NEW VOICES IN CLASSICAL RECEPTION STUDIES
Issue 11 (2016)

"Penelope Gone to the War": The Violence of Home in *Neverhome* and *Father Comes Home from the Wars*[1]

© Nadine M. Knight (College of the Holy Cross)

Laird Hunt's historical novel, *Neverhome*, published in September 2014, and Suzan-Lori Parks' triptych of plays, *Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2, & 3)*, which premiered at the Public Theater in October 2014, offer new versions of the *Odyssey* set during the American Civil War. Edith Hall observes that "the near-mythic status of the Civil War has become a substitute for the legendary Trojan War" in American culture (2012: 137). Certainly the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have a strong influence on novels and films representing the American South and the Civil War: works as varied as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Cold Mountain*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Sommersby,* all take the *Odyssey* for inspiration (Hall 2012: 59-60, 138-40; Johnson and Johnson 2003: xiii-xiv; McConnell 2013: 155). While Hunt and Parks sketch out trajectories very similar to the *Odyssey*'s plot—war, disguises, delay, and finally return—I am most interested in how each work ends in the irredeemable destruction of home. Homecoming is traditionally seen as the "central motif" of the *Odyssey's* trajectory (McConnell 2013: 1) and likewise is homecoming an important part of Civil War commemoration. Janney points out that soldiers "marched home to a hero's welcome" and that "joyous citizens received their victorious men with celebrations at the local train depot, feted them with fine dinners, and cheered them in parades" (2013: 75), and Mitchell notes that "soldiers regularly claimed that it was only through leaving their homes and suffering… the violence of war that they learned domesticity's true value" (1993: 34). But contrary to these positive framings of homecoming, *Neverhome* and *Father* both end with failure and betrayal when their soldiers return. By denying their characters a triumphant or even a peaceful return, Hunt and Parks compel readers to reconsider celebrations of the Civil War as a triumph of emancipation and an end to violence within the "houses" of the nation and the family. If homecomings from the Civil War end in disunion—as they do so forcefully in these texts—then the stability of the nation remains at risk.

With its focus on homecoming, the *Odyssey* is sometimes placed in contrast to the *Iliad* as the postwar epic of reconciliation: Zerba contends that in the *Odyssey* "characters emerge from conflict and crisis into resolution and social reintegration," (2009: 297). But as Carl Rubino points out, "Homer is perceptive enough to know that *nostos*, coming home, involves much more than the mere transportation of one's body back to one's homeland… the poet is fully aware that his hero must return in so many other ways as well—politically, socially, emotionally" (1984: 943). To that end, Jonathan Shay notes most succinctly, "Odysseus has shown us how *not* to return home from war" (2002: 149, original emphasis). Patrick Reardon's review of *Neverhome* emphasizes the subversion of an expected happy ending when he writes that, "For all its blood and wandering, 'The Odyssey' is a tale of triumph" while *Neverhome* is "more ambiguous" (2015: "Review"). The most important questions raised by the *Odyssey*, then, are: What constitutes a triumphant homecoming? And is the violence of war ever left behind? The answer to the former might be hazy, but the latter is clear: for Homer, as for Hunt and Parks, violence always comes home. Parks and Hunt thus push against not just the popular perception of the *Odyssey* as a happy homecoming, but also against certain triumphalist Civil War narratives. Though numerous scholars have written about the major trends in how the Civil War has been narratively framed, Gary W. Gallagher gives a useful summary: the "Lost Cause tradition," which "played down the importance of slavery"; the "Union Cause tradition," which was the "effort to maintain a viable republic"; the "Emancipation Cause" of a war primarily to end enslavement; and the "Reconciliation Cause" which saw white partisans agree on shared "*American* virtues" at the expense of African American recognition (2008: 2, original emphasis).[2] *Neverhome* and *Father*, appearing as the United States ends its Sesquicentennial activities, disrupt the Emancipationist and Unionist narratives in particular by asking us to more seriously consider delay—of progress, of equality, of security—and continued violence as the true legacies of the Civil War.

Father and *Neverhome* are not literal or comprehensive retellings of the epic, though each text makes its debt to Homer clear. The first significant influence is in the mutability of the hero's identity, which is

repeated by Hunt and Parks. Homer's Odysseus is, famously, "the man of twists and turns" (*Odyssey* 1.1)[3], and both Hunt and Parks emphasize the mutability of identity in the name changes and disguises that transform the housewife Constance to the (male) soldier Ash, and the slave Hero to the war veteran and ex-slave Ulysses. In one way, it seems as if Hunt and Parks literalize the notion that war changes the soldier. However, the violence that shapes both Constance and Hero began at home, long before either protagonist set off for war. To that end, the violence at the end of the *Odyssey* is paramount to understanding the questions raised by *Neverhome* and *Father.* In Book 22, Odysseus finally confronts the scores of suitors who have been draining his resources and wooing Penelope in his absence. Spurred on by Athena, Odysseus and Telemachus lay waste to the suitors:

> Odysseus scanned his house to see if any man
> still skulked alive, still hoped to avoid black death.
> But he found them one and all in blood and dust…
> great hauls of them down and out like fish that fishermen
> drag from the churning gray surf in looped and coiling nets
> and fling ashore on a sweeping hook of beach—some noble catch
> heaped on the sand, twitching, lusting for fresh salt sea
> but the Sungod hammers down and burns their lives out…
> so the suitors lay in heaps, corpse covering corpse. (*Odyssey* 22.406-414)

This slaughter of the suitors is described with excessive dehumanization as the suitors are reduced to hapless fish, and the violence of the moment only increases when in cruel excess, Odysseus also slaughters a dozen slave women whom he unfairly accuses of being "sluts—the suitors' whores!" (*Odyssey* 22.490). These irreversible acts of violence re-forge a father-son bond between Telemachus and Odysseus and signal a return to the "true" Odysseus, who has, before this action, been disguised as a beggar.[4] This is the clearest demonstration that Odysseus, for all his mutability and canniness, should be instead known for his "ruthlessness. Athena calls him *schetlios*, which usually implies harshness and cruelty" (Ahl and Roisman 1996: 132). This ruthlessness also characterizes the Odysseus-figures in *Neverhome* and *Father*. Unlike the Homeric figure, however, when Constance and Hero mete out violence, there is no celebration of family reunion or rightful rule. Domestic instabilities on a national scale led to a Civil War in the first place, and continued domestic instabilities on a personal scale suggest how easily another civil war could begin.

"WE DON'T EVER TURN OUR CHEEK, DO WE, MAMA?"

Elizabeth Vandiver emphasizes "the impossibility of a functioning marriage in the shattered society" of the Civil War, and how "[m]arriage, along with peace, seems to be part of the lost and fragmented past" in her reading of the Homeric influence in the novel *Cold Mountain* (2004: 140). In *Neverhome*, too, marriages cast doubt on their viability: in addition to the war's separation of husband and wife, Constance thinks frequently of the child she lost and her inability (or unwillingness) to have another. There is a further "shattering" of traditions as Constance, an Indiana farmwife, disguises herself as Ash, a male soldier in an Ohio regiment. Her husband, Bartholomew, minds the farm and patiently awaits her return. The clearest nod to Homer comes from a comment made by the wife of Constance's favorite colonel (who was a classics professor before the war) when she learns of Constance's story: "Penelope gone to the war and Odysseus staying home," she gently teases (Hunt 196).[5] While the colonel's wife might think Constance is Penelope, Constance is the true Odysseus of *Neverhome*, as the figure who prides herself in her assertiveness and her physical capacity for violence. As she tells us in the opening lines of the novel, "I was strong and he was not, so it was me went to war to defend the Republic" (Hunt 2014: 3). She proves herself in feats of strength; is one of the best shots in the regiment; holds her own in wrestling; does not complain about fatigue work; and, she notes, when compared to her husband, "he was made out of wool and I was made out of wire. He took the sick headache every winter and I'd never got sick one gray day in my life…. He would turn away any time he could, and I never, ever backed down" (Hunt 2014: 7). Bartholomew is the gentle, patient, and more domestically talented half of the couple. He brews better tea, has an eye for the best flowers, and "was a better operator in the kitchen with his small hands" than Constance (Hunt 2014: 179). He acts, in short, as the perfect stereotypical housewife. *Neverhome* thus

presents us with a zero-sum game of domestic investment: for Constance to go to war, Bartholomew must become the archetypal "Waiting Wife" of folkloric tradition (Clark 1980: 46).

Much like Penelope, Bartholomew is also forced to withstand attempts to claim the family's land. Distrusting Bartholomew's demonstrated patience and fidelity, Constance hides the deed to the farm so that Bartholomew could not sell the property in her absence. Squatters take over the farm and while they dig up the property in search of the deed, Bartholomew is reduced to wearing an apron and "holding a tray had [sic] cups of coffee on it. He went around to each of the boys and let them choose a cup" (Hunt 2014: 221-222). These suitors deepen the humiliation by lingering over coffee, while Constance, disguised again as a male figure, questions the local sheriff about her farm and the "little fellow" and "little corncob" serving coffee (Hunt 2014: 224). As in the *Odyssey,* these suitors have exhausted supplies, disrespected the property, and disempowered the remaining head of the household. And as we shall see, the soldier's return does not fully undo the damage done.

Bartholomew's gentleness fails to guide Constance; rather, the relationship that drives Constance the most is the memory of a mother whose enduring lesson to Constance was, "We don't ever turn our cheek, do we, Mama?" (Hunt 2014: 227). It is a lesson that Constance takes too fully to heart when she returns from the war. In Odyssean fashion, Constance slaughters the would-be usurpers. Armed with a stolen Henry rifle, she brings the war home to her farm. Constance tells us:

> I didn't like what I was about to set to doing, but I didn't like them spending their days setting there on my chairs worse. I didn't like Bartholomew fetching them their coffee worse. I didn't like the deep fat on the back of Ned Phipps…. It was him I shot first. (Hunt 2014: 232-233)

Odysseus and Telemachus took their slaughter too far; so, too, does Constance: "I looked at the musket in my hands, then I counted the corpses. My heart skipped a hard beat so I counted again. Five dead boys and a goat. The one inside made it six. Six was too many" (Hunt 2014: 235). In addition to the poor goat, Constance has accidently murdered her own husband. While Constance uses Odyssean ruthlessness in reclaiming her land, she is denied any chance of spousal reunion as a reward, in contrast to the reconciliation between Odysseus and Penelope in the *Odyssey*. For Constance, there is only destruction and further disorder.

Although the *Odyssey* ends with the possibility that Odysseus will soon again abandon Penelope and his lands, first the Homeric Odysseus gains Penelope's recognition and acknowledgement of him as her husband (Ahl and Roisin 1996: 271; Felson-Rubin 1994: 62; Hall 2012: 179). He and Penelope also enact an important reconciliation when they spend the night together and "reveled in each other's stories" (*Odyssey* 23.343). Needless to say, Constance's failure to recognize Bartholomew while shooting forecloses any renewal of their marriage. Moreover, since she unwittingly created an alibi for herself when she disguised herself as a man while scouting her property, there is not even any justice for Bartholomew. Nor does Constance find any way to atone. At the novel's end, she is a woman experiencing the "persistent erosion of her sanity" (Abbott 2014); a woman who "can no longer conceal her disintegration" (Clark 2015). She is waiting for word from her colonel, which it seems will never come. Her sanity is precarious at best and she ends on a note of delay, waiting for someone to tell her what to do next. This aimlessness reinforces the Homeric notion that home is always unsettled. More importantly, it does more than simply reflect the awful truth that war veterans have often brought violence to their households upon their return.[6] Here, as a representative of the Union army, Constance fails to preserve her own personal union: metonymy for the nation's failure to reconcile and bring justice to *all* of its inhabitants after the war.

In *Neverhome*, what Hunt makes clear is that Constance was primed for violence long before the war; indeed, for her, the worst violence she witnesses and perpetrates always come from the domestic sphere. Tellingly, throughout the novel Constance's actual war experience remains faintly sketched at best. In contrast, she shares vivid memories of seeing her childhood neighbors burned out of their farm by xenophobic locals and she recalls her mother's sudden suicide. The information about her mother's suicide, emerging in brief asides and flashes of memory, brings the violence of the novel full circle:

> Before Bartholomew breathed his last I let his head down soft onto the dirt floor of the barn and I went out to the edge of the south field and climbed the ash tree where my mother had hung herself and where I had found her swinging on the last day of my youth. I climbed it and felt for the notch just about the branch where she had tied her rope. In the notch was an oilskin bag and in the bag was the deed to my farm. (Hunt 2014: 238)

In naming herself Ash when she went to war, and hiding the deed to the farm in the same ash tree where her mother killed herself, Constance fully acknowledges the inescapable legacy of home as a site of violence and death. The most brutal violence dealt by Constance, both premeditated and accidental, always comes when she returns to wearing a dress.[7] During the war, when she and some comrades are captured, Constance "went rustling over in that stout lady's dress" and brutally dispatches her captors: "I smashed that heavy jug down. I smashed it down again, and then a third time, and then I put my hand into the blood I had made and brought it back up to my face…. I shot [another soldier] in the mouth…. [A different soldier] fell over in the pile of rebel grays. You almost couldn't hear him land. I went over to see if I had finished my work, saw I hadn't, and shot him again" (Hunt 2014: 52-53). As with Odysseus and the suitors, here we too find an emphasis on the excessiveness of her kills and, with the "pile of rebel grays," reminiscent of Fagles' image of the "corpse covering corpse" of Odysseus' killing spree.

Constance also uses a dress to her advantage when she escapes from "prison madhouse" (Hunt 2014: 164), where she has been locked after she is outed to her regiment and accused of being a Confederate spy. Imprisoned as a woman, Constance escapes by seducing a former comrade. She then enacts her most gender-coded revenge against Neva Thatcher, the woman who almost seduced Constance into living with her and who then betrayed Constance when Constance declined the offer. Neva's greatest treasure is a china set, so Constance detours to Neva's house while escaping in order to destroy it: "I knew where she kept a mallet and I fetched it out and went back to her room and I pounded the china-pot heirloom on her bed pillow until its powders were floating up into the air" (Hunt 2014: 170). This is a deeply intimate form of violence: to destroy an item that has been coded as explicitly feminine and to leave the evidence in the bed Neva offered to share with her. Although the Homeric Penelope destroys her weaving (coded as feminine work) each night while stalling the suitors, the difference is that Penelope destroys her *own* work for strategic gain; Constance, in contrast, destroys another woman's possession out of petty impulse. Even in disguise, Constance acts not as a soldier, but as the unyielding and violent woman she has always been. As Vandiver points out, in *Cold Mountain* there is "an unbridgeable fault line between the war's brutal violence and the remnants of domestic life" (2004: 146). The difference is that in *Neverhome*, the Civil War does not cause Constance's fault lines; rather, it simply hones her homegrown killer instinct and gives her better weapons with which to destroy her home and marriage.

"AND FREEDOM MIGHT BE COMING"

Suzan-Lori Parks' *Father Comes Home from the Wars* presents the novelty of a slave willingly fighting for the Confederacy because he thinks it will give him freedom. In Parks' typically unsubtle naming practices, her protagonist, Hero, will later rename himself Ulysses, and Hero's main rival is named Homer. Hero is in love with Penny, who faithfully waits for him to come home from the war. His loyal dog is originally named Odd-See because of a wonky eye, but by the final play his name is Odyssey Dog and he has gained the power of speech. Odyssey Dog retains all of the fidelity of Homer's Argus, though this Odyssey Dog follows Hero to the war. The power of mythologized figures and the subversion of their legends and even their racial identities are longstanding interests of Parks: previous plays have given us several Lincolns and a Booth, as well as multiple Hester Prynnes and a Sarah Baartman (the so-called "Hottentot Venus"). Carol Schafer notes that "Parks uses Homer's *The Iliad*… for a model and inspiration" for her 1996 play, *Venus* (2008: 182-183). By examining the Odyssean framework of *Father,* we can extend Schafer's observation that Parks "aligns herself with Homer and the other poets who compose what is perceived by audiences as history" (2008: 184). As she re-weaves her own version of the *Odyssey*, Parks asks us to consider how African Americans see their history in depictions of the Civil War, how slaves found their freedom, and if Emancipation readily came to anyone at all.

In addition to asking us to consider whether war and violence really end, the *Odyssey* also, of course, involves slaves whose plight is always far more precarious than that of Odysseus himself. Johnson and

Johnson note that "when Odysseus lands at Ithaca, those he seeks out and trusts are his slaves" (2003: 135) though Ahl and Roisman point out that Eumaeus, one of the most loyal slaves, is "understandably bitter" because "[n]o one has given *him* freedom yet" (1996: 199, original emphasis). More immediately, Rankine notes the tremendous influence the *Odyssey* had on Ellison's *Invisible Man* in speaking for the alienation felt by African Americans at the hands of white supremacy: "While war, wandering, and upstart suitors of his wife Penelope displace Ulysses from home, myopic antagonists, some of whom practice distinctly American rituals of exclusion, would keep the unnamed African American narrator of *Invisible Man* from recognizing America as his homeland" (2008: 127).[8] With *Father*'s historical setting in an overlooked region of the Civil War, and with its focus on the slave experience, Parks invites us to question the "epic" nature of Civil War memory and reminds us of the ongoing alienation and disenfranchisement that are legacies of the war, particularly in the marginalization of African Americans in the Unionist memory of the war and the rise of Jim Crow spurred by the Lost Causist romanticization of the Confederacy.

Closely related to the question of freedom is the problem of delay. Delay is an important feature in the *Odyssey*, and Schweizer observes that waiting is essential to the epic's narrative structure as a whole (2002: 280). He counts not just the adventures that cost Odysseus a decade in his quest for home, but also the constant retelling of everyone's deeds which inflates the length of the epic; additionally, he notes that Penelope, with her husband's status uncertain and her cyclical weaving and unweaving to stall her suitors' claims, "lives not in time but in duration" (Schweizer 2002: 289). Parks parallels the epic's structural and thematic delays and the making-and-unmaking of progress (as in Penelope's weaving) with her own emphasis of delay through repetition and multiple "rests" and "spells" of pauses and silences of varying length and intensity "[d]enoted by the repetition of figures' names with no dialogue" (Parks 2015: "Elements of Style"). The delays emphasize Parks' interest in the delayed emancipation for those enslaved, particularly those in states too remote for successful self-emancipation. As Letitia Guran points out, many of Parks' plays contain "punctual repetitions of lines and even full scenes" which stems from her embrace of a distinctly African American celebration of oral tradition and subversion of the established discourse (2011: 70).[9] This is an important function of Parks' strategy to

> repeat certain lines and scenes, for what may seem at first, obscure reasons, along the lines of Surrealist poetics…. As Harry Elam and Alyce Rayner note, the stake of the Rep. and Rev. [Repetition and Revision]… is not simply to replay or repeat the past but also to 'right' history at the discourse level. (Guran 2011: 70)

Similarly, as S.E. Wilmer notes, the repetition that Parks uses in her earlier plays about Lincoln's assassination "raises questions about the visibility of Lincoln versus the invisibility of African Americans in the anti-slavery struggle—that is, their absence from their own history" (2000: 449). With this Civil War setting in the furthermost reaches of the Confederacy, Parks uses repetition not only to create discursive interventions into history, but also to highlight the personal cost of delay. The action is slow to begin in these plays; the freedom that the slaves yearn for will, we see, be just as slow to actually reach them.

Part 1 of the *Father* plays, *A Measure of a Man*, begins with Parks' signature style of repetitious conversations between characters; conversations that inch forward only slowly, and prize reaffirmation over progress. The circularity of discourse symbolizes the narrow confines of the lives of the enslaved and the failure of any lasting sense of progress; life on a Texas plantation for the enslaved is stagnant. The play opens with slaves betting on whether Hero, a fellow slave, will follow the "Boss-Master" into the Civil War or not:

> **Second:** Me, I'm betting that he's going.
>
> **Leader:** Are you now?
>
> **Second:** That's right.
>
> **Leader:** You're betting that Hero's gonna go to the War?
>
> **Second:** That's how I'm betting. Mark it.

> **Leader:** You betting that Hero's going to the War with the Boss-Master? Working as the Boss-Master's servant-slave? (Parks 2015: 6).

The conversation continues in much the same vein to the point of frustration. We learn that Hero is being bribed to follow the Boss-Master: "when Boss and me spoke alone together/He promised me:/ My Freedom for My Service" (Parks 2015: 21). Even as he comprehends the irony of fighting for the Confederacy in order to gain emancipation, Hero reveals that the Boss-Master promised freedom to Hero before, and, gullibly, Hero has done his bidding only to remain enslaved. To attempt to earn freedom the first time, Hero snitched on Homer, a fellow slave who attempted to run away and who then had his foot amputated in punishment. The other slaves do not let Hero forget this: "Freedom in exchange for breaking the bond of trust. And you said yes" (Parks 2015: 50). In the *Father* plays, as in the *Odyssey,* freedom is won through the hero's self-interest, infidelities, and delay—and freedom does not extend to anyone else.

The constant repetition in *Father* resists a Civil War teleology of war, emancipation, and victory. In the second play, *A Battle in the Wilderness*, Hero and a captured Union soldier, Smith, (an ex-slave passing for white), are wondering about freedom:

> **Hero:** And Freedom might be coming.
>
> **Smith:** It'll come. One way or another, it'll come. (Parks 2015: 95)

And yet, they are still waiting. This sense of suspension, Kate McLoughlin argues, is part of the trauma that war wreaks on time, space, and the structure of narrative itself: "War configures time as well as space…. To ascribe a start and an end to a conflict is to emplot it" (2014: 107). More importantly, McLoughlin's take on the temporal disruptiveness of war speaks to the way that freedom is nearly incomprehensible to the slaves. She writes, "asking *when will it end? how will it end?* and, deadliest of all, *will it end?,* wartime refuses or is unable to imagine post-war" existence (McLoughlin 2014: 112). Thus, war becomes the "extended present" (McLoughlin 2014: 112). We can replace "war" with "slavery" in the course of these plays given the same pernicious doubts the enslaved characters have that freedom will ever arrive. Devastatingly, neither Hero nor Smith can truly imagine themselves as free or see it as beneficial. Hero worries, "Seems like the worth of a Colored man, once he's made Free, is less than his worth when he's a slave" (Parks 2015: 96).

Parks' final subversion of the triumphant Civil War Emancipationist narrative comes at the end of the third play, *The Union of My Confederate Parts*. Hero, in a traditional symbol of emancipation, has renamed himself, though his choice of the name Ulysses of course recalls Parks' debt to Homer. Just as in the epic, the plot of Hero's homecoming is delayed through the structuring of repetition and refusals to disclose information. Here, the homecoming signals the collapse of domestic trust and the continuation of enslavement. Penny, Homer, and a group of runaway slaves share an exhaustively repetitive discussion of Hero's potential homecoming with Odyssey Dog, who has gone ahead to announce Hero's return. Odyssey Dog admits, in an aside to the audience, that he is deliberately stalling: "I've got news and they want me to tell it. But the telling is hard because my news will make one sad and the other happy. I don't want to disappoint" (Parks 2015: 128). This reticence foreshadows the most important news that will go unspoken in this play; it also acts as a reminder that every homecoming also has the potential for someone's disappointment. Homecomings are a reminder of personal changes that have occurred beyond the sight of either party, and they often disrupt the routines and relationships of those left behind to wait. Roisman suggests that, after such a long absence, Penelope in the *Odyssey* has "mixed feelings" (1987: 59) about Odysseus' return and argues that "it would be natural for Penelope to feel resentment" (1987: 63). Indeed, Penny of the *Father* plays is pregnant with Homer's child and is on the brink of joining the runaways. Penny's willingness to abandon her wait for Hero reaffirms that for the slaves, home and even marriage—for of course Penny and Hero cannot be legally wed while the institution of slavery exists—are unsustainable fictions.

Where the *Odyssey,* after the tumult of Odysseus' return, presents a peaceful moment in the marital bed as "husband and wife confided in each other" (23.329), Hero forecloses any tender reconciliation with an astonishingly tone-deaf presentation of gifts. He produces an alabaster foot for Homer, a bitter reminder

that Hero caused his amputation in the first place. Hero then displays a picture of the new wife he married while at war and intends to install on the plantation alongside Penny. Penny, perhaps finally speaking for all of the previous Penelopes, does not react well: "All that time of waiting and wishing and praying that you were alive/ And I was in our house just now/ Praying you was dead" (Parks 2015: 157). With supreme hypocrisy, Hero accuses Penny of infidelity and attacks Homer with a knife. Hero slaughters his chances at a happy future, just as Constance did in *Neverhome*. Penny joins the runaways, one of whom is worried that freedom might "burst my brains to madness" or "flood my heart to death" (Parks 2015: 151). Despite their fears, however, Penny, Homer, and the runaways feel that even a torturous freedom is better than this west Texas homestead. The *Father* plays thus convey that freedom is, in the slave's world, always fraught with danger and tragically incompatible with *nostos.*

David W. Blight, in discussing the agency shown by African Americans in claiming the Emancipationist memory of the war as their own, argues that "national rebirth and redefinition" were the key metaphors in their narrative of the "mythic power" of freedom (2001: 303). But for Parks' enslaved characters, there is no rebirth; there is no redefinition. As with Constance, war has not changed Hero. He betrayed his fellow slaves long before the Civil War, and betrayed them again even after experiencing war. The final betrayal marks the least forgivable delay in these plays: after Penny and the others leave, Hero realizes, "This paper. I never got to read it to them./ The Proclamation. I copied it down" (Parks 2015: 158). Parks' skepticism about any true sense of victory or emancipation for African Americans is made vivid in the fact that Hero's news of the Emancipation Proclamation goes unvoiced and thus unrecognized. Hero has effectively served the Confederacy's interests after all. While the bloodbath may be largely metaphorical in this play, it is as painful as in *Neverhome*. Both *Neverhome* and *Father Comes Home from the Wars* end quietly, with disappointment and despair. Constance is waiting for an answer it seems will never come, while Hero, alone except for Odyssey Dog, begins to dig a grave for the Boss-Master. He is still serving the past more than he is burying it. Reid Mitchell cuts to the chase when he asks, "wasn't the Civil War a war over the meaning of home?" (1993: 37). With the destruction at the end of *Neverhome* and *Father,* the meaning of home is crueler than the war ever was; the fractured foundations of the "house divided" deeper than previously thought.

CONCLUSION

In his preface to *Herakles Gone Mad: Rethinking Heroism in an Age of Endless War*, Robert Meagher begins his examination of Euripides by stating that "one aim of this book is… to argue that the ancient authors had much more to say about the folly and horror of war than about its allure or advantage" (2006: ix). Nearly a decade after Meagher's publication, with the proliferation of drone warfare as the new face of "endless war," it is certainly important to further consider invocations of the *Odyssey* for what it may offer our understanding of current military crises. But it is also important to consider the *Odyssey* as a text that is prominent in light of the recent Civil War Sesquicentennial celebrations. If we can agree that the American Civil War brought untold horror and countless deaths, still we are tempted to celebrate it as the righteous salvation of the Union and the deliverance of millions of enslaved people. Yet in these two texts, neither a slave nor a housewife finds freedom or triumph in the war and the safe return to their homes. And tellingly, each work ends before the Civil War does (it appears to be late 1863 at the end of both texts); these dissatisfying and inconclusive endings represent the work that remained for the nation after the Civil War, much as Homer's own ending cast doubt upon how long peace would last for Odysseus. Given how the nation's systemic inequality has manifested itself in police violence, a neo-Confederate-inspired massacre in Charleston, S.C. in 2015, and urban protests across the United States during this Sesquicentennial, the *Odyssey* reminds us not just to question the virtue of war, but also to ask whether domestic peace—on the personal as well as national scale—is truly possible.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbot, K. 2014. "She Wears the Britches." Rev. of *Neverhome*. *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* online*,* n. pag. 19 Sept 2014.

Ahl, F. and H. Roisman. 1996. *The* Odyssey *Re-Formed*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Blight, D. 2001. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Clark, C. 2015. Rev. of *Neverhome*. *The Guardian.com,* n.pag. 30 Jan 2015.

Clark, R.T. 1980. "The Returning Husband and the Waiting Wife: Folklore Adaptations in Homer, Tennyson, and Pratt." *Folklore* 91.1: 46-62.

Cook, W. and J. Tatum. 2010. *African American Writers and the Classical Tradition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dean, E. 1997. *Shook Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Fahs, A. and J. Waugh. 2004. *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Felson-Rubin, N.1994. *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gallagher, G. 2008. *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Guran, L. 2011. "Suzan-Lori Parks: Rearticulating the Laws of Race and Gender in African American History.*" South Atlantic Review* 76.2: 65-9.

Hall, E. 2012. *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's* Odyssey*.* London: I.B. Tauris.

Homer. 1996. *The Odyssey.* Tr. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin.

Hunt, L. 2014. *Neverhome.* New York: Little, Brown.

Janney, C. 2013. *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Johnson, C. and V. Johnson. 2003. *Understanding the* Odyssey*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

McConnell, J. 2013. *Black Odysseys: The Homeric* Odyssey *in the African Diaspora Since 1939.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McLoughlin, K. 2014. *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the* Iliad *to Iraq*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Meagher, R. 2006. *Herakles Gone Mad: Rethinking Heroism in an Age of Endless War*. Northampton: Olive Branch Press.

Mitchell, R. 1993. *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Parks, S. 2015. *Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2, 3).* New York: TCG.

Rankine, P. 2008. *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Reardon, P. 2015. "Review: 'Neverhome' by Laird Hunt." *Chicago Tribune* online, n. pag. 12 Sept 2014.

Roisman, H. 1987. "Penelope's Indignation." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* vol. 17: 59-68.

Rubino, C. 1984. "'Smitten by a desire to see again what I had once loved': Homecomings in Homer, Virgil, and Proust." *MLN* 99.4: 941-950.

Schafer, C. 2008. "Staging a New Literary History: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus, In the Blood,* and *Fucking A*." *Comparative Drama* 42.2: 181-203.

Schweizer, H. 2002. "Penelope Waiting." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 85.3-4: 279-299.

Shay, J. 2002. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and The Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner.

Tritle, L. 2000. *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival*. London: Routledge.

Vandiver, E. 2004. "From Noman to Inman: The *Odyssey* in Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*." *Classical and Modern Literature* 24/2: 125-148.

Wilmer, S. 2000. "Restaging the Nation: The Work of Suzan-Lori Parks." *Modern Drama* 43.3: 442-452.

Zerba, M. 2009. "What Penelope Knew: Doubt and Skepticism in the 'Odyssey'." *The Classical Quarterly* New Series 59.2: 295-316.

---

[1] My sincere thanks to Trevor Fear and the anonymous reader for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

[2] For other important works on the framing of the Civil War, see Blight, *Race and Reunion* (2001), Fahs and Waugh, *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (2004), and Janney, *Remembering the Civil War* (2013).

[3] All quotations come from the Robert Fagles (1996) translation of *The Odyssey.*

[4] Ahl and Roisman put it even more brutally: "It is a grisly image with numerous resonances. Most striking is the totally remorseless attitude Odysseus shows toward the slaughter he has perpetrated. The suitors lying before him (some still struggling vainly for life) appear to be creatures of a different order; not fellow humans" (1996: 255). Hall, for her part, calls Odysseus a "he-man" in this scene (2012: 109).

[5] These connections were not lost on the novel's reviewers, either: Clare Clark, in *The Guardian,* calls the novel an "upside-down *Odyssey*"; Patrick Reardon of the Chicago *Tribune* notes that the plot gives us a Circe and Sirens and helpfully summarizes the novel by writing, "'Neverhome' is a modern 'Odyssey,' a mythic journey… Indeed, as a word, 'neverhome' is simply another way of saying 'odyssey.'"

[6] For striking evidence of the toll on Civil War soldiers in particular, see Dean, *Shook Over Hell* (1997). Both Jonathan Shay's *Odysseus in America* (2002) and Lawrence Tritle's *From Melos to My Lai (*2000) reveal how classical texts can help contemporary American war veterans better process their trauma, and both have chapters devoted to the Homeric parallels of the violence of homecoming and the effects upon waiting wives/families.

[7] This is also why I have chosen to refer to her as Constance throughout this article, even when describing scenes in which she goes by Ash.

[8] Hall, too, notes that the *Odyssey* is apt in speaking for the African diasporic experience, as it provides a precedent for exile, enslavement, and exploitation. She credits *Invisible Man* as "one of the most important reasons for the attachment to the *Odyssey* of African-Americans, and people of African descent" (2012: 55). In *Omeros,* Derek Walcott's Caribbean revision of the poem, the "enforced displacement of slavery is thus patterned after Odysseus' exile, his punishment for offending Poseidon" (2012: 170). McConnell also traces the *Odyssey's* influence on works from the African Diaspora; she devotes a chapter to the film *Sommersby* as a retelling of the *Odyssey* set during Reconstruction and with more prominent roles for the ex-slave analogs to Eumaeus and Eurycleia (2013: 159).

[9] As Guran explains, "Parks' concepts enter into a unique dialogue with the vernacular African American practice of Signifyin(g) and with the concept of *Signifying on the Signifier,* forged by Henry Louis Gates, Jr, which also entails a double-voiced repetition and reversal" (2011: 67). She continues: "By making her characters *Signify on the Signifyin'*, which is a response twice removed from the scripted, canonical discourses, Parks allows them to form new agency and act upon their world, fictional as it may be… in addition they undertake a more radical linguistic and dramatic intervention in the introduction of puns, parody, pastiche, recontextualizations, and rewritings of storylines… and thus critically revise long-lasting representations and norms imposed on African Americans by the canonical dominant culture" (2011: 69, all emphases original).