Reformulating Freedom: Slavery, Alienation and Ambivalence in Suzan-Lori Parks’s Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2 & 3)

Paula Barba Guerrero
University of Salamanca, Spain.

Abstract

In her epic trilogy Father Comes Home from the Wars Suzan-Lori Parks explores the (re)construction of social relations between and within communities during the American Civil War. To do so, Parks builds normative expectations, which she later deconstructs by means of ambivalence. Parks defies archetypal understandings of black slavery and questions the rigidity of our historical memories of war. Hence, the initial power imbalance of the trilogy reveals unethical and hostile dynamics of war. In view of the outcomes of racism, classism and sexism, Parks’s protagonists react ambivalently, disrupting expectable alliances. Their radical dissociation produces otherness and alienation within the boundaries of the black community, which are overcome returning to one’s own roots. In constructing a liminal battlefield, Parks challenges preconceived ideas of freedom while dissecting the evolution of her black characters’ identities during the conflict, thereby reshaping the slave narrative tradition to make it fit into the highly ambivalent context of war. This frame of reference reduces humans to mere commodities, allocating the process to recover self-determination in the fight against one’s own cause, community and beliefs.

Keywords: African American Identity, Freedom, Ambivalence, Civil War, Alienation.

In her epic trilogy Father Comes Home from the Wars, Suzan-Lori Parks explores the possibilities of rereading history while commenting on the ambivalence of slavery and war. Composed in three short plays (A Measure of a Man, A Battle in the Wilderness and The Union of my Confederate Parts) that look more like a three-act piece, Parks tells the story of Hero, her black slave protagonist who, stuck in a plantation in Far West Texas, decides to go to war with his master and fight for the Confederacy in order to earn his freedom. With the American Civil War as background, the plays tackle issues of human interrelation, autonomy, ambiguity, ethics and freedom, which are examined through the historical lens of warfare. Canonical history is not recognized as the appropriate means for the playwright to navigate space and identity, though. Since she perceives historical accounts as fixed codes that are subjectively produced—exclusively representing one side of the (hi)story, Parks decides to revise the past in order to refigure events anew. When exploring segments of temporality, the playwright advocates for a dramatic retelling that eludes merely political purposes, transcending the boundaries of blame and finger-pointing so as to unravel the mysteries of time, space and human relationality (Jiggetts 314).

Because canonical myths are not valid for Parks, she decides to rewrite them, imbuing permeability to her historical accounts. For the playwright, the past is a breathing entity that can
be re-enacted in the present to incorporate other realities that are yet untold (Jiggetts 317). This notion is especially significant when considering the epistemological subordination of minority narratives to the Eurocentric model, which Parks’s drama overcomes. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon suggests that those individuals who have interiorized a status of inferiority (and thus are detached from their native culture) adopt and imitate the language and traditions of the “civilizing nation” in an attempt to gain positions of honor (18-19). Such “epidermalization of inferiority” (13) implies that the colonized community is sentenced to remain discursively dependent upon Western epistemology, embracing *white masks* to cover and repress their cultural roots, their *black skin*. Fanon’s pessimistic understanding of blackness is, however, realigned in Parks’s drama, fitting what Homi K. Bhabha defines as mimicry. In an attempt to give a full account of history, Parks’s theatre counteracts direct imitation (mimesis) of Eurocentric codes by applying a “double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 89), that is mimicry, a subversive strategy that camouflages the parody of Western discourse as faithful imitation or reproduction. In doing so, mimicry enables Parks to expose the weaknesses of the colonial system of beliefs, redefining *African American-ness* by means of performativity and ambiguity.

This article thus concentrates on the projection of war as a source of ambivalence found in the characters’ behaviors as well as in the act of writing. I intend to show how, because of the alienation produced by war, Parks’s characters betray the roles they initially perform, restarting the historical cycle of power and violence in order protect the mythical order of the battlefield that dominates Eurocentric discourse. Parks’s theatrical triptych thus revisits the past to point out unexpected attitudes of characters at war, while redefining black identity in the protagonists’ violent interrelations. It is only in the characters return to the bones, to their cultural traditions, stories and folklore that their assimilation of inferiority can be unlearned, their repressed stories disclosed, and their identities finally liberated from the canonical accounts of history.

1. **Parks’s Epic of Fluidity and Ambivalence**

The theatre of war has come to occupy a fundamental position in the history of drama; from the ancient world classics to the modern trends of the Western world, violence has permeated the stage exposing warfare from very different perspectives and in divergent contexts. The exploitation of gruesome imagery, epic instruction or the depictions of military conflicts questioning war’s legitimacy have repeatedly tried to determine those human instincts and social myths that urge us to battle. The theme of war is, then, not unfamiliar to Parks, who has explored its violent outcomes in plays prior to *Father Comes Home from the Wars*. The reason for the playwright’s affinity to the examination of war culture is that it couples with an interest of a personal kind, given that her father joined the military in order to acquire better life conditions. Her epic drama is thus affected by Parks’s first-hand experience, which gives the trilogy its title (Parks, “Interview”) and opens up a debate on the figure of the soldier in America. In Parks’s words, “service people [in the US] have generally fought the wars and come back [to be] forgotten” (Lawson), most likely without a home to return to. Such a dilemma results from a
shift in our conception of violent conflicts, which signals a progression from the former recognition of the soldier as a brave, honorable figure who sacrifices himself for the community, to the current questioning of service people based on our aversion to war. Christopher Coker studies this evolution to conclude that today’s soldiers are reduced to being “public servants” in the hands of the state (7), for war is no longer dependent on Homeric kinship bonds, but rather based on the ideology of the nation (58). The absence of a home to go back to together with the subordination of warriors to national ideologies and political doctrines draw parallelisms between the current military panorama and the situation black slaves endured during the Civil War. This connection of slavery and current warfare is mirrored in Parks’s trilogy in the character of Hero, bringing together the present and the past. Such disruption of our common understanding of time enables Parks to reformulate history as a cyclic, breathing being that eludes rigidity, while commenting on the aftermath of violence for the soldier (particularly when being a slave).

Parks’s interest in warfare is not only tackled through her personal memories, as she aims to offer a historical account of the past based on the collective myths and legends that shape our understandings of war. The playwright relies on the epic tradition, which has conditioned the identity of heroes since ancient times. To refer to epic folklore means mentioning Homeric fictional warriors, whose virtues seem beyond reach—for they are not a faithful representation of our flawed humanity (Coker 32). Despite their archetypal nature, heroic characters have followed the patterns of Homer’s heroes and, in doing so, they have underpinned the narratives and discourses supporting hegemony and immobility. Because Odysseus or Achilles perform the role of the patriarch—a masculine figure who supervises and commands the actions of the rest of the characters working for him—the stratification of the social order has become inherent to the epic tradition. Such hierarchy is not acceptable, though, for a contemporary African American playwright like Parks who, aware of the dangers of Western bigotry, decides to reformulate the epic tradition to make it fluid and many-sided.

In view of the detrimental outcomes that cultural assimilation conceals,1 Parks decides to undo the monolithic discourse of Eurocentric narratives in an attempt to recuperate the buried (hi)story of her community’s past. Parks perceives that the misrepresentation of black stories in canonical history denies African Americans the opportunity to come to terms with the traumatic experiences of slavery, a cultural deprivation that haunts them generation after generation. In order to fill that absence, she occupies historical spaces digging2 in the black unconscious to

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1 According to Fanon, cultural absorption of Eurocentric values implies the “death and burial” of one’s own cultural distinctiveness (18). This is particularly significant in the case of African Americans, who have been deprived of their African origins and their American history, expected to comply with the inferior social status given to them.

2 In many of her plays Parks resorts to the digger motif so as to retrieve the unacknowledged past of her community.
recollect the remnants of those untold, half-forgotten events that will pay homage to the victims and allow the black community to start healing.

Parks’s literary archeology is characterized by the use of original mechanisms with which she imitates racist and paternalistic discourses to later deconstruct them. One of her most representative techniques is the application of Rep&Rev, repetition and revision, through which “the characters refigure their words and [...] experience their situation anew” (Parks, “Elements of Style” 9) to reveal canonical truths that, in their re-enactment, lose their validity. Her innovative dramaturgy serves to indicate a progression in the characters’ behaviors as well as to revisit our fixed perception of history, making it more inclusive. Parks’s historical account thus operates at physical, psychological and ethical levels, performing historical events, echoing (buried) traumatic memories, and upholding African American stories from the past. Her plays reflect the black community’s effort not to forget their history—and their identity with it. In *Father*, this process of remembrance gets translated into the characters’ discourses, for they literally “mark” those events (Parks, *Father* 19, 36) which are not “in any book, not written down [because] history would find [them] barbaric” (55). Signaling instants in a black slave’s lifetime thence becomes her method to account for the desperation and uncertainty of African American slaves, but also for their desire to remember those episodes scarred in the community’s unconscious.

Parks’s drama pursues a (de/re)construction of the past that prioritizes the slave’s perspective so that the social understanding of war and freedom changes. She avoids sanctifying oppressed characters and dissecting her society into a binary disposition of white/evil versus black/good, though. Her protagonists show interiorized colonial traits that alter their expected anti-white reactions in order to explore the complexities of identity, violence and race. Even when the influence of the *Odyssey* is clear, *Father Comes Home from the Wars* is not a retelling of it, but a completely different epic cycle. In it, Parks references traditional epics in order to reformulate their classical meaning incorporating African American realities. As a result, Parks’s protagonists somehow mirror the *Odyssey*: Hero (later called Ulysses) sets off to fight the war leaving behind his home, his community, his wife Penny (Penelope) and his dog Odd-See. When he arrives, he finds out that Penny has engaged in a romantic relationship with Homer, another black slave. Hero attempts to murder his first wife’s suitor, but ends up alone, awaiting the arrival of his second wife Alberta (whom he met during the war) while his community escape (from him) to become fugitive slaves. Despite its superficial symmetry with the *Odyssey*, Parks’s drama only reproduces classical epic structures and imitates their conflicts to renegotiate the powers and ideologies that govern the stage (and the nation) oppressing her protagonists. Rather than defining her characters as heroes or antiheroes, Parks highlights the humanity in them to reveal the traumatic consequences of slavery and war. As opposed to Homer’s archetypal descriptions, Parks avoids stereotyping order to expose human flaws and vulnerabilities. Parks’s protagonists are not judged or censored (though the cause for their actions is), since the playwright’s decision is to make them speak whatever is true for them. These characters escape
Homeric either/or definitions to become individualized personas that constitute or represent a collective, which either opposes race bias or promotes it.

The amalgamation of individual and collective experiences is another characteristic of Parks’s epic. Borrowed from Homer, the interplay between the collective and the individual is stressed as a significant strategy to clarify positions of power. In Homer, the individual champions remain powerful and dominant whereas the collective, comprising less significant warriors and powerless figures, is relegated to the rear of the battle. Parks’s drama mimics the Homeric distribution of space, centering the narrative in the Colonel and Hero’s journey and their later encounter with Smith, leaving the slave community aside as a distant land for Hero to return to. Then, the three founding parties of the Civil War—the Confederacy, the Union and the slaves—are represented by individual characters with singular and fully-developed identities, while the African American community is homogenized as a distant collective, forgotten and unrepresented in part two. This detachment from the collective serves to explain Hero’s estrangement from his community, and his subsequent return “full of [him]self,” as if he had “completed a cycle,” acquiring the colonial attributes that he was lacking in the process (Fanon 19). One of these new features is his name, Ulysses, which reminds the spectator of the Homeric patriarchal figure that gets rearticulated in the play. Because Ulysses’s authoritative role is downplayed by the final departure of the black characters theoretically under his command, the historical value of Homeric hierarchies is questioned. Hero’s perception of himself as the new white master in the plantation illustrates the projection of Parks’s Rep&Rev, recreating Ulysses’s return home after war, the assassination of his wife’s suitors and the reproduction of power structures to later expose this social order as an artificial, performative simulation. Hero’s name is not the only intertextual reference to Homer’s epic, though. Most of the characters’ aliases mirror the Odyssey, ascribing Homeric identity traits, while stressing the cyclic repetition of the past so as to disclose the fluidity of Parks’s renewed epic. Led by Brechtian sensibilities, her epic drama appeals to the spectator’s emotions as well as to their reason, distancing them from the action to make them reflect (39, 149). Consequently, the depiction of war does not offer visceral violence for the sake of violence, but rather analyzes the effects of war at the level of identity, implying violence without necessarily staging it.

The perception of glory is crucial in the understanding of Parks’s epic theatre. Whereas in Homeric narratives heroes are praised and remembered as honorable members of the community, Parks’s trilogy displays the warrior as a tool in the service of political agendas. Their honorability is thus obliterated by the atrocities committed, for, as Ondrej Pilny observes, Parks’s theatre introduces a grotesque treatment of the epic that connects her slave-narrative to the Odyssey while decolonizing history (23, 127). This allows her to reformulate the epic tradition. Parks introduces Hero’s expectations of becoming a respectable member of society in the eyes of his white reference group as the conductive thread that stitches the plays together while depicting
the effects of colonization; an attitude of subordination studied by Fanon that allows him to define himself through the gaze of his oppressors, a mirage that only grants him recognition when reproducing colonialism. Hero reduces war to a source of freedom and status, underlining the ambivalence of military honors in his own problematic participation. Since he is a black slave obliged to go to war and fight for the Confederacy, whatever heroic deed he might accomplish would be stained with the blood of those who aimed to liberate him, and with the freedom of his community. The dilemma of his participation, which stems from the traditional Homeric conception of warriors as honorable community members, is performed onstage to portray warlike honorability as a criminal and unethical act. Parks considers Hero’s participation erroneous, for fighting for the Confederacy is a shameful and selfish action executed to exclusively obtain his freedom. In Father, honor is not granted by war, a cultural critique that emphasizes the fluid performativity of the playwright’s protagonist, who assimilates colonial power structures to later integrate them in his treatment of others. Since war implies freedom and mobility for the slaves, Parks’s epic adapts its ambivalent form to the malleability and fluidity of the characters who initially perform stereotyped roles that, in their repetition, expose their ulterior motives: to liberate themselves from the oppressive forces, by either escaping or affiliating with them.

Freedom in the play is obtained by risking one’s own life. Therefore, reaching equality becomes a life-threatening event for those characters, who, placed in precarious conditions, endure a difficult journey to free themselves from political domination. In Father, Parks designs different road maps leading to autonomy. First, she lays out Hero’s passageway as an equally desired and feared incorporation to the military, for even if Hero seeks the kind of social acceptance and status that war participation will grant him, he also fears its deadly outcomes. Hero’s doubt fades after the Colonel’s ultimatum. Presented in the form of possibility, the Colonel offers Hero the choice to join him and fight for the Confederacy in exchange for his freedom, or to stay in the plantation, cross him and face the consequences. Out of fear, Hero enters the Confederate army and is transformed into a different person able to assert his superiority in front of his community, but incapable of unlearning colonial impositions, returning to the Colonel rather than escaping with Smith to “the safety of the oncoming Union Army” (Parks, Father 83). Hero remains the “non-Hero” he asserts himself to be in part one, “trot[ting] behind the Master” (47), reproducing his conduct in search of recognition and acceptance because, in his mind, becoming free equals acting white. Parks’s second route towards liberty is that of the fugitive slaves, who escape authority risking their lives to distance themselves from their masters’ jurisdiction. The act of running away implies an agonic recovery of agency, which would be the first step necessary to obtain self-determination. Parks’s cartographies of freedom and power disclose the potential of war to promote liminal transformations. In her plays, war has a corrective value that, depending on the characters’ personal experiences, unfolds into a liberating or a conservative revision of social conventions. Hinted at its title, the trilogy associates the return from a dangerous journey to the arrival to a home. The home is therefore a different space for Hero: the plantation where he aims to become a master, and for the fugitive
slaves, a utopic homeland to be explored in the upcoming parts of this epic. Given that the slaves cannot feel at home in America, it seems feasible to argue that they settle and find their place in this country only as they traverse and trespass space. Going through the threshold of war that “unite[s] oneself with a new world” (Gennep 20), the social stratification that ostracized black characters and transformed their bodies and spaces into alien nations is thus deconstructed. Parks’s epic mobility parallels the fluidity of travelling through water, erasing political demarcations and returning the characters to their homes; a symbolic return to Africa, the place where their cultural roots are and a metaphorical ascription of those origins into their new homeland.

Parks’s ambivalent projection of history is therefore based on “a fundamental tension between self-assertion and self-denial” (Brauner 29) liable to transforming the normative version of history “into a meaningful fuel for progress” (Trudier vii). In a different context David Brauner notes that ambivalence is tantamount to minorities’ writing, since their work presents a desire to both rewrite and maintain tradition (30). Their narrative ambivalence is established as a betrayal and a product of their culture, which provides the necessary means to merge Western and African discourses in this case. There is, then, a simultaneous presence and absence of historical trauma, which evidences the infection of the dominant culture and the existence of an “unresolved tension” that enriches their writing (30-33). Parks’s plays present how her characters internalize dominant colonial discourses, and how these discourses interact with their African heritage. In this way, the discourse of the master not only gets challenged and questioned through mimicry, but also in the protagonists’ ambivalence (for they worship and abhor both their inherited and assimilated traits) and in the ambiguity of the narrative itself. Parks’s plays neither condemn nor protect any of the conflicting ideologies of the Civil War. Instead, the plays annul the old binary of hero and anti-hero as epitomes of righteousness and sinfulness respectively, aiming to bring forth a new, mobile epic. In the trilogy, the constant tension between affirmation and rejection favors the revitalization of the epic tradition, which becomes a fluid vehicle to present the characters’ turmoil of ambivalent feelings.
2. (In)Visible History: Ambiguity, Alien-nation(s) and Ambivalence

Parks’s revision of history traverses the horrors of war, slavery and race to question those truths that we heedlessly accept. From her examination of slave life to the acquisition of patriarchal freedom, the playwright scrutinizes social bias, vulnerability and ethical responses to rethink history and the American Civil War from a full-length scope. Parks unites contrary ideologies within the boundaries of her characters’ individual spaces to build ambivalence and force her audience to reconsider the past and the present. One is encouraged to undergo a civil war of a personal kind, impersonating the body of the nation so as to deconstruct social impositions. Her views on nations are therefore based on her own understanding of inclusive communities. Yet, Parks is also aware that her epic account of history should not be romanticized. She therefore warns the audience about the cycle of revenge and violence that war implies, since the Civil War in her plays unfolds into other unnamed wars within the African American community. Longing to create the grand narrative of unspoken African American history, Parks detaches her characters from the soil that is familiar to them, disrupting spaces—physical, mental and even their own bodies—to expose their alienation resulting from the war. To do so, Parks sets in a battlefield her mobilization of race, gender, class, power, vulnerability, protection, violence and war discourses to mark the existence of microcosms, nations-within-the-Nation which are at war as well, alien to their inhabitants who cannot rationalize the unequal distribution of space and power, and the unfair regulations governing them. Taking the figure of the soldier as central to her narrative, the father that comes home from the wars in Parks’s epic becomes an ambivalent figure, divided and transformed by a conflict that will not acknowledge his participation.

It has already been argued that the perception of the soldier’s figure has been modified over time. Whereas warfare was perceived as a “familiar affair” (Coker 58), nowadays it has become “a way of conducting politics,” intrinsically derived from the birth of nations and the materialization of war(riors) into a controlled weapon to maintain order between and within states (Foucault 168). The soldier therefore embodies Foucault’s understanding of corpora as a controlled force unable to exercise its will, and as rather docile, disciplined artillery (168-69). The gradual change in the social judgment of soldiers responds in the end to a political strategy used to ensure the continuance of the ideology the nation holds. With this perception in mind, it seems noticeable that, in military conflicts, soldiers would be used as specialized machinery against the opponent to guarantee protection from the exterior menace. Yet, how is the military expected to respond when the conflict occurs within the nation-state? Given that discipline implies a certain degree of fear and ambivalent admiration of soldiers—as war is perceived as a sacrifice for the community but also as an abominable political tactic that warriors carry out, it is no surprise that civil conflicts are not expectable of privileged societies. The presence of a dissenting group of inhabitants that defies the nation’s discourse to change a set of unfair conditions that threaten their lives seems however predictable in a society that puts them in vulnerable positions; a reality as plausible in the era of capitalism as it was in periods of slavery, when society was extremely stratified and distributed into well-delimited categories. Such is the
trans-temporal connection Parks establishes and the background of her epic trilogy, in which the opposition between Unionists and Confederates replicates in the battlefield setting the social fight between slaves and masters found in the collective unconscious. Hence, war makes visible the social division of nineteenth-century America, which stems from part of the privileged white society’s recognition of bare-life individuals, to borrow Agamben’s term, acknowledging the precariousness of black lives.

Apart from rendering black precarity visible, A Measure of a Man insinuates panopticism. The slaves’ descriptions of spaces, properties and actions imply the unwanted supervision of the master, which translates into a lack of freedom of movement for slaves. That is why the master’s demand for Hero to join him at war in exchange for his freedom is, in fact, an instance of dominion. If Hero wants to decline his proposal, he would have to amputate one of his limbs to have a proper excuse, as he cannot hide from his master’s gaze. Thus, Foucault’s avowal of visibility as “a trap” (200) is laid bare in Parks’s epic cycle, in which slaves long for darkness, as it implies invisibility, freedom of movement and hope. The night is thus presented as aura time of protection that the characters measure. The idea of measuring time in terms of light/darkness reveals a hidden urge to be free from surveillance, which simultaneously heightens the black/white opposition in the play. What is more, in their endeavor to predict Hero’s destiny the characters hint the ending of the trilogy, for they discuss Hero’s departure with his master while the dawn approaches. The allegorical reading of the mise-en-scène connotes the victory of the Union in that their master’s farewell brings the night (freedom) they are anxiously awaiting. At the end of part three, these natural conditions would be tantamount to the slaves’ escape since, until the night has fallen, the characters cannot escape.³

The allegorical opposition of darkness/freedom/blackness versus light/slavery/whiteness is interesting as well in the analysis of the second part of Parks’s epic. A Battle in the Wilderness is the only segment of the trilogy that takes place at plain sight, disclosing ambivalence. In the battlefield, Hero is constantly watched by his master, replicating the social hierarchy of pre-slavery America. Thanks to the power that such distribution grants him, the Colonel feels entitled to disrupt Hero’s intimacy and private spaces, including his own body. The Colonel qualifies Hero according to his physical attributes and skills, reason why, in his simulation of a slave auction in front of Smith, he commands Hero to get naked. Despite the disgust and outrage that such order makes Hero feel, the pervasive stratification of society renders him incapable of verbalizing his refusal to undress (which he persistently thinks of). Ostracized by slavery, Hero accepts the values of the dominant culture, but simultaneously remains ambivalent to them.

³ In order to introduce this idea of escaping, Parks uses the expression to misplace oneself, which is also introduced as the title of one of the metaperformances. Before the performance of Misplaced Myself, Parks explains that this expression was actually used to refer to fugitive slaves who had run away, reason why she took it as the song’s title (“Music”).
Although Hero has internalized racism, and behaves accordingly, he resents the consequences. His ambivalence is thereby based on his acceptance of servitude and his aversion to compliance (Warren 55-56). No matter how much the Colonel humiliates or abuses Hero, he will continue to obey for his hopeless conditions prohibit social mobility, a fact that he abhors.

However, Hero is also asked to monitor the Unionist Soldier, Smith. The dynamics of slavery are therefore duplicated and mirrored in Hero’s relationship with Smith, who is both a prisoner of war and enslaved by a slave. The ambiguous result of this social mise-en-abyme transforms war into a highly ambivalent interpersonal relation, for it establishes itself as a microcosm that mirrors society while attempting to undo the parameters that sustain that social system. The imitation of the master/slave dynamics works, however, as a discursive element for resistance. In her mimetic representation of colonial sociopolitical structures, Parks gives way to satirical understandings of slavery that decode the racist contours of the national ideology because of their ambiguity. Parks plays with the politics of repression, mastery and dominion locating her characters in different layers of the power scale. Since these strata are contradictory, the resulting social interaction seems parodic and therefore deconstructs the system’s validity. In a hierarchy in which black means slave and thus inferior, the fact that Hero has control over Smith’s enslavement (while simultaneously being the Colonel’s slave) questions its own hierarchical logic; and since Hero belongs to two power layers—slave and commander—at the same time, the chain of command gets broken. The ambivalence of the war zone does not reach climax, however, until Smith, a white-skinned character, informs Hero of his African ancestry, disrupting colonial hierarchies even more. Being a white man with black genealogy, Smith embodies the war conflict, impersonating an aberration that adulterates the social order. His physical whiteness combined with his black origins and his struggle to end slavery proves identity in these plays to be fluid, ambiguous and performed.

Normative power hierarchies collapse in view of Smith’s performativity, since they become self-contradictory and impossible to apply. As a white man, Smith is granted power over the African American community, being later degraded for his liberal opinions (while still being superior to black slaves). Given that he is as well a prisoner of war of African American origin, it becomes impossible to locate him into the fixed, pre-established and simplistic ranks of oppressive hierarchy, which does not take into account the many-sided condition of humanity, especially the discrepancy between his body and his identity. Smith’s ambiguous ethos thus alters the social order, a direct attack on racism that the spectators have to decipher. To be able to interpret the apparition of this character as an act of war against unquestioned bias, indoctrination and as a source of liberal resistance, the audience is expected to leave aside their beliefs, because only in the adoption of an unbiased sensitivity, an interest to undo normative power hierarchies and to listen to the Other, will they be able to discern Smith’s drive. If the audience approaches this play without previously forgetting about social constructs, they will probably understand (at a subconscious level) Smith’s desire to improve the slaves’ conditions as a condescending act (Warren 291) for he would still be seen as a white persona onstage, and unconsciously considered superior. Yet, Smith is a man of color that colonizes his white body to
fight (from the privileged position) against slavery. Vital as he is for the understanding of power in this play, Smith also works as an epiphany to Hero. Due to his dual essence as a black/white individual, Hero finds a range of possibilities in this character, for he realizes that, even in being black, he can perform the role of white characters. Hero’s perception of performativity is therefore opposite to that of Smith. While Smith tries to defeat slavery, Hero adopts duality as the means to snatch white power and sustain another kind of slavery within the black community.

Hero’s bipartite identity originates from his desire to be powerful, a behavioral trait caused by the adoption of the very same masculine Victorian values that were denied to him as a slave (Pendergast 68). In Bodies that Matter, Judith Butler questions the relation between the constitution of bodies, the fixity of their cultural meaning and their indissociability from the social norms that constrain them. In doing so, she associates social regulations with the significance of our bodies, a connection evident in Parks’s protagonist. After war, Hero becomes the embodiment of slavery, for his body holds the meaning of matter ‘bound to be oppressed’ while his mind pursues the power to exert that oppression. Hero’s appropriation of the hegemonic and patriarchal role of the master symbolizes thence a dualistic conception of the ego, proof of the behavioral effects the war environment has had on him. The whitening process thus occurs at a psychological level, which opposes and contradicts the protagonist’s corporeality. Whereas for Smith his skin works as a costume to call racism into question, for Hero, his inherited soldier’s clothes come to substitute his body, as the power they imply eclipses his black skin, covering it, making it invisible. Warrior clothing therefore gains a metaphorical meaning, for Hero’s body has literally become the body of the nation, re-enacting the civil war in its physic/psychic struggle. This opposition is heightened by Hero’s adoption of a new name, Ulysses. The name in itself remains ambiguous for Hero claims it is taken from the Union General, but it recalls Homer’s Odyssey as well, the story of a patriarchal warrior. Thus, the tension between his desire to be white and his physical blackness is constantly performed onstage by means of ambivalent outbursts. These alien seizures seem to reflect either hostility towards his own community, or hospitality, love, and protection. For instance, when Hero returns to the plantation after war, he brings presents for his community; an act of love contradicted by his refusal to tell them they are free(d). Hero brings Homer a white alabaster foot to make up for the one he lost when the Colonel forced him to cut it, an act of redemptive affection overshadowed by his later assassination attempt. As he thinks Homer and Penny have been “unfaithful” to him, he decides to reassert his power over his wife—whom he perceives as his property (just like Odyssey’s Ulysses)—killing her suitor. He also brings Penny a silver spade for her to take care of a garden that, he claims, ought to be her own, promising her a home and a future together to, then, show her a picture of Alberta, his new wife who will replace her in their bed. Throughout the plays, there are many instances of Hero’s conditioned affection, for he loves

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his community, but needs to assert and defend his superior status. This is, again, the reason why Hero “kicks his dog” and tells him to remember his place (Parks, *Father* 121) when Odd-See contradicts him about his assumption of Penny’s affair. Even if he believes his dog to be “his luck” (113), Hero does not (perhaps cannot) allow insubordination of any kind, for it challenges his superiority. The extreme ambivalence that the character epitomizes could be interpreted as a personification of the entire armed conflict. The clothing and the name work as aid-devices to his psychic colonization, which is counterbalanced by his black body; for his corporeality, distorted and dislocated by the colonizer’s white gaze (Fanon 112-113), denies Hero the status and power he yearns.

Hero’s reproduction of “the strategies of control white slave-masters used” (hooks 4) in the plantation against his own community becomes a sign of his body/mind dissociation, which remains constant in *The Union of my Confederate Parts*.

The hierarchical distribution of the characters is not exclusively based on their race however, but also presents sexist parameters that stimulate a war between the sexes. The representation of femininity onstage resembles that of the *Odyssey*, in which the feminine characters (summarized in the figure of Penelope) are fenced within the boundaries of the familiar *oikos*, where social mobility is once again not permitted (Whittaker 31). The home thereby becomes a central institution to which women are confined. In *Father*, feminine subordination is manifest, since Penny seems to be a property of Hero. Her connection to the household parallels Homer’s depiction of Penelope, who is reduced to weaving as a sign of acceptance of masculine impositions and feminine limitations (Whittaker 35, 40). Yet, Penny’s acquiescence is not epitomized in the passivity of a repeated chore, but rather *dug into*, explored in depth to decrypt the patriarchal discourse that oppresses her, raise awareness about her situation and allow her to move on, leaving the domestic space. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the objectification of femininity culminates in Odysseus’s assassination of Penelope’s suitors. Murder in this case seems admissible since Odysseus’s property, his home and his wife, had not been respected during his absence (Whittaker 32-33). In asking for Penelope’s hand, the suitors were trying to obtain Odysseus’s political power, which enables him to exert dominion by means of violence. From this perspective, marriage translates into a political transaction to obtain new possessions, which, if appropriated by the enemy, require for the master to go to war. Such understanding of the marriage bond is also mirrored in Parks’s epic. When Hero/Ulysses returns home, Homer seems to have dishonored Penny and his bed, colonizing his territory. Thus, Hero attempts to murder him with a knife in order to exert dominion and reassert his position of power.

Hero exemplifies the “transformative” power that war has on soldiers (Coker 4). It is only after war that a freed Hero (Ulysses) willingly withdraws his support for the Union unfolding into extreme ambivalence. As he has been at war, Hero perceives himself as superior to the rest of the slaves, even when he fought on “the wrong side” of the war (Parks, *Father* 25). And even

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4 Please note that the title of the play in itself warns the reader of Hero’s ambivalence, for he drifts from liberal to conservative poles.
if he initially comes back with a copy of the Proclamation aiming to inform the rest of the slaves of their freedom, his good intentions do not last long, for he defines himself as a hero of war and expects to be treated accordingly, as if he were Homer’s Odysseus. His feelings of grandeur are translated into an account of his war-journey, which is highly romanticized into a heroic journey back home. However, his final decision not to let the other characters know that they are free is, perhaps, the most obvious instance of his actual craving for power. At stake in Hero’s deliberate secrecy is the loss of his community’s freedom, since, in occulting their liberation, Hero aims to impose a renewed stratified social order of which he would be master. After retelling his deeds, Hero tries to impose a sexist neoslavery upon Penny, who is expected to stay with him at the plantation and accept his new wife Alberta and the children that might be born to this marriage. His restored social order paves the way for a new civil war in the microcosm of black space, for men like Hero, bell hooks regrets, perceive women through the lens of Western patriarchy as mere bodies to colonize (4). hooks associates this “dominator” behavior of some former black male slaves which reproduce the control strategies of white masters (4). In repeating his master’s acts of violence, Hero is asserting his superiority and self-identifying as a powerful white patriarch.

However, this is not the only black male figure introduced in Parks’s (and hooks’s) writings. Opposite to Hero, the character of Homer, the black slave who gets romantically involved with Penny in Hero’s absence, represents what hooks defines as the “rare” black slaves that did not assimilate white patriarchal norms and therefore produced “a different subculture” in which the domination of black women through violence was unthinkable (4). Homer reneges on the patriarchal norms of the white masters and rather chooses to escape slavery and run away with Penny. Hero’s and Homer’s divergent behaviors set up a binary representation of black men, which, one could argue, might translate into the different home-spaces they will occupy, their future family dynamics and the different journeys they will undertake in Parks’s continuation of her epic cycle. What is certain is that this division establishes a twofold understanding of black masculinity that points to the aftermaths of slavery, and mirrors Unionist and Confederate conducts now directed toward women; that is violent oppression of black individuals or pro-equality views. In these plays, Parks snatches the historical relevance of white Civil War soldiers to give visibility to those black slaves who continued to suffer long after the war ended. Parks highlights the atrocities committed against these male slaves, equating them to the patriarchal powers that acted on black women afterwards. She does so to signal the traumatic legacy of slavery on the African American community. Either yearning or despising the master’s power, Parks’s male slaves paint a picture of personal and collective horror, revealing the destructive effects of colonial supremacy. Father Comes Home from the Wars thereby stands for a social critique of the very same history that never acknowledges black voices, that does not even echo
their presence, denying the African American community the possibility to come to terms with trauma.

History, then, is perceived as a cyclic repetition that constantly leads back to war, for the oppressed are liable to become oppressors of their own communities. In *The Union of my Confederate Parts*, Hero’s transformation of the social order implies new forms of slavery, social divisions and expectable civil wars. The conflict in the play is surprisingly anticipated by Odd-See, Hero’s dog. Invoked in the first play as Hero’s lucky charm, Odd-See appears onstage at the end of part three. If its allegorical name gives the dog an ambiguous meaning, its actions help to provide a more specific function to it in part three, that of an unreliable narrator. His name might therefore stand for his inability to properly see as well as for his capacity to observe the characters’ destiny (their odds). Hence, Odd-See becomes a trans-temporal figure, able to move forward and backwards in the narrative, to recall the past into the present and merge it with anticipations of the future. In the end, it is Odd-See who dissects part three’s ending in his veiled dialogue with the audience. As a dog, Odd-See has the capacity to talk, which makes him the supernatural force in the play, but, in more realistic terms, he is an animal partially characterized by its tendency to dig. And digging is vital to understand Parks’s (hi)story. Odd-See recalls Odysseus’s dog too and not only in his name (Odyssey), but also in his behavior, for he is the first to identify his master after his journey. As a tamed animal, Odd-See replicates the slave/master dynamics and offers vistas into Hero’s newly abusive behavior. And even though it is clear that (as Hero’s luck) he does not accompany him in the battlefield, his entrance at the end raises ambiguity. Odd-See is the key to Parks’s organic theatre for he represents the figurative entrance of the writer on-scene, an external force that knows the prospective actions of other characters and offers predictions to misguide the spectators. By making the audience believe that the news about Hero’s return will make Penny happy and Homer sad (Parks, *Father* 104), Odd-See evokes the initial rendezvous between Hero and Penny, when Hero made Penny feel like “a bird,” free from oppression (28, 111). Yet, the expected love-scene appears as a source of sequential ambivalence, in which positive memories obliterate Hero’s metamorphosis and symbolize a misleading sense of hope. Hero’s transformation seems ineludible though, alienating him from his community who leave him standing with his uniforms and a silver spade. About to bury his master with the instrument that Parks uses to dig into history (and that, ironically, Odd-See is holding when the play ends), Hero establishes himself as a figure in control, which will definitely mark the future of his family tree in direct opposition to that of Penny and Homer, who have ironically become fugitive slaves after the Proclamation.

Ulysses’s dualism enters a loop of symbolical repetition in which his body/mind conflict is materialized in tokens. In his return home, Hero brings presents to the same characters he later attempts to oppress. Those gifts, namely a spade for a flowery garden, a prosthetic white alabaster feet and a silver spoon, reproduce his ambivalence towards blackness, for they belong

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5 This scene is a clear instance of Rep&Rev, for the wording is the same, but its meaning has been revised.
to the white life-style that Hero pursues. His ambiguous ethos is most evidently presented by his clothes being “battlefield trophies” that imply his incapacity to be critical towards the power he has idealized (Kozol 131). Wearing the Unionist uniform given by Smith under the Confederate one inherited from his master, Hero/Ulysses becomes the threshold of war, which cannot fit into the traditional pattern of epic narratives. He is neither condemned nor applauded for he is both attracted and repelled by the power he yearns.

The combination of Unionist and Confederate traits in his persona seems extremely ambivalent and ambiguous, and also signals the mobility between social categories promoted by the Proclamation. In her analysis of Topdog/Underdog, Jennifer Larson argues that clothes “highlight the fluidity, exteriority, and superficiality of identity” (183), a claim true for Father Comes Home from the Wars. In Parks’s epic theatre clothes are a distraction emphasizing the apparent so that the audience can make certain basic assumptions that would later be undone by means of mimicry. Clothes remain ambiguous elements, which favor the stratification of society, labelling the characters into different social groups, but also hide the non-normative side of their identities, underlining performativity. However, as Larson remarks, clothes are “empty signifiers,” whose meaning is to be imbued by the audience from the historicized reality they have experienced (186). Hero never leaves any of his uniforms behind, as they have both come to be antithetical parts of his identity that underline his own ambivalence and transform his body into a site of war. Thus, the stage becomes a battlefield for the two sides of his persona to strive for mastery. The act of dressing with war clothes represents the sacrifice of his actual self: He initially endorses Eurocentric standards covering himself up with the audience’s social expectations, which incurs in a mental displacement of the self. In his attempt to earn freedom, Hero ends up burglarizing it from his community, as he never reads the Proclamation to them. Yet, Hero’s heart (hidden under a Confederate appearance) seems to still find comfort, “a sort of Truth” (Parks, Father 115), in Smith’s uniform. At the end of part three, Hero has not undone the foundations of slavery yet, as he still refers to the Colonel as his master. Hence, it seems feasible that, as Pilny indicates, Parks’s hero is still figuring his identity out, and that the transformations imposed by war are liable to be effaced if Hero becomes one of Parks’s diggers (127).

3. Undoing the Myth of War: Musical Revisions and Ethical Responsibilities

The outbreak of war seems naturally connected to a cultural myth that shapes our perception of war figures and their violent actions. The meaning inferred from them is fixed into history as a rigid ultimate truth that should not be relived. Parks, however, tells history anew and re-enacts the past into the present to narrate those stories that have repeatedly been neglected. She “dig[s] for bones, find[s] bones, hear[s] the bones sing [and] write[s] it down” (Parks, "Elements" 4), a beautiful metaphor for her search within the unstable framework of collective memory to find unspoken, unwritten memoirs to fill historical gaps. The normative discourse of the nation is
therefore counteracted by the fluidity of the unsaid, for those untold truths signal the discursive vulnerability, destructibility and falseness of the ideological norms the nation establishes. Parks selects the Civil War as framework for her epic for its deconstructive power. In her illustrations of the conflict, one can easily identify the alienation, and marginalization of black bodies before, during and after the war. The precariousness of African Americans, allegedly defended by the Union, is exposed, then, to disrupt the mythical order that ennobles war.

In Father, Parks explores the myth of war to highlight its ambivalence, which is portrayed as the aftermath of socially-unrecognized traumatic experiences resultant of unethical representations and retellings of the past. In doing so, she comments on her protagonist’s collective identity, which appears as a wound that never closes, unacknowledged in history. She gives account of African American trauma to underscore the consequences of war in the community. Hero sacrifices his identity to become a tool in the hands of political power. This implies that his self-esteem is reduced to the public opinion of his white reference group, which divides him into black Hero and white Ulysses; a split identity that causes him to lose his community, and conceals unrecognized trauma. In these plays, Parks shows Hero’s ambivalence towards himself as a reflection of national division, but also as a characteristic that emerges because he goes to war, judging himself from an external Western gaze. Given that society condemns him, Hero attempts to escape his own definition in order to be accepted. The myth of war thus responds to Western configurations of the hero, which are unreachable for African American soldiers. In Oneself as Another, Paul Ricoeur argues that self-identity is problematic, for it drifts from sameness—those repeated habits that define identity as static and shared, to selfhood—the individualizing traits that expose plurality within the individual (115-119); self-interpretation therefore moves from one pole to the other, promoting ethical behaviors. This double perception of the self gets engraved in social discourses which, according to Ricoeur, implies treating others with respect and empathy, for one perceives himself as an Other, but also identifies features of himself in Others (203). Solicitude thus becomes an essential characteristic of the self that belongs to the paradoxical exchange of “the esteem of the other as oneself and the esteem of oneself as an other” (194, emphasis in original). Ricoeur’s oxymoronic perception of good deeds calls attention to the interplay between individualizing and shared identity features to underline the importance of our relation to others. An ethical ambivalence seems to be raised, however, when matters of power and politics come into play, an issue examined in Parks’s epic. In Father, the institution of war denies self-esteem, as the Other cannot be equivalent to the hegemonic force. Ricoeur contends as well that authority is violently imposed over time thanks to the institutions and mythical traditions that sustain it, obliterating what he perceives as our organic inclination to live in harmony (195-197). Aware of the dangers of mythical reproduction, Parks reformulates the epic tradition through mimicry, pointing at those myths and foundations that discredit African American representation and, by extension, infringe upon their right to depict their hyphenated identity.

The African American discursive dependency upon the Western culture, especially upon its language, signals an urgency to reinvent black identity incorporating those white elements the
playwrights have appropriated (Olaniyan 140). Contemporary African American writers are inevitably rooted in the U.S. (and its cultural belief system) while simultaneously carrying the traumatic baggage of slavery, transmitted in the collective unconscious. Their hyphenated identity is thus in need to be rediscovered for, as Audre Lorde affirms, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (859). The inclusion of white discursive elements serves to revisit their own definition while undoing the social norms that still oppress their community. This notion is very close to Parks’s usage of original techniques that, imitating Western discourse and the epic tradition, defeat the epistemological subordination of minority writings to the Eurocentric canon. Through mimicry, Parks reproduces white discourse to question its legitimacy, incorporating elements of her own—such as Rep&Rev—that alter cultural meanings. In her drama Parks resorts to mimicry in order to revisit history; a dramatic technique “embedded in the vernacular tradition of African American oral culture” (Saal 180). Parks’s combination of “modernist alienation” and the vernacular responds to her desire to criticize historical representation by imitating the dominant discourse in order to deconstruct it (Saal 180). Vital to her revision is the inclusion of rhythmical overlapping of music and narrative in that it connects the poeticism of the epic tradition with the cultural critique of slavery, racism and war; for, as Brecht affirms, the inclusion of music is a sine qua non to the emergence of a theatre of a poetic kind (125). In a different context, Erich Nunn points out the fusion of “poetic and musical lyricism with acts of racialized violence” as the site of racial identity negotiation (138). He establishes music as the vehicle to mark the effects of racial violence, functioning as “elegies for individual victims” (Nunn 139). And although in Parks music serves to emphasize the elegiac tone of human crises, it is embedded in the undoing of racial patterns of identification by means of the satirical and the tragicomic. Her songs fill the tragic background of slavery with rhythmical interjections that provide an ambiguously cheerful aura that enshrouds the audience. The spectators are encouraged to experience the action at sensorial unconscious levels, being able to defeat the impositions of tragedy. Music is thus experienced as an optimistic lament that arouses from the spiritual strength of the vernacular, laughs in the face of adversity, and emerges as an affirmation of resistance.

Since myths are symbolic representations of reality, racial identification in Parks is built discursively. Thus, discourse becomes “an agonistic terrain” for African Americans for they are expected to share space “in grossly unequal terms” (Olaniyan 26-27). Agency is presented, then, in agonistic terms, aiming to end the devaluation of the Other. Parks’s dissolution of war myths is contingent on her archeological storytelling, which becomes “provocative,” altering defining characteristics of the dominant culture (Saariluoma 16). In order to invalidate the traditional Eurocentric rhetoric, the playwright assumes an active role and digs in the collective memory of her community in search for stories buried and forgotten. Her procedure points to the “offensive to do work” that oppressed communities need to endure (Thompson 172) if they aim to recover...
unofficial versions of the past. Parks’s rhythmic digging denies (hi)storical fixity, approaching the realms of ritual, repetition and the vernacular to recover an unrepresented history that works like a specter on us and “that won’t stay buried” (Thompson 169). Wars explore our capacity to be moved by symbols, abstractions and political agendas; but they also challenge our ethical responsibility towards others. In Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2 & 3), hope, survival and salvation rely on the characters’ interrelations, which introduce war as an ambivalent collective phenomenon that should not be read in binary terms, for ambivalence is pivotal to the decolonization of history.

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