

**Adapting Ambiguous America: or, per-Forming a More Perfect Union in
the Plays of Caridad Svich and Suzan-Lori Parks¹**

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Introduction

From the inception of the United States, race has been a supremely defining characteristic for both the inhabitants of the colonies, and for the face of the nation itself. Those who were white, male, and Western European wrote: “We the People, in order to form a more perfect union . . .” while those who were indigenous were “Americanized” or simply annihilated, and while those who were black were imported and exported along with the sugar and the tobacco. In these supposedly “post-race” days, the United States continues to grapple with the “race line” as Dr. Du Bois called it—as evidenced through the focus on race in the 2008 Presidential Election. In as late as October, political pundits were claiming that President-elect Obama’s mixed racial heritage would ultimately provide him with a second place finish on November 4th, indicating that a vast number of the people of the United States would be unable, even in this 21st century world, to look beyond “race” as it has been traditionally drawn and invented.

Through *Alchemy of Desire/Dead Man’s Blues* by Caridad Svich and *The America Play* by Suzan-Lori Parks, I look at linguistic negotiation in the reinvention of US American history and culture. These plays speak to a larger framework of cultural identification, longing, and searching through a disruption of commonly held and traditionally accepted forms. I explore ways in which Svich and Parks use and manipulate language to point to an exiling of, and search for, an authentic self in an increasingly culturally ambiguous and transforming world. These texts act as sites of transfer, transmitting knowledge while smudging historically and traditionally defined distinction (Taylor 2; 11; 25). While doing so, they ask the audience to consider “flexible definitions” of cultural knowledge, memory, and identity. They blur distinct racial/geographical/cultural boundaries, and challenge audiences to move beyond a traditionally identified landscape through

1 This article is the revised version of the talk delivered at the conference organized by American Studies Association of Turkey (Boğaziçi University, 8-10 October 2008).

the words of a Black Abraham Lincoln, and the culture and mysticism of a racially ambiguous Bayou. I invite readers to explore history and present day in order to see more clearly the ambiguities and contradictions still at work while searching for the People's "more perfect union;" and in an increasingly multi/trans/inter-and intra-cultural world, I present a challenge to investigate the space between Suzan-Lori Parks' "America," Caridad Svich's "America," and your own "America."

In the 2006-2007 academic year I placed *Alchemy of Desire/Dead Man's Blues* and *The America Play* on the required reading lists for two of my classes—History of the Theatre, and Acting. With obviously different content and focus between the two courses, I was very interested in the students' radically similar responses to these two plays. Both plays blew apart my students' traditionally held beliefs in theatre, dramatic structure, and performance. For my history students, it was evident that cultural memory and identity remains strongly grounded in white/Anglo-phone notions of identity which is why some vehemently disliked *The America Play*. They dismissed Parks' play as "just another play talking about the oppression of blacks." My acting students were thrown more by the organization of *Alchemy of Desire/Dead Man's Blues* and conveyed a sense of alienation from the play—that they were unable to understand what was going on with the characters' needs and wants. Many of them admitted that they could not get past the organization at all and that the story was completely lost on them. Here the well-made play was being made foreign. In response, the students in both courses were desperately trying to continue in a Realistic notion of dramatic literature by shoving these plays into an Aristotealian box of "structure."

Both texts deal with memory—cultural and collective—and were being decoded by my mostly white, middle-to-upper class students from Long Island, New York. But in both *Alchemy of Desire* and *The America Play*, the playwrights do more than just encode an interesting message in the DNA of each play. Both Svich and Parks create worlds where the students reacted to not just the organization, but to the ideas presented to them in these "alternate universes." The musicality of *Alchemy* gave them unsure footing of how to interpret the text which sounds more like the heightened language and poetry of a writer from an earlier century. *The America Play* disrupts commonly held ideas about US American history through a Black Abraham Lincoln living in the "Great Hole of History." Parks expresses concern that in a general sense, the "history of History is in question" and that a play is a way of rewriting the history that has been "unrecorded, dismembered, [and] washed out" (Parks *Possession* 4). *Alchemy of Desire* and *The America Play* dissect "American identity" and spotlight the

opacity of history itself. Both Parks and Svich are part of a generation of writers who “seek to deconstruct and reconstruct not only theatrical forms but also the boundaries by which those forms have been created” (Svich *Out of the Fringe* ix). Their manipulation of form and language are at work in the undoing of strict center/margin delineations as they comment and critique theatre and culture in the United States.

The Plays

Alchemy of Desire/Dead Man's Blues, described as eerie and lyrical, metaphysical and emotive; challenging and provocative, elusive and strange (Svich *Out of the Fringe* xii-xiv) centers around a small community marked by and living with the effects of war and death. Simone mourns Jamie, her husband of one-month who died in a war in a country no one has ever heard of. *Alchemy* is a haunting story with two titles and two story-lines. Simone grieves Jamie, and the scenes shift back and forth between Simone and her neighbors and Jamie's search, caught somewhere between two worlds wandering the earth. The play begins with Simone sitting alone on stage, surrounded by buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken. The four women in the neighborhood, like a Greek chorus, are the alchemists of the play. Tirasol, Caroline, Selah, and Miranda appear and disappear like the mist of the Bayou. At times they are cutting up vegetables, other times Selah is hunting stones and talking about ghosts; Tirasol sings a haunting song of death and loss, reminiscent of Greek choral odes of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschelyus:

Take me to the flood, Lilah.
Take me to the flood.
I wanna see the moon winkin
through river of blood,
through river of blood ...
Take me in a flood, Lilah.
Take me in a flood.
And there I'll see the boat sinkin
through ocean of mud. (Svich *Alchemy of Desire* 419)

The townswomen add to the environment of magic and mysticism as well as provide the catalyst for Simone's healing. The ritual they perform exorcises Simone's house of the ghost of her husband and is the antecedent for Simone's

ritual burning of Jamie's clothes. This action frees Simone, thereby releasing Jamie from his wandering.

The America Play intersects thematically with *Alchemy of Desire* as both play's centrifugal forces are death, history, and spirits—and any combination of those aspects: the death of history and the history of death. Parks' *The America Play* has been described as twisted nursery rhymes. The main character, The Foundling Father, also called The Lesser Known, is a gravedigger by trade. He is a Black man who grew up with an awareness of the irony that he resembled Abraham Lincoln The Great Emancipator. Because of his obsession over all things Lincolnian, he decides to leave his family in the middle of dinner to travel West. He finds an amusement park called "The Great Hole of History" and there becomes a Lincoln impersonator, complete with "Lincoln-like" beards in a variety of styles and colors. There the Foundling Father plays out the assassination of Lincoln for anyone who can pay a penny to "assassinate" him. His wife Lucy and son Brazil are left behind to dig for artifacts in the "Hall of Wonders." There they find, among other ancient artifacts, Washington's wooden teeth, and a television through which the Foundling Father appears to them. He comes out of the television to appear in *Our American Cousin* (the play Lincoln was watching when he was assassinated) and then the Lesser Known returns to his coffin. And Lucy and Brazil return to digging, searching and searching.

Ambiguity as Catalyst: From the Inside Out

I am curious how *Alchemy of Desire* and *The America Play* redefine and/or divert focus onto cultural memory within a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic US America. One way that Svich and Parks push against the prescribed boundaries and definitions of "American" is by taking the United States apart from the inside out. By speaking to an internal diaspora these playwrights express the sense of alienation from one's own history and culture, where people try again and again to make sense of their place in the w/whole of History but have been denied a place in the larger historical narrative of the United States. The internal diaspora has the effect of what Parks calls a "fabricated absence," and is akin to what Charlotte Stoudt describes as "a scavenger hunt with a missing prize, an echo chamber without an end" (Stoudt). It is a place where the repeated echoes of history past and history foretold cannot be or perhaps are not willingly stopped. She creates a tangible tension between the myth as we know it and the myth as she is taking it apart.

Parks' Foundling Father jumps up and down on the myth that is "America." He repeats the phrase "So says hearsay" throughout *The America Play*, commenting

on and spotlighting what Parks calls “reconstructed historicities.” A history that has been crafted and drafted to disassociate people from their own history; the history of “History” is one of alienation from truth. Parks says that the story goes “Once upon a time, you weren’t here . . . you weren’t here and you didn’t do shit!” (Drukman 296). It considers US American history as a giant puzzle with thousands of missing pieces. And that is where the Foundling Father came from. The hole in history that contains and constricts Parks’ “fabricated absence[s]” and “Reconstructed Historicities” (Parks *The America Play* 163). As the Foundling Father says, “Some inconsistencies are good for business” (163). In *The America Play* people pay a penny to *recreate* this moment in US American history: to capture the echo and make it stop moving and changing for a moment, a moment in time that is worth a penny.

During the second half of the play, Lucy and Brazil hear the echoes of the gunshots, every time someone “Shoots Mr. Lincoln.” They are where “he digged the hole and the whole held him” (159). They are caught in the abyss of time at the other end of the Hole where echoes of gunshots play over and over. The echoes are full of haunting whispers and silence—silenced people and their histories. Here Brazil and Lucy are aware of the echoes, bouncing off the hollow and empty space of “history” but hear the echo of The Foundling Father—another voice searching, but ultimately caught in the echo chamber.

BRAZIL. You hear im?

LUCY. Echo of thuh first sort: thuh sound. (E.g. thuh gunplay)

(rest)

Echo of thuh 2nd sort: thuh words. Type A: thuh words from the dead. Category: unrelated.

(rest)

Echo of thuh 2nd sort, type B: words less fortunate: thuh Disembodied Voice. also known as “Thuh Whispers.” Category: Related. Like your Fathuhs.

(rest)

Echo of the 3rd sort: thuh body itself.

(rest)

BRAZIL. You hear im.

LUCY. Can’t say. Can’t say son.

BRAZIL. My faux-father. Thuh one who comed out here before us.

Tuh one who left us behind. Tuh come out here all uhlone. Tuh do his bit. All them who comed before us—my Daddy. He’s one of them. (Parks *The America Play* 184)

Brazil refers to those who came before, both The Foundling Father and his ancestors before him. They are hearing echoes of the words from the dead. The Foundling Father among them as he searched for his own sense of identity and cultural memory/association in the “Hole” void of all memory and recognition of him, apart from his association with Lincoln. Apart from what US American history assigned him, he was nothing but an echo, a shadow of the Great Man. He was only the Lesser Known—digging literally to find his own roots in the hole that is the narrative of US American history.

In *Alchemy of Desire/Dead Man’s Blues* Svich unties America and “American” through a lens other than the one traditionally allocated to Latina/o dramatists. She writes toward the transformative; and her work is transforming. In her introduction to *Out of the Fringe*, she explains that of the two choices of cultural representation, there is the “exotic lens” and the “correctly ethnic” role. The mostly white regional theatre community expects the exotic lens and the correctly ethnic role is the expectation of the Latino theatres (“Out of the Fringe: In Defense of Beauty” xi). “One was being seen,” she writes, “while another was being left on the fringe, not necessarily abandoned, but certainly not allowed to be seen” (xi). She states very clearly that *Alchemy* grows from a desire to “re-imagine the United States from within: to take apart familiar structures and reconfigure them in a way that will forge new theatrical identity, one that is reflective of a multifaceted culture yet rooted in ancient, even primeval impulses and forms” (395). Her nomadic upbringing, she states, is in part what informs her perspective—that location *and* dislocation and feeling like an exile *and* a native imprint in her work. As a playwright, she concerns herself more with the voice and space, of negotiating and adapting place and history. Her plays often are based in a “sense of place” whether, as she continues, that is an emotional or geographic locale. You can see this awareness in Simone, after she witnesses Jamie’s ghost and chases after him, saying:

And where is it you run to? Huh?

What the hell are you lookin for?

There’s nothing. Nothing here.

Just trees, and water and goddamn branches that got me all cut up.

And all you think about is runnin.
Like the air's gonna take you someplace you've never been.
Well, I can't lose you – can't let myself lose ...
I heard you. I know I did.
I saw you. I know. – I did.
To have you come back to lose you –
You tell me you're here. You tell me.
You ain't goddamn leavin me again.
I am gonna find the breath.
I'm gonna trespass on the night.
I'm gonna swallow the stars until I find you. (Svich *Alchemy of Desire* 424-425)

Simone transcends the physical environment through her speech. Svich writes about language as physical and three-dimensional and here we see the physical world break down and give way to the spiritual. Simone's dialogue continues to break down the walls and geographic boundaries of the play's setting, while Svich simultaneously breaks down the walls and geographic rendering of theatrical "place."

Ambiguity as Catalyst: Location

Neither setting in either play can be explained nor can they be located specifically in the "familiar." Both *Alchemy of Desire* and *The America Play* defy latitude and longitude. This creates a distancing where the audience reacts to their own assumptions about people, language and culture. A paradox surfaces as Svich's hybrid world and Parks' ambiguous place intersects with the audience's fixed boundaries and separations. Svich and Parks' plays are not built on Western ideas of dramatic "structure," form or concept. They are rooted deeply in ritual and loosely in "location."

The America Play's setting is described by Parks as "A great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of The Great Hole of History" (Parks 158). The Foundling Father lives in an amusement park called the Great Hole of History. He chimes in on location and its shaping by the dominant ideas of cultural knowledge and identity when he talks about his wife Lucy, describing their early relationship:

The Foundling Father. When he and Lucy were newly wedded and looking for some postnuptial excitement: A Big Hole. A theme park. With historical parades. The size of the hole itself was enough to impress any Digger but it was the Historicity of the place the order and beauty of the pageants which marched by them the Greats on parade in front of them . . . The Hole and its Historicity and the part he played in it all gave a shape to the life and posterity of the Lesser Known that he could never shake. (162)

The Foundling Father's past, present, and future are both literally and figuratively in a big hole. His life and history is seen as a fabricated void that he can neither fill nor escape. Parks reconfigures the "metaphysical landscape of racial memory" (Bernard 688) by excavating temporal and emotional location. She creates an unstable and fluid environment as she subverts dramatic structure and conventions by continuously reinventing them.

During my graduate studies, the university was going to produce *Alchemy of Desire*, but ultimately chose a different play because the director felt it was offensive to show Black people in the manner Svich draws her characters. Now while the setting is evocative of the Bayou of the Southern parts of the United States, the playwright clearly states in the introduction to her play, that she has not specified a location. So both the director weaving together the production and the audience reading and/or viewing the play will ascribe their own "location." This is key to my discussion of Svich's work as blurring, adapting, and renegotiating cultural knowledge, memory and identity. The underlying assumption here made by the director, that the characters are Southern Black Americans, is a symptom that can be traced back to my students' reactions for a moment. The way these two audiences related to the texts was to describe them as inappropriate or "out-of-the-box." Thereby reinforcing the predominance of White/Anglo theatre as the original notion of authenticity and anything that runs counter is unsuitable or "outside the lines."

Marrero conveys Svich's association of self as true hybridity in both cultural association and aesthetic perspective as she describes *Alchemy of Desire* as a mixture of Greek tragedy, the Southern United States, ritual, music, and poetry. Svich describes the "place" of the show as "An open, fluid space evocative of the swamps of a burnt-out bayou" (Svich *Alchemy of Desire* 398). It is set "within an internal terrain, which the plays themselves construct, making no allusions to

identifiable, specific, geographical locations (be they Hispanic or Anglo). Theirs is a self-contained world set within what could be termed the deliberations of language, the psychological, and the theatrical” (Marrero xvii). Svich considers the play “presentational” and not overtly political, with no clear association to anything Latina/o.

She writes in an effort to redraw/reinvent a US American landscape and history that is “reflective of [our] multifaceted culture” (Svich “The Writer Speaks” 394). While the language and music of *Alchemy* are traditionally defined to a certain geographical location Svich mixes language, music and ritual from all throughout the Americas (Manzor 184-6). She creates a hybrid place as well as people. She fuses the rituals of Santeria with the rhythms and cadence of the Southern United States, thereby blurring the audiences’ “reading” of the performers. In critiquing the idea of “America” through the vagueness of her characters and her “ambiguous bayou” Svich confronts the audience with their own assumptions.

This points to tensions between old world and new world calling into question traditional stories and versions of history, pointing toward, instead, a broader reinvention that continues to go through a process of adaptation. *Alchemy* draws parallels to Greek plays with its chorus of women surrounding the anguished protagonist. Simone seeks to deal with the death of her husband Jamie, while searching for answers and a redefined self. The women in her life, the Greek chorus help her exorcise the spirit that haunts her. *Alchemy of Desire/ Dead Man’s Blues* defies distinction through, in one sense, the Western theatrical device of a “Greek Chorus” situated within a culturally blurred landscape.

Ambiguity as Catalyst: Language

Both plays showcase old world versus new world issues and ideologies. In their bodies of work, Svich and Parks reclaim and recreate history using language to generate new conventions. They are willing as artists to use the “theatrical canvas as a way to reinvent and/or reimagine their history” through negotiating and adapting old conventions of language. Because of this, their plays stand both in and outside of the “American experience” (Svich “Out of the Fringe: In Defense of Beauty” xv). Parks’ use of puns on the words founding father/foundling father/foe-father/faux-father/fore-father breaks down the linguistic and cultural forms in a way similar to Svich’s disrupting of geographical and emotional location. Parks uses puns and plays on the words to point to the absurdity of concrete language, identity and cultural location. Locked into one sphere of isolated and “clear” site is impossible.

Parks, who is African American, balks at the notion that her plays are supremely about race and the social construction of language. She goes on to state that her plays *are* about the Black experience and are *not* about the black experience. Her employment of language is a medium through which to confront the dominant culture's idea of "we the people" within a larger framework of culture and theatre. An interviewer of Suzan-Lori Parks once wrote that her plays are like "Urgent messages that [she] has stuffed into bottles and cast into the sea of white America's incomprehension—of women, of blacks, and of those who are both" (Als 7). Adapting the very idea of history, and the larger issue of historicity is a very clear factor in *The America Play*. Parks has said of her use of language that it is not even all English. "It's the sound of the dead, and the dead don't make living sounds" (8). Language goes where people cannot—across planes of realities and Parks troubles language, rhythm, and how those two components interact. She places "spells" in her plays—places where there is no dialogue, just characters' names:

LUCY. He dug this whole Hole.

BRAZIL. Sssnuch. This whole Hole.

LUCY. This whole Hole.

(rest)

BRAZIL.

LUCY.

BRAZIL.

LUCY.

BRAZIL. (Parks *The America Play* 186)

She writes that this form offers a sort of "architectural look" (*Elements of Style* 16). While this Parksian element adds rhythm and meter, it also interrupts the formal organization of the play. This implies, as Johung points out, that African American history and identity can be interrupted, revised, "or, more precisely, rewritten—through formal intervention" (40).

Svich's *Alchemy of Desire/Dead Man's Blues* blurs the lines of historicity as well as the cultural signifiers long held in comfortable positions by the dominant culture—the cadence and dialects that Svich incorporates into her play display her own sense of mestizaje. Her hybridity as a person of mixed racial makeup

bleeds over into her plays as she seeks to create a means of expression for her ideas. Svich maneuvers her way through language adapting and adopting different combinations—drafting a hybrid language from the many influences in her life. She states that there are a “whole range of linguistic options that you can simply invent [and that she enjoys] fusing cross-culturally” in all of her writing (García-Romero). Svich’s racial hybridity provides a negotiation and reinvention of her own sense of race and identity because of her multicultural and transcultural perspective on life and art. Svich was born in the United States and is of Cuban-Argentine-Croatian-descent and states that she is neither fully Latina, nor fully American, but rather something truly hybrid in her sensibilities: “bilingual, multicultural, female” (Svich “The Writer Speaks” 394).

Svich and Parks agree that language is illusory, “[it] is physical. It lives inside the body . . . the terrain where the characters live is manifested in the way they speak” (García-Romero). And a solid and complete idea of history, culture, and knowledge is also illusory. Svich calls upon something from the old world to comment on the state of this new culturally ambiguous world she creates. Simone and Jamie are able physically in touch with one another in the scene titled “Chimera.” In Ancient Greek mythology, the “Chimera” is a thing hoped or wished for but is in fact illusory or impossible to achieve. Simone holds Jamie after he has fallen asleep on her lap:

SIMONE. It’s quite possible we’re made of air.
That we’re deep-down truly made of air.
That the rest is just stuff to keep us tied to the ground,
to keep us from flyin’. (Svich *Alchemy of Desire* 439)

Here Simone speaks of her individual sense of alienation from her community, but we can also read Svich’s view of cultural memory as illusory, imaginative—thoughts made up of historicities. Svich and Parks tell stories that, as Taylor’s intermediary does, unravel the future (Taylor 89).

To end where I began, for my students, the *theory* of a multi-cultural society was made *real* in the sense of the Black faces among the white faces in my classroom. But the *concept* of a collective cultural identity—one that included acknowledging their participation in a culture where many histories continue, as Gates writes, to be “unrecorded, dismembered, [and] washed out”—broke down the boundaries of their center, challenging them with a closer glimpse of an “internal diaspora.” Through Selah, the oldest character in *Alchemy of Desire*, Svich speaks of the internal diaspora, the longing to search for an authentic self in an exiled culture:

SELAH. It's all right to wander in your mind.

You got to wander before you can come to believe something.

That's why they say it like that: "Comin' to believe."

It don't just happen. No sir.

You got to find your way to it, whatever it is,

whatever you set down and say you're goin to believe—

you got to find yourself to. (Svich *Alchemy of Desire* 412)

Parks discusses the ephemeral nature of history—as a recorded or remembered event—theatre is the best medium for re-telling it. She states that part of her job as a playwright is to “locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (Parks *Possession* 4). Lucy addresses this wandering and coming to something when she states:

LUCY. At thuh Great Hole where we honeymooned—
son, at thuh Original Great Hole, you could see thuh
whole world without goin too far. You could look intuh
that Hole and see your entire life pass before you. Not
your own life but someones life from history, you know,
[someone who'd done something of note, got theirselves
known somehow, uh President or] somebody who killed
somebody important, uf face on uh postal stamp, you
know, someone from History. *Like* you, but *not* you. You
know: *Known*. (*The America Play* 196)

Svich writes about her intention to specifically use language to speak to the centrism in theatre and in US American culture; and Parks states that she doesn't set out always to write about race or to deconstruct/reconstruct identity through the language and structure of her plays. But their library of plays shows how both playwrights strip down cultural codes and products transforming and adapting them into a retelling of cultural identification and the history of people. That the ambiguous ness of their texts speaks to the need of US American theatre and culture to be re-created: “Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events—and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human . . . 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). The works of Svich and Parks play and replay variations on “historicity.” Their plays are rocks thrown into the pond that is “America.” We watch the ripples moving through traditional systems of belonging, adapting the message, disrupting the center, and transferring movement to the margins.

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