

**Anxiety and Personal Identity in  
Suzan-Lori Parks's  
*Topdog/Underdog***

سوزان- لوري باركس  
(المُتَسَلِّط/ المُضْطَّهَد)

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**Abstract:**

The concept of identity has been a pivotal issue in getting a comprehensive understanding of African-American culture and literature. The predominance of this subject is mainly due to the segregation and oppression practiced against the black race in the course of history. The absence of a clearly designated frame of identity manifests itself in the idea of rootlessness and unbelonging, an idea that gives an authentic testimony to the anxiety of identity and its crisis. It is the identity that makes people different from each other. On the other hand, identity means one's belonging to a social group.

The present study concentrates on anxiety and personal identity in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*. It is divided into five sections and a conclusion. Section one is an introduction to the concept of identity. Section two deals with the black identity in relation to history and tradition. Section three explore the significance of Suzan-Lori Parks and her achievements. Section four discusses the theater of Suzan-Lori Parks and the contemporary poetics of the black identity. Section five analyzes Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* which is a typical study of the anxiety personal identity of two black brothers, Lincoln and Booth, who are suffer from identity confusion. The Conclusion sums up the main findings.

**المخلص:**

لقد كان مفهوم الهوية قضية محورية في التوصل الى فهم شامل للثقافة والادب الأمريكي من أصول افريقية. ان هيمنة هذا الموضوع يعود بصورة رئيسة الى التمييز والاضطهاد الذي مورس ضد العرق الأسود في مسار التاريخ. ان غياب الإطار المعين بشكل واضح للهوية يبين نفسه في فكرة اللاجنور وعدم الانتماء وهي فكرة تعطي شهادة معتمدة لقلق الهوية وأزمتها. انها الهوية التي تجعل الناس مختلفين عن بعضهم بعضا. من جانب اخر فان الهوية تعني انتماء الفرد الى فرقة اجتماعية. تنصب الدراسة الحالية على القلق والهوية الشخصية في مسرحية سوزان لور- باركس (المُتَسَلِّط/ المُضْطَّهَد). تُقسّم الدراسة الى خمسة أجزاء وخاتمة. يمثل الجزء الأول مقدمة لمفهوم الهوية. يتطرق الجزء الثاني الى هوية السود وعلاقتها بالتاريخ والتراث.

يستكشف الجزء الثالث أهمية سوزان لوري باركس وانجازاتها الأدبية يناقش الجزء الرابع مسرح باركس والفن الادبي المعاصر للهوية السوداء. اما الجزء الخامس الذي هو محور الدراسة فيحلل مسرحية باركس (المُتَسَلِّط/ المُضْطَّهَد) التي تعتبر دراسة نمطية للقلق والهوية الشخصية لأخوين اسودين وهما لنكولن وبوث اللذين لديهما شعورا مثيرا لاضطراب الهوية. تلخص الخاتمة اهم النتائج التي توصلت اليها الدراسة.

## **1.1.Introduction**

The word 'identity' was originally taken from the Latin root *idem*, meaning "the same." The term is double faced in that it indicates similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique for all human beings. It is the identity that makes people different from each other. On the other hand, identity means one's belonging to a social group. Hence, there are types of identity: national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, a matter which refers to things people share.<sup>[1]</sup>

The concept of identity is usually associated with the studies of ethnicity, gender, and race. Before the 1950s, it was not widely circulated, and it became very popular with the emergence of the German psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson (1902-1994) who is acclaimed to be the father of the concept.<sup>[2]</sup> Erikson argues that at all the phases of man's life, man experiences an identity crisis which he defines as "a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential."<sup>[3]</sup> Elsewhere, Erikson formulates another opinion of identity crisis. He states that such a crisis or confusion encompasses "an inability to establish intimacy, a sense of time urgency, a lack of concentration on required tasks, and a rejection of family or community standards."<sup>[4]</sup> Psychologically viewed, identity refers to personal and group identifications. It is concerned with self-definition, and the self is conceptualized as a fairly stable, internal entity that is rarely modified to fit the context. In fact, "the self is a core sense of who one is. That is, you are who you are; shifting is indicative of a problematic, deficient or disengaged identity."<sup>[5]</sup> In the contemporary sense of the word, identity has become a key concept in different fields, especially with the rise of globalization and its subsequent effects on life.

Suman Gupta mentions that the term 'identity' is broadly used in academic, media, and other debates with a gamut of implications which have never been dealt with before. There are certain groupings that show a concern over the issue of identity.<sup>[6]</sup> More important is that "talking about identity in this contemporary fashion implies considering the relations between such groups: in terms of minorities and majorities, power relations, rights and prerogatives, tensions and conflicts."<sup>[7]</sup> This statement betrays the fact that identity has a special status in contemporary affairs and literature is a broad area that tackles this essential yet problematic issue of identity.

## **1.2. The Black Identity in Relation to History and Tradition**

The concept of identity has been a pivotal issue in getting a comprehensive understanding of African-American culture and literature. The predominance of this subject is mainly due to the segregation and oppression practiced against the black race in the course of history. The absence of a clearly designated frame of identity manifests itself in the idea of rootlessness and unbelonging, an idea that gives an authentic testimony to identity crisis. Thereupon, African-American dramatists, female and male, dedicate their achievements to promote a sense of belonging and deep-rootedness of the black identity. Such feeling of belonging may be understood "as a correlative activity to the constructing of one's racial identity attitudes"<sup>[8]</sup> of what has been "labeled a process of psychological nigrescence."<sup>[9]</sup> Identity is shaped at the "unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture."<sup>[10]</sup> Identity and history are inseparable, because one's history leaves its marks on the present. Walter Benn Michaels observes that "Without the idea of a history that is remembered or forgotten (not merely learned or unlearned), the events of the past can have only a limited relevance to the present."<sup>[11]</sup> The individuals of a specific society often show their identity through parading over their ancestral heritage and traditions. In much the same way, African-Americans have been struggling to achieve self-definition and to defend their legal pursuit after a specific black identity. The placement of history and tradition to the concept of identity is a powerful mechanism to assimilate and accept other cultures because "history and tradition have another role to play: the interpellation of subjects

and the inducing of a sense of identity and belonging."<sup>[12]</sup> This quote reveals much about the significance of history in the construction and reconstruction of one's identity.

African-Americans always deem it necessary to look on their glorious past to understand the present in that their prospective identity is profoundly rooted in tradition and history. The sense of belonging creates the impression of selfhood and national identity in the eyes of African-Americans who pride over their tradition and heritage, because "cultural heritage is the key for those using the label African -American. [Black people] are aware of their cultural past and pragmatic about their present situation."<sup>[13]</sup> Closely related to the past memory is the violence done to African -Americans across different historical epochs. The blacks are not in a position to forget what happened to their identity through racial exclusion, oppression, segregation, and other forms of effacing their black identity.

### **1.3. Suzan-Lori Parks and Her Achievements**

Suzan-Lori Parks, the daughter of a military officer, was born in 1964 in Fort Knox, KY. Two early efforts failed, *The Sinners' Place* (1984), *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987), but the third play she wrote, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), won an Obie Award (1989) for best new off-Broadway play. She continued writing at a feverish pace and won another Obie in 1996 for *Venus*. Her play *In the Blood* (1999) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 2000 but did not win. Later efforts became more structured in a linear fashion with multiple themes introduced in wildly poetic language. She was described as a "black Samuel Beckett."<sup>[14]</sup> Some of Parks' plays are *The Sinners Place* (1984), *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987), *Devotees in the Garden of Love* (1992), *The American Play* (1994) and other plays.

Parks' writing is imbued with posing and answering questions regarding the individual and collective identity of African-Americans and people throughout the world. . She not only tells these stories through words but with sound, using repetition that often has the ability to create a hypnotic effect.<sup>[15]</sup> Taken altogether, Parks' plays present a panoramic view of American affairs at all levels. They are case studies of identity, race, gender, education, the U.S. foreign policy, to name a few things that have preoccupied Parks' thinking.

### **1.4. The Theater of Suzan-Lori Parks and the Contemporary Poetics of the Black Identity**

The plays of Suzan-Lori Parks dramatize the subtle and complex influences that form both individual and collective identity. Theater in Parks' view should aim to cause a radical change in African- American people as to make them construct their own history and identity. She believes that the African- American literary and social traditions have been distorted. According to her, "theater is an ephemeral art that exists only in a present moment; it has the ability to bring the past and possible futures to life in the present, thereby reconstructing our perception of who we were, who we are, and who we wish to be."<sup>[16]</sup>

In her essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1999), which recalls a famous essay by T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), Parks writes that the three traditions, "The Great Tradition, the Personal Tradition, and the Tradition of the Next New Thing" form the framework within which one can understand the identity of the self and that of the whole nation.<sup>[17]</sup> For Parks, the past, the present, and the future are inseparable to delve into the nature of African-American authorship. She raises the question of how these traditions are interrelated in a way as to construct one's history and identity.

### **1.5. Anxiety and Personal Identity in Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* (2002)**

In 2002, Parks won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Topdog/Underdog*. She became the first African -American woman to win the coveted award in drama since its inception in 1917.<sup>[18]</sup> Actually, she reenacts the story of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. This is the second play

by Parks, which dramatizes the horrid liquidation of Lincoln whom the African-Americans admired for freeing them from the tyrannical yore of slavery. The figure of Lincoln also recurs in *The America Play*. Seen from this perspective, the figure of Lincoln has been connected with the blacks' search for identity.

The action of *Topdog/Underdog* typifies the miserable life led by the two brothers Lincoln (the topdog) and Booth (the underdog). They always spend time talking about their concerns, grievances, and above all, their attempt for getting a sense of identity. Booth implores Lincoln not to call him by his name, "Dont be calling me Booth no more, K?" (and Lincoln wonders whether Booth has really changed his name, "You changing yr name?"<sup>[19]</sup> Changing the names refers to an identity in crisis. Booth oftentimes tries to be master of the situation in that he wishes to be the best player in the card game with his brother, Lincoln: "My new names 3-Card. 3-Card, got it? You wanted to know it so now you know it. 3-card monte by 3-Card. Call me 3-Card from here on out." (351). He mistakenly holds the idea that it is possible for him to change his identity by adopting a new name. <sup>[20]</sup> James Utz argues that Booth, in altering his name to 3-Card, appears strongly heading to impersonate Lincoln's identity. <sup>[21]</sup>

Lincoln and Booth painstakingly endeavor to overcome their problems. They offer a kaleidoscopic depiction of their everyday situations such as poverty, bad luck, and sensual pleasure: LINCOLN. My dear mother left me, my father's gone way My dear mother left me and my father's gone way I don't got no money, I don't got no place to stay. My best girl, she threw me out into the street. My favorite horse, they ground him into meat I'm feeling cold from my head down to my feet. My luck was bad but now it turned to worse. My luck was bad but now it turned to worse. Don't call me up a doctor, just call me up a hearse.

(353-354)

Both Lincoln and Booth ponder over the dilemma of not being able to hold their identities together in a society that prevents the individual from free thinking and social acceptance. Lincoln could be Abraham Lincoln if his actions create that identity for him. Lincoln and Booth need to fulfill certain role requirements that can make them true men. These requirements are concerned with social ambitions, wealth, and respect. The brothers are unable to achieve their dreams. In the earlier *Red Letter Plays*, Parks's women protagonists had also struggled with a stereotype, with society's image of the single mother on welfare. *In the Blood* (1998), females, with identities thrust on them by a patriarchal society, overturn the rules to give expression to their desires as mothers and lovers. <sup>[22]</sup> Thus, Parks's male and female characters are conscious of their identity and they are determined to challenge all racial oppressive policies which cause personal anxiety.

Booth reveals his sense of disorientation and wretchedness, basically reflecting on the world he imagines. His imagination carries him too far. He lives, with his brother Lincoln, in "A seedily furnished rooming house room" (343). He is a black man in his thirties, and he is not able to give himself an African name lest he should be racially profiled. In the first scene, he imagines himself playing cards with a number of cops, who respect authority, and he defeats them. Later, he continues the game vanquishing the imaginary cops, thereby achieving self-recognition. Booth, simply but vainly, hopes to lead a generous and magnificent life.

In scene two, Booth returns from his job as a shoplifter. He discharges himself of the things he has illicitly gained. Parks describes him at the outset of the scene: From his big coat sleeves he pulls out one new shoe then another, from another sleeve come two more shoes. He then slithers out a belt from each sleeve. He removes his coat. Underneath he wears a very nice new suit. He removes his jacket and pants revealing another new suit underneath. The suits still have the price tags on them. He takes two neckties from his pockets and two folded shirts from the back of his pants. He pulls a magazine from the front of his pants. He's clearly had a busy day of shoplifting.

(354)

Clothes in Parks' plays reflect characters' identities and their social and racial distinction. Booth's act of shoplifting certainly expresses his sense of an identity crisis. Jennifer Larson affirms that "Booth is essentially shopping (or shoplifting) for new identities, and his true identity remains mysterious. As he peels off each layer of stolen identity, we never see the true Booth, only more clothes."<sup>[23]</sup> Correspondingly, Lincoln has his brother's obsession with physical appearance and personal attractiveness as a way to express his own identity.

Booth is much annoyed by his deeply growing apprehension that he has no clothes sense in that he shows his inability to choose what articles of cloths that fit in with his being, "[t]hey say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that dont make me who I am" (356). The two brothers have a firm belief in the importance of articles of clothing, because "switching identities involves merely taking off old or putting on new clothes, as an actor puts on a costume to get into character for a performance and then leaves that costume behind to return to his offstage life."<sup>[24]</sup>

In this play, Parks explores how the black man is engaged in the masculine rivalries that capitalist society displays. Susan Faludi clarifies the ways which undermine men's faith in themselves; she concludes that "our society is a culture of ornament in which manhood is defined by appearance, by youth and attractiveness, by money and aggression."<sup>[25]</sup> Booth rejects all that society can offer him. Saint-Aubin holds that, "for men in this culture the relationship between gender (masculinity) and sexuality is a strict one: Masculinity depends on sexuality."<sup>[26]</sup> Booth brags about his masculine prowess and adventures with Grace whom Booth loves. Like him, she tries to find her identity.

The primary linear realistic narrative is overlaid with three particular performance scenarios which are repeated and revised throughout the play. The first is the patter of the 3-card Monte game, which reinforces the ideal image of black masculinity the brothers aspire to. The second is the stories that the brothers tell about their childhood memories. This increases their understanding of ideal familial and gender roles, and definitions of home. The third is Lincoln's performance of Abraham Lincoln's death, which serves to demonstrate the inevitability of the final act of murder. It refers to capitalism and patriarchy, reflecting the life of African-American men in 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' lifestyles and professions.<sup>[27]</sup>

Lincoln's anxiety concerning his occupation is a symptom of his uncertainty concerning his identity, whether he is the real deal or whether he is, or has always been, an impostor. Booth finds Lincoln's current work slavish, an impression exacerbated by the fact that Lincoln performs in whiteface. Booth in effect accuses Lincoln of dishonesty: his personal identity is inseparable from his racial identity, but Lincoln "makes up" an identity that depends on concealing his race and, by extension, whitewashing African-American history. For Lincoln, however, his "real" job testifies to something more.<sup>[28]</sup> He feels quite anxious about having no specific goal to achieve in life: "I dont gotta spend my whole life hustling. Theres more to Link than that. More to me than some cheap hustle. More to life than cheating some idiot out of his paycheck" (371). Lincoln's removal of the whiteface is both theatrically and dramatically relevant to the whiteness of the American scene. It is a turning point in the play, because it "makes an unusual shift from highlighting the construction of race to emphasize the deconstruction of racial identity."<sup>[29]</sup>

The black family disintegration constitutes and worsens the sense of identity loss Lincoln and Booth strongly feel. These two brothers have been uncared for in the time of their parents, a matter which makes them feel quite alienated and divested of any glimpse of hope for altering the course of their life.

The reminiscences of the past are persistently juxtaposed with Booth and Lincoln's ever-present excruciating experiences, causing them much agony and unrest. They blame their parents for not creating and leading a luxurious life, which they should have enjoyed after their parent's departure. This desideratum to the genealogical history is a marker for a sense of a truly tangible belonging. Ed Blank of *Tribune-Review* sees both Lincoln and Booth as imprisoned by what he calls "a legacy foreshadowed by their identity as African-American males, underscored by their father's labeling.... The metaphor passes for plot."<sup>[30]</sup>

The last scene of *Topdog/Underdog* displays a considerable knowledge of Lincoln's customer, who is perhaps not only a "brother," but literally his brother. Such speculations further heighten the sense of irony that attends Lincoln's question to Booth near the climax of the play: "I know we *brothers*, but is we really brothers, you know, blood brothers or not, you and me" (399). Lincoln's question bespeaks a concern that authentic identity remains inaccessible beneath the layers of the hustle. Thus, his anxiety concerning his personal identity extends to his familial relationships. He and Booth may act like brothers, but perhaps it is only an act. Earlier, Lincoln asks Booth if they're really brothers, Booth recounts their mother's infidelities, his knowledge of which leads her to pay him off: "She musta known I was gonna walk in on her this time cause she had my payoff—my *inheritance*—she had it all ready for me. 500 dollars in a nylon stocking. Huh" (398). Booth then places that nylon stocking—his inheritance/bribe—on the card table, the bet that will finally make the game real. Yet, neither the brothers nor the spectators are sure if there is actually money in the stocking. Booth has never untied the knot that secures his inheritance which binds him to his mother. The money in the stocking in *Topdog/Underdog* either promises to redeem the beliefs and actions of the characters or threatens to undercut them. The play's meta-theatrical logic threatens to destabilize its naturalistic, economic, and ethical values.<sup>[31]</sup>

The struggle between the two brothers shows their differences. This fraternal conflict has become more obvious in the sixth scene than the previous confrontations, a conflict of identities and survival. When Lincoln loses his job as a historical impersonator and returns back to be con man and card shark, both he and Booth enter in a war to possess the same thing. This conflict of interests clearly reaches its pinnacle the moment Lincoln instructs Booth how to play the card game in order to get dishonestly his so-called inheritance left by his parents.<sup>[32]</sup> Salvation can occur through the transformation of the audience, the representatives of society, whose collective participation is a necessary component in the medium of theater. Parks asserts that her plays exhibit "the yearning for salvation: that particular kind of salvation that only the theater, of all the art forms, can offer."<sup>33</sup>

By representing the construction of identity within interracial relationships, Parks purportedly overemphasized the fact that the black community had its problems and complications which were proposed to be carefully considered. Even within the black family, there were many markers of identity crisis. She did not draw a picture of an individual's personal affairs; rather, she was after dramatizing the black's anxiety of personal for identity.

## **Conclusion**

The study is an attempt to investigate the way Suzan-Lori Parks dramatized her own concept of identity, which is relevant to the black existence. The treatment of the quest for identity in Suzan-Lori Parks' is somewhat different from that of other female African-American playwrights. Parks does not always present female characters seeking their own identity; rather, she portrays how black men possess a fervent desire to explore their self- definition. *Topdog/Underdog* examines Suzan-Lori Parks' dramatization of anxiety and personal identity. The play is a typical study of black men, Lincoln and Booth, who have an exhilarating sense of identity confusion. Their personal and racial confusion is mirrored in remembering the ancestral background, the hideous murder of Abraham Lincoln, and the demanding exigency of their current situation. The play under discussion can be put under the rubric of literature of resistance and liberation, because it calls black people to

strongly resist all the attempts aiming at marginalizing and de-rooting their black identity in a white society. In a similar vein, the idea of liberation is not confined only to getting rid of the colonial hegemony; rather, it implies the liberation of the blacks from the standards of the language used by the whites. Hence, the playwright employs a language which functions as a vehicle to express her own ethnicity and attitudes towards various problems that face the black race. The discursive formations contained in the play show the singularity and the independence of their life. History in is affirmed, reenacted, and rewritten to represent the black identity. It is seen as a necessary requisite for understanding the past, living the present with all its repercussions, and safeguarding the future of black generations.

## Notes

- 1 David Buckingham, "Introducing Identity" in *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, ed. by David Buckingham, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 1.
- 2 Quoted in William Petersen, et al. *Concepts of Ethnicity*, (London: Harvard U P, 1982), 57.
- 3 Quoted in Jess Feist and Gregory J. Feist, *Theories of Personality*, (New York: WCB/McGraw-Hill, 1998), 242.
- 4 Quoted in Feist and Feist, 243.
- 5 Michael L. Hecht. et al, *African American Communication: Exploring Identity and Culture*. (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2003), 48.
- 6 Suman Gupta, *Contemporary Literature: the Basics*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 142.
- 7Ibid. 8 Lawrence J. Prograis Jr. and Edmund D. Pellegrino (eds). *African American Bioethics: Culture, Race, and Identity*. (Washington: Georgetown U P, 2007), 114.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Maurice E. Stevens. *Troubling Beginnings: Trans (per) forming African American History and Identity*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), 3.
- 11 Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2011), 97.
- 12 Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*, (New York: Open U P, 2004), 26.
- 13 Hecht et al. , 85.
- 14 Anthony D. Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett, *The A to Z of African American Theater*, Lanham, The Scarecrow P, Inc., 2009), 386-7.
- 15 Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color*, vol.1 (London: Greenwood P, 2006), 646.
- 16 Carol Schafer, "Staging a New Literary History: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus, In the Blood*, and *Fucking A*," *Comparative Drama*, 42, 2, Summer 2008,182.
- 17 Suzan-Lori Parks, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Theater* 29.2 (1999), 26.
- 18 Hill and Barnett, 387.
- 19 All quotations from "*Topdog/Underdog*" are taken from James Utz ed., *Contemporary Drama: Performing Identity*, (San Diego: Cognella, 2010). Reference is made to page number only.
- 20 Jochen Achilles, "Does Reshuffling the Cards Change the Game? Structures of Play in Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*," in Kolin, ed., *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*, 107.
- 21 Utz, 342.
- 22 Barbara Ozieblo, "The 'Fun that I had' : The theatrical gendering of Suzan-Lori Parks's 'figures,'" in *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook*, 54.
- 23 Jennifer Larson, " Folding and Unfolding History: Identity Fabrication in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Top dog/Underdog*. *Reading Contemporary African -American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self*. Ed. Harris Trudier, (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 195.
- 24 Larson, "*Folding and Unfolding History*, ." 182.

25 Quoted in Ozieblo, 51.

26 Ibid.

27 Jason Bush "Who's Thuh Man?! Historical melodrama and the performance of masculinity in *Topdog/Underdog*," in *Suzan-Lori Parks: Casebook*, 8.

28 Michael LeMahieu, "The Theater of Hustle and the Hustle of Theater: Play, Player, and Played in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*," *African American Review*, 45, 1-2(Spring/Summer 2012), 35.

29 Faedra Chatard Carpenter, "Spectacles of Whiteness from Adrienne Kennedy to Suzan-Lori Parks," Young Harvey, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theater*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), 174.

30 Quoted in Carolyn Casey Craig, *Women Pulitzer Playwrights*, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004. 276.

31 LeMahieu, 42.

32 Daniel Grassian, *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip Hop Generation*, (South Carolina: the U of South Carolina P, 2009), 45.

33 Schafer, 200.

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