

*THE RED LETTER PLAYS:  
IN THE BLOOD  
FUCKING A*  
By Suzan-Lori Parks

**CASEBOOK**

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TAR 662

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## Introduction

This casebook is for a production of Suzan-Lori Parks' *The Red Letter Plays*, comprised of two theatrical adaptations of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850): *In The Blood* and *Fucking A*. This casebook is framed as an imaginary production I pitched to an Artistic Director. Because I lack imagination, I imagine this at Arizona Theatre Company in my current position in the Artistic Department. However, in this scenario, I have much more clout at ATC and often propose ideas for production, to this proposal is appropriate and not presumptuous. I would serve as the dramaturg on the production and my concept would be allowed heavy influence over the show.

## Concept

Initially, Suzan-Lori Parks intended to write a riff on *The Scarlet Letter*, titled *Fucking A*. After a long writing process resulting in a play with 52 scenes, an "alien baby" play, as Parks describes, "burst out" (qtd. Black 35). She titled it *In the Blood*<sup>1</sup> and subsequently wrote another riff, this time with the title *Fucking A*.<sup>2</sup> In 2001, TCG published both plays together under the title *The Red Letter Plays*.

Parks is arguably the most influential contemporary American playwright and Hawthorne's novel is a well-known and frequently adapted American classic. Producing both of *The Red Letter Plays*<sup>3</sup> side-by-side offers an opportunity to recontextualize themes of a canonical American story in the present while also interrogating our nation's past and present. The Signature Theater produced the plays alongside each other in 2017 as separate productions. However, because these two plays are "important intertexts for each other," for this production the two plays will be performed *physically* side-by-side. Simultaneously in the same building, both plays will be performed twice in a row. The audience will be free to choose which to see first or they may move back and forth from one to the other during the show. Activating the audience in this way will demand a high level of engagement with the themes, stories, and characters. This concept is intended to replicate for the audience, in an approachable yet challenging way, "the aesthetic and political implications" of representations of race, class, and gender scholars have addressed in Parks' plays (32).

Parks' *RLP* are "satirical and surreal rewriting/revisioning of history" (Black 31). The script reflects the characteristics of her playwriting style as described in her essay, "Elements of Style" (1994): Rep & Rev in dialogue and structure, non-linear time, language as a physical expression from the body, and historical past as present. With incorporation of Euripides' Medea, fairytales, and African folklore in

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviated *ITB*.

<sup>2</sup> Abbreviated *FA*.

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviated *RLP*.

addition to *The Scarlet Letter*, Cheryl Black argues *RLP* is “more overtly literary, as opposed to historical, ‘rep and rev’” (32). However, despite its many literary sources, Parks does not privilege text and instead writes a script for the postdramatic theatre. The dramaturgy of this production will emphasize the postdramatic elements provided in the script and maximize the open space for additional meaning. “The use of time distortion,” Scholar Medhi Ghasemi argues, “creates fluidity and involves readers or audiences in the ebb and flow of atemporality [further blurring the] line between past and present” (832). With specific casting requirements but a text that strongly implies multiculturalism, the bodies of the actors cast will significantly impact the meaning and fully emerge in performance with the focus on the bodies of poor, illiterate women of color. Social status in the plays are signified by signs, icons, or symbols on the body, such as an “A” or type of clothing. With TALK subtitles in *FA* and Brechtian-style songs in the action of both plays, options for media in the production are endless and powerful.

Black lists the many ways critics classify Parks’ use of Epic dramaturgy: “episodic plotting, the use of a chorus, direct address to audience, generic names (Butcher, Welfare), use of titles, [and] songs” to alienate and distance the audience (50). However, she proposes Parks may be more Artaudian than Brechtian in her desire to illicit a visceral response in the audience. She has said that her plays, “BEG for the gut response. Let the stomachbrain, let the heart-brain, inform your head-brain, and not always the other way around. Because then we’re getting to some deep stuff. And it’s frightening. But it’s also healing” (qtd. Black 50). Artaud tried to shock the audience on a primitive and visceral level; Brecht desired to stimulate intellectually to inspire political action. Without focusing too much on using Artaudian or Brechtian lenses, I am interested in continuing this consideration of the dramaturgy of *RLP* in light of the Theater of Cruelty. Inspired by Artaud’s demand for abolishing the stage and any barriers between audience and actor, the most important aspect of this production concept is its site-specificity. The site-specific venue serves the play’s ambiguous setting and as a strategy for attracting new audiences by using non-traditional, public space for performance.

## Recommendations for Actors for this Dramaturgy Casebook

*I provide in this electronic casebook a distillation of my dramaturgical research I find most useful to the production. On the first day of rehearsal I will give a presentation with plenty of pictures and the designer will show you sketches as well. It's a lot of words but I do not expect anyone to read ALL of this. Here are some suggestions for using dramaturgy in this process:*

- First, skim through to see if anything interests you. All the sources are available upon request. If I mention something briefly and you want to know more, please email me. For example, does the reference to Parks as more like Artaud than Brecht make you want to read even a small amount of Artaud?
- Read about Parks then pick another of her plays (or more) to read.
- Breeze through the glossary.
- I highly recommend reading Parks' Short Elements of Style essay included here.
- Look at the cultural context section— Is there something you see in the script I missed? (Of course there is!)
- In the Critical History, I give summaries heavy on quotes to give a taste of each article.
- Sign systems and economies are VERY important to each character, so I recommend you at least skim. If Semiotics or economics is a scary concept, I can happily send a brief article to help you out (Wikipedia might also offer the same basic info!)
- Look at the bead diagram that tracks the various signs/symbols/icons in the play. If you want to make your own bead diagram for your character, it's easy and I can send you the short article about those.
- Look at the counter-text description. I will share will you all for your contributions in rehearsal.

Basically, take a quick look through the Casebook. Read what you find useful, skip what you don't. Ask for more of something if it's interesting or let me know if you are curious about something that is not included.

## VENUE

*The venue for this production will be the Steinfeld Warehouse, at 101 W. 6<sup>th</sup> St. in downtown Tucson.*

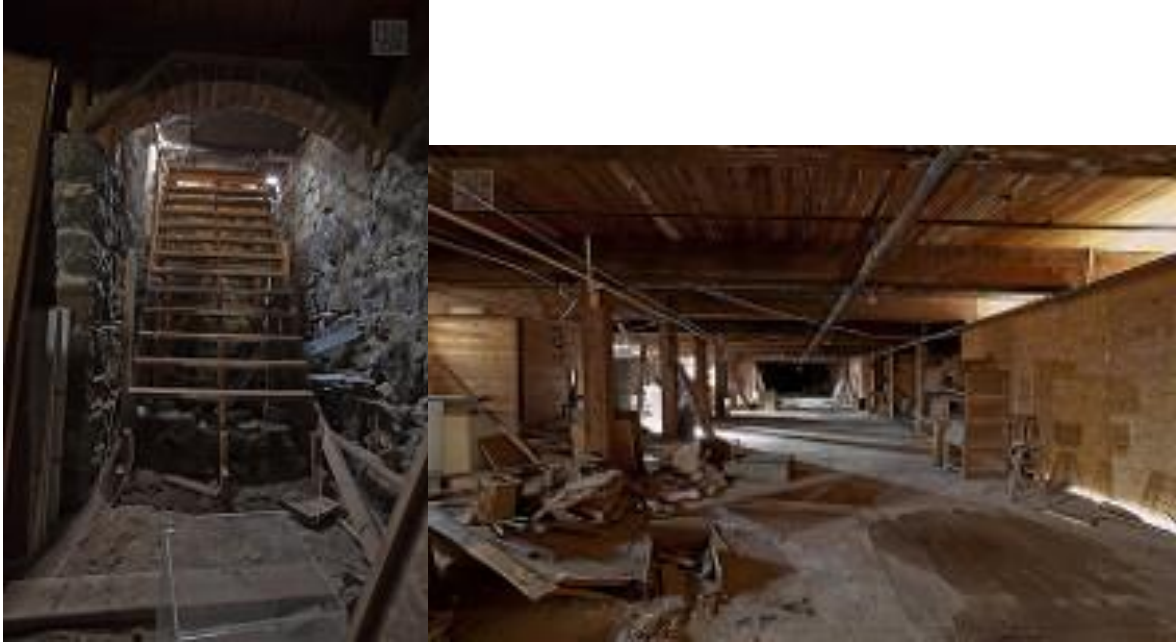
Hosting a variety of arts events, from exhibitions to performances, this venue is managed by the Warehouse Arts Management Organization (WAMO), a non-profit whose mission stated on their website is “to preserve, protect, promote, and program the Tucson Historic Warehouse Arts District” by providing space and developing the work of Tucson artists. Built in 1907, the Steinfeld Warehouse has recently been restored to a site for art after being a source of conflict with the city government.

Apart from its history, its architecture offers a variety of spaces large enough to simultaneously host the two performances and allow the audience to move freely. Parks does not specify a setting for *FA* and *ITB* is set in “Place: Here. Time: Now,” but both plays have an Author’s Note: “The setting should be spare, to reflect the poverty of the world of the play” (3; 115). One space could be more proscenium style seating than the other for contrast or both could be completely non-traditional in configuration. Staging the production in a warehouse relate literally to the play’s “spare” setting. Conceptually, the venue supports the play by providing an industrial atmosphere and sense of liminality on the periphery of downtown Tucson. Additionally, the process of travelling to the venue would impact the overall audience experience significantly.

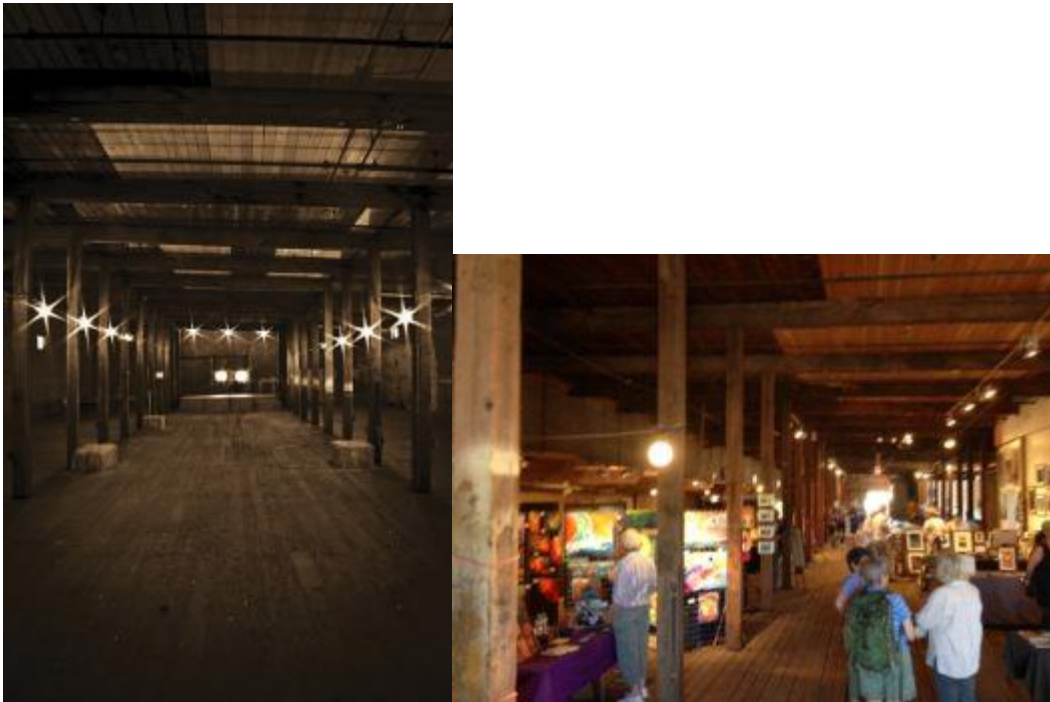
Architecturally and geographically, the Steinfeld Warehouse is perfect and places the production in a community space recently recovered by artists from the city. A tour is necessary for the creative team in order to maximize the space for staging, audience movement, and scenic design.

*Photos of the Steinfeld Warehouse before its renovation:*





*Photos after renovation, showing that is a more hospitable environment, but still has its warehouse architectural charm*



## LETTER TO ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Dear David Ivers,

I am proposing a production of Suzan-Lori Parks' *Red Letter Plays*, which includes two "riffs" on *The Scarlet Letter: In the Blood* and *Fucking A*. Because we were considering trying to develop a relationship between ATC and Parks, this production is an excellent opportunity to initiate that while promoting her work and contributions to the American theater scene. Personally, these are my favorite plays of hers because she utilizes everything I love about her theatricality and use of language, especially her Rep & Rev in form and content. Both plays depict a woman named Hester who is unable to read and labelled with an "A." In *In the Blood*, Hester is a poor mother of five children each from a different father. Smart but illiterate, Hester practices writing in the dirt but never moves beyond the letter "A." In *Fucking A*, Hester is an abortionist with the "A" branded on her chest to mark her occupation. She is also illiterate and is trying to pay the government to release her son from prison but always comes up short.

Doing these two plays side by side allows for the opportunity to explore theatrical adaptation as a response to contemporary social issues. Among the most adapted classic novels, Hawthorne's story exists as a cultural touchstone many would be familiar with enough to recognize Parks' adaptations. The Signature Theater did both productions in repertory in 2017, but I am proposing we produce these as one production of *The Red Letter Plays*. If we use the enormous Steinfeld Warehouse in downtown Tucson, we would have many options for staging the plays simultaneously but in separate enough spaces. If we ran both performances twice in a row, the audience could see one then the other or move between during the performance. The production would be an example of our mission to bring theatre to new audiences by producing in non-traditional, public spaces. This concept may require approval and would be even better if Parks were involved. The plays already speak to each other but their themes have become frighteningly more relevant with political and social issues in the age of Trump. Without articulating an opinion as a company, the production would invite opportunities to engage community organizations and education initiatives perhaps not with high schools but certainly the University.

As an ATC staff member, I am proposing this concept with the hope of serving as dramaturg for the production. I would work collaboratively with the director and designers in creating the final concept and then in rehearsals serve as a more traditional production dramaturg. While a dramaturg-driven production concept is less common, perhaps the production as a special event outside the regular season, a possibility we discussed earlier this season, would allow for more room for experimentation in the play itself and the structure of the creative team. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and would love to schedule a time to discuss this with you in the coming weeks as we plan the next season.

Best,

Anna Jennings

## LETTER TO DIRECTOR

Dear Jo Bonney,

Your agent suggested I write you directly to gauge your interest in directing a production of Suzan-Lori Park's *The Red Letter Plays* as a special event in Arizona Theatre Company's 2019-2020 season. As you know well, the two plays adaptations of Hawthorne's classic novel *The Scarlet Letter* are excellent intertexts and we imagine staging both offsite in the Steinfeld Warehouse in downtown Tucson. I would serve as the dramaturg for the production based on this concept the Artistic Director and I have been discussing. Essential to the concept is the simultaneous performances of the two plays, running twice each so that the audience can go to one then the other.

I understand it is unusual for a dramaturg to create a concept first and then pitch to a director, but we are embarking on this production as a rather ambitious audience development strategy based on my MFA research. I believe this concept would be a powerful tool in bringing in new audiences, exposing Parks' lesser known works, and creating theatre that speaks to the social issues of our time. After months of conversation with the Artistic Director, she has approved the proposed production with this concept and we are now seeking a director expert in Parks to execute. We are seeking a director who would be interested in a highly collaborative, non-traditional creative team structure. Your work at the Signature Theater last year on *Fucking A* makes you an ideal director for the project. Of course, there would still be much room for your strong directorial instincts and expression in solidifying the concept and staging. While we have some designers in mind, we would seriously consider your suggestions if you were to accept. We are committed to a collaborative process and are lucky to have a luxurious design, rehearsal schedule, and a generous grant for this special project. Fortunately, we have the resources to fully execute this ambitious project.

If this sounds of interest to you, please let me know and we can schedule a time to discuss further the concept and production/budget details.

Sincerely,

Anna Jennings

**Artistic Coordinator**

**Arizona Theatre Company**



# SUZAN-LORI PARKS

## Biography

### Early Life and Career

Born in Fort Knox, KY in 1964, Parks moved to Germany as a child because her father was a career army officer and there became interested in language. She attended Mt. Holyoke College in 1985. She wrote her first play, *Sinner's Place*, which was not produced due to its vulgar language. Yet, James Baldwin, a professor of hers, recognized her brilliance and predicted her success: "this beautiful creature ... may become one of the most valuable artists of our time" (qtd. Kolin 9). After graduating in 1985, she studied acting at the Drama Studio in London where she once played Puck. In "Puck's Magic Mojo: The Achievements of Suzan-Lori Parks," Philip C. Kolin compares her writing technique to Shakespeare's magical trickster: "[she] uses spells, fantastical shapes, and frightful pageants to express and probe the collective unconsciousness of her characters, and of her audiences as well" (7).

### Awards

As Baldwin predicted and her early role as Puck reflects, her talent was quickly recognized. Her first play after college, *Betting on the Dust Commander*, was produced in 1985 in a bar in NYC. In 1989, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* earned her an Obie, followed by another Obie in 1995 for *Venus*. The following year, she premiered *The America Play*, perhaps her best-known work. She became a Guggenheim Fellow in 2000, then a MacArthur Genius in 2001. *In the Blood* was a Pulitzer finalist in 1999; she was the first black woman to win a Pulitzer in 2002 for *Topdog/Underdog*. In 2008/2009 season, Signature Theater dedicated their season to celebrating her work. Parks is also an actor, novelist, screenwriter, educator, public speaker, brown belt in karate, running, guitar, jazz musician, composer (in many of her plays), and theatre scholar/theorist.

### Rewriting American History

Parks often writes about American History, especially the Civil War as in *Father Comes Home From the Ward*. Her "imagination is very excited by Lincoln" after buying a kids' picture book about him. Lincoln features prominently in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* (Kolin 14). However, she explains: "the plays have less to do with Lincoln and more to do with the memory of Lincoln.... It's the past in the present moment. It's not just looking back. It's the past as it explodes into the present" (qtd. 13). Using the past to comment on the present, her plays "interrogate black cultural memory and contemporary black identity," resulting in what Kolin calls a "[liberation of] African Americans from a compulsory sense of selflessness" (8). Her characters often seem more like figures. She describes her voice: "Where is the play-wright. Everywhere and nowhere" and her characters, that often seem more like figures, "The characters speak for me but also beyond me. They know much more than I do. They speak from a deep well of knowledge — the intelligence of the Jungian collective consciousness. The voices of the characters are much larger than the voice of the playwright" (qtd. 18).

## Style and Form

Beyond subject matter and thematic commonalities, Parks' style demonstrates most clearly her innovative playwrighting capability. With many recognizable influences, including Brecht, Beckett, Faulkner, Pirandello, Chekov, Genet, Shakespeare, Adrienne Kennedy, Gertrude Stein, and Ntozake Shange, Parks' influence on the American theatre is well-noted and undeniable. August Wilson described Parks as "an original whose fierce intelligence and fearless approach to craft subvert[s] theatrical conventions" (qtd. Kolin 10). Challenging conventional theatrical form and dramatic structure, her plays "defy and dismantle the linear, the static, the predictable" (7). Parks' style is distinct, with heavy use of music, "spells" of silence written into the script, and poetic language based in the black vernacular and jazz. Also challenging the playwriting process, she embarked on her project *365 Days/365 Plays* writing a play a year which demonstrates her prolific generation of work, extending beyond playwriting.

## Works (selected)

The Sinner's Place (1984)

Betting on the Dust Commander (1987)

Imperceptible Mutabilities of a Third Kingdom (1989)

The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World (1989)

The America Play (1991)

Venus (1995)

Topdog/Underdog (1999)

365 Days/365 Plays (2006-2007)

Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2 & 3) (2009)

And many other teleplay, screenplays, radio plays, essays, books, songs, including: *Getting Mother's Body* (novel, 2003), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (teleplay 2005), *The Great Debaters* (screenplay with Robert Eisle 2007)

## GLOSSARY

### *In the Blood*

**Slut** (9) – insult for a woman who has many sexual partners, first written use by Chaucer in 14<sup>th</sup> century

**Bastard** – unpleasant person, but here used for its archaic definition meaning the child of unwed parents

**Pain in yr gut** (22) – pain in the stomach is a symptom of many medical disorders (including irritable bowel syndrome, endometriosis, ulcers, pancreatitis, ovarian cysts) and Hester's medical condition is ambiguous.

**Mother Hubbard** (23) – English nursery rhyme first published by Sarah Catherine Martin in 1805, likely based on orally passed down child's stories. In light of the 1805 poem, there are some similarities between Hester and Mother Hubbard:

Old Mother Hubbard  
Went to the cupboard,  
To give the poor dog a bone;  
But when she came there  
The cupboard was bare,  
And so the poor dog had none.

She went to the baker's  
To buy him some bread;  
When she came back  
The dog was dead!

She went to the undertaker's  
To buy him a coffin;  
When she came back  
The dog was laughing.

She took a clean dish  
to get him some tripe;  
When she came back  
He was smoking his pipe.

She went to the fishmonger's  
to buy him some fish;  
When she came back  
He was licking the dish.

She went to the alehouse  
To get him some beer;  
When she came back  
The dog sat in a chair.

She went to the tavern  
For white wine and red;  
When she came back  
The dog stood on his head.

She went to the fruiterer's  
To buy him some fruit;  
When she came back  
He was playing the flute.

She went to the tailor's  
To buy him a coat;  
When she came back  
He was riding a goat.

She went to the hatter's  
To buy him a hat;  
When she came back  
He was feeding her cat.

She went to the barber's  
To buy him a wig  
When she came back  
He was dancing a jig.

She went to the cobbler's  
To buy him some shoes;  
When she came back  
He was reading the news.

She went to the sempstress  
To buy him some linen;  
When she came back  
The dog was spinning.

She went to the hosier's  
To buy him some hose;  
When she came back  
He was dressed in his clothes.

The Dame made a curtsy,  
The dog made a bow;  
The Dame said, Your servant;  
The dog said, Bow-wow.

This wonderful dog  
Was Dame Hubbard's delight,  
He could read, he could dance,  
He could sing, he could write;

She gave him rich dainties  
Whenever he fed,  
And erected this monument  
When he was dead.

**Old woman and the shoe** (23) – An English nurse rhyme with debated origins, possibly as far back as the Middle Ages. Earliest extant publication of the poem is dated

1794. Several versions exist, some, with a more loving ending. Most common version:

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.  
She had so many children, she didn't know what to do;  
She gave them some broth without any bread;  
Then whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.

**Stock Market** (25) – Also referred to as the Stock Exchange. Mostly simply defined as a market where investors buy and sell shares or stocks in publicly traded companies. In the US, the stock market was originally a physical market, but now most trading is virtual and extends beyond individual nations globally as well.

**Bond Market** (25) – similar to the stock exchange, but investors buy and sell debt mostly in the form of bonds.

**Wall Street** (25) – a street in south Manhattan where the New York Stock Exchange is located.

**Grain Futures** (25) – “Futures” is short for “futures contract” which is buying a product (like grain) before based on a speculated or predicted price of that product in the future. Speculating prices with futures can maximize profits and but also increases risk. In 1922, the Grain Futures Act Law was passed to reduce wild fluctuations in grain price predictions.

**Bulls and Bears** (25) – Referring to bull market and bear market. In a bull market, prices are rising; in a bear market, prices are falling.

**Pork Bellies** (25) – A cut of pork from the belly of the pig that are traded as futures from the 60s-80s. Today, meat can be frozen which eliminated the pork belly future market and the term is now used to refer generally to the futures markets.

**DOW** (25) – short for Dow Jones, an index represented by a percentage that indicates the rise/fall of the NY stock exchange, based on the average of certain stocks.

**Prize fighter** (25) – a boxer who competes for prize money

**Wide World of Sports** (28) – A sports TV program that began on ABC in the early 1960s as television gained popularity.

**Hands balled up** (29) – sometimes a symptom of fibromyalgia, a painful musculoskeletal disorder

**Larks** (33) – a small songbird, many different types of larks exist

**L.M.P** (40) – medical abbreviation for Last Menstrual Period

**Queen of Sheba** (41) – First appearing in the Hebrew Bible, she travels to Jerusalem to visit King Solomon and bring him gifts. She is a figure in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religion as well as a secular storytelling in many cultures. Historians continue to debate the origins of the figure and whether she actually lived.

**SPAY** (41) – term used to describe the sterilization of female animals.

**Soapbox** (46) – literally, a box that contained soap used as a stand for someone speaking in public. Figuratively, soapbox is used to describe an opportunity to speak publicly.

**Hysterectomy** (56) – medical term used for the removal of the uterus in humans

**Gibraltar** (61) – A strategic military location and current British territory on the southern tip of Spain, captured in 1704

**Tripe X rated** (71) – X rating on a film means only for adult viewers, some pornography uses double or triple X unofficially to give the impression of more explicit content

**Capitalism** (72) – Capitalism, an economic and political system with privately run trade and industry

**Tax shelter** (73) – a financial arrangement made solely to avoid paying taxes

**IRS** (73) – Internal Revenue Service, the US's federal agency that collects tax, among other state financial functions

**Pilgrims** (74) – A person travelling for religious reasons, here specifically referring to the Puritans who left England to colonize and settle in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620.

**Neerdowell** (75) – a worthless, lazy, person or someone who never-does-well

**E-clipse** – when a celestial body passes in front of another. On earth a lunar eclipse occurs when the earth passes between the Sun and the Moon; a Solar eclipse occurs when the moon passes between the sun and the earth, casting a shadow on the surface of the Earth. Humans have attached many mythical, religious, or superstitious meanings to eclipses—sometimes a good sign but often a bad omen.

**Narcotics** (88) – any illegal, nonprescribed drug sold for its psychoactive or physiological effects. Ex. Cocaine, heroin, marijuana, etc.

## *Fucking A*

**Necrophilia** (143) – Sexual intercourse with or attraction to dead bodies

**Sodomy** (143) – anal sex

**Bestiality** (143) – sex with animals

**Pedophilia** (143) – sexual attraction towards children

**Armed robbery** (143) – taking someone else's property when carrying a weapon

**Petty theft** (143) – theft of something small

**Embezzlement** (143) – when someone with access to funds uses those funds without permission of the owner(s)

**Cannibalism** (143) – eating flesh of one's own species

**Red Sea** (144) – The sea between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In the Book of Exodus, Moses parts the sea for the Israelites to cross

**Civil servant** (151) – government worker often administrative

**Gilded cage** (153) – Scholar Ghasemi explains this expression “recalls ‘Gilded Age,’” which as described in Encyclopedia Britannica Online (2015) refers to ‘a period of gross materialism and blatant political corruption in US history’ that spanned the last three decades of the 19th century [...] The term was coined by writers Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner (1873) in *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, satirizing what they believed to be an era of serious social ills and corruption covered by a thin glittering layer of gold” (Ghasemi 839). Parks is using this as a R&R on the term to comment on contemporary wage gap, like the 1%

**Racketeering** (160) – any fraudulent business dealings

**Moneylaundering** (160) – concealing money obtained illegally, for example a front business that covers profits from drug dealing

**Cyber fraud** (160) – using the internet to commit fraud

**Dialing for dollars** (160) – cold calling people to sell something fraudulent

**Public conveyance** (160) – any land, air, or water vehicle for mass transportation

**LendingSpot** (160) – R&R? No definition found.

**Boondoggle** (160) – a worthless or wasteful activity that seems valuable

**Grand larceny** (161) – theft of valuable property

**Hotwiring** (161) – starting an engine without a key by connecting wires

**High treason** (161) – betraying the government, often a national government

**Mutiny at sea** (161) – mutiny is a rebellion against a leader, typically military, here a rebellion at seas

**Murder in the first/second degree** (161) – 1<sup>st</sup> degree murder is premediated, willful killing of a person, 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder is intentional killing but not premediated

**Jumping the turnstile** (161) – fare evasion or using public transport without paying the fare, “turnstile” seems to be a Rep & Rev

**Murder in the nth degree** (161) – not a legal term, but the name of a Salt Lake City band that started in 1999

**Aiding and abetting** (161) – when someone aids someone else in a crime

**Persona non grata** (161) – an unacceptable or unwelcome person

**Defacing animates and inmates** (161) – R&R, disfiguring something alive and prisoners, seems to be saying prisoners are not considered living beings

**Gimmick nor schtick** (161) – synonyms, a trick or performance or skill a person has that gains attention

**Mugging** (161) – robbing someone in public or making exaggerated faces

**Harboring the convicted** (161) – often “harboring a fugitive” which is knowingly hiding someone wanted for a crime, here probably means hiding someone convicted of a crime R&R

**Fencing the stolen** (161) – R&R on the many meanings of fencing: the sport of fighting with swords, or arguing without directly mentioning something specific, fencing surrounding a house, or enclosing something, or to deal in stolen goods (informal and rarely used)

**Giving false testimony** (161) – giving a statement in a legal setting that the person knows to be untrue



**Devil Incarnate** (218) – a Devil Incarnate is a phrase that can be used to describe something or someone that is the physical manifestation of Satan, as opposed to Jesus who would be the incarnate of God as a physical manifestation of the concept of God

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

### *In the Blood*

**Premiere – The Joseph Papp Public Theater**/New York Shakespeare Festival (1999) dir. David Esbjornson

- Narelle Sissons (set design), Jane Cox (Lighting design), Don DiNicola (sound), Elizabeth Hope Clancy (costume), John Dias (dramaturg), Kristen Harris (SM)

**Guthrie Theater** – Minneapolis MN (2000) dir. Timothy Douglas

**Next Theatre** – Evanston, IL (2003) dir. Lisa Porter

**Edison Theater** – Los Angeles, CA (2003) dir. Laura Marchant

### *Fucking A*

**Premiere – DiverseWorks Art Space/Infernal Bridegroom**, Houston, TX (2000) – dir. Suzan-Lori Parks

**Joseph Papp Public Theatre** (2003) – dir. George C. Wolfe

### *The Red Letter Plays*

**Signature Theatre** (2017) - *In the Blood*, dir. Sarah Benson; *Fucking A*, dir. Jo Bonney

- First time both plays were produced together.
- Part of “Signature Residency One” in 2017 when Parks was the year-long resident playwright

## CRITICAL HISTORY

*Ranging in topics from her body of work as a whole to her influence on contemporary theater to close reading of her plays, scholarship on Suzan-Lori Parks abounds, including three full books. While fewer scholars focus specifically on The Red Letter Plays (reflective of the fewer number of productions), In The Blood has received slightly more critical attention as a Pulitzer nominee. In this section, I summarize relevant criticism examining concepts in these and her other plays but first start with Parks' own scholarship. All Articles available electronically, by request.*

### "Elements of Style" by Suzan-Lori Parks

*"Scholarship is important but for me — reading it doesn't help me write. Reading scholarship about the works of 'Suzan-Lori Parks' would take me outside the work. And I need to keep myself inside it, I need to be deep up in it, not outside intelligently observing, not at arm's length. Staying deep up in it: that's the best way for me to write my next thing" -Suzan-Lori Parks (qtd. NAME 190).*

Though she does not read scholarship on her work, Parks wrote her essay, "Elements of Style" (1994), as "a way in" to her plays as well as "to examine what seems to me a real crisis in American dramatic literature" (494). In her playwriting, Parks seeks to "explore form, ask questions, make a good show, tell a good story, ask more questions, take nothing for granted" (495). Because this essay is essential to understanding Parks' style, dramaturgy, and influence on postdramatic theatre, I am including in this casebook a summary of most of her "ideas, feelings, thoughts, takes on the world, riffs, ways of approaching the word, the page, the event, the subject, the stage, that keep me awake" and her challenges to the "new generation of theatre artists" (495).

She begins by encouraging playwrights to consider "Why does this thing I'm writing have to be a play?" and ends with opening night fashion advice: "Don't be shy about looking gorgeous. I suggest black" (499). Between those two nuggets, she describes the most distinctive stylistic traits of her writing. Without degrading conventional dramatic structures, she explains **form and content** are "interdependent": "The container dictates what sort of substance will fill it and, at the same time, the substance is dictating the size and shape of the container" (495). She considers **time** in different shapes beyond linear, **etymology** as the "thrilling history" words, **history** as "time that won't quit," and "**language is a physical act**," involving "yr whole bod" (497-499). She advises not calling character characters, telling not asking playwrights what you think their play means, dancing while writing, omitting **stage directions** like the Greeks and Shakespeare, and interrogating the "our own intolerance" as an arts community instead of blaming "easy targets" like politicians. Stylistic elements in these plays include the "**(rest)**," denoting "a pause, a breather" or transition, and the "**spell**" which is an "elongated and heightened (rest)," marking a moment of "great (unspoken) emotion" for directors and actors to fill as they like. Most importantly, she describes a concept from Jazz she adopts in playwriting: "Repetition and Revision," or "**Rep & Rev.**" Whether in dialogue or structure, repeating a phrase/image (revising with each repetition) creates rhythm and "forward progression"

(496). As a “literal incorporation of the past,” she explains Rep & Rev is essential to retelling stories and the “theatrical experience.”

## Books

Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook – Kevin J. Wetmore and Alycia Smith Howard (2007)

A publication in the Routledge’ series of Casebooks on contemporary dramatists, Wetmore and Howard provide a collection of essays on Park’s language, representation, and dramaturgy for several of her plays and her work as a whole.

Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works – Ed. Philip C. Kolin (2010)

Editor Phillip C. Kolin includes in this critical anthology on Parks two interviews, a production history, and essays by various scholars examining her plays, dramaturgy, influences, contributions, and legacy. In the introduction, Kolin refers to her “re-inscribing and contemporizing [of] Hawthorne” in *The Red Letter Plays*, specifically pointing to the “racialized spectacles” in *In The Blood* (11). Classifying her as a postmodern playwright, Kolin describes her dramaturgy as “recursively self-reflexive, always theatricalizing, unabashedly reminding audiences they are watching a play or a play/show-within-a-play” (13). He extends his description beyond the commonly noted Brechtian elements in her work: “Parks creates metatheatre, a theatre in search of itself, but one that invites the disruptions out of which it springs” (13). This is a wealth of criticism on Parks and many articles would be useful, such as Jon Dietrick’s article summarized below.

Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks - Jennifer Larson and Linda Wagner-Martin (2012)

The most recent scholarly book on Parks, Larson and Wagner-Martin continue to examine Parks’ plays and her contributions to the American Theatre. Chapter 4, titled “What ‘Able’ and ‘Angel’ Mean to Welfare Mother,” focuses specifically on *In The Blood* and the semiotics of the letter A.

## Journal Articles/Book Chapters

“Parks’s *In the Blood*” – Phillip C. Kolin (2006)

In this first scholarly article on the play, Kolin explains its title “recalls Adrienne Kennedy’s plays about young black heroines immersed in sacrificial blood-letting” (246). He focuses on the multiple meanings of blood in the play which “define Hester’s character, conflict, and tragedy” (246). Kolin argues that with the ending of the play, when Hester writes an ‘A’ with bloody hands after killing Jabber, Parks “evokes The Blessed Virgin Mary cast as a welfare mother pushed beyond the limits of pain” (248). The article is not terribly illuminating, but does point to important moments with blood.

### “Staging a New Literary History: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus, In the Blood* and *Fucking A*” – Carol Schafer (2008)

Schafer begins by citing Parks, who “views the theater as a place where history and literary history can be revisited and rewritten” (182). This article examines how Parks places Black women in the literary canon mostly populated by white male characters. Schafer compares *In the Blood* to classical Greek tragedy in its “thematic question of free will in opposition to fate” and its structure which begins “with a *parados* and ends with an *exodus*” (188). She connects the structure of *Fucking A* to Epic Theater and Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* in its episodic structure of scenes and alienation techniques like TALK.

### “‘A Full Refund Aint Enough’: Money in Suzan-Lori Parks's Red Letter Plays” – Jon Dietrick (2010)

Included in Kolin’s anthology of essays on Park, this article examines the economies in the worlds of each of *The Red Letter Plays*. He describes a stylistic “move toward realism” for Parks in these plays in both setting and character, but focuses mostly on the semiotic functions of money (88). Referring to existing scholarship, Dietrick explains critics often “read money as a symbol of a troubling discrepancy between the symbolic and the real” and demonstrates how the “need for money drives the plots of both plays” (89). His criticism moves beyond economics and enters semiotics of language and the body to demonstrate that the world of each play has several sign systems operating simultaneously (97).

### “‘A’ Is for Abject: The Red Letter Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks” – Cheryl Black (2012)

Black focuses primarily on the subjectivity of the two Hesters as examples of Parks’ characteristic “satirical and surreal rewriting/revisioning of history as well as literary phrases and texts” (31). Black describes these plays a “more overtly literary, as opposed to historical, ‘rep and rev’” (32). Referring to existing scholarship on representation of race, class, and gender as well as “the aesthetic and political implications of these representations,” she argues that Parks’ Hesters are not subjects, but “abject” characters. To define this term, she cites Judith Butler’s description of abject beings as “those who are not yet ‘subject’” (qtd. 33). After analyzing moments of abjection in both plays, comparing them to *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Woyzeck*, and demonstrating that Parks’ dramaturgy is more Artaudian than Brechtian, Black concludes: “The abjection of the female characters Parks portrays in these two plays is unmistakably tied to social and cultural systems [...] Although these protagonists are not passive, they are not able to effect change in their environment” (51).

### “Reorienting *Scarlet Letters*: Suzan-Lori Parks’ and Marina Carr’s Hester Plays” -- Siobhán O’Gorman (2015)

O’Gorman analyzes the adaptation dramaturgies at work in *The Red Letter Plays* and Marina Carr’s *By The Bog of Cats*. Citing existing scholarship on adaptation studies, this article points to the most pertinent adaptation theories for these plays. She argues that Parks’ adaptation of Hawthorne “undermines” the literary canon, rather than reinforcing it, by “destabilizing dominant ideologies and emphasizing a

productive moral ambiguity” (41). In her analysis of Parks’ adaptation strategies, she also draws comparisons to “the striking dualities” of Parks’ Hester to Euripides’ Medea, arguing the play “[reorients] the stigmatized, fallen woman scenario towards an interrogation of current issues concerning the interconnections of race, gender, judgement and justice” (57). O’Gorman’s argument that Parks’ “exposure” and “explosion” of sign systems “subvert the dominant cultural suppression of perspectives that might threaten the status quo” is useful in understanding the semiotics of the plays and its contemporary relevance (58).

### “Wanted: Debt or Alive in Suzan-Lori Parks’s FA” – Mehdi Ghasemi (2016)

Ghasemi uses a postmodern lens to look at the intertextuality of *Fucking A* not only with Hawthorne, but other literature and her other plays, too. Another article that looks at the signification of ‘A’ Ghasemi lists some of the multiple possible meanings: “Abjection, Abortion, Absolutism, Adultery, Agony, Alien/nation, Alterity, Ambivalence, Ambition, Anomie, Antebellum, Annals of history, Atonement, Atrocity, Authenticity, Authoritarianism, and even America.” (831). This article proves useful in understanding the adaptation techniques Parks uses to bring Hawthorne’s 19<sup>th</sup> century novel to contemporary relevance.

## SUGGESTED CUTS

*Parks provides possible cuts on pages...*

### *In The Blood*

- 22 – Hester listens to Reverend D’s tape as she practices her letters
- 26 – In Amiga Gringa’s monologue about the stock market, internal cut with more details
- 73 – Reverend D’s monologue about taxes, God, the poor, etc.
- 99 – A section of Hester talking to herself about what she will say the money from Reverend D is for.

### *Fucking A*

- 160 – Butcher lists his daughter’s crimes.

*I suggest no cuts. The cuts would not alter the meaning of the plays but would lose some of Parks’ Rep & Rev in language (especially on page 160). In rehearsal we should keep these in mind though if it is necessary to balance running times to keep ITB similar in length to FA—but we will not cut the Butcher’s monologue!*

## CULTURAL CONTEXT

“Old myths imagined in new ways continue to live [and] we can also create new mythologies” – Jill Dolan (qtd. O’Gorman 58)

### Adapting Themes to Current Issues

O’Gorman provides a definition of adaptation before considering Parks’ *RLP* in her article: An adaptation “involves transposing a source or stimulus into a different language, medium, or culture” (43). Parks moves the themes of sin and punishment in *The Scarlet Letter* into conversation with contemporary sociopolitical issues like women’s reproductive rights, poverty, wealth disparity, the private prison system, police brutality. The relevance of these discussion has recently become even more immediate with the Trump administration and the resulting increase in xenophobia, racism, and threats to women’s rights. I include below links to only a few articles to the cultural context for this production: Michael Shermer’s article in *Scientific American* “Abortion Is a Problem to Be Solved, Not a Moral Issue,” Michelle Chen’s article in *The Nation* “Who Profits from Our Prison System?,” Dylan Matthews’ Vox article about Brett Kavanaugh’s threat to *Roe v. Wade*, and a very recent PRI article with the disturbing title, “Dozens of Indigenous women forcibly sterilized file a class action lawsuit against the Canadian government.”

[Abortion Is Problem To Be Solved](#)

[Who Profits From the Prison System?](#)

[Coerced Sterilization of Indigenous Women Class-Action Lawsuit](#)

[Brett Kavanaugh and Roe v. Wade](#)

### US Prison System

The news is full of stories that speak to the themes in *RLP* and scholarship is full of analysis of Parks adaptation strategies that engaged “with recently controversial issues in the United States – namely the overwhelming numbers of incarcerated black Americans (O’Gorman 53). Chen quotes Bianca Tylek, director of Corrections Accountability Project, an organization exposing the operations of the private prison system, “What we even consider a crime is highly shaped by corporate influence.... And the question there becomes, is that how we want crime to be defined, [who decides it] and then who’s targeted by that.”

### Capitalism

In *FA*, the Freedom Fund which Hester pays regularly to free her son despite increasing cost is one example of the play’s comment on incarceration and capitalism. Dietrick argues that in *RLP*, “All relationships between characters are mediated by money” (90). In *FA*, the economic system is tied to gold, echoing a 19<sup>th</sup> century economy. Today’s floating currency is not attached to a physical substance.

So, “the money system of *Fucking A* seemingly represents just the fantasy of a value that *is* what it *represents*” (96). Extending beyond economics into semiotics, he cites existing scholarship that “[reads] money as a symbol of a troubling discrepancy between the symbolic and the real” (89). This of course is a very scholarly reading that might not be clear to audiences, but the fact that both Hesters never get a leg up or have enough to make ends meet is an economic reality which contemporary audiences certainly will resonate with.

### Challenging Power Structures with Semiotics

While updating Hawthorne’s 19<sup>th</sup> century politics and morality to speak to contemporary issues of race, class, and gender, Parks continues the source text’s questioning of “larger philosophical interrelations between judgement and semiotics” (43). The slippage of sign systems is a postmodern trait aided by the “otherworldly” setting that makes the play “a prism that represents multiple different perspectives,” challenging the hegemonic, dominant sign systems and institutions (Ghasemi 843). In addition to money’s signification in the plays, the play also interrogates language sign systems. According to Ghasemi, TALK in *FA* represents Parks’ “critical message: Women need to have power to create their own discourse in order to challenge [masculine] discourse” (835).

## PROGRAM NOTE

For tonight’s performances of Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The Red Letter Plays*, you will not be told where to sit, when to get up for intermission, or even which play to watch. Each audience member will decide how to experience these two theatrical adaptations of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*—

Will you watch *In the Blood* then *Fucking A*?  
Or, *Fucking A* then *In the Blood*?  
Or, will you move in between the two?  
Or, will you watch one twice?

This production is intended to activate the audience in the theatrical experience in this non-traditional venue. In the Author’s Note preceding both plays, Parks notes: “The setting should be spare, to reflect the poverty of the world of the play.” As a site-specific production, the venue relates conceptually to both plays and offers an opportunity to see theatre outside its normal spaces. The Hester’s in both plays are outcast, occupying spaces on the outskirts of society. While *In The Blood* and *Fucking A* are separate and distinct plays, tonight they are presented for the first time as one production.

By adapting one of the most well-known novels in American literature (twice), Parks moves the 19<sup>th</sup> century themes of sin and punishment in *The Scarlet Letter* into today’s conversations and debates regarding race, class, and gender. We



want to expose the contemporary theatre audience to Parks' unique use of language, inspired by Repetition & Revision in jazz music and her undeniable influence on the contemporary American theatre. Many of her plays explore American history, revising and recontextualizing our stories to speak to our contemporary issues. As the audience you are not only free to move around the venue but also free to decide the meaning and relevance of tonight's plays to your world.

Suzan-Lori Parks encourages people to not *ask* the playwright what a play means but *tell* a playwright what you think a play means. We hope you have many thoughts after the shows and hope you will join us for a postshow discussion and tour of the Steinfeld Warehouse.

## EDUCATION/OUTREACH

*Many possible education initiatives and community partnerships would be worthwhile to consider for this production with Park's contributions to the American theatre and these play's commentaries on many sociopolitical issues.*

### Education

The subject matter of these plays would make it difficult to invite **high school** students as we normally do, but it's possible some schools might be interested and we should reach out to our usual contacts. For higher education, the **English Department** at the University of Arizona might have a faculty member specialized in 19<sup>th</sup> century American Literature we could invite to join us for a pre-/post-show discussion of Hawthorne's novel. In the **Theatre Department**, we could invite a faculty member for a discussion of Parks' contributions and influence. As a site-specific production, it may also be a good opportunity to bring on interns for this show specifically in production, stage management, or other areas.

### Community Engagement

As discussed in the venue section, the **Warehouse Arts Management Organization (WAMO)** is interested in placing art in the community and as our venue, we should certainly consider ways in which our organizations can partner to strengthen the Tucson art scene. **Planned Parenthood** is an obvious organization to reach out to with the play's discussion of reproductive rights. While we do not want to have them officially there with booths or literature or anything, we should consider offering a 2 for 1 discount code or a block of tickets to sell and donate those profits to the organization, as we've done with other productions. The local group of women artists, **Woman Kraft**, and other Tucson women's groups such as the **Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona**, the **Tucson National Organization for Women**, and UA's chapter of **The American Association of University Women (AAUW)** might also be interested. These ticket initiatives would not only offer an opportunity for our company to make donations to our community, but also encourage new audiences who may not be regular theatre goers to attend a show.

## DIAGRAMS OF TENSIONS AND STRUCTURES

### Plot Diagram

As the performances will occur simultaneously and the audience can move between the two, the plot diagram is divided into two columns to visualize the forward progression of action in each. It is currently handwritten and messy but will be typed up and enlarged for the rehearsal room. I include scene names and summaries of the most essential actions that move the plot forward or what Ball calls “dominos.” Because *FA* had more dominoes and we are optimistically planning on equal running times, I diagrammed *FA*’s plot first and then *ITB*, trying to line up scenes and numbers of pages as much as possible to understand what will be happening simultaneously. Another version of this can be done closer to tech with a stopwatch, if necessary. This diagram revealed some less obvious differences between the two plays, most surprisingly how many more events occur in *FA* than *ITB*. It also demonstrates visually Schafer’s observation that *ITB* resembles Greek tragedy in structure while *FA* is Epic in structure.

### Bead Diagram

Some various webs and maps I made revealed to me that for me the essence of the form and content in *RLP* is the signification of status in the world of each play. So, because Hawthorne “seems utterly preoccupied with the nature of signs, stigmas and stigmata” according to Black and Parks continues while interrogating and subverting that semiotic preoccupation, my bead diagram tracks the use of signs, symbols, or icons to communicate status in the play (43). Again, I diagrammed the plays side-by-side and marked scenes. Initially, I intended to use the same beads for both plays but found in reading *FA* after *ITB* that the meaning of each bead was shifting slightly—talk about arbitrary semiotics! So, I include a key with definitions for each play.

## COUNTER-TEXT

Rather than tracing carefully Parks' use of Hawthorne's characters, story, themes, and ideas, my counter text will instead dismantle Hawthorne's text physically to find connections to contemporary issues, whether in the plays or not. But first, a quick summary of the source text...

### *The Scarlet Letter* – Nathaniel Hawthorne

Summary from *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*:

“Scarlet Letter, The Novel by Hawthorne, Nathaniel , published in 1850. It is considered a masterpiece of American literature and a classic moral study.

“The novel is set in a village in Puritan New England. The main character is Hester Prynne, a young woman who has borne an illegitimate child. Hester believes herself a widow, but her husband, Roger Chillingworth, returns to New England very much alive and conceals his identity. He finds his wife forced to wear the scarlet letter A on her dress as punishment for her adultery. Chillingworth becomes obsessed with finding the identity of his wife's former lover. When he learns that the father of Hester's child is Arthur Dimmesdale, a saintly young minister who is the leader of those exhorting her to name the child's father, Chillingworth proceeds to torment the guilt-stricken young man.

“In the end Chillingworth is morally degraded by his monomaniacal pursuit of revenge; Dimmesdale is broken by his own sense of guilt, and he publicly confesses his adultery before dying in Hester's arms. Only Hester can face the future bravely, as she plans to take her daughter Pearl to Europe to begin a new life.”

### Counter Text

According to Van Allen Bradley in the Editor's Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, “The novel itself, which achieves reality through the richness of historical detail, is built around three principal scenes at a platform, or scaffold, in the Boston market-place.” Critics have noted these are more realistic than her other plays. However, the time and place are ambiguous and do lend the sense of realism Hawthorne employs in the novel. Therefore, most of the “realism” is observed through the characters and their actions, which have many correlations in the source text. Hawthorne's Hester Prynne refuses to identify the father of her baby as in Hester does in *ITB*, for example. Also, as Hester Prynne is sentenced to wearing an “A” for Adulteress” on her dress forever a spectator shouts that she should be “branded her forehead with a hot iron” (Bradley). Hester's “A” in *Fucking A* is branded on her skin but stands for Abortionist instead.

Noting some parallels between Parks and Hawthorne illuminates Parks' Rep(etition) & Rev(ision). However, I find it more interesting to discover these resonances through my own discovery rather than having them pointed out. So, I have avoided looking for scholarship that lists to many similarities and differences in Parks' Rep & Rev and instead will do a dramaturgical Rep & Rev for my counter-text by dissecting Hawthorne's novel for any resonance with today's sociopolitical issues. I will create a map-like visual of

Hawthorne's novel, tracing the themes, language, characters, and events echoing contemporary Capitalism, Feminism, and Morality. Parks has done her job in bringing Hawthorne into contemporary discussion of women's reproductive rights. *RLP* inspires me to further complicate the source text by mining it further. My Dramaturgical Rep & Rev counter-text will begin with tearing the pages out of two used copies of the same edition of *The Scarlett Letter* (so each page can be pasted and visible on a wall). Then I will start highlighting, drawing, erasing, making notes, etc. I might include a list of other adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter* but if that distracts me from falling into the counter-text I will not.

Eventually, I will share the counter text with the director, designers, and actors, inviting them to join the Rep&Rev in rehearsal. Ultimately, this visual will be displayed in the venue for the audience to view (and maybe add to as well). The intent of this counter-text is to map how the canonical American story has been riffed on, adapted, modified, and perhaps even violated, but it is not a methodical analysis of Parks' adaptation techniques. Hopefully enriching the meaning making process, this counter-text would serve as an artistic contribution of a dramaturgy object in addition to my traditional dramaturgical research that mostly simplifies but hopefully sometimes complicates things, too.

## DESIGN RESEARCH PROPOSALS

My initial recommendation is to take a tour of the Steinfeld Warehouse at your earliest convenience. Soon, the creative team will tour the venue together, but WOMA is very willing to give designers tours at their convenience.

I would like to point towards a couple quotes from the script, primarily the Authors Note: “The setting should be spare, to reflect the poverty of the world of the play” (3; 115). While we do not need and should not have a lavishly designed production, it is imperative we carefully consider every object, light, sound, and piece of clothing in these plays as they are so dependent on meaning through signs and symbols. We will need to give careful consideration to the projections of subtitles for TALK in *FA*. Parks writes in the script: “The production should present a nonaudible simultaneous English translation” (115). I suggest several thorough readings of each play. Parks gives us all we need and the rest is our to play with.

Beyond a tour of the space and analyzing the script, I suggest looking at the articles and theories in this casebook. If something is interesting to you, I will happily point you in the direction of more. If theory is not part of your process, I would suggest taking a look at Hawthorne’s source text. We certainly do not want to try to reinscribe the original meaning to these plays, but as Parks performs *Rep & Rev* on this on other classic stories, you may also find it helpful in your process. For myself, I created a counter-text that I will share with you all at the first design meeting which dissects *The Scarlet Letter* not to trace Parks’ adaptation but to continue to complicate and explode it.

If reading is not your thing, let me know and I will happily send resources with drawing or photos from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that reflect the industrial, peripheral atmosphere of the venue.

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