

Overture: rites of reparation

Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*

The black theatrical body is rendered flexible in Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play*. *The America Play* stealthily appropriates national comportment by drawing attention to the artifice of the show that is US citizenship. Twisting, turning, holding, and slumping his body just so, the protagonist of *The America Play* unravels mimetic blackness and centuries of black theatricality, revealing how performance “highlights the *mechanics* of spectacle.”¹ In order to disrupt the equivalence of blackness with display and thereby to interrupt the passing down of black theatricality from one generation to the next, the play troubles genealogy. The protagonist is a gravedigger who moonlights as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator and, upon his death, leaves a hole in the ground to his son Brazil. The hole left as Brazil's inheritance serves as the setting of the play and replicates another hole, the Great Hole of History, which is a historical theme park. The protagonist, also known as the Foundling Father, first encounters the Great Hole of History while honeymooning with his wife Lucy. A desire to recreate the Great Hole drives the Foundling Father to leave his family and to go west and dig a replica. Once transplanted, people begin to notice that the protagonist bears “a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln.”² Although “diggin [is] his livelihood . . . fakin [is] his callin,” so the Foundling Father, whose name implies his lack of parentage, becomes an Abraham Lincoln impersonator (179). His protean nature bolsters ironically his presidential bona fides to the point where the Foundling Father suffers the same fate as Lincoln: a stray bullet kills him in the theater at the end of act I, which is how, as Parks describes, “he digged the hole and the whole held him” (159).

In the play the hole accumulates several different meanings: it serves as the setting of the play, refers to graves and women's genitals, undermines a teleological view of history, functions as a locale for improvisation and creation, and recalls the trauma enacted when the Foundling Father leaves

Brazil and Lucy. Filled with ambiguity, riddled with doubling, and saturated with slippages, I argue that the hole also evokes two historical holes: the hole the bullet bored in President Abraham Lincoln's head and the one resulting from the trans-Atlantic slave trade that the Middle Passage symbolizes. Referencing the history of US chattel slavery, *The America Play* fills metaphorically the cavities related to the trade in human flesh with performances – faking and digging – which are two exemplary examples of reparative modes central to the black theater throughout the twentieth century. To clarify, I define performance – borrowing and intertwining Richard Schechner's and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theories – as “restored” or “twice-behaved behavior” that “assumes an audience during its actualization.”³ While Schechner's often-cited definition does not explicitly require an audience, I assert the dynamics of reception to emphasize how reception functions as a critical part of the literary history of a play. African American dramatists direct the exertive force black performance produces to create rites of repair.

The combination of digging and faking metonymically represents black theatrical reparations, which are acts of redress and social justice. Faking becomes the motif through which Parks calls into question the certainty of the body as a signifier of the real. *The America Play* foregrounds this line of inquiry by having the Foundling Father refer to his beards, the shape of his body, his costume, and the wart on his face throughout the first act. In Brechtian fashion, he emphasizes the artifice of his physical properties and challenges the mimetic quality often associated with great acting. Unable to seamlessly impersonate Abraham Lincoln, the Foundling Father explains the illogic that “Some inaccuracies are good for business. Take the stovepipe hat! Never really worn indoors but people dont like their Lincoln hatless”; as he implies, patrons do not accept other inaccuracies (168). His comments raise the question of why audiences require some “inaccurate” details and disdain others, and may anticipate and arguably produce the desires of the live theater audience. In the Yale Repertory Theater production (1994), this comment would have drawn attention to any dissonance an audience member might have felt about a black actor, Reggie Montgomery, playing Lincoln.

The Yale Repertory Theater's production of the play sets a precedent for casting that the text supports even though the play never mentions race explicitly. Although Parks does not specify the race of the main character in *The America Play*, she gives him an occupation – digger – that rhymes with a familiar racial slur. Throughout Parks' oeuvre she uses punning and rhyming to impart meaning. Additionally the back cover of *The America*

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Play and Other Works that the Theatre Communications Group (TCG) first published in 1995 features a black man elusively in profile dressed as Abraham Lincoln and standing in front of the American flag. The front cover depicts a disembodied Lincoln with the title of the collection superimposed on the signature stovepipe hat and Parks' name in red capital letters over the chest area of the suit, suggesting that by the time one finishes the collection, the engagement will fill the hole the founding father leaves with the foundling one. The back cover of the TCG volume responds to the visual call of the front cover, creating protocols for literary reception that mimic the engagement among actors and audiences encouraged in Parks' theater, whereby the drama manages the expectations of the audience through the references to patrons who find some historical inaccuracies troubling and others necessary. Until and perhaps even after the inauguration of President Barack Hussein Obama, Reggie Montgomery's physical characteristics seem at odds with the role he plays; "the U.S. president has traditionally stood for everything that blackness was not: commanding, legitimate, virtuous, white," according to Tavia Nyong'o.⁴ Yet Montgomery and President Obama play it nonetheless. The Foundling Father's faking elucidates how the theater exemplifies a "real" that constantly slips and destabilizes bodies and thus race, which renders blackness a dubious guarantor of the real.⁵ Even in a postmodern context, black bodies often represent the authentic and material. In the play, theater becomes a masterful exemplar of the malleability of the archive, even of the black body – a *sine qua non* of material evidence.⁶

The play continues to press the limits of material evidence, bolstering the interrogation of archives as complete chronicles of the past.⁷ The hole in *The America Play* also represents the loss of narrative and the active process between writers and readers and actors and audiences that repeatedly attempts to fill the gaps. The active improvisational impulse marks distinctly the benefit of using the theatrical event as a model for practices of reading more generally. Just as each theatrical reproduction of *The America Play* results in an individual and shared experience, so too does each individual reading of the text, suggesting that all literary history should acknowledge how the event may alter the archive, the materiality of the play as text, and make an ephemeral yet necessary addition to literary histories. Keeping in mind the literary implications, the theater as a model for dynamics of reading has particular importance in terms of black studies. Loss remains a central concern to black historiography, in large part due to the nature of archives that rely solely on material evidence, evidence regarding the experiences of enslaved Africans in the

US that is in many instances irrecoverable. At the same time the legacy of slavery, as communicated through racial hierarchies, reduces black people to materiality – walking archives – reflecting the assumption that at one point the ancestor of a black person was literally property. Through manipulations of the relationships between actors and audiences, African American drama foregrounds the ideologically constituted nature of all bodies, making African American drama the perfect medium to untangle this snarled web of racial inheritances and, in Parks' words, to make history. She writes, "theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events – and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human."⁸

Although the term is often associated with legal battles for material remuneration, *The African American Theatrical Body* uses "reparations" to signify acts of making history that result in "the symbolic reordering of the social and political hierarchy," as cultural critics Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Michele Elam put it.⁹ For decades, black literary theorists have contemplated the ways black writers challenge existing historical narratives by inserting their voices and therefore remaking the very meaning of history. These important revisionary acts have been key to the development of black feminist thought. The act of revising, nevertheless, stands at a critical distance from the act of making. Revision is reactive while making is proactive. I do not offer this distinction to create a hierarchy, especially since revisionist histories provided the vantage point by which theorists might imagine the use of reparations as a term that describes the act of narrative. One such important study, the autumn 2005 issue of *Representations*, edited by Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman on behalf of the Redress Project, specifies how and why the production of narrative qualifies as a historical act that imparts reparations. The issue focuses on trans-Atlantic slavery. Best and Hartman explain, "What is crucial for us . . . is the incompleteness of abolition. We understand the particular character of slavery's violence to be ongoing and constitutive of the unfinished project of freedom."¹⁰ Best and Hartman clarify that in their engagement with slave narratives they "are concerned neither with 'what happened then' nor with 'what is owed because of what happened then,' but rather with the contemporary predicament of freedom, with the melancholy recognition of foreseeable futures still tethered to this past."¹¹ The tie to the past, through the stories we tell, identities we live, or societies we build, creates an opportunity to not only "squarely engage the problem of 'futures'" but also actively and continually address history.¹²

Whereas Best and Hartman focus on the way narrative mobilizes politics that may advance the ongoing pursuit of freedom "on behalf of the slave

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(the stateless, the socially dead, and the disposable) in the political present,” this book considers how symbolic reordering functions through narration, visual representation, and acoustic signification (speech, song, and music) to create historical events that demonstrate the political power of aesthetics. As the Elams cogently argue in “Blood Debt: Reparations in Langston Hughes’s *Mulatto*,” the symbolic function of the reparative act, or what they call “payback,” does not limit its political potency but enhances it. They insist that history, as form of narration, is the living force of ideas, embodied in and daily enacted by people. “Thus social change can potentially occur through history itself.”¹³ Moreover, the constitutive force of history on individuals enables an active consideration of not only who we may become but also who we thought ourselves to be, a radical formation of self that advances liberation in the now and creates the conditions in which political change may occur in and through the body.

While the first act of *The America Play* establishes the characteristics of the hole as a site to be filled with acts of repair – faking and digging – the second act locates the restorative quality in the act of transfer. Act II takes place thirty years later and features Brazil and Lucy, searching for the Foundling Father’s remains. The protagonist leaves detritus buried in the ground and his Lincoln act for Brazil to find. Lucy’s persistent admonition, “DIG,” punctuates Brazil’s labor. As he digs, Brazil demonstrates the repertoire, a “nonarchival system of transfer,” that his father left him.¹⁴ Brazil explains:

(Rest. Rest.) On thuh day he claimed to be the 100th anniversary of the founding of our country the Father took the Son out into the yard. The Father threw himself down in front of the Son and bit into the dirt with his teeth. His eyes leaked. “This is how youll make your mark, Son” the Father said. The Son was only 2 then. “This is the Wail,” the Father said. “There’s money init,” the Father said. The Son was only 2 then. Quiet. On what he claimed was the 101st anniversary the Father showed the Son “the Weep” “the Sob” and “the Moan.” How to stand just so what to do with the hands and feet (to capitalize on what we in the business call “the Mourning Moment”). Formal stances the Fatherd picked up at the History Hole. The Son studied night and day. By candlelight. No one could best him. The money came pouring in. On the 102nd anniversary the Son was 5 and the Father taught him “the Gnash.” The day after the Father left for out West. To seek his fortune. In the middle of dinnertime. The Son was eating his peas. (182)

The father leaves his son a physical and emotional hole and the mechanisms to capitalize on his losses. The Foundling Father’s conspicuous enactment of mourning reconfigures the Great Hole of History – the

Middle Passage – from a negative site that affiliates black people – shared trauma binds together – into the wellspring of common practices that an individual may choose to repeat. While Parks’ play focuses on a specific set of practices – faking and digging – these exemplify the general deconstructive impulse at the heart of all the performances explored in this book. With varied success, the performances beg audiences to sympathetically relate to and critically analyze the competing and conflicting interests that inspire Brazil’s performance – the genuine trauma the loss of his father causes, the avaricious appetite that profitable mourning business produces, and the emotional pleasure created by crafting history in relationship to the person he will become.

In Parks’ play blackness no longer solely corresponds to that which tragically marks the subject and binds him to a past he did not choose. Alternatively, blackness produces the potential for intergenerational profits as its performance passes from the Foundling Father to Brazil. Nevertheless, the profitability requires the sacrifice of the body; the tears the Father produces and Brazil may reproduce communicate the physical pain the performance induces, the Father throwing himself down and biting into the dirt. Notably, in Brazil’s reenactment he may emphasize the theatricality of the display by mimicking his father’s physical action or choose to resist that representation by standing still as he tells the story. If Brazil were to mimic the Lesser Known’s actions, then the assertion “this is how youll make your mark” would pun on the word “mark,” underscoring how performance manipulates actively the racially signified body. Glenda R. Carpio suggests, “Parks distinguishes the kind of mourning that her work dramatizes from the kind that the Faker teaches his son by insisting that her audience process rather than simply consume the mourning her plays enact.”¹⁵ I add to Carpio’s cogently argued interpretation an acknowledgement of the director’s choice or that of the actor, which creates the potential for Brazil to refuse his inheritance – to simply tell the story and not reenact mourning. Such a performance would take on a derisive tone. I point out the interpretive multiplicities in order to highlight the collaborative process at the heart of all literature and to locate collaboration as a site of political action. This multiplicity enables Parks’ character to disavowingly embrace racialized inheritances. In this gesture he is not alone: an entire generation of artists has attempted to attenuate race’s burden while mobilizing its productive power. One such artist, Glenn Ligon, coined the term “postblack” to demarcate art that refuses to be bound by a category, black art, which the artists found limiting. “It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not

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being labeled as ‘black artists,’ though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining notions of blackness.”¹⁶ Appropriating Ligon’s concept, Brazil’s narration has the potential to materialize a postblack performance that embraces the desire to shirk the burden of inheritance. Such a move endows agency upon the makers of black historiography, locating them behind the scholar’s desk, on the stage, and in quotidian performances.

In staging a melodramatic scene of mourning at the replica of the Great Hole of History, the play reclaims that negative physical and psychic space, an apparent vacuum, and fills it with performance, noting “This is the Wail . . . There’s money init.” By emphasizing Brazil’s inherited ability to stage mourning, Parks separates the black actor from his role. As a result, hypervisibility becomes a constitutive element of blackness that overdetermines black people’s physical bodies and undermines their psychological, intellectual, and emotional lives. The stereotype that black people in the US intrinsically excel at singing and dancing, for example, stems from a long history of displaying not only black people but also people of color in the Americas more generally.¹⁷ From the first enslaved Africans brought to US shores, uninhibited looking participates in the production of blackness. In the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy serves as one of the primary demarcations of the performative nature of blackness, which notably stands at a critical distance from black people. Audiences knew famous performers Bert Williams and George Walker for, among other things, performing in blackface. Seeing images of them may provoke the question why a black person would need to don black face paint? The addition of black face makeup on brown skin attests to the active construction of blackness that occurred on, but not in, their bodies.

Similarly, *The America Play* advances a model of bodily materialization through performance; however, it purposefully stages replicas and repetitions to demonstrate how those performances may shift over time and serve to manage and transform inheritances. The play calls attention to the ability to transform the history of black people’s losses in the US through site-specific performances that must be repeated in order to facilitate an alternative manifestation of birthrights. Instead of only offering the burden of the Middle Passage, which the hole metaphorically represents, to Brazil as a legacy, the Foundling Father leaves mechanisms for his son to capitalize on those losses. In so doing, the play not only unsettles the relationship between black identity and loss but also reveals that white identity does not necessarily imply fullness. Additionally, *The America Play* deconstructs blackness’ inherent theatrical nature, by

depicting Brazil being taught to perform even as the Foundling Father highlights the monetary incentive for him to wail.¹⁸ The potential for wailing in Brazil's description produces echoes throughout this book, resounding most forcefully in Chapters 2, 5 and 6.

While each chapter considers the co-option of putatively negative space, emphasizing African American drama's ability to intercede in material histories, by beginning with an Overture – a hole and a revelation – I set this book in a hole that twentieth-century black dramatists have transformed into a (w)hole à la Parks. Unlike Parks, I insert parentheses to mark the unfinished reparative project. The space – physical and psychic, geographical and affective – that black dramatists carved out in the twentieth century marks a central political and aesthetic innovation of the genre; the creation of space enables African American drama to render rites that continually redress the rupture the trans-Atlantic slave trade causes. Indeed, slavery in the Americas marks the beginning of this tale with a break that organizes the scenes of the drama that will unfold.¹⁹ The geographical relationships and corporeal legacies of that rupture still regulate psychic, physical, economic, communal, and governmental relationships, and modes of looking, hearing, and feeling in the twentieth century and the contemporary moment. Each artistic period of the twentieth century, from the Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem era (1877–1919) to the Post-Soul one (1978 to the present), reflects the strictures of the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a primal scene that, in opposition to the organizing principles of Sigmund Freud's tale of origins, enables plenitude.²⁰ Using the same principles that enable *The America Play* to produce a (w)hole, African American drama creates participatory sites on the page and stage that transform modes of hearing, seeing, and being, such that the trauma associated with Freud's rendering of the primal scene, from a different point of view, allows a historical lesson that dramatists then co-opt in the name of repairing historical damage that will not go away but that also does not have to live on in its current manifestation. This book considers the way African American dramatists flipped the epistemological script, transforming absence into ways of being present, homelessness into modes of finding a home, loss into mechanisms of mourning, and disenfranchisement into rites that render repairing.

More specifically, Parks demonstrates her notion of “Reconstructed Historicities,” structuring the progress of *The America Play* with repetitions and reversals (163). Not only does the play call for Brazil to repeat his father's performance, but it also undermines the singular authority of historical narrative marked by specific dates and times. The play establishes the dates as “hearsay,” which explains why Brazil remembers being

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two years old at the one hundredth anniversary and five years old at the one hundred and second (182). The slippages in Brazil's memory function as a part of the play's overall reworking of the past, which Parks introduces with the epigraph "in the beginning, *all the world was America*" (159). The epigraph has an oppositional relationship to the play, which foregrounds narratives that exceed national memory, the voice of the Foundling Father versus that of Lincoln. The reversals in Parks' canon, and African American drama more generally, enable black performers to continually manipulate subject and object positions.

Once *The America Play* establishes the mutability of history, it advances the importance of attending to the content of narratives. Take for example a line often repeated in the play that is also an example of chiasmus, "he digged the hole and the whole held him" (159). The line depicts a world turned upside down not only through the pun on (w)hole but also by foreshadowing that the Foundling Father's digging will result in his demise.²¹ Through the transformation in the line and the play (from hole to whole) the Foundling Father shifts from agent of action (the subject of the sentence) to the object receiving the action. Marking a slippage between the written and the oral, the homophones function to denote the constructed nature of all historiography that factual evidence purportedly underpins.

The use of chiasmus is a fitting device to negotiate the relationship between historicity and the theater, which, as a form, reverses positions and allows for shifts in the status quo. Parks collapses the distance between historicity and the theater by deploying the same rhetorical strategy used in one of the most often-cited lines from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. In Frederick Douglass' 1845 autobiography, he details the brutality of the slave breaker, Mr. Covey, and remarks, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."²² In the *Narrative*, chiasmus communicates Douglass' movement in the opposite direction from the Foundling Father. Instead of becoming an object, Douglass becomes a subject – from slave to man. The critical difference between Douglass' assertion and the Foundling Father's prediction informs the shape of history that each figure may draw. In Douglass' autobiography, the development of the narrative follows the evolution of a great man in the tradition of other great men, demonstrating distinctively how the formerly enslaved man stands in for black people in the Americas in general.²³ His narrative attests to the humanity of enslaved Africans and advocates their freedom. The Foundling Father, conversely,

is a black man playing Lincoln. His actions call the audience to reconsider a relationship between the legacy of Lincoln and black people. This reflexive and complicated relationship does not undermine the humanity the *Narrative* establishes; in fact it broadens the freedom sought in Douglass' autobiography through the transition from an empty hole to a full one – a (w)hole – that holds the Foundling Father by the end of the play. By revising Douglass through visual and spatial associations, Parks situates the theater as a potential space for birthing radical aesthetics and histories through performance.

When modified by the demarcation “black,” performance becomes at once a mode of subjection and of objection. My purposeful use of chiasmus, referencing subjection as subordination and the act of becoming a subject, and objection as being rendered an object and resisting the dominant order, communicates the simultaneity of the revolutionary and black-minstrel-like characterizations expressed in William Wells Brown's *The Escape* (1858), the first published African American play.²⁴ Eleanor Traylor's essay “Two Afro-American Contributions to Dramatic Form” (1980) locates the source of all American theater in the minstrel show and the slave narrative.²⁵ Following Traylor's early study, Fred Moten designates black performance as a radical aesthetic tradition in his groundbreaking work *In the Break* (2003). *In the Break* revises Saidiya Hartman's pioneering *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), and in so doing enacts an ethical shift that recalibrates the value attributed to black life. As described in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, both authors reference the brutal beating of an enslaved black woman to mark her as an object. In Chapter 2, I investigate the inaugural scene of Aunt Hester's objectification as depicted in Douglass' narrative, but alternatively turn here to the organizing grammar that Parks' play shares with the autobiography. I return to the scene of this crime via Suzan-Lori Parks' *The America Play* and argue that black drama destabilizes the temporality of the black radical tradition. African American drama often introduces familiar racial performances that have historically been associated with the objectification of black people (i.e., lynching or minstrel-inspired style) and then challenges those performances by creating sites that interrupt that objectification (for example, Chapter 5 analyzes the haunting quality of a lynching victim's voice). African American drama returns to the scenes of crimes to interrupt historical processes used to render black people objects and offers performance strategies that not only keep the dehumanizing force of objection at bay but also enable the performers and audiences to object by reconfiguring the historical order.