A portrait of the remarkable African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks: arriving at a new aesthetics

Supervisor: Dr. Ilka Saal

Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels – Nederlands” by Lien Vanmarsnille

May 2009
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Ilka Saal who introduced me to the amazing plays of Suzan-Lori Parks and gave me excellent guidance during the writing process. I am deeply indebted to her as she provided me with many secondary sources.

Many thanks also to my parents, Ludo Vanmarsnille and Diane Van De Sompel, my brothers Jan Vanmarsnille and Tim Vanmarsnille and my college friend Annelies Raveydt for their encouragement and support.

Last but not least I thank Jonathan Maelfait, my beloved and best friend and the person I could always turn to to give me a pep talk. I thank him for his assistance with the formal structure of my thesis and his ever inspiring ideas.
Contents

Introduction .......................... 1

Chapter I: Theatricality and the Gaze in Venus and Topdog/Underdog .......................... 4
   I.1. Introduction ..................... 4
   I.2. The Politics of Spectacle and Spectatorship in Venus ...................... 9
   I.3. Topdog/Underdog: Practising the Performance, Performing the Real .......... 16
       I.3.1. Introduction ................ 16
       I.3.2. Impersonating Lincoln .......... 17
       I.3.3. Choosing Appearance over the Real ................................ 19
       I.3.4. Performing the Game ............ 20

Chapter II: Suzan-Lori Parks and the great hole of history .......................... 23
   II.1. Introduction .................... 23
   II.2. Rep & Rev: a formal principle with political implications ................ 24
   II.3. The America Play ................ 28
       II.3.1. Introduction ................ 28
       II.3.2. The fallacy of American historiography and the importance of artifacts 29
       II.3.3. Ritualizing the assassination scene .................................. 30
       II.3.4. The Lesser Known’s legacy ..................................... 33

Chapter III: Towards a New Aesthetics .............................................. 40
   III.1. Introduction .................... 40
   III.2. A Real Challenge: Interpreting Textual Markers ...................... 41
   III.3. Parks’s Unique Theatre Language: mixing African-American characteristics with postmodernism ............................................. 49

Conclusion .......................... 56

Bibliography .......................... 59
Introduction

Through each line of text I’m rewriting the Time Line –creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined.

Suzan-Lori Parks, “Possession” (The America Play and Other Works 5)

In 2002, contemporary playwright Suzan-Lori Parks won a Pulitzer Prize in Drama for her play *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) and her popularity has been on the rise ever since. At the age of forty-five, Parks has already written twelve plays, a novel and a few screenplays and she is still continuing her writing today. Her work has been staged in the US and around the world and she is considered to be one of the most innovative dramatists of her generation. Her originality occurs both at the levels of form and content in her plays as she ventures to experiment with traditional narrative styles and conventional plotlines. As an African American born in the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) century, Parks belongs to an innovative generation of black artists who have developed a new awareness of blackness in the wake of authors such as James Baldwin and Adrienne Kennedy. Being well-educated and belonging to a new middle class, this generation no longer seeks affirmation of the dominant white culture or the approval of a purely black audience. Instead, these artists are producing a new direction in African-American drama, refusing to define their art solely in terms of the politics of slavery and racism. However, this does not mean that the notion of race is not intrinsic to their work, but it is no longer restricted to the black experience in which African-American characters are portrayed as oppressed individuals. This goes for Parks too, whose works have been both praised and criticized for their ambivalent position towards traditional notions of blackness. In her work, Parks refuses to victimise her black protagonists, thereby denying a one-way reading of her plays. In her essay “An Equation for Black People Onstage,” Parks
wonders: “Can a Black person be onstage and be other than oppressed?” to question the way in which black drama in the past has always been defined as “the presentation of the Black as oppressed.”

Instead, Parks produces a multifaceted portrait of her black protagonists, giving them a voice of their own. I believe that in Parks’s work a new concept of the black identity emerges as she casts her characters as individuals with each a particular personality.

Parks’s position towards the “black play” is inspired by her interest in the representation of African-American identity and history. As she is exploring the boundaries of the medium of theatre and literature, she is overthrowing the traditional representations they constitute.

This to say that Parks takes aim at the way in which the roles of African Americans have been depicted in the dominant narratives of American history. She confronts the reader and audience with the fact that, on the whole, African-Americans have been absent in the great annals of American history. In line with her viewpoint on the limiting perspective of the discourse of victimization, Parks creates her very own discourse to raise this matter, combining implicit political statements with her omnipresent emphasis on theatre as a medium. To put the representation of history and literature to the test, she is destabilizing traditional narratives and questioning their authenticity. The challenging aspect for the reader and audience is the fact that Parks employs both form and content to arrive at this revision of the historical and literary canon. My goal in this thesis is to discuss the various factors that have contributed to the creation of Parks’s “new black aesthetics”, moving towards a new black identity.

To achieve this goal, I have divided my thesis into three chapters that deal with the most important themes in Parks’s work. The first section will examine the ways in which the power of theatre and theatricality in her plays Venus (1996) and Topdog/Underdog (2001) is

---

employed to present atypical stories which undermine the traditional modes of representation.
In *Venus* Parks revises the story of the historical Saartjie Baartman, turning the protagonist
into a self-conscious woman instead of a mere victim of European colonialism by the concept
of posing. I will also explain how Parks attributes a significant role to the audience as both
observers and accomplices in the spectacle on stage. In the second part of this chapter I will
examine *Topdog/Underdog*, a play that stages the downfall of two African-American brothers
in which the notion of theatricality plays an important part. Further, the second chapter will be
dedicated to the discussion of the history theme as an important factor in the development of
Parks own distinct dramatic style. To comment upon the absence of black narratives in white
historiography, Parks is staging in *The America Play* (1994) a black protagonist in the guise
of Abraham Lincoln thus subverting the legend of historical figures. In the final chapter, a
description of the formal characteristics of Parks’s plays will be given to underscore the
importance of Parks’s stylistic experiments in the construction of her very own aesthetics and,
in extension, of a new black identity.
Chapter I: Theatricality and the Gaze in *Venus* and *Topdog/Underdog*

I.1. Introduction

One of the most important elements in Parks’s work is the power of theatre and theatricality. This should not be surprising since she mostly write plays, obviously with the intention of seeing them being produced on stage. But there is more to it, though. For Parks; theatre is all about watching, and this assumption controls her whole work. While watching and being watched is an inherent part of the medium of theatre, it can also be related to the notion of race. Being looked at “is a byproduct of being different from other people” as Parks puts it. Critics often link this point of view to the concept of double consciousness, articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois “as a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”. In other terms, black people are condemned to see themselves with the eyes of white people, being “depend(ent) on whites for representation”. But Parks tries to reverse this “preconceived notion” of being submissive characters by “returning the gaze”. Instead of portraying her personages as mere victims of racial prejudice, Parks gives them an identity different from the traditional black versus white depiction. She does that by rendering her characters as self-conscious creatures who are not afraid to make a spectacle out of

---

4 Ibid., 313.
7 Ibid., 7.
themselves. Moreover, she ascribes a significant role to the audience by pointing out their complicity as observers of this spectacle. At the same time, the complex relationship between spectator and audience draws the attention to the plays’ artificiality.

For Parks, theatre is a multifaceted medium, allowing the playwright to “explore the form, ask questions, make a good show, tell a good story, ask more questions, take nothing for granted”\(^9\). This implies that, while examining Parks’s work, one should not ignore the importance of the form and the fact that form and content go together. Therefore, a performance on stage is no less a show than it is the telling of a story. By inserting the technique of a play-within-a-play, footnotes and other highly metatheatrical elements, Parks confuses the audience about what is real in the reality of her plays. With her emphasis on artificiality as an inherent part of the medium of theatre Parks further complicates her plays. The use of these theatrical devices deny the reader and spectator a straightforward understanding of her plays. The reason for doing this, Parks explains in her essay, is because she is trying to escape “this insidious essentialism” that is “a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of being”\(^10\). What Parks is trying to do here, is to create a new black identity different from that “insidious essentialism” which refers back to the double consciousness talked about in the previous paragraph.

The origin for this new understanding of blackness can be found in the works of African-American authors such as Trey Ellis, who devoted his work to argue in favor of a multitude of voices in African American artistic expression. In his manifesto “the New Black Aesthetic” from 1989, Ellis introduces the term “cultural mulatto” referring to those African-Americans who are “educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures” and who “can also navigate

---


easily in the white world”\textsuperscript{11}. Just as Ellis himself, Parks can be depicted as a cultural mulatto too as she descends from a relatively academic background, and was familiarized with a white society at an early age as she spent a part of her childhood in Germany. As a cultural mulatto Ellis realized that “we no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black”\textsuperscript{12}.

Twenty years earlier, Hoyt W. Fuller first established a definition of this idea of a black aesthetic in his article “Towards A Black Aesthetic”. According to Fuller, “the journey toward a black aesthetic … cannot, by definition, lead through the literary mainstreams”\textsuperscript{13}. This is also true for Parks, who, as will be discussed in the next chapters, revolts against the literary canon and traditional literary narratives to create something new and original. In his article, Fuller centered on the ways in which white racism has affected the literary criticism as “conscious and unconscious white racism is everywhere, infecting all the vital areas of national life”\textsuperscript{14}. The solution to this subjective American literary criticism for black writers is to reject these established limits, hoping for “the emergence of new black critics who will be able to articulate and expound the new aesthetic and eventually set in motion the long overdue assault against the restrictive assumptions of the white critics”\textsuperscript{15}. Fuller further defines this black aesthetic as “a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience ”\textsuperscript{16}.

In 1989, Ellis reconsiders this notion of a black aesthetic, moving closer towards Parks’s later postulation that “there is no such thing as THE Black Experience”\textsuperscript{17}. Whereas Fuller and his supporters were preoccupied with the persistence of racism in American society, Ellis expresses his position towards racism as such: “For us, racism is a hard and little-changing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 235.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Fuller, “Black Aesthetic,” 200.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 204.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 204.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Parks, “An Equation,” 21.
\end{itemize}
constant that neither surprises nor enrages”18. Racism has no longer an affect on their writings, just as there is no desire among the new black artists anymore to please either white or black world. They have moved past this, and instead of “letting other people define their identity”, Ellis argues, “today, there are enough young blacks torn between the two worlds to finally go out and create our own”19. Parks can be considered as one of these artists who has found her own way to voice her literary impulses in other terms than the standard dramatic conflict of oppressed black people versus white. On this topic, Stuart Hall wrote a very relevant article discussing the problems of representation that this shift in black cultural politics has brought about:

Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject.20

These new politics have proved to be a real challenge for the new generation of African-American artists as they no longer wanted to rely on the save haven of “the innocent notion of the essential black subject”, namely, that all black people are good. Instead, they chose to recognize “the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects”21. The same is true of Parks's work in which the usual discourse of victimization has made room for a more complex discourse which values a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. Acknowledging the heterogeneity of blackness in “An Equation for Black People Onstage”, Parks states that “there are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness onstage”22. The difficulty in

18 Ellis, New Black Aesthetic,” 239-240.
19 Ibid., 235-236.
doing so has to do with the perception of these new means of representation as there is always a risk that one will be criticized for having objectified, stereotyped or mocked the black characters in question. But while this kind of criticism is hard to avoid, Parks has taken her chance to construct a new African-American identity in which individuals are no longer solely defined as victims of oppression and racism, instead they are portrayed as real humans with their own virtues and vices. To arrive at this new concept of black identity Parks has developed a very specific dramaturgy in which her emphasis on spectators and spectatorship plays an important part. The significance of this emphasis will be illustrated below with the example of her play *Venus*.

A central term in the discussion of theatricality and this new understanding of identity in line with the plays of Parks is “mimicry”. The term dates back from the ancient times, derived from the Greek language it means “imitation”. In a more recent period, the concept of mimicry has been subject to the discussion of colonial discourse. According to Homi Bhabha, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite”\(^{23}\). He further claims that “mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge”\(^{24}\), thus “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace”\(^{25}\). While Bhabha sees the ambivalent status of mimicry as threatening, several critics have argued in favor of mimicry in relation to Parks’ s work. According to Ilka Saal and others, “Parks uses mimicry as a way of mirroring and displacing colonial power”\(^{26}\). In other words, a performance of one of Parks’ s plays can be seen as a way of confronting the audience with their own complicity in the theatre as well as in real life.

It is important to remark that Parks’s employment of mimicry never serves to support the dominant discourses such as colonial mimicry did. On the contrary, it serves “as a device for


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 86.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 86.

\(^{26}\) Saal, “Politics of Mimicry,” 58.
questioning and subverting the very notion of representation as imitation (mimesis)”. Very often, Parks plays with the conventional modes of representation by emphasizing the theatrical nature of a play.

In the following paragraphs attention will be given to two of Parks’s most interesting plays, namely *Venus* and *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), to elaborate the notion of theatricality further. While discussing *Venus*, the emphasis will lay on the element of watching and spectatorship. As the main character of the play is being put on display, she self-consciously strikes a pose as to maintain control over her own body. Also in *Topdog/Underdog* theatricality is an essential ingredient of the play. In this play two brothers are struggling to get by, one of them is dreaming of setting up a street confidence game while the other dresses up as Abraham Lincoln to act out his assassination in an amusement park. The highly theatrical card game as well as the Lincoln-performance present the spectator with “a situation in which simple distinctions between depth and surface, reality and performance refuse to hold”.

I.2. The Politics of Spectacle and Spectatorship in Venus

The play *Venus*, presenting the story of the historical Venus Hottentot, a Khois-san woman named Saartjie Baartman, deals with the exhibition of the black female body. Because of her enormous derriere, the real-life Baartman was brought from South Africa to England to be made into a spectacle. After her death, her body continued to be exposed for scientific reasons. While she served as the subject of several artistic works, she has become a symbol of suffering under colonialism. In “Object Into Subject: Some Thoughts On the Work of Black Women Artists”, Michelle Cliff states that throughout history “black women have been

---

double objectified—as Black, as women; under white supremacy, under patriarchy. It has been
the task of Black women artists to transform this objectification.”29 I want to argue that this is
exactly what Parks does in her play, though this appraisal has been contested by some critics.

In an article entitled “The Re-objectification and Re-commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks’ s Venus”, Jean Young claims that “Parks’ s portrayal of
Saartjie Baartman draws on cultural images and stereotypes commonly used to represent
Black women in demeaning and sexually debased roles, the objectified oppositional “Other”
measured against a white male “norm”30. Taking into account that Parks did not intend to
write the play as an exact imitation of the story of the real Saartjie Baartman, one can
understand why this play has given rise to so much controversy. In a newspaper interview,
Parks elucidates why she did not stick to the original story, referring back to what above has
been described as “the preconceived notion of black versus white”:

I could have written a two-hour saga with Venus being the victim. But she’s multi-faceted. She’s vain,
beautiful, intelligent and, yes, complicit. I write about the world of my experience, and it’s more
complicated than “that white man down the street is giving me a hard time.” That’s just one aspect of our
reality. As Black people, we’re encouraged to be narrow and simply address the race issue. We deserve so
much more.31

In Parks’ s play, the character Saartjie Baartman is portrayed as a self-conscious woman more
than as a victim of colonialism. This can be explained by the fact that Parks never aims at
writing merely about the tragic story of black people since “the use of the White in the
dramatic equation is”, as she argues, “too often seen as the only way of exploring our
Blackness”\(^{32}\). She further points out that: “As African-Americans we have a history, a future and a daily reality in which a confrontation with a White ruling class is a central feature”\(^{33}\). Since “this reality often traps us in a singular mode of expression”\(^{34}\), Parks tries to offer us another way of presenting black people onstage. Parks is distancing herself from a more traditional literature of victimization by inserting a complex depiction of her characters and using the multifaceted medium that theatre is. To counterbalance the critiques on Parks’s \textit{Venus}, one has to refer to its artistic value and underlying significance.

A correct remark on the critique by Jean Young is formulated by Greg Miller who observes that “while critics like Young locate a disturbing ambiguity in Parks’s representation of Baartman, they fail to consider to what use Parks puts this ambiguity”. Miller further notes that “Parks’s play posits an additional subject beyond Baartman, and this subject is that of the spectator in all its guises”\(^{35}\). In \textit{Venus} “the chorus of spectators” plays an important part, since their presence makes the staging of Baartman or the Hottentot Venus ever so real. In scene 24 for example, Venus becomes the star of a freak show being forced to show off her voluptuous curves:

\begin{quote}
THE MOTHER SHOWMAN:

Turn to the side, Girl.

Let em see! Let em see!

(Rest.)

What a fat ass, huh?!

Oh yes, this girls thuh Missin Link herself.\(^{36}\)
\end{quote}

Even though at this moment the spectators have no lines, their significance is apparent since without an audience, there would not be a show. The fascination for the black female body

\(^{32}\) Parks, “An Equation,” 19.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 19.


existing from the early 19th century onwards turns the Hottentot Venus into an object. According to the anti-racist writer Lillian Smith, “Through objectification … an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech; denied self-definition, self-realization; and overarching all this, denied selfhood”\(^{37}\). In Parks’s Venus, the character of the Mother Showman takes part in this colonial discourse by putting Baartman on display in a cage addressing her in rude language as if she were not human. However, Baartman tries to overcome this objectification by taking her fate into her own hands: “We should spruce up our act. I could speak for them. Say a little poem or something”\(^{38}\). And later on she reveals to the Mother Showman: “No. I’ll set up shop and show myself. Be my own Boss make my own mint”\(^{39}\). When Baartman is brought to court to find out whether she is exhibited against her will, she declares that “(t)o hide yr shame is evil. I show mine. Would you like to see?”\(^{40}\). It is in these moments of self-consciousness that Venus “reclaims agency over her body”\(^{41}\).

Moreover, when Venus self-assuredly strikes a pose, the complicity of the spectator can no longer be denied. As a matter of fact, “it is not clear whether in watching the play now an audience can escape the same contradictory arguments over rightness and rights that were waged when Baartman was alive”\(^{42}\). As the act of watching is central to the play, there are several levels in which this watching takes place. On the level of the real-life audience, we are confronted with a problem: while watching the performance of the play, the audience inevitably takes part in the continuing voyeurism of Venus. So, though Parks’s representation of Venus holds a resistance to exploitation, at the same time, “the play represents and reinscribes these same systems of oppression and degradation by putting her once again on


\(^{38}\) Parks, Venus, 60.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 83.

\(^{41}\) Saal, “Politics of Mimicry,” 62.

display before the gaze of an audience”\(^43\). However, now, the spectator is forced to recognize the colonial exploitation and our complicity within the play since we too, as an audience, become fascinated with Venus’s sexuality. In the words of Homi Bhabha we “turn to this process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed”\(^44\). So instead of giving an accurate retelling of the historical events, Parks focuses on the role of the audience and its part in continuing colonial discourses. By gazing at the spectacle of Venus, the spectator becomes aware of his own desires which are influenced by the historical depiction of “the black Venus”.

Parks uses several techniques to raise this awareness, partly by focusing on this notion of spectatorship and the gaze and partly by applying textual devices which challenge traditional theatre and representation. This is most apparent in the play’s intermission which is not actually an intermission. According to the stage directions: “House lights should come up and the audience should be encouraged to walk out of the theatre, take their intermission break, and then return”\(^45\). But at the same time, one of the prominent characters, namely The Baron Docteur, comes upstage and gives a lecture on the anatomy of Venus. The spectators once again face a dilemma: should they do as they are told and leave the theatre to take their break, or should they stay and listen to what The Baron Docteur has to say? While he is instructing his medical colleagues about the measurements of Venus’s body, he is at the same time addressing the audience as if they were “willing participants in the vivisection of his subject”\(^46\):

Please, Sir, indulge yourself. Go take uh break.

Ive got strong lungs:

So please, if you need air, excuse yrself.

---


\(^{44}\) Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” 89.

\(^{45}\) Parks, Venus, 95.

You'll hear me in the hallway.\textsuperscript{47}

Geis’s interpretation of this theatrical trick offers us an acceptable explanation: It is “one of the most powerful encouragements to the spectators to question their own status as voyeurs\textsuperscript{48}”.

Another stylistic device is the use of footnotes which underlines the artificiality of the play. When Venus is brought before the law, for example, elements such as a dictionary extract and the certificate of Venus’s baptism are offered as to underscore the historical and informative character of the narration since footnotes are usually used for this purpose. The use of footnotes will be further explained in the third chapter which deals with the formal elements of Parks’s work. In line with what Geis says: “through this device the play juxtaposes two layers of narrative time: the historical past (the setting of the play) and the present tense for the audience\textsuperscript{49}. In the historical past the story of Saartjie Baartman is told while the present tense is the time in which the actual performance of the play takes place. Parks manages to combine two time frames as a means of disturbing the experience of the audience while observing the play. There are many instances in the play in which this is the case. At the beginning of the play, for example, one of the characters declares that there will not be any show tonight since Venus is dead. Given that this is announced in the opening scene of the play, there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is performed. Clearly there will be a show tonight to which the audience of \textit{Venus} is attending. But these kinds of statements emphasize the theatricality of the play, alerting the audience that this play will be all about show and ambiguity. To confuse the spectator even more, the play’s scenes are counted down from 31 to 1, as if the story was told in reverse order. But that is not the case; aside from Venus’s death in the preface, the plot takes a chronological course. Again, this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Parks, \textit{Venus}, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Geis, \textit{Parks}, 89.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 80.
\end{itemize}
underscores the theatricality of the representation of Venus: “both the spectacle and the narrative fail to produce the real Baartman, or the real story”\textsuperscript{50}. Elam and Rayner most perpectively note that Venus “is built up artificially and rises out of the gaze of her spectators; narratives falsify and fragment her on stage, giving satisfaction only to an audience: between, Parks leaves space for the real, if absent Baartman”\textsuperscript{51}.

In addition to Saartjie’s biographical story, the play includes another text called “For the Love of The Venus.” This intertext, for which The Baron Docteur is the only audience, functions as a play-within-the-play in which a Young Man and Bride-to-Be are staged alternately. As the groom utters his desire to “love something Wild”\textsuperscript{52}, his mother encourages the bride-to-be to dress up like a Venus Hottentot. The staging of this masquerade can be seen as a critique to what above has been described as the objectification of the black female body. As the obsession of the Young Man with this wild female is acted out before the eyes of The Baron Docteur, this play-within-a-play serves as a mirror to the doctor’s own desires. By extension it also reflects how we in the audience do not escape the fetishization of the female black body, leading us back to the notion of watching and the different levels in which the watching takes place.

The tragedy of it all is that at the end of the play, Venus is not released from the miserable situation she founded herself in. While we learn that she is dead, her corpse is further exposed for scientific reasons in a museum. This is in line with the story of the real-life Baartman whose remains were kept in the Musée de l’ homme in Paris until 1994. We come across a similar ending in another play by Parks, namely The America Play, as the corpse of the main character The Foundling Father becomes part of the display in the Great Hall of Wonders. While during his life he was an Abraham Lincoln impersonator, the

\textsuperscript{50} Harry, Elam and Rayner, “Body Parts,” 273.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 273.
\textsuperscript{52} Parks, Venus, 58.
performance goes on after his death when what is left of him is being watched by tourists in an amusement park. His body is being objectified for pure entertainment, or as Geis puts it:

Parks thus paints a picture of the black man’s wounding in history, the use of the Lincoln myth to create a fake version of liberation and valor at the expense of the real pain and suffering of blacks, which is swallowed into a black hole of forgetting and replaced by commodification and theatricality.  

The same is true in Venus, for the sake of the show both within the play as the play itself, the whole notion of remembering history is put to the test. In the next chapter this topic will be further elaborated, but first, one of Parks’ s other important plays will be discussed on the level of theatricality.

I.3. Topdog/ Underdog: Practising the Performance, Performing the Real

I.3.1. Introduction

Topdog/Underdog is one of Parks’ s most recent plays and once more, a lot of attention is given to the notion of performance and theatricality. As will be shown in the following paragraphs, Parks exploits the medium of theatre and performance to question the representation of identities and the tension between the actual performance of the play on stage and the performance of the characters within the play. In her article “What is a black play?” Sandra Shannon states about Parks that “in plays such as The America Play and Topdog/Underdog, she features characters whom she strategically casts as African Americans but whose racial identities become dramatic devices- not racial or cultural signifiers”.

---

53 Geis, Parks, 112.
I.3.2. Impersonating Lincoln

The two main characters in *Topdog/Underdog* are Lincoln and Booth, two African American brothers whose names were given by their father as a joke. While Booth sits around their room most of the time, practising his skills in the three-card game to swindle money out of his future audience, Lincoln is working in an arcade as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator. At first sight, in comparison to Parks’s earlier experimental work, this play seems to be a conventional realist family drama with its two-character plot and realistic dialogues. But once you dig deeper, the play turns out to be full of metaphors and double meaning. In an interview Parks explains her fascination for the Abraham Lincoln figure:

> What is it about Lincoln that hooks me first? It’s his costume…: the hat, the beard, the height… And he was shot in a theatre by an actor. That’s what draws me to him a lot, also. Costume? Free the slaves? That’s icing on the gravy. Shot in a theatre by an actor. How good is that?55

In this citation Parks is pointing out how crucial the whole element of theatricality is to her without obscuring the historical significance of Lincoln. But since the story of how he freed the slaves has been told many times before, Parks offers us a different story: the story of two brothers who seem to be destined to live up to their names. Though the choice of the names Lincoln and Booth is supposedly arbitrary, one cannot deny the allusion to Abraham Lincoln and his assassin John Wilkes Booth. The historical names of the characters are just one of many theatrical devices in the play, prompting a metadramatic awareness in the spectators.

Another highly metatheatrical element concerns the clothing of the characters. To imitate Abraham Lincoln at the arcade, Lincoln has to dress up as the historical Lincoln, wearing a hat, beard and white makeup. This getup reminds us of the minstrel tradition in which white performers blackened their skin to take up the appearance of black people.

embodying certain stereotypes. By reversing the roles, and putting whiteface makeup on a black person’s skin, Parks is criticising this tradition. This parody of the minstrel tradition functions as a comment on the way in which White America saw Black America until the end of the 19th century.

This Lincoln impersonation gives rise to a mixed feeling. In the words of Geis: “Here, Parks creates her own version of a trope that appears frequently in African-American literature: that African-American identity almost inevitably involves disguise and role-playing as part of the effort to function in a hostile culture.”56 This to say that black identity is always performative, as can be deduced from the DuBois quotation about double consciousness at the beginning of this chapter. In this play, the question is whether or not his costume, whiteface makeup and the experience of being shot at several times a day, though with blank cartridges, disgraces Lincoln as a person. As a result, Lincoln tries to separate his costume and act from his real self, “like an actor preparing for a great role”57. Stating: “They say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that don’t make me who I am”58, Lincoln is emphasizing the importance of clothes, drawing a line between his job as a performer and his real self in suggesting that his white persona is mere costuming, and hence performance. This perception that the character Lincoln is himself a performer is a highly theatrical element in the play. We are most vividly reminded of this truth in a scene in which Lincoln and Booth are practising Lincoln’s death scene and acting skills because he fears that he will get fired and replaced by a wax dummy otherwise. As an audience we are watching his rehearsal on stage and wonder to what extent this Lincoln-imitation does not affect Lincoln as such. While Lincoln is trying to maintain the distinction between performance and reality, at several moments in the play he acknowledges that they seem to coincide. This duality is brilliantly foregrounded in statements from a minor character Lincoln refers to as his “Best Customer”:

56 Geis 114.
58 Ibid., 29.
“Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does thuh show go on?”\textsuperscript{59} and “Yr only yrself … when no ones watching”\textsuperscript{60}. As Lincoln describes how his Best Customer regularly pays him a visit and stands behind him to shoot him, he admits: “… and when the gun touches me he can feel that Im warm and he knows Im alive. And if Im alive then he can shoot me dead. And for a minute, with him hanging back there behind me, its real”\textsuperscript{61}. But even in these revealing moments, Lincoln has to realize that “it’s a sit down job. With benefits”\textsuperscript{62}. It is what keeps him of his former obsession with the three-card monte.

\textbf{1.3.3. Choosing Appearance over the Real}

In comparison to his brother, Booth has a different idea about clothing and “the real”. When he brings home two brand new suits stolen from a department store, he thinks his new clothing will change his life: “Gracell see me in this and she gonna ask me tuh marry her”\textsuperscript{63}. Having put on their suits, Booth compliments Lincoln saying that “you look sharp too, man. You look like the real you”\textsuperscript{64}. His comments imply that for Booth, the outward appearance is the real deal, whereas Lincoln distinguishes between the costume and the real. Also in his practice of the confidence game of three-card monte, which his brother Lincoln once mastered before one of his team members died during a hustle, Booth does not seem to realize what the game really is about. For him, being able to do the talking is enough to become master of the three-card monte. But Lincoln repeatedly warns him that to control the game he must acquire all kinds of skills: “Theres 2 parts to throwing thuh cards. Both parts are fairly complicated. Thuh moves and thuh grooves, thuh talk and thuh walk, thuh patter and thuh pitter pat, thuh

\textsuperscript{59} Parks, \textit{Topdog/Underdog}, 34.  
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 34.  
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 50.  
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 54.  
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 28.  
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 30.
flap and thuh rap: what yr doing with yr mouth and what yr doing with yr hands.”65 It becomes clear that Booth attaches great importance to the outward signs -whether it is in clothing or the card game- whereas Lincoln maintains a distance between symbols and what is real. Though both characters are being performers, they both deal with it in different ways. Lincoln is aware of his role as a performer, so much that he, during his death scene rehearsal with Booth, stops his act by calling out that “it was looking too real or something”66. In Booth’s case, trying to outdo his brother as a performer, “also extends to various kinds of self-deception”67. One example is his relationship with his girlfriend Grace, which, until the end of the play, when we learn that Booth has killed her, is uncertain for the audience whether it is real or make-believe. Whilst Booth trusted that the three-card game would render him money and success, it is not surprising that after his failure with Grace and in a final bet with Lincoln, Booth ends up shooting both characters out of impotent anger. As Geis puts it:

Booth’s subsequent shooting of Lincoln evolves from the sense that on every front, his ability to perform - as a man, as a successful capitalist-hustler-moneymaker, as a younger brother able to gain his older brother’s respect- has been threatened because he feels himself to be acted upon rather than an actor.68

1.3.4. Performing the Game

Since we learned that Lincoln and Booth are both performers, one should consider the metatheatrical implication of this fact. Their status as performers is visible in their speech and moves as both characters over and over again rehearse the same monologue for the three-card monte scam:

65 Parks, Topdog/Underdog, 75.
66 Ibid., 52.
67 Geis, Parks, 116.
68 Ibid., 124.

Parks’ s famous pattern of “Repetition and Revision”, which will be discussed in a later chapter, is exemplified in this speech, which only adds to the metatheatrical dimension. While the two brothers are practising their skills, one is inevitably inclined to associate these rehearsing scenes to those of an actor studying for his role. One is reassured of this implication when Parks remarks that Booth’s “moves and accompanying patter are, for the most part, studied and awkward”69. In line with the performers, the three-card monte game is in itself ever so theatrical. The game is actually a performance in which every participant has its moves, speech and most importantly, its function. For example, the dealer:

He acts like he dont wanna play. He holds back and thuh crowd, with their eagerness to see his skill and their willingness to take a chance, and their greediness to win his cash, the larceny in their hearts, all goad him on and push him to throw his cards, although of course the Dealer has been wanting to throw his cards all along. Only he dont never show it.70

Apart from a regular crew, the performance needs to involve a crowd or audience without whom the hustle game could not exist. Here comes in the element of theatricality, as in Venus, the real audience of the play is ascribed the role of the crowd as we are witness to Booth’s and Lincoln’s try outs. Margo Jefferson puts it this way: “(T)he fact that we could be in the street or the subway watching this act is titillating. So is the game itself. No bogus stage tricks at the Ambassador Theater (sic.); this actor has to handle the cards, and by watching, we become the

69 Parks, Topdog/Underdog, 7.
70 Ibid., 74.
potential suckers or the too-smart-for that bystanders. Through the trope of rehearsal, the play draws attention to the literal nature of its own production.

Given the examples of Venus and Topdog/Underdog, one can assert that the complexity and at the same time geniality of Parks’s plays is indebted to her emphasis on theatricality. By using the presence of the audience as a device, Parks manages to make us aware of our own part in the plays, as observers as well as accomplices. As Parks’s plays tend to have multiple meanings and modes of interpretation, her emphasis on the power of theatre and (meta)theatricality prompts us to understand her work in the most humble way. Parks is able to offer the reader and audience an original story moving away from the traditional discourse in which black characters are portrayed as mere victims and white characters as plain oppressors. Instead she presents the atypical story of Saartjie Baartman who is self-consciously making a spectacle out of herself to reclaim agency over her own body. Moreover, with her emphasis on theatricality, she points to the fact that there is more to African-American drama than just the race problem. For Parks, the very genre of theatre and the possibilities that it creates, for example in Topdog/Underdog in parodying traditions or phasing out the distinction between the performance and the real, are as important as its content. In this sense she is moving towards a new black aesthetic in which stereotypical ideas and traditions are cancelled out in favour of formal experiment and meaningful revisions of existing narratives. To support this theory, the following chapters will be dedicated to two other main themes of her work to come to a more wide-ranging analysis of the playwright and her writings.

---

Chapter II: Suzan-Lori Parks and the great hole of history

II.1. Introduction

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to “make” history – that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life – locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.72

This is only one of Parks’s many statements about history, revealing her concern with American history as it is known today. Parks is convinced that American historiography is up until today still dominated by the stories and achievements of white people while the past of African Americans has been systematically erased. Without putting the blame on somebody, Parks is trying to reconstruct a history that has long been overshadowed by the mainstream. “Parks shows that history is and always has been as much enemy as ally to the collective memories and shared secrets of a black people jettisoned into a white world” 73, writes Shawn-Marie Garrett. Parks’s plays offer a comment on the representation of American history by destabilizing the common knowledge of traditional historical events and figures. In The America Play, for example, the figure of Abraham Lincoln is staged by a black gravedigger, and the play Venus is rather loosely based on the Venus Hottentot. By including all kinds of holes and gaps in her work, Parks is further referring to history and the absence of certain histories. In The America Play, which we will talk about later in this chapter, the setting has

literally become a hole, namely an exact replica of “The Great Hole of History”. This is characteristic of Parks’s work: instead of straightforwardly criticizing American-or in general Western- historiography, she formulates a counter narrative by experimenting with the conventional modes of language, form, and structure. Rather than a latent criticism, her plays can be seen as an alternative to the existing historical memory of America. Another motif connected to this history theme is the digging motif, which reappears throughout Parks’s work. As she says in the above quotation, Parks is digging into the past to find narratives that have been excluded from the recorded history. What she perceives as absent in the records is the collective black experience of humiliation and discrimination that in reality has always been omnipresent.

II.2. Rep & Rev: a formal principle with political implications

Staying true to her inventive style, Parks does not simply proffer these stories about slavery and inequity but includes in her plays more complicated situations and references to the past. According to Jeanette Malkin, “Parks’s theatrical inventiveness and her language of loss and mourning (for a forgotten history, a stunted memory) have created new ways of experiencing memory in the theater”\(^7^4\). One of these ways to challenge the white historiography is her use of a technique she calls “Rep & Rev”. The notion of Repetition and Revision is based on the basic structure of jazz, where a motif is repeated and varied. Parks uses it “to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score”\(^7^5\). Through this technique, Parks’s engagement with history becomes manifest in the form of her plays. Since “form is not something that ‘gets in the way of the


\(^7^5\) Parks, “Elements.” 9.
story’ but is an integral part of the story”\textsuperscript{76}, Parks explores the form of a play to serve its content and vice versa. For instance, in Rep & Rev texts, as Parks puts it, “we are not moving from A→B but rather, for example, from A→A→A→B→A. Through such movement we refigure A. And if we continue to call this movement FORWARD PROGRESSION, which I think it is, then we refigure the idea of forward progression”\textsuperscript{77}. In the opinion of Deborah R. Geis, Parks’s idea of “Rep & Rev” is also inspired by the tradition of “signifyin”:

“Signifyin” is a form of discursive practice we can see in African-American literature extending back to slave narratives. To “Signify” is to mimic or echo dominant discourse, but to repeat it in a subversive way that lets the (knowing) listener or reader understand how the discourse is being mimicked, undermined, reinscribed, revised, and reused for purposes that may run counter to the original, authoritarian intent.\textsuperscript{78}

In other words, her use of “Rep & Rev” contributes to her objective to unbalance the dominant discourse, to upset the historical narratives from which African-Americans have been dislodged. One should bear in mind though, that this strategy does not function to recuperate an authentic African-American voice, as Saal pointedly remarks: “Rep & Rev emphasizes that there is no original model to be copied or retrieved, that imitation is always an imitation of itself, albeit with a difference”\textsuperscript{79}. In an article on ‘Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture’, James A. Snead suggests that in black culture, repetition can be linked to Freud’s theory of repetition compulsion, in which “repetition … has replaced memory, the ‘normal’ access to the past”. He further notes that “this obsessive acting-out of the repressed past conflict brings the patient back to the original scene of drama”\textsuperscript{80}. It is tempting to connect

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 9-10.
\textsuperscript{78} Geis, \textit{Parks}, 15.
\textsuperscript{79} Saal, ‘Politics of Mimicry,’ 64.
\textsuperscript{80} Snead, James A. “Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture.” \textit{Black Literature and Literary Theory}, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Routledge, 1984. 67.
this trauma theory to Parks’s use of repetition, but in this case, prudence is called for. Though these repetitions in a way try to retrieve elements from the past, whatever they invoke, it is never a single traumatic event or essential experience as for Parks, there is no original history, history is only made present through its staging. As Steven Drukman argues: “Parks’s drama … is concerned with the stories her figures tell to inhabit their experience as they speak their way into history. In the telling, identities (including, but not limited to, racial,) are performed, reinhabited, reimprinted… but never for the first time”81. How we can describe the function of Rep and Rev then, Parks formulates as following: “characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew”82.

By repeating and revising a given form, Parks is at the same time revising its content. This opinion is shared by Jeanette Malkin, who argues that, “To ‘repeat and revise’ is to reject linearity and causal rationality in favor of a spatially open view of time and process. It is to favor multidirectionality and re-visions of a ‘past’ as definitions of progress”83. Following from this argument, what we see in Parks’s plays is that they do not follow a chronological plot but are framed in stories intertwining past, present and future. This makes sense since for Parks, “history is time that won’t quit”84 and therefore can only be represented by denying full closure. Distancing her plays from a traditional linear timeframe and using the Rep & Rev method, Parks “aim(s) at overcoming fixity, or stereotyping, through the returns of memory”85. For instance, in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989-1990), Parks repeatedly revises a news report stating “This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world”86, each time changing some vocabulary or adding little details. By doing so, Parks is reinscribing this black figure into history because “the subversive

84 Parks, “Elements,” 15.
85 Malkin, “Memory,” 158.
repetition of a line, act, or visual image has a transformative effect while calling the subject repeatedly into memory.”

There is a clear relationship between her plays and history, not only by her use of Rep & Rev and the references to history, but most importantly through her believe that “theater can make history”\(^88\). In an interview Parks explains why history matters to her the way it does:

I think because if you looked back into the past or looked up onto a screen, a film screen, or looked in a show, or looked on the shelf in the library, you don’t see enough of you. Or even if you do see enough of you, I do think you have the right to put some of you up there by any means necessary. … I think it is just as valid as what we are told happened back then.\(^89\)

For Parks there is no one single true history, since all historiographies are constructs we can not speak of a right and wrong history. Instead, she believes that there are several versions of history, and each version has its own significance. By creating new versions and alternatives in her plays, she is expanding the common knowledge and idea of history. Only by putting a multitude of voices and stories together, one can get a bit closer to the real story. Consequently, in The Death of the Last Black Man, Parks underscores repeatedly the necessity to register your history: the Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread character says over and over again: “You should write it down because if you dont write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You should write it down and you should hide it under a rock.”\(^90\). This emphasizes Parks’s conviction that the history of African-Americans has not been remembered adequately. By rewriting her own historical narratives, Parks is trying to restore their place in the history of America.

\(^87\) Geis, Parks, 16.
\(^88\) Parks, quoted in Jiggets, “Interview,” 317.
\(^89\) Parks, quoted in Jiggets, “Interview,” 317.
\(^90\) Parks, “Death of the Last Black Man,” 104.
In the following section, I will further reflect on the theme of history by focusing on *The America Play*. One should always bear in mind that we can not separate—what seems to be—Parks’s historical and political viewpoint from her aesthetics, as form and content are mutually dependent. So, in discussing the meaning of history and the act of memory in her work, we will come across some stylistic elements as well, though these will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

**II.3. The America Play**

**II.3.1. Introduction**

*The America Play* deals with the same historical character as Parks later used in *Topdog/Underdog* namely, the ex-president Abraham Lincoln. Instead of commemorating this president “who freed the slaves”, Parks introduces his impersonator, ironically called the Lesser Known, a black gravedigger who bears resemblance to Lincoln. According to Katy Ryan, “*The America Play* parodies the legacy and commodification of Lincoln”\(^91\), by staging a black Lincoln imitator who reenacts Lincoln’s assassination for a penny in an American history theme park. In this play Parks is criticizing the important place the commodified spectacle occupies in American society and the way America is given way to its partial amnesia. As American history nowadays seems to be reduced to its artifacts, Parks is “re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history”\(^92\). Needless to say that those events are not exactly the ones we find in the history books. What is more, Parks’s staging of historical events is far removed from traditional literature or plays with their linear narratives which are so commonly used.

---


92 Parks “Possession,” 5.
II.3.2. The fallacy of American historiography and the importance of artifacts

Considering *The America Play* one cannot overlook the many elements that seem to suggest that this play is going to be about America. Apart from the title, also the book itself, in which the play is published, seems to scream “America” with its stars and stripes on the cover. On the front, an empty suit with the hat and beard so characteristic of the historical Lincoln is displayed and on the back cover we can see that same costume but now a black man is wearing it. Katy Ryan explains: “The humor and despair in the play relies on the discrepancy between black skin and white images. Without blackness, there could be no play on the white construction of Lincoln”93. As Ryan and other critics have pointed out, it seems that Parks is not only writing about America as such but also about those who have been invisible in American history. She is not specifically writing about the famous president on the front cover of her book but about the people who were pushed into the background. By staging the Lesser Known, Parks is seemingly creating a space for African Americans in the great annals of history. The same motive could lay behind her choice for an entirely black cast, on which Ryan comments that “by incubating history on a stage filled with black performers, Parks fundamentally shifts the ground on which the events of America’s official past are remembered”94. The irony of it all is that this play could not have been written if it was not for the traditional Lincoln myth recorded by whites. Moreover, the only way the Lesser Known will be remembered after his death is by his performance of “the real” Lincoln. Parks is herself aware of this contradiction, and the aspiration articulated by some critics that the

93 Ryan, “No Less Human,” 90.
94 Ibid., 91.
repetition of The Lesser Known’s performance and the repetition of the performance of *The America Play* itself before an audience will offer The Lesser Known a place in the canon of American history, turns out to be vain hope. As we will see later on, “everything about the Lesser Known’s death is twinned with the death of the legend: everything except its impact and its memory”\(^95\). It is thus with a hint of irony that the cover and title of the play were chosen, realizing that modern society is dependent on the images that were once created about America and American history. The empty costume on the front cover reminds us of this fact, as we can recognize Lincoln’s identity only in his stereotypical clothing and beard. On this cover, history has made way for its artifacts and the same will turn out to be true in this play. In the words of Ilka Saal: “this is a play about history itself, about attempts to unearth it, to represent it, to retell it …. The play does not suggest that in the process something original, authentic can be retrieved”. And further on: “While *The America Play* is a play about America, it also brazenly *plays with* ideas of America”\(^96\). Parks herself acknowledges this in an interview when asked about the significance of the John Locke quote at the beginning of her play: “[It] may encourage people to think about the *idea* of America in addition to the actual day-to-day reality of America”\(^97\). This to say that the play will not offer any kind of catharsis -- if anything, it is a comment on the overdetermination of American history by artifacts and stereotyped ideas of itself.

**II.3.3. Ritualizing the assassination scene**

The importance of artifacts turns up at several moments in the play. In the first scene the Lesser Known, also called the Foundling Father finds himself in a great hole which is an exact copy of the “Great Hole of History”. He recounts the story of his life: how he was a

---

\(^95\) Malkin, “Memory,” 180.

\(^96\) Saal, “Mimicry,” 63.

gravedigger by trade and how he went on his honeymoon and discovered a historical theme park, which inspired him to leave his wife and head out West to dig his own hole to perform as Abraham Lincoln, after people told him how much he resembled Lincoln. His whole performance is based on his likeness to Lincoln, and in his costuming we find the first example of this commodification of Lincoln and of history. With his black coat and stovepipe hat, his collection of fake beards and the bust of Lincoln, the Lesser Known is performing as Lincoln: “His act would now consist of a single chair, a rocker, in a dark box. The public was invited to pay a penny, choose a selection of provided pistols, enter the darkened box and “Shoot Mr. Lincoln”98. As Deborah Geis notes: “the Foundling Father in The America Play uses the costume to his advantage … and seems to create a self out of his act”99. Whereas the protagonist in Topdog/Underdog had mixed feelings about his Lincoln impersonation, for the Lesser Known this act gives meaning to his life: “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”100. The Lesser Known is well aware of his role as a performer, for example, he is frequently wearing a yellow beard instead of a black one since “some inconsistencies are perpetuatatable because theyre good for business”101. Geis comments that “what he realizes, as an impersonator, is that the historical persona is a constructed image”102, in which certain symbols such as the beard and the hat help to maintain that image. A striking evidence of this belief is offered when the Lesser Known reveals that his first attempt to impersonate Lincoln by giving speeches, was only greeted with a moderate success. It was only when someone suggested that he ought to be shot, that the Lesser Known became famous. In this regard, Haike Frank makes a claim that “the fact that the public shows a greater interest in Lincoln’s

99 Geis, Parks, 118.
100 Parks, “The America Play,” 162.
101 Ibid., 163.
102 Geis, Parks, 105.
murder than in his political speeches and, by implication, his political deeds, points to the dominance of fragmentation and the power of sensationalism in society”\textsuperscript{103}. The following monologue bears witness to this reduction of Lincoln’s life and political career to the moment he was shot in a theatre:

Uh Hehm. The Death of Lincoln!: --. The watching of the play, the laughter, the smiles of Lincoln and Mary Todd, the slipping of Booth into the presidential box unseen, \textit{the freeing of the slaves}, the pulling of the trigger, the bullets piercing above the left ear, the bullets entrance into the great head, the bullets lodging behind the great eye, the slumping of Lincoln, the leaping onto the stage of Booth, the screaming of Todd, the screaming of Todd, the screaming of Keene, the leaping onto the stage of Booth; the screaming of Todd, the screaming of Keene, the shouting of Booth “Thus to the tyrants!;” the death of Lincoln! – And the silence of the nation.\textsuperscript{104}

On the same topic Deborah Geis convincingly suggests that the tourists in the theme park who pay to relive Lincoln’s assassination by taking up the role of his assassin Booth, are complicit in this kind of reductionism:

Parks uses tourists who want to act out the part of Booth in the assassination of Lincoln --and the complicity, even profit, of the Lincoln impersonator- to comment on the reduction of history to a kind of cultural tourism that prioritizes the thrills of revenge and death over the real moments of bodily trauma or the political implications of the assassination itself.\textsuperscript{105}


\textsuperscript{104} Parks, “The America Play,” 189, my emphasis. When the Foundling Father announces ‘the centerpiece of the evening’, he presents the death of Lincoln, indicated by Parks with the blank spots, in a whole series of events that do not seem to link up with each other chronologically. Geis argues that “as the events themselves fall into the Great Hole of History, each phrase has an iconic meaning for the Foundling Father’s spectators, and yet they seem to want a potpourri of narratives (each line is a tag or reminder) reiterated for their pleasure without concern for accuracy.” (Geis, \textit{Parks}, 110).

\textsuperscript{105} Geis, \textit{Parks}, 104.
Eventually, what is left of the historical Lincoln are not his deeds or political speeches, but a theatricalized death scene and his costume which is turned into a stereotyped artifact. Moreover, the continuous reenactment of the assassination at the theme park “places the act itself into a mise-en-abîme, a Beckettian void or bottomless hole.”106 Thus, this repeated assassination does not conceal a meaning for the tourists out of which they could learn a lesson. Instead, it renders the event itself empty, no more than a ritual to be repeated for pure amusement. According to Steven Drukman, “all these historical fetishes are, in fact, the by-products of the repetition and revisions of history itself”107. The America Play shows that historical events and figures, by repeating and reenacting them in the media, literature, drama, etc., are turned into rituals, spectacles out of which the original can not be retrieved again.

II.3.4. The Lesser Known’s legacy

In the second act of the play, “The Hall of Wonders”, the obsession with artifacts continues with the characters of Lucy, the Lesser Known’s former wife and Brazil, his son. As they are staged in the Great Hole, Brazil is digging for relics of his father while his mother is encouraging him: “Dig on, son... Cant stop digging till you dig up something. You dig that something up you brush that something off you give that something uh designated place. Its own place. Along with thuh other discoveries. In thuh Hall of Wonders”108. All the things Brazil knows about his father have to do with his career as a Lincoln imitator in the Great Hole of History replica. Even after the Lesser Known’s death, when Brazil is trying to find evidence of his father’s existence, the only things he can find are bits and pieces of his Lincoln act. In this way, the same fate has fallen to the Lesser Known that fell to Lincoln. His past has been reduced to a single action; the repeated impersonation of Lincoln. Even the life

106 Geis, Parks, 105.
of Brazil himself is threatened to become no more than a continuation of his father’s since he is looking more like him everyday, in his physical appearance as well as his skills for “faking”. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory argues that:

The entire process of recognition forces Brazil to turn his efforts to creating his own representations of self, to write his own history, to avoid following in his father’s footsteps, which submerged The Foundling Father into the “Great Hole of History,” where he play-acts someone else’s history and is ritualistically shot.\(^{109}\)

The question is whether Brazil will ever be able to shake off his father’s legacy as he reveals near the end of the play that: “We could say I just may follow in thuh footsteps of my foefather.”\(^{110}\) In the very last scene of the play, Brazil seems incapable of finding his own way to form an identity and deal with the past as he starts a business called “The Hall of Wonders”, in which he displays all the artifacts he dug up in The Great Hole of History that he inherited from his father. After reciting all the historical objects in his possession, Brazil confronts the audience with his newest wonder: “One of the greats Hisself! … Note: the top hat and frock coat, just like the greats. Note the death wound: thuh great black hole – thuh great black hole in thuh great head. –And how this great head is bleedin. – Note: thuh last words. –And thuh last breaths. – And how thut nation mourns.”\(^{111}\) Brazil has displayed the corpse of his father to allude to the Lincoln myth again so that even after his death, The Lesser Known is represented as a person only through the representation of someone else. One might say that in Brazil’s digging, Lincoln and the Lesser Known finally merge, though this does not lead to any catharsis whatsoever. The act of digging can be seen as an act of remembering, in Brazil’s case an attempt to put his father on the historical map. But the sad


\(^{111}\) Ibid., 199.
part is that both Lincoln and the Lesser Known, though remembered, will only leave behind artifacts and their constructed speeches. Anthony Kubiak unfolds the link between this end scene and its part in “the recreation of history as kitsch” in the following useful comment:

The terror that is history is thus emptied of content, it becomes a cerebral Hole, a double of the hole in Lincoln’s brain filled not with history as trauma, but rather with the disintegrated grey matter of historical detritus: a bust of Lincoln, Washington’s bones and his wooden teeth, glass trading beads, peace pacts, and so on, tracing American history back to its origins in Puritan culture and before, existing now not as historical narrative, but as midden, the compost heap of a New Historicism that, as the mimetic double of history, conceals in its archival fetishism history’s lack – historicism’s own narrative insufficiency and its deadly clamors, in Parks’s words, ‘the Hole and its Historicity’, counterpart to the hole that is history, the history that hurts.\footnote{Kubiak, Anthony. “America/Amnesia.” \textit{Performance Research} 5:3 (2000): 35.}

Kubiak is suggesting here that Parks has created this ‘historical hole’ in which American history has been reduced to a form of theater, to mirror “our blindness to the very theatre that constitutes us”\footnote{Ibid., 36.}. In other words, by mostly focalizing on artifacts and dominant discourses, another side of history has been left obscured. For Parks it is the history of African-Americans that has not yet been explored adequately.

In an interview with playwright Michele Pearce, Parks is elaborating on her construction of history as she does not believe in the historiography of the dominant culture: “I take issue with history because it doesn’t serve me – it doesn’t serve me because there isn’t enough of it. In this play, I am simply asking, ‘Where is history?’, because I don’t see it. I don’t see any history out there, so I’ve made some up”\footnote{Pearce, “Alien Nation,” 26.}. In this quotation Parks is admitting that she does not believe in one true history as history is always formed and revised by others.
Una Chaudhuri puts forward the idea that the past can only be known to us through language and therefore is always subject to reinterpretation:

Parks’s denial of history occurs at the level of language, or rather of the recognition that history, because it exists as language, is always subject to revision […] Every fresh repetition of one of history’s privileged textual fragments rewrites the meaning, the substance and affect, of that fragment. This is the performative principle that undermines the Lesser Known’s historical project: instead of recuperating the greatness of the past, the performance of history unravels that greatness, textualizing its performers as inauthentic and belated ‘bit-players’ in the drama of American greatness.115

So the power of this play lays in its refusal to reaffirm the dominant narratives put forward in American historiography. A refusal that manifests itself in the play’s emphasis on artifacts and its ironical staging of the commodification of history. With every performance of the play, Parks is creating her own version of history, a version that resists fixed white-orientated constructions and allows other voices to emerge. Thus Parks uses theatre to make room for a black presence. However, reassuring the audience of her earlier mentioned statements on the depiction of the traumas and injuries done to African-Americans in the past that it “traps us in a singular mode of expression” 116, Parks focuses on commodification and theatricality while dealing with black characters. Both the actions that take place on stage and the language used in the play, underscore Parks’s concern with historical representation. At several moments in the play, Parks employs language as a meaningful device to question the validity of historiography, for example with linguistic wordplay such as the “Foundling father” instead of the founding father and the forefather becoming “foe/faux-father”. This is an ironical comment on how the terms founding father and forefather have been used throughout history as rendering authority to the persons who were credited these titles. This pun indicates Parks

distrust about history writing, more than that she actually considers them “enemy” and “false” fathers or ancestors. Parks is producing this particular language to deconstruct the histories that have been incorporated into the canon, stating that: “the history of Literature is in question. And the history of History is in question too”\(^{117}\). In return, Parks narrates alternative historical experiences including characters that “are absent in normative historical narratives but made present through the very act of Parks’s imprinting”\(^{118}\).

In the same way, Parks uses the actions in the play, arousing a certain feeling of unsettlement in the reader or audience. For instance, the clear distinction between life and death is cancelled out in this narrative, as the Lesser Known returns to the Great Hole many years after his death “to say a few words from the grave”\(^{119}\). Marc Robinson reads the Lesser Known’s return to the living as a way of “forcing the past back into the present, and thus enabling himself to revise history”\(^{120}\). For the same reason this play does not distinguish clearly between the past, the present, and future, but offers us a grey zone in which fragmented memories intertwine with the present. While Brazil and Lucy are digging up remains from the Lesser Known, their dialogue alternates with memories of their past and with the Lesser Known’s meditations. Thus, by the conflation of time and of reality and imagination, Parks is further distorting the conventional linearity in favor of more experimental forms. The purpose of this collapsing of past with present Parks explains in these terms: “History is not ‘was,’ history is ‘is.’ It’s present, so if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past … so you can fill in the blanks. You can do it now by inserting yourself into the present. You can do it for back then, too”\(^{121}\). By denying full closure, Parks’s writing can transform these voids in the past into

\(^{117}\) Parks, “Possession,” 4.


\(^{119}\) Parks, “The America Play,” 197.


\(^{121}\) Parks, quoted in Jiggets, “Interview,” 316.
existences in the present. Parks is using the theatre to resurrect figures and stories from the past that have never reached the present before. The reason why Parks invents these voices from the past is because she is not satisfied with the historical narratives that have been passed down through the ages.

A final example of how the canonical representations of history are undermined in *The America Play*, manifests itself in Parks’s use of footnotes. Inquiring into the reason for putting footnotes in her play, Parks replies:

> But I love them, they’re so great! It’s not like, “so you’ll understand this play you have to read this line.” Most of them are totally made up and ridiculous. One of them talks about some of the Foundling Father’s unpublished works. One of them talks about what Mary Todd *might* have said on the night her husband died. It’s playing, again, with the form and the idea of a footnote.\(^\text{122}\)

The footnotes serve as an ironic comment on the authority with which some events are turned into historical truths and others are being brushed aside.

In conclusion, as *The America Play* is a play about the construction and misconstruction of history, Parks uses an unusual timeframe and textual devices to support her argument. These take the form of footnotes and language play, devices which we can also trace throughout her other work. However, her main instrument to attack the white construction of history is by mirroring its clichés in the play itself. Her emphasis on artifacts and the theme park-setting are aimed at making us aware of the commodification and exploitation of history. What is more, by staging a black man to play the part of an important white historical figure, Parks is parodying the minstrel tradition, implanting “[her] idea that history perpetuates itself through simulacra, and that each generation is called upon to imitate

---
the previous one without questioning the nature of falsehoods or performances involved.”

Her continuous resistance to this kind of ignorance manifests itself also on the formal level of her plays which will be talked about in the following chapter.

---

123 Geis, Parks, 109.
Chapter III: Towards a New Aesthetics

III.1. Introduction

While in the previous chapters we were dealing with the themes of history and theatricality in Parks’s work, this chapter will focus on form. Whenever Parks is asked to comment upon the formal side of her plays, she insists upon the fact that she cannot identify her work with the general use of traditional linear narratives: “Some people say, ‘Oh, you can say anything, great idea, but put it in a structure that we can understand so that we can get this stuff.’ And I think, there’s no way that this stuff that I’m trying to say is going to fit into that structure”\(^\text{124}\). Parks is emphasizing that she cannot allow others to decide what structure she should use in her plays as for her, “as I write along the container dictates what sort of substance will fill it and, at the same time, the substance is dictating the size and shape of the container”\(^\text{125}\). This to say that for Parks, form and content are interdependent and therefore, to give an exhaustive analysis of her work, one cannot overlook the importance of the form. Consequently, the thematic development of history and theatricality in her work will also be reflected in its formal structure. In addition to Rep and Rev, which I already discussed in the previous chapter in connection with the history issue, Parks’s work is characterized by a series of other meaningful aesthetic innovations, including her use of rests and spells, her specific language, etc. These formal innovations not only give her work its distinctive character but also underline Parks’s concern with the dominant discourses in historiography and the literary canon. While in the discussion of The America Play it became clear that Parks has offered another version of history to be included in the literary canon, the formal characteristics of her

\(^{124}\) Drukman, “Parks and Diamond,” 64.

\(^{125}\) Parks, “Elements,” 7-8.
work are a sign of her originality as well as her attempt to “form a sort of bulwark against an insidious, tame-looking, schmaltz-laden mode of expression that threatens to cover us all, like Vesuvius, in our sleep”. Through her creativity and innovativeness, Parks stands out as a playwright, arguing against servile imitation and in favour of experiment. Disappointed by white historiography and the literary canon, Parks is rediscovering theatre, exploring its possibilities in both thematic and formal way. While focussing on the formal characteristics of her work, one will be reaffirmed that theatre is an art form destined to be performed, as Parks notes: “I think I write to be read aloud”. This also implicates the presence of an audience, which then again can be linked to the notion of theatricality discussed earlier. Aware of the various uses of language and form, they become playful instruments that Parks uses to shake up her audience, providing an unprecedented dramaturgy. Hence, the following paragraphs will be dedicated to the formal experiments found in Parks’s dramatic texts, focussing on the way in which they add meaning to the general project of Parks’s playwriting.

III.2. A Real Challenge: Interpreting Textual Markers

An important factor that contributed to the creation of her own artistic voice is Parks’s language use. Commenting upon Parks’s dramatic language, Geis states that “Parks uses an idiosyncratic, poetic form of theatre language that is truly her own and that creates a deliberate form of resistance to “norms” of theatrical discourse”. These norms, which Parks deliberately neglects to take into account, include stage directions and a correct spelling use. Her resistance is apparent in her use of a very specific speech of which she states that “it’s just an attempt to get things on the page how I think they sound to me”. In theatre, the

127 Drukman, “Parks and Diamond,” 69.
128 Geis, Parks, 13.
129 Parks, quoted in Jiggets, “Interview,” 311.
power of language is perceptible when a text is being performed, which is why Parks gives preference to the sound of a word instead of holding on to its correct spelling. Parks writes the words down as they should be pronounced, offering her actors clues about what kind of speech is characteristic for their role. “Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests and through digesting creates a performance on stage”, she says. “Each word is configured to give the actor a clue to their physical life. Look at the difference between ‘the’ and ‘thuh’. The ‘uh’ requires the actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack”\textsuperscript{130}. Because in Parks’s texts stage directions are rare, her distinctive theatre language becomes all the more important. For Parks, stage directions become redundant as she states that “the action goes in the line of dialogue instead of always in a pissy set of parentheses. How the line should be delivered is contained in the line itself”\textsuperscript{131}. Clearly, this makes her plays a real challenge for the stage director and actors.

In an attempt to compensate this lack of stage directions, Parks uses “slightly unconventional theatrical elements”\textsuperscript{132}. In Venus as well as in “from Elements of Style”, Parks offers her readers, actors and directors a “road map” in which she explains the significance of these theatrical devices:

\textit{a (rest)}

Take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition.

\textit{a spell}

An elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures’ names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look.

This is a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no ‘action’ or ‘stage business’ is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit.

\textsuperscript{130} Parks, “Elements,” 12.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{132} Parks, Venus, 7.
The feeling: look at a daguerreotype; or: the planets are aligning and as they move we hear the music of their spheres. A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It’s also a place for an emotional transition.133

In the author’s notes in Venus, printed at the beginning of the novel, Parks also adds this: “[Brackets in the text indicate optional cuts for production.]” and “(Parentheses around dialogue indicate softly spoken passages (asides; sotto voce).)”134 As clear as these last two guidelines are, all the more obscure are the previous ones. A “rest” is a short silence, while a “spell” is a longer moment in the text in which the characters’ names are printed without accompanying speech:

THE VENUS

THE BARON DOCTEUR135

In trying to explain the significance of a “rest”, Diamond states that “there is clearly a difference between a moment when a writer has not given a character anything to say and that character’s name doesn’t even appear on the page and when that character’s name appears on the page, has been given space, and says nothing”136. In a detailed discussion of the spells in Venus, Jennifer Johung acknowledges the various potentialities that these textual markers possess, underscoring that readers, directors and performers must undertake the task to interpret, try out and make decisions about these formal constructions “as they best see fit”137. Johung further suggests that Parks’s spells involve a transition from the merely textual articulation on page to their embodiment on stage: “If we can imagine the names of a spell as musical notes”, she says, “then we can conceptualize the space of spell as a vertical spread or

133 Parks, “Elements,” 16.
134 Parks, Venus, 7.
135 Ibid., 106.
136 Drukman, “Parks and Diamond,” 70.
137 Parks, “Elements,” 16.
chord—with all names/notes sounded together—gesturing toward a horizontal progression through time—with one name/note sounded after another.”\(^{138}\) By requiring personal interpretation and improvisation, these spells have become a real challenge for actors performing Parks’s plays. But at the same time, these stylistic elements expand the conventional modes of theatre, a contemplation that runs as a leitmotiv through her work.

Considering what Geis stated at the beginning of this paragraph, these unconventional theatrical elements are another illustration of Parks’s resistance to dramatic conventions, in other words, “we consider this formal shift from determinacy to indeterminacy as functioning to expand, rather than confound, the frameworks through which readers and practitioners make specific interpretative decisions.”\(^{139}\)

The same objective is the basis for Parks’s invented glossary which she published under “foreign words & phrases” in her theoretical text “from Elements of Style”. Parks made a one-paged dictionary to reflect on the use and meaning of some specific lines or expressions that appear repeatedly throughout her work, for instance: “\textit{do in diddy dip didded thuh drop}/dó-in-díd-ly-díp-díd-díd-tha-dráhp/, meaning unclear. Perhaps an elaborated confirmation, a fancy ‘yes!’ Although it could also be used as a question such as ‘Yeah?’ (\textit{Last Black Man})”.\(^{140}\) As one might wonder how these “new” words are staged, Liz Diamond, director of Parks’s earlier plays, gives an illuminating account: “That’s just learning how to read the play as a musical score, determining that every single thing on the page is there for a reason”. She continues: “that periods and commas and semicolons and dashes and the distance between the heading and a line of text and the way it is written on a page are all full of rich clues for the director.”\(^{141}\) In other words, in Parks’s work the slightest details can be meaningful, and it is the director’s and reader’s task to find out how to make sense of these linguistic and textual

\(^{138}\) Johung, “Spells,” 51.
\(^{139}\) Ibid., 40.
\(^{140}\) Parks, “Elements,” 17.
\(^{141}\) Drukman, “Parks and Diamond,” 69.
marks. Thus, her plays necessitate an active contribution of its audience, the meaning of a play no longer solely depends on what the playwright meant by it, but rather on how the audience perceived and interpreted it. This is the reason why Parks prefers to “rather talk about the ‘reading’ of my plays than the ‘meaning’”\textsuperscript{142}.

Parks is one of those theatre artists who is fully aware of the language and stylistic elements she makes use of and exploits this to her advantage. The previous paragraph concentrated on her use of atypical dramatic codes which allowed her to create alternative means to move page onto stage outside the dramatic conventions. The following section will briefly discuss Parks’s wordplay as this too is an attempt to overcome fixity and move away from convention.

In writing a certain passage, Parks never restricts her language so that people can derive one specific meaning out of it. On the contrary, by playing with metaphors, Parks leaves room for multiple interpretations, all equally valuable but none being exclusive. For example in \textit{The America Play}, “The Great Hole of History” has been discussed in connection to the hole in which African-American history has disappeared, while this hole can just as well be a metaphor with humoristic, even obscene implications, as Parks points out: “People have asked me why I don’t put any sex in my plays. ‘The Great Hole of History’ –like, duh”\textsuperscript{143}. Thus this hole stands for an absence, a void or grave, but could as well signify vagina or womb. In \textit{The Death of the Last Black Man}, there is a recurring line in which Parks plays with the difference between the written form of the word “round” and its oral sound in black speech: “Before Columbus thuh worl usta be roun they put uh /d/ on thuh end of roun makin round”\textsuperscript{144}. This is another example of how Parks uses a metaphor to alter the text’s meaning. In this line Parks refers to Columbus and his successors as those who established writing, leading to the destruction of the preliterate world as “without that /d/ we coulda gone on spinnin forever.

\textsuperscript{142} Drukman, “Parks and Diamond,” 61.
\textsuperscript{143} Parks, “Elements,” 16.
\textsuperscript{144} Parks, “Death of the Last Black Man,” 102.
Thuh /d/ thing ended things ended.”¹⁴⁵ Parks uses language conveying layered-ness of meaning which results in the creation of complex, multidirectional plays. On the subject of this multiplicity of meaning, one can remark that this offers a real challenge to the people who want to put Parks’s plays on stage. As there are many readings of a text, a director will have to make a choice out of the many possibilities the play offers without reducing it to a simplistic version of itself. Liz Diamond states something similar in an interview:

> What I hope is happening in the course of the production is that the field of meanings that the play makes possible (…) are offered up by the particular way that figure’s been cast, moves, speaks, etc.; that there will be a kind of wavelike effect so that one possible reading will be in the next instant contradicted by another and that all kinds of reverberating and clashing ideas will come up because that’s very much the nature of this poetry.¹⁴⁶

This density of Parks’s dramaturgy does not necessarily need to be considered as problematic. Just as the disregarding of stage directions and the inclusion of “rests,” “spells” and an invented glossary are part of Parks’s original and inimitable art, this wordplay and language ambiguity give added value to her work.

A final stylistic feature that belongs to Parks’s challenging aesthetics is her use of footnotes. As much as they are part of her formal experiment, they also function to problematize the authenticity of historical markers. As already hinted upon in the previous chapters, Parks includes footnotes to question the legitimacy with which events are recorded and established as an authentic history. The critic Christopher Innes reasons that “historical fact is exposed as the residue of accepted beliefs, given the status of truth solely by its

¹⁴⁶ Drukman, “Parks and Diamond,” 61.
continued existence in the popular imagination. So being myth, history is simply another form of fiction”\textsuperscript{147}. He supports his argumentation by referring to the footnotes in \textit{Venus}:

\begin{quote}
THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST.

Footnote \#1

\textit{(Rest.)}

Historical extract. Category: Theatrical.

\textit{(Rest.)}

The year was 1810. At one end of town, in somewhat shabby circumstances, a young woman, native of the dark continent, bares her bottoms. At the same time but in a very different place, on the other end of town in fact, we witness a very different performance.

\textit{(Rest.)}

Scene 29:

Presenting: “For the Love of The Venus”

A Drama in 3 Acts. Act I, Scene 3:

\textbf{Scene 29 “For the Love of The Venus,” Act I, Scene 3}

\textit{A play on a stage. The Baron Docteur is the only person in the audience. Perhaps he sits in a chair. It’s almost as if he’s watching TV.}

\textit{The Venus stands off to the side. She watches The Baron Docteur.}\textsuperscript{148}

According to Innes, “as implied by the footnote equating the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman’s body in 1810 with theatre, the actual events of the past have exactly the same validity as any fictional performance”\textsuperscript{149}. Traditionally, footnotes function as objective devices to add information thus reinforcing the authority of a text. By developing her own footnotes, mixing both facts and fiction, Parks plays with the traditional purpose of footnoting and thus


\textsuperscript{148} Parks, \textit{Venus}, 34.

\textsuperscript{149} Innes, “Staging Black History,” 25.
continues, like so many of Parks’s other stylistic inventions, the undermining of traditional historical and literary narratives.

All these textual markers illustrate Parks’s deep self-awareness of the language used. By determinedly staging language with a density of meaning, Parks’s is avoiding an unidirectional interpretation of her plays. As she states in an interview: “I think I provide the map …. And what I try to do is say there are 10 roads, 20, 50 roads –take one. I get a kick out of seeing what people do. I think that the playwright provides the map. But I think a bad play only has a one-way road”\textsuperscript{150}. The same is true for Parks’s inclusion of unconventional dramatic codes in her work. Parks is urging the audience to liberalize their minds, to expand their perception of theatre and the way they think a play is supposed to be staged. In fact, by being formally innovative, she is pushing her audience to rethink standardized representations, to rethink “the sacrosanct play text”\textsuperscript{151}. As critic Louise Bernard puts it in an insightful article on Parks’s language: “… Parks’s work denies the reader/audience easy access to definitive ‘answers’.” He further states that “Parks aims not to ‘torture’ her reader/audience but to provide images and ideas of and about black experiences that challenge the historical and contemporary ‘misrecognition’ that is perpetuated not only by the written word but, in the age of postmodernity, by the voice on our tv’s”\textsuperscript{152}. The power of her language and language deconstruction, provided by formalistic innovation, therefore, has also repercussions on a more political level.

\textsuperscript{150} Parks, quoted in Jiggets, “Interview,” 312.

\textsuperscript{151} Geis, \textit{Parks}, 22.

III.3. Parks’s Unique Theatre Language: mixing African-American characteristics with (post)modernistic devices

In Parks’s plays the power of language is not only defined in dramatic terms but also in historical. To find a balance between theatrical experiment and staying true to African American culture, is not an easy endeavour. For Parks her choice of language confronts her with a dilemma:

At one time in this country, the teaching of reading and writing to African-Americans was a criminal offense. So how do I adequately represent not merely the speech patterns of a people oppressed by language (which is the simple question) but the patterns of a people whose language use is so complex and varied and ephemeral that its daily use not only Signifies on the non-vernacular language forms, but on the construct of writing as well. If language is a construct and writing is a construct and Signifyin(g) on the double construct is the daily use, then I have chosen to Signify on the Signifyin(g).153

Choosing a language which is closer to African-American vernacular than to standard American English should help to overcome the association with a history of oppression linked to that standardized form. But do not mistake her concern to be solely about how to represent the complexity of the black vernacular without ruling out the variety of meanings attached to that very speech. The language she accords her characters has as much to do with emotion and action embedded in the words. In an interview she explains with the example of ‘o.k.’ how significant the smallest detail or difference can be in language:

It’s a recording of, not only the way words sound, but what that means. The difference between ‘k’ and ‘o.k.’ is not just what one might call black English versus standard English, for example. Or black English versus mid-Atlantic English. It’s not that, so much as it’s an attempt: I am trying to be very specific in what’s going on emotionally with the character. Because if you just try out, ‘I’m going with you, O.K.’

‘I’m going with you, ‘K,’ it’s a different thing going on. If you jump to that word faster, if you put your words together in a different order, you’re feeling something differently, and it’s just an attempt to try to be more specific so that I don’t have to write in all these parenthetical things.\textsuperscript{154}

This comment points out how Parks is occupied with which words will reveal a certain emotion rather than with whether the nature of her language will be defined as black English or whatsoever. Thus the performative function of language predominates the historical implications attached to that same language. However, despite the fact that Parks gives priority to the theatrical possibilities of language, this does not mean that she is not interested in its historical background: “Because words are so old they hold, they have a big connection with the what was. … My interest in the history of words –where they came from, where they’re going- has a direct impact on my playwrighting (sic.) because, for me, Language is a physical act”\textsuperscript{155}. For Parks, it is always both the dramatic and historical function of language, which in her work remarkably seem to coincide. Accordingly, Parks manages to produce a language which is greatly indebted to African-American culture and which is at the same time most suitable to be performed on stage. The strategy of Rep & Rev which relies on the jazz aesthetic, has already been dealt with in the previous chapter. But Parks’s texts are also in other ways influenced by oral and literary traditions, such as the typical minstrel performance occurring with a twist in both The America Play and Topdog/Underdog in which the role of the white actor wearing blackface is reversed. In Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom (1988), Parks imitates the call-and-response forms of black oral traditions and in The Death of the Last Black Man, the traditional slave narrative is given a new, postmodern look. Also in her debut novel, Getting Mother’s Body, she inserts several blues songs in between the chapters, though this work is not intended to be put on stage. The influence of

\textsuperscript{154} Parks, quoted in Jiggets, “Interview,” 311.

\textsuperscript{155} Parks, “Elements,” 11.
music resonates throughout her work, an observation which Parks asserts in her essay *From Elements of Style*:

> After years of listening to Jazz, and classical music too, I’m realizing that my writing is very influenced by music; how much I employ its methods. Through reading lots I’ve realized how much the idea of Repetition and Revision is an integral part of the African and African-American literary and oral traditions.156

While Parks’s texts are partly drawing upon African-American culture and legacy, they can nevertheless be described as innovative and challenging. The combination of these oral traditions and the jazz inspired rhythm with formal modernist and postmodernist characteristics resulted in a new and original writing style. This method of mixing styles and genres seems to work remarkably well as the use of modernist puns, stream-of-consciousness and broken syntax add greatly to the musical pattern characteristic for her work. Also Parks’s employment of postmodernist techniques such as intertextuality, fragmentation and the inclusion of footnotes and media, becomes a part of that bigger picture that Geis calls “postmodern African-American culture”.157 Just as jazz music is based on free improvisations, Parks uses her artistic freedom to improvise, mix and match, ultimately leading towards the development of a new aesthetics. One such example of her ingenuity and emphasis on musical rhythm is provided by Brazil in *The America Play*: “Over here one of Mr. Washingtons bones, right pointer so they say; here is his likeness and here: his wooden teeth. Yes, uh top and bottom pair of nibblers: nibblers, lookin for uh meal. Nibblin. I iduhnt your lunch. Quit nibbling. Quit that nibbling you. Quit that nibbling you nibblers you nibbling nibblers you”158. The alliteration in the last sentence is an example of modernist wordplay

---

while it also helps to establish a certain rhythmical pattern in the text. The combination of these various linguistic and cultural components ultimately results in what can be seen as Parks very own theatre language.

Though Parks’s style is unique, one can trace throughout her work the influence of key modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett and James Joyce, as well as the influence of African-American writers like James Baldwin and Adrienne Kennedy. About her affinity to modernist writers Parks remarks:

I’m fascinated with what they are allowed to do, I guess. What Joyce was allowed to do or what Joyce allowed himself to do, what Beckett allowed himself to do, what Faulkner allowed himself to do, Woolf… What they got away with… Doin’ “diddly-did-did the drop” comes out of that tradition of doing whatever you want (laughter) and saying: “Here it is! You Mr. and Ms. Critic, you guys go away and think about it and exercise your brains and come up with something thrilling!”

Basically Parks is saying here that she admires these modernist writers who dared to explore the boundaries of what was accepted at that time in literary circles. One can imagine that this way of thinking resembles her own attitude towards the mainstream. For Parks, theatre makers should challenge themselves, take things one step further the way Joyce, Beckett and others did in their own time. Geis correctly remarks that “those who respond to Parks’s work sometimes express surprise that these now canonical white writers exerted such a profound influence on her artistic aspirations”. She refutes this claim by pointing to the fact that “their use of stream-of-consciousness, their willingness to break from conventions of sentence structure and language, and their assertion of voices that countered received wisdom were powerful examples to Parks”\(^1\). This urge to experiment is not the only element Parks has got in common with her modernist predecessors, at various times in her work, one can find other

\(^1\) Drukman, “Parks and Diamond,” 72.
\(^2\) Geis, Parks, 6.
formal experimentations which recur in the works of both generations. The most important of these formal experiments is the use of Rep & Rev, which connects Parks’s texts with the work of Beckett and Stein as in their work too, one can detect a frequent occurrence of repetitive sentences. Geis states that “in Stein’s work repetition is seen as both structurally and ontologically inevitable, as if we make our way through the world by means of repetition, yet the process evolves into variations, as if an end point happens in spite of all.”¹⁶¹

While this idea of Rep and Rev is partly influenced by modernist works, repetition can also be found in the works of African-American writers as Adrienne Kennedy. Similar to Parks’s texts, a conventional plotline or character development is nowhere to be found in Kennedy’s plays. Descending from a younger generation of writers, Parks has always admired Kennedy “because she made me feel like I could do anything at that moment.”¹⁶² Again, Parks is referring to writers she respects because of their courage and eagerness to experiment. Therefore, the most valuable lesson that Parks has learned from reading those pivotal writers is probably that she should not be afraid to play with form and to expand the possibilities of theatre. In interviews, Parks talks freely about the influence certain writers had upon her, as she realizes they played an important part in how her life and career worked out. Therefore, in the following paragraph I will mention the moments in her life that Parks herself designates as the most crucial ones in having had an influence on her writing. Since drama critic Deborah R. Geis very recently published a volume about Suzan-Lori Parks, this brief account will be based upon this reliable source.

Before Parks started writing plays, she studied chemistry as her schoolteachers always had discouraged her from studying English literature because of her poor spelling abilities. After reading Virginia Woolf To The Lighthouse, Parks decided to refrain from sciences and enrol in English and German studies. A crucial moment for her future career was her

¹⁶¹ Geis, Parks, 24.
¹⁶² Parks, quoted in Jiggets, “Interview,” 314.
introduction to the great African-American author James Baldwin, who was a guest lecturer at
the short-story writing seminar she attended. He was the one who suggested she should turn to
playwriting, which she did with mediocre success: “I have to admit, the play I wrote wasn’t a
good play. It was badly written; it was a first try at writing. But it had all the things in it that
I’m obsessed with now. Like memory and family and history and the past”\textsuperscript{163}. Geis notes that
“Baldwin was influential in claiming an identity as a black writer in an era when doing so was
a politically charged act, and in insisting that the African-American past be reclaimed into
history”\textsuperscript{164}. Other African-American writers who influenced Parks include Adrienne Kennedy
and Ntozake Shange, two black women playwrights who started publishing respectively thirty
and twenty years before Parks. It was only in 1994 Parks and Kennedy first met, but Parks
always had a great admiration for her as she claims that Kennedy’s work “inspired her to take
weird riffs and shifts of character.”\textsuperscript{165}

Authors such as Kennedy and Baldwin have prepared the way for the emergence of a
new generation of African-American writers to which Parks belongs today. As I explained at
the beginning of the first chapter, this new awareness of blackness and the resulting African
American artistic expressions have been discussed in the ideological essay of Trey Ellis in the
late eighties but it is still relevant in the discussion of contemporary art. In his essay Ellis
remarked on the challenges of African American artists: “Stripping themselves of both white
envy and self-hatred they produced supersophisticated black art that either expanded or
exploded the old definitions of blackness, showing us as the intricate, uncategorizable folks
we had always known ourselves to be”\textsuperscript{166}. Parks has continued this way of thinking, exploring
and investigating Blackness in America by presenting numerous varieties of black
experiences onstage. At the same time, the modernist and postmodernists writers have

\textsuperscript{163} Parks, quoted in Jiggets, “Interview,” 317.
\textsuperscript{164} Geis, Parks, 6.
\textsuperscript{165} Solomon, “Signifying,” 75.
\textsuperscript{166} Ellis, “New Black Aesthetics,” 237.
provided the materials with which Parks has been experimenting freely. Critics such as Martin Favor observed the significance of the post-modern discourse already in the first mention of a new aesthetic. He correctly remarks that “in order to have an authentic art, the African American artist must engage all his/her influences; if white and black cultures are not completely isolated from one another in the United States, why should art formulate them as such?”\textsuperscript{167} This valuable insight can be applied to Parks as well since she manages to create an artistic voice that is truly hers out of the different styles and cultures she has been influenced by.

\textsuperscript{167} Favor, Martin J. “‘Ain’t Nothin’ Like the Real Thing, Baby’: Trey Ellis’ Search for New Black Voices.” \textit{Callaloo} 16: 3 (Summer 1993): 696.
Conclusion

From examining different primary and secondary sources of Parks’s work, I can say that she has arrived at a new aesthetics that draws upon African-American traditions as well as typical elements of the postmodern period. Following Trey Ellis and his belief in the future of a “New Black Aesthetic,” Parks produces a very distinct dramaturgy on the premises that Ellis’ manifesto laid out. Parks is preoccupied with the representation of African-American identity, but no longer solely in connection with the obstacles of racism and slavery. By depicting black protagonists with their individual defects, Parks shows that she does not shun controversy. Evident from the discussion, we can see how Parks opposes limited modes of expression producing instead multidirectional plays with a multiplicity of meaning. Like Ellis, Parks is concerned with “recording and constructing a multitude of voices emanating out of Black America”\(^\text{168}\). Born in the age of modernity, Parks uses elements characteristic of the (post)modern discourse to achieve this objective. One of these elements is parody to question the validity of representations surrounding us. Her constant rewriting of the historical and literary canon in plays such as The America Play exemplifies her dissatisfaction with the available historiography and the way in which African Americans have been written out of history. While destabilizing the collective memories of traditional historical figures and events, Parks is making space for alternative stories that have not yet been recorded in the great annals of history. She does so by reversing traditional roles and narratives like the minstrel tradition in The America Play. By putting these invented stories alongside actual historical retellings and facts, she is contesting the authenticity of the latter. This to overcome fixity and leaving space for interpretation. This guiding principle is also noticeable in Venus

\(^{168}\) Favor "‘Ain’t Nothin’ Like the Real Thing,’” 694.
in which Parks has chosen to counteract the clichéd discourses in which the dramatic conflict evolves around the presentation of African Americans as oppressed by a white ruling class. Instead, Venus is given agency by self-consciously posing in front of an audience and thus returning the gaze of her onlookers. In this sense, the spectators become as much the subject of the spectacle as Venus, as Parks devises several techniques to focus on the audience’s complicity. As in some of her other works, Parks uses footnotes to underline the artificial nature of the narrative and the unreliability of texts.

Her continuous emphasis on theatricality is also apparent in *Topdog/Underdog* as the two brothers incorporate performing as a life style due to their obsession with the confidence game. In the character of Lincoln, Parks foregrounds the discrepancies between a real self and a performed identity, reminding us of the fact that black identity is always performative. Following from this observation, Lincoln is trying hard to separate his essential self from his performed, considering his façade as mere performance. This is foregrounded in Parks’s insertion of many metatheatrical elements which forces the audience and readers to think about theatre in relationship to reality and about the performativity of identity. Theatricality forms an inherent part of Parks’s drama as she uses theatre to hold a mirror to our face. She sets her audience thinking about the way in which the American society is influenced by the images and myths that were once created in literature and history books. For instance in *The America Play* Parks illustrates that all what remains of the historical Lincoln are not his political achievements or failures but a theatricalized death scene and his costume which is turned into a stereotyped artifact. Thus this emphasis on theatricality has political implications.

As the form in Parks’s plays inextricably links to the content, she uses language as a powerful device to subvert the dominant discourses in historiography and the literary canon. She has created a truly original theatre language that offers a resistance to conventions of
traditional theatre. Her use of “rests” and “spells” challenges the traditional stage directions while her wordplay and language ambiguity add to the multiplicity of meaning denying full closure. Her complex language forces the reader to rethink standardized representations. While her language can not be narrowed down to a simple classification, it seems closest to African-American vernacular. Though Parks hurries to draw upon the performative function of language, one can not deny the various influences of the African-American culture that can be found in her work. Most important is the concept of Rep & Rev, inspired by the jazz and the practice of signifying, which creates space for new interpretations. The combination and bending of these African-American based traditions with formal modernist and postmodernist devices leads to a deconstructed language with great significance. Her formal innovativeness has contributed to the creation of a new aesthetic. Along with this development, I dare to say that this aesthetic has constructed a new African-American identity that exhibits the self-awareness Ellis talked about in his manifesto, to challenge existing discourses and to create an individual personality. This African-American identity defies stereotyping and moves beyond the traditional notions of blackness, opening up significant possibilities in American drama and the field of art on a whole.
Bibliography


