Filling the “whole hole of History”: (rest)ing in Suzan-Lori Parks’ Interregnum


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Within the Afrofuturistic walls of Black Panther's Wakanda lies the transhumanist sub-altern/ative future we need now and one that offers profound possibilities for dramatic, transformative, cultural change (Redding 1). The power of Wakanda’s vision is that it interrupts exclusionary ideological discourse and, as Nelson Barre suggests, “confronts the mythologies around which Americans have constructed narratives that elevate half-fulfilled promises of equality and salvation from the stains of history” (172).

The traditionally composed and upheld landscape of U.S. American cultural memory offers a static, whitewashed accounting of the past. This position of telling reinforces a singular perspective of the conqueror, having rendered the conquered mute, regaling the audience with tales of victory. In contrast, postmodern ideals of decentered power and kaleidoscopic perspectives make room for an empowered voice of the conquered who duly disrupts the conqueror’s myopic story with a radically different take on the same tale revealing a narrative fissure. The empowered voice, untelling the myopic past in the present, alters the trajectory of the future based on this new way of remembering — ultimately creating a multi-directional ripple in the timeline. In the present, the new composition looks backward uncharting established points, while simultaneously, and yet still in the present, forecasts future contingencies otherwise disallowed in traditional, presbyopic storytelling. The concern of multi-directional untelling is no longer the “moral education of the audience” but rather to “stimulate the individual’s capacity for subjective judgment, action, and last but not least, for thinking utopia” (Saal 68).

In the “Introduction” to Old Stories New Readings: The Transforming Power of American Drama, the authors describe various intentions of storytelling. They write,

Whether imaginary or based on real events, stories are at the core of any culture. Regardless of their lengths [...] humans tell stories to each to express their innermost fears and needs, to establish a point within an argument or to engage their listeners in a fabricated composition. (López-Rodriguez and Pineda-Hernández ix)
The writers continue to offer different viewpoints surrounding the purpose of cultural myth, but their notion of “fabricated composition” is particularly germane to my focus on sub-altern/ative futures. It is a spacial-temporal location where the empowered voice implicitly and explicitly untells history by stitching the fabrication back together with threads of subaltern/ative perspective. The writings of Suzan-Lori Parks are exceptional illustrations of stitched fabrication. She writes about fragmenting narratives in “New Black Math” as the character Black Playwright states, “We gonna crack the heart wide open cause when it healed up last time it healed up wrong, crack it open and reset it, heal it right. Crack open the mind wide open cause when it healed up, our thoughts healed up wrong” (“New Black Math” 581).

To crack it open, however, there has to be a stop in the forward development of the fabricated narrative — a place to listen to the stories of old and new — and then rewrite them to incorporate the shift. Antonio Gramsci refers to this temporal moment as an interregnum, an interstitial place somewhere between old and new that creates a pause; an opening; a shifting that creates opportunity for social and cultural change. Julian Jiménez Heffernan situates an interregnum as a “period of freedom from customary authority” and refers to Gramsci’s definition as a “state of emergency” that challenges the legitimacy of the political order (95). Heffernan describes it as a purgatorial realm where we still are and have always been (98), while Patrick J. Deneen describes it a moment of transitional clash between entrenched ideals of tradition and new ideals for the future (369). As we find ourselves within this interregnum, however, we are faced with recognition of who we have been. The multi-directional moment of tension highlights cultural uncertainty, though, as we are paradoxically unclear as to whom we will become based on a new way of regarding the past.

In this manner, and through the “crack it open” aesthetic of her “Black Playwright,” Suzan-Lori Parks functions as a mystical archeologist up to her elbows in the dust of history’s narrative, exhuming the past, bringing bones back to life, and dressing them in hope for future contingencies. Angenette Spalink describes Parks’ theatre as one that “enables an excavation of ‘dismembered’ history […] where the ‘unrecorded’ past can be exhumed to interface with the present (71). But Parks doesn’t just re-assemble/re-member the past, she reorients it through multi-directional untelling — demanding an audience turn and watch as the past brushes by us in the present on its journey toward what it’s creating for the future. Retelling or re-membering implies the originary moment survives the encounter. But in Parks’ creative interregnum, the static narrative unravels as it’s been taught, replaced with something that contains an echo of the previous memory but resonates with a vibe, story, and voice all its own. Parks infuses the “whole hole” of the narrative chasm with voices of historically marginalized and silenced groups of people, creating space for an articulation of sub-altern/ative perspective and future/s.

However, although her work is celebrated and award-winning, her dramaturgical approach remains at times somewhat opaque to audiences — she really makes us work for it. In 1997, Louise Bernard addressed how recognizing meaning in Parks’ plays remains a challenging issue. She contends that “Parks’s work denies the reader/audience
easy access to definitive ‘answers’” and that as a playwright, she doesn’t aim to, “‘torture’ her reader/audiences 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” (Bernard 694-695). Nineteen years later in 2016, playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and director Lileana Blain-Cruz acknowledge that little has changed when speaking of Signature Theatre’s 2016-2017 season of Suzan-Lori Parks plays. “It’s because her plays are so weird,” laughs Jacobs-Jenkins, when unpacking why it has taken so long for a broader public to recognize Parks’ contributions to theatre. He continues, “And Death of the Last Black Man is the weirdest of the weird” (13). In discussing the rehearsal process of Signature’s 2016 production of The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World (2016), Parks mentions the gift of seeing people hear her words. She states, “It’s an incredible gift, to see that the world caught up — not caught up to you, but caught up to this thing you heard. You heard this and now we can all hear this. It’s very exciting” (“Stepping Forward on Faith” 12).

From as far back as 1987, she has employed multi-directional untelling in her dramaturgy, through the mouths of her figures, the creation/subversion of language, and the exercise of a unique play structure. In 1993, dramaturg Laurence Maslon stated that if we can't hear Parks, there's nothing wrong with her voice, there' something wrong with our ears (Garrett 24). Parks herself speaks about the “world catching up” to what she has heard for a long time. Although there is still a fair distance to catch up to Parks, there are two contemporary pop culture texts — Hamilton: The American Musical (2016) and Black Panther (2018) — which have caught up to Parks’ framing. Their enormous international success reveals a shift in the public consciousness toward sub-altern/ative untellings and kaleidoscopic perspectives. Although distinctly different from her plays, as well as each other in distinct ways, at the heart they represent Parks’ multi-directional untelling and enact Saal’s subjective judgment stimulation. They display — implicitly and explicitly — what Parks has been doing for thirty years: paradoxically projecting our being and not being; stories of who we are, but who we aren’t; and reveal to us as a society and individuals, who we collectively could be.

Into the Interregnum — Suzan-Lori Parks, The Founding Fathers and An African King

Despite Lin-Manuel Miranda’s success with In The Heights, no one was prepared for the ways in which Hamilton was about to impact society explicitly decentering theatre, race, historical narrative, and history itself. Bill Brantley, theatre critic for the New York Times writes in his review of Hamilton that the play is about “who owns history” and who is in control of the narrative, and that these “scrappy, adrenaline-charged young folks, with their fast way with rhyme that gives order to chaos, have every right to be in charge of the story here” (Brantley). Nancy Isenberg, author of a biography on Aaron Burr (the man who shot and killed Hamilton in a duel), says that to understand the success of the musical we have to understand its explicit critique on history. She writes, “We need to understand the scope of its ambition, which is nothing less than giving America a new origin story” (Lewis). Anthony Reed, when discussing the musical structure within
Parks' writing, acknowledges the ways in which her repetition and revision structure expands and extends the possibilities of “what is.” He states, “Repetition sits with simultaneity, allowing for a more expansive sense of what has been thought and felt in this tradition and of what can be” (149). In *Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity*, Duncan S. A. Bell describes rejecting the universality of dominant views in exchange for subaltern myths. He writes that “The governing myth thus coexists with and is constantly contested by subaltern myths, which are capable of generating their own traditions and stories, stories as likely to be concerned with past oppression and suffering at the hands of the dominant groups as by tales of national glory” (74). Here Bell highlights the discursive power of nationalist myth through the articulation of a selectively narrated and reconstructed past (75).

In *Hamilton*, Miranda has traditional “white-made history” in his sights as he explicitly untells the tradition/origin story of our nation's Founding Fathers (Barre 180). By costuming the history on black and brown bodies, the performance requires we put aside the “history of History” to ingest an untelling of what we think of the past in the present while forecasting new possibility into the future. Jeremy McCarter, Miranda's co-author on *Hamilton: The Revolution*, describes the paradoxical impact of seeing the moment in *Hamilton* where young men and women of color win freedom for all of us — even as their own freedoms have been impinged upon for hundreds of years (Miranda and McCarter 113). At the end of the play, the multicultural cast stands before the audience — with seemingly future forecasts in mind — asking: “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?” Against the traditionalized mythology and within a framed resistance, Miranda repositions the audience's relationship to representational history. Soyica Diggs Colbert describes the reorientation of produced performance and audience receptivity as artists turning the tables on the audience (59). She asserts that this action does not “topple the dynamic of watcher and watched” but rather places the objectified centrically, reorienting the object as subject who now re/creates the desired frame (58-59). Reed acknowledges that with Parks' work, we are asked to affirm all these alternatives as simultaneously true (151).

In *Postmodern Blackness* bell hooks writes about the decentered subject finding ruptures and gaps in which to engage in oppositional practice; she specifically discusses the creation of art that “reflects passionate engagement with popular cultures, because this may very well be ‘the’ central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur” (124). Gayatri Spivak's rejection of orientalism advocates for a constant critique of heterogeneous ideologies maintaining that when discussing power and order one must seek to “know the discourse of society's Other” (66). She famously questioned whether the subaltern can speak when criticizing colonialism and the notion of the West as normative signifier against which any deviating narratives are bracketed other. The critical and box office juggernaut *Black Panther* reflects hooks' oppositional gaze and Spivak's rejection of normative signifiers — albeit with implicit untelling — as its backward-forward looking lens eschews the “history of History.” As Parks' aesthetic itself is a deconstruction of dominant telling, *Black Panther* is rich with Black Power symbolism and “Afrofuturistic” lens (Dery.)
the film seeks to empower, whose story is being told, and who gets to tell it — but with no explicit reference to its positioning. Wakanda's present eliminates a narrative past of enslaved Africa, elucidating for the audience visions of a future that could have been based on a past that never was; the implicit untelling here doesn't just unravel or untell the present based on the past but eliminates the reference material in order to multi-directionally envision new past, present, and future. The film untells the whole of History implicitly in the representation of Wakandan culture thriving at highest capacity with no influence of white imperialism or the Western World.

*Hamilton* and *Black Panther* upend the notion of historical narrative as social control as they weave for us similar critiques of hegemonic discourse despite clear delineation of stage and screen, politics and economics (Barre 188).

Both texts similarly frame contemporary performance through Parks' conscious multi-directional untelling manipulating gaps in the originary moments of cultural mythscape. Within the interregnum, they force a present-past-present-future site of emancipation, and explicitly and implicitly lift the narrative from an oppressive timeline of colonialism and occupation. And in doing so, they forecast: *who gets to tell our story?*

bell hooks expands the cultural criticism as espoused by Spivak and Bell and exercised by Parks when hooks states that a voice of resistance articulated through a transformed model of language and expression must be revealed: "I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew" (hooks "Marginality" 243). Parks' multi-directional untelling — as examined through the explicit construction of *Hamilton* and the implicit vision of *Black Panther* — acts as site of transfer, and from within this *creative interregnum* she paradoxically untells fabricated perceptions offering audiences moments to pause and reflect on: Who are we? And where are we? What have we done? What are we doing and where are we going? Who gets to tell our story? Heffernan's notion of purgatory appears appropriate as we work to find our footing, and, as Bell suggests, the seemingly impenetrable myth of nation shifts within Parks' interregnum.

**My New Self Was Uh 3rd Self Made By Thuh Space In Between.**

Within the pause, Parks' dramaturgy does many different things simultaneously, and she herself acknowledges the bi/multi-directionality of her work. In “an Equation for Black People Onstage” she writes, “What can theatre do for us? We can 'tell it like it is'; ‘tell it as it was’; ‘tell it as it could be.’ In my plays I do all 3” (21). Her paradoxical positioning destabilizes cultural constructions of history through re/un-creating/telling worlds somewhere in between truth and tale-telling, and undermines theatrical tradition. She is referred to as a stylist who implicitly and explicitly appropriates the dominant style of language and form in order to critique that authoritarian way of telling (Geis 7). Part of her job as a playwright, she suggests, is to “locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (4). In “Possession,” Parks' refers to the ephemeral nature of history when she states, “Through each line of text I'm rewriting the
Time Line — creating history where it is and always was but has not been created yet” because theatre is the best medium for adapting and retelling recorded or remembered events (5). Louise Bernard looks at how Parks challenges her audiences as she offers them ideas and images that deconstruct the “misrecognitions” of historical and contemporary perceptions of blackness (694). Parks’ theatrical incubator functions as a vehicle through which to untell many staid ideas — the “history of History” being one of them — and from within the interregnum she births living refusals of dominant myth (“Posession” 4).

One example of how she explicitly does this is through the setting in *The America Play*. At its beginning, The Foundling Father stands by himself in “A great hole. In-the-middle-of-nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History” (159). He is aware of its static pressure on him, and the manner in which it presses him into the past from the present, while also firmly holding him in his current place, not allowing for his future contingencies. He speaks of participating in the digging of the hole that continues to hold him, displaying an awareness of the power historical narrative and cultural memoryscape can wield. Of the hole he states,

**THE FOUNDLING FATHER:** The Lesser Known had a favorite hole. A chasm, really. Not a hole he had digged but one he’d visited [...] A Big Hole. A theme park. With historical parades. The size of the hole itself was enough to impress any digger but it was the Historicity of the place the order and beauty of the pageants which marched by them the Greats on parade in front of them. (162)

Here the Foundling/Founding/Floundering/Faux/Foe/Four/Fore Father describes his alienation from history, something he is a part of it yet also by which he is defined and restricted. Rather than active participant in its making, the parade of time/place/event marches on while he remains, rendering him spectator and object outside its creation. Leslie Odom, Jr., who originated the role of Aaron Burr in *Hamilton*, expresses a similar experience with U.S. American historical narrative when he discusses the impact the musical had on his connection to history. He says, “This show has been such a gift to me in that [...] I feel that it’s my history, too, for the first time ever. We all fought in the Revolutionary War. I think this show is going to hopefully make hundreds of thousands of people of color feel a part of something that we don’t often feel a part of” (Lurie). Daveed Diggs, who originated Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette, echoes this impact of *Hamilton* when he says, “I walked out of the show with a sense of ownership over American history. Part of it is seeing brown bodies play these people” (Monteiro 93). The common experience amongst these texts — both from imagined figures and real people — is the feeling of alienation from history. Parks’ “whole hole of history” is a trope repeated throughout her works, as is the alienation of self within a larger cultural memoryscape. As shown with The Foundling Father, often the figures within her stories are at once trapped by myth yet at the same time cultivate ground for
its untelling. Her landscapes provide implicit and explicit critiques of institutionalized narrative through the very existence of these telling her stories. Much like the cast of Hamilton and the Afrotururistic aesthetic of Black Panther, they explicitly defy the erasure from historical narrative many of their ancestors suffered. Simply by being named, Parks draws them out from the edge of “History’s” margin and gives them opportunity to fill the fissure of histories with sub-altern/ative voice/s. One of the most explicit methods through which Parks untells is how she identifies and names the voices.

We Won’t Be Able To Tell You Apart From The Others. We Won’t Even Know Your Name [21]

Calling them “characters” she writes, would be an injustice (“Elements of Style” 12). She describes them as “figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers maybe, speakers maybe, shadows, slips, players maybe, maybe someone else’s pulse” (12). However we call them, her storytellers are themselves often adapted ideas or emblematic figments who mediate meaning through their names. They are given metaphoric shape that communicates before, during, and beyond the dialogue they speak and many of them embody the psychic trauma of racial and gender stereotype demanding audiences engage with those subjugated, entrenched images and ideas. (A group of figures in Father Comes Home From the Wars is named The Chorus of Less Than Desirable Slaves.) For example, in The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, there is Black Man With Watermelon, Yes and Greens Blackeyed Peas Cornbread, Before Columbus, and Queen Hatsheput. The emblematic identification of their names informs, challenges, and confronts audience perception and reception of them. They also reveal critiques of institutional corruption and discrimination as displayed by Welfare from In the Blood:

WELFARE. I walk the line

between us and them

between our kind and their kind

The balance of the system depends on a well-drawn

boundary line. (Parks “In the Blood” 60-61)

Also from In the Blood is the Reverend, representative of exploitative religious powers, who gets sexually excited discussing Hester La Negrita’s poverty and sickness. After the Reverend coerces Hester into performing oral sex on him, he says to the audience:

REVEREND. Suffering is an enormous turn-on. (78)

Her ghosts can also exist in and out of time, which disorients the viewer and confronts them with multiple layers of representation through which to sift (Geis 18). Take, for example, Hero, another figure from Father Comes Home From the Wars. His name reveals a great deal about him — leader of his community; strong; reliable; he who would save others from harm. The name “Hero” has multiple resonances as it draws upon Greek and
Roman mythology, Medieval morality tales, and general understanding of hero/villain relationships in old and new well-made plays and melodrama. The play itself is the first third of a planned/hopeful saga of nine total parts and draws upon the mythology of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Parks’ Hero, much like the fabled heroes of stories old, is faced with a conflicting choice: earn his freedom by joining his slave-master The Colonel in fighting for the Confederate Army or remain enslaved. In Part I, “A Measure of a Man,” Hero’s community urges him to stay home; Part II, “A Battle in the Wilderness,” shows us Hero, The Colonel, and Smith a captured Union soldier; finally, with Part III, “The Union of My Confederate Parts,” Hero returns home, having renamed himself “Ulysses” (the Roman version of Odysseus). He says,

HERO. Ulysses suits me and I chose it for myself. Any of you ever done that? Choose your own name? No, right? It’s really something. Take all the time you need to get used to it. (141)

Parks conflates multiple concepts related to “Ulysses” questioning the very idea of hero/heroism. The Greek meaning of the name is “wrathful,” or “to hate,” a marked departure from “Hero.” A slave-name given to him by The Colonel, Hero remarks about the arbitrariness of naming when he reveals to Smith that his former name, “Joe” was also given to him by a slave-master. Hero’s choice to rename himself after the Union General Ulysses S. Grant conflates with Homer’s Ulysses from *The Odyssey*. Both are reluctant soldiers who return home after a long period of absence after overcoming many challenges. Hero, like Ulysses, wanted to avoid going to war, and in the end both lose their companions and treasures. But moreover, Parks highlights the fixed place in which Hero can make his choice: fight to uphold the system that oppresses you or remain enslaved always. Is freedom free that costs you your freedom? Much like The Foundling Father in *The America Play*, Hero has little room within which to maneuver; the whole hole still contains him. Hero, despite his naming and renaming, remains caught in gap. As B Man states, “He belongs to the ages” (169). Parks’ shadows tell stories from the perspective of the conquered — not the conqueror — and are multi-directional as they speak.

Her shapes’ names often express important information within the story but also directly to the audience as well. “Part II: Third Kingdom” of *Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom* introduces us to a group of seers aptly named: Kin-Seer, Us-Seer, Shark-Seer, Soul-Seer, and Over-Seer. In this metaphoric vision of the Middle Passage, the “Third Kingdom” is made from the in-between of the old and new worlds. The seers represent African hostages enslaved and forced onto slave ships bound for the Americas, and each of their names emblematically characterizes their function in the story. Amongst them, Kin-Seer sees past and present “kin.” They envision ancestors present Past-Present-Future similarly to Lucy and Brazil’s dusty findings; none of them know what they’ve encountered but seek to define them actively seeking out the mythscape within the offer pause, summoning the narratives to them (Colbert Diggs 68). Soyica Colbert Diggs writes of a continually living past, one never gone, but a persistent timeline site of
excavation and interpretation fully existing in the past, but ever changing in the present with multi-directional variations for the future (61). Kin-Seer expresses this paradox when describing the dream in which they see themselves in different timelines simultaneously:

KIN-SEER. Last night I dreamed of where I comed from. But where I comed from diduhnt look like nowhere I been... I was standin with my toes stuckted in thuh dirt... Wavin at my uther me who I could barely see. Over thuh water on thu other cliff I could see my uther me but my uther me culd not see me... But my uthr me whuduhnt wavin at me. my uther me was wavin at my Self... And then my Self came u between us...

Me wavin at Me. Me wavin at l. Me wavin at Self. (37-39)

Before stopping on the fifth variation, Kin-Seer's lines morph through four variations of rep-n-rev. One example being,

KIN-SEER. MAY WAH-VIN ET MAY. MAY WAH-VIN ET EYE.

MAY WAH-VINET ME SOULF. (39)

To the fifth and final variation of the line:

KIN-SEER: Me wavin at me at my I me wavin at my soul. (40)

Kin-Seer's dream highlights a both implicit and explicit particular of Parks. Her figures orbit worlds outside the realm of dominant codes and power structures found in the language system of the United States. Kin-Seer paradoxically visions into the interreggnum the existence of multiple contigencies creating a meeting of their selves. Similarly, *The America Play* paradoxically situates Lucy and Brazil as they encounter and forecast multi-directionality based on unearthed artifacts of buried pasts, forgotten presents, and unforetold futures, looking for who they are, were, and might become. Untelling the mythscape through the eyes and mouths of these seers creates worlds where sub-altern/ative realities are embodied, as well as spoken, through her invention of a new word order.


Parks writes in “Elements of Style:”

*Language is a physical act.*

Language is a physical act — something that
Involves yr whole bod.

Write with yr whole bod.

Read with yr whole bod.

Wake up. (18)

Ntozake Shange once said that writing within Western theatrical conventions is like wearing a straitjacket on her mind (Geis 9). Shange is another playwright whose dramaturgy dances freely around language and form. Parks takes the lid off of an ordinary linguistic system allowing "new narratives and ideologies to be spoken and heard" (Cherry 158). Colbert Diggs addresses how Parks' wordplay enacts historical rifts, creating space for black lives to be legible and possible (Colbert Diggs 62). She describes how through material language Parksian temporal linguistic confusion removes the traditionally marginalized sub-altern/ative voice from history's frame, providing escape from "objecthood" (62). Black Man With Watermelon highlights her play with language and multi-directional untelling of selves when he mentions the intersection of timelines in his present moment of sitting on a porch. He states:

BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON. We sittin on this porch right now aint we. Uh huhn. Aaah. Yes. Sittin right here right now on it in it ain'tuh first time either iduhnt it. Yep. Nope. Once we was here once we wuhduhnt we […] There is uh Now and there is uh Then. Ssall there is. (I bein in uh Now: uh Now bein in the Then: I bein, in Now in Then, in I will be. I was be too but that's uh Then that's past [...] Same porch. Same me. Thuh Then that's been somehow sits in thuh Then that will be: same Thens [...]}. (“Death of the Last” 126)

Parks' undermines not only language but again erodes cemented notions of time as Black Man With Watermelon experiences the same paradoxical intersection of selves as does Kin-Seer. Black Woman With Fried Drumstick offers the ultimate paradoxical take on Parks’ rupture of the timeline:

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK. Yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world. Uh! Oh. Don't be uhlarmed. Do not be afeared. It was painless. Uh painless passin. He falls
twenty-three floors to his death. ("Death of the Last" 129)

Similarly, the insider/outsider dialectic as displayed by The Foundling Father in *The America Play* confronts and unhinges language as oppressive gatekeeper and cultural codifier to further excavate the “Great Hole of History,” one mostly devoid of African American perspective in the “American” historical narrative. Lucy from *The America Play* talks about this with her son Brazil when she states,

LUCY. [...] son, at thuh Original Great Hole, you could see thuh whole world without goin too fr. You could look intuh that Hole and see your entire life pass before you. Not your own life but someones life from history [...] Like you, but not you. You know: Known.[10]

In “Put My Thang Down, Flip It and Reverse It,” Mecca Jamilah Sullivan writes about the destabilizing impact of imagined languages (706). She refers specifically to the manner in which these new languages change the world the characters inhabit and the process through which the new lingua rattles the intellectual space of the audience (706). Parks mixes German, English, French, and her own deconstruction of English in her plays. She describes words as spells in our mouths, old ones that hold onto history, and her job as a playwright is to give the actor physical clues as to how the words should manifest in their bodies (“Elements of Style” 11).[11] She asks,

Is it y-o-u-r or y-r? With y-o-u-r there's more room. See what it feels like in your mouth, in your tongue, in your body. Allow the language to inform the choices. Read the words, and *feel*. My plays *beg* for feeling. They *beg* for the gut response. Let the stomach-brain, let the heart-brain, inform your head-brain, and not always the other way around. Because we're getting to some deep stuff. And it's frightening. But it's also healing. (Garrett “An Interview” 190)

Her invention of language subverts racialized and gendered colonialization of the mind through remediated language giving her figures and her audience a rest, a pause in which to remap themselves.

Take for example her play *Fucking A*, which has an entire invented language called “TALK.” In the world of the play, Hester Smith is an abortionist, branded with a seeping, festering letter “A” that never heals. And as Abortionists are the lowest of society, she must always wear her branded “A” visible. TALK, described by Parks as a foreign language, is spoken by the female figures and centers on issues of sexuality and biology. Sullivan describes TALK as an intimate, transgressive code-switching practice where the women of the play occupy insider/outsider positions within the culture (713-714). Through TALK Parks addresses language as cultural code and its relation to access and power. It expresses what her characters want to say to each other but also what the character’s language means to the world and about the world in which they exist.
Although she employs this device of adapting revising subverting reimagining retelling untelling in many of her plays, *Fucking A* stands alone for its incorporation of an imagined, unique language. When Hester runs into The First Lady — the Mayor’s wife — and person responsible for putting Hester’s son in jail, Hester unleashes a tirade of TALK. She uses the more personal language of TALK to deeply insult and curse The First Lady as opposed to the language of the entire community, referring to her in vulgarities only TALK could communicate. Hester screams:

HESTER. *Suptah nekkie frokrisp Chung-chung! Noonka Bleehc tryohla*

die. Noonka! Grope tillie not. Grope say Basket shreck eey

grope say winduptrala! Grope sah Tupdom linske die like um
die Nassum. Grope sah Ovoweh miss eeh so quaknie! Grope

sah Milch shreck eeh naymilch noonkey treben! Noonke! [12] (149)

As the audience watches, this is an explicit reminder that we don’t have access and are positioned on the periphery, as well as voyeurs of their exploitation. TALK exists as a subaltern/ative form of communication, an implicit reality to the world of the figments but an explicit reminder to the audience of the barrier between insider and outsider. Viewers mentally shuffle between listening to the actors in the scene, watching the projections of the subtitles, and searching to put meaning together with the words and actions. True to Brechtian-alienation, this position divides the viewer into halves: one part inside the story, the other working to decode the message. That place of transition has echoes of interregnum, as the pause in between hearing and understanding requires a stoppage — a moment to reconcile the lack of access with the attribution of meaning. Sullivan describes the disruptive terrain of Parks’ language as complex geographical terrain whose “borders are shaped by black women’s languages of difference” (717). The transformational space created by her employment of language asks viewers to consider entrenched positions of dominant and subordinate culture. Her digging focuses on exhuming missing relics of our historical narrative not just by troubling entrenched notions of U.S. American culture but also through specific adaptation of theatrical norms.

Lucy

Brazil

Lucy

Brazil

Lucy: Hellowoooo! Hellowoooo!

(Rest) [13]
The third manner in which Parks' untells dominant positioning is perhaps her most explicit: her structural style. Fred Moten references how “anarchic organization” delineates an “ontological field wherein black radicalism is set to work” (85). While Moten is discussing the power and positioning of Amiri Baraka’s writing, Parks' collection of work also embodies the generative force of “asymptotic, syncopated nonconvergences of event, text, and tradition” (87). Moten's suggestion of a space which fills and erases itself at the same time coalesces with Parks' untelling (89). Kolin refers to this as Parksian realities collapsing into a theatre of black holes (“Introduction” 3), while Bernard writes of her ability to rewrite the “metaphysical landscape of racial memory” through the manner in which she structures her plays (688). In Carpenter's interview with Liz Diamond, they describe these texts as three-dimensional (193). Parks (re)creates the U.S. American memoryscape via poetry, imagery, music, word play, and metaphor and often employs the form of jazz music upon which to hang her stories.

Parks describes repetition and revision as integral to her writing. Rep-n-Rev is a distinct form of blues/jazz where the musician plays one series of notes to only go back and revise the musical structure, improvising new sounds and motifs with each passing presentation. She says the traditional container of dramatic structure is incompatible to the needs of her figures and her plays end up looking more like a musical score than a traditional playscript (“Elements of Style” 9). Her utilization of this technique requires audiences stay attentive, always ready to hear the slightest variations and what those small shifts might indicate. Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread displays this technique in The Death of the Last Black Man when the figures find land at the end of the play. This section of Yes And Greens lines is a revision of the same lines from earlier and throughout the script, but the earlier version was written without the (pauses) and the slight variation in the final lines of each stanza:

YES AND GREENS. You will write it down because if you don’t write it down
then we will come along and tell the future that we did not exist / You will write it
down and you will carve it out of a rock.
(Pause.)
You will write down thuh past and you will write down thuh present and in what
in thuh future / You will write it down.
(Pause.)
It will be of us but you will mention them from time to time so that in the future when
they come along theyll know how they exist.
(Pause.)
It will be for us but you will mention them from time to time so that in the future
when they come along they'll know why they exist.

(Pause).

You will carve it all out of a rock so that in the future when we come along we will know that the rock does yet exist. (“The Death of the Last” 130-131)

The character reflects Parks' skepticism about the validity of history, further digging at the idea that the history of History should not be trusted. And through the subtle rep-n-rev shifting throughout Yes and Greens’ lines, Parks interrogates the system of control that is the historical telling rep and reving from “they'll know how they exist” to “they'll know why they exist” to “we will know that the rock does yet exist” (131).

The rep-n-rev reveals an interstitial space in their dialectical score, relying upon the structure of jazz to display the shift in the characters' experience. Bernard draws upon Paul Carter Harrison's explanation of the unifying effect of music for the black community when he states that music, “[...] unveils an emotional potency and spiritual force that is collectively shared. Black music articulates the cross-fertilization of African sensibility and the American experience [...] the African roots have survived the death-grip of Western acculturation” (Bernard 689). Parks' use of the antiphonal pattern of jazz embraces and harnesses its free structure, positioning her characters, language, and form outside the marginal site of the center (692).

Although “rep-n-rev” is a Parksian regular, I believe her most unique iteration of traditional dramatic structure is found in her “(rests).” The (rest) in Parksian structure can mean different things and take on different form — as displayed by the “spell” exchange between Lucy and Brazil in this section’s heading: a spell is an elongated rest. The technique is a version of dramatic beat but that which contains slightly different intention and meaning; it’s a moment indicative of a pause of some sort, offering time to “take a breath” as Parks writes (“from Elements”). With her earlier plays, she employs “pauses,” but in The America Play she inserts the (rest) as if a simple pause would no longer suffice the needs of the un/telling. These breaks, whether short or elongated, produce “dissonance, distraction, and interruption” of static narrative (Colbert Diggs 71). Thomas DeFrantz is quoted in Black Movements saying, the “break is the most significant gesture of African American performance, as it contains both the tie to ubiquitous flow and the potential for anarchy and disruption” (71). Central to their points is the idea of individuality, as DeFrantz and Colbert Diggs address the power of rupturing aesthetic practice through individual perspective. Through her (rest)s, Parks produces not only multi-directional untellings of the known but offers interregna space somewhere between recollection and anticipation (Reed 161).

Her manipulation of structure, word play, “rep-n-rev,” and emblematic figures points to ways in which “otherness” is contained and devalued. Parks co-mingles past and present, mutating past contingencies with future possibilities, in order to highlight the very present vacancy of sub-altern/ative narratives in U.S. American cultural/historical
narrative. She continues to encourage audiences, as Lucy does to Brazil in The America Play, to “dig on” in the great hole. Lucy tells him, “Dig on, Brazil / Cant stop diggin till you dig up somethin” (174). Her structure is Gramsci’s interregnum. The places where she gives figures, directors, and actors time and space to (rest), is that in-between location of illumination where untelling happens. Where the narrative as it has been can be forecast backward and forward into contingencies not before conceptualized. Within her plays, she weaves these ruptures, interrupting cultural codes, originary ideas, and theatrical convention, and it is within these fissures her figures carry on, speaking new words and ideas, sub-altern/atively filling in whole holes with new voice.

In The Future When We Come Along We Will Know That The Rock Does Yet Exist

Looking forward, one can consider the transition from explicit to implicit suggestions to be an indication of growth in terms of our collective social consciousness. Acknowledging both the means and the effects of such impactful works is both a means to, and an outcome of, growth; and is consistent with the purpose of performance to provoke and transform audience (not to mention the performers). Parks’ creative interpretations of the dramaturgically traditional, her abstract-ness in these places of here, there, anywhere, or even nowhere, bring concrete the paradox that language is both an illusion and a determinant in cultural memory and history. Lileana Blain-Cruz recently directed Signature Theatre’s production of Parks’ The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World and said of Parks’ legacy, “There’s a celebration of black life, there’s a celebration of black beauty, there’s a celebration of our existence, and our complicated and dense history and those who come before us. That’s really beautiful, the opportunity for joy, and for power and for strength, which I think Suzan-Lori Parks is all about” (“Signature Stories” 4).

Within her (rest), she tells the (rest); untelling prescribed ideas of history, character, language, and form to fill the pause with sub-altern/ative narratives. Parks untells (dis)remembered histories in order to confront the forced cultural schizophrenia enforced upon the black psyche by a white dominant culture (Kolin “You one uh mines?” 45). Suzan-Lori Parks’ multi-directional/dimensional blending together of performance/time/narrative/protest/memory/resistance/history is explicitly displayed with the rapping forefathers of Hamilton and implicitly woven into the Afrofuturistic power and beauty of Black Panther’s Wakanda. Resistant texts and voices resonate within Gramsci’s pause, bi-directionally amplifying and empowering the voice of the conquered which roars (sometimes whispers) in resistance to the designed archive of our past, hoping for radical possibilities in our future. This unmarked terrain of our mythscape is where they all come together. Soul-Seer forecasts this in Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom when stating:

SOUL-SEER: The tale of who we were when we were, who we will be when we will be and who we be now that we iz. (56)

Welcome to the interregnum.


Cornish, Matthew. “Performing the Archive: History and Memory in Recent German Theatre.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 67, no. 1, March 2015, pp. 63-82.


—. *Father Comes Home From the Wars, Parts I, II, & III*. TCG, 2015.


“Stepping Forward on Faith: An Interview With Suzan-Lori Parks.” *Signature Stories*, no. 17, Autumn 2016, pp. 7-12.

**Endnotes**

Isenberg offers cogent criticism as well on Hamilton. She describes it at times problematic as it becomes more and more treated as history rather than entertainment.

Dery's seminal article on Afrofuturism, provides an excellent poetics of the genre. In the article he writes, “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture — and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future — might for want of a better term, be called ‘Afro-futurism”’ (180.)

Adam Rosenberg. Mashable. March 2, 2018. Black Panther surpassed Jurassic World. The film recently became the fourth most successful film of all time by surpassing $1.2 billion dollars in global box office sales. Hamilton grossed $161 million dollars from May 2017-May 2018. Although part of the show's financial success is that the average ticket price is $282, Hamilton was responsible for bringing in 10% of the $1.7 billion dollars made from Broadway shows. Michael Paulson. “Broadway Sets Box-Office Record Powered by ‘Hamilton’ and Bruce Springsteen.  https://nytimes.com/2018/05/30/theater/broadway-sets-box-office-record.html

Shark-Seer & Kin-Seer from, Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom, pp. 55.

An important point of further discussion should center around Lyra D. Monteiro's rich critique of Hamilton's missing slave narratives. The reality that the majority of The Framers owned slaves is mentioned in the Cabinet rap battles, but they happen so quickly the moments are easy to miss. Monteiro points out this missing narrative of the enslaved African people can mislead the audience. “This has never been a white nation” she writes (93). Monteiro does reference the lyrics about Sally Hemmings, but also notes the moment happens very quickly, and if you’re not familiar with the Jefferson/Hemmings story, you can easily miss it. I believe the absence of representation of slavery in the play is not a failure of the story, and not the story Miranda was telling, but it certainly is an area of tension worth further exploration.

Charles, From Imperceptible Mutabilities Of The Third Kingdom, pp. 53.

As there is no direction as to the gender of the character, the fluid pronoun “they” will be used.

Black Man With Watermelon, from The Death of the Last Black Man In the Whole Entire World, pp. 105.

Interesting to also note is Parks' use of capitalization. She has often remarked about the influence classical works have had on her writing, and Shakespeare's utilization of capitalizing words of significance can be seen reflected all throughout her oeuvre.

The physical sensation of the difference between “thuh,” “th,” and “the.”
[12] TALK translation: You and yr slack dried-up prissy pussy! No one would be caught
dead inside such a stupid twat! May you never conceive! May yr womb dry up and
shrive! May yr tubes tie themselves in knots! May yr egg sacks be forever empty! May yy
breasts shrivel and never ever give milk!


[14] Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread, from *The Death of the Last Black Man in
the Whole Entire World*, pp. 131.

[15] The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World AKA The Negro Book of
the Dead for Signature Theatre’s production.