

Racial Identity Transformed: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* and David Henry Hwang's *Yellowface*

Lenke Németh

"The mask which the actor wears is apt to become
his face." (Plato)

"The face we choose to show the worlds—reveals
who we really are." (Hwang, *Yellowface*)

Enthusiastically praising the opportunities, the peace and wealth in the new land, French immigrant St. Jean Crèveceour described the new nation in his *Letters from an American Farmer* in 1782 as follows: "here individuals of all nations are melted into a *new race of men*, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world" (italics added, 70). Less than a century later in 1855, Walt Whitman, the bard of American democracy, shared Crèveceour's fervor and joyously declared that "America is the Race of Races."¹ Prophetically, they both envisioned a *new race*, a new amalgamation of people of different nations, races, and ethnicities, and interestingly enough, they also anticipated the elusiveness of this concept. Indeed, the pluralistic and multi-racial American society has always struggled to conceptualize the national character thus Crèveceour's question "What, then is, the American, this new man?" raised in the eighteenth century has never lost its validity. Insistence upon a singular definition of the national character, however, has proved to be futile since the meaning "is transformed by experience, this being the gift offered by a culture in which transformation is the essence" (Bigsby 2).

¹ Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, 1855.

Paradoxically, the *constant* feature of American culture lies in its inherent *dynamism* and its always changing nature due to the never ceasing flux of immigrants. “The story of the American process,” as Zsolt Virágos articulates it, “has always been that of unifying forces versus divisive issues” (“Diagnosing” 19), and accordingly, the effects of two basic forces, centripetal—directed toward centralization—and centrifugal—moving away from a center—have shaped the American culture. Arguably, over the past three centuries two major models, the *assimilationist* and the *multicultural* have evolved. While the first one targets the unification of the American nation, the second throws into relief the heterogeneity of the American culture. With an unprecedented focus on the distinctiveness of ethnic groups and various subcultures in the decades from 1960s to mid-1990s, the multicultural era, however, created as well as deepened schisms and splits in the American society. Labeling multicultural America a “boiling pot,” Virágos maintains that the separatist impulses then “spawned a whole spate of ‘versus patterns’ (we-ness versus they-ness, Eurocentrist vs. Afrocentrist interpretations of history, male vice vs. female virtue, virtually everybody vs. the white male, etc. and other divisive strategies of polarization and mythicized exclusionism” (“Diagnosing” 16).

As opposed to the multicultural phase when the cult of ethnicity and difference was celebrated, in a matter of less than two decades since the mid-1990s, the American society has entered its postmulticultural phase and is approaching a *sybiosis* of different cultures, which, ideally, involves a mutually beneficial interaction between them. I suggest that the New Millennium marks a cultural paradigm shift from multiculturalism to *postmulticulturalism*, which qualifies as the *third model* of the American culture. Inescapably, the postmulticultural phase necessitates the reconceptualization of Americanness and national identity. Harry J. Elam maintains that postmulticulturalism “offers space for new explorations of cultural and ethnic hybridity, for the interrogation of racial meanings, and for a re-thinking of the politics of cultural identity” (Elam 116). In the present paper my aim is to explore dramatic representations of the new kind of cultural identity that I term the *cultural mulatto* and will offer a description of this new literary archetype. The plays selected for study include two productions in the postmulticultural phase of American drama: African American Suzan-Lori Parks’s Pulitzer Prize winning play *Topdog/Underdog* (2002) and Asian American David Henry Hwang’s *Yellow Face* (2007). Before having a closer look at the works, however, I

will highlight certain socio-economic causes leading to the emergence of postmulticulturalism and will provide a characterization of the cultural mulatto.

The shift to postmulticulturalism is due to major socio-economic changes in the US that have challenged previous notions of citizenship, race, and ethnicity. As a result of the effects of globalization (integration of national economy into international economy) a new migration of people began in the late 1980s on the US-Mexican, US-Caribbean, and US-Pacific borders for job opportunities and better living conditions. The unprecedented increase in the numbers of immigrants on the borders of the US has triggered radical changes and the rearrangement of priorities in many facets of US life. First of all, the massive migration of the people who moved to and fro across the borders while maintaining their familial ties with their relatives has challenged former conceptions of American identity, race, and ethnicity. Arguably, within the context of transnational migration and a globalized world “monolith communities like Asian American and African American, ceases to exist as a successful marker of difference” (Park 280).

The 2000 Census marks the first occasion when the assignment of *mixed race* could be chosen by the respondents, who could acknowledge any combination of races they were descendants of. Prior to that Census only one racial designation option was allowed to choose, which corroborates the emphasis on the cult of ethnicity and difference celebrated in the multicultural phase. The introduction of the new mixed race category brought about a re-arrangement in the racial and ethnic composition of the American population. 7 million Americans identified themselves as mixed race in 2000, while by the 2010 Census their number grew to more than 10 million. It is predicted that their number “could account for one in five Americans” by 2050 (Kotkin).

I propose this era produces a new hybrid, fluid cultural identity that I term the *cultural mulatto*. Introduced originally by cultural critic Trey Ellis to identify a type of African American appearing in the 1980s, the cultural mulatto, by extension, aptly describes the new American in the postmulticultural era. By definition the cultural mulatto embraces the cultural legacies of two or more cultures that are in a mutually interactive relationship with each other. Navigating easily in between the iconic signifiers of several cultures, the cultural mulatto breaks down the arbitrary barriers between ethnicities and races that induced much strife and pain in the course of American history.

This new type of identity emerges in the literature and art of a new generation of artists—primarily black—who were born into or grew up in a radically altered cultural and political scene after the multicultural era. The new generation's art is not burdened with the separatist and nationalist impulses inherent in the 1960s-1980s, neither do they define black experience in terms of segregation and slavery but present characters with “a hybrid, fluid, elastic, cultural mulattoesque sense of black identity” (Ashe 614). The legitimacy of identifying literature in the postmulticultural period as a discrete literary period as well as its label is still contested—the names range from post-soul, post-liberated through post Black, post-ethnic to New Black. I prefer to use the label *post-ethnic* on its being the most comprehensive to refer to all the ethnicities in the post-Civil Rights Movement era literature.

As regards Ellis's definition of the cultural mulatto he places much emphasis on the cultural mulatto embracing various cultural legacies: “[j]ust as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world” (235). By giving prominence to the *multi-racial* and *multi-cultural* legacies as shaping factors of the black self, Ellis not only removes centuries-old social and psychological burdens that African Americans have experienced in their marginalized position but also pries open race-imposed cultural boundaries and dichotomies that have long traumatized African American consciousness and existence. Pertaining to the mixed legacies Ellis notes that “[w]e no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black” (235). Perceptively, Bertram D. Ashe is right in extending the definition of cultural mulatto referring not only to all African Americans but to all Americans: “All African Americans are, to one extent or another, naturalized ‘cultural mulattos,’ as are all Americans, and any other Americans, of any race or ethnicity, who grew up in this country” (614).

On the basis of the abundance of characters with a hybrid and fluid sense of identity in post-ethnic literature Ashe establishes the cultural mulatto archetype (612), though he declines to describe its specific features. I find the following criteria can be set up and adequately be used for the identification of this archetype: (1) a quintessential representative of the post-ethnic era, the cultural mulatto possesses a *composite identity* that evinces biraciality and biculturalness; (2) the cultural mulatto's

identity is never stable but is always in flux; (3) the cultural mulatto transforms the former no man's land, the *wild zone* between the white and the ethnic worlds into an intercultural sphere, a *contact space* thus securing long-desired space in between the two cultures; (4) the cultural mulatto crosses the color line and re-inscribes himself/herself in the history of America; (5) the cultural mulatto embraces the iconographic signifiers of both the white and the black cultures and histories.

Erika Fischer-Lichte's theoretical considerations pertaining to the role of theatre and drama in demonstrating as well as challenging outdated or traditional conceptions of identity are effectively corroborated in the dramatization of the cultural mulattoesque identities as presented in the plays selected for study here, Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* and Hwang's *Yellow Face*. Fischer-Lichte points out that there has always existed a "dialectic relationship" between the theatre and the cultural and social reality of the outside world: "theatre or drama has never been satisfied with merely mirroring or depicting this external world but has always also functioned as a forum of questioning and critical analysis, a sphere of experimentation offering or even initiating alternative identities" (5). Like other forms of cultural performance—for example, rituals, ceremonies, or rites of passage—theatre is particularly concerned with the formation and change of identity, while the self-reflexivity of drama illustrates how the genre examines its own structure in the light of changes in the concept of identity. I claim that both *Topdog/Underdog* and *Yellow Face* deconstruct stereotypical beliefs about race and identity and at the same time they push beyond simple racial definitions based on binaries.

Hybridity and fluidity of identity are central to both plays, which is conveyed by a sense of duality constantly interacting on their thematic and formal levels. A never-ceasing oscillation is present between fact and fiction, historical figures and fictional characters, reality and illusion, and characters performing different roles, races, and identities. Both Parks and Hwang re-visit scandalous events in American history and provide a highly inventive blend of fact and fiction achieved by populating the stage with historical as well as fictional characters. Parks addresses the theme of the archetypal rivalry between brothers over power, yet by naming the African Americans brothers Lincoln and Booth—given to them by their father as a joke—she not only extends the play with racial, cultural and historical dimensions but the continuous interaction between them creates a sense of fluidity of races and identity. Hwang is concerned with the scandalous event of casting a white actor, Jonathan Pryce for the main

role in the Broadway performance of the musical *Miss Saigon*—even though the role called for a Eurasian and gives an account of his own protest against this practice of yellowfacing. By doubling himself, Hwang assumes the role of DHH, the narrator/announcer in the play, who is a replica of himself, and thus he is able to trace his own journey from his initial orthodox convictions about race to greater openness, an entirely altered view about it.

Whitefacing, the reversal and challenge of the politically incorrect practices of blackfacing and yellowfacing widely used on stage and screen, especially in the first half of the twentieth century constitutes a central element in both plays. Linc and Booth identify with historical figures from white history and culture, which is an ironic re-writing of the history of the United States “A reformed card shark” (Geis 114), Linc has given up making living out of the three-card monte game and instead each day he whitefaces himself to transform into Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the US in order to enact his assassination in an arcade. Booth enacts his namesake’s fate as he kills his brother in a dispute over money.

Hwang effectively demonstrates in his play “how the oppression has less to do with one’s actual ethnic background than with how one attempts to perform one’s identity in a world fond of neat classifications” (Park 282). Hwang and his supporters (which originally included Actors Equity) found it outrageous that after decades of white actors donning “yellowface,” it was morally and ethically wrong for a white actor to play “Asian.” DHH thinks it appalling: “Yellow face? In this day and age? It’s—It’s—did suddenly turn the clock back to 1920. Are we all going to smear shoe polish on our faces?” (Hwang 11). So in response to the *Miss Saigon* debate DHH writes *Face Value*, in which an “Asian American character is supposed to infiltrate a production wearing whiteface, only to reveal later that he is Asian” (Park 282). In order to avoid stereotypical assumptions about typical physical Asian features, by accident, DHH casts the role of the activist to Caucasian Marcus Dahlman, assuming that he is mixed race. When realizing his casting mistake, DHH covers it up by going so far as giving Dahlman a new name, Marcus Gee and a Siberian Jew ethnic background. Ironically, by yellowfacing himself, that is performing the role of the oppressed Asian American actor, the Caucasian Marcus gains recognition and wealth. Eventually DHH has to face that his political correctness (beginning of the 1990s) is merely “a blatant restriction of artistic freedom” (Hwang 11).

The performative nature of identity and race is accentuated in both plays. Linc's whitefacing himself involves putting on the signifiers of identity change, the hat, the beard and the coat, which transform him into Abe Lincoln. Linc's constant fluctuation between his role enacted in the arcade and his real self, however, reinforces the performativity of identity. He fights against the signifiers that, "Fake Beard. Top hat. Don't make me into no Lincoln. I was on my own before any of that" (Parks 30). Yet, the Lincoln role creeps into his everyday life. In a hurry to catch a bus home Linc has not time to take off the costume and a kid asks him for his autograph. "They'd just done Lincoln in history class and he knew all about him," as Linc tells the story to Booth, and "there was Honest Abe right beside him on the bus" (Parks 11). Dressed as President Lincoln is not only an "uncanny reminder of the performativity of identity," but also "makes us intensely aware of Lincoln's (the actor's) 'blackness'" (Dietrick 58).

Booth's acts and deeds convincingly reinforce the performative nature of identity. Desperately trying to learn how to deal cards the way his brother used to, he constantly imitates him by rehearsing the moves and gestures, yet "his moves and accompanying patter are, for the most part, studied and awkward" (Parks 7). Adamant to assert his masculinity and his success with Grace, his apparent girlfriend, he sets up a scene of a romantic dinner with champagne but Grace never turns up. Additionally, the brothers have their common game of acting out the roles of Ma and Pa, a highly comic fast paced ritual of joy when Lincoln brings home his pay:

BOOTH. Lordamighty, Pa, I smells money!
 LINCOLN. Sho nuff, Ma. Poppas brung home thuh bacon.
 BOOTH. Bringitherebringitherebringithere. (Parks 26)

The constant metadramatic quality of *Topdog/Underdog* is further enhanced by Linc's description of reality and illusion in the Lincoln performance thus creating a *mise en abyme* and also raising question pertaining to reality and mimesis. Linc begins his account by emphasizing, "Its pretty dark. To keep thuh illusion of thus whole thing" (48). The sense of duality operates here since the darkness in the arcade refers to Linc's impersonation as well as to the actual theatre performance that Abe Lincoln was watching when he was assassinated. Then the issue of the ability of seeing or not seeing in the darkness, that is perceiving reality or an image/imitation of reality is further expanded by Parks. Though the

one to be assassinated should not (be able to) see the assassin, Linc admits that he can see an upside down reflection of the customers in the “Big old dent” on the silver metal electrical box on the opposite wall, so “everything reflected in it gets reflected upside down” (48). The acute irony of this scene lies in Linc’s highlighting the moment of *reality* that turns out to be entirely inappropriate: “There is a moment of reality: Me looking at him upside down and him looking at me looking like Lincoln” (50). Ultimately, both the customer and Linc see distorted versions of reality, since Linc can see an upside-down, a “carnivalized” version of reality, while the customer can see a fake Lincoln. Reality, as seen by them, is merely a replica of the real historical event that took place in the nineteenth century.

Irony and a farcical tone operate in Hwang’s play as well. For comic effect, the person of color in *Yellow Face* is a white man. By the end of his journey DHH understands that “people of color, do not choose to live inside labels: race is acted upon them from the outside in” (Park 282). Ultimately, DHH, that is Hwang, is able to transcend the more outdated assumptions of multi-culturalism and suggests: “Maybe we should take words like Asian and American like race and nation – mess them up so bad no one has any idea what they mean any more (63).”

Lincoln’s oscillations between his masks and selves as well as Marcus Gee acquiring a new identity by merely consistently performing it adequately illustrate that both plays trouble blackness and Asian Americanness, respectively, and hold them up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain coherent black or Asian American identity.

Both playwrights’ works benefit from constant experimentation with dramatic form. Their innovative methods and techniques are most obvious in their handling of the theatrical space. The observation pertaining to Parks’s use of stage that it is an “accumulation of places” [...] “in which characters from various historical times and locations can appear” and thus characters have “multi-spatial and multi-temporal existence” (Wilmer 444) is equally valid for Hwang’s stage. They both populate the space with historical, imaginary and real characters thus they not only underlie the multiplicity of selves and legacies but they create a peculiar synchronic presence of various spaces and times.

The cultural mulatto navigates easily in between the iconic signifiers of several cultures, enhances cross-race dialogue and transcends

racial difference thus breaking down arbitrary barriers between races and cultures. I tentatively suggest that the cultural mulatto embodies an American identity that Crèvecoeur and Whitman prophetically envisaged and attempted to define centuries ago.

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