The Scarlet Letter Variations #1 : Mutual Percolation Effects between The Scarlet Letter and In the Blood

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https://doi.org/10.15017/1832796

出版情報：言語文化論究. 39, pp.47-58, 2017-09-01. 九州大学大学院言語文化研究院
バージョン：
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The Scarlet Letter Variations # 1:

Mutual Percolation Effects between *The Scarlet Letter* and *In the Blood*

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I. Suzan-Lori Parks and Her "Red Letter Plays"

As shown most dramatically in her Pulitzer-winning *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) and its accompanying piece *The America Play* (1994)—plays in which African-American characters playact the role of Abraham Lincoln at the moment of his assassination as part of a theme-park attraction—theatrical reenactments of untold and undocumented experiences of African Americans characterize the works of Suzan-Lori Parks (1963-). She believes that "because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to . . . locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down" (Parks, "Possession" 4), but this does not necessarily mean that African-American experience is the sole subject of her dramatic inquiry. Parks also emphasizes that "[t]he history of Literature is in question" and that "the history of History is in question too" (ibid. 4), implying that her plays not only record things as they actually happened but also document the process in which such recording has been done (in the name of History or Literature).

We can find a good example of Parks's attempt at reexamining and thereby revising the history of American literature in *In the Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000), another pair of plays that are jointly called "The Red Letter Plays." The title refers to Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), on which both plays are based and after whose heroin, Hester Prynne, the plays' protagonists are named. "The Red Letter Plays" began as a kind of joke: one day when she was in a canoe, Parks told her friend in a noncommittal tone that she was "going to write a play called *Fucking A*, and it's going to be a riff on *The Scarlet Letter*" (Sova 100). As it turned out, she had never actually read the novel before that, but the idea somehow lingered and would eventually materialize not as one play but two. These plays can hardly be called "adaptations" of *The Scarlet Letter* since, other than some shared names or basic settings, these texts have very little in common between them. The only thing that evidently connects them to each other is the scarlet letter "A," that equivocal, mysterious piece of embroidery whose discovery initiates a retelling of a series of long-forgotten events that comprises the story of *The Scarlet Letter.*

In the novel, townspeople are said to have "often heard of the scarlet letter" in the form of "a hundred false or exaggerated rumors" even though they have not once seen it "with their own bodily eyes" (*The Scarlet Letter* 213)[1]. "The story of the scarlet letter grew into a legend" (*TSL* 236), adds Hawthorne, and this is exactly what would happen to the novel itself and its iconic letter "A." Parks's is, of course, not the first attempt to rewrite *The Scarlet Letter*, and it can be said that the long line of numerous rewritings itself forms a literary tradition. Therefore, the bones' song that Parks tried to hear and write down when she

wrote "The Red Letter Plays" might have been those rumors and legends built around *The Scarlet Letter.* Parks explains that to her, "the plays have never been history plays. They're all about the intersection of the historical and the now. Even *In the Blood* is about the intersection because it is not based on *The Scarlet Letter* but *The Scarlet Letter* is one of its parents, let's say" (Wetmore 134). While the notion of "adaptation" presupposes a unilateral, or unidirectional, lineage between the original text and its lesser copies, Parks's "riffs" deconstruct such linearity and open up space for other possibilities.

Parks gives a special name to her dramaturgy: "Rep & Rev," short for "Repetition & Revision" which is "a concept integral to the Jazz aesthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc.—with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised" (Parks, "From Elements of Style" 8-9). "Rep & Rev" allows her "to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score" (ibid. 9). Since each repetition inevitably produces errors and variations in the process—note that, for Parks, words are something physical and thus cannot be free from the physical condition of those who speak them—the accumulation of those variations as a whole creates another kind of drama, "a drama of accumulation," as Parks calls it (ibid 9). "Rep & Rev" is integral to her playwrighting and also indispensable for our understanding of her dramatic endeavor because it most succinctly illustrates the way "The Red Letter Plays," rather than simply rewriting *The Scarlet Letter*, document and revise the whole history of accumulated rewritings; and inasmuch as her own rewritings are also part of the process of accumulation, for Parks, documentation is inseparable from production. This is the reason why Parks sees theater as "a perfect place to 'make' history" and the song she hears as "a play—something through a production *actually happens*" (Parks, "Possession" 4).

Although Parks uses jazz terms—"a riff" and "Rep & Rev"—to describe her play's relation with Hawthorne's novel, a more apt terminology can be found in classical music: "The Red Letter Plays" are two *variations* of the same theme, *The Scarlet Letter*; hence the title of this article, itself being a pun[2] on J. S. Bach's *The Goldberg Variations.* Being variations, *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* are as different from each other as they are from *The Scarlet Letter.* It might be helpful to picture these three forming a capital letter "A," with *The Scarlet Letter* on the pinnacle, from which two diagonal lines lead to *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* at the bottom, and the horizontal line representing a connection between the two variations. This is a better visual representation of what is happening between these works than an ordinary family tree in which things go only downward.

According to Lawrence Buell, the letter "A" as a "defining symbol, continues to serve as a touchstone motif for mass culture down to this day," and he concludes that "the percolation effect of *The Scarlet Letter* as mantra endures" (Buell 72). As Parks would put it, a "riff" may be in order here on Buell's comment, and it is that in the case of "The Red Letter Plays," the percolation effect (or rather multifarious percolation *effects*) may work retroactively, from Parks's plays to *The Scarlet Letter*, too. This article focuses on *In the Blood* and examines how the play revises *The Scarlet Letter* while being influenced by the latter.

II. A Strange Intertextual Connection

In the Blood is about Hester, La Negrita, an illiterate African-American single mother of five (named Jabber, Bully, Trouble, Beauty, and Baby), her struggle to learn the alphabet (she can never make it beyond "A" in the end) to get out of her poverty, and her desperate murdering of her eldest son. Hester's

characterization is reminiscent of the protagonist of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) who also strives to overcome with wits and diligence the hardships she and her children face during war. Hester is an outcast in a society where her sexual promiscuity is frowned upon and her dependence on welfare to support her family is deemed an outright crime. She seeks support in her white friend Amiga Gringa, her doctor, Baby's father Reverend D. and a social worker from the welfare office. They pretend to be helpful, but, as their respective confessions at the end of each scene show, they are all exploiting Hester both economically and sexually. The play ends with Hester being surgically neutered and imprisoned for the murder. Except for the actor playing Hester, one actor doubles as an adult character (e.g. Reverend D.) and a child (e.g. Baby), and the cast also forms a chorus that recites the *vox populi* that pitches Hester into the trajectory of her tragic downfall.

Parks's plays often forcibly implicate their audiences in the act of violence and abuse enacted onstage by means of superposing the audience's gaze onto the one that characters cast on other (mostly female and African-American) characters.[3] In the case of *In the Blood*, it is the chorus that makes this superposing of gazes possible. Harvey Young expounds the complicated relationship between chorus and society in ancient Greek tragedy[4]: "To attend theatre was … to be a citizen watching a citizen play a citizen who indeed is watched by a citizen who both watches and watches you watch. The theatre was a place where society watched itself—and the presence of the chorus, as a metaphorical, partially unsilvered mirror, allowed this to occur" (Young 31-2). Parks's use of chorus also draws on the same function of chorus to create a kind of community based on collaborative theatrical undertakings, and she calls it "pageant-making":

> My favorite part of *In the Blood* is where I get to listen to the actors run around backstage because they have to make quick costume changes.… The pageant is going on. The playing of the play, the inner workings of the pageant, is often very much in my mind as I write.… [Y]ou can say my work is a new kind of community pageant.… [M]ostly there is an invitation for the community to come together and put on a show. (Wetmore 139-40)

While this passage foregrounds the bright side of Park's pageant-making (i.e. community-building), there is a dark side to it, too. *In the Blood* does invite the audience's participation but, thus summoned and interpellated, the audience is then asked to play the role of the oppressive chorus that represents the violence and injustice their own community inflicts upon the most vulnerable and unprotected of its members.

The chorus in *In the Blood* is the sort of mirror Young describes on which the audience members expect to see their own truer self, but what it reflects back to them is the image of a life that is completely unfamiliar to the audience mostly made up of middle- to upper-middle-class Americans. "Creating someone I don't know and her made up world shows us more about who we are," says Parks, adding that this is "a better mirror … than if I were to parade in front of you an instantly recognizable person in an instantly recognizable situation" (Sova 99). Hester, La Negrita in *In the Blood* is so far beyond our understanding that we do not even know how to categorize her according to our current social order, and the play also shows how fiercely she defies our patronizing sympathy. What the audience sees in the play, and what we need to recognize in order to understand the play, is "a great psychic distance to travel between an audience member's seat and the character on stage" that makes such a traveling "incredibly intense, very

visceral" (ibid. 99).

Another distance we have to travel is the one that separates *In the Blood* and *The Scarlet Letter.* As explained in the previous section, when Parks revised *The Scarlet Letter*, she tried to hear a song from the past. In doing so, Parks replicates the novel's narrative structure as well as its content. In "The Custom-House," the introductory chapter to *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator uses the word "ghostly" several times to describe how he believes the scarlet letter is sent to him as a message from the past, from a world of the dead (*TSL* 33). Furthermore, when he by chance discovers the scarlet letter, his thought is directed toward "the corpse of dead activity" and how "to raise up from these dry bones an image of the old town's brighter aspect" (*TSL* 30), indicating a striking similarity between *In the Blood* and *The Scarlet Letter* as to how they are conceived as promising stories. The fact that Parks did not know much about *The Scarlet Letter* when she first encountered her creative "scarlet letter" makes this similarity even more striking because what we have here is a sort of connection that cannot be explained in terms only of linear and unidirectional causality. A "ghostly" causality might be a suitable name for this, or a *mutual percolation effect*, for while Parks here unwittingly replicates Hawthorne's creative device, this act of "Rep & Rev" inadvertently alters the meaning of Hawthorne's text.

Deborah R. Geis points out that "the shift toward Hawthorne marks a recent movement in [Parks's] work toward critique of the canon" (Geis 128), but this does not fully explain why it had to be Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* among other canonical works of American literature that Parks chose as the target of her critique. Again male gaze upon female bodies might give a clue to this mystery. As Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young observe, "Parks decries the commodification of the black female body" in *In the Blood* in which "Hester's sexuality is at the center of many demeaning gazes, all of them turning her into victim, exoticized other, and 'slut,' a name written on the wall of her home" (Kolin and Young 16). On the other hand, Hester Prynne's sexuality is more carefully hidden from the reader and the people of her town: "She who has once been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration" (*TSL* 143). Her sexuality is something unspeakable, and even the author's "magic touch" cannot unleash it, so it must be represented in the form of the scarlet letter "A," whose meaning is as much unspeakable as its bearer's sexuality. Like the word "slut" written on the wall, however, the letter "A" Hester Prynne has to wear in public is so visible and at the same time so unspeakable that, as a result, it is turned into an unmistakable sign of obscenity.

Despite many of its limitations and shortcomings originating from the historical conditions of its time, and despite Hawthorne's well-known misogyny, *The Scarlet Letter* contains several passages that seem to uphold women's rights:

> As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. (*TSL* 144)

> She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness. (*TSL* 227)

While the first quotation still clings to the notion of reforming (modifying or transfiguring) women to make them fit into the prevailing social mores, the second insists that the world itself, not women, must be changed for the wellbeing of women and men alike. The latter is a voice of someone who does not belong to the text of *The Scarlet Letter*, an echo of which we can find in *In the Blood*. Parks's "Rep & Rev" enables us to see a possibility that this voice has traveled one and a half century in time across a seemingly unbridgeable ideological divide to take its uncomfortable abode in the text of *The Scarlet Letter*. As Jennifer Larson points out, "Parks's substantial revision of Hester Prynne and *The Scarlet Letter* also shows that time, and thus history, have become only more malignant for America's present-day Hesters, especially if they are black and poor. Indeed time and history have only complicated Hester's plight" (Larson 42). In other words, when read side by side, these texts create a stereoscopic view of the history of women's struggle for equal rights and dignity, and Parks's revision is literally a "re-visioning" of a sort by means of which Hester's plight is reimagined to be something as actual and contemporary as any plight women in today's America have to go through.

III. *In the Blood* and "Rep & Rev" of *The Scarlet Letter*

The previous section explained what Parks does by revising *The Scarlet Letter* through *In the Blood*, and the next thing we need to examine is *how* she does it. As mentioned above, Parks introduces a chorus in *In the Blood* to demonstrate the social pressure that labels Hester as a slut, a welfare mom, and finally a monster mom who kills her child for a selfish reason. The chorus, consisted of other cast members than the one playing Hester, appears onstage at the beginning and the end of the play. Part of the first chorus goes as follows:

> JUST PLAIN STUPID IF YOU ASK ME AINT NO SMART WOMAN GOT 5 BASTARDS
> AND NOT A PENNY TO HER NAME
> SOMETHINGS GOTTA BE DONE TO STOP THIS SORT OF THING
> CAUSE I'LL BE DAMNED IF SHE GONNA LIVE OFF ME
> HERE SHE COMES
> MOVE ASIDE
> WHAT SHE GOTS CATCHY
> …
>
> They part like the Red Sea would.
> Hester, La Negrita passes through them.
> She holds a Newborn Baby in her arms.
> (*In the Blood* 7)[5]

Apparently, this scene replicates the second chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* where townspeople exchange their opinion on Hester Prynne; for example, one woman exclaims: "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray!" (*TSL* 49) In both cases, Hesters' character is established through public opinion in an early part

of the story; and both of them are considered to be a threat to the social system that must be eliminated by force.

The one thing that Hester, La Negrita has and Hester Prynne does not is the bad reputation as a promiscuous single mother (she has five children, all with different fathers); as a bad welfare mother; and as a monster mom who kills her child. This characterization reflects the controversy over "illegitimacy"—a term that was already obsolete back in the 1990s, both legally and socially—that swept over the United States and affected its economy and policymaking. Barry Glassner reports that "illegitimacy" made "a powerful comeback" at a moment when "nearly one in three children was born to an unwed mother," and behind all this was the Conservative Republicans' strategic move to mobilize unwed mothers as a political and economic ammunition by "applying an 'illegitimacy ratio' to determine how much money states were eligible to receive in federal block grants" (Glassner 93-4). In addition, Glassner explains that stories and images of monster moms on the media have strong effects on the people's self-esteem:

> They say that we—or our wives, sisters, daughters, or friends—are good mothers by comparison. They invite us to redirect (more accurately, misdirect) our self-doubts. When we lose our temper or strike out at our children we may secretly worry about our potential for child abuse. But at least we know we could never do the things Awilda Lopez did.… Infanticidal mothers are routinely depicted by the media as depraved beyond what any of us can imagine about ourselves or our friends and relatives. (Glassner 98-9)

Were it not for the presence of the advanced media network, this description might pass as that of a seventeenth-century Puritan community in New England because, in both cases, outcasts are labeled as such by public opinion, which in turn is built upon the expulsion of the same outcasts from the community.

In *In the Blood*, Hester's body is subjected to constant monitoring by law and medicine as a potential risk factor to society. In addition, her body is "sexualized" in two incompatible manners: on one hand, it is dirty and unhygienic, and thus repulsive and unattractive; on the other hand, it emanates an irresistibly powerful sexual attraction, and it is this latter point that poses the most serious threat to Hester's life. Inserted at the end of each scene is a monologue by one of the adult characters where they confess how they exploited Hester to satisfy their sexual appetite. Doctor brags about Hester being "very giving very motherly very obliging very understanding" and letting him do whatever he needed including ejaculating inside her (*ITB* 45), which implies that he might be the father of one of Hester's children. Amiga Gringa is a woman whose circumstance is very much similar to Hester's in almost every detail except that she trades her newborns away for profit and never feels the slightest pang of conscience for that. Her confession is about filming her making love with Hester: "Girl on girl action is a very lucrative business.… Im just trying to help her out.… Ah, what do you expect in a society based on Capitalizm" (*ITB* 72). Her choice of words is suggestive because it makes sex sound like it is a profitable merchandise or a surefire stock option.

The reference to the sinister-looking "Capitalizm" in Amiga's confession suggests that there might be some manipulative force at work behind all this and that Amiga might be doing what she does against her free will. In *In the Blood*, this mysterious force materializes in the form of an astronomical event, but the same kind of symbolism has been already prefigured in *The Scarlet Letter.* In one of the most memorable

scenes in *The Scarlet Letter* where Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale stand on the gallows' platform, a letter "A" appears on the night sky as if symbolizing their shared guilt (*TSL* 136). Rumor soon spreads and people start interpreting its meaning variously: some say it stands for "Angel" (*TSL* 138); others believe that it signifies "Able" (*TSL* 141). Hester, La Negrita says that she witnessed an eclipse when she was walking down the street. A sign appeared in the sky, but this time it was not a letter "A": "Big dark thing. Gods hand. Coming down on me. Blocking the light out. 5-fingered hand of fate. Coming down on me" (*ITB* 84). The phrase "hand of fate" also appears in *The Scarlet Letter* in a similar context: when she picks up the letter "A" that she just moments ago threw away, Hester feels "a sense of inevitable doom upon her, as she thus received back this deadly symbol from the hand of fate" (*TSL* 184).

All of these examples point to the existence of something so large and strong that we cannot properly recognize, let alone understand, what it is. While the letter "A" in *The Scarlet Letter* may connote blessing or salvation, the hand of fate in *In the Blood* pertains to more secular matters. For example, like Adam Smith's "invisible hand," Parks's "hand of fate" can be understood as a figuration of market logic that afflicts Hester, La Negrita. The closing scene of the play underscores this interpretation:

Amiga Gringa
An "A."
Doctor
First letter of the alphabet.
Welfare
Thats as far as she got.

Hester holds up her hands—theyre covered with blood.
She looks up with outstretched hands.

Hester
Big hand coming down on me. Big hand coming down on me. Big hand coming down on me.

(*ITB* 109-10)

Unlike the "A" for "Able" in the case of Hester Prynne, the "A" written on the ground signifies Hester, La Negrita's inability, or the lack of skills and resources necessary for her survival in a world where money matters more than anything else. We cannot, however, simply conclude that Hester is a victim of the "hand of fate" and what it symbolizes because there is yet one more mystery to solve: Why does Hester need to say that it was a "5-fingered" hand of fate that she saw?

Apparently, "5" is an important number to Hester, who always calls her children "5 treasures. 5 joys" (*ITB* 12) as if to convince herself that what she has done is nothing to regret or be remorseful about. Her self-confidence starts to crumble as the play nears its end, and in her own confession following the murder scene, Hester finally admits what she has tried so hard not to believe: "Never shoulda had him. / Never shoulda had none of em. / Never was nothing but a pain to me: / *5 Mistakes!*" (*ITB* 106) The tragic tone of her exclamation is nonetheless offset by what we witness at the beginning of the same scene where Hester and her children visit Reverend D.'s new church to ask for money:

I'll only ask for 5 dollars. 5 dollars a week. That way he cant say no. And hes got a church, so he got

> 5 dollars. I'll say I need to buy something for the kids. No. I'll say I need to—get my hair done. There is this style, curls piled up on the head, I'll say. Takes hours to do. I need to fix myself up, I'll say. Need to get my looks back. Need to get my teeth done.… He dont cough up I'll go straight to Welfare. Maybe. (*ITB* 99)

Like Amiga, Hester is also willing to trade her five children away for five dollars a week of money. Moreover, the money thus earned is most likely to be spent on the maintenance of her good looks, the very attribute that guarantees her sexual allure and *marketability*, which ensure her return to the plight she tried to escape from in the first place.

The casting—five actors playing five adult characters and five children, as well as forming a chorus—reinforces the feeling that Hester's efforts to protect her five children are being hindered by none other than the same five people she tries to protect who, as a chorus, also represent public opinion that relegates her to the rock bottom of social strata. In this craftily structured stage witch-hunt, Hester is given literally no way out from her wretchedness partly because it is a self-inflicted problem for which she is liable; and the same holds true for the audience because when they watch everybody in the play turn a blind eye to Hester's suffering, they practically see their own *apathy* (another "A" word) played out onstage. In other words, at the same time that the psychological distance separating Hester and the audience induces a kind of empathy in the latter toward her suffering, the psychological proximity of their bodies in the theater space produces reflective repulsion. If theater is for Parks a place for community-building, it nonetheless emphasizes the difficulties and drawbacks inherent in such undertakings.

IV. The Embodiment of the Letter "A"

In the Blood is structured on the abovementioned sets of binary oppositions—empathy and apathy, attraction and repulsion, and so forth—that create a sort of cognitive and affective dissonance in viewers. This dissonance is further fleshed out, or "embodied," in at least two different ways in the play: textually and corporeally. One example of textual embodiment can be found in Amiga Gringa's utterance quoted above in which the quotation marks put around the "A" prompt the actor to pronounce it differently, thereby suggesting Amiga's psychological distance from, or apathy toward, what the letter signifies for Hester. That is to say, she is here just "quoting" it, but this may lead to confusion because the viewers of the play's production—they do not see the quotation marks—cannot tell whether she is quoting it or not.

Parks uses this technique in two pivotal dialogs in the play:

> **Reverend D.**
> You must go to him and say, "Mister, here is your child!"
> **Hester**
> Mister here is your child!
> **Reverend D.**
> "You are wrong to deny what God has made!"
> **Hester**
> You are wrong to deny what God has made!

Reverend D.
"He has nothing but love for you and reaches out his hands every day crying wheres daddy?"
Hester
Wheres daddy? (*ITB* 48)
Jabber
It read "Slut." "Slut."
Hester
Hush up.
Jabber
Whassa "Slut"?
…
I know what it means. Slut.
Hester
(Shut up.)
…
Jabber
Slut. Sorry.

The word just popped out, a childs joke.
He covers his mouth, sheepishly. They look at each other.

…

Hester quickly raises her club and hits him once.
Brutally. He cries out and falls down dead.
(*ITB* 105-6)

In the first quotation, Reverend D. is halfheartedly giving Hester advice quoting some hackneyed advice-column remarks, while Hester parrots his words almost verbatim except for the quotation marks. This is a sort of "Rep & Rev" in which repeated words add a variation to the preceding utterance and alters the overall meaning of the dialog. A dissonance here originates from the fact that the "Mister" they are talking about is Reverend D. himself, as a result of which his superficially avuncular concern for Hester belies itself and unwittingly exposes his hypocritical hidden motives. The second quotation shows how the slightest changes in intonation and the most innocent jokes can be a life-and-death issue. Jabber is at first just reading aloud the word written on the wall for her illiterate mother, but the quotation marks are dropped on its fourth reiteration, making him sound as if to be directly addressing his mother, calling her names.

The second quotation above also demonstrates the process in which an empty sign ("Slut"), as it goes through repetitions and revisions, gradually becomes embodied. Parks says that "Language is a physical act … something which involves your entire body" (Parks, "From Element of Style" 11), and this is visually illustrated in *In the Blood*. When teaching his mother how to write the capital "A," Jabber suggests that she practice it using her body: "Legs apart hands crost the chest like I showed you" (*ITB* 11). The "A" drawn by Hester's body is a hieroglyphic representation[6] of a "mother courage" standing firm up against the challenges and prejudices she has to endure. Predictably, however, spreading one's legs apart has also a sexual

connotation in *In the Blood*. When Hester sees Doctor for her regular medical checkup, Doctor asks her to give him "the Spread & Squat" so that he can "have a look under the hood," and Hester obediently follows his order: "Hester spreads her legs and squats. Like an otter, he slides between her legs on a dolly and looks up into her privates with a flashlight" (*ITB* 39). Just as an automobile repairman crawls under the *body* of a car, he inspects her *body* parts from below.

This last example suggests a connection between Hester, La Negrita and the most famous "prostitute" in the United States. Lauren Berlant argues that the Statue of Liberty has "an altogether different character—for a fee she is open to all for entry and exploration from below":

> The construction of the national genitalia of our national prostitute reminds us that the National Symbolic is there for *use*, for exploitation, to construct a subjective dependency on what look like the a priori structures of power. It would not be too strong to say that the political deployment of the feminine icon has a pornographic structure. (Berlant 27)

Reimagined (or re-fantasized) this way, the Statue of Liberty seems to offer another way to connect *The Scarlet Letter* and *In the Blood*. The Statue of Liberty is a symbol of America as an all-embracing asylum for the oppressed of the world, an attribute Hester Prynne—"people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble" (*TSL* 227)—also possesses[7]. As both caregiver and prostitute, the symbolic nature of the Statue can be said to have been central to the creation of American national identity. Hester Prynne and Hester, La Negrita seem to be as incongruous as these two attributes are with each other but, introducing the Statue of Liberty as the third apex of a triangle, we can again picture a letter "A" in which these three figures are connected to and mutually affecting each other.

V. Imagining the Unimaginable

As a variation on the scarlet letter "A," *In the Blood* repeats and revises the discourses surrounding not only *The Scarlet Letter* itself but also its byproducts permeating virtually every nook and cranny of cultures in the United States and abroad. Just as the meaning of Hester Prynne's "A" has been the subject of heated discussion in academia and in general public, Hester, La Negrita's "A" is also open to future discussion and perhaps to an endless series of interpretations. One notable example of such interpretations is put forward by Jennifer Larson. Thinking about the connection between Parks and Tony Kushner[8], the playwright included in the "Thanks 2" list of *The Red Letter Plays*, it occurred to Larson that the "A" might stand for "AIDS, a disease that travels 'in the blood' of its victims" (Larson 54). Circumstantial evidence abounds in the text: the chorus intones that "BAD NEWS IN HER BLOOD" and "WHAT SHE GOTS CATCHY" (*ITB* 7); Hester complains of chronic abdominal pain and failing eyesight; and the eclipse she witnessed is probably a product of her hallucination.

Right after murdering Jabber, Hester writes an "A" on the ground with her hand (*ITB* 106), so the majority of critics posit that the title of the play signifies the red letter written "in the blood." Larson's interpretation adds a new twist to this prevailing reading of the enigmatic title, and together these interpretations help us understand the predicament Hester has to face as something immediate and urgent that

needs to be addressed in real life outside the theater as well as by means of theater. The figure of "contagiousness" enables us to revise what Buell calls "the percolation effect of *The Scarlet Letter*" as a multidirectional, mutual percolation effect, allowing for the possibility of imagining the unimaginable. For one last example, consider this:

> Children, too young to comprehend wherefore this woman should be shut out from the sphere of human charities, would creep nigh enough to behold her plying her needle at the cottage-window, or standing in the door-way, or laboring in her little garden, or coming forth along the pathway that led townward; and, discerning the scarlet letter on her breast, would scamper off, with *a strange, contagious fear*. (*TSL* 73, italics added)

That Hester, La Negrita's disease can somehow travel back to the past and trigger this fear in the children might be something unimaginable, but the scarlet letter "A" is a kind of portal through which these intertextual and inter-*contextual* encounters of things that would otherwise have no connections whatsoever with each other can be imagined.

Notes

1. Further references to this novel will be parenthetically noted in the text as *TSL* with page numbers.
2. Parks's writing is full of puns and wordplay. For example, by documenting or recording the lived experience of her fellow African Americans, Parks is also "re-membering" those dismembered experiences or "re-collecting" their dispersed racial memory. This kind of playful use of language also characterizes Parks's writing style, and it deserves a serious examination here because the success of her rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter* hinges on such semantic and semiotic modifications of the original text.
3. One notable example of this is *Venus* (1996), arguably the most controversial play by Parks, which depicts the exploitation of the so-called Hottentot Venus. When she is still alive, Venus's body is the object of European males' sexual and scientific—these are somehow inseparable and indistinguishable—gaze, and even after death, what remains of her bodily existence is dissected and fragmented, ending up on display stands in museums where these body parts are exposed to further ogling from curious museumgoers. *Venus* replaces these "museumgoers" with "theatergoers" and turns the space of playhouse into a nineteenth-century anatomy classroom—which is also called a "theater"—making the audience take part in the event onstage and, by extension, in the event that happened long ago in a faraway place.
4. The chorus in Greek tragedy stands between the inside and outside of drama, mediating between the event onstage and the daily conduct of life offstage. As a sort of narrator or commentator, it explains the characters' feelings and gives a preview of what is going to befall the hero. Its exclamations and laments at crucial points in the plot reflect the feelings and emotions the audience is supposed to have in reaction to the play. Together these functions of chorus give the audience an opportunity to take stock of the social ills in their community ritually played out onstage; and watching their problems being magically solved and their community's sin likewise absolved gives them a catharsis. In

summary, the chorus is there to reinforce the audience's communal identity and to maintain their social bond.

5. Further references to this play will be parenthetically noted in the text as *ITB* with page numbers.
6. Hester Prynne's daughter Pearl is depicted as a "living hieroglyphic" that makes what her parents try to hide "plainly manifest" and visible (*TSL* 180). In other words, she is an embodiment of the scarlet letter "A" and its hidden meanings. Parks goes one step further and has her "A" literally embodied by the actor's body.
7. To some extent, Hester Smith in *Fucking A*, an abortionist, is another variation of this woman-as-caregiver figure.
8. Kushner is known for his epic *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (Part One 1991; Part Two 1992). The play is about the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. in the 1980s and gay people's struggle for survival in the middle of the social and political turmoil. Like Parks's plays, Kushner's masterpiece explores the possibility of theater as a site of community-building. The first act of the part one of the play is titled "Bad News," which means "diagnosed as HIV-positive."

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