

Introduction:

Under the Piano and All That Jazz

Biography, Influences, Themes, Style

I hear the sound of digging. A sound I know pretty well cause I done heard it so many times. You hear a lot of digging sounds in my line of work.

—*Getting Mother's Body*

HEAD DIGGER. Here is the well. Dig here.
(*The Diggers dig. As they dig, they sing.*)

—*Where is the Well?* (365 Days/365 Plays 59)

Contemporary playwright Suzan-Lori Parks is the most recognized and innovative dramatist of her generation. Winner of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in Drama for her play *Topdog/Underdog* (and the first African-American woman playwright to win this award), Parks has created a significant body of work—including screenplays and a novel as well as a very substantial number of plays—and her drama is now part of the American theatrical canon. Her works have been produced around the country and internationally; she has been a MacArthur Fellow; and she has most recently served as the director of the playwriting program at the California Institute for the Arts.

Parks's works confront cultural constructions of history and literature. *Venus*, her play about Saartjie Baartman, who was exhibited

as the “Venus Hottentot” in the nineteenth century, has been of interest to anthropologists and scientists who study the ongoing fascination with Baartman. At the turn of the millennium, Parks’s paired “red letter” plays, *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*, rewrote Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* with a new look at the classic character of Hester.

Parks’s style is unlike that of any other playwright: she draws upon the jazz aesthetic of “repetition and revision”; she has invented a technique called the “spell”; and each of her works presents a new challenge to the audience—for example, parts of *Fucking A* are in an invented language. She also revises conventional notions about the construction of character: in *Last Black Man*, for instance, the characters (if one may call them that) include figures with names like “Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork” and “Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread.” As these qualities may suggest, Parks’s plays are widely produced but are also extremely challenging. This volume—for general readers and spectators, teachers and directors, and students—offers an understanding of Parks’s aesthetic that both analyzes her individual works and locates them in larger contexts. At present, Parks’s works are studied in courses on American and African-American literature, on drama, and on postmodernism; outside of the academy, her works are staged in theaters around the world, and she is the subject of ongoing media attention (recently, for example, as a screenwriter for the film adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). The chapters that follow examine her works in detail, from the earliest experimental pieces like *Pickling*, to the hugely popular *Topdog/Underdog*, to her wide-ranging forays into fiction, music, and film.

To begin, it is worth taking a panoramic look at Parks’s background, literary and theatrical influences, themes, and unique style.

From the Fort to the Lighthouse: A Biographical Sketch

Parks’s background—followed by her literary and dramatic influences—provides a helpful starting point for understanding her work. While her plays are far less overtly autobiographical than those of,

say, Ntozake Shange or Adrienne Kennedy, we can see her own past in her drama.

Suzan-Lori Parks was born on May 10, 1964 (she points out that she shares a birthday with John Wilkes Booth [Sova 32]) in Fort Knox, Kentucky, the second of three children (she has an older sister, Stephanie, and a younger brother, Donald ["Buddy"]). Her father, also named Donald, was an army colonel (a family setup that figures prominently in *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*), and her mother, Francis, was a teacher who provided strong encouragement for her children to read and write. As a child, Parks says, she made up a song about everything (Parks, "An Evening"). At the age of five, she started writing novels (Garrett 22), which she would compose as she sat underneath the family's baby grand piano. In fourth grade, she created with her brother a family newspaper called *The Daily Daily* and says, "We'd type it every day in our attic" (Miller and Cotliar 2).

As the result of her father's military career, Parks lived in many places as a child, including North Carolina, California, Kentucky, Texas, Vermont, Maryland, and Germany, where she was enrolled in a junior high school, "not speaking a word of the language" but learning it as she spent four years there (Solomon 79). TALK, her invented language in *Fucking A*, shows strong German influences, and the style of her plays as a whole forces readers and actors to learn a new tongue, as it were (see the discussion of language later in this chapter). Parks has said, "I've heard horrible stories about 12-step groups for army people. But I had a great childhood. My parents were really into experiencing the places we lived" ("Suzan-Lori Parks" 1). But she also felt profoundly the effect of her father's being gone for long periods of time, echoed in both *Imperceptible Mutabilities* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*; Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam comment that "[f]rom her perspective, her father 'died' in these periods only to be reborn upon return. When he did return, her mother would immediately attempt to feed him" ("Unfinished Business" 458). Parks told interviewer Shelby Jiggetts, "At one time we were moving every year. I think moving around had an influence on my writing" (310).

Back in the States for the last few years of high school, Parks was, because of her allegedly poor spelling, discouraged from writing by an English teacher, who told her that she should become a scientist. Parks entered Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, as a chemistry major. Parks eventually affirmed her love of literature after reading Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse*, she says, “pulled me from the science lab into the literature lab” (Jiggetts 310). She changed her majors to English and German, graduating cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1985. A turning point came when she took a fiction-writing seminar with the great author James Baldwin at Hampshire College. Baldwin encouraged her to turn to playwriting; his support was “like a kiss on the forehead to ward off all evil” (Miller and Cotliar 2). She adds, “I had a lot of heart, and I loved writing. And I think that’s what he saw. He believed in me when I couldn’t” (Bryant 43). Parks’s first “real” piece of writing, a short story called “The Wedding Pig,” was “about a school teacher in a small Texas town who attends a violent harvest ritual that goes dramatically awry.” While writing the story she felt a “wave of psychic energy” going through her body, and knew that she would become a writer: “The story had elements of sex, love, violence, history and ritual, all connected—and all five of those elements have been around a long time in my work” (Sova 32). Her senior project at Mount Holyoke was her first play, *The Sinner’s Place*, which won her honors in English but which the theater department refused to produce: “You can’t have dirt on stage. That’s not a play,” she was told. However, Mary McHenry, an English department professor, gave her a copy of Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and “made me understand that I can do anything I want” (Garrett 24; Jiggetts 310).

After graduation Parks spent a year in London, studying acting at the Drama Studio, and then moved to New York City, where she took a secretarial course and “learned how to type very quickly” (Parks, “An Evening”). She worked as a legal assistant and at various other jobs while she attempted to start her career as a playwright, beginning in 1987 with productions like *Betting on the Dust Commander* at a bar called the Gas Station (see discussion in the next

chapter). By 1989, when Parks was barely twenty-five and had received important critical notice for *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, the *New York Times* named her “the year’s most promising new playwright.” Her career thereafter will be discussed throughout this study: Obie-winning off-Broadway plays, a five-hundred-thousand-dollar MacArthur “genius” grant in 2001 (among myriad other grants), and a production on Broadway of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Topdog/Underdog*. Along this route, she penned the screenplay for Spike Lee’s film *Girl 6* in 1996 (see the last chapter for a fuller discussion of her film work). In 1998, she met blues musician Paul Oscher, a former harmonica player for Muddy Waters, and married him in July 2001; while the blues is one of several musical influences that resonate throughout Parks’s work, it is particularly evident in the novel she wrote during this period, *Getting Mother’s Body* (see the last chapter in this book). As a mentor to developing playwrights, she taught at Yale and the New School, and took a position as director of the ASK Theatre Projects Writing for Performance Program at the California Institute for the Arts.

Mothers (and Fathers) of Invention: Influences

Read me by repetition. Saints and singing and a mission and
an addition.

Saints and singing and the petition. The petition for a repetition.

Saints and singing and their singing.

Saints and singing and winning and

Do not repeat yourself.

—Gertrude Stein, *Saints and Singing*
(*A Stein Reader* 399)

I find there are no places only my funnyhouse.

—Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*
(*Adrienne Kennedy in One Act* 7)

Parks mentions frequently that her first major influence was the writer James Baldwin, with whom she took a fiction-writing course in college. When it was time to workshop her pieces in class, she

would stand up and perform all of the characters (Bryant 43). Baldwin asked her whether she had considered playwriting. Parks listened, she has said, because “[s]omeone I respected was telling me what to do—in a good way. It wasn’t some Whosey-Whatsit who runs La Fuddy Duddy Playhouse in Whosey-Whatsitville” (Garrett 22). As the renowned author of such works as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country*, Baldwin was influential in claiming an identity as a black writer in an era when doing so was a politically charged act, and in insisting that the African-American past be reclaimed into history. In “Many Thousands Gone,” an essay in *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin writes words that Parks seems to have incorporated into her thinking about history and ancestry and about the speaking body: “In the case of the Negro the past was taken from him whether he would or no; yet to forswear it was meaningless and availed him nothing, since his shameful [‘heathen’] history was carried, quite literally, on his brow” (29).

In her own reading and as a college student Parks was introduced to the pivotal modernist writers, including James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf. Reading Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* restored her at a time when Parks felt discouraged about the possibility of majoring in English: “I remembered who I was,” she remarks; “Virginia Woolf’s novel re-membered me—it put me back together because it reminded me of what I loved” (Parks, “An Evening”). Parks has said that Faulkner is her favorite of the modernists and that she is “fascinated with what they were allowed to do . . . What Joyce was allowed to do or what Joyce allowed himself to do, what Beckett allowed himself to do, what Faulkner allowed himself to do, Woolf . . . What they got away with” (Drukman 72). Stein’s influence can be seen throughout Parks’s work, from the use of repetition (as in Stein’s *A Circular Play / A Play in Circles*, or in *Saints and Singing*) to the experimentation with language (see, for example, Stein’s *Reread Another / A Play / To Be Played Indoors or Out / I Want to Be a School*). Those who respond to Parks’s work sometimes express surprise that these now canonical white writers exerted such a profound influence on her artistic aspirations. But their use of stream-of-consciousness, their willingness to

break from conventions of sentence structure and language, and their assertion of voices that countered received wisdom were powerful examples to Parks.

African-American writers who influenced Parks included not only Baldwin but also Zora Neale Hurston, whose 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* she would adapt in a screenplay decades after first reading it. Hurston, who traveled through much of her career as an anthropologist studying black folklore and dialects, fed Parks's interest in creating a stage language that pays close attention to sounds and that reflects the punning, inversions, creative substitutions, and metaphor that can be witnessed in Hurston's work. Hurston preserved and recorded ways of speaking and telling tales as a historical mission, at the same time using this material for her own fiction and drama. While Parks is more obviously a stylist in appropriating vernacular language and storytelling (including minstrelsy), she is playing off the legacy of Hurston in creating new histories (or new ways of telling history) that implicitly or explicitly critique the dominant ways of telling.

Parks also paid attention to two black women playwrights whose careers began in the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, respectively: Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange. Kennedy first received critical attention when her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* was produced by Barr, Albee, and Wilder, who also produced LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*, in 1964 (the year that Parks was born). Shange was the first African-American woman since Lorraine Hansberry to have a play on Broadway, with the 1975–76 *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. A brief look at both playwrights' styles and themes reveals Parks as their figurative daughter and sister.

Adrienne Kennedy, who has said that her most powerful influences were Federico García Lorca and Tennessee Williams (Parks also acknowledges Williams's influence [Jiggetts 309]), creates a surrealist form of poetic drama. "My plays are meant to be states of mind," she has remarked (*People* 127). Rosette Lamont, in her introduction to one of the first anthologies to feature Parks's work, notes that Kennedy (like Marita Bonner before her) "turned away from realism

and used the avant-garde idiom" (xxx). In her autobiographical collage *People Who Led to My Plays*, Kennedy says that she also draws upon elements as diverse as the movie star magazines she loved as a child ("I kept stacks of *Modern Screen* in the vanity table drawer" [33]) and the African political events of her young adulthood, such as the 1961 murder of a black hero, Congo prime minister Patrice Lumumba ("I felt I had been struck a blow" [119]). Plays like *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *The Owl Answers*, and *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* eschew conventional plot and character in favor of repetition (which Parks transmutes into "rep and rev"), fractured characters who sometimes speak chorally or share lines (such as Sarah the Negro in *Funnyhouse*, who speaks with Jesus, Patrice Lumumba, and others, or Clara in *Movie Star*, who lets Bette Davis and others say her lines for her), and surreal images (like the madwoman holding her own head in her hands in *Funnyhouse*). As Robert Vorlicky points out in his perceptive essay about the influence of Kennedy on playwright Tony Kushner, Parks draws upon not only Kennedy's surrealism, but also her predilection for monologues (5–6). Kennedy, like Parks, is interested in African-American history on both autobiographical and archetypal levels, but resists the direct political voice of Black Arts playwrights (LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins) in favor of a more visual and poetic, more personal (and, one might argue, more feminist) approach to seeing history anew. Parks did not meet Kennedy until 1993, when they, along with Ntozake Shange, were on a panel about African-American women playwrights; Parks and Kennedy hit it off immediately, and Parks persuaded Kennedy to join her in a visit to Disneyland (Ben-Zvi 206–7). Parks comments, "I like Adrienne Kennedy because she made me feel like I could do anything at that moment" (Jiggetts 314); Kennedy's work "inspired [her] to take weird riffs and shifts of character" (Solomon 75).

Ntozake Shange, who drew upon her dance training to perform her "choreopoems" at coffeehouses in the Bay Area, made a huge impact in 1975 when *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* was performed at a bar called DeMonte's on New York City's Lower East Side, then at the Henry

Street Settlement, then off-Broadway at the Public Theater, and then on Broadway in September 1976 (*See No Evil* 16). Media coverage of the play tended to focus on the closing “beau willie brown” sequence as an example of male-bashing. Far more important, though—and what Shange carried into her later works, such as *Spell* #7—was the unique fashioning of the play text, spinning and dancing free from Western conventions of language and presentation. In a program note, she writes:

i cant count the number of times I have viscerally wanted to attack
deform n maim the language that i was taught to hate myself in . . .
the straitjacket that the english language slips over the minds of all
americans. there are thoughts that black people just dont have/
according to popular mythology/so white people never “imagine” we
are having them/& black people “block” vocabularies we perceive to
be white folks’ ideas. this will never do. (*See No Evil* 21)

Shange’s texts are written in poetic form, with few stage directions, and with a close attention to speech as containing sound and movement. Her “colored girls’” journeys to self-discovery are closely bound to their ability to claim images and language, with the freedom to narrate and create their agency, both collective (as women of color) and individual. Ben-Zvi suggests that, whereas Shange creates a self that emerges through her own language, Parks is interested in the political effects of competing ways of using language (cf. *Venus*): she “offers less a face beneath a mask—a language beneath a language—than the play between discourses” (191). Nevertheless, the legacy of Shange’s dramatic voicings is evident. While Kennedy’s work inspired Parks’s fragmentation of characters and diminishment of plot in favor of repeated and unfolding stories, Shange influenced her freedom with language, specifically the freedom to rebel against white, Western standardizations of English. In both playwrights, language is deeply connected to the speaking characters bodied forth on stage; the unconventional look of the text reflects the need to find an Africanist-feminist way of speaking (for further discussion, see Geis, *Postmodern Theatric(k)s*, chap. 6).

Can You Dig It? Some Recurring Themes

African-American dramatists are often expected to reflect “the black experience” in everything they write, without accounting for multiplicities, differences across class and gender, and varying political and artistic outlooks. Parks is intent on avoiding this “essentialist” attitude: “[T]here is no single ‘Black Aesthetic’ and there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted” (“Equation” 21); her “New Black Math” expands creatively upon this idea (see the discussion in the last chapter of this book). Her resistance to being pigeonholed is reflected, in part, in the wide number of styles and genres with which she has experimented, as well as her insistence that the (white) modernists were as important an influence upon her writing as authors like Baldwin, Hurston, Kennedy, and Shange. At the same time, it is possible to define themes and stylistic choices that run through her work, and to characterize not only her political and historical outlook, but also her aesthetic choices for conveying it.

Kimberly W. Benston has argued that “[a]ll Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of the black presence in America” (qtd. in H. Gates 123). While Parks may not see such “genealogical revisionism” as her project, discontinuous and violated genealogies, legacies, and ancestry are paramount in her work. *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* warns repeatedly of the consequences of history that has been forgotten or rewritten by oppressors: the Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread figure 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” (104). Yet the recording of history, Parks suggests, is not itself an act to be trusted. “I can get more out of history if I joke with it than if I shake my finger and stomp my feet,” she says (Pearce 26). As Shawn-Marie Garrett points out, “Parks shows that history is and always has been as much enemy as ally to the collective memories and shared secrets of a

black people jettisoned into a white world" (26). In her essay "Possession," Parks writes:

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, 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 theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. (4)

In all of her works Parks plays on the trope of remembering/dismembering, with all of its punning meanings. The act of memory is key, and the *re-* is a reminder that it must occur repeatedly, which ties into the "rep and rev" of her texts. To dis-member in this sense is to forget. The sense of *member* as limb (or sometimes the penis) is also crucial, invoking the long history of lynching and other forms of torture: characters in her plays, such as the Venus Hottentot, are literally taken apart and put back together again through the act of memory (the remains of Saartjie Baartman, the real Venus, were dissected and pickled by Georges Cuvier; the play is a means of putting her back together again, even while it shows the impossibility of doing so). To be a member is also to belong to something; since African-Americans have been deprived of full membership as citizens, Parks is also re-membering them in the sense of putting them back onto the roster, back into the historical narratives from which they have been displaced, and rewriting (re-membering) those historical narratives in the process.

A related theme resonating through Parks's works is that of digging. "You find your voice by digging," she says. "Lots of my characters dig" (Fraden 40). To dig is both to excavate something that has been buried (like the forgotten parts of African-American history), and, in now-dated Beat vernacular, to understand. Some of Parks's plays have literal diggers: Brazil in *The America Play*, for instance, is digging up his father's past, and the Negro Resurrectionist in *Venus* earned his name because he once dug up cadavers for medical

schools, but he now is emceeing the digging up / re-membering of the Venus Hottentot. Parks has said that the abrasive rhyme of *digger* / "nigger" is intentional. Digging also works symbolically in many of her pieces; the entire text of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* involves the unburying or unearthing of the African-American past in order to put the Black Man, whose death is restaged throughout the production, to rest.

Linked to both re-membering and digging is the trope of resurrection. The Black Man with Watermelon dies and comes back repeatedly in *Last Black Man*; the Foundling Father in *The America Play* and Lincoln in *Topdog/Underdog* are "assassinated" by tourists over and over; the Venus Hottentot dies and is brought back to life in the "countdown" narrative; and so on. As Harry Elam and Alice Rayner point out, "The notion of resurrection is consistent with much of Parks's work that points to how theatrical performance revivifies history, and how history is already performative" ("Body Parts" 275). One digs in order to resurrect; one resurrects in order to re-member. It is possible that Parks is influenced by her childhood Catholicism (and as the chapter "Choral Explorations of Race and Politics" discusses, so is the structure of *Last Black Man*), but her interest in resurrection—which includes bringing back literary and historical characters, like the re-envisioned Hesters in the red-letter plays—is inherently a *theatrical* way of imagining history. In the theater, characters start their stories all over again every night, and twice on matinee days. The power to resurrect is the power to repeat history. While scripted dramatic characters are compelled to reiterate the plot intended for them (hence Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's angst in Tom Stoppard's play about fate and *Hamlet*), Parks is fascinated by the tension between this limbo of repetition and the small variations within (it is a truism that no two performances of a play are exactly the same). As shall be discussed shortly, this fascination manifests itself through her use of repetition and revision. But it also links thematically to her renarrating history so that the lost past (again, particularly the African-American past) is resurrected and retold.

Signifyin, Spells, and Style

Parks uses an idiosyncratic, poetic form of theater language that is truly her own and that creates a deliberate form of resistance to “norms” of theatrical discourse. “I write to be read aloud,” she says (Drukman 69), and adds, “Language is a physical act. It’s something which involves your entire body—not just your head” (“Elements of Style” 11). When the text is performed, the audience, following the flow of the dialogue and the slangy, stichomythic exchanges, may not be aware of the care with which Parks has created a resistant, complicated textual statement. From her earliest work she omits punctuation, spells words (“thuh”) according to their pronunciation, uses footnote numbers, and so on. “Look at the difference between ‘the’ and ‘thuh,’” she writes in “Elements of Style.” “The ‘uh’ requires the actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack” (12). The same essay includes a glossary of what she calls “foreign words and phrases,” explaining the sound and meaning of locutions she is fond of, such as “ssnuch,” “chuh,” and “gaw” (17). Her comment about the significance of writing “k” instead of “o.k.” is illuminating:

It’s a recording of, not only the way words sound, but what that means. The difference between “k” and “o.k.” is not just what one might call black English versus standard English, for example. Or black English versus mid-Atlantic English. It’s not that, so much as it’s an attempt: I am trying to be very specific in what’s going on emotionally with the character. Because if you just try out, “I’m going with you, O.K.,” “I’m going with you, K,” it’s a different thing going on. If you jump to that word faster, if you put your words together in a different order, you’re feeling something differently, and it’s just an attempt to try to be more specific. (Jiggetts 311)

It would be oversimplifying to say that Parks writes in African-American vernacular, though that is certainly a component of her linguistic style. Kimberly Dixon explains that it is “grounded in African-American vernacular but extends beyond political definitions of articulateness to examine speech as a political process” (52).

I would add that Parks is also making an aesthetic and visual-aural choice as an artist; like a painter or musician, her choices riff on those of some of her predecessors, but also help embody what *distinguishes* her work as an individual creator.

Oral traditions associated with African-American culture—work songs, blues, jazz, call-and-response, sermons, and minstrelsy and vaudeville—show up in various ways in Parks’s work, making a striking combination with her more “literary” use of modernist wordplay and stream-of-consciousness and her postmodernist use of intertexts, footnotes, media, and other referential devices. Yet the combination is not jarring if we realize that her collagelike style is not only a contemporary artist’s freedom to draw upon any and all sources, but owes a great deal to the African-based tradition of “signifyin” and to the jazz-inspired “rep and rev” discussed subsequently. Parks tells Alisa Solomon:

At one time in this country, the teaching of reading and writing to African-Americans was a criminal offense. So how do I adequately represent not merely the speech patterns of a people oppressed by language (which is the simple question) but the patterns of a people whose language use is so complex and varied and ephemeral that its daily use not only Signifies on the non-vernacular language forms, but on the construct of writing as well. If language is a construct and writing is a construct and Signifyin(g) on the double construct is the daily use, then I have chosen to Signify on the Signifying. (Solomon 76)

If postmodern African-American culture is a repository of these traditions, intentionally bent, twisted, and appropriated as both homage and critique, then Parks’s combining them is also a way of creating an artistic voice that is uniquely hers yet speaks profoundly about the past and present.

Central to Parks’s aesthetic is the idea of “rep and rev,” or “repetition and revision.” She comments, “I’m working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score” (“Elements of Style” 9). We can see its antecedents both in jazz music and in the tradition of

“signifyin.” Jazz relies on the introduction of a main melodic theme followed by variations that improvise upon this theme but do not repeat it exactly. Steven Drukman remarks, “The ‘rep and rev’ strategy keeps the spectator/reader ever vigilant, looking for something missed in the last repetition while scrutinizing the upcoming revision. Closure seems just on the horizon . . . where it remains” (57). Parks adds that the “rev” is what keeps the “rep” interesting: “[I]n drama change, revision, is the thing. Characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew” (“Elements of Style” 9).

“Signifyin” is a practice that goes back to early African culture, but it has been discussed most famously by Henry Louis Gates Jr., who says that it “is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference” (xxiv). Gates suggests that “Signifyin” (which he writes with a capital S and an absent or parenthetical g at the end to distinguish its “free play” from the “order and coherence” implied by the lowercase s and its denotative emphases [see Gates 46, 49]) is a form of discursive practice we can see in African-American literature extending back to slave narratives. To “Signify” is to mimic or echo dominant discourse, but to repeat it in a subversive way that lets the (knowing) listener or reader understand how that discourse is being mimicked, undermined, reinscribed, revised, and reused for purposes that may run counter to the original, authoritarian intent. Gates writes, “It is this principle of repetition and difference, this practice of intertextuality, which has been so crucial to the black vernacular forms of Signifyin(g), jazz—and even its antecedents, the blues, the spirituals, and ragtime—and which is the source of my trope for black intertextuality” (64). Analyzing the relation of Gates’s sense of “Signifyin” to Parks, Haike Frank explains that multiple meanings ensue, “as is the case when a speaker of the black vernacular consciously empties the white signifier of its original white signified, substituting it with a different signified that expresses the black experience” (6). For example, Parks “signifies” on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by having it performed repeatedly by a black Lincoln in *The America Play*. She “signifies” on many artifacts from racist discourse in *Last Black Man*, such as the “cure for big lips” for-

mula repeated by the Prunes and Prisms character. Louise Bernard explains the connection between Gates's account and Parks's appropriation of jazz composition techniques:

Parks's larger framework of Signification, or tropological revision—i.e., the way in which a specific trope is repeated with difference between two or more texts [cf. Gates]—mirrors the multilayered equivalents in the jazz composition: (1) *Rep* ⊕ *Rev* within a given tune; (2) the intertextual dynamic between a (European) standard and a jazz riff (for example, Coltrane's rendition of "My Favorite Things"); and (3) the jazz musician's personal riff on another jazz musician's "standard" (for example, the variations of Ellington's "Caravan"). (693)

Similarly, though Parks does not incorporate the blues directly until her later works (e.g., Lincoln's song in *Topdog/Underdog*, the mother as blues singer in *Getting Mother's Body*), the influence of blues structure is relevant from the beginning. Again, the blues line relies on a pattern of repetition and variation; blues songs also are notorious for "signifyin," often in terms of the subversive, sometimes hidden sexual meanings of the lyrics.

Parks uses "rep and rev" to "signify" because the subversive repetition of a line, act, or visual image has a transformative effect while calling the subject repeatedly into memory, often in a ritual fashion. As Dixon says, "In performance a subtle phrase or gesture can, with repetition, be transformed into a larger metaphor" (58); in *Last Black Man*, for example, the image of the Black Man moving his hands recurs—with variations—and becomes one of the images of the figure's movements between death and life. Another way that Parks "signifies" is in her use of repeated or choruslike lines; one thinks of such passages as "Emergency, Oh, emergency . . ." from *America Play* (160), "This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world" from the play by that name, and "Diggidy-diggidy-diggidy-diggidy" (3) from *Venus*. The choral repetitions give the play a musical structure that evokes elements of African oral tradition, worksongs, and churchlike call-and-response. Parks remarks, "The

verses contain the information or meat, the choruses the fun, the fat, the gravy. The power of the chorus comes not from the presentation of new information but from its repeating" (Jacobus 1632–33).

The tradition of "signifyin" in African-American performance can be witnessed not only in the musical forms of jazz and the blues, but also in the popular entertainment forms of burlesque, minstrelsy, and vaudeville, which sometimes featured whites performing in blackface, but which also existed in black performances dating back to minstrel troupes formed just after the Civil War (and which could be seen in late-twentieth-century versions such as "Showtime at the Apollo"). Leslie W. Lewis reminds us that "black performance history begins from within and by signifying on the racial stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy" (56). The vaudeville-minstrelsy form resurfaces frequently in Parks's works, from Lucius and Mare's routines in *Betting on the Dust Commander*, to Ham's "stump speech" in *Last Black Man*, to the whiteface version of *Our American Cousin* in *The America Play*, to the Negro Resurrectionist as "interlocutor" in *Venus*, to the Ma and Pa Kettle routine that the brothers Lincoln and Booth do in *Topdog/Underdog*. Parks is fond of not only the comic timing that comes from vaudeville-style dialogue, but also of the signifying in these forms that often comes from punning and other forms of wordplay.

While Parks draws upon these traditional forms, like many post-modern theater artists (e.g., Charles Mee, Lee Breuer, Robert Wilson, and others), she incorporates mixed media in her works. Early pieces such as *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *Betting on the Dust Commander* feature slides; *Last Black Man* and *The America Play* have figures on television; productions of *Venus* have featured mixed-media historical representations of Saartjie Baartman; the Know Theatre Tribe's 2006 production of *In the Blood* played film versions of Hester during the characters' monologues about their encounters with her. Playing with these forms, especially photographs, allows Parks to comment on the dubious truth-telling of such representations (though her plays make no claims to truth). Exceeding the boundaries of what theater is "supposed" to include,

she brings in alternative visual forms and texts to create a Brechtian distancing from the plot and characters in favor of competing, more critical forms of scrutiny.

Her characterization, again like Brecht's, prevents audience members from immersing themselves in the characters as if they were real. A "character" in Parks is not grounded in psychological realism, Stanislavskian biographical motivation, or emotional affect. To call her figures "characters" would be "an injustice," Parks says; instead, "[T]hey are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers maybe, speakers maybe, shadows, slips, players maybe, maybe someone else's pulse*" (12). This is not to say that they lack complexity; they may be overlaid with the historical resonance of a real or fictional figure from the past (such as Venus in the play by that name, or Hester in *In the Blood*) or with the psychological complexity of conflict (as the brothers Booth and Lincoln are in *Topdog/Underdog*). However, it would be accurate to describe Parks's characters as "figures." Often they do not resemble a person who could be real but instead represent an idea or political or historical concept. The figures Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork and Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread in *Last Black Man* represent soul food traditions, and (as will be discussed in the chapter "Choral Explorations") part of the pleasure and challenge of the work is figuring out how to embody these figures on stage. W. B. Worthen argues that Parks's "figments" (as she calls them) are also "figments of the idea of dramatic 'character' itself" (16). Characters may seem to exist both in and out of time, in a Beckettian limbo, as we see for Miss Miss in *Pickling* or Lucius and Mare in *Betting on the Dust Commander*. The same play may present characters on different levels of representation; for example, in *Venus*, the protagonist and the Baron Docteur are both mythical and historical; the Negro Resurrectionist and the Mother-Showman are fictional but three-dimensional; the Bride-to-Be and the other play-within-a-play characters are theatrical and two-dimensional (one production even used puppets to represent them); the circus freaks are exaggerations or abstractions. It is a mistake to claim that Parks has "evolved" into creating psychologically complex characters in later plays such as *Topdog*. Booth and Lincoln fit on a continuum

that merges the fictional, the mythical, the historical, and the psychological, and that includes the Foundling Father from her related *America Play*. We should be wary of reviewers' tendency to favor more "believable" or "fleshed out" representations.

Just as she eschews naturalistic or psychological representations of character, Parks is less interested in "plot" than in the theatrical event. With the possible exception of *Topdog/Underdog*, her plays focus more on ritual than on climactic narrative. Indeed, in "Elements of Style," she includes hand-drawn "diagrams" for several of her plays, using mock-mathematical "equations": for example, the picture for *Last Black Man* is of the measurements of a coffin, with instructions to "find the volume of the solid" and then to "find the half-life" (13). If these "equations" are difficult to understand or seem parodic, that is precisely the point; Parks resists what she calls the "bad math" of "clarity" (14). Referring to *Last Black Man*, she has said that "on stage, as in physics, an event doesn't have to be big to be a big deal. In the theater, someone can simply turn their hand palm up and that is an event" (Solomon 79).

Another defining feature of Parks's texts is her vision of time and space. Time is linked to repeatability and to the "rep and rev"; as S. E. Wilmer puts it, "Parks has replaced the 'aura' of historical event or epoch with the notion of time as infinitely repeatable" (448). Wilmer also points out that for Parks, "[t]he stage space is simultaneously historical, contemporary, and imaginary" (444). Space in the theater is defined in part by the way that actors move within it. "Plays are about space to me," says Parks (Jiggetts 309). She provides few stage directions for her actors: "The action goes in the line of dialogue instead of always in a pissy set of parentheses" ("Elements of Style" 15). Often, therefore, stage action is embodied through performative language; in other words, it is possible to figure out what a character is *doing* by paying close attention to what he or she is *talking about doing*, such as when we hear the patter that accompanies the three-card monte deal in *Topdog/Underdog*.

In Parks silence becomes a strategic and intentional device, as in Beckett, although she is not particularly interested in the pause as a unit of silence. Short silences in her works are indicated as "rests."

She comments, "'Rest' is actually a great word. It's musical. And having the word 'rest' over and over and over to indicate every single place where the character takes a little break in between paragraphs of speech is perfect" (Pearce 26). It is the more complicated rest, the "spell," which has become one of Parks's most notable and talked-about stylistic elements, and a consistent challenge for actors performing her work (although a "spell" doesn't manifest itself as effectively in print, its unique presentation in the text does force the reader to slow down). The character, says Parks, "is not speaking but is taking up space on the page and is taking up time on the page and must take up space and time similarly on the stage" (Drukman 70).

In a "spell," the text provides the names of the characters without accompanying dialogue:

Lincoln
Booth
Lincoln
Booth

Parks notes that in such sequences, "This is a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no 'action' or 'stage business' is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit" ("Elements of Style" 16). Looking at a daguerreotype, or imagining that "the planets are aligning, and as they move we hear the music of their spheres," is a way to feel the inside of a spell: "A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It's also a place for an emotional transition" (16–17). The term *spell*, of course, conjures up multiple meanings: it is simultaneously a moment of magic or hypnosis, a spelling out of how two characters are feeling, and a folk idiom for an indefinite period of time (as in "sit down and rest a spell") or for a trance or illness ("she's having one of her spells"). An audience may or may not be made aware of when spells are taking place, depending in part on what the actors do during one of them.

Jennifer Johung's detailed discussion of the spells in *Venus* provides a way of looking at their function in Parks's work as a whole. Johung is captivated by the unorthodox look of the spells on the

pages of the play text, and the complicated transition from page and stage that readers, spectators, directors, and performers must undertake. Johung suggests that the spells may be imagined as a kind of musical notation, with the names of the figures analogous to notes:

If we can imagine the names of a spell as musical notes, then we can conceptualize the space of spell as a vertical spread or chord—with all names/notes sounded together—gesturing toward a horizontal progression through time—with one name/note sounded after another.
(51–52)

Johung explains that Parks's spells on the page allow us to imagine the transition to their embodiment in *performance*, especially as a character's identity is shaped in physical relation to another character.

A final textual intervention that teases our assumptions about page and stage is Parks's inclusion of footnotes. One is reminded of her modernist predecessor, T. S. Eliot, with his notes to *The Waste Land*; many postmodernist authors have played with the borders between notes as academic information and notes as fanciful or parodic intervention (see, for example, works by David Foster Wallace or Dave Eggers, or perhaps Vladimir Nabokov's entire *Pale Fire*). Of course, a footnote in a play text is not normally part of the performance. As Elam and Rayner remark about *The America Play*, "[T]he footnotes play with the status of the peripheral text as a sign for marginalized experience. Where are those footnotes in performance? Like the exclusions of history, they are on the side" ("Echoes" 186). *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* includes footnotes in part 3 ("Open House") that provide information ranging from a cop sales term to the history of slavery. In *Last Black Man*, Parks adds note numbers without corresponding texts (or are they mathematical exponents?) to the genealogical stump speech offered by Ham. The footnotes in *The America Play* (discussed at greater length in the chapter "Resurrecting Lincoln") become, in the play text, part of the dialogue between "truths" and tale-telling in American history; Parks mixes "real" and invented or speculative information. As Kurt Bullock puts it in his insightful discussion, "Parks toys with the traditional conventions of endnotes by demonstrating them to be both

factual and fictional, legitimating and problematizing" (80–81). In *Venus*, finally, the notes are incorporated in the performance, as the Negro Resurrectionist narrates them as part of the series of "Historical Extracts" about Saartjie Baartman that he gives the audience; here, the spectators are confronted with the question of whether "research" on the Venus Hottentot tells the whole story (see further discussion in the chapter "Anatomizing *Venus*").

Traditionally, notes serve two purposes: they bolster the "authority" of a text by providing documentation, and they are a repository for information that may not fit in the body of a discussion. Parks is interested in both of these aspects: at times, her notes show the play as a process—one that involves mediation and labor on the part of the author—and she juxtaposes real and imagined information as an indication that history (with its exclusions, especially of African-Americans) is predicated on *narratives* that may not tell the "whole" story. Thus, notes are also a way of working liminally with the play text; they provide a kind of ghost-voice from the playwright as creator, but they also (in the plays other than *Venus*) hover in the margins of the performance. The notes, like so many of Parks's stylistic trademarks, legitimize (the playwright did Research), mock-legitimize, and "ill-legitimize": in other words, they deflate and mock, or perhaps bastardize, the sacrosanct play text, history play, or historical narrative.

Telling is suspect, Parks seems to say, and genealogies are by nature discontinuous because their parts have been dis-membered.