

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## African American Literature and the American Southwest: A 'Minor' Dialogue

D. Seth Horton

University of Virginia

[dsh8e@virginia.edu](mailto:dsh8e@virginia.edu)

---

In the novel *Getting Mother's Body*, Susan-Lori Parks crafts a narrative that intertwines the personal and the geographical, blurring the boundaries between literary expression and spatial identity. The novel, set in the rural landscapes of 1960s Texas, not only explores the intricate dynamics of a Black family on a journey to reclaim their matriarch's buried treasure but also delves into the ways in which the physical environment shapes and is shaped by the characters' experiences. Setting is not merely a backdrop but rather an active participant in the ongoing development of characters' lives. The novel can thus be read through an intersectional lens of literary and geographical studies wherein the landscape serves as both a literal and symbolic space that reflects the complexities of race, identity, and belonging.

Utilizing Parks's strengths as a playwright, the story unfolds through a progression of first-person monologues. It follows the lives of the Beedes, an African American family living in the fictional town of Lincoln, Texas, as they grapple with the past and strive for a better future. The central plot revolves around Billy Beede, a young, pregnant woman who is determined to avoid the fate of her late mother, Willa Mae Beede, who died years before from attempting to give herself an abortion in a hotel bathroom. Billy's life drastically changes when she discovers that her mother's burial site in Arizona is about to be excavated for a shopping mall. Believing that her mother was buried with a valuable cache of jewelry, she sees an opportunity to secure her future by retrieving the treasure. Along with several other members

of her family, Billy sets off on a road trip from Texas to Arizona where the significance of geography becomes a central concern within the narrative.

Parks's novel reaffirms that Texas is a state where the South, at some point, usually a rather vague one, becomes the Southwest. Initially, in the novel, the depiction of the small Texas town locates it firmly in the South, a region marked by deep-rooted racial tensions and economic disparities to such a degree that the landscape, with its dusty roads and dilapidated towns, seems to be reflected in the barrenness of some of the characters' internal states, which is to say they have internalized the geography they inhabit. However, the journey motif in the novel highlights the relationship between movement and space. As the characters leave behind their rootedness in the Texas landscape towards the relative openness of the desert, their physical movement through space becomes a metaphor for their attempts to reclaim agency and reshape their destinies. The journey culminates in a poignant and transformative climax when the group eventually reaches Willa Mae's grave, and thus the roads they travelled along the way are not simply routes from one location to another; rather, they are pathways that connect the past and present, the living and the dead, the known and the unknown. This connection between movement and space emphasizes how geography is not static but constantly in flux, shaped by the narratives and actions of those who inhabit it.

Despite Glenda Dicker/sun's contention that *Getting Mother's Body* is not a retelling of *As I Lay Dying* (Dicker/sun 2010: 157), much of the recent critical response has helixed these two novels together. Laura Wright, for example, examines how Parks uses the dual concepts of passing and performativity to interrogate racial and gender identities, and she does this while analyzing the intertextual dialogue between Parks's novel and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (Wright 2011). Similarly, Christopher Leise and Eleanor Gold (2015) argue that Parks employs the rhetorical device of chiasmus, wherein concepts are repeated in reverse order, typically in an A-B-B-A pattern. They argue this strategy inverts and subverts Faulkner's themes, transforming his tragicomedy into a more ambiguous narrative that resists simple categorization. Jennifer Larson (2012) furthermore reads *Getting Mother's Body* as a doubled revision in that Billy's transformation of her mother's legacy is comparable to Parks's rewriting of Faulkner's novels. However, she subsequently places particular emphasis on Parks's ability to blend creativity, form, and cultural history into a dynamic aesthetic that refuses to keep identities or geographies static, and it is this linkage between historicity and aesthetics that marks another significant feature in the novel's critical reception.

In a larger project that reads the role of deceased woman in literature as figures of social justice, Brian Norman argues that 'the exhumation plot enacts a very literal encounter with the exiled, discarded, mistreated, and misunderstood of a nation's history' (Norman 2012: 162), and thus the corpse of Willa Mae Beede comes to represent the nation's attempt to forget or ignore aspects of its racial past. Elsewhere (2009), he explores how Parks uses the concept of the 'historical uncanny' to address lingering racial segregation in post-Civil Rights America, arguing that *Getting Mother's Body* reflects on the persistence of segregationist symbols and their haunting presence in contemporary society. Rhonda Jenkins Armstrong emphasizes the ways in which Texas serves as a site of geographical contestation that is 'marked by transience' (Armstrong 2015: 44). She also examines the performative aspects of Parks's

writing, highlighting how the novel's structure and narrative techniques reflect a theatrical sensibility. Overall, her analysis underscores how Parks challenges readers to reconsider the ways in which the past is remembered and retold, particularly in the context of marginalized communities.

It is also Armstrong who offers the rare interpretation of the novel's engagement with the American Southwest. After all, as Parks herself notes in an interview, *Getting Mother's Body* 'was really born in the landscape of West Texas, where we spent time when my father was with the Army in Vietnam' (Marshall 2003). Armstrong focuses her commentary on Lincoln, arguing that the small Texas town is a liminal space situated between the South and the West.

It is Arizona, however, that serves as the ultimate destination of the Beede family, and yet despite this teleological destination, it has received scant critical attention. That Willa Mae is buried in the Southwest, a region with less African American cultural history than, for example, the American South, is significant because it forces the characters to engage with a history that is not inherently theirs, creating a space where they must navigate unfamiliar cultural and historical terrains. The journey to Arizona thus becomes a metaphor for uncovering buried aspects of their past, confronting the legacies of displacement, and seeking a sense of belonging in an otherwise alien environment. In this sense, then, Arizona in particular, and the American Southwest in general, becomes a significant, haunting presence in the novel for it is a place of both estrangement and revelation that highlights the complexity and fluidity of African American identity in novel ways.

In both *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari theorize the concept of 'minor literature' as a way to cognize what it might mean to write in a marginalized voice from the cultural periphery. More recently, Neil Campbell has extended their arguments about the deterritorialization of language towards a regionalist framework (Campbell 2016: 4). Thus, he reconfigures the American West away from its epic metanarrative of Manifest Destiny, conquest, and unilateralism, for example, and instead interprets the region as a space that is dynamic and relational in its engagement with both local and global developments (Campbell 2016: 2-3). If the radical possibilities of 'the minor' can conceptually disrupt that which is 'major,' then I would here like to suggest that Parks's novel offers an invitation to work through these concepts by placing African American literature in dialogue with other literary representations of American Southwest geography. *Getting Mother's Body* thus not only serves as a kind of roadmap that reveals how our understanding of African American literature might be expanded by a 'minor' region like the American Southwest, but it also transforms our cultural understanding of the Southwest itself with the insertion of the Beede family.

Historically, the Southwest has been a geographical site of contradictions. For many artists who arrived in Taos during the 1910s and 1920s, it was a utopia; for the Latin American migrants who lost their lives attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border, it has been a dystopia. For the Mormons who broke away from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to practice plural marriage in what is today called Colorado City, the remoteness allowed them to construct a fundamentalist enclave; for the hippies that now populate East Jesus, a desert cooperative for artists close to California's Salton Sea, the desert remoteness is seen as

similarly advantageous. Sedona, Arizona has become a center in New Age thought because the area's vortices are thought to be healing, and yet it's less than a day's drive away from Alamogordo, home to the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, where the Federal Government first detonated a nuclear weapon in 1945, the radiation of which likely caused the unusually high rates of infant mortality in communities downwind from the explosion.

A place of memory, a place of forgetfulness. A prelapsarian utopia, a hellscape of dehydration and death. An isolation that serves both conservatives and antinomians alike. A landscape that inspires meditative tranquility as well as destruction the likes of which have never before been seen in human history. This is the Southwest, and now with *Getting Mother's Body*, it is also a place where an African American literary tradition has been figuratively unearthed. The story of Willa Mae Beede's exhumation is not merely a brilliant novel, although it is certainly that, but it also serves as a demonstration of how minor characters and regions can reshape, redefine, and fundamentally revise one another.

### Works Cited

- Armstrong, R. (2015) 'Rewriting the Corpse in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Getting Mother's Body*.' *The Southern Quarterly*, 53(1), pp. 41-56.
- Campbell, N. (2016) *Affective Critical Regionality*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1986) *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Polan, D. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Massumi, B. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dicker/sun, G. (2010) 'Demeter, Persephone and Willa Mae Beede: Suzan-Lori Parks Gets Mother's Body.' In Kolin, P. (ed) *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*. Jefferson: McFarland, pp. 156-68.
- Larson, J. (2012) *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks*. Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press.
- Leise, C. and Gold, E. (2015) 'A Toast to Mr. Smiles: Chiasmus and Comitragedy in Suzan-Lori Parks's Signified Faulkner.' *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, 40(2), pp. 137-57.
- Marshall, J., 'A Moment with . . . Suzan-Lori Parks, Playwright.' *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. [Online] [Accessed 11 June 2024] <https://www.seattlepi.com/entertainment/books/article/a-moment-with-suzan-lori-parks-playwright-1115418.php>
- Norman, B. (2012) *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Norman, B. (2009) 'The Historical Uncanny: Segregation Signs in *Getting Mother's Body*, a Post-Civil Rights American Novel.' *African American Review*, 43(2/3), pp. 443-56.
- Parks, S. (2003) *Getting Mother's Body: A Novel*. New York City: Random House.
- Wright, L. (2011) 'Casting the Bones of Willa Mae Beede: Passing and Performativity in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Getting Mother's Body*.' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 30(1), pp. 141-57.