

## HISTORY PLAYS AS/OR COUNTERHISTORY PLAYS: A STUDY OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS'S MAJOR PLAYS

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### Abstract

Innovative and unconventional, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks is passionate to rewrite the de-emphasized or dismissed history of African Americans in recorded history. Owing to this fact, a number of her plays are referred to as 'the history plays.' This essay attempts to approach a number of plays by Parks from the perspective of Michel Foucault's implications of 'history' and 'counterhistory' to determine whether Parks's plays are history or counterhistory plays. To this end, the essay first cites Foucault's definitions of history and counterhistory and then examines a number of literary devices Parks has employed in her plays to answer the question.

**Keywords:** Suzan-Lori Parks, history plays, counterhistory, Michel Foucault.

### 1. Introduction

The exigency of rewriting history has been expressed and stressed in the words and works of African American scholars and writers. Alain Locke as the father of 'New Negro' and the Harlem Renaissance, Willis Richardson, May Miller, Toni Morrison and many others are amongst those scholars and writers. As Toni Cade Bambara claims, history writing is of high importance as it keeps African Americans alive and makes them the heroes of the tales, preserves and saves their lives, and this is in line with their survival, struggle and wide-awake resistance (Bambara, 1984, p. 46). Likewise, Ralph Ellison in his famous novel *Invisible Man* clearly stresses the exigency of writing when asking at the very end of the novel:

So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I've learned some things. Without the possibility of action all knowledges comes to one labeled 'file and forget,' and I can neither file and forget. Nor will certain ideas forget me; they keep filing away at my lethargy, my complacency (Ellison, 1952, p. 437).

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This exigency is also seen in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. when he writes, “Without writing, there could exist no repeatable sign of the workings of reason, of mind; without memory or mind, there could exist no history; without history, there could exist no humanity” (Gates, 1989, p. 21).

Like her African American predecessors, Suzan-Lori Parks not only deems rewriting history necessary for African Americans, but also engages herself to rewrite their own history through the medium of theater. Owing to this fact, a number of plays by Suzan-Lori Parks are known as ‘the history plays.’<sup>2</sup> In her essay ‘Possession,’ she writes, “I’m remembering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history” (Parks, 1995, p. 5). In the same essay, she also writes:

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theater, for me, is the perfect place to ‘make’ history - that is, because so much 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 theater and real-life - locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it. The bones tell us what was, is, will be; because their song is a play - something that through production actually happens - I’m working theater like an incubator to create ‘new’ historical events (Ibid, p. 4).

‘To create new historical events,’ Parks stresses the de-emphasized, or even denied, place of African Americans in recorded history and accordingly attempts to deepen the readers’/audiences’ insights into the African American canon of history. Through re-enacting historical events onstage, history is reborn and replayed in front of audiences who are invited to relentlessly dissect and learn lessons from it. In this way, Parks uses theater to “make history” and revive the “unrecorded, dismembered, washed-out” parts of it.

This study examines a number of plays by Suzan-Lori Parks, including *The Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *The America Play* (1994) and *Venus* (1996), from the perspective of Michel Foucault’s implications of history and counterhistory with the intention of finding out whether they are history plays or counterhistory ones. I first explicate Foucault’s perspectives with regard to history and counterhistory and then examine the plays with a focus on the literary devices employed on page and stage in an attempt to answer the question.

## **2. Foucault’s Theory of History and Counterhistory**

Michel Foucault opens his lectures in *Society must be Defended* with a discussion on ‘the insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault, 2003, p. 7). He offers two definitions of subjugated knowledges. The first defines subjugated knowledges as “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations . . . . Subjugated knowledges are, then, blocks of historical knowledges . . . , but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship” (Ibid, p. 7). The second defines subjugated knowledges as “a whole series of

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<sup>2</sup>. Carol Schafer in her essay, ‘Staging a New Literary History: Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*, *In the Blood*, and *Fucking A*,’ and Heidi J. Holder in her essay, ‘Strange Legacy: The History Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks,’ have referred to a number of Parks’s plays as ‘the history plays.’

knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges . . . hierarchically inferior knowledges” (Ibid, p.7). In other words, subjugated knowledges refer to any types of experiences which have been introduced by the narrative of dominant monopolies as unqualified or disqualified knowledges, and thus they have been filtered, debased and pushed to the margins (Ibid, pp. 7-9). In the same lecture, Foucault defines genealogy as “a sort of attempt to *desubjugate* historical knowledges, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse” (Ibid, p. 10; emphasis added). In this sense, through reviving the hidden or forgotten bodies of experiences and memories, genealogy results in the insurrection and resurrection of subjugated knowledges, which have the potential to interrogate and rupture the iceberg of epistemic hegemonies. In another lecture, presented on 28 January 1976, Foucault defines history as “the discourse of power, the discourse of the obligations power uses to subjugate; it is also the dazzling discourse that power uses to fascinate, terrorize, and immobilize . . . and history is precisely the discourse that intensifies and makes more efficacious the twin functions<sup>3</sup> that guarantee order” (Ibid, p. 68).

Foucault goes on to state that history is a ritual which aims to reinforce sovereignty. But, counterhistory, as its name implies, refers to “the discourse of those who have no glory, or those who have lost it and who now find themselves, perhaps for a time – but probably for a long time – in darkness and silence” (Ibid, p. 70). Counterhistory then attempts to illuminate those dark spots and undo their silence. Counterhistory contributes to the destruction of the ‘twin functions’ of history as it both “breaks up the unity of the sovereign law that imposes obligations” and “breaks the continuity of glory” (Ibid, p. 70). As a result, the invisible marginal knowledges of the oppressed people who have lacked power but have the impulse to resist against amnesia start to come to light. To put it more pointedly, counterhistory is the reflection of the unheard voices, experiences and memories which have never been fitted into the texture of official history. This struggle against the monopolization of official knowledge is what Foucault calls “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Ibid, p. 70).

### 3. Devices used in the plays

This section examines the devices used in the plays by Suzan-Lori Parks from the standpoint of Foucault’s definitions of history and counterhistory provided above.

#### 3.1 *Digging and Resurrecting*

In a number of her plays, Parks attempts to excavate African American history like an archaeologist and employs two leitmotifs in her plays: digging and resurrecting to do that. To dig, which has been emphasized in Foucault’s words, is to explore and excavate something that has been buried and hidden. This is the neglected and invisible past/history of African Americans in the plays. According to Carol Schafer (2008, p. 182) this is because a major part of African American cultural traditions and mores are oral rather than written. Thus the cultural traditions have been transmitted orally. Furthermore, the African Americans have never historically been in positions of power to inscribe and publish their own history (Ibid.). Black Man With Watermelon, one of the figures in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, expresses this concern when he says that his “text was writ in water” (Parks,

<sup>3</sup>. The twin functions are the ‘genealogical function’ and ‘memorialization function.’ The goal of the former is to magnify the names and glories of the kings, their predecessors and successors, stressing the uninterrupted line of sovereignty. The goal of the latter then is to stress that what sovereigns do is expedient and for the good of their community, and thus even the slightest action of a sovereign deserves to be admired, narrated and remembered.

1995, p. 116). ‘Water’ refers to various rivers and seas famous in African American history, including the Middle Passage, the Combahee River and the Ohio River. If his stories, which have been sunk and masked in these waters, are not remembered and recorded, they would be removed from history and forever lost so that future generations would not have access to them in any way.

Recorded history is a selection of events narrated from the perspectives of fallible historians. As Barbara Chase-Riboud writes, “in a free nation, history should be revered, . . . and should be revised often. For History is nothing more than the human adventure as told by fallible humans, which they serve” (2003, p. 354). It is a truism that oppressors in positions of power were not supposed to record the history of the brutal oppressions they had inflicted on oppressed peoples. According to hooks,

One must face written histories that erase and deny, that reinvent the past to make the present vision of racial harmony and pluralism more plausible. To bear the burden of memory one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching the debris of history for traces of the unforgettable, all knowledge of which has been suppressed (hooks, 1992, p. 172).

Through exploring and reenacting ‘the debris of history’ and the deviant moments, Parks calls into question the authenticity of traditional historiography so as to deconstruct the contents of the documentation through the different perspectives she invests in her plays.

In *The America Play*, Act Two Part C, entitled ‘Archeology,’ Lucy and Brazil, mother and son, dig a hole, dusting and polishing the unearthed objects as archeologists, in search of precious buried inheritance. As Brazil says, “This hole is our inheritance of sorts. My Daddy died and left it to me and Her. And when She goes, Shes gonna give it all to me!!” (Parks, 1995, p. 185). It is inferred from his words that even the hole itself is a precious inheritance that needs to be preserved from generation to generation, and each heir or heiress needs to continue the digging or excavating operation attentively. During their excavation, they find a jewel box on which the letters ‘A. L.’, which stand for Abraham Lincoln, have been carved in gold, one of Mr Washington’s bones and his wooden teeth, peace pacts, writs, bills of sale, treaties, notices, handbills and circulars, freeing papers, summonses, declarations of war, medals for bravery and honesty, to name a few, which belong to ‘the Foundling Fathers,’ including Brazil’s own dad. In Lucy’s words, to be a digger as her husband was, is an honor, and accordingly, she urges her son “to be of his line” (Ibid, p. 186). Through the advertent discovery of the subjugated knowledges of his father and his predecessors, he will be able to attain self-knowledge and self-discovery, cope with institutional oppression, and accordingly attain empowerment. In other words, the process of self-knowledge and self-discovery which is a prerequisite to social transformation is not achieved without excavating and desubjugating his neglected past and history.

Parallel to digging, In *Venus*, Parks employs ‘countdown’ or ‘backward’ device. Here, she chronicles the story of The Venus’s life and death in thirty-one scenes in reverse order. The play starts with ‘Overture’ and then moves backward from Scene 31 to Scene 1. It can be argued that 31 scenes possibly represent 1 month, which can be a short slice of time or time in miniature. The use of inversion in this play helps Parks to flashback to history with a focus on The Venus’s story/history, and gather the pieces of The Venus’s body, fragmented into anatomical parts during the autopsy operation. What Parks does is, seemingly, a reverse dissection. Trinh Minh ha argues that “gathering the fragments of a divided, repressed body” and “writing them” are ways for black women to voice “all that had been silenced in phallogocentric discourse” (Trinh, 1989, p. 37). In other words, the use of inversion in the form of countdown is similar to the digging/drilling and filling operations; meant to remove the cavities and fill the hole with the

restorative materials. I would like to argue that the countdown device also recalls the counterhistory trend.

The use of digging as a device helps Parks to revitalize the masked past, identity and cultural retention of African Americans, to pay homage to all those who have navigated the way to transforming African American life and to provoke readers/audiences to study and research the buried aspects of African American history. She digs through all the layers of recorded history so as to exhume the black bones, give them identity and dignity, and as soon as the exhumation operation is done, the resurrection process starts. The power to resurrect is the power to rewrite and rerecord history, which is to reinforce the dignity and identity of those for whom 'the Great Whole of History' has proved to be a 'Great Hole of History' in which they have either been absent or voiceless, and thus their memories and experiences have been missed or dismissed. In the plays, Parks intends to counter the erasure of African American history and defrost the frozen Great Whole of History through re-inserting the displaced missed ones and re-recording the unheard voices after probing the historical events and gaps. According to Foucault, counterhistory "has to disinter something that has been hidden, and which has been hidden not only because it has been neglected, but because it has been carefully, deliberately, and wickedly misrepresented" (Foucault, 2003, p. 72). This sense of invisibility is perceived when some of the figures who have come from different eras of history in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* claim that they have been present (in history) although they have not seen one another (Parks, 1995, p. 103). Thus Parks reminds us of the existence of holes in history. In this play, Parks makes these figures travel back and forth in history so much that they finally meet one another and help resurrect a part of their masked histories. According to Foucault, resurrecting the excavated knowledges preserves them from the threat of 'recolonization.' He remarks:

once we have excavated our genealogical fragments . . . that we have been trying to *dig out* of the sand, isn't there a danger that they will be recoded, recolonized by these unitary discourses which, having first disqualified them and having then ignored them when they reappeared, may now be ready to reannex them and include them in their own discourses and their own power-knowledge effects (Foucault, 2003, p. 11; emphasis added)?

This concern has also been expressed in some of the plays by Parks. Like Foucault, Parks is concerned with the recolonization or re-subjugation threat of African American discoveries as what they unearth during the archeological operation might not be compatible with the accepted and conventional norm of history, known as the Great Whole of History, and, accordingly, it might be at stake. Collins avers that "Dominant groups aim to replace subjugated knowledge with their own specialized thought because they realize that gaining control over this dimension of subordinate groups' lives simplifies control" (Collins, 2000, p. 286). Thus, to resurrect them, Parks proposes 'writing' and then 'hiding' and/or 'carving' as ways to preserve African American history. In *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread, one of the figures, says, You should *write it down* because if you dont write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You should write it down and you should *hide it under a rock*. (Parks, 1995, p. 104; emphasis added).

But after writing down, how does Parks attempt to *hide* the excavated knowledges under a rock and/or *carve* them to be protected from the threat of recolonization? To 'carve' the knowledges, Parks uses 'the Rep. & Rev. strategy; i.e., the repetition and revision strategy, which acts as carving a fact on stone or on the minds of readers and audiences. As Parks says in an interview, "Stone = eternity" (Garrett, 2010, p. 183). The strategy resembles the techniques used

in education and memory recovery for those who have lost their memories. In her plays, Parks, like a schoolmarm, repeats the lines to fix history lessons covering centuries of African Americans' distresses in the minds of the readers/audiences. And to 'hide' the knowledges, Parks uses 'code strategy' in the form of puzzling numbers and names, which is in line with the main discussion of this essay.

### 3.2 *The Use of Puzzling Numbers and Names*

Puzzling numbers and names in the plays by Parks are used to offer a battery of perplexing information. Owing to their thought-provoking nature, they act as powerful sites for evoking alternative meanings and perspectives for readers/audiences. In other words, the insurrection of subjugated knowledges in the form of puzzling numbers and names arouses the readers'/audiences' curiosity and makes them eager to research into the layers of their history. This research then enables them to unveil different substrata or deposits of their knowledges and experiences and to challenge the recorded hypotheses. It calls attention to their social struggles and conflicts, achievements and failures, which have become buried in their interstices. These investigations promote a critical awareness towards past struggles and efforts hidden from view, which can have a great impact on planning the tactics and confronting the struggles in the present. This device, which manifests itself in, amongst others, numbers, names and dates in Parks's plays, functions as a way to represent the excavated knowledges.

In *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, the figure of Black Woman With Fried Drumstick repeats, "yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world" (Parks, 1995, p. 102). It is worth noting that this date, i.e., 1317, refers to the travels of a group of Africans during Mandingo rule from Mali to North America, which had occurred before the voyage of Columbus, documented by Ivan Van Sertima in his book, *They Came Before Columbus*, claiming that Columbus himself has indirectly confirmed this fact in his diaries, when he wrote that the natives of Hispaniola had told him stories of black-skinned people who had come from the south to trade gold-tipped metal spears (Sertima, 1979, p. 35). Before Columbus is one of the figures of this play, who helps to prove this claim. In this regard, bell hooks asserts:

No history books used in public schools informed us about racial imperialism. . . . We were taught the Columbus *discovered* America; . . . that black people were enslaved because of the biblical curse of Ham, that God 'himself' had decreed they would be hewers of wood, tillers of the field, and bringers of water. No one talked of Africa as the cradle of civilization, of the African and Asian people who came before Columbus (hooks, 1981, 120; original emphasis).

It would not be out of context to note that the use of names such as Before Columbus encourages readers/audiences to further their knowledge about them and their roles in history. In addition, these puzzling names define how the characters are seen by the outer world in addition to their social positions, occupations, races and genders. In another case, Parks employs a figure in *Venus*, called The Negro Resurrectionist. Through studying the historical materials, we find that the term 'resurrectionist' was used to apply to body snatchers, who furtively disinterred corpses from cemeteries. The purpose of body snatching was to sell the corpses to medical schools for autopsy or anatomy analyses. However, in this play, Parks challenges this stereotype through presenting a new definition for resurrectionist. It is The Negro Resurrectionist who reads his spells "Diggidy-diggidy-diggidy-diggidy," "Diggidy-diggidy-diggidy-dawg" (Parks, 1997, p. 3) and resurrects The Venus. Naming a figure as such helps Parks

call attention to her theme of resurrection. The Negro Resurrectionist then attempts not only to question the mentioned cause for The Venus's death by doctors but also to comment on her death and even courageously insist on his opinion so as to struggle against the monopolization of official knowledge. He intones, "Thuh doctor says she drank too much. It was thuh *cold* I think" (Ibid, p. 3) which may stand for cold shoulder and cold logic. Moreover, it is The Negro Resurrectionist, who narrates the story, reads the footnotes and announces the scenes. Thus, as the narrator, he has the ability to bring objections against the dominant claims, implying that this version of The Venus's story/history is being retold by black people who had lost their glory (Foucault, 2003, p. 70) and that they are attempting to insert their own voices and views which create rupture in the iceberg of epistemic hegemony, and this is in line with Foucault's notion of counterhistory. It merits noting that desubjugating the historical knowledges through inserting the voices of African Americans as oppressed voiceless people also makes Parks's plays "*theatre of the voice*, the voice being a reverberation of past events" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 76; original emphasis).

Moreover, in her other play, *The America Play*, Parks repeatedly refers to Abraham Lincoln as 'The Lesser Known.' This puzzling epithet implies that Lincoln, who played a part in spreading equality in American society, has not received the merit he deserved, and then readers/audiences are left to study his worth and ponder on his merits. From another perspective, it may also imply that a black figure, who in this play appears in typical Lincoln costume, is lesser known or defamiliarized to readers/audiences.

In *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Black Man With Watermelon ironically asks his wife to make his coffin in this way, "Make me uh space 6 feet by 6 feet by 6. Make it big and mark it so as I won't miss it. If you would please, sweetness, uh mass grave-site. Theres company comin soonish. I would like tuh get up and go. I would like tuh move my hands" (Parks, 1995, p. 109). His words, asking for a spacious relaxing resting place, sized "6 by 6 by 6" (Ibid.), may stand for a coffin and at the same time may recreate the image of the slave ships transferring black people, while being squeezed into lightless compartments, to 'the New Land.' The annals of history record that for about two months they had to remain tightly enchained in storage compartments with hardly enough air to breathe, which led to the death of many of them, making the ship storage compartments a mass coffin. In one case, bell hooks refers to the American slave ship Pongas, which "carried 250 women, many of them pregnant, who were squeezed into a compartment of 16 by 18 feet" (hooks 1989, p. 18). However, other readers and audiences may decipher this number differently.

It is worth noting that in some instances readers/audiences may even find themselves unable to decipher the used numbers. For instance, in Panel III of the same play, Black Man With Watermelon says, "Our one melon has given intuh 3. Calling what it gived birth callin it gaw. 3 August hams out uh my hands now surroundin me an is all of um mines" (Parks, 1995, p. 117; emphasis added). In another case, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick says, "93 dyin hen din hand . . . 93 dyin hen din hand with no heads let em loose tuh run down tuh towards home infront of me" (Ibid, p. 106). To justify this problem, I refer to bell hooks as viewing these incoherent parts as "void[s] where they are still invisible, their history unknown, their reality denied" (hooks, 1992, p. 149).

To conclude this section, Parks's dramaturgy is replete with such puzzling names, numbers and dates, used to refigure history in such a way that the reality of the past is simultaneously lived out in the present. They can only be deciphered via study and research, and what is acquired through study and research can deepen the readers' insights about their unknown past and history. In addition, the use of these puzzling names, numbers and dates catalyzes the process of 'Participation,' a postmodern technique, as Parks attempts to involve readers/audiences as much as possible over the course of her plays. Seen in this light, readers/audiences are no longer passive recipients and consumers but active producers, who

actively participate in the process of history creation. They research and decipher multiple meanings that are no longer stable and in cases contradict the narratives represented in the Great Whole of History.

### 3.3 *The Employment of Real Historical Figures and Events*

To cast light on the dark spots or invisible moments in the history of African Americans, Parks employs real historical figures in her plays. These figures who come from different historical eras appear on page and stage as eye witnesses to redefine and refine readers'/audiences' perceptions of African American history and their roles, which are mostly unknown or taken for granted.

In her pseudo-historical play *Venus*, Parks stages a black woman by the same name based on the historically true tale of Saartjie Baartman, who was brought to England in 1810 three years after slavery had been banned in that country. Saartjie Baartman was displayed as Venus Hottentot both in England and then in France due to her African physical features, especially her swollen buttocks. After her death, a scientist removed her buttocks and genitalia, which were displayed in Le Musée de l'Homme, Paris, until they were returned to South Africa on 5 May 2002.

In this play, Parks explicitly dramatizes this dark moment in history as well as the miseries of black women as voiceless creatures subjugated to, amongst others, exploitation, sexploitation, displacement, unhomeliness and institutionalized discrimination, inviting readers/audiences to actively participate in rewriting and rereading of their own history. As 'the Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders' in *Venus* say:

Those who sent her said she couldn't return for a thousand yrs.  
Even though she was strong of heart even she doubted she would live  
that long.  
After 500 years they allowed her to ask a question.  
She wanted to know what her crime had been (Parks, 1997, p. 58).

These words clearly feature the dark spot or hole of history as these people had no permission to return home or even ask questions for ages, let alone write their own history. In this play, *The Venus* likens The Baron Docteur, who attempts to discover new medical knowledge through dissecting her body, to Columbus. She says, "You could be whatshisname: Columbus . . . Columbus II" (Ibid, p. 104). In this context, Columbus, on the one hand, is celebrated as the discoverer, and, on the other hand, is reproached as the founder of exploitation. Thus, these two similar figures would, through their discoveries, provide a great service to the white world but at the cost of harming the local or black peoples. Moreover, the use of metaphor here undermines and questions the authenticity of both Columbus's and the doctor's discoveries. Through rewriting and resurrecting *The Venus*, Parks finds opportunity to simulate Venus Hottentot's history/story but with a remarkable difference: *The Venus* gains her own voice in this play, and accordingly Parks finds an opportunity to write and right the traditional history according to her own view. As Parks says in her interview with Shawn-Marie Garrett, "Writing used to mean just 'writing' but now maybe writing can include RIGHTING. Get right. Be right. Right. Write. Write on. Right on" (Garrett, 2010, p. 185). Seen in this light, writing as a form of cultural and historical production can challenge the ways in which knowledge and power are constructed and can allow many alternative voices to arise, which break the monophony and monopoly of the dominant discourse. To put it differently, writing enables different and in cases opposing discourses to appear and then resist the existent dominant texts introduced as grand narratives.



As already indicated, *The America Play* features a black man, named 'The Lesser Known,' who is recast as Abraham Lincoln. The Lesser Known appears on the stage dressed as Lincoln. He makes his living dressing up as President Lincoln in a carnival midway game and allowing the audiences to take the role of John Wilkes Booth and assassinate him for only a penny. Parks is trying to indirectly accustom people to accepting an African American president, an image that seems absurd to them for various reasons. It is worth noting that Lincoln and Booth reappear in Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*, but this time as two African American brothers who live together in a small shabby apartment. In *The America Play*, Parks mentions George Washington's name with honor, introducing him in Brazil's words as the father of the country, who should be resurrected.

Moreover, in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Parks employs Ham, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut and Old Man River Jordan in a reunion to desubjugate their knowledges. The representation of Ham is a response to racialist theories dating back to the 18th century, based on Noah's curse against his dark-skinned son Ham's descendants (Genesis 9:18-27, The Holy Bible), to justify slavery and discrimination against people of color. In this play, Old Man River Jordan allusively and ironically says, "Ham seed his daddy Noah neckked. From that seed, comed Allyall" (Parks, 1995, p. 122). By employing Ham, Parks exposes and satirizes the long history of racial injustice and distortion, ascribed to the religious myth. Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut alludes to Hatshepsut, the only woman pharaoh in ancient Egypt, who ruled Egypt for about twenty years during the 18th dynasty, accomplishing remarkable feats. But after descending from the throne her stepson and nephew destroyed any of her feats bearing her image or her name. In Second Chorus of the play, she sadly remarks, "My son erase his mothers mark" (Ibid, p. 116). In this play, Old Man River Jordan recreates "the allegorical image for the Ohio River" (Geis, 2008, p. 69), an eye witness to the sufferings of slaves in American history. These figures are all brought to undo their historical silences and voice their unheard memories which in cases combat the historical recorded history and readers'/audiences' modes of received perceptions. Seen in this light, Parks's plays are sites of resistance.

In some of these plays, Parks directly and indirectly refers to the traumas of the Middle Passage. For instance, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* re-enact this Passage across the Atlantic from Africa that many slaves endured at the beginning of their captivity as an unforgettable part of their collective memory. In other words, African Americans, according to Parks, are perpetually frozen in the Middle Passage, and she attempts to revive their voices lost in that Passage. In *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, Parks also refers to Amendment no. 13 of the US Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation.

The employment of these figures and events is to caution people not to let them pass into oblivion and to inspire them to study their services and effects. For Parks, these historical figures, who experience life in death, are capable of moving us. Unlike Brother Jack in Ralph Ellison's work, who thinks the dead can do nothing and assumes that "the dead are absolutely powerless," the invisible man firmly believes that "whenever they hear the imperious cries of the people in a crisis, the dead respond," adding that "all the old heroes are being called back to life . . . and are being asked to step once again upon the stage of history" (Ellison, 1952, p. 23). These iconic stage figures in Parks's plays bear evidence of the reality of the African American experience and their absence or displacement in the Great Whole of History.

### 3.4 *The Use of Footnotes*

To clarify the oppressions imposed on African Americans throughout history, Parks employs a large number of footnotes in her plays. In *The Art of the Difficult*, Tony Kushner writes:

[Parks] is the only American playwright I know who makes use of footnotes, which also present a conundrum for the production team: How do you stage a footnote? Or do you? Parks doesn't tell you. Her plays are full of these sorts of provocations. A director, actor or designer who believed it to be his or her job to do the footnotes, quotation marks and rests 'correctly' would soon find themselves utterly lost (Kushner, 1997, p. 63).

In *Venus*, Parks employs a great deal of historical, medical, literary and legal materials, excerpted from a number of works and books, denoted in the form of 'footnotes.' In addition to the footnotes that are sporadically used throughout the play, Scenes 28, 13 and 10 are entitled 'Footnote.' These are the very short scenes, which contain extensive excerpts from anatomical notebooks as well as from Baartman's autopsy reports, which Dr Georges Cuvier delivered as lectures in 1817, and from newspaper advertisements, court documents and spectators' diaries. For instance, Footnote # 3 is as follows:

Historical Extract. Category: Literary. From Robert Chambers's *Book of Days*:

(Rest)

'Early in the present century a poor wretched woman was exhibited in England under the appellation of *The Hottentot Venus*. The year was 1810. With an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty, she was said by those to whom she belonged to possess precisely the kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots.'

(Rest)

The year was 1810, three years after the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade had been passed in Parliament, and among protests and denials, horror and fascination, The Venus show went on (Parks, 1997, p. 36).

As seen in the above footnote, Parks firstly introduces Robert Chambers's *Book of Days* to readers/audiences and, secondly, provides readers/audiences with further information about the historical event running in the play. These footnotes refer readers/audiences to the inscribed past while at the same time denote the *de jure* and *de facto* controversy and open them up to criticism. The wide use of footnotes and introduction of several other works bring forth multiple narratives and plural perspectives which altogether give a hybrid structure to the play. The multiple narratives then prepare the ground for readers/audiences to compare and contrast them and in cases find the existent discrepancies among them and help to light up the dark spots from different perspectives. It is worth noting that the extensive use of literary, medical and historical footnotes denotes that fiction, medicine and history are human-constructed discourses which are not genuine and monolithic and need to be rethought and reworked. In addition, these footnotes, which indicate the multiplicity of inscriptions from different standpoints, work to contest any fixed notion of history both for the figures in the play and its readers/audiences.

In *Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom*, Parks uses this device as a reference to other sources in order to evidence her claims. One of the footnotes is as follows: “Footnote # 1: The human cargo capacity of the English slaver, the *Brookes*, was about 3,250 square feet. From James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, G. J. McLeod Limited, 1981, page 283” (Parks, 1995, p. 43). This footnote is in fact introducing a book written by James A. Rawley, a white scholar, on the African Americans in the early years of the slave trade and their drowned history in the Middle Passage. Then right after that, Footnote # 2 reads, “600 slaves were transported on the *Brookes*, although it only had space for 451. *Ibid.*, page 14” (Ibid, 44). Parks first quotes these words from James A. Rawley’s book, and then she either uses them to represent a part of African Americans’ miseries or to call into question their verity. To put it differently, Parks agrees that recorded history might contain its deviant moments and events, and these moments and events can be used as evidence either to depict the sufferings of African Americans or to impugn the authenticity of traditional historiography.

I would like to add that the application of these footnotes as intertexts and metatexts open the gates for potential mini-narratives to enter and desubjugate historical knowledges. The intersectional entrances of these mini-narratives which in cases contrast with the mainstream perspective create fragmented and subjective visions in Parks’s plays. These visions then help to problematize the essential concepts of history and open critical spaces for interrogating the hegemony of the Great Whole of History as the absolute monolithic truth. The skeptical cracks created in the iceberg of the Great Whole of History as a result of its interrogation then provide the ground for African American alternative discourses to rise up and “reform both the history and the historiography of the present” (Spaulding, 2005, p. 21). As a result, her plays welcome different and even contradictory visions and promote polyvocality which consequently break up the unity, continuity and monopolization of official knowledge. In other words, Parks’s attempt to both challenge the objectivity of dominant historiography and represent an alternative historiography based on the subjective and fantastic representation of history seems to be in line with Foucault’s descriptions of counterhistory and its double roles. The first, which is performed as opposition to the Great Whole of History, creates disunity, mainly because it raises the opportunity for subjugated knowledges to appear on the scene. Foucault refers to this role as the ‘principle of heterogeneity.’ The second, which he calls the ‘principle of discontinuity,’ cracks the continuity of the Great Whole of History and produces chasms in its fabric.

#### 4. Conclusion

Suzan-Lori Parks attempts to offer a rewriting of African American history through the medium of theater, filling readers/audiences with new significations, which in cases are contrary to the ones recorded in the Great Whole of History. Rewriting historical events with new significations admittedly helps Parks both to challenge and change readers’/audiences’ perceptions of American history as the only valid, valuable and voiced version of history and to redefine and refine their perceptions of African American history. Therefore, it goes without saying that history in a number of Parks’s plays is a site where her thinking assumes a position of resistance against the recorded narratives, and this position is in line with Michel Foucault’s definition of counterhistory.

Through the use of devices discussed above, i.e., digging and resurrecting as well as countdown, the use of puzzling numbers and names, the employment of real historical figures and events and the application of footnotes, Parks attempts to un-knit and then re-knit the already knitted dress of the Great Whole of History by adding the ignored patterns of African American history, emanating mostly from their collective unconscious. She attempts to otherize rather than authorize the Great Whole of History to make the hole whole based on her valence,

to unearth the historical truths buried beneath the layers of racial prejudice, which can no doubt reconstruct identity and glory for African Americans, who in the past have been rendered invisible or merely glimpsed through the murky lenses of hierarchies. The fact that Parks focuses on the staging of alternative views of history implies that reality is based on subjective representation rather than on an objective version as s/he who has the pen has the power and right to write as s/he wills. In addition, she believes that much of African American history has been erased from the canons of the dominant culture, and the main reason behind this is that it has the potential to debunk and subvert the dominant discourse. Thus, she is determined to destabilize the contents of traditional historical documents with the application of another signification, i.e., theater, and accordingly her plays provide the foundation for the edifice of subversive versions of history.

I would like to conclude this article with Foucault's view which states, "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" (Foucault, 2003, p. 133). Suzan-Lori Parks is a playwright who attempts not only to write African Americans into history but also to change readers'/audiences' perceptions of recorded history. Accordingly, her plays act as the counterhistories of prophecy and promise, the counterhistories of the subjugated knowledge that has to be desubjugated and deciphered. Seen in this light, Parks's plays are best referred to as 'counterhistory plays' rather than 'history plays.'

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