

**The Metaphor of the Hole in Suzan Lori Parks's
The America Play
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Abstract**

Suzan Lori Parks is a contemporary African-American playwright who receives early critical accolade and renown. She provides world literature with several dramatic contributions fighting the exclusion of the African-American experience from American history. Her *The America Play* (1993) is an embodiment of her strife toward resurrecting the past and saving the black community from ever existing in the margins of American society. The play also highlights Parks's innovation and virtuosity in using the theater as a medium for digging into the past and reconstructing historical events. This study is a critical investigation into *The America Play*, demonstrating the different holes in the play and referring to the playwright's devices for covering them up. In other words, the study is an attempt to discuss the underlying significance of Parks's metaphor of the hole and how she employs it to enhance her literary purpose.

استعارة الحفرة في مسرحية المشهد الأمريكي

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ملخص

سوزان لوري باركس كاتبة أفرو أمريكية معاصرة تميزت بغزارة ورقي أعمالها المسرحية التي تعكس اهتماماً بالغاً بأحداث التاريخ الأمريكي وقضايا الأمريكيين السود ومعاناتهم الفقر والتهميش والتجاهل المستمر لدورهم في رسم الثقافة الأمريكية، وتصب هذه الأعمال في مجملها في إبراز الهوية الأفقرو أمريكية وكشف الستار عن دورهم الذي تم طمسه عن عمد، ولتحقيق هذا الهدف فقد ابتكرت باركس حفرة تلعب دوراً مزدوجاً في عملها الدرامي **المشهد الأمريكي** (1993) كمسرح للأحداث وكاستعارة تنظر من خلالها إلى أعماق الماضي لتكشف الحقائق الدفينة وإعادة صياغة التاريخ بموضوعية بعيداً عن المغالطات العنصرية ومداواة جراهم العديدة وبخاصة ما يتعلق باغتيال الرئيس الأمريكي أبراهام لنكولن (الزعيم الأمريكي الذي حرر العبيد وأعطى السود الحق في الالتحاق بالجيش وسمح لهم بالمشاركة في الحياة السياسية) عام (1865).

استخدمت سوزان لوري باركس العديد من الوسائل الدرامية لإبراز وملأ هذه الحفر المختلفة التي تتعرض لها مسرحية **المشهد الأمريكي** بوصفها إحدى إسهامات باركس الرئيسية، وتتمثل هذه الوسائل الدرامية في مزج التاريخ بالفكاهة واستخدام التكرار والتفخيح والاستعانة باللهجات والمفردات الإفريقية والمبالغة بشأن الشخصيات النمطية وغير ذلك من الوسائل.

والهدف من هذا البحث هو تناول استعارة الحفرة التي تدور حولها أحداث المسرحية بالدراسة والتحليل للتعرف على مغزى هذه الاستعارة ووسائل الكاتبة في إبراز وملأ هذه الحفر التي تتعلق بالتاريخ الأمريكي لجذب انتباه المجتمع الدولي إلى مشكلات السود بالولايات المتحدة الأمريكية.

Since Parks's *The America Play* is an echo of the Black Arts movement, this study is an attempt to trace its role in performing and compensating for the loss of the black race. The study focuses on the playwright's creation of some great hole to function as both metaphor and setting for her 1993 achievement. It discusses the underlying significance of that hole as well as the various strategies involved in filling it. It examines her employment of humour, the rep & rev technique, language, exaggeration of black stereotypes, and the pause structure. It also reflects the playwright's strong commitment to filling the great holes in the life of African-Americans by calling public attention, through her theatrical performances, to the centrality of the Africanist presence in American culture. In other words, the paper approaches *The America Play* with an aim to illuminate Suzan Lori Parks's profundity and creativity as a playwright preoccupied with digging into the past for clues to the African-American identity.

Suzan Lori Parks is a contemporary African-American playwright, novelist, and screenwriter. She was born in 1964 in Fort Knox, Kentucky. She was highly acclaimed as an accomplished playwright owing to her originality and prolific mind. Randy Gener claims that "Suzan Lori Parks wrote a play a day for a year. While the rest of us mortal creatures struggled to come up with a germ of an idea for that One Great Play, Parks actually woke up every morning, set pen to paper and before she turned in for bed—voila! 'I just wrote them'" (10). *The Sinner's Place* (1984), *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987), *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *The America Play* (1993), *Venus* (1996), *In the Blood* (1999), *Fucking A* (2000), and *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) are major dramatic works. Merits are a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1989, a New York Foundation for the Arts grant and a Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1990, an Obie for her play *Venus* (1996), a PEN-Laura Pels Award for Excellence in Playwriting in 2000, a Guggenheim fellowship in 2000, a MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 2001, and the Pulitzer Prize for her *Topdog/Underdog* in 2002.

Parks's plays support the Black Arts movement that emerged in the 1960s to express the needs and aspirations of the race. They are instances of the black play as they articulate "discourses that are

products of and advocates for practices and voices of a growing conscious resistance against the inequalities of the social system” (Haviara-Kechaidou 80). They represent various agendas continually inspired by the African-American conviction that though

the historical legacy of slavery and the continued experience of racial oppression mean that peoples of African descent are often socially, economically, and politically positioned at the “margins” of the dominant culture, the Africanist presence remains central to the foundation of America. Although the democratic ideal, in material terms, has not been realized, just as the Founding Fathers did not recognize the direct contributions of black people in the building of the American nation, American culture remains (always already) the product of black style and innovation. (Bernard, “Musicality” 687)

Parks’s plays reflect not only the conditions of black people but also the playwright’s singularity and genius. They demonstrate her ability to create metaphors playing overlapping roles in a certain work on the one hand and unifying her works into one organic whole on the other hand. A good instance is the metaphor of the hole which *The America Play* is trying to fill along with her other works. Subtle manipulation of humour in certain contexts is another point in case. This sense helps her to say more and advance her argument. A third aspect is the employment of the rep & rev technique, repetition and revision, which enables her to reconfigure certain historical episodes in the hope to give the African-American character the right due.

Parks’s innovative language is a new element of distinction as she interweaves black vernacular and dialects into the dialogic structure of the plays. This tendency gives the spoken word the power to bring the audience closer to the action of the play in order to facilitate the process of communication between the playwright and her addressees. Exaggeration of black stereotypes is also remarkable in Parks’s attempt to compensate for the loss of the African-American identity and the marginalization of the black race. Her use of the pause structure is another central element giving the audience the

opportunity to receive the playwright's message with their utmost concentration. These are vehicles for simultaneously digging and covering up the great holes of history, a vocation also embraced by Robbie Mccauley, Tony Kushner, and others who follow the African-American tradition that "the purpose of all art produced by brown hands was to improve the representation of blacks and, in this manner, advance the sociopolitical cause of the race" (Bernard, "Jazz" 27).

The America Play is one of Parks's major contributions to American drama. Its distinction lies in the creation of some great hole to serve as both metaphor and setting. That the action of this 1993 achievement takes place around and sometimes in a hole forces Parks to bring dirt onstage for the sake of getting the audience fully involved in her theatrical performance. Shawn-Marie Garrett reveals that "(d)irt Onstage would turn out to be something of a theme for Parks, who has gone on since her Mount Holyoke days to become one of the most intriguing and challenging young playwrights of the contemporary American stage" (22). The play is one of various endeavours to fill the deep holes of history and to portray the African-American search for identity. That is why "Parks and her characters use a range of strategies to fill the holes their collective and individual histories have left them. Yet, even as she proliferates these strategies of compensation, Parks refuses to let the hole be completely covered up or forgotten" (Kanter 128).

To start with, *The America Play* draws on a "great hole. In the middle of nowhere." The underlying significance of this "great hole" is immediately referred to in the opening lines: "The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History" (AP 159). The hole is Parks's synonym for the scars and lacks caused by "the fabricated absence" (Parks, "Interview" 296) of black people from the American archive. To shed extra light on Parks's metaphor of the hole, Sanja Bahun-Radunovic, writes:

the black holes are full of compressed/repressed matter:
the Great Hole of History is thus also a repository of
"unrecognized" histories unfolding over a long-time
span. Its status extends to that of a potentially eventful
place in which the past, present, and future are

condensed into a dynamic presence—a place where the recorded and unrecorded meet in the performative juncture of linear time and circularity. (462)

Parks's "exact replica of the Great Hole of History" is the product of centuries, as implied by the adjective "great." Though the historicity of such a hole puts Parks before a real challenge, she insists on filling it by portraying and accounting for the loss of the black race. What is peculiar about this hole is that the more you dig, the more you fill. In other words, as long as the playwright digs into the past, she unearths those parts that have long remained hidden. Parks's spade is her writing literature to the theater, which she sees fit for the reenactment of history:

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 a 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. The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is a play—something that through a production actually happens—I'm working theatre like an incubator to create "new" historical/events. I'm remembering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events—and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human. ("Possession" 4-5)

A major hole in the life of African-Americans is the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States. This leader changed the racial future of the country by freeing the slaves and accepting blacks in the army. He further proposed that recently emancipated slaves should have the right to vote and participate in shaping the country's political life. Remaining thus

conscious of humble people, he won the favour of the black race while stirring the hatred of John Wilkes Booth, a white actor who badly denounced the Lincoln administration. Booth strongly opposed Lincoln's handling of the slavery issue and was outraged by the defeat of the South in the American civil war. Consequently, he entered the presidential box and shot Lincoln during a performance of *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theater in Washington in April 1865.

To fill the Lincoln hole, Parks creates a twentieth-century myth by producing a replica of Abraham Lincoln, referred to as the Foundling Father or the Lesser Known. The replica is a black man who "spends his life straining to grab hold of Abraham Lincoln's historical legacy, and in some ways, he succeeds" (Goto 119). He is a gravedigger, a job that satisfies the playwright's desire to dig and fill holes. Parks adopts an element of fiction in her introduction to the Foundling Father: "There was once a man who was told that he bore a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. He was tall and thinly built just like the Great Man. His legs were the longer part just like the Great Mans legs. His hands and feet were large as the Great Mans were large" (AP 159). Here, she inserts narration into the fabric of the play, which is a direct influence of her other talent as a novelist. In this situation, the playwright becomes a narrator while the audience become listeners to some fascinating story.

The Foundling Father's physical "resemblance" to the Founder carries the audience to so crucial a part of American history. It revives the image of Lincoln and compensates for his long absence from the scene. Conscious that the replica should not override the original, Parks contrasts the former with the latter: "While the Great Mans livelihood kept him in Big Town the Lesser Knowns work kept him in Small Town. The Great Man by trade was a President. The Lesser Known was a Digger by trade. From a family of Diggers" (160). Here is a reference to each man's geographical location and social rank, which points to another hole no device can cover up.

Despite the wide gap between the original and the imitation, the Lesser Known manages to cause an effect. He plays his role so perfectly that one visitor to the great hole is led to say: "he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot" (164). Though the visitor's remark is a violent reaction, it is a sign of the playwright's success in

drawing people's response and indulgence in the Lincoln era. It is also a reference to the viability of Parks's privileged medium:

Although Parks draws upon diverse literary sources, she has chosen to write for the stage because of its capacity to bring the past to life in the present. This "remembering" grants her audiences opportunities to reimagine the past and re-create the present, thereby offering hope for the future. Salvation can occur only through the transformation of the audience, the representatives of society, whose collective participation is a necessary component in the medium of theater. (Schafer 200)

The fact that "He digged the hole and the whole held him" (*AP* 159) indicates that the Lesser Known is trapped in The Great Man's hole and that he will spend the rest of his life as a Lincoln impersonator. This sentence is repeated three times to reassure the Lesser Known about his success as an imitation of the great man. As the action unfolds, "everywhere out West he went people remarked on his likeness to Lincoln. How, in a limited sort of way, taking into account of course his natural God-given limitations, how he was identical to the Great Man in gait and manner how his legs were long and torso short." While part of the hole between the replica and the original is naturally filled, there remains another part of that hole to be done by the Lesser Known himself. Conscious of that part, "The Lesser Known had by this time taken to wearing a false wart on his cheek in remembrance of the Great Mans wart" (163). The result is: "When the Westerners noted his/wart they pronounced the 2 men in virtual twinship" (163-164). Here is another proof of Parks's virtuosity in breaking the silence surrounding certain chapters of American history.

The "virtual twinship" remarked by Westerners urges the Foundling Father to make his livelihood as a Lincoln impersonator. He abandons the trade of his forefathers and becomes "a curiosity at best." This new position leads him to address visitors through "posters inviting them to come and throw old food at him while he spoke. This was a moderate success. People began to save their old food 'for Mr

Lincoln' they said. He took to traveling playing small towns. Made money" (164). While "food" and "money" are the lesser known's reward, the increasing number of visitors to the Lincoln impersonator is the playwright's. Though people's act of saving and throwing "old food" for the imitation is something humiliating, the greatness the replication of Abraham Lincoln confers on the Lesser Known seems to be compensatory enough for him.

It may be thought that the death of the Foundling Father represents a sudden hole likely to hinder Parks's endeavour. This thought is immediately aborted with the appearance of Lucy and Brazil, his wife and son, to replace him in the second act: "They are in a great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of The Great Hole of History" (174). Linking together the two acts, these opening lines emphasize the historicity of that hole in addition to referring to the heirs of the Foundling Father. They further indicate that though other characters appear on the stage, the setting does not change, which highlights the continuity of the playwright's goal.

It dawns out that Lucy and Brazil are accustomed to filling holes. Thirty years earlier, the Foundling Father "Left his family behind. Back East. His Lucy and his child. He waved 'Goodbye'. Left us tuh carry on. I was only 5" (179). Lucy undertakes the responsibility of filling such a hole caused by her husband's departure. What adds to her dilemma is that Brazil was still a very young child in need of parental love and care. She therefore plays a double role when she follows the man's trade to make her livelihood on the one hand and when she tries to compensate for his early absence from the child's life on the other hand.

As the action advances, Lucy prepares her Brazil for "the Hole of Wonders" (176). Absorbing his mother's teachings, the son is led to say: "This Hole is our inheritance of sorts. My Daddy died and left it to me and Her. And when She goes, Shes gonna give it all to me!!" (185). The phrases "our inheritance of sorts" and "all to me" are pieces of evidence on Lucy's success in instilling in her son the love for truth and participation in resurrecting the past. While the possessive adjective "our" refers to a shared responsibility at present, the pronoun "me" indicates that such a responsibility will be Brazil's only in the future. The verbs "died," "left," "goes," and "give" stress

the son's awareness that the "Hole of Wonders" is a transient possession. As with his parents, Brazil will one day bequeath it to his children along with the four verbs of departure.

Lucy's strong historical enthusiasm reverberates as she frequently addresses her son: "You're stopped" and "Dig on, Brazil. Can't stop diggin till you dig up somethin. Your Daddy was uh Digger" (174). She wants her son to undertake the responsibility seriously and without delay, as implied by "Dig on" and "Can't stop diggin" While "till you dig up somethin" is an attempt to encourage the son by stirring his curiosity, reference to his father's trade reminds the son of a familiar example to him. The woman follows this strategy, leaving no possibility for Brazil to choose otherwise.

As Lucy fosters her son's love for the past, she teaches him how to deal with their affluent archive: "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. Uh place in the Hall of Wonders right uhlung with thuh rest of thuh Wonders hear?" (176). Here is a series of instructions reflecting Lucy's strong commitment to the supreme goal of correcting and elevating the image of black people. It is a sense she is now trying to transmit to her son with the same degree of intensity and enthusiasm. Significantly, there is much logic in the arrangement of "dig," "brush," and "give." Once a thing related to their history is discovered, it will very soon be brushed by so many brown hands to be given a "designated place" in world literature and history. It is a duty assigned to every Foundling Father, every Lucy, and every Brazil in society.

Since the Foundling Father's death causes both private and historical holes, Parks attends to other strategies to compensate for his absence. One of these strategies is the frequent discussion of him by Lucy and Brazil:

His lonely death and lack of proper burial is our embarrassment.

(rest)

Diggin was his livelihood but fakin was his callin.
Ssonly natural heud come out here and combine thuh 2.

Back East he was always diggin. He was uh natural. Could dig uh hole for uh body that passed like no one else. Dugged em quick and they looked good too. This Hole here—this large one—sshis biggest venture to date. (179)

The couple's speech oscillates between the man's life and death to the extent that offers him a virtual role in the second act. In addition to satisfying the family's eagerness for the Foundling Father, this regular discussion of him saves Lincoln and his impersonator from oblivion, which is Parks's ultimate aim.

Search for signs of the Foundling Father is another strategy for covering up that family hole. Throughout the second act, Lucy repeats: "Dig on. Dig on. BRAZIL: Dig on" (177). It follows that the couple find "A Jewel Box made of cherry wood, lined in velvet, letters "A.L." carved in gold on thuh lid" (185). It is the box that kept the Lesser Known's collection of beards referred to in the first act. Here, the box keeps memories of the Foundling Father and provides consolation and drug for his wife and son as a consequence.

Lucy and Brazil's continuing discussion and search for signs of the Foundling Father lead to his unexpected return at the end of the play. They seem to be invoking the man's spirit to perform Lincoln's death one final time: "(Lucy and Brazil watch the TV: a replay of "The Lincoln Act". The Foundling Father has returned. His coffin awaits him" (194). This final scene is a reference not only to the murder of Abraham Lincoln, but also to the playwright's strong devotion to the reconstruction of historical events. A similar strategy is at work in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. In this 1990 achievement, Black Man with Watermelon always returns to the stage to show how he was continually beaten, enslaved and killed. The hero's frequent return is a way of fighting the negation of African-Americans, whose literary marginalization in the period of slave trade has rendered their story almost forgotten.

For easier invocation of the Lincoln impersonator, scenes from *Our American Cousin* regularly interrupt the second act of *The America Play*. However, *Our American Cousin* does not divert our attention or break the fluency of the action. Rather, it carries the audience to Ford's Theater and recalls the nineteenth-century

atmosphere of the event. This overlapping of actions is another vehicle for connecting to the past by allowing the Foundling Father to play Lincoln as a character in the adopted play. Using this strategy at this late stage, though, is an indication that the Foundling Father performed his role effectively in the first act and was in no need for the *Our American Cousin* aid in his lifetime. It is also a sign of Parks's creativity as a playwright who is ready to employ all possible means to enhance her literary purpose.

Parks tends to insert humour into *The America Play* as a catalyst for more innovative presentation of historical events and better access to the audience. Though the play is a kind of cultural criticism, it is one of her funniest works. Parks justifies this tendency when she tells Steven Drukman: "humor's a great way of getting to the deep shit, isn't it? Humor is a very effective way of saying something that you probably could never say ordinarily. And, you know, we do it everyday. I say all kinds of bizarre things with a little laugh, or as a joke" ("Interview" 301). In this respect, she trusts joking with history to be more effective than introducing it traditionally.

Another major hole in *The America Play* is the one in the head of the assassinated president. Parks focuses on that hole for it represents one of endless wounds in the life of African-Americans. She is apt to let that hole bleed by reenacting the scene of assassination several times. Bahun-Radunovic alleges that "(t)he frequency of these re-enactments, in which patrons assume the role of the assassin John Wilkes Booth and make "great black holes" in Lincoln's head, indicates the popularity of the show" (461). It is through humour that Parks frequently approaches that hole and prevents it from healing. In this situation, as long as the Lincoln hole bleeds, deep sorrow for the man who emancipated the slaves in the United States is spontaneously expressed.

As the Lesser Known becomes "a curiosity at best," he provides fun to his visitors:

The Lesser Known returned to his hole and, instead of speaking, his act would now consist of a single chair, a rocker, in a dark box. The public was invited to pay a

penny, choose from the selection of provided pistols, enter the darkened box and 'Shoot Mr Lincoln'. The Lesser Known became famous overnight. (AP 164)

The "single chair," "rocker," and "dark box" create the setting for a repeated sequence of unobtrusive murders. At this stage, Parks centers on people's strong appetite for violence that drives men and women to pay the Lesser Known for participation in the reenactment of the assassination scene:

A WOMAN: Excuse me.

THE FOUNDLING FATHER: Not at all.

(A Woman, as Booth, "stands in position")/

THE FOUNDLING FATHER Haw Haw Haw Haw

(rest)

HAW HAW HAW HAW

(Booth shoots. Lincoln "slumps in his chair". Booth jumps)

A WOMAN: "Strike the tent".¹⁰ (exits). (166-167)

In addition to filling visitors with pleasure, humour gets the audience fully involved in history. To cause a permanent effect, Parks reenacts the murder of Abraham Lincoln six times over the course of the first act. That is why the Lesser Known's monologue is frequently interrupted by a man, a woman, or a newly-wed couple coming onstage to play Booth. This scene interests some visitors to the extent that they ask for a second time playing Booth: "A Man, the same man as before, enters again, again as John Wilkes Booth. He takes a gun and "stands in position": at the left side of the Foundling Father, as Abraham Lincoln, pointing the gun at the Foundling Father's head" (165). While this repeated scene satirizes human violence, it refers to the insatiable desire of whites to scapegoat every Lesser Known of colour. A main reason is that the hero is primarily a representative of his race though he makes his livelihood as a Lincoln impersonator.

Indulgence in the reenactment of Lincoln's murder leads visitors to quote words related to the occasion. Some visitors are heard to shout the words of Mary Todd Lincoln, the president's wife: "Emergency please put the Great Man in the ground" (160). Another group repeats the claim of Booth: "The South is avenged!" (165). The choice of a certain reaction is likely to reflect the attitude of visitors

toward the assassination of Abraham Lincoln: while those who revive the words of Lincoln's wife hold a sympathetic attitude, those who repeat that "The South is avenged" may share Booth his evil impulse. It seems as though Parks is delivering a history lecture, adopting notably advanced methods of presentation.

Parks's rep & rev technique is another distinctive feature of *The America Play*. It is "an integral element in the oral and musical traditions of Africa and the African Diaspora" (Green 148). Parks repeats old histories and skillfully revises these episodes that seem to support her stance. Her characters consciously refigure their language either to supply a missing part or to reflect their fresh experiencing of an earlier situation. To correct the image of black people, *The America Play* reconstructs historical events by repeating the American drama with black characters at its center, which explains why "the historically 'white' incident of the assassination of Lincoln is played in blackface" (Schmidt 199). This strategy enables black actors to emerge, advance their search for identity, and finally improve their social and political existence.

Significantly, the rep and rev technique is a means for cultural empowerment. In order for a notion to be dominant, it should be repeated and revised. For historical empowerment, the scene of Lincoln's murder is repeated several times throughout the play. The sort of revision that occurs to the scene concerns the person who plays Booth and the words he echoes at the end of the game. Men and women take delight in playing Booth though some of them tend to echo the words of Lincoln's wife. In addition to fulfilling its historical task, this repeated sequence of obtrusive murders results in the Lesser Known replacing the great man despite the awareness that he is merely a Lincoln impersonator.

Repetition sometimes occurs to supply missing parts or incomplete ideas. The first act records that "What interested the Lesser Known most was the murder and what was most captivating about the murder was the 20 feet- (A Woman, as Booth, enters)" (AP 166). This speech is thus interrupted by the appearance of that woman who plays Booth. The idea of "the 20 feet" remains incomplete until the playwright declares: "What interested the Lesser

Known most about the Great Mans murder was the 20 feet which separated the presidents box from the stage” (167). In a third context, she repeats: “What interested our Mr Lesser Known most was those feet between where the Great Blonde Man sat, in his rocker, the stage, the time it took the murderer to cross that expanse, and how the murderer crossed it” (168). A thorough reading of these lines shows that Parks does not repeat herself. Here, the playwright gradually advances her idea as if she were a painter trying to complete the picture she has started earlier. It is our focus on the starting point, not the part added, that deludes us into thinking that Parks’s lines are mere repetition.

Proceeding with her search for clues to identity, Parks attends to a language exploiting African-American dialects and the black vernacular tradition. She is a lover of “words, sounds, and styles of language,” an aspect that Amy S. Green highlights when she describes Suzan-Lori Parks, Paula Vogel, and Diana Son as

facile chameleons, able to switch voices, dialects, and modes of speech with dazzling versatility. The result of all this fooling around is language that achieves a kind of vernacular eloquence, language that is grounded in the many dialects of daily/life in twenty-first-century America, yet able to keep up a running conversation with the past. (143-144)

Conscious that hers is no easy task, Parks rises to the challenge and fights, through language, western denial of the centrality of the Africanist presence in western culture.

Parks’s skillful use of language is also manifest in creating the space between a great man and a Lesser Known of colour. A good instance is the way each man is mourned. Because of Lincoln’s historical importance, the mourning phrases of his family members and close associates still resonate in the historical archive. *The America play* quotes the mourning words of Lincoln’s wife and repeats them several times over the course of the first act: “Emergency oh, Emergency, please put the Great Man in the ground.” The Founder is not only “put” in the “ground,” but also given a proper location as a major historical figure. He further becomes the focus of writers including Suzan Lori Parks, who commemorates him in *The*

America Play and *Topdog/Underdog*, her Pulitzer-Prize-winning play. *Topdog/Underdog* is a two-man play speaking of two brothers, Lincoln and Booth, who were left by their parents to strive in a society caring little for young black men. The two brothers were in a continuing struggle finally culminating in Booth murdering Lincoln over a card game, a tragic scene recalling that of the man to whom African-Americans owe their emancipation.

The above notion sharply contrasts with that of the impersonator's death, as inferred from Lucy's speech to her son: "His lonely death and lack of proper burial is our embarrassment" (*AP* 175). Brazil, on the other hand, launches into uncontrollable sobbing when he uncovers a "medal" that might have belonged to his father: "Uh medal for fakin? Huh. This could uh been his. Zsis his? This is his! This is his!!!" (186). These are ordinary reactions to the departure of a Lesser Known, expressed through ordinary words and phrases that suit his humble position.

Parks's language plays a soothing role thirty years after the Lesser Known's death. To lighten up her son's depression, Lucy utters a series of consolatory sentences: "It is an honor to be of his line," "Mr Lincoln was his favorite," and "He dug this whole Hole" (186). The woman's speech confers on the Lesser Known some great stature that may compensate for his unmarked departure. Maybe, she realizes the great hole between the Founder and the Foundling Father and tries the effect of words to fill it. Though the woman's attempt is historically a failure, it is a successful reflection of her devotion as a wife who "couldnt never deny him nothin. I gived intuh him on everything. Thuh moon. Thuh stars. Thuh bees knees. Thuh cats pyjamas" (187).

Exaggeration of black stereotypes plays an eminent role in filling various individual and collective holes in the play. Parks draws on her observation that Americans are attracted to copies, taking into account the fact that exaggeration of copies should be a little larger than life so as to avoid deviation from the truth. A good manifestation is her depiction of the Foundling Father, who is keen not to deviate from the truth and therefore shows the audience one of the beards in his collection: "This beard I wear for the holidays. I got

shoes to match. Rarely wear em together. Its a little much” (161). The man’s explanation why he “Rarely” wears his “fancy beard” reflects his complete understanding of Parks’s concept of exaggeration: “This is my fancy beard. Yellow. Mr Lincolns hair was dark so I wear it much. If you deviate too much they wont get their pleasure. Thats my experience. Some inconsistencies are perpetuatable because theyre good for business” (163).

Parks reveals the truth of the Foundling Father’s beards from the very beginning of the play:

The Lesser Known had several beards which he carried around in a box. The beards were his although he himself had not grown them on his face but since he’d secretly bought the hairs from his barber and arranged their beard shapes and since the/procurement and upkeep of his beards took so much work he figured that the beards were completely his. Were as authentic as he was, so to speak. (159-160)

These lines are an attempt to introduce the hero in his real image before starting the process of replication so that the audience may be able to realize the degree of exaggeration shown by the Lesser Known. That is why Parks’s is a kind of cautious exaggeration rising from her belief in people’s selective appetite for truth.

Abiding by the principles of exaggeration, Parks highlights some “perpetuatable” “inconsistencies.” One of these “inconsistencies” is the Foundling Father wearing a “stovepipe hat” though the Founder never wore one indoors. He does so because “people dont like their Lincoln hatless.” This response to people’s liking is an echo of the Foundling Father’s assumption that “Some inaccuracies are good for business” (168). In addition to satisfying a certain desire, responding to people’s liking creates an atmosphere that bridges the gap between the speaker and the addressee and easily communicates the historical event the playwright is targeting.

When Brazil dominates the action of the second act, he fills a hole and causes another. While he compensates for his father’s absence by following his trade, he unconsciously falls in the trap of over-exaggeration and deviates from the truth. A good instance is the story about his parents’ early days of marriage which he relates to

visitors to the “Hole of Wonders.” The Foundling Father and Lucy, Brazil narrates,

honeymooned there. At thuh original Great Hole. Its uh popular spot. He and Her would sit on thuh lip and watch everybody who was ever anybody parade on by. Daily parades! Just like thuh Tee Vee. Mr George Washington, for example, thuh Fathuh of our Country hisself, would rise up from thuh dead and walk uhround and cross thuh Delaware and say stuff!! Right before their very eyes!!!! (179)

It is Lucy who draws our attention to such a hole when she corrects her son: “Thuh Mr Washington me and your Daddy seen was uh lookuhlike of thuh Mr Washington of history-fame, son.” She adds: “Thuh original Mr Washingtonssbeen long dead” (179). The woman’s love for truth makes of her a reliable witness of history, one who understands well her vocation as an heiress of that “exact replica of The Great Hole of History.”

Parks’s innovation also resonates in her employment of the pause technique. A pause is often indicated by the word “rest” that follows a number of speeches. This device offers the audience a moment of quiet thinking and helps them to absorb the playwright’s ideas. Though there is no interaction with actors at such moments, Parks’s audience are not detached from her characters:

Dramatically, the sign of thinking is a pause, not words, and the audience, at least for that moment, has no access to the inner self, except if an actor somehow portrays it in movement. And yet, on balance, and in spite of these pauses and spells. Parks’ characters seem transparent, at least most of the time. They move generally in an allegorical, Brechtian direction, in which characters speak directly to the audience, revealing everything necessary for our understanding. (Fraden 446)

The America Play relies on the pause structure from first to

last. The first act, for instance, opens with a series of adjacent pauses:

THE FOUNDLING FATHER AS ABRAHAM
LINCOLN:

“To Stop too fearful and too faint to go”.¹

(rest)

“He digged the hole and the whole held him”.

(rest)

“I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed”.²

(rest)

“He went to the theatre but home went she”.³

(rest)

Goatee. Goatee. What he sported when he died. Its not
my favorite.

(rest)

“He digged the hole and the whole held him”. Huh.

(rest). (AP 159)

Each piece of information is followed by a pause indicated by the word “rest.” It is until the audience get the idea that another idea is revealed, a process that enables the audience to follow the playwright’s line of thought with their utmost concentration up to the play’s end.

In conclusion, Parks’s inherent reluctance to the marginalization of the black community urges her to dig into the American archive for clues to the African-American identity. To reach this end, the playwright creates a hole to be both metaphor and setting for her 1993 achievement, which leads her to bring dirt onstage to get her audience fully involved in her theatrical performance. Through this hole, *The America Play* digs out relics that are likely to fill the various holes of history caused by the exclusion of any African-American experience. The play is an endeavour to construct historical events to admit the centrality of the Africanist presence in western culture. It is a supreme goal that Parks tries to realize through the theater, a medium that serves her literary purpose and brings her considerable fame.

To attain her goal, Parks attends to a number of strategies revelatory of her creativity and depth of mind. She inserts humour

into the action of the play though *The America Play* is a kind of cultural criticism. This element is incarnate in the frequent reenactment of Lincoln's murder, which drives men and women to participate and ask for a second time playing Booth. Another line of distinction is the rep & rev technique Parks uses to repeat and revise episodes related to the Africanist presence in western culture. As the playwright repeats the scene of Lincoln's murder, she bears in mind the need to revise by changing the person who plays Booth. She also alternates between the mourning words of Lincoln's close associates and the vengeful reaction of the assassin each time shooting Lincoln's impersonator. This process gives the scene its popularity and calls public attention to that worthwhile chapter of American history as a consequence. Despite the complexity of black vernacular and dialects, Parks is keen to give her dramatic language the African-American flavour. In many contexts, she deviates from the rules of English grammar and spelling and uses words unfamiliar to white audience. However, she rises to the challenge of compensating, through language, for the loss of the African-American identity. Cautious exaggeration is a remarkable element ranging from the playwright's belief that Americans are attracted to copies. This device gives black stereotypes much prominence and saves her work from deviation from the truth. Another point in case is the use of the pause technique indicated by the word "rest," which offers the audience moments for thinking and increases their coping with the playwright's message. These vehicles work either individually or in harmony with one another toward finally filling the great holes of history in addition to reflecting Suzan Lori Parks's profundity and mastery as an African-American woman playwright.

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