

Repetition and revision in suzan-lori park's history plays and topdog underdog



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In her two decades as a playwright, Suzan-Lori Parks has tackled American history from many angles; while she shuffles themes of race, family, death, and time between each of her plays, they are all linked by the common structure of what she calls her “ Repetition & Revision” writing style. Most of her early work employs this jazz structure of repeated and rephrased dialogue as the framework for the play itself, which is more of a performance piece than a narrative. For example, the texts of 1994’s *The America Play* and 1990’s *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Entire World* (commonly referred to as Parks’s history plays) define the structure as something of a lyrical cacophony. However, her breakthrough 2002 Pulitzer-winning *Topdog/Underdog* reconfigures “ Rep & Rev” into a more traditional dramatic structure.

Topdog/Underdog is grounded in natural dialogue, without overlapping or repeating, but it retains her stylistic ethos in its plot, which recycles historical narratives into a contemporary urban setting. It also features characters that attempt to revise their own personalities, but unlike the speakers in Parks’s history plays, who revise slave narratives to form authentic, self-created identities, the characters fail to meaningfully change their shameful conditions. Rather, the Rep & Rev that occurs in *Topdog/Underdog*, most notably in the refrained form of the three-card monte routine, exists only to distract the characters from their responsibilities. While the figures of the early plays successfully subvert historical oppression, the protagonists of *Topdog* cannot prevent history from violently repeating itself, as their attempts to revise their identities do not reach the heart of the more pressing issues of poverty, sexism, and alcoholism that surround them. With

this turnaround in the significance of “ Rep & Rev,” Parks argues that issues of historical identity have been fairly well addressed, but that poor African American men need to shift their revisionary focus away from personal image and towards righting concrete social ills.

“ Repetition & Revision” is a term that Parks herself coined in the foreword to *The America Play*, in an essay entitled “ From Elements of Style.” She says the form of her dramatic writing is directly analogous to “ the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write a musical phrase once and again and again; etc. - with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised” (Parks, *The America Play* 9). She applies this technique to textual phrases, from lines to entire acts, in her plays, to such an extent that “ characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show that they are experiencing their situation anew” (9). She explains that it is an intentionally non-linear form: “ In such plays we are not moving from A → B but rather, for example, A → A → A → B → A” (9). As such, the repetition can take on a metaphorical significance as “ a literal incorporation of the past” for the characters and audience to reflect on (10). In each of the three plays, the “ Rep & Rev” device is used to support different metaphors, fitting with Parks’s ethos that “ form and content are interdependent” (7). It follows, then, that the change in how “ Rep & Rev” is implemented from the history plays to *Topdog* can be an accurate barometer for how the themes of each play differ and evolve. *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Entire World* may not be Parks’s most cryptic play, but its complexity can be daunting. The post-modern text is riddled with allusions to James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Richard Wright, and the Bible, but has very little in the way of recognizable dialogue. Rather, the

structure of the play is formed from overlapping phrases and monologues spoken by a menagerie of “ Figures,” each a representation of a historical Black stereotype.

Parks explicitly denies these figures the title of “ character” because she does not want them to be misconstrued as representations of actual people (Parks, *America* 12). The figures’ speeches are refrained and altered in Parks’s signature style, changing either specific words or grammar to convey new metaphors. In this way, the stereotypical figures deconstruct themselves, line by line, as their speeches change in meaning. Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam argue that the revisions that drive the play forward signify that Parks’s goal is “ not only to challenge and re-write history, but to right history” (449). They argue that the linguistic revisions the figures make serve to challenge the racist beliefs about African Americans that each figure represents. One example of such revision is the mantra of the eponymous figure, Black Man With Watermelon, who dies before and many times during the play. He speaks one recurring line, “ The black man moves his hands,” whose literal significance changes in each context (Parks, *America* 101). In all cases, though, it refers to some loss of independence or freedom, as his hands are bound with the leather straps of an electric chair and by lynching rope (Parks, *America* 108, 118). Rayner and Elam posit that the phrase is “ Parks’s gestural, aural, visual, and theatrical signifier for crossing over into the world of the dead” (449). This follows the aforementioned scenes of his death with tied hands and a passage in the text, in which two figures question “ Where he gonna go now that he done dieded?” and “ Where he gonna go tuh move his hands?” (Parks, *America* 114). Rayner and Elam take

this to mean that the motions of the hands themselves, each time met with resistance, represent the Black Man's attempts to cease existing as a stereotype. This hypothesis fits, as the figure is defined by his stereotyped name and appearance but seeks, in death, to move his own body parts, hitherto bound by violent circumstances.

While the action of *Death of the Last Black Man* is focused on its central figure, Parks has made it clear that his deaths are emblematic of the accumulated violence against African Americans that has obscured their history. Rayner and Elam argue, "As his generic name suggests, he is the prototypical 'Black Man'," and cite Parks' statement that "[African Americans are] a people who are honored or damned because of the actions of one of our group" and conclude that "the death of each black man who is hung, electrocuted, hunted down, or has fallen out of history counts equally as the death of the last black man. The death of every black man in the past inhabits the death of each black man in the present" (Rayner and Elam 451, Jacobus 1372). In writing and rewriting these deaths, Parks "rights" their legacy by reflecting on what caused them. While lynch violence is seldom forgotten, the deeper roots of racist stereotypes that have historically prevented African Americans from speaking out against such violence are in danger of being ignored as "a thing of the past." Parks addresses these stereotypes head on, and shows that these "missing histories" continue to make their mark on the present. Indeed, the play is written in an intentionally nonlinear style to reflect its timelessness, as referenced in *Black Man With Watermelon's* monologue on the conflation of past and present in the play's setting. Alluding to Samuel Beckett's characters' tendencies to

define themselves in temporally baffling terms, Parks includes phrases such as “ Thuh me-has-been sits in thuh be-me” (Parks, *America* 126). The conflation of past and present tenses is a device Beckett used in *Waiting for Godot* and other plays, to emphasize that whatever occurs in the play does not depend on when it occurs or has occurred (Rayner and Elam 451). As such, the injustice that afflicts *The Last Black Man’s* figures has occurred and does occur in some form or other in both the past and present of America

Throughout the play, the dead man is prevented from moving his hands by various external forces and is thus left to haunt his wife, *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick*. As a presence that is dead but not gone, he signifies a stereotype born out of slavery that still looms over the present. The first impediment against “ moving his hands” (i. e. getting rid of the stereotype thrust upon him) is the watermelon, a staple of the *Pickaninny/Sambo* image. He refutes the image of the docile slave, saying, “ This does not belong tuh me. Somebody planted this on me. On me in my hands,” but he is powerless to let go, as another impediment takes the watermelon’s place (Parks, *America* 105). Before repeating, this time in first-person, “ I would like tuh move my hands,” he describes his execution by electric chair: “ The straps they have on me are leathern. See thuh cord waggin full with uh jump-juice try me tuh wiggle but belt leathern straps: width thickly” (109, 108). The conflict changes from debunking the specific *Sambo* stereotype to dealing with legal injustice, but the continuity between the signifiers shows that they are a part of the same issue. This continuity is seen in the repetition of the “ hands” line into a revised context. In both cases, the man incredulously questions the stereotype that has become his identity; the line “ melon

mines?" is echoed in the similarly phrased line "forearm mines?" (108). He moves from questioning the validity of the Sambo stereotype that he has no control over to questioning the reality of his electrocuted arm. He must not only question the watermelon and execution paraphernalia thrust upon him, but also his own arms, the driving forces behind the hand motion that can free him. He realizes that his own concept of self, the metaphorical vision of his dying body, must also be refuted in order to bring the "dead" stereotypes to final rest. In this way, Parks explores the impossibility of refuting stereotypes by only erasing their visual, surface-layer record rather than questioning one's own complicity in self-stereotyping. This is seen in the figures' twice repeated exchange of "Whose fault is it? Aint mines," in response to "The black man bursts into flames. The black man bursts into blames" (103). The implication in this line is that the chorus of stereotypes refuses to believe in their guilt, and choose to blame all, rather than most, of their misfortune on their white creators. Only by considering his own stereotyped body as a dubious construct, rather than just the situations that surround it, can the central figure redefine himself apart from any stereotype.

In the play's "Final Chorus," in which all the figures celebrate the central stereotype's final death, the universal Black Man comes to terms with the concept that "Thuh tongue itself burns itself," that he is partially to blame for his prolonged suffering (Parks, *America* 130). His past attempts to "turn thuh page" on his stereotyped identity failed because he took no accountability for propagating the stereotype, and sought only to deny its hold on him. With the Black Man's final passing, Parks' revision wipes the

slate clean, leaving a void in place of harmful false identities. Parks's earlier piece, *The America Play*, attempts to fill that identity void with its main character's acts of revision. *The America Play* is set in the limbo-like "exact replica of the Great Hole of History," a carnivalesque vision of America in which cultural artifacts are buried (Parks, *America* 159). The first act consists of a black Abraham Lincoln impersonator telling his life story, in which the lines between his past and present are blurred. He makes his living by acting out abbreviated bullet points of history, specifically Lincoln's speeches and assassination, but, in true Parks style, he remixes such well-known plots into a personal narrative. So, when the impersonator, known as the Foundling Father, fails to improve his lot in the world, he cannot deny his own involvement. If there is anything to blame, it is an internalized form of prejudice that keeps him down. This is exemplified by the subservience the imitator, who refers to himself as the "Lesser Known" in his history, holds to the legacy of the actual President Lincoln, the "Great Man," to such an extent that he wishes he "would have had at least a chance at the honor of digging the Great Mans grave" (161). Nicole Hodges Persley explains this shift: "The Last Black Man addresses literal acts of violence, lynching, electrocution, etc. against African American men, and their impact on the African American community."

The America Play focuses on the psychological violence, the embodiment of social values attributed to blackness and whiteness" (72). In the first act of *The America Play*, the whiteface Lincoln repeats and revises a series of verbal and visual tics that acknowledge the overbearing material presence of Abraham Lincoln's legacy in American culture. From "A wink to Mr. Lincolns

pasteboard cutout" to "A nod to the bust of Mr. Lincoln," Parks gives a number of stage directions, paired with an out-loud narration of each action, for the "Foundling Father," the impersonator, to enact (The America Play 160, 161). Andrea J. Goto argues that this seemingly strange imitation of and obsession with a white cultural figure can be traced to the fact that "the Lincoln myth belongs to African Americans at least as much, if not more than, to white Americans" (120). Thus, the Foundling Father's repeated deferential acknowledgement of Mr. Lincoln, "the Great Man," combined with his revisionary tendency to spruce up his act with historically inaccurate beards creates what Persley considers a "remixed" identity that is born out of pressures to conform to white culture, but grows into a form that straddles the lines between Black and White, past and present (The America Play 161, 168). With the Foundling Father's anachronistic performance, Parks denies "white historical authenticity, showing how fickle, flawed, and skewed it is" (Kolin 14). By revising (and thus refuting) the myths of white cultural superiority, but having a character repeat them (nods to bust, etc.), Parks highlights the fact that in the past-present continuity of American culture, white hegemony has become more visible and recognizable, but it still continues to have an indisputably profound influence on the lives of African Americans. In this way, Parks argues that the roots of oppression may not be destroyed, but that they can be undermined, by historical revision. As a departure from her previous work, *Topdog/Underdog* employs its novel versions of "Rep & Rev" in a linear, realistic plot structure to more drastically change the focus of Parks's writing. Moving the plays' action into the factual present, *Topdog/Underdog* starts from the same assumption that

Repeating and Revising history can have a positive impact on African

<https://assignbuster.com/repetition-revision-in-suzan-lori-parks-history-plays-and-topdogunderdog/>

American identities, but, by the end of the play, the tragic inevitability of the characters' fratricide implies that the revisions they struggle for actually have a negative impact on their lives. *Topdog* also features a black Lincoln impersonator, but one who wishes more to distance himself from that identity than to hybridize it with his own. The play follows the domestic troubles between this Lincoln and his brother Booth and their history as three-card monte con men. In *Topdog*, Parks mostly abandons the use of repeating and revising dialogue wholesale, and instead allows the characters to converse normally, but she applies her style to the metatextual scheme of the play itself. With characters named Booth and Lincoln, the assassination of one by the other is expected, so Parks sets up the audience to look out for any deviations from this historical trend. The only major revision in this capacity is the familial motivation that was not present in the historical assassination. Otherwise, the revisions that Booth and Lincoln apply to their predetermined identities actually prevent them from changing the historical trend of violence by and against black men.

The cycles of violence from *The Last Black Man* are combined with *The America Play's* theme of identity insecurities in the character of Booth. As the "Underdog" of the play, he is bitterly jealous of his brother's success in hustling and romance, and consequently seeks to reinvent himself in his brother's image. He attempts to reinvent himself as a violent, successful card hustler named "3-Card" when faced with the reality of his fiscal insecurity: "Anybody not calling me 3-Card gets a bullet" (Parks, *Topdog* 107). Booth's attempts to distance himself from a past of poverty and familial neglect only plunge him into a deeper hole, as his violent delusions

eventually lead him to murdering his girlfriend and his brother (107, 108). Jochen Achilles explains that “Booth’s perception of the world and himself can be described as a naïve acceptance of appearances and the belief . . . in the possibility of identity change via the doubtful magic of a name” (107). The history plays’ figures succeed in reinventing themselves because they spend a whole play refiguring their language and actions to support the new identities they arrive at by the end of the play. Booth, however, simply repeats the monte routine - “Watch me close now watch me close now: who-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-the-red-card?” etc. - (without revision between scenes) and lies to himself, saying that he “wins all the money” (5, 6). In fact, his hustling practice, referred to in stage directions as “clumsy” and “studied and awkward,” does nothing to support himself or his brother (16, 5). Furthermore, he is blind to the parasitic effects of the hustling lifestyle, explained by Lincoln as the guilt that made him quit that life: “We took a father for the money he was gonna get his kids new bike with and he cried in the street . . . Swore off thuh cards. Something inside me telling me -” (54). By revising himself into a gangster identity without repeating his brother’s success, and repeating the monte scam without revising the criminal element that drove Lincoln away, Booth undergoes an incomplete and counteractive transformation.

While Booth, the murderer, ultimately thwarts either brother’s attempts revise himself out of shame, in keeping with The Last Black Man’s message, the victim shares some of the blame. Lincoln’s failed attempts at repetition and revision in Topdog generally follow the same pattern of historical reinterpretation as those of the Foundling Father. They share the role of a

carnie who reenacts Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Topdog's Lincoln, unlike the Foundling Father, tries to make a clear distinction between his job and his personal identity: " Fake beard. Top hat. Don't make me into no Lincoln. I was Lincoln on my own before any of that" (28). This assertion, however, is challenge by Booth's insistence that Lincoln plays the role " too real," and by Link's " Best Customer," who asks him " Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does the show go on?" (50, 32). The latter conjecture is proven by Lincoln's hesitance to change the routine in any meaningful way because his white audience likes " they historical shit in a certain a way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up" (50). Unlike the Foundling Father, who synthesizes the Lincoln story with his own, Topdog's Lincoln, in an attempt to separate himself from a predefined identity, repeats the mainstream, heroic (white) vision of Lincoln's death as best he can, even though he's " uh brother playing Lincoln. Its uh stretch for anyones imagination" (51). By acting out a pitch-perfect Honest Abe, Lincoln hopes to prove that he is very different outside of the costume, disproving the legacy of his name. Paradoxically, by focusing so much on this identity revision, Lincoln only repeats an old routine, just like Booth's monte, and fails to enact meaningful change in his life. As Booth and Lincoln try in vain to escape their fates, they blind themselves to the negative effects of their poverty-stricken life.

Addiction, especially, is an issue Lincoln deals with daily, but with denial. He drinks or refers to drinking in most scenes, and shows his alcoholic dependence by calling the whiskey " med-sin" (9, 24, 63, 83). When liquor isn't available, he " studies [cards] like an alcoholic would study a drink,"

revealing his susceptibility to addiction in any form (55). Alcoholism is revealed to be a cornerstone of his personality when Lincoln tells Booth, “[our father] was drunk when he told me, or maybe I was drunk when he told me . . . why he named us both. Lincoln and Booth” (22). The name, whose connotations Lincoln tries to shrug off throughout the play, is intrinsically connected to both his and his father’s alcoholism. So, if Lincoln wants to escape from his name and all that it implies he must also seek soberness. He fails, as he turns away from his ‘Honest Abe act’ of identity revision and back into his drinking. This is shown in the stage directions at the end of the scene in which Lincoln practices his routine: “He gets up, considers giving the new moves another try” (35). The ultimate sign of Lincoln’s failure to revise his identity is his repeated drinking. Booth’s main vice, on the other hand, is womanizing. An integral of his 3-Card fantasy is his hypothetical success with women. He invents schemes to impress and dominate women, such as stealing his girlfriend and expensive ring, but in a smaller size so she won’t be able to remove it and reject him (8). Because his lack of money marks him as a deadbeat, Booth resorts to manipulation tactics, revealing his sexist mentality. For example, he realizes he needs a phone because “you get a filly to give you her numerophono and gone is the days when she just gives you her number and dont ask for yrs” (30). He denigrates women as “fillys,” objects of sexual desire, that he seeks to control. This mindset follows directly from his attempts to reinvent himself as a successful hustler, as sexual prowess figures prominently in his fantasy (18). Booth’s sexism shows that his vain attempts at identity revision lead only to lechery, not better fortune.

Extrapolating from Lincoln and Booth's misfortunes and misdeeds to a general trend among poor black men (following Last Black Man's concept of theatrical universality), Parks argues that misguided concerns about identity cripple attempts to change poor African Americans' social standing. While her previous plays hinted at the opportunity to change a "predetermined path" of shame and misery by reevaluating the paths of prejudice that lead to it, *Topdog/Underdog* concludes that such strategies may only distract from other pressing concerns of an urban black populace. Achilles notes that the games Booth and his brother play, with the Lincoln reenactment and the card scam at the forefront, "are prisons and traps rather than instruments of viable self-invention" (122). These traps of repetition prove fatal for Lincoln and damning for Booth on the last pages of *Topdog/Underdog*, as an American history of violence comes full circle (Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* 108). Suzan-Lori Parks takes "Rep & Rev" out of her dialogue and into her characters' lives, she comments on how progressive cultural revision cannot exist today without shameful historical repetition.