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SUZAN-LORI PARKS AND NAOMI WALLACE IN RELATION: PLAYING THE AMERICAN GAME FOR REAL AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT: Two American women whose writings for the theatre have been both nationally and internationally recognized, Suzan-Lori Parks and Naomi Wallace have drawn on the notion of game-playing to explore and undermine the inextricability of the power relations that govern their vision of America. Because theatre is about playing, games occupy a central position around which meaning revolves and multiplies on stage, infinitely magnified by Parks's and Wallace's poetic imagination. As far apart and unique as they are, their voices deeply resonate with the American landscape and beyond, echoing each other in ways that call for an examination of the correspondences that make their plays *related*, in the sense Edouard Glissant gave to the term, of a totality that does not exclude differences, of a meeting of pluralities, which is the stable/unstable ground of games, and of a place from where infinite beauty can spring. Parks's *The America Play* and Wallace's *The War Boys*, both written in the early 90s, evolved through a creative process that feeds on itself into the widely acclaimed *Topdog/Underdog* that earned Parks a Pulitzer Prize in 2002 and *The Breach*, which was produced at the Avignon Theatre Festival in 2019, expanding Wallace's popularity in France. Through a comparative analysis of the poetics at work in these four plays, the aim of this article is to bring these two women's voices together, placing them in relation without erasing their particularities to delineate the contours of a "relational poetics," to again use Glissant's terminology, one that evokes rather than explains, one that resurrects

the past to reinvent our present and divine the future: an art of divination.

RESUMEN: Suzan-Lori Parks y Naomi Wallace, dos mujeres estadounidenses cuyos escritos para el teatro han sido reconocidos nacional e internacionalmente han recurrido a la noción de juego para explorar y socavar el carácter inextricable de las relaciones de poder que rigen su visión de América. Dado que el teatro consiste en el juego de la representación, los juegos ocupan una posición central en torno a la cual gira y se multiplica el significado en escena, infinitamente magnificado por la imaginación poética de Parks y Wallace. Por muy distantes y singulares que sean, sus voces resuenan profundamente en el paisaje estadounidense y más allá, haciéndose eco mutuamente de maneras que invitan a examinar las correspondencias que hacen que sus obras estén relacionadas, en el sentido que Edouard Glissant dio al término, como totalidad que no excluye las diferencias, como un encuentro de pluralidades que es el terreno estable/inestable de los juegos, y de un lugar del que puede brotar una belleza infinita. *The America Play* de Parks y *The War Boys* de Wallace, ambas escritas a principios de los 90, evolucionaron a través de un proceso creativo que se alimenta de sí mismo en la ampliamente aclamada *Topdog/Underdog* que le valió a Parks el Premio Pulitzer en 2002 y *The Breach*, que se presentó en el Festival de Teatro de Aviñón en 2019, ampliando la popularidad de Wallace en Francia. A través de un análisis comparativo de las poéticas en juego en estas cuatro obras, el objetivo de este artículo es acercar las voces de estas dos mujeres, poniéndolas en relación sin borrar sus particularidades para trazar los contornos de una "poética relacional," por utilizar de nuevo la terminología de Glissant, que evoca más que explica, que resucita el pasado para reinventar nuestro presente y adivinar el futuro: un arte de adivinación.

Relation is learning more and more to go beyond judgments into the unexpected dark of art's upsurgings. Its beauty springs from the stable and the unstable, from the deviance of many particular poetics into the clairvoyance of a relational poetics.
Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

Suzan-Lori Parks and Naomi Wallace began writing for the theatre at approximately the same period. Their first full-length plays, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *The War Boys* premiered in 1989 and 1993 respectively, one in New York, the other in London. Since then, their work for the stage has attracted

international critical attention, making them two major figures in the North American artistic landscape. Although their voices have now reached well beyond their native United States, the academic discourse surrounding their work betrays a tendency to place them in categories that rarely overlap. While Parks's celebrated plays have been examined alongside such concepts as "post-blackness"[1] (Ashe and Saal 9), Wallace has repeatedly been referred to as a "transnational artist" valued for her ability to "think across borders" (Potter). As theoretical tools, transnationalism and post-blackness do have the advantage of positioning Parks's and Wallace's theatre within some very relevant cultural trends; but such *trans-* and *post-* perspectives also have the disadvantage of imposing new borders upon critical thinking, borders that confine analysis to pre-defined categories that are safely ensconced within scholarly rhetoric. The trouble might come from the overuse of prefixes like *trans-* or *post-* to account for the diversity of contemporary artistic output, a diversity that has to do with an ever-changing world where the very notion of border has become moot. The etymology of both prefixes indeed implies a crossing of limits, thus positing the existence of *something before* that has to be either relegated to the past or surpassed for something new to arise. Although such thinking allows cultural products to be both historicized and apprehended as identifiable objects in the somewhat chaotic profusion of artistic creation, it envisions art as a linear process, a series of repetitions and differences. To give way to the future, the past has to be passed through in what appears to be a unidirectional, repetitive and implicitly violent dynamics, a moving forward achieved by dint of breaking through something. These successive crossings give time its substance and justification as both a leave-taking of the old and a welcoming of the new. The consequence is a mode of thinking along mutually exclusive categories that confines research to either/or alternatives and art to the pursuit of a future envisioned as necessarily and radically *different* from the past.

But what of the shared interval, where and when categories overlap? The aim of this article is to explore the porous place where past and future coexist as traces or presages, a place as elusive and

[1] The introduction to the collection of essays edited by Bertram D. Ashe and Ilka Saal provides a useful definition of "post-blackness" as "a valid and productive category of analysis with regard to the poetics and politics of contemporary engagements with slavery in African American culture."

ungraspable as the here-and-now of the present, which, after all, is what theatre is all about. Erring in both its senses of making mistakes and straying from a given path will therefore guide the steps of this analysis. For the unpredictable does not necessarily wait at the end of a mapped-out road. It hides in unlikely places and emerges from chance encounters. It is the unexpected product of what French Caribbean poet and thinker Edouard Glissant calls "the thought of errantry," a thought he defines as a "poetics" which "infers that at some moments it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation" (18). Turning to Glissant and his concept of Relation to examine plays by two North American women playwrights is a choice motivated by the off-center position of Glissant as a French intellectual born in 1928 in La Martinique, a French Caribbean island where the memory of slavery, as part of French history, still haunts the idyllic postcard of translucent water, white sand and tropical lushness that these overseas territories usually evoke in metropolitan France. The verb "haunt" might not be the right word to use, as French colonization has left very tangible, not just spectral, marks in that region of the Americas, but it has the merit of establishing a connection between Glissant and one of the key motifs of Parks's and Wallace's theatre: namely, the various ghosts they revive on stage to deal with the thorny issue of the inglorious parts of western history. Relation as Glissant sees it is as much a poetics as a mode of knowledge based on the power of imagination to re-late, or, etymologically, to "bring back" something from the past and tell about it. Relation is therefore both about retelling and connecting: a looking back as well as an opening into the future. If the concept is particularly relevant today, it is because now is a moment when the very notion of western history has exploded into a million stories, replacing the old east/west division with an inextricable overlay of narratives. Now, the histories of so-called western nations are being placed within a wider frame of the history of the world, and the movement of western conquest that has resulted in a rounding of the world is giving way to a multiplicity of crisscrossing paths, which is what Glissant calls the "chaotic journey of evolving cultures" (Glissant 1).

Parks's and Wallace's concern with the past may therefore serve as a point of entry into the "chaotic journey" of an analysis that proposes to follow traces and listen to echoes in the hope of offering new insights into the work of two powerful theatre artists. The journey begins with a *common place*: Kentucky in the United States, where Parks and Wallace were both born in the early 60s. But that common

place is informed by other places from the very start of their lives. Wallace's mother was Dutch, and Parks spent part of her teenage years in Germany, where her father, a colonel in the Army, was stationed after serving in the Vietnam War. Very early, then, the knowledge of other places, languages and cultures turned these women into crossers of borders, placing their American identity in relation to the world as "open totality" (Glissant 78). The four plays under study in this article are set in the United States. The two early plays, Wallace's *The War Boys* (1993) and Parks's *The America Play* (1994) were selected for their critical stand against the United States as a nation. The choice of the two later plays, *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) and *The Breach* (2019), was mainly guided by the enthusiastic receptions of their first productions, *Topdog* making Parks the first African American woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for drama, and the staging of *The Breach* by director Tommy Milliot at the Avignon Festival expanding Wallace's popularity in Europe. What further motivated this choice was game-playing as a shared foundational element in Parks's and Wallace's development as playwrights, one that seems to be at the core of their vision of America. Whether it involves role-playing or engaging in an activity for fun, game-playing is, first of all, about competing physically or mentally with others until a winner emerges: the good actor who tricks his audience into believing in a role or the skilled card player who successfully manipulates his /her opponent. Playing a game thus always requires a certain propensity for lying and pretending, which makes it inextricably linked to theatre. From the early to the later plays, Parks and Wallace explore and extend this definition, deploying its infinite potentialities on the stage. Used as a metatheatrical device, game-playing places the audience on shifting grounds, leaving them with the dizzying impression of watching actors playing characters who are themselves playing at being others. As a performative device, it is a means of relating the self to others, of showing identity in action, identity as relation, which is precisely how Glissant envisions Relation, namely as a "poetics in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (Glissant 11). Playing games indeed involves playing roles. It shows how identities circulate between bodies, another crossing of borders that Parks and Wallace use, each in her own unique way, to undermine "the old idea of identity as root" that Glissant was set on debunking: "Identity is no longer just permanence; it is a capacity for variation, yes, a variable—either under control or wildly fluctuating" (Glissant 141).

PLAYING IT LIKE AN AMERICAN: "TOP MY LOVE!"[2]

In *The America Play*, the black actor playing The Foundling Father is both the narrator and the main character in a story about re-enacting the death of Abraham Lincoln. His body is not the container for a fixed identity but a locus through which the identities of The Foundling Father as narrator, The Lesser Known as the main character, and The Great Man as Abraham Lincoln circulate to re-late several tales: Lincoln's assassination by actor John Wilkes Booth during a theatre representation in 1865, The Lesser Known's life as both black digger of graves and Lincoln impersonator who left for the West, and the journey of The Lesser Known's wife and son to find him. Through the re-enactment of the history of The Great One, it is the story of The Lesser One that is being told, a story buried deep in what Parks calls "the Great Hole of History" (*America Play* 159). For, the "virtual twinship" (164) that ironically binds the Great One and the Lesser One together as brothers in fate, both eventually being shot in the head, relates two life stories separated in time that nothing but an act of imagination, a poetics, can bring together.

As inverted doubles of each other, the black man and the white man meet through a performing act, which is Parks's way of rewriting history. Playing at being the Great One thus repeats and reverses the order of things, just as the three figures of speech that start the play relate the chasm where the history of African Americans lies buried to the chiasmus that opens up language to new meanings: "He digged the hole and the whole held him" (*America Play* 159). For, playing with language or with identities has only one aim: relating what would otherwise remain separated, incompatible, radically other. What emerges out of the game is the hidden relation, the chasm in chiasmus and the Founding Father in the Foundling Father. Yet, playing is possible precisely because there is an unbridgeable difference, a split, between The Foundling Father who *plays* but *is not* one of the Founding Fathers. Playing a role always presupposes a difference between the self (that I am) and the other (that I am not). But what it also implies is that the split is located *within* the self who becomes double, both self and other, through the very act of performance. In other words, the hole is contained within the whole. In fact, it is what holds the whole together. The history of America is built on such a

[2] Naomi Wallace, *The Breach*, 34.

hole. In *The America Play*, the original hole is the Civil War that divided the nation around the question of slavery during Lincoln's presidency, an inside war referred to as "the brother against the brother" (*America Play* 160).

A similar conception of America informs Wallace's *The War Boys*, a play about three young American men who spend their spare time earning money by watching over the border separating the United States from Mexico. Because they are bored of waiting for something real to happen, they play at imagining the stranger on the other side, at being that stranger, impersonating him or her through various scenarios that ironically show how much their friendship relies on a shared racist and sexist vision of others: a sense of "we" that constitutes itself against "them." But, once again, what Wallace calls "the War Boy's game" (*The War Boys* 147) only serves to reveal that the enemy is already inside. That enemy's alien presence gradually emerges from the gaps in the self-revelatory stories of this very American band of brothers, splitting their narratives into fragments, exposing their lies through holes and gaps, pointing to an original split that finds its way on stage through the hyphenated identity of one of the boys, named Greg, who turns out to be Mexican-American: "When I was a little *niño* I was two separate pieces, just below the surface, held together by skin" (*The War Boys* 156). Thus, in *The War Boys* too, the hole is contained within the whole. It both splits and builds the boys' identities. Their very names, Greg, David and George, reflect this impossible combination of sameness and difference through the mirror effect produced by the repetition of the same sound at the beginning and end of each name. In between, a variation of letters—a slight distortion—prevents the names from being perfect palindromes, a stylistic device that echoes the ABBA structure of the chiasmus in Parks's *America Play*. The return to the same is thus undermined by a minor disturbance, hardly noticeable yet essential if the circular meaning of revolution is to mingle with that of evolution, if linear time and cyclical time are to overlap, reconciling repetition and difference through a sense of wholeness that contains the seeds of its own destruction: a w/hole full of possibilities. As poets for the stage, both Wallace and Parks hint at the possibility of change within stable representations of identity as root and of history as linear progress. In *The America Play* as well as in *The War Boys*, the game indeed re-enacts a history of violence, a history that involves men playing at being a greater or lesser other who turns out to be a foil for their American identity to be acknowledged, for a sense of brotherhood, of

a nation, to exist. It is a game that not only reenacts the history of a nation, but that also serves as the foundation of that nation. Its rules are based on the antagonistic opposition between friends and enemies that underlies and justifies the position of the United States as a leading nation. It is the American game that is played for real because its very rules are constitutive of an American identity. Yet, because game-playing always relies on a lie, it is its very precariousness that Parks and Wallace expose. For, the original split, whether it be a hole in the border, a wound in a dead man's head, a hyphenated identity or the Great Hole of History, is the unstable foundation and origin of the American nation: it is the missing father that has either died or abandoned his family. Parks's and Wallace's orphan characters play around that crack, exposing the violence of a game that seems to be exclusively male, a game of brothers vying with each other until one of them wins, until the split between the winner and the loser finally re-establishes the separation between "self" and "other," or rather "self" above "other" since the American game always involves a movement upwards, a competitive "topping" of the other in a deadly repetition of the same, a dream of greatness that ends in murder and death:

> THE FOUNDLING FATHER: The Lesser Known meanwhile living his life long after all this had happened and not knowing much about this until he was much older [...] knew only that he was a dead ringer in a family of Diggers and that he wanted to grow and have others think of him and remove their hats and touch their hearts and look up into the heavens and say something about the freeing of the slaves. That is, he wanted to make a great impression as he understood Mr. Lincoln to have made. (*The America Play* 166)

The later plays, *Topdog/Underdog* and *The Breach*, reinforce the idea of the American game as stereotypically virile, even macho, and violent to the point of death. The two black brothers in *Topdog*, named Booth and Lincoln in what is referred to as their father's "idea of a joke" (*Topdog* 24), keep exchanging the roles of winner and loser though a gambling game—Three Card Monte—that ends up in Booth killing his brother. In this later play, Parks chooses to narrow the scope of her plot from American history to the story of two brothers, but the notion of game-playing remains, it even multiplies as Lincoln works in an arcade impersonating his namesake with customers playing at shooting him and is at the same time a talented card hustler, a talent that made him a local celebrity. The Three Card Monte game is indeed

what makes Lincoln a "great man" in the eyes of his brother Booth, who dreams of teaming up with him in what appears to be, again, an exclusive sense of togetherness, a sense of "we" constituting itself against others:

> BOOTH. We could be a team, man. Rake in the money! [...] Big brother Link and little brother Booth—
>
> LINCOLN. 3-Card.
>
> BOOTH. Yeah. Scheming and dreaming. No one throws the cards like you, Link. And with yr moves and my magic, and we get Grace and a girl for you to round out the posse. We'd be golden bro! (*Topdog* 20)

There is definitely a touch of social realism in this play and a departure from Parks's earlier, more abstract and poetic *America Play*. Yet, the same original split contaminates the relation between the two brothers. It takes the symbolic shape of "the split budget" (*Topdog* 69) that the parents decide to give to each of their children before leaving them. Together with their names, what the brothers inherit is a gap between them, a secret sum of money each of the parents gave to one of their sons separately, the mother to Booth, the father to Lincoln. Quite significantly, it is that inheritance that Booth gambles and loses in a last attempt at outplaying his brother at the Three Card Monte game. It is that secret money that leads him to murder his own brother because he cannot accept the gap, the difference that makes him the played, not the player. Thus, with Booth killing Lincoln, history repeats itself, and the split is maintained.

Unlike Parks, Wallace never mentioned any connection between *The War Boys* and *The Breach*. Yet, the three teenage boys who play a dangerous game to prove their bond of friendship in *The Breach* share many characteristics with the three young boys of the earlier play. Like them, they occupy different rungs of the social ladder. Like them, the game they play is based on a sense of brotherhood achieved through exclusion. In *The Breach*, the game consists in betraying one's family, breaking an original, natural bond to create a new, stronger allegiance based on the sacrifice of what the boys hold most dear. For Acton, the youngest and poorest of the three, it means sacrificing his older sister, Jude. Like Lincoln in *Topdog*, Jude is the eldest sibling who had to provide for her family after their father's fatal fall from a defective scaffold. Unlike Lincoln, she is a girl,

a strong and beautiful one, which makes her an object of desire and a high stake in the boys' game. What Acton has to do in order to prove his bond of friendship is to give her a sleeping pill so that, while she is unconscious, the other two boys can sexually assault her.

A sacrifice and a betrayal, Acton's deed cracks the play apart. The blank in Jude's memory has opened a breach in her body that turns out to structure the whole play. That split is the unstable foundation on which the plot is erected, a building standing upon a hole: just like America. It cracks open space and time, breaking the play into two time-dimensions, 1977 and 1991, two moments apart inhabited by younger and older versions of the characters, who meet on stage without seeing one another. In between these two separate moments, the lost interval is gradually, yet never completely filled by their stories. In the end, however, one winner emerges: the one who played them all, the rich one, Hoke, who inherited his father's healthcare company and, with it, the medical power to control human minds, to make people forget what happened, to prevent them from knowing. From knowing what? That the whole American game, the whole topping game consisting in sacrificing what the boys held most dear was based on a lie, Hoke's lie. For Hoke was the one who initiated the brothers' game by failing his exams, when, they would understand later, failing his exams meant nothing to a daddy's boy who would eventually inherit his family's wealth. The topping game thus initiates a movement upwards that can only end up in a return to the same because rising is an illusion, a lie made up by the powerful ones, the rulers, the always-already winners, to maintain the status quo.

CHANGING THE RULES: GOING DOWN

But there is another way of playing, one that does not involve topping the other, one that does not involve going up. The alternative game Parks and Wallace imagine is rather about going down, about digging or falling, and, eventually, about knowing. Parks uses the digger motif in many of her plays as an allegory of black people's search for their past, for a lineage that would relate them to their own founding fathers, not to the white substitutes provided by the grand yet partial narrative advanced in history books. As a descendant of Diggers, with a capital D and a pun on the n-word, The Foundling Father looks for and finally disappears into the Great Hole of History, a blank that comes to represent many things at once: a theme park for the great parade of history to be re-enacted, the forgotten past of

black American people and, finally, The Foundling Father's own grave. In *The Breach*, the action takes place in the basement of Jude and Acton's house. The dark emptiness of the foundations is a concrete means of giving shape to the blank, the split that breaks time, space and bodies apart, swallowing up stories like a bottomless hole, a hole into which Acton eventually falls and disappears in a tragic re-enactment of his father's death.

As such, down below where terrible secrets are kept, in that place of mourning and remembrance that are Parks's and Wallace's stages, another game can be played. Jude and Acton call it the falling game. It is a game they invent to connect with the last moments of their father's life by imagining what thoughts could have crossed his mind while falling. A way of filling in the blank, the falling game allows them to remember and reinvent the lost interval of space and time when the loved one was hurt and they did not know about it. It is their game, their way of recovering from the loss of the father and the possibility of changing the rules to avoid the return to the same history of violence. It is a way of outplaying death:

> JUDE. When Dad was falling, he was thinkin': *Damn, double damn. I didn't get to eat my lunch. Velveeta—*
>
> ACTON. *—on rye and a pickle. Shit. There goes my best arm!*
>
> JUDE. *And my favourite drink: Orange Crush! Orange—*
>
> ACTON: *—Crush! I'm flyin' like a bird, no, like a brick from the fourteenth floor.* Dad's thinking:
>
> JUDE: *I shoulda put fresh socks on this morning.*
>
> ACTON: *I'm upside down, spinnin' like a top. Is someone gonna—*
>
> JUDE: *—catch me? Catch me or bye, bye, birdie.* (*The Breach* 43)

The above passage strangely echoes the exchange between the widow and son of the Foundling Father, called Lucy and Brazil, at the end of *The America Play*. In his search for a place in history, the Foundling Father left them for the West, a direction that alludes both to the conquest of the West made by his white "foefathers" (191) and to the crossing of the Atlantic by the African slaves made by his true forefathers. Lucy and Brazil finally find the place where he died, and

Lucy imagines what he would have said to his son, using fragments from a few of Lincoln's historical speeches and mixing them with more personal words in a passage that not only ridicules the falseness of American national rhetoric but that also creates a new sense of "we," one that has to be imagined, one that emerges from the silence of a secret that is revealed and yet cannot be heard. What happens between Lucy and Brazil then is the opposite of a split; it is a blank that reconciles the living with the dead, that brings "me," "you," and "him" together at last: a hole finally made whole, and the revelation of a wonder, as Brazil's reaction "O" seems to imply, the letter "O" figuring both the hole and the wholeness of the full circle:

> BRAZIL. Whatwouldhesay?
>
> LUCY. He'd say: "My how you've grown!" He'd say: "How your weepin?" He'd say: —Ha! He's running through his states and capitals! Licketysplit!
>
> BRAZIL. Howuhboutthat!
>
> LUCY. He'd say: "Uh house divided cannot stand!" He'd say: "4score and 7 years uhgoh." Say: "Of thuh people by thuh people and for thuh people." Say: "Malice toward none and charity toward all." Say: "Cheat some of thuh people some of thuh time." He'd say: (and this is only to be spoken between you and me and him—)
>
> BRAZIL. K.
>
> LUCY. Lean in. Ssfor our ears and our ears alone.
> LUCY
>
> BRAZIL
>
> BRAZIL. O. (*America Play* 191)

Imagination thus becomes a means of filling the hole with hope, of bridging the gap opened by the impossibility of knowing. In the space between words that materializes in Parks's scripts as "a repetition of figures' names with no dialogue" (*Topdog*, Author's Notes 3), the infinite potentialities of what *could be* suddenly emerge. Parks calls this typographical device a "spell," emphasizing its almost magical powers. In *Topdog*, it occurs when Lincoln and Booth remember their

childhood and, for a moment only, realize that "it could be like that again" (70). In the silence that passes between them, something happens that makes Lincoln accept to teach his brother how to play Three Card Monte. The power of silence to change the course of the inevitable manifests itself at the very end of *The War Boys* when Greg, the Mexican American boy, stops short of killing his friend after reading the words "made in the USA" (196) written on the barrel of the gun, realizing in that suspended moment that he would be the played, not the player, if he gave in to the impulse of murder.

By exploring the infinite potentialities of gaps, blanks, holes or silences that both separate and relate, Parks's and Wallace's poetics are rooted in what Glissant refers to as "the experience of the abyss," which is linked to the experience of black people and then metaphorically expands into his utopian proposition of a world community: *le Tout-monde*. For Glissant indeed, Relation is always open, it is about shared knowledge, and it is about recovering a forgotten past that originated in the slave ship, then extended to the ocean itself and came to represent the unfathomable depths where so many anonymous bodies disappeared. As the space of pain and oblivion, the abyss can be grasped only through poetry, through a use of language that has dropped its anchor into the real and has become bottomless:

> This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange. For us, and without exception, and no matter how much distance we may keep, the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown. Beyond its chasm we gamble on the unknown. (Glissant 8)

As poetic motifs, falling and digging run counter to the arrow-like trajectories of conquest that have resulted in a rounding of the world, a completion of the circle that leaves no hopes for a different future. By opening up new dimensions where memory intensifies and space increases through imagination, these two motifs create time warps for a new sense of being together to emerge. From that perspective, Parks's and Wallace's writing for the theatre takes part in the "thinking of errantry" mentioned earlier, a mode of thinking that "silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us" (Glissant 18).

For, in the space opened up by the abyss, while falling or digging into the bottomless hole, errant thinking becomes possible. As a form of thinking that has dropped its anchor to the safe ground of reason and logic, it loses itself in the meanderings of imagination, not to possess knowledge or win the game, but to approach everything that has been lost and forgotten. It thus takes part in the search of the unknown as both past and future, which means that what it offers is a glimpse into an "open totality," another word for Relation as Glissant conceives it:

> The difference between Relation and totality lies in the fact that Relation is active within itself, whereas totality, already in its very concept, is in danger of immobility. Relation is open totality; totality would be relation at rest. (Glissant 171)

"IN THUH BEGINNIN THERE WERE SOME OF THEM VOIDS"[3]

And this is how the notion of the sacred in Glissant's thought can be understood, as the purpose of errantry, which has nothing to do with idle roaming but includes a sense of sacred motivation: "Errant thinking is the postulation of an unyielding and unfading sacred" (Glissant 21). The notion of the sacred needs to be used with caution. For Glissant, it has negative implications when it means the sacredness of filiation that served to justify the conquerors' right to own the land and to legitimate the idea of identity as root. His claim for "a modern form of the sacred" relies on the surpassing of the "duality of self-perception (one is citizen or foreigner) [which] has repercussions on one's idea of the Other (one is visitor or visited; one goes or stays; one conquers or is conquered)" (17). The sacred must be first and foremost relational, and its modern form must be "a Poetics of Relation" (16) that does not set apart the secular from the divine, or the self from the other, because there is nothing transcendent about it. For the sacred is immanent to a world apprehended as an "open totality," that is to say, as both transparent and opaque, a world that, though it has been explored from pole to pole, still retains its mystery:

> We will look straight at the sacred, the assumed order in the disorder of Relation, without being stricken with awe. We will discuss it without the solemn chant of the Greek chorus for our sole influence. We will imagine it without divining the hand of a god there full force. To imagine

[3] Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play*, 185.

> the transparency of Relation is also to justify the opacity of what impels it. The sacred is of us, of this network, of our wandering, our errantry. (Glissant 155-56)

In the plays under study, the sense of the sacred first transpires through the etymology of the names given to the female characters. In *The War Boys*, Greg's girlfriend is called Evalina, a name derived from Eve, the biblical origin of life, while in *Topdog*, Booth's girlfriend, Grace, is another religious hint at a possible salvation and Booth's hope for a better future. But these women are not flesh-and-blood characters, only names mentioned in stories told by men, ghosts with no voices of their own hovering above the stage, like unattainable dreams. Conversely, female characters do appear on the stages of *The America Play* and *The Breach*. Lucy, The Foundling Father's wife and Brazil's mother, acts as her son's guiding light during their journey west, and the diminutive Jude evokes both Judas, the traitor of the New Testament, and Judith, the biblical savior of Israel who seduced and beheaded the chief of the invaders whose name, Holofernes, somehow sounds like a combination of Hoke and Frayne, the two boys who molested her while she was unconscious.

As central figures in both plays, Lucy's and Jude's presence on stage calls for an examination of the relation between the feminine and the sacred, a relation that extends from their names to their roles as guardians of secrets and intermediaries between two worlds. Judith bears the secret of the rape inside her body, while Lucy calls herself a "Confidence" whose job is to keep the secrets of the dead. Both sacrificed themselves for the men they loved: Jude accepted the boys' devious plan for her brother Acton, and Lucy keeps humming a song about how she sacrificed everything for The Foundling Father's dream of greatness. Finally, and most importantly, both can hear the dead, or rather the echoes of their voices, which makes them time travelers as well as mediums. There is indeed an aura of magic about them, which, whether comically or more realistically conveyed, gives them a power that the male characters do not have. That power is maybe best described by Lucy at the end of *The America Play*, when mother and son have finally found the hole where The Foundling Father lies. They are getting ready for the funeral, which is about acknowledging a place for black people in history, and Lucy says to her son: "Well, dust and polish, son. I'll circulate" (*America Play* 198).

Circulation as the power to travel different times and places is what allows Lucy and Jude to heal the wounds of loss. Lucy bridges

the gap between father and son, opening up a way for inheritance to be passed on. She is the one who keeps telling her son Brazil that he is like his father, a Digger, and that "it is an honor to be of his line" (186). By finding the place where The Foundling Father is, Lucy has not only made the crossing possible from past to present, from father to son, but she has turned the hole of history that was a void into a hall of wonders where secrets are sacred. Through the bringing together of the fake Lincoln with the true one, she has made history whole at last, which is why the white man and the black man bleed from the same wound at the very end of the play, when past and present are finally united into a w/hole:

> BRAZIL. To my right our newest Wonder: One of thuh greats Hisself! Note: thuh body sitting propped upright in our great Hole. Note the large mouth opened wide. Note the top hat and frock coat, just like the greats. Note the death wound: the great black hole—the great black hole in the great head. —And how this great head is bleedin. —Note: the last words. —And the last breaths. —And how the nation mourns— (199)

In *The Breach*, Jude's attempt at healing her wound by going away from home to begin a new life only results in a deeper wound: the loss of Acton, who commits suicide by jumping off a bridge in a tragic re-enactment of his father's death. The fourteen years that separate Jude's departure from her return home, therefore, serve to show how the wound she kept inside her has spread, becoming larger and deeper with the years. No matter how hard the four characters try to forget, Jude's sacrifice has left a gaping gash into their lives, a gash that neither time nor distance can heal. Even Hoke's medication has failed to make Acton feel better. For the past cannot be forgotten in the sense of being erased; it can only be buried somewhere deep where it will continue to undermine the present.

But the past can return differently through an act of imagination, a re-enactment that has the power to heal, which literally means "to make whole." Jude has that power. It manifests itself at the end of *The Breach*, when 1977 Jude and 1991 Jude join to play the falling game with Acton. In that moment when past and present no longer exist, when the here-and-now of the stage "could be anywhere" (*The Breach* 94), the game extends beyond the limits of the possible to "a version of the past that didn't happen, but could have" (92). What happens is a possibility, that Acton and Jude could have been saved, that things could have been different. And that possibility allows for a

different interpretation of the end. As Acton, who has been standing with his back to the audience on a raised level at the back of the stage, makes his final jump and the lights go out, what the audience is left with is a black hole that calls out to them. What it says is "hole talk" as Lucy explains to her son in *The America Play*: "You know, hole talk. Ohwayohwhyohwayoh, just to get their attention" (181). For the black hole is also a gaping mouth that calls from beyond, out to anyone who is listening, for the possibility of salvation, for the invention of a future born out of the reconciliation of the past with the present. For such a possibility to be achieved, the past must find its way into the present, and the sense of "we" must grow to include "me," "you," and a third person "him/her." This projection on stage of a trinity can be found in the four plays—the three cards of the Three Card Monte game, the three boys in *War Boys* and *The Breach*, the three members of the family in *The Breach* and *The America Play*.

CONCLUSION: PARKS'S AND WALLACE'S GAMES FOR THREE

For Parks and Wallace, knowledge can only be achieved through the extension of dualities and antagonistic binaries to the void left by loss, when the voice of the dead turns the you/me encounter into a trinity. It is a form of knowledge that relies on imagination because the void is bottomless and complete truth unreachable. Because it comes from the relation of what, in reality, cannot be related, it is a form of knowledge that can only be divined through a poetics, through the art of telling stories, as illustrated in this passage from *The Breach*:

> HOKE. Okay, Judith. Okay. Even though it's quite obvious to both Frayne and I that you were, as a young woman, and still are, warped, spiteful, and of unsound mind—all of which, by the way, can be treated with medication—I will suspend judgment.
>
> JUDE. Thank you.
>
> ACTON. Altar.
>
> HOKE. But come near my family and I will crush you like a beetle. Hell of a crack.
>
> ACTON. A base or pedestal used for sacrifice to gods—
>
> JUDE. I understand.

ACTON. —or to deified heroes.

JUDE. Family is sacrosanct. (72)

The antagonistic exchange between Jude and Hoke grows in meaning through the insertion between the lines of the voice of the dead, that of Acton, who is heard reciting the definitions of words starting with "A" from an encyclopedia. Through this intervention from the past, Hoke's threat takes on new meaning. Acton's definition of the word "Altar" interrupts the dialogue with lines that undermine the stability of language until the meaning of sacrifice ironically slips, or rather circulates from the sacrifice of family values to the sacrifice of Jude on the altar of the rich and powerful Hoke, the "god" that can crush her like a beetle.

In the end, it is all about words, or rather, about the relation between them, how they echo one another. It is in the space between words, not in words themselves, that new possibilities of meaning emerge and, with them, the outlines of a future beyond a deadly repetition of the same. As Brazil has it in *The America Play*, there is no final revelation, the abyss remains, and it is up to the living to give it a shape: "What his last words had been. There hadnt been any. Only screaming. Or, you know breath. Didnt have uh shape to it" (198). The screams, the breaths, the whispers and murmurs that echo each other in Parks's and Wallace's theatre all point to the same origin, the opening of the mouth, and to the same end, the last shapeless sounds coming out of it. In between, a gap or a gasp to be filled with a meaning that has been lost, but has to be shaped anyway for the game to go on and for another future to be divined: "Through each line of text I'm rewriting the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined" (Parks, *Possession* 5). "We must, I believe, disrupt the lie with an imagination that is fierce, demystifying, and persistent." (Wallace, *Let the Right One In* 257)

Parks and Wallace endow imagination with the ability both to disrupt the well-rehearsed American game and to reinvent it, which is why their works for the theatre matter. As two North American women playwrights, they do not only expose the lie of a nationalist discourse based on the exclusion or erasure of the other as foreign, female or simply not fitting in with the virile, conquering image of the winner; they also provide us, spectators and citizens of the world, with the means to change the rules of a game that engages all of us.

Shakespeare saw the world as a stage on which we are all players, Parks and Wallace give us the possibility of being game changers.

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