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**QUEST/ION OF IDENTITIES
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMINIST
POSTMODERN DRAMA:
A STUDY OF SELECTED PLAYS BY
SUZAN-LORI PARKS**

Mehdi Ghasemi

University of Turku

Faculty of Humanities
English Department

Supervised by

Professor Joel Kuortti,
English Department
University of Turku, Finland

Dr. Minna Niemi
English Department
University of Turku, Finland

Reviewed by

Professor Jopi Nyman
English Department
University of Eastern Finland

Professor Sandra Adell
Department of Afro-American Studies
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Opponent

Professor Jopi Nyman
English Department
University of Eastern Finland

Custos

Professor Joel Kuortti
English Department
University of Turku, Finland

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Affectionately dedicated to

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who believe there is no skin between us

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Abstract

Innovative and unconventional, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks belongs to the continuum of African American playwrights who have contributed to the quest/ion – the quest for and question – of identities for African Americans. Her plays are sites in which the quest/ion of identities for African Americans is pursued, raised and enacted. She makes use of both page and stage to emphasize the exigency of reshaping African Americans' identities through questioning the dominant ideologies and metanarratives, delegitimizing some of the prevailing stereotypes imposed on them, drawing out the complicity of the media in perpetuating racism, evoking slavery, lynching and their aftereffects, rehistoricizing African American history, catalyzing reflections on the various intersections of sex, race, class and gender orientations, and proffering alternative perspectives to help readers think more critically about issues facing African Americans.

In my dissertation, I approach three plays by Parks – *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *Venus* (1996) and *Fucking A* (2000) – from the standpoints of postmodern drama and African American feminism with a focus on the terrains that reflect the quest/ion of identities for African Americans, especially African American women. I argue that postmodern drama and African American feminism provide the ground for Parks to promote the development of a political agenda in order to call into question a number of dominant ideologies and metanarratives with regard to African Americans and draw upon the roles of those metanarratives as a powerful apparatus of racial and sexual oppressions.

I also explore how Parks engages with postmodern drama and African American feminism to incorporate her own mininarratives in the dominant discourses. I argue that Parks in these plays uses postmodern drama and African American feminism to encourage reflections on intersectionality in order to reveal the concerns of African Americans, particularly African American women. Her plays challenge the dominant order of hierarchy and patriarchy, while in some cases urging unity and solidarity between African American men and women by showing how unity and solidarity can help them confront race, class and gender oppressions. Furthermore, I discuss how the utilization of postmodern techniques and devices helps Parks to transform the conventional features of playwriting, to create incredulity toward the dominant systems of oppression and to incorporate her mininarratives within the context of dominant discourses.

Tiivistelmä

Innovatiivinen ja ennakkoluuloton Pulitzer-palkittu näytelmäkirjailija Suzan-Lori Parks kuuluu niiden afroamerikkalaisten kirjailijoiden jatkumoon, jotka ovat pyrkineet haastamaan ja uudelleen määrittelemään afroamerikkalaista identiteettiä. Hän on näytelmiensä kautta sekä tekstuaalisesti että draamallisesti korostanut afroamerikkalaisen identiteetin uudelleen määrittelyn tarvetta kyseenalaistamalla valtaideologioita ja suuria kertomuksia, purkamalla afroamerikkalaisia koskevien stereotyyppien perusteita, sekä osoittamalla median rasismia ylläpitävää valtaa. Hän on tuonut esiin orjuuden ja lynkkausten jälkivaikutuksia, kirjoittanut uudelleen afroamerikkalaisten historiaa ja virittänyt pohdintoja sosiaalisen ja biologisen sukupuolen, rodun ja luokan erilaisista intersektionaalisista vaikutuksista. Näin hän on tarjonnut lukijoille vaihtoehtoisia tapoja ajatella kriittisesti afroamerikkalaisten kohtaamia ongelmia.

Väitöskirjassani analysoin Parksin kolmea näytelmää – *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *Venus* (1996) and *Fucking A* (2000) – postmodernin draaman ja afroamerikkalaisen feminismin näkökulmista, keskittyen seikkoihin, jotka heijastavat afroamerikkalaisten, erityisesti naisten identiteetikysymyksiä. Väitän, että postmoderni draama ja afroamerikkalainen feminismi tarjoavat Parksille keinoja edistää poliittista ohjelmaa, jonka avulla voi kyseenalaistaa erilaisia valtaideologioita ja afroamerikkalaisia koskevia suuria kertomuksia sekä osoittaa näiden suurten kertomusten merkittävää roolia rodullisessa ja sukupuolisessa alistamisessa.

Analysoin myös sitä, miten Parks soveltaa postmodernia draamaa ja afroamerikkalaista feminismiä tuodakseen hallitsevaa diskurssiin omia pienoiskertomuksiaan. Väitän että näytelmissään Parks käyttää juuri näitä keinoja motivoitakseen pohdintoja intersektionaalisuudesta ja nostaakseen esiin afroamerikkalaisten, erityisesti naisten ongelmia. Hänen näytelmänsä yhtäältä haastavat hallitseva hierarkkisen ja patriarkaalisen järjestyksen ja toisaalta kannustavat afroamerikkalaisia sukupuolen ylittävään yhtenäisyyteen ja keskinäiseen solidaarisuuteen osoittamalla, miten yhtenäisyys voi auttaa vastustamaan rotu-, luokka- ja sukupuolisortoa. Pohdin lisäksi sitä, miten postmodernien tekniikoiden ja menetelmien hyödyntäminen tarjoaa Parksille keinoja muokata näytelmäkirjoituksen perinnettä, horjuttaa hallitsevien sortojärjestelmien varmuutta ja tuoda omia pienoiskertomuksiaan hallitsevan diskurssin rinnalle.

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List of Publications

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Chapter One: Introduction

Suzan-Lori Parks and the Quest/ion of Identities

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.

Jean-François Lyotard (1984, xxiv)

Suzan-Lori Parks (born May 10, 1963 or 1964)¹ is an innovative and unconventional Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright.² She belongs to a continuum of African American playwrights who have contributed to the quest/ion – the quest for and question – of identities for African Americans. Her plays³ are sites in which she emphasizes the exigency of reshaping African Americans' identities through questioning the dominant ideologies and metanarratives, delegitimizing some of the prevailing stereotypes imposed on them, drawing out the complicity of the media in perpetuating racism, evoking slavery, lynching and their aftereffects, rehistoricizing history, catalyzing reflections on the various intersections of sex, race, class and gender orientations, and proffering alternative perspectives to help readers think more critically about issues facing African Americans.

¹ Parks notes that her first name is spelled with “Z” as the result of a misprint early in her career: “When I was doing one of my first plays in the East Village, we had fliers printed up and they spelled my name wrong. I was devastated. But the director said, ‘Just keep it, honey, and it will be fine.’ And it was” (Marshal 2003). Parks has been vague about her actual year of birth, and accordingly biographical accounts of her birth year vary. For instance, drama scholar Deborah R. Geis (2008, 3) writes: “Parks was born on May 10, 1964 (she points out that she shares a birthday with John Wilkes Booth).” However, in some other sources the year is recorded as 1963. Parks sums this up as follows: “Apparently I’ve been born in five different years and places and I went to Yale and a lot of this isn’t true. What you read about me isn’t true and sometimes different every time” (Wetmore Jr. 2007b, 133). I discussed this matter via email with Chair of the Directing department at Yale School of Drama Elizabeth Diamond (2012), who has had a close relationship with Parks and has directed a number of her plays, and she noted that 1964 is Parks’s correct year of birth:

To get to your question straight away: May 10 1964 is the correct date, I believe. I had no idea about the John Wilkes Booth connection, but it is too perfect! Reminds me of the playwright Samuel Beckett who insisted he was born on Good Friday, the day Christ was crucified.

² Parks’s play, *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002, making her the first African American woman playwright to receive the honor. After winning the prize, she told Angeli R. Rasbury (2002) on the *Women’s eNews* website that: “As the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize [for drama], I have to say I wish I was the 101st.” In addition, her *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *Venus* garnered the Obie Awards, and her *Father Comes Home from the Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3* won the 2015 Kennedy Prize for Drama.

³ Parks’s plays to this date are as follows: *The Sinner’s Place* (1984), *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1990), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *Devotees in the Garden of Love* (1992), *The America Play* (1994), *Venus* (1996), *In the Blood* (1999), *Fucking A* (2000), *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006), *Ray Charles Live!* (2007), *The Book of Grace* (2010) and *Father Comes Home from the Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3* (2014).

The title of my dissertation consists of four elements, namely “Quest/ion of Identities,” “A Study of Selected Plays by Suzan-Lori Parks,” “Postmodern Drama” and “African American Feminism.” Thus, in this endeavor, I approach three of Parks’s plays – *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *Venus* (1996) and *Fucking A* (2000) – from the perspectives of postmodern drama and African American feminism, focusing on the terrains which reflect the quest/ion of identities for African Americans, especially African American women. Accordingly, the theoretical framework that underpins my work is the intersection of three notions – postmodern drama, African American feminism, and identity – which will help in the analysis of the plays under study.

In my dissertation, I argue that Parks promotes the development of a political agenda to question a number of metanarratives and dominant ideologies with regard to African Americans and to draw attention to the roles that these metanarratives and dominant ideologies have played in the construction of race, class and gender hierarchies. In addition to questioning the metanarratives, Parks engages with postmodern drama and African American feminism to incorporate her own mininarratives within the context of dominant discourses in order to reshape African Americans’ identities. The questions I propose are:

1. In which ways do Parks’s plays under study respond to the paradigm shift of postmodern drama and to African American feminism in order to critique the dominant order of hierarchy and patriarchy?
2. In which ways do these plays lend themselves to theories of postmodern drama and African American feminism to reveal the concerns of African Americans and raise the quest/ion of identities for African Americans?
3. And what postmodern techniques and devices does Parks employ to both transform the conventional features of playwriting and create indeterminacies toward the dominant systems of oppression, while also helping her to include her mininarratives?

To provide answers to these questions, I examine Parks’s plays and relate them to the theoretical paradigms of postmodern drama and African American feminism as they have been adopted by Parks to reshape identities for African Americans, particularly African American women. However, I first deem it necessary to elaborate on the concepts of the quest/ion of identities, postmodern drama and African American feminism before moving on to discuss “Aims and Methods.”

1.1 The Quest/ion of Identities

The quest/ion of identities has been one of the most heatedly debated themes in African American literature, manifesting itself ever since its first conscious forms. In the genre of drama, African American playwrights have made great efforts to highlight the value, importance and dignity of African Americans' identities through resisting racism and its negative impacts on African Americans' personal and social lives. Trinidadian playwright and scholar Errol Hill (1987, 1) contends that drama "can have a significant impact on the relentless struggle of a deprived racial minority for full equality" and that it can upgrade the spiritual well-being of African Americans who have been "divorced from their ancestral heritage through centuries of degrading slavery." For this reason, a number of African American playwrights, including Parks, have used drama to reimagine their own past, to interrogate the conventional history and to rewrite their own histories, which, as theater scholar and director Harry J. Elam, Jr. (2001, 9) argues, "play a critical role in the formation of African American cultural politics and in the shaping of African American identities." Below, I offer a short history of African American drama with a focus on those plays which share common themes and leitmotifs with Parks's plays included in this dissertation. Through this short history, I attempt to draw a line of continuity between Parks's plays and earlier African American playwrights' works in their efforts to reshape African American identities.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, William Wells Brown's *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858) – which is claimed to be the first African American play – and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins's *Slave's Escape; or, the Underground Railroad* (1880) are among the early plays that record African Americans' experiences and memories of slavery and articulate the inhumanity of the white slave owners' practices that motivated the slaves to escape.

These themes of slavery and the consequent anti-slavery struggle – among other issues and concerns – continued in the twentieth century in plays such as Angelina Weld Grimke's *Rachel* (1916), Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930), Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* (1935) and Shirley Graham's *It's Morning* (1940). Grimke's *Rachel*, often considered one of the most significant plays of the early twentieth century, depicts the lamentable conditions of African Americans, including lynching, racism and discrimination, while emphasizing the role of family and community unity in resisting the brutalities of racism. In *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, Johnson carefully examines miscegenation and lynching through the character of a mulatto who is going to be lynched, while his black mother attempts to save his life by notifying the white governor, who in fact is his biological father. In a similar vein, Hughes's *Mulatto* criticizes discrimination

and the prohibition of interracial relationship. In her play *It's Morning*, Graham – a prolific African American playwright of her time – combines dance and music to show “the importance of music for the black community during slavery to help alleviate their burdens” (Barrios 2009, 198). The play illustrates the destructive effects of slavery and how a mother – after learning that her daughter has been sold to another master – decides to kill her rather than witness her abuse and misery.⁴

Since the late 1950s, “African American playwrights began to receive acknowledgement” (Ibid., 187). Accordingly, playwrights like Lorraine Hansberry, Ossie Davis, Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin and Charles Gordone occupied a crucial place in American drama. Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) was a huge success. It won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and marked the first appearance of an African American woman playwright on Broadway. The play confronts the perpetuated false stereotypes of African Americans, racism, inequities, injustices and racial segregation leading to social disintegration. Hansberry’s play changed the face of African American drama, showing how African Americans can maintain their dignity under overwhelming circumstances. At the same time, the play perpetuates Africanness and looks nostalgically at Africa “as an escape from the brutalities of racism in the United States” (Wilkerson 2001, 47).

Hansberry’s successful confrontation with racial discrimination inspired the African American playwrights of the 1960s to encounter racism in their works. However, under the influence of the Black Arts Movement – which was a performance movement – the quest/ion of identities took a new turn and made a powerful impression on African American identities. A new generation of playwrights emerged and continued to expand the canon of African American drama. Ossie Davis’s *Purlie Victorious* (1961) is one of the more successful plays of the Movement. It portrays African American experiences in the Southern plantations and criticizes Jim Crow laws and the racial and gendered stereotypes of African Americans. Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) is another playwright, who came to prominence during that time. His one-act play *Dutchman* (1964) depicts African Americans’ identity crisis as well as their racial conflicts and frustration with racial oppressions, while at the same time it creates an opportunity for self-expression against centuries of misrepresentation. The play manifests Baraka’s main

⁴ The Spanish theater scholar Olga Barrios (2009, 198) observes: “Most of the plays of this time place the mother and/or grandmother as central figures who would do whatever necessary to protect their children and family/home from external racism and injustices against them.” As I will discuss in Chapter Four, Parks in *Fucking A* similarly employs a protective mother who devotes herself to freeing her son from prison. When she fails, she kills him to protect him from Hunters’ brutalities.

themes, including black liberation and white racism. As he confirms in an interview, drama should liberate African Americans from inequalities and “instruct them about what they should do and what they should be doing” (Coleman 1994, 84). Another one-act play by Baraka, *Slave Ship* (1967), dramatizes the history of the Middle Passage, the Plantation Era and the era of African American Civil Rights Movement. In 1964, James Baldwin’s⁵ *Blues for Mister Charlie* was produced on Broadway. The play condemns racial inequality and the conventional stereotypes against African Americans as well as the killings of African American men who were believed to sexualize society with their own hypersexuality. These playwrights urged African Americans to involve themselves socially and politically and open up areas of struggle for their own freedom from racial discriminations and controlling stereotypes.

In 1970, Charles Gordone’s *No Place to Be Somebody* (1969) was the first play by an African American playwright to win the Pulitzer Prize. The play displays the problems of an unemployable mulatto actor. He is cast neither as a white man, since he is too dark for white roles, nor as a black man, since he is too light for black ones. Due to this problem, he resorts to writing and performing his own plays. He addresses his audiences directly and speaks of his own problems which self-reflexively reveal both his artifice and the artificiality of his plays. At the same time, Gordone’s play commemorates Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. in order to acclaim the African American history of resistance.

Alice Childress and Sonia Sanchez are often cited as prime examples of the African American women playwrights who came to prominence during the Black Arts Movement. In some of her plays, Childress deals critically with what she has called the “anti-woman” laws (Curb 1980, 58) made by white men to deny black women’s rights and to make their personal and social lives unbearable. In *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* (1966) and *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), she draws on a number of problems, including interracial love in the South as well as the intersections of multiple oppressions, patriarchy and miscegenation prohibition that black women encountered in the segregated South. Her characters, who come mostly from the working class, expose their bitter experiences with regard to race, sex and class inequalities. She also stresses the need for African Americans to “appreciate their inherent beauty” (Harris 2007, xiii). Likewise, Sanchez’ *The Bronx Is Next* (1968) and *Sister Son/ji* (1969) deal with the violence

⁵ In an interview, Parks admits that Baldwin, with whom she took a course in short story writing at New Hampshire College, has left a major influence on her works (Jiggetts 1996, 309). It is worth noting that in his evaluation of Parks’s performance in his class, Baldwin described Parks as “an utterly astounding and beautiful creature who may become one of the most valuable artists of our time” (Wetmore, Jr. 2007a, xix), even before Parks had a single play published or staged.

and oppression befallen African American women, while she urges African American men and women to take unified action against white oppression. She articulates a black feminist attitude, showing both black women's abuse by white men, and their betrayal by their male revolutionaries, and in a critical manner she challenges phallogentrism, racism and sexism. In *Malcolm/Man Don't Live Here No Mo* (1972), Sanchez dramatizes the life and history of Malcolm X and his significant role in the Black Power Movement. The use of poetry in some of her plays "giv[es] birth to *poemplays* written in a very visual language," which enables her to turn away from the constraints of classical realism (Barrios 2009, 202).

Ntozake Shange's play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* from 1976 portrays seven black women who are in search of identities in a patriarchal society and manage to bond for support, to voice their demands and to resolve their problems in unity and solidarity. The play demonstrates that collectivity allows African American women to overcome the negative impacts of race and gender and to achieve independence and liberation. Shange voices the unexpressed painful experiences of black women and ends the play with a celebration of self-determination.

In the 1980s and 1990s, following the success of Shange's *for colored girls*, a number of African Americans succeeded in playwriting and attracted national attention. George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1984) "subverts and revises the negative connotations of the term 'colored' and redefines it as an affirmation of African-American cultural diversity" (Elam, Jr. 1992, 294). In a non-realistic form, Wolfe's play condemns the history of racism and oppression of African Americans and seeks to relegate the shackles of the past and the stereotypical characters to the museum – wherein ancient and static artifacts are displayed – so as to create space for new perceptions about African Americans. The play also reprimands middle-class African Americans' passivity. In the same period, August Wilson, twice a Pulitzer Prize winner for *Fences* (1987) and *The Piano Lesson* (1990), made a substantial contribution to African American drama. His plays deal with the necessity of survival, the survival of their past, ancestors, memories and inheritance. According to Wilson, African Americans should rediscover the collective African cultural memory, and in this Africanness they would survive in contemporary America (Elam, Jr. 2001, 10).

There has been an impressive increase in playwriting by contemporary African Americans such as Robbie McCauley, Pearl Cleage, Kia Corthron and Adrienne Kennedy, who have used the page and the stage to show the vital importance of identity reformation. They have offered different perspectives on African American issues, especially historicity, cultural specificity of

African American women as well as the impacts of racism, sexism and classism. McCauley, best known for her play *Sally's Rape* (1989), looks at the era of slavery and makes ties between the whites and the blacks through employing one black and one white actor with the audience participating as the third actor. Cleage, describing herself as “a third-generation black nationalist and a radical feminist” (Hatch 2003b, 447), wrote *Flyin' West* (1992) and *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1995) to draw upon the history of African American westward migration and relocation to New York, respectively, and to protest against racism, sexism and classism. In her plays, she uses an alienation effect to distance readers from the past events and engage them in critical thinking. Corthron lays her emphasis on black women's oppressions. She dramatizes the poor living conditions of black women and the grim realities of making a living as an abortionist in the South in *Come Down Burning* (1993), and the problems and miseries of imprisoned black women in *Cage Rhythm* (1993). In addition, Kennedy's *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* (1996) depicts the fictionalized account of her own son's arrest and beating by white police officers. It reveals the trauma of police brutality through an excess of images of death, deprivation and beatings. The play focuses on the psychological states of some of the characters who move fluidly between times and places, creating fragmentation, time distortion and nonlinearity.

This short historical outline of African American drama indicates that postmodernism has not been widely embraced by African American playwrights; however, as much as postmodernism is in the eye of beholder (Rapp 1998, 155), in her introduction to *Contemporary African American Female Playwrights* Dana A. Williams (1998, xix) labels Kennedy both a postmodern and a surrealist playwright and considers Shange a postmodern playwright, arguing that Shange attempted “to escape the stifling bounds of tradition.”

As my summary shows, there are some playwrights who have carved out a space for African American drama in American literature. Their works constitute a continuum in the pursuit of African Americans' quest/ion of identities in drama, and they have given direction to the efforts of their ancestors. More specifically, continuity is outlined here in the works of African American women playwrights who in their plays challenge the oppressive systems which have denigrated African American women in their personal and social life. These women interrogate patriarchy and criticize the interlocking oppression of racism, sexism and classicism. They also engage with issues such as rape, abortion, stereotyping and victimization in order to affirm their dignity. Jamaican-American author Michelle Cliff (qtd. in hooks 1992, 46) asserts that “[t]here is continuity in the written work of many African-American women. . . . All of these define a response to power. All structure that response as a quest, a journey to complete,

to realize the self; all involve the attempt to break out of expectations imposed on black and female identity.”

Inspired by some of the earlier playwrights, Parks – whom playwright Tony Kushner (1997, 62) “believes to be . . . one of the most important dramatists America has produced” – has clearly benefitted from this continuum, and in return she has enriched the tradition with postmodern techniques and writing styles, creating provocative dramas that represent and emphasize the visions, concerns and quest/ion of identities for African Americans, particularly African American women. As Parks notes, her plays share one vital quality, “the yearning for salvation” (qtd. in Garrett 2000). A number of her plays, including *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *Venus* and *Fucking A*, employ features of postmodern drama and lend themselves to discussion through African American feminist theories, calling into question a number of dominant ideologies and metanarratives with regard to African Americans.

Thus, the quest/ion of identities is crucial for Parks to the extent that she begins her essay “Possession” with two questions: “Who do I write for?” and “Who am I?” (Parks 1995e, 3). Moreover, in an interview with Philippine-American playwright Han Ong (2014, 42), Parks responds to the latter question as follows: “Well, who am I? I’m not just Suzan-Lori Parks, thirty years old, whatever. It’s all those who came before me, because my family comes from all over. I don’t take any of those things for granted, none of them.” In her comments, Parks emphasizes the quest/ion of identities, mainly because the dominant society and culture have neglected the African Americans’ issue of identities. She therefore deems it her duty to make up for it according to her vision. In a number of her plays, Parks refers to the collective consciousness⁶ and collective unconscious⁷ of peoples of African descent in order to dramatize their unrecorded or misreported moments in history. In this way, she evokes – alongside archetypes, stereotypes and myths – common experiences, memories, oppressions, triumphs and tribulations, which altogether help her

⁶ “Collective Consciousness” is a term coined by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. The term refers to the shared beliefs, values, customs, traditions and attitudes operating as a unifying force within a society. In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1947) argues that in traditional or primitive societies, religion plays a crucial role in uniting members through the creation of a common consciousness. In those societies, an individual’s consciousness is shared to a great extent with the consciousness of other members of society, creating solidarity through mutual likeness. In this light, the common interests of African Americans can function as the collective consciousness which unifies African Americans and creates solidarity between them.

⁷ The term “Collective Unconscious” was first introduced by the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung in 1916 to refer to the storehouse of myths, symbols, archetypes and memories, shared by a society, a people or in some cases all humankind. In Jungian psychology, the term refers to a part of the unconscious mind, originating from the ancestral experiences. It is also described as a local or universal library of human knowledges.

reshape African Americans' identities. In addition, this would liberate them from the representations imposed on them throughout history.

For Parks, one way to liberate African Americans from those negative representations is to embrace postmodern views of identity and consider the self as a dynamic characterization of the individual. Here, I should note that identity as a slippery term cannot be defined as a single event in space at a single moment in time, simply because it ebbs and flows, is always in flux and is comprised of a great number of inner qualities as well as external representations of self, reconstituted as a result of the interaction of diverse factors and orientations involved in a process of "becoming" rather than "being." According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1996, 4; emphases added),

Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of *becoming* rather than *being*: not "who we are" or "where we have come from" so much as what we might *become*, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.

As can be deduced from the above quotation, Hall likens identification to "a process never completed" (Ibid., 2) and puts his primary emphasis on "soft identities" rather than "hard identity." Unlike the former which signify flexible features such as histories, cultures, worldviews, values and beliefs and are matters of fluidity or becoming, the latter includes features that are mostly fixed and undecided such as one's parents, birthplace, ethnicity and gender and are matters of fixity or being.

I liken postmodern identities to chess games, where players – unlike solvers of puzzles who have only a single fixed place for each piece – can make various alternative choices and moves. With each choice and move a new paradigm opens up before the players. In this light, identity consists of innumerable defining characteristics that make up the whole of who we *become* in any given moment, originating not only from the energies that come from within but also from the multitude of forces that are imposed by the outside world, including the current forms of social communication, particularly mass media, along with political campaigns, religious beliefs, the annals of history, economic, social and political systems, and so on. These internal energies and external forces which play crucial roles in "recycling"⁸ and reshaping our identities contest fixation and solidity, and thus our identities become kaleidoscopic, situational and contradictory.

⁸ Zygmunt Bauman (1996, 18) compares modern and postmodern notions of identity. To him, the catchword of modernity was "creation," while the catchword of postmodernity is "recycling." Accordingly, he argues that the former is as concrete as steel, whereas the latter is a bio-degradable plastic. He continues that in today's world, "disposable products designed for immediate obsolescence" have replaced durable objects (Ibid., 23).

In consequence, there is no one single fixed identity or “identity of being,” but miscellaneous identities or “identities of becoming.”

Aware of the interaction between these internal energies and external forces that affect African Americans’ identities, Parks first contests the idea of African Americans’ fixed identity and then recycles and reshapes their identities. *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *Venus* and *Fucking A* employ different figures and/or characters⁹ – each representing a group coming from different eras and locations – who share their narratives and discourses, which are often contradictory and opposing, and engage in direct and indirect dialogues, thereby providing readers with kaleidoscopic perspectives that challenge the identity imposed upon African Americans throughout history.

To challenge that identity, Parks excavates African American history like an archaeologist. The excavated knowledge of African American history would help her rewrite and reenact African American history, and, through this, enable readers to view alternative versions of it. As Parks (1995e, 5) writes: “Through each line of text, I’m rewriting the Time Line – creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined.” Viewed in this light, creating history is a site of remembrance and resistance and a way to reclaim identities for African Americans for whom “the Great Whole of History” has proved to be “the Great Hole of History”¹⁰ in which they have been either absent or voiceless, and their narratives have been either denied or unrecorded. Consequently, Parks questions the Great Whole of History in order to fill some parts of the Great Hole of History with her revisions of history.

To achieve this end, she applies two strategies in her plays: “Abrogation” (Ashcroft et al. 1998, 5–6), i.e., questioning the centrality and objectivity of dominant historical discourses and documents, and “Appropriation” (Ibid., 19–20), i.e., reconstituting those dominant discourses and metanarratives through inserting African Americans’ mininarratives which have been either

⁹ In a number of her plays, such as in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Parks prefers to call the cast “figures,” while in other plays, including *Venus* and *Fucking A*, she refers to them as “characters.” Further information is provided when studying the plays in detail.

¹⁰ “The Great Hole of History” is a phrase that Parks uses both in her essay “The Elements of Style” (Parks 1995d, 16) and her play *The America Play* wherein she writes: “A great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of *The Great Hole of History*” (Parks 1995a, 158, 174 and 179; emphasis added). At the same time, Parks repeatedly uses the word “whole” in *The America Play*. For instance, one of the characters utters: “he digged the *hole* and the *whole* held him” (Ibid., 159), and another character says: “Cleared thuh path tamed thuh wilderness dug this *whole Hole* with his own 2 hands and et cetera” (Ibid., 179; emphases added). The wordplay is again repeated by another character: “At thuh Great *Hole* where we honeymooned – son, at thuh Original Great *Hole*, you could see thuh *whole* world without goin too far” (Ibid., 196; emphases added). Parks also uses the word “whole” in the title of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*.

neglected or erased from the Great Whole of History. To put it differently, she first challenges the dominant discourses and then introduces and incorporates some of the African Americans' mininarratives within the context of the dominant discourses. However, they are not presented as the ultimate truth, as Parks self-reflexively contests them, too. Challenging the Positivist perspective in a Relativist manner,¹¹ Parks approaches conventional history by impugning its validity. Aware of the subjectivity and bias of the Great Whole of History or "professional historiography,"¹² Parks rejects the teleology, totality, certainty, objectivity, universality and essentialism of professional historiography. As a postmodernist playwright, she contests the idea that historians are objective observers and unbiased recorders of historical accounts, arguing instead that they are selective, and that their own limitations, interests and biases ultimately affect and surface in their accounts. As literary critic Haike Frank (2002, 5) notes: "In accordance to postmodernism's claim that history equals our narrative of past events, [Parks] seems to suggest that reality is based on subjective representation . . . of reality, including historical reality," which "can only be achieved by a multiplicity of perspectives." In this way, Parks embraces postmodern aesthetics in order to revisit and rewrite history and situate African American narratives therein.

In this sense, a number of Parks's plays are referred to as "history plays," or rather "counterhistory plays,"¹³ wherein she provides alternative narratives and counter-historical versions of African American history. As Parks (1995e, 4) writes, "the history of Literature is in question. And the history of History is in question too," and thus she sees her plays as "a

¹¹ Positivism maintains that there is absolute Truth and that unbiased and objective tools to measure this Truth can be developed. Relativism, on the contrary, as an antithesis of Positivism, claims that all groups produce their own ideas of truth which are equally valid. Accordingly, no group can claim to have a privileged understanding of the "truths" over other ones (Westacott 2015). The tension between Positivism and Relativism has become increasingly evident as feminism, postmodernism and other paradigms continue to challenge traditional scientific objective views and perspectives on knowledge development. In this climate, Relativism favors open-ended and multiple interpretations arising from indeterminacy, subjectivity and readers' participation in the creation of meanings.

¹² In "Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality," historian Hayden White (2005, 152) writes: "What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography." White notes that professional historiography favors continuity, totality, fixity, causality and objectivity which are in sharp contrast with postmodernism.

¹³ For philosopher Michel Foucault (2003, 68) history is "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" so as to reinforce its sovereignty. However, for him 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., 70). Counterhistory, then, attempts to illuminate those dark spots, it "breaks up the unity of the sovereign law that imposes obligations" and "breaks the continuity of glory" (Ibid.). As a result, the invisible marginal knowledges of the oppressed people who have lacked power but have the impulse to resist amnesia begin to come to light. More emphatically, 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.).

way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature.” She asserts further that literature has the power to make and revise history, to incorporate those who have been rendered either invisible or hypervisible¹⁴ in the maze of the dominant cultural and political discourses and to make the “dis-membered” remembered and put their “body back together” (Ibid., 4–5). Thus, she destabilizes conventional historical documents through drama and theater, “claiming that the staging of an historical event makes it actually happen” (Frank 2002, 5) as theater has the power and attraction to gather people together at one specific time and place:

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 down. (Parks 1995e, 4)

I argue that through drama and theater, Parks makes history, dramatizes or theatricalizes it and thereby paves way for rehistoricizing history and providing her readers with new significations. Rehistoricization is an attempt to offer reinscriptions and rereadings of history from new perspectives. Through questioning the Great Whole of History and replacing it with many histories, rehistoricization provides the ground for the arrival of different mininarratives and accordingly creates a dynamic view of history, namely a “history of becoming.” Unlike the Great Whole of History, or “history of being,” the history of becoming no longer sees history as a static, fixed and finished product, but a dynamic and fluid process which is constantly in flux.

By rehistoricizing African American history, Parks not only rewrites history herself but deems writing history necessary for African Americans. She suggests that they write their own histories, simply because until the twentieth century they were not in the positions of power to inscribe and publish their histories. The legal ban on black literacy during slavery made it practically impossible, and accordingly many of their histories have been eliminated from the canons of the dominant culture. Thus, rewriting their own histories helps African Americans question the identity and history of being and embrace the identity and history of becoming.

¹⁴ Black feminist Audre Lorde (1984, 42) observes that “within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism.”

1.2 Postmodern Drama

Postmodern drama is a fairly recent phenomenon that originates from postmodernism, for which there exists no one constitutive definition. According to Josh McDowell, Bob Hostetler and David Bellis (2002, 12), “to define and truly understand postmodernism can be a lot like standing in an appliance store trying to watch three or four television shows at once. It defies definition because it is extremely complex, often contradictory, and constantly changing.” Owing to this fact, postmodern drama can be sketched as a set of critical, rhetorical and strategic practices using a wide range of techniques such as aleatory, alienation effect, aura, collage and montage, contradiction, cyberspace, decentering, difference, ephemerality, fabulation, fluid identity, fragmentation, intertextuality, magical realism, paranoia, participation, *petits recits*, *poioumena*, revision, self-reflexivity, simulacrum and temporal distortion. This already complex matrix has been further enriched, for example, by literary theorist Ihab Hassan (1980) – with *antiform*, *anarchy*, *exhaustion/silence*, *absence*, *parataxis*, *rhizome/surface* and *indeterminacies* –, by the American postmodernist John Barth (1984) – with *exhaustion* and *replenishment* – and by one of the most prominent theorists of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon (1988 and 1994), – with *historiographic metafiction*, *pastiche* and *irony*. The use of these techniques has transformed both the forms and contents of drama and destabilized the dominant concepts, including *authenticity*, *epistemic certainty*, *historical progress*, *linearity*, *presence*, *stability*, *univocal identity* and *univocity of meaning*.¹⁵ To narrow down the wide scope of features of postmodern drama in the present dissertation, I outline a number of these that are most appropriate to my readings of Parks’s plays.

Postmodern drama functions to question and challenge the dominant orders of hierarchy and patriarchy in an effort to free thoughts from outworn ideologies and metanarratives. According to the French literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard (1984, 60), in postmodernity, faith in metanarratives has ebbed, and thus, knowledge has had to seek its legitimation not universally but locally. Building on Lyotard’s definition, Linda Hutcheon (1989, 39) argues that postmodernism “is characterized by no grand totalizing master narrative but by smaller and multiple narratives

¹⁵ Here, it is worth remarking that some of the techniques of postmodernism, including intertextuality, collage and montage, alienation effect and self-reflexivity, appear to duplicate some of those present in modernist literary works. The main reason is that – unlike Radical Postmodernism, which is a critique of modernism and calls for a radical break with modernism, – Strategic Postmodernism or postmodernism of “progress” acknowledges the convergence between modernism and postmodernism and attempts to rethink and rewrite modernism in order to deepen the critique already begun by modernism (Heaphy 2007, 50–68). Seen in this light, there are lines of continuity and some commonalities between modernism and postmodernism and their techniques.

which do not seek (or obtain) any universalizing stabilization or legitimation.” Based on these observations, postmodern drama seems to be characterized by a rejection of metanarratives in order to introduce mininarratives that are provisional, contingent and relational. I argue that since postmodern drama has the potential to replace the homogenous and monolithic identity of marginalized voices with heterogeneous and plural identities, it has been adopted by those playwrights who have “a decisive political agenda, above all by feminist and/or ethnic writers” (Schmidt 2005, 23) to create incredulity toward the dominant orders of hierarchy and patriarchy.

Likewise, Parks’s postmodern drama promotes the development of a political agenda to confront the metanarratives and dominant ideologies subjugating African Americans, mainly because Parks’s plays show a penchant for the revival of neglected and repressed discourses, among them African Americans’. Accordingly, her plays draw upon aspects of dominant social systems that have abused power to denigrate African Americans and deprive them of their rights. Parks represents figures and/or characters that are forced to live in and interact with the social systems of hierarchy and patriarchy as defined by dominant political forces. As a result, her plays, either read or performed, shake up those systems in societies which are still conducting, supporting and following those ideologies, either consciously or unconsciously. Her plays open our eyes to race, class and gender oppressions suffered by African Americans throughout history, create awareness in her readers to critically assess those ideologies and encourage further social change and progress. In this sense, Parks’s drama is the drama of the marginal, since it offers African Americans the possibility of critiquing essentialism and reshape their identities. As feminist author bell hooks (1993, 515; emphasis added) observes:

The critique of *essentialism* encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity. . . . Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of the self and the assertion of agency. . . . Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience.

In a similar manner, Parks notes that “there is no single ‘Black Aesthetic’” and that “African Americans should recognize this insidious *essentialism* for what it is: a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of being” (Parks 1995c, 21–22; emphasis added). Building on hooks’s and Parks’s observations, I argue that the employment of a critique of essentialism in the form of postmodern drama enables Parks to call into question essentialist knowledge and its legitimacy which have imposed a fixed identity on African Americans and reduced them “to only one way of

being.” To put it differently, to eschew that trap, Parks questions the identity and history of being and embraces the identity and history of becoming through her postmodern drama, which has the potential to question the faith in traditional conceptions of identity and history and place them in doubt and flux. As postmodern historiographer Keith Jenkins (1997, 20) comments, postmodernism sets the stage for those people who have been deprived of the opportunity to write down their histories, and accordingly it “‘free[s] up’ historians to tell many equally legitimate stories from various viewpoints.” Hence, postmodern drama questions the total absolute concepts of Identity, History and Truth and replaces them with many identities, histories and truths, providing the ground for the arrival of multiple narratives, or rather counter-narratives, which include and represent the views of African Americans.

My argument with regard to postmodern drama is also related to Hayden White’s concept of “Metahistory,” which signifies that postmodernism rejects any totalizing view of history, while creating awareness that history is a discourse and not an absolute truth. Since postmodernism maintains that there exists no absolute truth, it follows that there exists no basis for absolute meaning; rather, meanings are individually or socially constructed. This implies that no single fixed meaning and interpretation of history exists, but, in its stead, a plurality of readings and interpretations that may be influenced by the interests of individuals, groups and nations. Due to this, postmodern drama perceives history as a linguistic construct of man-made discourses which are not given or natural. These constructs and discourses – which consist of sets of words, selected, assembled and emplotted into narratives with plots – contain traces that betray them as contradictory, ironical and paradoxical. In revisiting and reexamining the historical texts, which, according to literary critic Jeanette R. Malkin (1999, 20), “challenge the usual representations of the past,” postmodern drama foregrounds ironies and paradoxes that, due to their critical and subversive power, can help readers to pinpoint the contradictions within historical texts. This implies that postmodern drama does not deny history but invites readers to rethink and reenvision it in an attempt to “rehistoricize”¹⁶ history rather than “dehistoricize” it (Hutcheon 1988, 115). Postmodern drama seeks for self-reflexive history wherein readers can be more aware of some of the limitations, interests and biases behind the historians’ writings.

¹⁶ Rejecting literary scholar Andreas Huyssen’s idea that postmodernism relegates history to the “dustbin of an obsolete episteme,” Hutcheon (1993, 256) believes that “[h]istory is not made obsolete; it is, however, being rethought – as a human construct.” By the same token, as Hassan (1993, 274) observes, “postmodernism may appear as a significant revision,” since it denies the objectivity of historians.

To rehistoricize history, postmodern drama fictionalizes it, which implies that “history itself may be a form of fiction” (McHale 1987, 96). Literary theorist Brian McHale (Ibid.) argues that “[i]n postmodernist revisionist historical fiction, history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional and fiction becoming ‘true’ history – and the real world seems to get lost in the shuffle.” Hutcheon introduced the term “historiographic metafiction” to refer to the literary works that fictionalize historical figures and/or events. Accordingly, the inclusion of historical documentation within plays and the treatment of history as man-made discourses which require reenvisioning and rehistoricizing are some of the features of postmodern drama. A number of postmodern playwrights, including Parks, employ historical figures in their plays that, for instance, travel to the present and meet with fictional characters. The use of historical figures along with fictional and in cases contemporary ones creates a stylistic hybridity, while also creating the ground for addressing and recontextualizing old themes and motifs.

The tendency to address and recontextualize old themes and motifs through parody and intertextuality undermines their originality. Postmodern drama parodies other literary works, uses their forms, genres, quotations – either true or fake –, allusions or other means to replay the past, compare it with the present and recontextualize former forms of representation. As drama scholar Kerstin Schmidt (2005, 36) notes, “postmodern drama is inherently intertextual. It does not simply deny its predecessors, nor does it try to eliminate the tradition.” Thus, postmodern drama “quotes from a wide range of other texts.”¹⁷ In addition to parody and intertextuality, postmodern drama may use “double-coding”¹⁸ as well as “palimpsest”¹⁹ techniques. In *Theater and Its Double*, the French playwright Antonin Artaud (1958, 74) states that “[m]asterpieces of the past are good for the past: they are not good for us.” Building on Schmidt’s and Artaud’s views, I argue that parody and intertextuality, double-coding and palimpsest can be used in postmodern drama to link the present to the past, rewrite the masterpieces of the past, recontextualize their old themes and motifs

¹⁷ In a similar remark, Schmidt (2005, 21) observes that “[p]ostmodern drama draws on a variety of cultural predecessors to involve them into its . . . project,” and this involvement makes postmodern drama enter into “multifaceted relationships with other texts” (Ibid., 37).

¹⁸ In architecture, “double coding” is used to describe the architects’ attempts to establish links between the present and the past through blending new techniques with old patterns in a construction. For instance, they fit new buildings into old structures; thus, a building may look quite old or ancient, but upon entering it, one finds it totally new and advanced.

¹⁹ In palimpsest, the original text of an old manuscript made of papyrus or paper is partially erased or scraped, and this makes room for a new text to be written on the layers of the original one which results in the creation of a hybrid text. Schmidt (2005, 38) contends that “the palimpsest provides a . . . model for explaining how layers of different texts and discourses are built upon each other.” Based on these definitions, one can assume that the palimpsest offers a multi-layered text which includes both the old and the new views.

and make them proper for and relevant to present conditions. In her essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which makes a direct reference to T. S. Eliot’s 1921 essay by the same title, Parks (1999, 26–31), like Eliot, expresses her penchant for embracing tradition, while using her personal experiences and individual talent to appropriate it for the present time. Thus, she does not reject tradition; on the contrary, her plays maintain a relationship with other texts of different genres – literary, legal, medical, historical either directly or indirectly – in innovative contexts, originating from her use of postmodern techniques. Parks’s interest in the past and her commitment to evoke it through parody and intertextuality is critical rather than nostalgic, since there is no sentimental longing or wistful yearning for the past.

Postmodern drama also looks for the death of centers, “from the ‘death of god’ to the ‘death of the author’ and ‘death of the father’” (Hassan 1986, 505). Postmodern drama presents a redefinition of the functions of performers,²⁰ who are no longer considered mere agents controlled by playwrights, and, thus, no longer correspond to their conventional functions. In fact, the “death of the author” or here rather the “death of the playwright” occurs in postmodern drama, and accordingly performers play key roles in recreating plays. In his essay “Death of the Author” (1977), the French semiotician Roland Barthes argues against the practices and principles of traditional literary criticism, which incorporate the author’s biographical and historical backgrounds and intentions in interpreting the literary works. To Barthes, this method of interpretation actually imposes a limit on the text. By the same token, in postmodern drama the playwright is subordinate to the concept of the structure or discourse of the playscript. The absence or dearth of stage directions and character descriptions allows readers and performers more freedom for their own interpretations and experimentations and accelerates the process of the “death of the playwright” and the “birth of readers and performers.” Contexts, dialogues and communications are subverted, and the application of innovative techniques are interpreted and implemented differently by different readers and performers. The utilization of these techniques shows the flexibility and fluidity of postmodern drama wherein the dramaturgical decisions about the playscripts are left open.

In her plays, Parks rarely uses stage directions and avoids using character descriptions. As she writes: “The action goes in the line of dialogue instead of always in a pissy set of parentheses. *How* the line should be delivered is contained in the line itself. Stage directions disappear” (Parks

²⁰ Performers in my definition include not only the actors and actresses but also the directors, lighting engineers, stage and costume designers and others who are directly and indirectly engaged in the production of a play.

1995d, 15–16; original emphasis). Likewise, in the interview with Ong (2014, 39; emphasis added), she contends that

95 percent of the action, in all of my plays, is in the line of text. So you don't get a lot of parenthetical stage direction. I've written, within the text, specific directions to them, to guide their breathing, to guide the way they walk, whether or not they walk, whether or not they walk with a limp, whatever. They know what to do from what they say and how they say it. *The specifics of it are left up to the actor and the director.* The internals are in the line, the externals are left up to them.

The absence of character descriptions and dearth of stage directions manifest Parks's resignation from pre-directing the performances and her desire to free the performers from her imagined "author"ity²¹ and to grant performers the freedom to decide how to present her plays. The French theater critic Bernard Dort refers to this condition as "the emancipation of performance" (qtd. in Connor 1997, 145), which results in performance fluidity and diversity as well as "impersonalism," implying "a 'disconnection' of author from work" (Caramello 1983, 25). The emancipation of performance makes the playscript distinct from its diverse performances, since each performer inevitably interprets and implements the playscript in a different manner. In this intellectual climate, each new performance of any of the plays seems to be a new gestalt. Consequently, postmodern dramatic forms become transformative and ever-shifting. This is what Hans-Thies Lehmann, the German theater scholar, refers to as "postdramatic theatre" in his book entitled *Postdramatic Theatre*. Lehmann (2006) deals with a number of traits and stylistic features which have been used in drama and theater since the late 1960s. Lehmann's postdramatic theatre "is not primarily focused on the drama in itself, but evolves a performative aesthetic in which the text of the drama is put in a special relation to the material situation of the performance and the stage" (Gemtou 2014, 3–4), and thus it lays its emphasis on the interaction between performers and audiences rather than the playscript.

As a result of this interaction, postmodern drama becomes participatory. It invites readers and performers to decide over the interpretations of the playscripts and to fill in the gaps which exist in the playscripts or performances. This can be seen as a transition from having passive readers and performers to active agents who can function as co-producers of the plays. Here, I should note that, in addition to the absence of character descriptions and dearth of stage directions, the use of Rests and Spells, generic figures' and/or characters' names and puzzling use of numbers

²¹ I came up with this formulation in conjunction with Pamela B. June's (2010, 4) book *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*, where she writes that the authors of postmodern novels question and subvert "author"itative objectivity.

accelerates readers' participation in the process of decodification. Naturally, readers' interpretations may differ from one another, simply because each reader, affected by their ethnicity, gender and class as well as their religious, political and cultural orientations, approaches the play differently.

Under these circumstances, postmodern drama assumes that no ultimate reading and meaning exists and accordingly no single interpretation. Parks has clearly expressed her interest in flight from a fixed easy interpretation in her essay "From Elements of Style." As she writes, in bad math " $x + y = \text{meaning}$. The ability to make simple substitutions is equated with *clarity*" (Parks 1995d, 14; original emphasis). Parks's words reveal that she is not interested in easy equations which are easily deciphered but, as she says, "obscured" ones (Ibid., 15). Her lack of interest in single meanings subverts fixity and finality and questions the formation of one single structure. In this, she aligns with postmodern drama that favors "writerly texts" or "texts of bliss" rather than "readerly texts" or "texts of pleasure." In his *S/Z*, Barthes (1974) draws a distinction between *lisible* ("readerly") and *scriptible* ("writerly") texts. The readerly texts, Barthes argues, are presented in a plain, linear, straightforward manner which demands no special effort in order to be digested. In such texts, meaning is fixed and pre-determined, since they avoid the use of elements that would open up the text to multiple interpretations. By contrast, in writerly texts, meaning is no longer evident; readers are not passive receivers of information as they are required to take part in the construction of meanings. In other words, in postmodern drama the stable meaning or metanarrative of readerly texts is replaced by a proliferation of meanings or mininarratives, simply because the writerly texts make use of such elements that the readerly texts attempt to avoid. Later, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes (1975) introduces and distinguishes two types of texts: *plaisir* ("pleasure") and *jouissance* ("bliss"). Their distinctions correspond to the distinctions between readerly and writerly texts. The text of pleasure corresponds to the readerly text, while the text of bliss corresponds to the writerly text which explodes the literary codes and provides the grounds for readers to come up with multiple meanings. Barthes (1975, 14) defines "text of bliss" as "the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language."

This plurality of readings and meanings makes postmodern drama dynamic, ceaselessly oscillating between two poles of "presentation" and "representation," "making" and "unmaking," "signifier" and "signified." These nonstop oscillations create interpretations and simultaneously

impugn the interpretations they have just created. As Hutcheon (1993, 243) writes, “postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges.” As a result, interpretation becomes plural and indeterminate and saves the playscripts from closure and completion. Therefore, the playscripts can be seen as the signifier, and diverse readings, interpretations or performances of the playscripts can be accounted as multiple signifieds that are not constituted based on the intentions of the playwright but rather those of readers and performers.

In this climate, “indeterminacies” – which according to Hassan (1986, 504–505) “include all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society . . . and pervade our actions, ideas, interpretations” – are unsatisfying to those who seek clarity and final meaning. In her interview with Ong (2014, 43), Parks talks about a young man who stood up in a theater after a performance of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* to complain that he did not understand a single word.²² That is because her plays, as she claims, “are like complex carbohydrates, nourishing but difficult to digest, and for some even to watch” (Garrett 2000). Kushner (1997, 63) endorses this view in “The Art of the Difficult”: “You won’t find [Parks’s plays] easy reads any more than you might have found them easy sits. Perhaps they’re even harder reads than sits.” Parks’s plays are considered hard due to their complex organization in which the texts are plural and indeterminate and require readers to engage in performing duets with them. Each reader plays their part based on their orientations and experience.

Parks’s texts are plural and indeterminate as she deconstructs the concepts of place and time and no longer follows a linear plot, creating “disintegration” in Hassan’s terms. Time no longer presents a progressive coherent linear movement, and it intermingles past, present and future. Consequently, “time,” as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1996, 25) writes, “is no longer a river, but a collection of ponds and pools.” It is repeated, revised, slowed down, accelerated, halted, stretched and so on, which results in the creation of omnitemporality and time distortion. Place may also become dislodged and “multiperspectival,” a space with multiple variables. Thus, Parks’s plays are set in a world wherein time and place are fluid and slide away from the norms

²² Elsewhere Parks (in Jiggetts 1996, 312) comments on the readability of the plays:

I think I provide the map. . . . And what I try to do is say there are 10 roads, 20, 50 roads – take one. I get a kick out of just seeing what people do. I think that the playwright provides the map. But I think a bad play only has a one-way road. Yes, I think the bad play has one road; one idea, one message, one way of doing it. It’s so much about one thing. And everybody walks out of the theater going, “Yeah, homelessness is bad,” for example. That’s not a map; I don’t know what it is. It’s bad art.

of logic, creating “fragmentation,” which as Hassan (1986, 505) observes, catalyzes indeterminacies. Fragmentation, which in Schmidt’s (2005, 20) view is “a defining trait of postmodern drama,” creates the ground for Parks’s figures and/or characters to travel back and forth in history, “dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing” and record them (Parks 1995e, 4).

Fragmentation is further emphasized by the use of the “Rep. & Rev. & Ref.” (i.e. Repetition and Revision and Reference) technique. The application of Rep. & Rev. & Ref. disturbs the linear progression of time, and examples of Rep. & Rev. & Ref. abound in Parks’s plays. Parks describes Rep. & Rev. technique as follows: “In such pieces we are not moving from A–B but rather, for example, from A–A–B–A. Through such movement, we refigure A. And if we wish to call the movement FORWARD PROGRESSION, which I think it is, then we refigure the concept of forward progression” (qtd. in Rayner & Elam Jr. 1994, 447). Rep. & Rev. technique starts with a phrase and continues with its repetition (Rep.) and modification (Rev.). Rep. is used to preserve, while Rev. is used to develop an idea further. In his interview with Parks, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. (2007b, 129) adds another element to Rep. & Rev. The new element evolves the formula to: Rep. & Rev. & “Ref.” The supplementary element signifies the widespread use of references in the form of intertexts, metatexts and paratexts in her plays. To further fragment the plays and create indeterminacies, Parks employs Rest and Spell, footnotes, glossaries, songs and plays within plays – which will be discussed in detail when analyzing the plays in the following chapters.

My contention is that some of the indeterminacies created in Parks’s plays originate from the linguistic plurality that activates the infinite play between signs and referents, signifiers and signifieds. The linguistic indeterminacies that manifest themselves in wordplays, puns, the use of technical vocabularies and different languages embrace a plurality of interpretations. Additionally, Parks’s use of different languages juxtaposed through linguistic bricolage breaks the frame of the dominant language and raises polyvocality. In introducing the voices of African Americans, Parks also employs a variety of vernacular dialects and, resonant with the rhythms of African American speech, spells words phonetically. A glance at Parks’s plays manifests that vernacular dialect that she employs in, for instance, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is different from the dialect she uses in *Venus* or in *Fucking A*. This diversity of the vernacular indicates that Parks favors language fluidity, embracing polyphony and multivocation rather than a monolithic African American vernacular English. In this way, Parks also promotes linguistic fluidity to blur the defined boundaries between high and low languages and cultures, a

characteristic strategy for postmodern drama that seeks to reject “all forms of elitism” and to incorporate “pop art forms, such as television, film and others” (Schmidt 2005, 41).

As a result of such incorporation, postmodern drama has been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the development of communication technologies as well as the mass media, and it often utilizes a wide range of media devices and technologies such as TV and radio as metaphors of control to arrest the viewers’ attention and direct their views. Through the use of these devices and technologies, playwrights can represent the ubiquity of the media in life and criticize the mediated culture in postmodernity and their key roles in disseminating the ideologies of the dominant political and social systems. For instance, TV news, claiming to present disinterested “facts,” is repeated at regular intervals, feeding viewers with a series of news from different parts of the world with a number of images that appear in quick succession. The use of media in drama may result in the decrease of the number of actual performers, since TV and radio sets can replace the actual bodies of performers (Schmidt 2005, 82).

Furthermore, the use of the mass media, particularly that of TV, radio and newspaper employed in a number of Parks’s plays, signifies, in Hassan’s (1993, 281) phrasing, “rhizome/surface” which is in sharp contrast with “root/depth.” Rhizome/surface in this study denotes 1) the way the media often deal with issues in a shallow and superficial manner, 2) how the media cannot or do not provide the viewers with all “facts” concerning the issues they represent, 3) how media representation and coverage of events is partial and biased and 4) how the media use repetition and revision in their representation to absorb viewers’ and/or readers’ attention and feed them with repeated opinions and aural-visual images. Furthermore, due to optionality, viewers can do constant channel surfing between the media and channels, catching maybe only fragments of any given program, which in turn increases the rhizome/surface phenomenon. I should note that the unilateral pattern or mono-directional nature of communication as a major trait of the media is distancing and leaves little room for viewers and/or readers to participate and express their own views.

All in all, postmodern drama provides a platform for questioning and challenging prevailing stereotypes that suppress differences and maintain the hegemonic legitimation of power. In their potential to create incredulity toward negative portrayals and stereotypes, Parks’s postmodern plays challenge the racist and sexist stereotypes ascribed to African Americans. This can be seen in the attention she pays to the intersectional issue of race, class and gender inequality. In her study of contemporary African American women playwrights, Beatrix Taumann (1999, 6) comments: “The casting of a contrasting image by a minority playwright is always an act of resistance against

existing ideological structures. Black women in America have been and continue to be confronted with numerous stereotypes, images of 'black,' of 'woman,' and of 'black woman.'" In this fashion, Parks uses stereotypes in order to resist and confront them.

The above-mentioned features are some of the hallmarks of postmodern drama which I will trace and analyze in the selected plays by Parks. Through employing postmodern devices, Parks dismantles the fixed conception of identity and creates incredulity toward the dominant ideologies, which still work to maintain that identity of being for African Americans, while she attempts to fill in the cracks created in the structures of those ideologies with some mininarratives. In her plays, the figures and/or characters, mostly coming from the already existing slave narratives, are both historical and contemporary, fluid between past, present and future. They appear to narrate their mininarratives that have been either denied or unrecorded, creating a site of remembrance and resistance to reshape African Americans' identities. In addition to reflecting a postmodern fluid concept of identities, Parks adopts African American feminist standpoints in the plays studied in this dissertation.

1.3 African American Feminism

The efforts of African American women authors and activists shifted Feminism, which had been mainly based on elitist white women's experiences and gender inequality, from being a monolithic concept to plural feminisms. This transition, which can be considered a link between African American feminism and postmodernism, creates the ground for African American feminists to question the white women's solipsism or the domination, universality and unilaterality of Feminism as another type of metanarrative. As hooks (1984, x) writes, "much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin." She concludes that Feminism "lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences." Thus, African American feminists attempt to highlight the issue of race, gender and class inequalities that inhabit the multiplicity of African American women's mininarratives and experiences. As African American Studies scholar Hazel V. Carby (1997, 50–51) observes: "The herstory of black women is interwoven with that of white women but this does not mean that they are the same story. Nor do we need white feminists to write our herstory for us, we can and are doing that for ourselves." Furthermore, she argues that "Black women do not want to be grafted onto 'feminism' in a tokenistic manner. . . . Feminism has to be transformed if it is to address us"

(Ibid., 52). The rationale behind these observations is that Feminism was not an inclusive movement, since it had failed to take the rights of black women into account, and that decenteredness was needed.

As a result, African American feminism developed out of the Women's Movement and the Black Liberation Movement in order to meet the requirements of African American women who were racially oppressed in the former movement and sexually oppressed in the latter one. As Civil Rights activist Pauli Murray (1995, 186) maintains: "Black women, historically, have been doubly victimized by the twin immoralities of Jim Crow and Jane Crow." Murray defines Jane Crow as "the entire range of assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements that have robbed women of a positive self-concept and prevented them from participating fully in society as equals with men" (Ibid., 185). Faced with the sexism of black men and the racism of white women, African American women decided to form a movement of their own – a movement that could exclusively meet their requirements and address the ways sexism and racism had affected their personal and social lives – and presume an image of African American women as powerful, independent subjects.

According to sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 233), the core themes of African American feminism consist of "work and family, negative controlling images, struggles for self-definition in cultural contexts that deny Black women agency, sexual politics that make Black women vulnerable to sex work, rape, and media objectification, and understandings of motherwork within Black women's politics." Based on such arguments, an early Civil Rights activist Mary Church Terrell (1904, 292) argued that "[n]ot only are colored women . . . handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women." Anna Julia Cooper uses the term "double enslavement" to describe the condition of African American women (see King 1995, 294), and in a similar vein, Frances Beale uses the term "double jeopardy" to argue the race-gender effects that subjugate African American women (Ibid., 296). However, nowadays the triple jeopardy of race-class-gender is a widely used concept (Ibid., 297).

African American feminism relies especially on African American women's distinctive personal and common experiences and mininarratives. In this light, each and every African American woman should be able to locate and share her own personal mininarratives with other women and expand the domains of knowledge amongst African American women. While stressing the importance of individual African American woman's mininarratives, Hill Collins (2000, 32) writes:

Black feminist thought can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance.

On this account, African American feminism seeks for black women's empowerment and transformation, and thus it invites black women to bring their daily, neglected mininarratives to the collective consciousness which "can have a profound impact in stimulating resistance" and creating empowerment for them (Ibid., 275). Consequently, they endeavor to combat the interlocking oppressive effects of sex, race, class and gender axes, creating "simultaneity of oppression" in feminist activist Barbara Smith's (1995, 256) terms, "Matrix of Domination" in Hill Collins's (2000, 18) terms, "Politic of Domination" in hooks's (1984, 21) terms and "Intersectionality" in critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's (1991, 1241) terms.

As these terms imply, there are many different interconnected factors contributing to the way one might experience domination or discrimination. Intersectionality holds that various biological, economic, cultural, political and social categories – such as race, class, gender, sexual orientations and other axes of identity – interact, "creating a system of oppression that reflects the intersection of multiple forms of domination or discrimination" (Knudsen 2006, 62). The relationships among these various axes are like a mathematical equation, in which each axis has a single, direct, but additive effect on the equation. Since these distinctive systems of oppression are parts of "one overarching structure of domination" (Hill Collins 2005, 221), they must be confronted simultaneously; to wait for one to end before working on the others bears an ineffective result. Accordingly, "any analysis that focuses solely on one particular . . . category without recognizing its imbrication with other pertinent categories . . . will inevitably tend toward a universalizing of one particular social experience that is both false and obfuscating" (Harper 1994, 90–91). Thus, in the present dissertation, I explore the relationships among these interconnected categories being deployed in the formation of domination or discrimination.

To achieve empowerment, African American feminists also question and confront the dimensions of dominant knowledge and their legitimacy which function as metanarratives on several levels; namely, the level of personal experiences and the community level. These dimensions of dominant knowledge as discussed earlier include, for example, the negative controlling images and stereotypes that have perpetuated dehumanization for African American women and afflicted them in their personal and social lives. In parallel with confronting those

metanarratives, African American feminists provide their own dimensions of their knowledge which can provide a “unique angle of vision on self, community, and society” (Hill Collins 1991, 22) and reflect their standpoints. To this end, African American feminists have designed a roadmap with four major themes:

First, African American feminism is committed to confront the “interlocking” and “overarching” systems of race, class and gender oppressions.

Second, there exists considerable diversity among African American women. This diversity to a great extent originates from black women’s lived individual and/or shared experiences.²³ African American feminism cannot thus be seen as a monolithic and static ideology.

Third, African American feminism emphasizes the promotion of African American women’s empowerment through “creating self-definition and self-valuation which enable them to establish positive, multiple images and to repel negative, controlling representations of Black womanhood” (Taylor 1998, 234–235).

Fourth, it recognizes African American women’s legacy of struggle and urges them to intertwine intellectual thought with social and political action in order to resist and transform daily discriminations (Hill Collins 1991 and 2000; Guy-Sheftall 1995, 10).

Hill Collins (2000, 22) sums these themes up by saying that African American feminism “aims to empower African American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions.” Whether one chooses to use the term African American feminism, Black feminism or Black American feminism, the overarching purpose of the movement is to develop theories which could adequately address the way race, class, sex and gender were interconnected with African American women’s lives and to take action to resist oppressions and stop racist and sexist discriminations.

One of the theories that evolved out of African American feminism is “womanism.” Womanism is a social change perspective which has generated debates and controversies. Alice

²³ A number of contemporary black feminist scholars have emphasized African American women’s lived and individual experiences as the basis of their collective empowerment (Spaulding 2005, 15). Hill Collins (2000, 36) believes that African American women can achieve mobilization and empowerment through using their diverse individual experiences to create collective identities. As she writes:

Individual African American women have long displayed varying types of consciousness regarding our shared angle of vision. When these individual expressions of consciousness are articulated, argued through, contested, and aggregated in ways that reflect the heterogeneity of Black womanhood, a collective group consciousness dedicated to resisting oppression becomes possible. Black women’s ability to forge these individual, often unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is key to Black women’s survival.

Walker, who is credited with popularizing the term, has offered varied definitions on the concept of womanism under four entries²⁴ – each of which includes different paradigms – that altogether make the term more debatable and controversial. As a result of the different paradigms that womanists like Walker have invested in it, there exists no single constitutive definition for womanism, but rather varying interpretations on what the concept means. More broadly, womanism seeks to subvert racial and gender oppressions and inequalities for all people. To Walker, a womanist is “[c]ommitted to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (Walker 1983, xi; original emphasis). However, at its core, womanism is considered to be a perspective based upon the experiences of black women. Therefore, a number of black feminists perceive little difference between African American feminism and womanism,²⁵ since they both struggle against racism and sexism imposed on black women and support a common agenda of black women’s self-definition and self-valuation. As historian of black women Barbara Omolade (1994, xx) points out: “Black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by Black women who are themselves part of the Black community’s efforts to achieve equity and liberty.” On this account, African American feminism and womanism seem to become virtually interchangeable; however, not all critics agree on considering the two terms to be interchangeable.

To narrow down the wide scope of womanism, I briefly outline the features of womanism that are appropriate to my reading of Parks’s plays. Walker’s construction of womanism is a partial

²⁴ Womanist 1. From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish”, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker 1983, xi)

²⁵ Journalist and news producer Taigi Smith (2002, 62) notes:

I declared myself a womanist when I realized that white women’s feminism really didn’t speak to my needs as the daughter of a black, single, domestic worker. I felt that, historically, white women were working hard to liberate themselves from housework and childcare, while women of color got stuck cleaning their kitchens and raising their babies. When I realized that feminism largely liberated white women at the economic and social expense of women of color, I knew I was fundamentally unable to call myself a feminist.

effort to acknowledge the contribution of African American women to society, which can provide them with opportunities to prove their capabilities for the attainment of equality in society. By the same token, in addition to the struggle against sexism and racism, womanism addresses the unity and solidarity of African American men and women. Having literally been in the same boat, African American men and women are invited to promote a political agenda and cooperate together against the racial oppression and inequality that have affected their lives. Thus, Walker does not exclude men, because without a commitment to unity and solidarity, the movement might be doomed to failure. Rather, she calls for building a nonsexist cooperation among African Americans, regardless of their gender. It is through this cooperation that African Americans manage to “obliterate the corrosive system of dominance, manipulation, exploitation” (Bambara 1970, 164). The integrity and solidarity between African American men and women would ensure their survival and change their future for the better.

Affirming this point, political activist Angela Davis (1989, 5) states that “[w]e must strive to ‘lift as we climb’ . . . We climb in such a way as to guarantee that all of our sisters and brothers, regardless of social class, and indeed all of our brothers climb with us. This must be the essential dynamic of our quest for power.” Thus, womanism gives priority to the cooperation of African American men and women in their struggle against racism, classism and sexism. In this sense, “[w]omanism does not see the man as [a woman’s] primary enemy as does the White feminist” (Hudson-Weems 1998, 25) and “seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender-oppression without attacking black men” (Hill Collins 2000, 11). As a result of this coalition, womanism becomes a process of self-conscious struggle that requires unity to overcome oppressions and segregations. Put simply, womanism is concerned with fortifying unity and integrity between African American men and women, seeking liberation for the entire race from interlocking oppressions as well as negative images and derogatory stereotypes.

A number of Parks’s plays deal with the experiences of African American women. These plays depict some of the concerns of African American women originating from race, class and gender intersectionality that have created negative images of them and have diminished their chances for empowerment and equity in society. In some of the plays, Parks deemphasizes the binary opposition of the male/female dichotomy and gender differences in order to create unity and solidarity among her figures and/or characters. Hence, while investigating the intersections of race, class and gender identities in her plays, Parks refuses to exclude men and their concerns and instead invites women to cooperate with men in order to challenge oppression and to attain

empowerment. In this dissertation, my readings of Parks's plays are grounded on these definitions and dimensions of African American feminism.

1.4 Aims and Methods

As noted earlier, in this dissertation I approach three of Parks's plays – *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *Venus* (1996) and *Fucking A* (2000) – from the standpoints of postmodern drama and African American feminism with a focus on the terrains that reflect the quest/ion of African Americans' identities, particularly those of African American women. These plays have much in common, and despite their differences in subject, characterization, theme and structure, they lend themselves readily to the interdisciplinary purposes of this dissertation.

What makes these three plays appropriate for my study is that they respond to the paradigm shift of postmodern drama and to African American feminism in order to create incredulity toward the dominant systems of oppression and raise the quest/ion of identities for African Americans. These plays offer representations of metanarratives and dominant ideologies with regard to African Americans, revealing the mainstream's justifications for their discriminative views, based on the annals of history, stereotypicality, traditional hierarchy, religious abuse or misunderstanding and pseudo-scientific racism as well as the dominant ideologies of the economic, social and political systems. Moreover, the plays portray the patriarchal and hierarchical oppressions imposed on African American women in order to question and challenge the dominant order of hierarchy and patriarchy and seek empowerment and transformation for African American women. Since *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *Venus* and *Fucking A* center on black female experiences, their inclusion in my analysis is crucial.²⁶

To bring the issue of identities into focus in this dissertation, I use a range of the most significant contributions to the studies of identity, especially Stuart Hall's theorizations, and situate them in relation to the selected plays by Parks with regard to postmodern drama and African American feminism. Since history and its (re)writing is an essential ingredient in the (re)formation of identities, in this endeavor I draw upon the historical elements of Parks's plays in order to show

²⁶ Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *In the Blood*, which have also received notable critical acclaim, could qualify for the same interdisciplinary analysis; however, the pressing need to delimit the scope of my research in this dissertation prevented me from including them.

how she rehistoricizes history to reshape African Americans' identities. To this end, I explicate how the contents and forms of her plays work to "otherize" rather than "authorize" the Great Whole of History through questioning the annals of history as another form of metanarratives and the ways that readers imagine and experience history and receive recorded accounts thereof and rewriting African Americans into history.

In addition to theories of identity, I focus on a number of related theories with regard to postmodern drama as well as African American feminism in order to explore the ways Parks's plays critique the dominant order of hierarchy and patriarchy. I examine the ways that her plays lend themselves to the concerned theories of postmodern drama and African American feminism to utter the concerns of African Americans, particularly African American women, and to reshape identities for them. Subsequently, in each chapter I study one of her plays. I first present some relevant background information with regard to the plays and then apply the theoretical framework to their analysis.

To demarcate my discussions with regard to postmodern drama and to keep them within a manageable scope, I focus on those dimensions of postmodernism which constitute a discussion of postmodern drama. I draw upon a number of theories in the field of postmodern drama, such as those of Schmidt and Lehmann, and apply them to Parks's plays. I argue that Parks employs postmodern devices and techniques to transform the conventional features of playwriting, to create indeterminacies and incredulity toward the dominant systems of oppression and to introduce her mininarratives in the dominant discourses to set the stage for African Americans' identity reformation by changing readers' perceptions of African Americans. The employment of these devices and techniques helps Parks revitalize the histories and cultural memories of African Americans.

Parallel with the theories of postmodern drama, I employ German playwright Bertolt Brecht's theories on "epic theater." According to Hutcheon (1988, 219), both postmodern drama and epic theater "place the receiver in a paradoxical position, . . . [they are] participatory and critical: we are to be thoughtful and analytic, rather than either passive or unthinkingly empathetic." In addition, she believes that both postmodern drama and epic theater challenge "the concepts of linearity, development and causality" (Ibid.) and replace them with contradiction, nonlinearity and instability to make readers and audiences become thoughtful and analytic instead of being passive and sympathetic. As Schmidt (2005, 33) contends, postmodern drama, like epic theater, catalyzes "the reflection upon its own constituents and the attempt to unveil theatrical illusion." I track the elements of epic theater in Parks's plays and show how those elements can

create contemplation and participation, inviting readers to take a critical rather than an emotional stance toward the concerns of African Americans, especially African American women. In other words, Parks employs the techniques of epic dramaturgy in order to show the various hierarchal and patriarchal power relations and to stimulate and critically engage readers with her themes, which self-reflexively deal with dominant ideologies and their roles in the construction of patriarchal hierarchy.

In the field of African American feminism, I utilize a range of associated theories, such as those of Hill Collins, hooks, Walker and Crenshaw. Their efforts to mark the terrain of African American feminism make this work possible, and my readings of Parks's plays are largely grounded on the works of these theorists. I deem it necessary to note that I treat race, class, gender and sexuality as intersecting rather than competing frameworks. I also cast a critical eye on the oppressions imposed by patriarchal system on white women in both *Venus* and *Fucking A*.

My contention is that both postmodern drama and African American feminism share a number of common concerns: both are concerned with disrupting the boundaries between the dominant and the marginal, masculine and feminine, high and popular cultures. Both create the ground for challenging the dominant ideologies and metanarratives, and accordingly the premises of postmodernism, which challenge and debunk the metanarratives overlaps with the endeavors of African American feminism to subvert gender norms, hierarchy, patriarchy and negative stereotypes of black women as forms of metanarratives. It is worth remarking that "the dominant discourses in [African Americans'] culture are invariably patriarchal" (Wolff 1990, 190), and thus African American feminism inspects the spaces which have been opened up by postmodern drama to question and discredit patriarchal domination and negative stereotypes and to assert the concerns and desires of African American women. Therefore, in its critique of patriarchy and negative stereotypes, African American feminism maintains a relationship with the trends of postmodern drama. In addition to challenging metanarratives, both postmodern drama and African American feminism create a ground for mininarratives to be heard and included in the dominant discourses. Hence, both cater to the interests of marginalized groups and provide them with the conceptual tools to assert their concerns and experiences (Schmidt 2005, 25). Moreover, they both favor a multiplicity of narratives and experiences that resist unilaterality and expand the domains of knowledge. In the present dissertation, I seek to delineate the ways in which Parks challenges the metanarratives with regard to African Americans to clear space for the inclusion of mininarratives. Furthermore, both postmodern drama and African American feminism evoke past events and their memories in order to question them and reform the present formed on the basis

of the past knowledges, and thus, any recall of the past is critical and not nostalgic. As Hutcheon (1988, 39) writes about postmodernism:

This is as far from 'nostalgia' as anyone could wish. Yet we have seen that Jameson and Eagleton, in their recent writings on postmodernism, attack it for being nostalgic in its relation to the past. But if nostalgia connotes evasion of the present, idealization of a (fantasy) past, or a recovery of that past as edenic, then the postmodernist ironic rethinking of history is definitely not nostalgic.

Building on Hutcheon's observation, I argue that the past and history of African Americans which are revisited in Parks's plays are not nostalgic but critical, since her plays evoke and revisit centuries of displacement, slavery, oppression, discrimination and exploitation that have afflicted African Americans in their personal and social lives.

In addition to the theories of postmodern drama and African American feminism, I use Parks's essays and interviews, which provide important tools for reading her plays. In her essays, Parks writes about such issues as the importance of rewriting history, the form and content of literary works, the function and significance of language and the creation of great literary works. However, her essays and interviews are discussed only to the extent that they provide insights into her plays. It is worth noting that even though my analyses in this dissertation mostly rely on the written, published scripts of Park's plays, in some cases I draw upon a number of performed scenes to support my arguments. However, since the priority is given to the playscripts, I use the term "drama" rather than "theater" and "reader(s)" rather than "audience(s)" to emphasize textuality rather than action.

Moreover, a number of Michel Foucault's concepts, including the "Medical Gaze," "Knowledge/Power," "Bio-power," "Heterotopia," and his theories with regard to "history" and "counterhistory," memory and questioning of documents are also employed to gain deeper insights into Parks's plays. Foucault's theories help explicate how Parks deconstructs the dominant hierarchal and patriarchal systems to reshape identities for African Americans, particularly African American women, who have been rendered either invisible or hypervisible, due to their race, sex, class and gender. All in all, Foucault's ideas about the relations between knowledge/power and body as well as the medical gaze – which seek for emancipation of women's bodies and mind from men's possession of knowledge/power and control – provide theoretical resources for feminism and stimulate its interests. On the basis of this, I associate Foucault's theories with African American feminism, too.

As previously mentioned, Parks is the first African American woman playwright to have won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Since this is one of the most prestigious prizes for dramatic art in the United States, its recipient can be seen as a superlative practitioner and exemplar of contemporary American drama. Owing to this fact, a number of critical works in the form of reviews, scholarly articles and books have already been published on her works. To date, four commentary books have been published on Parks's works, which are as follows: *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook*, edited by Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. and Alycia Smith-Howard (2007); *Suzan-Lori Parks*, written by Deborah R. Geis (2008); *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*, edited by Philip C. Kolin (2010); and *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks*, written by Jennifer Larson (2012). These books approach Parks's genres – play, novel, screenplay and essay – from different standpoints, provide analyses of them and address issues such as form, gender, ethnicity, creativity, musicality, history and language. They deal also with Parks's leitmotifs, particularly “digging,” “resurrecting” and “re-membering,” and investigate the theatrical devices used in her different genres.

Moreover, a chapter in the following four books has been allocated to an analysis of Parks's works:

1. *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (1999) by Jeanette R. Malkin deals with configurations of memory in postmodern drama and targets the intersection of three prominent fields: the current discourses on memory, the study of postmodern aesthetics and the reading of late twentieth-century dramatic texts. Under this triangular relationship, in the sixth chapter, entitled “Suzan-Lori Parks and the Empty (W)hole of Memory,” Malkin studies some of Parks's plays, including *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *The America Play*, focusing on their postmodern mindsets, preoccupation with questions of memory and the threat of erasure of African American history.
2. *Recovering the Black Female Body* (2000), edited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, focuses on the depictions of African American women's bodies in a number of literary works since the nineteenth century. The essays in the book “discover” the black female body through exploring its historical representations and “recover” the black female body through examining the African American writers' resistance against those representations. In the sixth chapter of the book, entitled “Body Language: The Black

Female Body and the Word in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*," Yvette Louis approaches Parks's play from the standpoint of Black feminism.

3. *The Theater of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama* (2005) by Kerstin Schmidt studies the relationship between postmodernism and contemporary drama. The book manifests some aspects of postmodern drama in theory and practice. In addition to Parks, Schmidt examines plays written by Jean-Claude van Itallie, Megan Terry and Rochelle Owens. The fifth chapter, entitled "Suzan-Lori Parks: 'Rep & Rev' Postmodernism," is an analysis of *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *The America Play*, and Schmidt traces the postmodern aesthetics of these plays.
4. *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (2008) by Lisa M. Anderson highlights the dramatic and political premises of black feminist drama and investigates the intersection of race, class and gender in twenty-first century drama. In the fourth chapter, entitled "Battling Images: Suzan-Lori Parks and Black Iconicity," Anderson explores and challenges the images and stereotypes of African American men and women and studies *Venus*, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* and *In the Blood* from the standpoints of Black feminism.

These critical works on Parks's plays along with some others, recorded in the bibliography, help me contribute to the growing body of criticism of Parks's plays. I build upon them to offer an analysis of Parks's plays from the standpoints of postmodern drama and African American feminism. On the one hand, my close reading of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *Venus* and *Fucking A* – which constitutes the major portion of my study – helps me explore a number of the metanarratives and dominant ideologies with regard to African Americans – represented in media, history, social and political systems – and examine the roles they have played to racially and sexually denigrate African Americans. On the other hand, the exploration of postmodern techniques and devices that Parks employs to create incredulity toward those metanarratives and incorporate her mininarratives into the dominant discourses to reshape African Americans' identities will add to the existing scholarship.

1.5 The Architecture of the Dissertation

The present dissertation consists of Chapter One: Introduction, in which I lay out the basic ideas of the work, followed by three main chapters and the conclusion. In Chapter Two, I discuss *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* from the perspectives of postmodern drama and African American feminism. I examine how the discourses of postmodernism enable Parks to increase incredulity toward a number of dominant ideologies and metanarratives and to create indeterminacies and plurality of interpretations. I also show how the use of postmodern aesthetics helps the playwright to create a *postmortem* state and suggest alternative perspectives which can resist and eventually break the monophony and monopoly of the dominant discourses. I probe how postmodern drama helps Parks to represent a typical image of a media-saturated society and to ironically address and question dominant ideologies, disseminated by the media against African Americans. My analysis of Parks's incredulity toward dominant ideologies and metanarratives continues with an examination of the play from African American feminist perspectives. I employ a range of associated theories to show how the play lends itself to the related theories and concerns of African American feminism and at the same time deemphasizes gender differences and the male/female dichotomy to create unity and solidarity among the figures.

In Chapter Three, I analyze the content and form of *Venus* in order to explore the repercussions that postmodern drama and Black feminism have exerted on the play. I first scrutinize the wide range of intertexts, metatexts and paratexts used in the play and argue how they help Parks to reshape the represented historical knowledge of the past, surpass the history of being and move toward the history of becoming. I focus on indeterminacies and paradoxes, embodied in the play's themes, form, characters, language, etc., which help the playwright to create incredulity toward the dominant ideologies with regard to black men and women. By the same token, I approach *Venus* from the standpoints of intersectionality, resulting in the "Penta Ps," namely the five rationales for The Venus's shows and autopsy, including *promotion* of white male anatomists and white race, *privilege* of whiteness, *perversion* of the black female body, culture and race, *profit* of white entertainers and *pleasure* of white male spectators and owners. I study the various interconnected biological, social and cultural categories and examine how pseudo-scientific racism and its claims as another form of metanarrative paved the way for white scientists to promote their own knowledge of human anatomy, privilege whiteness and pervert black womanhood. Finally, I probe how the perversion of the black female body and privilege of

whiteness set the scene for white entertainers to put women of African descent on public show in order to gain profit and prepared the ground for white spectators to gratify pleasure.

In Chapter Four, I study *Fucking A* from the standpoints of postmodern drama and African American feminism and examine how Parks deploys the discourses of postmodernism and African American feminism to address a number of social ills which have afflicted some members of societies in their personal and social lives. I also study how Parks proffers alternative perspectives through the use of postmodern aesthetics to create incredulity toward a number of dominant metanarratives manifesting themselves in the form of ruling economic, social, cultural and political systems as well as history. The exploration and critique of metanarratives continue from the perspective of African American feminism and its emphasis on the intersections of race, class and gender. I refer to a range of intersecting theories to show how *Fucking A* lends itself to these theories to utter the concerns of African American women and release them from the dominant ideologies that have entangled them throughout the history. In my analysis, the focus is on the terrains that reflect African Americans' quest/ion of identities.

Chapter Two

Sleep, Death's Twin-Brother:

The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World

If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down
the long, dark and shameful corridors of time
reserved for those who possess . . . strength without sight.
Martin Luther King, Jr. (2003, 218)

Suzan-Lori Parks's play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*²⁷ has garnered critical acclaim, even being acknowledged as a play with "astonishing power" (Kelly 1992) to decline stereotypes (Wood 2001; Geis 2008) and to reconfigure history (Rayner and Elam, Jr. 1994; Brown-Guillory 2002). Critics have also praised the play for its "musicality of language" (Bernard 1997) and its "body language" (Dixon 1998) as well as the richness of its poetic language (Solomon 2001; Louis 2001). Parks (1995c, 3) explains that the idea of writing this play emerged while she "was taking a nap":

I woke up and stared at the wall: still sort of dreaming. Written up there between the window and the wall were the words, "This is the death of the last negro man in the whole entire world." Written up there in black vapor. I said to myself, "You should write that down," so I went over to my desk and wrote it down. Those words and my reaction to them became a play.

The play had a first public airing in the form of a reading at St. Marks Poetry Project in 1988 in New York; however, it first premiered in a full production at the Brooklyn Arts and Culture Association in September 1990 by artistic director, Greta Gunderson, and director and theatre scholar, Beth A. Schachter. The play was subsequently produced by artistic director Stan Wojewodski, Jr. and director Liz Diamond at Yale Repertory Theater in January 1992 and successively by director Harry Elam at Stanford University in the same year and by Rob Melrose in Cutting Ball Theatre, San Francisco, in 2006.

²⁷ Quotations are taken from the version included in *The America Play and Other Works* (1995b). The play was first published in *Theater* 21.3 (1990): 81–94. Hereafter, I will use *The Death of the Last Black Man* as a truncated form of the title, and the abbreviation D is used in parenthetical references.

The play opens with “Overture” in which all figures²⁸ with their bizarre names – which have a high degree of codification and signify the way they are seen and identified in the outer world and denote the fictionality of the play – appear on stage, address the audience and introduce themselves in turn. The Overture is followed by five Panels – “Thuh Holy Ghost,” “First Chorus,” “Thuh Lonesome 3some,” “Second Chorus,” and “In Thuh Garden of HooDoo It” – and it ends with “Final Chorus.” Panels 1, 3 and 5 are in the form of a dialogue between Black Man With Watermelon and his wife, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick; however, in some cases their dialogue is repetitive, distracted and irrelevant. Panels 2 and 4, in addition to the Overture and Final Chorus, are in the form of chorus and include the voices and visions of almost all figures. According to literary scholar Peter Szondi, “postmodern drama subverts communication patterns” as the use of dialogue recedes compared to traditional drama, and dialogue is mostly superseded by a “single character / actor’s monologue or . . . the collective voice of a chorus” or audience address (qtd. in Schmidt 2005, 56–57). The form of the play is thus in many ways postmodern. Here, the monologues and even the receded number of dialogues between the figures – coming from different ages, literary works and points in history, each with their own distinctive set of mininarratives – form a larger discursive terrain or a multi-voiced narrative.

In the following, I offer an analysis of *The Death of the Last Black Man* from the perspective of postmodern drama and African American feminism. I investigate how the discourses of postmodernism help Parks to emphasize incredulity toward dominant ideologies and metanarratives with regard to African Americans. I show how Parks provokes reflections about racism and damaging stereotypes directed against African Americans, while marking the importance of history/story writing which suggests the inclusion of alternative perspectives within the dominant discourses that can resist and eventually break the monophony and monopoly of the dominant discourses and reshape African Americans’ identities. Meanwhile, I probe how the employment of the theories of postmodern drama helps us to read Parks’s representations of a

²⁸ Here, Parks prefers to use the term “figures” rather than “characters.” As she says in an interview with Lee Jacobus (2001, 1633; original emphases): “The most important things about the figures is that they are *figures* and not *characters*. They are *signs* of something and not people just like people we know.” In addition, as she writes in her essay, “Elements of Style”: “They are not *characters*. To call them so could be an injustice. They are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers* maybe, *speakers* maybe, *shadows, slips, players* maybe, maybe *someone else’s pulse*” (Parks 1995d, 12; original emphases). These figures, who are all dynamic, constantly evade fixity even at the close of the play. Thus, the figures are always *about-to-be* as their identities are, manifesting a type of purposeful figures in search for motion and promotion. In this regard, Federman (1993, 44) states that “the people of fiction, the fictitious beings will no longer be called characters, well-made characters who carry with them a fixed personality, a stable set of social and psychological attributes (a name, a gender, a condition, a profession, a situation, a civic identity). These surfictional creatures will be as changeable, as volatile, as irrational, as nameless . . . as the discourse that makes them.”

media-saturated society and demonstrate how she ironically addresses some of the dominant ideologies, disseminated by the media against African Americans. The study of incredulity toward a number of dominant ideologies and metanarratives with regard to race and gender continues in the African American feminist study of this chapter in which I examine the play from African American feminist perspectives. I show how Parks utters some of the concerns of African American women, including race and gender oppressions, while she to a large extent blurs gender differences and the binary opposition of male/female to create unity and solidarity among her figures.

2.1 Intertextuality, Figures and Stereotypes

As a literary device, intertextuality can be defined as an implicit or explicit reference to and interrelationship between different texts which can create a related understanding of the new text. This device can provide the ground for readers to, for instance, compare and contrast the present conditions with the past or touch upon the roots of some ideologies. I argue that Parks here uses this device to draw upon other texts – through the themes and the use of unorthodox and bizarre names of the figures – in order to retell the long story of oppression of African Americans as well as to satirize and at the same time question prevailing metanarratives represented in the form of stereotypes which act as a powerful apparatus of oppression against African Americans. Parks questions the stereotypes to challenge the fixed identity imposed upon African Americans as a step in the resistance process.

The intertextuality in *The Death of the Last Black Man* starts right from the title. *The Last Black Man* resonates with titles of previous African American literary works, amongst them Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), and the nameless character who reached maturity, for example, in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).²⁹ Ellison's anonymous

²⁹ I came up with this idea when reading Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s (1989, 245–246) book, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self* (1989), and tried to expand and apply it to this play:

Ellison in his fictions signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference. . . . The play of language, the signifying, starts with the titles. *Native Son* and *Black Boy* – both titles connoting race, self, and presence – Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man*, invisibility an ironic response of absence to the would-be presence of "blacks" and "natives," while "man" suggests a more mature, stronger status than either "son" or "boy". . . . Wright's reacting protagonist, voiceless to the last, Ellison signifies upon with a nameless protagonist who is nothing but voice, since it is he who shapes, edits, and narrates his own tale, thereby combining action with the representation of action to define reality by its representation. This unity of presence and representation is perhaps Ellison's most subtle reversal of Wright's theory of the novel as exemplified in *Native Son*, since Bigger's voicelessness and powerlessness to act (as opposed to

mature man reappears in Parks's play, still unidentified but bearing the collective memories and identities of earlier African Americans, to act as the last contestant in this relay race. Additionally, *The Death of the Last Black Man* – which resonates to a great extent in tone and in the use of repetition and revision with the speech delivered by Invisible Man in Tod Clifton's funeral ceremony – promotes a political agenda through holding another commemoration ceremony for Clifton³⁰ and other anonymous and/or "lost members" of the African American community.

Furthermore, *The Death of the Last Black Man* shares some features with James Baldwin's play *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964). Baldwin's play begins with Lyle Britten, a white storeowner, shooting dead Richard Henry, the African American protagonist. Like *Black Man With Watermelon*, Richard reappears in different occasions throughout the play and narrates his story, and it is his grandmother, Mother Henry, who each and every time entertains him, bringing milk, sandwiches and cake for him, saying: "Sit down and eat, you got to get your strength back" (Baldwin 1964, 28). However, he refuses to eat and replies: "Take the tray away, old lady. I ain't hungry no more" (Ibid., 32) and prefers to raise objections against the miseries, cast upon them by white folks. In Parks's play, it is the Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, who is eager to entertain and feed her husband each and every time that he returns home. She offers: "Cold compress then some hen" (D, 105); however, *Black Man With Watermelon* refuses, saying that he is not hungry. Baldwin's play ends with the killing of Richard with a series of flashbacks to establish the reasons for Richard's death. Moreover, some of Baldwin's characters complain about the race and class inequalities in the society and blame God for their oppressions. For instance, Lorenzo, a black character, states: "It's that damn white God that's been lynching us and burning us and castrating us and raping our women and robbing us of everything that makes a man a man for all these hundreds of years" (Baldwin 1964, 4). Likewise, the employment of Ham in Parks's play – as will be discussed later in detail – is an attempt to question the abuse or misunderstanding of religion for the justification of slavery.

react) signify an absence, despite the metaphor of presence found in the novel's title; the reverse obtains in *Invisible Man*, where the absence implied by invisibility is undermined by the presence of the narrator as the narrator of his own text.

To Gates, Jr. (1988, 60), "intertextuality represents a process of repetition and revision. . . . A number of shared structural elements are repeated, with differences that suggest familiarity with other texts." I also agree with Gates, Jr. (1989, 242) when he says: "It is clear that black writers read and critique other black texts as an act of rhetorical self-definition."

³⁰ When Invisible Man's friend, Clifton, is ruthlessly shot dead by the police for no logical reason, he is determined to "make it known that the meaning of his death was greater than the incident or the object that caused it. Both as a means of avenging him and of preventing other such deaths . . . yes, and of attracting lost members back into the ranks" (Ellison 1952, 338). As the first step, he decides to "use his funeral to put his integrity together again" (Ibid.).

All in all, *The Death of the Last Black Man* consists of eleven figures. For my analysis, I have categorized the figures' names in six categories as follows:

1. Stereotypical: *Black Man With Watermelon* and *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick*;
2. Historical: *Before Columbus*, *Old Man River Jordan* and *Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut*;
3. Biblical: *Ham*;
4. Intertextual: *And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger* and *Prunes and Prisms*;
5. Food: *Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork* and *Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread*;
6. Mass communication: *Voice On Thuh Tee V*.

These categories are meant to capture the main element of a given name, although some of the names may fall into two or even more categories. For instance, *Black Man With Watermelon* is stereotypical, intertextual and at the same time includes food. *Ham* is both biblical and foodstuff, and *Prunes and Prisms* is part food and part intertextual. There exists a correlation between the figures and their names as the names are highly codified and signify the way the figures are seen and identified by others. The invention of the figures' names also emphasizes the fictionality of the play. I agree with Anderson (2008, 72) and Geis (2008, 60) that the naming distances readers from the figures and – in line with Brechtian aesthetic distance – would not allow easy identification. Thus, distance from the figures may direct readers to view the play as conscious critical observers and to understand the political significance of the figures.

The intertextual dimension further emphasizes the constructed nature of the figures. *Black Man With Watermelon*'s name resonates with "Watermelon Man," a 1970 American movie directed by Melvin Van Peebles. It tells the story of a bigoted white insurance employee who wakes up one morning and finds that he has turned into a "negro" (Berra 2010, 43). *Black Man With Watermelon*'s name also reverberates with Boy Willie and Lymon, the black characters in August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson*, who are selling watermelon in white neighborhoods. However, in Parks's play, *Black Man With Watermelon* repeatedly insists that the watermelon is not his: "This does not belong tuh me. Somebody planted this on me. On me in my hands" (D, 105). In another instance he asks: "melon mines? –. Dont look like me . . . Was we green and stripedly when we first comed out?" (D, 107). *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* responds to his questions: "Thuh *features* comes later" (Ibid.; emphasis added). This indicates *Black Man With Watermelon*'s endeavors to resist stereotypical representations of African Americans that popular culture has perpetuated. He should thus be seen, not as an individual, but as a representative of his race.

Black Woman With Fried Drumstick's name, then, plays upon widely circulated stereotypes associated with social roles for African American women, such as a nurturing caretaker and a domestic cook. In the first part of the play, she fits well in hooks's (1981, 44) description of black females:

Within the black slave sub-culture, it was the black female who cooked for the family, cleaned the hut or cabin, nursed the sick, washed and mended the clothes, and cared for the needs of children. Black slave men regarded tasks like cooking, sewing, nursing, and even minor farm labor as woman's work.

However, in the course of the play, as will be discussed later in this chapter, she refuses to be a minor subordinate figure and transforms into a major influential one, one who is competent to recast her past and the next generations' identities.

Before Columbus then signifies the pre-Columbian conditions before the European discovery and colonization of "the New World." His/her name resonates with the title of Ivan Van Sertima's (1976, 35) book, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, in which he claims that a group of Africans during the Mandingo dynasty had already traveled from Mali to North America before the voyage of Columbus, and that Columbus himself has indirectly confirmed this fact, writing in his diaries that the natives of Hispaniola had told him stories of black-skinned people who had come to trade gold-tipped metal spears. Thus, as Geis (2008, 66) writes: "Before Columbus's name challenges the traditional credit that Columbus gets for having 'discovered' America." Generally speaking, Parks deploys some figures that "are absent in normative historical narratives but made present through the very act of Parks's imprinting" (Johung 2006, 44), and the presence of these figures challenges the veracity of historical records, widely accepted as metanarratives. The employment of this figure indicates that Parks does not take the represented history as a total and disinterested entity, and accordingly she challenges, detotalizes and otherizes it.

Old Man River Jordan recreates "the allegorical image for the Ohio River" (Geis 2008, 69). Since he has been an eyewitness to the sufferings of runaway slaves, including Black Man With Watermelon, he relates mininarratives of runaway slaves' efforts and agonies in crossing the river and escaping slavery. As he says, Black Man With Watermelon "runs along thuh path worn out by uh 9 million paddin bare footed feet" (D, 114). Old Man River Jordan represents the preeminent escape route for fugitive slaves and the dividing line between North and South – or freedom and

slavery. Thus, the figure links the play to slave narratives, delineating the escape of slaves, to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and to Tony Morrison's *Beloved*.

As a parody of African American Afrocentrism, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut represents historically the collective memories and experiences of the African ancestors of African Americans. Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut alludes to the woman pharaoh in ancient Egypt, Hatshepsut, who ruled Egypt for about twenty years during the eighteenth dynasty, achieving remarkable triumphs. However, after descending from the throne, her stepson and nephew destroyed her achievements bearing her image or her name. In the Second Chorus, she sadly remarks: "My son erase his mothers mark" (D, 116). Parks attempts to open the eyes of readers to the rich but invisible civilization of people of African descent – the unseen parts of their civilization – and accordingly employs Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut to retell her mininarratives and to provide African Americans with a piece of advice based on her own experiences.

In a similar vein, Ham represents biblically the collective memories and experiences of the African ancestors of African Americans. The representation of Ham is a reaction to racist views "based on Noah's curse against his dark-skinned son," Ham, and his descendants (The Holy Bible, Genesis 9:18–27), "to justify slavery and discriminations against people of color" (Veltman 2006). Old Man River Jordan allusively says: "(Ham seed his daddy Noah neckked. From that seed, comed Allyall.)" (D, 122). By employing Ham, Parks exposes and satirizes the long history of racial injustice and distortion, ascribed to the religious myth. In other words, the presence of Ham reveals the mainstream justification for discriminative views through the abuse of religion or, rather, misunderstanding of religion.

Another figure, And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger is drawn from the image of Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son* (Geis 2008, 69). The transfer of this character from Wright's novel to Parks's play shows that "characters in black metafiction move gracefully from one world to the other, taking advantage of the juxtaposition of the imaginary and the real worlds" (Jablon 1997, 56). His transfer is also an attempt to rebut his negative stereotypical image as he says: "I would like tuh be fit in back in thuh storybook from which I camed. . . . I am grown too big for thuh words that's me" (D, 115–116). His name has been Bigger, but by boastings about his wrath, violence and brutality, his name has been changed to And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger. Furthermore, he proclaims that he does neither like the name he was given nor the way his story has been told and formed. According to theorist of postmodernism Brian McHale (1992, 121), "characters in postmodernist narrative fictions . . . can become aware of their own fictionality,"

and accordingly, like *And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger*, they challenge their own given identities, unwanted descriptions and false badges.

Prunes and Prisms is a phrase spoken aloud in order to form the lips into a pretty pursed shape, as per the instructions by Mrs. General to Amy, i.e. Little Dorrit in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (Geis 2008, 70). Mrs. General advises Amy:

The word Papa . . . gives a pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, *prunes*, and *prism* are all very good words for the lips: especially *prunes* and *prism*. You will find it serviceable, in the formation of a demeanour, if you sometimes say to yourself in company – on entering a room, for instance – Papa, potatoes, poultry, *prunes* and *prism*, *prunes* and *prism*. (Dickens 1868, 503; emphases added)

Furthermore, Prunes and Prisms alludes to Chapter 13, Nausicaa, in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922): “And the dark one with the mop head and the nigger mouth. I knew she could whistle. Mouth made for that. Like Molly. . . . Say *prunes* and *prisms* forty times every morning, *cure for fat lips*” (Joyce 1993, 354). In the play, Dickens and Joyce are paraphrased as follows: “Say *prunes* and *prisms* 40 times each day and you'll *cure your big lips*. Prunes and prisms prunes and prisms prunes and prisms: 19” (D, 113; emphases added). Prunes and Prisms is first represented as a passive figure who has adopted white beauty standards by repeating the phrase again and again in order to eliminate this sign of blackness (fat lips) and to assimilate into whiteness. Geis (2008, 71) aptly observes that Prunes and Prisms “calls attention to the history of black self-effacement through the use of hair straighteners, lightening creams, diction exercises, and so forth.” This practice stands for self-hatred and efforts to escape negative portrayals and is a clear example of “racial passing.” Later, this figure becomes a dynamic figure who joins the others in reshaping identities. The names of Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork and Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread, derived from food items, allude to African American cuisine, and imply that African Americans have had to work hard to procure food, consisting mainly of pork, grease, peas and cornbread.

In contrast to the figures from the past, Voice On Thuh Tee V stands for the most powerful contemporary medium for the dissemination of negative images, ideas and age-old stereotypes that impose the idea of black inferiority through repetition. Parks seeks to question such derogatory stereotypes conveyed through the media, which will be discussed in detail in section 2.4 Media and Metanarrative.

Strictly speaking, Parks reiterates some of the racist stereotypes – created by whites about African Americans – in an ironic way that coerces readers to see the construction of stereotypical

images and to reflect on their beliefs and deeds. By employing the stereotyped figures, *The Death of the Last Black Man* satirizes, challenges and delegitimizes the prevailing stereotypes as a step in the resistance process. hooks (1992, 170) writes that “stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation, . . . created to serve as substitutions. . . . They are an invention, a pretense.” Furthermore, she calls for changing the negative stereotypes as a way to uplift the race as a whole (hooks 1981, 55–56). In her attempt to challenge the certainties and the fixed cultural, social, sexual and political identity, Parks is aware that stereotyping is a powerful apparatus of oppression. This is a relevant way to challenge such illusions and controlling images of African Americans. As Hall (1990, 225) writes, “identities come from somewhere, have histories,” and that “identity is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (Ibid., 226). Thus, identity is a process constantly in flux, and as a result, it should be seen as a matter of becoming rather than being. Consequently, Parks avoids the trap of reducing identity to only one way of being, which can be seen as a departure from and quest for the dissolution of fixed identity.

In addition to questioning a fixed African American identity, assigning unorthodox names to the figures disempowers American history and culture and its metanarratives, racial injustices and oppressions which label, control and exploit African Americans. The figures are evidence of both the reality of the African Americans’ experiences and their representations and identifications in the outside world. It is worth noting that the figures themselves do not use these names to address or call one another throughout the play, attesting to their protest against stereotypical racist representation.

2.2 Indeterminacies and Text of Bliss

Hassan (1993, 282) coined the term “indeterminacies,” referring to a complex category that is composed of various different elements, and defined the concept as follows: “By . . . indeterminacies, I mean a combination of trends that include openness, fragmentation, ambiguity, discontinuity, decenterment, heterodoxy, pluralism, deformation, all conducive to indeterminacy or under-determination” that requires readers to interpret a text. In *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Chris Baldick (2008) defines indeterminacies as “a principle of uncertainty invoked to deny the existence of any final or determinate meaning that could bring to an end the play of meaning between the elements of a text.” Therefore, indeterminacies connote the impossibility of

deciding conclusively, for instance, what a word means in a certain circumstance, leaving the meaning open for different interpretations.

To create indeterminacies, Parks sets *The Death of the Last Black Man* in a world wherein time and place are fragmentary and fluid and slide away from the norms of logic. This provides Parks's figures with the opportunity to travel back and forth in time. Although the time of the play is given as "The Present," the play moves backward and forward in time in a non-horizontal and nonlinear way, creating time distortion. Accordingly, Alisa Solomon (2001, 28) suggests that "history in *The Death of the Last Black Man* refuses to be linear or sequential; history is round." This time distortion is manifest, for instance, in the words of Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut when she says: "Yesterday tuhday next summer tuhorrow just uh moment ughoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world. . . . He falls 23 floors to his death" (D, 111).³¹ As Larson (2012, 21) writes, "Black Woman's yesterday, today, and 'long time uhgoh' coexist, but in a jumbled and fragmented state." Owing to time distortion, "memories converge, condense, conflict, and define relationships between past, present, and future" (Malkin 1999, 23), creating a sense of omnitemporality or in Ubersfeld's (1999, 135) terms "non-time."

The creation of omnitemporality or non-time helps Parks to blur the time and tense boundaries, import different figures from different eras to the play and provide them with the opportunity to share their experiences and mininarratives. According to Geis (2008, 58), "the Black Man speaks of living in both the past and the present at the same time, though his way of putting it is amusingly confusing." A part of the confusion arises from the distortion of the borderlines between past and present tenses and the oscillation of figures between past and present events. As a result, the reconfiguration of the past emerges in the present, and immediately the reconfiguration of the present manifests itself in the past. I interpret this to mean that there would be no difference between past, present and future if African Americans fail to reconfigure their prospects, resulting in no improvement in their status. As Black Man With Watermelon says: "That's how it has gone. That's how it be wenting" (D, 119). Through the continuous swing between past, present and future and the use of narrative-within-narrative, Parks draws upon the past to philosophize about the present and future. This may reflect the "irreparable damage thesis," claiming that the damage of the past continues to persist in the present and the future (Hill Collins

³¹ In her play *Sister Son/ji* (1969), Sonia Sanchez also plays with time and creates time distortion. Sister Son/ji says that "today I shall be what I was/shd have been and never can be again. today I shall bring back yesterday as it can never be today. as it should be tomorrow" (Wood 2010, 37). It seems that Sister Son/ji would like to have simultaneous access to yesterday, today and tomorrow to control and adjust them to her own requirements. Like in Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man*, past, present and future coexist, and their distinctions are blurred.

2005, 60). Omnitemporality functions as a warning that if the damages and consequences of the past are not remedied, they might persist in the future.

To enhance indeterminacies, Parks also plays with tenses by mixing them. For example, *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* says, “Coming for you. Came for you: that they done did. Comin for tuh take you. . . . Cut off thuh bed-food where your feets had rested” (D, 105). In another example, *Old Man River Jordan*’s wordplay – “Do in dip diddly did-did thuh drop? Drop do it be dripted?” (D, 116) – renders past and present tenses unidentifiable, and the use of the consonant “d” in the form of alliteration as well as the indeterminate use of “Do” and “Did” as past and present tense identifiers magnify the sense of omnitemporality. As a result of such mixing and distortion of tenses, readers oscillate between past and present events.

Parks blurs not only the borderlines between past, present and future tenses and times, but also creates fragmented narration. For instance, although *Black Man With Watermelon* is lynched in one section, he is again in a later section watching the news of the death of “a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement” (D, 110). This collapse of sequential and linear time scheme provides Parks an opportunity to deal simultaneously with events that occurred in different eras. Parks projects a future time based on the past and present conditions in order to make readers cognizant how history might repeat itself, and what has happened to African Americans is recurring now and might continue to recur. Linearity is broken to show that the effects of metanarratives and dominant ideologies will not disappear if African Americans do not take action.

Moreover, the play is not set in any particular location. This dislocation signifies the constant move and nomadism of the figures from different ages and locations, creating indeterminacies as well as a multi-perspectival setting. Together with different times and tenses, the dislocation works further to create nonlinearity and a sense of disintegration that fracture the narrative time and place, impeding the plot and replacing the notion of unified black community with poly-consciousness. Thus, Parks blends different location substances as well as time and tense ingredients, mingles them and then serves a mixture of different locations, times and tenses in the play.

Rayner and Elam, Jr. (1994, 449) write that *The Death of the Last Black Man* is “a ghost story with a celebratory ending” in which the ghost of *Black Man With Watermelon* keeps reappearing and haunting his wife, *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick*. She offers him food, the quintessential symbol of nurturing, and attempts to justify the repeated deaths and recurring appearances of her husband’s ghost. Although *Black Man With Watermelon* has died, he has not come to rest as he still has unfinished business (Ibid.).

I claim that *The Death of the Last Black Man* is the story of Black Man With Watermelon, who represents dead black people and their multiple violent recurring deaths – being hunted, hanged, jettisoned, drowned, falling from 23 floors, lynched, electrocuted – day in, day out. However, owing to his commitment to return and narrate his story, “histree” and/or history, he has always been resurrected and “comed back” to his nurturing wife. In the play, he also manages to escape lynching in the eleventh hour with a rope round his neck, attached to a tree branch, to finish an “unfinished business,” and this last point is where I agree with Rayner and Elam, Jr. His unfinished business is to urge his wife, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, representing living black people, to write down his mininarratives. Emphasizing the importance of writing down their mininarratives, Parks summons a number of figures from different historical eras – since the time of Ham and Pharaoh Hatshepsut until the assassinations of the leaders and activists of the Civil Rights Movement – to retell their experiences, reminding Black Man With Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick that history repeats itself. Eventually, he manages to reconcile his mission, and his wife informs the chorus about this by saying: “He diediduh he did, huh” (D, 129). In contrast with Rayner and Elam, Jr., I argue that the play has neither “a celebratory ending” nor a sad ending, but an open one, in concordance with the features of postmodern drama. The play ends with the chorus repeating “Hold it” seven times (D, 131). Yet it remains indeterminate whether Black Woman With Fried Drumstick has accomplished *her* mission.

As we can see, the play leaves room for ambiguity, which raises indeterminacies. The plurality of possible readings and meanings and the multiplicity of viewpoints make the play in Barthes’s terms a “writerly text,” opening the space for diverse interpretations and exhibiting a postmodern sensibility. This sense of indeterminacy is enhanced through the puzzling use of numbers, lack of explicit stage directions and character descriptions, idiosyncratic language, multidirectional narratives of events and the play of signifiers with a galaxy of signifieds, to name some of the most pertinent elements. In such a climate, Parks finds room for incorporating some mininarratives, either explicitly or implicitly, within the context of her playscripts and engages her readers in playing with plural interpretations. Let us first consider the puzzling use of numbers.

Parks’s puzzling use of numbers leads to a battery of perplexed interpretations. Owing to their thought-provoking nature, numbers in Parks’s dramaturgy act as evocative sites of alternative meanings and perspectives that are sometimes extremely difficult to interpret. The insurrection of subjugated knowledges in the form of numbers directs readers to explore the different layers and substrata of historical knowledge. Such exploration can deepen readers’ insights and add to or problematize existing knowledge.

An explicit instance of this is in Panel I where Black Man With Watermelon ironically asks his wife to prepare his resting place as follows: “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” (D, 109). His request for a spacious, relaxing resting place, a coffin or a grave sized “6 feet by 6 feet by 6 feet” (Ibid.), may at the same time evoke an image of a slave ship transferring Africans, squeezed into tight, lightless compartments, to “the New World.” As historical records reveal, slaves had to remain tightly chained for about two months in storage compartments, with hardly enough air to breathe, resulting in the death of many of them, making these compartments mass coffins.³²

Elsewhere in the play, the use of numbers is more complicated. For instance, in Panel III, 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?” (D, 117; emphases added). In yet 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” (D, 106; emphases added). In the excerpts above, readers may be unable to decode “3 August.” They may wonder whether August refers to the eighth month of the year, and if so, what is special about the date of 3 August? Or August is an adjective, meaning grand and majestic, and modifies “hams.” Or “August ham” stands for watermelon. If the latter, what does number 3 signify? Likewise, the use of number “93” which modifies dying headless “hens” – signifying both female chicken and women – puzzles readers who may fail to find its significations or may doubt whether it is purposeful. To answer this problem, I refer to hooks (1992, 149) as viewing these incoherent parts as “void[s] where they are still invisible, their history unknown, their reality denied.”

Consequently, the use of numbers catalyzes the process of participation in which readers – in line with postmodern aesthetics – take active part in the creative process of interpretation by

³² In *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, Marcus Rediker delineates the brutal and dismal conditions of slave ships as mobile prisons and sites of dehumanization, trauma, struggle and death for African captives. While offering the images and measures of the vessels, Rediker (2007, 315) describes how African captives were “packed, side by side, almost like herrings in a barrel, and reduced nearly to the state of being buried alive. . . . in close quarters, unable to sit up or turn over.” He also shows how some captains built some platforms “on the lower deck of slavers, from the edge of the ship inward about *six feet*, to increase the number of slaves to be carried” (Ibid., 68; emphasis added). Likewise, in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright (2008, 14) depicts the miserable conditions of slave ships as follows: “Laid out spoon-fashion on the narrow decks of sailing ships, we were transported to this New World so closely packed that the back of the head of one of us nestled between the legs of another.” hooks (1989, 18), too, refers to an American slave ship, Pongas, which “carried 250 women, many of them pregnant, who were squeezed into a compartment of 16 by 18 feet.”

creating meanings out of signifiers and signifieds. The use of numbers shifts the site of attention from objects to the interaction between readers and objects which involves them in creating meanings, and hence readers may decipher multiple, maybe contradictory, meanings. To put it differently, the puzzling use of numbers in *The Death of the Last Black Man* allows the inclusion of some mininarratives in history in the form of codes to accelerate readers' participation in decodification.

Even more pertinent factors that transform conventional features of playwriting and increase indeterminacies are the dearth of explicit stage directions and the absence of character descriptions or a "pissy set of parentheses" in Parks's (1995d, 15) terms. Apropos of Patrice Pavis (1992, 29), stage directions create "a metatext determining the dramatic text or a pretext that suggests one solution before the director decides on another." I argue that Parks avoids metatexts and relinquishes her authority over performance, which paves the way for the "death of the playwright" and "birth of readers and performers." With the birth of readers and performers, new perspectives emerge, since each reader may interpret the playscript in a different way. Seen in this light, the playwright is "no longer a supreme, a sovereign, a superior, omnipotent being – a prophet-like figure – in full control of his creation" (Federman 1993, 57). Under this condition, neither the playwrights nor their playscripts are centered. Accordingly, performances devised on the basis of performers' views are distinguished from scripted dramas, and even performances by different performers would be distinct from one another, since each performer inevitably interprets and implements the playscript in a different manner.

Parks uses stage directions or the "pissy set of parentheses" twenty times with more or less the same italicized words: "(*A bell sounds once*)," "(*A bell sounds twice*)" or "(*A bell sounds three times*)," mostly appearing at the very beginning or at the close of Overture, Panels and Choruses, evoking consciousness and Brechtian distance, "a reminder that we are watching a performance" (Geis 2008, 59). In addition, she uses "(*pause*)" four times successively near the end of the play (D, 131), "All (*Except Ham*)" twice (D, 103 and 124) and "All (*Except Black Woman*)" once (D, 119). Thus, the dearth of stage directions and absence of character descriptions catalyzes indeterminacies which lead to performance fluidity and diversity as well as gender fluidity, since readers and performers should decide on the gender of a number of figures, including Voice On Thuh Tee V, Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork and Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread whose gender is not explicit in the playscript.

The innovation of an idiosyncratic language is another of Parks's dramatic strategies to create indeterminacies. The innovation of an idiosyncratic language based on African American

vernacular language also enables Parks to create resistance against the linguistic hegemony of the higher discourses and to surface African American vernacular language. As Geis (2008, 13) states: “Parks uses an idiosyncratic, poetic form of theatre language that is truly her own and that creates a deliberate form of resistance to ‘norms’ of theatrical discourse.” Thus, Parks populates the dominant “lettere/d/” language with linguistic structures, emanated from African American vernacular language. This is a dissident attempt to get “uh print . . . someway on [the dominant discourses]” (D, 105) and to create a type of polyphony or, in Hassan’s terms, “multivocation,” so as to empower African Americans with voice. The innovative language, manifest in altered spellings, wordplays and puns, complicates readers’ access to a definite interpretation.

Parks’s altered forms of spellings – or, in Kolin’s (2010, 16) terms, “subversively unconventional spellings” – can be found throughout *The Death of the Last Black Man*. Parks’s approach in altering the spelling makes the words playful, and in this playfulness the play creates plural, and in cases contradictory, interpretations. For instance, upon returning home, Black Man With Watermelon comes across a strange sight and declares his disapproval by saying: “Saint mines. Saint mines. Iduhnt it. Nope: iduhnt. Saint mines cause everythin I calls mines got uh print uh me someway on it in it don’t got uh print uh me someway on it so saint mines. Duhduhnt so saint: huh” (D, 105). At first glance, it seems that Black Man With Watermelon fails to find his print on the watermelons, grown on his farm, and accordingly he declares that they are not his. However, I argue that he is alluding that certain children are not genetically related to him, that he is not their father. As the conversation advances, he asks in awe: “Who give birth tuh this I wonder. Who? Not me. Saint mines” (Ibid.). He insists on the veracity of his conclusion when he says: “I kin tell whats mines by whats gots my looks. Ssmymethod” (D, 106). Such interrogation leads him to question even his own genealogy when he asks: “Who gived birth tuh me I wonder” (Ibid.), expressing uncertainty about his real parents.

In another scene, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut says: “Before Columbus thuh worl usta be roun they put uh /d/ on thuh end of roun makin round. Thusly they set in motion thuh end. Without that /d/ we coulda gone on spinnin forever” (D, 102). Malkin (1999, 170) points out that here “Parks constructs an elaborate conceit based on the difference between the ‘correct’ written form of the word *round* and its oral sounding in a black diction.” The figures refuse to use the formal spelling of the word “round” and prefer to use the altered one “roun,” instead, which is an effort to resist the lettere/d/ /d/ominant /d/iscourse and to propose an alternative one. Given the availability of interpretation, I argue that Africans and African Americans have played an essential role in history, but since they were deprived of power to inscribe their narratives nor had right to

acquire literacy, whites appropriated those achievements through using their letter/d/ /d/ominant /d/iscourse. The deletion of /d/ in a number of words in the play creates /d/efamiliarization to make the ordinary seem strange.

Parks uses also wordplay in *The Death of the Last Black Man* to create indeterminacies and at the same time raise the quest/ion of identities for African Americans. “I play with words,” Parks explains: “I think the world is telling us. Telling us telling us something that is present but not written down” (Nelson 2013). In the play, one can clearly observe this. Let us consider one case: And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger introduces himself as follows: “*Sir name Tom-us* and Bigger be my Christian name” (D, 115; emphasis added). Through wordplay, Parks demonstrates how the identities of African Americans were assaulted, as they had to adopt the “surname” of their masters. The word “Tom” which alludes to Uncle Tom as a verb means to make someone obedient and submissive and signifies the ways that white masters employed to make their slaves comply with their orders.

The use of puns is also effective in the creation of indeterminacies. As Kolin (2010, 48) declares, Parks’s puns are “multidirectional” and help readers “travel over many miles and years, seeing and hearing suppressed black memories.” As *Before Columbus* states: “Before Columbus directs thuh traffic: left right left right” (D, 116). The word “traffic” may refer to the passage of people or vehicles along routes of transportation as well as an illegal or improper commercial activity or trade. It also evokes human trafficking, the transportation of African Americans to the New World. By the same token, *Black Man With Watermelon* says: “They . . . [p]ulled me out of thuh *trees* then *treed* me then *tired* of me. That’s how it has gone. That’s how it be wentin” (D, 119; emphases added). The use of puns, complete with alliteration, express how these people first were cut off from their family trees and then were chased and enslaved after which they were overused, exploited and even murdered under different pretexts.

In his production of the play, Rob Melrose had *Black Man With Watermelon* appear on the stage carrying a tree branch with a piece of rope tied to his neck. He repeatedly refuses his wife’s modest proposal to loosen the tie and remove the tree branch: “You bring your tree branch home. Let me loosen thuh tie let me loosen thuh neck-lace let me loosen up thuh noose that stringed him up let me leave thuh tree branch be. Let me rub your wrists” (D, 118). This scene recalls Nanny’s words in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* while advising Janie. She sighs and says: “You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots” (Hurston 1990, 16). It seems that *Black Man With Watermelon* is eager to preserve even that rootless branch, which symbolizes the only remaining part of his family tree, ties and heritage as well as his history of oppressions.



Fig.1. Allison L. Payne and Myers Clark in
The Death of the Last Black Man, directed by Rob Melrose.
 Cutting Ball Theater, San Francisco. Photo: Rob Melrose.

Kolin (2010, 48) believes that “[t]hrough . . . her puns, Parks re-enacts on stage the violence done to black bodies over time, thus inscribing their ‘innard’ history of oppression, but also their opposition to such indignities.” Likewise, Larson (2012, 19) writes: “In these particular puns, the space conjures memories of slavery as well as lynching.” Building upon Kolin’s and Larson’s views, I argue that these wordplays and puns function as flashbacks providing the ground for Parks to articulate various mininarratives that recall a number of the practices and oppressions that have befallen African Americans throughout history, while at the same time these devices help her to challenge the fixity of meaning.

The linguistic features altogether create a dissonant rhythm in the language of *The Death of the Last Black Man* and hence make it difficult to decode. As an example, I quote at length Ham’s monologue:

SOLD! allyall⁹ not thuh be confused w/allus¹² joined w/allthem³ in from that union comed forth wasshisname²¹ SOLD wassername¹⁹ still by thuh reputation uh thistree one uh thuh 2 twins loses

her sight through fiddlin n falls w/ugly old yuh fathuh⁴ given she⁸ SOLD whodat³³ pairs w/you²³ (still polite) of which nothinmuch comes nothinmuch now nothinmuch⁶ pairs with yessuhmistuh¹⁷ tuh drop one called yo⁹⁻⁰ now yo still who gone be wentin now w/elle gived us el SOLD let us not forget ye¹⁻²⁻⁵ w/thee³ given us thou⁹⁻² who w/thuh they who switches their designation in certain conversation yes they¹⁰ brought forth onemore² at thuh same time in thuh same row right next door we have datone¹² w/disone¹⁴ droppin off duhtherone²⁻² SOLD let us not forget du and sie let us not forgetyessuhmastersuh³⁸ w/thou⁸ who gived up memines³⁻⁰ SOLD we are now rollin through thuh long division gimmie uh gimmie uh gimmie uh squared-off route round it off round it off n round it out w/sistuh⁴⁻³ who lives with one called saintmines⁹ givin forth one uh year how it got there callin it jessgrew callin it saintmines calling it whatdat whatdat whatdat SOLD. (D, 124)

Ham's dissonant words are accompanied by a large number of disordered footnote-like numbers which refer to nothing. This absence denotes missed or dismissed references and documents. Through the use of scrambled words and disordered numbers, yet another source of confusion and indeterminacies, the play bears witness to the holes in African American history. Moreover, it looks as if the jumbled text has been written in another language. Geis (2008, 65) suggests that "The cries of 'SOLD' that punctuate this part serve as reminders of the slavery auction block, the act of cutting of legacies and inheritances or knowledge of family histories." However, as Parks says: "the dead speak their own kind of language, different from that of the living, and different depending on how long they've been dead" (Garrett 2000). Parks recreates a language of the dead in order to recreate their memories and record them into history. However, I should note that the use of linguistic features discussed in this section makes the languages of both the dead and the living indeterminate, open to different analyses and in cases hard to decipher.

These indeterminate features make Parks's play, in Roland Barthes's terms, a "text of bliss," which discomforts readers. Together, these features bring readers' relationship with language to a crisis and make its decodification complicated. Seen in this light, Parks's playscript – due to the use of time distortion, dislocation, fragmentation, idiosyncratic language, wordplay, puzzling use of numbers, pun as well as the dearth of stage directions and absence of character descriptions, to name but a few elements – discomforts readers and in some cases leaves them in indeterminate states. These features also make space for the playwright to proffer alternative perspectives to help readers think more critically about African Americans and to raise the quest/ion of identities for them.

2.3 The Postmortem State and Magical Realism

As I have already discussed, *The Death of the Last Black Man With Watermelon* oscillates between the past, the present and the future, implying that the recurrent deaths and miseries of Black Man With Watermelon have not ended but continue in the present and may continue into the future if the social order remains unchanged. Therefore, “[t]he death of every black man in the past inhabits the death of each black man in the present in the sense that history is lived as a present” (Rayner and Elam Jr. 1994, 451). Parks repeatedly explores the case histories of the violent deaths visited upon Black Man With Watermelon as well as his returns to his wife after each death experience. The representation of multiple deaths provides the ground for Parks to recreate the brutal racial oppressions African Americans have had to endure. Furthermore, Parks creates a landscape littered with conjured deceased figures, amongst them Ham and Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, all summoned from ancient history to the present time, sharing their own mininarratives with readers.³³ Geis (2008, 26) observes this feature and writes: “Fascination with the dead coming back to life pervades Parks’s plays.” She adds further that “there is a desire to keep or preserve something that has died” (Ibid., 27). Arguably, the preservation of the deceased figures through their reappearances enables them to retell their stories which may result in the preservation of their mininarratives and memories. Moreover, the reappearance of deceased figures creates a state that is simultaneously both *postmodern* and *postmortem*.

As for the *postmodern* state, the simulation of different types of deaths and returns of Black Man With Watermelon as well as the reappearance of other deceased figures furnishes the play with a sense of magical realism. These simulations entice readers to compare and contrast their knowledge of the past as being represented in the annals of history with the statements uttered by the deceased figures in the play. As Larson (2012, 2) notes: “The historically focused elements of Parks’s aesthetic . . . position her as an author whose work challenges the ways readers imagine and experience history and/or receive recorded accounts thereof.” Larson adds also that “Parks belongs to the group of writers and historians who revise history with an eye toward putting absent or neglected groups back into it” (Ibid., 3). This is a postmodern attempt to disrupt the

³³ Quoting John S. Mbiti’s *African Religion and Philosophy*, Parks (1995e, 5) affirms this interpretation:

A person dies and yet continues to live: he is a living-dead, and no other term can describe him better than that. . . . The living dead are bilingual . . . and speak in nasal tones. They belong to the time period of the Zamani [past] and by entering individuals in the Sasa [present] period, they become our contemporaries. The state of possession and mediumship is one of contemporarizing the past, bringing into human history the beings essentially beyond the horizon of present time.

representations of the past and to free thoughts from dominant metanarratives and to unknit the already knitted dress of “the Great Whole of History” and then reknit it through adding to it the ignored patterns of African American history, leading to a mode of cultural awareness in which neither identity nor history and our knowledges are natural, fixed or given.

To show that histories and our knowledge of them are neither given nor fixed, Parks assumes an ironic attitude toward the former hypotheses of the whites about the universe and challenges their metanarrative ideology. She reviews the misapprehensions white people have had concerning the universe ironically and calls into question their past and present misconceptions of African Americans. As *Before Columbus* remarks:

The popular thinking of the day back in them days was that *the world was flat*. . . . Back then when they thought the world was flat they were afeared and stayed at home. They wanted to go back out then when they thought the world was flat but the water had in it dragons of which these dragons they were afeared back then when they thought the world was flat. . . . Them thinking the world was flat kept it *roun*. Them thinking the sun revolved around the earth kept them satellite-like. They *figured out the truth* and scurried out. Figuring out the truth put them in their place and they scurried out to put us in ours. (D, 103; emphases added)

In this excerpt, through reviewing white men’s former misconstrued hypotheses about a flat earth and the rotation of the sun around the earth – which happened to be wrong – Parks establishes general incredulity toward metanarratives. Parks expresses her admiration for the enthusiasm of the whites to discover new domains with their diligence and intelligence, which paved the way for their motion and promotion. White men, according to Parks, were operative and “figured out the truth.” However, Parks rebukes white men for oppressing the blacks.

This way of referring to the past is in line with Hutcheon’s (1988, 39) idea that “one never returns to the past without distance,” and that distance in postmodernism is “signaled by irony.” Through this ironic distance, Parks pursues two objectives at once: on the one hand, she increases incredulity toward the metanarratives of the whites and the controlling images they have created about African Americans and, on the other hand, she encourages self-confidence in African Americans. For instance, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut in *Overture* says: “We are too young to see. Let them see it for you. We are too young to rule. Let them rule it for you. We are too young to have. Let them have it for you. You are too young to write. *Let them – let them. Do it*” (D, 104; emphasis added). As can be deduced from the quote, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut is suffering from self-distrust and self-diffidence. However, as she talks on (at the very end of the

quote), she finally becomes hesitant, changes her mind and then asks her addressees to “do it” themselves.

Furthermore, the play summons up the brutality of the past and treats serious and horrific topics such as the ruthless deaths and oppressions inflicted upon African Americans in a ludic and humorous way. Thus, we are no longer shocked to witness that death as a serious topic is treated ironically and figuratively. For instance, *Black Man With Watermelon* implicitly and explicitly narrates how he has been electrocuted, lynched, jettisoned, fallen off 23 floors from a passing ship, hanged, hunted, chased by slave catchers and their dogs, and yet he keeps reappearing. His description of himself being lynched is at the same time amusing and revolting. The creation of figures with humorous and bizarre names – adding the comic and ironic flavor to the play – are combined with morbid and cruel elements to create black humor.³⁴

As for the *postmortem* state, the reappearance of deceased figures functions as a historical autopsy of these figures. The autopsy of history then provides the grounds for making use of the deceased figures’ experiences in order to raise incredulity toward their represented history and to accord them a more elevated status. It would not be out of context to refer to hooks’s (1992, 180) idea as she writes that “the dead call us to remember. Some of us have not forsaken these teachings. We hear the voice of our African past urging us to remember that a people without ancestors are like a tree without roots.” The reappearances of *Black Man With Watermelon* as a generic figure after his deaths and his accounts of his deaths provide a device through which readers may remember the many different types of brutal deaths suffered by African Americans throughout history. *Black Man With Watermelon*’s accounts of his brutal deaths create concern about postmortem conditions, and several figures repeatedly voice this concern. *Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut* in Panel II and *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* in Final Chorus pose significant questions about this: “Where he gonna go come to now that he gonna go gone on?” (D, 121) and “Where he gonna go now now now now now that he done *diediduh*?” (D, 129; emphasis added).

I argue that he would go either to history or oblivion: if *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* takes the advice – repeated and revised as many as fourteen times throughout the play – to “write down” their past, story and history (D, 104) and “hide it under a rock” (D, 111) or “carve it out of a rock” (D, 131) – he will go to history and be remembered for ever, and if she refuses to do this,

³⁴ Suffice it to say that some other US minority literatures, including Chinese American and Native American literature, have also used humor and comedy for resistance and subversion to oppose the metanarratives offered by the dominant ideologies and to reenvision and rehistoricize their history. But since that discussion does not fall under the purview of this dissertation, it is not necessary to offer any of the extant cases.

he will go to oblivion or, in Martin Luther King's (2003, 218) terms, "be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time." These options are outlined through wordplay: the coined word "diediduh," when dissected, consists of "die," "died," "did" and "duh" (do), implying: Do or Die.

As Toni Cade Bambara (1984, 46) claims, writing is of high importance³⁵ for African Americans as it keeps them alive and makes them the heroes of their tales, preserves and saves their lives, and sustains their survival, struggle and vigilant resistance. Thus, through playwriting, Parks herself writes and advises African Americans to write down their own histories/stories, because as she says: "there are a lot of things that black people have done that haven't been written down – haven't been chronicled, are not remembered. There is a lot of history that has fallen through the gaps, the cracks. . . . These unchronicled events are what I'm interested in writing about" (qtd. in Mahone 1994, 242). Furthermore, Parks comments that "[w]riting used to mean just 'writing' but now maybe writing can include RIGHTING. Get right. Be right. Right. Write. Write on. Right on" (Garrett 2010, 185). Viewed in this light, writing as a form of cultural and historical production can challenge the ways through which knowledge and power are constructed, can exchange ideas and allow many mininarratives and alternative voices to arise, breaking the monophony and monopoly. To put it differently, writing enables different and in some cases opposing discourses to appear and resist the existing dominant discourses and metanarratives, simply because writing and the knowledges emanating from it help to shape awareness and a viable present and future. This is a way toward self-definition, which creates the ground for African American definitions to emanate from within rather than without.

Towards the end of the play, *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* comes to terms with her husband's deaths and reappearances and learns what he wants her to do. Other figures also urge her to follow up *Black Man With Watermelon's* incessant request – reverberating as a crucial theme throughout the play – to "remember me and write down my story" (D, 127). He repeatedly reappears to his wife so that she cannot help remembering him. As Geis (2008, 11) comments: "In

³⁵ The vital importance of writing, which connotes knowledge, self-discovery and transformation, has been expressed and stressed in the words and works of African American scholars and writers such as Alain Locke, the father of "New Negro" and the Harlem Renaissance, Willis Richardson, May Miller, Toni Morrison and many others. Ellison (1952, 437) in his famous novel *Invisible Man* writes: "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." Likewise, hooks (1993, 516) writes that "[writing] allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy."

all of her works Parks plays on the trope of remembering/disremembering, with all of its punning meanings. The act of memory is the key here, and the *re-* is a reminder that it must occur repeatedly, which ties into the ‘rep and rev’ of her text. To dis-member in this sense is to forget.” Building on Geis’s remark, I argue that in the play “to write” means preserving Black Man With Watermelon’s memories which stand for his collective consciousness and unconscious, whereas to “dis-write” would mean to forget and to lose.

In addition, Black Man With Watermelon feels his “text was writ in water” (D, 116). I argue that “water” alludes to various familiar rivers and seas in African American history, especially the Middle Passage, the Combahee River and the Ohio River. If his histories/stories are unrecorded and dis-remembered, they might be erased from history, and future generations will not know them. From a different perspective, Black Man With Watermelon’s words allude to the words engraved on John Keats’s tombstone, stating that “This Grave contains all that was Mortal, of a YOUNG ENGLISH POET, who on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his heart, at the Malicious Power of his Enemies, Desired these Words to be engraven on his Tomb Stone: Here lies One whose name was writ in Water.” These words signify the binary opposition of water vs. stone or mortality vs. immortality, showing that Keats’s texts would have been writ on water if he had not written them down, but now that he has inscribed them, his body might be mortal, but his work is immortal, writ indeed on stone. I argue that Black Man With Watermelon and his collective memories are writ in water if Black Woman With Fried Drumstick fails to write them down, and consequently Black Woman With Fried Drumstick herself experiences death in life, too, and if she succeeds, those memories are writ in stone.

Based on this argument, the unwritten mininarratives of African Americans are in danger of extinction or cooptation; thus, writing their histories/stories down affirms their presence, identity, humanity and wisdom, helps African Americans keep their oral traditions alive and protect their histories/stories and traditions from extinction. As Gates, Jr. (1989, 21) 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.” Hence, the leitmotif “You should write that down” speaks not only to the urgency of history and the need to reclaim mininarratives and traditions, but also to the complex creative process of transcribing the oral (thought and idea) into script and further into the theatrical space of performance. As Black Man With Watermelon says: “Thuh tongue itself burns itself” (D, 130). His words imply that the oral language and memories are not stable, and if they are to remain in history, they have to write

themselves, which is the quest to move from silence to language, from unmarkedness to markedness, from invisibility to visibility and from absence to presence.

On this account, writing is an attempt to capture in print the histories/stories of African Americans which are in their voices and memories. Here, Parks manifests a sense of “paranoia,” a feeling that African Americans’ narratives are in danger and need to be reexamined and recorded, which helps new identities to develop for them. According to Gates, Jr. (1989, 104), “[t]here would be no presence of African [American]s in history without this power of representation.” This power of representation through writing down and transferring their knowledges is a way to attain identities, power and social status. Accordingly, Parks does not only urge African Americans to “write that down,” but also “hide it under a rock,” and finally by the end of the play it changes to “carve it out of a rock” (D, 131). It seems that after stressing the importance of writing and urging African Americans to write down their mininarratives, Parks advises them to find some ways for protecting those inscribed mininarratives.

To signify her concern for postmortem identities, Parks employs Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, who says in Panel II: “I left my mark on all I made. My son erase his mothers mark” (D, 116). This seems to suggest that the articulation of one’s presence in history is quintessential, since it means being remembered. Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut’s words imply that writing histories/stories does not suffice, but rather African Americans should employ some ways to protect their written histories/stories; otherwise, their writings like hers would be at stake. Then, at the very end of the play, the figures unanimously repeat “Hold it” seven times. As Malkin (1999, 174) writes, the phrase “transmutes into ‘Told it’: a declaration that Parks has herself created memory through its performance – its telling – in the present.” In this vein, African Americans have two options: Write or Die, Publish or Perish, Use it or Lose it. As African American feminist thinker Maria Stewart (1995, 29) writes: “We have never had an opportunity of displaying our talents; therefore the world thinks we know nothing. . . . Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? . . . Sue for your rights and privileges . . . we shall certainly die if you do not.” Seen in this light, if African Americans use the opportunity to write and publish, this would be the death of the last black man in the whole entire world, implying that Black Man With Watermelon would no more die in the hands of oppressors. Essentially, death here connotes passivity, amnesia and the waning of identity, while writing would resurrect African Americans and save them from oblivion. If, however, they refuse to write, publish and use the opportunity, this is in fact the death of the last black man in the whole entire world, implying that Black Man With Watermelon would not survive.

An example of the oscillation between mortality and immortality can be found in the dialogue between Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork and Prunes and Prisms: “This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world,” “Not yet–” (D, 110). Prunes and Prisms’s response, “Not yet–,” indicates that there is still hope to revive Black Man With Watermelon. Death here is more a psychological dread and trauma than a physical experience. Hence, Parks is negotiating postmortem mortality or immortality, demonstrating a strategy for African Americans’ eternal life. As an example, Black Man With Watermelon says to his wife:

There is uh Now and there is uh Then. Ssal there is. (I bein in uh Now; uh Now being in uh Then; I bein, in Now in Then; in I will be. I was be too but thats uh Then thats past. That me that was be is uh me-has-been. Thuh Then that was be is uh has-been-Then too. Thuh me-has-been sits in thuh be-me; we sit on this porch. *Same porch. Same me.* Thuh Then that’s been somehow sits in thuh Then that will be: same Thens. . . . *Them thens stays fixed. Fixed Thens.* Thuh Them stays fixed too. . . . Home. *Stays fixed, them do.*) (D, 126; emphases added)

This excerpt demonstrates that it is no time to stand still, since immobility would mean “same me,” a fixed identity. The passage of time would not heal the sorrows if African Americans refuse to take proper actions, and accordingly no difference is perceived between “then” and “now,” and “Them,” signifying the metanarratives and dominant ideologies with regard to African Americans, “stay fixed” and do not change. As Black Woman With Watermelon says: “Things today is just as they are yesterday cept nothing is familiar cause it was such uh long time uhgoh” (D, 107). As a result, Black Man With Watermelon is killed over and over again, and no sign of change is perceived in whites’ perceptions of African Americans. Parks seems to suggest that for those who refuse to take action, the past, the present and the future are a matter of being or fixity, whereas for those who take proper action they are a matter of becoming or fluidity.

Through writing their mininarratives, African Americans can elude the fate of invisibility and safeguard or – as the figures unanimously repeat at the very end of the play – “hold” their experiences and memories like jewels out of the reach of those who may either destroy them or claim them as their own. This is accounted as a part of the political agenda of coming to consciousness, which brings vigilance and empowerment for younger generations. In 1938, the civil rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune (1983, 11) argues: “If our people are to fight their way up and out of bondage we must arm them with the sword and the shield . . . of pride – belief in themselves and their possibilities, based upon a sure knowledge of the achievements of the past.” In my view, Parks repeats Bethune’s words in her play in a postmodern way, revealing that knowledges of the past achievements matter greatly in the struggle for empowerment and play a

conspicuous role in African Americans' progress. However, for Parks, the identity operation is not yet complete with writing. She stresses on hiding their writings under a rock or carving them out of a rock that symbolizes preservation. Foucault (2003, 11) stresses the exigency of preserving excavated items:

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?

Parks is likewise concerned with the threat of recolonization of African Americans' discoveries, simply because what they unearth during the archeological operation might not be compatible with the conventional norm of history, namely "the Great Whole of History," and accordingly what is discovered might be neglected or rejected. According to Hill Collins (2000, 286): "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." Thus, Parks proposes "writing" and then "hiding" and/or "carving" as a way to preserve African Americans' histories/stories.

In *The Death of the Last Black Man, Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread* 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*. You should write down the past and you should write down the present and in what in the future you should write it down. (D, 104; emphases added)

Once again, Parks encourages African Americans to write down their mininarratives and memories and warns them of the consequences if they fail to do so. She stresses that writing is a process never completed, and she stresses the importance of writing the past, the present and the future. She also stresses the importance of preserving writings through hiding them under a rock. But how does Parks herself attempt to *hide* the excavated knowledges under a rock or to *carve* them to be protected from the threat of recolonization? For hiding the knowledges, she uses a "code strategy" in the form of puzzling numbers, while for carving the knowledges, she uses the Rep. & Rev. strategy, which is an intricate play of repetition and revision.

The Rep. & Rev. strategy, I argue, functions as carving a fact in stone – or in the minds of readers – and it resembles the techniques used in education as well as in memory recovery for

those who suffer amnesia. It acts as a drill which repeats its revolving moves and in each move, makes a revision. In this play, like a teacher, Parks repeats the lines to drill in history lessons the subject matters of which cover centuries of African Americans' suffering. This is a strategy, commonly employed in the mass media, news and commercial advertisements, to inform and achieve maximum effect on the viewers. The repetitive structure – blended with rhythmic patterns, “lettere/d/” language and convincing, intoned voices, decorated with selected montage images – no doubt mesmerizes viewers and leaves an impression on them.

2.4 Media and Metanarrative

The development of the media in recent times has impressed a number of playwrights both in direct and indirect ways. In a direct way, playwrights use the media in their plays, and accordingly the media contribute to the dematerialization of the stage, to the reduction of the actor to a mere vocal or audiovisual presence, and to the disturbance of traditional perception with regard to theater. In an indirect way, then, the media have affected theater writing. As Schmidt (2005, 77) notes, “the postmodern stage has turned into a mediatized space,” and accordingly the media have “shaped contemporary dramatic writing and performance.” Playwrights are influenced by the mass media; the news, movies and images on TV, the styles and dictions utilized in newspapers, magazines and other printed media, advertisements, music and radio programs.

In *The Death of the Last Black Man*, Parks makes explicit use of TV by employing Voice On Thuh Tee V as one of the figures, manifesting direct media influence. It is also an indication of how in postmodernity TV has occupied a central position in many households, becoming almost a family member. The ubiquity of TV and its inevitable effects on viewers lead to viewers' isolation and the expansion of TV's predominance. According to the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1981, 172; original emphasis):

TV, by virtue of its mere presence, is a social control in itself. There is no need to imagine it as a state periscope spying on everyone's private life³⁶ – the situation as it stands is more efficient than that: it is the *certainty that people are no longer speaking to each other*, that they are definitively isolated in the face of a speech without response.

³⁶ I would like to modify Baudrillard's statement. The privacy policy of the new generation of smart TV sets informs customers that their TV sets are capable of spying on them and warns that they should be aware that their spoken words might be transmitted to and abused by a third party.

Baudrillard (1993, 365) also observes that “TV watches us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us. Throughout all this, one is dependent on the analytical conception” of the media. Baudrillard illustrates how TV is an integral part of modern life – just like Voice On Thuh Tee V is an integral figure of the play – and how it influences viewers’ perception, simply because watching TV seems to be an integral part of everyday life and what viewers see on TV may affect the way they think. In addition, TV can diminish social interaction and communication between individuals, even among the members within a household, prompting alienation and isolation.

Voice On Thuh Tee V appears eleven times in the play, announcing the following repeated and revised piece of news:

Good evening. I’m Broad Caster. Headlining tonight: the news: is Gamble Major, the absolutely last living negro man in the whole entire known world – is dead. Major, Gamble, born a slave, taught himself the rudiments of education to become a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement. He was 38 years old. News of Major’s death sparked controlled displays of jubilation in all corners of the world. (D, 110)

The announcement demonstrates hatred toward African American social and political activists. Based on the information presented in the headline, Voice On Thuh Tee V alludes to the Civil Rights Movement leaders and activists Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) and Malcolm X (1925–1965). These controlling images and negative portrayals assigned to African Americans – introducing them as figures associated with death and destruction and thus leading to the news of their deaths bringing about, hyperbolically, “jubilation in all corners of the world” – isolate African Americans from society and make them internalize racism.

The employment of Voice On Thuh Tee V creates a world-within-a-world, presents a typical image of media-saturated society and draws out the complicity of the media in perpetuating racism. In contrast to the other figures from the past, Voice On Thuh Tee V represents the most powerful contemporary medium for the dissemination of negative images, values, ideas and age-old stereotypes in this play and attempts to impose and fix the idea of black inferiority into people’s minds through repetition and revision. Parks warns readers of the threat of racism, which is prevalent “in all corners of the world,” and shows how racism relies heavily on the manipulation of hegemonic ideologies and perceptions of race circulated via the media. Voice On Thuh Tee V provides the grounds for Parks to critique the media and their ubiquity as a means used by the dominant powers to affect peoples’ minds about African Americans by representing them negatively. By calling attention to that manipulation, Parks unveils what lies behind such

representations: a history of racism and oppression that is at the root of the inequality, keeping large numbers of African Americans at the lower levels of the social and economic ladder. Thus, the simulation of a typical TV program may make readers conscious of the roots of the constructed negative images of objectified African Americans in the media.

Arguably, the simulation and critique of the media can serve as a practical mode for both questioning the negative iconography of blackness and liberating viewers' minds from these images. Meanwhile, the self-reflexive critique of the media can help African Americans resist Frederic Jameson's (1991, 3) idea concerning the "cultural logic of late capitalism" in which society moves beyond capitalism into the consumer, media and information age in which we are constantly bombarded with media programs, including advertisements and news. Viewed in this light, *Voice On Thuh Tee V* exposes how the constant flow of negative images may in fact threaten African Americans' quest/ion of identities. It reminds African Americans of the need to take proper action against such false representations.

No doubt, the bombardment of news and views becomes more effective when the media serve as the main source and lens for looking at the world. As Anderson (2008, 1) observes: "The racial stratification of the United States ensures that there are many communities in this country whose exposure to the blacks is through the media. Media representations, as the only ones, form these people's conceptions of blacks." In a television-oriented culture, TV represents a world-within-a-world. The unfair, stereotypical media representations of African Americans, particularly to those viewers who have no actual contact with them, create and universalize metanarratives. These kinds of representations no doubt create a crisis for African Americans' quest/ion of identities and impose a sense of self-diffidence on them. In the present time, new communication technologies "have changed the backdrop against which" identities are reshaped (Cerulo 1997, 397). Thus, through the employment of *Voice On Thuh Tee V*, Parks satirizes, challenges and delegitimizes the prevailing white stereotypes of African Americans represented in the media. It is an attempt to challenge certainties and fixed cultural, social, sexual and political identities, because stereotyping is a powerful apparatus of oppression, and any attempt to challenge these illusions and controlling images is a proper way to improve the face of African Americans.

In drawing attention to the role of the media, and especially TV, in identity reformation, Parks acknowledges the media's potential to create and affirm negative and positive impressions. As David L. Altheide argues, new communication technologies present new communication formats and new modes of selecting, organizing and presenting information. These new formats then serve as avenues to "open a door to intervention and control" and to reshape social identities

(Altheide 1995, 17). They can make “simulation and reality look the same on the screen,” creating new possibilities for the identification of self and others, and can help the self to define social situations, while leaving others vulnerable to the reality of crafted images (Ibid., 18). Altheide’s remarks reveal some of the persuasive techniques that new communication technologies use to manipulate and influence the masses, reshape their opinions and define normality and abnormality. I would like to add that television, with its capacity to transmit live images and news and repeat them at regular intervals, reinforces the naturalness of its programs and fixes the images and views on the minds of its viewers.

Accessible to an infinite number of viewers, the controlling and controlled media – presenting the world through the lenses of their cameras and screens – can create images for or against individuals, groups or nations and thus reshape viewers’ perceptions and attitudes. To make readers aware of the new formats dragging their identities “down the dark corridors of time,” Parks refers to the media as something which helps to sustain a problematic form of negative images of African Americans, written for them and widely broadcast by the hegemonic systems of oppression as metanarratives. As filmmaker Pratibha Parmar (1990, 116) notes: “Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves.” It can be said that the disseminated negative images of African Americans which are also viewed by the African Americans reveal people’s perceptions of them and no doubt affect their personal and social lives. Under these circumstances, Parks warns African Americans of the destructive effects of the media on their quest/ion of identities. This issue has been stressed by hooks (1992, 1) as follows:

If we compare the relative progress African Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation. Opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and re-inscribe white supremacy.

Black subjects, as hooks states, should be aware that the mass media act as a system of knowledge and power, “reproducing and maintaining white supremacy” (Ibid., 117). This is the idea of Invisible Man when he critically declares:

These white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that

you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth. Because it's the kind of lie they want to hear. (Ellison 1952, 110)

Thus, the mass media with its power and influence has the ability to manipulate viewers and represent the real as unreal and vice versa. To live in postmodernity is to experience fake things as real, and real things as fake, and accordingly reality is no longer real, but hyperreal. From Baudrillard's (1993, 342–343) perspective, postmodernity is defined by a shift into “hyperreality” in which simulations, representations and signs have replaced the real. Based on this assumption, the sense of the real is lost. There tends to be no direct access to the real which is simulated through the mass media, language and textuality. Federman believes that the mass media even have the power to manipulate history, and that television can both falsify and justify historical facts. According to Federman (1993, 25), as a result of history manipulation, “the unequivocal relation between the real and the imaginary disappear,” and “the clear line that separates fact from fiction is blurred, and consequently, historical events must be doubted, reviewed, reexamined,” especially the events which are “RE-presented to us by the mass media.” As a consequence, doubt as one of the main features of postmodernism not only calls into question the authenticity of the annals of history but also asks us to review and reexamine them.

Through employing *Voice On Thuh Tee V*, Parks shows the potential of the mass media to manipulate historical “facts,” which provides the ground to problematize media representations. Let us consider *Voice On Thuh Tee V*'s words again: “Good evening. I'm *Broad Caster*. Headline tonight: Gamble Major, the absolutely last living Negro man in the whole known entire world is dead. Gamble Major, born a slave, rose to become a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement. He was 38 years old” (D, 110; emphasis added). In the excerpt, Parks uses wordplay to ironically question the reliability of *Voice On Thuh Tee V*'s news and highlights the fake nature of its programs. The term “*Broad Caster*” rather than “*Broadcaster*” implies someone who scatters seeds and spreads nets to hunt. *Voice On Thuh Tee V* as a simulated reality of the media repeats and revises this piece of news so as to represent African Americans as /d/evaluated, /d/ehumanized and /d/estructive creatures and make viewers believe it. I here argue that TV as one of the main sources of our information of the world can create positive or negative impressions of some groups or nations by manipulating information and can fix those impressions in the minds of a number of viewers through repetition and revision.

Furthermore, TV's unilateral relationship with viewers does not allow direct criticism, creating a type of monopoly and monophony, since it leaves little possibility for viewers to raise

their criticism against its news and views. According to Baudrillard (1981, 170; original emphases), the media “*are what always prevents response*, making all process of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response *simulation*, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communications intact).” *The Death of the Last Black Man* disturbs the one-way pattern of communication as some of the figures express their criticism and rebuttal to what is broadcast. In Panel II, for instance, Voice On Thuh Tee V announces: “News of Majors death sparked controlled displays of jubilation in *all corners of the world*” to which Prunes and Prisms immediately and ironically reacts and responds by saying: “Oh no no: world is *roun*” (D, 110; emphases added). This response questions the accuracy of TV news, while ironically recalling the former hypotheses with regard to the shape of the earth which has been proved to be wrong. In another scene, Voice On Thuh Tee V appears and makes the following announcement:

Good evening this is thuh news. A small sliver of uh tree branch has been found in *The Death of the Last Black Man*. Upon careful examination thuh small sliver of thuh treed branch what was found has been found tuh be uh fossilized bone fragment. With this finding authorities claim they are hot on his tail. (D, 120; original emphasis)

Parks here criticizes the media discourses which attempt to color their claims with hues of documentation and scientific logic. The diction used in the above headline is not objective although it claims to provide readers with documentation. Through the use of repetition and revision, Parks rebukes the way Voice On Thuh Tee V animalizes African Americans to protect white racial domination by using the word “tail” as a pun for “trail” and “tale.” I agree with Kolin (2010, 47) who remarks that Parks’s Rep. & Rev. signifiers carry puns, “encouraging audiences to see double or triple around the edges of white fictions that have enshackled African Americans.” In addition, a review of this news which is repeated and revised reveals “rhizome/surface,” since it deals with the issue of the Civil Rights Movements in a shallow and superficial way and fails to provide viewers with all the “facts” in a disinterested manner. It is worth remarking that in Final Chorus, Voice On Thuh Tee V announces: “Good morning. This is thuh last news.” This implies that African Americans would also need the power and influence of the media – and especially TV as a “meta-medium,” in Neil Postman’s (2006, 37) terms, directing viewers’ knowledges and perceptions of the world – to substantially change the damaging stereotypes and reshape their images and identities.

2.5 Historiographic Metafiction and Counterhistory

As I have already discussed, Parks deals with and challenges the issue of history, as she is fully aware that history does not record everything. It is selective in description, and it is inevitably written from the particular angles and views of historiographers who are neither infallible nor disinterested, and accordingly there cannot be an unproblematic, absolute and monolithic history. This view is also reflected in Hutcheon's (1988, 43) words: "What [postmodernism] does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world – and that we create them all. . . . They do not exist 'out there,' fixed, given, universal, eternal; they are human constructs in history." The historiographic metafiction of Parks reminds us that history is a human construct and should not be treated as a totality. She provides the grounds for rethinking and reworking its contents, and hence she attempts to challenge and shift the ownership of history.

By confronting history and memory from a variety of angles, Parks affords delicate standpoints, enabling readers to challenge and change the accepted metanarratives. For the African Americans, whose right to literacy and writing had been denied, collective memory was one of the tools which helped them create alternative histories and reshape their own past. For its part, Parks's play denaturalizes "notions of historical documents as representations of the past and of the way such archival traces of historical events are used within historiographic and fictive representations" (Hutcheon 2002, 48). It seems also to include a repertoire of history in miniature, tracing African Americans' histories from their imagined roots in the biblical curse of Ham and in pharaonic Egypt to the time before Columbus and the Middle Passage to enslavement and subjugation, continuing up until the Civil Rights Movement and the assassinations of two of its leaders. The representation of violent deaths of African Americans can be considered a wake-up call to put an end to further violence and injustice.

Thus, Parks brings her figures together with their different experiences from history, literature and the media and unites them for a common purpose. Each figure steps forward and delivers his or her unique piece of mininarrative. This resonates with two vectors or axes, drawn by Hall (1990, 223): the so-called "vector of similarity and continuity" and the "vector of difference and rupture," which are in a dialogic relationship. The former vector includes "a sort of collective one true self . . . which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common," whereas the latter stresses the differences which exist in their personal experiences (Ibid.). According to Hall: "We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience,

one identity', without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute . . . 'uniqueness'" (Ibid., 225). In this play, these two vectors work together. For instance, the figures bring their own individual experiences and mininarratives to the play and share them with other figures, while at the same time their experiences and mininarratives produce collective historical narratives of oppression and inequality.

To match and patch various voices and visions as features of identities from different ages with various personal views and news, ruptures and discontinuities, Parks employs collage and montage.³⁷ Like pieces of torn photographs, collage and montage offer portraits of African Americans' histories and identities and display different and, in cases, opposing images. These devices evoke the effects of fragmentation, heterogeneity, multiplicity and plurality. Thus, *The Death of the Last Black Man* looks like a dramatized mosaic built out of the juxtaposition of a number of glimmering and dimmed images. The mosaic thus formed is derived from the elements of media, literature, history and politics that blend and clash, manifesting polyvocalism in a discontinuous way. According to Walter Benjamin (2005, 152): "The history of the oppressed is a discontinuity," and that "continuity is that of the oppressors." In order to insert the excluded ones, Benjamin believes "[t]he task of history is to get hold of the tradition of the oppressed" (Ibid.) through the activation of their collective memories, which can help to fill the ruptures and breaks of their past (Ibid., 26–27), very much as Parks does in this play. Parks contests the idea of uninterrupted history through the use of miscellaneous figures, coming from different ages and locations, and rewrites hybrid, plural and interrupted histories. In this light, Parks's play acts as a "giant screen," in Baudrillard's terms, which represents these different periods, places and peoples at once.

Since *The Death of the Last Black Man* represents these periods, places and peoples at once in a fragmented and nonlinear style, touches upon the historical events in rhizome/surface manner and combines legends and narratives of slavery, the play can be seen as a "neo-slave narrative."³⁸ Bernard W. Bell (1987, 285) describes neo-slave narrative as an attempt to

³⁷ "Collage" is the transfer of different materials from a number of contexts to another, and "montage" is to juxtapose, superimpose and graft those borrowings of heterogeneous contexts in a new context.

³⁸ The term originates with Bernard W. Bell in his book *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (1987). Unlike the slave narratives which were written in the form of autobiography and aimed to abolish slavery, the neo-slave narratives are mainly written to underline the historical legacy of slavery as a central experience in the lives of African Americans and thus are in the form of historical fiction. In addition, unlike slave narratives, which were written in linear forms to transcribe historical narratives in detail and verify as many "facts" as possible to establish authenticity, neo-slave narratives are nonlinear and fragmented, lend themselves to contemporary narrative forms, often touch upon the issues in a shallow and superficial manner and do not make any such efforts to claim authenticity.

“combine elements of fable, legend, and slave narratives to protest racism and justify the deeds, struggles, migrations and spirit of black people.” Thus, the neo-slave narratives are not nostalgic but provide a critical examination of history. Parks also unveils the past in her play but does not show any nostalgia toward it. She does so by engaging critically with dominant narratives and provides some counter-narratives. Bell (Ibid., 289) also defines “neo-slave narratives as residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom.” *Black Man With Watermelon*’s narratives which signify orality and unmask a part of oppressions suffered by African Americans provide readers with an insight into African American history and their efforts to attain freedom.

Parks confronts historical events in order to question “the Great Whole of History” and to fill according to her valence “the Great Hole of History,” through the medium of drama and theater as sites of resistance. This hole is perceived when some of the figures in *The Death of the Last Black Man* claim that they have been present in history, while they state that they have not met one another in the past (D, 103). The figures’ words remind us of the existence of holes in history. In order to fill some of the holes, Parks rewrites a part of their history, and to allow the figures to meet one another, she disrupts time and geographical continuity and makes the figures travel back and forth so much that they finally come across one another.

As a result, the rewritten events act as a prophecy and promise of counterhistories of subjugated knowledge that has to be desubjugated and deciphered. In this sense, this play is a “counterhistory play.” To argue for this claim, I refer to Foucault’s (2003, 133) definition of history and counterhistory, according to which “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” to reinforce sovereignty (Ibid., 70). Accordingly, “counterhistory” 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.). Counterhistory then attempts to illuminate those dark spots and undo the silences and 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.). In other words, counterhistory is a reflection of unheard voices, experiences and memories which have never fitted into the texture of official history.

As a counterhistory play, *The Death of the Last Black Man* represents some marginal parts of histories of African Americans that due to their illiteracy and/or lack of power to record them

are not found in published texts of American history.³⁹ In this regard, hooks (1981, 120; emphases added) asserts:

No history books used in public schools informed us about racial imperialism. Instead we were given romantic notions of the “new world,” the “American dream,” America as the great melting pot where all races come together as one. We were taught that *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*.

Thus, figures such as *Ham and Before Columbus* bring up some of the subjugated and marginal mininarratives of African American histories and desubjugate them. In short, through exploring and reenacting “the debris of history” (hooks 1992, 172) and its deviant moments, Parks calls into question the authenticity of professional historiography in order to destructure the content of the documentation by incorporating different perspectives.

2.6 The Male/Female Dichotomy Deemphasized

At the center of the play, there are two black figures: Black Man With Watermelon and his wife, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick. Throughout it, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick shows her deep affection and attention toward her husband. For instance, upon Black Man With Watermelon’s return, she kindly attempts to stimulate his appetite and feed him. She repeatedly asks her husband questions like: “Hen. Hen?” “How uhbout uh hen leg?” or “Just ate?” (D, 105–109). Then, she offers her husband cold compress: “Cold compress then some hen. Lean back. You comed back. Lean back” (D, 105). In another instance, when Black Man With Watermelon returns home with the tree branch and the rope tied round his neck, it is Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, who shows empathy by saying: “Your days work aint like any others day work; you bring your tree branch home. Let me loosen thuh tie let me loosen thuh neck-lace let me loosen up thuh noose that stringed him up let me leave thuh tree branch be. Let me rub your wrists” (D, 118). Indeed, in the first part of the play, she is cast as a nursing wife, whose only concern is to

³⁹ In a conversation between Tommy and Bill in her play *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), Alice Childress also protests against educational systems at schools and the way they disregard black history. Confirming Tommy who states that school was not a great part of his life, Bill says that he failed to acquire any knowledge about African American history “cause the books full-a nothin’ but whitey” (Perkins 2011, 202).

feed her husband in a traditional manner or to ease his physical pain. She acts as a mother-like figure, loving, nursing, nurturing, feeding and fostering him.

However, as the play proceeds, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick's main concern is not to serve her husband or attend to his physical needs any more. She sits on the porch next to him and listens attentively to his narratives every time he returns. In Panel V, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick assures her husband that "[s]omethins turnin," inspiring high hopes that "[s]pring-time" is close, and "[t]his could go on forever" (D, 125–127). She also notifies her husband of the ways she had engaged herself and stepped into the resistance process during his absence. As she says in Panel I:

Comin for tuh take you. Told me tuh pack up your clothes. Told me tuh cut my bed in 2 from double tuh single. Cut off thuh bed-foot where your feets had rested. Told me tuh do that too. Burry your ring in his hidin spot under thuh porch! That they told me too to do. Didnt have uh ring so I didn't do diddly. They told and told and told: proper instructions for thuh burial proper attire for thuh mournin. . . . I didnt do squat. Awe on that. You comed back. You got uhway. Knew you would. (D, 105)

In this excerpt, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick refuses to act according to the prescribed order that she has received from white oppressors. She refuses to pack up her clothes, cut her double bed to a single one and bury her wedding ring which she has never even had, implying that they have had no wedding ceremony. Instead, she takes different measures to express her protest against her husband's unfair execution, simply because she is well aware that following the instructions would result in their breakup. These signs indicate that she is fully devoted, reliable and trustworthy to accomplish the assigned missions.

By the same token, Black Man With Watermelon is a committed figure, closely attached to his wife. He returns directly to his wife and no one else to tell his histories/stories after his resurrections. This implies that he thinks of his wife as a trustworthy companion and firmly believes that his survival is dependent on her. The repeated deaths have transformed him. Later in the play, he refuses to demand that Black Woman With Fried Drumstick assume a subservient role, including taking care of household needs, cooking, feeding and nursing the family. Rather, he trusts and mobilizes his wife to write down his mininarratives of oppression and resistance. He hands off the baton of history to her in the identity relay race, asking her to carry it further. If she refuses, they would all remain within passive subordinate roles and continue to experience death in life day in, day out. Consequently, Black Man With Watermelon strongly urges her to write

down, hide, carve and hold his mininarratives. In this way, primacy is given to the “body of text” rather than to “male or female body” and dramatizes African American women as men’s partners in the process of resistance. This means trusting and empowering black women and expanding their roles, which results in the empowerment of the movement in which black women as an important source of survival can play a key part in sustaining thrust toward empowerment.

Parks does not stress gender inequality between African American men and women, notably seen in the relationship between *Black Man With Watermelon* and *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* but instead emphasizes the unity of gender and race in order to eradicate in a womanist manner their separation and fractionalization. However, working within the complementarity of gender and race does not mean to turn a blind eye to differences between black men and women but to minimize the effects of gender inequality in order to direct energies toward more significant ends. Thus, considering the question of survival for the African American community from a womanist perspective in this play, gender differences are of lesser importance, while working together to establish and strengthen a bond of solidarity based on mutual concern is of greater significance. This bond is clearly perceived in *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick*’s unquestioned support of *Black Man With Watermelon*. Parks demonstrates the key role of African American women in the creation of this bond, which – as *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* says in Final Chorus – can turn the page (D, 128).

I argue that the tight bond between the couple is necessary for following up their shared ends: their own survival, the survival of their histories/stories and the survival of their race and future generations. In order for *Black Man With Watermelon* to be strong, *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* has to be strong. In other words, building a strong nation able to cut off the yokes of oppression requires the involvement of every man and woman. Hence, they should stand shoulder to shoulder in the struggle, for without such cooperation, the struggle will fail. As a result, *The Death of the Last Black Man* displays a collective effort to interpret “/d/ivide and conquer” as “/d/efine and empower.” In this condition, *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* can be seen as the collective unconscious of African Americans. She finds a discursive intellectual position which transforms her from a flat figure to a round dynamic one – just like the way that the hegemonic perception of the universe changed from flat to round as the play ironically manifests. Accordingly, she is engaged in a process of transformation through refusing to assume a fixed passive identity. This position soothes *Black Man With Watermelon*, who is concerned about the history and memory of their race. She thus has to uphold the mininarratives of her husband. As the play demonstrates, *Black Man With Watermelon* is unable to move his hands, but *Black*

Woman With Fried Drumstick can, and she acts as his hands. As a result, he is no longer tied. They know that it would be practically hard to survive if they fail to engage in meaningful cooperation. In this way, her role is as important as that of Black Man With Watermelon.

Parks first elaborates on the passive mother-like role of African American women both in their personal and social lives, but then she shows them restoring their self-confidence, socializing and acting responsibly as equal active partners in developing a political agenda toward freedom and in fighting against racial oppression and “those in power” who are determined “to keep the powerless in their place” (hooks 1992, 54). This approach helps Parks to create solidarity between African American men and women and foreground the key roles of African American women in racial uplift.

To this end, Parks rebuts black male phallocentrism which, as hooks (1992, 103) critically describes, “constructs a portrait of woman as immoral, simultaneously suggesting that she is irrational and incapable of reason” and thus prevents black men from listening to their women or assuming that “women have knowledge to share.” On the contrary, Black Man With Watermelon insists that his wife assume an active discursive role in the movement rather than subordinate roles which can be seen as an attempt “to cultivate Black female leadership and stop using Black women for domestic duties” (Hill Collins 2006, 166). In this regard, Yvette Louis (2001, 143) writes that “Parks construes discursivity for Black Woman that amplifies her sphere of influence and constructs a black female subjectivity that becomes the site for reconstructing and recuperating the black body and identity of Black Man.” Consequently, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick is employed as a discursive figure and her key and dynamic role challenges the negative stereotypes against women – which have been turned into a metanarrative – as emotional human beings.

Moreover, *The Death of the Last Black Man* deals with the aftereffects of lynching in the lives of African American women. From this standpoint, it can be considered as an “anti-lynching play.” According to Kolin (2010, 50): “Most of Parks’s plays are rooted in the horrors of lynching. . . . The most obvious manifestation of a lynching in Parks occurs in *The Last Black Man*, where the title character, Black man, appears on stage with a rope around his neck.” Parks clearly depicts an “unwritten law” which justifies the brutal killings of the blacks “without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal” (Wells-Barnett 1995, 70). In connection with this, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick gives an account of this dreadful event in her own words:

They comed for you and tooked you. That was yesterday. Today you sit in your chair where you sat yesterday and thuh day afore yesterday. . . . Thuh chair was portable. They take it from county tuh county. Only got one. . . . Put thuh Chair in thuh middle of thuh City. Outdoors. In thuh square. Folks come tuh watch with *picnic* baskets. (D, 107; emphasis added)

She is here talking to Black Man With Watermelon who sits with a rope around his neck, implying that he has just escaped lynching. Her comment on lynchings in different counties is verified in historical records: Between 1882 and 1927, 3589 African Americans, including 76 women, were lynched under various, and in cases senseless, pretexts in the presence of white women and children. After the Civil War and the First World War, some were lynched for wearing their army uniforms. Occasionally, food was served which created a *picnic-like* atmosphere (Hatch 2003a, 221). In a similar vein, Anderson (1997, 6) writes:

Tales of black men raping white women resulted in lynch mobs who, in their murderous frenzy, would kill the first black they could find. Black women were powerless against the mobs that entered their homes and forcibly removed their husbands, sons, and fathers; if the accused men weren't home, the women of the household would likely be raped, or lynched, or both.

White women's accusations of rape by African American men frequently resulted in the lynching and death of the accused.

It is quite evident that the lynching of black men – generally marked with hypersexuality, as another metanarrative that sexualizes the environment – under the pretext of defending white womanhood from black men's presumed irrepressible rape instincts and as a punishment for the rape of white women was perpetrated to maintain the hegemony of the whites. Ellis, the white character in Baldwin's (1964, 57) *Blues for Mister Charlie*, repeats the stereotype about black men's excess sexual appetite when he says: “[Niggers] got one interest. And it's just below the belly button.” White men used lynching, castration and other forms of chastisement to prevent them from having relationships with white women. This issue is also expressed in Baldwin's play where Ellis and Ralph believe that it would be better for their women to be raped by an orangutan or a stallion than a black man (Ibid.). In addition, in the same play when Parnell recounts to Lyle his academic life in Switzerland where Swiss, Danish, English, French, Finnish and Russian girls were delighted to have a relationship with some African princes studying there, Lyle says with hatred that “I won't never send no daughter of mine to Switzerland” (Ibid., 66). However, he is willing to send his son to that country to have a relationship with African princesses as “long as he leaves her over there” (Ibid.). However, in the case of white men and black women, inter-racial

relationships were encouraged as long as they did not lead to marriage. As Joseph B. Washington (1972, 297) comments: “White men have failed to be serious in their relationships with the black woman” as they regarded the black women as beasts, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, evil and sexual savages who are unfit for marriage. The main reason behind white men’s refusal to marry black women refers to the negative stereotypes and metanarratives which showed black women as morally and sexually loose and unfaithful and as unsuitable wives who were unworthy of protection.

Hill Collins (2005, 221) criticizes this double standard when she notes that “they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but death is to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women.” Parks protests against this double standard that white women must be protected from being sexually abused by black men, while black women have no protection against sexual abuse by white men. This double standard is demonstrated in the scene in which Black Man With Watermelon returns home and comes across a number of watermelons/children in which/whom he finds no copy of himself, showing that his wife had been raped during his absence. The occurrence of such a sight makes Black Man With Watermelon doubt his own origin. He asks: “Who gived birth tuh me I wonder?” (D, 106). The question in the form of aporia not only represents an image of Black Man With Watermelon, who is suffering from being rootless, but also provokes an image of African American women being sexually abused. Thus, the lynching of black men and the rape of black women as “two race/gender-specific forms of sexual violence, merged with their ideological justifications of the rapist and prostitute in order to provide an effective system of social control over African-Americans” (Hill Collins 2000, 147). In this system of social control, black men as the main target of lynching carried the heavier burden of race (Hill Collins 2005, 216), while black women as the target of rape carried the double burden of gender and race. Thus, lynching and rape emerged as mechanisms to discourage interracial relationships between black men and white women and provided white men with the license to rape black women.

However, this is not the whole story. From another standpoint, one of hooks’s (1981, 80) concerns can be clearly perceived in this play when she writes that

historiographers who study black people’s history tend to minimize the oppression of black females and concentrate their attention on black men. Despite the fact that black women are victims of sexist and racist oppression, they are usually depicted as having received more advantages than black men in American history.

hooks's remarks show that African American women have experienced racial and sexual oppressions, too; however, their oppressions have not been foregrounded. This is seen in this play right from the title – *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* – where Black Man With Watermelon and his recurrent violent deaths have been foregrounded. The play also highlights the tortures that have overwhelmed him, testifying to the isolation and invisibility of African American female subjects. Thus, it can be said that the play explicitly foregrounds the sufferings and deaths of Black Man With Watermelon but overshadows the physical and mental traumas of Black Woman With Fried Drumstick.

As another example, a great number of questions posed by other figures merely address the miseries of Black Man With Watermelon. For instance in Panel II, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut asks: “Where *he* gonna go tuh wash *his* dribbling hands?” and right after her, Prunes and Prisms repeats and revises: “Where *he* gonna go tuh dry *his* drippin clothes?” (D, 112; emphases added). In these questions, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut and Prunes and Prism concentrate on Black Man With Watermelon's escape from slavery in which he has been forced to cross some rivers and has been lacerated. They feel empathy for him and make inquiries about his dreadful condition, such as his bloody hands and wet and bloody clothes. Old Man River Jordan also engages in this conversation and offers more detailed information as if he had been an eye witness to Black Man With Watermelon's escape and agonies: “*He* is dead *he* crosses thuh river. *He* jumps in thuh puddle have *his* clothing: ON. On thuh other side thuh mountain yo *he* dripply wet with sopping. . . . *He* jumped in thuh water without uh word for partin come out dripply wet with soppin” (Ibid.; emphases added). Finally, Black Man With Watermelon finds an opportunity to describe in detail the way he tricked the chasing dogs and slave catchers into thinking that he was at home. He says:

I am soppin wet. I left my scent behind in uh bundle of old clothing that was not thrown out. Left thuh scent in thuh clothin in thuh clothin on uh rooftop. Dogs surround my house and laugh. They are mockin thuh scent that I left behind. I jumped in thuh water without uh word. I jumped in thuh water without uh smell. I am in thuh river and in my skin is soppin wet. (D, 112–113)

The above questions and narratives clearly show that the play revolves around the pains of Black Man With Watermelon and the concerns of other figures about his conditions.

In addition to recounting his escape narratives, Black Man With Watermelon in Panel III recounts the scene of his lynching where a large group of people had thronged his platform on a rainy day, “pullin out their umbrellas,” and then “Sky flew open and thuh light went ZAP. Tree

bowed over till thuh branch said BROKE,” and he manages to escape death in the eleventh hour (D, 119). As we see, the figures mostly take Black Man With Watermelon’s agonies into consideration, and their main focus is on his escapes, lynchings, deaths, reappearances and even postmortem conditions. I conclude this section with Harriet A. Jacobs’s (1861, 119) words in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering, and mortifications peculiarly their own.” Likewise, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick has surely suffered; however, in all these cases her miseries and traumas have remained invisible.

2.7 Sleep, Death’s Twin-Brother

In *The Death of the Last Black Man*, primacy is given in part to the necessity for self-knowledge and quest/ion of identities and in part to the question of the omnipresence of the media and their propaganda directed against African Americans in an attempt to write death for them. Parks longs for salvation, salvation from being destined to be slaves under any pretext, salvation from race and gender inequality and metanarratives, salvation from disunity and confrontation among African American men and women, salvation from presuming African American women to be weak dependent subjects who have to take subservient roles at home, salvation from fixity, passivity, negligence and “sleep” or rather “death in life.” Seen in this light, the title of the chapter, “Sleep, Death’s Twin-Brother,” implies that there is no difference between death and sleep, both of which signify ignorance and passivity, and I have found it in line with one of Parks’s leitmotifs in this play. The title of the play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, which is continuously repeated, has this message: if African Americans attain salvation, no other African American in the whole entire world will die, and if they fail, no African American will be saved. This would then be the last black man and his last return.

Parks engages herself wittily in a countermove on the stasis of metanarratives and the fixed identity assigned for African Americans. She conveys this sense of fear and hope in a postmodern way, employing a number of postmodern techniques, amongst them intertextuality, indeterminacies, magical realism, irony and historiographic metafiction as discussed in detail in this chapter. The use of these techniques enables Parks to create incredulity toward a number of metanarratives and dominant ideologies – which still function to maintain the identity of being for African Americans – while at the same time articulate some mininarratives that set the stage for the reformation of their identity. She thematizes the postmodern concerns of history writing with

“the indeterminate and unstable nature of textuality and subjectivity” (Hutcheon 2002, 46), and correspondingly she creates a hybrid style of history writing.

Furthermore, the play voices the concerns of African American women, including race and gender oppressions and inequity, highlighting at the same time a way toward solidarity and common goals. To this end, Parks breaks down the binary male/female opposition, challenges the implications of superiority of male over female and refrains from emphasizing the male/female dichotomy and gender differences among her figures. She counters this dichotomy in favor of unity and solidarity and creates a convincing portrayal of African American women who can function as discursive and trustworthy participants in the movement. Finally, she shows how African American men’s trust in African American women and their cooperation can help them build a strong nation together and transcend their race. Thus, to think of *Black Man With Watermelon*’s death as the death of the last black man requires unity and solidarity to compensate for the sustained loss, the loss of African Americans’ written histories. Through writing their histories, they succeed in claiming that they have always been and continue to be in history.

Chapter Three

Peace in Pieces: *Venus*

The re-writing of history is therefore an endless task.

Trinh Minh-ha (1989, 84)

Suzan-Lori Parks's pseudo-historical play *Venus*⁴⁰ appeared on stage in America in 1995. It is a "blueprint of an event" (Parks 1995e, 4) that dramatizes the dismal story of Saartjie Baartman (popularly called Venus Hottentot),⁴¹ a South African girl of the Khoikhoi tribe, who was lured to London by false promises of prosperity, sold into slavery and displayed seminude as a "freak" during the 1810s first in England and then in France. What made her worthy of public display was her biological oddity – her protruding posterior. Prior to her death, Dr. Georges Cuvier "commissioned an artist to make a plaster molding of her body" (Miranda and Spencer 2009, 913). After her death, he autopsied her body "in front of an audience of scientists," and her remains and the plaster molding were displayed at the Musée de l'Homme, France (Ibid.). Two centuries later, in 2002, her remains were returned to South Africa and buried in her birthplace, ending her long and demanding journeys.⁴² Parks elaborates how the idea of writing *Venus* emerged:

I first heard about the woman called the Hottentot Venus at a cocktail party. Liz Diamond was talking about her and I was eavesdropping. As I listened bells started going off in my head and I knew this Saartjie Baartman woman was going to end up in a play of mine. She was a woman with a remarkable bottom, a woman with a past, and that got me interested in her. . . . With *Venus* my angle is this: *History, Memory, Dis-Memory, Remembering, Dismembering, Love, Distance, Time, a Show*. (V, 166)

⁴⁰ All quotations in this chapter are taken from *Venus: A Play by Suzan-Lori Parks*, Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1997, and the abbreviation V is used in parenthetical references.

⁴¹ As Robert Brustein notes: "The word Hottentot began as a derogatory term for the Khoikhoi tribe in South Africa. It was coined by an Afrikaner who said, 'they only have two words, 'hot' and 'tot,' and that's the way the word came into being. It was later applied to 'Venus Hottentot'" (qtd. in Kalb 2014, 156). It is worth remarking that Saartjie Baartman is also known as Venus Hottentot and Sarah Baartman.

⁴² After his election as President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela raised the issue of Baartman's repatriation and requested President François Mitterrand to return her remains to South Africa. However, the process took the French government eight years to pass a carefully-worded bill that would not allow other countries to claim their treasures taken by the French. In January 2002, Baartman's remains were returned to South Africa and were buried in Hankey in the Eastern Cape Province on South Africa's Women's Day, 9 August 2002.

Venus premiered at Yale Repertory Theater in March 1995 by director Richard Foreman. It was subsequently produced by George C. Wolfe at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York in 1996, winning the Obie Award. In 1998, Parks herself directed a short version of *Venus* at the Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia. It was further performed under the direction of Jessi Hill in February 2007 at Yale School of Drama. During November 2010, the play was staged once again under the direction of Karla Koskinen at the Alys Stephens Center Odessa Theatre, University of Alabama. *Venus* begins with two quotations: one from Jean-Luc Godard in French – which reads “Le travail humain / Ressucite les choses / D’entre les mortes,” and can be translated as: “Man’s labor / Resurrects things / of the dead” – and the other from Virginia Woolf in English, which goes “‘You don’t believe in history,’ said William.” The quotations highlight the main themes of the play: cracking the doom of represented history and stressing the urgency of reworking metanarratives. The use of French and English in the quotations also charts the itineraries of Baartman’s journeys and her shows in England and France.

Venus has been admired by a number of critics as “The Art of the Difficult,” which “demands for a better world” (Kushner 1997) and the “Drama of Disinterment” (Warner 2008), which attempts to recreate and restage history (Schafer 2008; Rodríguez-Gago 2002; Geis 2008) and to refigure verbal and visual language (Lyman 2002). It has earned respectable praise from a number of critics for its contribution to critiquing the dominant feminist analyses of black female bodies (Elam and Rayner 1998) and to challenging the association of animal imagery with black females (Osha 2008) as well as the object of white men’s desire (Miller 2013). Anderson has analyzed it as a commentary on the femininity and sexuality of women of African descent. However, not all theater critics have praised the play. *Venus* received severe criticism by Jean Young (1997, 699), who in her article “The Re-objectification and Re-commodification of Saartjie Baartman” objects to the idea that Baartman was complicit in her own exploitation. Unlike Young, Ilka Saal (2005, 59) argues that Parks was interested in “Baartman the spectacle,” and accordingly “the complicity of the audience in the perpetuation of imperialist discourses and colonial desire” matters to the playwright (Ibid., 61).

In a similar manner to the previous chapter, in what follows I highlight a number of key preoccupations of the postmodern aesthetics used in *Venus* and argue that the discourses of postmodernism can provide alternative perspectives to approach the play. To achieve this end, I first explore the wide range of intertexts, metatexts and paratexts used in the play and show how their use can create narratives-within-a-narrative, a heterogeneity of styles and plural perspectives. I demonstrate how the repetition of these subtexts, coming from other different texts, links the

past to the present and helps Parks to rehistoricize Baartman's history through incorporating her mininarratives and to reshape the represented knowledge of the past. I then explore indeterminacies as a feature of postmodernism in this play – embodied in its themes, plot, form, language, etc. – and show how these elements create ambiguity, heterodoxy and a plurality of interpretations. I also investigate the play's paradoxes, manifesting themselves in the opinions, hypotheses, deeds and subtexts, and argue that they help to undermine any claims of totality.

In my analysis, I approach the play from the standpoint of intersectionality. I argue that the intersections of race, gender and class have five outcomes or "Penta Ps," namely: 1) the *promotion* of white male anatomists and white race, 2) the *privilege* of whiteness, 3) the *perversion* of the black female body, culture and race, 4) the *profit* of white entertainers and 5) the *pleasure* of white male spectators and owners. I study the various interconnected biological, social and cultural categories and examine how pseudo-scientific racism paved the way for the whites to promote their knowledge of human anatomy, while expanding the dimensions of their essentialist knowledge about the black body to privilege whiteness and pervert black womanhood. I probe further how the perversion of the black female body and privilege of whiteness based on such metanarratives set the scene for white entertainers to put women of African descent on public show for profit and prepared the ground for white spectators to gratify their pleasure.

3.1 Inter/Meta/Paratextuality and Revision

Venus draws from numerous archival documents, including excerpts from historical, medical, literary and legal materials, thereby creating narratives-within-a-narrative. For instance, as Parks herself writes at the beginning of the playscript, *Venus* incorporates "scenes from, 'For the Love of the Venus,'⁴³ a Drama in 3 Acts" (V, [iii]). Scenes 4, 8, 11, 23, 26 and 29 make extensive use of that drama, which creates a play-within-the-play (Geis 2008, 81). Parks bases this internal drama on *La Vénus hottentote, ou haine aux Françaises*, which is a "one-act vaudeville," written in 1814 by Emmanuel Théaulon, Armand Dartois and Nicolas Brazier (Sharpley-Whiting 1999, 32). However, the text within *Venus* is Parks's invention – a fictitious melodrama. I argue that through using and abusing that drama, Parks reiterates that all texts, including historical ones, are

⁴³ The excerpts of this drama, which form 6 scenes of *Venus*, depict a young couple who are going to marry. To be a real man, the groom is to travel to Africa before marriage to discover something. However, when seeing Venus Hottentot's advertisement in the newspaper, he desires to own her as something different. To win him back, the bride then contrives a plot and casts herself as Venus Hottentot.

in danger of distortion and falsification. The extensive use of materials from that drama also helps Parks link the past to the present and revisit and revise the past in a new context. As Nicole Hodges Persley (2010, 74–75) writes: “By sampling and remixing past tragedies in the present, Parks is able to link new audiences to the atrocities of racial subjugation in . . . history that are often forgotten.” As a consequence, the intertexts remind readers of atrocities and racial injustices that often pass into oblivion through the passage of time, while they have shaped people’s thoughts and tendencies with regard to people of African descent.

A number of the intertexts are denoted in the form of “footnotes.”⁴⁴ These footnotes are widespread throughout the play and, as such, even make up three scenes – Scenes 10, 13 and 28. These very short scenes, entitled “Footnote,” include extensive excerpts from anatomical notebooks and Baartman’s autopsy reports – which Cuvier delivered as lectures in 1817 – as well as from newspaper clippings, advertisements, court documents and spectators’ diaries. These footnotes function as intertexts, metatexts and paratexts⁴⁵ in *Venus*. In “Postmodern Paratextuality and History,” Hutcheon (1986, 312) refers to the use of footnotes as paratextual insertions of historical documents – be they newspaper clippings, legal statements, or photographs – into metafictional texts.” For instance, Footnote #3 reads:

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.”

⁴⁴ Footnote #2 from Robert Chambers’s *Book of Days*; Footnote #4 from Daniel Lysons’s *Collectanea: A Collection of Advertisements and Paragraphs from the Newspapers Relating to Various Subjects*; Footnote #6 from R. Toole-Scott’s “The Circus and the Allied Arts.” Kushner (1997, 63) believes that

[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’s statement confirms both Parks’s unique style of using footnotes in playwriting and the inconvenience that the implementation of footnotes causes for performers.

⁴⁵ The term “intertext” can be defined as a text within a text in the form of allusion, quotation, referencing, translation, parody, etc. which can make an interrelationship between the two texts. The term “metatext” is defined as a text about another text in which one text describes, explains or makes critical commentaries on another text. The term “paratext” refers to all added written materials included in a book that does not count as the primary narrative or the main text. These added elements, amongst them forewords, notes, indexes, glossaries and translations, form a frame around the main text.

(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^{46]} show went on.

(V, 36; original emphases)

As seen in the footnote above, Parks introduces Robert Chambers's *Book of Days*, which provides readers with further information about the event in the play, and reveals the illegality of The Venus's shows during the 1810s under the recently passed Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Such footnotes, which in cases even engulf the main text, refer readers to some documentation which claims factuality, while at the same time these notes contest the authority and objectivity of these documents by opening them up to criticism. Thus, the use of footnotes keeps readers moving between factuality and fictionality. These constant moves color the play with hues of historiographic metafiction. According to Hutcheon (1986, 307), "what historiographic metafiction emphasizes is that, while documents are indeed formal or material traces of the past, they are also – as traces – texts, and as such they are already interpretations – that is distanced from brute reality or experience unmediated by time or by act of transcribing." Parks's footnotes mingle fact and fiction in order to rehistoricize Baartman's history from another standpoint.

In *Venus*, there are also two glossaries at the back of the play: "Glossary of Medical Terms" and "Glossary of Chocolates," which create metatextuality and paratextuality. Parks defines the technical terms used in the play and refers readers twice within the playtext to the glossaries for further information (V, 91 and 105). References to the glossaries on the one hand disrupt attention and the linearity of reading, which is in line with Brechtian aesthetic distance, and on the other hand keep them in constant motion and oscillation between the main text and glossaries, which is in line with The Venus's constant moves from town to town and country to country.⁴⁷ Hutcheon calls these types of notes "extra-textual references": they refer to the world outside the main body of the text.

⁴⁶ Unlike in *The Death of the Last Black Man*, in *Venus* the cast is called characters and not figures. Parks uses the definite article "The" before the names of all of the characters. The use of the definite article signifies that the characters are particular ones whose identities are known to readers. This is perhaps to both generalize and individualize the characters through establishing a prototype of them for all people, blacks and whites. In addition, some of the characters are nameless or unnamed, including The Man, The Brother and The Young Man. This state of being unnamed may be accounted as another attempt to generalize the characters.

⁴⁷ The Venus's constant moves from town to town and country to country signify nomadism, which according to Kimberly D. Dixon, "can be understood not only as a product of the migratory history of black people but also as an expression of postmodernism's preoccupation with migration, exile and shifting identities" (Dixon 2001, 214).

The use of footnotes and glossaries evokes the “text-performance opposition” (Ubersfeld 1999, 4) as performers need to devise ways to include them in the performance and make the performance “speak or tell the whole text” (Ibid., 5). It is worth remarking that footnotes and glossaries are used in historical discourses to provide readers with further information but are considered of lesser importance than the main text. Through the use of footnotes inside the main text and reference to the glossaries on a regular basis, Parks blurs the borderline between margin and center, in itself a postmodern attempt, and highlights these textually marginalized notes.

The wide parodic use of intertexts introduces multiple genres to this play and hence embraces heterogeneous styles, a pluralistic polyphony, multiple narratives, hybridity and a narrative fragmentation. This heterogeneity suggests that Parks cannot claim that she is the sole proprietor of her play, because her play is a parody and a borrowing from different works. These intertexts denote that fiction, medicine and history are human-constructed discourses that can be rethought and reworked. Thus, Parks here first “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts” (Hutcheon 1993, 243) the existent discourses and the knowledges they emit through intertextuality (Hutcheon 1988, 3). Such use and abuse, installment and subversion of the discourses in the form of intertexts “replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text” and acts as “the shift from validation to signification” (Ibid., 126 and 96). The intertexts both inform readers of the erstwhile texts written about Baartman and place them in the position of critics. With its usage of a wide variety of intertexts in *Venus*, the play as a whole is a “repetition with revision and reference.” The reference to and repetition of different literary, historical and medical intertexts provide Parks with an opportunity to revise Baartman’s history, add her own mininarratives into the context of the existing history and offer a rereading of her history from a new perspective which can help to redefine the views of her history and fill readers with new significations.

On the basis of this argument, it can be said that the intertexts rehistoricize rather than dehistoricize history. Thus, Parks does not deny the existence of the past nor does she subvert history but rather, in a postmodern manner seeks to subvert the grand totalizing narratives of history or the hegemony and authenticity of one metanarrative over others and to embrace a plurality of mininarratives. Accordingly, Parks – for whom the existence of past is a prerequisite for historical study – does not deny history but invites readers to rethink and reconstrue it for the purpose of its “deconstruction” rather than its “destruction,” simply because she refuses to approach and embrace history as a genuine and monolithic entity. In contrast, she views history as decentered, discontinuous and plural. She is fully aware that historiography is selective in

description and inevitably written from the particular points of view of historiographers who are neither infallible nor disinterested. Thus, Parks attempts to detotalize history through creating awareness that history is a man-made discourse and not an absolute given truth.

Parks's interest in rewriting Baartman's history is close to John Barth's (1984, 193–206) idea of "literature of replenishment" as she attempts to replenish an exhausted literature. It is worth noting that other writers have shown interest in Baartman's history as well, amongst them the South African poet Stephen Gray, who published a collection of poems, entitled *Hottentot Venus and Other Poems* (1979), and the British writer Angela Carter, who wrote a short story, titled "Black Venus" (1985). In addition, the American poet Elizabeth Alexander has a poem, entitled "The Venus Hottentot" (1990), and the American visual artist, poet and novelist Barbara Chase-Riboud has published a novel, titled *Hottentot Venus* (2003). Lydia R. Diamond, the African American contemporary playwright, has also depicted Baartman's history in her play, entitled *Voyeurs de Venus* (2006). In addition, Parks's effort to rewrite Baartman's history signifies "double-coding," which is a postmodern technique used, for example, in architecture. In double coding, the architects attempt to establish some links between the present and the past through blending new techniques with old patterns in a construction. When applying this definition to Parks's *Venus*, at first we find it to be an exhausted work; however, upon reading it we find that Parks has worked to replenish it with her mininarratives and postmodern techniques. I also argue that Parks has used a "palimpsest" technique in order to fill in the parts which she feels have been effaced or washed away from the annals of history. In this light, in the play two vectors are simultaneously operative: the vector of "similarity and oldness" and the vector of "difference and newness" which together work to represent a double view of Baartman's history.

3.2 Indeterminacies and Plurality of Interpretations

As in *The Death of the Last Black Man*, in *Venus* Parks creates indeterminacies through playing with the play's setting, plot, form and characters, and by employing Rests and Spells as well as an invented vernacular language, which all complicate interpretation. In an interview with Ong (2014, 43), Parks says, "I do play with time, but it's because it's all happening right at once for me. Everything that ever happened, it's all happening right now." *Venus* is suspended between the past and the present, between here and there, between what was and what is, which allows Parks not only to escape determinacy and closure but also to imply that different times and places make

no difference if people refuse to change themselves and their perceptions. In Overture, The Mans Brother, The Mother-Showman and The Grade-School Chum say:

Behind that curtain just *yesterday awaited*:
Wild Female Jungle Creature. Of singular anatomy. Physiqued
in such a backward rounded way that she *outshapes*
all others. Behind this curtain just *yesterday alive uhwaits*
a female – creature
an out – of townner
whos all undressed *awaiting* you
to take yr peak. So youve heard. (V, 5; emphases added)

Here, there is no verb-adverb agreement, and the past and present tenses clash with each other. From another perspective, the play is at once temporal and atemporal. Although it is noted that the event took place in the early 1800s in Southern Africa (V, 10), and the play operates within a specific historical context, at the same time it moves to the present, creating temporal distortion.

This temporal distortion manifests itself in the use of deliberate “anachronisms.” For instance, one member of The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders at the beginning of Scene 30 refers to her “jet lag” when she says: “I remember my first day here. / I didn’t know which end was up. / And I had *jet lag* to boot” (V, 19; emphasis added), which alludes to the transfer of many women of African descent to England before *The Venus*. Moreover, at the beginning of Scene 29, these words appear in the stage direction: “The Baron Docteur is the only person in the audience. Perhaps he sits in a chair. It’s almost as if he’s watching *TV*” (V, 25; emphasis added). In Scene 18, The Mother-Showman refers to “Fort Knox,” which is The United States Bullion Depository opened in Kentucky in 1937. These anachronisms – jet lag, TV and Fort Knox which are superimposed on nineteenth-century history – break the solidity of time and place as fixed entities, blur the defined borderlines between the settings and create a link between present and past time. Indeed, Parks’s use of multi-perspectival or ever-shifting settings, occurring in different cultural, historical and geographical landscapes and times, reveals that black experiences and identities are not fixed, monolithic and confined in one single moment and place.

Devising a circular plot is another source of indeterminacies. *Venus* ends where it begins with the death of The Venus, as the final scene, Scene 1, replays the “Overture.” Both in the beginning and the end, The Negro Resurrectionist, announces: “I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead” (V, 3 and 160). Furthermore, even The Venus’s itineraries are circular. In The Mother-Showman’s plans, they move from “Town X to Town Y Town Y to Town Z. /

Town Z to Town A Town A to Town B. / Town B to Town C then back to Town X then off” (V, 52). The statement made by The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders also testifies to the circularity of her tour when they say: “She had in all that time circled the globe twice on foot / saw 12 hundred thousand cities” (V, 58). Consequently, Scene 21 is entitled “*The Whirlwind Tour*” (Ibid.). The circular plot returns readers to the beginning to see whether they are willing to resume reading and witnessing the same course of action and hearing the same metanarratives and dominant ideologies with regard to people of African descent or to take part in rewriting the play in a new way. In other words, the return to the beginning repeats the cycle until readers revise their own perceptions and take action to stop the cycle of systems of oppression.

To enhance indeterminacies in *Venus*, Parks also makes use of inversion in the form of countdown or backward movement. Parks chronicles the story of The Venus’s life and death in thirty-one scenes numbered in descending order. The play starts with “Overture” and then moves backward from Scene 31 to Scene 1. I would argue that the 31 scenes stand for the days of one month, which can be seen as time in miniature. Scholars have written about Parks’s reversed use of scenes suggesting, as Schafer (2008, 183) does, that “*Venus* is the first of Parks’s plays to follow a linear narrative structure based on events in the life of a single figure.” Schafer argues further that “the scenes are announced in numerically reversed sequence despite the fact that the action moves forward linearly” (Ibid., 184). Similarly, Greg Miller (2013, 134) affirms that “[t]hough the scenes are presented from thirty-one to one, the main story retains its chronological presentation. The result resembles a mirror; what we see appears straightforward, though in fact we are viewing (or reading) the play in reverse.” However, I argue that the story refuses to move chronologically as claimed by Schafer and Miller. If we consider for example Scene 28, the autopsy report appears even before The Baron Docteur buys The Venus from The Mother-Showman. Furthermore, in Scene 16 The Venus is alive, while she witnesses The Baron Docteur stand on a podium reading from his notebook the results of his autopsy to spectators. The scenes, which have been extracted from *For the Love of the Venus*, and Scene 20C, which is limited to the definition of the legal term “Habeas Corpus” (V, 65), as well as the widespread use of footnotes throughout the play also function to impede the linear chronological order.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The presence of some other scenes also dismantles the chronological order of the play, amongst them Scene 19, which is simply written in the form of “Spell” with no dialogue, and Scene 15, which is only a countdown from 31 to 14, and Scene 3, where The Venus presents “A Brief History of Chocolate,” which seem to be patches sewn on the texture of the play’s linearity. In addition, the structure of the play which consists of short scenes defies the linearity of the play and no longer creates a flowing river but, rather, small puddles.

I argue further that the use of inversion helps Parks to make a flashback into history with a focus on Baartman's history and gather the pieces of her body, fragmented into anatomical parts during the autopsy operation. What Parks does is seemingly a reverse dissection and/or resurrection. As Geis (2008, 11) comments, *The Venus* is "literally taken apart and put back together again through the act of memory." In my view, the reverse dissection implies that even a fragmented body should not be taken as a passive site but rather an active agent in promoting a political agenda. It is a physical reminder of individual and collective memory of the long history of oppression, which can create solidarity for people of African descent, link them with their ancestors and, as Schafer (2008, 181) notes, "question representations of black women's bodies as possessions, as objects of desire, and as bloody biological battlefields." Thus, the reverse dissection and/or resurrection enables Parks to revisit Baartman's history with an eye to dissect and question the metanarratives that resulted in her exhibits and autopsy.

It would not be out of context to note that the assembly of *The Venus's* body fragments functions as a phantasmagoria that creates a frightening, ghost-like, even nauseating atmosphere and projects shifting images onto readers. For instance, readers can feel this atmosphere when The Baron Docteur stands on a podium in Scene 16, addressing the audiences directly and reads the sickening autopsy report, making the play essay-like. The Baron Docteur begins his autopsy report as follows:

I do invite you, Distinguished Gentlemen,
Colleagues and yr Distinguished guests,
If you need *relief*
Please take yourselves uh breather in thuh lobby.
My voice will surely carry beyond these walls and if not
My finds are published. Forthcoming in *The Royal College*
Journal of Anatomy. (V, 92; original emphases)

The Baron Docteur provides the participants with a choice: to stay or to leave, and if they need relief and decide to leave, they can either listen to The Baron Docteur's voice in the lobby or read his findings later in a publication. As Elam and Rayner (1998, 277) and Larson (2007, 203) write, readers are entangled in a double bind: to stay would mean to participate in and approve of the discourses of biological racism, while to leave would mean to turn a blind eye to the reality of another commodity offered for consumption. To entangle audiences in a double bind is also considered to be an element of postdramatic theatre in which "a sphere of choice and decision" is granted to audiences, and in that sphere "they decide which of the simultaneously presented events

they want to engage with” (Lehmann 2006, 88). In addition, addressing audiences directly and offering them a choice is a metafictional element which evokes the fictionality of the drama. I would like to argue that Parks entangles audiences in a double bind and locates them in a sphere of choice and decision to examine whether they would dispense with the dominant ideologies which have resulted in Baartman’s dislocation, exhibit and autopsy and change their views and attitudes on black female bodies.

In addition to offering a flashback into history to gather the fragments of The Venus’s body, the use of inversion in the form of a countdown is similar to the dentists’ drilling and filling operations, meant to remove cavities and fill the hole with restorative material. Through the application of inversion, Parks fills the hole with The Venus’s mininarratives. Furthermore, a countdown indicates the time remaining before an important event scheduled to occur, such as a shuttle launch or the start of New Year’s Eve celebrations or the explosion of a bomb. In this play, perhaps contesting the metanarratives, including the negative stereotypes, the Great Chain of Being and the pseudo-scientific racism as well as rehistoricizing Baartman’s history would be those great events, since these acts can denaturalize and explode the contrived “Truth,” presented itself as ultimate or absolute, and change it into truths. The play counts backward in a form of reversal that signifies a return to the past, conflating it with the present. Yet the reversed numbers in fact pull one into the future. While readers are involved in the past and history, they proceed in the future. Even in the numbering of the scenes, Parks simultaneously plays with time and links past, present and future.

Lack of character descriptions is another source of indeterminacies in *Venus*, which undermines Parks’s authority over her play. Parks, however, employs few stage directions which in cases are embedded in the dialogues and are distinguished from the playscript with a different font and right-aligned typeface. As an example, the play opens with the following stage directions:

The Venus facing stage right. She revolves,
counterclockwise. 270 degrees. She faces upstage . . .
The Venus revolves 90 degrees. She
faces stage right. (V, 1)

Revolving counterclockwise seems to be in tandem with the scene countdown. According to the above stage direction, The Venus first revolves 270 degrees, and then she revolves an additional 90 degrees. These two turns when added together make 360 degrees, i.e., a full circle, and form a cyclical shape. The rotations also help audiences see The Venus’s full body from different angles. Like a commodity, she is exposed on a rotating platform before audiences. From another angle,

these rotations depict Parks's history itinerary in order to expose Baartman's history and trace the roots of black women's oppressions.

To enhance indeterminacies, Parks uses "Rests" and "Spells." In her "Author's Notes," Parks first states that in *Venus* she uses some "unconventional theatrical elements" and defines Rest⁴⁹ as "Take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition" and Spell as follows:

An elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue. Has a sort of architectural look:

The Venus

The Baron Docteur

The Venus

The Baron Docteur

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. A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It's also a place for an emotional transition. (V, [iv])

As seen in Parks's definition and the example, in Spell a name is printed on the page of a playscript, but against expectations, it is not followed by a line of dialogue or stage directions. Only the character's name is repeated or another character's name appears, creating a dramatic stasis or "non-textuality." Ubersfeld (1999, 143) refers to Spell as "the visible, textually indicated interruption of all the networks of the text and of performance . . . represented by (a) a textual blank . . . (b) a gap in performance, a blackout, a lowering of the curtain, a freezing of the actors' movements, or any other break in the action." Thus, readers and performers have different options to fill in the gaps, and naturally they devise different ways to achieve this end. Federman (1993, 44) explains the philosophy of these blank spaces in postmodern works:

in those spaces where there is nothing to write, the writer can, at any time, introduce material (quotations, pictures, charts, diagrams, designs, illustrations, doodles, lists, pieces of other discourses, etc.) totally unrelated to the story he is in the process of inventing. Or else he can simply leave those spaces blank, because fiction is as much what is said as what is not said, since what is said is not necessarily true, and since what is said can always be said another way. There is no constriction in the writing of fiction, only arbitrariness and freedom.

⁴⁹ According to Kushner (1997, 63), Parks "uses the word rest as a stage direction where other playwrights usually use the word pause."

Based on Parks's definition as well as Ubersfeld's and Federman's assumptions, Spells provide readers and performers with optionality and catalyze participation, since they are free to choose how to fill in the blank spaces or just leave them as they are. Hassan (1970, 91) refers to such blank spaces as "paracriticism," which he defines as "an attempt to recover the art of multivocation." This is to say that the paracriticisms produced by different readers and performers are different, and this creates multivocality. Thus, Spells provide readers and performers with an opportunity to paracriticize those blank spaces.⁵⁰

Throughout *Venus*, Spells are used sixty times. Signifying their importance, Scene 19 is written simply in the form of Spells between The Venus and The Baron Docteur. Spells create long-term silence, which may stand for the historical silence imposed on people of African descent. They may also signify gaps that still exist in history and demand endeavors to be filled in. With regard to silence, The Venus is not allowed to speak in her shows. Whenever she is about to speak in public, The Mother-Showman suppresses her. This is testified by Witness #1 in the court when he says: "She didnt speak at all" (V, 68) and by Witness #2, who says: "Through all of this the creature didnt speak" (V, 69). When The Venus proposes to The Mother-Showman that "[w]e should spruce up our act. / I could speak for them. / Say a little poem or something," The Mother-Showman retorts: "Yr a Negro native with a most remarkable spanker. / Thats what they pay for. / Their eyes are hot for yr tot-tot. / Theres the poetry" (V, 51). Elsewhere, when she finds out that The Venus can count, The Mother-Showman asks her not to reveal it to anyone (V, 40). Even when she just sighs – "Uhhhh!" –, The Chorus begins to play drums to cover her voice (V, 4). Thus, The Venus appears voiceless in public, displayed, introduced and spoken for. However, it can be claimed that Parks functions as a transmitter, making the unheard and unrecorded voice and mininarratives of The Venus be heard and recorded. Furthermore, the use of Spells can bring up moments of peace for critical contemplation over the past and its dominant systems of oppression built upon hierarchal and patriarchal metanarratives.

Spells are used here in different places for different purposes. Each reader may decipher them differently. Spells may express hesitation, such as when The Mother-Showman is hesitant

⁵⁰ Lehmann (2006, 51) labels this type of theater as "the 'directors' theatre' or 'theatre of direction' (*Regietheater*)."
In such a climate, the playwright resigns her authority over the play and its performances. This paves the way for the death of the playwright and birth of readers and performers. Parks comments on this in "Author's Notes" in *Venus*, where she writes that the use of Rests and Spells clearly and willingly surrenders control of her text to readers and performers who are required to interpret them in any way "they best see fit" (V, [ix]). As Kushner (1997, 64) writes: "Such art demands effort from its audience. . . . Difficult Art needs to be assembled in collaboration with the spectator; it doesn't come prepackaged by the artist. It insists on its spectators doing some of the work." Seen in this light, readers and performers need to be active agents, and Rests and Spells give them significant power over the productions of the play and its meanings.

to sell *The Venus* to *The Baron Docteur* (V, 82). They may also stand for internal conflicts, such as the one where *The Mother-Showman* is resisting *The Baron Docteur's* demand (V, 83). These long and short moments of silence help to create a Brechtian alienation effect as the use of Rests and Spells repeatedly reminds readers and audiences that they are reading or watching a play. According to Ubersfeld (1999, 144), "the gap obliges the spectator to put aside not only the action, the succession of the story, but indeed the theatrical universe, and momentarily rejoin his or her own world." Thus, Rests and Spells create gaps in the play and make the artificiality or fictionality of the play apparent to readers through emotional distance.

In contrast to the use of Spells, which create non-textuality and nonlinearity, Parks also uses long and extensive monologues and a plethora of details that create overcrowded spaces, especially in the footnotes and the autopsy reports. Apropos of Lehmann, "one aspect of postdramatic theatre revolves essentially around the monologue. It offers monologues of diverse kinds; it turns dramatic texts into monological texts and also chooses non-theatrical literary texts to present them in monologue form" (Ibid., 127). In other words, "Postdramatic theatre knows not only the 'empty' space but also the overcrowded space" (Ibid., 25). *Venus* makes use of these two paradoxical spaces, i.e., empty and overcrowded ones, alongside each other. These spaces make the play postdramatic.

In addition to the postdramatic elements, the use of a vernacular language further catalyzes the operation of indeterminacies. As in *The Death of the Last Black Man*, in *Venus* Parks employs an African American vernacular language; however, a glance at both plays shows that the vernacular language used in *Venus* is different from that used in *The Death of the Last Black Man*. Parks makes use of the fluidity of language and accordingly employs different types of vernacular in her plays. As Louise Bernard (1997, 688) writes, the vernacular language of Parks is a "counter discourse to the dominant historical record which has served to deny or displace the centrality of the Africanist presence in the Western imagination." Through the application of fluidity of vernacular language, Parks resists the dominant discourses and its prevailing ideologies as she raises the quest/ion of identities.

As do Parks's other plays, *Venus* denies easy access to a definite interpretation, and the invented language complicates interpretation further. According to Kushner (1997, 64), the indeterminacies of *Venus* stem from "the author's determination to cast away the conventions and niceties of the narrative dramatic form that might close off interpretation, meaning, insight." I would argue that the language complexity of this play stems from the use of puns and wordplays,

which begets more interpretations and more indeterminacies. Let us consider puns. Parks accentuates The Venus's attraction in the Overture as such:

An *ass* to write home about.
Well worth the admission price.
A spectacle a debacle a priceless prize, thuh filthy slut.
Coco candy colored and dressed all in au naturel
She likes the people peek and poke. (V, 7; emphases added)

In this excerpt, Parks uses the term “ass” as a pun both to mean buttocks and the animal, two prominent images in this play. The term “coco” also appears as a pun, which means “buttocks” and also refers to a style of African-influenced musical show. It also stands for the abbreviation of coconut palm, and it recalls hot chocolate. Moreover, the icon of “butt” (V, 62) which is another dominant image signifies the remarkable back or the past that has been exploited aggressively throughout history for profit or pleasure. In an interview with Una Chaudhuri (1996, 35), Parks comments that “the butt is the past, the posterior; posterity. She’s a woman with a past, with a big past – History.” As a chorus member observes: “Thuh gals got bottoms like hot air balloons. / Bottoms and bottoms and bottoms piling up like / 2 mountains. Magnificent. And endless” (V, 7). I contend that the shame of the past does not prevent Parks from searching for identities and rediscovering Africans’, and by extension African Americans’, rich heritage which has been either denied or taken for granted.

As for wordplay, an example is provided by The Negro Resurrectionist, who expresses the cause of The Venus's death as follows: “Exposure iz what killed her, *nothing on*” (V, 3 and 160; emphasis added). The term “nothing on” can be read as “nothing else.” It also can be interpreted that she was “totally naked.” I argue that through wordplay The Negro Resurrectionist doubts and rebuts the dominant claims and offers his own mininarratives of the cause of The Venus's death as verified by doctors. In response to The Man and The Baron Docteur, who repeat unanimously that “she died of drink,” he courageously insists that “It was thuh *cold* I think” and repeats that “Exposure iz what killed her, *nothing on*” (V, 3 and 160; emphases added). The Negro Resurrectionist's opinions may stand for mininarratives or rather counternarratives which go against the grain and contradict and weaken the dominant voice. Altogether, the features discussed above act as multifarious maps that Parks offers for reading her play. They conceive her play with indeterminacies and plurality of interpretations, while opening up spaces for the inclusion of alternative perspectives and mininarratives.

3.3 Write “Paradox,” Read “de.repoX”

Postmodern drama explores history with “paradox” in order to reveal its contradictions and question its authenticity. Paradox is a figure of speech in which some statements, propositions and situations contain conflicting ideas, contradictory features or incompatible elements, and thus, at different occasions, they appear to contradict one’s former statements, opinions and propositions. This device, as Hutcheon (1988, 211) notes, is “double-voicing,” since it plays “one meaning off against another.” Parks employs this device to question and undermine the authenticity of metanarratives and dominant ideologies and create ruptures in the received knowledges and beliefs of readers.

As an introduction to paradox, let me begin this section with a discussion of the hypervisibility/invisibility dichotomy which metaphorically includes the discursive forms of address, treatment, respect, etc. As I discussed earlier, The Venus is placed center stage and rotated 360 degrees in order to be totally visible to all spectators from all sides. However, when The Venus tries to claim her share of the profit from the shows according to her agreement with The Mother-Showman, she is called an ugly mouth, and she is denied her share. In another scene, during the shows and in the court, The Mother-Showman calls The Venus politely “lady” and “miss” but afterwards treats her like an animal and keeps her in captivity. Yet again, in Overture, when the characters try to entice people to come and see The Venus, they call:

THE VENUS HOTTENTOT
THE ONLY LIVING CREATURE OF HER KIND IN THE
WORLD
AND ONLY ONE STEP UHWAY FROM YOU RIGHT NOW
COME SEE THE HOT MISS HOTTENTOT
STEP IN STEP IN. (V, 7)

Here, The Venus is only one step away from the white spectators. However, The Mother-Showman introduces her later as the ninth wonder, who paradoxically embodies the “lowest link in God’s Great Chain of Being” (V, 31). Thus, The Venus’s position is oscillating between the worlds of animality and humanity. As Osha (2008, 82) writes in “Venus and White Desire”: “It is as if at the moment of sexualization or sexual arousal the [Venus is] humanized, though neither before nor after that moment. . . . Thus the spirals of white desire determine both the humanity and the animality of the black subject.” This desire is seen in The Baron Docteur’s sexual

relationship with The Venus when he first admits her humanness by his desire to enter her body and then, immediately after achieving orgasm, denies it for his own economic and social interests.

In another example of the hypervisibility/invisibility dichotomy, The Baron Docteur wants The Venus to wear her yellow dress, but when The Venus learns that they are not going anywhere, she complains as follows:

Its always only you and me.
You and me this room that table.
We dont go out.
No one visits.
You dont want me seen. (V, 126)

The paradox is that The Baron Docteur only spends time and sleeps with her in the confined space of a room and refuses to appear with her in public, as he knows that would shame him and imperil his reputation and career. Moreover, the excerpt demonstrates how the cage in London has been replaced by the doctor's room in the medical academy in Paris. His response – “Yr seen enough at the Academy” (Ibid.) – reveals that he would be embarrassed to be seen with a black woman in public, creating another paradoxical moment in the play. These paradoxes question and challenge the reliability of the hypotheses that have resulted in The Venus being reduced to animality and invisibility.

Venus shows ironically how the interests of a dominant group can easily lead to the redefinition of concepts. For example, The Mans Brother, The Mother-Showman and The Grade-School Chum say: “She gained fortune and fame by not wearing a scrap / Hiding only the privates that lipped in her lap” (V, 6). Here, the concepts of “nakedness and nudity” are exchanged to “fortune and fame.” In another example, The Young Man states:

When a Man takes his journey beyond all that to him was
Hitherto the Known, when a Man packs his baggage and walks
Himself beyond the Familiar, then sees his true I; not in the
Eyes of the Known but in the eyes of the Known-Not. . . .
His place in the Great Chain of Being is then to him and to
All that set their eyes upon him, thus revealed. (V, 26)

Here, the journey of “a Man” is described in superior terms. However, The Man's and The Venus's journeys bear contradictory results. After her journeys, The Venus is located in “The 9 lowest links in Gods Great Chain of Being” (V, 31), while The Man's locations in the Great Chain of

Being is elevated. By the same token, The Mother-Showman offers another definition for “man.” When introducing The Venus, she says that “yr not a *man* – until you’ve hadder” (V, 35; emphasis added). From The Young Man’s and The Mother-Showman’s words, it is inferred that a white male can turn into “man” and attain higher position in the Great Chain of Being only after they gain possession of “Known-Not” lands and their people. It can be said that the Great Chain of Being as a dominant ideology is used as a means to discredit The Venus and exclude her from humanity, placing her on the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

Consequently, when The Baron Docteur finds out that The Venus is pregnant, he decides to save his honor, career and reputation and demands her to abort the baby. He worriedly says:

God. Is there anything we can do about it.
Ive a wife. A career.
A reputation. Is there anything
we can do about it we together in
the privacy of my office.
Ive got various equipments in here
we could figure something out. (V, 128)

So here is the paradox: Do humans mate with non-humans? And if they do, can they progenerate, and if yes, do they resort to abortion for their unwanted pregnancies? The Baron Docteur engages in a sexual relationship with The Venus despite his own views about black women as non-humans. In the end, he impregnates her twice, both times leading to abortion. According to Winthrop D. Jordan (1974, 70; original emphasis),

desire and aversion rested on the bedrock fact that white men perceived Negroes as being *both alike and different* from themselves. Without perception of similarity, no desire and no widespread gratification was possible. Without perception of difference, on the other hand, no aversion to miscegenation nor tension concerning it could have arisen.

Jordan later observes that if the sexual relationship between two creatures results in the production of offspring, those two creatures belong to the same species. No doubt, he notes, the Negro can mate with other varieties of mankind and produce offspring (Ibid., 106). In *Venus*, The Baron Docteur feels a surge of desire for The Venus, while at the same time he has an aversion to miscegenation which would endanger his career and reputation. Furthermore, the sexual relationship between the Baron Docteur and The Venus, which results in pregnancies, negates the perceptions used to exclude her from the category of the human. I would argue that just as The

Baron Docteur wants to wipe out all signs of his sexual relationships with The Venus, white masters and slave holders have tried to erase the traces of oppression and violence they used against black slaves in history.

Despite The Venus being excluded from the category of humanity, she is at times paradoxically required to uphold rationality and is held responsible for her oppression. For instance, she is treated by the court as a free rational person eligible to testify and enjoy free will to make decisions. Against this backdrop, Parks first shows that The Venus has nobody to speak for her in the court and then represents the court verdict, ironically showing how their verdict is far from reality:

It appears to the Court
That the person on whose behalf this suit was brought
Lives under no restraint.
Her exhibition sounds indecent
But look at her now, shes nicely dressed. (V, 78)

The excerpt shows how the court judges the book by its cover and that their verdict is based on The Venus's nice clothes and appearance and not on the Witnesses' testimonies. Nobody speaks in the court in favor of The Venus, and there is no pettifogger to support her case there. The court even ignores testimony which could support The Venus's case and issues its own writ. At the end of Scene 20J, the court compliments itself that "in our great country / even a female Hottentot can find a court to review her status" (Ibid.). The court's compliment to itself is a manifesto of race, class and gender hierarchy, since its claim – "even a female Hottentot" – implies that The Venus's case has been heard, and this suffices to absolve the court.

The Venus's connection to her "homeland" is also paradoxical. According to Larson (2007, 215), The Venus shows a keen interest in leaving her homeland when she receives an offer from The Man. She loves the idea of moving to Europe in search of prosperity. In another scene, when The Baron Docteur attempts to persuade her to return to her homeland, she refuses:

The Baron Docteur: Ive got a wife. Youve got a home-land and family back there.
The Venus: I dont wanna go back innny more.
I like yr company too much.
Besides, it was a shitty life. (V, 105)

Despite the disdain expressed here, The Venus gets homesick by the end of the play and says: "I always dream of home / in every spare minute. / It was a shitty shitty life but oh I miss it" (V,

158). These excerpts suggest that home is a place of alienation for The Venus, and the notion of home no longer signifies a romantic, warm and idealized haven; however, she misses it. Such a complicated idea of home mirrors the complicated conditions of community and nation. In such a climate, home as well as community and nation signify exile for her. Shabnam Grewal et al. (1988, 10) describe the notion of home as follows: “When white people come to your Home, steal your land and impose their language, culture and religion, force you to live in ghettos, shanty-towns or reservations, can you still call your country Home? Black people in South Africa have been made homeless in their own country.” The Venus, lured to London by false promises, leaves her home in search of a better life. To Larson (2012, 30), The Venus’s choice is “like Jacobs’s choice, the choice between one evil and a lesser evil.” Larson quotes Elizabeth Brown-Guillory who says that The Venus “could have chosen between subjugation by the Dutch colonizers in her native South Africa and exploitation with the possibility of some monetary reward in England and France” (Ibid., 31). The Venus, oppressed at home by the Dutch colonizers, decides or rather is forced to leave, and accordingly she follows The Man’s scheme, except that her dreams of prosperity in Europe are not realized, and she is sold into slavery.

Through the previous examples, it is clear that The Venus has been precipitated into a state of “in-betweenness,” belonging to neither one place nor the other. The notion of “home” bears with itself the notion of “homelessness,” since The Venus is homeless both in her own home and in her adopted home, Europe. Thus, it can be said that *Venus* illustrates the notion of “double homelessness.” From another perspective, The Venus’s status manifests “double-consciousness,” representing itself in The Venus with “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 1903, 11). Moreover, Parks clearly shows indecisiveness in The Venus’s words. This indecisiveness induces readers question whether her life was better either before or after leaving her homeland. Before leaving her homeland, The Venus dreamed: “I would have a house. / I would hire help. / I would be rich. Very rich. / Big bags of money!” (V, 17). But at the end she is regretful:

I would live here I thought but only for uh minute!
Make a mint.
Had plans to.
He had a beard.
Big bags of money!
Where wuz I?
Fell in love. Hhh.

Tried my hand at French.
Gave me a haircut
And *thuh claps*. (V, 159; emphasis added)

The Venus's dreams of becoming rich have been deferred, and although she has undergone mental agony and physical suffering to improve her condition and prove her talent, she has not achieved her goals. Rather, she and her body have been abused to postulate racist theories in order to justify black racial inferiority and to protect the systems of oppression. The use of the phrase "thuh clap" as a pun in the excerpt implies both applause and the sexually transmitted infection, used colloquially for "gonorrhea."

There are moments when The Venus is asked questions, and it appears that she is in a position to make a decision. For example, The Brother in Scene 31 asks The Venus: "How would you like to go to England?" (V, 15). In a similar way, later in the play, after buying The Venus, The Baron Docteur asks her: "Sweetheart, how would you like to go to Paris?" (V, 86). However, it is soon revealed that these are rhetorical questions. The Venus immediately asks: "Do I have a choice? Id like to think on it" (Ibid.). The Brother, like The Baron Docteur later in the play, only answers her question with another question: "Whats there to think on? Think of it as a vacation! / 2 years of work take half the take. / Come back here rich. Its settled then" (V, 17). The Venus asks, "Do I have a choice?" and The Baron Docteur replies, "you look like you need a vacation, Say 'yes!' / Say 'yes' and we'll leave this minute." He adds, "Its settled then" (V, 87). The Venus is not able to refuse as it would not be feasible for a slave to say "No." Likewise, the words uttered by Witness #3 – who testifies that "that wretched object . . . has been brought here. . . . It is contrary to every principle of morality and good order as this exhibition connects the same offense to public decency with that most horrid of all situations, *Slavery*" (V, 72; original emphasis) – reveal that The Venus lacked the volition to reject The Man's proposal. How can a slave give a willful refusal of her master's bidding? The statement made by The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders shows that she had been taken to England against her will. They state:

Legend has it that The Girl was sent away from home.
Those who sent her said she couldn't return for a thousand yrs. . . .
After 500 years they allowed her to ask a question.
She wanted to know what her crime had been. (V, 58)

These words clearly testify that she had no right to speak let alone decide and that she has been rendered voiceless for 500 years. When The Venus introduces herself in the Court, The Chorus of

the Court is bewildered, saying: “She speaks!!” (V, 74). I argue that by reconstructing the past from a postmodernist perspective, Parks foregrounds The Venus’s voice that had been silenced in a patriarchal society. To this end, The Venus’s journeys and her private life are recorded through her mininarratives that are represented against the context of the dominant discourses.

As the play goes on, it becomes quite clear that The Venus knows her choices are very limited. For example, when The Brother declares his desire for her after they arrive in London, The Venus has no possibility to refuse his will (V, 23), only to yield to her masters’ decisions. In another instance, after she is impregnated, The Baron Docteur asks her opinion about abortion even though he has already made up his mind, thinking that it is the only way to keep his honor as the mere appearance of the swollen belly would ruin his career and life. Anne Davis Basting (1997, 225) parallels The Venus and The Negro Resurrectionist and writes that “The Negro Resurrectionist/Watchman faces a decision similar to Venus’ before him. Forced to promise delivery of her body for the autopsy, he ponders his limited choices: loss of his job and the certain ensuing poverty, or honoring the bones of the dead.” Here, it seems that the term “choice” has been paradoxically redefined as “force.”

As I have shown, paradoxes abound in the play. They reveal incongruity and contradiction between what is expected and what occurs, or between what is said and what is meant, and this undermines certainty and problematizes the historical, medical and pseudo-scientific knowledges accounted as metanarratives with respect to The Venus.

3.4 The Presence of the Past

As I have discussed earlier, *Venus* simulates and replays the history of Saartjie Baartman. Even though it makes use of historical records, *Venus* is not “an exact replica” of Baartman’s life, and I agree with Anderson (2008, 56) that a review of Baartman’s history proves that “while Parks uses facts from the historical record, her play is not an accurate biography of Baartman.” Rather, Parks returns to Baartman’s history in an effort to link the past to the present and reform the history of the present, which is based on the history of the past, through adding and including new mininarratives in the texture of history. As Parks explains in an interview: “History is not ‘was,’ history is ‘is.’ It’s present, so if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past . . . so you can fill in the blanks. You can do it now by inserting yourself into the present. You can do it for back then, too” (Jiggetts 1996, 316). Thus, through rewriting Baartman’s history, Parks attempts to “fill in the blanks” of past and creates “The Presence of the

Past,” which according to Hutcheon (1988, 4, 19, 20; original emphases) “is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, and ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” “in the light of the present” which “does not deny the *existence* of the past; it does question whether we can ever *know* that past other than through its textualized remains.” To put it differently, the presence of the past does not refer to past memories or traditions and their revival at the present time in a nostalgic mode but to the ironic use of old forms in parody.

Seen in this light, “the re-writing of history is therefore an endless task. . . . The more [marginalized people] dig into the maze of yellowed documents and look into the non-registered facts of their communities, the more they rejoice upon discovering the buried treasures” (Trinh 1989, 84). As McHale (1987, 87; original emphasis) observes, a number of historical fictions “treat the interior life of historical figures as dark areas – logically enough, since the ‘official’ historical record cannot report on what went on *inside* a historical figure without fictionalizing to some extent.” Hence, writers of historical fictions invent some dialogues, soliloquies, interior monologues and even documentation. I argue that Parks benefits from historiography and fiction alike to represent the interior life of *The Venus*, light up the dark areas of her life and reshape readers’ knowledge of the past, and in this process voice, demarginalize and include the missing events in history through the medium of fiction. The play recreates private moments of *The Venus*’s life and her conversations with *The Man*, *The Brother*, *The Mother-Showman* and *The Baron Docteur*, divulging something about those otherwise unknown moments. Thus, the historiographic elements in *Venus* put emphasis on the play as an event of the past and frustrate it from being a decisive and final event. These features show that Parks avoids looking at history as a fixed entity and attempts to revisit and rework Baartman’s history in the light of the present.

Mas’ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton (1991, 54) assert that what is read and believed as history is an extensive system of ideas produced and maintained by those in power, ideas which exclude certain histories in order to perpetuate dominant ideologies. Accordingly, history should not be accounted as a solid and fixed narrative but “a contestation of diverse textualizations.” This is what Parks communicates in *Venus*. She shows that history, like identity, is not fixed but constantly in flux. As a result, it is the history of becoming rather than the history of being. Zavarzadeh and Morton deem it necessary “to combat the dominant ideology, because it foreshortens the horizon of historical possibilities by constructing the world in terms that legitimate the interests of one class by subjugating others” (Ibid., 16). Thus, the rewriting of history desubjugates *The Venus*, who is allowed to speak: “After 500 years ... / She wanted to know what her crime had been” (V, 58). This is Parks’s attempt to see *The Venus* through the lens

of black people rather than the white historians' writings that have silenced, censored and excluded some past events due to their limitations, biases, interests, etc.

In addition to the voice of *The Venus*, Parks uses multiple other mininarratives and historical records which create a state of heterogeneity. This state of heterogeneity then blurs the lines between historical and fictional reconstructions of the past and leaves readers in an intricate, confusing network of interconnecting pathways. The main reason behind this is that neither the official record nor the fictional reconstructions of the event are in congruity, and none of those plural versions stands as the authentic or original representation.

The self-reflexivity of *Venus* also underlines the artificiality of Parks's own work. For example, *The Bride-to-Be* informs her lover of the artificiality of her love toward him. She says: "My Love for you is artificial / Fabricated much like this epistle" (V, 26). "This epistle" can stand for any written materials in the play, *The Baron Docteur's* autopsy report and, as a metafictional comment, even the play itself. Later, *The Baron Docteur* himself self-reflexively stresses the artificiality of his findings when he repeats and revises *The Bride-to-Be's* words:

"My Love for you is artificial
Fabricated much like this epistle.
Its crafted with my finest powers
To last through the days and the weeks and the hours."
(*Rest*)
I made it up myself.
Just this morning.
You like it? (V, 102)

Anatomist #8 also expresses his disbelief in the represented discourses when he says: "Throws all of those throw-back theories back in the lake, I'd say. / Throw em back in the lake" (V, 112). The quotes above increase incredulity toward the monotony of dominant ideologies and metanarratives through highlighting that they are human-constructed and echo the need to replace them with the polyphony of mininarratives. Federman (1993, 31) refers to this type of works as "critifiction: a kind of narrative that contains its own theory and even its own criticism." According to Federman, in critifiction, the writer

creates a fiction and simultaneously makes a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension that breaks down the distinction between fact and fiction, between fiction and criticism, between imagination and reflection, and as a result the

concepts of creation and interpretation merge into a new type of discourse – a critifictional discourse. (Ibid.)

In a similar vein, Parks uses the postmodern potential to fictionalize Baartman’s history to critique and transform the represented discourses as well as to unmask the fictionality of her own version of *The Venus’s* history/story in a self-reflexive critifictional mode, simultaneously challenging and questioning the authenticity of the literary and medical intertexts.

Parks’s choice to rewrite of Baartman’s history in a postmodern theatrical style helps her to “locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (Parks 1995e, 4). From S. E. Wilmer’s (2000, 443) perspective, restaging Baartman’s icon is “ethical,” and through it, Parks is “paying respect to those who have disappeared by re/making and staging their histories.” Perhaps Parks is saying that history repeats itself, and as long as the spirit of dehumanization is alive, many Venuses remain dead. As a parallel to Baartman, another woman, also from the Khoikhoi tribe, was displayed in public as Venus Hottentot in 1829. Furthermore, several other African women who were called Hottentot, as Anne Fausto-Sterling affirms, “ended up on the comparative anatomists’ dissecting tables” (qtd. in Schiebinger 2000, 205). The Grade-School Chum confirms this in his comment to *The Baron Docteur*:

yr not the only Doc
whos got hissself uh Hottentot. . . .
Some chap in Germany or somethin
got his hands on one.
He performed the autopsy today. (V, 142)

The fact that several African women were thus autopsied resulted in the ascendancy of pseudo-scientific racist theories that paved the way for the emergence of metanarratives about black female bodies. Thus, the rewriting of Baartman’s history encourages readers to decide whether they believe the dominant perceptions of their ancestors. If they take the challenge to answer such a probe, it may help them to reconsider preconceived notions about black female bodies.

As in *The Death of the Last Black Man*, in *Venus*, “death” and “postmortem” are important leitmotifs that change the stage into a landscape of death and resurrection. The presence of *The Negro Resurrectionist*, as Kolin (2010, 12) writes, “exemplifies Parks’s interest in the supernatural, death and afterlife.” The play appropriately unfolds with *The Negro Resurrectionist* announcing: “I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead” (V, 3). Thus, *The Venus* is dead even before the play starts. Through the repeated and revised announcements of her death,

it is made clear that “[t]here wont b inny show tonite” (Ibid.). The postmortem setting is further emphasized when The Venus announces her own death as follows: “I regret to inform you that tuh Venus Hottentot is dead” (V, 4). Right from the beginning, the presence of a dead character, announcing her own death, creates a postmortem milieu.

The postmortem milieu is intensified when the anatomists are dissecting The Venus’s body, while she is still alive, and she follows the instructions of The Baron Docteur, who demands her:

Sweetheart, stand here where the light is perfect on you.

Just relax.

Only doctors here.

Thats beautiful. (V, 113)

Such a scene manifests the technique of “lesionism,” which in Schmidt’s (2005, 50) definition, refers to “the deliberate altering, sometimes even injuring, of body parts in front of an audience, to present the body not as a fixed entity or a united whole, but as divided into fragments and parts.” However, The Venus does not remain fragmented. As the object of curiosity, she repossesses her body and life right after she is dissected. This trace of postmortem is also present in Scene 6 where The Baron Docteur – “Several Years Later, at a Conference in Tubingen” – is presenting the second part of his autopsy report, entitled “The Dis(-re-)memberment of The Venus Hottentot, Part II” (V, 147), while The Venus is still alive (V, 148). Furthermore, at the very end of Scene 2, The Venus’s death is noted in a stage direction (V, 159), but right after that in Scene 1, The Venus reappears, addresses readers, ironically reads her narratives and then begs them to visit a museum to see “Loves corpse,” i.e. her body. She states:

When Death met Love Death deathd Love

and left Love tuh rot

au naturel end for tuh Miss Hottentot.

Loves soul, which was tidy, hides in heaven, yes, thats it

Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please

Visit. (V, 161; original emphasis)

As Vivian N. Halloran (2009, 6) observes, “the world, as a repository of objects, is itself a museum.” Similarly, I argue that *Venus* is a kind of a museum that exhibits a repository of The Venus. Thus, she invites people to read her mininarratives or attend her shows which make history come alive, demonstrate the dehumanizing effects of pseudo-scientific racism that degrade its

victims to the position of animals, promote awareness of black history and honor the victimized black people.

Right after her invitation to visit the museum to see her body, The Venus makes a request four times to kiss her (V, 161–162), concluding the play thus with her narrative, request and death. To put it differently, the play both starts and ends with The Venus's death and with her incessant moving back and forth between death and life, thereby experiencing both "life in death" and "death in life." While she is dead, she is uncovered and remembered by the characters and the spectators. However, while she is physically alive, she is mentally dead, since she is denied her human rights. On the one hand, her life in death in the form of resurrection may imply that writing and performance have the power to bring a new life into her dead body and destabilize the constructed identity for her. On the other hand, her death in life may imply that treating a human being like an animal due to her race and gender and under the pretext of some hypotheses and considering her as commodity is to withhold her life.

Another postmortem moment is presented when The Negro Resurrectionist declares:

I used to dig up people
dead ones. You know,
after theyd been buried.

Doctors pay a lot for corpses. (V, 158)

This quote signifies that some people had no peace even after death. In this case, it is Parks, who engages with the act of resurrecting The Venus and her mininarratives. As Sara L. Warner (2008, 182; original emphases) notes: "While South Africans labored to *recover* Baartman through acts of interment – retrieving her from foreign soil and placing her finally in a grave – Parks sought to *uncover* her in what I am calling a 'drama of disinterment.'" However, I argue that both acts of interment and disinterment are significant efforts to lay her dismembered body to rest with honor and to resurrect her history/story and her quest/ion of identities. Hence, interment and disinterment, death and resurrection, become tropes for cultural change, sobriety and empowerment. Parks's and other writers' disinterment efforts acted as catalysts, accelerating the process of Baartman's factual interment in her birthplace in 2002.

The postmortem state also provides the ground for the reconsideration of a number of racial and sexual stereotypes about the people of African descent, which are historically specific and have reduced them to their bodies. Parks employs certain characters who are even named in a typical stereotyped manner underlining this particular history, reminding readers of the roots of

these stereotypes and challenging the misrepresentations of the blacks. For instance, Parks employs “The Negro Resurrectionist” as the narrator. The term “resurrectionist” was applied to body snatchers, who furtively disinterred the corpses of criminals, the destitute and the marginalized from cemeteries and sold the corpses to medical schools for autopsy or anatomy analyses (Novak and Willoughby 2010, 134). Parks, however, attempts to reverse this definition of “resurrectionist.” The Negro Resurrectionist is first cast as a displaced character who has been disconnected from his own history and identity but then recast as someone in search of spiritual resurrection and cultural reconnection; as the one who renarrates the past in order to resurrect the lost past. His role as the narrator implies that this version of Baartman’s history is being retold by the black people who are attempting to insert their own voices and views into history. In this regard, Christopher Innes (1999, 106) notes that “like . . . the Negro Resurrectionist, [Parks] brings dead figures back to life on her stage in new configurations to liberate and re-appropriate history.” Seen in this light, Parks herself acts as a resurrectionist who revives the histories/stories and quest/ion of identities of people of African descent.

In addition to questioning the dominant claims, as discussed earlier, The Negro Resurrectionist by the end of the play acts as a resistant and protective character, who refuses to follow The Grade-School Chum’s order and who attempts to protect The Venus’s raped, abused and fragmented body. However, the heavy pressures laid upon him cast him again in his former role and urges him to deliver The Venus’s corpse to The Grade-School Chum, who addresses The Negro Resurrectionist and says: “You used to unearth bodies for my postmortem class. An illegal craft as I remember” (V, 150). When The Negro Resurrectionist replies that he had done it long ago, The Grade-School Chum responds: “Once a digger always one” (Ibid.). Here, Parks questions and criticizes the stereotypes and the fixed identity imposed on the blacks. She also confirms that the power and wealth of the whites can oblige the blacks to commit illegal acts, and accordingly she introduces the whites as the accomplices in black illegal deeds and the main agents in the process of victimizing and humiliating the blacks. This is clear in The Negro Resurrectionist’s words when he says:

Doctors pay a lot for corpses
But “Resurrection” is illegal
And I was always this close to getting arrested.
This Jail-Watchmans job much more carefree. (V, 158)

The Grade-School Chum offers gold to The Negro Resurrectionist for delivering The Venus's corpse after her death and threatens him that he would inform the police of The Negro Resurrectionist's previous illegal acts if he refuses.

The portrayal of The Venus also challenges the negative stereotypes of black women as immoral and bestial sex objects and promiscuous wantons. As Gerda Lerner (1972, 163) writes: "A myth was created that all black women were eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily 'loose' in their morals and, therefore, deserved none of the consideration and respect granted to white women. Every black woman was, by definition, a slut." Similarly, a chorus member describes The Venus as follows: "An ass to write home about. / Well worth the admission price. / A spectacle a debacle a priceless prize, thuh filthy *slut*" (V, 7; emphasis added). Parks seems to hold that people of African descent need to rediscover the roots of these stereotypes if they are to be truly liberated from them; as a result, she uses and installs a number of these stereotypes so as to abuse and subvert them. In the following section, I discuss a number of the stereotypes and icons used in popular culture to label the black women, how they help to interrogate the idea of fixed and universal identity and thus to find a possibility to question and reshape them.

3.5 Practicing Penta Ps

Since the issuance of the Combahee River Collective Statement⁵¹ in 1977, a number of Black feminists have rethought the relationships between sex, race, class and gender axes and promoted scholarship to examine this rubric of hierarchies as interlocking forms of oppression, named "intersectionality." As the term implies, there are many possible different intersecting factors in one's experience of oppression or discrimination. Intersectionality holds that various biological, social and cultural categories such as race, gender, class, age, sexual and other axes of identity interact, "creating a system of oppression that reflects the intersection of multiple forms of domination or discrimination" (Knudsen 2006, 62). The relationships among these various axes are like a mathematical equation, in which each axis has a single, direct, but additive effect on the equation. It is worth noting that intersectionality is a concept often used in critical theories to

⁵¹ In their statement, the members of the Combahee River Collective outlined their position as follows:

We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (Hull, Scott and Smith 1982, 13)

describe the ways in which overlapping oppressions are interconnected to debase a person or a community; however, it also applies to the intersecting orientations and institutions that interrelate to grant privileges to a person or a community.

An examination of Parks's *Venus* reveals that the play aims to catalyze reflections on the various intersections and their interlocking effects that unfairly discriminate against black women and privilege the whites on different social, political and economic levels. In addition to addressing the way sex, race, class and gender are interconnected in black women's lives, *Venus* tackles pseudo-scientific racism and its discoveries that have marred the image of black women for centuries. To this end, *Venus* delves into different orientations devised to *privilege* whiteness as a master signifier and paves the way for the whites to *pervert* the black female body so as to *promote* themselves scientifically, *profit* from black women and attain *pleasure* in them. In this subchapter, I show how the intersections of race, gender, class and sex result in "Penta Ps," the five main rationales for The Venus's shows and autopsy. They are to:

1. *promote* the white male scientists and white race,
2. *privilege* whiteness,
3. *pervert* the black female body, culture and race,
4. *profit* the white entertainers, and
5. *pleasure* the white male spectators and owners.

In order to *promote* the white male scientists' knowledge of human anatomy, The Venus is autopsied, and her organs are removed and measured. Major scenes in the second half of the play and a few scenes in the first half are dedicated to the dissection and to the autopsy reports. The dissection of The Venus illustrates The Baron Docteur's fascination with the racial and biological differences between whites and blacks. As Hill Collins (2005, 99) writes:

Through laboratory experiments and field research, Western science attempted to understand these perceived racial differences while creating, through its own practices, those very same differences. For example, Sarah Baartmann's [sic] dissection illustrates this fascination with biological difference as the site of racial difference, with sexual difference of women further identified as an important topic of study.

The Baron Docteur finds The Venus's dissection fascinating, since it provides him with access to medical knowledge, while also sustaining the political, scientific and economic power and domination of whites over blacks. Her dissection elucidates the white male anatomists' greed in

promoting their anatomic knowledge as a site of knowledge/power inscriptions. This can be interpreted within the sphere of Foucault's (1977, 27) idea that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." Foucault's statement shows how those who gain knowledge are gifted with power and then stand superior to others. The Baron Docteur abuses The Venus to promote his positivistic science or, as Hill Collins (2005, 143) writes, "infotainment." She is "enjoyed while alive and, upon her death, studied under the microscope for the burgeoning field of comparative anatomy" (Ibid., 28).

The dissection of The Venus's body helps The Baron Docteur to articulate some "scientific" hypotheses, arising mostly from the biological differences between whites and blacks. These hypotheses were at the same time used to both prove racial differences and to justify the racial superiority of whites and inferiority of blacks. As a dominant totalizing system, scientific metanarratives were the most effective means that whites used to dehumanize blacks and to justify their claims. Thus, with the ascendancy of pseudo-scientific racism, European scientists sought scientific validation for their racist attitudes toward black bodies and to justify African peoples' inferiority and enslavement.

Such theories paved the way for the humiliation, commodification and consumption of blacks, particularly black female bodies. For instance, due to a widely held notion of devolution, black women were aligned with nature, and accordingly they had devolved to animality. Such images of black women reduced them to physical body parts such as buttocks – which function as a sign of primitivism – rather than mental ones. Those hypotheses, as Roslyn Poignant (2004, 11) writes, "took an anti-humanist turn . . . to measure, quantify and classify human physical differences" and "to arrive at a typology of race that sought to grade humankind on a scale extending from the savage to the civilized." According to Poignant: "The treatment of Saartjie Baartmann [sic] . . . was indicative of the accompanying shift in the idea of savagery from the noble to the ignoble end of the spectrum" (Ibid., 12). It is worth noting that the "Age of Enlightenment" and the "Age of Scientific Racism" were contemporaneous, and thus Parks's revisiting the Age of Scientific Racism is indeed simultaneously a questioning of Enlightenment, the legitimacy of scientific hypotheses as metanarratives and their roles in the construction of race, class and gender hierarchies that generate white sexist and racist stereotypes about blacks.

Parks depicts the rapid growth of scientific discoveries and the tight competition among the scientists and researchers in different parts of the world, especially in Europe. In this, human life and dignity were of lesser or no importance. She claims that for a scientist it was vital to outdo

others in registering discoveries under their own name. This is clear in *The Grade-School Chum* when he says:

Some chap in Germany or somethin
got his hands on one.
He performed the autopsy today.
Word is he'll publish inny minute. (V, 142)

As *The Grade-School Chum* implies, *The Venus* is not the only black woman who had ended in an autopsy room, signifying scientists' incessant attempts to achieve and record new discoveries, which recalls the old maxim that "the end justifies the means."

The hypotheses derived from the process of autopsy were used, on the one hand, to *privilege* the whites and their culture and, on the other hand, to *pervert* black female body, culture and race. According to Hill Collins (2005, 99), "Western scientists perceived African people as being more natural and less civilized, primarily because African people were deemed to be closer to animals and nature, especially the apes and monkeys whose appearance most closely resembled humans." Consequently, the association of animal imagery with black women paved the way for their humiliation, commodification and consumption. To put it differently, introducing themselves as rational, ordered and civilized, whites redefined notions of rationality and irrationality, normality and abnormality, humanization and dehumanization. The pseudo-scientific data on racial and biological differences was a way for them to attain their goal. The redefinition of those concepts through white standards and norms helped to label black women as abnormal, primitive and hypersexual beings yet enticing due to their different sexual organs.

Ascribing abnormality, primitivism and hypersexuality to *The Venus* resulted in her display as a sexual freak. Her autopsy allowed white spectators and anatomists to focus on her sexual organs. However, her representation in the play repeats ironically some of the negative stereotypes in a self-reflective mode in order to challenge the scientific metanarratives and negative stereotypes commonly used to represent black women.

After visiting the Musée de l'Homme in 1982, evolution biologist Stephen Jay Gould (1982, 20) wrote an account in which he first describes the brain of Paul Broca, the French scientist, and comments:

Yet I found the most interesting items on the shelf just above, a little exhibit that provided an immediate and chilling insight into nineteenth-century mentalité and the history of racism. In three

smaller jars I saw the dissected genitalia of three Third-World women. . . . The three jars are labeled “une négresse,” “une péruvienne,” “la Vénus Hottentotte.”

According to Gould, “the Musée de l’Homme had a habit of preserving exotic women’s genitalia, and also the brains of great male European scientists” (Ibid.) which serves the idea of rationality of white men and hypersexuality of black women. Accordingly, in *Venus*, only a short sentence in the autopsy report describes The Venus’s brain. The rest of the report is dedicated to the description of her other body organs (V, 28). The Baron Docteur weighs The Venus’s brain “immediately after removal” from the skull and finds that it weighs “38 ounces,” which is equal to 1,077 grams (Ibid.). This compares unfavorably with the average weight of the brain of a white woman which, according to Gould (1980, 156), was 43 ounces, equal to 1,212 grams. In fact, such experiments have been used to make a direct correlation between brain size and intelligence and infer that due to their smaller brain size blacks are less intellectual than whites. Amanda Thompson (2007, 5) observes that “[t]he myth of intellectual inferiority is not dispelled today. Recent ‘scientific’ studies such as *The Bell Curve* (1994) continue to assert that blacks do not have an equal capacity of intelligence as whites,” showing that negative stereotypes about blacks and their lack of intelligence compared to whites continue to this day.⁵²

The Venus’s brain is the first organ which is removed from her body in the autopsy operation. The removal of her brain stands for the removal of her memories and identities, which makes it possible for The Baron Docteur to take possession of her mind and to attain control over her body. As a result, The Venus is impregnated twice by The Baron Docteur, and subsequently she is forced to abort the babies. The use of abortion instead of contraception clearly signifies The Venus’s lack of control or authority over her body. It is The Baron Docteur, who decides when to impregnate her and when to abort the babies he diagnoses as unfit. This administration of life and determination of death can be interpreted from Foucault’s (1979, 135) theory of “bio-power.” Seen in this light, it is The Baron Docteur, who has what Foucault calls “the right to dispose of the life” of the fetuses “just as he had given them life.” I argue that the administration of life and determination of death are the hallmarks of patriarchy that permits men to control the female body and her fertility. In the racialized context, this control is necessary for maintaining the privilege of white men over black women. Black feminists have always been concerned and complained about their own limited rights over their own bodies, sexuality and fertility. In this regard, hooks (1981,

⁵² In the 1950s, studies comparing the brains of blacks and whites began to fall into disfavor and thus halted for a while. However, after a hiatus, a number of studies on differences in brain volume and size between blacks and whites have resumed in new styles, including IQ tests.

74) states: “Lower class women and consequently many black women have the least control over their bodies.” Thus, rape as a powerful tool of sexual violence, and abortion as a tool to wipe out the signs of that violence, are in the hands of men who can tear up the bodies of black women as powerless prey.

The Great Chain of Being, also a metanarrative and leitmotif in *Venus*, has been used by whites to rank their subjects under the pretext of their race, class and gender, and to privilege themselves. Locating blacks next to apes and monkeys in this Great Chain of Being paves the way for whites to exclude blacks from the category of human beings, thereby depriving them of their human rights. As Hill Collins (2005, 99–100) notes,

the close proximity to apes and monkeys that Africans occupied within European derived taxonomies of life such as the Great Chain of Being worked to link Africans and animals through a series of overlapping constructs. . . . This family resemblance between African people and animals alike as embodied creatures ruled by “instinct or bodily impulses” worked to humanize apes and dehumanize Black people.

On this account, blacks are dismissed from the realm of humanity, and the vertical ranking of races based on white canons and scientific findings helps whites to locate themselves on top and place blacks on the bottom, closer to impulse and animality. The public display of *The Venus* in a cage on the platform is central to portraying black women as animals. Parks rejects the animalistic portrayal of black womanhood, pointing out that race, class and gender inequalities were the main factors which paved the way for black women’s oppressions.

The Mother-Showman refers to *The Venus* as “The 9 lowest links in Gods Great Chain of Being” (V, 31). She later refers to her as “The very lowest rung on Our Lords Great Evolutionary Ladder!” (V, 45). “Occupying such a position,” black women are at the bottom of the societal hierarchy and “bear the brunt of racism, sexism, and classism” (hooks 2000, 16). Parks ironically ascribes the origins of the Great Chain of Being to God in order to question its reliability as a metanarrative. In this regard, Jordan (1974, 102) asks the following rhetorical question: “Could it be that the Creator had graded mankind from its noblest specimens to its most brutal savages?” He further contends that “the implication of the association of the Negro with the ape were profoundly disturbing to faithful Christians and men of good will” (Ibid., 104). I argue that the Great *Chain* of Being is indeed a means to “chain” black people and yoke them in slavery and bondage.

Due to The Venus's defined low rank, The Baron Docteur attempts to conceal his relationship with her. He confines The Venus into one room and never appears with her in public. This arouses The Venus's objection when she says: "You don't want me seen" (V, 126). Also, The Grade-School Chum understands the consequences of the relationship and repeatedly begs The Baron Docteur to end his relationship with her. When The Baron Docteur asserts: "Shes my True Love. / She'd make uh splendid wife," The Grade-School Chum retorts: "Yr sick. . . . Yr reputation is in shambles" (V, 140). When the attempt to change The Baron Docteur's mind fails, The Grade-School Chum says: "She'll make uh splendid corpse" (V, 144). With this response, The Venus is confined to her body in order to elevate the position, rank and reputation of The Baron Docteur, and by proxy, The Grade-School Chum.

I argue that in a reversed order – just like the way the scenes are numbered – and exactly in the opposite direction to The Venus who attempts to elevate her rank, the white characters work to drag her down to the lowest level. The Venus's devolution runs through the play. In Scene 31, The Brother asks The Man: "whats her name?" and The Man replies: "Her-? Saartjie. Little Sarah" (V, 13). The Brother repeats and revises The Man's reply as follows: "Saartjie. Lovely. Girl! GIRL!?" (Ibid.). In a short dialogue like this The Venus's identity changes from Saartjie to "GIRL." In Scene 17, right after selling her to The Baron Docteur, The Mother-Showman calls her "animal" (V, 89), and in Scene 6, The Negro Resurrectionist reads from the doctor's notebook, in which The Baron Docteur repeatedly likens her to "monkey." In the next scene, The Grade-School Chum's letter to The Baron Docteur degrades her even further: "Send the *Thing* back where she came from" (V, 113; emphasis added), completing The Venus's devolution from Saartjie to Girl to animal and finally to an inanimate object.

But this is the image on one side of the coin. On the other side, there stands the image of her during the night's amorous or sexual intercourse. As Omolade (1995, 375) notes: "History would become all that men did during the day, but nothing of what they did during the night." The Venus had witnessed the parts of her history that are unknown to others, and in the play she has an opportunity to reveal what had been done to her during the nights or otherwise in private. For instance, The Brother calls The Venus "The African Dancing Princess" and asks her to lift up her skirt and gropes her (V, 23). Similarly, The Baron Docteur calls her "Dearheart" (V, 107) and "Little Hotsey-Totsey" (V, 136), claiming to love her more than his wife (V, 106). Here, the fascination and intimacy between white men and The Venus challenges the veracity of the pseudo-scientific hypotheses, which resulted in the perversion and devolution of the black female body, and shows that even those who uphold those hypotheses to sustain their political, scientific and

economic domination and privilege ignore them if and when they can benefit from the black female body.

The Venus had left her family, home and traditions behind in order to improve her social and economic status. She voices her goal when she addresses the court, saying that “I could wash off my dark mark. / I came here black. / Give me the chance to leave here white” (V, 76). Her wish to become white is a wish for deracination. For men to rule a deracinated woman like The Venus, who is rootless and alienated from her own heritage, is achieved without great effort. In order to acquire attraction and wealth, The Venus embraces the category of the “exotic,” introducing herself as “an exotic dancer” and claiming that she has been “[v]ery well known at home” (V, 20). By trying to become exotic, The Venus behaves like a hypersexual and avaricious woman who attempts to entice The Baron Docteur to approach, kiss, touch and love her (V, 102–108). In doing so, she helps the systems of oppression to achieve their ends.

The Venus’s hypersexual behavior and plea can be analyzed from two opposing perspectives: on the one hand, rather than contesting the stereotypes of black femininity, the portrayal of The Venus’s hypersexuality – manifest in her words and acts particularly after she learns French and becomes The Baron Docteur’s consort – seemingly adds to the prevailing metanarrative and the stereotypes of black women. Such behavior has “a direct correlation to the ‘expectation of blackness’ in the public sphere” (Williams-Witherspoon 2013, 2). As theater scholar Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon argues, people of African descent “negotiate whether to imitate and play to the myths; stage a resistant counter hegemonic performance or, to succumb to expectation” (Ibid.). It could be said that rather than staging a resistant counterhegemonic performance, The Venus imitates and plays to the myths and succumbs to the “expectation of blackness,” because her attempts to counter those expectations have borne no results. Consequently, she has no choice except to take “the next step in the vicious cycle by beginning to take on the characteristics of the stereotypes,” in what Williams-Witherspoon (2010, 49; original emphasis) calls “resigned resignation.” On the other hand, The Venus’s acquisition of French during her six-month stay in France can be seen as a contestation of the stereotypes devolving people of African descent to animality. It shocks the Chorus of the 8 Anatomists so much that they question the reliability of their own findings. As they say: “Throws all of those throw-back theories back in the lake, I’d say” (V, 112). However, as for The Venus acting the part of savage for The Baron Docteur, I would say that The Venus, who has left her home behind in order to wash off her dark mark (V, 76) and has been degraded by her race, sex, class and gender, finds no other choice except to make herself more attractive in the eyes of The Baron

Docteur. This can be seen as a strategy of survival, for she supposes that The Baron Docteur can help her attain her own goal. She therefore seeks to gain his attention with her body as her only possession.

The perversion of the black female body helps the whites to privilege themselves and provides the ground for white owners to put the blacks on display and gain *profit*. The Venus is a vulnerable and profitable commodity. In Scene 31, for instance, The Brother asks The Man to finance his scheme: “A simple 2 year investment. Back me / and I’ll double yr money no lets think big: / I’ll triple it” (V, 11). It is then revealed that his plan is to find and bring some black girls to England and hire them as dancers there, mainly because The Brother firmly believes that “The English like that sort of thing” and “that’s how we’ll cash in” (V, 12). The Venus is brought to London, exhibited seminude, encaged and treated like a zoo animal so that white men can cash in. Hill Collins (2005, 100) touches upon the link between capitalism and the commodification when she writes that

certainly animals could be slaughtered, and domesticated as pets, because within capitalist political economies, animals were commodities that were owned as private property. As the history of animal breeding suggests, the sexual promiscuity of horses, cattle, chickens, pigs, dogs, and other domesticated animals could be profitable for their owners.

The Venus is likewise treated like a domesticated animal, for she is a profitable commodity that can be sold, exhibited and abused for white entertainers’ profit under the capitalist system.

In addition, Parks shows how The Venus’s labor and misery profit white entertainers and advance their financial status. The Venus is announced available for public display “from 10 in the morning until 10 in the evening. Mondays through Saturdays” (V, 44). When she asks The Mother-Showman for her equal share of the profits, earned from her extensive work in displaying her body in public, she is rebuffed and threatened. When The Venus questions The Mother-Showman’s accounting and threatens to “be [her] own Boss make [her] own mint” (V, 55), The Mother-Showman convinces her that there is nowhere for her to go, and that she needs protection from drunken white men. The way The Mother-Showman threatens The Venus is a common oppressive tactic which, according to hooks (1981, 81), “white slavers used to prevent rebellions and slave uprisings,” and is “the brainwashing of slaves to believe that the blacks were really better taken care of as slaves than they would be as free people.” Hence, when The Venus urgently demands more money, The Mother-Showman retorts:

Don't push me Sweetie.
Next doors a smoky pub
full of drunken men.
I just may invite them in
one at a time
and let them fuck yr brains out. (V, 56)

The threatening reply shows that The Venus is not in a position to demand her share of the profits, as The Mother-Showman denies her right by extreme violent means. Although The Mother-Showman uses sexual violence as a threat, The Venus's response reveals that she had already been abused by those drunken men: "They do it anyway." The Mother-Showman affirms The Venus's claim: "Well. / Its the same / for all of us, Love" (Ibid.). However, it is evident that due to her race and class The Mother-Showman does not experience the same abuses as The Venus. This is concluded also by Anderson (2008, 61; original emphasis), who writes that

Venus is aware that it is *not* the same for Mother-Showman as it is for her. As someone who wields power through her race and class (she does essentially run a business), Mother-Showman will never be subject to the same kinds of abuses as Venus, who does not have the advantages of race and class that Mother-Showman has.

The contrastive positions of The Mother-Showman as a white woman profiteer and The Venus as a black woman emphasize the determining roles of race and class in the Great Chain of Being. Parks further clarifies this through the contrastive positions of The Mother-Showman as a white woman and The Baron Docteur as a white man. It is my contention that naming her The Mother-Showman rather than The Mother-Showwoman indicates that she stands somewhere between white men and black women, with a privileged position over The Venus due to her race and class but a less-privileged one in relation to The Baron Docteur due to her gender and class.

Furthermore, Parks implicitly draws a distinction between black men and black women with the characters of The Negro Resurrectionist and The Venus, revealing the determining role of gender. Both The Negro Resurrectionist and The Venus have been exploited by the dominant power. However, comparing these characters and their statuses demonstrates their differences. For instance in Scene 2, The Venus envies The Negro Resurrectionist and says: "Yr lucky" (V, 157) and adds: "You dont have anything you miss? / Yr lucky, Watchman" (V, 158). In one scene, The Grade-School Chum urges The Negro Resurrectionist to steal and deliver her corpse to his friend in the medical profession for scientific analysis (V, 151). After the mission is accomplished, he is

rewarded a gold coin, showing that not just white men and women, but even a black man may profit from the commodified body of a black woman, just as *The Negro Resurrectionist* profits from the body of *The Venus*. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston (1990, 36) writes: “Us colored folks is too envious of one ’nother. Dat’s how come us don’t git no further than us do. Us talks about de white man keepin’ us down! Shucks! He don’t have tuh. Us keeps our own selves down.” Like Hurston, Parks shows how some blacks are accomplices in helping whites achieve superiority and obstruct their own progress.



Fig. 2. Jasmayne McCorvey as *The Venus*, Trista Baker as *The Mother-Showman* and Tim Craig as *The Negro Resurrectionist* in *Venus*, directed by Karla Koskinen. University of Alabama, Alys Stephens Center Odess Theatre.

In *Venus*, Parks also deals with white women’s concerns to heal the rift between black and white women by exposing their common issues and seeking redress for their shared distresses: betrayal and patriarchy. Parks approaches the issue of betrayal through *The Baron Docteur*’s

invisible, nameless wife who functions as an actant.⁵³ Never appearing on the stage, she stands as a representative of white women under patriarchy. It cannot be denied that the abuse of black women as sex objects by their white male masters, and in *The Venus*'s case in particular by *The Man*, *The Brother* and *The Baron Docteur*, has shaken the bases of white women's family lives. This dimension is also reflected in *The Grade-School Chum*'s letter to *The Baron Docteur*, where he writes:

In yr liason with that Negress, Sir, you disgrace yrself.
Not to mention the pain yr causing yr *sweet lovely wife*.
A year in her bed is plenty, Sir. Surely yve tired of her
heathen charms by now. (V, 113; emphasis added)

The Grade-School Chum considers *The Baron Docteur*'s sexual relationship with *The Venus* a disgrace that puts both his career and his family life in jeopardy and distresses his wife. However, in his letter, he never mentions the pains *The Baron Docteur*'s sexual relationship and betrayal have caused *The Venus*. From another perspective, the sexual relationship of *The Baron Docteur* as a married white man with a black woman recalls the ownership status in the slavery system in which white men owned their slave mistresses. Jordan (1974, 77) notes that white men have placed their white women on a pedestal and then "run off to gratify their passions elsewhere. For their part, white women, though they might propagate children, inevitably held themselves aloof from the world of lust and passion, a world which reeked of infidelity and Negro slaves." When *The Grade-School Chum* addresses *The Baron Docteur* and says: "Yr wife distraught," *The Baron Docteur* retorts: "Oh, she is not!" (V, 141). *The Baron Docteur*'s response shows that he does not perceive his wife's concern, since it was a common practice for white men to have black mistresses, and thus there should be no reason for his wife to feel distraught.

While the display of black women helps white owners to gain profit, it helps male spectators – who have "come miles and miles and miles and miles and miles / Coming in from all over to get themselves uh look-see" (V, 4) – to gain *pleasure*. Their sense of pleasure emerges mainly from gazing. Throughout the play, *The Venus* as a spectacle is consumed voyeuristically for pleasure by the spectators, the characters in the play, the anatomists and the doctors alike. In addition, those

⁵³ The term "actant" was coined by Algirdas Julien Greimas. According to Ubersfeld (1999, 37), "[a]n actant can be absent from the stage, and its textual presence can be limited to its presence in the discourse of other subjects of enunciation (speakers), while the actant itself is never a subject of enunciation."

spectators who pay a little more may touch certain parts of *The Venus*. As Parks says in an interview: “Yes, there’s a lot of watching in *Venus*. In *Venus*, the doctor is watching Venus, and the Resurrectionist is watching everybody. Then actually at the end he becomes the watch, the death watch on Venus. So, it’s all this kind of looking. There’s a whole lot of looking going on” (Jiggetts 1996, 313). Following Parks’s delineation, *Venus* displays different kinds of gazes which I classify here under three categories:

1. Hegemonic Gaze, including Male and Medical gazes;⁵⁴
2. Gratifying Gaze, including Intra-diegetic and Extra-diegetic gazes;⁵⁵
3. Appealing Gaze, including Direct and Indirect gazes.⁵⁶

The *hegemonic gaze* emerges from the authority of one social group over the other and explains how men, either as spectators or medical doctors, exercise their predominance over women through their gaze for pleasure and examination. As a subcategory of hegemonic gaze, *male gaze* stems from men viewing the female figures in commercials, TV, theater and so on as sex objects or objects of desire. The cameras, for instance, zoom on the bodies of women, displaying them as erotic and pleasing objects for both male performers within the movies and audiences who watch the movies. The male performers and audiences emerge accordingly as dominant, while the female characters are passive under the active gazes of men. In this play, *The Venus* is being gazed upon by The Chorus members, The Brother, The Man, The Negro Resurrectionist and the anatomists as well as the spectators who attend her shows. These people are all male and all eyes. Their active gazes manifest an unequal power relation between themselves and the object of their gaze. As an example, Witness #2 – a widow who provides second-hand testimony – says to the court: “My dear man was fond of sights and before he died / he viewed *The Venus H*” (V, 68). All of the other witnesses are men who had attended *The*

⁵⁴ The term “medical gaze” was coined by Foucault. He argues that doctors’ new powers of diagnosis relied on their “gaze” – a new type of medical perception and experience. Physicians who observed bodies carefully could potentially penetrate the illusions of outdated theories and see the hidden “truth” of disease. In the process, practitioners gained much power and status, because no one could challenge their stories of illness. The patient’s own experience or perception became less important than the doctor’s judgment (Foucault 1973).

⁵⁵ In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey introduces the concepts of the “intra-diegetic gaze,” “extra-diegetic gaze” as well as “male gaze” as features of power asymmetry. Mulvey states that, in films, women are typically the objects, rather than the possessors, of gaze. Thus, this notion is based on men as watchers and women as watched.

⁵⁶ “Direct gaze” and “indirect gaze” were introduced by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen in their *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996).

Venus's shows, signifying male spectators' interest in objectifying the black female body for visual pleasure.

While trying to draw in men to see The Venus's shows, The Mother-Showman calls:

Are you feeling lowly?

Down in the dumps?

Perhaps yr feelin that yr life is all for naught? Ive felt that way myself at times.

Come on inside and get yr spirits lifted.

One look at thisll *make you feel* like a King!" (V, 45; emphases added)

The Mother-Showman entices men to take advantage of The Venus in order to gain visual pleasure and cheer themselves up; however, she is not interested in how all this make The Venus feel, if at all, since she has grown accustomed to being exposed and gazed upon, and she has nothing more to feel about it. And even if she has feelings, there is no one to care and sympathize with her. Consequently, her apathy and exposure result in her death. As The Negro Resurrectionist notes: "Exposure iz what killed her" (V, 3 and 160). According to Warner (2008, 194), it was "exposure to the elements, to drink, to sexually transmitted diseases, to racism, to sexism, to the gaze" that killed her. Thus, race, class and gender seem to play a key role in lifting the spirit of the spectators and making them feel like a king, while for The Venus they mean her downfall.

As the second subcategory of the hegemonic gaze, *medical gaze* denotes that in the relationship between the patient and the doctor, the latter appears as sound and sane and accordingly has authority over the body and even mind of the former who is cast as an ailing and helpless object. As already discussed, major scenes in the second half of the play and a few scenes in the first half of the play are dedicated to The Venus's autopsy. In these scenes, The Venus appears as a powerless character with no authority over her own body as the anatomists cut and measure her organs and look at her with clinical or voyeuristic eyes. In this way, the play satirically challenges the dehumanized nature of medical gaze, questions the scientific discourses as metanarratives and impeaches physicians and scientists – all male in *Venus* – as philanthropic sages who claim to advance their knowledge in order to serve humanity. The Baron Docteur in Scene 12 addresses the anatomists, saying: "Enough play, *Gentlemen!* / Lets get to work!" (V, 112; emphasis added). The use of only men as medical practitioners manifests both the exclusion of women from science and the men's attempt to maintain their power to possess women's bodies.

As dimensions of the hegemonic gaze, both male and medical gazes create unequal power relations between the gazer and the gazed upon. This is clearly evident in Scene 30 when The

Venus asks The Brother: “Can I go out and take a look [at the golden streets of London]?” and The Brother replies: “No no. Don’t budge. / You cant” (V, 22). This unequal gendered power relation between the viewer and the viewed is also powerfully present where The Baron Docteur is masturbating, and he has his back to The Venus. She asks: “Lemmie see,” but he forbids this: “Dont look! Dont look at me. / Look off / somewhere” (V, 106). This denial emphasizes how The Venus has no right to look back, retaining the subject position for The Baron Docteur and the object position of his phallogentric gaze for her. In addition, the statement made by The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders emphasizes this state of affairs when they say: “She spent that whole year longing not looking but longing not looking” (V, 58). The comment shows how The Venus had a great interest in looking, but she was prevented from doing so.

The *gratifying gaze* is divided into *intra-diegetic* and *extra-diegetic* and includes the gazes which are exchanged between either characters within a play, or audiences and characters in the theater. *Intra-diegetic gaze* refers to the gazes which are exchanged within a play or a movie and through which a character gazes at another character or an object. *Venus* manifests a great number of intra-diegetic gazes, including the gazes that, for example, The Negro Resurrectionist, The Man, The Brother and The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists direct toward The Venus. For instance, after The Venus has just finished taking a shower, she finds The Negro Resurrectionist gazing at her. Her objection – “What are you looking at?” (V, 35) – draws attention to the way women are consumed by men’s eyes. In another scene, The Grade-School Chum asks The Negro Resurrectionist: “You watch The Venus Hottentot?” and he responds: “I’m her watchman, that’s right” (V, 50). In addition to The Negro Resurrectionist, as the play shows, “The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists waits patiently for [The Baron Docteur] to resume, then, turning their backs to The Venus, they steal looks over their shoulders at her and jerk off” (V, 119). These exchanges illustrate that The Venus as a character is the target of the other characters’ gratifying gazes which are overtly and covertly directed against her and her body.

The other form of gratifying gazes, *extra-diegetic gaze*, refers to audiences who gaze at characters on the stage, or textual characters who consciously look at audiences and address them. Both as a play and a play-within-a-play, *Venus* includes gazes exchanged between the audiences and the textual characters. Firstly, as a play, *Venus* is attended by a number of audiences who are interested to watch Parks’s play in the present time. These audiences watch the performances of *Venus*, and naturally all of the characters, and especially The Venus, are incessantly subjected to their gazes. They follow the play and stare at The Venus and her body and costume. Secondly, as a play-within-a-play, *Venus* zooms on the exposure of Saartjie Baartman to the curious crowd.

The Venus is incessantly subjected to the voyeuristic gazes of the spectators as she is the one in the spotlight. The spectators, who have paid and “come miles and miles and miles” (V, 4) to see her, cannot help groping, gawking and gazing at her. I argue that these spectators, without whom these shows would not be organized and who thus have an essential role in upholding the systems of objectification and exploitation with their complicity and passivity, despite their invisibility, are as guilty as The Brother, The Man, The Mother-Showman and The Baron Docteur. If they had responsibly refused to attend Baartman’s shows, the profiteers would never cut her off from her homeland and put her on display to “cash in.” Viewed in this light, Parks reminds the spectators of their double roles: destructive, i.e., supporting the exploitation system, and constructive, i.e., avoiding passivity and indifference about what is happening in the community.

Extra-diegetic gaze in *Venus*, both as a play and a play-within-a-play, is not confined to the exhibit hall. As Jennifer L. Griffiths (2009, 37) notes, “the environment of spectacle” extends to “the public space of the courtroom . . . where desire and displacement of accountability supersede the search for clear, balanced truths or the pursuit of justice.” Thus, the courtroom can be seen as another exhibit hall wherein The Venus is displayed; she is not immune to the gazes of the participants, judge and jury there, either.

It should be noted that the gazes are not unilateral. The Venus returns the gazes whenever she finds an opportunity. Thus, she is identified simultaneously both as the object and the subject of the gaze, the spectacle and the spectator, the observed and the observer. The Venus gazes back at spectators in her shows and in the court whenever she can. This is an attempt to break the cycle of unilateral voyeurism and consumption by looking back or returning the gazes at her spectators and audiences (Elam and Rayner 1998, 277). This is where the gazer becomes the gazed upon. Since returning the gaze has the potential to ignore and even challenge the hegemonic power of spectators and audiences, in my view, The Venus yields some power in her state of powerlessness. When she asks her spectators: “To hide yr shame is evil. / I show mine. Would you like to see?” (V, 76), she reveals that she does not feel shy to pose herself, and that she has self-possession to perceive her spectators’ shame through directing her looks back at them and thus to assume control over them.

The gazes in *Venus* can also be examined from the perspective of the *appealing gaze*, including *direct* and *indirect gazes*. The direct and indirect gazes are formed on the basis of the relationship between offering and demanding gazes. *Indirect gaze* is the spectator’s offer, wherein the spectator initiates the viewing of the subject, who is unaware of being viewed. For instance, the furtive looks that The Negro Resurrectionist and the Chorus of 8 anatomists cast at The Venus

at different stages stand for indirect gaze. *Direct gaze*, on the other hand, is the subject's demand to be viewed. Through different approaches, the subject attempts to grip the attention of other people and catch their eyes. The direct gaze in this play anchors itself in The Venus's request to readers to visit her in the museum. The Venus asks readers to read about her adventures or attend her shows, which make history come alive, demonstrate the dehumanizing effects of slavery which can degrade its victims to the position of animals, promote awareness of black history and honor the victimized blacks. In this configuration, readers are seen as critical museum visitors.

From a different angle, the spectators' and characters' pleasures are not confined to gazes and visual pleasure. The Mother-Showman urges The Venus: "Strip down. . . . / That scrap too around yr womans parts hand that here too" (V, 29). The Venus's attempt to resist – "It don't come off / it stays. Its custom" (Ibid.) – bears no result, and consequently The Venus has to yield. As a chorus member testifies:

They say that if I pay uh little more
I'll get tuh look uh little longer
and for uh little more on top uh that
I'll get tuh stand
stand off tuh thuh side
in thuh special looking place. (V, 6)

The quote illustrates that money matters, and those spectators who pay more may attain even more pleasure. As another chorus member continues: "(*And from there if Im really quick I'll stick / my hand inside her / cage and have a feel / (if no ones looking).*)" (Ibid.; original emphasis). These words depict a hedonist society in which pleasure is crucial. For the spectators, The Venus is an object that can be gazed, touched and abused for pleasure. As hooks (1992, 62) writes: "[The Venus] is there to entertain guests with the naked image of Otherness. They are not to look at her as a whole human being. They are to notice only certain parts." To make her the object of gaze and gratification, she needs to be depersonalized and become less than a human. In this process, money plays a significant role, since the sex-crazed spectators could attend The Venus's shows and touch her body in exchange for money which can be seen as a medium of power. The Venus, as earlier discussed, is also consumed and enjoyed physically and sexually throughout the play by The Brother, The Baron Docteur and the drunkards.

With regard to the pleasure of the white male spectators and owners and in parallel to gaze, I also argue that The Venus – who is interested in eating "red heart box of chocolate" (V, 86) and

presents “A Brief History of Chocolate” (V, 155–156) – is consumed and enjoyed like chocolate. As Kyla W. Tompkins (2007, 202) notes, the use of chocolate creates a metaphoric association between the black female body and food objects. As The Venus says: “While chocolate was once used as a stimulant and source of nutrition / it is primarily today a great source of fat, / and, of course, pleasure” (V, 156). In fact, in The Baron Docteur’s eyes, The Venus and her body equate to the chocolates he offers her; “an exotic beverage” (V, 155), which is a metaphor of pleasure of any type for The Baron Docteur as well as the other male characters and spectators. In this regard, William B. Worthen (2010, 187) writes that “the role of chocolate in the economy of nineteenth-century colonial expansion, as well as its exotic, erotic, and emotionally satisfying qualities, explicitly parallel the ways in which Baartman herself was and continues to be exploited.” Thus, offering chocolate to The Venus is an act of passivizing and silencing her. By accepting and consuming the chocolate, The Venus signifies self-consumption which occurs as a result of her silence and submission toward the male characters’ and spectators’ desire to objectify, exploit and sexploit her.

3.6 Peace in Pieces

In *Venus*, Parks first resurrects and then joins The Venus as a companion in her demanding journey toward empowerment, inviting readers to join them. Empowerment necessitates the rejection of those dimensions of essentialist knowledge – whether personal, historical or institutional – that uphold dehumanization of women of African descent. It further necessitates the possession of those dimensions of knowledge that foster humanization and salvation for them. For this purpose, Parks finds another location to peer into The Venus’s history/story and to question the legitimacy of historical and pseudo-scientific hypotheses, their role in constructing race, class and gender hierarchies, and their contribution to racist and sexist stereotypes. Parks creates mininarratives through the as-yet unheard voices of the characters, particularly those of The Venus. Seen in this light, the heading of the present chapter, “Peace in Pieces,” is double-edged: on the one hand, it denotes that “peace” can be achieved after the breakdown of metanarratives into “pieces.” Parks breaks down the stereotypes originating from historical and scientific metanarratives into “pieces” to bring “peace” to people of African descent. On the other hand, The Venus sets off on a journey with high hopes of attaining peace. However, forlorn of hope, she ends up in The Baron Docteur’s medical academy and is cut up into pieces.

Parks refuses to see history as a fixed and absolute narrative. Thus, in *Venus*, she detotalizes and rehistoricizes The Venus's history/story. She makes use of inter/meta/paratexts in the form of footnotes, glossaries, excerpts from historical, medical and literary books, newspaper clippings, advertisements and court documents, which create a hybrid, polyphonic structure. In some cases, Parks employs these texts to install and then subvert them and critique their knowledges and legitimacy. Parks also creates indeterminacies and incredulity toward the dimensions of essentialist knowledge through the use of different techniques, including multi-perspectival settings, inversion, Rests and Spells and so forth.

Furthermore, Parks voices the concerns of women of African descent with regard to intersectionality by showing how a number of interconnected factors, such as race, class and gender, work together to create systems of oppression and discrimination. The recasting of The Venus exposes the intersecting connections and removes the stains of stereotypes and scientific metanarratives from the face of The Venus, and, by extension, all women of African descent. Parks opens up the eyes of black women to the ways in which whites have *perverted* them in order to *privilege, promote, profit* and *pleasure* themselves, which I have here named the "Penta Ps." This is yet another of Parks's attempts to raise the issue of black women's oppressions and consider their quest/ion of identities. Moreover, the play is a new test for white readers to see whether they repeat or even imagine the perversion of female black bodies, culture and race for their own privilege, pleasure, promotion and profit.

As a conclusion, it is my contention that the play establishes a link between colonial Europe and the world today. Once The Venus was brought to England and France to be displayed for the profit of a group of people, and crowds travelled miles and miles and miles and paid to attend her shows for their own pleasure. In today's world, the treasures and cultural heritage of some countries have been illegally taken and are exhibited in the museums of some other countries to attract tourists from all over the world and gain profit. Today's Brothers, Men, Mother-Showmen and The Baron Docteurs who merely think of their own profit, privilege, promotion and pleasure continue to pervert others.

Chapter Four

Wanted: Debt or Alive in *Fucking A*

Once upon a time freedom used to be life – now it's money.

Lorraine Hansberry (1994, 74)⁵⁷

Fucking A,⁵⁸ bursting onto the American stage in 2000, is one of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Red Letter Plays*. As an example of Brechtian epic theater (Schafer 2008; Geis 2008), *Fucking A* possesses the attributes of revenge tragedies and has intertextual connections with Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* (Fraden 2010; Dietrick 2010), while representing the blurred borderline between a mother's nurturing love and murderous rage (Foster 2007). The play premiered at the Diverse Works Art Space for Infernal Bridegroom Productions in Houston, Texas, in February 2000 and was directed by Parks. It was later produced at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York City in March 2003 under the direction of Michael Greif. In 2012, Richard Perez directed *Fucking A* at the Urban Theater in Chicago. In an interview with Wetmore, Jr. (2007b, 124; original emphases), Parks explains how the idea of writing *Fucking A* emerged:

With *Fucking A*, I was in a canoe with a friend. We were paddling along a river or lake – this was years ago. I was in the back of the canoe and I said to her, "I'm going to write a play called *Fucking A*, and its going to be a riff on *The Scarlet Letter*. Ha, Ha, Ha!" and I started laughing really hard. I hadn't actually read *The Scarlet Letter*, of course. It was one of those books that was assigned in high school but I hadn't read it. I hadn't wanted to. So we paddled around in the canoe, laughing, and we got back to land and drag the canoe up onto the shore and the idea was still with me – I had been hooked. That was the beginning of that play. So then I had to read *The Scarlet Letter*. Then figure out what about *The Scarlet Letter* had so sneakily hooked me.

⁵⁷ In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lena Younger continues to tell her children:

In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too. . . . Now here come you and Beneatha – talking 'bout things we ain't never even thought about hardly. . . . You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that we kept you out of trouble till you was grown; that you don't have to ride to work on the back of nobody's streetcar – You my children – nut how different we done become. (Ibid.)

⁵⁸ All quotations in this chapter are taken from the version included in *The Red Letter Plays*, published by Theatre Communications Group, 2001, and the abbreviation F is used in parenthetical references.

In her book *Suzan-Lori Parks*, Geis (2008, 127) writes: “No postmodern artist, though, has taken on quite the same creative remapping of *The Scarlet Letter* as Suzan-Lori Parks does in her . . . *Fucking A*.” She then offers the following synopsis of the play: “In *Fucking A*, which includes both Brechtian-style songs and moments of an invented language called TALK, Hester earns her meager living as an abortionist in a dystopian, sci-fi society, and is trying desperately to see her jailed son, Monster, again” (Ibid.). The play consists of nineteen scenes, divided into two main parts. Part 1 consists of twelve scenes, which may signify the number of months in a year, and part 2 consists of seven scenes, which may stand for the number of days in a week. This structure – which bears resemblance to the structure of *Venus* consisting of thirty-one scenes signifying the days of month – represents time in miniature and reinforces the idea that such events and discriminations, as represented in the play, still recur in our world today.

In this chapter, I approach *Fucking A* from the points of view of postmodern drama and African American feminism. To analyze the play as postmodern drama enables me to investigate a number of key preoccupations of postmodern aesthetics in *Fucking A* and examine how Parks deploys the discourses of postmodernism to address social ills which have afflicted African American women in particular in their personal and social lives. Meanwhile, I show how the use of postmodern aesthetics catalyzes incredulity toward a number of dominant metanarratives – manifesting themselves in the form of ruling economic, social, cultural and political systems as well as the annals of history – and engages readers in a type of resistance against those metanarratives. I continue my exploration and critique of metanarratives from the perspective of African American feminism and its emphasis on the intersections of race, class and gender. I draw upon the ways that Parks uses to challenge the dominant patriarchal and hierarchal systems in which men hold hegemonic power and accordingly predominate in roles of political and social leadership and economic control, to which I hereafter refer as “malestream.” I will employ a range of intersecting theories to show how the play lends itself to these theories to utter the concerns of African American women. As in the previous chapters, the focus of my analysis is on the terrains which reflect African Americans’ quest/ion of identities.

4.1 Intertextuality: Repetition and Revision

In *Alternate Worlds*, John Kuehl (1989, 62–63) writes that in metafiction authors “make intertextual references,” borrow “characters from one’s own and others’ works,” and “frequently recycle [the borrowed] characters.” To Umberto Eco, borrowing a character from another text is

“the transmigration of characters from one fictional universe to another” which forms “transworld identity” (qtd. in McHale 1987, 57). In *Fucking A*, there are several intertextual references⁵⁹ both to Parks’s own and others’ literary works such as the use of characters’ names. For instance, Hester is a contemporary version of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Like Hawthorne’s Hester, Parks’s Hester has to wear the scarlet letter A, or the fucking A of the title, above her left breast, which “weeps as a fresh wound would” (F, 125), simply because, like demarcated cattle, her A is “deeply branded into her skin” (F, 117). Law dictates that it must be visible, and so in Scene 5 when Hunters want Hester to cover up her A, she replies: “I cant its against the law” (F, 146). Literary critic Christine Woodworth (2007, 145–146; emphases added) notes that unlike Hawthorne’s Hester, her letter A signifies her despised job as an abortionist and not as an adulterer:

Fucking A reworks Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* in a Brechtian-feminist manner, reflecting both past and present. The setting is a somewhat ambiguous totalitarian society that serves as an allegory for today. *Adultery* no longer holds the same stigma as in the world created by Hawthorne. However, the role of *abortionist* in contemporary society seems an apt parallel.

Parks seems to suggest that the letter A always exists, but its forms differ. As Hester says in the play: “The A looks so fresh, like they branded me just yesterday” (F, 125). Her observation indicates that oppression and injustice, exploitation and sexploitation, abduction and abjection have not ceased, but they have merely been transformed through the passage of time. In other words, Parks’s revision of Hawthorne’s theme shows that even the passage of time has not healed the sorrows of oppressed members of society, reasserting the agonies of African American women whose daily lives are marked by experiences of inequality.

From another perspective, the intertextual reference to *The Scarlet Letter* is an example of “reinvention,” which according to Madelyn Jablon (1997, 133), “is central not only to the African American aesthetic but also, of course, to the postmodern aesthetics, where it allows escape from the literature of exhaustion by providing a door to the recreation of old forms.” I argue that Parks’s reinvention of *The Scarlet Letter* evidences the destructive consequences of racism and sexism on African American women and invites readers to compare and contrast the miseries of the black

⁵⁹ In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Parks pays homage to her literary antecedents and reveals her interest in borrowing their plots, themes, characters, etc. As Parks (1999, 26–27) writes:

[W]e writers read their words often when we do not have the courage to write our own. We talk about their writing, love their words, their plots, their characters, pilfer their turns of phrases, sometimes wishing we were them, those great dead writers. . . . The Great Tradition is like your great-grandmother who was born with the seed for you deep inside her.

and the white Hester. Parks's version illustrates how the ostracism that Hester as an African American woman experiences in the contemporary era is much harder than those experienced by the white Hester at the hands of her white, Puritanical male oppressors in the seventeenth century. In addition, Parks shows how poverty in a modern capitalist society such as the United States is as mortal as adultery in the Puritan age.

I also argue that the intertextual reference to Hawthorne's novel helps Parks to critique the dominant patriarchal and hierarchal systems in which men hold hegemonic power and accordingly predominate in roles of political and social leadership and economic control. By replacing the white Hester and her child with the black Hester and her child, Parks satirizes the contemporary American malestream culture. Compared to the white Hester, the black Hester as a social outcast is under even harsher oppression. For example, by the end of the novel, the white, educated Hester is treated as a saint and survives with dignity, and her daughter Pearl prospers. They are warmly embraced by society and play a key role in giving comfort to other women in trouble. The black illiterate Hester, in contrast, due to race, class and gender prejudices, experiences a tragic denouement and is forced to slit the throat of her child. Thus, Parks highlights the continued existence of the malestream and shows its greater pernicious effects on African American women.

As a doubly intertextual character, Hester also signifies upon Hester, La Negrita, who is the main character of Parks's play *In the Blood* (1999). *In The Blood* tells the story of Hester and her five illegitimate children. Being homeless, illiterate and notorious as a "slut," she tries to get help from her children's fathers. She has hopes that at least one of them, probably Reverend D, would help her to improve her own and her children's lives, but it is a forlorn hope. She then out of anger kills her eldest son, Jabber, for calling her "slut." By the end of the play, Hester, La Negrita, is imprisoned and can no longer help her children. The Hesters in both *Fucking A* and *In the Blood* are illiterate and poor, and they both kill their own sons. According to Verna A. Foster (2007, 77), "[b]oth Hesters attempt to conform to the conventional model of 'good mother' [but] [t]he strain of doing so without any support contributes to their fatal actions." Their acts of killing their sons move readers from a comfortable position to an uncomfortable one, much like with The Baron Docteur, reading the autopsy report in *Venus*. As Foster writes: "Parks shocks her audiences into confronting their own prejudices, recognizing two Hesters as individual human beings, and acknowledging the appalling social injustices that produce the murderous rage or despair that causes loving mothers to kill their own children" (Ibid., 76). Arguably, Hesters' murderous acts can create a shockwave sufficient to open readers' eyes to the miseries and oppressions that have befallen black women as weaker members of society.

Similarly, many of Parks's characters in *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* are corrupt but not remorseful, and accordingly they never desire to mend their ways and repent. On the contrary, day by day, they fall deeper into crime and corruption. Like the two Hesters, almost all the characters in these plays have a branded A, but unlike Hesters', their "As" are invisible. Apart from an image of a corrupted society, the sexual abuses of Hesters, Canary and the female characters who seek for abortion signify instantaneity. The male characters in these plays abuse women for their instant material satisfaction and pleasure. On the one hand, The Mayor exploits his wife to take over her wealth and, on the other hand, sexploits Canary for his pleasure. In a similar vein, Hester in *In the Blood* is raped repeatedly for transitory unilateral satisfaction. In addition, due to the presence of abundant bloody images in the play, it can be said that *Fucking A* occurs "in the blood" through those images. Hester's and Butcher's aprons and tools are in the blood. Likewise, Hester's A is branded on her body, and it bleeds. Additionally, in the final scene when Hester slits her own son's throat, she is drenched in his blood. The amount of blood along with the recurrence of sexual abuses and deaths in these plays represents a dark dystopian society.

Parks creates intertextual links also with other literary works, including Tony Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* (1854), Ntozake Shange's play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) and O. Henry's short story "After 20 Years" (1905), which all contribute to the hybrid fabric of *Fucking A*. For instance, in the final scene Hester chooses to kill her own son before Hunters arrest him. As Geis (2008, 138) writes: "Hester's decision to 'save' Monster by killing him herself conjures up slave narratives in which the mother chooses to end her child's life rather than give the child up to slavery." This scene resonates with Morrison's *Beloved* (Foster 2007, 75) wherein Sethe, a female runaway slave, chooses to kill her own daughter and attempts to kill her other children to prevent them from being captured and returned to slavery. Like Sethe, Hester and Monster consider death to be preferable to a despised life. In a similar way as Sethe's, Hester's violent rage is against the ruling social, economic, political and cultural systems and their dominant ideologies which have deformed Boy(s) to Monster(s). According to Foster: "Her action is . . . a blow against the oppressive and unjust society that has imposed constraints upon her as if she were a slave, that imprisoned her child and required her to 'buy' his 'freedom'" (Ibid., 82). Sethe and Hester are cast as unsupported characters who do not wish their children to be crucified by the brutality of society, and resort to killing them rather than hand them over to the persecutors.



Fig. 3. Kelly Owens as Hester and Lance Newton as Boy/Monster
in *Fucking A*, directed by Richard Perez.
Urban Theater, Chicago. Photo: Anthony Aicardi.

Another feature that links *Fucking A* and *Beloved* is the mark on Hester's and Sethe's bodies. Sethe tells Beloved and Denver that her mother had a mark on her rib in the form of a circle and a cross branded in her skin. As Sethe says, one day, her mother carried her behind the smokehouse, "opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said: 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead.'" At this stage, Sethe begs her mother to mark her, too, so that her mother could know her (Morrison 1987, 76). In *Fucking A*, Hester also marks her own body and her son's. She creates bite marks on both her own and Boy's arms in an attempt to fix their identity; however, at that point she is unaware that what matters is not physical identification.

In addition to intertextual connections with *The Scarlet Letter* and *Beloved*, I argue that the play shares some of the attributes of Dickens's *Hard Times*. In Scene 18, 3 Freshly Freed Prisoners sing together a song, titled "Hard Times":

Hard Times Hard Times
Hard Times Hard Times
Hard Times, if ya followed me this far,
I'll just lay down and die. (F, 204)

Hard Times highlights the social and economic pressures on underclass members of society during the Victorian era and depicts the divide between them and the upper-class capitalist mill owners. The novel exposes a dystopian society and attacks the harsh conditions of life in English industrial towns wherein enormous wealth was produced for owners, while the workers lived in misery. These are also some of Parks's concerns in *Fucking A*. Through tracing the history of oppression, she indicates that systems of oppression exist even today, and despite the passage of time, those systems have "followed" us "this far."

Parks draws attention to the hard times for the underclass in a number of songs that she has written for the play. For instance, Canary and Hester sing "Working Womans Song":

Its not that we love
What we do
But we do it
We look at the day
We just gotta get through it.
We dig our ditch with no complaining
Work in hot sun, or even when its raining
And when the long day finally comes to an end
We'll say:
"Here is a woman
Who does all she can." (F, 123; emphases added)

In their song, Hester and Canary describe their unsatisfying daily jobs they are forced to perform under harsh conditions – heat and rain – in which they "just gotta get through it." It is the only way they can support themselves. They also speak about their potential which is not used in a proper way; however, they hold that they do what they can to support themselves.

In *Fucking A*, there are many characters who have their own songs⁶⁰ which ironically and polemically question the dominant ideologies and metanarratives or reveal the characters' thoughts. Thus, the songs give voice to the characters regardless of their race, class and gender. The songs, which in cases act as soliloquies, reveal the nature of these characters and work to "challenge the externally defined controlling images used to justify black women's objectification" (Hill Collins 2000, 106). Furthermore, they help to decrease emotional tensions.

⁶⁰ Hester has a song called "My Vengeance" and Hunters have a song called "The Hunters Creed." The First Lady's song is titled "My Little Enemy" and The Mayor's is "My Little Army." Butcher's cheerful song is named "A Meat Man is a Good Man to Marry" and 3 Freshly Freed Prisoners sing "Hard Times," while Monster sings "The Making of a Monster." Finally, Canary's song is called "Gilded Cage."

Arguably, the presence of songs functions as an intertextual connection between *Fucking A* and Ntozake Shange's play *for colored girls* that deals with the stories of seven nameless African American women who have suffered from different types of oppression in a racist and sexist society. The women are identified by seven colors that stand both for the women who make up the rainbow and the women of color. They are called Ladies in Red, Yellow, Orange, Green, Blue, Brown and Purple. Like Shange's choreopoems, the songs in *Fucking A* deal with love, prostitution, rape, abandonment, liberation, infidelity and abortion, embodied in each character's story. Furthermore in *Fucking A*, Parks, like Shange, refers to red and yellow dresses. For instance, Hester addresses Canary by saying: "Me in my bloody apron. You in yr yellow dress" (F, 121), and they call themselves "babykiller" and "whore" (F, 122). The image of babykiller recalls the abortionist in Shange's play, who performs illegal abortions in the least hygienic condition in her house. Likewise, the image of Parks's "whore" evokes Shange's prostitute. The intertextual connection of *Fucking A* to *Beloved* and *for colored girls* evokes Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s (1988, xxi) theory of "signification," which "functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition." As Gates, Jr. writes, authors reuse motifs from previous (African American) works but alter them and "signify" upon them in order to create their own meanings. Parks uses and revises the aforementioned literary works and offers new readings of them. Throughout the new rereading of those works, she provides the ground for readers to perceive how the dominant systems of oppression have denigrated the disempowered members of society, particularly African American women, in their personal and social lives.

Parks also offers a new reading of O. Henry's short story "After 20 Years" in order to signal the crucial social and cultural downfall which society has experienced during the last century. O. Henry's story deals with two staunch teenage friends who had been like two brothers, but one of them has had to move with his family to another state. They pledge to meet each other after 20 years from that date at 10 o'clock at Big Joe Brandy's in New York. It is told that after the twenty years, one of them, Bob, has become a rich, hardened criminal or an outlaw, while the other, Jimmy, has become a police officer or a man of law. Like Bob and Jimmy, Hester has high hopes throughout the play to have a picnic with her son "After 30 years" (F, 158). I argue that in such a corrupt society both mother and son have turned into outlaws, so much so that the mother abhors her son's deeds and vice versa, and they attempt to hide their own identities. Right after escaping from prison, Monster breaks into Hester's house to rob her but leaves unidentified as soon as he finds that Hester is his mother. Likewise, Hester declares: "The dead Boys dead mother works for herself now. Shes an aborter. Don't hang yr head shes not yr mom. My fucking A. He woulda

hated what his mother has become” (F, 207). Furthermore, both *Fucking A* and “After 20 Years” pose the question of which factors are responsible for turning one into a lawbreaker. As Monster sings in his song, “The Making of a Monster,” it is easy for a society to create a horrible social monster:

Monster

Youd think itd be hard
To make something horrid
Its easy.
Youd think it would take
So much work to create
The Devil Incarnate
Its easy. . . .
To make you a Monster. (F, 218)

It seems that numerous individual, social, economic, political and cultural factors can work to change one, for instance, from Boy to Monster or from man to devil.

There are also intertextual connections between *The Death of the Last Black Man* and *Fucking A*. Both lay their emphasis on the significance of literacy and try to motivate African Americans to write down their own histories/stories. Furthermore, literacy and writing pave the way for self-definition, since they create the ground for African Americans to emanate from within rather than without. Parks shows the need for literacy⁶¹ in *Fucking A* through employing Scribe, who pens letters for illiterate, underclass people. As Scribe remembers, his father had forced him to acquire literacy, and thus he had learned reading and writing at the age of three (F, 140). He says that “[d]ad wanted me to make something of myself. So he stood over me with a stick. I still got the welts, well, the scars of the welts” (Ibid.). Scribe has many customers, and in one case when he intends to close his shop, Butcher says: “Theres lots of people want writing done and yr shops closed. That’s bad business” (Ibid.). This comment manifests the high level of illiteracy in the community. Hester is one of Scribe’s regular customers and praises his handwriting, wishing to be literate herself. She says to Butcher that Scribe “makes the nicest looking letters. Even when he’s sloshed. Such pretty shapes, straight bold lines and gentle curls. Makes me wish I could read.

⁶¹ The significance of literacy has been stressed by other African American writers and thinkers. For instance, Arthur Flowers (1999, 148) writes: “Literacy itself is an act of freedom; it ennobles the mind and makes you a functioning member of an increasingly complex society. That’s why tyrants burn books and slave masters deny slaves the right to read and write. Literature frees the imaginations.”

And write too” (F, 159). In this way, Parks invokes and revisits the history of African Americans when they were banned from acquiring literacy.

In Scene 6, however, the illiterate Hester surprisingly reads Scribe’s freshly written equivocal letter (F, 148). This shows that – like Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, who was motivated by Black Man With Watermelon to write down their own mininarratives – Hester as a result of Butcher’s motivation, advice and help has acquired literacy (Ibid.). In a similar manner to Black Man With Watermelon, who addresses his wife and repeats: “You should write it down” (D, 104), Butcher urges Hester to learn and says: “You should learn” (F, 148).

A link is also established between the news items in this play and those on TV in *The Death of the Last Black Man* wherein African Americans are introduced, through exaggeration, as hardened habitual criminals whose presence offends and destroys the community. After receiving the newspaper with a “wanted” notice for Monster, dead or alive, Third Hunter reads out the information on Monster and his crimes: “Murder, necrophilia, sodomy, bestiality, pedophilia, armed robbery, petty theft, embezzlement, diddling in public, cannibalism—” (F, 143). The enumeration of the crimes makes Hunters sick, whereas the description of the ways they mutilate the convicts and their dogs – for instance, cut the convicts’ fingers or testicles – entertains them, and this double-dealing reveals their hypocritical characteristics. The long list of crimes ascribed to Monster raises the question of how a boy who has passed all these years in prison under surveillance has been able to commit such crimes? In both plays, through representing a simulation of the media, Parks shows how the media – controlled by the dominant powers – use exaggeration to affect and contaminate peoples’ minds about African Americans with their news and views, seen as metanarratives.

As for the intertextual link between *Fucking A* and *Venus*, I should note that Hester’s choice between A and B resonates with The Venus’s choice, studied in the previous chapter, as a choice between one evil and a lesser evil. The Venus had to choose between subjugation by the Dutch colonizers in South Africa and exploitation by The Mother-Showman and The Baron Docteur in England and France. Like The Venus, Hester has to “choose” between A and B, the two options given to her: “Go to prison or take this job. That was my choice. Choose A or choose B. I chose A” (F, 165). Parks implies that these people are the victims of the dominant cultural, social, economic and political systems which dictate to the weaker members of society and even label them. Hester is made into and labeled as “babykiller” and Canary as “whore.” Likewise, Boy is both turned into and named “Monster.” The people, absorbed in such a despotic system which calls itself democratic, do not have any choice and control over their lives, jobs and bodies. Here,

Parks seems to suggest that systems of power are arbitrary and may engender double standards which work to oppress and consume the underclass.

Parks repeats and revises the literary works studied above and builds her play upon their foundation. Signifying upon both black and white authors makes *Fucking A* “double-voiced” with both black and white literary antecedents (Gates, Jr. 1988, xxiii). In a similar vein, the wide range of intertexts in the play also recalls the idea of “cultural mulattos,” dubbed by Trey Ellis. As Ellis (1989, 235) notes: “Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world.” Thus, Parks navigates in the white and black worlds so as to reform the monolithic trend of African Americans’ representations and “explode the old definitions of blackness” (Ibid., 237). Additionally, signifying upon these works creates a “plurality of voices as well as a multiplicity of discourses” (Wall 1989, 7) and “usedupedness” (Federman 1993, 118) which help Parks to remake the old and offer a rereading of those works. This is an attempt to see the old with new eyes and make them new.

4.2 Resisting Interpretation: Is the “A” What We Think?

Through the employment of several techniques, including dislocation, time distortion, episodic structure, two-column dialogue arrangement, absence of character descriptions, generic character names, wordplay, the invented language TALK as well as Rest and Spell, Parks challenges the univocity of meaning and engenders undecidability in *Fucking A*. Undecidability of meaning begins from the very title itself: *Fucking A*. The letter “A” refuses to articulate distinctly the notion(s) it signifies, and this refusal creates various interpretations and significations for letter A. “A” suggests: Abjection, Abortion, Absolutism, Adultery, Agony, Alienation, Alterity, Ambition, Ambivalence, Annals (of history), Anomie, Antebellum, Atonement, Atrocity, Authenticity and Authoritarianism. Consequently, the list of possible notions for the interpretation of the letter A leaves readers in an indeterminate state. I argue that the letter A stands for the long history of oppression and discrimination of any type imposed on disempowered people of any race, class, nation and creed. To support my argument, I refer to Parks’s own description of the play as “An otherworldly tale” (F, 113), indicating that the play is not confined to a particular location. Furthermore, Foster (2007, 78) believes that “*Fucking A* is an ‘otherworldly tale,’ set in a kind of futuristic alternate universe that grotesquely incorporates and exaggerates some of the worst

features of both Antebellum and contemporary America.” However, I argue that *Fucking A* is a social critique of not only America but any society suffering from such “As” as I have listed above.

Thus, owing to such dislocation, a number of scenes in the play lack a setting, while other scenes have indefinite settings, which make the play as a whole, in Hassan’s (1993, 154) terms, “provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space)” as well as multi-perspectival. For instance, according to *The First Lady*, the play is set in “a small town in a small country in the middle of nowhere” (F, 129), while Scenes 4 and 8 are described to be located in a park “in the middle of nowhere overlooking the sea” (F, 136 and 154). The use of provisional spaces creates not only nonlinearity and a sense of disintegration but also indeterminacies.

Likewise, no specific time frame has been set for the play, thereby creating time distortion that creates fluidity and involves readers in the ebb and flow of atemporality. Distorting time helps further to blur the demarcation line between past and present events. For instance, in lieu of police forces or detectives, Parks deploys three Hunters who track down and catch runaway prisoners or convicts with their dogs and torture and mutilate them mercilessly. The representation of Hunters – which calls to mind a number of slave narratives – next to the employment of Hester as an abortionist creates time distortion. In one scene, Hunters’ descriptions of their savage treatment of runaway convicts recalls the history of slavery, while in other scenes, Hester’s illegal work as an abortionist brings to fore contemporary problems of women. Thus, the play oscillates between past and present, between what was and what is, implying that time and place make no difference if people refuse to change their perceptions and improve their conditions.

I argue that the employment of Hunters enables Parks to revisit and recontextualize the history of escaped African American slaves. She takes readers back to the time of slavery and commemorates those who suffered and even lost their lives. As Parks notes in an interview: “History is not ‘was,’ history is ‘is.’ It’s present, so if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past . . . so you can fill in the blanks. You can do it now by inserting yourself into the present. You can do it for back then, too” (Jiggetts 1996, 316). Thus, history is recontextualized in order to question continuity, absolutism, closure and wholeness of history. As in *The Death of the Last Black Man* and *Venus*, Parks cannot close her eyes to the history of oppression that has affected the lives of African Americans, and accordingly she raises the issue of history as counterhistory and imprints it once again, but from a fresh perspective. I argue that she represents history from the bottom-up perspective, a perspective wherein the grassroots and the disempowered members of society (black, poor, female and

working class) are focused on, and their mininarratives and experiences are recounted and incorporated within the context of dominant discourses.

In addition to dislocation and time distortion, the use of episodic structure is another device which creates indeterminacies in *Fucking A*. A number of scenes are set apart by their individual subtexts, characters and plots. These scenes can be read or performed as short, one-act plays. In other words, these scenes can act as micro-stories for readers. For instance, Scene 1 includes a long conversation between Hester and Canary, while Scene 2 shows The First Lady and The Mayor arguing about their own problems. Likewise, Scene 5 represents a dialogue between Butcher and Scribe about their childhood. The introduction of new characters and subjects in a number of scenes impedes causality and breaks the linearity of the play. Thus, an event or scene does not necessarily follow from the previous ones. Furthermore, Scenes 9, 10, 11 and 12 intervene and halt the meeting and conversation between Monster and The First Lady, which begins in Scene 8 and resumes later in Scene 13.⁶²

The linearity of the play is ruptured also by deploying Rep. & Rev., and Parks comments that “Rep & Rev as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use 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” (Parks 1995d, 9). In a similar vein, Malkin (1999, 157) argues that “to ‘repeat and revise’ is to reject linearity and causal rationality in favor of a spatially open view of time and process. It is to favor multidirectionality and re-visions of a ‘past’ as definitions of progress.” Malkin continues that through the use of Rep. & Rev., Parks “aim[s] at overcoming fixity, or stereotyping, through the returns of memory” (Ibid., 158). I argue that Rep. & Rev. is not confined to the repetition and revision of phrases and sentences but, as I discussed extensively in section 4.1, Parks repeats and revises a number of literary works to open up new possibilities for surveying the transformation of past and present dominant ideologies.

Like *The Death of the Last Black Man* and *Venus*, the absence of character descriptions in *Fucking A* is a further source of indeterminacies that blurs, for example, the racial demarcation. Thus, readers and performers do not learn whether Canary and Waiting Women, Monster, Jailbait, Butcher, 3 Freshly Freed prisoners and Hester are white, black or something else, as neither the stage directions nor the dialogues reveal anything about their race. Accordingly, race fluidity

⁶² In her “Elements of Style,” Parks rejects the use of linear plot form. She comments: “Why linear narrative at all? Why choose that shape? . . . If a playwright chooses to tell a dramatic story, and realizes that there are essential elements of that story which lead the writing outside the realm of ‘linear narrative,’ then the play naturally assumes a new shape. . . . I don’t explode the form because I find traditional plays ‘boring’ – I don’t really. It’s just that those structures never could accommodate the figures which take up residence inside me” (Parks 1995d, 8).

surrenders the control of the playscript to readers and performers. This shows that in these plays race as a single category does not suffice to cover the complexity of disempowered peoples' identities, and thus, following Hall (1996, 444), "reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity" is required.

Like race fluidity, the employment of doubling as well as generic names enhances indeterminacies. The play consists of eighteen characters, six female and twelve male, but as "the play calls for eleven performers with some doubling" (F, 115), seven performers are cast in double parts. However, the play and its stage directions do not determine the characters cast in double parts. The generic names – The Mayor, The First Lady, Butcher, Freedom Fund Lady, Scribe, three Hunters, Guard, two Waiting Women, Jailbait,⁶³ Boy/Monster and three Freshly Freed Prisoners – can be seen as an attempt to transform readers from passive receivers to active participants in meaning production. Readers can adapt these characters to the social and political systems in their own contexts. The use of the definite article "the" in the names of two characters, i.e. The Mayor and The First Lady, directs readers to both individualize and generalize these characters through establishing them as prototypes. In this light, The Mayor, for instance, is more than a character in charge of a town; he stands for the dominant malestream with great political, economic and social power which enables him to fulfill his sensual desires.

The use of wordplay, as another source of undecidability, creates a sense of lexical and structural ambivalence, mainly because the words and phrases, in cases with variant spellings, bring to fore unexpected undertones laced with multiple meanings. Wordplay illustrates the fluidity of language as a productive living organism, and examples of lexical and structural ambivalence abound in the play. As an intriguing example, Canary uses "Hizzoner" to refer to The First Lady's husband, The Mayor (F, 123). The term is a humorous version of "His Honor" and has traditionally been used as a title for the man holding the office of mayor for example in the United States. The term also suggests either "His owner" or perhaps "He's on her." It may also be read as "He's won her" as the play reveals that The Mayor, as a representative of the malestream and dominant systems of oppression, has sexual relationship both with her wife and Canary, recalling ownership status in the slavery system in which white men owned their wives and mistresses, while he intends to usurp his wife's wealth.

⁶³ Jailbait is a slang term for a minor who is younger than the legal age of consent for sexual activity but is physically mature enough to be mistaken for an adult with the implication that they might be found sexually attractive.

Apart from the use of wordplay, Parks creates an invented feminine language, called TALK. The innovation of TALK is double-edged: on the one hand, it adds ambivalence as it is used and understood only by women in the play. On the other hand, as a non-mimetic language, it raises the opportunity for the disempowered people, women in this case, to free themselves from their dependence on the dominant discourses and revive their neglected or marginalized discourses to resist the existing hierarchies. To put it differently, TALK augments the level of undecidability and frustrates the privilege of the dominant language and the higher discourses of the malestream, validating women's quest/ion of identities. I argue that Parks avoids mimicking the malestream language as the normative language in order to uncover both the power of women in creating their own language and the power of language in voicing women's neglected discourses, which leads to the innovation of a language of equality. Needless to say, the knowledge of more than one language provides the speakers with several options, and optionality can equip them with a discourse of power. This is what Butcher, who knows only few phrases in TALK, confesses: "No fair you two Talking in front of me. Uh, *noonka Talking-mehnavavee*. No fair" (F, 211; original emphasis), which has been translated by Parks as "I couldn't speak TALK to save my life" (F, 225). Butcher's protest and regret show that the knowledge of TALK could create further awareness and a more favorable position for him.

From another perspective, the innovation of TALK may stand for linguistic bricolage,⁶⁴ defined as the juxtaposition of different languages which can both create syntactical breaks and blur boundaries between high and low cultures and languages. I argue that the use of two languages in this play signifies "diglossia," a situation in which two languages are used within a community. Charles A. Ferguson divides the varieties of diglossia into a superposed variety that has high prestige and is considered the superior category of speech, used in formal situations (known as H), and the variety which is used in informal situations and ordinary conversations and has low prestige (known as L). Mikhail Bakhtin refers to these varieties as center or authoritative discourse and periphery or internally persuasive discourse. The former is used by those holding positions of authority in the society, whereas the latter is used by those who are "denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society (not by public opinion, nor by scholarly norms, nor by criticism), not even in the legal code" (Bakhtin 1981, 342). Thus, it can be said that the adoption of diglossia is a dissident attempt to both create

⁶⁴ The postmodern technique of linguistic bricolage signifies the use of different terms and phrases, coming from different languages and their juxtapositions, which creates syntactical breaks and shatters the unity of language. Lehmann (2006, 87) believes that in linguistic bricolage "language sounds are simultaneously presented on stage so that one can only partially understand them."

linguistic diversity and polyphony – which breaks up the unification – and empower oppressed women through casting light on their dimmed discourses, regardless of their race and class. TALK challenges the dominant discourses as a political tool of resistance against the linguistic hegemony of the dominant culture, and it recalls women to their quest/ion of identities and common roots in order to resist and disrupt the dominant discourses. Parks’s dramatic idea of using a language incomprehensible to men in the play is effective for conveying her critical message: women need to have power to create their own discourses in order to challenge the malestream.

As a counter-hegemonic discourse, TALK also disturbs the establishment and maintenance of a center within the playscript, mainly because it contests the central position already preoccupied by the formal dominant language. It provides a ground for the expression of women’s voices, knowledges and subjectivity. In addition, TALK brings to the fore the elimination of structural constancy and homogeneity and the creation of multilingualism or multivoicedness, representing multiple perspectives and viewpoints and reinforcing the idea of “no one truth.” The use of TALK can eliminate the fallacy of assuming formal English as the authentic version of language and the language of power and dominance through inserting the voice of alterity and alien/nation, since it enables as-yet-disadvantaged people to voice their concerns. As Geis (2008, 13) states: “Parks uses an idiosyncratic, poetic form of theatre language that is truly her own and that creates a deliberate form of resistance to ‘norms’ of theatrical discourse.” Therefore, TALK introduces an invented language and breaks away from orthodox and conventional play writing.

Furthermore, TALK is the language of privacy and secrecy for women. It is used when women talk about their private and feminine concerns and issues. Gates, Jr. (1989, 171–172) quotes George Steiner who says that “each living person draws . . . on two sources of linguistic supply”: the current social usage that corresponds to his or her “level of literacy” and “a private thesaurus,” and it is this private thesaurus that is “inextricably a part of his subconscious, of his memories so far as they may be verbalized.” He further renames the private thesaurus “cultural or ethnic privacy,” and says that “this element of privacy makes it possible for a culture to use language to mask its meanings from all but its own initiates” (Ibid.). As Steiner concludes, “the human being performs an act of translation, in the full sense of the word, when receiving a speech-message from any other human being” (Ibid.). Accordingly, translations of the sentences in TALK are placed at the end of the playscript, which functions both as a paratext and a metalanguage. In her stage directions, she also suggests: “The production should present a nonaudible simultaneous English translation” (F, 115). The use of TALK and its translation is reminiscent of Federman, who says that he once dreamed of “writing a book in which two languages would merge into one

another. On the cover of this book (if such a book were ever to be published), it would say, TRANSLATED BY THE AUTHOR, but without specifying from which language” (Federman 1993, 83). According to Federman, bilingualism includes an element of playfulness as the two languages can play with each other “not only in the sense of game but also in the sense of looseness” (Ibid., 83–84). Moreover, referring readers to visit the translations as well as the presentation of simultaneous translation in performances both work to distract readers’ and audiences’ attention from the play’s events and to denote the play’s nonrealistic theatricality.

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the use of Rest and Spell increases indeterminacies. These unconventional theatrical elements, which create a sort of dramatic stasis or “non-textuality,” recur throughout *Fucking A*, too. Parks uses Rests one hundred and twenty four times and Spells sixty seven times. To emphasize the importance of Spells, major parts of Scenes 4 and 8 are in the form of Spells. Both Rests and Spells create short and long silences, which may represent the historical silence and submission imposed on oppressed members of society. In addition, such silence can bring up moments of peace for critical contemplation. In other words, Rests and Spells, which fragment, dissociate and break up the continuity of the play, highlight its fictionality and offer readers empty spaces or silences for contemplation or paracriticism “in the presence of literature” (Hassan 1975, 25).

The use of Spells may also help to place readers and performers in the authorial position to rewrite the play, while reading or performing it, and to fill in the gaps with their own options and interpretations which can catalyze the participation process. Ubersfeld (1999, xvi) describes the dramatic text as “troué,” a kind of text which contains gaps that are to be filled by a performance. In this regard, Liz Diamond in her interview with Steven Druckman (1988, 70) comments that rehearsals of Parks’s plays allow performers to collectively discover what to do with Parks’s “dynamics,” and that while performers are not sure what to do, they know that they need to take action. I agree with Diamond’s view that Parks’s play creates both participation and indeterminacies for readers and performers, and accordingly the ways people articulate to fill in the gaps differ from one another, which bring about diversity and plurality of interpretations.

In this play, the Spells have different significations in different locations, and each reader may decipher them differently. For instance, Spells can express undecidability, such as the Spells in Scenes 4 and 8 when Monster is about to start passionate relationships with both Canary and The First Lady (F, 137 and 156, respectively). Undecidability manifests itself in Spells further in

Scene 14 where The First Lady wonders whether to keep the baby or to abort it (F, 190), and it is emphatically extant when Monster begs his mother to kill him before Hunters capture him:

Hester

Monster

Hester

Monster

Hester

Monster (F, 219)

The use of a Spell here shows – through the lack of dialogue – that Hester is hesitant to kill her son, while Monster is waiting for his mother to act. Elsewhere, a Spell may express irresolution, for example when Canary begs The Mayor to marry her (F, 152), or it can stand for internal conflict, such as when Hester and Canary plot to abort The First Lady’s child (F, 196). However, the Spell used when Hester confronts The First Lady indicates her external conflict (F, 148). According to Ubersfeld (1999, 144), “the gap obliges the spectator to put aside not only the action, the succession of the story, but indeed the theatrical universe, and momentarily rejoin his or her own world.” Thus, Rests and Spells make the artificiality of the play apparent through distancing. In addition to Rests and Spells, Parks uses long monologues. Scene 9, wherein Butcher enumerates his daughter’s crimes, is an example of a long monologue. It goes on for two pages (F, 160–161). The long monologues direct attention toward the speaking subjects and their topics of discussion. This is one of the features of postdramatic theatre that, according to Lehmann (2006, 25), “knows not only the ‘empty’ space but also the overcrowded space.”

These features which create undecidability help to distinguish *Fucking A* from the “absolute drama.”⁶⁵ Additionally, undecidability in *Fucking A* distances readers from “efferent” reading and makes them resort to “aesthetic” reading wherein “*the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text*” (Rosenblatt 1978, 25; original emphasis). Consequently, these features make *Fucking A* a Barthesian writerly text which should be read aesthetically. These indeterminate features work to maintain the play as an open process or production rather than a total finished product, mainly because the play provides the grounds for each and every reader and performer as a self-appointed coauthor to rework it with their own creative imaginations and backgrounds.

⁶⁵ Based on Peter Szondi’s definition, absolute drama is dominated by dialogue, condemns readers and performers to silent observation and adheres to linearity and three unities of time, place and action (qtd. in Lehmann 2006, 3). The features, which Szondi enumerates for absolute drama, are all absent in *Fucking A*.

4.3 Raveling and Unraveling Paradoxes

Fucking A is a dystopian representation of a capitalist world wherein money talks and its power articulates the socio-economic class, human relationships and even social justice. The play depicts and criticizes a typical patriarchal and hierarchal capitalist society, especially the United States where millions of African Americans are imprisoned for trivial crimes, and imprisonment transforms them from Boy to Monster and Jailbait. I argue that *Fucking A* questions capitalism as a metanarrative that promises economic abundance, peace and prosperity and challenges the polarization of male wealth and power which brings about the exploitation and sexploitation of women, especially women of color. As an example, The Mayor, cast as an arrogant and voluptuous character, due to his wealth and power enjoys a dominant status. He, who in his office should focus on relieving the sufferings of people and pay heed to elevating their living standards and improving their welfare, health and education, is busy “rubbing shoulders with people” (F, 130) and increasing his profit and power.

Parks unmask The Mayor and reveals his real hypocritical nature and shows how he plots to kill his wife in order to usurp her wealth. As he says to Canary: “Planning a murder takes a lot of thought. Shes got to be wiped out just right so that the blame falls on some nobody and not at all on me or my office” (F, 151). Canary suggests him to “[h]ave one of yr lieutenants do it. Or a sniper” (Ibid.). As The Mayor continues:

My wife will die a tragic death. I will stand like the soldier that I am as they put her in the deep dark ground. My chest will heave in sadness but no tears will fall. I am their soldier-Mayor. Not a tear will fall. She will have left me all her money. I will hang my head and the people will want me to lift my head up. The people will demand that I remarry.

(Rest)

They will demand that I remarry a woman of a – of a certain background. My heart will be split in two. Each night with my new wife I will dream of you. (Ibid.)

He discloses that he is ready to take any action necessary to increase his wealth even at the cost of his wife’s life. He further reveals that he intends to breach his promise to marry Canary, too. The Mayor emphasizes this when he later says to Canary: “‘Wife,’ ‘Mistress,’ what does it matter? Take the gold. Buy something nice” (F, 153). However, he is ironically criticized when he claims that as a civil servant he never breaches his promise and that he sacrifices his pleasure for the sake of people (F, 152). As an allegorical character, he abuses his power to satisfy his desires through his sexual relationship with Canary. Parks depicts a society in which a child who steals some bread

is severely punished, while The Mayor's abuse of power, position, and wealth remains unpunished. Foucault (1977, 287–288) refers to such a discrepancy as follows: “Are you not afraid that the poor man put into the dock for snatching a piece of bread from a baker's stall will not, one day, become so enraged that stone by stone he will demolish the Stock Exchange, a wild den where the treasure of the state and the fortune of families are stolen with impurity?” Thus, Parks not only focuses on the double standards but also exposes the hypocrisies, power abuses and justifications of The Mayor as a representative of the ruling class.

Throughout the play, The Mayor repeatedly claims that he has been elected by the people: “And those people elected me to lead for the rest of my life and when they elected me they expected me to produce a son and they elected and expected that son to lead for the rest of his life and so on and so on and so on and so on and so on and so on and—” (F, 127). As The Mayor proclaims, he intends to rule throughout his lifetime and transfer his position to his son. His emphasis on having an heir to continue his rule contradicts the idea of democracy and manifests autocracy and nepotism, an accusation, especially in politics, that the relatives of an influential and powerful figure ascend to power without the required qualifications. I argue that autocracy favors continuity, authority and closure, which are in conflict with the nature of postmodernism. Parks shows that autocracy and absolutism, even if they are gilded with seemingly democratic elections, result in corruption and double standards. In this climate, an individual such as The Mayor with despotic tendencies and practices will find the legitimation to rule over a society according to his own desires under the pretext of benefiting the society.

In addition to critiquing autocracy gilded with democracy, the play rebukes common people and their role for maintaining and supporting such power systems. This is manifest in The Mayor's words when he says: “My weekly errands. The Mayor rubs shoulders with the people. After all these years they still like it” (F, 130). In this regard, Baudrillard (1994, 41) remarks that “one can always ask of the traditional holders of power where they get their power from. Who made you duke? The king. Who made you king? God. Only God no longer answers. But to the question: who made you a psycho-analyst? the analyst can well reply: You.” Baudrillard's remark manifests how common people play a crucial role in maintaining autocracy, the system of power which is not God-given, and Parks ironically targets peoples' ignorance and passivity which result in the continuation of despotism. Thus, people can pave the way for either democracy with their wisdom or autocracy with their own folly. Parks approaches autocracy with questioning postmodern eyes to insist on discontinuity and to challenge its legitimacy and continuity.

“Gilded Cage,” a song sung by Canary, points out the heavy price of gaining freedom. The song shows a lioness in “a gorgeous gilded cage” and how its “bars shone like sunshine” (F, 153). The song tells that “[s]he’d gone in there all on her own” and “[n]o one had forced her” (Ibid.). The song continues:

“Freedom,” she said, “aint free at all.
Its price: a heavy wage
And when you find how much your freedom costs
You just may give it up
For a gorgeous gilded cage.” (Ibid.)

The price of freedom is so heavy that it makes some people cease resistance and choose to remain in their comfortable cage. As a metaphoric expression, “Gilded Cage” denotes that the peoples who are trapped in such systems of power have no freedom but might have a seemingly comfortable life if they do not struggle to release themselves from their gilded cage; or else they have to pay high price for freedom.

The expression “Gilded Cage” also recalls “The Gilded Age” (2015) which, as described in *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, refers to “a period of gross materialism and blatant political corruption in US history,” which spanned the last three decades of the nineteenth century, though some date the end of the era to the passage of the sixteenth Amendment in 1913. The term was coined by writers Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873), satirizing what they believed to be an era of serious social ills and corruption covered by a thin glittering layer of gold. During this era, the industrial economy of the United States boomed and created great opportunities for some people to build immense fortunes, while leaving many workers struggling for survival (Encyclopedia 2015). Thus, while a few people wore diamonds and lived in luxury, many more people wore rags and lived in poverty. In a similar manner, Parks satirizes the contemporary era of serious social problems, oppression as well as race, class and gender inequalities, hidden under the falsely coated layers of capitalism.

As already discussed, the play centers on Hester’s love for her son, showing how she devotes her life to free him. It also speaks of The First Lady’s efforts to conceive and give birth to a son, and how both Hester and The First Lady spare no efforts to attain their ends. However, the play does not tell why every night a great number of women come to apply for abortion. Do they not have any affection toward their babies? Women are coming into Hester’s place – which can be

seen as a “heterotopia”⁶⁶ of the society – to abort their babies, in contrast with Hester, who is ready to die for her son, and The Mayor and The First Lady, who dream of having a son. This is revealed when The Mayor informs Butcher of his wife’s pregnancy. Butcher then tells Hester: “They finally got lucky” (F, 200). The question is then raised how a child is imagined to bring happiness to The Mayor’s and The First Lady’s lives but to bring agony to a great number of women who apply for abortion every night.

From an opposing perspective, perhaps those women apply for abortion due to their excessive love toward their babies as they do not want their babies to step into the world of abjection. By the same token, Hester who is an idealist mother at first sacrifices her own needs and desires in the interests of liberating her son from prison, assuming that his liberation would release them both from devaluation and repression. However, as the play proceeds, she learns that his liberation from those shackles, the image that she has harbored in her dreams, will never come true, since they dwell in a corrupted society which in itself is a larger prison. To put it differently, Hester spares no efforts to free Boy/Monster from prison, but paradoxically, she only frees him from a prison-within-a-prison, and thus at the end she prefers to kill him. Only her strong affection toward Monster enables her to kill him in order to save him from an even more terrible fate. She shares the same excessive love toward her son that her woman clients might have had toward their aborted babies.

In consequence, the play depicts a dystopian society in which sexual violence and harassment are common, and adultery and prostitution are not considered illegal, while prisons ultimately turn convicts into criminals, or Boy to Monster. Even the characters themselves testify that society is corrupt. For instance, Hester notes: “Its hard to be good when surrounded by so many bad people” (F, 160). In addition, in Scene 9, Bucher advises Hester to lock her door, since there are some convicts on the loose (F, 157). Hester and Butcher state that the society in which they live is corrupt and insecure. Canary is another character who voices her concern toward society’s corruption. As she says: “Do you know how many men and women they got locked up? More thans walking free in the streets that’s how many” (F, 193). Through this hyperbole, Canary draws attention to the huge number of prisoners and shows that corruption is prevalent in society. Moreover, a number of criminals, as Butcher notes, are not in confinement or captivity,

⁶⁶ In *The Order of Things* (1967), Foucault articulates several types of heterotopia. My reading of *Fucking A* holds connection with his “crisis heterotopia,” denoting forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis, i.e., aborting unwanted babies, which takes place during midnight and out of sight in Hester’s house and The Baron Docteur’s room. In addition, the term “heterotopia of deviation” – which refers to places such as prison wherein individuals whose behaviors deviate from norms are placed – is applied to this play.

committing crimes and making the society insecure. In addition to the failure of prisons to punish and correct the criminals or at least diminish the crime rate – which after all are considered the main objectives of prison formation – the prisons indirectly affect the personal and social lives of inmates' family members. *Fucking A* depicts how the imprisonment of Boy throws Hester into destitution and brings about her mental, physical and economic distress.

Hester, who has been thrown into destitution in her attempt to free her son, refuses to believe that he has changed into a criminal in prison, and accordingly she insists that he is an angel. For instance, when Freedom Fund Lady comments that “[h]es committed a few crimes since yr last payment,” Hester retorts: “Must be a mistake. Hes a very good boy” (F, 133). Freedom Fund Lady argues further that Monster is “a hardened criminal,” but Hester firmly believes that her son is an angel (F, 134). In Scene 9 and right after Butcher enlists his daughter's crimes, Hester still claims: “My Boys an angel who had a little bad luck” (F, 161). Thus, Hester, who has not seen her son during the prison years, refuses to accept that her son is no longer Boy but has become Monster and ascribes his situation to bad luck. Later, when she hears the escaped convict has a mark similar to hers, she still refuses to admit that it is him (F, 196).

Likewise, mistaking Jailbait for her son and noticing his negative behaviors with her own eyes, Hester still refuses to believe that he has become a hardened criminal and repeats: “You were never bad. They tell me yr bad but I dont believe them. You shouldn't believe them either” (F, 181). However, in Scene 19, Hester begins to gradually accept that her son has changed and is no angel any more. First, she states: “My mark looks like a heart. His looked horrid. Like a gash” (F, 209), implicitly claiming that she has preserved her identity, while her son has failed to do so, although a while before she had said: “He woulda hated what his mother has become” (F, 207). She remains, however, uncertain that Boy could have become Monster and says: “Hes not. He couldn't be. But what if he is. Monster. He isn't. But he could be. Although hes not” (F, 216). Since Hester's identification of Boy has been grounded on physical identification, it is hard for her to accept that identity may be fluid and that different factors can work to change it at different stages of one's life. However, she eventually realizes this, which leads her to rebuke her son by saying: “You used to be so good. What happened?” (F, 218). Here, we can see a transition from her initial idea of a fixed absolute identity to a perception of fluid identities.

Furthermore, the ironic use of the Freedom Fund organization points a critical finger at the prison system. This is revealed in Freedom Fund Lady's words: “His files here somewhere. Not to worry. We never lose anything. Of course you could just make a payment get a receipt and I could enter it all into his file at a later time” (F, 131). When Freedom Fund Lady finds out that

Hester is going to pay extra money, she continues: “Paying extra! Wonderful. ‘Freedom Aint Free!’ Glad you understand our motto, Mrs. Smith” (Ibid.). The motto “Freedom Aint Free” is one of the paradoxes that *Fucking A* highlights. In a number of capitalist societies, convicts can have the alternatives to pay fine as a penalty to shorten their prison term for some offenses, and those who have the financial means are in different positions than those who have not. This encourages the haves to commit crimes, while the have-nots have to stay in prisons even for trivial crimes. The “Freedom Fund” as an ironic phrase signifies that prisoners need to pay for their freedom, and if they are unable to pay for their freedom, they have to endure imprisonment. As soon as Freedom Fund Lady finds that Hester is ready to pay extra, she calls Hester Mrs. Smith instead of “babykiller.” However, when Hester asks to meet with her son or “to picnic” with him, she responds: “Picnic. Picnic. Picnic. Yr son wont be up for a picnic any time soon. His picnic price has doubled” (F, 134). This short exchange indicates how money can improve someone’s position in a capitalist society.

Like the Freedom Fund organization, Hunters spare no efforts to chase and seize the runaway convicts for their own profit. They revisit their history of brutality and retell how they unleash their dogs to catch and bite the convicts for special prizes (F, 142). They depict how they put hot coals on the convicts’ chests and joyfully describe how the convicts scream. In Scene 11, for example, Hunters describe one of their inhumane and cruel techniques, called “runthrough,” which creates a lot of fun for them, as follows:

Third Hunter

The best thing to do to a convict when you catch him. It gets the loudest screams.

First Hunter

You get a hot iron rod and run it up his bottom and out his throat.

Third Hunter

Then you stick the rod in the ground and let him wiggle on the stick. (F, 173)

Hunters’ attitude in treating runaway convicts is ruthless and inhumane. Even Butcher refuses to treat cattle in such a manner, and he claims that he reads books to acquire knowledge about animal anatomy and to learn techniques to reduce their suffering at the time of slaughter (F, 162).

The way Hunters describe their experiences is shocking for readers very much like the way The Baron Docteur reads his autopsy report in *Venus*. Hunters’ attitude is so merciless that Monster prefers to die rather than be hunted by them. As Monster says to his mother:

When they catch me theyll hurt me. Run me through and plant me in yr front yard so you can hear me scream. . . .

I heard once how they cut one guys balls off and let him watch the dogs eat them and then they cut his fingers off and the dogs ate those and he had to watch. His fingers and then his toes then his feet then his hands. (F, 218–219)

These words make Hester uncertain, but finally after a long Spell, she slits her son’s throat. This is a paradoxical scene, since Hester’s dream had been to free her son or at least have a picnic with him. Meanwhile, readers are not relieved when they see that Hunters claim Monster’s still-warm dead body: “Hes still warm. Hes ours by rights, gal. Give him up” (F, 220). Hunters think of themselves as exclusive owners of people. It is paradoxical that Hunters accuse Hester for being a “babykiller,” while at the same time they regard their violent torture and killing of runaway slaves and prisoners as justified. *Fucking A* directs attention to the worn-out morality and double standards that have concentrated on trivial issues, while leaving out the major issues that have shifted societies toward immorality.

4.4 Intersectionality: Reading Like an African American Feminist

Fucking A is indubitably a feminist play, occupied with rape, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, motherhood, reproduction and feminine sexuality. Like *The Death of the Last Black Man* and *Venus*, it deals with the feminist potential to interrogate the appreciated conceptions of feminism and to highlight African American feminist intersectional concerns of sex, race, class and gender. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, Parks is also sensitive to the oppressions imposed on white women. *Fucking A* portrays a typical patriarchal capitalist society in which power is in the hands of men who make the major decisions. Thus, it is not only shown how the oppressions, including betrayal and patriarchy, affect The First Lady, but through the adoption of TALK a connection is also made between her and the less privileged women. In this way, a form of female solidarity is constructed, crossing racial and class divisions. Parks represents women who “encounter recurring social issues such as poverty, reproductive concerns, illiteracy, violence, sex work” (Hill Collins 2000, 29) and lack control over their bodies, to name but a few. However, the representation of white women’s concerns shows that race and class can surely add insult to injury.

Fucking A is double-ended: it touches upon the white women’s oppressions through the employment of The First Lady as The Mayor’s wife. Thus, it contrasts the oppressions of white

and black women, thereby reinforcing the aims of African American feminism. In more concrete terms, the play represents a paradigm of oppression wherein maleness and whiteness are advantageous, while femaleness and blackness are disadvantageous. In Scene 1, Canary reveals The Mayor's plot to usurp his wife's wealth and "bump her off" (F, 124). As Canary says:

Canary

He hates her. Her days are numbered.

Hester

But he loves her money so her money buys her time. The Rich Bitch. . . .

Canary

Shes not the Rich Girl no more, shes our First Lady. You should give her respect.

Hester/Canary

Hahahahahahahahaha!

Canary

She dont got all the luck.

Hester

More luck than me. (F, 119; emphasis added)

The dialogue between Hester and Canary signifies that a woman can be positioned as The First Lady due to her wealth, marriage and whiteness; however, she cannot obtain equal position with her husband because of her gender, and thus "[s]he dont got all the luck." However, compared to the underclass and ostracized black women, The First Lady enjoys more rights and feels luckier.

Although readers later learn that indeed it was The Mayor who had been barren, it was The First Lady who had to visit European doctors to resolve the problem of infertility. As she says: "Ive tried. I went to *Europe*. Saw all those doctors. All of them poking at me. All of them overcharging me because they all knew I was foreign. All the pills they gave me. Suitcases full. And I take them. I take them every day. Ive tried" (F, 128). Like in *Venus*, these words are revealing. First, The First Lady is sent to Europe for treatment, which points out the relationship between knowledge and power equations. Second, the doctors have total control and dominance over their patients' bodies and minds. Third, as a foreigner, she is treated unequally and unjustly, and fourth, the play challenges doctors and their knowledge – as metanarratives – that fail to diagnose The First Lady's fertility, questioning ironically the absolutism of the tradition of science and its unquestioned place and implying the dissolution of its centrality. Later in the play, when The First Lady is impregnated by Monster, it is finally proven that she had been fertile all along, but due to her gender, The Mayor had required *her* to undergo medical tests.

Like The Venus who begs The Baron Docteur to kiss and love her, The First Lady begs for her husband's attention and affection, for example, by saying: "But you could spend more time with me. *Meh Kazo-say greengrass ee-sunny skies* —," where the TALK passage translates as "my vagina is nice and pleasant" (F, 128; original emphasis). When she humbly asks The Mayor to have sex with her, he refuses:

First Lady

One more shot. Please. Just one more.

Mayor

I have errands.

First Lady

Please.

(Rest)

Think of the nation. (F, 130)

The irony is that The Mayor, due to his gender, money and power, reduces women to suppliants: The First Lady considers all of their activities, even the sexual relationship, with The Mayor as favors to the nation and the society, and by the same token, Canary begs The Mayor on her knees to marry her (F, 152).

Fucking A illustrates that, as a dominant ideology, infertility is considered a shortcoming in women, and consequently in social ranking the barren ones occupy a lower status compared to the fertile ones. Comparing the ways in which The Mayor treats The First Lady when she has been diagnosed as infertile and after she conceives proves this claim. In Scene 2, The Mayor calls her infertility "disgraceful" (F, 127) and refers to "her" problem as national disgrace: "Yr a disgrace to the nation. Everyone agrees. I should remove you from our townhouse and put you in our country house" (F, 129). However, when he finally finds out that she has become pregnant, he feels overjoyed.

It can be inferred from the play that even among fertile women, those who give birth to sons are of higher rank than those who conceive daughters. This signifies that the gender of the child can affect the social status of his/her mother and father. The importance of a child's gender is revealed in The Mayor's words:

The people look up to me. They look up to me and they see my right hand dangling. Where I should be holding the hand of my *son*, or perhaps have my arm resting proudly on the *young mans* shoulder my right hand is only dangling. Empty. And they see it. And they begin to wonder what kind of man I am. (F, 128; emphases added)

The Mayor's words show that he is only satisfied with a male heir who would succeed him. Under these circumstances, The First Lady is forced to cheat on her husband and commits adultery with Monster, who finally impregnates her. However, for a while she is hesitant whether to keep or abort the baby. In Scene 14, while waiting for Hester to attend to her, Waiting Women notice The First Lady who has also come for abortion. Upon seeing her, Waiting Woman #2 asks her: "Ya come to Hester Smith cause she'll let you keep yr veil on and wont ask no questions, huh?" and The First Lady retorts: "Im here same as you" (F, 190). Their conversation shows how women want to get rid of their unwanted and/or illegitimate babies in secret. However, The First Lady decides to keep the baby and attribute him to The Mayor, singing in her song, entitled "My Little Enemy":

They say Fidelity
Is the most important thing
When yr married.
But its such a pricey luxury.
When yr up against the wall
Yll take a poke from some poor slob.
The child Im growing will be my salvation.
Who knows, he may grow up to rule the nation.
And my husband, blind with happiness,
Will never guess
The enemy in his army. (F, 191)

The song treats fidelity ironically as of high importance. Even though The First Lady criticizes herself for her infidelity and adultery, she justifies this by claiming that she was pushed to it for the salvation of the nation. In her conversation with Waiting Women, The First Lady presents yet another justification for her infidelity: "One seed is as good as another. And when the *husband* resembles the *lover*, he wont be none the wiser" (F, 190–191; emphases added). For The First Lady, impregnation itself is important, signifying that the end justifies the means, and for that means, "husband" and "lover" do not make any difference. Her words resemble The Mayor's words to Canary when he says: "'Wife,' 'Mistress,' what does it matter?" (F, 153).

The Mayor divides women into two categories: "the asexual, moral virgin women who are protected by marriage and their sexual, immoral promiscuous counterparts" (Hill Collins 2000, 134). As Hill Collins notes: "Assumptions of normal and deviant sexuality work to label women as good girls and bad girls, resulting in two categories of female sexuality" (Ibid.). In this regard,

Evelynn Hammonds (1999, 96) states that “[w]hite women were characterized as pure, passionless, and de-sexed, while black women were the epitome of immorality, pathology, impurity, and sex itself.” Hammonds then concludes that this image of black women mirrored “everything the white woman was not” (Ibid., 95). In a similar vein, Hill Collins (2000, 145) demarcates the virgin/whore dichotomy when she writes: “Black ‘whores’ made white ‘virgins’ possible.” Black women were believed to be the source of deviance and destruction of themselves and the men who became involved with them. They were shown as wanton, immoral, female hypersexual whores who openly expressed their sexual availability, and they could bring about the downfall of society.

Thus, like in *Venus* wherein The Baron Docteur as a married man sexploits The Venus but refuses to marry her, *Fucking A* shows how a wealthy white statesman sexploits and objectifies Canary as an immoral promiscuous woman even in front of his wife. The sexual relationship between Canary and The Mayor places the former as a promiscuous outcast in the powerless position with no control over her body, while The Mayor has the power to do whatever brings him pleasure. Thus, objectification of black female bodies for transitory pleasures with no affection or commitment toward them ruins the lives of women, seen as prostitutes in the public eye. The black women, then, denigrate “themselves by willingly using White men for their own financial or social gain” (Hill Collins 2000, 162). The play depicts how The Mayor ruins Canary’s life for his own pleasure so much that no man would like to marry her. Even Hester rejects Canary’s wish to marry Monster: “If he takes after his dad hes good looking but dont you go getting any ideas. Hes a good boy and when I finally buy his freedom he’ll be looking for a wife. He wont want the likes of you,” calling Canary “Whore” (F, 122).

I argue that the objectification of the black female body in the nineteenth century based on a set of metanarratives, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter, laid the foundation for contemporary representations of black women as objects. Treating them as sexual subjects, then, originated the icons of deviant sexuality, including whores, sluts, jezebels and bitches. In this regard, Walker (1981, 42) states: “The more ancient roots of modern pornography are to be found in the almost always pornographic treatment of black women who, from the moment they entered slavery . . . , were subjected to rape as the ‘logical’ convergence of sex and violence.” The formation of such metanarratives paves the way for the malestream to gain control over women’s bodies. As discussed in the previous chapter, Parks surveys the life of The Venus in order to seek for the roots of the iconization of black female sexuality and to show how its pernicious effects

have affected the lives of black women. Based on that discussion, *The Venus*, through the passage of time, is here transformed into Canary.

Interestingly enough, Canary's full name in this play is Canary Mary, which suggests a binary opposition: half-Mary, half-whore. This seems to denote that she could be a pure Mary-like figure, but due to her poverty, she is forced to submit herself to The Mayor, who is merely interested in exploitive and mechanical sex. It is worth mentioning that engagement with sexual activity dominates *Fucking A*. In addition to The Mayor's relationship with Canary, and The First Lady's adultery, the women who come to Hester every night for illegal abortion are engaged in sexual activity, consensual or otherwise. They have no control over their bodies, for otherwise they would not be queuing for Hester's services. For example, Jailbait rapes Hester, while she mistakes him for her son. As the stage direction reads:

Jailbait kisses her and feels her up.
Hester, struck dumb with grief and disbelief,
lets Jailbait do what he wants. He touches and
gropes her and she sits there, flicking at his hands
from time to time. . . .
After a moment the action stops. . . .
Jailbait embraces her again and the rape continues. (F, 184)

Hester has no control over her body, either, and due to her grief, does not show any resistance and is sexually extorted.

According to Hill Collins (2000, 135), sexual extortion functions to deprive African American women "of their will to resist and make them passive and submissive to the will of the rapist[s]" who claim to own exclusive rights to their bodies. As Canary says to Hester: "The Mayor owns my exclusive rights" (F, 122). She later rephrases the notion when she meets Monster in the park who asks for a kiss: "My lovers rich. He owns exclusive rights to me" (F, 138), showing that she is controlled by The Mayor. Canary's relationship with The Mayor is built on the unequal foundation of money and power; otherwise, she feels no affection toward him. This is evident from her response to Hester's question whether she loves The Mayor: "No. But he buys me anything I want" (F, 124). Indeed, without money and power, The Mayor would be nobody. This fact is revealed in Scene 7 where Canary quickly drops her marriage request when The Mayor gives her some gold coins (F, 153).

It is worth noting that African American feminists have long been concerned with women's rights over their own bodies. The play deals with abortion as a way to remove unwanted children

or to hide women's rape and/or illegal sexual relationships which are the concerns of women of any color or class. The importance of this issue for women is revealed when Freedom Fund Lady says to Hester:

I've never had a need of yr services, but I did have a friend once who came to you. The public clinic had a *looong* wait list—yr quick and you do the job for half the price. Said you were very thorough. And that yr *the most discreet woman* in the country. That's something.

(Rest)

You know there are *lots of women* coming through this place in need of die Abah-nazip. (F, 132; emphases added)

Freedom Fund Lady here reveals that a large number of women apply for abortion day in, day out. She then uncovers the insufficiency and higher expenses of public clinics which move women toward illegal abortionists to save time and money. Moreover, the "*looong* wait list" of public clinics along with Hester's numerous abortion applicants evokes an image of womb/tomb. Through using their own "bio-power," these women determine the death of their babies, while manifesting the subjugation of their own bodies and their lack of control over them. Freedom Fund Lady acknowledges Hester's services to society but still calls her "the most discreet woman in the country," a euphemism for "the most evil woman." The implication here is that the insufficient and unaffordable legitimate services which members of a society need result in the formation of furtive illegal businesses and the activity of "discreet" individuals who are in great demand by society.

Fucking A directs blame toward the defective social systems which force women to have illegal abortion rather than provide them with a safe, hygienic and legal one. In addition, it rebukes the vicious circle of poverty and childbirth and critiques societies that have imposed poverty of any type, including economic, cultural and educational poverty, deeming it the root of evil. This is an attempt to represent social injustices, buried under the layers of race, class and gender, through the medium of drama and theater, and to invite readers to participate in the political agenda and reform those injustices. The information and transformation of individuals can, then, bring about the transformation of society and its social, economic, cultural and political systems.

The play reveals that in addition to Freedom Fund Lady's friend, Canary has had an abortion by Hester some time ago. With the employment of Waiting Woman #1 and Waiting Woman #2, and the claim that a number of anonymous women come to have abortions every night, the play signifies the critical status of abortion in society. Thus, during just one typical night, four women

come to abort their babies (F, 117), Hester lighting four candles, one for each of them. Furthermore, Hunters' daughters have also been Hester's regular customers. This fact is revealed when Hunters pejoratively call Hester a stinking babykiller, and she retorts: "Yr daughters been a customer of mine. More than once" (F, 146). The play signifies how women's bodies are a realm over which men rule, and how babies with no future are a burden to their mothers. From this angle, Hester's job can be seen as a service to would-be mothers. Hester attempts to remove the strain placed on women who must mother and bear the long-term responsibilities of parenting the unwanted children under oppressive conditions.

To emphasize the significance of Hester's role, I should note that when she does not answer the door of her house, her clients feel worried. This is seen in Scene 14 where Waiting Women #1 and #2 are waiting for Hester to open the door:

Waiting Woman #2

Why dont she answer her bell?

Waiting Woman #1

Sign says "Closed." Maybe she closed for good. Maybe she quit the business. (F, 189)

This evokes a similar situation when Scribe closes his shop, while his illiterate clients wait for him to write letters for them, which shows that both Scribe's and Hester's services are in great demand. Thus, while Hester's aim is to earn money and free her son, she is simultaneously performing a service to women. As Canary says to Hester: "No one would wanna kill you. We need you too much. Like me, you perform one of those disrespectable but most necessary services" (F, 121). Similarly, Freedom Fund Lady defines Hester's "most necessary services" as follows: "Someones gotta empty the toilet!" (F, 132). As the play progresses, it becomes clear that the characters who view Hester as a babykiller fail to view the abuse and objectification of women by men who just seek the gratification and satisfaction of their own sensual impulses.

The following conversation between Hester and Butcher revisits the hot debate on abortion and whether it is good or bad for society:

Butcher

Why do they brand you aborters? They dont brand us butchers.

Hester

The brand comes with the job is all I know. "And the brand must be visible at all times." Thats the law. Everyone knows what I do—but then, my A is also *like a shingle and a license*, so nobody in needll ever get suckered by a charlatan.

(Rest)

What we do is bad. And good. And bad and good and good and bad. There's no easy way to look at it. (F, 164–165; emphases added)

Hester's repetitive statement – “What we do is bad. And good” – and her comment that “There is no easy way to look at [the issue of abortion],” emphasize the pros and cons of having abortion, an ongoing heated debate in different countries. In the United States, for example, unlike liberals who believe that abortion should be legalized and open to all women, the conservatives consider it immoral and oppose it strongly. Hester observes that it would be impossible to come to a universal agreement over the issue. The above excerpt shows how, unlike butchers, abortionists have been branded and made socially disreputable. I argue that branding some groups and people within a society – which creates social divisions – is a hallmark of patriarchal capitalist societies which according to Teresa L. Ebert (1996, 90–91) is an attempt to “naturalize the social division of labor by means of pre-given (‘natural’) human attributes, such as sex, race, age and gender. Difference in class societies is the difference of economic access, which is determined by the position of the subject in the social relation of production.” In line with Ebert, Parks challenges the patriarchal and hierarchal capitalist societies in which a number of people are branded due to unequal labor division and lack of access to economic resources. Thus, the branded Hester cannot enjoy equal rights, since, based on the dominant ideologies, she belongs to the marginalized underclass. Through imposing the harsh pressures of socio-economic oppression on Hester under different pretexts, the malestream marginalizes her. All of the female characters, except The First Lady, feel class distinction more clearly due to their impoverished status in that patriarchal and hierarchal capitalist society.

I argue that the branding provides the ground for recognizing, excluding, observing and controlling subjects. As Foucault (1977, 199) writes, “all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal).” In this light, the branded individuals are easily recognized and are held under constant surveillance. Foucault refers to a leper who is branded as a clear example of exercising the ritual of exclusion and adds: “The constant division between the normal and abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, brings us back to our own time, by applying the binary branding and exile of the leper to quite different objects” (Ibid.). Thus, in addition to exclusion, branding individuals is a way to keep a close eye on them.

Through employing bourgeois/upper-class and proletarian/underclass characters, *Fucking A* criticizes class societies which suffer from discriminations. Parks shows that this is even worse in

the case of black women who suffer from the racism-classicism-sexism triplet. As Beverly Lindsay (1979, 328) argues, the interaction of jeopardy is “the most realistic perspective for analyzing the position of black American women; and this perspective will serve as common linkage among the discussions of other minority women.” Under such circumstances, race, class and gender distinctions and hierarchies impede African American women from being integrated in the society. For instance, as an African American man who has a job with moderate income and ability to read, Butcher locates himself in the middle of the Great Chain of Being, while the illiterate Hester as an African American woman with an illicit job stands somewhere in the lower steps. Hester notes it in her song, called “My Vengeance,” where she sings: “The low on the ladder / The barrels rock bottom” (F, 184). As a result, the poverty and illiteracy imposed on black women help those in power to control them socially, economically and politically. In such an unequal society, The Mayor as an upper-class character eats fresh meat every day, while the underclass members of society fail to sustain their basic needs (F, 200). For example, Hester cannot afford to buy meat, and Butcher, in his affection toward her, gives her some meat. This signifies a class society in which people acquire their identities according to their economic and social status. As a cultural and social practice, what one eats can signify one’s social class and financial status. Consuming fresh meat – much like the consumption of chocolate in *Venus* – is a clear sign which shows that The Mayor’s character has been founded upon physicality and food, and for him food is another source of pleasure, equating his appetite for food with his sexual desire. The connection between the consumption of food and the consumption of the female body labels women sexual objects. Seen in this light, for The Mayor, both fresh meat and women exist for consumption and transient pleasure.

Fucking A represents an equation, consisting of some intersectional variables such as race, class and gender, which work together to position African American women at the bottom of social hierarchy. Poverty and illiteracy, rape and oppression, alienation and objectification are some of the vicious results of this intersectionality. In other words, Parks represents a paradigm in which maleness, whiteness, wealth and power elevate men’s (The Mayor’s) status, while femaleness, blackness and poverty work together to degrade women (Hester and Canary). The play challenges the malestream view of class, race and gender stratifications and oppressions which the capitalist consumerism – or as Ebert (1996, 132) puts it, “the articulation of novel forms of acquiring profit within capitalism” – has imposed on its members, especially on African American women, who suffer the most from the intersections of race, class and gender.

4.5 Wanted: Debt or Alive

In *Fucking A*, Parks builds upon the foundation of a number of literary works to recall the long history of oppression and critiques social, political, cultural and economic problems that have afflicted the lives of vulnerable members of society, especially African American women. The invention of an “otherworldly” setting along with the idea of fluid race as well as the employment of postmodern techniques expands the domain of the play and provides it with an infinite and indefinite nature. These features make the play a prism which represents multiple different perspectives, while creating incredulity toward the patriarchal and hierarchal capitalist societies and their dominant ideologies that have repressed their disempowered members. Furthermore, the employment of distancing techniques, including Rest and Spell, episodic plot, generic names, songs and so forth, act to achieve an alienation effect and distance readers from empathy toward the characters. The use of these techniques helps readers think rather than feel, which may catalyze them into taking appropriate action.

Furthermore, the play mixes fact and fantasy, story and history to refashion African American histories and to deal with some of the concerns of African Americans through contesting the social, economic and political constructions of the dominant systems. Additionally, it mixes horror and humor together to open readers’ eyes to social ills – unseen under the gilded layers of the dominant systems. This is an attempt to liberate marginalized people from the shackles of the past and the dogmas of the present. For this, Parks raises the issue of history as counterhistory in order to revisit and refashion the histories of African Americans.

Parks also stresses the value of education and literacy as a way to elevate the position of African Americans. Moreover, the creation of TALK can be considered to be an attempt to unify and empower women around the axis of gender in order to challenge the dominant discourses. TALK reminds women of their quest/ion of identities and common roots in order to resist and disrupt the dominant discourses. Parks’s dramatic strategy of inventing a special language for women emphasizes her critical message: women have the power to create languages and discourses on their own in order to challenge the malestream discourses.

In addition to challenging the malestream discourses, *Fucking A* contributes significantly to the discourses of race, class and gender intersectionality. To achieve this end, Parks stages a number of female characters who have been exiled from the malestream, showing that not only African American women but also white women are oppressed in patriarchal and hierarchal capitalist societies. However, the representation of oppressions and discriminations imposed on

both black and white women implicitly provides the ground for readers to understand the specific destructive effects of race, class and gender intersectionality on African American women through comparing the status of black and white women.

The playful title of this chapter, “Wanted: Debt or Alive,” followed by a quotation from Lorraine Hansberry, signifies that money is the backbone of capitalism. It determines the position of people and enhances the power of the haves and improves their welfare. In contrast, due to their poverty, the have-nots suffer from social and class inequalities, and as seen in *Fucking A*, even a petty mistake may result in their punishment, which can then, again, be compensated for with money. However, since the have-nots do not have the required means to pay for their freedom, like Monster and Hester, they are in debt, and if they are alive, they should spend their life in prison. But if one day they decide to free themselves from the Debt/Alive bond, they become wanted/hunted, and consequently death is cast on them.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I set out to explore three of Suzan-Lori Parks's plays – *The Death of the Last Black Man* (1990), *Venus* (1996) and *Fucking A* (2000) – from the standpoints of postmodern drama and African American feminism with a focus on the terrains that reflect the quest/ion of African Americans', particularly African American women's identities. The plays that I have explored have much in common, and despite their differences in subject, theme and structure, they have allowed me to sketch out the use of postmodern drama and African American feminism in them.

What unites these three plays, as I have extensively discussed, is their examination of a world in which readers can look at African Americans with new eyes. To this end, Parks critically interrogates a number of dominant ideologies and metanarratives with regard to African Americans, including pseudo-scientific racism, patriarchy, stereotypes, religious abuse and/or misunderstanding, annals of history and the "Great Chain of Being" as well as the ruling economic, social, cultural and political systems and discourses, and suggests some mininarratives as alternative, subjective ways to create incredulity toward those metanarratives.

The examination of the annals of history as metanarratives enables Parks to free the minds of readers from the constraints of the represented dominant History. The three plays evoke the history of slavery so as to reinforce the idea that the liberation of the present requires the liberation of minds from the misrepresented knowledge of the past (Spaulding 2005, 23). Parks uses incidents from history – or rather herstory – to fill in the gaps in the history of African Americans. She benefits from the potential of historiography and fiction alike to expose the interior life of her figures and/or characters, to light up the dark areas of their lives and to reshape readers' knowledges of the past. In this process, she demarginalizes and includes the missing voices and visions in history through the medium of fiction. Through the potential of postmodern drama, history is fictionalized to open the gates for critiquing and transforming the represented discourses as well as unmasking the fictionality of her own versions of history in a self-reflexive mode. Parks's view that historians are not objective observers and unbiased recorders of historical events both calls into question the authenticity of professional historiography and locates her own perspectives within the context of history.

Parks reinscribes and reenacts history on the page and on the stage and, through this, enables readers to see alternative versions of it. Consequently, history in the three plays represents a site of resistance to the “Great Whole of History” and rehistoricizes history to refine the views of readers with new significations and to recycle identities for African Americans. Through questioning the totalizing concept of History and replacing it with multiple histories, rehistoricization provides the ground for the arrival of diverse mininarratives about events and accordingly creates a dynamic view of history or a history of becoming.

To this end, Parks employs a nonlinear progression through such disruptive devices as time distortion and dislocation that create fluid multi-perspectival settings and enable her figures and/or characters to travel back and forth in history to find the denied or unrecorded narratives and to voice them. In order to promote nonlinearity, she also uses episodic and circular plots, Rep. & Rev. & Ref., Rests and Spells, footnotes, glossaries, songs, choruses and plays within plays. The utilization of such devices in addition to typographical manipulation, lack of character descriptions and a dearth of stage directions makes Parks’s dramaturgy flexible, fluid and participatory. Thus, dramaturgical decisions over her playscripts are left to readers and performers. Furthermore, these devices make her plays “writerly,” hosting indeterminacies, paradoxes, playfulness and contradictions that encourage a plurality of readings and interpretations.

The linguistic plurality – emanating from language fluidity, wordplay, puns, puzzling numbers, spelling alterations – of the plays activates the infinite play between signs and referents, signifiers and signifieds, and consequently catalyzes the plurality of readings and interpretations. These devices function to both transform the conventional features of playwriting and create indeterminacies and incredulity toward dominant systems of oppression, while helping her to include her mininarratives into the texts. The devices also bring readers’ relationship with language to a crisis, unsettle them, leave them in an indeterminate state and make decodification complicated. Moreover, linguistic bricolage – juxtaposing different terms and phrases coming from different languages as well as using different languages, including TALK – creates syntactical breaks that shatter the unity of language and break the frame of the dominant languages and discourses. The employment of linguistic bricolage promotes language fluidity which can blur the defined boundaries between high and low cultures and languages. Thus, whether these plays are read on the page or watched on the stage, and whether they occur in the past, present or future, the postmodern elements are common to them as they dismantle the linear, static, predictable and determinate views and offer a dynamic option for approaching African American history.

In order to reinscribe and reenact history, Parks employs a number of historical figures and/or characters from different historical eras who appear side by side with fictional figures and/or characters. This enables hybrid characterization and settings, while at the same time it creates the ground for addressing old themes. In each of the three plays, Parks creates a postmortem landscape littered with conjured or resurrected deceased figures and/or characters. Arguably, the reappearance of the deceased enables them to retell their narratives, which may then entice readers to compare and contrast their previous knowledge of the past, functioning as an autopsy of history creating a mode of awareness that neither identity nor history nor our knowledge of them are natural, fixed or given.

The plays incorporate techniques such as parody, intertextuality, double-coding and palimpsest to establish relationships with other texts and genres. Additionally, they make use of paratextuality, metatextuality and extra-textuality in the form of allusions, quotations – either real or fake –, excerpts from historical, legal, medical and literary books, newspaper clippings, advertisements and court documents to replay the past, compare it with the present, recontextualize the past forms of representation, transform old themes and appropriate them to the contemporary life conditions. The wide use of inter/meta/paratextuality brings forth multiple genres that signify a heterogeneity of styles, narratives and perspectives which altogether create polyphony as well as narrative fragmentation. In such a context, Parks does not claim sole authorship, since her plays borrow extensively from many different works. The extensive use of literary, medical and historical intertexts further denotes that fiction, medicine and history are human-constructed discourses which can be rethought and reworked. Thus, Parks here first “uses and then abuses, installs and then subverts” the existent discourses and knowledges (Hutcheon 1993, 243).

Furthermore, the three plays embrace and challenge the representations of African Americans, especially those of African American women. They show how differences in race, class and gender, which have led to the formation of negative stereotypes and discriminations, are not to be equated with actual inferiority or deficiency. The plays certainly problematize these stereotypes, revealing the mainstream’s justifications of their discriminative views, based on traditional hierarchy, religious abuse and misunderstanding, pseudo-scientific racism, and so on. The protagonists of these plays, locked in conflicts with the mainstream, strive for their own independence, autonomy and subjectivity.

In this dissertation, I have approached the issue of stereotypes from two opposing standpoints: on the one hand, the employment of stereotyped figures and/or characters satirizes,

challenges and delegitimizes the prevailing white stereotypes of African Americans as the first step in the resistance process. It challenges the certainties and fixed cultural, social, sexual and political identities, contesting stereotyping as a powerful apparatus of oppression. However, on the other hand, I have studied the employment of these stereotyped figures and/or characters from the perspectives of “expectation of blackness” and “resigned resignation” signifying that some people of African descent have succumbed to and internalized these stereotypes.

Parks represents the negative images of African Americans projected by the dominant cultures. For instance, she uses TV in *The Death of the Last Black Man* and newspaper in *Fucking A* to manifest the fact that, via manipulating information, the media can create negative impressions and stereotypes against any group or nation. The simulation and critique of the media can serve as a practical mode for questioning the iconography of blackness in the mass media. Thus, Parks employs the media not only to remind African Americans of the media’s potential to create negative impressions against them, but also to point out the exigency of taking proper actions to thwart the programs that have targeted their identities.

In these plays, Parks also challenges the sexist images describing male African Americans as rapists who deserve to be lynched. By the same token, Parks demonstrates the patriarchal and hierarchical oppressions imposed on African American women in order to question and challenge the dominant order of hierarchy and patriarchy, seeking for African American women’s empowerment and transformation. To this end, she portrays and catalyzes reflections on intersectionality – namely the interlocking oppressive effects of sex, race, class and gender axes as interconnected factors that have created domination and discrimination for women of African descent, unfairly perverting black women and privileging the whites on different levels on the basis of these orientations. She shows how her black female figures and/or characters are subjected to various intersections of race, class and gender orientations devised to privilege whiteness as a master signifier and pervert the black female body and which pave the way for the whites to gain profit and pleasure and promote themselves. Moreover, these plays can be considered a new test for white readers to see whether they want to repeat or even imagine the perversion of black female bodies, culture and race for their own privilege, pleasure, promotion and profit.

To achieve empowerment and transformation for African American women, Parks questions the dimensions of essentialist knowledge and the legitimacy of “scientific” hypotheses as metanarratives and the role they play in the construction of race, class and gender hierarchies and their contribution in creating white sexist and racist stereotypes about black women. She uses multiple alternate images in order to confront negative and controlling images of black women.

To put it differently, empowerment and transformation necessitate the rejection of knowledges that uphold dehumanization and damnation for women of African descent. They further urge the development of those dimensions of knowledge that foster humanization and salvation for them.

As I have argued, many of Parks's female figures and/or characters are illiterate, uneducated or impoverished and abused by men who enjoy superior socio-economic status (doctor, mayor, etc.), who have by and large constituted the malestream, and whose ideologies represent and determine normality. Parks observes that illiteracy is one of the roots of evil that has destructive effects on African American women's lives and minds, moving them toward exclusion and encouraging them to take improper jobs. Thus, she seems to be suggesting that acquiring literacy and writing enables African Americans resist discriminations and elevate their positions.

Parks also promulgates unity and solidarity between African American men and women, showing how unity and solidarity can help them confront race and gender oppressions. *The Death of the Last Black Man*, to a great extent, avoids magnifying the differences and conflicts between African American men and women, deals with their common issues and stresses their bonds to aid in cooperating and overcoming those concerns. It also distances itself from representing African American women as feeble passive subordinate figures and represents them as influential trustworthy partners who are competent to participate in recasting their past and identities. In other words, Parks refrains to a great degree from emphasizing the male/female dichotomy and gender differences between her figures and/or characters in order to afford them solidarity and to provide a convincing portrayal of African American women who can function as discursive and trustworthy partners in the freedom movement. She shows how African American men's trust in women and their cooperation can help them build strong communities together.

As discussed in relation to both *Venus* and *Fucking A*, Parks also deals with white women's concerns, and accordingly she seeks redress for their distresses. From this perspective, through raising white women's concerns, Parks achieves two ends at once: on the one hand, she draws on the white women's oppressions, and on the other, she creates the ground for readers to compare and contrast the conditions of white and black women.

Finally, to quote a review of Parks's work, "no one can predict at this stage where this unpredictable dramatist will go next" (Hotreview 2004). In her interviews, Parks has promised to produce more plays in the years to come, and surely scholars and students will be provided and challenged by her new works that will further contribute to the struggle and scholarship.

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