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THE MEANING OF THE MEANINGLESS IN THE
PLAYS OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS

Andrea J. Goto



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**THE MEANING OF THE MEANINGLESS IN THE
PLAYS OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS**

A Thesis

Presented to

the College of Graduate Studies of
Georgia Southern University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master's of English

In the Department of

Literature and Philosophy

by

Andrea J. Goto

May 2004

April 7, 2004

To the Graduate School:

This thesis, entitled "The Meaning of the Meaningless in the Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks," and written by Andrea Jean Goto is presented to the College of Graduate Studies of Georgia Southern University. I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of English in the Department of Literature and Philosophy.



Linda Rohrer Paige
Supervising Committee Chair

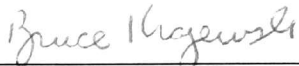
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Ray,
who inspires me every day of my life.

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First and foremost, I wish to thank Dr. Linda Rohrer Paige for introducing me to the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks and challenging me to write about her work. Furthermore, the many hours Dr. Paige dedicated to this thesis—hours filled with painstaking editing, invaluable guidance, and straightforward criticism tempered by encouragement—helped to bring about some of my best writing. Her belief in me as a critical writer and thinker will continue to inspire me as I move toward my educational and professional goals. I would also like to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Caren Town and Dr. David Dudley, for their assistance throughout the thesis writing process. In addition, Dr. Town's twentieth-century American Literature course and Dr. Dudley's African American Literature course both contributed largely to portions of this thesis. Finally, I am indebted to my husband for his endless patience and support, and to my mom and dad for giving me the tools necessary to succeed; with them in my life, all things are possible.

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Introduction: Suzan-Lori Parks and Making Meaning

Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to death.

—Salman Rushdie

What if the color of a person's skin didn't matter? Many ethnic communities are superficially identified by skin color. Though the American culture has become somewhat sensitive to the intrinsic limitations of terms such as "white," "yellow," "red," or "black," realizing that these categorizations too often fail accurately to identify a person's ethnicity, it still relies too heavily on skin color and makes assumptions about individuals based upon their appearance. According to the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, by refraining from compulsively distinguishing, and thus separating racial communities from one another, we could prevent the perpetuation of meaningless assumptions made about an individual's character based upon his or her race. As Parks's plays demonstrate, Americans should challenge racial categorization. Moreover, rather than fearing the disorganization of racial communities; it should *hope* for such a phenomenon. More as an artist than as an African American woman, Parks examines assumptions about her race and then turns these on their heads. In response to the now tired and outdated discourse on racism that pits racial communities against one another, the playwright shares her dream of uniting racial communities through her work. Ironically, the technique she employs to forge a new discourse on race is characterized by obscurity and

ambiguity—in short, by chaos. This technique works precisely because it challenges the racist ideas that are often unconsciously embedded in the minds of Americans.

Like a quiet, destructive mold, lingering racist ideas thrive in the dark shadows of our history and language, threatening our attempts to fully achieve equality. In 1776, Americans supported the idea of a democratic country, as evidenced by the institutionalization of the anti-autocratic sentiments expressed in the Declaration of Independence; however, an emphasis on the differences between racial communities overshadowed this ideal, even as the country became socially aware and progressive. For the past two hundred years, a majority of African American critics have demonstrated again and again a preference for racial equality while still insisting upon an essential difference between the races. This illogical condition fails to incite progress simply because commonality is inherent to the concept of equality. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, tiptoes dangerously close to the paradoxical trap of this “separate but equal” thinking. In his 1897 essay, “The Conservation of the Races,” Du Bois warns against the theory of difference because the culture could potentially misuse this thinking against blacks by equating difference with inferiority (294), which is exactly what happened. All kinds of racist rhetoric ensued—ideas ranging from claims that blacks originated at a different time than whites,¹ to those citing medical conditions that affected only African Americans, such as “Dysæsthesia Æthiopica,” otherwise known as “rascality” (Cartwright 390). Though fearing this misuse of difference theory, Du Bois nonetheless reinforces it, suggesting that profound differences exist between African Americans and

¹ The term for this theory is “polygenesis” (Cartwright 390).

Caucasian Americans, “spiritual, psychical differences—undoubtedly based upon the physical, but ultimately transcending them” (292).

The times have changed, but contemporary critics still echo Du Bois’s position. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks perceives America and its people as racially divided, a rather vague division based upon what she considers the unique black experience. Making this argument, hooks, like Du Bois, prevents African Americans from shedding (metaphorically) their skin color to express themselves in diverse ways. Just as racist rhetoric restricts the possibilities for blacks, critics, such as Du Bois and hooks, restrict the ways in which African Americans can express themselves. They do this by assuming that there is such a thing as a “correct” way to express blackness. Though great strides have been made, criticism founded in difference theory falls short in that it does not allow blacks to access an identity independent from the culture’s construction of “blackness.” Besides, if African Americans do look to this model to inform their identities, they find the black race predominately presented in one way—as oppressed.

Parks comes to the stage when the discourse on race appears most vulnerable to change. Today, in the afterglow of a highly successful Civil Rights movement, the fight for equality has grown stale. True, many equal rights advocates continue to persevere, but there no longer exists the same sense of urgency because America has successfully dismantled legal racial apartheid. Does that mean racism no longer exists? Absolutely not. It only means that now we must look harder and longer into our language, history, and movements to extract that mold of racism harming our democratic potential. The

extraction requires new tools—new ways of seeing, acting, and speaking that may seem unconventional, if not outright strange. Parks rises to the challenge. Her plays, despite all of their ambiguity and strangeness, provide a means to dislodge this mold from the nooks and crannies of our national character.

Using the stage as her medium, Parks creates new ways for African Americans to express an identity that goes beyond the idea of essential blackness *and* oppression. In so doing, she exploits the political possibilities of theater in a way first imagined by Bertolt Brecht. Summarizing Brecht's vision, critics Jeanne Colleran and Jenny Spencer define this instructive theater as one "that would activate its audiences, stage the movements of history as well as the agents who make it, and envision social justice as a necessary, not an impossible, task" (2). Parks responds to Brecht's call by creating a new kind of representation for African Americans on the stage that goes beyond an oversimplified discourse on difference to reveal that "separate" may not mean "equal."

Not alone in exploiting the theater's potential to stage new possibilities for African Americans, Parks, in fact, joins a growing number of African American playwrights who work to expand the notion of blackness by staging it as something other than as oppressed. Similar to Parks, these artists challenge the idea of an essential black identity with unconventional narratives, staging, language, and characters. For example, in Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* (1994), the dialogue between a white and black woman becomes the first step in a move toward social progress. Eugene Nesmith states that by allowing her characters to speak as equals, McCauley endeavors "to break down barriers, and to bring communities closer together" (212). Anna Deavere Smith also

joins Parks and McCauley in the movement to dismantle difference. In *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1993), Smith encourages her audiences to look beyond her characters' skin color to experience both their unique qualities and their similarities. In her play, individual characters are not grouped by race; their likenesses stem from the fact that they all play the witness to a tragedy that occurred at a particular moment in America's history.² Smith emphasizes this point, explaining that in *Fires in the Mirror* "one sees something much more interesting than the stark lines of Black and White. One sees motion, and one hears multiple symphonies" (xxxvi).

A chorus of unique voices exemplifies the postmodern theater to which McCauley, Smith, and Parks belong. Employing unconventionality in their works, each playwright aims to transcend the racial restrictions placed upon individuals, but Parks's plays take the postmodern theater to a new level with their surreal language, characters, location, and history. For this reason, some audiences accuse her of writing plays too difficult or too ambiguous to grasp. Even though the critics acknowledge this complexity as evidence of the playwright's finely crafted art, they argue that Parks does not convey a clear or easy meaning through her work. Compounding this problem is Parks's refusal to provide an interpretation of her work. In fact, at times she seems unconcerned with the "meaning" of her plays. In an interview with Steven Drukman, Parks contends that most critics approach her plays in the wrong way:

² *Fires in the Mirror* recounts a 1991 clash in a Brooklyn community that occurred after a car from a motorcade driven by a Hasidic Jewish Rabbi swerved out of control killing a seven-year-old African American boy who was playing on the sidewalk. In response, a young Jewish scholar was stabbed and killed, allegedly by a young black man, who later was acquitted of the crime.

I think most people think that, say, for example, the Foundling Father [the lead character in *The America Play*] means ‘x’ and if you figure out what that means, what he stands for, then that will enable you to figure out the play. People are welcome to understand the production in any way they choose, but I see that process as completely unhelpful. (59)

Displaying her pleasure in hearing what she considers misinterpretations of her plays, Parks presents her work to the critics saying, “Here it is! You Mr. or Ms. Critic, you guys go away and think about it and exercise your brains and come up with something thrilling!” (qtd. in Drukman 72).

If Parks appears cynical towards her critics, it is probably because they repeatedly read her African American characters as unilaterally oppressed, to which she always responds in the same general spirit by asking, “Can a Black person be onstage and be other than oppressed? For the Black writer, are there Dramas other than race dramas? Does Black life consist of issues other than race issues?” (“An Equation” 21). Defending *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989) against such critics, the artist insists that her play is neither about the “black experience” nor about “sorrows and frustrations and angers of people who have been wronged,” (qtd. in Elam and Rayner, “Unfinished Business” 456). What, then, *are* her plays about?

Parks’s distrust of the critical interpretation of her plays does not suggest that she rejects meaning or that her work is meaningless. In fact, precisely at the moment when the meaning of a character, event, or image becomes obscured, the playwright’s work comes to life. As Christopher Innes insightfully notes, Parks “challenge[s] us to rethink

our categories. [She] destabilizes received views of the world, moving beyond standard feminist and anti-racist positions” (27). Reversing or revising ideas such as “whiteness” and “blackness” or “truth” and “fiction,” the playwright treats them as malleable, dynamic concepts rather than as fixed ones, thus exposing the layers that compose an African American identity and challenging her audiences to rethink racist assumptions.

This study provides the tools to access the meaning of the “meaningless” in three of Parks’s most complex plays: *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1986), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989), and *The America Play* (1992). A close examination of these works reveals how the playwright employs unconventional approaches to language, character, location, and history—the four most fundamental influences upon one’s identity—to destabilize the assumptions about African Americans that attempt to influence the way in which all Americans view this particular community

Chapter I

Playing with the Power of Language in *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*

What upsets me is language. I can't win in your language.
—“Robbie,” from McCauley’s *Sally’s Rape*

Appropriating the characteristics of those in power remains one way to access authority within American society, yet this method makes racial communities very nervous because some fear that it requires them to compromise their ethnic identity. The critic bell hooks often speaks against what she perceives as the inherent dangers of appropriation. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, she posits this theory:

[B]lacks who imitate whites (adopting their values, speech, habits of being, etc.) continue to regard whiteness with suspicion, fear, and even hatred. This contradictory longing to possess the reality of the Other, even though the reality is one that wounds and negates, is expressive of the desire to understand the mystery, to know intimately through imitation, as though such knowing worn like an amulet, a mask, will ward away the evil, the terror. (166)

According to hooks, blacks appropriate the language of the “Other” (referring here to white Americans) as a means to “possess the reality of the Other,” to be more white-like (166). Demonstrating an understanding of the power of language, hooks acknowledges how language maintains the ability to construct, and sometimes de-construct,

communities. Communities form and divide by regional dialects and languages because ways of speaking greatly influence identity. [H]ooks oversimplifies language, however, dividing it into two distinct black and white parts, implying that African Americans speak one way, and white Americans another, a position that Parks rejects outright as a stereotype. The stereotype on which hooks relies presents African Americans as speakers of black vernacular and white Americans as speakers of Standard American English (SAE). However, as current demographics demonstrate, economics, education, and geography all challenge the notion that race alone shapes our ways of speaking. Unlike hooks, Parks's black characters manipulate language, and the power that it evokes, as they see fit.

Disregarding the notion that African Americans appropriate the language of those in power at the expense of their racial identity, Parks distinguishes herself from hooks, who considers this action as one that "wounds and negates" blacks. This discourse, this fear of giving in to the colonial power, exists throughout the world. Outside of America, for example, Eastern Indians have long feared the dangers of assimilating into the colonial British culture. More like Parks than hooks, Salman Rushdie, a British Indian who experienced colonization first hand, regards linguistic appropriation as important to social progress and harmony. In his essay "Imaginary Homelands," Rushdie seeks to calm what he perceives as the irrational fears of Indians who believe that by speaking English they submit to colonial power. He asks his Indian readers to explore the positive effects of assimilation:

How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world? (17-18)

Rushdie questions whether people's living as a cohesive community outweighs the perceived dangers of appropriation. Thus, his questions regarding linguistic appropriation prove to be the same ones Parks explores in her work.

In *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, Parks plays with language to challenge preconceived notions of what "black" and "white" languages sound like, allowing for an expansion of meaning. *Imperceptible Mutabilities* contains three separate narratives, though each part remains thematically related to the whole. Parks stages three African American women together in an apartment battling a roach problem in "Part 1: Snails." In the second narrative, Mrs. Aretha Saxon prepares for emancipation and plots her departure to the North. The final narrative tells the story of Mr. Sergeant Smith's family, who patiently wait for him finally to receive "Distinction" for his military service so that he can return home with honor (58). Though most of Parks's plays use language unconventionally, "Part 1: Snails" best illustrates the power of language by addressing well-known assumptions evoked by ways of speaking.

“Part 1: Snails” begins with Molly explaining to Charlene that she is contemplating suicide because she cannot master the “standard” language. Expelled from school for her inability to pronounce “ask” instead of “axe,” Molly must now look for work (25). In the workplace, she again finds herself rejected because of the way she speaks. Retelling the incident to Charlene, Molly says, “Straight up. ‘Talk right or youre outta here!’ I couldnt. I walked. Nope. ‘Speak correctly or you’ll be dismissed!’ Yeah. Yeah. Nope. Nope. Job sends me there. Basic skills. Now Job dont want me no more” (26). Molly finds herself dismissed because she fails to learn the apparently important lesson that that “‘SK’ is /sk/ as in ‘ask’” (25). As the voice of the subaltern, or colonized person, Molly expresses the cultural assumption that the black vernacular remains an undesirable pattern of speech in certain American communities.

Parks juxtaposes the women’s black vernacular with SAE to further demonstrate her awareness of how certain patterns of speech elicit racist assumptions. The Naturalist/Dr. Lutzky, a scientist turned roach exterminator, represents the stereotypical SAE speaker. Charlene describes him as an “exterminator professional with uh Ph.D. He wore white cause white was what thuh job required” (28). Regardless of the race of the actor playing Lutzky (Parks refuses to specify in the text), his “wearing white” evokes multiple meanings. Literally speaking, a scientist wears a white lab coat, but this character, metaphorically, covers himself in whiteness by appropriating the language associated with that community. Thus, Lutzky “performs whiteness” even if a black man dons this role. When his linguistic performance collides with the women’s stereotypically African American linguistic one, Lutzky becomes confused as to which

are the lower life forms—the women or the cockroaches—and turns his exterminating gun on the women.

Through the violent intersection of two linguistic communities, Parks illustrates how such divisions deepen people's notions of inequality because her characters, like many Americans, make sweeping generalizations about language and its speakers. Linguistic discrimination is yet another by-product of the essentialist thinking that the playwright seeks to revise. By performing "whiteness," an "exercise" conventionally associated with power in racist America, Lutzky has the privilege of rejecting the way the dispossessed speak. On the other hand, as Alisa Solomon points out, the female characters are forced to "negotiate between two disparate but intersecting worlds"—worlds distinguished, in part, by ways of speaking (76). To "negotiate" implies an act of compromise or sharing which allows people to come to an agreement; in other words, Charlene and Molly must adapt to their environment. They must slowly, but deliberately (almost "imperceptibly"), change their ways of speaking in order to access power, epitomized as education and employment, in America. At this point, Parks does something new; she *embraces* appropriation as a means for survival—and does not apologize for it.

Through her characters, Parks proves that linguistic appropriation does not require African Americans to relinquish their "blackness" because such linguistic patterns are only generally ascribed to particular races. In particular, "black vernacular" is a misnomer, given that all speakers are not black. Similar to all dialects, black vernacular can represent a racially and regionally diverse community of speakers; hence, dialects fail

to serve as accurate markers of racial identity. In her interview with David Savran, Parks explains that “[t]here’s a kind of joy with language shared by a lot of black people I know and a lot of Southern people I know, white and black. The joy of playing with words and the sound of words. It’s not black or white, it’s just a love of saying things [. . .]” (157). Parks’s characters thus exist in a transitional space, sometimes using, sometimes losing, black vernacular.

Illustrating how language repeatedly fails to express or define blackness, Parks’s characters remain unchanged in spite of their varying use and *disuse* of black vernacular. For example, Charlene and Molly “sound like” very typical Anglo-American names, but as the drama unfolds, Parks textually renames Charlene, Molly, and Veronica as “Chona,” “Mona,” and “Verona”—names that sound ethnic. Perhaps surprising to readers, the renamed characters remain physically the same women, just as they do when their speech patterns change. Charlene/Chona uses Standard English as a survival tool. In an attempt to prevent Lutzky from exterminating them, Charlene/Chona says, “I am going to make a peach cobbler. [. . .] I’ll cut you off a big slice. Enough for your company. Youre a company man” (35). Just as she pacifies Lutzky by offering him pie, she soothes him by addressing him in a way in which he is familiar (in his same dialect). Mona’s way of speaking, on the other hand, troubles the doctor: “You are confusing the doctor, Mona. Mona, the doctor is confused” (33). Charlene/Chona’s transition to a Standard English speaker appears subtle, again, almost imperceptible, but along with the pie, it ultimately prevents the women’s extermination. Her linguistic appropriation thus becomes a clever and powerful vehicle for survival.

Parks also stages a space in which two ways of speaking can exist harmoniously, and the speakers, therefore, contest assumptions about their social worth (as evidenced by their dialects). Veronica/Verona concludes “Part 1: Slugs” with a speech that combines the black vernacular, when speaking of her childhood, and Standard English, when speaking of herself as an adult professional. Though this may seem to reinforce generalizations about speakers of the black vernacular and SAE, a closer look reveals that the speech actually challenges them. After her speech (the longest, uninterrupted monologue in “Part 1: Snails”), Veronica/Verona retells the story of a stray dog that was brought into the veterinary hospital where she works as a euthanasia specialist (36-37). She says that she classified the dog simply as “black dog” before putting it down (36). Audiences can interpret the “black dog” as a metaphor for how racist America views African Americans—as strays that are too much trouble to care for and, therefore, must be put down. Further textual evidence supports this reading. For instance, in the previous section, Molly/Mona speaks to herself in the third person as if she were a dog: “Lie Mona lie Mona down. [. . .] Down, Mona, bites!” (34). But Parks also allows for a different, more meaningful reading in the scene following the one in which Veronica/Verona puts down the dog; she explains why she had to dissect the black dog: “I had to see I just had to see the heart of such a disagreeable domesticated thing” (37). Not surprisingly, she discovers no essential difference between the black dog’s heart and that of other dogs: “But no. Nothing different. Everything in its place. Do you know what that means? Everything in its place. That’s all” (37). Thus, by implication, a superficial signifier such as “color” fails to indicate an authentic distinction between

individuals, just as speakers are misrepresented by assumptions made about their speech patterns. Veronica/Verona makes her presentation in two dialects, but the same woman stands unchanged before the audience. Whereas the language of these female characters may change, the fact that they are human beings never does.

To understand how Parks plays with language, one must be familiar with theories of language. For example, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin explains that “[a]ll language communicates itself” (63). He expresses linguistic theory with the following example: “The language of this lamp [. . .] communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is *communicable*, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For in language the situation is this: *the linguistic being of all things is their language*” (63). This example demonstrates what the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure deemed the arbitrary relationship between the two facets of the sign: the “signifier” (the word) and “signified” (the thing represented by the word), a relationship Roy Harris and Talbot J. Taylor explain by noting, “Nothing about the monosyllable *horse* determines that it should mean ‘horse’ rather than ‘cow’” (178, 185).

According to Saussure and Benjamin, when any culture attempts to deduce authentic information about the signified’s mental being from the signifier, it does so in error. Therefore, the term “white,” when applied to a person, carries all sorts of social and political connotations and implications that may—or may not—accurately represent the signified (usually it does not). This is what Haïke Frank refers to as “symbolic meaning” in his essay on Parks’s use of language (13). The culture mistakenly views this

“symbolic meaning” as an authentic expression of the named thing’s mental being. These symbolic meanings, even though arbitrarily ascribed, are often assigned value; thus, they help shape cultural assumptions about the object’s identity.

Parks’s plays reinforce the arbitrary relationship of the signified/signifier to dismantle racist notions embedded in language. Many critics explore Parks’s inventive use of language, often referring to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. In his essay “The Instability of Meaning in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play*,” Frank best summarizes Gates’s linguistic theory of “signifying on the signifyin’,” explaining that “one signifier can be made to carry more than one meaning as is the case when a speaker of the black vernacular consciously empties the white signifier of its original white signified, substituting it with a different signified that expresses the black experience” (6). Parks plays with the arbitrarily ascribed “meaning” of the signifier by translating it into the black vernacular, thus uncovering layers of meaning.

The best demonstration of Parks “signifying on the signifyin’” occurs in *The Death of the Last Black Man*. The play retraces the tragic life of BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON, the metaphoric embodiment of the African American slave experience. Existing outside of linear time as a ghost-like figure, this character re-experiences the worst parts of slavery: lynching, beating, execution, and historic erasure. Ambiguous figures, such as BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK (his wife), QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT, BEFORE COLUMBUS, HAM, and a few others, complement his story with their own narratives patched together throughout the work. But it is QUEEN-

THEN-PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT who signifies on the signifyin' when she says, "Before Columbus thuh worl usta be *roun* they put uh /d/ on thuh end of roun makin round. Thusly they set in motion thuh end" (102). QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT explains how the black vernacular thrived during the pre-colonial time in America—a time when a people existed free from oppression. Making the world "round," Columbus's colonial spirit brought a phonemic end to world as it was once known: "Thuh /d/ thing ended things ended" (102). Thus, in the play, the word "round," as opposed to "roun," symbolizes the profound influence of colonial power. Joking, "Without that /d/ we coulda gone on spinnin forever," QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT plays on the colonial justification that the oppressor comes to the rescue of its uncivilized brethren (102). While the difference between "round" and "roun" clearly remains a matter of dialect outside the play, within it, the shift denotes how ways of speaking change more than just the way we say the word, it changes the way we view the *world*.

In *The Death of the Last Black Man*, the pre-colonial, or "pre-Columbus," America appears a very different place than today. During pre-colonial times, fearing the unknown made men humble. Humble, that is, only until science reassured the would-be explorer that his ship could not possibly fall off the edge of the earth because it is round. With his confidence restored by science and rational thinking—hallmarks of civilization—the once timid explorer metamorphoses into the relentless colonist. The aptly named figure, BEFORE COLUMBUS, retells the story:

The popular thinking of the day back in them days was that the world was flat. They thought the world was flat. Back then when they thought the world was flat they were afeared and stayed at home. They wanted to go out back then when they thought the world was flat but the water had in it dragons of which meaning these dragons they were afeard back then when they thought the world was flat. They stayed at home. Them thinking the world was flat kept it roun. Them thinking the sun revolved around the earth kept them satellite-like. They figured out the truth and scurried out. Figuring out the truth put them in their place and they scurried out to put us in ours. (103)

Highlighting the hypocritical justifications of colonialism, BEFORE COLUMBUS voices the colonial position that considers scientific knowledge a measure of civility, even when its actions are often barbaric. Scurrying out of Europe like hungry rodents, the colonists succeeded for many years in holding down native peoples, the ones BEFORE COLUMBUS represents.

Understanding the figure BEFORE COLUMBUS requires some knowledge about the debate that surrounds the Columbus myth. Attacking this myth, hooks perceives that America's willingness to celebrate Columbus as the country's founder illustrates the kind of thinking that prevents this country from achieving racial harmony. Rather than celebrate, hooks contends that Columbus's "discovery" of America represents "an occasion to grieve for what this world was like before the coming of the white man" (*Outlaw Culture* 198). The cultural values of colonial societies that supported the

combined colonization and enslavement of indigenous Americans also justified the enslavement of Africans, and later, African Americans. Whereas hooks grieves for the time before Columbus, Parks takes a proactive stance, asking her audience to remember this time and to use this memory to help inform our future as we try to purge the racist ideology that exists in language and “turn back to a concern for the collective harmony and life of the planet” (199)—as Parks would say, to turn back to the time before Columbus when the world was “*roun*.”

The language of Parks’s plays goes beyond mere dialogue or narrative. In *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, speech patterns and the characters using them challenge preconceived notions about speech communities. *The Death of the Last Black Man* demonstrates how words reconstructed in new ways can express histories, locations, and ideas that have either been long overlooked, or freshly discovered. Certainly, the language of Parks’s plays pushes the boundaries of expression, yet this technique may threaten to distance the playwright’s audiences. Beyond being difficult to read, many passages are hard for actors to speak, and nearly impossible for audiences to comprehend. Passages from *The Death of the Last Black Man*, in particular, remain some of the most complex in all of Parks’s plays. Phrases such as “Do in dip diddly did-did thuh drop” (116), and “Sure ya dontcha sure gaw ya dontcha sure ya dontcha do yall gaw” (117), may seem like nonsense, but by making it appear so, Parks alerts her audiences of the power of language, meaning derived from seeming meaninglessness. Unable to overlook what her characters say by simply watching the action or their expressions, Parks’s audiences must hear the sounds and understand how they are employed to gather

meaning. In short, the playwright wants her audience to think about the language.

Rather than simply stringing words together in the same conventional way, Parks seems to employ unconventionality as a way to remind her audiences of the profound influence their ways of speaking have upon them and those who listen.

Parks's joy in playing with language may stem from the arbitrary nature of words, allowing her to invent modes of expression for uncharted, or un-named, feelings or locations. Celebrating the infinite nature of language, Benjamin explains, "[A]ll language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, defines its frontier" (64). Believing in what Benjamin calls language's intrinsic ambiguity and infinity, Parks fills her plays with dynamic language, allowing the words and their speakers to express multiple meanings. Parks, likewise, resists writing in any single mode of expression about any one thing, but in doing so, she must continually dodge what Alisa Solomon refers to as "white institutions wanting to fix that flattening—d onto her roun' writing" (80). Thus, Parks fills her plays with dynamic language, encouraging words to live, mutate, and, most of all, to express multiple meanings that expand beyond the conventionally symbolic. This use of language directly corresponds to the way the playwright strives to represent African Americans: "We should endeavor to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety," she claims ("An Equation" 22).

Chapter II

Possessing Stereotypes and Unconventional Roles: The Characters in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* and *The America Play*

possession. 1. the action of possessing, or the condition of being possessed. 2. the holding or having of something as one's own, or being inhabited and controlled by a demon spirit.

—Epigram to Parks's "Possession"

Paul Laurence Dunbar, a well-known African American poet, is best remembered for his dialect poetry. In his poem "The Old Cabin," the speaker acknowledges the horrors of slavery but sentimentalizes over the loss of the folk plantation tradition following Reconstruction:

Dough de time was mighty tryin',
In dese houahs somehow hit seem
Dat a brightah light come slippin'
Thoo de kivahs of my dream. (5-8)

Criticizing the poet for his sentimentality towards folk life during slavery, some critics accuse Dunbar of engaging in "the minstrel tradition and the worst of plantation stereotyping" (iii). Though Dunbar defends his poetry against such allegations, his accusers, nonetheless, regard his work as minstreling—or pandering—the folk tradition to a white audience. The characters in his poems, similar to the one in "The Old Cabin," reflect a stereotype or an archetype that originated during Dunbar's time, that of the

newly freed slave at once thankful for his freedom, yet unconvinced of this capacity to survive as a free man.

True, folk life stereotypes promote racism by misrepresenting African Americans as simple people, reliant upon whites, but Dunbar's most skeptical critics may overlook the possibility that by taking possession of the stereotype, the poet attempts to dismantle it, just as Parks does in her plays. Reductive "typing"—whether by stereotyping, "archetyping," or limiting the roles available to a person based upon their race—strips the individual of his or her autonomy. Reclaiming these "types" by putting them in her plays *The Death of the Last Black Man* and *The America Play*, Parks disrupts any poignancy of black stereotypes, revealing their absurdity. Furthermore, she places her characters in unconventional roles to defy the limitations for African Americans that had been historically set by powerful white American men.

No clearer demonstration of absurd and oppressive stereotypes exists than in Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man*. In this play, the lead characters' names, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON and BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK, are reminiscent of popular images of folk plantation life. Few critics would argue that such images figure as authentic representations of African Americans at any time in American history, and yet these names evoke "types" with which the culture seems entirely familiar. In her essay, Elinor Fuchs identifies BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON and his wife, BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK, as "two rural characters," but more importantly, she considers them potential "stereo-archetypes, archetypal in their rural simplicity and mutual devotion" (48). Taking possession of the stereotype, the

playwright destabilizes its traditional meaning, its power. She does not, however, challenge the folk stereotype by creating folk characters that exhibit a deep, personal psyche. Parks creates her characters in the exact image of the two-dimensional stereotype to expose how it is completely nonrepresentational of African Americans.

Fated to live out his life as the embodiment of a folk stereotype, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON remains trapped in the worst part of African American history. Parks illustrates how his stereotypical slave experience, like his stereotypical name, operates as a double oppression. Oppression renders BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON unsure of what, if anything, really belongs to him:

I kin tell whats mines by what gots my looks. Ssmymethod. Try it by testin it and it turns out true. Every time. Fool proofly. Look down at my foot and wonder it its mine. Foot mine? I kin ask it and foot answers back with uh “yes Sir”—not like you and me say “yes Sir” but uh “yes Sir” peculiar tuh thuh foot. Foot mine? I kin ask it and through uh look that looks like my looks thuh foot give me back uh “yes Sir.” Ssmymethod. Try by thuh test tuh pass for true. Move on tuh thuh uther foot. Foot mine? And uh nuther “yes Sir” so feets mine is understood. Got uh forearm thats up for question check myself out teeth by tooth. Melon mines?—. Dont look like me. (106-07).

Taking inventory of his body parts as he would goods on a store shelf, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON illustrates the utter dislocation and alienation of his character. Unsure that his body parts are his own, the character, a bodily manifestation of a stereotype,

exemplifies the oppressive power and yet absurd nature of stereotypes. Quite simply, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON cannot determine how his body bears any resemblance to a watermelon, though his name suggests such a relationship. Revealing the ridiculousness of the stereotype, he asks his wife if he is, in fact, a watermelon: “Was we green and stripedly when we first comed out?” (107). Though BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON does not literally resemble a watermelon, he embodies the oppression characterized by the folk stereotype.

The burden of the stereotype that he bears limits the roles that BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON has available to him. For example, because of the stereotype, he cannot find success in the corporate world traditionally comprised of white males. In Parks’s play, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON believes that white America requires that he present himself in a way that is consistent with the stereotype. For instance, in order to work, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON thinks he must look like a melon from the melon patch by donning a “stripey [suit coat] with thuh fancy patch pockets” (127). Not surprisingly, his playing this part threatens to kill him because what he mimics, like the name he bears, relies upon a stereotype that originated at a time in America’s racist past:

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: [. . .]. Let me loosen your collar for you you comed home after uh hard days work. Your suit: tied. Days work was runnin from them we know aint chase-ted you. You comed back home after uh hard days work such uh hard days work that you cant breathe you. Now.

BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Dont take it off just loosen it. Dont move thuh tree branch let thuh tree branch be.

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Your days work aint like any others day work: you bring your tree branch home. Let me loosen thuh tie let me loosen thuh neck-lace let me loosen up thuh noose that stringed him up let me leave thuh tree branch be. Let me rub your wrists. (118)

BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON's tie, a metaphorical rope, hangs him. By showing the profound influences stereotypes can exert upon a character, Parks demonstrates the challenges African Americans face in a culture that mistakes racist stereotypes for truth.

The stymied condition that Parks stages makes BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON incapable of *doing* anything—he remains perpetually enslaved: “Hands behind my back. This time tied” (118).³ In an interview with Savran, Parks argues that the “black police”—those voices responsible for “making sure that you’re black enough”—are at least partially to blame when African Americans feel trapped by an oppressed history (157). She explains that the black police “mak[e] sure that your writing is black enough, who you’re dating is black enough, and what comes out of your mouth is black enough, and what you wear is black enough” (157). As Parks suggests, the essential blackness that the “black police” demand of African Americans makes little room for personal representation—just as racial stereotypes hamper the ways in which blacks can express their identities.

³ He remains incapable, that is, until near the end of the play when, it appears, he may be able to move beyond the oppression through the cathartic experience of telling [his]story and even writing it down.

For example, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON's name exhibits his inability to express himself as anything other than a metaphor for the folk experience. Referred to simply as "Black Man," the character could really stand for *any* African American man as though no differences exist amongst them. Parks's figure thus remains a representation of the "black experience" constructed over time, a burden that the playwright considers impossible and absurd given her insistence that "there is no single 'Black Experience'" ("An Equation" 21).

As a metaphor, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON illustrates the paradoxical trap African Americans may encounter when constructing identity. The "black police" insist upon a universal representation of African Americans, but such representation enslaves individuals by insisting that they express themselves in only one way—in other words, as a stereotype. If an African American rejects the expectations of the "black police," however, and assimilates into the culture that once oppressed him or her, this individual duly risks playing the minstrel to white America. Using BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON as the proverbial "Every[black]man," who cannot express himself beyond his name or the oppressive history it signifies, Parks stages the paradox with which African Americans live everyday.

Not leaving African American women out of the picture, *The Death of the Last Black Man's* other lead character, BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK, also bears a name that casts her into a stereotypical folk role. Representing the stereotypical image of the black female experience, BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK is a politically ineffectual, yet loving figure. As both black and female, her character illustrates how she

is doubly stripped of power as she helplessly watches her husband endure physical torture. True, her name is an absurd representation, but it expresses a double meaning. BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK is literally a black woman with fried drumsticks to offer to her husband—the only thing she *can* offer. Along with love, chicken, of all things, serves as communion, a balm offered for her husband’s suffering. Trying to convince BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON to take what she can give, she says, “Fixed uh good big hen dinner for you. Get yourself uh mouthful afore it rots” (107); however, as a metaphorical figure rather than as an individual, he does not need food to survive. He hungers for something more than she can possibly give.

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK’s offering of food conjures up the “Mammy” caricature, a familiar figure for most American audiences. In his essay on this caricature, Phil Patton describes Mammy as the “Southern earth mother, source of nutrition, wisdom, comfort, and discipline, cook, advisor, mediator” (par. 2). Though loving and firm, the caricature Patton describes lacks power:

Nurturing and protective, self-sacrificing, long-suffering, wise, often world-weary but never bitter, Mammy mixed kindness with sternness and wrapped her own identity inside the weight of her heartiness, her own sexuality inside her role as surrogate mother, teacher, and cook. [. . .] And she never escapes her sense of the limitations of being black. (par. 5)

Though tending to her husband rather than to a white slaveholder’s family, BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK resembles the Mammy caricature, making force-feeding her husband her “purpose” because this is all of which she feels capable.

Parks again takes possession of racist stereotypes in *The America Play*, but instead of a caricature she uses a familiar nursery rhyme founded on racist rhetoric. In the play, a black man known as The Foundling Father leaves his wife and son behind when he goes out West to play Lincoln, performing the reenactment of the President's assassination. The familiar racist jingle, which begins, "Eeny meeny miney moe," still exists on today's playgrounds; however, the second portion of the rhyme, "catch a nigger by the toe," has been revised to say, "catch a *tiger* by the toe." Parks resurrects the racist version of the rhyme by taking the image of the "nigger toe"—a Brazil nut—and assigning it to a figure in the play. The Foundling Father explains that he names his son Brazil after the nuts "in a fit of meanspirit after the bad joke about fancy nuts and old mens toes" (162). David Pilgrim and Phillip Middleton's analysis of the word "nigger" sheds light on why The Foundling Father uses the Brazil nut/"nigger toe" as his son's namesake. Given that the word "nigger" reinforces "the stereotype of the lazy, stupid, dirty, worthless parasite," The Foundling Father names his son in the image of the "nigger toe" because "his son looked like a nobody" when he was born (Pilgrim and Middleton, par. 4; *The America Play* 162).

BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON does not look like a watermelon, just as Brazil does not *look* like a nut. Furthermore, a Brazil nut does not look like a black man's toe anymore than a peanut looks like a white man's toe. Though initially a racist and absurd image, Parks refocuses it, allowing the stereotype to express something new. In this instance, the image implies Brazil's emotional instability. For example, though the son does not look like a nut, he does act rather "nutty." Learning the profession of weeping

from his father, Brazil perfects his job over time. He discusses with his mother how he determined the appropriate way to mourn over the death of a family friend:

BRAZIL: Couldnt choose between wailin or gnashin. Weepin sobbin or moanin. Went for gnashing. More to it. Gnashed for her and her like I have never gnashed. I woulda tore at my coat but thats extra. Chipped uh tooth. One in thuh front.

LUCY: You did your job son.

BRAZIL: I did my job. (176)

Diverging from the association of Brazil nuts as “nigger toes,” Parks strips the racist connotations from the nut, making a riff on Brazil’s “nuttiness.”

In addition to playing with the powerful stereotypes of folk tradition, *The Death of the Last Black Man* evokes the infamous African American archetype originating from Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Parks recasts Bigger Thomas, Wright’s young black character who murders a white woman, in *The Death of the Last Black Man* as her character AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER. By turning Bigger Thomas into an archetype of looming black potential, what Elam and Rayner refer to as “the prototypical, angry, savage, and dangerous black brute,” Parks exposes racist assumptions about African Americans that trap them within restricted roles (“Unfinished Business” 453).

Elam and Rayner rightly interpret Parks’s version of Bigger Thomas as a downtrodden victim, one who suffers when others control his representation, which proves far more insightful than a pop-culture reading which envisions Bigger as nothing more than a “black brute.” To say that Bigger Thomas fuels racist assumptions about

violent and dangerous black men, or to say that Wright's novel provides an unfair representation of all African Americans would be to misinterpret the text. As Elam and Rayner suggest, *Bigger* serves as an example of a man taunted by the possibilities of America because the culture continually denies him, and black men in general, access to opportunity.

Wright risks critical attack for creating a character that mirrors, at least to some degree, the black brute stereotype, yet the fear of unintentionally perpetuating racist stereotypes should not restrict a writer's creative license. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright argues against the claim that *Bigger* damages the black man's image in America because he does not represent "blackness" positively. According to Wright, *Bigger* defies racial categories, suggesting that there exists "literally millions of him, everywhere" (441). In fact, Wright describes *Bigger* more as a condition than a man: "he is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out" (447). Changing the face of African American literature, Wright depicts a character living within a restricted reality, frustrated by the fact that infinite possibilities exist just beyond his reach. He explains that literature written by African Americans prior to *Native Son* fails in getting "down to the dark roots of life" (443), a condition not confined to any one race.

Critics note that Parks, too, shares Wright's desire to expose the "dark roots of life." Shawn-Marie Garrett explains that the playwright's characters "rarely 'do the right thing,'" and they, inadvertently, perpetuate the fear that any unfavorable representations

may threaten an entire racial community (132). Instead of blaming Parks for omitting romantic lead characters from her plays, her audience should understand that her interest lies in what is present, not what is absent from her work. She intends her audiences to recognize that culture constructs stereotypes as a means of supporting absurd and racist assumptions. By understanding how a reading culture misappropriates Bigger Thomas, seeing him as a racial archetype rather than as a representation of the modern condition, Parks's audiences can best approach AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER. Parks's "Bigger," lifted straight from the pages of *Native Son*, demonstrates the effects of being "icon-ified" as a representative African American man, as a symbol rather than as a human being.

In *The Death of the Last Black Man*, written some fifty years after *Native Son*, Parks illustrates how Bigger Thomas's character has grown so out of control that his original purpose in the novel (as defined by Wright) has been lost or obscured at best, a distortion AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER identifies when he says, "I am grown too big for thuh world thats me" (116). As an archetype, AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER fears that he has lost control over his representation, thus he begs to return to the pages of the book from which he originated: "I would like tuh fit back in thuh storybook from which I camed" (116). The oppressive stereotype that he comes to bear, like most of Parks's stereotypical character constructions, forces him to beg for his freedom, not from the pages that constructed him, but from the culture that continues to misuse him, as made evident when he cries out, "WILL SOMEBODY TAKE THESE STRAPS OFF UH ME PLEASE? I WOULD LIKE TO USE MY HANDS" (110).

Parks exercises her ability to challenge the tradition which places these “straps” upon African Americans by casting her characters in unconventional roles, those traditionally possessed by white characters. Because the theater relies upon the visual experience, Parks does not expect to prevent her audiences from “seeing” race. She does, however, seem set upon challenging them to see *beyond* it. Black actors generally perform Parks’s plays, but this decision really remains up to the director, given that the playwright does not insist upon the race of her characters. The absence of such direction from Parks is, in itself, a political statement to directors, actors, or audiences that may assume whiteness unless otherwise informed.⁴ Elaborating on this insistence in an interview with Savran, Parks makes the point that her audiences do not always respond well to ambiguous, undefined characters:

I guess I don’t specify [the race of the characters]. Maybe I should so that everyone will know they’re black. But in other people’s plays, they don’t say they’re white. Sam Shepard [she picks up *Seven Plays*] . . . let’s see, he’s a damn good writer. “Dodge, in his sixties. Hallie, his wife, mid-sixties. Tilden, their oldest son.” The problem is that as the years go by, people will continue to assume that these people are white and assume that my people are whatever they want them to be—a lot of lightening up as time passes, or whitening out. (156)

⁴ This assumption also occurs when directors, actors, and audiences assume that black actors will perform in plays written by African Americans.

Parks admits that she has her preference as to whether black actors or white actors play certain roles, but she acknowledges that “everybody else doesn’t have to share that preference” (156).

Parks’s plays open the door to new territory where one cannot presume to know or predict the roles of her characters—these roles, *obscured*, are not simply reversals. Through this technique, the playwright encourages her audiences to move beyond preconceived notions of race and character. Just as the role of the African American mother/wife became obscured during slavery, it becomes ambiguous in Parks’s plays. In “Part 3: Open House” of *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, the newly emancipated Aretha Saxon bids goodbye to the family that she has served her whole life. As the family prepares for her departure North, their departing words illuminate Aretha’s humble role within the home. Patient, she remains submissive to the children, Anglor and Blanca, for whom she has cared, while they treat her disrespectfully:

ANGLOR: Today is her last day. She’s gone slack.

BLANCA: Is today your last day, Aretha?

ANGLOR: Yes.

ARETHA: Smile for your daddy, honey. Mr. Charles, I cant get em tuh smile.

BLANCA: Is it? Is it your last day?!

ANGLOR: You see her belongings in the boxcar, don’t you?

BLANCA: Where are you going, Aretha? You’re going to get my doll!

ARETHA: Wish I had some teeth like yours, Miss Blanca. So straight and cleaned. So pretty and white.—Yes, Mr. Charles, I'm trying. Mr. Anglor. Smile. Smile for show.

BLANCA: You're going away, aren't you? AREN'T YOU?

ANGLOR: You have to answer her.

BLANCA: You have to answer me. (41-42)

Aretha's clearly established role at the beginning of "Part 3: Open House" turns hazy near the end as audiences begin to wonder who *is* Aretha Saxon? Who is her husband? Who are the children? The initial clarity—yet later confusion—about Aretha's character is grounded in the assumption that Parks makes about how her audiences will perceive a character based upon his or her race.

Parks encourages such assumptions about her characters, then destabilizes them as "Part 3: Open House" progresses. Aretha Saxon maintains her black, female self throughout the narrative, but her name seems problematic from the start: reading Aretha's name, the former slaveholder says, "Funny name for you, Mrs. Saxon" (45). "Saxon" refers to the Germanic portion of the term "Anglo-Saxon," which denotes the white colonizers of America. Therefore, the character's name suggests that white slaveholders have "colonized" her black person, a mark that she will bear as long as she keeps the name. Parks further demonstrates the power of slave names in "Part 1: Snails" when Chona instructs Verona to sign Dr. Lutzky's extermination invoice. Verona says for Mona to sign "X, Mona," with "X" signifying the rejection of her slave name (35). In "Part 3: Open House," the slaveholder requests that Aretha sign her dead husband's

name: “An ‘X’ will do,” he says (45). Historically, slaveholders would sometimes rename enslaved Africans with “Americanized” names. As the formerly enslaved gained freedom, some wished to reclaim their heritage by assuming African names. For example, Malcolm X altogether rejected an assigned surname, explaining, “For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ‘Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears” (Haley 203).⁵ Unlike Malcolm X, Aretha retains her name and, perhaps ironically, her power.

Viewing Aretha’s character as one dispossessed is a perspective shared by Parks’s critics who remain always alert for representations of oppression simply because of the character’s “blackness.” In spite of this reading, there exists the possibility that the play celebrates Aretha’s agency. For example, “Saxon” represents just as much an expression of Anglo-Saxon history as it does an expression of Aretha’s character. Perhaps by taking possession of the name, “wearing” it unapologetically, Aretha has made it hers. Similar to Parks, Rushdie considers this kind of appropriation as positive because through it one expresses a dynamic, rather than a stagnant, identity. Speaking as a native Indian about his adoption of the English language, Rushdie encourages others in postcolonial times to embrace the colonizer’s language because the native language, like the native Indian, has undergone a profound change:

The word “translation” comes, etymologically, from the Latin for “bearing across”. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is

⁵ Malcolm X explains: “The receipt of my ‘X’ meant that forever after in the nation of Islam, I would be known as Malcolm X. Mr. Muhammed taught that we would keep this ‘X’ until God Himself returned and gave us a Holy Name from His own mouth” (Haley 203).

normally opposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained. (17)

Rather than perpetuating the idea of a colonized figure, Aretha's name represents an identity likened to Rushdie's "translated character." This dynamic concept of identity thus allows Parks to create characters who exhibit a wider range of self-expression than simply oppressed.

Aretha Saxon's family name may also serve as a reminder that African Americans and Euro Americans share, at least, a few similar historical narratives. Traditionally referred to as "African-Americans," the race suffers from compulsive "over-hyphenation." For example, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison claims that within the United States "Africanist people struggle to make the term ['American'] applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen" (47). White Americans, who somehow assume that "American" means white, seem to forget that they too come from a "hyphenated" and colonized history as "Anglo-Saxons." Viewed this way, Aretha Saxon's character reminds audiences that both white and black Americans have roots in a past marked by violence and colonization. Aretha's full name thus serves as an expression of an inclusive human experience, rather than an exclusive racial one. By combining "Aretha" (one may think of Aretha Franklin) with "Saxon," Parks prevents the character's identity from being interpreted as either entirely black or white—an inclusion that emphasizes her membership to the *human* race.

In his essay on *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, James Frieze acknowledges that Parks stages dynamic identities that transcend race, and, therefore, oppression. He writes, “To show how Black people carry the relationship to Whites within them, and to think beyond that relationship, Parks dramatizes Black people relating to each other and themselves, trying on Blacknesses which are defining but also mutable” (527). Exhibiting this mutable blackness, Parks’s characters first appear conventionally oppressed, but then Parks turns that oppression on its head, transforming them into powerful figures.

Pairing Aretha Saxon’s ambiguous character with another ambiguous figure, Parks further problematizes how she expects her audiences to perceive her characters in terms of race. Charles, whose name brings to mind the Anglo tradition, is both the name of Aretha’s former slaveholder *and* that of her deceased husband. Aretha asks Miss Faith, a character which embodies the historical record, “You wouldnt know nothing ubhout uh Charles, wouldja? Charles was my master. Charles Saxon?” (51). Perhaps Charles Saxon and the slaveholder are one and the same. Perhaps the master raped Aretha, or maybe she willingly engaged in a relationship—or perhaps these nebulous lines also intimate that Charles Saxon was a tyrannical husband. Regardless of the audiences’ interpretations, the various possibilities of meaning obstruct any one reading, thus allowing a dynamic and multifaceted meaning.

Two dream sequences occur in “Part 3: Open House” in which Aretha and Charles (as the slaveholder) engage in a dialogue. In the first one, Aretha tries to secure a home, explaining to a dismissive Charles that her deceased husband is unable to sign the property documents:

ARETHA: We split up now.

CHARLES: Divorce?

ARETHA: Divorce?

CHARLES: The breakup of those married as sanctioned by the book.

Illegal, then. Non legal? I see. Were you legally wed, Charles? Wed by the book? Didn't—"jump the broom" or some such nonsense, eh?

Perhaps it was an estrangement. Estrangement then? You will follow him, I suppose.

ARETHA: He's—He's dead, mister Sir.

CHARLES: I'll mark "yes," then. Sign here. An "X" will do, Charles. (45)

In this scene, Charles's response to Aretha demonstrates implicit racism. Not only does he presume to know her answers before she gives them, but also he insists that she act agreeably, marking "yes," when clearly a "yes" does not convey Aretha's circumstances. Charles's condescending and racially bigoted reply to Aretha turns to shallow impatience as he dismisses her concerns:

CHARLES: There is a line—

ARETHA: Mehbe—

CHARLES: that—that has formed itself behind you—

ARETHA: Mehbe—do I gotta go—mehbe—maybe I could stay awhile.

Here.

CHARLES: The book says you expire. No option to renew.

[.....]

CHARLES: Move on, move on, move on! (45)

Ironically, Aretha appropriates Charles's position of power in the second dream sequence, which also brings "Part 3: Open House" to a close. She reclaims her power by making an "Historical Amendment" (53), which renders Charles powerless, as demonstrated when Aretha tells him to smile for the camera, to play the happy subaltern: "Dont care what you say you done, Charles. We're makin us uh histrionical amendment here, K? Give us uh smile. Uh big smile for the book. [. . .] Mmm goin tuh take my place aside thuh most high" (53). Charles desperately tries to come up with a reason for Aretha to stay, but she rejects his attempts saying, "Dont matter none. Dont matter none at all" (54). Rather than merely switching roles, Aretha reclaims her power in a very unconventional way—she imaginatively rewrites her reality.

In *The America Play*, Parks manipulates representations by casting her characters in paradoxical roles. Referring to Parks's tendency to play with representations, S. E. Wilmer in "Restaging the Nation" remarks that they "are not always able to keep up with their multispatial and multitemporal existence, and they sometimes seem lost in the polysemic confusion of presence and absence" (444). Indeed, in *The America Play*, The Foundling Father finds himself trapped within a series of paradoxes, simultaneously occupying the space of presence/absence, margin/center, and father/son—divisions deeply instilled into his, and America's, psyche. In this way, Parks's plays fit Jeannette R. Malkin's description of the postmodern theater. In *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, Malkin explains that postmodernist writing means "a release from control, a

collapse of boundaries, a rejection of center and hierarchy” (19). Again, first acknowledging the well-established center and its function, Parks’s *The America Play* then distorts it, instituting a theater in which “greater freedom and greater chaos seem to occur simultaneously,” a space where margin and center merge (19).

If *The America Play* creates a space in which hierarchies fall to pieces, then the roles once organized by that system become subject to interpretation. The Foundling Father spends his life straining to grab hold of Abraham Lincoln’s historical legacy, and in some ways, he succeeds. Diamond refers to *The America Play* as “a riot,” though she adds, “I mean, it’s completely heartbreaking, but I think it’s unbelievably funny [. . .]” (qtd. in Drukman 72). Humor springs from the play’s unconventional action: a black man dresses up as Lincoln, allowing customers to play the role of Booth and shoot him with blanks. The Foundling Father explains that he shares a real physical likeness to Lincoln, a “virtual twinship” (164); however, his blackness, otherwise referred to as part of “his natural God-given limitations,” makes the entire play look like a minstrel show in reverse (163).

Elam and Rayner argue that the “perpetuation of the Lincoln myth has created real scars for African Americans” (“Echoes” 183). While the Lincoln myth, like any myth, remains problematic in the way such constructions tend to distort truth, *The America Play* focuses more on possibilities than on oppression. Conventional readings, such as the one Elam and Rayner offer, regard The Foundling Father as reflecting the dangers of appropriation in the way he attempts to be like Lincoln, “The Greater Man.” Through this attempt, The Foundling Father loses his sense of self, he “forgets who he is

and just crumples,” whereas “The Greater Man continues on” (*The America Play* 173). Without a legacy like Lincoln’s, The Foundling Father believes that his name will disappear with his death; his memory will not transcend his time on earth. If his goal is to be remembered, then The Foundling Father should foster at least a relationship with his son, a sure way to ensure a kind of legacy, if not a “famous” one. Yet when The Foundling Father goes out West to perform his role, he leaves his wife and son behind.

Playing with the role of the father in *The America Play*, Parks conflates the domestic, or private, with the political. For example, in choosing to name her character “The Foundling Father,” Parks toys with the idea that the black character acts a *foundling* father, whereas Lincoln represents a Founding Father. This distinction has a profound meaning, given Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), because it suggests that Lincoln functions as the surrogate father to the foundling, or orphan. Herein lies the inflammatory concept that black Americans rely upon white paternalism in order to survive in the world, yet Lincoln’s paternalism possesses another meaning that does not again view the black man on stage as oppressed.

In his essay, Frank interprets The Foundling Father’s reverence for Abraham Lincoln as an example of how “Parks challenges the preconceived notion of the African American population as minors who depend on whites for representation” (10). If her audiences accept Lincoln as America’s Founding Father (which implies surrogacy since this one man cannot be credited for populating the whole country), then why does Parks expect her audiences to feel uncomfortable when an African American character sees Lincoln as a paternal or political ideal? The man has been historically memorialized as

one of America's Founding Fathers, an icon for democracy. Therefore, the Lincoln myth belongs to African Americans at least as much as, if not *more*, than to white Americans. If Parks's partiality toward universalism prevents her from distinguishing between "kinds" of Americans, then *The America Play* celebrates The Foundling Father's efforts to reclaim a history as much his as every American's. Looking beyond race and viewing the nature of icons through some alternative lens, then *The America Play*, as Parks anticipates, "solve[s] for x" (12).

When a black actor comes to the stage dressed as Lincoln, one would expect audiences to find the image absurd for various reasons, but this initial reaction intrigues Parks. Whereas critics may wonder wherein the humor lies in The Foundling Father's revision of the icon, or what stumps audiences when they hear Aretha's last name, Saxon, they should consider the larger question, asking why cannot markers of "blackness" and "whiteness" coexist? Parks allows for these racial markers to thrive in the figure of Aretha Saxon and The Foundling Father. Though critics can read these characters as oppressed, another reading always becomes available. These ambiguous characters thrive *because* of their ambiguity, their double consciousnesses allowing them to embody, reflect, and express new meanings beyond conventional ones. In *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*, Martin FAVOR advocates a vision similar to the kind Parks expresses in her plays. Poignantly arguing that we must widen the meaning of race, he insists that we move beyond conventional assumptions to foster "the largest possible space in which coalitions may be formed and diversity displayed" (152).

Taking possession of racist stereotypes and unconventional roles, Parks's characters demonstrate how a racist culture assigns social limitations based upon a person's skin color. If Parks succeeds in convincing her audiences of the absurdity of such limitations, she accomplishes, at the very least, creating a theater filled with possibilities for African Americans. Her work begins and ends with the stage, and upon it Parks accomplishes something unique: she invents an unconventional space in which races co-exist harmoniously, an idealistic vision for America.

Chapter III

Reinventing Spaces in *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *The America Play*

I'm continually encouraging myself to explore The-Drama-of-the-Black-Person-as-an-Integral-Facet-of-the-Universe. This exploration takes me, in a very organic way, into new territory. . .

—Suzan-Lori Parks, from “An Equation for Black People Onstage”

In order to achieve equality, allowing notions of “blackness” and “whiteness” to coexist, we must dismantle the hierarchical constructions surrounding these traditional connotations. As long as “blackness” remains marginalized, and “whiteness” centralized, then the discourse will remain grounded in the same, tired hierarchical organization that fosters antagonism amongst racial communities. Uninterested in participating in the popular discourse which identifies who exists in the margins and who exists in the center, Parks invents new spaces on the stage to express unique identities outside of the confines of race.

Even before tackling “racialized spaces,” the playwright, in general, encourages audiences to move beyond seemingly fixed assumptions about space. Instead of rejecting these traditional spaces, such as margin and center, or heaven and hell, Parks invents a new space called the Third Kingdom, a response to the fact that traditional structures or spaces “never could accommodate the figures which take up residence inside of [her]” (“Elements” 8). To begin, Parks’s use of the word “Kingdom” is not particularly clear. Again, the term conveys multiple meanings simultaneously, which is the point. For

example, the presence of a Third Kingdom implies that a First and Second Kingdom must exist. These Kingdoms may refer respectively to humankind as the “First” and to the animal kingdom as the “Second,” or Heaven as “First” and Earth as “Second.” In both instances, the First Kingdom appears to carry more weight than the Second. So what then does the Third Kingdom represent? In *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, the Third Kingdom symbolizes liminality. Each of the four sections making up *Imperceptible Mutabilities* deals, at least in part, with characters trying to locate themselves in various spaces—the space of the home, the society, the country—but “Part 2: Third Kingdom” best explains the metaphorical makeup of this space.

Ghost-like figures called “Seers” reside in Parks’s Third Kingdom. The Kin-Seer, Us-Seer, Shark-Seer, Soul-Seer, and Over-Seer engage in an apparently confused discussion about the direction in which they are going and the direction from whence they come:

KIN-SEER: Last night I dreamed of where I comed from. But where I comed from diduhnt look lie nowhere like I been.

SOUL-SEER: There were 2 cliffs?

KIN-SEER: There were.

US-SEER: Uh huhn.

SHARK-SEER: 2 cliffs? (37)

As “Part 2: Third Kingdom” unfolds, the Seers exist in a number of metaphoric liminal spaces, between two cliffs and between two continents. In geographical terms, the Seers exist in the Middle Passage, the migratory space between Africa and America where

enslaved Africans first “found” their way to America. Symbolically, the journey across the Atlantic Ocean marks the historical moment before a significant change occurred in the lives of both enslaved Africans and free Americans.⁶ No longer belonging to the African race, and not yet belonging to America, those who journey through the Middle Passage undergo a sudden and acute identity crisis.

In the geographic route to America, Parks places her ghosts of the past—there, they exist as figures caught in a kind of limbo. The un-remembered nature of their existence causes some critics to misread their importance. For example, the Kin-Seer points to the quagmire implicit in being a dislocated self: “My uther me then waved back at me and then I was happy. But my uther me whudunhnt wavin at me. My uther me was wavin at my Self. My uther me was wavin at uh black black speck in thuh middle of thuh sea where years uhgoh from uh boat I had been—UUH!” (38). The Seers do not exist in the tangible sense of the “world as we know it”; as Diamond points out in “Perceptible Mutability in the Word Kingdom,” the Seers are “floating in the hyphenated space between Africa and America” (87). Precisely for this reason critics should not read the Seers as dislocated selves in the Third Kingdom in the same way that they do the dislocation of African Americans in America. In *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, to be un-remembered does not imply a figure’s meaninglessness. In fact, according to Malkin, the postmodern space allows characters to develop in a region in which “greater freedom and greater chaos seem to occur simultaneously” (19). Parks’s Middle Passage is a space that critics tend to misread as oppressive. Though it is correct, as Frieze emphasizes, that the

⁶ James Baldwin points out the universal impact of slavery in “Stranger in the Village.” He writes, “[T]he interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too” (129).

“Seers embody the confusion of living in limbo,” this existence does not have to be read as the representation of a divided or absent identity (527). Placing the Seers outside of cultural confines, Parks renders them powerful in their ability to assert dynamic identities.

Only a few critics interpret the Seers as powerful figures; however, one such critic, Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, in her essay on history in Parks’s plays, distinguishes between the dislocation of African American identity in America and the dislocation the Seers experience in the Third Kingdom. In America, this dislocation or divided self emerges through the wide use of the hyphenated term “African-American,” which serves to distinguish blacks from “other” Americans. Brown-Guillory refers to this divided self as a by-product of the “slavocracy [that] continues to be manifested in the lives of present-day Blacks” (184). She further remarks, “This collective racial memory [. . .] provides the impetus for the continued sense of disconnection and displacement that Blacks experience” (184-85). The most important aspect of Brown-Guillory’s criticism comes when she explains how the “collective racial memory” does not infiltrate the Third Kingdom, as illustrated by the Seers who “refuse to participate in the discourse of dominance—to take on the culture in totality—for that would reinforce dominance. They speak in the language of the liminal” (196), one only a few critics manage to translate.

Furthermore, in addition to Africans who made the journey to America via the transatlantic route, other cultures share a similar historical narrative. When recounting the histories of various cultures, one discovers that the similarities sometimes become more apparent than differences, and Parks seems fascinated with how these narratives

connect. For example, religious and political persecution brought most Europeans to the shores of America in the hopes that the New World was a better world. Even many Africans were tricked into believing that the new continent would yield a better life, only to be enslaved. While America fondly remembers its courageous colonizers, it tends to forget that the passage to the New Country was characterized as rather humble, even tragic. James Baldwin, a widely acknowledged influence on Parks,⁷ challenges the image of the heroic Plymouth Rock Pilgrims in his essay “A Talk to Teachers.” Baldwin clarifies the Pilgrims’ position in history:

What happened was that some people left Europe because they couldn’t stay there any longer and had to go someplace else to make it. That’s all. They were hungry, they were poor, they were convicts. Those who were making it in England, for example, did not get on the *Mayflower*. (684)

In *Telling the Truth About History*, the authors echo Baldwin when explaining how America overlooks the nature of its beginnings, much like the Puritans who, upon arriving in the New World, quickly forgot that they came “to build a city on the hill for the spiritual edification of their European brethren.” This deep forgetting of the past helped to transform the Puritans into “disputatious colonists,” who, in turn, forgot their humility and waged war against indigenous Americans (Appleby, et al. 107).

Forging similarities throughout historical narratives, Parks rewrites the narrative of the Middle Passage to serve as a metaphor for comparable human experience. In America, those with Jewish, Irish, Latin, Chinese, or Japanese heritage may retell similar

⁷ Parks credits her start in playwriting to Baldwin. She attended his creative writing course at Hampshire College, and there he encouraged her to write for the theater (Savran 143).

stories of persecution, and yet these tales often take a back seat to the oppressed history of African Americans. Realizing these historical similarities does not belittle the horrors of the Middle Passage—quite the contrary. It rather illuminates the fact that hyphenations, such as African-American, Asian-American, Irish-American, etc., create “otherness” by marking ethnic groups as “less,” or only partially, American. A quintessential “American” does not seem to exist, with the exception, perhaps, of Native Americans, given that each “group” has come to America as orphans or slaves. Referring to *The America Play*, Garrett summarizes Parks’s technique of forging communities by conflating histories when she states that the play “challenge[s] conventional thinking by Parks’s insisting that the stories of Africa, America and Europe have been inextricably interwoven through cultural borrowing and exchange, as well as subjugation” (25).

The space of the Third Kingdom, therefore, exists outside of (or in-between) traditional assumptions about racial identity, and yet the Seers occupying this space paradoxically suffer from crises about their identities. The Seers experience confusion over shedding a socially constructed identity, not an authentic one. Inhabiting the region that Parks affectionately refers to as “new territory” (“An Equation” 21), they try to emancipate themselves from cultural conventions in order to embrace the freedom that the liminal space affords them: “My new Self was uh third Self made by thuh space in between” (*Imperceptible Mutabilities* 39). Not a tragic space, it is a space of possibility, of delightful multiplicity. Moving outside the proverbial box to imagine new ways of being, thinking, and speaking, Parks’s audiences encounter the wonderful chaos of the Third Kingdom, where multiple identities thrive.

The Third Kingdom, as the playwright constructs it, maintains subversive power over America's dominant culture in that it manifests itself as a kind of counter-culture in the shadows of a world defined by categories and hierarchies. What the dominant culture mistakes for "gaps" or voids, are actually the liminal spaces that Parks fills with infinite possibility. Rewriting the Middle Passage as a space in which one forges a positive identity is only one of many unconventional revisions of oppressive space that Parks creates.⁸ The most frequently discussed "gap" in Parks's plays may be found in *The America Play's* Great Hole of History, which Parks informs us, is the place where the entire action of the play occurs—she refigures the stage as a hole: "A great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of The Great Hole of History" (158). Leaving aside the historical aspect of the Great Hole for a moment, one recognizes this space as vintage Parks in that it contains all kinds of possibilities. As a spoken word, "w/hole" expresses two disparate meanings—either a positive or negative presence. Herein lies the paradox of Parks's w/hole—a paradox she plays with at the beginning of the play when The Foundling Father says, "He digged the hole and the whole held him" (159).

Like a black hole, The Foundling Father's hole remains a space where the usual cultural conventions do not apply. In his space he can construct himself in the image of the historic Abraham Lincoln without being informed that such a construction is either

⁸ Pointing out how this technique functions through the Chorus in *The Death of the Last Black Man*, Elam and Rayner explain that the Chorus, like the traditional Greek ones, fills in the narrative "gaps." The authors note that the two Choruses fall between the three major movements of the play (Parks calls these "panels")—"Thuh Holy Ghost," "Thuh Lonesome 3some," and "In Thuh Garden of HooDoo It." These Choruses, along with a "Final Chorus" that falls at the end of the play, "refigure the gaps or spaces between the three panels" ("Unfinished Business" 452).

destructive or ridiculous, depending upon who does the criticizing. Expressing that his space is a positive one, The Foundling Father speaks of himself in the third-person, proclaiming, “The Hole and its Historicity and the part he played in it all gave a shape to the life and posterity of the Lesser Known that he could never shake” (162). The life-giving nature of The Foundling Father’s hole also conjures up another image of a hole, the vaginal space. Digging his hole in the ground, or in “Mother Earth,” reinforces the idea of the hole as a vaginal space. Just as Parks rewrites the Middle Passage as a positive space, she constructs the vaginal canal to serve as a safe harbor from the cultural assumptions that lead to oppression. In this space, The Foundling Father, neither dead nor yet born, remains protected in the location of creation. Thus Parks envisions, paradoxically, the hole as a kind of “life force,” seeing in it hope or progress for the black race.

Parks’s spaces are dynamic. In them, her characters do not lie stagnant waiting for the culture to inform them how to construct their identities—they are ghosts, yet their subversive ghostly power makes them forceful and, ironically, alive. The origin and the destination traditionally overshadow the importance of the passage. Parks’s postmodern sensibility, however, allows her to rework liminal spaces and “empty” holes, to fill them with more meaning. In these meaningful locations, Parks’s characters exist as dynamic beings, emancipated from the expectations of a culture influenced by a racist past.

Chapter IV

Parks's Re-Vision of History

To remember is to empower.

—bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture*

American culture constructs the notion of identity from the past. Looking for historical heroes, it selects the most desirable, patriotic figures and uses them to define the national identity. Frank notes the profound influence of the past when he explains how history shapes the present: “We influence and distort our perception of reality with premade concepts that are handed down from generation to generation without being reflected upon” (16). The construction, therefore, is an idealization informed by a carefully constructed public history—a version of the past Parks finds suspect. Because the past informs the present, diverse American communities, in particular, suffer when historians whitewash the past. For example, in their book on the limitations of the historical record, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob argue that elitist history reflects the past that belongs only to a small portion of America’s population (157). The authors address the inherent limitations of this kind of historical representation as well as note its potential danger, given that history has a profound effect upon reality: “In these histories, their social preferences have been embedded in stories of the nation’s achievements, leaving children with a set of values that were male in gender, white in color, and Protestant in cultural orientation” (157). In particular, elitist history overlooked the positive contributions minorities made to American culture. Avoiding traditional distinctions that

divide racial communities, Parks shows the arbitrary nature of history (or memory) which intends to support such divisions. She responds by setting aside the impetus toward “historical accuracy” and simply provides levels of ambiguity throughout her plays. After all, according to Frank, “America *is* only representation”—fictional or not (16, emphasis added).

Without rejecting the important influence of great white men in America, Parks manages to challenge their absurd “icon-ification” that embeds itself into America’s popular memory. *The America Play* reduces Abraham Lincoln to a stovepot hat, a beard, and a mole. In fact, the cover of *The America Play: And Other Works*, published in 1995, shows a portrait of Lincoln in front of an American flag; however, Lincoln’s body is suspiciously absent, reducing the great icon to only a suit, hat, and a beard. Yet, the cover clearly depicts Lincoln, even though it does not reveal his body. In addition to revealing how deeply imbedded these non-essential markers are upon our national consciousness, the cover also reminds the reader how Lincoln’s “icon-ification” erases the man, making only his symbolic figure of importance. Given the absence of Lincoln’s body, it seems fitting that The Foundling Father can “become” the former president by simply putting on his beard, hat, and mole.⁹

As The Foundling Father takes possession of the icon, he plays with his rendition of Lincoln as if the figure’s superficialities really *mean* something:

THE FOUNDLING FATHER (*Rest*): I think I’ll wear the yellow beard.

Variety. Works like uh tonic.

⁹ Interestingly, a black man dressed as Lincoln appears on the back cover of *The America Play: And Other Works*.

(*Rest*)

Some inaccuracies are good for business. Take the stovepipe hat! Never really worn indoors but people dont like their Lincoln hatless.

(*Rest*)

Mr. Lincoln my apologies. (Nods to the bust and winks to the cutout)

(*Rest*)

[Blonde. Not bad if you like a stretch. Hmmm. Let us pretend for a moment that our beloved Mr. Lincoln was a blonde. (168)

The character The Foundling Father, like Parks, embraces “variety,” yet he concerns himself with the way the American culture traditionally represents Lincoln’s appearance. Nonetheless, the audience for which he performs—the same once for which Parks writes—resists a revised representation of its hero: “someone remarked that he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot” (171).

Through her characters’ misappropriation of the past in *The America Play*, Parks demonstrates the futility of trying to achieve historical accuracy. In particular, the characters that appropriate the role of Booth in The Foundling Father’s reenactment of Lincoln’s assassination illustrate how easily Americans misconstrue history. For example, the first Booth character, “A Woman,” shoots The Foundling Father, dressed as Lincoln, and then says, “Strike the tent” (167). A footnote to this statement informs readers of the play that Parks actually quotes the words of General Robert E. Lee, not those of Booth (167). “B Man” takes his turn shooting Lincoln and says the words spoken by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton as he stood at Lincoln’s deathbed: “Now he

belongs to the ages;” and “C Woman” shouts the words of Mary Todd Lincoln: “Theyve killed the president!” (169-70). Only “A Man” gets the part “right” by shouting Booth’s words, “Thus to the Tyrants,” but even he cannot resist putting his own spin on them by adding, “The South is avenged!” (171-72). This misappropriation of famous historical quotes shows how pithy sayings overpower the event they represent, and yet these are the pieces of history that remain immortalized. “B Woman,” as Booth, best illustrates this point when she takes her aim at Lincoln:

(Booth shoots. Lincoln “slumps in his chair.” Booth jumps)

B WOMAN *(Rest)*: LIES!

(Rest)

LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIES!

(Rest)

LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRS!

(Rest)

Lies.

(Rest. Exits. Reenters. Steps downstage. Rest)

LIES!

(Rest)

LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIES!

(Rest)

LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRS!

(Rest)

Lies.

(*Rest. Exits*) (167-68)

“B Woman” makes no attempt to reenact accurately the assassination; according to her, it is all lies anyhow.

Lucy, The Foundling Father’s wife, also demonstrates both a false-reliance upon history and its misrepresentation over time. Beginning in Act Two, Lucy meanders about with an ear trumpet listening for information on her missing husband who has taken his Lincoln show on the road. Getting no word of her husband’s whereabouts, she catches only echoes of the gunshots from the reenactment. Throughout the entire play, Lucy strains to hear while her son, Brazil, repeatedly asks her for updates on his father. Though at times Lucy clearly hears *something*, her mistrust of history prevents her from making any sure claims:

BRAZIL: You hear him then? His whispers?

LUCY: Not exactly.

BRAZIL: He wuduhnt here then.

LUCY: He was here.

BRAZIL: Ffyou dont hear his whispers he wuduhnt here.

LUCY: Whispers dont always come up right. Takes time sometimes.

Whispers could travel different out West than they do back East. Maybe slower. Maybe. Whispers are secrets and often shy. We aint seen your Pa in 30 years. That could be part of it. We also could be experiencing

some sort of interference. Or some sort of technical difficulty. Ssard to tell. (178)

Lucy's hesitancy likely comes from experience, for the public memory constructed for her by others overshadows her personal memory. In schools, for example, students' learning the names of the American Presidents far exceeds the importance of their learning their personal histories. No one requires us to recall the names of our great-grandparents for they are not of national importance, unless, of course, our roots may be traced to Benjamin Franklin or George Washington—as many people proudly boast they do. In *The America Play*, Lucy and The Foundling Father, like most Americans, do not find themselves represented by the national memory. Honeymooning at the Original Great Hole of History, they sit at the lip—a metaphorical expression of marginality—and, according to The Foundling Father, watch “the Historicity of the place the order and beauty of the pageants which marked by them the Greats on parade in front of them” (162). Some critics consider this scene as evidence of African American marginalization, but they forget that very few Americans, regardless of skin color, can locate themselves within the national memory.

As Drukman points out, Parks turns real historic tragedies in to “farce” by placing figures from the past within a theme park setting, thus contributing to the “Theater of the Absurd” (57). Yes, Parks renders history as absurd, but she never underestimates its power. The two black honeymooners, after all, watch the parade from the metaphoric sidelines. For this reason, Lucy remains keenly aware that history, like a game of “Telephone,” loses the original message in translation; like history, it has been distorted,

misconstrued, and made up over time. Realizing this, Lucy insists, “Now me I need tuh know tuh real thing from tuh echo. Thuh truth from tuh hearsay” (175). However, understanding how historians distort the past is very different from believing that one only exists if he or she can locate the family’s ancestry in history textbooks. Parks’s characters exist, yet the playwright compels them to fill in the gaps of their personal memories—to exist more fully than they otherwise would.

These characters, similar to Parks’s audiences, feel reverence for the power of the written word, but its potential for erasure or revision brings into question the assumptions they make about its truth-value. For instance, Parks toys with the academic look of footnotes, making her audiences or readers acutely aware of the gap between its appearance of exactness versus the skeptical information it provides. Footnoting the dialogue in *The America Play*, she gives the reader or audience (if the director can find a way to express it) more information. When The Foundling Father, for example, says “Useless Useless,” a footnote indicates that these were the last words spoken by Booth (160, note 7). Giving supplemental information is the traditional purpose of the footnote, but Parks appropriates the academic appearance of footnotes to provide ambiguous and purported information rather than to convey concrete facts, such as places or dates. Most of the footnotes in *The America Play* are accounts of famous last words that appear authentic and academic while acknowledging the potential for error: “*Possibly* the words of Mary Todd Lincoln after the death of her husband” (160 note 4, emphasis added).

Kurt Bullock, one of the few critics to address Parks’s footnoting, demonstrates how she plays with the assumption that a footnote is an objective tool by turning it into a

rhetorical device (79). Using this device, the playwright shows “that all orality is fictionalized, then textualized, and so become[s] commodity, open for investigation and scrutiny” (76). Though Bullock’s essay on “Famous/Last Words” only addresses *The America Play*, the footnoting works similarly in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*. Here, Parks uses footnotes more traditionally, citing the texts and page numbers from which her information came. In “Part 3: Open House,” Miss Faith ridiculously misuses the recorded “facts” of the past to inform the present. As Aretha Saxon tries to figure out how many people she can fit into the house for her emancipation party, Miss Faith interrupts her calculations, interjecting facts about the numbers of Africans that slave traders stuffed into cargo ships. While her notes may be factually accurate, they seem useless to Aretha, who merely seeks to accommodate a comfortable number of guests:

ARETHA: You say I’m tuh have visitors, Miss Faith? You say me havin uh visitation is written in thuh book. I say in here we could fit—three folks.

MISS FAITH: Three. I’ll note that. On with your calculations, Mrs. Saxon!

ARETHA: On with my calculations. Thuup.

MISS FAITH: Mrs. Saxon? I calculate—we’ll fit six hundred people. Six hundred in a pinch. Footnote #2: 600 slaves were transported on the *Brookes*, although it only had space for 451. *Ibid.*, page 14.

ARETHA: Miss Faith, six hundred in here won’t go.

MISS FAITH: You give me the facts. I draw from them, Maam. I draw from them in accordance with the book. Six hundred will fit. We will have to pack them tight. (43-44)

Because Aretha is black, Miss Faith's calculations imply that the party should maximize space similar to the way slave ships did in the past. Parks demonstrates how the character's understanding of history shapes her entire frame of reference, just as a racist history may inform her audiences' perceptions.

Miss Faith's understanding of the world relies upon another kind of historical textbook, the Bible. In "Part 3: Open House," the book to which the characters refer, mutates from textbook, to legal document, and eventually, to a semblance of the Bible itself. Still trying to calculate the appropriate number of guests for the party, Miss Faith begins to speak in the language of the Bible, thus conflating documentation from slave ships with religious discourse. Fearing that Aretha intends to cheat her "out of valuable square inches," Miss Faith appropriates the role of a slave trader, quoting from some unknown text to remind Aretha that "She who cheateth me out of some valuable square inches shall but cheat herself out of her assigned seat aside the most high" (44). Miss Faith's warning sounds suspiciously similar to those of slaveholders, who relied upon the Bible to justify enslavement. Like them, the character uses the language of the Bible to inspire fear in Aretha, just as the slaveholders used weighty threats of God's wrath to quell rebellious attitudes. Aretha fears the wrath of God even if she fails to fear the wrath of the slaveholder.

Building on this notion of misappropriated Biblical language, Parks demonstrates in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* how whites historically have misapplied the story of Ham to support the notion of blacks as inferior beings, disapproved of by God. As told in Genesis (9:18-27), Ham, the youngest son of Noah, witnessed his father both naked and

drunk. To punish him for what he saw, Noah cursed Canaan, Ham's son, to be enslaved by Ham's brothers. Nineteenth-century Christian theologians traced the story of Ham to "prove," geographically, that Africans were thus the Children of Ham, cursed by God, and therefore, all forms of blackness were evil. As an iconic figure, the character Ham links to the other great black archetypes in *The Death of the Last Black Man*. In a rather lengthy passage, Ham pontificates on the absurdity of tracing back African American lineage to determine a distinct relationship to the cursed son of Noah:

MeMines gived out 2 offspring one she called Mines after herself thuh uther she called Themuhns named after all them who comed before. Themuhns married outside thuh tribe joinin herself with uh man they called WhoDat. Themuhns in WhoDat brought forth only one child called WhoDatDere. Mines joined up with Wasshisname and form that union came AllYall. (122)

Within this cataloguing effect, Ham highlights ambiguous names to illustrate the potential for error when attempting to trace the roots of "Ham's Begotten [Family] Tree" (121).

Subsequently, imperfectly constructed versions of history means that gaps in our national memory exist. Parks places her characters within these historical gaps, not to show them as a marginalized race, but to prevent personal histories from slipping through cracks. In this way, her history plays address the lost personal memories of all Americans, overwritten by what historians consider the more important memory of "America." Fearing that a national history renders most individuals forgotten and

anonymous “WhoDatDeres” and “Wasshisnames” of the past, Parks’s characters attempt to affix themselves into the historical record.

For instance, in “Part 4: Greeks (Or The Slugs)” of *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, Mr. Sergeant Smith’s family keeps a ledger while he awaits his military distinction abroad. The ledger provides the mother and her children with “proof” about their family history. When they receive Sergeant Smith’s letter, Mrs. Smith instructs her daughter, Buffy, on how to categorize its contents:

MRS. SMITH: “Mention of Work”: check “yes.”

BUFFY: Check.

MRS. SMITH: “Mention of Family”: check NO.

BUFFY: Check. (64)

By writing it down, the family intends to record history as accurately as possible.

Tragically, when the ledger disappears, the family loses its ability to remember altogether. Mrs. Smith’s sudden blindness thus stems from her inability to remember. She “lost [her] eyes” and cannot recognize her husband; therefore, she demands proof of his existence (69). When Buffy tells her mother, “They took thuh ledger,” Mrs. Smith responds, “Sstooo bad. We needs documentation. Proof” (70). Further, when her husband tries to defend his place in the home, Mrs. Smith rejects him because he lacks proof of identification:

MR. SERGEANT SMITH: I wrote! I called!

MRS. SMITH: There’s lots uh Smiths. Many Smiths. Smithsss common name.

[.....]

MR. SERGEANT SMITH: I visited. We had us a family. That's proof.

MRS. SMITH: Lots uh visits. Lots uh families. (70)

Here, Parks illustrates the absurdity of Mrs. Smith's reverence for the written word by having the character not remember her husband unless evidence from the ledger exists. Though showing the absurdity of relying entirely upon a ledger, the playwright, nonetheless, emphasizes with a play on words the danger of forgetting—"dis-remembering" leads to "dis-membering." Mr. Sergeant Smith returns home without any legs, having lost them in the war. As a balm for Smith's loss of his legs, the military finally awards him "Distinction" in spite of his less than valiant role in the war. Unfortunately for Mr. Sergeant Smith, his family misplaces the ledger and therefore *cannot* "distinguish" him as a member of their family.

While poking fun at the way people rely upon historical records to inform their identities, Parks nonetheless acknowledges the power of writing down for future generations what occurs in the present. Instead of rejecting history, Parks's characters heal inaccuracies by providing more historical narratives. At the end of *The Death of the Last Black Man*, the figure YES AND GREENS BLACK-EYED PEAS CORNBREAD voices the need to write what has not yet been written:

You will write it down because if you dont write it down then we will
come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You will write it
down and you will carve it out of rock.

(Pause)

You will write down thuh past and you will write down thuh present and
in what in thuh future. You will write it down. (130-31)

Parks's plays fill in these historical gaps. Making no distinction between the written word of history texts and the written word of the plays, Innes notes that "the actual events of the past have exactly the same validity as any fictional performance" (25). In historical texts, the public memory always precedes the private, personal one. In Parks's plays, just the opposite occurs. By foregrounding the importance of the personal memory, the playwright celebrates the unique individual history rather than the fabricated idealism of the national memory. Borrowing exclusively from the public memory, Americans risk developing as monochromatic figures chasing after an unattainable ideal, whereas if personal memory informs our identity, we bloom as individuals and defy categorization. In Parks's plays, historical accuracies are less important than the physical act of writing it down. Likening herself to an archaeologist, Parks explains that one of her tasks as a playwright is to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down" ("Possession" 4). By putting her theory into action—digging up the "bones" of history and transferring that history to paper, Parks resurrects the forgotten or silenced voices of the past, providing a more expansive representation of America's history in her plays.

Conclusion

Americans may fear that if we succeed in dismantling racial categorizations, then our nation will slip into chaos. People will not know where they belong; they will not know their assigned places. But Parks regards this fear with good humor:

[. . .] once anybody jumps out of their skin, of their identity, and swims in the underground sea of the unconscious where everybody is and it doesn't really matter who you are and everything is mythic and strange and large—I don't know, I'm not sure what would happen. That would be the end of the world. (qtd. in Savran 158)

This sentiment further emphasizes the playwright's belief that "once the whole group realizes that they're actually free, wonderful things could happen" (qtd. in Savran 158).

Not a superfluous rejection of form, character, or content, the chaotic ambiguity that saturates Parks's plays serves a profound purpose. This ambiguous treatment of language, character, location, and history destabilizes categories and hierarchies from within: superficially, the playwright's characters seem flatly drawn and oppressed, yet they explode from their conventional states into complex and ambiguous characters. Nonetheless, ambiguity sometimes leads to confusion, which may explain why some contemporary audiences dismiss her plays, labeling them too difficult or inaccessible.

Some audiences struggle to understand Parks's vision because the visual experience of the theater may reinforce assumptions similar to those that the playwright attempts to dismantle in her work. Generally speaking, audiences often rely upon an

actor's appearance to gather supplemental information about the character he or she plays. Trying to encourage her audiences to see beyond skin color, Parks does not always dictate the race of the actors who play her characters, but in doing so, she risks distancing those viewers who are unable to make this leap. For example, in "Part 4: Greeks (Or The Slugs)" of Diamond's production of *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, a white actor plays the son of an African American couple, Sergeant Smith and his wife. In the post-play discussion, a young white man queried Parks: because the actor playing the son is white, he confessed to assuming that Mrs. Smith had cheated on her husband (Savran 156). Though aware that her audiences often struggle to suppress assumptions based on a character's appearance, the playwright does not simply place white characters in traditionally black roles, or vice versa; her dramas do more than reverse simple typecasting—they reject "typing" of any kind, casting her characters in an infinite number of roles. In fact, she argues that unsophisticated reversals are "the thinnest sort of dramaturgy. Ideas like these—equations featuring this lack of complexity—are again and again held up to us as exemplar, as the ultimate possibilities for Black people onstage. Black presence on stage is more than a sign or messenger of some political point" ("An Equation" 20-21).

Even so, many audiences remain reluctant to embrace unconventional theater, or as Parks calls it, the "new territory" which her plays explore. Expressing her unique vision for African Americans in theater, Parks drafts the following equation: "BLACK PEOPLE + x = NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT [NEW TERRITORY]" ("An Equation" 20). The playwright believes that if black actors stage "x," which, as she explains, represents "the

realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than the Oppressed by/Oppressed with 'Whitey' state," then a new and important dramatic conflict will emerge (20). According to the playwright, this "new dramatic conflict" will provide a kind of theater in which "the White when present is not the oppressor, and where the audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit" (20). To move beyond "that same old shit," about which Parks complains, the playwright first needs to reveal the unnaturalness of imposed structures and hierarchies, and then systematically break them down. Dismantling the imposed structures upon which racist assumptions thrive, she moves beyond simply pushing the theater's boundaries, she explodes them.

Excavating both the discourse on race and the space of the theater remains a difficult task even for a visionary such as Parks. Not surprisingly then, some of the author's most recent works, such as the 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning play *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), or her first novel, *Getting Mother's Body* (2003), mark a departure from the postmodern surrealism that infests Parks's history plays. Perhaps the playwright has become frustrated with audiences: for instance, the confused young man who fails to appreciate how she represents race in her plays. Perhaps she has fallen prey to the conventional demands of popular culture to provide work that appeals to a larger audience. More likely, however, Parks's momentary divergence reflects how she works in a way that is consistent with the message of her earlier plays—as an African American playwright, she resists being pigeonholed, either by her own expectations or the expectations of her audience. Here is the point at which the "plight" of the African

American and the artist converge, as each struggles to resist the expectations of American culture in order to tap their potential. As the playwright herself explains: “I think that everybody, if they’re able to let go, just for a moment, of the person they assume themselves to be, will realize that they are anybody. On the surface, it’s tied into the African-American experience because that’s who I am. But one step back, it’s part of that big, primordial soup” (Savran, interview 155). Instead of separating individuals into categories and communities, Parks challenges her audiences to dive into the “primordial soup”—her nourishing version of America’s “melting pot.”

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