

The White Gaze and Third Self in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*

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“Look, a Negro! ... It was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person ... I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors” (Fanon, 1967, 84).

Abstract:

This article scrutinizes the drastic effects of the dehumanizing white gaze on the black individual's self from psycho-existential perspectives, mainly through the thoughts of the existential philosophers and thinkers Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Lewis R. Gordon. I argue that the white inferiorizing gaze makes the black-skinned individual estranged from his / her authentic self and, therefore, develop a fragmented self. This leads the black individual to internalize inferiority and to build what is called “false consciousness.” These effects are analyzed in the African American playwright Susan-Lori Parks' play Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom (1989), specifically in the first and second parts of the play: Snails and Third Kingdom.

Key Words: *Suzan-Lori Parks, white gaze, bad faith, third self, estrangement*

Introduction and Literature Review

The idea of the white gaze is addressed by the Afro-Caribbean existential thinker Frantz Fanon in his seminal book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Throughout the chapters of this book, Fanon dissects the negative psycho-existential consequences of racism on the colonized and on black-skinned individuals, both males and females. Fanon argues that white subjects look at the black individual as subhuman for being black-skinned. Therefore, the black person is enslaved inside his / her black body; he / she becomes enslaved by others' negative and inferiorizing ideas of him / her, “I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have

of me but of my own appearance” (p. 87). Consequently, under the white gaze, the black-skinned individual develops an inferiority complex and his / her skin color becomes a mask. Fanon reiterates, “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (p. 90).

Jean-Paul Sartre explicates this existential notion in his ontological *Being and Nothingness*. It is through the look of the Other that existential experience of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity takes place. The famous example of a person looking through a keyhole clarifies this gaze. While this person is completely immersed in the act of peeping, all of a sudden, he hears footsteps and realizes that he has been seen by somebody. This person moves from the pre-reflective status to a reflective one as being the object of the Other’s shameful look (259-263). He sees himself through the Other’s look. The Other’s look fixes him in his *being* in the same way of being-in-itself, as an object. Consequently, the black individual “is made to adopt the posture of a third person that views himself with the critical ‘detachment’ of a ‘pure witness’” (Haddour, 2010, p. 84).

This existential notion is dramatized by the African American dramatist Suzan-Lori Parks in the first and second parts of her *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*. The black skinned characters in these two parts are objectified by the white gaze which turns them into mere objects. Due to interiorizing the inferiorizing white gaze, the black characters in these two parts develop what I call a *third self*. As a result, they struggle to confirm their existence as human beings against the white gaze that considers them subhuman and animals.

A Brief Plot Review

Imperceptible Mutabilities skillfully presents the existential struggle of black people to confirm their identity, starting from being on the slave ship deported from their country into the middle of nowhere. The play, with its non-linear scenes, dramatizes the story of enslaving the blacks and deporting them into America and its existential consequences. The play consists of four parts. Each part has a distinct title and a different story, but all of them showcase various existential issues and they form new possibilities (mutabilities) for understanding the black problem, which is the unifying theme of these different parts. In one of her articles, Parks reiterates this conviction, “[T]here is no single ‘Black Experience,’ there is no single ‘Black Aesthetic’ and there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted” (Parks,

1995a, p. 21). Throughout the scenes of the play, Parks goes back and forth through the history of the blacks' struggle to connect the past with the present.

The first scene, "Snails," presents three black female roommates, Molly, Charlene, and Verona, who struggle to confirm their humanity in an anti-black world where they are treated like animals. First, Molly demonstrates her problem with language that has caused her to be dismissed from school and to be fired from her job. Then the scene moves to show that Molly, Charlene, and Verona are the objects of a study on how to observe insects in their own natural environment rendered by the Naturalist; the very idea that Parks deconstructs by the end of the scene. The second part, "Third Kingdom," goes back in history to re-identify the specificity of the blacks' problem of being uprooted from their identity and sent onboard a slave ship to America, where they lost their sense of a true self. In the third part, "Open House," Parks underlines the harsh struggle of the black female character caused by slavery.

In the play, Parks presents her female servant character, Aretha Saxon, who is responsible for taking care of her master's two children, Anglor and Blanca Saxon. Aretha is getting old and, therefore, is dispended with. She is marking her last day with the white family. The white female character, Miss Faith, tells Aretha that she is freed because she and her contract expired according to the Emancipation Proclamation, "You expire. Along with your lease. Expiration 19-6-65 with no option to renew" (p. 47). She tries her best to make the children smile at the camera while she tries to have some photographs for her future memory. The fourth part, "Third Kingdom (Reprise)," seems to be a repetition of the second part where the characters discuss their loss of identity onboard the slaver. The last scene, "Greeks (or the Slugs)," dramatizes the story of the black family of the sergeant Mr. Smith who is away from his family, serving on anonymous island. His family—his wife and his three children—keeps waiting for him to be honored by his Commander and receive his distinction. His wife has lost her sight, waiting for his return and his two daughters always quarrel over his letters to see whom is loved more by their father. Ironically, Mr. Smith he returns home, losing his leg and losing the war.

Critical Analysis and Discussion

In Parks' play, the *third self* refers to the idea that between *I* and *myself* there is a *me*. The *I* connotes my subjectivity; as a person of action and agency, the *myself* implies the *I* as an object

of my consciousness, whereas the *me* means the *I* as objectified by others. The *third self* implies two existential dimensions: the first one is distancing one from one's own self due to the trapped identity and the second one is absorbing inferiority and *otherness*, as it is projected by the white racist supremacy. In the first and second scenes of the play, Parks presents the idea of the *third self*, which sheds light on the existential notion of the identity crisis. It becomes an obstacle in the face of defining oneself under the white gaze.

In the first scene, the three black female roommates always refer to themselves as a “me.” Molly says, “Once there was uh me named Mona who wondered what she'd be like if no one was watchin” (p. 27). They always put a distance between themselves and their dramatic personae in the play. This distance connotes the negation of the self. They have fallen prey to racism and they, in turn, act upon racist construction of identity. Molly acknowledges that the self under the white gaze is not authentic self; it is the inferior self, resulting from absorbing *otherness*. Parks is adamant that in each character there is an other (1995a, p. 19). These black female characters always feel that they are observed by others. Therefore, they always feel objectified due to the Other's gaze. Chona emphasizes this notion, “Once there was uh woman was careful. Once there was uh woman on thuh lookout. Still trapped” (p. 31). Consequently, these characters always speak about themselves in a reflective way. That is, between *I* and *myself* there is the self projected by others for me. Being trapped in an identity projected by others is the source of their anxiety.

In this scene, Parks showcases the idea of being trapped by the Other's gaze through the white Naturalist, Lutzaky. We see that the white Naturalist has placed electronic cockroaches in their flat to observe their behaviors. The spectators see the Naturalist wear a white coat, standing at the podium lecturing his students about the advancement of technology in observing animals. He explains to his students that the advancement of technology enabled scientists to develop house roaches to spy on the objects of the study (Molly, Chona, and Verona) in their natural environment. The purpose of which is to determine “how we of our world (*mundus modernus*) best accommodate them” (p. 29). This scene suggests that the white Naturalist is not only white-skinned, but also is performing whiteness. That is, he embodies the white racist doctrine and anti-black racism. Charlene declares, “Once there was uh one named Lutzky. Uh exterminator professional with uh Ph.D. He wore white cause white was what thuh job required” (p. 28). In

fact, Charlene refers to the white coat as a “white cause,” confirming the racist attitude of this white Naturalist as he demonstrates the white supremacy by which Molly, Chona, and Verona are trapped. Andrea J. Goto (2007) points out, “Lutzky ‘performs whiteness’ even if a black man does this role” (p. 109). This idea is emphasized, according to Goto, by the fact that Parks does not identify the race of the actor in the script.

Their trapped identity is metaphorically revealed by the fact that these female characters have bites all over their black bodies. Kolin suggests, getting bites over her eyelids suggests that Molly has a confused view over her identity and is trapped in her identity due to dehumanizing white racism (p. 53). As the white Naturalist is invited to exterminate the roaches, he considers these black female characters to be roaches that need to be exterminated from the face of the earth merely for being black. In reaction to this white racist supremacy, Parks deconstructs this ontological notion of black essential inferiority. Interestingly, instead of seeing animals on the stage, the spectators see female human beings in their “natural” daily life. Parks gives her female characters the power to confuse the Naturalist with a Ph.D. who admits his confusion and his unprofessionalism, “Am I wrong in making a livelihood—meager as it may be—from the vermin that feed on the crumbs which fall from the table of the broken cake of civilization” (p. 32). By the end of the scene, Verona, specialized in euthanasia, replaces the white Naturalist at the podium and speaks about her experience in Africa as a guide to white naturalists and concludes that “Everything in its place” (p. 37).

Anxiety and confusion lead Molly to raise an existential question that traces the black problem through ages and sheds light on the play’s focus on demonstrating “the problem of the self in relation to history.” (Garrett, 2007, p.1). Molly raises such a question in the first few lines, “Hhh. What should I do Chona should I jump should I jump or what?” (p. 24). Molly considers suicide by jumping out of the window as an outlet of her fragmented self.

The idea of the *third self*, which has become an emblem of being trapped in their identity crisis, is expressed clearly by Seers in the second part of the play. The spectators see a group of black character aboard a slaver deported from their homeland. Due to losing the authentic self, in a dreamlike conversation between Kin-Seer and Over-Seer, the same existential question posed by Molly in the first scene is raised by KIN-SEER, “Should I jumb? Shouldijumporwar?” (p.

40). Frieze (1998) reiterates that Park's technique of repeating the same ideas and lines not only gives Parks the opportunity to connect the characters together, but also to conjure up the historicity of her metaphors and to challenge them at different moments throughout the performance (p. 528). In the middle of nowhere, these black people are estranged from themselves as a result of losing their identity and, consequently, losing their true *self* and developing a third self. The conversation between SOUL-SEER, SHARK-SEER, KIN-SEER, and US-SEER is very illuminating:

SOUL-SEER: To-the-middle-of-the-bottom-of-the-big-black-sea.

KIN- SEER: And then my Self came up between us. Rose up out of thuh water and standing on them waves my Self was standin. And I was waving waving and my Me was waving and waving and my Self that rose between us went back down in-to-the-sea.

KIN-SEER: FFFFFFFF.

US-SEER: Thup.

SHARK-SEER: Howwe gonna find me Me?

KIN-SEER: Me waving at Me. Me waving at I. me waving at my Self. (p. 39)

This conversation shines light on the existential search for a true identity and authentic self due to being thrown into the world of slavery and racism. These black characters have lost their true self as they are transferred from their native countries and placed in an alien environment which, in turn, has led to their self-alienation.

Ilka Saal (2014) argues, "The 'Third Kingdom' refers here not only to the space in-between . . . but also to the fragmentation of the self under the trauma of displacement" (p. 245). As it is presented in the first part of the play, Parks skillfully reiterates the existential idea of the *third self* which is embedded in Seers' conversation over *I*, *me*, and *myself*. The existential constituent of these black Seers' identity is lost as KIN- SEER metaphorically puts it, "and my Self that rose between us went back down in-to-the-sea" (p. 39). It raises the existential question, "Howwe gonna find me Me?" (p. 39). Consequently, Parks puts this existential search through the time triangle of past, present, and future, and it encompasses the male and female search for a true identity.

This time triangle that Parks sets as a vehicle of search for an authentic identity corresponds with the existential constituents of the person: *I*, *me*, and *myself*, which she establishes from the first scene of the play. Gordon (1995) explains that the relationship between *I*, *me*, and *myself* appears in the anguished situation and he details how the *I* poses the self in relation to the person's consciousness. *Myself* is reflective and appears when the *I* poses the *self* as an object of consciousness. In the anguished situation, the *I* faces *myself* as a possibility and as a freedom. Therefore, in the state of anxiety, *me* is not what "I am" because it is a mere possibility. When *me* is posed as an object of consciousness, it becomes fixed and static, which results from considering *myself* at the moment of speaking, reflecting on my past actions and activities. Consequently, "[t]he self faced in anguish must therefore be the one pursued in the effort to bridge the gap between that me and I—my possibility" (p. 15). The true existential self is a self that is projected toward the future, which is beyond the person's grasp at the moment of reflection as the moment of reflection encompasses only what has become past. This future self is a set of choices that the *I* undertake in the future (Ibid, p.14).

The choices that the individual undertakes demonstrate the existential idea of temporality of the individual's existence in relation to her Being through time. Carol Schafer (2008) argues that Parks "sees history in a phenomenological manner that insists that the present exists in the future and that the past exists in the present" (p.182). Existentially speaking, this process is very important as it conceives Blackness itself in an experimental way. The process itself is existential; it emphasizes the notion that the projection of Black self is not what it has been constructed and it can be addressed through what it has not yet become. That is to say, Black identity is embedded in the process of becoming, incorporating past, present, and future together. Gordon (1995) points out, "What I am slips into the past, and what I can be is always ahead of me" (9). That is why Black identity is imperceptible mutabilities in the New World. The idea of becoming is embedded in Seers' conversation over King-Seer's dream:

KING-SEER: Tonight I dream of where I be-camin from. And where I be-camin from duhduhnt look like nowhere like I been.

SOUL-SEER: The tale of how we were when we were—

OVER-SEER: You woke up screaming.

SHARK-SEER: How we will be when we will be—

OVER-SEER: You woke up screaming.

US-SEER: And how we be, now that we iz. (p.54)

In the Seers' conversation, the identity construction oscillates among three poles: past, present, and future. King-Seer addresses the past, US-Seer contemplates the present, whereas Shark-Seer anticipates the future. King-Seer has dreamt of the place where he came from and this place appears strange to him. The change has taken place over time; the change does not involve the place itself (Africa), but the change involves their view of the place that represents their identity. Therefore, Soul-Seer analyzes King-Seer's speech saying that the issue concerns the idea of their identity in relation to place and time; their identity when they were in Africa before they were deported to the New World. Shark-Seer reveals the identity construction in the future "How we will be when we will be" (p. 54).

On the other hand, US-Seer addresses the temporality of their identity in the present, "And how we be, now that we iz." Their Being becomes an illusory concept that they cannot conceptualize. Its comprehension requires the amalgamation of the past, the present, and the future as well as a unity of the constituents of the self: *I, me, myself*. Parks explains "[T]hrough each line of text I'm writing the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined" (1995b, p.5). This over-quoted line expresses the idea that Blackness is to be addressed through time. Blackness in this play is contained in the philosophical doctrine of becoming that concerns existential aspects in each scene of the play. Roger White (1999) argues, "According to Sartre I cannot have a pure future, but can only apprehend it in synthesis with my past and present" (p. 55). It conjures up the past in the present in order to construct an identity that will be evolving in the future in facing the world of slavery and oppression, which, in turn, will lead to the unity of the self: *I, me, and myself*.

Conclusion

Due to being objectified by the white gaze, the black characters in the first and second parts of Suzan-Lori Parks' play always distance themselves from their dramatic personae and they, therefore, always speak about themselves in a reflective way. This reveals their confusion about their identity and their absorption of *otherness*. They have developed an existential *third self*, which is inauthentic mode of seeing the world. The white gaze leads the black individual to

develop a fragmented, inferior self. It imprisons the black person inside her skin color. In the second part, Parks addresses the idea of the *third self* through the time triangle: past, present, and future. The search for authentic self through this time triangle shows the existential notion of Blackness as “becoming,” which should lead to the unity of the triangle: *I, me, myself*.

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