



**‘I suggest black’: The Written Play Text as a Historical  
Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-  
Lori Parks’ *The America Play***

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## **Contents**

<b>Acknowledgments .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Introduction: Parks and Literary Drama .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Chapter One: The Encoded Text - A New Form of Written Theatre .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>1.1 Language and Silence .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>1.2 Footnotes and Puns .....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Ownership and Loss of Identity .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>2.1 The Question of Names: Being Both 'Foundling' and 'Father' .....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>2.2 Apostrophes and 'Possession' .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Echoes in the Great Hole of History</b>	
<b>3.1 Repetition and Revision .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>3.2 Being 'Black and Whole' .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>89</b>

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**‘I suggest black’: The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The America Play***

## **Introduction: Parks and Literary Drama**

Suzan-Lori Parks is arguably one of the most prolific playwrights of the twenty-first century. Having won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play *Topdog/Underdog*, she has been recognised for her metatheatrical dramas that incorporate tragedy and irony to exemplify issues of race and identity on the stage.<sup>1</sup> Her background in creative writing, one foundation for her career as a playwright, has evidently been a heavy influence when analysing her priorities for writing a dramatic text. Studying English and German Literature at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, Parks admitted in a 1996 interview that she originally did not care for theatre during her time at the university.<sup>2</sup> ‘Theatre people to me were actors’, she explained, noting that she was ‘pretty ignorant’ towards the discipline and read ‘few plays’ as a student, aside from Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, it was in college that Parks wrote her first play and began to establish herself as a playwright, with help from James Baldwin, her lecturer on short story writing.<sup>4</sup> Parks’ lack of engagement in the theatre scene during her college years, and her preference for the act of writing over production, helps foreground ideas surrounding her status as a playwright who highly values the written word. This stance appears unorthodox, but allows the playwright to create ambitious theatre with layers of meaning hidden within its text. This consequently forms the focus of this dissertation, as Parks’ use of puns, grammar and speech patterns through her ‘Rep & Rev’ structuring widen the possibilities for a dramatic text and its status as a physical, historical document.

Parks’ plays have always had an active interest in history and memory, with more specific references appearing in her ‘Red Letter Plays’,<sup>5</sup> based on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*,<sup>6</sup> and the two works dubbed ‘the Lincoln Plays’, *Topdog/Underdog*

<sup>1</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (New York: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Shelby Jiggetts, ‘Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks’, in *Suzan-Lori Parks In Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young, (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, *The Red Letter Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter: introduction by Harvey Pearce* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906).

and *The America Play*.<sup>7</sup> In these plays that rework well-known stories in both literature and history, Parks subverts ideas of time and space in order to forge her own legacy within the theatrical canon. Parks' plays serve as a version of recorded history that she can make sense of in her own terms, as she believes that history as it is currently retold does not serve her; 'I don't see any history out there, so I've made some up.'<sup>8</sup> These ideas feed into Parks' identity as a black playwright, as she notes that 'so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out', and in its place white narratives have been remembered as recorded history, something which Parks finds hard to reconcile.<sup>9</sup> More modern works, such as the successful musical *Hamilton*, have found ways to popularise historical narratives in a way that represents marginalised viewpoints, pointing out gaps in the historical canon.<sup>10</sup> Having been praised for her innovation in the dramatic arts, Parks was named one of *Time Magazine*'s '100 Innovators for the Next Wave' in 1999, with the same publication honouring her as one of the most influential people in the world twenty-four years later.<sup>11</sup> These accolades evidence the longevity of her influence over contemporary theatre and therefore her dedication for creating subversive, challenging plays.

This dissertation aims to exhibit how Parks, by rewriting these biased historical narratives, can create a space both in the historical and literary canon for black narratives. With a clear focus on ideas of legacy and identity, Parks' most striking example of these is embodied in her 1993 work, *The America Play*, which centres around the Foundling Father, a black man whose career as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator has given him a sense of importance. Living in a replica of the Great Hole of History, the setting serves as a metaphor

<sup>7</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), pp. 127-160.

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Pearce, 'Alien Nation: An Interview with the Playwright', in *Suzan-Lori Parks In Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young, (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution* (Little, Brown Book Group: Massachusetts, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young, "'Watch Me Work": Reflections on Suzan-Lori Parks and her Canon', in *Suzan-Lori Parks In Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young, (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p. 1. ; Sterling K. Brown, *Suzan-Lori Parks* (2023) <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2023/6269454/suzan-lori-parks/> [Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2024].

**‘I suggest black’: The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The America Play***

for the cavernous space that the Foundling Father is unable to occupy unless he goes about creating his own authentic legacy, something which he struggles to do without a strong example of previous black narratives to guide him. As Ilka Saal describes it, ‘this is a play about history itself, about attempts to unearth it, to represent it, to retell it,’ making a conscious effort to explore the landscape of theatre in re-enacting the past.<sup>12</sup> Although the space of the play invites curious interpretations on the stage, Parks’ dedication to encoding the physical text with deeper meaning draws my analysis to the grammatical, formal and linguistic choices made by Parks to cement her agenda for challenging theatre that emulates literature.

## **Chapter One: The Encoded Text - A New Form of Written Theatre**

Evidently, Parks wants to encourage a more thorough inspection of the written word when it comes to theatre, something which is arguably unorthodox considering theatre is created to be performed, not necessarily read. Parks argues that a play ‘should be literature, a show and some sort of historical document – which is what a play is.’<sup>13</sup> The ‘show’ of the play is evident in that it is staged to entertain, and the physical script provides a blueprint for such performances. Yet Parks’ focus on the text as a ‘historical document’ sets apart her intentions for a play as it draws attention to the work’s legacy. Acknowledging that this tradition for more literary-focused plays is not something that is easy to come by, Parks’ work is set apart from other playwrights of the time for its literate quality and open rebellion against formal structures, encouraging those who produce her play to pay attention to the finer details of her text.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.1 Language and Silence**

In this sense, Parks uses a fragmented and informal language style throughout the play, embodying her rebellion against the historical canon and cementing her dedication to written

<sup>12</sup> Ilka Saal, The Politics of Mimicry: The Minor Theater of Suzan-Lori Parks, *South Atlantic Review*, 70:2 (2005), p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Michelle Pearce, ‘Alien Nation’, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

drama. Leaning into this idea of creating a new space, Parks resists the rules of the written English language. Emily Kate Harrison notes that Parks creates a space on the page where 'the language with which we are traditionally equipped is no longer adequate or powerful enough to fully communicate what her characters seem so desperate to transmit', adding that 'perhaps [...] it never was.'<sup>15</sup> The characters in *The America Play*, whether they are aware of this fact or not, are grappling with huge conflicts within their identities, aiming to retrieve a lost history that is seemingly unattainable. Through the pervasive and often abstract use of language, Parks 'disrupts the dominant narrative' to claim a new one for herself.<sup>16</sup> A large part of this reclamation is her use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), used between Lucy and Brazil, the wife and son of the Foundling Father. A prominent example of this is Lucy's persistent use of double negative sentence structures, at one point demonstrating her dedication to her lost husband by stating 'I couldn't never deny him nothing.'<sup>17</sup> This example actually uses three negatives in one sentence, rendering it back to its original meaning as if only one negative were used, however when spoken this sentence sounds informal due to its unusual grammatical structure. Straying from the rules of standard English, Black English language communities often use structures such as double negatives and, although their meaning is still understood clearly, Chi Luu points out that these 'grammatical differences [...] have stigmatised the speakers of Black English as linguistically backward, uneducated, or unintelligent.'<sup>18</sup> It is clear, however, that this is not Parks' view when writing Lucy and Brazil's speech, but rather she uses it to indicate a sense of common ground between the pair.

Despite this, there are charged moments of silence between Lucy and her son, punctuated by what Parks calls 'spells'. Present in many of her plays, Parks defines spells as 'elongated, heightened rests', wherein the characters' names are repeated in the script with

<sup>15</sup> Emily Kate Harrison, 'Bang, Bang, Mr. President: Re-Visioning Presidential Assassination on the American Stage' (unpublished masters thesis, Savannah College of Art and Design, 2004), p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Parks, 'The America Play', p. 149.

<sup>18</sup> Chi Luu, *Black English Matters*, (2020) < <https://daily.jstor.org/black-english-matters/> > [Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2024], para. 4.

**'I suggest black': The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play***

no lines of speech assigned to them.<sup>19</sup> Parks encourages readers and performers to interpret these pauses how they wish, yet they are a necessary structure in the play to demarcate moments where language is either unnecessary, or is rendered useless. The first act of the play shows further evidence of where language feels ill-fitting, as the Foundling Father uses what is deemed more standard English, which Harrison describes as 'the language of the dominant culture', when speaking to those who pay to shoot him.<sup>20</sup> She goes on to note that the Foundling Father is 'a man trapped between two cultures, a man forced to shed the roots of his African heritage in pursuit of a very hegemonic American Dream.'<sup>21</sup> This observation focuses on the central conflict of the protagonist's identity, in that he cannot find a way to be 'whole' whilst embodying both the dominant culture and his own. Consequently, Parks uses language features consistent with speech communities to mark identity and sense of belonging, but not without her own twist. Parks always looks to challenge our expectations, with the example of the triple negative 'I couldn't never deny him nothing' sounding convoluted when spoken, but when observed upon the page its meaning unravels, alike a lot of the puns used throughout this play.

### 1.2 Footnotes and Puns

This language is often encoded into the text in such a way that its irregularities can only be deciphered when viewed on the page. Further foregrounding her dedication to the written play text, Parks writes in puns that go unnoticed when performed, something which Parks herself finds entertaining, particularly regarding her use of footnotes. 'Most of them are totally made up and ridiculous,' she told Michelle Pearce in an interview, adding that 'it's playing, again, with the form and the idea of a footnote.'<sup>22</sup> As Pearce rightfully questions, the purpose of a footnote is usually academic, to add some scholarly confirmation to an idea, yet Parks gleefully

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<sup>19</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, 'From Elements of Style', in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994) p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Harrison, 'Bang, Bang, Mr. President', p. 120.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Pearce, 'Alien Nation', p. 48.



rejects this. The footnotes in her text create more speculation than clarity, most notably when looking at the words spoken by each of the Foundling Father's assassins as they pretend to shoot him dead. The words spoken are a mixture of phrases, either spoken in the wake of the real Abraham Lincoln's death or are supposedly the words John Wilkes Booth cried as he killed the president.<sup>23</sup> In some cases, such as the words spoken by Edwin Stanton, who was widely reported to have said the classic line 'now he belongs to the ages', the footnotes are used in their correct sense.<sup>24</sup> However, as Parks admits, some footnotes are made up, such as the hysterical words of Mary Todd Lincoln that are repeated throughout the first act, 'Emergency, oh Emergency please put the Great Man in the ground.'<sup>25</sup> Here, Parks plays with the legitimacy of written history, satirising what is considered to be historical fact to indicate how difficult it truly is to pin down one version of history.<sup>26</sup> Parks even allows for some moments of metatheatricality in her text as the Foundling Father realises this fact. A regular customer comes in to perform the assassination twice over, as the Foundling Father decides that, with his choice of words, 'Thus to the tyrants' and 'The south is avenged', and the Derringer gun, this man is 'one for History. As it Used to Be. Never wavers. No frills. By the book. Nothing excessive.'<sup>27</sup> Parks uses the phrase 'by the book' not only to demonstrate how history is deemed as a simplistic, fixed event, but to further emphasise the legitimacy given to what is written.

The playwright ultimately rejects this notion to write about history as it is told. This should come as little surprise as the play is set in a theme park of history, in a large hole, a place where Parks can write with exuberance. Many critics acknowledge this playfulness in Parks' writing style, with her creativity lending itself to the idea that she is curating something new in her text. Yet simultaneously, Parks decides to fill these holes and silences, with hidden

<sup>23</sup> Parks, 'The America Play', pp. 159-160.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>26</sup> Harry Elam and Alice Rayner, 'Echoes from the Black (W)hole: An Examination of The America Play', in *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*, ed. by Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 186.

<sup>27</sup> Parks, 'The America Play', p. 133.

**‘I suggest black’: The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The America Play***

puns and linguistic features that hide in the text of her play. These arguably symbolise this wider setting of the Foundling Father’s theme park in the Great Hole of History, as Harry Elam and Alice Rayner suggest that ‘the invisibility or marginalisation of African American history becomes a playground for Parks to make up history.’<sup>28</sup> Alike to her spellings and use of Black English language, Parks’ puns and footnotes serve to ingrain a new narrative of history where it has always been, yet lays undiscovered; it may be written in a hole, but Parks is determined to dig it up. Whilst Parks’ play is full of hidden messages and meanings, it is paramount that we analyse what is absent too.

## **Chapter Two: Ownership and Loss of Identity**

Despite being the lead character in the first act of the play, the Foundling Father is arguably absent within his own narrative, underscoring Parks’ intentions to display him as a fabrication of other people’s histories. The first words the Foundling Father speaks, “‘To stop too fearful and too faint to go,’” are placed in quotation marks.<sup>29</sup> Parks’ footnote at the end of this line does not indicate where these words are from, but gives the illusion that these words that the Foundling Father speaks are quoted from somebody else. This instantly sets a precedent for the character of the Foundling Father, who is not only introducing himself through the words of others, but is also dressed as Abraham Lincoln, impersonating a historical figure rather than representing himself. Parks’ footnote does address the form of the sentence however, in that it is an example of chiasmus; ‘a grammatical figure by which the order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in the other.’<sup>30</sup> By presenting these two ideas in juxtaposition, the quote indicates an impasse, creating an echo of sorts in this first line of the play, as the conflicting statements of being both unable to stop or go create a circularity of ideas that

<sup>28</sup> Elam and Rayner, ‘Echoes from the Black (W)hole’, p. 187.

<sup>29</sup> Parks, ‘The America Play’, p. 129.

<sup>30</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, *Chiasmus* (n), (2023)

<[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/chiasmus\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#9709941](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/chiasmus_n?tab=meaning_and_use#9709941)> [Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> April 2024].

cannot resolve itself. Heidi J. Holder highlights the use of this 'syntactical inversion' and notes how these occur throughout the text as a whole, where 'the real is confused with the impersonation'.<sup>31</sup> This first line spoken by the Foundling Father could then be indicative of his wider attitude within the play; he is stuck between ideas, unable to truly define his position in life, and consequently have a firm grasp on his identity. Here, we can once again see how Parks' themes within her play are deeply entrenched in the linguistic techniques she uses, creating a complex and layered text, encoded with deeper meaning.

### 2.1 The Question of Names: Being Both 'Foundling' and 'Father'

Another inversion present in the play is in the main character's name itself, which once again denotes an irreconcilable issue in the historical canon. Throughout, the Foundling Father is given this title by Parks, something which, on the surface, appears to be grand, owing itself to the similar title of 'founding father', a name given to a group of men who helped create the United States of America. *The America Play* subsequently presents Parks' revisioning of America, as its protagonist is a 'foundling' rather than a founder. The use of the word 'foundling' creates a conflicting parallel within the construction of the lead character's name; the Foundling Father is an orphan and yet placed in a parental role, taking responsibility for what comes after him. Parks' use of the 'foundling' motif draws on the history, or lack thereof, that came before the Foundling Father, and echoes her previous comment that history 'does not serve [her]'.<sup>32</sup> This is significant when dissecting the historical figures alluded to, as Abraham Lincoln and the founding fathers of America have been attributed with the making of the United States as we now know it. The figure of Abraham Lincoln is particularly poignant when looking at ideas of black history; he was serving as president in 1865 when the 13th amendment enforcing the abolition of slavery was passed. Lincoln as president has often been accredited with this momentous event in history, despite the collective efforts of many groups who had

<sup>31</sup> Heidi J. Holder, 'Strange Legacy: the history plays of Suzan-Lori Parks', in *Suzan-Lori Parks: a Casebook*, ed. Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. and Alycia Smith-Howard (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 20-21.

<sup>32</sup> Pearce, 'Alien Nation', p. 47.

**‘I suggest black’: The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The America Play***

been resisting and protesting slavery for years. Herein, Lincoln represents an important legacy in history for the Foundling Father and also serves as an example of how history is often retold from a mostly white perspective. Elam and Rayner discuss these ideas in their text ‘Echoes from the Black (W)hole’ and establish how this saviour narrative of Lincoln freeing the slaves essentially ensures that ‘African Americans are marginalized in their own story.’<sup>33</sup> They argue that Lincoln’s status as a ‘Great Man’ is predicated on the way those who have been enslaved have become the ‘lesser known’ in history.<sup>34</sup> This lasting legacy of the Lincoln name, hailing him a national hero, therefore ties him closely with modern black identity and the idea that black narratives have not been given space in the historical canon, so much so that they do not have such a strong legacy. The Foundling Father subsequently embodies these ideas; he feels ill-equipped to create a legacy on his own terms, and therefore he turns to a whitewashed version of history to try and understand his own identity and ‘father’ a legacy of his own.

Drawing further on the iconography of Lincoln, the Foundling Father’s costume helps further perpetuate ideas of fabrication in his struggle to form his identity. We later come to discover that even his costume is a fabrication, as the Foundling Father had ‘secretly bought the hairs from his barber and arranged their beard shapes’.<sup>35</sup> Not only do the beards serve as a metaphor for the fragmented nature of the Foundling Father’s identity, but also indicate his attitude towards this state. The Foundling Father justifies his ownership of the beards, explaining that even though he did not ‘[grow] them on his face’, he constructed them and took good care of them so ‘he figured that the beards were completely his’.<sup>36</sup> The Foundling Father’s attitude demonstrates that he does not believe he has to have created something to stake a claim over it; he is a product of many different people, through his costume and the words he speaks, and he cannot identify that this stops him from forging his own identity. Through these smaller metaphors, Parks is able to map the identity of the Foundling Father

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<sup>33</sup> Elam and Rayner, ‘Echoes from the Black (W)hole’, p. 183.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Parks, ‘The America Play’, p. 129.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

onto wider considerations of race and history. The Foundling Father foregrounds his understanding of himself through historic white idols such as Abraham Lincoln; he centres his person and career around a small resemblance to the 'Great Man' as he does not have another legacy to follow. This remoteness from his own legacy even becomes embodied in the way that he speaks, as he regularly refers to himself in the third person, not being able to identify himself in the performance he is giving. This lack of personal pronouns stops the Foundling Father from being able to clearly state ownership over anything in the play, whether this is his clothing or even his own narrative.

This links back to the semantics of the Foundling Father's name and the irony Parks creates with these ideas of fatherhood and being an orphan. Lacking ownership, our protagonist does not 'father' anything in the play, with even his son only finding connections with him through the echoes of his life in the Great Hole of History. However, Parks wishes to represent this as a self-sustaining issue, placing the Foundling Father in this orphaned role, the same as Brazil partially is without his father. Wilmer draws attention to this fact, aligning how this choice of name 'calls attention to African-Americans as orphans, deprived of family life by slavery and by absented fathers.'<sup>37</sup> The Foundling Father has not had his heritage recorded and handed down through history in the same way these famous white figures in history have, and therefore struggles to define his own place in American history without using these ideas as a blueprint. There is little to no authenticity in his replication of other people's history.<sup>38</sup> With so much to unpack from the first page of the play, it is evident that the language and grammatical choices within Parks' work is significant in dissecting the many layers of meaning that echo in this play.

## 2.2 Apostrophes and 'Possession'

<sup>37</sup> S. E. Wilmer, 'Restaging the Nation: The Work of Suzan-Lori Parks', *Modern Drama*, 43:3 (2000), p. 445.

<sup>38</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 88.

**'I suggest black': The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play***

Analysing the construction of Parks' play on an even more microscopic level, her grammatical choices can also help indicate her wider ideas on legacy and history. As previously examined, Parks' play text uses colloquial language, arguably as an act of rebellion, and this is reflected in the grammar of the text. A lot of the words in the text are spelled phonetically and, most poignantly, Parks' use of apostrophes is sparse. When rewriting history in this text, Parks takes this one step further by not only rejecting the historical canon, but the rules by which a text can be written. It could be argued that this varying use of apostrophes is another demonstration of Parks bending the rules on the page to suit the narrative she is creating. However, if the language which the Foundling Father uses encodes so much about his sense of self and his relation to history, then the grammatical rules which hold these linguistic choices must also hold significance to Parks. Notably, apostrophes are missing in the text in places where they are needed to state possession, not only when the Foundling Father refers to himself, but also when ascribing things to the esteemed 'Great Man', Abraham Lincoln himself. Even when describing Lincoln's features and aligning them with his own, the phrasing of 'the Great Mans stature' is written without an apostrophe,<sup>39</sup> as well as references to 'the Great Mans grave' and 'the Great Mans livelihood'.<sup>40</sup> Owing to the fact that not even the Great Man, the idol of this narrative, has a possessive apostrophe after his name, this speaks volumes about Parks' intentions with the text; even the most central figure in the narrative does not have the grammatical markings of ownership. Here, it could be argued that history belongs to no one in *The Great Hole of History*, as it is Parks' space to claim and dislodge the dominant narrative.

Parks also wrote a piece called 'Possession', which is the first of three essays that precede the titular play in *The America Play and Other Works*, and its title seems a little more than coincidental.<sup>41</sup> In the essay, Parks clearly states her intentions for challenging the canon;

<sup>39</sup> Parks, 'The America Play', p. 131.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 129-130.

<sup>41</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', pp. 11-12.

‘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.’<sup>42</sup> Parks is the author of this version of history, taking initiative to carve her own place into the historical canon, harking to the title of the essay and ideas of ownership and the text. As previously explored, the physical text is paramount in understanding the play as a whole; Parks is creating a historical document of her own. Apostrophes not only denote possession, however, but are ‘used to indicate the omission of a letter or letters’, subsequently drawing attention to what is kept and removed, in the written word and arguably the wider text.<sup>43</sup> Parks’ agenda aims to rectify history’s tendency to erase black narratives, so the theme of omission is equally as important as possession. Layering the use of apostrophes onto the wider themes of Parks’ work, they appear to relate significantly to ideas about what is kept, what is removed, and who has the authority to choose that, proving how essential close analysis of the text is when understanding Parks’ aims for the stage.

## Chapter Three: Echoes in the Great Hole of History

### 3.1 Repetition and Revision

A consistent feature of Parks’ work is her use of a technique called Rep & Rev, particularly in her historical plays, where she takes pre-existing ideas and reworks them across the course of the play. Used as a way to ‘refigure the idea of forward progression’, Parks rejects the chronology of a text that ‘cleanly arcs’, repeating and revising material as an opportunity to reevaluate the situation the characters find themselves in and subsequently challenge those who try and stage such a text.<sup>44</sup> Although these ‘revisions’ are symbolic of the ownership Parks has come to claim over this retelling of history, Rep & Rev throughout *The America Play* appears to foreground a sense of stagnancy, particularly in the second act. Lucy and Brazil

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, ‘apostrophe (n.2), sense 2’, 2023  
[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/apostrophe\\_n2?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#698091](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/apostrophe_n2?tab=meaning_and_use#698091) [Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2024].

<sup>44</sup> Parks, ‘From Elements of Style’, pp. 15-16.

**‘I suggest black’: The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The America Play***

search for the Foundling Father in the replica of the Great Hole of History thirty years from when he first left them, only to experience the same echoes of the past that he did. Echoes are a recurring motif within Parks’ play, mirroring her aims for Rep & Rev whilst also solidifying the metaphor of the Great Hole of History being a large chasm in which stories are often lost. In this second act, echoes come in the form of Lucy and Brazil repeating phrases back to each other, interjecting without adding any additional meaning. Describing the Foundling Father and how he left his family behind, Lucy recounts how ‘Mr Lincoln was of course his favourite’ figure to impersonate, with Brazil adding that ‘I was only 5’ when his father moved west to dig his hole.<sup>45</sup> This section of dialogue is filled with mirroring as the pair repeat parts of this story back to one another, with Lucy confirming Brazil’s youth and elaborating on the story, with her son’s only contribution being this repeated line, that he was ‘only 5’. Not only are the pair embarking on a nostalgic mission, retrieving the Foundling Father after thirty years and recounting memories of him, but they also find themselves being unable to process and express their emotions. Although Parks’ Rep & Rev structuring aligns with her desire to rebel against dominant culture, it also feeds into a feeling of hopelessness. As Ilka Saal suggests, *The America Play* is all about digging for meaning and truth, retelling it in a compelling way, but this ‘does not suggest that in the process something original [or] authentic can be retrieved’ for the characters.<sup>46</sup> These repetitions and revisions by the mother and son therefore convey the cyclical nature of their existence; they are entrapped both by the hole and the language that they use. This back and forth symbolises an inability to move forward and create a legacy of their own, with the inadequacy of language representing this struggle to move forward when their identities revolve around somebody else’s past.

The most significant echo that ricochets throughout the Great Hole of History is that of the gunshot that ends Lincoln’s life, as it is an act that is repeated and revised throughout the play. Throughout the first act, multiple fabricated murders are performed on the Foundling

<sup>45</sup> Parks, ‘The America Play’, p. 145.

<sup>46</sup> Saal, ‘The Politics of Mimicry’, p. 63.



Father and across the second act, arguably an echo of its first, these gunshots are audible throughout the cave as Lucy and Brazil search for the Foundling Father. With the different parting words used by these faux assassins, and the multiple beards and costumes used by the Foundling Father, each separate act of shooting 'Lincoln' is a repeated and revised imitation of the last. Once again, however, Saal's words ring true, that these retellings of history don't necessarily create something new, but are merely 'representations of representations'.<sup>47</sup> Here, Parks both literally and metaphorically creates an echo chamber in which the Foundling Father has trapped himself, and that his wife and son end up experiencing and become wrapped up in themselves. The echoes of the gunshots in the second act are a poignant symbol for the Foundling Father's legacy; it is only this act of death that he is remembered by, a death that not only does not belong to him, but it only exists in this space.

### 3.2 Being 'Black and Whole'

'Echoes from the Black (W)hole' discusses how the act of assassination within the play is what opens up wider discussions of the play's content, noting that the metaphor of the bullet in Lincoln's head 'also penetrates the discursive layers of meaning' in *The America Play*.<sup>48</sup> Delving into one of the possible interpretations of this line, Parks' motif of juxtaposing 'holes' and the idea of 'wholeness' draws attention to the curation of identity within the confines of written history. By digging this replica of the Great Hole of History, the Foundling Father himself feels a sense of wholeness; he has made his living as a grave digger, and is able to commemorate a great figure in history within a hole that he has dug himself. The Foundling Father states that he had been 'living regretting he hadn't arrived sooner', that he could've been the one to dig Lincoln's grave if he were alive at the time, and through this act he would be able to become a Great Man.<sup>49</sup> Aside from the evident, and frequent, acts of assassination and their echoes throughout the cave, the play as a whole has an overarching theme of death.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Elam and Rayner, 'Echoes from the Black (W)hole', p. 185.

<sup>49</sup> Parks, 'The America Play', p. 130.

**'I suggest black': The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play***

Those who aligned the Foundling Father with Abraham Lincoln himself did not observe any positive qualities that the two men may have shared, but rather state that the Foundling Father looked so much like Lincoln that he 'ought to be shot'.<sup>50</sup> It is therefore through replicating Lincoln's death, rather than the life he led up to it, that the Foundling Father makes a name for himself.

Elam and Rayner's excellent analysis of the character of the Foundling Father conflates his personal mission for legacy to Houston A. Baker Jr.'s theory on what it means to be 'Black and Whole'.<sup>51</sup> Baker explains that the only way to be both these things at once is to embody a black identity fully and 'escape the incarcerating restraints of a white world', seeking instead refuge in a 'black hole' of sorts, where there can be 'uninhibited African American cultural exploration'.<sup>52</sup> There is a strong argument to be made that this is the path that the Foundling Father seeks as he digs his Great Hole, however his efforts are so entangled with the history of white Americans before him that this goal appears unattainable. This is particularly poignant as the Foundling Father seems at peace with this fact that he will only ever replicate the lives of others, whether he deems this as a negative fact or not. Analysing the Foundling Father's ideas of ownership when looking at how he views his Lincoln beards from earlier in this essay, it is clear that the Foundling Father has a naïve view on what he is able to create and own in the confines of a dominant culture that favours white historical narratives. Elam and Rayner conclude these ideas by claiming that the Foundling Father becomes Black and Whole through his death, as he is placed in the ground and can be compared to the Great Man, his idol, Abraham Lincoln.<sup>53</sup> Through this, the pair argue that 'his legacy, his place in history, is reaffirmed' as he is buried in the Great Hole, which is a very optimistic view of the end of the play. However, the Foundling Father's inability to create something new for himself, as Saal has suggested, creates a sense of hopelessness, as he dies in this replicated state; he has

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>51</sup> Elam and Rayner, 'Echoes from the Black (W)hole', p. 180.

<sup>52</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr., *Blues, ideology, and Afro-American literature : a vernacular theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 151, in Elam and Rayner, 'Echoes from the Black (W)hole' p. 180.

<sup>53</sup> Elam and Rayner, 'Echoes from the Black (W)hole', p. 190.

dedicated his life to fabricating what has come before him, struggling to reach a sense of wholeness when dominant culture has consumed his identity. This suggests that death is indeed a way to become Black and Whole, not through the Foundling Father's reunion with his idol when he is buried, but that there appears very little hope for this 'Black and Whole' existence on earth. The echoes of the Foundling Father's life through countless imitations of death are poignant, with Harrison comparing their lasting reverberations to the idea that 'a part of us [...] is forever alive in time', to both those who knew and loved us or complete strangers.<sup>54</sup> Despite more dour interpretations, Parks' play indicates that there is space to be made for untold stories, whether their echoes are heard or lost to history.

## Conclusions

Ultimately, Parks' *The America Play* fabricates a written history that symbolises the lost stories of black Americans. Elam and Rayner perfectly encapsulate the ideas Parks wants to get across in her writing, indicating that 'the problem for the characters in the play is how to participate in the myths of history', and this could not be more true for the way in which the Foundling Father comes to reconcile his identity.<sup>55</sup> Being a part of and apart from history are some of the most poignant ideas that the Foundling Father must grapple with, with his participation in the historical canon coming at the cost of his own legacy; a life with his family that can cherish and remember his own stories, passing them down in parallel with dominant culture. Through her intricate metaphor of space and history, Parks successfully finds a way for the Foundling Father, and those who come after him, to become Black and Whole in their lifetime, without having to mirror the lives of their white counterparts. Through this, Parks wishes to exhibit that black national identity in America is still something she finds hard to reconcile when there are so few representations of black lives that are widely taught as history.

<sup>54</sup> Harrison, 'Bang, Bang, Mr. President', p. 138.

<sup>55</sup> Elam and Rayner, 'Echoes from the Black (W)hole', p. 179.

**‘I suggest black’: The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The America Play***

Parks acknowledges the pain of this existence through moments of satire in her text, but just because she is inventive and, at times, unserious in her methods, this does not diminish the power of her commentary.

Through highlighting the importance given to the written text, as opposed to commentaries performed in a temporary space, Parks carves out a space in the canon where her written history is hard to ignore. With her subversive style of literary-focused theatre allowing for multiple layers of meaning in the subtext of her play, Parks is not only asserting her right to a place in the canon, but ultimately rejecting traditions that have come before it. This celebration of black narratives is defiantly solidified in the historical document that is *The America Play*.

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**'I suggest black': The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play***

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**'I suggest black': The Written Play Text as a Historical Document Exploring Race, Identity and Legacy in Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play***

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