving out of Booth's apartment (6.86-87), and cheating a small boy out of his money (1.9)—but the aforementioned losses and, ultimately, the loss of his life overshadow these small triumphs and put his status as topdog into question. However, it is this character's lack of success, particularly in his card play with Booth, that enables Parks to hide from audiences that Lincoln may be hustling Booth and the audience the entire play. Booth's wins in Scenes 5 (78) and 6 (95) need not be indications that Lincoln is rusty, that he has lost his touch as a cardsharp. After all, they stand as part of the larger hustle that Booth and Parks's audiences have not yet fully mastered. In other words, Lincoln's alleged resistance to picking up the cards may just be part of the game; as he himself says in trying to teach Booth the finer points of this hustle, "Dealer don't wanna play":

Thats thuh Dealers attitude. He *acts* like he dont wanna play. He holds back and thuh crowd, with their eagerness to see his skill and their willingness to take a chance, and their greediness to win his cash, the larceny in their hearts, all goad him on and push him to throw his cards, although of course the Dealer has been wanting to throw his cards all along. Only he dont never show it. (5.73)

Through all of these instances, Parks thus sets up her audiences in a scam of her own. She creates situations so that our sympathies lie with Lincoln. Moreover, because he serves as our guide into the world of three-card monte, and because Booth accepts his lessons at face value, audiences are encouraged to do the same. Only savvier audience members, those who recognize the importance of reading Lincoln otherwise, realize they are

possibly being taken for a ride, and in this way, Parks merely repeats her characters' family history. At play's end, when he kills his brother, Booth once more finds himself deprived (albeit at his own hand) of another attempt at family and enslaved by forces larger than he is.

### ***Venus: A Touch of Diaspora***

Parks's *Venus* should also be of particular interest to readers of diaspora and trauma. First performed in 1996 at the Yale Repertory Theatre and literally counting down to the death of the play's protagonist,<sup>89</sup> Parks relates in this work the fictionalized story of the historical personage Saartjie Baartman, an African woman who was brought to England and put on display in London as a sexual and racial oddity.<sup>90</sup> A playbill of that time reads:

NOW EXHIBITING  
AT  
N<sup>o</sup>. 225, PICCADILLY  
NEAR  
THE TOP OF THE HAY-MARKET  
From TWELVE 'till FOUR o'Clock  
Admittance, 2 s. each.  
THE  
*Hottentot Venus,*  
JUST ARRIVED FROM THE  
INTERIOR OF AFRICA;  
THE GREATEST  
PHENOMENON  
*Ever exhibited in this Country;*

<sup>89</sup> Except for the inclusion of an Overture, the story unfolds chronologically with the protagonist starting as a young girl and aging until her death several years later. Parks, however, identifies the first scene as Scene 31 and ends with Scene 1.

<sup>90</sup> I follow the naming and spelling conventions that Parks employs: Saartjie, Baartman, The Venus.

Whose stay in the Metropolis will be but short. (qtd. in Holmes xvi)

History now tells us that there was nothing extremely odd about Saartjie Baartman's features, but she was exhibited, particularly as Parks treats her, as a sexual(ized) and racial(ized) Other, known for having steatopygia, which Parks defines in the glossary included in *Venus* as "an excessive development of fat on the buttocks, especially of females, which is common among the so-called Hottentots and some Negro peoples" (164).<sup>91</sup> Rumors of the time also stressed that the Hottentot Venus supposedly "suffered" from overdeveloped genitalia. We know, however, from archival documents, including a body cast of Baartman, that she was not the sexual deviant, freak, or oddity that society presented her to be. Instead, just as many read trauma as a social marker of the cultural milieu, Baartman can be read as a symbolic signifier of the social makeup and cultural moods of nineteenth-century Europe: Young, citing Sander Gilman, asserts that "[t]he icon of the Hottentot and the body of the white prostitute, both with 'oversized' buttocks, were inextricably linked in a fusion of race, gender, and social class" (706); moreover, Baartman was a victim of pseudo-science used to promote imperialist and colonialist impulses (Osha; Fausto-Sterling; Gould). Indeed, given that the French showman Réaux donated Baartman's body to the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, France, thereby circumventing the dissection and burial laws of nineteenth-century France (Holmes 154) and that her remains were the property of the *Musée de l'homme* until 2002—France did not return her body to her homeland for a proper burial until that time and her remains appeared in a museum exhibit as late as 1994 (Elam and Rayner 266)—

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<sup>91</sup> Unless specifically noted, all references to *Venus* refer to TCG's 1997 publication of the text.

we should read Baartman's life itself as a text about race, sex, gender, freedom, and colonialism in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Although she did not live the traditional life of a slave and although *Venus* is not always faithful to the facts, what makes Baartman's story specifically relevant to students of diaspora is the protagonist's coerced journey from her homeland and her treatment in the West.<sup>92</sup> According to some historians, Baartman was brought to England illegally (Holmes 41-52). The slave trade had been abolished in England in 1807, and indentured servants, which was Baartman's status, were not allowed to leave their homeland. (Historically, members of the Hottentot tribe could not even enter into contracts unless they were in a court setting because of their supposed mental inferiority [Young 704].) To circumvent the law, Holmes argues, her captors brought Baartman to England as a stowaway (50-51) in part because her employer lost favor with government officials. Although he was forced to return home because he spoke out against the treatment of slaves and the lack of medical care given to them (and to native people in general) in light of a venereal epidemic (44), his concern for the sick and disenfranchised did not extend to Baartman. Other scholars question this version of events, arguing the head of

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<sup>92</sup> Parks's version of the tale omits many details about Baartman's life in Africa—the loss of her father, her marriage to a European soldier, the death of a child. Parks also fudges facts about Baartman's life in Europe. Although *The Hottentot Venus* was rumored to have been pregnant on various occasions during her time in Europe and to have married one of her captors, scholars have yet to verify these details (Holmes 115). Likewise, although Baartman did interact with a high-ranking official at Paris's Museum of Natural History, Georges-Léopold-Chretien Cuvier, who was sexually attracted to her and cajoled her into posing for "scientific life drawings," Holmes claims, again, no physically intimate relationship occurred between them (144). Parks, however, shows *The Venus* engaged in a sexual relationship with The Baron Docteur to whom she supplies aphrodisiacs and fertility aids and for whom she submits to two abortions. Parks also substitutes a love of chocolate for Baartman's alleged alcohol addiction.

the family for which she was a servant girl made arrangements and got permission for her departure (Fausto-Sterling 28; Gould 293).

The fact that debate surrounds Baartman's origins and even her tribal affiliation (Fausto-Sterling 22) is something Parks does not explore in *Venus*; Parks instead remains interested in the degree to which Europeans objectified and sexualized Baartman, a fact that likewise attracts other scholars. Beyond the issue of sexual deviancy attached to the black body at this time in European history, Gould relates how in the *Musée de l'homme*, scientists dissected Baartman and preserved her remains—her genitalia—along with those of *une négresse* and *une péruvienne*, albeit “no brains of woman...nor any male genitalia grace[d] the collection” (292). This gendered inequity and focus on the Hottentot people and on the female body, Gould points out, indicates “a grim fascination [with Baartman], not as a missing link in a later evolutionary sense, but as a creature who straddled that dreaded boundary between human and animal” (294). Indeed, both parts of her stage name underscore issues of humanity and sexuality, and Parks's decision to use *Venus* as her title and “The Venus” next to her protagonist's lines, despite the various characters in the play who call her The Venus Hottentot, ultimately emphasizes that we should recognize the protagonist's elevated status, that we should remember her beauty and humanity (or perhaps divinity), unlike her peers who linked her to beasts and emphasized her racial and ethnic affiliations.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Gould writes “On the racist ladder of human progress, Bushmen and Hottentots vied with Australian aborigines for the lowest rung, just above chimps and orangs. (Some scholars have argued that the earliest designation applied by seventeenth-century Dutch settlers—*Bosmanneken*, or “Bushman”—was a literal translation of a Malay word well known to them—*Orang Outan*, or ‘man of the forest.’)” (294).

Given Parks's use of "Venus" for her title, it is thus ironic that some theater critics view Parks's protagonist as an item, an object, from the outset and, most importantly, complicit in her enslavement. Individuals who see Baartman, as Parks shows her, as participating in her bondage are established theater reviewers like Robert Brustein and Ben Brantley, as well as critic Stephen Lucasi, and to be fair, Parks herself has described *The Venus* as complicit (qtd. in Young 700). Indeed, as depicted in *Venus*, "Little Sarah" was drawn to England with visions and lies of riches, fame, and the opportunity to return home to a life of luxury, and in the course of the play when the English judicial system offered her the opportunity to leave her captors and return home, *The Venus* demurs, not wanting to go back to Africa empty-handed.

Rather than see her as complicit in her servitude however, we must remember Baartman begins the play as a gendered and socially defined serving girl, and not a goddess (not that she is ever truly treated with reverence). Her socioeconomic condition drives her actions; as Young and Osha maintain, we must see naiveté, shyness, poverty, and the sociopolitical moment as dictating Baartman's decisions. Moreover, if we reframe this debate about complicity and historical accuracy and remember that Parks is first and foremost an artist, it becomes easier to recognize that Parks's focus is not just on the historical Venus but the society that surrounds her then and now.

Whether Baartman was a real person or invented character, the crimes committed against her in real life and in the play remain undoubtedly disturbing, and the fact that whites brought Baartman to London under dubious circumstances (if not illegally, then without fully appraising her of their plan), put her on display, used her for economic gain



and to further their careers, and kept her, as Parks shows, in horrible conditions speaks directly to issues of slavery, identity, and diaspora.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, identity and naming highlight the issues of agency and autonomy in Parks's text, which, after all, is her own construction as is her protagonist. Parks did not choose to write a biography, nor did she call or subtitle her play *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*, as did documentary filmmaker Zola Maseko. As I noted earlier, Parks also did not call the play or her character "The Hottentot Venus" as Baartman was known. The work's title is simply *Venus*, and the protagonist's lines simply get attributed to "The Venus." Indeed to highlight the way her protagonist gets objectified, in the cast list Parks identifies her character as "Miss Saartjie Baartman, a.k.a. The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot." The Overture subsequently identifies her as "The Venus Hottentot," and the first "formal" scene then uses "The Girl" before her lines. Indeed, it is only in the first scene that characters address Baartman as "Saartjie" and "Little Sarah," and this occurs a mere two times (31.13); by the fifth scene characters identify and address her consistently as "The Venus Hottentot," but Parks continues to ascribe her lines of dialogue to just "The Venus," an entity worthy of respect and reverence, by using the definite article and dropping "Hottentot" as a modifier.

Throughout *Venus*, Parks continues to emphasize the ways in which society objectified Baartman and robbed her of her chosen identity.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, viewed as an item and object to be controlled from the get-go, Parks's serving-girl protagonist enters

<sup>94</sup> Parks is not alone in drawing inspiration from Baartman's situation—she has been the subject of prose pieces and poems, as well as nonfiction works.

<sup>95</sup> Gregg Miller cogently notes that Parks herself never attributes any of her protagonist's lines in a tag in the margin to "Saartjie Baartman" (125).

England as a moneymaking scheme financed by The Man and orchestrated by The Mans Brother, who takes advantage of her sexually. The brother subsequently sells her to the The Mother-Showman, who, in turn, features Baartman as The Venus Hottentot in her traveling circus/freak show complete with Siamese twins, a fire-eater, and a Cyclops. Ultimately, The Baron Docteur purchases the title character from The Mother-Showman and forces The Venus into another form of servitude. She becomes the object of his and the scientific community's studies, and she is kept as his mistress, "kept" being the operative word. Although he regularly presents her for scholarly study at the Academy, The Venus complains that they always dine in and that when they do go out, it is within a closed carriage (9.126). Indeed throughout the play, Parks shows others as systematically and literally controlling and manipulating The Venus's movements. The first line the brothers speak to her exhorts her to reclean the floor (31.11). Soon thereafter, they demand that she dance (31.13-14), a command that tellingly occurs before she even knows of their plan to exhibit her as a source of entertainment for European crowds. The Mother-Showman likewise forces her to dance (24.44), as well as resorts to kicking her (24.45), as a means of enlivening her performance. Furthermore, Parks depicts her protagonist as being in a cage while in The Mother-Showman's keep (21.61), and at the play's end when her lover leaves her in the cold—clapped in the clap allegedly with the clap—for twenty-three days to die (Overture.3), The Venus remains "chained like a dog" (7.146). Additionally, during the scenes involving her trial in England, Parks describes court officials as keeping her separate from the proceedings, placed in a jail cell at one time (20C.65) and a cage at another (20I.74).

Besides curtailing her physical movement through cages and chains, and thereby highlighting The Venus's physical bondage, Parks show that The Venus is deprived of the earnings of her labor (*Venus* 25.40-41); that her contract of indenture does not exist and will result in a perpetual state of servitude, a fact that members of The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders immediately recognize but choose not to tell her (30.19-21); and that, as a slave, she lacks control over her own body. Reducing her to a sexual object, audiences both popular (20F.69) and academic (7.137) grope, poke, and manhandle The Venus, as do the men who control her destiny, notably The Baron Docteur (14.101) and The Mans Brother (30.23).<sup>96</sup> Though a woman, The Mother-Showman even threatens her with rape:

Next doors a smoky pub  
full of drunken men.  
I just may invite them in  
one at a time  
and let them fuck yr brains out. (22.56)

Beyond her sexual exploitation—which is also evidenced by the scientists who masturbate behind her back when they are studying her at the academy (14.106 and 12.119) and by the angry widow who links her husband's death to merely seeing The Venus (20F.68-69)—Parks's protagonist is denied basic comforts. Although The Mother-Showman is the one denying The Venus of these basics, she is shocked at the state of The Venus's cage—as if cleanliness or sartorial modesty were within The Venus's control given the lack of freedoms, money, and comforts allotted her:

Hup Ho, Girl! Come on!

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<sup>96</sup> Kornweibel classifies the umbrellas, canes, and fingers with which she is prodded as phallic symbols (74).

We got a crowd out there....  
 Theyre fresh from the pubs and I hate to say it  
 but the stench of liquor on their collective breaths....  
 is only matched by  
 the stench of yr shit in this pen, Girl! Jesus!....  
 Jesus! *Yr an animal!* (17.89)

Indeed The Venus was treated, like most slaves, no better than an animal.

The courtroom scene in particular focuses on the degree to which people kept The Venus in a state of secondary citizenship. Central to her case are whether others kept her against her will and whether she committed acts of indecency, as if once again her lack of clothes, her costume, and her dwelling were of her choosing. The court scene, too, points to the lack of freedoms accorded her. Throughout this extended scene, characters routinely use the phrase Habeas Corpus (i.e., “that you have the body”), and Parks uses this phrase ironically as a means of highlighting the freedom the other characters have over their bodies, a freedom The Venus lacks.<sup>97</sup> For example, although The Baron Docteur, The Mother-Showman, and various English citizens refuse to present themselves, the court permits this behavior, yet when The Venus tries this same tactic, claiming, like the others, that she “is unavailable for comment” (20I.74), The Chorus of the Court vehemently objects. Instead of helping her, the court ignores that The Venus is a slave even though England had abolished the slave trade three years prior, a detail of

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<sup>97</sup> Holmes writes that in England “[t]he writ of habeas corpus (‘that you have the body’) is a process for securing the liberty of the subject by affording an effective means of release from unlawful or unjustifiable detention whether in prison or in private custody. It is a prerogative writ by which the Sovereign has a right to inquire into the causes for which any of her subjects are deprived of their liberty. By it the High Court and the judges of that court, at the instance of the subject aggrieved, command the production of that subject, and inquire into the cause of his imprisonment. If there is no legal justification for the detention, the party is ordered to be released” (208).

which *The Negro Resurrectionist* reminds Parks's audiences (20.77). In fact, The Chorus of the Court ultimately turns a blind eye to The Venus's predicament and instead congratulates itself that "it is very much to the credit of our great country / that even a female Hottentot can find a court to review her status" (20J.78). Parks underscores the irony of this statement with the riotous stream of laughter in which the members of the court then engage. Consider, too, that when The Venus joins The Mother-Showman's troupe and becomes its biggest draw, beyond being deprived of all the money due her, she still literally does not count. While The Mother-Showman recognizes her as "Wonder Number Nine," she shrewdly hawks The Venus as a separate attraction; The Venus is not included in the regular admission price (27.35).

As a further means of highlighting the degree to which The Venus is kept in servitude, Parks specifies doubling among the actors and has two characters, played by the same performer, engaging in similarly disturbing behaviors. One of the most interesting acts of doubling involves the actors who fill the roles of those who initially scheme about the young Saartjie Baartman. These conspirators are known merely as The Man and The Mans Brother. The former, who agrees to provide the financial support for his sibling's get-rich-quick scheme, also ends up playing the role of The Baron Docteur, the individual who, despite his declarations of love to The Venus, keeps her confined; displays her before his medical colleagues (Parks, *Venus* 12.112-120); and lies about his ultimate intentions, telling her, for example, that maceration means "after lunch" (7.139). He also forces her to have two abortions (9.129 and 7.138) and ultimately hastens her death out of fear that another scientist is closer to publishing his findings about the

Hottentots (7.142-44). Likewise, the actor performing The Mans Brother also plays the role of The Mother-Showman, as well as the part of The Grade-School Chum. As with the linked characters of The Man and The Baron Docteur, Parks unifies the roles of The Mans Brother, The Mother-Showman, and The Grade-School Chum through the actor who plays them and by their various betrayals of The Venus. Additionally, The Mother-Showman shows the degree to which sex and gender cut across race lines; whites, whether male or female, betray Parks's protagonist. Even the linking of both sexes in The Mother-Showman's name, "mother" and "man," points to this fact. All of these details ultimately help refute critics who lament that The Venus is complicit in her enslavement.

In terms of content and structure, these literary moves also continue to reiterate that *Venus* is the work of a playwright, that *Venus* is ultimately a fictionalized story and not necessarily Baartman's. Used to promote the idea of the alleged racial superiority of European peoples, Baartman was subjected to biological study during her life, and this dis(re)memberment of The Venus, as a fictional being and historical person, continued even beyond her death. As I noted earlier, her body became the property of France, and she became known as Case Exhibit #33 in the *Musée de l'homme* after scientists made a wax mold of her body and dismembered her corpse. The latter details, however, escape Parks's plot. Instead, she focuses on The Baron Docteur's claims that she died of drink even when The Negro Resurrectionist counters it was exposure (Overture.3)—exposure to the weather and, I would add, to European culture. Parks's focus thus is not on accuracy, but creating a story of modern-day slavery and subjugation based on past events: *Venus* is a fictional work, drawn and drawing from life, that is meant to unsettle

audiences and recognize the ways in which individuals continue to manipulate and enslave others. The dismembering of the The Venus's "tail" and tale, in "real" life and in Parks's version, illuminates the lack of control all humans ultimately have over their bodies and reputations.

***The America Play—A Play on America and the Knowing of the Traumatic Past***

A two-act play created from 1990 to 1993, *The America Play* mainly concerns three characters: one called "The Foundling Father, as Abraham Lincoln," a former gravedigger with an uncanny resemblance to Lincoln; the Foundling Father's wife, Lucy; and his son, Brazil. The first act of the play, the "Lincoln Act," focuses entirely on The Foundling Father, who stands before a "*hole that is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History*" (1.159). Speaking primarily in third person, but occasionally lapsing into the first, he tells of his beginnings and of how he came to his career as a Lincoln impersonator. After visiting a theme park dedicated to American history on his honeymoon, The Foundling Father—or the Lesser Man as he sometimes calls himself, the Great Man being Lincoln—eventually left his family with the idea of starting his own history-focused tourist attraction. As he traveled westward and people continued to note his resemblance to America's sixteenth president, he began performing as Lincoln. (He started by giving speeches; he moved on to allowing audiences to throw food at him during his recitations; and then he ended, like the character named Lincoln in *Topdog/Underdog*, by charging people to assume the role of John Wilkes Booth and shoot him.) The first act of *The America Play* relates The Foundling Father's successes,

the way in which he modifies his Lincoln routine, and his attempt to recreate another Hole of/in History, an enterprise that combines his skills as a gravedigger and his love of the past.

The second act of *The America Play*, which is subdivided into several scenes, focuses on Lucy and Brazil. Like their husband/father introduced in the first act, they are in “an exact replica of *The Great Hole of History*” (Parks 2.174), but Lucy and Brazil devote their time to searching through the hole for The Foundling Father’s remains; they want to give him a proper burial, for their work is, like The Foundling Father’s, tied to death and mourning: Lucy is a confidence woman, in that she hears the confessions (i.e., the confidences) of those near death, and Brazil is a professional mourner. Interspersed among their work and conversations are excerpts in which The Foundling Father appears. Sometimes he is playing parts from Tom Taylor’s *Our American Cousin*, the play Abraham Lincoln saw on the night he was killed; at other times he is stepping into his role as the “lesser Lincoln.” In the final scene, Lucy and Brazil unearth a television set on which they view one of The Foundling Father’s performances, but in a moment of theater magic, he also appears on the stage with them. A tenuous reunion takes place as The Foundling Father, simultaneously dead and alive, re-enacts his performance for his son and also inspects his own coffin. The play closes with Brazil speaking in a moment of ambiguity in a play filled with ambiguity: perhaps he is welcoming guests to his father’s memorial service; perhaps he has lapsed into the future and is acting as a docent interacting with tourists and showing off the historical artifacts he and his mother have unearthed in their makeshift Hole of History, the newest being The Foundling Father.



A most unconventional work, *The America Play* “is a *play about* America, [but] it also brazenly *plays with* ideas of America” (Saal 63) as well as ideas about plot, dramatic convention, and history as a whole. Like *Topdog/Underdog* and *Venus*, as another drama about the generational effects of slavery, *The America Play* largely circulates around the unraveling of interpersonal ties. Central to the story is the fact that The Foundling Father abandoned Lucy and Brazil, when the latter was only five years old. Although mother and child have been actively searching for their lost loved one, when they do find him, it is obvious they still feel and resent his absence. Like The Venus asking her audience to kiss her, The Foundling Father requests that his loved ones hug him, a request they never fulfill (Parks, *The America Play* 2.G.196-97). Moreover, like *Venus* and *Topdog/Underdog*, *The America Play* becomes a meditation on history and the historical record. In these works, Parks shows how the reclaiming of history (represented by The Great Hole of History as well as by The Foundling Father) itself has the potential to be traumatizing. As explained in Shoshana Felman’s narrative about teaching about the Holocaust in a graduate seminar, the claiming of past experience, particularly traumatizing events, can cause a cognitive and/or emotional reliving of the facts in question. As a result, facing the past involves a conscious reconsideration and narrative reordering of events. History becomes a perpetual reordering and reorienting as new events and competing perspectives come to light (or as society allows them to do so). If, as Parks intimates, history is a hole, history as a whole is full of gaps and breaks—it requires a constant filling in of information, much as trauma is represented by breaks, gaps, and narrative disruptions that need to be filled in to create “smooth” narratives.

Moreover, if history is traumatizing, history as a whole is never something from which we can heal or escape. It itself has the potential to be (a) never-ending (source of) trauma.

### **Trauma, Repetition, Revision, and History**

*The America Play*'s use of echoes stands as a marker of diaspora and historical trauma, of trauma that continues to be repeated. Thus, three of the seven scenes in the second act are titled "Echo." Scene B provides an excerpt from Act III, Scene 5, of *Our American Cousin*; Scene D provides another excerpt from the latter, with The Foundling Father assuming the role of one character from Taylor's comedy, before he begins re-enacting one of his performances as Lincoln in a town named Snyder; and Scene F is composed of a single stage direction: "*A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes*" (Parks, *The America Play* 194). This particular line itself is an exact repetition of the first words in Act II (174), which itself is a variation of the last words of Act I (i.e., "*A gunshot echoes. Softly. And echoes*" [173]).<sup>98</sup> Other repetitions abound. The Foundling Father repeatedly offers "[a] wink to Mr. Lincoln's pasteboard cutout" (1.160, 1.162, 1.171-72) or nods to the bust of Mr. Lincoln (1.161, 1.166, 1.170-72), he regularly "*slumps in his chair*" after being shot (1.164-65, 1.167, 1.169-71, 2.G.198), and he often repeats bits from his performances.<sup>99</sup> Besides the literal echoes that permeate the text, repetition dominates this particular play in other ways. One obvious example is The Great Hole of History itself and The Foundling Father's replica of it. Brazil claims that The Great Hole

<sup>98</sup> The line "*A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes*" actually appears throughout the play (2.A.174, 2.A.175, 2.A.177, 2.A.180, 2.G.198).

<sup>99</sup> The phrase "*slumps in his chair*" itself always appears in quotes in the text, and we can view this as Parks highlighting this idea of the exact (mimetic) replication of trauma.

holds daily parades (*à la* Disneyland) and has exhibits that feature “great” figures from American history, such as Presidents Washington, Lincoln, Fillmore, Jefferson, and Harding; Amerigo Verspucci, Columbus and his backers, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain; and Marcus Garvey. (Parks humorously throws Mary Queen of Scots and Tarzan [2.A.179-80] into the mix as well.) There is also the handing down of professions—Brazil is not only in the funeral business as a wailer and gnasher, but now he is practicing his father’s work as a gravedigger.

These repetitions acknowledge the viewpoint of trauma scholars who claim that trauma is never mimetic—it can never be mimetic if an individual has yet to fully know an event; it is thus never a faithful replication. As a result, not only is The Foundling Father the lesser man, the use of the comparative places him against the great Abraham Lincoln, and everything he does surrounds an altered repetition. It is also for this reason that Lucy has to correct her son, telling him to “keep [it] to scale” (Parks, *The America Play* 2.A.180), when he begins to exaggerate: he claims that the historical figures he mentions—the real people rather than costumed impersonators—are actually present at The Great Hole of History. In a particularly insightful move that reminds audiences of the inherent differences between traumatic negotiations—that they evolve over time and may never be exact and faithful renderings of the initial event—when listing exhibits in The Great Hole of History, Parks has Brazil rattle off the names of some of America’s presidents in one breath, without commas (i.e., “Washington Jefferson Harding” [2.A.180]) as if they were one person, to say nothing of the altered history he offers by omitting the presidents who came before and after Jefferson. The blonde beard and

various hats that The Foundling Father wears in his Lincoln performances, all historical inaccuracies, point to another altered repetition.<sup>100</sup> The above references to The Foundling Father's interaction with Lincoln's bust also fit into this schemata: sometimes the line is "A nod to the bust of Mr. Lincoln" (1.161, 1.170); sometimes it is "A nod to Mr. Lincolns bust" (1.166, 1.171); and sometimes it is "A nod to the Great Mans bust" (1.172). All these examples reinforce that the play is itself about modified repetition. Indeed the first lines of dialogue in *The America Play* are examples of and explicitly point to the concept of "chiasmus" (1.159), which is the syntactical inversion of "parallel phrases" ("Chiasmus").

Through this focus on inversion, repetition, and parallelism, and the presence of the historical past in the present, Parks shows how the effects of slavery and diaspora persist, that they are indeed both historical and contemporary events. They remain parts of our ongoing national story. However, these repetitions must be read symbolically; they are never exact duplications, but modified versions of an initial traumatizing event. The Foundling Father imitates Lincoln and the attraction known as The Great Hole of History, and just as the trauma of history has been revised, so too must its healing if that is even possible. New solutions must be found, solutions that apply specifically to the revised traumatic event, and we can see Brazil conforming to this truth. He follows in his father's trade, the funeral business, albeit with his own spin on it: he is a mourner as well as a digger. Moreover, he works to create his own Hole of History. It is built upon his dad's, but becomes Brazil's own version of it, Brazil never having visited the attraction himself.

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<sup>100</sup> These inaccuracies also point to the fact that history is full of holes.

Thus although his situation supports the concept that generational trauma can be handed down, the suffering and the trauma are new, different, unique. After all, if The Foundling Father is mourning the loss of “A. Lincoln,” his son is mourning the loss of “a Lincoln” and his response to this loss must, by extension, change and be altered. Furthermore, as historical followers of A. Lincoln and a Lincoln, modern-day Americans also share in the knowledge of The Foundling Father’s suffering and participate in it, as well as that of Lucy and Brazil, in a different way. Modern audiences also face historical holes and gaps that must be filled, but unfortunately learning more about the past may lead to the unearthing of new holes and contradictory pieces of information that also have the potential to be traumatizing.

To highlight this personal-national loss, give it veracity, and point to the ways in which historical and generational trauma becomes altered and revised, Parks plays with the ways in which history gets documented, particularly through the use of footnotes in *The America Play*. The footnotes show how academia can perpetuate the trauma of racism even when it attempts to force individuals to confront it. Indeed, throughout the play, Park is appropriating the ways of academia; however, because she constantly undermines its methods, she highlights for twentieth-century audiences the distinction between knowing, experiencing, and rewriting trauma. She achieves this first by never fully nor formally documenting her work. Although she incorporates footnotes, she provides no formal bibliography. More importantly, a bibliography remains an impossibility because some of the ideas she references do not exist. Consider, in Act I, the “Lincoln Act,” where The Foundling Father upsets accepted linear ideas of history by

questioning the accuracy of historical narrative. The Foundling Father discusses people's love for Lincoln in his stovepipe hat and their desire to see him wearing it even when he was indoors, but he questions whether Lincoln ever flaunted this social custom. He, however, perpetuates this misrepresentation because it is "good for business" (Parks, *The America Play* 1.168). Additionally, The Foundling Father proposes the idea of a blonde Lincoln and defends this idea by citing the line "'The sun on his fair hair looked like the sun itself.'<sup>11</sup>" (1.168). This play on words specifically highlights the problems of knowing. The use of the homophone pair sun-son in a play about founding fathers, absent fathers, and father-son relationships throws the idea of meaning into question particularly for viewing audiences who only hear the text. Because her focus is on how textual meaning gets generated, Parks reminds us of the orality of drama and thus of the need to study trauma textually in the literature classroom. Confusion also arises from the predicate "looked like the sun itself"; this construction points to the ideas of similarity but leaves room for difference (the light after all merely *resembles* the sun). Beyond these tensions, for readers of her work Parks undercuts all attempts at knowing, questioning whether events are indeed knowable, through the attached footnote that states that this reference is "[f]rom 'The Sun,' a composition by The Foundling Father, unpublished" (1.168). In other words, the substantiating source itself does not exist or at least does not exist as a real, credible document. In this way, Parks demonstrates that American history, as narrative, is itself largely a series of assertions and performances of reclaimed experiences and traumas (involving loss, slavery, racism, segregation, and the horrors of

diaspora), and as such, history has the potential to be invented and continually reinvented just as dramas continue to be recreated with each performance.

Indeed, a few lines later in *The America Play*, Parks shows this process of traumatic (re)invention literally in process when she describes First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln's reaction to her husband's shooting. The author writes, "On that sad night she begged her servant: 'Bring in Taddy, Father will speak to Taddy.'<sup>12</sup> But Father died instead unconscious" (1.168). Although Parks presents this detail in the past tense, she undercuts this information by writing in Footnote 12: "Mary Todd Lincoln, wanting her husband to speak to their son Tad, *might* have said this that night" (1.168; emphasis added). Similarly, Parks notes that "'*Emergency* oh, *Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground'" could "[p]ossibly [be] the last words of Mary Todd Lincoln after the death of her husband" (1.160). Through the conditional tense and this focus on possibility, Parks works again to disorient the members of her reading audience and deprive her viewing audiences of the full story, creating a situation where lack of knowledge—gaps in the narrative—perpetuates large-scale communal loss that mirrors that of her individual characters. She further accentuates this disorientation and gaps in the historical record (i.e., knowledge) by including lines she says that scholars have attributed to historical figures but have not verified, such as John Wilkes Booth screaming "The South has been avenged!" and "Thus to the tyrants" upon fleeing the stage of the Ford Theater (1.165). Parks creates a diasporic borderland, a contact zone, of trauma, where the past (and its traumas) butt up against the present. She actively questions the idea of claimed experience by questioning whether our collective

knowledge (i.e., narrative) of America's collective past is, or can ever be, accurate, pure, or true.

In this way Parks highlights the impossibility of knowing the past and hints that (re)inventing the past may be the only way to experience and triumph over it. As Parks reminds readers in her essay "an Equation for Black People Onstage,"

For the Black writer, are there Dramas other than race dramas? Does Black life consist of issues other than race issues?

And gee, there's another thing: there is no such thing as THE Black Experience; that is, there are many experiences of being Black which are included under the rubric. Just think of all the different kinds of African peoples. (*The America Play and Other Works* 21)

This line of thought raises interesting questions for students of trauma and diaspora. Although it recognizes that trauma can be culturally specific, that it is socially negotiated, that what is traumatic for one individual may have a different effect on another person, and that trauma is repeated, Parks questions whether merely reading about trauma can elicit traumatic transference. She questions whether there is one traumatic experience for people of African descent (and other minorities) within the United States as well as for America as a whole. Thus, rather than rely on audience members engaging in feelings of collective empathy and sympathy, her plays strive to demonstrate how the members of her theater audiences can be traumatized collectively, as well as made to experience trauma individually, as either its agents or objects.

Parks thus asserts in *The America Play*, as well as in *Topdog/Underdog* and *Venus*, the impossibility of healing from trauma and that generational traumas in particular are never ending because they can never be known fully. Some vestiges of trauma will resonate and differ from group to group and from person to person, hence all



the echoes that pervade these three plays by Parks. As Booth says in *Topdog/Underdog*, “People like they historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming” (3.50). However the choices regarding trauma and history are not always up to the individual’s discretion; just as nations mourn the loss of their citizens and the effects of historical sufferings, the solutions to such losses are ever in flux as revised trauma and suffering get headed down from generation to generation in ways that are “raggedy and bloody and screaming.” Healing is not a “complete” solution as it does not provide a return to wholeness because wholeness itself is a myth. Moreover, this hope for erasure may only apply to traumas felt by individuals that result from a specific event or loss, such as in response to a natural disaster, a near-death experience, or the death of another. When the trauma stems from cumulative hardships, the lived effects of this trauma may change—in terms of the nature of the suffering and proposed solutions to it—but will never disappear. The solutions to such sufferings may be nonexistent because conditions of cumulative hardship can continue and evolve whereas singular events cannot. Comments Parks has made regarding her storytelling style, which she calls Rep & Rev (or repetition and revision), shed light on this idea of repetition, change, and transformation. In her essay “from Elements of Style,” which appears in *The America Play and Other Works*, she asserts, “it’s not just repetition, but repetition with *revision*. And in drama [...] change, revision is the thing. Characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew” (9). Moreover in the margins of the text, she notes “*Rep & Rev are key in examining something larger than the moment*” (9), that

larger entity in *The America Play*—as well as *Topdog/Underdog* and *Venus*—being the socioeconomic legacy of slavery and diaspora.

### **Audience as Agent and Object of Trauma: Destabilizing Distance**

Through her focus on bondage and the effects of racism in all three of her plays under consideration, Parks strives to dramatize the tension between appearance and reality, traumatic past and present, and agency and passivity by blurring boundaries and working to disorient audiences through a destabilization of the fourth wall. By doing so, Parks asks audiences to reconsider, in the parlance of Judith Lewis Herman, whether bystanders must side with either the perpetrator or victim of man-made trauma. Instead, Parks shows how they can—and at times do—play the role of both perpetrator *and* victim.

The most obvious example of this in *Topdog/Underdog* appears in the monologues where Lincoln and Booth practice their patter. Consider this scene, from the play's opening lines:

Watch me close watch me close now: 3-Card-throws-thuh-cards-lightning-fast. 3-Card-thats-me-and-Ima-last. Watch-me-throw-cause-here-I-go. One-good-pickll-get-you-in, 2-good-picks-and-you-gone-win. See-thuh-red-card-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-thuh-red-card?

(*Rest*)

Dont touch my cards, man, just point to thuh one you want. You-pick-that-card-you pick-a-loser, yeah-that-cards-a-loser. You-pick-that-card-thats-thuh-other-loser. You-pick-that-card-you-pick-a-winner. Follow that card. You gotta chase that card. You-pick-thuh-dark-deuce-thats-a-loser-other-dark-deuces-thuh-other-loser, red-deuce, thuh-deuce-of-heartsll-win-it-all. Follow thuh red card. (Parks 1.5-6)

Here, Booth is practicing his speech, and he seems to be in control of the situation. Booth's use of rhyme conveys a sense of mastery in the opening lines, and each clause offers new information. However, as we can see from other speeches that he gives, his delivery changes. As Elizabeth Pochoda claims, Booth's patter deteriorates as the play continues, showing his slowly evolving mental breakdown. Parks's use of hyphens in Booth's later speeches shows this unravelling in particular. For example, compare the earlier speech of Booth, which Parks characterizes as "studied and awkward" (1.5), to this later one:

Watch-me-close-watch-me-close-now: who-see-thuh-dark-card-who-see-thuh-dark-card? I-see-thuh-dark-card. Here-it-is. Thuh-dark-card-is-thuh-winner. Pick-thuh-dark-card-and-you-pick-uh-winner. Pick-uh-red-card-and-you-pick-uh-loser. Theres-thuh-loser-yeah-theres-thuh-red-card, there's-thuh-other-loser-and theres-thuh-black-card, thuh-winner. Watch-me-close-watch-me-close-now: 3-Card-throws-thuh-cards-lightning-fast. 3-Card-that's-me-and-Ima-last. Watch-me-throw-cause-here-I-go. See thuh black card? Yeah? Who see I see you see thuh black card? (5.79)

The almost complete reliance on hyphens conveys a greater sense of disruption, alienation, fragmentation, and isolation on Booth's part. Moreover, although both passages incorporate rhyme and repetition, the repetition and delayed rhyme work to slow down his second speech. Although this patter is something with which he is familiar, it becomes obvious it is not something he has mastered as a narrative. He must continue to practice it. An even more telling comparison is of Booth's patter to Lincoln's later in the play (4.56-57), which Parks renders as smoothly fluid (and free of hyphens) and describes as "deft, dangerous, electric" (4.55).

When audiences focus on these speeches as markers of character development or a device used to show contrasts between the two brothers, which is how critics often read

them, they ignore the fact that we can see Parks as using these monologues to engage audiences in yet another way: they become an attempt to destabilize the fourth wall. Rather than officially break the fourth wall and have a character formally address the audience, Parks unsettles her audiences by maintaining the appearance of this barrier. The passages devoted to the patter explicitly force audience members to become part of the play. They literally stand as Lincoln and Booth's imagined audience, as opposed to merely Parks's. As such, audience members become part of the game/scam. Thus, these monologues cannot merely be dismissed as the interior thoughts of a character (like a suicidal Prince Hamlet).

Obviously many contemporary authors use monologues and the second person to make the audience a silenced partner in a conversation and thus participants in the play; audiences thus become a justification for the play itself. Consider, for example, Margaret Edson's *W;t*, where protagonist Vivian Bearing relates her cancer treatments and reveals the subsequent softening of her personality to the audience; Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, where Tom Wingfield explains his role as our narrator; or even Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, in which The Stage Manager not only talks to audiences, but Wilder plants actors in the theater seats to ask questions about Grover's Corners (1.21-26). None of these breaks in the fourth wall, even when they involve a philosophizing predator in Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, is a particularly radical move theatrically. However, for Parks, the presence of silenced audiences in *Topdog/Underdog*, *Venus*, and *The America Play* works differently.

Although the broken wall is meant to engage audiences psychically, audiences become more than potential conversationlists in Parks's work. Audiences of *Topdog/Underdog* become identified (and traumatized) as the mark in the game; they become members of the charade and are embedded as performers within the performance and the traumas of both the past and present. Per Lincoln in *Topdog/Underdog*, there is an entire crew linked to the performance of three-card monte, and we must consider the marks as an extension of the crew for they too create the performance. Even though the marks in the game know that the exercise is a scam, they believe they can beat it, and as such they become willing participants in and perpetrators of the hustle. They inhabit this dual world of belonging to (i.e., being part of) the scam and not actually belonging to it (i.e., being part of the crew that runs the scam); they are both in and outside of the action. Thus, Parks's audiences, beyond the normal duality of any staged performance featuring a break in the fourth wall, are observers and participants in the scam and the larger play in which it appears. Because they too hear the patter throughout the play, they remain part of the crew, the hustle, the suffering. They are silent observers, but also active participants, and it is this connection between observer, participant, and actor that is so central, as Herman notes, to trauma. I do not mean to suggest that traumatized individuals cause their trauma, but we must acknowledge that beyond bystanders aligning themselves with either victims or perpetrators, this state of belonging and not belonging is something traumatized people and many people of diaspora, especially descendants of diasporized peoples, experience. They too exist in this dual state of belonging and not belonging, being exiled from both hostland and homeland because they are unwelcome in both

places, and in the case of descendants of diasporized people, a hostile hostland is often itself their homeland, their birthplace. Thus, returning to a place to which they never belonged is an impossibility because they have never been elsewhere. Whether returning is an impossibility or not, choosing not to return to the homeland of their ancestors becomes an act in and of itself, an act without action, just as a relived moment of trauma occurs and does not occur. The individual, whether a member of diaspora or a descendant of a diasporized people, remains isolated, caught in metaphorical no man's land.

The connections among trauma, embedded participants and performances, and the fourth wall are also present in *The America Play* and again have the effect of including and isolating audiences, making them active but alienated participants in the play's action. Because Parks embeds the speeches that The Foundling Father regularly performs within the play, we become viewers of these performances that led to his success and linked to the first viewers of his first performances. Not only do we experience his history, but we also hear his rationale for playing Lincoln in the manner he chose for his first audiences. We see him in character, supposedly laughing at the performance of the nineteenth-century actress Laura Keene and then dying after being shot. We witness him responding to his regular customers (1.165), refusing to converse with newcomers (1.169), and explaining these inconsistencies in behavior such that modern-day audiences pivot between knowing and experiencing, between knowing and not knowing their status and role in the events playing out before them. They enter into a state of belonging and not belonging, much like The Foundling Father does when he tells his story in the third person but lapses at times into the first (1.162, 1.166, 1.168). Moreover, because he does

address us, his modern audiences, just as he does the ones who contributed to his first successes, Parks implies we too are responsible for his success—and demise. We become on some level the regulars to whom he deigns to talk; thus audiences traverse time and history, just as The Foundling Father does, just as the sufferer of trauma does. We become the agent, object, and observer of his trauma, and as such, we have the opportunity (if willing) to realize the degree to which we are implicated in his trauma and the traumas of others, particularly man-made traumas, even if we are not directly involved in the initial traumatizing event.

Another point to consider regarding the transferability of liminality and trauma is that although The Foundling Father speaks of loss, he does not necessarily experience or engage with feelings of loss or the disorientation that accompanies it. As I noted in the prior paragraph, he tells his tale objectively for the most part in the third person as a distanced observer. However, Lucy and Brazil obviously do feel loss as they mourn The Foundling Father's absence, a situation in which Parks's audience are similarly placed when Act II begins. Parks's audiences become, like Brazil, children of this found(l)ing father and, like Lucy, the wife of this missing husband. Even if they do not experience hurt, estrangement, or isolation, at the very least they also become separated from the character who dominated the first act. As such, if, given its title, *The America Play* is specifically a national text, then its national reading audience of Americans, as followers of Abraham Lincoln, also suffers at the absence of this lesser man known as The Foundling Father and that of his great predecessor, both of their deaths becoming defining moments in Americans' history and knowledge of America and *The America*

*Play*. It is, after all, imperative to note that Parks does not dwell on Lincoln's accomplishments or faults (in either *Topdog/Underdog* or *The America Play*). Beyond the occasional reference to the phrase "death to tyrants," Parks's focus is on the *idea* of Lincoln, the myth of Lincoln as a forefather, and thus the idea and myth of America. Her focus is not on Lincoln's accomplishments nor the merits of his presidency; the title after all is not *The Lincoln Play* but *The America Play*. Instead as members of a suffering nation, as children abandoned by and suffering from the absence of a father or husband figure, as victims of a historical, foundational loss, Parks's American audiences are left, like Brazil, to wail and gnash their teeth over their separation from this particular version of "A. Lincoln." They are left to become, like Lucy, the holder of this impostor's confidences, or at least those he imparted in Act I. America becomes a potential site and source of trauma, where individuals relive the imagined (i.e., performed) trauma as perpetrator *and* victim because Parks, the conventions of theater, and time itself deprive audiences of the ability to engage fully with the past. The past itself becomes a trauma, and trauma becomes a performance in which we are continually engaged, participating, remembering, witnessing, and questioning. If we choose, it is a performance, as well as an experience, that can be shifted, shaped, and reshaped through its reliving.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Again, these details reiterate that trauma always involves history, the present, and the future; Lee's reminder about the assassination of The Foundling Father also supports this. She points out that one of the characters who assumes the role of John Wilkes Booth in *The America Play* reorders historical events, intimating that the freeing of slaves followed Lincoln's assassination and that Lincoln's shooting and emancipation both created holes—black holes—in American history: "This moment in the play thus collapses time and implies that both progress toward, and obstruction of, equality and justice was *traumatic* for America" (12, emphasis added).



If trauma is forever changing, perhaps this explains why Parks's plays end on such notes of despair. Resolution is the goal, but because the trauma is ever in flux, the individual finds himself never returning to a state of wholeness and forever in the process of diminishment. Consider, for example, the focus on names and naming in *The America Play*. The Foundling Father, as the Lesser Man, is always less and always diminished. As his name implies, there is no return to equality or balance—because, to reference *The Crucible*'s John Proctor, “it is [his] name! Because [he] cannot [and does not] have another” (Miller 4.133). Suffering and trauma in this way become permanent states of exile, difference, and less-ness just as in *Topdog/Underdog* Lincoln and Booth are doomed to repeat their predecessors' actions. In the latter work, the character Lincoln, like the sixteenth president, is shot from behind at point blank range (Parks 6.108), and like their parents, the brothers separate themselves from family members; Booth even talks of leaving his own children once he has them (5.68) Additionally, in *The America Play*, “foundling” as an adjective places the lesser Lincoln in a state of permanent exile and dispossession that he passes on to his wife. At no time in the play is he, as Lucy or Brazil are, given a proper name. He is always referred to as The Foundling Father even before he has a child. Similarly, even once he is a father, he remains forever defined and identified by his orphaned status. Like the traumatized individual who never identifies himself otherwise, he lives both in the past and present; he parallels the bystander of trauma who can be both victim and perpetrator.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> We may also see him as representing the idea that individuals never fully recover from trauma.

Yet, another play on words surrounds The Foundling Father's name and points to an ongoing reevaluation of his role and status in the world. As an Abraham Lincoln impersonator, The Foundling Father represents and re-presents this American forefather. However, as Brazil shows and critic Deborah Geis argues (108), "forefather" can also be pronounced, dialectically, as foe-father and faux-father. In both variations of forefather, Parks introduces that tension of outright antagonism, fraudulent identity, and concerned parent. Because this tension also gets linked to history, through the reference to Abraham Lincoln, *The Great Hole of History*, and *The Foundling Father's* lesser imitation of that Great Hole, which is, per Brazil, full of faux-artifacts, Parks again connects American history and knowledge (and Americans' history and knowledge) to trauma and the concepts of repetition, imitation, and performance. Trauma, history, and knowledge thus are not about claiming the past but (re)experiencing it in an altered vein. These ideas also apply to Lucy and Brazil and their situation. Though digging in the present, they are very much consumed with and by the past. As a result, they are simultaneously objects filled with loss and agents who perpetuate their devotion to that same loss. They are (in the words of Dominick LaCapra) not moving through grief but mired in it. Taken collectively then, loss traumatizes and defines *The Foundling Father*, Lucy, and Brazil, and the larger event that ultimately instigates this loss is history itself, represented by the Great Man, Abraham Lincoln, as well as the (w)hole of American history. This scenario of loss likewise applies to Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* in that the characters in this play are doomed to abandonment caused by their parents and seemingly destined to reenact the fates of Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth. *Topdog/Underdog's* younger brother

is indeed caught up in identity issues linked to his name. A gifted shoplifter, he longs to excel at three-card monte and even warns his brother that he has changed his name to “3-Card” (1.17); he also longs to serve as both the stickman and dealer in the scam (1.17); and at one point when helping his brother practice for his arcade job, he screams “I am Booth!!” (4.50), pretending to be John Wilkes Booth rather than referring to himself. Indeed he boasts new outfits (from suit and tie to shirt and shoes) for both himself and his brother (2.23) in an effort to change their appearance and the ways in which others see them. Identity continues to permeate the play when the characters ruminate on the philosophical musings of Lincoln’s best customer, who LeMahieu argues is Booth in a moment of disguised identity (33) and who whispers, among other things, ““Yr only yrself... when no ones watching”” (Parks 2.32).

Through this focus on the past and its effect on identity, Parks reminds her readers that although history is traumatizing, it is also a performance that is chosen, just as trauma too, on some level, is chosen. We ultimately have, to some degree, the opportunity to accept or reject a prescribed identity or the traumatic nature of an event. In this way, Parks shows that a focusing on the bystander of trauma through issues related to the fourth wall can point to issues of agency. Within the triad of the perpetrator, bystander, or victim of trauma, the alignment of individuals to one perspective or another is an act of power, of swaying the bystander to one position or the other. When we shift our concern solely to the perspective of the bystander, the assertion of individualized power of another sort arises. The focus becomes on the power of the viewing audience to choose, to select, to act or not to act, and in the case of drama, viewers do indeed have the

power to stop the performance, to suspend their suspension of disbelief, to walk out of the theater and effectively end the performance. However, this is a power over which audiences do not truly have control. If an audience member walks out of the theater or shuts a book, the play still goes on; it still exists.

### **Audience as Agent and Object of Trauma: Continuing to Weaken the Fourth Wall**

As with *Topdog/Underdog* and *The America Play*, Parks destabilizes the fourth wall for audiences of *Venus* as a way of making their role in The Venus's sufferings more apparent. From the outset, Parks forces the audience to consider their part in the drama as active participants. Introduced to the audience by *The Negro Resurrectionist*, The Venus opens the play by revolving 270 degrees (Overture.1). Parks thus literally puts The Venus on display for contemporary audiences, just as The Venus's European contemporaries put her on exhibition; like the marks in *Topdog/Underdog* who listen to Lincoln and Booth's patter on the street, the audiences of *Venus* become voyeurs literally involved in this pageant. They are not just viewers of the play; they are also creators of the action onstage and thus of The Venus's torment, and Parks's exactness regarding the number of degrees that The Venus moves points to the calculated behaviors of The Venus's oppressors and literally and specifically the degree to which she was manipulated.

This focus on performance and the relationship between The Venus and her viewing audience is particularly relevant because the audience learns in the overture to *Venus* that The Venus Hottentot is dead (Parks 3). All that follows then is merely a re-creation, but one that does not exist without the audience. As a result, in this work, the

audience members are not only viewing the play, but they engage in creating the performances of and within *Venus*. They are the individuals who frequent the Wonders of the World sideshow along with the actors on the stage; they are members of the jury that judge Venus; Parks likewise links audiences to The Baron Docteur who views with them the various embedded performances of *For the Love of Venus*. Additionally, the use of the moniker The Venus Hottentot, rather than her actual name, Saartjie Baartman, allows Parks to continue to objectify and anatomize this historical figure, a personage who, through the mere performance or reading of the play, is brought to life in the present moment. Even though she is dead, she remains on display, put there by audiences' willingness to attend a performance or read the script.

In this particular play, something as traditional as the intermission even becomes a way of destabilizing the fourth wall, thereby forcing Parks's audiences to recognize their role in The Venus Hottentot's demise. In Parks's play, whether there is an intermission is debatable, for the action continues while audience members disperse to the lobby. Parks, however, requires it by giving the intermission a scene number; cutting it would create a gap in the text and interrupt the numbered sequence of the remainder of the play. During the intermission, The Bride-to-Be, one of the characters in the embedded play, *For the Love of Venus*, reads love letters aloud (Parks, *Venus* 16.91-92, 16.94-95, 16.97). Additionally, one of the Eight Wonders of the World with whom The Venus travels as part of The Mother-Showman's entourage sings "[a] song on behalf of myself and The Venus Hottentot, to the Ladies of New York," an excerpt Parks identifies as a "Historical Extract" (16.99). The majority of the lines delivered during the intermission,

however, involve The Baron Docteur presenting a lecture “[i]n the Anatomical Theatre of Tübingen” in which he describes The Venus’s autopsy and his medical findings (16.91-98). In this instance, he offers an extensive inventory of her physical measurements, bone structure, musculature, etc. Consider the degree to which she is dismembered and delineated:

The great space between the eyes was 1.8: Remarkable.  
 The eyelids horizontal apertures were a full .95.  
 Irises dark brown with olive brown *conjunctiva*.  
 In profile the nose was nearly straight, straight on it was broad  
 and much depressed.  
 One and a half across the base and but one-half inch  
*one-half inch* from tip to *septum*.  
 Nostrils, Gentleman, were patulous,  
 of regular oval form: .5 in length, .3 in breadth.  
*Septum narium* short and broad.  
 Aperture of mouth: 1.7 inches in width  
 with lips  
 broad and overted especially the upper one. (16.93)

Parks spreads this inventory of fragmentation—and we must remember fragments themselves are a hallmark of trauma—over eight pages of text, and The Baron Docteur and his colleagues repeat these details that they procure at other moments in the play (12.114-18, 8.134, 6.147-48).

This inventory meticulously mirrors the attention French scientists devoted to Baartman as a means of expanding their classification project. Fausto-Sterling, for example, notes that in his paper on Baartman, French scientist Henri de Blainville devoted several paragraphs to her genitalia although he never saw them (33); Cuvier, by extension, who was able to examine her body postmortem devoted a fifth of his paper to a description of her posterior (36). Their work, like that of Parks’s The Baron Docteur,

dehumanize their subject and reveal more about themselves and their cultural mindset than they do Baartman. (Given Baartman's "home" in twentieth-century Paris and her exhibition there, not much has changed.) Even the praises lavished on Baartman—her talent for language, her "pleasing hand"—worked to accentuate her Other-ness; indeed, difference ultimately outweighed her positives, which explains the shame Parks has The Baron Docteur attach to their affair. At the very end of his monologue in *Venus's* intermission, he drops his professional mask and lapses into a moment of tenderness and sentimentality before resuming his clinical and culturally sanctioned demeanor:

Her shoulders back and chest had grace.  
 Her charming hands... *uh hehm*.  
 Where was I?  
 Oh, of course:  
 On referring to the absolutely different characters  
 ... there laid down  
 we find that in no case does our subject  
 pass over the boundary line.  
 (*Rest*)  
 Thank you. (16.98)

Whether that boundary line is between man and beast or white and black remains ambiguous as written here; both binaries apply for his time.

Moreover, because The Baron Docteur's speech runs throughout the intermission—again for the most part it is the intermission<sup>103</sup>—Parks makes audience members question the ways in which they too participate in the objectification of The Venus (as well as other people in their lives) or allow others to control them. They can no longer dismiss The Venus's dismemberment as the work of an earlier time or another

<sup>103</sup> The intermission runs nine pages and is spoken primarily by The Baron Docteur. The Bride-to-Be has fourteen short lines, The Negro Resurrectionist five, and Higgenbottom's song is optional.

people. By remaining in their seats, audience members give up their sense of freedom and like *The Venus* become constrained by others' power, but by ignoring the action onstage, they assert their agency, thus setting themselves up as equals to The Baron Docteur and placing themselves at least within the action of the play above *The Venus*. Like the doctor and modern-day French officials, they choose to ignore *The Venus's* situation. Thus, although the fourth wall is maintained, Parks destabilizes it and makes audiences question their role in *The Venus's* dehumanization. They can write her off as a historical anomaly from the past whose loss is over, even as they feel sorry for her (or conversely do not care). It is for this reason that it is crucial we remember once again Parks created Baartman as a fictional character, for by fictionalizing Baartman, Parks makes *The Venus* her audiences' contemporary. Thus, when they listen, they can identify as members of the scientific community did; they can sympathize, or they can view her as nothing more than a novelty, an oddity, a freak, something lesser and subhuman, rather than an individual who was stripped of her rights. Either way, because the entire intermission is not optional, The Baron Docteur's voice "aims beyond the theater space to the world beyond" (Elam and Rayner 276); as he notes midspeech, "I've got strong lungs: / so please, if you need air, excuse yrself. / Youll hear me in the hallway" (Parks, *Venus* 16.95).

By straddling this middle ground, Parks forces twenty-first century audiences themselves to become traumatized, stuck between the here and now, robbed of their agency and made to see the ways in which they themselves perpetuate trauma by actually making them inflict that trauma on *The Venus* or actively work against it. The



compliments given her as well as the reviling of her anatomy are fragmenting not only of the human body and her humanity, but ours, and ultimately audiences are further trapped because as of 2002 Baartman's predicament became resolved with the return of her remains to South Africa. The larger question at play then is to what degree are audiences responsible, through acts of commission or omission, for the enslavement of their contemporaries, The Venus being one such individual. This is why the Jack Higgenbottom excerpt, which is the last part of the intermission, is so relevant. Performed by Wonder #7, this song is dedicated to the ladies of New York, a place to which Saartjie Baartman never traveled, although it is sung on her behalf and references her. Parks thus directs this line specifically to modern-day American audiences and makes them question their role in the events unfolding before them.

### **Bracketing the Audience: Bringing Them In**

One crucial way in which Parks works to place audiences of all three of these plays, particularly her reading audiences, in an in-between space between agent and object of trauma is through her use of bracketed material in the script, lines of text that can be deleted from the drama's stagings. These moments in *Venus*, for example, themselves frequently involve issues and instances of performance. The aforementioned song by Jack Higgenbottom, allegedly an individual who performed along with The Venus "on tour" (16.99), is one such example. Likewise, there are several instances where Parks introduces optional material within the embedded play *For the Love of Venus*. For example, in Scene 11 of *Venus*, which Parks subtitles Act II, Scene 12 of *For*

*the Love of Venus*, the character known as The Mother discusses with her daughter, The Bride-to-Be, historical responses to male-female relationships that have ended. The Mother schemes to help her daughter rekindle her fiancé's love and to force a wedge between him and the Hottentot with whom he has become enamored. She speaks of women's, even some fictional women's, responses to jiltings, spurnings, and betrayals, citing Cleopatra, Phaedra, and Ophelia:

[... They also drank poison. Fell on their swords.  
 In modern dress they slit their wrists.  
 Fill their pockets with rocks.  
 Jump from bridges.  
 Infront of trains.  
 Sleeping pills. Take one or two too many. Thatll do it.  
 Hunger strike: Turn yr face tuh thuh wall dont eat for weeks.  
 Thats like pining. But more dramatic.  
 To simply waste uhway—]. (122)

In this excerpt, The Mother shows how suicide, like man-made trauma, itself is a type of symbolic performance geared to a particular audience, the method of death being culturally specific and having particular meaning for the individual killing herself or for the persons she wishes will find her corpse. This particular passage also points to issues of sexual heteronormativity and the ways in which gender roles govern trauma—that sexual violence is a means of perpetuating imbalances of power.

Another embedded performance within *Venus* from the play *For the Love of Venus* involves a conversation between an uncle and his nephew, who is the groom that has fallen for The Venus Hottentot. Acting as an interpreter between The Venus and The Young Man, The Uncle delivers these lines:

She sez she comes from far uhway where its quite hot.  
 She sez shes pure bred Hottentot.

She sez if Wilds your desire  
 she comes from The Wilds and she carries them behind her.  
 [Wild is her back-ground her fundament so to speak  
 and although shes grown accustomed to our civil ways  
 she still holds The Wilds within her  
 behind, inside, infront  
 which is to say, that all yr days  
 with her will be a lively lovely bliss.] (Parks 8.133)

In these instances, as well as others, readers of Parks's play must confront questions regarding these passages: What is their point? What happens to the play if they are not performed? How does their presence or absence change the play?

As elements that do not necessarily advance the plot, the above passages in *Venus* can easily be dismissed because they truly are redundant. We get that information elsewhere in the play. Also, in several of the passages involving the embedded play *For the Love of Venus*, the only character viewing these performances is The Baron Docteur; passages such as these thus shed light on his character and reinforce for audiences his infatuation with The Venus. However because we get that information elsewhere, the use of brackets in this particular play becomes an opportunity to engage and thus disorient reading audiences. They must question the point of this information and the benefits of including or excluding these scenes because once read, they always and already possess this information. Unlike viewing audiences, readers are not deprived of this detail; they are given it but told to weigh the benefits of withholding (or including) it. This consideration then forces audiences once again to question their own relationship to The Venus, as well as to popular representations of desire, and they must decide whether they think the scenes should be included based on their experience with theater, desire, racism, and Other-ing.

If Parks uses brackets in *Venus* to force members of her reading audiences to question how they contribute to The Venus's demise, the brackets in *Topdog/Underdog* force actors and directors (and thus their viewing audiences) to consider how Booth in particular should be read, judged, and performed. In the final scene, in an attempt to retaliate against Lincoln for returning to three-card monte and not including his younger brother in this enterprise, Booth talks about Lincoln's wife and her own desire to hurt Lincoln by sleeping with Booth. As Booth relates the story however, Cookie has a change of heart. Then, in brackets, this passage appears in the 2001 edition of the play published by TCG for mainstream audiences:

[And then, just like that, she changed her mind.

*(Rest)*

But she'd hooked me. That bad part of me that I fight down everyday. You beat yrs down and it stays there dead but mine keeps coming up for another round. And she hooked the bad part of me. And the bad part of me opened my mouth and started promising her things. Promising her things I knew she wanted and you couldnt give her. And the bad part of me took her clothing off and carried her into thuh bed and had her, Link, yr Cookie. It wasnt just thuh bad part of me it was all of me, man,] I had her. Yr damn wife. Right in that bed. (Parks 6.92)

These lines paint Booth in a drastically different light than the image we get of him in earlier scenes, for he now appears as a rapist. Both brothers are guilty of various crimes, from a legal sense as well from the perspective of good behavior in general, but this information about Booth colors him even more as the villain of the piece and does not effectively balance out his brother's misdeeds. Even though early in the play Booth claims he has need for the constant release of sexual energy (3.43), he now comes across as more dangerous than ever, and audiences are left to consider how this passage changes their views of this underdog. Parks pulls the proverbial rug out from audiences because

even if these lines remain, unbracketed, within the play, which is how they appear in some editions of the text, they do not necessarily have to be read as true. Because we never see any other characters onstage, the reliability of this statement remains in doubt. We never know whether Cookie perhaps changed her mind yet again, nor do we know whether this event even took place. We only have Booth's words, and, again, honesty and truthfulness are neither brother's strong suit. However the brackets highlight this uncertainty even more so, forcing reading audiences, actors, and directors to consider their own role in interpreting what happens on the stage. Parks creates a borderland space forcing audiences to step in and outside of the action and consider what is really happening and how we should align ourselves with (or against) her characters.

Brackets likewise appear throughout *The America Play*, but here they are meant to challenge audiences and invite them to delve deeper into the text. Some of the bracketed lines are truly repetitive; in Act One, Parks offers this passage:

It is said that the Great Mans wife did call out and it is said that the Lesser Known would [sneak away from his digging and stand behind a tree where he couldnt be seen or get up and] leave his wife and child after the blessing had been said and [the meat carved during the distribution of the vegetables it is said that he would leave his wife and child and] standing in the kitchen or sometimes out in the yard [between the right angles of the house] stand out there where he couldnt be seen standing with his ear cocked. “*Emergency, oh Emergency, please put the Great Man in the ground.*”

(*Rest*)

It would help if she had called out and if he had been summoned been given a ticket all bought and paid for and boarded a train in his look-alike black frock coat bought on time and already exhausted. Ridiculous. If he had been summoned. [Been summoned between the meat and the vegetables and boarded a train to Big Town where he would line up and gawk at the Great Mans corpse along with the rest of them.] But none of this was meant to be. (161)

The multiple brackets in this passage point to the pervasiveness of fragments for the traumatized and the ways in which they are consistently subjected to feelings of disorientation and a lack of control; details, which logically fit and should make sense, do not and thus keep the individual off balance. Even the most mundane of activities—sitting down to a meal—becomes disrupted and disruptive. Parks’s audiences are meant to feel this disorientation and actively realize the degree to which traumatized individuals need to parse through what fits and what does not, to integrate details both big and small into the larger narrative of their individual and collective experiences. Some of the bracketed sections in *The America Play* run several paragraphs to several pages, to indicate the degree to which traumatized memories can take over an individual’s life. For example in Act Two, Scene A, in a passage that runs to four pages, Lucy ruminates on a previous experience with Bram Price, to whose deathbed she was called and to whose dying child she tended. In this passage, in which she encourages Brazil to keep digging, so that she can sift through the past to learn “thuh real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay” (175), Lucy also ends up revealing the elder Price’s secrets (177) and talks of the younger Price returning from the dead as an echo (175). Parks, through this scene, gets to the heart of the problems of historical revision and loss through a tale of family members who meet the same ends, and it is by parsing through their history that she claims Lucy and Brazil will make (narrative) sense of their own loss of The Foundling Father. (Indeed the Prices share another connection to The Foundling Father in that their names, Bram, are a corruption of Abraham.) Parks’s play demonstrates the experience of dealing with trauma and how it affects both the mundane and the

monumental, both the past and the present. Even Lucy's revelation of the elder Price's deathbed confessions point to this. As she notes, sharing these secrets with her son is not a violation of her job as there is twelve-year statute of limitations (2.177); in other words, it is expected that the past and trauma will continue to resurrect themselves within the present.

### **From the Page to the Stage, the Stage to the World: Audience as Continued Collaborator, Audience as Sufferer**

Parks simultaneously puts her audiences in the role of object and agent, gazing and gazed at, victim and perpetrator, acting and acted upon through other stylistic devices that encourage individual interpretation. As I noted earlier in regards to *Venus*, we too are watching *For the Love of Venus* with the doctor, which is meant, per Elam and Rayner, to parallel The Baron Docteur's own marriage (223). Moreover, his fascination with The Venus parallels ours. He, the bridegroom of the play, and Parks's audiences are linked in that their "love" manifests itself through watching, through the gaze. The subtitle of this embedded show, "a freakshow," which Parks employs in the stage direction of the version of *Venus* found in the Summer-Fall 1996 issue of *Theatre Forum* (41), also becomes a means to implicate audiences. Furthermore, because we are dealing with a play within a play, Parks questions for what and to whom "freak" applies, the actors in this performance as well as all its spectators—The Baron Docteur, The Venus, The Negro Resurrectionist, and Parks's modern-day viewers. This applies to The Mother-Showman's enterprise as well, for we are also visitors to the Wonders of the World

traveling circus, particularly if we remember that both *The Mother-Showman* and *The Negro Resurrectionist* are our ringmasters.

Parks uses this particular device of the ringmaster to indicate that her real focus is her viewing audience. These ringmasters force us to consider our response to *The Venus Hottentot's* predicament and the degree to which we are implicated in the continued bondage of individuals who are restricted because of their race and gender in our modern times. Because *The Baron Docteur* speaks to us during *Venus's* intermission and because *The Negro Resurrectionist* serves as our narrator, forever speaking to modern audiences, these two characters become part of the present moment, and we are linked to them. Thus, when *The Negro Resurrectionist* ultimately becomes a character in the play as well, revealing himself to be a gravedigger who allows himself to be co-opted into delivering *The Venus's* body to unsavory individuals within the science community—he is coerced with a single gold coin and a knee to the groin (5.151)—we too are implicated in *The Venus's* post-death confinement. We too are guilty of her enslavement, death, and dismemberment.

Even *Venus's* beginning and conclusion work to implicate contemporary audiences. In the “Overture,” *The Negro Resurrectionist* is literally introducing the other characters in the play, or—to be completely correct—asking them to introduce themselves, but *The Venus* herself proclaims that “There wont b inny show tuhnite” (8), because she is dead. What follows, however, for Parks’s audience is indeed and obviously a show. Because the audience stays put, their very presence creates the show. This dynamic also explains why *The Venus* rotates throughout this section of the play;



Parks is stressing the degree to which she is putting on a performance as well as the degree to which audiences watching that performance contribute to The Venus's subjugation. The last lines of the play, spoken by The Negro Resurrectionist and The Venus, even function as a way of involving Parks's audience. Indeed, they are a command to the audience:

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST. A Scene of Love:  
THE VENUS. *Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss.* (1.62)

The Venus asks to be loved, and given that this comes in the scene called "Final Chorus," the emphasis and action are not geared to the other characters in the play, but to those viewing the play. Denied true affection by the individuals on the stage, The Venus directs her request to contemporary viewers.

Even the numbering of the scenes in *Venus* works to implicate audiences (and on some level is akin to Anna Deavere Smith's playing with the placement of timelines in *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror*). Although the action unfolds by and large chronologically, the scenes are listed antichronologically. Thus, as The Negro Resurrectionist announces the scenes' numbers and names, he also reminds us of the artificiality of the situation. We already know the ending—The Venus dies—and our narrator brings us further into the play by merely counting down the scene numbers (25.41, 15.100, and 14.101); mentally, audiences engage in that countdown with him and if the question, then, is to what are they counting down, the answer is her death, in which the viewers have now participated and collaborated. Countdowns lead to a moment of action, a culmination, and this entire play, a countdown in and of itself, refers to what

audiences will do with this information once the play and countdown ends.<sup>104</sup> In similar ways, by using characters with ties to Abraham Lincoln in both *Topdog/Underdog* and *The America Play*, audiences end up preparing themselves for the deaths of these characters; we know what happens to A. Lincoln and a Lincoln. Additionally, if we believe Chekhov's assertion that a gun in a play's opening dictates shots by play's end, audiences of *Topdog/Underdog* should not be surprised by the bloodshed that occurs on the final pages after Booth draws his weapon on Lincoln a mere three pages into the opening scene (1.7).

Costuming also becomes a way in which Parks works to implicate audiences and make them assume the role of an agent of trauma. In *The America Play*, the focus on The Foundling Father's beard co-opts viewing audiences, emphasizing their role and that of the artificial in his success. Rather than have him sport a realistic (or real) beard, Parks has him deliberate on the efficacy of the various beards he owns, including the aforementioned blonde one. Lincoln's costuming in *Topdog/Underdog* goes beyond a beard, frock coat, and stovepipe hat to include whiteface makeup. Through the costume as well as Booth's telling remark about Lincoln wearing home the "shit" (Parks 1.7) of "some crackerass white man" (1.20), Lincoln's situation becomes an ironic commentary on the objectification of African-Americans in the American theater through the minstrel tradition. Modern audiences who view themselves as more evolved than their theatergoing predecessors are put in the same position as the latter; they are participating in the racialization of an entire group through the popular media. As Booth says in a line

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<sup>104</sup> Again it is crucial to remember that when *Venus* debuted, Baartman's remains were still in Paris.

that is just as relevant for The Foundling Father of *The America Play* as it is for Booth's brother, "You play Honest Abe.... [Y]ou going all the way back. Back to way back then when folks was slaves and shit" (1.20).

Costuming within Parks's *Venus* is also obviously meant to make audiences squirm by placing them in the role of perpetrator and voyeur. In the "Overture" of *Venus*, Parks informs her audiences, through the character of The Venus herself that "[s]he gained fortune and fame by not wearin uh scrap / hidin only thuh privates that lipped inner lap" (8), a line The Negro Resurrectionist transforms into "She gaind fortune and fame by not wearin a scrap / hidin only thuh privates lippin down from her lap" (8-9). Now to some degree it would be historically accurate if Parks dressed The Venus in a simple scrap of loincloth; when Baartman was posing for French scientists, she refused to pose nude, acquiescing only when they allowed her to stand before them with a strategically placed handkerchief. Furthermore, The Negro Resurrectionist's line points to the popular misconception that Saartjie Baartman had overdeveloped genitalia. However, Parks and her directors frequently manipulate these details as a means of implicating audiences. They accomplish this by having the actress playing The Venus appear on stage sheathed in tights and wearing padding on her legs and posterior. (See, for example, the photo by T. Charles Erickson that accompanies Anne Davis Basting's review of the Public Theater's 1996 production of *Venus*. In this picture, actress Adina Porter, in her padded costume, stands before a huge poster of herself that is even more grossly distorted [224].) Through these moves, Parks and her directors force viewing audiences to participate in The Venus's objectification. Foregoing these costume choices

and playing The Venus “straight” would work to convey the degree to which European audiences incorrectly viewed The Venus. By using the padding however, Parks forces her audiences into the same position as nineteenth-century European society; she works to unnerve audiences, to make it hard for them to say “that was not I who did that,” by making them view The Venus just as many of her European contemporaries did.

The fact that *For the Love of Venus*, the play that is embedded within *Venus*, has its roots in historical fact and popular culture also helps to reinforce this dilemma of modern viewers and what they permit to happen in their world. Holmes and Sharpley-Whiting both speak of a French play that debuted after Baartman’s entry into France in 1814. Called *La Vénus hottentote, ou la haine aux Françaises* (*The Hottentot Venus, or the Hatred of Frenchwomen*) and premiering in 1814, this vaudevillean work by Théaulon, Dartois, and Brasier focuses on a young Frenchman who is interested in marrying a “savage” because she will be free of the sins of civilized society. Ultimately, however, he marries a French girl who convinces him of his folly by masquerading as a Hottentot. At first, he is attracted to the Hottentot costume until another character reveals a picture of the real Hottentot Venus. The Venus’s features are so grossly distorted, as they were in the popular press and the scientific community of that time, that he seeks instead one of his “own kind” (Holmes 126; Sharpley-Whiting 32-41). By fictionalizing this fiction by Théaulon, Dartois, and Brasier, Parks forces serious scholars (as well as popular audiences) to ponder exactly what Baartman looked like. The popular drawings with which audiences were and are familiar are media distortions and ones to which audiences (then and now) contribute(d) and which they propagate(d). Today’s viewers

must then contemplate how their interpretations of these drawings would have contributed (and continue to contribute) to the enslavement and possession of The Venus.

Contemporary critics through various means likewise help convey the ways in which modern audiences are responsible for The Venus's dilemma. For example, Fausto-Sterling describes in detail the racist underpinnings of Cuvier's work and that of other scientists of his time. She details their attempts to show that Baartman was indeed a lesser human if not less than human; some, for instance, specifically attempted to place Baartman and other members of her tribe (and by extension all people with a darker skin color) as a link between humans and orangutans (26). Theirs was the work of racist thought and a cultural justification of imperialist expansion (40). As a result, Fausto-Sterling explicitly chooses not to reproduce pictures made of Baartman, claiming that doing so would perpetuate this earlier mindset (19). Similarly in her "Venus Live! Sarah Bartmann, the Hottentot Venus, Re-Membered," Vlasopolos opts to reference the historical person on which Parks's play is based through the various iterations of her name ("Saartjie, Saartje, Sarah, Baartman, Bartmann, Bartman," the Venus, the Venus Hottentot, the Hottentot Venus) to highlight the various ways in which popular culture has attempted to define and classify this individual.

Beyond issues of illustrations and naming, Baartman's background remains murky; Baartman was perhaps a member of the Khoisan Bush tribe, the Khoi Khoi or Hottentot people having become extinct centuries earlier (Fausto-Sterling 22). Not knowing her full history, scientists who were her contemporaries selectively chose details about her to advance their arguments. Fausto-Sterling notes, for example, that the French

scientist de Blainville compared her with animals and “the lowest race of humans, the Negro Race” (33) while Cuvier “imperceptibly separated the tamed and manageable European woman from the wild and previously unknown African” (38). Because their science was ultimately about classification and the perpetuation of racial intolerance and differences, de Blainville, Cuvier, and the “freakshow” hucksters of London, Paris, and America (P.T. Barnum once hired an African-American man to pretend to be an example of a “primitive” African race [Fausto-Sterling 30]) all helped to foster ideas about race and racialization. They helped to create the idea of white/European superiority. By extension, Parks forces her audiences to consider the way in and degree to which they blindly accept cultural ideas. The decisions to costume The Venus as she was in Parks’s drama, to play with her name, to include the embedded “freakshow” *For the Love of Venus*, indeed to simply call the play *Venus* and evoke the goddess of love without any other appellation (like Hottentot) all work to make audiences question their role in this particular individual’s enslavement. Parks shows how stylistic decisions manipulate audiences’ thought processes.

Tellingly, that *The Venus Hottentot, or the Hatred of Frenchwomen* was a comedy also resonates with issues related to trauma and the problems of race and racialization that Parks explores in *Venus*. Quoting Freud, Sharpley-Whiting reminds readers that vaudeville is meant to “bribe the third party (the audience) with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with the interlocutors (the actors/writers) of the joke without very close investigation” (33); in other words, we have another instance of a perpetrator (the joke’s teller), bystander (the audience), and victim (the butt of the joke). The subtitle of the

original play about The Venus Hottentot (i.e., *The Hatred of Frenchwomen*) and title of Parks's iteration of it (*For the Love of Venus*), with their tension between love and hate, also ask audiences to consider exactly how they would describe The Venus's treatment in all three of the linked plays as well as in today's society and with which party (i.e., victim, villain, onlooker) they would align themselves.

Parks's various trademark moves regarding spells is another way to involve audiences, especially readers of her work, as participants. As she notes in the stage directions for *Topdog/Underdog*, providing a definition that reappears in the notes preceding *Venus* and *The America Play and Other Works* with only a change in characters' names, a spell is

An elongated and heightened (*Rest*). Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look:

**Lincoln**  
**Booth**  
**Lincoln**  
**Booth**

This is a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no action or stage business is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit. (2)

This focus on character identity, as dictated by the directors and their actors, highlights that trauma is socially dictated. Obviously, people react to trauma differently: some are able to overcome it much more easily; some, like Solnit, emphasize the potential for goodwill and camaraderie that natural disasters can pose. The idea that trauma is not just socially dictated but chosen is a radical departure for trauma theory. This shift in perspective highlights the idea of responsibility even more so and questions the ways in

which institutions as representatives of individuals actually create trauma. As I have noted elsewhere, Caruth's seminal book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, as its title implies, stresses that trauma is "out there," that it exists as an experience waiting to be claimed. Trauma remains, however, really about creating knowledge, of the conscious self actively choosing to master and experience a traumatic event. This is the larger idea Laub and Auerhahn promote, when they talk of how healing from trauma involves the mastery of knowledge, of the knowledge of facts that we are loath to recognize. At the level of the performance, Parks shows how an interpretation is chosen—how the creation of character and trauma is an act that actors, directors, viewing audiences, and readers of scripts collectively and collaboratively execute.

**"I'm your Venus / I'm your fire / At your desire" (Shocking Blue)**

Putting cheesy references to '60s music aside, I argue that Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*, *The America Play*, and *Venus* all stress that trauma is a manifestation of desire and power, of desires for power and belonging. After all, the reliving of trauma stems from absence, the unfulfilled desire to feel "normal," to have power over a troubling situation, or to realize the limits of one's own mortality—that one does not have control over events, people, even one's self or one's destiny. In *Topdog/Underdog*, both brothers mourn the loss of parental love, interpersonal relationships, and economic opportunity and advancement. Booth in particular lashes out due to the betrayal and loss of respect he feels Grace, Lincoln, and society have directed toward him. He desires power, respect, and a sense of superiority over others. By comparison, in *Venus* the



protagonist longs to be loved. “*Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss*” (1.162) she exhorts; “Love me?,” she cries (14.107). In *The America Play*, Lucy and Brazil lament the loss of The Foundling Father to death and to his desire to pursue his dreams, while the latter laments the loss of Abraham Lincoln, a double loss in that The Foundling Father was born after Lincoln died (1.161). Their losses and desire for what is lost and for what they never had emphatically point to the fact that trauma, even when not linked to slavery and diaspora, is intimately tied to issues of desire, difference, loss, power, and the Other in the present day.

For students of slavery and diaspora however, Parks’s writings remain doubly relevant. *Venus* in particular explores issues of the Other and how people often use the Other to maintain power. Even the minor character of The Bride-to-Be refuses to recognize The Venus’s shared humanity. By dressing up in this manner and then by slowly unveiling and revealing herself to her groom, The Bride ultimately and literally showcases the similarities between herself and The Venus Hottentot on multiple levels—both women lack power, and both resort to physicality as a way of surviving (in) the world. Essentially, for modern audiences, as well as her bridegroom, The Bride-to-Be proves that at the core The Venus Hottentot is indeed like her, like other Europeans, like any other human being. The objectification of the Other thus becomes a way to preserve the status quo, and the ways in which The Mans Brother, The Mother-Showman, The Baron Docteur, the court, and the other “wonders” of the world keep The Venus in subservient positions and prevent her from advancing likewise work to establish and further, in the minds of these perpetrators, their superiority. They co-opt The Venus’s

body and profit from her exoticness while attempting to establish their difference from her. This explains in part why, in the most minute and clinical detail, *The Baron Docteur* and his students provide quantitative measurements of her from head to (to shoulder to sternum to umbilicus to perineum to patella to) toe (12.114-19). Parks explicitly links *The Venus's* literal and figurative chains to the concept of the Great Chain of Being and the attempts of nineteenth-century scientists to discredit *The Venus* by classifying her as low on the chain and ultimately less than human; she becomes the victim of pseudo-scientific practices used to justify racism, imperialism, and colonialism.<sup>105</sup> Despite the similarities between *The Bride-to-Be* and *The Venus*, the focus of *The Baron Docteur* and his peers (those Parks puts in the play and those that are in theater seats) forever remains on difference, thus the ongoing reference to the fact that these measurements will be corrected postmortem. These details help demonstrate that trauma, diaspora, and Parks's plays are largely about processes of normativizing and normalizing, of dealing with the Other on the level of the group; after all, *The Baron Docteur's* scholarly presentations ultimately exemplify the degree to which *The Venus* is most undeniably human. This focus on difference also explains why attempts to heal from trauma, which obviously involve flashbacks, really center on viewing situations differently. For Booth this would mean recognizing that his mom may have betrayed him once again—there may be no money in the stocking that he thinks holds his inheritance and that he has used in his bet with Lincoln. It would also mean understanding his limitations as player of three-card monte. For *The Foundling Father*, it involves recognizing what his departure

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<sup>105</sup> Kornweibel, Lee, and Wright all argue we need to read *Venus* as a tale about colonialism.

meant and means for Lucy and Brazil, and for Lucy and Brazil, recognition centers on the loss, resentment, and opportunity that The Foundling Father's absence affords.

If trauma is about gaps—in memory, knowledge, or experience—trauma has to involve desire, for the latter also is about gaps, what is lacking, absent, or missing. Trauma then, as evoked in Parks's writings, is about a desire for wholeness, oneness, and connection to others. In this way, the reliving of trauma is a representation of and about attempts to gain what is missing or is perceived as missing. Thus Lincoln and Booth are to varying degrees engulfed in the desire for power and superiority over others, for economic stability, and for a loving family environment. The Venus, like all enslaved peoples, works towards and yearns for freedom, agency, and self-actualization. For The Foundling Father, it is the desire to be upwardly mobile (of being more than a lesser man) and to be connected to the past; for his family, it is likewise a desire to be reconnected to the past and thus ultimately to him. Trauma thus revolves around and surrounds desiring and claiming a state of difference and Other-ness. For the agents of trauma, this stand against Other-ness concerns gaining power and reestablishing it over others and over situations in which they feel as if they have lost control. For the traumatized individual, the desire involves others recognizing their needs and wants. Likewise, diaspora involves seeing others differently, as an Other, as a threat. Indeed, Saal sees Parks's plays as about representation, an idea that has larger implications for readers of trauma, for if her works are about representation, we should see Parks as reminding her audiences that man-made trauma always remains about representations of desire and power (or the lack thereof). For the perpetrator of traumas, including those expelling others into diaspora or

propagating racism, that inflicting of suffering remains a means to establishing and maintaining superiority over others.

## CHAPTER 4 AUGUST WILSON, AUNT ESTER, AND THE PHYSICALITY OF TRAUMA

By focusing on real events from contemporary history, Anna Deavere Smith offers insight into two specific man-made, collective traumas and the ways in which the potential for healing is dependent on issues of social negotiation. In and of themselves, *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* stand as communal approaches to healing, orchestrated by Smith, that examine the interplay between the group, the individual, and the Other; essentially, Smith paints a panoramic view of people in pain and the ways in which contemporary Americans still grapple with issues of identity, dispossession, isolation, and separation from America as an entity in and of itself. In particular, by focusing on minority and immigrant populations, she shows many members of these groups as outsiders who remain doubly isolated from the hostland/homeland of American society. Suzan-Lori Parks likewise focuses on issues of negotiation and on dispossessed and disenfranchised individuals separated from mainstream society. Smith and Parks are also alike in that they are more experimental in their techniques: Smith employs monodrama and Parks works to engage audiences by playing with the fourth wall and engaging in her trademark spells and Rep & Rev (i.e., repetition and revision). Parks's characters however, particularly when they are people of color, remain isolated with little to no chance of connection; essentially, they fail in their attempts to connect with others, continuing to be isolated from the larger group.

Although focused on similar concerns regarding the presence and status of minorities in the United States, Smith's and Parks's contemporary August Wilson

ultimately offers a divergent approach both in terms of form and content. Like Smith and Parks, he was interested in using the stage as a venue on and through which unheard voices and tales (frequently of suffering and disconnection) could be heard. Within his ten-play “century cycle,” with each work of the cycle set in and dedicated to one decade of the twentieth century, Wilson strove to create a space for his African-American characters to tell their stories—to present experiences and histories not traditionally included on the American stage. Indeed, whether they involve confession as in *Gem of the Ocean*, the learning of family secrets as in *King Hedley II* or *Radio Golf*, the recounting of family histories as in *The Piano Lesson*, or the use of the blues to relate personal sorrows or to advance economically as in *Seven Guitars* or *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Wilson’s plays mark storytelling as a means of celebrating the past and of sharing and explaining pain. His characters grapple with scars, seen and unseen, physical and emotional, that remind them of past losses and the continued effect of those losses on their present lives. Trauma, for these characters, is alive and well, and frequently tied to diaspora, Jim Crow, and slavery—all sources and manifestations of the racism and discrimination that have plagued the experience of African-Americans in the twentieth century. Because Wilson writes plays that are more traditional in nature—he does not break the fourth wall to the degree that Parks and Smith do, and he employs small casts rather than give the panoramic view of a community that Smith elicits—he finds himself with a greater challenge when it comes to engaging and traumatizing his audiences beyond plot and characters’ situations.

Despite the differences between Smith, Parks, and Wilson, the characters in Wilson's plays, like Smith's and Parks's, are dealing with dispossession, disenfranchisement, disconnection, and repeated and cyclical suffering.<sup>106</sup> However, Wilson's audiences hear of and see the potential for healing through deliberate attempts to create family and community. If Smith's *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* provide the conversational venue that must be present for healing to occur—indeed if her plays are about creating those conditions at the level of the larger community and pointing out how trauma is negotiated and perpetuated—and if Parks's are about denied attempts at healing, Wilson's dramas show individuals who have gone through or are actively trying to engage in that process of healing even when the process fails them; for them, trying alone can bring about change and transformation. Wilson thus depicts several characters as *consciously* involved in their attempts to heal from trauma, and his plays subsequently mark a paradigm shift in terms of how we think about trauma, showing healing as a pursued activity rather than an instinctual event that the psyche initiates. Moreover, in response to critics who describe Wilson's work as dark in outlook, I argue that his plays, if not hopeful, end on moments of hope that are achieved through the creation of personal connections with others through the nurturing of personal relationships. Thus, though there is danger in reading trauma as an opportunity for growth—one can construe such a reading as justifying trauma—for Wilson, as a dramatist who is not as experimental in

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<sup>106</sup> Characters in *Gem of the Ocean*, for example, have experienced the separation of families under the slave system firsthand. One has lost four husbands (Wilson 1.1.18) and is distanced from her children. The loss is again revisited at the play's end, when one character dies of a gunshot wound, a situation described as “*an old, old unwelcome visitation*” (2.5.81). Indeed, throughout the text, characters speak of specific instances of loss (1.3.36) as well as the constant threat of violence and death (2.2.60).

technique as Smith or Parks, trauma becomes a marker of celebrating African-American culture, of the perseverance of a traditionally disenfranchised people and the ability to overcome hardship. When it comes to Wilson's work, trauma is also a means of studying the link between the individual and the group and the ways in which one individual's move toward growth and self-actualization relates to the larger community's continued oppression and otherwise subordinate status.

Much trauma literature speaks of the lack of control an individual has, whether over events or healing. Because scholars recognize trauma as an unclaimed experience, they frequently focus on the stages a traumatized individual goes through, with the end result being the claiming of knowledge and the full integration of a traumatizing event that can be recalled at will. Discussion involves the state and stages of being traumatized, the dissociation, the gaps, the fragments. Although there is the talking cure and aversion or exposure therapy, the medical literature on trauma does not, however, necessarily focus on exactly how an individual reclaims the missed experience. The stages of growth are described, often in relation to an individual's connection to audiences and the Other, but not the process whereby the individual moves from one stage to the next. Most often the critics show the healing to be prompted by the subconscious desire to mend a tear in the psychic skin. Social and emotional triggers force the individual to relive the event and in doing so, the individual's control over the present and her memories is lost. Additionally, in the case of healing initiated in a controlled (i.e., doctor-patient) setting, the therapist continues to control the situation, begetting another instance of the traumatized individual lacking power, for if the cure happens under the guidance and



direction of the trained professional, it is the professional who is in charge. Furthermore, although critics agree that trauma is socially situated, we do not necessarily hear how the individual himself navigates the stages of healing, how he moves from one phase to another, or how he negotiates the acquisition of that knowledge within a community. It is almost as if the individual is taken out of the equation with the community accepting or rejecting the trauma and thus retaining the proverbial upper hand. Wilson, however, shows individuals actively grappling with their pasts, consciously trying to claim that experience (and the related feelings of traumatic and diasporic disconnection and dispossession) on their own terms. As Wilson famously noted in various essays and interviews, the question at stake in his work overall is what individuals do with their pasts; at stake are issues of assimilation, acculturation, and resistance.<sup>107</sup> Wilson's characters emphasize that healing can—and to some degree must—be actively sought, explored, and manifested within the larger community.

Additionally, for scholars of trauma, it is through Wilson that we can see a challenge to the concept that trauma is an interior wound that merely manifests itself through physical symptoms. Trauma is always described through emotional and cognitive gaps, holes, and absences; Wilson, however, reminds us of the physicality of trauma not just in terms of the initial traumatizing event, but also in terms of the healing of trauma. Too often, trauma specialists ultimately see healing solely as an emotional, interiorized process, and it obviously is that. However, the physical aspects of healing must also be

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<sup>107</sup> See, for instance, Wilson's interviews with Bonnie Lyons in *Contemporary Literature*, John DiGaetani in *A Search for a Postmodern Theater*, or Sandra Shannon in *African American Review*, as well as his essays "How to Write a Play Like August Wilson" and "The Ground on Which I Stand."

considered. If trauma concerns a separation within the body and a separation of this body from others', healing must involve connection, a lifeline, something that physically as well as emotionally connects or ties—like a rope, an image specifically linked in *Gem of the Ocean* to the loss of a loved one—people to both the past and present. This focus on physicality likewise reinforces the necessity of studying trauma within the theater or the literature classroom, for the genre of drama heightens the visceral connections between story and audience, as well as the physicality of trauma, in a public, communal setting.

Although we can find multiple examples of individuals actively making choices throughout Wilson's writings,<sup>108</sup> the first play in the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean*, stands as particularly appropriate for a discussion of choice and healing as they relate to trauma, diaspora, and agency. With its events occurring in 1904 in Pittsburgh, the latter being the setting for the majority of Wilson's plays and the place of his birth and upbringing, *Gem of the Ocean* is the ten-play sequence's foundation in that it focuses specifically on the character of Aunt Ester, whom Wilson's other characters and his critics generally recognize as the emotional center of Pittsburgh's Hill District, as Wilson depicts it. More importantly, *Gem of the Ocean* is the only play where Aunt Ester, a soul cleanser and

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<sup>108</sup> For example, Herald Loomis exemplifies this sense of agency in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* by actively seeking his wife and ending the play bathed in his own blood "shining like new money" (2.5.94). In the climax of *The Piano Lesson*, Berniece Charles chooses to invoke her ancestors by playing on the piano (2.5.106-07), something she has refused to do up to this point in the drama even though the instrument dominates her front room, while her brother Boy Willie demonstrates his willingness to fight a ghost for her on various occasions (1.1.12, 2.5.106). Similarly, Troy Maxson in *Fences* struggles with his son's desire to pursue a career in athletics; in light of his own inability to play sports professionally, he refuses to let Cory play high school football. King Hedley II, in the play named after him, also actively chooses to end the cycle of violence that surrounds him by throwing down his weapon rather than kill another character (2.5.101).

spiritual healer, actually appears although she is considered the spiritual presence that looks over all the other characters in Wilson's plays.

Critics describe Aunt Ester in various ways but always cite her importance to Wilson's dramas; they identify her as a griot (Gantt 19), as well as deity and mother (Caywood and Floyd 76-77). Furthermore, as an "ever-present reminder of the need for connection to the past" (Herrington 172), Aunt Ester is the individual

who initiates and sustains the inter-textual conversations that take place within the cycle and who holds the ten plays together. Though she is not physically present throughout, she is still a constant force that defines and shapes the finer aspects of African American cultural identity. She is Wilson's living metaphor of black experience and the model for present and future black cultural identity. She also embodies decades of cultural memory. (Shannon 37)

Wilson himself claims she is "the most significant persona of the cycle. The characters are all her children. The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personalities and for dealing with a society in which the contradictions, over the decades, have grown more fierce" (qtd. in Noggle 60). Because she is the link to the past, at least one critic views Aunt Ester's name as a play on words: Aunt Ester, per renowned theater scholar Harry Elam, Jr., is the other characters' ancestor (76). Moreover, if Wilson's female characters are often seen as weak, marginalized, or peripheral, as some critics claim, Aunt Ester gains importance because she stands as a corrective to that assertion. Though aged and fragile, she is the bond that holds the African-American community of the Hill District in place. Even at her weakest moment, she becomes a rallying cry for the community, much as collective trauma can be a source of community building, identity, and cohesion. Moreover, as Wilson's principal female character, one who is referenced throughout the cycle and who is embodiment of the

living presence of the past, Aunt Ester offers readers an opportunity to reflect on the relationships between healing and agency and between drama and trauma, particularly the interiority of trauma and its physicality. Aunt Ester, her advice, and the people with whom she surrounds herself represent that larger community that must accept a trauma occurred, acknowledge that the event in question was traumatizing and worth being heard, and realize that the traumatized individual must actively pursue healing as a physical process if healing is to occur.

### **The Gist of *Gem***

*Gem of the Ocean* was one of the last plays that Wilson wrote but is, chronologically, the first play in his century cycle. Set in 1904, with the remnants of slavery continuing to define characters' lives, the play ostensibly revolves around one character's search for absolution and desire to rise above the bondage he feels. Wilson's protagonist is a citizen of the United States; indeed his very name is Citizen, albeit at a time when Jim Crow laws, legal and de facto segregation, and the concept of "separate but equal" were firmly entrenched in American society and prevented African-Americans from exercising their rights as citizens. *Gem of the Ocean* thus refers to the plight of many residents of Pittsburgh's African-American community; demonstrates that slavery, manifested in terms of poverty and racism, is still a traumatic reality of the twentieth century; and shows agency and the forging of family ties as a way of dealing with the trauma linked to disenfranchisement.

The play's prologue opens with a physical struggle between Citizen Barlow and one of Aunt Ester's devotees, her "gatekeeper" Eli. A recent émigré from the South, Citizen has come to Aunt Ester's home looking for food, shelter, and, most importantly in his eyes, forgiveness. In his short time in Pittsburgh and during his tenure as an employee at one of its steel mills, Citizen has learned that Aunt Ester is the Hill District's spiritual advisor; she has, his peers say, the ability to heal souls. This appeals to Citizen, who is in search of absolution, having committed a crime that resulted in the death of another mill worker. Although he does not reveal the nature of his crime at this point in the play, his desperation is obvious given that he will not heed Eli's advice that he return on Tuesday, hence their fight. Citizen only departs when Aunt Ester appears and herself suggests he return Tuesday.

Acts One and Two document Citizen's official entry into Aunt Ester's care and household. In Act One, although he does not wait until Tuesday—he camps outside her house and breaks in when Aunt Ester is alone—Citizen finds himself welcomed. He joins and moves into Aunt Ester's community at 1839 Wylie Avenue, where he meets another of Aunt Ester's caretakers, Black Mary. Through the latter, Citizen also encounters Caesar Wilks. Black Mary's brother, Caesar is one of the richer African-Americans in the community, having established himself as a business owner and a local constable. During his stay at Aunt Ester's, Citizen helps Eli to build a stone wall—one purportedly designed to keep Caesar out—in return for his room and board. As part of his tenure at 1839 Wylie, Citizen also interacts with the other characters who round out the play: Solly Two Kings and Rutherford Selig. Solly, an older man who is a fixture in the neighborhood, is

an admirer of Aunt Ester and a former worker on the Underground Railroad; Selig is a white peddler who sporadically stops by Aunt Ester's house with his wares. (Selig is also known as a "people finder," a fact Wilson more fully explains in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.)

*Gem of the Ocean* ultimately centers on the spiritual journey that Citizen must take to overcome his past and become a member of this community, to be a citizen in more than name. When working at the mill, Citizen stole some nails and allowed another worker, Garret Brown, to take the blame, an event that has immediate and widespread consequences. Denying his guilt, Brown sought refuge from Caesar in the river and refused to emerge; knowing that doing so would result in his incarceration, he chose instead to drown. Citizen is haunted by this coworker's death, as is the Hill District as a whole. Although only Citizen and Aunt Ester know of the former's role in Brown's drowning, the people of the Hill District believe in Brown's innocence, a fact that leads to protests over his death and burial, as well as concern about the economic hardships faced by African-Americans; strikes; the shutting down of the mill; and the imprisonment of its protesting workers. Solly, audiences eventually learn, secretly sets the factory on fire at the end of Act One as a sign of protest.

At the same time as the mill story develops, Wilson's audiences learn that tensions exist between Black Mary and Caesar, that Aunt Ester is grooming Black Mary to become her replacement as the community's next spiritual advisor, and that there is a blooming attraction between Black Mary and Citizen. At the center of the play, however, is Citizen's search for forgiveness, peace, and absolution. Aunt Ester sends him across

the state performing various tasks that are meant to be ritualistic in nature (e.g., searching for pennies and finding a particular individual), and upon his return, she takes Citizen to the mythical City of Bones. Located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the City of Bones represents heaven and the physical resting place of many of the slaves who died en route to the Americas, and it becomes the site of Citizen's redemption. Through the power of suggestion, Aunt Ester, Black Mary, Eli, and Solly recreate the journey to the City of Bones on the ship named *Gem of the Ocean*, such that Citizen believes he is actually on a boat; indeed, his is a journey that finds him sweating, shaken, tossed by ocean waves, and afraid for his life even though he never leaves Aunt Ester's home. At one point, he sits on the floor, supposedly in the ship's hold, crying, whimpering, and eventually singing himself an African lullaby he heard in his youth.

Once he arrives at the dazzling City of Bones, Citizen confronts Garret Brown and receives his absolution. This moment occurs when Citizen, an individual who was born into freedom, is able to identify with the Other, as represented by the slave past of his ancestors and peers. At this point in *Gem of the Ocean*, as an outward sign of his transformation, he truly connects with those in the Hill District, particularly the disenfranchised members of the African-American community who find themselves at odds with those in power: when Caesar comes looking to arrest Solly, Citizen joins the other characters in the play to engineer their friend's escape. Although Solly dies in the end, shot by Caesar, his death marks a second rebirth for Citizen as it allows him the opportunity to display what he has learned. Understanding the hardships others are facing, Citizen had already agreed to accompany Solly down South to help out a sibling

who is in desperate straits and who is prevented from going north. Once Solly dies however, Citizen literally assumes Solly's mantle and takes up his cause as a freedom fighter; he will continue Solly's crusade to free other African-Americans who, despite their alleged freedom, find their liberties curtailed and denied.

As a whole, *Gem of the Ocean* speaks to issues of trauma, diaspora, and dispossession particularly as they relate to America. Through the title itself and the boat to which it refers, Wilson foregrounds the United States as a site of trauma, dispossession, and exile in a few key ways. Firstly, there was indeed a slave ship called *Gem of the Ocean*. This name is also the title of a drama written by Amiri Baraka, one of the "Bs" Wilson cites as an influence and inspiration.<sup>109</sup> The title and boat additionally allude to David T. Shaw's "Columbia, Land of the Brave," which is often alternately referred to as "Columbia, Gem of the Ocean." This popular nineteenth-century song, written before the Civil War, is largely patriotic and nationalistic in its views, highlighting popular (and positive) aspects of America: home of the free, land of the brave, a beacon of liberty and opportunity.<sup>110</sup> This "Gem of the Ocean," as an apposite linked to the female Columbia, a symbol of the United States, stands in direct opposition to the lack of freedoms experienced by African-Americans in 1904. Indeed, in Aunt Ester's account of this slave ship, the captain abandons vessel, crew, and cargo when their supply of drinking water is lost (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.2.67). The United States, instead of being the mythic land of opportunity, equality, and freedom, thus

<sup>109</sup> Other inspiring "B"s for Wilson include Romare Bearden, Jorge Luis Borges, the blues, Ed Bullins, and James Baldwin.

<sup>110</sup> Besides citing connections between Baraka, Shaw's song, and Wilson's title, Elam notes a poem by Phyllis Wheatley (80).



becomes the site of a battle over the most basic of physical needs and the cause of death and hardship. After all, Wilson notes the ship (in this instance a symbol of American society) and not the Middle Passage itself is the site of death, hardship, and suffering linked to the slave trade.

By setting the entire play in Aunt Ester's home and by linking the United States to a slave ship and Citizen's healing, Wilson suggests that although the United States is both a site and source of trauma for many minorities, it is also the place where that trauma can be resolved if and when community is fostered. Moreover, by creating *Gem of the Ocean* for the stage, by telling this tale as a drama, Wilson engages audiences in the physicality of trauma; they are literally invited into Aunt Ester's home and physically experience and see Citizen's journey to the City of Bones as and when he does, and it is this tension between past and present—between immateriality and physicality—that surrounds and defines the City of Bones and becomes a marker of the simultaneity and liminality of trauma. Wilson's audiences themselves must grapple with the physicality of slavery, diaspora, and the Middle Passage as historical remnants of the past in the present.

At the play's end, despite Solly's death and the warrant Caesar will most likely issue for Citizen's arrest, Citizen is freed from his past but chooses to dedicate himself to others by assuming Solly's mission. He ties himself more securely to this community he has joined as well as that of the larger African-American community within the United States. Thus, for Elam, "Solly's death near the end of the play, and the trajectory of *Gem of the Ocean* as a whole, suggests that this question, 'what good is freedom?', is not simply one left in the past. For Wilson, in this play and throughout his canon, asks that

this question continually be reconsidered” (87). Revising Elam’s thoughts, I maintain Wilson’s question about freedom is linked to a physical past and to a physical (i.e., present) moment as a physically tangible problem. In other words, both the ship and play called *Gem of the Ocean* become a vehicle of transport, separation, empathic unsettlement, and possible unification for Wilson’s audiences if they recognize the need for healing within various areas of American society and each individual’s role in that process, regardless of his or her race and connection to moments of past and present suffering linked to racism.

### **Citizens in Name Only**

Citizen’s crime (i.e., stealing the nails and letting another take the blame) and the resulting moment of trauma stem from his lack of income, lack of opportunity, and the economic impoverishment placed on him by his job and, by extension, a racist society. Although he has left his home in Alabama, moved north in an attempt to better himself, and found work at the mill, Citizen continues to be enslaved in a life of degradation and deprivation. Early in *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen reveals to Aunt Ester that he is unable to make ends meet because his landlord and the mill consistently cheat him out of his meager earnings. “Room and board” turns out to just be a room, and Citizen’s roommate even denies him the opportunity to sleep in a bed. Additionally, when payday arrives, Citizen realizes the mill is garnishing part of his wages, and when he threatens to quit, he is told that he cannot because of the money he still owes (Wilson 1.2.22). Like members of the Joad family in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* once they begin picking fruit in

California (450-523; ch. 26-27), Citizen discovers he is working to support the company store rather than himself.

In these ways, although the North represents greater opportunity and freedom, Citizen finds himself treated as an individual with fewer rights than his white counterparts. With his ability to meet his most basic needs dependent on others, he remains in a slave state: penniless, possessionless, and without agency. He lacks the basic amenities of a home, resorts to thievery to get ahead, and is told he cannot move on. Even Citizen's initial decision to go north was prompted by a lack of opportunities; early in *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson has Citizen inform the other characters in the play that when he left Alabama, he had to travel on back roads because whites "didn't want anybody to leave. Say we had to stay there and work" (1.2.22). In other words, slavery may be officially over, but the immediate consequences of dispossession and a lack of belonging remain in effect for Citizen—and the black citizens who surround him. In fact, homelessness is such an issue in *Gem of the Ocean* that characters talk of the many individuals who have resorted to sleeping under bridges (1.1.10), and Solly is so disturbed by his peers' life of poverty that he commits arson (2.2.70). Solly realizes that although the factory is Pittsburgh's main source of employment, its wages and shutdowns, which are themselves indicators of poverty in that they are related to employees stealing materials from their job site that they can use or sell (1.1.11), are actually perpetuating economic hardship.

Unlike Citizen in the first half of the play, Solly is able to see beyond his own hardships. He realizes, in fact, that conditions in Pittsburgh are indicative of the

sufferings African-Americans face throughout the nation and that, in the language of Erikson's *A New Species of Trouble*, trauma can arise from a singular event as well as from ongoing, cumulative conditions of hardship. As a result, Solly returns to his earlier, antebellum profession; having worked as a "dragman" on the Underground Railroad in the 1800s, he now finds himself, in the twentieth century no less, needing to return to the South to save his sister Eliza. A letter from Eliza that prompts his return says,

the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since bondage. The people are having a hard time with freedom. I can't hold on here anymore. The white peoples is gone crazy and won't let anybody leave. They beat one fellow on the road so bad his mama say, "Who is he?" They killed some more and say the colored can't buy any tickets on the train to get away. Say they will sink the ferry if any colored on it. I want to leave to come North but it is too bad. It is a hard time for everybody. Write and let me know what to do as I try to hold on but can't. (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 1.1.15)

Eliza's letter, with its use of words like "bondage" and "freedom," as well as its focus on the beatings of African-Americans and the lack of movement imposed on them, obviously speaks to aspects of slavery. Stylistically, Eliza's letter also reminds Wilson's audience of other aspects of the slave system. Her grammatical errors, particularly her "white peoples is" construction, marks her lack of formal education as well as a perceptive understanding of the social situation. The phrase "white peoples" becomes for her a larger social entity, such that whites, a plural, become singular in nature, exerting power in ways that are more formidable than those wielded by individuals working alone. The traumas of slavery and segregation are so pervasive and acutely felt that they become referenced in the letter's content as well as its form. Moreover, the letter reiterates that issues of freedom reach beyond Wilson's hometown of Pittsburgh to the larger nation. As

many who went north in the Great Migration learned, leaving a racist South did not translate into an escape from racism.

Details surrounding Eliza’s plea for help, namely Solly’s circumstances, also highlight the continuing effects of slavery. Although Solly allegedly lives in freedom, his inability to read (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 1.1.15) or write (1.3.25-26) likewise marks the education that white America denied him as a (former) slave. Also, although both he and Aunt Ester recognize the value of hard work, Black Mary questions the job that he pursues—or that, because he refuses to work at the mill, society on some level allows him to pursue. Solly supports himself by selling “pure,” or dried dog excrement, as fertilizer, a profession that ironically ties him once more to the Underground Railroad: dogs attacked him while he was leading other African-Americans to freedom, and he still carries scars from those attacks (2.2.58). Solly’s choice of work also ties him to the agricultural work performed by slaves. Solly, however, chooses not to reject this past and the potentially traumatizing sufferings that characterize it. He embraces his slave past although Wilson has some of Solly’s peers turn to other types of work to support themselves as a means of purposely avoiding any connections to slavery. (For example, Citizen turns to the steel mill, and Caesar the food, housing, and liquor businesses, as well as the business of the law.) Aunt Ester and Solly, as members of an older and wiser generation, as ones who survived the traumas of their slave past, respond as they do because they recognize the need to accept the past and the affirmative power of doing so even when the past is marked by traumatizing events. In fact, Aunt Ester scolds Black Mary, who refuses to handle Solly’s wares, reminding her that “God made that! Ain’t

nothing in God’s creation that ain’t good” (1.1.16).<sup>111</sup> She and Solly even call the manure “pure,” allowing Wilson to highlight that their past is something to be valued and revered. Likewise, just as Solly’s work and scars serve as a physical marker of his former slave status, Solly’s name, too, marks him: he changed his name from Alfred Jackson, the name Caesar inscribes on his arrest warrant (2.4.79), in an attempt to hide from the law and slave catchers. Moreover, the names he chooses, David and Solomon, are taken from the Old Testament and serve as another way of elevating himself above (while still honoring) this slave past. He selects names that reference royalty, but he still finds himself, like Citizen, with fewer liberties than his white counterparts.

Most importantly, his scars, names, even his walking stick, as reminders of a past trauma, indicate that surviving trauma can be linked to a greater good when utilized for others. For example, although Solly’s walking stick temporarily serves as a physical barrier to the City of Bones in the second act and prevents Citizen’s full immersion into this community, it is first and foremost a marker of individual and collective hardship that he transforms into a means of communal support, memory, and freedom. In the same passage in which he describes his arrival in Canada as passenger on the Underground Railroad, he talks of returning to his Railroad duties and using the stick as a weapon (1.3.27-28). Indeed, later he explicitly links the stick to his time on the Railroad (2.2.57), and although his focus is on violence—he calls the stick a “bone breaker” (1.3.27-28)—he resorts to this violence in the context of helping others, something he exhorts Citizen

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<sup>111</sup> Ironically, Black May adamantly refuses to respect Solly’s work and its tie to agriculture. Although she is a member of the younger generation and was born free, she is also linked to slavery through her choice of work: she serves as a domestic for Aunt Ester.

to do (28): the stick now carries sixty-two notches with each mark representing a fugitive slave he helped to bring to freedom (2.2.57).

Likewise, when Aunt Ester transforms the image of a rope—a marker of lynching that Wilson connects to her son Junebug’s death—into a positive, she asserts the idea that healing from trauma does not always necessitate acceptance from the larger group. Communal negotiation is no longer the only means to healing. It remains a factor, but so does individual acceptance, and in this instance, the attempt to change for the better marks the healing from the trauma. For example, after admitting that Junebug’s death was “[t]he darkest day [she] ever did see,” Aunt Ester shows that she ultimately accepted that loss by noting “Rope can help you do a lot of things. You tie it around a bucket and you can get water out of a well. You can tie things together with a piece of rope. God make the rope. It’s man who sometimes gets in the way of God’s creation and turns it over to the devil” (Wilson 1.2.21). Although Aunt Ester’s perspective may highlight the importance, for many, of faith in overcoming adversity, this passage also highlights humanity’s role in causing trauma as well as the individual’s willingness to confront a traumatizing event and seek to overcome it. The rope, however, also connects with the larger thematic focus on physical community. As a physical object, the rope’s strength comes from the individual strands that comprise it, that are bound together in a cohesive, stronger, new whole. She intimates then that healing involves consciously dealing with trauma and moving it towards a larger communal purpose. This explains her use of the second person in this passage. Granted, she is talking to Citizen, but the use of “you” directs that healing and help outward. If she had used “I,” the focus remains only on the

applicability of her advice to herself; “you” directs it to Citizen as well as to those individuals viewing the play. Additionally, by connecting the rope to water, Wilson foreshadows the sea journey that Citizen will undertake in the second act, one that is largely influenced by community.

### **Aunt Ester and Slavery: Trauma as Visiting and Vanquishing the Past**

Beyond the rope and the loss of her children, Aunt Ester brings the realities of slavery and its emotional horrors front and center for Wilson’s audiences in other ways. Based on her physical appearance and frailties, Aunt Ester was obviously born when slavery was legal; she even retains the document that relates that she was sold at the age of “twelve years and five months old... for the sum of \$607” (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.4.78). It is thus no surprise Wilson portrays Aunt Ester as older and physically weak. She hobbles around the stage, and Eli and Black Mary fret about her health (1.1.16). She even has to have Black Mary wash her feet (1.5.42), and when Caesar escorts her to the police station for helping Solly, the others are shocked not just because she is under arrest (2.4.80), but because she has not left the house in decades (1.1.10). She is no ordinary elder though. Alleging to be 285 years old, Aunt Ester rises to the occasion despite her frailties: she directs Citizen on his journey to wholeness and quickly moves into action when the other characters carry a wounded Solly into her home (2.5.81). Additionally, she deliberately uses her knowledge of past events to help others, a fact found in many of the plays in Wilson’s cycle. Because of both her age and her actions, we can easily dismiss Aunt Ester as the spectacle character that inhabits many of Wilson’s plays, and



indeed Wilson's audiences can readily see her as being mystical; she is, after all, the Hill District's spiritual advisor and "soul washer."

However, unlike the other plays in Wilson's cycle in which she is mentioned, it is in *Gem of the Ocean* that readers learn Aunt Ester is not some supernatural, death-defying creature. Although her physical appearance would easily place her in slave times, it is the name "Aunt Ester Tyler" that specifically links her to slavery, the past, and the larger African-American community. Because her name is actually a title, her character emphasizes the persistence of the past in the present. As she explains to Black Mary in Act 1, Scene 5, this name has been handed down from predecessor to successor, much like trauma can be handed down from generation to generation. Thus, *Gem of the Ocean*'s Aunt Ester is merely one in a long line of women who have served their communities as a maternal caretaker, and this is the title that Black Mary, once she agrees, will next assume (43). The handing down of this role and name from woman to woman highlights not only issues of gender and power, but the importance of the physical as a means of responding to trauma. By having the community's spiritual leader be an African-American woman, an individual with the potential to be doubly marginalized, by race and by sex, Wilson emphasizes the power that traumatized individuals actually have. Moreover, through Aunt Ester, he foregrounds that individuals may recover from traumatic memories, but they will find themselves forever changed; complete triumph, in the sense of a return to a prior state of wholeness, is not a possibility. Strength comes instead through the process of engaging with trauma, with life, by bringing the past literally, physically, tangibly into the present and using it for the

larger communal good. Paradoxically, healing concerns not just the individual but, ultimately, others as well.

Because of her age, Aunt Ester has greater ramifications for Wilson's work and to scholars who focus on slavery and racism as sources of trauma. If she is 285 years old, Aunt Ester was born in 1619, a year of particular significance for the United States and the origins of national suffering, hardship, and inequality in the Americas. Because 1619 is when slaves were first brought to the Virginia colony, Wilson draws attention to how intricately tied slavery is to American history. Obviously, this date is, to some degree, problematic, for it ignores much we have been taught about Columbus, Spanish and French explorers, and their abuse of indigenous peoples. This is something of which Wilson was keenly aware if we consider his one-sentence short story "The Greatest Blues Singer in the World," which he references in the foreword to *King Hedley II*. This story reads as follows: "The streets that Balboa walked were his own private ocean, and Balboa was drowning" (vii). By including this story in his introduction to *King Hedley II*, the play in which Aunt Ester dies, and by connecting the fifteenth-century Spanish conquistador Balboa to the genre of blues music, Wilson specifically links European, American, and African history. He recognizes the interrelations between the new and old worlds and the role that slavery, conquest, and colonialism played in them. Moreover, Wilson is reminding audiences of the danger of identifying America's beginnings with 1620, the Puritans, Plymouth Rock and the like, with their connotations of religious tolerance, compassion, and religious freedom. By using 1619 as the year of Aunt Ester's birth, Wilson offers some sly commentary about the myths surrounding America, namely

that America is not about freedom (religious or otherwise), but about slavery, intolerance, and the lack of liberty. Racism, in other words, is what has consistently defined and traumatized America, and indeed all of the play's African-American characters remain in some form of bondage or another.

By tying Aunt Ester specifically to the beginnings of slavery in what would become the United States, and by setting the play in 1904, Wilson emphasizes how the country's traumatic past—involving slavery—remains part of the twentieth century. Slavery and the problems it poses are thus still present, literally and figuratively, in her character. Moreover, Wilson questions the privileging of America's European origins and asks audiences to recognize its African beginnings as well. Wilson thus is arguing for a more expansive idea about American history, identity, and community, of what it means to be a citizen and how America's heritage encompasses the history of all its peoples, not just those wielding power. As one of America's first citizens, Aunt Ester thus becomes a marker, touchstone, reminder, and example of what it means to survive and how that occurs. For her and for the Aunt Esters that precede and follow her, survival and self-preservation involve the active creation of community and the deliberate reframing of traumatizing memories. Just as the historical moment dictates what gets counted and studied as history, narrativizing trauma for Wilson and Aunt Ester involves filling in the gaps and understanding events rationally as well as physically and emotionally. Consider, for example, that we do not know the date of Aunt Ester's arrival in the New World nor when or where she was born, only when she was sold, but does this matter? It does not, for if healing from trauma is claiming knowledge, Aunt Ester represents the individual

doing just that: she claims her heritage, past, and the trauma of slavery through her date of sale and name (or, at least, that of the women who preceded her). Moreover, she physically and emotionally understands Citizen's pain and suffering. Unlike Caesar, a former slave who writes off others' suffering when he should know their pain—he has been through similar situations, and as their landlord and local constable, he contributes to their hardships—Aunt Ester offers Citizen food and shelter with no strings attached. Beyond helping to orchestrate his healing, she tenderly sings him lullabies (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 1.2.23) and gives him work to do to help give his life meaning. (Caesar, by contrast, gives Citizen a quarter and a promise of lodging, but in the same breath threatens him with violence and eviction [1.3.31-32], indicating how racism and trauma actually involve Other-ing and how easy it is for racist thinking and attitudes to be transferred and taught to others even through alleged acts of kindness.)

As a person and a community institution whose name—a title she has consciously chosen—and role connect her specifically to the past and older generations, Aunt Ester is destined to keep memories, including those of traumatizing events, alive, and as such, her character reiterates that trauma actively involves physicality and a personal commitment to healing; her character demonstrates healing is more than an instinctual response that the psyche dictates. As she avers, “I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. I got to feed them otherwise they'd eat me up. I got memories go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folks. All the old-timey folks. I'm carrying their memories and I'm carrying my own” (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 1.5.43). In the parlance of trauma theory, Aunt Ester realizes the need

to remember and integrate memories into a cohesive narrative structure and the necessity of acting consciously, hence her use of the first person and short declarative sentences that reference her as an individual with agency. She does not merely wait for triggers to which her psyche responds. She transforms events to her benefit and that of the larger community.

Aunt Ester specifically encapsulates that connection between the individual and community, and the relationship among preservation, healing, and physicality, through the use of the words “carrying” and “feeding,” transitive verbs that literally emphasize the realities of the physical world. She feeds these memories and lets them nourish her rather than repress them and let them eat her up; she allows them to become part of her personal history and, given her role in the Hill District, of the larger narrative of the African-American community. Aunt Ester, in other words, becomes the deliberate and deliberating medium through which others’ healing occurs. Her insistence on remembering out loud speaks of the importance of testimony to the healing process; this speaking out loud also reiterates that the healing of trauma involves acts that are purposely chosen and performed. Additionally, Aunt Ester’s actions emphasize the need for traumatized individuals to have a conscious understanding of the issues surrounding historiography and narrativization—that society allows for their stories to be told. Healing, as Aunt Ester knows and demonstrates, even though historiography and narrativization are not part of her vocabulary, can be orchestrated, taught, and manipulated.

Aunt Ester, as a healer, also allows herself to walk trauma's fine line of empathic unsettlement. Per LaCapra, she knows the danger of emotional transference and of being swallowed up by trauma, trapped in the process of acting out trauma rather than acting through it (65-70). Consider the above phrasing when she talks of her memory and her duty to remember. As noted, she uses the active and present tense (i.e., "I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive") to describe how she feeds these memories rather than allow them to consume her. She maintains (i.e., chooses) order and control over them as narratives that need to be passed on as an "acknowledge[ment of] the passionate, suffering affectional side of human nature" (Hartman 545). In this way, Aunt Ester reminds audiences and the other characters in the play that trauma exists both in the past and present, and that audiences must learn to bear witness to trauma without being consumed by it. They must learn to bring the various elements together as in a quilt, an object she displays in the play (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.1.52). Her use of the first person and present tense is thus particularly relevant, and her focus on her self in the active voice denotes once more her choice to seek out healing and create meaning from the things that happen to her. Hers is not a passive healing that "just" occurs; it is one she actively selects and to which she willingly submits. Again, it is this choosing that upsets ideas about healing from trauma, namely that it is not something over which the individual lacks control.

Because healing, as Aunt Ester demonstrates, is not just a subconscious response, but one in which the individual most actively participates, this explains why she gives Citizen various tasks to perform and why he himself must choose to continue on his

journey to the City of Bones. He must believe that his journey is real, and he must not run away from the experience. His moment of healing occurs when he models himself after Aunt Ester and also uses the first person, the short declarative sentences, and the transitive verbs to confess and to name himself. As with Aunt Ester, healing occurs only at Citizen's choosing and self-declaration. From the very beginning of *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson has Citizen actively seek out Aunt Ester and repeatedly choose to heed her advice and directions. Even though he throws down her Bill of Sale in fear while he is on the ship named *Gem of the Ocean* (2.2.67) and physically turns away from Gatekeeper Garret Brown when he arrives at the City of Bones (2.2.69), Citizen ultimately elects to follow her advice. He makes the choice to pursue his healing. Citizen thus demonstrates the degree to which agency and free dictate the healing process.

I do not mean to be overly optimistic and argue that healing occurs simply and immediately at an individual's choosing. Obviously, some individuals never get over their losses especially when communities deny healing, will not acknowledge that an event even occurred, or continue to perpetuate the conditions and causes of suffering, but key to Citizen's transformation are his active attempts to achieve healing and communion with others. Wilson shows him doggedly persevering to be in Aunt Ester's presence (Prologue.7-8, 1.1.9, 1.2.19); he willingly accepts the tasks asked of him, whether they involve building a wall (1.2.23) or searching for pennies and people (1.5.46); he continues to believe he is on a boat going to the City of Bones. At any point, he could step back and refuse to participate; instead, he continues on his journey. He goes along with this performance, ultimately saying, at Aunt Ester's urging, to the Gatekeeper to the

City of Bones, Garret Brown: “It was me. I done it. My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails” (2.2.69). Only at this point does he gain admission to the City of Bones.

Moreover, that trauma surrounds issues of knowledge and knowing and that the healing of it involves issues of language and linguistics, of signs and symbols, are similarly tied to Aunt Ester. However, through this character, Wilson demonstrates that healing can never occur purely in the realm of the symbolic. It is the union of the symbolic and physical, the figurative and the literal, within the communal sphere that yields healing. For this reason the map to the City of Bones, which has been stitched onto the quilt that Aunt Ester shows Citizen as she prepares him for his journey, is so telling. Just as Citizen transforms his spiritual, psychic journey into a physical experience, Aunt Ester (and Wilson) models the need to bring together scraps of the past into a larger, integrated, ordered whole.<sup>112</sup> As the narrator of Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” recognizes, a quilt only has meaning when it is put to use, and when the knowledge of its significance is understood and lived, rather than merely displayed on a wall as historic knowledge. Like the rope to which Aunt Ester refers when discussing the death of her son (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 1.2.21), the pieces of this quilt that features the City of Bones only gain value, strength, and significance when brought together into a larger whole, when the quilt is understood as a physical and tactile marker of the world, a physicality

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<sup>112</sup> Wilson’s twentieth-century cycle also fits this description if we remember that the plays were written in non-chronological order (i.e., he did not write *Gem of the Ocean* first, followed by his 1910s play, the 1920s play, etc.). As a result, even audiences who followed Wilson’s career play by play as each debuted must reorder all ten plays into their correct sequence and larger whole for their full meaning to emerge.



heightened through thread, batting, layers, knots, and physical embellishments not present on a paper map. The quilt is a layered, three-dimensional reminder of the past that has a greater chance of surviving the vagaries of time. Moreover, unlike a piece of paper, the creation of a quilt differs from the mere act of putting pen to paper. Traditional patchwork quilts bring together pieces of the past. They demand greater physical involvement on the part of their producers and stand as a more time-consuming and tangible act of documentation than writing. Like the mother in Walker's story who gives the quilts to the daughter who knows how to construct them, Aunt Ester shows that her quilt and trauma gain power only when people actively use them, when the events, stories, and hardships they represent are actually recognized, understood, and felt by and for others. This is the work and ends of healing from trauma.

The detail of the quilt also acknowledges the link between drama and trauma. If history is a series of traumas (Caruth 16), artists, whether writers, quilters, visual artists, or musicians, who recycle parts of the past and focus on trauma as their subject matter are ultimately working to make history a more integrated part of our collective knowledge. Their aim is to tell "the stor[ies] of political and cultural disengagement" (16). In this way, if something of the past and trauma always remains, as loss, lack, or presence, we must recognize that imagined (i.e., artistic) reconstructions themselves have the potential to move readers who remain separated from events because of time, space, place, socioeconomics, race, gender, etc. Moreover, drama, because of its particular ability to engage us differently than other genres and mediums, has the potential to be

traumatizing, to intrude on our daily lives, and to ask us to recognize others' experiences as being similar to, as well as different from, our own.

### **Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale: Texts, Trauma, and Choosing, Then and Now**

Though “just” a piece of paper, Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale and the specifics surrounding it, like the quilt, have relevance not just for audiences interested in Wilson's cycle or in discussions of slavery, but for students of trauma. Wilson, however, offers few descriptive details about this document. Although it is referenced throughout *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson never describes its physical attributes in terms of size, condition, or color. In essence, as a prop, it is thus no different from the letter Solly receives from his sister. However, Wilson links these simple sheets of paper to the weighty issues of freedom and the curtailing of individuals' physical movement and rights. For this reason, the lack of details about the Bill of Sale is intriguing. The only specifics that Wilson provides are that Aunt Ester folds the document into a paper boat (2.2.63) and then unfolds it for Caesar when he arrives looking for Solly with yet another piece of paper designed to restrict an individual's movement and liberties—an arrest warrant (2.4.78-79). As for the information recorded on Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale, Wilson supplies only this: “Know all men by these present, that I, William J. Ogburn of the County of Guilford... State of North Carolina, have this day sold and delivered... to Isaac Thatcher... a Negro slave girl named Ester, twelve years five months old... for the sum of \$607: the right and title to said girl... I warrant and defend now and forever to be sound and healthy” (2.4.78). In these few lines, with the ellipses part of the script itself, Wilson indicates that the Bill of

Sale, as a textual document linked to trauma, reinforces that (traumatizing) events have value only if people attach significance to them. Thus, despite the holes in the text, representing the gaps linked to the dissociative nature of trauma and memory, Wilson emphasizes the weight that this text still carries, in 1904 as well as in the twenty-first century, by always choosing to capitalize it throughout the script.<sup>113</sup> Likewise, Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale reminds us that trauma is often linked to gender, larger society, and imbalances of power, and that language is a means to perpetuate trauma. Except for the one reference to Ester Tyler in the document as Wilson relates it to his audience, the focus is on men, their status, and their power. The use of the first person to identify Ogburn reiterates the power of the patriarchy; his testimony about Aunt Ester's health and physical state—"now and forever"—is proof enough and makes Ester Tyler literally and semantically the object of this sentence and transaction.

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<sup>113</sup> This focus on texts and documents as a source of healing appears in various plays by Wilson. Boy Willie from *The Piano Lesson* views a deed and the land it represents as a way of overcoming the slave past that the carved piano of the title represents. Deeds are also central to *Radio Golf* in that the deed to Aunt Ester's home, illegally obtained, may stop a revitalization initiative in downtown Pittsburgh and effectively end several individuals' political careers. Recording contracts and sheet music are critical to both *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Seven Guitars*, and the invalidity of a sales receipt in *King Hedley II* prompts King to consider marching on a local Sears's photo department with a machete (2.1.63). Although not dealing with issues of land, Wilson's character Stool Pigeon focuses on texts and another type of ownership. Stool Pigeon, a character who appears in *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*, fixates on the importance of newspapers in the latter work. Stool Pigeon so stubbornly refuses to throw out papers, because they chronicle the community's history, that another character considers reporting him to authorities for zoning violations (1.2.27). Additionally, when hoodlums break into Stool Pigeon's home, attack him, and maliciously burn his collection, his concern is not for his physical wounds, but the loss of his past. He carries the newspapers' ashes around with him in a bag (2.2.68-69) because he realizes the community is separated from its history. This too applies to Wilson's audience members. The loss of the papers is the loss of their past, and this is why in *Gem of the Ocean* Aunt Ester keeps and urges Citizen to cling to the Bill of Sale—to their past.

Wilson's details about geography as found in this document are also another means whereby he points to the connections between slavery, power, semantics, and American history. Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale refers to North Carolina; if Aunt Ester's birth date connects to the slave trade in Virginia, her sale thus brings in yet another colony, reiterating the expansion of slavery in the Americas. More interesting is the use of the phrase "state of North Carolina" well before North Carolina or any of the original colonies were indeed states. In this way, Wilson reiterates audiences' need to reconsider American history and the fact that language and audiences shape history and trauma; he points to the fact that identifying North Carolina as a state helped to promote its independent status. The colony gained meaning, power, and status in part through language, just as recognizing an event as traumatizing (or not) grants it that status and just as Aunt Ester's health could be proven by her master's word. Additionally, referring to North Carolina as a state before it was a state is itself an act of revisionist history emphasizing that slavery would indeed carry over into American nationhood—from the seventeenth through the twenty-first centuries. These moves thus become ways in which Wilson forces audiences, particularly American audiences, to recognize the vestiges of slavery and racialized trauma in modern times and to see that linguistic acts can convey racialized trauma.

Also significant is that Wilson and Aunt Ester focus on her Bill of Sale rather than any documents that marked her as a free woman. Trauma, they reassert, is not just negotiated between the individual and the collective; on some subconscious level, the individual himself chooses to give it meaning and weight, and in doing so, he deems it to

be traumatizing. Thus, rather than focus on her freedom and the event that provided it to her, Wilson through Aunt Ester focuses on a more troubling moment that defines her and her ancestors, the particular event that has plagued these individuals: her time as a slave. Rather than highlight the documents that mark Aunt Ester's passage to freedom, Wilson emphasizes the relevance of slavery in modern life and the ways in which traumas and losses define individuals. Her focus on the Bill of Sale also needs to be considered in light of Solly's history with the Underground Railroad and his slave experiences, as well as Citizen's interactions with Garret Brown. Just as Solly chooses to focus on his rechristening rather than his slave name (even after the Emancipation Proclamation when he should no longer be considered a fugitive), Citizen feels guilty about Garret Brown's death because he chooses to see it as a murder rather than an accident or a suicide. Likewise, Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale continues to have meaning because she gives it meaning.<sup>114</sup> Thus, although theorists tie trauma to the subconscious (linked per Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to a rending of the psychic skin [23]), the situations surrounding Citizen, Aunt Ester, and Solly reiterate that there is a degree of choice. For example, although Caesar dismisses the Bill of Sale as "dead," claiming "[t]hese ain't slavery times no more, Miss Tyler. You living in the past. All that done changed. The law done changed" (2.4.78), the way in which Aunt Ester uses the Bill of Sale—the fact that

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<sup>114</sup> This idea of competing meanings is also present in many of Wilson's plays, such as *The Piano Lesson*; the piano has different significance for siblings Boy Willie and Berniece because each places a different value on their family history. For Boy Willie, selling the piano represents a means of moving forward financially and a sign of his ancestors triumphing over slave owners; for his sister, the piano is an heirloom to be cherished and preserved, and a painful reminder of the losses the women in her family experienced.

she uses the Bill of Sale—marks its relevance and currency because she deems it to have relevance and currency. Her folding and unfolding of the Bill of Sale thus points to scholars, such as Farrell, who recognize the uses of trauma. When we perceive individuals as merely reacting to events beyond their control, the fact that trauma has cultural uses and performs cultural work gets diminished, and we can view Wilson’s work as correcting that misconception. By focusing on this document, Aunt Ester emphasizes that the lessons Citizen and twenty-first century viewers, both black and white, need to learn concern freedom *and* slavery. By having Citizen reclaim an event that he did not experience, that occurred before he was born, Wilson points to the overriding and overarching effects of slavery in the modern world. No one remained—or remains—untouched by it.

Paradoxically, choice as it relates to trauma is also tied to Aunt Ester’s role as a healer. Although her Bill of Sale links her to the past, trauma, and the horrors of the slave trade—the U.S. in other words is both a site and source of trauma—she chooses and directs the document’s significance, marking this textual artifact as an object that allows her to help others and that ties her to a larger extended family defined by skin color. For example, as a means to serve others, her Bill of Sale achieves talismanic status by becoming the boat *Gem of the Ocean* on which Citizen will travel to the City of Bones (Wilson 2.2.63). The document stands for the communal and ancestral memories of the journey of the Middle Passage and the various individuals, including her own family members, who died on their trip to the Americas. In this way, beyond providing physical proof of her name, the document enables the Aunt Esters, family members, friends, and

strangers who preceded her to be commemorated; the Bill of Sale becomes, in the twentieth century, tangible and physical proof of their experience. Because she represents this long line of Aunt Esters—and because she physically embodies these women in name and action, assuming the memories and stories of others in the community—this document enables Aunt Ester to remember those who survived the passage, along with their descendants who lived through or died in slavery. A text itself, the Bill of Sale highlights the importance of language to trauma and the ways in which one can overcome trauma by testifying about it. Additionally, as a result of her focus on communication and the presence of the historical past in the present, the Bill of Sale commemorates kin<sup>115</sup> who died in “freedom,” like Garret Brown and, at the play’s end, Solly. The Bill of Sale thus becomes particularly significant as a trauma text that marks the horrors of slavery specifically because it represents a past that, on a literal level, is not necessarily *this* Aunt Ester’s or this audience’s, yet still remains tied to the present. Moreover, this past does not compromise or weaken her; instead it compels her to help others. In these ways, the Bill of Sale—and slavery—can be read as a master narrative against which we must also read the other stories told in the play as well as those of American history, stories in which Americans are seen as the God-fearing and morally upright residents of a city on a hill, to use the language of the Puritans, rather than as aggressors. Thus, Wilson’s audiences, no matter their skin color, as fellow citizens of a postbellum society, must

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<sup>115</sup> She is, after all, the “aunt” of the entire African-American community of the Hill District. The only character in the play who even calls her Miss Tyler is Caesar (2.4.78, 2.4.80), the sole African-American that we see onstage who remains outside of Aunt Ester’s family. When Citizen arrives at her doorstep in the Prologue, even he addresses her as “aunt” (7).

follow Citizen's lead. We must acknowledge the danger inherent in not working to understand—really and truly to comprehend—all that slavery, diaspora, discrimination, and the historical past portend for citizens of the modern world.

Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale as a textual artifact therefore points to the relationship between trauma and agency. In this way, even for those in Wilson's audiences who miss that "Aunt Ester" is a title,<sup>116</sup> Aunt Ester's actual date of birth remains a moot point; what is of greater importance is that she claims it as her own. She herself need not have experienced the Middle Passage to realize the event as traumatizing, for "[w]hen a certain primal past is impossible, as the primal origin of the subject is for psychoanalysis, it can never be repossessed 'as it was.' It can only be encountered through repetition as an impossible experience *in the present*" (Belau par. 4). In this way, Wilson argues that the "primal origin" of the trauma of the slave trade "can never be repossessed 'as it was.'" This originary trauma must always be a repossession—and repossession is key if we remember that diaspora is literally about dispossession, that slaves were transformed into actual commodities and thus possessions. Additionally, we must recognize Wilson recreates this originary trauma for contemporary audiences as well as for Citizen. As such, Wilson demands that audiences realize slavery remains a source of trauma today, and because it is impossible for younger generations living in 1904 or the twenty-first century to have experienced the Middle Passage, they must experience its horrors in the realm of language and imagination—the symbolic—a fact Citizen realizes onstage in the

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<sup>116</sup> This includes those who are familiar with Wilson's other plays but have experienced them in the order in which they were written, produced, and published rather than when they are set.



second act. Audiences of Wilson's work also participate in this experience by their mere presence in the theater or as readers. However, beyond presence, viewing and reading audiences alike must imagine the event and learn that being an imagined event in no way minimizes the trauma's horrors. After all, Citizen's experiences in the second act when he journeys to the City of Bones are largely created in his mind. If audience members are willing, his situation can affect them just as it physically and emotionally affects Citizen. The fact that diaspora thus continues to impact newer generations points to the idea that what these characters are experiencing is, on some level, a "loss of loss itself" (Belau par. 11). Trauma and forced expulsion, as many pieces of literature attest, affect not only the first generation but subsequent ones. This reasoning becomes another way to counter the arguments of those who maintain slavery is a thing of the past, that slavery affected only past generations, or that we live in a post-racial society. In the same way, we must view Wilson as intimating that the loss of some defining trauma—some originary, foundational trauma that happened generations ago—can also be debilitating. The inability to identify with others who have been hurt breeds alienation and isolation within traumatized and non-traumatized individuals alike.

### **Citizen, the City of Bones, and the Physical World of Trauma**

Beyond using Aunt Ester and Citizen to emphasize that healing involves choice, Wilson also ties the physicality of trauma and its healing specifically to these characters. Wilson thus reminds readers and viewers that healing involves a commitment from the individual and an exertion of physical activity. It is not just a cognitive, emotional,

psychological response. Healing requires interaction with the material world and with the community. *Testimonio*, testifying, narrativizing, and storytelling are all crucial to healing from trauma, but so too, Wilson demonstrates, is an exertion of and commitment to physical action. As with Aunt Ester, Wilson shows through Citizen that healing from trauma is not just an instinctual reaction that occurs on the level of the subconscious, but a deliberately chosen and physically manifested act. Healing for him does not just involve negotiation, which implies a degree of loss and compromise, but actively working for the good of the larger community. It is not just knowledge or experience *à la* Cathy Caruth that is merely assumed; it must be actively sought out and then applied beyond the self to the larger group.

Indeed, physically connecting with others is something that Citizen desires. The need for physical connection explains his fight with Eli in the prologue (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 7-8), the fact that he maintains a vigil outside Aunt Ester's house, and that he ultimately breaks into her home when Eli and Black Mary are out (1.2.19). He cannot bear to be separated from Aunt Ester; hence the significance that her very appearance in the Prologue has a calming effect on him and makes him listen to reason (8). Audiences also glimpse this desire for physical contact in Act 1, Scene 4, which ends with Black Mary putting Citizen in his place. She rebuffs his sexual advances by saying she could come to his room in the night, but questions what he will have the next morning. When he replies he will have nothing but himself, his hands will be empty, she responds, "That ain't ever gonna be enough" (42), and it never will be enough because Citizen's focus is still on the self. Through this exchange and the various situations in the play, Wilson

sheds light on the dynamic between victim and group. The issue is not, as many trauma theorists say, group acceptance, but an individual focus on bettering the self as well as others.

The relevance of the physical to healing also appears in the next scene. Here, Citizen confesses to Aunt Ester his role in Garret Brown's death (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 1.5.44), but this telling does not lead to his healing, nor does it bridge the physical disconnection he feels from others. Aunt Ester realizes that narrativization and testimony—the Holy Grail for healing in trauma theory—are not sufficient to save Citizen and absolve him of his guilt. Wilson thus demonstrates that it is not enough for a community to accept the traumatized individual's story; the traumatized person must also learn to acknowledge and accept others' sufferings. Yes, healing involves the individual and the group, but it also centers on and around physical and symbolic acts, negotiations, and compromises the traumatized person performs for himself and for others. Recognizing this interplay between groups and individuals, the physical and the symbolic, as well as the physical and the interior, Aunt Ester creates a physical experience for Citizen to undertake, one that he eagerly accepts. This plan for purification involves performed actions that he must undergo as part of his healing:

I'm gonna tell you about the City of Bones but first I'm gonna send you upriver. When you get there I want to look around and find two pennies lying on the ground. They got to be lying side by side. You can't find one on one street and another on another street. They got to be lying side by side. If you see one laying by itself just let it lay there. When you find them two pennies I want you to put them in your handkerchief and bring them straight back to me. ....

[But before you do that] Mr. Citizen, I want you to follow the Monongahela River clear up to Blawnox. There's a man named Jilson Grant. Ask anybody where you can find him. Jilson Grant. Tell him Aunt Ester sent you....

He's gonna give you something. Then you take and put that in your handkerchief with the two pennies and bring it straight back to me. (1.4.46)

Jilson Grant's gift, which was supposed to be a piece of iron, is itself another instance of the need for the physical, for objects with mass and weight. Through these tasks and items, Wilson links a (physical) commitment to healing with the physical world. Because trauma is the reliving of a past event, Citizen has to experience this past wound in the present moment, and indeed the physicality of the present, of trauma, and of diasporic dispossession and disconnection is prominently displayed through his experiences. In fact, Aunt Ester shows the degree to which trauma and its healing involve the tangible, that trauma is not purely an inner, psychic occurrence. To be fair, we must recognize that trauma obviously occurs in response to physical events, and bodily responses to trauma undoubtedly arise out of flashbacks and nightmares, or in response to triggers. This physicality, after all, is what prompts aversion therapy, but ultimately trauma theory tends to privilege the belief that healing occurs within the psyche. *Gem of the Ocean*, however, offers a corrective, arguing for an awareness of the physical tangibility and manipulability of trauma. Wilson, through Aunt Ester, points to physicality as a means of healing, and of the necessity of accepting that tangibility and tactility. Thus, the Bill of Sale, the tasks Citizen must perform, and the journey to the City of Bones demonstrate that physical, tangible objects and experiences tied to the historical record also hasten recovery. After all, to facilitate Citizen's emotional journey, Aunt Ester has to send him on a physical one, one that deliberately involves the larger physical world and physical activity, and one that teaches him about others and Other-ing.

This focus on physicality and the physical world, as well as the group and the symbolic, and their relation to healing also surround Citizen's mystical destination. The City of Bones, like the ship *Gem of the Ocean*, as the site of wounds and healing transcends, as does trauma, time and space. By showing Citizen the quilted map detailing the route to the City of Bones, and by describing his destination as "the center of the world" (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.1.52), Aunt Ester fixes the City of Bones as a real and physical place defined in and by the present moment for Wilson's audiences. Although it marks the past and characters in the play associate it with death, it is also a site of life and living; Aunt Ester describes it thus:

The people [there] got a burning tongue, Mr. Citizen. Their mouths are on fire with song. That water can't put it out. That song is powerful. It rise up and come across the water. Ten thousand tongues and ten thousand chariots coming across the water. They on their way, Mr. Citizen. They coming across the water. Ten thousand hands and feet coming across the water. They on their way. (2.1.53)

Again, the focus here is not just on the symbolic (i.e., language), but the effect of the symbolic on the physical (i.e., bodies). Aunt Ester heightens the physicality of this space through a focus on the Empedoclean elements of fire, water, earth, and air, as well as on physical movement—of rolling chariots as well as moving feet. Moreover, Aunt Ester speaks of her mother and other family members who *currently* live there (2.1.52). It is a site, not of the past, but of life and the present. As Noggle says, referencing Joseph Roach, "The Middle Passage *is* a language in Wilson in that it communicates a shared history, not so much as it is 'discursively transmitted' through historical understanding but as a form of memory that is 'publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences'" (62) in the present. As such, Roach notes the connection between the

literal and the symbolic, the past and present, as well the physical and metaphysical. Citizen himself thus experiences the City of Bones in the actual moment, and although his trip occurs within the privacy of Aunt Ester's home, other characters serve as public witnesses to this physical journey.

Through these details, Wilson is thus pointing to the fact that the diaspora and traumas of the past are alive and well; because these historical sufferings remain in the present, Wilson recognizes throughout *Gem of the Ocean* that his audiences need to understand physically and intellectually the historical and present pain linked to racism in order to overcome it communally and collectively. In fact, although Citizen references different aspects and images of the City of Bones than Aunt Ester, he too emphasizes its physicality. Upon seeing it, he cries out, "It's made of bones! All the buildings and everything. Head bones and leg bones and rib bones. The streets look like silver. The trees are made of bones. The trees and everything made of bone" (2.2.68). Even Citizen's cry of terror that the populace of the City of Bones looks like he does—its people have his face (2.2.66)—emphasizes the physicality of the place. Thus, Wilson's recreation of the Middle Passage in 1904, decades after the fact, is another way in which he works to traumatize his audiences. Just as Citizen lives, rather than relives, the Middle Passage, so do Wilson's viewers. The Middle Passage is a crossing that Citizen and Wilson's audiences experience for the first time as an event that continues to traumatize individuals—emotionally and physically—in the twenty-first century. This focus on the physical becomes further proof of the necessity of using drama and the stage to study trauma, as drama and theater themselves emphasize issues of physicality rather than

merely engage audiences through written description as is the case in a novel or short story.

Citizen's physical involvement with healing is also evidenced in still other ways. Some productions have the actor portraying Citizen perform this scene with his eyes shut. Although this demonstrates that trauma is largely an interior wound that resides largely in the mind, such a staging reminds audiences of trauma's distinctly physical effects. When Aunt Ester speaks of the wind, waves, and stars, she is so effective in setting the scene that Citizen eventually "*gets up and makes a sudden move to balance himself*" before crying out "It's moving! The boat's moving! I feel it moving. The land... it's moving away" (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.2.65). He goes on to describe what he sees, but at one point is so taken aback that he is unable to breathe (2.2.66). Then, when he opens his eyes out of fear, he is so disoriented and unaware of his surroundings that he throws down the Bill of Sale—his boat. He struggles against the ensuing storm and finds himself whipped and branded (2.2.67). The stage directions likewise speak of his fear and awe at other points, noting at one moment that he has curled up into a fetal position and at another time that he has been struck speechless. Furthermore, at the very end of the journey, he is so engaged in the moment that he is drenched with sweat (2.2.70). As a result of the physical nature of his boat ride, once he has officially entered the city and gone into that nowhere space between Africa and America, between the traumatic past and present—which occurs only when he formally confesses to Garret Brown—Citizen sits down, crying in relief, becoming, per the stage directions, "*a man of the people*" (69-70).

Because Wilson depicts Citizen's ordeal onstage within the confines of Aunt Ester's house, he aims to make audiences of *Gem of the Ocean* also relive these moments of awe and terror. Like him, we are, when the play begins, outsiders to the community that gathers at 1839 Wylie. We too are to hear the songs that are sung to him, and although the stage directions do not specify whether or what special effects should be employed to conjure up a storm, we are to witness Citizen's physical and emotional responses; indeed, we are even meant to hear the ship's hatch fall shut with a bang (2.2.67). To heighten the senses of audience members, some productions have used troughs of flowing water onstage to evoke the City of Bones as well as the play's larger, constant setting of Pittsburgh and the three rivers that flow around it. As citizens of the twenty-first century, Wilson's audiences are likewise subject to witnessing a past event in the here and now, and the audiences' and Citizen's ability to experience this event, and deal with the traumas of the past, revolve around their own willingness to believe that the event is traumatic. Just as Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale will become the starting point for Citizen's redemption and become the boat *Gem of the Ocean* only if he believes (2.1.53), Wilson's audiences can recognize and experience his trauma, disconnection, and dispossession only if they believe in the trauma in question—both Citizen's story and the past Aunt Ester maintains—as well as its severity and the physical ramifications of that trauma. For this reason, the fact that Citizen finds himself “*symbolically brand[ed] and symbolically whip[ped]*” (2.2.67) has particular meaning and becomes another way to have Wilson's audiences engage with one trauma of America's past.<sup>117</sup> These acts of

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<sup>117</sup> Zaytoun claims that in the 2005 production of the play done at the Walter Kerr



symbolic torture, another aspect of the play Wilson chooses not to describe, highlight the relationship between the physical and the symbolic within trauma. By having actors mime the branding and whipping, Wilson forces audiences, including directors and actors, to imagine exactly what that would entail—the blood, the pain, the sizzle of iron on flesh. Readers and viewers must also contemplate what symbolically stands for branding and whipping in 2003, the date of the play’s debut: racism, discrimination, lack of opportunity, etc. Moreover, because Citizen is our guide and touchstone—he also has not experienced slavery officially; he too is a citizen of a more modern world—his reaction should be that of Wilson’s audiences. As there is no whip or brand for him, or for us, our reactions should be the same.<sup>118</sup>

This tension between past and present is also reflected in that Wilson sets the play’s action at 1839 Wylie, a fact characters mention multiple times in the drama. Aunt Ester’s address, critics note, alludes to the violence of diaspora, the slave trade, and the battles African-Americans fought to counter assertions that they were less than human. The year 1839 marks the date of the *Amistad* affair, which brought into question whether the United States was a place of sanctuary and asylum for exiled peoples and whether illegally gotten slaves were salvageable property. The fact that characters repeatedly describe 1839 Wylie as a house of refuge—a house, per Black Mary, of “sanctuary” (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.4.79)—marks the need for a safe haven in 1839 and

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Theater in New York City, Eli and Solly symbolically lynch Citizen as well (717), although TCG’s published version of the script does not mention this.

<sup>118</sup> On some level then, Wilson creates an embedded performance within the larger one just as Parks does in her work.

1904.<sup>119</sup> Linked to a court case questioning ideas of slavery, autonomy, freedom, and asylum, 1839 Wylie becomes a literal place of asylum, reiterating the role of the physical in the process of healing from horrifying events.

Wilson ties this tension between the symbolic and the physical to the City of Bones in other ways; despite Aunt Ester's attempts to situate it specifically and physically in the world, if the characters desire a return to the motherland, they remain thwarted. Belau asserts that trauma is a symbolic loss and that an individual can only overcome this loss symbolically, and this idea definitely applies to the situations that characters face in *Gem of the Ocean*. Not ever having been to Africa, their connection can occur only on the level of the symbolic. However, this reunion, even if symbolic, remains out of reach. Yes, some connections to Africa persist; characters in *Gem of the Ocean* remember African lullabies (Wilson 1.2.23 and 2.2.67), and, most importantly, Citizen travels to the past and the City of Bones (2.2.62-69), which, for him, brings relief and forgiveness. However, strikingly, on a literal level, never is there a reunification with Africa: the City of Bones is not in Africa, but somewhere deep in the Atlantic Ocean; it remains a transitional place, just as the people of diaspora remain in an in-between place, lacking acceptance, per Safran and Clifford, in both homeland and hostland.

Additionally, although the City of Bones is imagined, characters become so familiar with it that this in-between place can become, per Aunt Ester, "the center of the world" (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.1.52), and it does, at least figuratively, for Citizen when it becomes the site of his healing. Indeed, his desire for cleansing from the very

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<sup>119</sup> As well as 1619, 2003, today, and beyond.

beginning of the play dominates his thoughts (i.e., is the center of his world). The City of Bones thus reiterates that trauma and identity are liminal states; they reside in both the past and present and are simultaneously physical, mental, and emotional. In this way, the City of Bones comes to represent a physical place ultimately defined by a lack of suffering. Linking the City of Bones to heaven (e.g., Solly describes it as his desired final resting place [2.2.56] and Garret Brown supposedly resides there as one of its Gatekeepers [2.2.69]) reinforces that the City of Bones is also a place of death, absence, and lack. As such, the City of Bones emphasizes that people of diaspora often find themselves in a state of longing for elsewhere and a desiring to belong, even when they did not experience the traumatizing events themselves, an idea that trauma literature often attributes to descendants of Holocaust survivors. Peace and wholeness remain perpetually out of reach.

The City of Bones also problematizes claims linked to Wilson's work. By recognizing his focus on African identity and the need for African-Americans to remember their past, critics note that Wilson actively points to the presence of African rites, rituals, and culture in the United States. We must, however, remember once again that no character in *Gem of the Ocean* ever returns to Africa; Africa instead comes to them through rites and rituals because the City of Bones is deep in the Atlantic. There is, in other words, no reunification with the literal homeland but a resurgence of the homeland culture here in America, and again for scholars of diaspora, this reiterates the concept of the myth of the homeland. More importantly, because the City of Bones is an imagined place, this means that a sense of belonging comes only through a new physical

community in the present. Whether characters identify themselves as African or American, we must remember that this sense of belonging and communion literally and physically happens only within the United States. It is the creation of (African-American) culture and community that remains the solution when individuals are residing between these two places, fully planted in neither.<sup>120</sup>

This idea not only points to the mimetic-antimimetic aspects of trauma, but why trauma, diaspora, and literature need to be studied in tandem. For Citizen, the journey to the City of Bones is antimimetic in that as someone born after the Civil War, he obviously could not have experienced the Middle Passage. These events, however, are mimetic in that they did involve members of the African-American community (and, thus, Citizen's ancestors) and remain part of Aunt Ester's memory as a communal storyteller. Whether mimetic or antimimetic, the larger issue is that Citizen achieves an understanding of his people's past, which allows him to arrive at the gates, through physical experience. Only by physically reliving their suffering, and the pain he caused Garret Brown, can Citizen understand—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually—what it means to stand inside and outside a community and with or against others. If Citizen's sin is a wrong against his neighbor, he achieves absolution by realizing what it means to be one with his community and understand what the community has physically endured. This focus on healing as it relates to diaspora has

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<sup>120</sup> Wilson complicates this idea of closeness to African-American culture by having many of the characters nearest to Africa be outsiders within America. They often, but not always, represent the spectacle character, like Gabe in *Fences*, Hedley in *Seven Guitars*, or Bynum in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. On some level then, Wilson questions whether a connection to Africa promotes assimilation if belonging to the community in which they find themselves is indeed a goal.

larger meaning for Wilson's audience too, for we can view Wilson as arguing that the slave trade continues to have relevance for modern-day Americans, no matter their socioeconomic status or ethnic background. The legacies of slavery and diaspora—racism, inequality, discrimination, social injustice—continue to affect us. Healing remains an issue, and citizens, to reference Judith Lewis Herman, must acknowledge their own roles as victim, bystander, or perpetrator, for healing to occur here in the United States. We must link healing to larger communal connections.

In fact, Wilson's characters remaining isolated from the United States reiterates that America does not serve as a site of opportunity for Citizen or for the characters in *Gem of the Ocean*. Indeed America remains doubly isolating as both homeland (in that all the characters were born in the United States—except, possibly, Aunt Ester, or at least the original Aunt Ester) and hostland. Solly's understanding of Canada as a site of true freedom (2.2.57) highlights that America remains a place of exile for many African-Americans even when it is the land of their birth. In this way, the play's last words—"So live," Eli says (2.5.85)—become an injunction to both Wilson's characters and audiences. This directive is doubly significant in that it occurs within that in-between place of homeland/hostland of the United States, a liminal place that echoes the geographical coordinates of the City of Bones, likewise situated between two places; secondly, this injunction occurs within that liminal place of the theater performance that is also fictitious and real. Again, community and separation can both be imagined, but that in no way diminishes their effects on individuals.

### Healing in *Gem*

Through the person of Citizen, *Gem of the Ocean* specifically recognizes that healing from trauma belongs to the realm of language and performance. Although not performative in the linguistic sense, language itself performs an action when it occurs in the “right” communal context and when the traumatized individual chooses to pursue healing. For example, Citizen does admit his crime to Aunt Ester (Wilson 1.5.44), but this is not enough to “free” him. Ultimately, he must tell of his theft to the Gatekeeper, Garret Brown himself, and we must remember that Brown’s physical presence at the City of Bones is a result of Citizen choosing to place Brown there. It is not part of the voyage that Aunt Ester orchestrates; Citizen’s conscience supplies this detail. Moreover, although Citizen remains reluctant to confess and only speaks his admission of guilt at Aunt Ester’s urging, it is that moment of articulation, of him publicly saying to Garret Brown, “It was me. I done it. My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails” (2.2.69), that actually frees him and allows him to enter into the city. Citizen is, in other words, only able to move on by narrat(iviz)ing and physically living his moment of trauma before the larger group, showing that the relationship between language, audience, progress, the Other, and survival is crucial to the play. This emphasis on the first person is heightened if we reconsider when Citizen first talks with Aunt Ester about Garret Brown. In Act 1, Scene 2, Aunt Ester introduces Garret Brown as a topic of conversation, citing specifically the loneliness he must have felt in his final moments. Citizen does not acknowledge any connection to Brown, questioning instead why “he”—Citizen consistently uses the third-person pronoun rather than Brown’s name in this passage—did

not come out of the water (21). In that same scene, Citizen admits he killed a man, but cannot name Brown (23), and his references to “he” and some anonymous man highlight his attempt to distance himself from Brown’s demise. It is only after having literally and physically relived past traumas in the watery environment of the City of Bones in Act Two that Citizen is able to admit to his role in Brown’s death.

This emphasis on language, movement, and living reiterates that trauma is communally negotiated and that healing typically occurs only through communal acceptance *and* the physical world. After all, because Garret Brown is dead, a literal, physical reunion with him is impossible, just as many maintain that a return to the homeland for diasporic peoples is impossible. Furthermore, within the play’s larger context, if it is really about the twenty-first century, we (like Citizen) as citizens of America must collectively be the ones to initiate and participate in the healing processes linked to racism. This is something Wilson stresses throughout *Gem of the Ocean*; consider, for example, that with the exception of Caesar, all the African-American characters in *Gem of the Ocean* participate in Citizen’s journey. Without necessarily knowing what was the cause of Citizen’s affliction, Black Mary, Eli, and Solly collectively and communally recognize the urgency he ascribes to seeing Aunt Ester. Additionally, as noted earlier, Citizen’s healing occurs only when he admits his crime to all the members of the house. He has already confessed to Aunt Ester that he was the one who stole the nails (Wilson 1.5.44), but his admission brings no sense of absolution or relief to him. The moment of healing comes only after he confesses in the more public setting of Aunt Ester’s extended family and undertakes the physical albeit spiritual

journey of the Middle Passage that Aunt Ester and the others organize and in which they participate. Moreover, this confession does not elicit judgment from the other characters; none condemns Citizen for, let alone discusses, his role in Garret Brown's death. By choosing not to reprimand Citizen for his behavior—an act that resulted in protests, arrests, and the burning down of the community's main source of employment—the characters keep silent, which itself becomes another physical act that contributes to Citizen's healing. It is significant that they render his behavior as an act of protest, akin to Solly's act of arson, and although others outside of 1839 Wylie may condemn Citizen's crime, it is telling that Wilson allows no characters who currently work at the mill to appear onstage. The community that matters is the one we see onstage, the one that the characters in Aunt Ester's circle forge as they participate in the journey to the City of Bones. Additionally, the community that matters, that can make a difference to Citizen's situation, is the one made up of twenty-first century readers and viewers of Wilson's play before whom the action unfolds, but who, unlike audiences of Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* or *Twilight*, remain silenced by the maintenance of the fourth wall. It is these two communities that help to create this drama and the opportunity for healing for Citizen and others plagued by social injustice.

Additionally, beyond listening to Citizen's confession and accepting it without comment, the onstage community of Aunt Ester, Black Mary, Eli, and Solly who actively participate in the actual ritual of healing further demonstrate the importance of physicality and physical community to this process. Eli, Black Mary, and Solly help Aunt Ester invoke the sky, the sea, the wind. They chain him to the boat; they sing to him on



the journey; they don the European masks; and they symbolically put him in chains and beat him (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.2.65-67). Fully comprehending the horrors of slavery, Black Mary, Eli, and Solly know their roles and their “lines,” and they perform them without any real direction from Aunt Ester. They have participated in this ritual before and most likely will do so again. For them it is a performance, and as such it is meant to occur in a communal setting. Their repeated participation highlights that this healing is connected to a larger communal need linked to African-American suffering. Solly’s role in this scene in particular highlights the importance of a physically present community for the traumatized individual. He has not planned to be part of Citizen’s journey. Ready to leave, to go back to the South as a worker on a modern-day version of the Underground Railroad and rescue his sister, he drops in at 1839 Wylie to say a quick goodbye. At Aunt Ester’s urging however, Solly elects to stay and help Citizen. He prolongs his leaving, although his departure is a critical priority; as Solly was the one who burned down the mill, he needs to leave the scene of his crime immediately, but Aunt Ester, who is not aware of Solly’s actions involving the mill fire at this point, realizes the role that he, as an elder of their community, must play in the Citizen’s cause.

Beyond staying and helping to recreate the journey to the City of Bones, Solly, the oldest male in this extended family, supplies Citizen with other means of support:

AUNT ESTER. You hold on to them two pennies, Mr. Citizen. You gonna need them. Jilson Grant was supposed to give you a piece of iron. You ain’t got that. You got to go without it. The iron would have made you strong. That’s what Samson had. His strength wasn’t in his hair. He had a piece of iron that made him strong of heart and God found favor with him. You got to see if God find favor with you without that iron.

(*Solly hands Citizen his good luck chain link.*)

SOLLY. Here, put this piece of chain in your pocket. Now you got some iron. Jilson Grant ain't the only one got iron. That chain link brought me good luck many a time. Go on, put it in your pocket. (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.2.62)

These remains of the ankle chain Solly was forced to wear as a slave works as an amulet guiding Citizen on his journey even when he becomes separated from his boat (2.2.67), a traditional symbol of society. Although this dedication to community healing and collectivity delays his departure and thus tragically seals Solly's fate and death at Caesar's hands, the bit of iron serves as a reminder of the strength fostered in community, that healing can arise from collective suffering, and that the final stages of overcoming trauma include transforming it into an organized, underlying principle used to help others. Solly's good-luck piece is after all a *link*. Although it previously connected him to a life of degradation, he has transformed it into a reminder of the strength that lies in community and in numbers, as well as the strength found within individual resolve.<sup>121</sup> It is to some degree ironic that Solly continues to hold on to that slave past through a physical item, but Wilson himself notes that Solly's piece of chain is ultimately transformative. Just as the painful reliving of trauma is tied to healing, the iron link grounds Citizen's healing within the physical world. After all, Solly gives Citizen this link in lieu of that piece of iron that Citizen was to receive from Jilson Grant. Through this simple prop, Wilson notes how known (if not felt) experiences of the past need to be integrated into an understanding of a traumatizing moment if healing can be a possibility. Moreover, the link, as well as the coins Citizen finds and Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale, all

<sup>121</sup> Elam links this iron chain to Pittsburgh as well as the Yoruban god Ogun (85), further complicating the interplay between homeland and hostland for many people of diaspora.

persistent allusions to commodities and the economy of slavery, reiterates the idea that returning to trauma is itself the way to achieve healing.

Just as Solly's death stems from him realizing the connection between the individual and the group, Citizen's healing grows from the understanding that he, too, is part of a communal past represented by the City of Bones. Although he does not claim ancestors as part of the Middle Passage or the City of Bones as Aunt Ester does (Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* 2.1.52), he learns quickly that this larger collective history is indeed his history—and a living history at that. We must remember, as previously noted, that Citizen is “*terror-stricken*” to learn that the people on the slave ship “all look like [him]. They all got [his] face” (2.2.66). Entering Aunt Ester's home thus allows Citizen to enter the larger community of African-American history. Because his journey involves recognizing what it means to be a citizen, he truly becomes a man of the people and finds himself accepted into Aunt Ester's extended family and community: Black Mary and Citizen even arrive at a reconciliation with Black Mary encouraging Citizen to look her up when he returns to Pittsburgh (2.4.76), and audiences of Wilson's *Radio Golf*, the last play he wrote in his century cycle and the one focusing on the 1990s, learn this indeed does happen as the character Old Joe has the last name of Barlow and reveals his mother was named Black Mary (2.2.65). The fact that the larger world resides within the four walls of 1839 Wylie also points to the relationship between the public, the private, and the physical—that the personal is the political, and vice versa. Indeed, because Wilson never varies the setting nor takes audiences outside Aunt Ester's home, the audience itself is ushered into and not allowed to leave this world. In fact, in one production Aunt

Ester's parlor was a "cavernous, watery blue" to reinforce the audience's participation in Citizen's ocean voyage (Zaytoun 716).

The detail of the European masks also enables Wilson to highlight the degree to which the diaspora and the effects of slavery continue to be at the root of Citizen's dilemma for him and for audiences following his story. Although it is the theft of nails that precipitates the protagonist's desire to be cleansed, Aunt Ester recognizes his is a larger problem tied to poverty, racism, and disconnection from his community. It is the whites represented by the European masks who bar Citizen's literal and metaphoric healing—who enslaved him and keep him in bondage. Interestingly, a mask used in a New York production at the Walter Kerr Theater in 2004, as shown in a photo by Sara Krulwich that accompanies Ben Brantley's review of *Gem of the Ocean* titled "Sailing into Collective Memory," adds various nuances to the play and helps to solidify the link between characters onstage and those watching them. The picture shows Solly's mask to be stained a dark brown color rather than the white that would be associated with a "European" mask. In this way, director Kenny Leon linked people of color to slavery as slave traders. Also, the highly stylized mask evokes the one traditionally used to denote a comedy in the theater. Although *Gem of the Ocean* is obviously not a comedy, this mask points to the theater-going audience's involvement in Citizen's bondage and release, and the mask can thus be read as a condemnation of mainstream theater's historical ignoring of African-Americans and of popular audiences' support of the minstrel tradition. As Gantt says, Wilson's dominance as a dramatist is linked to "his ability to put into words the ideas and experiences of everyday African Americans, who have long been

caricatured, relegated to the periphery, or displaced altogether in drama created by playwrights from mainstream white society” (1).

In this way, though the connections may be less apparent because Wilson is a playwright who employs more traditional means of dramatic storytelling than someone like Suzan-Lori Parks or Anna Deavere Smith, *Gem of the Ocean* reiterates the appropriateness of studying trauma through drama and perhaps as drama. Essentially what Aunt Ester stages for Citizen is a series of dramas. His search for pennies and Jilson Grant, as Aunt Ester admits, lacks meaning (1.5.47); it is busy work, and thus as a charade, it is a performance, one that she designs for Citizen. Likewise, the journey to the City of Bones is a drama complete with masks and props (i.e., the Bill of Sale folded into a boat, the pennies, Solly’s walking stick and piece of iron). Aunt Ester orchestrates the scenario by calling together her actors, dimming the lights, and directing Citizen’s trip. Aunt Ester illustrates that the resolution of trauma itself involves and is, in and of itself, a physical and collective performance.

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For Aunt Ester, Citizen, and Wilson, overcoming trauma means not just understanding the present moment of trauma, but the past as well. Cathy Caruth’s idea of unclaimed experience thus must be broadened to include unclaimed history; it remains an act of truly knowing the past, of actively choosing to seek an understanding of it by consciously and purposely choosing to grapple with it on a physical level. This is a shift in thought for theorists of trauma; their focus is on the hole posed by a traumatizing event. Wilson shows, however, that the integration of traumatizing moments of

unclaimed experiences must include unknown, unclaimed history that must be handled, manipulated, accessed, and felt on some physical level. This, again, is why Eliza's letter and Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale are so integral to *Gem of the Ocean*. As written documents, the letter and receipt track American history. They become links to the Underground Railroad as experienced by Solly and to the City of Bones as Citizen encounters it. Texts—and we must include performances such as Citizen's search for pennies, work on the stone wall surrounding 1839 Wylie, and journey to the City of Bones in this category—become the route to felt knowledge, knowledge that is experienced rather than just factually learned, memorized, or claimed. In other words, the texts do not have an effect until they are physically realized in the present moment; therefore Citizen's visit to the City of Bones via the ship *Gem of the Ocean* becomes a physical experience of the Middle Passage as well as a physical encounter with Garret Brown. The Middle Passage and City of Bones become a way for Citizen to connect with others who, like him, still struggle with the legacies of slavery. In the same way, the play *Gem of the Ocean*, as a written document and stage performance, emphasizes how drama does something different than other genres when it comes to trauma. Drama encourages physical experience through the audience members' physical response to and engagement with the action on the stage. Theirs is not just an intuited, imagined reading experience; for this encounter to mean something, it must be transformed into a felt experience.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Because drama is a marginalized genre and because in earlier times (when drama served a religious purpose or as a form of popular entertainment) characters on the margins of society were often treated poorly on stage, we should not be surprised that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, drama has been appropriated by those who have been marginalized; consider, for example, those in the GLBT community. The theater is now the place for many an unheard voice to speak, and because drama is meant to be heard, it is a particularly appropriate genre for giving voice to those whose concerns the majority often ignores, such as the victims of trauma.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, if the history of trauma studies has tracked the plight of those lacking power in mainstream society (i.e., soldiers, women, children, people suffering from abuse), it makes sense that disenfranchised individuals and members of minority groups, which in American society have frequently been people of color, can be linked to literary works, particularly plays, depicting trauma. Trauma theory, after all, circles around the ideas of narrativization and audience approval as two means of healing from trauma, and literary theory recognizes the issues that are central to defining and identifying trauma—that trauma involves the symbolic and is specific to the situation, the individual, and the cultural moment.

Trauma, as an exercise in the making of knowledge, involves students of drama with issues of epistemology and historiography, and because of the dynamic between the individual and the larger group, it points to issues of identity politics, social negotiation, and power dynamics. Trauma theory as a school of thought also becomes a marker of

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<sup>122</sup> The academy, after all, has not always recognized trauma and trauma theory, and dominant cultures have often dismissed the traumas of minorities.

cultural studies, and a means to talk about minority rights, homogeneity and heteronormativity, and gender politics. In addition to the ways in which trauma theory can benefit students in the literature classroom, literary studies also affords, as noted in the preceding chapters, an opportunity to provide deeper insights into trauma and to question traditionally held ideas about it. Indeed, to view trauma through the lens of textuality helps to explain why what is traumatizing for one person is not necessarily so for another. The fact that an event is read and interpreted in a particular way, from a particular perspective, and simultaneously dependent on the reaction of the other (and the Other) gets to issues of perspective, reader-response theory, and the idea of multiple truths. The discipline of literary studies as a whole also benefits from trauma theory because of the former's focus on identity politics; drama highlights even more so the uses of trauma and the ways in which individuals in power have manipulated trauma to regulate and control the subaltern, or the ways in which trauma could be employed as an emergent text to subvert the status quo. An understanding of multicultural practices and agendas could also reiterate that trauma is culturally specific and involves privileging one reality over another. Linked to this as well is that idea that views of trauma in the West do not necessarily coincide with ideas about trauma in the East and within "primitive" cultures.

The connection between drama and trauma is even more profound: drama succeeds as a literary form—*the* literary form—to capture trauma, and both fields of study can benefit from being studied in tandem. For instance, drama provides a ready vehicle to provide a more accurate depiction of the ways in which trauma is nonlinear



and bridges the past and the present. Indeed that trauma is a liminal state, one that is simultaneously past and present and one that meditates on the processes of memory and remembering, is a concept that can be captured only in a live performance that is happening in real time as well as in the time of some other place, that of the play's action. Additionally, drama more readily captures the fact that trauma is a contact zone between the physical, the emotional, and the cognitive, as well as between the conscious and the subconscious; drama engages audiences through events that are both real and not real, and it allows them to experience a text on multiple levels, through multiple senses. Even at its most basic, drama lets audiences exist in a middle ground because it allows us to hear multiple conversations at one time, in the way that printed works cannot because the eye can only process one piece of text at a time. Additionally, in terms of liminality, traumas and dramas are entirely real and yet remain simultaneously unreal and otherworldly; both require cognitive interpretation and physical analysis as the traumatized subject becomes both performer and audience: it is through flashbacks that the subject acts but does so, to some degree, without agency. As the psyche takes over and forces the individual to relive moments of trauma, the individual becomes additionally alienated, belonging neither to the present nor the past. Like a performer, he is, on the one hand, following a script; on the other hand, he is merely watching an event outside of his control unfold before him.

Drama as a means of depicting trauma also highlights the connection between the individual and the group. Indeed, because of the role of the viewing audience in drama, plays allow trauma scholars to think more deeply about the relationship between the

individual and the larger group; the traditional communication triad of message, sender, and recipient is more specifically evoked given that dramas invoke this relationship in multiple ways. In addition to the characters themselves standing as senders and receivers in the plot of the play itself, the author serves as a sender for the audience, as do the director and performers. Senders and receivers abound particularly if we recall that each member of the viewing audience has the potential to view particular details, characters, and situations from different perspectives. However, what happens if we also shift focus and consider trauma and its ties to performance and performativity? What happens if we consider trauma in and of itself as a text and/or performance of those who have been silenced and ignored?

This concern with giving voice to the silenced, to those who are forced to remain quiet and to whose voices are deliberately unheard, indeed governs the work of August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Anna Deavere Smith. Beyond *Gem of the Ocean*, many of the works in Wilson's century cycle showcase individuals struggling with the long-term effects of loss and suffering: Berniece and Boy Willie wrestle with their family history and the loss of loved ones in *The Piano Lesson*; King Hedley II in the play named after him struggles with the effects of both past and future losses as well as poverty, inner-city blight, and the pressures of recidivist crime; the separation of family is also central to works like *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Fences*. Parks's *Fucking A* and *In the Blood*, her Red Letter Plays, which invoke Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, are likewise an outgrowth of her other pieces that connect trauma, social inequality, and history, as are Smith's riot plays.

Parks's, Smith's, and Wilson's works, however, are in no ways anomalies; the works of many other twentieth-century African-American playwrights can prove to be just as productive for discussions of trauma as linked to racism, thereby highlighting that acts of racism have the potential to be traumatizing. Now, a danger exists in pathologizing the black experience in America, a point with which I agree, although I would counter that when structuralized violence and discrimination become, as Erikson argues in his *A New Species of Trouble*, long-standing and ongoing conditions, they too can become sources of trauma. Indeed, there is no denying that many African-American playwrights have focused on specific events like riots, the Middle Passage, enslavement, rape, the loss of loved ones, the separation from family members, acts of violence that can and did lead to trauma. Early twentieth-century works by African-American writers that thus come to mind include Angelina Weld Grimke's anti-lynching drama *Rachel* (1916); Conrad Seiler's *Darker Brother* (1938), with its revisionist tale of American history in the moments before an angry mob lynches its African-American protagonist; or even W.E.B. Du Bois's *Star of Ethiopia* (1913). Though the latter is an exultant celebration of the accomplishments of African-Americans in America and the world, we must remember that Du Bois's pageant is a specific response to his times and stands as an attempt to combat the persistent racism and race crimes of early twentieth-century America. Despite its racist aspects, even Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1921-22) with its African-American protagonist offers an expressionistic study of an individual anticipating a moment of trauma through his portrayal of an individual unraveling in a moment of extreme duress.

Mid-century works by African-Americans that are also ripe for this discussion of trauma and the historical manifestations of racism, bigotry, and the poverty of slavery include Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Alice Childress's *The Wedding Band* (1966), and Beah Richards's *A Black Woman Speaks* (1950). If we continue to move into the second half of the twentieth century, we find still more works that would shed light on this connection between trauma, diaspora, and drama. Many of Amiri Baraka's works, such as *Slave Ship* (1978) and his 1970 *Great Goodness of Life (A Coon Show)*, nightmarish pieces about slavery, identity, and civil rights, likewise lend themselves to a discussion of trauma within the context of race relations as would Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1969), which depicts one woman's mental and emotional deterioration and struggles with racial identity. George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1986) and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1974) also examine that intersection between trauma, identity, history, and racial inequality, as do Charles H. Fuller, Jr.'s *A Soldier's Play* (1981) and Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* (1992).

That trauma and civil-rights issues dominate the dramatic output of twentieth-century African-American writers could however be considered proverbial low-hanging fruit. Undoubtedly, the works of Wilson, Smith, and Parks discussed in the preceding chapters stand as a corrective to those who argue the problems posed by slavery are a thing of the past. Indeed, Wilson, Parks, and Smith show that problems raised by the slave trade and diaspora continue into present day. Their works—because they are so stylistically different from one another—also show the myriad ways in which trauma can

be manifested on stage and in the audience through monodramas *à la* Smith that rely on journalistic verisimilitude, through the more traditional plays of Wilson, as well as through the more experimental works of someone like Parks.

These playwrights also demonstrate that when trauma is a thematic focus and an integral aspect of a drama's plot, we have to reconsider an author's intended impact. Rather than continuing with the Aristotelian emphasis on catharsis and the idea that dramatic tragedies serve the larger social purpose of moving the audience to fear, terror, pity, etc., of teaching about some larger social truth, and thereby working as a release valve, I argue these modern plays and playwrights work instead to move audiences to feelings of guilt and complicity. As many critics have noted, trauma demands the larger community align itself with either the individual victim(s) or the perpetrator(s) of trauma, and we can easily see that Smith, Parks, and Wilson frequently work to make audiences identify with the victim as a way of promoting healing and change for individuals in a similar socioeconomic situation; moreover, they work to make audiences identify as both victim *and* perpetrator as a means of promoting social change. The desired effect seems to be that members of viewing audiences do not just identify with those who feel victimized, but they also recognize their participation in the situation and by extension the situations outside of the theater in which they are involved as well as those in which they choose not to get involved.

Given the socioeconomic standing of most audiences who are financially able to support the theater in this day and age, Parks, Wilson, and Smith are actively working to change the minds and hearts of those more clearly linked to the power base of modern

American society.<sup>123</sup> Wilson, Smith, and Parks work to traumatize audiences, and they achieve this effect through various stylistic moves that often involve the destabilization of the fourth wall and by actively working to make their audiences experience the emotions that their characters do. Granted this is the objective of any good playwright, but I argue the ends of Wilson's, Smith's, and Park's true objectives actually reside outside of the theater. Working within this altered vein of social change as well as cathartic release, these authors strive to gain empathy and sympathy for the characters onstage and the citizens they represent in order to foster discussions about racism and discrimination. For these particular authors, incorporating aspects of trauma in their work reinforces that depictions of trauma are largely about power dynamics and a reflection of the cultural milieu in which a story is set as well as when it was written. And again, I would argue that they are not alone. Baraka, for example, is concerned that portions of his audience, white members in particular, feel the alienation ascribed to blacks, hence his barring whites from certain performances. On the opposite side of the emotional spectrum, he creates situations for audiences to join the actors onstage in jubilatory dancing (*Slave Ship* 259). Cleage works to have audiences identify with the three sisters and their extended family in *Flyin' West*, observe their plotting, and root for the murder of Frank Charles, the youngest sister's racist yet biracial husband. In *Rachel*, Grimke describes the middle-class trappings of the Loving family's home in such detail and has her characters

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<sup>123</sup> I do not mean to imply that members of the upper class are the only people who attend plays. For example, if we consider the many school groups that visit the theater, perhaps we must recognize playwrights as actively reaching out to those who are less set in their opinions, who do not yet wield power in a structuralized and/or large-scale manner, and who are more open to changing the status quo, to hearing from those outside of the dominant class.

speaking in such perfect English so as to force white audiences to recognize how they are similar to rather than different from these African-American characters who are struggling with the legacy of lynching, discrimination, racial hostility, and lack of economic advancement. Like Parks, Wolfe peppers *The Colored Museum* with historical and pop culture allusions (e.g., the Middle Passage, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Academy Awards, Marilyn Monroe, popular music) to find ways to get audiences to identify with the stories found in the various exhibits and skits that are part of his “museum collection” and that merit being preserved.

In addition to a focus on silenced voices, a similarity that many of these works share is the idea of performance. Beyond the fact that these playwrights are producing works that are meant to be performed, their dramas highlight issues of performance, performativity, narrative, and storytelling. *The Colored Museum* is a series of performances, as are the imaginings of Prayerful Johnson in *Darker Brother*, the short monologue of a racist actress in Langston Hughes’s *Sister Scarlet Berry* (1938), Ma Loving’s story of her husband and eldest son’s murder as well as Rachel’s tales about fairyland in Grimke’s *Rachel*, or the flashbacks that are integral to Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964). Looking to the authors that have been the focus of the preceding chapters, we find examples and instances of embedded performativity that themselves become markers of trauma. Beyond the fact that she is dealing with monologues, Smith emphasizes this idea of performativity through her focus on phonetic delivery, line breaks, and alleged adherence to journalistic verisimilitude. Smith also introduces this concept through those speeches in which individuals read from their writings or even

repeat speeches they have delivered before. Indeed, all of the stories in *Twilight* and *Fires in the Mirror* are instances of storytelling, and by having costume changes done on stage, Smith reinforces that this is a performance, that she is reenacting others' stories. Her staged plays that include actual news video also speak to this issue of performance and viewership.

On the other side of the spectrum, by clearly producing fictional works, Wilson and Parks both address the idea of performance by embedding smaller performances within the larger play. Citizen Barlow's journey to the City of Bones, for example, is an orchestrated, ritualized performance that the other characters in Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* structure specifically for him; it is a performance that includes masks, props, a director, and actors, as well as, within the character of Citizen Barlow, the emotionally involved and affected audience. Wilson reiterates this focus on performance in his other writings as well. In *The Piano Lesson*, for example, the exorcism of Sutter's Ghost, the healing of family rifts between siblings, and Berniece's willingness to accept the past coalesce around an impromptu performance that involves her purposely choosing to play on the family's heirloom. Performance reappears in Wilson's *King Hedley II*, where the characters unknowingly engage in an act of ritual sacrifice that leads to one character's death and the alleged resurrection of Aunt Ester's cat (2.5.102-04). Indeed, many of Wilson's plays incorporate instances of singing (e.g., *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II*, and *Fences*), recitations of poems and rhymes (both occur in *Gem of the Ocean*), or even quotations of scripture (e.g., *Gem of the Ocean*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *King Hedley II*), all of which become a means of creating embedded



performances for Wilson's audience and a way of creating fissures and cracks in the fourth wall. Likewise, *Radio Golf*, the last play in the cycle, involves a character, Roosevelt Hicks, who, as part owner of a radio station, is looking forward to producing a radio program about golf, hence the title of the play. The Broadway production of *Radio Golf* even ended with a character ceremoniously drawing stripes on his face with house paint (2.4.81); Wilson asks us to see him as gearing up for battle, but using house paint as a form of makeup also highlights the idea of theatrical performance.

As shown earlier, Parks also embeds performances and displays within her plays: there are the "performances" of three-card monte, reenactments of excerpts from Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* and from the fictionalized *For the Love of Venus*, and her various renderings of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in both *Topdog/Underdog* and *The America Play*. Additionally, Parks includes the display of The Venus in circus sideshows and the academy—even in a courtroom. Parks, like Wilson, also incorporates music in her works: one of the Wonders of the World sings in *Venus* (16.99), Lincoln writes and sings his own songs in *Topdog/Underdog* (1.21), and the words and music of "The Looking Song," written by Parks, are printed at the end of *In the Blood*. Indeed, *Fucking A* contains no less than ten songs with the words and music both by Parks.

For me, this recurring focus on performance points to specific questions regarding trauma: what happens if we move beyond definitions of trauma as an unclaimed experience and as symptomatic of the postmodern condition? What happens instead if we view trauma not just as an unclaimed experience or an exercise in creating knowledge, but as a text to be analyzed and thus the continued purview of literary studies?

Viewing trauma as a text and more specifically as a performance foregrounds the physicality of trauma—the need to involve the physical in the healing process. Trauma and performance foreground the necessity that the outer physical world be part of the healing process. The traumatic symptoms do not just manifest themselves in a physical manner or through the appearance of triggers in the physical world, but are also created through the idea of audience members that are actively listening, hearing, and validating their experiences. Strejilevich’s work on *testimonio* points to the importance of audience, as does Langer’s studies of Holocaust testimonies, which recognize the importance of a physical audience represented by both the interviewer and the camera. Like Anderson’s communities, although imagined, those details involve the physical world. Within drama, the physicality of the theater, its audiences, props, and costumes, as well as the presence of stage directions working to engage audiences—literally and figuratively—all create a more accurate portrayal of trauma whether the drama in question is performed in a vein that is more naturalistic or psychologically realistic.

Viewing trauma as performed text and as a text of performance also emphasizes and highlights issues of agency. Parks, Wilson, and Smith collectively show that, to some degree, the individual encountering suffering as “victim” or bystander *does* have some control over the situation if she chooses. Choosing does not promise change, but it provides an opportunity for it to occur or, at the very least, the opportunity to lay the groundwork for change to occur. After all, the focus, on some level, is merely on the opportunity for healing and not the promise of it. There is just as much of a chance for

the trauma to continue to repeat itself; that is, after all, in part, what defines trauma as trauma.

However, through this issue of choice, Wilson is able to examine the ways in which the traumatized individual encourages himself to overcome the past by actively seeking out help from others, as is the case with Citizen Barlow searching out Aunt Ester and the sanctuary that 1839 Wylie represents; in other words, we must recognize that Citizen chooses to relive past moments of suffering. Likewise, Parks begins with the individual creating his own potential to be traumatized. She shows individuals who, by actively trying to better their situations, may become further victimized by their situation and relive the trauma of their losses and lacks. At the end of *Topdog/Underdog* for example, in an effort to better himself financially and learn the “trade” of three-card monte, Booth has recreated the trauma of his youth: his separation from (he would characterize it as the abandonment by) another family member. By agreeing to play the “game” of trauma, in this case the “game” of hustling, he on some level agrees to the potential for trauma. In the same way, Brazil from *The America Play* finds himself at play’s end a performer/tour guide like his father, inviting visitors to his own version of The Great Hole of History. Knowing what happens to The Foundling Father, one question arises: will Brazil’s fate be the same? Smith, by focusing less on plot and more on theme, also challenges her audiences to consider their futures and next steps. Will they, like Carmel Cato at the end of *Fires in the Mirror*, continue to exist in a moment of lingering? Will they, like Twilight Bey of *Twilight*, be caught in a moment of in between-ness, of twilight, or will they be spurred to action, to make a change, to challenge the

status quo? Such a focus on agency reiterates that trauma, like many illnesses involving the mind, is often linked to, defined through, diagnosed via, and treated through behavioral rather than biological markers.

Wilson, Parks, and Smith also demonstrate how trauma gets performed and that trauma is in itself a performance, one that strips the performer (i.e., the traumatized individual) of a sense of agency and control. Although the individual is the agent of his actions—his psyche actually forces him to relive the traumatizing event—he is simultaneously robbed of agency just as performers find themselves restricted by their script, director, author, and audience. This is often reiterated not just for characters on stage but for viewing audiences as well. For example, some larger force manipulates the audience member of *Topdog/Underdog*, just as a more knowing individual manipulates the mark in a “game” of three-card monte. Likewise, neither the audience nor the traumatized individual has full control over memories, whether they are whole or fragmented, and as such both audiences and traumatized persons remain stuck in the role of viewer, of the passive audience member. Until the individual/mark gains control or complete knowledge of the narrative/game, he remains at the mercy of the larger event/dealer.

Indeed, in the works of these three playwrights, we find characters who regularly check in with others to gauge and correct their performance: The Venus asks to be loved just as The Bride-to-Be does, Booth requires feedback and tutelage from Lincoln, Lucy reminds Brazil to keep it to scale whereas The Foundling Father chooses to converse with some of his assassins, Citizen keeps returning to Aunt Ester to discover his next task, and

Smith's speakers ask her and thus her audiences if they "get" their story. Just as Parks's and Wilson's speakers relate how larger forces dictate their lives, Smith's audiences too are manipulated both by Smith and the characters that she performs. Smith plays on and to her audiences' beliefs, fears, and preconceived notions, and the speakers of Smith's works, whether black or white, yellow or brown, male or female, seek ways to break out of the traps of social injustice and inequity. This breaking out of specified roles recognizes that roles can be modified, that in the real world we need not follow the script, that we can draft our own lines and lives.

In all these instances, viewing trauma as a performance reiterates that there remains the opportunity for change through self-direction and community. For instance, in *Gem of the Ocean* we encounter Citizen's insistence that he see Aunt Ester, and subsequently we witness his faithful adherence to her prescriptions and directions. Likewise, even though The Venus lacks control over her body and even though The Foundling Father and Lincoln find themselves stuck in specific roles and scripts as impersonators of Abraham Lincoln, they, like the traumatized individual, fight to break the cycle of events in which they find themselves stuck. They can choose to adopt a yellow beard as The Foundling Father does, to remain in England and try to make money as The Venus does even when the courts afford her the opportunity to return to Africa, or to practice dying with more vigor as Lincoln does in *Topdog/Underdog*. Thus, trauma presents a script for healing, but offers opportunity for divergence, detours, ad-libbing, a different resolution.

Paradoxically, reading trauma as a performance or script also recognizes the futility and impossibility of change. Characters may attempt to break out of the cycle of trauma, hardship, suffering, etc., but if trauma is performed and scripted, what opportunity is there for growth, renewal, healing, wholeness? The ending is fixed, determined, and designed to be repeated: Booth remains alone; our various Lincolns stand at an emotional distance from others; The Venus trades one type of confinement for another; citizens of the twentieth century still find a need for an Underground Railroad; riots in Crown Heights, New York, are followed by those in Los Angeles, California; a government official is left lamenting the findings of the Kerner Commission decades after the fact; and tomorrow brings just another performance of these problems. There is opportunity for alteration, but that depends on the individual and group, as well as the hegemonic and the disenfranchised, working in tandem and accepting that the authors will deviate from the script. Otherwise, there is just alteration, repetition with a difference, trauma with a difference and not necessarily transformation, or else, to use purely theatrical terms, the audience stays home, the show closes; the play in question does not fit the larger cultural mood or moment.

Studying trauma within and through drama challenges other aspects of trauma theory. Because viewing trauma as a performance heightens awareness about trauma's liminal nature, audiences can begin to question whether trauma is merely about reclaiming experience. Parks's plays in particular emphasize this. By foregrounding the relationship between performance and performativity, by coercing audiences to exist in the middle ground of a modified fourth wall, of the blurred role between viewer and

participant, Parks privileges the idea that trauma is about learning and making knowledge rather than merely reclaiming experience particularly in the case of generational trauma. Consider, for example, Booth's situation in Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*. When Booth finds himself deprived of yet another personal relationship, he is unable to see his role in his situation. Gun in hand, pointed at his brother's head, Booth is blinded by how he contributes to his loss. Just as he cannot accept his role in Grace having stood him up, he cannot accept his limitations as a hustler and as someone dependent on his brother; as a result, he finds himself driven, through murder, to repeating the loss of his parents and the familial ties they represent. Booth has not yet learned to see the bigger picture. Lincoln, similarly, is deprived of human contact and a true understanding of what drives his brother. Whether he returns to the cards out of economic necessity or desire, he unsuccessfully gauges Booth's response to losing a bet and reaction to learning that Lincoln has returned to hustling without him.

To say that Parks's plays best represent this phenomenon is not to exclude those of Wilson and Smith. For example, in Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen does not overcome his past because he has greater insight into specific events that have unsettled him, but because he has greater insight into the human condition and human suffering as it affects others—Garret Brown, Solly and his sister, the workers at the steel mill—and not merely himself. This knowledge is not something he has reclaimed however; it is something he learns. Indeed, his healing does not involve seeing Garret Brown drown once more; although that is the moment of trauma for him, this is not the one he confronts. Instead, for Citizen healing requires that he actually interact with and face

Brown (2.2.69), who comes to represent the larger historical community to which Citizen belongs. Through focusing on communal processes, monologues, and a lack of the fourth wall, Anna Deavere Smith similarly points to ways in which community and collaboration surround trauma and the creation of knowledge and experiences. The variety of voices, similarity of situations, and voicing of stories through Smith's body ensure the potential for audience members to connect with individuals from many walks of life and see the humanity in others; in fact, the multitude of voices reinforces the idea of difference, that similarity and common goals can arise out of difference. When the channels of communication are opened up, individuals of one group can learn of the concerns, similarities, and differences of other groups. Whether such a connection or epiphany and claiming of knowledge actually occurs, however, always remains to be seen.

By viewing these three playwrights as working to show how trauma stands as a performance geared toward creating knowledge rather than just reclaiming an experience, we also glimpse a greater emphasis on the ways in which we interact with the historical record. In essence, viewing trauma as a performance helps us to see history as a performance as well, albeit not necessarily an accurate one. This accounts for the historical inaccuracies *The Foundling Father* perpetuates, as well as those of Brazil, and the liberties Parks takes in fictionalizing the life and situation of Saartjie Baartman. Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* also stands as a corrective to popular audiences' ideas about emancipation, and Smith's plays demonstrate the complexity of the events that occurred in Los Angeles and Crown Heights—that the term “riot” itself performs different work



than such words as “rebellion” and “uprising”—or that simplifying the riots to a black-white issue does a disservice to the larger social ills that plague, as well as the many different ethnic and socioeconomic groups that define, modern urban life and contemporary America.

Following this line of thinking, if history, whether past or present, whether claimed or experienced, is traumatizing, and if trauma is linked to performance, this reminds us that, on some level, we must view trauma as chosen. Although scholars typically recognize trauma as bigger than the individual, we ultimately have the opportunity to accept or reject the traumatic nature of an event, to succumb to it or to dismiss it, to use it as a rallying point to effect change (or get revenge) or to be defined and crippled by it, regardless of what society dictates. Thus, although healing from trauma, as Citizen Barlow demonstrates it, is tied to the physical world and must be actively pursued, so too, to some degree, is the initial labeling of an event as traumatizing. This idea of agency and choice also applies to the witnesses of trauma. From the perspective of a victim or a perpetrator, the focus is on compromise or loss. The alignment of individuals to one perspective or another is an act of power, of swaying the bystander to one position or the other. When we shift to the perspective of the bystander, the focus can be on the assertion of individualized power of another sort: that of the viewing audience. And viewers do indeed have the power to stop the performance, to suspend their suspension of disbelief, to walk out of the theater and effectively end the performance or close the book. However, even if they leave the theater, the performance continues. Furthermore, like traumatized individuals who have yet to overcome their

suffering, audience members remain unable to narrativize the storyline of the play as they do not yet know the storyline; it continues to unfold before them, and even if they are familiar with the work, there is always the chance that actors or directors may deviate from the text, ad-lib, or offer a different interpretation. There is no guarantee that what they expect will indeed occur. These audiences remain in a spot of knowing and not knowing.

Viewing trauma as a text and performance, however, raises serious questions. How can individuals who have been placed in positions of subordinate status be seen as participating in their own traumatization? Such a proposition—that by attempting to heal, an individual (or at least his subconscious) permits himself to suffer, to be traumatized again—becomes particularly problematic for minorities and peoples of diaspora, suggesting that they are causing their subsequent, recurring trauma, as well as that of new generations. To a degree, this proposition places them at fault for their suffering, and this merely becomes a way for their oppressors—whether historical or contemporary—to excuse themselves of any wrongdoings. However, interpreting this scenario in this way ignores that ultimately the group with power initiates the precipitating moment of trauma, typically chooses to maintain the status quo, and frequently refuses to hear this narrative of suffering and thereby acknowledge their role in the conditions that encourage it. Additionally, this concept of traumatic performativity and agency must address and recognize the ever-changing nature of trauma, that generational trauma changes each generation and itself changes with each generation. The traumas are related but not necessarily identical, just as one individual's reliving of a traumatizing moment may

change over time and just as responses to cumulative hardships likewise evolve. While repeated, they may be experienced anew and antimimetically by both agent and object of trauma.

Perhaps the liminality of trauma, and the ways in which it connects to diaspora theory, is what ultimately has the potential to save us from this dilemma of blaming the victim. If the liminal space, which is itself, within ritual, painful, defines trauma by being a symptom of the suffering individual who remains caught up in both the past and present, it is also the site (and a sign) of hope and potential for healing, for change. Thresholds, after all, are sites of movement and transformation. Similarly, diasporas and those sites where cultural groups clash—be they called contact zones or borderlands—are instances where change occurs, and change, after all, is what guides trauma toward its resolution: a change in outlook, a change in thinking, a change in thinking about an event;<sup>124</sup> it is that making of knowledge, rather than claiming of experience, for which I have been arguing. This is in line with those who argue that the ultimate sign of healing for many a sufferer of trauma is working to create change, to let the initial defining moment of trauma become a means of working for larger social change for others.

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Parks claims in her essay “Possession,” which appears in *The America Play and Other Works*, that the theater is where history is made in that the past, both what is recorded and what has been lost, is remembered there: “I’m working theatre like an

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<sup>124</sup> Consider, for example, Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, one major purpose of which was to fight racist ways of thinking, of combating racism that saw blacks as lacking agency, of seeing larger ways to define and describe the slave trade.

incubator to create ‘new’ historical events. I’m re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events—and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human” (4-5). Although in these lines Parks speaks of her own work and calling, her assertion is no less applicable to Wilson, Smith, and our understandings of the past and trauma. The imagined and/or relived pain of trauma is always real, always defining, always requiring our attention. Through community, communality, and commonality, drama provides the venue to experience and attempt to deal with suffering. Whether healing occurs or not, the trauma becomes part of the historical record, and the potential for healing thus remains. By reiterating that the study of trauma is an act of making knowledge, Wilson, Parks, and Smith remind us that the state of being traumatized marks and defines the human condition. We need to engage ourselves with others, to know others’ pain, situations, perspectives, and problems as belonging to Others and to ourselves.

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**ABSTRACT****THE TRAUMATIZED/TRAUMATIZING SUBJECT IN ANNA DEAVERE SMITH, SUZAN-LORI PARKS, AND AUGUST WILSON**

by

**CHRISTOPHER J. GIROUX****May 2014****Advisor:** Dr. Lisa Ze Winters**Major:** English**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

*The Traumatized/Traumatizing Subject in Anna Deaver Smith, Suzan-Lori Parks, and August Wilson* explores how drama, as a genre, is particularly suited for capturing aspects of trauma in ways that other genres cannot; this argument reinforces that trauma must be studied within the humanities, specifically within literature programs. Recognizing that trauma in and of itself is tied to issues of narrativization, textuality, and performativity, this project notes that Smith's, Parks's, and Wilson's work collectively attempt to traumatize contemporary viewing audiences and make them aware—cognitively and emotionally—of the hardships of discrimination and racism, which themselves can be seen as examples of generational trauma, trauma linked to diaspora, and trauma arising from long-term, cumulative, and collective suffering. Smith's, Parks's, and Wilson's works are no longer about catharsis, but empathic unsettlement and making audience members realize the ways in which individuals, particularly those who consider themselves to be bystanders, operate, in the parlance of Judith Lewis Herman, as both victim and perpetrator.

These particular authors show how trauma can be conveyed to audiences not only through plot lines, but through various stylistic and aesthetic devices, and as such, their dramas explore the ways in which trauma is manifested and communicated to audiences, while also challenging commonly held ideas about trauma. Smith's monodramas *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight*, both of which focus on late twentieth-century civil disturbances, provide commentary on the conditions that must be in place for communal healing to occur. Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*, *Venus*, and *The America Play* focus on individuals who succumb to the traumas they are psychically forced to relive. In contrast, Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, the first work in his "century cycle," offers an instance of healing, challenging popular ideas about this process by emphasizing its physicality and the degree to which choice impacts that process. All three playwrights emphasize the communality of trauma and the ways in which it is socially determined and negotiated; they accomplish this by actively engaging audiences through a destabilization of the fourth wall, embedded performances, and a stylistic and thematic focus on dissociation, fragmentation, liminality, and simultaneity.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Christopher Giroux is an assistant professor of English at Saginaw Valley State University. He received his B.A. and M.A. from Wayne State University. He also has poems published in various venues.