

# Critical Race Theory in Literature: *In The Blood* By Suzan-Lori Parks

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## Abstract

This study seeks to explore the fundamental principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and to use it as an analytical tool to discuss Suzan-Lori Parks's play, *In The Blood*. Through the key tenets of CRT such as systematic racism, race as a social construct, intersectionality, and power structures, a theoretical background for a literary analysis is framed. Relatedly, the primary focus of this study is to deeply analyze race, gender, power relations, and socio-economic conditions with CRT through the playwright's innovative representation of blackness. CRT clearly shows that racism is constructed through discriminative practices and sustained by law and institutions, resulting in justification and accordingly normalization of oppression. In line with CRT's main concerns, *In The Blood* embodies societal and ideological barriers and the dehumanization of black female bodies through social judgment, racial, and gender discrimination, and motherhood. CRT essentially deals with how Parks reconstructs traditional narratives of guilt, shame, and femininity and claims that Hester, the protagonist, is portrayed both as a victim of intersectional oppression and an individual struggling with the harsh conditions of life.

**Key Words:** Critical Race Theory (CRT), literary analysis, racism, intersectionality, Suzan Lori-Parks, *In The Blood*.

## EDEBİYATTA ELEŞTİREL İRK KURAMI: SUZAN-LORI PARKS'IN *IN THE BLOOD* ADLI OYUNU

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Eleştirel İrk Kuramı'nın (EİK) temel ilkelerini ortaya çıkarmayı ve Suzan-Lori Parks'ın *In The Blood* adlı oyununu irdelemek için bunu analitik bir araç olarak kullanmayı amaçlamaktadır. Sistematik ırkçılık, toplumsal kurgu olarak ırk, kesişimsellik ve güç yapıları gibi EİK'nin temel ilkeleri aracılığıyla, edebi bir analiz için kapsamlı bir teorik arka plan oluşturulmaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışmanın odak noktası, EİK'yi kullanarak cinsiyet, güç ilişkileri ve sosyo-ekonomik koşulları, yazarın siyahiliği temsili aracılığıyla derinlemesine analiz etmektir. EİK, ırkçılığın ayrımcı uygulamalarla inşa edildiğini ve baskının meşrulaştırılması ve buna bağlı olarak normalleştirilmesiyle sonuçlanan yasa ve kurumlar tarafından sürdürüldüğünü açıkça göstermektedir. EİK'nin temel prensipleri doğrultusunda, *In The Blood* oyunu, toplumsal yargılama, ırk ve cinsiyet ayrımcılığı ve annelik aracılığı ile toplumsal ve ideolojik engelleri ve siyahi kadın bedenlerin insanlıktan çıkarılmasını somutlaştırmaktadır. EİK esasen Parks'ın

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suçluluk, utanç ve kadınlığa dair geleneksel anlatıları nasıl yeniden yapılandırdığına odaklanmaktadır ve Hester'ı hem kesişimsel baskının kurbanı hem de hayatın zorlu koşullarıyla mücadele eden bir birey olarak tasvir edildiğini öne sürmektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Eleştirel Irk Kuramı (EIK), edebi analiz, ırkçılık, kesişimsellik, Suzan-Lori-Parks, *In The Blood*.

## INTRODUCTION

Literature can be described as the cultural and historical mirror of a society, developing in parallel with societal changes. It has an interactive and dynamic nature, both shaped by and shaping the society to which it belongs. It is, hence, deeply related to the social, cultural, and historical contexts. For this reason, critics have aimed to shed light on both the historical past and authors' fictional imaginations to explore the multifaceted function of literary works in expressing, interrogating, and challenging the values, experiences, and perspectives of a particular time and place. They have subjected these literary works to various in-depth literary analyses to uncover the deeper layers of meaning and function. Relatedly, literary theories provide critical and analytical perspectives that can be employed to analyze, interpret, understand, construct, or deconstruct literary texts in order to question the foundations of meaning, structure, language, identity, and various representations. These theoretical approaches offer multifaceted lenses through which the complexities and nuances of the literary works can be explored, challenging existing assumptions and generating new insights. Over time, the field of literary and cultural analysis has evolved into a broad and interactive discipline, encompassing diverse theoretical frameworks such as structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and critical race theory. Each of these approaches contributes distinct methodologies and perspectives, enabling scholars to explore the profound complexities of language, culture, and power in multifaceted ways. At the core of literary theory lies the recognition that literature does not have a neutral or polarized perspective rather, it is profoundly shaped by and responds to the complex social, political, and historical forces that define its context and influence its creation. Literature, then, holds the mirror to the values, beliefs, and power dynamics of societies. Accordingly, this paper seeks to apply Critical Race Theory (CRT) to Suzan-Lori Parks's play, *In The Blood*, to unmask how race, power, and social structures intersect to shape the experiences of the play's protagonist, Hester, and reflect broader systemic issues faced by black women in society.

Pauline Moret-Jankus and Adam J. Toth (2019, p.8) argue that it is not possible to talk about a unique matrix of race, because there is not a unique idea of race and not even one unique modern idea of race. As labile concepts, the expression of race theory, including monogenism, polygenism, exclusion, racism, and inequality is remarkably heterogeneous. Their definition, hence, varies, as does their reception. In that vein, literary texts dealing with racism are open to multiple interpretations, providing a "multiracial, multiethnic, cross-cultural perspective grounded in hope rather than complacency, which leaves a room for anyone is left not with a foreboding sense of 'race' burden, but with a renewed sense of racial wonder and possibility" (Wilson, 2005, p. XVIII).

In parallel with the previous representations of race and racism in literature, CRT, an analytical tool to discover systematic racism embedded in social structures, is used in this study to delve into how racial hierarchies and discriminatory practices penetrate societal institutions and interpersonal relationships, creating economic and social barriers. CRT pivotally claims that social, political, and economic inequalities are perpetuated through legal systems, policies, and institutions. This study respectively aims to explore how such systems marginalize and oppress Hester, particularly as a poor black woman. Through her plays, Suzan-Lori Parks portrays a typical patriarchal capitalist society where hegemonic power and accordingly the roles of political and social leadership and control of properties are held by men (Ghasemi, 2017, p. 62). In line with this, CRT deeply analyzes the relevant patriarchal, racist, and capitalist system that Parks tries to reflect and it primarily concerns with the social devastation caused by racism. Parks locates Hester at the nexus of intersecting systems to illustrate how these forces trap black women between their bodies and the oppressive social order.

### 1. CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to analyze and understand the nature of discrimination based on racism. Emerging in the 1970s and mainly focusing on inequalities in law, its primary interest is the intersection of race, law, and power. CRT provides critical lenses to figure out how systematic racism is embedded in the foundations of societal institutions. Based on the influential work of Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2023), an in-depth analysis of the theoretical foundations of CRT is discussed. Their work provides a comprehensive overview of the fundamental principles and perspectives that underpin CRT by exploring the persistent role of race and racism in shaping social, political, and legal structures.

The institution of slavery, which was legalized for political and economic reasons, represents a profoundly significant factor that has been instrumental in unmasking and shaping the concept of 'blackness' in white society. This exploitative and dehumanizing system has had a deep and lasting impact on the lived experiences, cultural identities, and social perceptions of black individuals and communities throughout history. Therefore, the systematic racism and oppression that legalized and perpetuated the institution of slavery played a crucial role in determining the experiences and socio-economic conditions of the black community over generations. Accordingly, racism can be observed to have a devastating impact on various dimensions of society, including the disruption of social order, barriers in education, inequities in the legal system, racial representations in literature, and disparities in health outcomes. Such unfair practices undermine both the individual and collective experiences of black people, resulting in a substantial gap in opportunities, outcomes, and quality of life between black and white individuals in society. Its impact is not limited to interpersonal relations but deeply extends into structural and institutional frameworks, significantly disrupting and reshaping primary foundations and organizational structures that underpin the social order. Ultimately, CRT is interested in exploring and analyzing such disruptions and challenges to the prevailing social order.

As a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power, CRT analyzes the foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law. Significantly reinforced by critical legal studies and radical feminism, CRT also draws from certain European philosophers and theorists, such as Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, as well as from the American radical tradition exemplified by such figures as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, César Chávez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Power and Chicano movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. It is clear that CRT has a multifaceted framework that enables scholars to apply it across various disciplines, including literature, education, and sociology. Critical principles of the shared concepts are highlighted here to delve into the relationship between CRT and other disciplines. CRT uses legal indeterminacy form law, which argues that not every legal case has one outcome while it uses a feminist perspective regarding the relationship between power and the construction of social roles as well as the unseen, largely invisible collection of patterns and habits forging patriarchy and other types of domination. Apart from a sympathetic understanding of notions of community and group empowerment, its common point with civil rights thought is neutralizing historical faults as well as the insistence that legal and social theory leads to practical consequences. The shared concepts between CRT and ethnic studies include cultural nationalism, group cohesion, and the need to develop ideas and texts centered on each group and its foundational events and histories (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023, pp. 3-5). Both its feminist, ethnic, and critical background plays a significant role in analyzing the literary texts through CRT. Most notably, CRT is useful for literary analysis since as an aspect of analysis, critical and cultural critiques provide literary interpretations contextualized within multifaceted and often racialized macro systems (Brooks, 2009, p. 37). Black authors frequently explore these macro systems including institutional racism, socio-economic gaps and historical injustices in their works as they try to be the voice of their community.

Kathy Mills and Len Unsworth (2018, p. 312) argue that confronting dehumanizing societal structures, CRT theorists unmask the endemic nature of racism in society, who apply transformative ideals aiming to ameliorate the subordination of others based on race, gender, sexuality, age, economic or social status, and other multilayered identities. In that vein, they try to draw attention to the essentiality of radical changes in the social structure. CRT, hence, is not only a tool for social criticism but also a framework for transformation by offering a pathway for enacting meaningful and lasting change within societal structures and institutions. Also, their focus on 'multilayered identities' is particularly noteworthy since it reflects a comprehensive understanding of how various forms of discrimination intersect, often compounding the experiences of those who belong to multiple marginalized groups.

## 2. CRT AS A LITERARY THEORY

As mentioned before, CRT is primarily related to historical, sociological, and legal forms of racism. Yet, CRT's considerations regarding social justice provide appropriate background for literature, as Edward Said (1978, p. 27) argues that although literature and culture are presumed to

be politically, even historically innocent, society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together. In literary analysis, CRT is essentially used to examine, challenge, and critique racism and racial construction in narratives (Jewel, 2020, p. 13). Rather than focusing on the representation of discrimination, CRT emphasizes the importance of analyzing and trying to understand the socio-cultural forces that shape how people, as readers and interpreters, perceive, experience, and react to racism. Undoubtedly, CRT does not solely identify race, racism, or racist characters in fictional works. Rather, CRT is mainly concerned with how literary texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant racial ideologies and power structures (Çakırtaş, 2020, p. 196). Understandably, it essentially focuses on the ways in which literary representations of race shape social and cultural understandings, or how marginalized voices and perspectives are excluded or distorted in the literary texts. Analyzing any literary text with CRT means that the main focus is on the intersections of race, gender, power, and ideological factors, which provides a better understanding of black people's (re)positions in societal order. Lynn and Adams (2002, p. 89) relate CRT with the African American literary tradition, drawing much of its energy and style from the poets, writers, and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as other storytellers from marginalized communities who boldly criticized America's racist history. Inevitably then, critical race theorists evaluate literature, legal documents, and other cultural works as evidence of a society's dominant culture, collective values, and beliefs. In this context, they deal with racism as a theoretical and historical experience, recognizing racism as a systemic force that can profoundly impact all members of a community, regardless of their specific racial backgrounds or identities (Çakırtaş, 2020, p. 196). Accordingly, in the following section, the main tenets of CRT are used to discuss black identity, black women's positions, and their reactions to survive *In the Blood*. CRT maintains that black identity is shaped and constrained by institutional racism, rather than by biological or cultural differences, which are also the fundamental points discussed in Parks's play, *In the Blood*.

### 3. IN THE BLOOD BY SUZAN-LORI PARKS

A black play dreams the impossible dream.

Suzan-Lori Parks<sup>1</sup>

Being somewhere between past and present and even future, Suzan-Lori Parks is a significant figure in the African-American literary tradition and follows a postmodernist approach with her ability to synthesize the traditional with an innovative perspective. She draws from a richness of historical and cultural experiences while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of contemporary theater and literature. Creating a fluidity of time and space, she follows an unusual style in which historical narratives, current realities, and speculative possibilities are interwoven. Pivotaly, Parks concerns with historical themes, oral traditions, and the lived experiences of black people through (re)imaginings and (re)writings with non-linear narratives, fragmented structures, and surreal or symbolic imagery. In that vein, "Parks forces the audience to recreate the 'reality' that she has theatrically deconstructed" (Ozieblo, 2007, p. 54). Thus, it is safe to say that

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<sup>1</sup> Parks (2005, p. 578)

her works are not merely historical and cultural reflections, or history itself. Rather, they are Parks's rewriting of history, which allows readers "to reconstruct a vision of historical or personal lives, of the intertwining of the private and the public in the lives of a specific group of people by not judging" (ibid, p. 54). She purposely depicts black experiences with multifaceted lenses to feature black existence and to show how their sense of self is constantly evolving and fluid. The author particularly emphasizes that blackness as a reality is beyond constructions, which is instead shaped by complex dynamics arising from both internal and external factors. Accordingly, her characters resist the imposition of external definitions to create space for self-expression and reinvention. Similarly, Oskar Eustis (2018, p. 284) argues that central to her plays' core is freedom, and her diverse use of theatrical styles and tones reflects the strong desire for liberation felt by her characters.

Parks discusses the essence of black play in her article, *New Black Math* (2005). Actually, her perspectives regarding black play underpin her literary tradition. For her (2005, p. 579), a black play in the white society has endured a tumultuous history, having been forcibly separated from its cultural origins, subjugated, and forced to conform to the values and norms of the dominant society. Besides dehumanization of the characters and cultural suppression, the expectation persists that Black theater should adhere to the established norms and values dictated by the dominant culture. Yet the playwright is aware that this expectation is directly a part of the stigmatization of the black community. The black play, hence, "employs the black not just as a subject, but as a platform, eye, and telescope through which it intercourses with the cosmos" (ibid, p. 582). In this sense, 'the Black' becomes the medium through which the play interacts with the broader universe, offering a unique, culturally grounded viewpoint that transforms how stories are told and understood. Most notably, the black play moves beyond the surface-level depiction of black experiences to delve into deeper philosophical and existential questions, through which it becomes a space where black culture, history, and consciousness serve as the foundation for broader reflections on life, society, and the universe. Accordingly, *In the Blood* (2001) discussed in this study in detail deals with the black experiences from a critical perspective.

*In The Blood*, one of two striking plays known collectively as *The Red Letter Plays* is a (post)modern adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) focusing on Hester's life, a homeless, impoverished African American woman raising five fatherless children. The play is the reconstruction of both history and literary tradition. Suzan-Lori Parks skillfully draws on themes and characters from renowned authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Jacobs, William Faulkner, and Tony Kushner, building on them, using them as foundations for a new text with more modern, more critical eyes, according to Jennifer Larson (2012, p. 12). In this way, Parks engages in an intertextual dialogue with the past, using their themes to explore issues related to blackness to explore race, class, or gender issues. Her talent to reinterpret classic texts with modern insights heightens her innovation as a playwright, and her work challenges audiences to reconsider these traditional narratives through the lens of contemporary struggles, especially those faced by marginalized communities. Mehdi Ghasemi (2017, p. 71) argues that Parks's reinvention

of *The Scarlet Letter* reveals the destructive consequences of racism and sexism on African American women and readers witness the miseries of the black and the white Hester.

Hester La Negrita, the central character of *In The Blood* is a poor, illiterate black woman who has multiple sexual relations with men and has five children, each with a different father. She only knows the letter A which symbolizes adultery in Hawthorne's novel. Yet Parks's A is open to multiple interpretations which reflect "Hester's fragile and fragmented identity-wearied by systematic attacks and her own shortsighted choices-as well the play's indictment of the forces that seek to undermine this identity. [...] Understanding Hester's A is a matter of life and death" (Larson, 2012, p. 52.). Such a multiple interpretation invites readers to consider the complex interplay between personal responsibility and societal injustice, reflecting the delicate balance between her individual struggle for survival and the destructive societal forces that threaten to undermine her existence. Similarly, the chorus reflects Hester as inferior rather than an oppressed victim: "BAD NEWS IN HER BLOOD PLAIN AS DAY"<sup>2</sup> (Parks, 2001, p. 7). As letter A, blood symbolizes various facts such as her blackness, her predetermined fate and her guilt as a murderer of her son.

Hester lives with her children under a bridge in extreme poverty. The fathers of her children are often distant or absent, and the men in her life, from the doctor to the priest, use her situation to their advantage, reinforcing her isolation and the systematic nature of her oppression. Each child in the play is assigned dual roles, representing corresponding adult characters. The eldest daughter, Bully, also portrays the Welfare Lady who seems to support Hester, while the eldest son, Jabber, also plays the role of Chili-Hester's first lover, who seeks to marry her by the end of the play. The middle son, Trouble, also acts as the abusive Doctor, who mistreats Hester, and the youngest daughter, Beauty, also embodies Amiga Gringa-Hester's white friend, who ultimately exploits her. Lastly, the youngest son, Baby, also represents Reverend D., who is the priest and father of Baby. The play represents the complex relationship of social, economic, and hegemonic practices of the white society through a black woman character. According to Jon Dietrick (2010, p. 89), "While critics almost universally acknowledge Parks's concern with the economic structures of society, several critics investigate Parks's obsession with the verbal and visual sign and its relation to racial, cultural, and gender identities." CRT, as a critical method in this study, will shed light on the struggle of black women to exist in white society by considering both the socio-economic and racial dimensions of the play.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF *IN THE BLOOD* THROUGH THE MAIN TENETS OF CRT

##### 4.1. Ordinary racism

According to CRT, racism is ordinary- not aberrational, which means that racism is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged. The ordinariness of racism means that all those who hold power or privilege are racists and do not acknowledge their views or actions as racist but as normal, typical and a part of the status quo (Bowman et al., 2009, p. 2; Delgado and

<sup>2</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks prefers capitalization as a part of her style of elements. For more information, see *Elements of Style in the America Play and Other Works* by Suzan-Lori Parks (1995).

Stefancic, 2023, p. 8; Rocco and Gallagher, 2004, p. 34). Philomena Essed (2002) links the ordinariness of racism with day-to-day experiences of racial discrimination to the macro-structural context of group inequalities represented within and between nations as racial and ethnic hierarchies of competence, culture, and human progress. Congruently, institutions such as education, health care, law, housing, or media embody cultural values organized around a distinctive function, in which racism is ideologically mediated through actual practices. This suggests that the majority of dominant group believes that one's own group is prioritized, while people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are perceived as less capable, less refined, culturally threatening, or less intelligent (pp. 202-205). Relatedly, Hester is the victim of ordinary racism in the play. Every day racism manifests not only through overt acts of hatred or violence, but through the systematic and routine ways in which Hester is marginalized, oppressed, and dehumanized by the people and institutions around her. At this point, Parks shows how racism works through institutions that have prestigious roles in society. Facing discrimination that is woven into the fabric of her interactions with society, Hester is subjected to abuse from the people around her, but her poverty and blackness cause her to submit to this exploitation. The readers first witness the relationship between Hester and the doctor who actually symbolizes the health system of American society. Since Hester is as poor as church mice, she uses her body to sustain her life, especially to feed her children. The doctor justifies himself through the ordinariness of racism while exploiting Hester:

**Doctor:** Except they wouldnt really fit.

They wouldnt really fit in with us.

Theres such a gulf between us. What can we do? (Parks, 2001, p. 44)

Parks reveals the sharp distinction between the black and white community through a doctor obligated to provide equal service to all patients regardless of their race or socio-economic status. The fact that Hester is both black and poor is enough for the doctor to take advantage of her vulnerability and meet his own sexual needs. In return, Hester is rewarded with a meager dollar that can barely fill her empty stomach, highlighting the profound inequalities and sexploitation she faces as a marginalized individual. Similarly, when Hester goes to confess to the priest, who is actually the father of her eldest son, she describes her miserable situation without revealing that he is the father of her child. The priest advises her to "Go to him. Plead with him. Show him this sweet face and yours. He cannot deny you"(Parks, 2001, p. 49). However, the priest's manner changes when he learns that he is actually the father:

**Reverend D.:** You should go. Home. Let me call you a taxi. Taxi! You shouldnt be out this time of night. Young mother like you. In a neighborhood like this. We'll get you home in a jiff. Where ya live? East? West? North I bet, am I right? TAXI! God. (Parks, 2001, p. 49).

The priest's social status is basically not suitable for him to have such a relationship with any woman, not just Hester. As a representative of religious institutions, an illegal relationship would damage the priest in various ways. However, having such a relationship with a black woman justifies the priest's acts, as he can easily get rid of Hester, saying that he supports her financially and sends her home, but he does not keep his promise. As seen, Parks criticizes social institutions through the inappropriate behaviors of people who represent these institutions, which sustains ordinary racism. Relatedly, the woman called Welfare is expected to economically support



unemployed Hester; however, the ordinariness of racism gives the right to Welfare woman to have a threesome:

**Welfare:** I walk the line  
between us and them  
between our kind and their kind.  
The balance of the system depends on a well-drawn  
boundary line  
and all parties respecting that boundary. (Parks, 2001, p. 61).

Welfare draws attention to the difference between herself and Hester, whom she sees as an unchaste black woman, yet she finds it legitimate to be involved in a sexual relationship with her including her husband. It is clear that Hester's relationship with the men and women representing official institutions is a picture of corruption in society in multiple ways. Hester's blackness, femininity, and poverty undoubtedly make her a victim of society. Although the intersecting roles of these three factors are discussed later, it would not be wrong to remark that the background of these unusual practices is the ordinariness of racism. Understandably, every individual who victimizes Hester derives their power from the racist system. As CRT argues, the laws legally support social inequality by not treating black individuals and white individuals equally.

#### 4.2. Interest convergence

Interest convergence, also known as material determinism, suggests that both the economic and physical interests of the dominant white society are perpetuated through the systematic practice of racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023, p.9) since racism fundamentally serves the self-interest of the white majority, who benefit from the oppression and exploitation of marginalized racial groups. Accordingly, the ways in which the dominant society practices racism are determined by both the desire to advance oneself in the material world and the desire to advance oneself financially or to feel better about oneself psychologically (Tyson, 2006, p. 371). Hester's relationship with Amiga Gringa based on inequality, dependence, and benefit exemplifies the interest of convergence. Amiga Gringa, a white woman who befriends Hester, represents a complex dynamic of power, manipulation, and exploitation despite the surface-level camaraderie. Seeming to have the best interest at heart for Hester, Amiga Gringa confuses Hester's mind and undermines her struggle to support her five children. She tells Hester that the sewing job offered by Welfare is a form of slavery since its price is less than a living wage and that if Hester performs well, she will become Welfare's slave. Meanwhile, she sexually exploits Hester and profits by filming their intimate relationship, further dehumanizing Hester and perpetuating the cycle of oppression. Ultimately, she connects her exploitation of Hester to the broader capitalist system:

**Amiga Gringa:** She made sounds like an animal. She put her hand between my legs. One day some of the guys took advantage. Ah, what do you expect in a society based on Capitalism. (Parks, 2001, p. 72).

Their relationship reflects a type of convergence where both women seek something from each other, though their motives and outcomes differ significantly due to their social positions. For Hester, Amiga Gringa offers a semblance of friendship, companionship, and perhaps a fleeting sense of support in a world where she is otherwise isolated and neglected. She likely sees Amiga Gringa as someone who can provide a form of relief or assistance, however temporary, in her

struggle to survive. On the other hand, Amiga Gringa's interest in Hester is more self-serving, as she leverages her relationship with Hester for personal gain, such as validation, a sense of superiority, or some material benefit. The 'convergence of interests' here underscores how relationships can be built on unequal exchanges, where both parties seek something, but one holds more power and control.

Similarly, expected to embody the virtues of humanity, Reverend D. uses Hester for his own desires. His interaction with Hester reveals a deep hypocrisy since he considers Hester as an object for his own personal and sexual gratification. Yet he takes great care to conceal this behavior in order to protect his public image and reputation as a priest. His exploitation of Hester reflects the power imbalance between them. Instead of providing Hester the moral and spiritual guidance that his role as a priest and the father of her child demands, Reverend D. abandons his responsibilities and takes advantage of his position of authority over her. Furthermore, Reverend D. tries to justify his situation by claiming that God put him in this situation rather than associating it with oppression caused by Hester's blackness. This act of deflection allows him to avoid confronting the true nature of his actions and the significant inequalities of power and balance in the play. Rather than acknowledging his exploitation of Hester with limited agency, Reverend D. frames his behavior as something beyond his control by saying, "There was a certain animal magnetism between us [...] God made me. God pulled me up" (Parks, 2001, p. 78) as though his position as a priest absolves him of personal responsibility. Using God as an excuse, Reverend D. tries to exonerate his behaviors as a result of his sexual desires, which are closely related to physical interest.

### 4.3. The Social Construction of Race

CRT argues that rather than being a biological category, race is a social construction invented, manipulated, or retired by society when convenient. It is not objective, inherent, or fixed (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023, p.9) as Frantz Fanon (1967, p. 6) emphasizes "what is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact". The historical categorization of race, with its various classifications such as free whites, unnaturalized foreigners, free colored, slaves, mulattos, quadroons, or octoroons reveals that race as a sum of beliefs and attitudes is a social construct rather than a biological reality (Tyson, 2006, p. 374). Parks relatedly tries to reveal that race is a social construct throughout the play. Through Hester's harsh circumstances, Parks demonstrates how race is not an inherent characteristic but rather a category that society imposes on individuals to justify white hegemony, discrimination, and oppression. Hester's identity as a black woman plays a pivotal role in understanding how she is treated by the figures of authority and by society, but Parks highlights that the significance of her race lies in the meanings and stereotypes that have been socially and historically attached to it. Thus, it is clear that the entire plot of the play is about race as a social construct. Parks shows how blackness transforms from a biological reality into a social construct, turning white Hester into a black one and positioning the new Hester as a victim of social pressure. In other words, the representation of institutions through characters in society, the constant abuse of Hester by those around her, and unequal social, and economic support for blacks are all indicators that race is constructed and maintained through social variables. The

changing categories regarding blackness reflect shifting societal and economic dynamics rather than any inherent genetic differences. Although Amiga Gringa behaves lewdly throughout the play, she is not criticized or labeled as a slut, nor is she abused by the people around her.

The fact that the definitions of race have evolved over time, influenced by political and economic needs, underscores that race is not fixed but fluid. Despite this, dominant social groups often assert that racial categories are permanent and immutable, reinforcing systems of power and inequality. CRT paves the way for examining the historical fluidity of racial definitions, emphasizing that race has always been shaped by societal norms rather than by biological differences. Relatedly, the people around Hester such as the doctor, the priest, and the social worker perceive her through the lens of these racial stereotypes, assuming she is inherently inferior, irresponsible, or undeserving of compassion simply because of her race. In this way, Parks exposes how race is constructed and weaponized to sustain systems of inequality.

#### 4.4. Differential Racialization

Differential racialization is related to how dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times in parallel to shifting needs such as agriculture, labor market, or war industry. Depending on the white society's needs and societal developments, black people, as well as other minority groups, are discriminated and stereotyped to justify racist practices (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023, p.10; Tyson, 2006, p. 375). Related to this, the image of the black woman, Hester and her children can be analyzed, as the play primarily focuses on the experiences of black individuals as minority groups. Rather than improving Hester's living conditions, the prevailing social pressure further exacerbates her struggles, contributing to her constant suffering and marginalization because blackness is not satisfactory for the white superiority, so "the black man must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon, 1967, p. 83). Similarly, Cherly Blacks (2012, p. 34) points out that "subjects maintain their subjectivity/identity in relation to an excluded antithetical Other-whiteness understands its identity in relation to "blackness," and corresponding relationships exist between masculinity/femininity, wealth/poverty". Hester's position among the white members of society is determined by discriminative practices to sustain white dominance. In this societal context, Hester's identity is shaped by her relation to white power and hegemony, and her worth is often determined by how well she conforms to the expectations and judgments imposed by a society built on the racial hierarchy as Hester says, "[...] Sometimes you cant win. No matter what you do"(Parks, 2001, p. 32). Hester exemplifies the deep frustration of living in a world where societal rules are stacked against her and where any attempt to improve her circumstances is met with barriers rooted in race and gender discrimination. Accordingly, the play ends at the prison door with the chorus's otherization (as in the prologue) of Hester:

**All:** LOOK AT HER!  
WHO DOES SHE THINK  
SHE IS THE ANIMAL  
NO SKILLS. (Parks, 2001, p. 108).

Blackness evidently equates with animality in the play, and Hester is portrayed as a useless, worthless individual. As a result, she is seen as deserving of all kinds of unfair and inhumane treatment by society. The way the play ends by describing Hester as an illiterate, ignorant, and

sexually addicted animal is one of the key issues that CRT examines and vehemently criticizes. This depiction perpetuates harmful stereotypes and objectifies the black experience. Such objectification validates the perspectives regarding blacks who are defined solely by their struggles, marginalizing their successes, hopes, and resilience. Moreover, it creates a huge gap between different minority groups, reinforcing the distinctions between 'us' and 'them'.

#### 4.5. Intersectionality

This tenet, which argues the idea that "race intersects with class, sex, sexual orientation, political orientation, and personal history in forming each person's complex identity" (Tyson, 2006, p. 376), is the primary concern of literary analysis. Essentially, *In the Blood* can be thought of as an intersection of different variables in which Hester's identity is defined by the interaction of race, gender, and poverty. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to clarify the ways in which black women under the US legal system are often caught between multiple systems of oppression based on race, gender, and economic hierarchies without being recognized for their unique experiences at the convergence of these systems (Wilson, 2013, p.17). To clarify the complex nature of intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989, p. 149) uses a traffic metaphor:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions, and sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.

As an analytic tool, intersectionality provides critical lenses to analyze relationality, power relations, and social justice to show what persisted, what became muted, and what disappeared throughout history (Collins and Bilge, 2020, p. 86). In that vein, Hester, represented as an incompetent person and unmarried woman with children who also cannot read or write, embodies multiple oppressive systems. In the prologue, Parks shows her secondary through chorus symbolizing the society that ostracizes Hester. Described as a negative stereotype in every respect, Hester is portrayed as a problem for society rather than a victim of society:

**All:** SHE KNOWS SHES A NO COUNT  
SHIFTLESS  
HOPELESS  
BAD NEWS  
BURDEN TO SOCIETY  
HUSSY  
SLUT  
PAH!  
[...]  
BAD NEWS IN HER BLOOD. (Parks, 2001, p. 6).

She is blamed for her own suffering as if her poverty and marginalization are the results of her choices rather than the consequences of living within an oppressive society. Individuals often belong to multiple social, cultural, and personal groups, each with its own set of values, norms, and expectations. This complex interrelatedness shapes both the individual and collective identity of people and forges their societal positions. "Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances", according to Delgado and Stefancic (2023, p.11). This

definition also draws attention to the multifaceted structure of identity, showing that individual identities are not constructed through a single factor but are subject to a change that evolves over time as a result of the combination of various factors. Relatedly, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another, which is actually a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. Accordingly, by reducing Hester to a stereotype determined by the intersection of her race, gender, and social status, the complexities of her life, struggles, and experiences are ignored. Parks challenges this view by urging the audience to confront how such stereotypes function to maintain societal hierarchies and avoid addressing the real problems of inequality and systemic oppression:

**All:** 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 [...] (Parks, 2001, p. 7).

What makes Hester stupid and a burden here? Intersectionality's primary concern with how social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life are influenced by intersecting power relations (Collins and Bilge, 2020, p.12) may answer it. The white hegemony objectifies blacks as others, patriarchy uses its power to oppress blacks as women and economic relations make a distinction between poor and others. Intersectionality focuses on the relationship between these external factors. Clearly, Parks positions Hester at this intersection:

**Welfare:** And I should emphasize that  
she is a low-class person. What I mean by that is that we have absolutely nothing in  
common.  
As her caseworker I realize that maintenance of the system  
depends on a well-drawn boundary line  
and all parties respecting that boundary.  
And I am, after all,  
I am a married woman. (Parks, 2001, p. 62).

Parks embodies that Hester exists at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalization, which makes her an appropriate target for abuse by those in positions of power. Hester's poverty leaves her with few options for survival, making her dependent on social services like Welfare woman who wields significant control over her access to meet her husband's unusual desires. The white society has long sexualized and degraded black women, historically treating their bodies as objects for exploitation. This racialized perception allows the social officer to justify his abuse, seeing Hester not as an individual with autonomy and dignity but as someone whose black body can be exploited with impunity. The intersection of her race and poverty leaves her vulnerable to (s)exploitation, as society often dismisses and devalues the experiences of black women, allowing oppressors to take advantage of them without any fear or regret.

#### 4.6. Voice of Color

This tenet supports the idea that minority authors, due to their distinct histories and experiences with oppression, may have a better ability to convey to their white counterparts matters that the latter are unlikely to fully comprehend. The enhanced ability to speak and write

about race and racism because of racial oppression, the voice of color is socially acquired rather than biologically (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023, p.11; Tyson, 2006, p. 394). As Audre Lorde (1984, p. 45) indicates, "If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others-for their use and to our detriment." More precisely, stereotypes, misrepresentations, biases and a loss of agency may emerge from the white perspectives regarding blackness. It is, hence, essential for black authors to take active roles in expressing who they are rather than leaving a room for white authors to impose their own limited and subjective definitions upon them. Similarly, Parks (2005, p. 583) remarks that inspiration, talent, and long-term connections to black voices- both literally and symbolically are essential for black playwrights, which requires a willingness to play with language through the meanings and the music of it, and exactly a vulnerability to the lessons of black history and politics. She tries to reveal that blackness is life itself, constituting "a new literary tradition to fill the absence where the presence of African and African-American women frequently was omitted" (Schafer, 2008, p. 182), which makes Parks a strong voice of color. Hester's feelings and love towards her children show how blackness is as real and natural as whiteness. Hester calls her children as treasure while society criticizes her because of her choices. Her only effort in her harsh life is for her children:

**Hester:** Doctor says I got a fever. We aint doing so good. We been slipping. I been good. I dont complain. They breaking my back is all. 5 kids. My treasures, breaking my back. (Parks, 2001, p.50).

Hester's resilience is rooted in her love and affection for her children. Instead of considering them as misfortune or sin, she defines them as her most precious treasure. And she tells positive stories about children's absent fathers so that her children would not be the victims of society. Relatedly, Delgado and Stefancic (2023, p. 52) argue that storytelling allows black authors to recount their experiences with racism through the deconstruction of constructed racism to show our own pernicious beliefs and categories; "Powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity." In that vein, Hester creates her own story about her children's fathers, which ends happily. Starting with "There were once these five brothers and they were all big and strong and handsome and didnt have a care in the world" (Parks, 2001, p. 19), it is a fact-based story; however it does not focus on Hester's mistakes about her choices. The characters who are all happy in the story represent Hester's children. Her imagination becomes a form of resistance against the oppressive forces that define her reality. Moreover, the 'happy ending' she creates for her children's fathers may reflect her deep desire for stability, love, and acceptance. Hester longs for a world where her children are not stigmatized for being fatherless and where her own worth as a mother is not constantly questioned. As in her fictional story, Hester tries to find a way to protect her children from the harsh realities of a racist system. Hester's efforts to protect her children are not just physical but also emotional and psychological as she tries to create a sense of security and hope for them in a world that perpetually devalues their existence:

**Hester:** My kids is mine. I get rid of en what do I got? Nothing. I got nothing now, but if I lose them I got less than nothing. (Parks, 2001, p.28).

Parks becomes the voice of a black mother, showing a mother's unconditional love and compassion. Rather than relating her mischoices with her race, the author emphasizes Hester's humanity and her unwavering devotion to her children despite the hardships of her life. Yet, Hester's maternal instincts proved helpless under societal norms, leading her to kill her son, Jabber, by brutally beating him with a club. With the death of her son, Hester becomes the voice of the black woman's despair against the racist order. She is torn between deeply regretting the choices she has made in her life and feeling profound remorse for the regret and sorrow she now feels over those choices and their consequences:

**Hester:** Never shoulda had him.  
 Never shoulda had none of em.  
 Never was nothing but a pain to me:  
 5 Mistakes!  
 No, dont say that. (Parks, 2001, p. 106).

Hester's dilemma is closely related to her position as a single black mother in a predominantly white, patriarchal society. The stereotype of the 'irresponsible black mother' becomes prevalent, positioning her as a societal problem rather than as someone in need of support. Instead of being seen as a victim of systematic inequality, she is judged for her life choices, particularly her sexual relationships and her children.

The play ends with Hester's tragedy in which she kills her son and is spayed to take her womanly parts. Although Hester seems to bear responsibility for her own tragic fate, it is evident that the actual reasons behind her downfall are the oppressive societal structures and systematic racism that black women face. Unlike Hawthorne's Hester, black Hester, excluded from society and constantly (s)exploited through her body, faced a multifaceted oppression. The intersectional challenges of race and gender create immense barriers that profoundly (re)shape Hester's life, who pays for it by being the murderer of her child. Condemned and vilified by society, Hester undoubtedly pays a heavy price for the intersectional effects of her race, gender and economic situation. Jabber calls Hester as slut because Reverend D. uses this insult to mantle his own faults. Hester is trapped in a cycle of deprivation and marginalization under the racist system that oppresses her, making it nearly impossible for her to break free from this cycle and leaving her vulnerable and unable to fully protect herself and her children from the harsh realities.

## CONCLUSION

A black play is doctor heal-good cause theatre is a healing thing.

Suzan-Lori Parks<sup>3</sup>

This study, which analyzed Suzan-Lori Parks's play, *In The Blood* under the main principles of CRT, claims that societal dynamics exert profound influences on individual rights and freedoms, particularly for marginalized groups. Specifically, it focuses on how political and ideological structures of a predominantly white society affect black women, highlighting their unique experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and class. In this respect, how these societal forces shape Hester's life as she struggles to survive with her five children in a hostile environment is discussed. Illustrating the harsh realities faced by black women in their pursuit of survival and

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<sup>3</sup> Parks (2005, p. 582)

dignity, the study explores how systemic racism and intersecting oppressions limit opportunities, suppress autonomy, and reinforce inequality. This analysis underlines CRT's emphasis on understanding the intersectional nature of oppression and how institutionalized racism continues to shape the lives of black women like Hester.

CRT, which examines the ways in which racism and discrimination are embedded in legal and institutional structures, argues the idea that equal and fair practices should be provided for all members of the same society. Accordingly, CRT is used as a framework in understanding how Hester's identity is shaped by intersecting systems of oppression, including political, ideological, patriarchal, and socio-economic forces to reveal that her struggles are not just individual experiences but reflections of broader societal inequalities. Drawing on CRT, this study explores that Hester's marginalization is a result of systematic inequalities that deny her access to basic rights and protections since the prevailing ideology in this white-dominated society labels black women as inherently inferior and a social problem. CRT agrees that Hester's body turns into a legal ground for (s)exploitation which is used for the desires and interests of both men and women. According to CRT, the fact that Hester has to bear the burdens of motherhood and societal impositions alone is closely related to patriarchal norms that devalue black women and deny them autonomy over their bodies and lives. In conclusion, however, Hester's poverty is a key factor in her marginalization as the responsible people for the main resources such as stable employment, education, or healthcare also manipulate her instead of improving her condition. The only way for Hester to survive is to let her body be (s)exploited since the socio-economic order is not regulated according to blacks' needs to live under equal conditions. On the contrary, it is the legal ground for the objectification of blacks for the comfort of whites, and CRT harshly criticizes this point and argues that conditions for minorities, including blacks, should be improved.

This study centers on analyzing Parks's play through the lenses of CRT, prioritizing themes of race, systemic oppression, and the intersectionality of power structures as they relate to black women. Consequently, other literary aspects such as intertextuality, linguistic features, motherhood, or morality that fall outside the scope of CRT were not included into the analysis. While CRT provided a focused framework for exploring the racial dynamics in the play, future studies may delve into these omitted areas, offering a more comprehensive analysis of Parks's play.

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