

## “He is One for History” The History of the Blacks in Susan Lori Parks’s *The America Play*

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### Abstract

History in the plays of African-American playwright Susan Lori Parks (b. 1963) is affirmed, reenacted, and rewritten to represent the black identity. It is seen as a necessary requisite for understanding the past, living the present with all its repercussions, and safeguarding the future of black generations. In her “Possession”, she claims that the white history of literature must be put in question because they have documented history from their own white perspective only, neglecting the fact that the blacks have their own role in that history. She tries her best to make her plays as literary mediations in order to rewrite the unrecorded and the unremembered history of African American people. Her purpose behind staging historical events is to show the bias and prejudice of the white history. Parks’s *The America Play* (produced 1994) is a complex, multidimensional play about history as it has no apparent linear plot to follow. This makes Parks a postmodernist writer. Her aim behind staging historical events is to make them occur in reality. The aim of this study is to show how Parks, as a black African-American playwright, has been successful in showing her own rich heritage through digging up the history of the blacks in order to call for their freedom and give them the voice that has been absent for centuries. This paper focusses on Susan Lori Parks’s *The America Play* as one of her history plays. It consists of an abstract, an introduction, and one section that tackles the history of the blacks in the play, and it ends with a conclusion that shows what the study has reached at.

**KeyWords:** The Lesser Known, impersonating, Parks, *The America Play*, The Foundling Father, African American canon of history, History Plays.

### هو واحد من أجل التاريخ”

### تاريخ السود في مسرحية أمريكا لسوزان لوري باركس

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### الملخص

تم تأكيد التاريخ في مسرحيات الكاتبة المسرحية الأمريكية الأفريقية سوزان لوري باركس (مواليد ١٩٦٣) وإعادة تمثيله وكتابته ليمثل الهوية السوداء. والتاريخ يُنظر إليه على أنه شرط ضروري لفهم الماضي، وعيش الحاضر بكل تداعياته، وحماية مستقبل الأجيال السوداء. في مقالة لها بعنوان "الملكية"، تدعي باركس بأن تاريخ الأدب الأبيض يجب أن يكون موضع تساؤل لأنهم وثقوا التاريخ من منظورهم فقط، متجاهلين حقيقة أن للسود دورهم الخاص في ذلك التاريخ. وقد بذلت الكاتبة قصارى جهدها لتقديم مسرحياتها كوسائط أدبية لإعادة كتابة التاريخ غير المسجل والمنسي للشعب الأمريكي من أصل أفريقي. وإن هدفها من تنظيم الأحداث التاريخية هو إظهار التحيز والاجحاف في التاريخ الأبيض. إن مسرحية باركس (مسرحية أمريكا) والتي أنتجت عام ١٩٩٤ هي مسرحية معقدة ومتعددة الأبعاد حول التاريخ لأنها لا تحتوي على قصة متسلسلة كي تتابع. وهذا يجعل باركس من كتاب ما بعد الحداثة. وإن هدفها من تنظيم الأحداث التاريخية هو لجعلها تحدث في الواقع. وإن هدف هذه الدراسة هو تبيان كيف إن باركس، ككاتبة أفريقية أمريكية، نجحت في عرض تراث شعبها الأسود الغني من خلال الغوص في أعماق تاريخ السود كي تتادي من أجل حرمتهم وتعطيهم الصوت المغيب لعدة قرون مضت. وقد ركز هذا البحث على مسرحية *أمريكا* لسوزان لوري باركس كواحدة من مسرحياتها التاريخية. ويتكون من ملخص ومقدمة وقسم واحد يتناول تاريخ السود في المسرحية وينتهي باستنتاج لما توصل إليه البحث.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأقل شهرة، انتحال الشخصية، باركس، مسرحية أمريكا، الأب اللقيط، الشريعة الأمريكية الأفريقية للتاريخ، مسرحيات التاريخ.

## I. Introduction

“I’ve said I write plays because I love black people. ...Not that I had any other reason before that, but I realized why I want black people on stage—because I love them.” Susan Lori Parks (*Britannica Encyclopedia*).

Parks, the first black American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama for *Topdog/Underdog*, is also the first Afro-American woman to achieve this honor for her writing on issues of African American people (Wetmore 1). She is one of the most highly acclaimed Afro-American woman playwrights in contemporary theater for being innovative and occasionally controversial. She, along with other Afro-American playwrights, has a great impact on American literature and culture. Except for Tennessee Williams, Parks may be considered “the most prolific and diverse playwright America has ever produced” (Kolin 1). Her managing of space and time in her postmodern plays has continued what had become typical of mainstream Broadway Theater, i.e., the use of realistic characters and time restricted situations. As projects of revision, her plays give voice to absence and question and revise presence. Parks presents a sequence of connected scenes which address stereotypes that have haunted Afro-Americans from slavery to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. She has done that through using comedy and mocking together formal English and black dialect speech (Brown 189).

In much of the twentieth-century historical drama of the USA, there is an interest in repetition in history where the playwrights portrayed certain kinds of actions like revolt, repression, and killing to be recurring patterns that may or may not be altered or destroyed in the present or future. Parks is one of those playwrights, but no playwright like her has been successful in drawing attention to the problems of staging history (Holder 18). The space between history and the contemporary moment is removed, and history is rewritten, this time to include African Americans’ voices in particular, which history has traditionally ignored.

The early plays of Parks are called “the history plays” in which the playwright renews historical events to fill a gap caused by the exclusion of any Afro-American presence. She explains why history matters to her the way it does through an interview with Jiggetts:

I think because if you looked back into the past or looked up onto a screen, a film screen, or looked in a show, or looked on the shelf in the library, you don’t see enough of you. Or even if you do see enough of you, I do think you have the right to put some of you up there by any means necessary. ... I think it is just as valid as what we are told happened back then (Jiggetts 317).

She is much-admired for her attempts to fill in the gaps of Afro-American memory and history, and for her refusal to depend on the Eurocentric history that was dominant for centuries. In her article "Possession," Parks claims, "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" ("Possession" 5). She states that her concern is about American history as if it is known today. She says,

A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history –that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to -- through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life -- locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down ("Possession" 4).

She wants to dig for the past of her marginal people and makes the theatre as the appropriate place for that mission. It is the best place for her to locate the heritage of the "ancestral burial ground." She takes the theatre as a critical space to revision history where the Whites are dominant and the Blacks as the underestimated and to show her audience that America is not a heavenly land of justice and equality, but a country of injustice and inequality. She also states that she is remembering and staging historical events that are suitable for insertion in history through their being happened on stage ("Possession" 5). She tries to create new historical events through stressing the de-emphasized and the denied place of African-Americans in recorded history and she also tries to attract the attention of her readers/ audiences towards the African American canon of history. By recreating historical events on stage, history is replayed in front of audiences who are intended to learn lessons from it; only in this way, Parks is able to make history and revive the unrecorded parts of it.

Critics have given a considerable focus to Parks's satirical and surreal rewriting/re-visioning of history along with literary phrases and texts, i.e., her "rep[etition] and rev[ision]" in this play and her other plays like *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), and *Venus* (1996) (Elam 178).

## II. Parks's *The America Play*

"He is One for History, Not your own life but someone life from history, you know someone from History." (166)

Parks named her play as *The America Play*, and not "the African American Play" to challenge what is represented as American history and identity. For her, the Africans' experiences in America are always already tied to concepts of

American identity. Critic David Richards claims that Parks's concept of history in *The America Play* has a postmodernist meaning that refers to the abstractions of language and music to represent the life of the African American people. He claims that Parks "represents the absence of black history in a society that has long defined itself by the exploits of a few select white men. *The America Play*, I suspect, wants to communicate how it feels to find yourself in this lost state, with no reliable signposts to point the way out" (Qtd. in Persley 65-66). It sheds light on the physical and psychological enslavement of black men while revealing the impact of their pain and suffering on the lives of black mothers and their children. It emphasizes the psychological violence, the personification of social principles attributed to blackness and whiteness, and the "fabricated absence" of blackness in American history (Persley 72).

In her essay "Elements of Style," Parks explains her personal concept for developing plays for the stage. In this essay, she refers to her characters as "figures which take up residence inside me, figures that do not fit inside the more traditional forms or the naturalism of, say, Lorraine Hansberry" ("Elements" 8). She uses realistic characters and time-confined situations in her postmodern plays. That's why she has extended what had become typical of mainstream Broadway theatre. Her plays shed light on absence and question and revise presence. The history is re-written and the space between history and the contemporary moment is removed. It is re-written to contain voices of Afro-Americans particularly whose history has been neglected. Parks writes dramas about the blacks but with their imperfections. She makes her characters re-engrave the very stereotypes they are intended to critique on a larger scale (Ynmtchell 83). Parks brings real historical figures on stage to shed light on dark spots or unseen figures that come from different historical periods and they appear on stage as an eye witness to enhance and change the audiences' perceptions of African American history and their roles that are unknown or not taken for consideration (Ghasemi 131). That's why, according to Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and historian, her plays represent the 'counterhistories of prophecy and promise, the counterhistories of the subjugated knowledge that has to be desubjugated and deciphered.' Foucault claims that the history or counterhistory that is emerged out of the race story and struggle will definitely express the voice that is in darkness, the sound from within the shadows. It will speak of those who have lost their glory and have found themselves recently, for those who have long been living in darkness and silence (Foucault 70). Foucault practiced history in his works to help his readers understand how history results in creating a form leading to criticize self-knowledge that leads to a specific freedom. He believes that "history had never been anything more than the history of power as told by power itself, or the history of power that power had made people tell: it was the history of power, as recounted by power" (Qtd. in Fillion 143).

In this play, a black man, named "The Foundling Father" (164), has always been told that he has a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. That's why he decides to learn all the famous lines and the details of the murder of, "The Great man," (159) Lincoln. He is "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 just as the Great Mans were large” (159). Throughout the play the Foundling Father always makes a comparison of his entire body with that of Lincoln, implying the psychological effect of whiteness and its social value on the newly emancipated African American slaves and their negotiation of identity. The Foundling Father puts white makeup to mask his black skin, takes pieces of hair from his barber secretly to create his beards, and dresses in “look-alike black frock coats bought on time” (161) to finish his appearance as Lincoln. He says:

This is my fancy beard. Yellow. Mr. Lincolns hair was dark so I dont wear it much. If you deviate too much they wont get their pleasure. Thats my experience. Some inconsistencies are perpetuable because theyre good for business. But not the yellow beard. Its just my fancy. Every once and a while. Of course, his hair was dark (163).

He has evaluated his self-dignity against the ghost of the white Great Man. He enacts Lincoln’s death for a penny fee. Lincoln is his costume and the beard and costume are what makes him looks like Lincoln. The costume is what makes him The Lesser Known (Wetmore 90). He clarifies his ability to get his work as a performer of Lincoln because he is strong enough to imitate his speeches when he wears the costume. He refers to this fact by saying:

When someone remarked that he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot it was as if the Great Mans footsteps had been suddenly revealed: instead of making speeches his act would now consist of a single chair, a rocker, in a dark box. The public was cordially invited to pay a penny, choose from a selection of provided pistols enter the darkened box and ‘Shoot Mr. Lincoln’. The Lesser Known became famous overnight (171).

He sits in a chair dressing up as President Lincoln to perform the assassination of the President and when he laughs ‘Haw Haw Haw Ha’ (165), the audiences take the role of John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated Lincoln, and shoot him for only a penny; and many of them say before shooting: ‘Thus to the tyrants!’ (165) while others say: ‘The South is avenged!’ (165) Parks wants the audiences to accept the idea of an African American president that seems absurd to the audiences for different reasons. By imitating Lincoln, the Foundling Father breaks the limits between the genuine actions of the Greater Man and his personified remix of them as the Lesser Known. He tells the audience that he started to create his own identity in relation to ‘greatness’ when he and his wife, Lucy, travelled to visit the Great Hole for their honeymoon. At that time, he comprehended the fact

that he was invited to ‘greatness’: “The hole and its historicity and the part he played in it all gave shape to the life and posterity of the Lesser Known that he could never shake” (162). Parks refers to Abraham Lincoln as ‘The Lesser Known’ which implies the fact that Lincoln didn’t receive the worth he deserves although he tried to spread equality in the American society, so that the audiences have to pay attention to his worth and consider his importance in the society. Parks calls him The Lesser Known maybe because she wants to imply that a black figure that performs the role of the president and appears in his costume is lesser known and de-familiarized to the audiences (Ghasemi 129).

In an interview with her by Kevin, Parks comments on her characters by saying that they are always confused and lost:

SLP: My characters often feel that, no matter what they do they can’t seem to make any progress. Lincoln in *The America Play* is following in the footsteps of a man who lived in the past. He’s walking forward in the footsteps of someone who is behind him. What does that mean to him? He gets terribly confused and angry and lost.

KJW: Isn’t that a wonderful metaphor for life in America anyway – we’re all confused and angry about the past. And the idea is, can you transcend it?

SLP: Sure. Yeah. We try. We all try (Wetmore 132).

The characters are searching for clues to their identities. The Foundling Father's wife, Lucy, and son, Brazil, dig in the sand around the great hole for clues to the truth, and they reveal objects that suggest that many accepted truths are in fact lies and distortions based on perception. In this play, Parks brings dirt onstage. The setting is referred to as “the great hole of history” (158) which is somewhere in the West of the United States in a great hole in the middle of nowhere, it “is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History,” (١٠٨) and it is centered on the Foundling Father who re-enacts Lincoln’s death as a sideshow act. It was dug by the Foundling Father and left to his family. Parks uses The Replica of the Great Hole as a symbolism to The Great Hole of History as a metaphor to refer to her impression of recorded history. The symbolism of The Replica of the Great Hole comes from its comparison to The Great Hole of History, a well-developed metaphor by Parks to describe her impression of recorded history. In the second half of the play, the Lesser Known’s wife and son are searching for him by digging in the dirt to find him so that they can bury him. They describe the genuine ‘Hole of History’, a theme park back east (Holder 20).

Brazil: 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 tuh TeeVee. Mr George Washington, for example, tuh Fathuh of our Country hissself, would rise up from tuh dead and walk uhround and cross tuh Delaware and say stuff!! Right before their very eyes!!!!

Lucy: Son?

Brazil: Huh?

Lucy: That iduhut how it went.

Brazil: Oh.

Lucy: Thuh Mr Washington me and your Daddy seen was uh lookuhlike of the Mr. Washington of history-fame, son.

Brazil: Oh.

Lucy: The original Mr. Washingtonssbeen long dead.

Brazil: Oh.

Lucy: That Hole back East was uh theme park son. Keep your story to scale (179–180).

In the second act of the play, “The Hall of Wonders,” both the Great man, and the Lesser Known man are buried in the ground as dead bodies. The difference is that the Lesser Known man’s death is foregrounded now. Lucy and Brazil spend their time digging in the hole that her husband had begun, planning to make it like the amusement park, The Great Hole of History. Lucy tells Brazil about his father's great fascination with Lincoln especially his assassination as he wants to know all about his father’s life. Lucy tells him sadly how the “Lesser Man forgets who he is and just crumbles the Greater Man continues on.” (79) Myth consumes actual individual alive, and Lucy warns her son against a similar fate, always remonstrating, “Keep your story to scale.” (80) Brazil is searching for the remains of the father because he deserted him when he was only five which allows him to regain their missing origins and traces. These imaginary relics “a bust of Lincoln, Washington's wooden teeth, bills of sale, peace pacts, medals for “faking,” and so forth” (41) have a similar purpose to the sign of the black hole. Similar to the blocked histories, the black holes in which space and time are just the contradictory to what we used to know, can be seen through their effects, like the misrepresentation of light and the uncommon behavior of atoms. In such hole, one can observe objects and events transformed by the action of a contrasted space-time in which the past comes after the future and the minor comes before the major, a group yearned for The Lesser Known (Bahun-Radunović 465).

Parks uses time and space as components that contribute to describe the history of the Blacks through retelling history in language. She clarifies that by saying:

The use of the White in the dramatic equation is, I think too often seen as the only way of exploring our Blackness; this equation reduces

Blackness to merely a state of non-Whiteness . . . We have for so long been an ‘oppressed people’ there are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness on stage [so that] Black presence onstage is more than a sign or messenger of some political point (Parks, “An Equation for Black People Onstage” 19).

This refers to the fact that Parks realizes well her being a black writer whose writing is devoted to her black heritage and that the blacks have been oppressed by the Whites and absent in history and here she tries her best to give them a voice on stage.

In this act the attention is not directed heavenward but definitely earthward, into the ground. The characters are all in the ‘death business’ as their profession: the ‘Lesser Known’, before impersonating Lincoln, was a grave digger in a long line of grave diggers; his wife keeps the secrets of the dead; and his son is a professional mourner, or ‘gnasher’ (Holder 22). The father taught his son how to mourn in order to earn money. He says, “This is the Wail. There’s money in it” (182). He taught his son ‘the Weep’, ‘the Sob’, ‘the Moan’, and ‘the Gnash’ until the son becomes an expert in mourning. He acts sadly in funerals in order to get more and more money, but without any real emotions. The saddest he performs; the more money he earns (Wetmore 96).

Through portraying the holes that represent the absence of black people in history, Parks examines history. She makes her play reflect history and confront history. Liz Diamond, as a director of most of Parks’s plays in close connection with her, states that Parks explains the “rep” and “rev” strategy used in this play by saying that this strategy can be seen in this play where characters and historical events take place first as tragedy, then as farce, and lastly as theatre of the absurd. She determines that this strategy “keeps the spectator/reader ever-vigilant, looking for something missed in the last repetition while scrutinizing the upcoming revision” (Ynmitchell 205). Her aim behind using the method of Rep & Rev is “overcoming fixity, or stereotyping, through the returns of memory” (Malkin 158). In her essay “Elements of Style,” Parks refers to the fact that this technique of Rep & Rev helps her examine something bigger than one moment of history. She uses it as a type of metaphor. She states,

I write plays that are theatrical, performative, language based and formally challenging while also being interested in human emotions and the human condition ... History, the destruction and creation of it through theatre pieces and how Black people fit into all of this, is my primary artistic concern. As an artist I have to go where the writing takes me (“Elements” 10).



Being interested in introducing innovative plays to postmodern theatre, her desire took her to the myth of Abraham Lincoln where she wrote *The America Play* that is full of repetitions and revisions of the actions and speeches that influence the audiences' understanding of the play. Through repetitions and revisions, Parks makes links to the narration of history. She argues: "The idea of Repetition and Revision is an integral part of the African and African American literary and oral tradition" ("Elements" 10).

Parks's writings reveal that she is concerned with examining the known history so that the audience can discover things that have been missing or hanging. Her purpose is to tell the unchronicled events. In her writing, she is concerned with posing and answering questions regarding the individual and collective identity of African Americans and people in general. She not only tells these stories through words but with sound, using repetition that often has the ability to create a hypnotic effect (Beaulieu 646). [In this play, Parks' recurring use of repetition and revision proves her satire to the](#) representations of historical figures like Abraham Lincoln impersonator who reenacts Lincoln's assassination for money (Brown 189).

This play imitates the heritage and commodification of Lincoln, digging up national, cultural, and individual memories. Parks's purpose is to create a space for the Lesser Known, not to document Lincoln's lesser selves. The Lesser Known is a black gravedigger who notices his uncanny likeness to Lincoln and capitalizes on this phenomenon by imitating the speeches and assassination of the Great Man himself (Ryan 82). The play reviews what happened in history using black figures on stage who narrate their American family stories. Parks states, "A man is telling the story of his life, and in the second act the family is coming to look for his remains; that's the story I want to tell" (Qtd. in Stevens 84). Her purpose behind narrating such story is to explore and show her audiences/ readers the remains of the father in order to criticize both white authority and the myth of America's self-representation of family and country. That is why Diamond emphasizes this fact by saying, "You're invited to say the play is about family, the country, race, men and women." (84)

### III. Conclusion

The study has found out that Parks has dug up for the heritage of her people, the blacks, through using history as a tool to show that those people have their own role in the history of humanity as a whole. Nevertheless, that history has been buried by the oppressors represented by the whites. That is why her role in her 'history plays' is just like that of an archeologist who puts her hands in the dust to discover historical events and retells them in a new way. The history she wants to create is the marginal one that is related to her being an African American woman. She wants her play to awaken her audiences/ readers to the African-American history where there is only absence and holes. The Great Hole of History identifies the black history as represented by emptiness and oppression. It is the hole of the unidentified people and the hole of the unrecognized history.

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