“Is This Possible?”: Re-presentations of Historical Holes in the Works of Suzan-Lori Parks, Toni Morrison, Marita Bonner, and M. NourbeSe Philip

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Abstract

This study maps various narrative "re-presentations" of historical silences, or "holes", across texts belonging to the African American and Black diasporic literature and performance tradition, spanning from the early twentieth century to as recent as 2008. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks is the primary focus of this exploration. Working at the intersection of Black feminist discourse and spatial literary studies, this study positions her "early history plays" in conversation with the works of Marita Bonner, Toni Morrison, and M. NourbeSe Philip. Deploying a thematic framework of burial and resurrection, and tracing spatial configurations designed to mark and mourn the silences of African American and Black diasporic histories, this project is structured around three key images that resonate in these writers' works: verticality, holes, and waves. Édouard Glissant's theorising of the 'abyss' in his landmark *Poetics of Relation* (1992) represents a critical lens through which this study responds to a recent swell of scholarship in the field of spatial literary studies, in addition to calls within the field of Black feminist discourse, from scholars such as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, for a "re-mattering" of the discourse around historical erasure. The project unfolds along an analytical thread of spatial specificity—thereby distinguishing its aims from previous scholarship in the field of spatial literary studies. Drawing plays, fictional narrative, and poetic forms into dialogue with one another, this exploration gleans novel insights into the way Parks, Bonner, Morrison, and Philip challenge the parameters of literary and dramatic representation.

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Declaration of Originality

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the university's guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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Introduction

This study examines narrative representations of historical silences in texts belonging to the African American and Black diasporic literature and performance tradition. My analysis gathers texts that re-present historical silences in ways that engender possibility—a possibility that complicates the seeming *im*possibility of bridging gaps in an "authorised" historical record. Possibility is by definition an expansive concept, manifest in each of the works I explore by Black women writers in manifold ways to ultimately gesture towards 'a more freedom filled future' (to borrow from performance theorist Soyica-Diggs Colbert).[1] My specific interest in historical possibility concerns the capacity for literature and performance to give expression to a legacy of Black erasure shaping a storied, whitewashed version of American history—and, more broadly, transatlantic history. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks is the primary focus of this exploration; this is because Parks gestures towards possibility in fascinating, distinctive ways, narrating spatial configurations designed to mark and mourn the silences that punctuate so much of African American history. She imbues buried narratives of African American history with the possibility of resurrection on the stages of her plays, along with the bodies, voices, and stories of Black lives erased from the historical record. In an essay entitled 'Possession', Parks sets out what is at stake in this act of historical redressal:

> […] because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to—through literature and the special relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.[2]

Parks envisages her creative practice as nothing short of a historical excavation. The ground figures an alternate record of history; just as buried matter is inevitably broken down and reformulated into something new, Parks's theatrical resurrections re-matter discarded narratives of African American history. For Parks, the liveness of theatre, its ephemerality and its 'special relationship' to 'real life'—those qualities which allow for a stage be filled with soil to, for a brief period of time, *become* the burial ground, as in her 1994 work *The America Play*—generates possibility for a reckoning, if not a reconciliation, with the historical past. As such, the interaction between space, history, race, and performance in Parks's plays orientates the various directions of my investigation. I contemplate these analytics via key images that I trace across her works: verticality, holes, and waves. Parks plots a renewed sense of time and place, distinct from colonial narratives, through these images. They are discernible in the physical and imaginative geographies of her texts: verticality in the flying descent of

[1] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements Performance and Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, Camden and Newark, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2017), p.44.
[2] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.3-5 (p.4).

Black Man with Watermelon in *Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990) who 'falls twenty-three floors to his death'; holes in the 'Great Hole of History', a replica of which forms the location of *The America Play* (1994); waves in the narrative form of *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (1989), as oceanic depictions of the Middle Passage drift in and out of view—to list just a few remarkable examples. Through this spatial lens, Parks's "history plays" reveal a critical intervention into the act of historical re-presentation pertaining to dramatic and literary forms—an intervention that unfolds from the question prefacing this study: 'Is this possible?'[3]

The quote derives from a play by Parks titled 'The Blank Before the World'. This work represents one of the final two pieces of Parks's yearlong play-diary project, which comprised over 365 entries written across a single year. The question posed connects to an extensive cosmological-philosophical inquiry into the historical unknown that threads throughout her project; it is no surprise, therefore, that this provocation features on the closing page of the text—as part of a Beckettian style work comprised entirely of stage directions. Given the significance of this quote within the following study, I reproduce 'The Blank Before the World' below:

THE BLANK BEFORE THE WORLD

A very slow light cue, as slow as possible,
from deep black to white-hot zoom.
The light reveals the stage, which is completely blank.
(Is this possible?)
The light cue is accompanied by the sound of wind-
the wind which brought most of us here to this country
or this planet. Then, the wind reveals itself to be
an enormously elongated single breath.
When the light cue has reached its maximum
and the breath has expired – the lights bump out quickly.[4]

Parks articulates the problem of "possibility" as a matter of dramatic representation. The notion of "blankness" is considered here from the perspective of staging: can a stage be 'completely blank' as the stage directions indicate? However, Parks's question of possibility also invokes a wider topic of inquiry centred on blank spots in the historical record: how can the dramatist represent history's innumerable

[3] I define Parks's "history plays" as those that explicitly centre the 'narrativity' of history. This includes all those featured in a collection of her earliest plays: *The America Play and Other Works* (1995). Scholar Jennifer Larson identifies that Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (1989) and *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990) are critical to understanding Parks's wider oeuvre. She states they are "*about* language" and they demonstrate "a deeply metaphorical and historicized approach"; see Jennifer Larson, *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks,* Understanding Contemporary American Literature series, ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Linda Wagner-Martin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), p.9. I repeatedly invoke the phrase "historical re-presentation" throughout this study in referring to the way Parks and others disrupt traditional historiographies of African American and Black diasporic experience by drawing on various representational modes, such as language, image, movement and form.

[4] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Blank Before the World' in *365 Days/365 Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), p.376.

black holes? Moreover, pertaining to the project of African American historical recovery: how can the dramatist navigate the archival parameters of transatlantic slavery to fathom the unknown or unspeakable stories of its victims? Drawn from this epic context of 'The Blank Before the World', Parks's question, 'Is this possible?' looms large in this study insofar as it conflates the unknown mysteries of the universe, the limits of dramatic representation, and the historical dimensions of Black erasure onto the same analytical plane. Parks routinely invokes the origin story of the world as an all-encompassing entry point to the concept of historical absences, or the unknowability of the historical past. Yet her works, this one included, specifically centre the legacy of loss and erasure that accompanies the historical record of African American and Black diasporic experience. In 'Blank Before the World' for example, the biblical creation narrative prefigures a specifically African American origin story. Multiple meanings emerge from this allegory. The wind-turned-breath that forms the eerie soundscape of the play figures a material connection to the geography of the Atlantic; the wind—which Parks adds, 'brought most of us here to this country'—made possible the movement of ships across the Middle Passage.[5] Yet the wind's reveal as a 'single breath' concurrently symbolises the life-giving properties of God's breath, as detailed in the biblical creation story.[6] Racial violence interlinks these origin stories in 'The Blank Before the World', as the wind-turned-breath marks a continuum between Middle Passage routes and their White, Christian, ideological roots. The Middle Passage or the 'impossible story', presents a historical hole that (as I will go on to argue in Chapter Two, titled 'Holes') establishes a continuum—both spatial and temporal—throughout Parks's works.

Burial and resurrection: a new narrative of blank

Parks situates 'The Blank Before the World' (the concept imagined through the play, as opposed to the play itself) as an ever-present originary coordinate across her drama. When asked in a 2006 interview about her creative process, she indicated the importance of her works 'lining up with the Bigger Thing'.[7] She likened this search for a 'particular conjunction or alignment' (as summarised by the interviewer) to: 'the hole in [Abraham] Lincoln's head and the (w)hole of history, and they line up and all of a sudden, through that (w)hole comes the play'.[8] Parks's extraordinary attentiveness to the material and racial dimensions of history serves as a critical impetus for my study. Given the plurality of Parks's aesthetic (though I recognise she has made the opposing claim on various occasions: that she does not necessarily have an aesthetic), I position her works in conversation with those of other Black women writers who demonstrate a vested interest in the potential of narrative spaces to inform, contest, and

[5] Ibid., p.376.
[6] Ibid., p.376.
[7] Kevin J. Wetmore, 'It's an Oberammergau Thing: An Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks' in *Suzan Lori-Parks: A Casebook*, ed. by Kevin J. Wetmore and Alycia Smith-Howard (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp.124-140 (p.130).
[8] Ibid., p.130.

reproduce historical narratives.[9] My study examines Harlem Renaissance playwright Marita Bonner's one-act play, *The Purple Flower* (1928), Toni Morrison's third novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), and M. NourbeSe Philip's books of poems, *Zong!* (2008).[10] Of Parks's dramatic oeuvre, I examine *Death of the Last Black Man* (1990), *365 Plays/365 Days* (2006), *The America Play* (1994) and *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (1989). Each of these texts engages with erased African American and Black diasporic histories by deploying overt spatial metaphors and materialities. They demonstrate remarkable formal complexity, as well as rich comparative ground concerning those aforementioned images that best define Parks's historico-spatial approach: verticality, holes, and waves. Unfolding from Parks's writing, my critical analysis also spans multiple genres (drama, poetry, and a fictional novel). For those texts I include that do not typically engender a critical approach to their performative dimensions—such as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and M. NourbeSe Philip's book of poems, *Zong!*—this comparative analysis importantly adds to the dynamic body of existing scholarship that explores their textual role as counter-histories.[11]

Parks, Bonner, Morrison, and Philip, in formulating textual counter-histories, share an insightful preoccupation with the revisionary potential of literature. The African American and Black diasporic literary and performance tradition contains no shortage of counter-histories to traditional historiographies (which typically envisage America as a site of freedom, self-determination and innocence). My decision to explore the works of Black women writers focuses my gendered approach to the discriminations of historical re-presentation, which reproduce along the lines of gender, as well as race and multiple other identity categories. The texts I examine engage with historical silences in ways shaped by their creators' lived experiences as Black women. Another important detail inextricable from my subject matter of 'historical representation' informs this decision: critics and audiences have historically overlooked and undervalued the work of Black women writers. Within the context of American literature, the overwhelming presence of White male writers in the textual canon—such as William Faulkner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, all authors on whose writing Parks has riffed—attests to this disparity. This troubling legacy emphasises the dimensions of "remembering" or "resurrecting" enacted through scholarly practice, which emerges from within a complex nexus of

[9] For an example of Parks's seeming resistance towards a singular approach to her body of work, see Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Theater,* 29.2 (1999), 26-33 (p.29) <muse.jhu.edu/article/34060> [accessed 13.1.23]. In this essay, Parks writes '[S]omeone once told me, "Venus isn't really a Suzan-Lori Parks play." To which I responded: "There isn't any such thing as a Suzan-Lori Parks play."'

[10] See Jennifer Larson, *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks,* Understanding Contemporary American Literature series, ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Linda Wagner-Martin (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), p.9.

[11] See Ellen Howey, 'The sea and memory: Poetic reconsiderations of the Zong massacre', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature,* 57.2 (2022), 336-353 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989419881233> ; Deborah Goldgaber, 'On Recovering the Past: Textual "Reversibility" in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong', *CR: The New Centennial Review,* 21.1 (2021), 207-235 <http://doi: 10.14321/CRNEWCENTREVI.21.1.0207>; Susan Farrell, '"Who'd He Leave Behind?": Gender and History in Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon"', *Bucknell Review,* 39.1 (1995), 131-150; Kathyrn Nicol, 'Locating the Front Line: War, Democracy and the Nation in Toni Morrison's Sula and Song of Solomon' in *Death in American Texts and Performances: Corpses, Ghosts and the Reanimated Dead,* ed. by Lisa Perdiago and Mark Pizzato (Surrey and Vermont: Routledge, 2010), pp.165-181.

social and cultural disparities that have historically positioned Black women as "inferior".[12] Thinking in tandem with Parks's attention to excavating disavowed histories, I recognise that the dimensions of remembering and resurrecting ingrained within scholarly practice play into the stakes of textual burial.

Marita Bonner's critical reception presents a demonstrative example. Bonner is a prolific writer whose body of work fell into obscurity for decades after she stopped publishing new writing in 1941. In 1987, scholars Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph undertook a preliminary investigation into Bonner's life, even interviewing members of her family and discovering a series of unpublished short stories she left complete in a notebook.[13] The published study was titled 'Marita Bonner: In Search of our Mothers' Gardens', and in the same vein as Alice Walker's publication of the same name (minus the reference to Bonner), constitutes a feminist act of historical excavation, as well as an assertion of Black womanhood and creativity.[14] The scholarly environment surrounding Bonner to a certain extent animates her visibility, shaping her texts' legacies and intellectual imports. This understanding informed my selection of primary texts, beyond their obvious thematic commonalities and shared historical bent. Black feminist discourse (to which Alice Walker's womanist literature presents a formative theoretical groundwork) occupies an important place in my thinking vis-à-vis Parks's attention to the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class—as Audre Lorde points out, 'the absence of these considerations weakens any feminist argument of the personal and the political'.[15] Parks, Bonner, Morrison, and Philip in many ways extend Alice Walker's search, continuing her incisive remembrance of Black women creatives; they too recall the works and lives of Black women in acts of 'women memorializing women'.[16] Morrison's *Beloved* is based on the real life story of an enslaved woman named Margaret Garner who attempted to kill herself and her children rather than returning to slavery. Beyond her own publications, Morrison nurtured the creativity of other Black women creatives in her role as senior editor for Random House. She brought numerous Black women writers including Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones to Random House during her years working for the publishing company.[17] Parks's play *Venus* (1997) chronicles the life of Sara (or Saartje) Bartmann, a Khoikhoi woman whom Scottish surgeon Alexander Dunlop exhibited in European "freak shows" in the nineteenth century. Parks returns a sense of agency to Bartmann's historical figuration by countering the colonial violence and exploitation that preclude her subjectivity

[12] Here I am referring to the implications of critical consensus, curricula, evolving modes of discourse, and institutional agendas—amongst a multitude of additional components of scholarly practice that contribute to the formulation of literary canons and trends.
[13] See Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph, 'Marita Bonner: In Search of Other Mothers' Gardens', *Black American Literature Forum*, 21.1 (1987), 165-183 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2904427>
[14] See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [1983] (London: Women's Press, 1984).
[15] Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in *Sister Outsider* [1984] (London: Penguin Classics, 2019), pp.52-53 (p.52). VLeBooks ebook.
[16] This apt expression serves as a section title in an edited collection by Henry Louis Gates Jr and Hollis Robbins. See 'Women Memorializing Women' in *The Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Hollis Robbins (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), pp.585-613.
[17] See Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (Hampshire and London: MacMillan Press, 2000), p.8.

in historical re-tellings.[18] This depth of care and attention toward the lives or creative works of Black women foregrounds the significance of kinship and ancestry to Black feminist modes of representation.[19]

My analysis unfolds from Parks's work throughout each section of this study because her plays are laden with historico-spatial meanings, and geared towards an ambition already exemplified in 'The Blank Before The World', (but which my study will further elucidate): the scripting of a new origin story for America. My comparative literary approach aims to stretch the theoretical framework through which scholars and critics view Parks's work. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. usefully highlights a predicament scholars encounter with Parks's body of work in arguing that 'Parks is neither easy to pigeonhole, nor easy to summarise'.[20] Nevertheless, all Parks's dramatic works lay bare the mythic foundations of America's origin story. Parks complicates historical re-presentation through the trope of "origins", enfolding within its iterations, themes of history, time, space, and race. The entangled and often-perplexing nature of these concepts animates Parks's early works, to the extent that the resulting obscurity of her experimental modes presents a challenge for audiences and critics. *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (1989), *Last Black Man* (1990), and *The America Play* (1994) reject conventional linear narrative. The figures featured in these plays seem to inhabit a particular modality described by theatre phenomenologist Alice Rayner, 'that dismantles fixed subjects and objects and turns past, present and future into ways of manners of attention'—thereby enacting Rayner's understanding of time in relation to performance.

Parks's early works give formal expression to the challenge of representing time. The dilemmas they pose endure through to Parks's later published works. In *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006) she parses the complexities of time as an analytical category in her marathon writing project. As I will underscore in Chapter Two of this study, origins denote a site of historical malleability in Parks's *365* project. Theatrical representation is distinctive for its 'non-originality' (according to postmodern understandings) and so the theatricality of Parks's works bolsters the heterogeneity of her historical conceptualisations; as performances, they incarnate the 'goneness' of the histories they represent.[21] Audiences were 'not quick to recognize Parks's contributions to theatre' and Parks has referred to the

[18] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997).

[19] I recognise that the term 'kinship' takes on a variety of meanings and forms within Black diasporic contexts, and that these receive detailed attention within the rich field of critical kinship studies. Jennifer L. Morgan's seminal scholarship has highlighted the way in which racial capitalism disrupted forms of kinship through processes of dispossession and dehumanisation, for example by forcibly removing individuals from their homes and family units. Simultaneously, racial capitalism engendered the commodification of kinship via the enslaved female body. See Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2021).

[20] See Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., 'Introduction: Perceptible Mutabilities – The Many Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks/The Many Suzan-Lori Parks of Plays', *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook*, ed. by Kevin J. Wetmore Jr and Alycia Smith-Howard, pp.xvii-xix.

[21] Elin Diamond highlights the difference between postmodern associations of performance and the notion of 'origins' compared to Plato's condemnation of non-originality in performance. See 'Introduction' in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.1-12 (p.1).

'world catching up' to the narratives she conveys.[22] What *has* changed in the years since Parks wrote her early history plays is the intellectual environment in which the public and scholarly community interprets her works. Jodie Van Der Horn Gibson stresses a meaningful connection between Parks's oeuvre and the popularity of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* (first performed in 2015) and the film *Black Panther* (2018), all of which speak to a revived interest in the revisionary potential for visual forms to critique and realise anew America's origin story. I would add to these examples Nikole-Hannah Jones's *The 1619 Project* (launched in 2019); the project reframes American history through the lens of transatlantic slavery, foregrounding slavery's integral role in the creation of America's present power structures.[23] The ubiquity of Parks's particular historical framing in the contemporary moment draws up the salience of my historical focus, and the importance of returning to Parks's earlier history plays at a time when America's origin story is the subject of popular dispute.[24]

Previous scholarship on Parks has recognised the significance of her dramatic works within a body of African American drama that re-writes American history by addressing under-represented, or erased, narratives of the past. Other seminal works belonging to this tradition include Amiri Baraka's *The Motion of History* (1978), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), and Randolph Edmonds' *Nat Turner* (1927). Parks is particularly influenced by Adrienne Kennedy, whose work also belongs to this body of African American drama, and whom she has stated 'inspired [her] to take weird riffs and shifts of character', of the kind exemplified in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964).[25] Subsequently, Parks is critically considered in relation to these playwrights. James Baldwin, too, is regularly interwoven in critical dialogue around Parks's drama; such work typically underscores his influence, as Parks's former teacher, on her choice of drama as a chief form for her writing.[26] Parks has reflected in essays such as 'new black math' (2005) and 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1999) on the role of the African American literary tradition as a vehicle for historical truths, and on how individual writers, but also movements such as the Black Arts Movement, have influenced her writing.

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[22] See Jodi Van Der Horn-Gibson, 'Filling the "whole hole of History": (rest)ing in Suzan-Lori Parks' Interregnum', *Global Performance Studies*, 2.2 (2019), para.5-6. <https://doi.org/10.33303/gpsv2n2a7>

[23] Nikole Hannah Jones and New York Times Magazine, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

[24] Plays published more recently by Parks have followed a similar pattern, wherein resonances acquire meaning over time. For example, Alexis Soloski, reflecting on Parks's *White Noise* (2019) wrote in 2021: She watched audiences take it in, sometimes leaning forward in their seats, sometimes leaning back, not necessarily ready for this truth. "People had a hard time, like, 'Why do you have to go there?'" But 2020 went there for them. Which means that reality has caught up to White Noise and it can help them have some uncomfortable conversations about race and class, conversations they may now be more primed for'. See Alexis Soloski, 'Forty days a slave: Suzan-Lori Parks on her incendiary new play White Noise', *Guardian,* 12 October 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/oct/12/forty-days-slave-suzan-lori-parks-incendiary-new-play-white-noise-black> [accessed 30.4.23].

[25] As quoted in Alisa Solomon, 'Signifying on the Signifyin': The Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks', *Theater,* 21.3 (1990), 73-80 (p.75).

[26] See Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young, '"Watch Me Work": Reflections on Suzan-Lori Parks and her Canon' in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries,* ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp.1-25 (p.3).

Such reflections present a 'guide', as Parks suggests, aiding readers, including myself, to decipher the aims and ideas that drive her writing.[27]

Parks is well-established as a playwright who has shaped postmodern concerns with the politics of representation in American drama, historical representation serving as a principal concern across her body of work. The works of British and American playwrights such as Sam Shepherd, Ntozake Shange, Samuel Beckett, Lynn Nottage, Caryl Churchill, and Sarah Kane, have also been highlighted as providing rich comparative ground to probe themes of memory and history. Comparative analysis embracing Parks's literary predecessors and contemporaries tends to focus on her formal experimentalism, in particular Deborah Geis's monograph *Suzan-Lori Parks* (2008) and Jennifer Larson's *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks* (2012). Parks's early history plays saw a swell in critical attention upon the publication of her compiled works, *The America Play and Other Works* in 1995, and again when, in 2002, she was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *Topdog/Underdog* and critics looked back to her earlier works, acknowledging the versatility of her use of dramatic form. Over the past decade, attention on Parks's earlier experimental plays has declined, despite the relevance of their themes of historical re-visioning in the contemporary moment. This is not to say that interest in Parks's works has declined overall; whilst this study focuses mostly on Parks's early, experimental history plays, her oeuvre also includes examples of dramatic realism, such as *Topdog/Underdog* (2002), *The Red Letter Plays* (2012), and *The Book of Grace* (2016). Parks's guiding themes of historical holes and narrative re-presentation endure throughout these works. However, a consequence of this decline in new scholarship on Parks's earlier history plays (those published in 1995 in *The America Play and Other Works*) is that the potential of her remarkable and distinctive use of spatial imagery has not been realised within discourse around spatial literary studies—a discourse that has expanded over the past decade.[28]

This thesis demonstrates the significance of Parks's spatial imagery (in her earlier history plays and her 2006 play diary project, *365 Days/365 Plays*) to contemporary discourse around spatial literary studies. This critical angle adds to scholarly research that has previously established Parks as a seminal playwright within a tradition of African American literature that rewrites or restages US history. For example, in Chapter One of this study I position Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* and Parks's *Death of the Last Black Man* in dialogue, introducing a spatial lens of verticality. Parks scholar Jonathan Kalb includes a reference to Bonner's *The Purple Flower* in 'Remarks on Parks', a published transcript of a 2004 symposium centred on Parks's drama. Kalb reflects on the split-stage setting of Bonner's *The Purple Flower,* which features a dimly lit level, beneath the 'Think Skin of Civilization' that Kalb

[27] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'From Elements of Style' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.6-18 (p.6).
[28] Robert T. Tally Jr., 'Introduction: Spaces of the Text: Literary Studies After the Spatial Turn' in *Spatial Literary Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Space, Geography, and the Imagination*, ed. Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), pp.1-10.

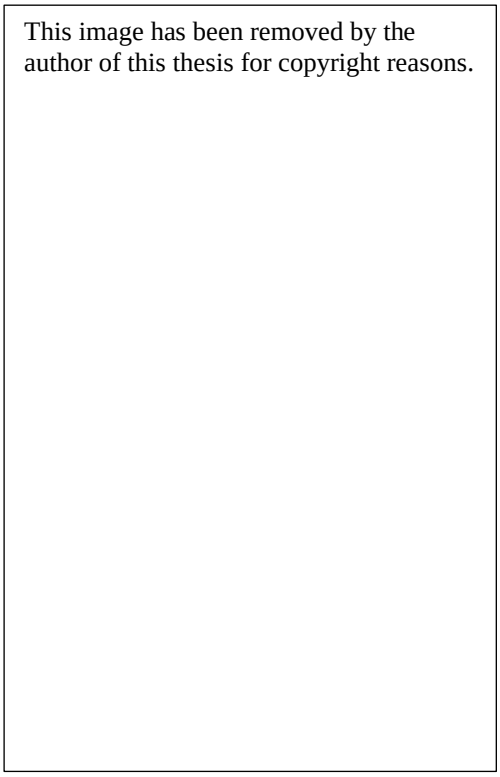
argues 'plunges Bonner's characters into an atavistic past'.[29] Kalb's comment represents a brief but insightful aside within his broader discussion of a 'tradition of concealment' in African American theatre, in which he draws on Parks's hole imagery as a touchstone.[30] Beyond this parallel, the significant links between these two African American women playwrights' works—their shared spatial paradigms around ascent, descent, and the significance of spatial imagery in disrupting linear formulations of the past—have not yet featured as part of the scholarly conversation around themes of history in Parks scholarship.

In the plays I examine from Parks's oeuvre, I argue she gestures towards a new narrative of blank. To examine Parks's conceptualisation of 'blankness', and to compare how other Black women writers partake in its fundamental logics, I contemplate the spatial sensibility of each text in relation to five key analytics that index Parks's dynamic aesthetic: race, time, performance, materiality, and the thematic interplay of burial and resurrection. Through their complex associations, I discern a framework of spatiality that enunciates the racial contours of historical silences. Also fundamental to the spatial sensibility of Parks's works is the role of performance and, more broadly, writing, in innovating the discursive contexts of each these aforementioned analytics. My critical orientation towards Parks's construction of space warrants a degree of specificity that I seek to grasp through my particular focus on key images. Scholarship has underscored the connection between history and space in Parks's drama within a much more general framework of postmodern understandings of space. In locating key images across the physical and conceptual geographies of Parks's works, this project unfolds along an analytical thread of spatial specificity that distinguishes its aims from previous scholarship. That said, scholarship by Jennifer Larson, Joseph Roach, Holly Berkowitz, Harry Elam and Alice Rayner has served as an important in-road for my research by indicating the significance of "the hole" across Parks's drama.[31] For example, Joseph Roach argues that the "Great Hole of History" of Parks's 1995 work, *The America Play,* formulates history as an assemblage of events that leaves *othered* perspectives and individuals "[tumbling] unmarked and unmourned into the Great Hole".[32] I discern in each of my key images (verticality, holes, and waves—otherwise conceived as dimensions) an engagement with the historical past, and along with this temporal aspect a spatial intervention into historical knowledge

[29] Jonathan Kalb, 'Remarks on Parks I: A Hunter College Symposium on the Work of Suzan-Lori Parks' in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries,* ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp.151-174 (p.162).
[30] Ibid., p.162.
[31] See Jennifer Larson, *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks,* Understanding Contemporary American Literature series, ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli and Linda Wagner-Martin (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2012); Joseph Roach, 'The Great Hole of History: Liturgical Silence in Beckett, Osofisan, and Parks', *South Atlantic Quarterly,* 100.1 (2001), 307-317 <muse.jhu.edu/article/30701> [accessed 18.4.23]; Holly Berkowitz, "This Could Go On Forever" Rethinking the End in Suzan-Lori Parks's Apocalyptic Dramas', *Modern Drama,* 65.3 (2022), 406-428 < https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/868348> [accessed 14.4.23]; Harry Elam and Alice Rayner, 'Echoes from the Black (W)hole: An Examination of The America Play by Suzan-Lori Parks' in *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in America Theater*, edited by Jeffrey Mason and Ellen Gainor (University of Michigan Press, 1999) pp. 178–92.
[32] Joseph Roach, 'The Great Hole of History: Liturgical Silence in Beckett, Osofisan and Parks', *South Atlantic Quarterly,* 100.1 (2001), 307-317 (p.314) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00382876-100-1-307>

and its continual reproduction. They are bound by the image of the abyss. Parks, Bonner, Morrison, and Philip imagine the abyss of the (historical) unknown as a site of Black life, as opposed to Black death; as a site that is malleable, as opposed to static and fixed; and, drawing on the ambivalence of blankness, as a dynamic site teeming with possibility. This abyss makes possible a new narrative of blank characterised by multiplicity: from the dizzying dominion of the vertical, to the concealing subterranean and cosmic geographies of holes, to the relentless movement of waves, below which lie the still depths of the abyssal ocean.

With just a glance at *The America Play and Other Works*, a collection of Parks's earliest plays, her new narrative of blank resonates. The subject matter of Black erasure and historical re-presentation is immediately apparent. The collection features on its front cover: a stovepipe hat, a fake black beard, and a suit, arranged against the backdrop of an American flag.



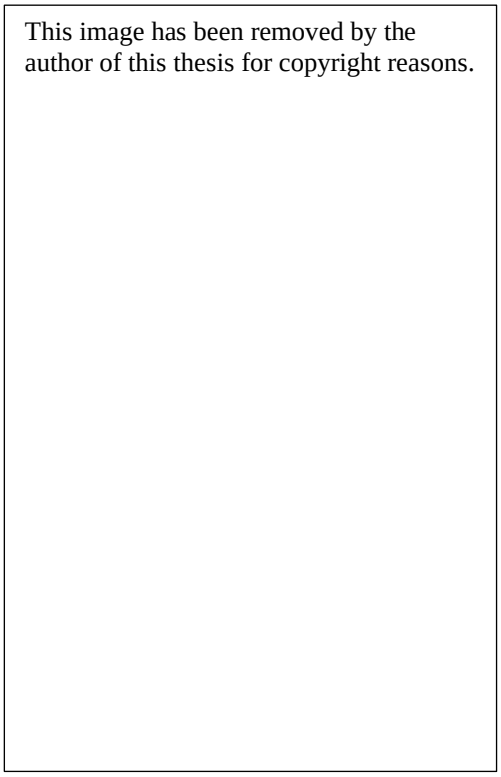


Figure 1 The America Play and Other Works (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) Photographer, Marianne Bernstein.

Despite the absence of his physical body, or even an actor of his likeness, the costume, combined with this backdrop, is undoubtedly representative of the sixteenth president of the United States: Abraham Lincoln. Photographer Marianne Bernstein deploys blankness to indicate Parks's preoccupation with Lincoln's over-determined status within American history; so potent is Lincoln's legacy in the collective national imaginary that the visual amalgamation of a stovepipe hat, and a beard, set against a United States flag, can evoke his memory. On the reverse cover exists an almost identical image, except that a Black male actor, Reggie Montgomery, assumes the position of the absent Lincoln. He is the

Foundling Father of Parks's 1995 work, *The America Play,* who leaves his profession as a 'gravedigger of great renown' to live out his dream as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator—as the 'Lesser Known'.[33] These images operate in tandem to give visual representation to the wonderfully complex resurrections of a buried African American history contained between the covers. Parks's drama, in particular her "history plays," are concerned with excavating dismembered histories that officiators have excluded from a mainstream "storied" version of American history. Hinging on Parks's question concerning possibility is a rewrite of blankness itself: a provocation towards this new narrative of 'blank'. In the images above, blankness characterises the representation of a disembodied Lincoln; the Black male actor featured on the reverse cover might signify the processes of Black erasure augmented by Lincoln's mythologised status. Parks gives expression to the normative invocation of Lincoln's memory as a symbol of freedom and innocence that obfuscates the historical experiences of Black Americans. Erasure is at stake in the national fervour that surrounds his storied image.

Parks's narrative of blank generates possibility via the merging of historical abstraction (as with Lincoln's deployment within national narratives of freedom, innocence and self-determination) with material markers of historical erasure (as with the setting of the "Great Hole of History", or rather its replica, in *The America Play)*. Parks engages with the much-commemorated figure of Abraham Lincoln in her plays in a manner that parodies this "storied" version of America. Also enveloped in the interplay between these two images are counterpart motifs of presence and absence, repetition and revision, and burial and resurrection—all of which inform the mechanism of historical redressal that undergirds Parks's creative practice. For Parks, 'a play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature'.[34] The imagistic representations of Lincoln and the Lesser Known encasing Parks's collection of plays signals this potential for performance to interact with the historical record, but also implicit in this interplay is the role of forms beyond theatre that contribute towards the *idea* of Abraham Lincoln within the national imaginary. I concur with historian Richard Nelson Current that Lincoln represents 'both man and myth, sixteenth president and national folk hero'.[35] Lincoln's fabled status endures through embodiments of his figure, from statues and paintings to actors performing his role. These modes also participate in the formulation of a storied version of America and thereby constitute radical sites of performance in everyday spaces. In articulating Parks's new narrative of blank, I aim to discern the possibilities of performance in everyday spaces, locating the stage beyond the conventional parameters of the theatre.

Monuments exemplify the performance of historical narratives outside explicitly theatrical spaces. The Lincoln Memorial monument stages Abraham Lincoln as a crucial historical player within

[33] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.3-5 (p.4).
[34] Ibid., p.4.
[35] Richard Nelson Current, 'The Martyr and the Myth: The Lincoln Nobody Knows' in *The Lincoln Assassination: Crime and Punishment, Myth and Memory,* ed. by Harold Holzer et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp.218-239 (p.237).

America's story. His memory is enshrined in its extravagant form, which I subsequently conceptualise within my thematic framework of burial and resurrection as a fragment of resurrected national memory. Monuments interact with the dynamics of historical in/visibility in that they historicize the figures or events they represent, giving weight to their memory in the present. As evidenced by the nationalistic undertones of the highly visible Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., monuments extend the "authenticity" and perceptibility of their attendant cultural narratives.

Figure 2 'Lincoln memorial at night' by Ad Meskens is licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0

The prodigious scale of the Lincoln memorial, cast in elaborately detailed white marble, emphasises that this monument is a celebration of Lincoln's presidency. The forty-four-feet tall columns and towering, nineteen-foot statue give material impetus for the collective mourning that has characterised his national legacy.[36] Vivan M. Patraka deploys the phrase 'spectatorial performances' when discussing the U.S. Holocaust Museum as a performance site. She explains that 'the museum is a complicated, crowded stage, always soliciting a certain spectatorial gaze through very skilled presentations'.[37] It is helpful to apply this performance perspective to Lincoln's re-presentation in the above figure, especially in light of the work that is currently underway to build a museum underneath the memorial (due for completion by 2026). Parks's fascination with Lincoln's memory reflects an axiomatic understanding that monuments stage history; they constitute a radical performance site. As a performance site, the memorial effects the production of new historical meanings.

[36] National Park Service, 'Lincoln Memorial', National Park Service <https://www.nps.gov/linc/index.htm> [accessed 12 April 2023].
[37] Vivian M. Patraka, 'Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Historical Memory at U.S. Holocaust Museums', *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.89-107 (p.99).

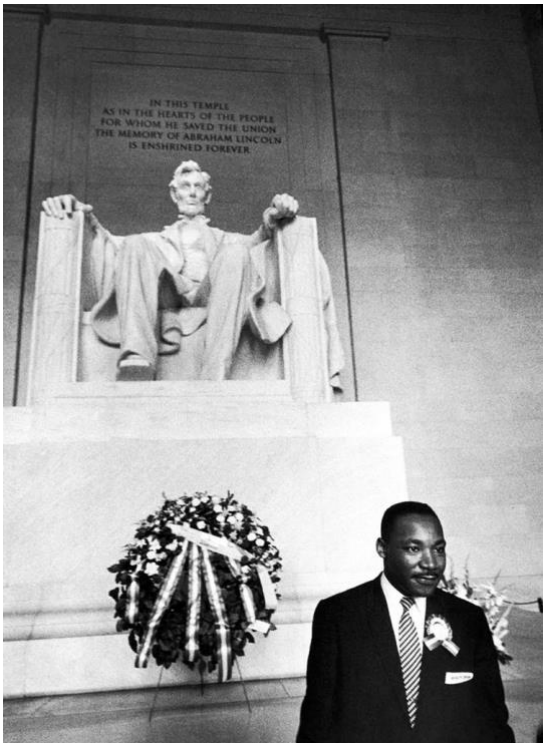


Figure 3 Martin Luther King Jr. in front of the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C., 1963. Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The image above depicts Martin Luther King Jr. in front of the Lincoln memorial at the Washington March in 1963. On this stage, Martin Luther King constitutes the live performing body and his 'I Have a Dream Speech' echoes the notions of absence and presence contained in Lincoln's spectral image, particularly in his expression of Lincoln as an individual 'in whose symbolic shadow we stand today'.[38] Parks refers to historical formulations of Abraham Lincoln and his visibility as part of the physical and psychic geography of America. She does this in *The America Play* by adorning the stage with a marble bust of Lincoln, a Lincoln impersonator who performs his assassination repeatedly, and a pasteboard cut-out of his figure. These visible, material referents frame Lincoln as part of a national imaginary; his seeming omnipresence perpetuates his mythologised status as a symbol of freedom—as "innocent Abe". Yet, visual narratives can also stage counter-narratives of history.

[38] Martin Luther King, 'Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech in its entirety' (Washington D.C., NPR, updated 2023) <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety> [accessed 18 April 2023].

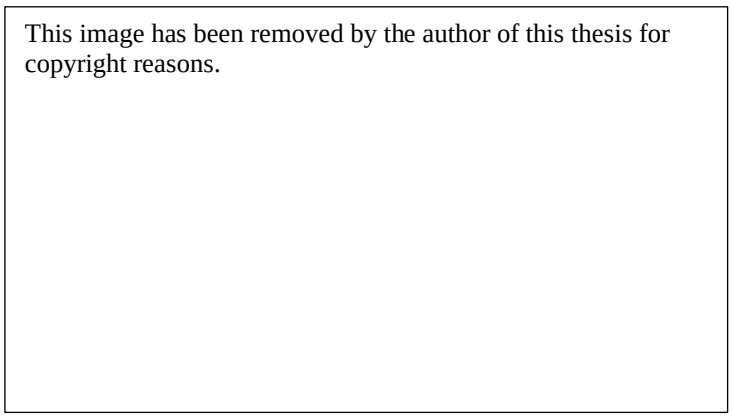


Figure 4 Ancestor Project by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo. Photo credit Kwame Akoto Bamfo. Source: Noah Dameh Blog.

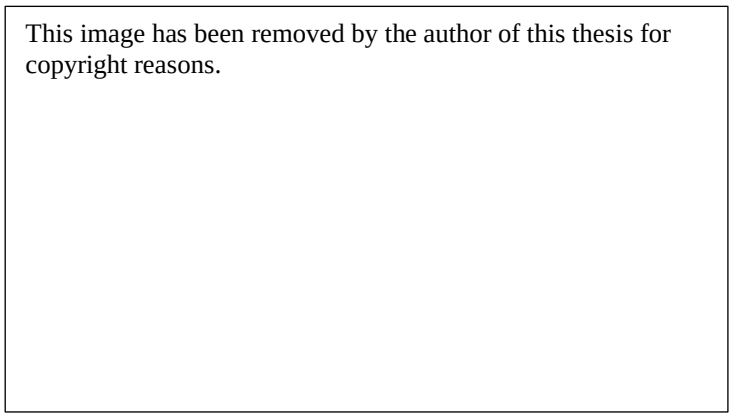


Figure 5 Ancestor Project by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, 2021 (Photo credit: Jojo Keelson.) Source: Monument Lab

The above sculptures are by artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo and form part of his 'Ancestor Project'. Akoto-Bamfo's project presents a visual narrative of the Atlantic world that compellingly centres the victims of the Middle Passage; the sculptures tell a story that disrupts the ubiquity of historical erasure otherwise bolstered by the containing and concealing nature of the physical landscape in the Ada West District of the Great Accra Region, Ghana. In contrast to the pompous, grand scale of the Lincoln memorial, Akoto-Bamfo's sculptures narrate counter-histories that delegitimise monolithic master narratives. They encapsulate both themes of burial and resurrection that are central to my study; the dead seem to emerge from their state of burial in collective resistance to the finality of death. In this sense, their material reality signals a renegotiation of space, time, and possibility. The presentness of the past is given visible, tangible form—a form that interacts with the surrounding geography, offering new dimensions of meaning and historical resonances. Kwame Akoto-Bamfo draws on an Akan tradition of creating portraits of the dead. Here, the dead represented are those imprisoned, kidnapped, or coerced into slavery.[39] Like the Lincoln Memorial situated in Washington D.C., the scene celebrates and mourns

[39] Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, 'Kwame Akoto-Bamfo: 'You see the faces of our ancestors', online video recording, produced by Sulley Lansah, BBC News, 25 June 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-48744703> [accessed 2.12.2022].

those it represents, thereby interacting with a national cultural memory. Parks's creative praxis engenders a framework for understanding the Ancestor project as a radical performance site that contests the archival record of the Middle Passage; Akoto-Bamfo re-presents this 'impossible' story, rendering an imperative to imagine otherwise. The conceptual symmetry between Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's project and my own study's key analytics (race, materiality, time, space, and the thematic interplay of burial and resurrection) reiterates the role of monuments as a dynamic form of historical re-presentation. Earth and water figure into the question of "possibility" in The Ancestor Project. The lake accumulates meaning as a representation of the Middle Passage, and the ground as an African burial ground. The thematic interplay of burial and resurrection unsettles the irrefutability of death, instead opening up possibility. Geographies of possibility inform my approach to holes.

In Chapter Two, I explore Parks's representation of the ground and her recurrent motif of digging, alongside cosmic images of black holes across her 1994 work, *The America Play* and her play-diary project, *365 Days/365 Plays*. Likewise, geographies of possibility steer my approach to images of waves in Chapter Three, via oceanic images in Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities* and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*. Here, I also articulate a quantum landscape within these works via an examination of light and wave-particle duality. Buried narratives of history, and the possibility engendered by their resurrection (or re-presentation), are tethered to material reality. I trace the interplay of burial and resurrection throughout a selection of Parks's dramatic works, along with Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and M. NourbeSe Philip's book of poems, *Zong!*. In Parks's "history plays", the figures continually die and resurrect (as in *The America Play* and *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*)—or in some cases undergo a metamorphosis (as in her 1989 play *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*). Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* features Sundry White Devils with horns that "glow red" and "bones tied carefully across their tails". In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison deploys the trope of the Flying African in circumventing the finality of death for the novel's male protagonist, Milkman. Philip's *Zong!* mourns the victims of the 1781 massacre on-board a slave ship after which the text is titled—Philip deploys the materiality of the Atlantic to remember the murdered captive Africans jettisoned from the *Zong*, thereby resurrecting their memory. Themes of burial and resurrection tether these works and signal each writer's commitment to the liberatory potential of their interplay. Echoing the Ancestor Project, death is conceptualised, not as an ending, but as a cyclical stage of becoming. Performance theorist Soyica Diggs Colbert, in a chapter of her text *Black Movements* which focuses on the legacy of the African Flight narrative, puts forth a definition of resurrection. Colbert conceives of resurrection in a performative manner that inspires my own approach to Parks's work:

> The term *resurrection* refers to the refusal to relegate to the dead a set of practices and ways of being, but also it calls attention to the transformation of materiality. […] I use it here as a way to focus on how we can understand performance as occupying a liminal position between the

> material and immaterial – as embodied yet ephemeral. The both-and status of performance offers insights into how black cultural workers have brought the category of the human back from the dead. Disrupting the purportedly natural progression of each performance and performer toward death is central to the intervention of the [Flying African] narrative.[40]

Performance as resurrection is, according to Colbert, a mode to fathom Black diasporic histories that fall outside the scope of Western formulations of the past. Moreover, Colbert's conceptualisation of the "category of human" as both buried and recoverable sets out what is at stake in the wake of Enlightenment's legacies—notably 'the dehumanisation of blackness'.[41] Colbert identifies a performance legacy of 'Black death-boundness', echoing Christina Sharpe's conceptualisation of 'the interminable event' of Black death.[42] This proximity between blackness and death necessitates a critical focus on just how performance as resurrection may engender possibilities that circumvent death. Colbert's definition of resurrection underscores the significance of performance as a category suited for the intellectual threads that this study takes up. The term burial, too, warrants consideration, and I interpret this expansively. Throughout this study, burial refers to bodies laid to rest, but I principally deploy this term to figure the status of discarded histories of African American and Black diasporic experience. Burial, as a collective act connected to religious and cultural custom, also presents an interesting relationship to the field of performance and this study's focus on repetition. Burial is a ritual act that draws on performance attributes such as spectacle, script, materiality, community, and catharsis.

Following Abraham Lincoln's profoundly theatrical assassination at Ford's Theatre during a performance of 'Our American Cousin', a pageant-like burial took place. This involved processions, the construction of a dedicated monument, and the transportation of his corpse across seven states via rail. Members of the public could visit and witness Lincoln's embalmed corpse, his face resembling a marble statue.[43] The emphasis on Lincoln's visibility throughout the sequence of events following his death is striking and underscores the dynamic of performance that permeates the act of burial, mourning, and commemoration. The rediscovery of the African Burial Ground in New York in 1991 exemplifies that mourning and commemoration are by no means a prerequisite to death and power differentials take shape through processes of memorialisation. Archaeologists discovered the burial ground during survey work for a building excavation in Lower Manhattan. Numerous groups were involved in the memorialisation and research of the enslaved Africans, including the African American descendant community, anthropologists, historians and government representatives.[44] Unlike Abraham Lincoln's

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[40] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements Performance and Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, Camden and Newark, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2017), p.26.
[41] Ibid., p.23.
[42] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke UP, 2016), p.9; as cited in Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.23.
[43] Marie Pecorari, 'Making up (for) the Great Man: Impersonation and Cosmetics in Suzan-Lori Parks's Topdog/Underdog', *Ètudes Anglaises*, 69.2 (2016), 194-205 (p.197). <http://doi: 10.3917/etan.692.0194>
[44] National Park Service, 'African Burial Ground, National Monument New York: History and Culture', *National Park Service* <https://www.nps.gov/afbg/learn/historyculture/index.htm> [accessed 19 April 2023].

commemoration, city planners had previously obscured the enslaved Africans buried at this site from national memory. Workers exhumed four hundred and nineteen Africans and descendants of Africans. In collaboration with community activist groups, they later reburied these individuals as part of a traditional African burial ceremony in 2003. The detail on one particular coffin received widespread fascination because of a heart shaped design nailed onto its lid. The unknown maker of the heart had used fifty-one iron tacks and this pattern was, soon after its discovery, identified as a sankofa symbol. This symbol is used by the Akan people of present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast, and stands for the proverb 'Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi' which translates to 'It is not taboo to return to take back what you forgot', or alternatively 'look to the past to inform the future'.[45] It signals a mode for communion with the dead and underscores the significance of material culture as part of a project of historical recuperation. As Parks maintains, the dramatist must 'locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down'.[46] Workers featured the symbol across the African Burial Ground National Monument that they subsequently erected. In effect, the symbol enshrines a visual counter-narrative that foregrounds the role of the buried, edifying their legacy in the present and rendering the geography of the site a stage that, like Parks's history plays, remembers those excluded from the historical record.

Historical Narrativity

The African Burial Ground monument demonstrates that the burial and resurrection of historical narrative is, to some extent, entangled with the production of place. Parks's creative practice centres the silences that mark the historical record, highlighting their structuring capacity and the ways in which the tandem thematic operation of burial and resurrection complicates their perpetuation through space and time. Attendant questions concerning how to re-present those absences are formative within the field of Black feminist discourse, and complicate the distinction upheld in the field of historiography between fiction and historical narrative. My research has led me to archives where such historical gaps are startlingly obvious. My approach to the archival record is two-pronged: I am interested in the archive as, to borrow from archivist Terry Cook, 'a metaphoric symbol, as representation of identity, or as the recorded memory production of some person or group culture', but also 'archives (plural)', that is, the 'history of documents over time'.[47] The racial parameters of historical knowledge redirected my methodology; I abandoned an investigation into the names of victims of the 1781 Zong massacre (intended to support my examination of M. NourbeSe Philip's book of poems, *Zong!*), and instead

[45]Diaspora Collective, 'Andrika Symbol Tells a Story' <https://thediasporacollective.com/blogs/discover/andikra-symbols-tell-a-story> [accessed 27 Feb 2023].
[46] Parks, 'Possession' in *The America Play and Other Works*, p.4.
[47] Terry Cook, 'The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape', *The American Archivist*, 74.2 (2011), pp.600–632 (pp.600-601); as cited in Julija Šukys, 'Archival Materials: Essayism as a Process of Witness, Care and Reckoning' in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, ed. by Mario Aquilina et al. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2022), pp.422-433 (p.422).

located the names of European crew members present on the ship's various voyages. Details of individual crewmember's names, their roles, wages and, in some cases, descriptions of their activities on-board, were discoverable in muster rolls. These historical traces signified the absent record of the enslaved Africans on-board, many of whom the crew jettisoned. My attempt to search for the voices or records of captive Africans drew up the exclusionary dimensions of the historical record, and the stakes of burial in an archival context. The question of 'possibility' demanded a creative response. Like Parks, I turned to the question of origins. A widespread critical neglect of the *Zong*'s previous voyages further problematises the gaping holes in the story of the Zong massacre. As such, echoing Parks's technique of 'repetition and revision', or 'rep and rev', my Conclusion to this project turns to the material reality of the vessel's repetitive movements across the Atlantic. I articulate the ceaselessness of this notorious massacre in the context of transatlantic voyages, in which jettisoning the enslaved was a commonplace practice. In short, I examine the *Zong*'s origin story. My Conclusion extends my literary analysis of Philip's text to the realm of the archive, where information concerning the ship's origins is discoverable. I present a series of archival findings that highlight the importance of 'origins' in re-envisioning the past: I examine details surrounding the ship's previous voyages, including a muster roll, and I consider a letter containing key information about a passenger onboard the *Zong.* With these sources, I attempt to demonstrate the importance of incorporating historical analysis into literary scholarship, and the transformative potential of this work in terms of presenting a more complete understanding of the past.

My own positionality as a White UK-based researcher has, and continues to be, a significant consideration throughout this project, owing to my focus on African American literature, performance, and history. In particular, my archival investigations relating to the Zong massacre, during visits to the National Maritime Museum and the National Archives, brought forth the immediacy of some of the questions underpinning my research, such as *who* gets to tell, or re-present, these stories? In addition, what does it mean to encounter and write about the violence and dehumanisation intrinsic to the documentation of enslaved subjects, without replicating these forces? My visits also necessitated a more direct confrontation with the implications of such research within an institutional framework that continues to undermine and devalue the work of Black scholars, and in which I receive certain privileges based on my own racial identity. Scholar Jessica Charbeneau explains that 'disclosures of whiteness […] can reveal the overarching nature of white hegemony and privilege within which all racial interactions and systems take place', and I reflect on my archival encounters in thinking with this assertion.[48] The processes of Black erasure and historical recuperation with which this study is concerned resonate beyond the scope of literature and performance, and I recognise the necessary challenges to white dominance in the very environment from which my research originates. Saidiya Hartman's methodological approach to engaging with archival silences, which she coins 'critical

[48] Jessica Charbeneau, 'White faculty transforming whiteness in the classroom through pedagogical practice', *Race Ethnicity and Education,* 18.5 (2015), 655-674 <http://doi:10.1080/13613324.2013.831823>

fabulation,' is particularly salient to my research questions. This term 'critical fabulation' draws on narrative theory via the definition of 'fabula,' which is defined by theorist Mieke Bal as:

> A series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions. (They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience an event.[49]

Hartman's method of critical fabulation disrupts conventions traditionally paired with historical narrative, such as the expectation of chronology and the notion of the actor as an individual being. Hartman also conceives critical fabulation as a resistance to the Enlightenment logics that frame a New World history. She describes her writing as 'straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration'.[50] Here, the term 'cultural history' serves as a useful reminder of the way in which historical narrative emerges through material forms (such as monuments) and shared conventions and practices (for example burial rituals). In practice, Hartman is asking the same question as Parks: how do you narrativize the history of Black women's experiences on the Middle Passage when they cannot tell their story? Hartman's method of critical fabulation comprises a 'counter-history at the intersection of the fictive and the historical'.[51] Her seminal essay published in 2008, 'Venus in Two Acts', examines the emblematic figure of the enslaved women in the archive, whom she refers to as 'Venus', to contemplate the fate of every other Black Venus for whom no name is remembered, and nothing she said recorded.[52] Speaking of the Venus figure as an emblem of multiple individual Black lives, Hartman sets out the limits of her endeavour to grasp Venus's story:

> It is a story predicated upon impossibility […] and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved.[53]

Parks captures the lasting burden of this impossible story through her authorial interjection in 'The Blank Before the World', evidencing Hartman's formulation of the challenges posed by the historical record. Parks's question 'Is this possible?' then recalls not only the limits of dramatic representation

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[49] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p7.
[50] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism,* 12.2 (2008), 1-14 (p.11) <http://doi: 10.1215/-12-2-1>
[51] Ibid., p.12.
[52] Ibid., p.1.; Parks's play *Venus*, although not examined as part of this study, grapples with the reductive treatment of Black women according to denigrating stereotypes and their silenced position in the archive. In *Venus*, Parks explores the way that Sartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited to audiences around Europe in the nineteenth century as an object of fascination and racial fetishization, has been historically remembered.
[53] Ibid., pp.2-3.

and the mysteries of the universe's origins, but importantly the absence of Black female subjectivity in a recorded history of Atlantic slavery. Just as Parks articulates cosmic frameworks to her plays, Hartman points out the fundamental logics that a retelling of the past throws into flux: 'How does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?'[54] Hartman draws on a monumental framework—'a collective biography of dead subjects'—to formulate questions in a manner that recalls Parks's routine recourse to the origins of the universe. Parks's play, *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is a work that mourns the lives of each Black Man whose life has been violently erased from the historical record. This rationale anticipates the tenets of critical fabulation. Each story of historical redressal by Parks is, as Hartman calls for 'a counter-history of the human', 'a practice of freedom', and 'a collective biography of dead subjects'. Yet as a piece of theatre it is a story *happening* on stage, thereby extending Hartman's aims by occupying a state of both a written record and a live, repeatedly performed event.

Hartman's method of critical fabulation integrates key postmodern ideas, notably an 'postmodern assumption' described by Elin Diamond that 'there is no unmediated real and no presence that is not also traced and retraced by what it seems to exclude'.[55] Owing to my central historiographical concern with 'blank spots', I continually return to the *constructedness* of historical narrative throughout this study, building on an axiomatic understanding of this concept within poststructuralist narrative theory. Hayden White, in thinking with Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of history, explains 'To "emplot" a sequence of events and thereby transform what would otherwise be only a chronicle of events into a story is to effect a mediation between events and certain universally human "experiences of temporality"'.[56] Two key binding features of fictional and historical narrative are then their formal composition as 'emplotted stories', and their tending towards time as an 'ultimate referent'.[57] Literature and historical narrative assemble a particular formulation of temporal progress that accumulates cultural weight as a singular 'universally human' experience.[58] Such implications draw up the hierarchical place-making capacity of historical narrative, in laying claim to categories such as 'human' and 'universal'. This study considers how this ordering aspect of historical narrative plays out in the realm of fiction, where the designation of 'truth' invites critical dialogue between the two forms.

Parks intimates her own reckoning with the relationship between these forms in an essay titled 'from Elements of Style' that prefaces her book of plays, *The America Play and Other Works* (1995). She charts a fascinating representation of narrative time and historical progression.

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[54] Ibid., p.3.
[55] Elin Diamond, 'Introduction' in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.1-12, (p.1).
[56] Hayden White, 'The Metaphysics of Narrativity: Time and Symbol in Ricoeur's Philosophy of History' in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp.169-184 (pp.172-173). ACLS Humanities E-book.
[57] Ibid., p.172; Ibid., p.175.
[58] Ibid., p.173.

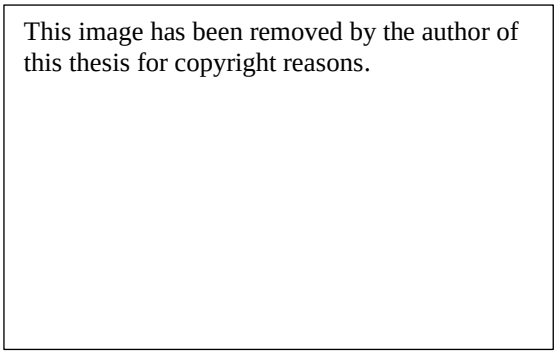

Figure 6 'Standard Time Line and Standard Plot Line are in cahoots!'; Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.6-18 (p.11).

Parks captions this diagram: 'Standard Timeline and Standard Plot Line are in cahoots!'.[59] Although she offers no accompanying commentary (often Parks presents her audiences with provocations, as opposed to conclusive statements), a key takeaway from this diagram is the interaction between dramatic structure and temporal progress, stretching back to time's very inception. The 'plot line' resembles both the Aristotelean 3-act structure (beginning, middle and end), and Roman poet Horace's 5-act structure, which follows progressive stages: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Denouement. Parks's language is strikingly similar; unconventional temporal markers, such as 'olden days' and 'Now+', exemplify theorist Paul Ricoeur's contention that historical events, through narrative, can be shaped into something new, thereby humanising time and imparting specific symbolic meanings.[60] Race, time, and narrativity are inextricably linked. The intersection of these concerns marks a burgeoning aspect of the field. Sheldon George and Jean Wyatt, in introducing their edited collection published in 2022, *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women Writers: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form,* note, 'it is only recently that ethical issues of race have begun to focus narratological inquiry'.[61] Yet this concern necessitates close examination since narrative form can engender new ways of thinking about narratology, ways that would bring about a more complete understanding of the modes through which racial constructs permeate literary and historical discourse.[62] As important to the theoretical scope of this study are the ways in which such theories of narrativity intersect with the fields of Black feminist discourse and performance theory. I work from this critical intersection as I turn to the literary and performance practices set out by Black women writers whose

[59] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'From Elements of Style' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.6-18 (p.11).
[60] Hayden White, 'The Metaphysics of Narrativity: Time and Symbol in Ricoeur's Philosophy of History', p.178.
[61] Sheldon George and Jean Wyatt, 'Introduction: Narrative Theory and Contemporary Black Women Writers' in *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women Writers: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form,* Narrative Theory and Culture Ser., ed. By Jean Wyatt and Sheldon George (NY and London: Routledge, 2022), pp.1-12 (p.1.) ProQuest Ebook Central.
[62] 'Ibid., p.2.

work demonstrates a marked interest in the relationship between narrativity and history.

Saidiya Hartman's pioneering work in this field has galvanized a trajectory of scholarship that builds on the questions she formulates, as well as her wider work addressing historical re-presentation.[63] The work of Hartman's predecessors, along with more recent scholarship, has established a rich and varied basis from which to interpret historical silences, along with the dynamics of violence that the archive embodies. In her landmark essay, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' (1987), Hortense Spillers sets out what is at stake concerning historical formulations of Black women in listing a number of her own nicknames, such as 'Earth Mother' and 'Brown Sugar'. Spillers comments on these expressions: 'they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents *buried* beneath them to come clean [italics my own]'.[64] Spillers depicts linguistic order as an aspect of the historical record that both obscures and reveals, a bedrock of possibility for articulating Black female subjectivity. In the context of the transatlantic archive, writers and creatives reckon with the over determination of the Black female body, and words mediate the dynamics of burial and resurrection as they seek to divine the 'agents buried beneath them'.[65]

The historical figurations of Black women that Spillers describes serve as a reminder that metaphor can represent a subjugating form of remembering. In her pivotal essay, 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage', Tinsley connects the important question of materiality versus metaphor to this study's key concerns regarding language, authenticity, racialized histories, and the violence of the archive. For example, Tinsley identifies that 'developing a black feminist epistemology to uncover submerged histories […] would involve muddying divisions between documented and intuited, material and metaphoric, past and present'.[66] Tinsley importantly calls for a re-mattering of the discourse. She underscores a tendency for scholarship that centres tropes of the Black Atlantic to miss the theoretical potential of its oceanic foundation, through their 'writing out of materiality'; this essentially involves calling on 'maritime metaphors' without a sustained discussion of 'maritime histories'.[67] Katherine McKittrick has made comparable appeals to pay attention to materiality when working with metaphor. She underscores the potential for metaphorical descriptors of the Middle Passage, such as 'tomb' to replicate the violence and brutality of the archive and foreclose possibility.[68] She notes that over-metaphorizing an object or event risks emptying it of its material

[63] See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).
[64] Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics,* 17.2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection (1987), 64-81 (p.65) <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>
[65] Ibid., p.65.
[66] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 14.2-3 (2008), 191-215 (p.194) <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-030>
[67] Ibid., p.197.
[68] Katherine McKittrick, 'Keynote Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip and Dr. Katherine McKittrick: Unmoored, Adrift, Ashore', online video recording <https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/492662/keynote-conversation-with-m-nourbese-philip-and-dr-katherine-mckittrick> [accessed 10 March 2023]. Here, McKittrick complicates Hartman's method of critical

meaning and its geographic locations; commentaries must pay attention to the 'livingness' or 'groundedness' of the metaphor.[69] Within my methodology, I respond to and reflect Tinsley and McKittrick's important critical interventions in three principal ways:

1) *By deploying a historical evidence-based approach to my readings of primary texts.* This study follows a historical framework that moves backwards through time, according to the historical contexts that underpin the primary texts. I begin in the early twentieth century with the politics of racial uplift, and then move to the mid-nineteenth century and the role of Abraham Lincoln in the historical imaginary as a symbol of freedom, before arriving at the historical realm of the Middle Passage in the final section. This historical anchoring entails a backwards movement through time and reflects an overall concern with the question of origins posed by Suzan-Lori Parks's work. Nevertheless, the Middle Passage, as an originary coordinate that continually folds into the present, serves as a continuous spatio-temporal referent throughout all three chapters of this study. I share with Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley that a historical slant is pivotal in terms of innovating literary scholarship. Moreover, I am inspired by Saidiya Hartman's turn to the archive as part of a practice of critical fabulation—the archive presenting the foundation for an always unfinished, always impossible encounter with the historical unknown.[70]
2) *By drawing from the geographies of the texts as an organising structure for this project, which is subsequently categorised into three spatial dimensions: verticality, holes, and waves:*

   Verticality: in terms of the topographies of Parks's *The Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), Marita Bonner's one-act play *The Purple Flower* (1928), and Toni Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977).

   Holes: with reference to the 'Great Hole of History' that inspires the physical and imaginative geographies of Parks's *The America Play* (1993). I explore quantum mechanics as a formal mode that underwrites this text by examining the metaphorical resonances of cosmic black holes (and holes discernible across multiple other forms) that recur throughout her play-diary project *365 Days/365 Plays* (published 2006).

   Waves: in terms of the 'Third Kingdom' of Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989) which depicts a kaleidoscopic Middle Passage imaginary. I contemplate Parks's attention to the Middle Passage alongside poet M. NourbeSe Philip's attention to the materiality of the Atlantic in her book of poems, *Zong!* (2008). Through this comparative analysis, I consider the way that water complicates spatial knowledge, especially in terms of origins: we begin life in water, in the womb, but water also represents an origin in the context of African American history and the violent history of the Middle Passage. Again, turning to

fabulation; in her essay 'Venus in Two Acts' (2008), Hartman draws on this very metaphor to describe the Middle Passage.

[69] Katherine McKittrick, 'Keynote Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip and Dr. Katherine McKittrick: Unmoored, Adrift, Ashore', online video recording [accessed 10 March 2023].

[70] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', p.14.

quantum mechanics, I consider the wave in terms of wave-particle duality, an aspect that indicates invisible dimensions, but also recalls Édouard Glissant's abyss through the concept of quantum tunnelling.

3) *By locating the material realities of form, genre, and metaphor throughout my analysis.* I contemplate symbolic meanings across each text with attentiveness to their material 'groundedness'.[71] I contemplate Philip's reconfiguration of the legal language of the court case *Gregson v Gilbert* that followed the Zong massacre; I explore what it means for characters to fall throughout Bonner's *The Purple Flower*; I draw attention to the significance of Macon Dead II's Green Packard as the Dead family journey towards Honore in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*; I analyse the physical holes that appear on the stages of Parks's plays. My analysis moves across multiple genres, forms, and metaphors, drawing up narratives of blank by foregrounding material aspects of the texts and performances.

Above all, these critical enquiries have shaped a robust set of questions (though no singular solution), to engage with the practice of narrative untelling, or to borrow from Hartman, 'the task of writing the impossible'.[72] Echoing Parks, such questions have converged with the proliferation of research in the field of spatial literary studies, so that the narrativity of space has received a great deal of critical attention. The intersection of Black feminist discourse, spatial literary studies, and as I will go on to describe, recent examinations of Middle Passage epistemologies, have greatly influenced the realm of fiction, informing what Hartman refers to as 'the lineaments of this new narrative'.[73] This continual questioning of the historical record has placed pressure on the act of historical narration in the present. Parks's question, 'Is this possible?' is one I continually return to because in so many ways it encapsulates the core research questions of this study, which I construct by way of Parks's creative praxis. Precisely what are the limits of narrative representation, and how do writers and artists navigate such limits? This study addresses questions of possibility though the lens of performance but moves beyond the scope of dramatic works by applying a performance lens to non-dramatic works—poetry and prose—as I ask: can performative and literary realms fathom buried narratives of history?

The history of African American performance

Parks, Bonner, Morrison, and Philip probe the limits of narrative representation—always with an attentiveness to processes of historical construction and intervention. The history of African American performance presents a key site to understand the limits of dramatic representation; these limits constitute a major component of my research questions. They bare thinking about in relation to the

[71] Katherine McKittrick, 'Keynote Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip and Dr. Katherine McKittrick: Unmoored, Adrift, Ashore', online video recording [accessed 10 March 2023].
[72] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', p.14.
[73] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', p.3.

problematic legacy of Western theatre and performance, which has historically employed theatrical forms and performance modes that rehearse white superiority through representations of Black objecthood. Blackface minstrelsy and the lasting influence of this performance tradition on Western theatre (as the most popular form of entertainment in the mid-nineteenth to twentieth century) attests to the pernicious potential of performance as a cultural medium. It is also important to consider the legacy of coerced performance that punctuates the history of displacement and enslavement in the context of Black Atlantic history. In fact, performance scholar Douglas A. Jones situates the beginning coordinate of an African American performance tradition on the deck of the slave ship, where 'European captors often forced the African captive to sing and dance on the decks of slave ships in order to preserve the health – and therefore value – of their human cargo'.[74] Yet the medium of performance also posed the potential for communal bonds in this context, as Jones goes on to explain the stakes of coerced performance: 'To consider the possible within the regimes of chattel slavery was, first and foremost, to take stock of the actuality of one's condition'.[75] Performance entails a reflection on 'one's condition' through collective action; in the case of the many captive Africans who were forced to perform on the decks of slave ships and on plantations, performance 'fostered the racial oneness that was necessary for survival, redressive action, and pragmatic problem solving'.[76] Sonjah Stanley Niaah deploys the term 'performance geography' in referring to the 'physical, mental, emotional and spiritual activity that enacts a human existence, specifically in the "black Atlantic" space between violation, ruptured roots, and self-reconstruction'.[77] She draws on the example of the limbo dance (which emerged due to the cramped conditions on slave vessels) and explains this performance 'holds memory and marks continuity among performance practices of the New World'.[78] This duality of performance draws into tension the oppositional categories of empowerment and abjection that extend into the racial politics of representation. My aim is to extend the realm of critical enquiry that Parks's plays have up until now fostered, by turning to the form of the novel (Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*), and poetry (M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*), and to a play written to be read (Marita Bonner's *The Purple* Flower) and foregrounding the performative aspects of these works.

[74] Douglas A. Jones, Jr. 'Slavery, Performance, and the Design of African American Theatre' in *Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*, ed. by Harvey Young (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 2012), pp.15-33 (p.16) <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139062107.003>
[75] Ibid., p.16.
[76] Ibid., p.17.
[77] Sonjah Stanley Niaah, 'Mapping Black Atlantic Performance Geographies' in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. by Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines, 2007), pp.193-219 (pp.193-194).
[78] Ibid., p.194.

Place-making, possibility, and the abyss

Beyond the historical slant of her works, or rather, as an integral aspect of this historical slant, Parks's conceptualisation of space and time foregrounds the constitutive role of colonial trajectories in what geographers such as Katherine McKittrick and Elleza Kelley have come to describe as 'place-making'. This narrative function is particularly salient in the works this project engages. Concerning place-making, this study sits at the intersection of geography, Black studies, and literary studies, as I trace specific images to discern how Parks, Bonner, Morrison and Philip draw on space as a mode of narration, to render legible the enmeshment of history, race and time. Central to this study is my contention that, through dramatisations of verticality, holes, and waves, Parks throws into relief hierarchical power relations, and posits counter-hegemonic spatial practices. I foreground Parks because her approach to historical re-presentation is groundbreaking and sets out the role of narrative space in terms of both constructing and disrupting the historical record. Parks has underscored the relevance of space as an analytic with respect to her drama, in an interview with Shelby Jiggetts:

> SJ: What does play writing mean to you?
> SLP: The more I think about plays, I think plays are about space. […] Plays are about space and, say, fiction is about place.[79]

Parks does not elaborate on the distinction she draws between space and place, though Michel De Certeau's conceptualisation of these terms as referring to 'two sorts of stories' about meaning making might present a starting point. De Certeau contends that 'space is a practiced place' and rehearses Merleau-Ponty's understanding that 'there are as many spaces as there are distinct spatial experiences'. On the other hand, De Certeau defines place as 'an indication of stability'.[80] Parks's settings certainly reject the acclaimed 'stability' and finite nature of De Certeau's notion of place. The key takeaway from Parks's comment, however, is that constructions of space are intrinsic to her plays' overarching meanings. These meanings converge around themes of burial and resurrection and, in this sense, it is useful to contemplate their role in her texts as verb. To bury, to resurrect, captures the act, the doing, of this historical intervention. Further, these verbs, when operating in tandem, give expression to the notion of infinity that their amalgamation enacts. That is because the emplotment of these themes is such that burial and resurrection drive the progress of the narrative in ways that foreclose linear progress, mandating that history fold in on itself and past, present, and future co-exist on a single narrative plane. The "verb" meaning of these terms is always implicit throughout this study where I refer to the tandem operation of burial and resurrection.[81] The term 'place-making' is especially conducive considering the

[79] Shelby Jiggetts, 'Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks (1996)', in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 66–75 (p.66).
[80] Michel De Certeau, 'Spatial Stories' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984), pp.115-130 (pp.117-118).
[81] I am grateful to Dr Eric Colleary for his helpful insights regarding the 'verb-ness' of my key themes of burial and resurrection.

open-ended and 'in-motion' aspect of Parks's form. According to De Certeau's notion that 'space is a practiced place', space also describes a stage of place making.[82] I will evidence this in exploring Parks's formulation of earth and water as forms that delinearise time.

I understand thematic instances of burial and resurrection, and their attendant spatial configurations across Parks's works, as historically oriented, meaning that as well as drawing up the spatial nature of hierarchical place-making strategies, these images articulate a particular positionality in relation to the movement of time. Images of verticality in Parks's work inscribe what Ann Cooper Albright calls 'the hegemony of the vertical' and narrate particular formulations of 'progress'.[83] In particular, I focus on linear formulations of Enlightenment progress and the concept of 'racial uplift' in the early twentieth century. At a more subversive level, verticality invokes the flying African narrative, by way of the 'possibility' of falling. Holes in Parks's work serve to conceptualise the legacy of loss and burial that marks African American histories—as in 'the replica of the Great Hole of History' that forms the landscape of Parks's *The America Play*. Waves in Parks's work figure a watery medium to a diffusive history, as Parks draws on the Atlantic and its material and metaphoric connections to unrecorded Middle Passage histories. Katherine McKittrick and Elleza Kelley underline the significance of literature and performance fields in creating both counter-histories and counter-geographies. I turn to McKittrick's pivotal publication, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), which importantly foregrounds the spatial characteristics of power relations.[84] McKittrick explains that due to the ubiquitous presence of Black death and anti-Black violence in the archive as 'analytic source', the citation of Blackness brings about the repetition of these aspects. This accretion of death and violence amounts to a temporal drag. McKittrick underscores the importance of continually identifying these repetitions, an endeavour that requires a multidisciplinary outlook, involving geography, literary studies, and Critical race theory.

The abyss is my lens for doing so. To relate the 'impossible story' of the Middle Passage, Édouard Glissant introduces the image of the abyss, in his landmark work *Poetics of Relation* (1990). He describes the abyss as 'a projection of and a perspective into the unknown'.[85] It extends through a series of spaces, born first in 'the belly of the boat', a boat that is also 'a womb abyss', and positions the dead alongside the living. It is then born in 'the depths of the sea', as Glissant explains:

> […] the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.[86]

[82] Michel De Certeau, 'Spatial Stories', pp.117-118.
[83] Ann Cooper Albright, 'Falling', *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 18.4 (2013), pp.36-41 (p.37) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.814333>
[84] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
[85] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990], transl. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.8.
[86] Ibid., p.6.

Then there is the final 'metamorphosis' of the abyss, discoverable in the 'blue savannas of memory or imagination'. In Glissant's descriptions, we glimpse potential for the dangers of metaphor that prompted McKittrick and Tinsley's call for a re-mattering of the discourse. In fact, Tinsley highlights Glissant's work as an example of what she described as 'calling on maritime metaphors without maritime histories'.[87] I deploy the abyss as a metaphor and a geography to interpret the works of Parks, Bonner, Morrison and Philip; it marks a dimension that encompasses all of the images I will trace across their works: verticality, holes, and waves. My reading of Philip's *Zong!* in Chapter Three leads me to the historical representation of the Zong massacre; I contemplate the journey of the slaver, the *Zong*, from the Gold Coast to Black River, Jamaica. Couched within Glissant's theoretical framework on Caribbean identity and the archipelago as a metaphorical origin that defies oneness, this historical anchoring underscores the possibilities of the archive for opening up the field of Middle Passage literary scholarship. The spatial-temporal continuum of the abyss is a mode of (un)mapping that marks the buried narratives of African American and Black diasporic experience. My analysis of Parks's cosmic framework in Chapter Two, which steers me to an examination of black holes and their relevance to her creative practice, provides fecund ground for a comparative approach with Glissant's abyss. Added to this, there is the salience of the unknown that the abyss seems to encapsulate, especially considering Glissant's shift from *Poetics of Relation* which saw the introduction of the abyss, to a poetics of 'tout monde' that emphasises the archipelago in more expansive terms, as 'a principle of global and globalising cultural contact and production'.[88] From a position of historical oblivion, Parks, Bonner, Morrison and Philip interrogate the silence of the archive through generative modes of historical narration.

From this perspective, the abyss resonates in the cover image of Parks's *The America Play and Other Works,* burying (by blanking) the Lincoln that belongs to traditional historiography, then on the back cover inserting a Black actor who performs his image.[89] Parks asks what it means to have a Black actor stand in for the immortalised president, commemorated as the 'great Emancipator'. How can performance unsettle trenchant connections between History and historical consciousness, arrived at through the medium of narrative? Édouard Glissant remarks:

> History and Literature agree […] to separate man from the world, to subject nature to culture. The linear nature of narrative and the linear form of chronology take shape in this context. Man, the chosen one, knows himself and knows the world, not because he is part of it, but because he

[87] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,', p.197.
[88] See John E Drabinski (2019)'Sites of Relation and "Tout-Monde", *Angelaki,* 24.3 (2019), 157-172 (p.169) <http://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1620467>
[89] Refer to figure 1.

> establishes a sequence and measures it according to his own timescale, which is determined by his *affiliation*.[90]

For Glissant, to establish chronological narrative, which is the fundamental activity of historical narration, is to position 'man' in relation to a select sequence of events. Form plays an important role since, as Glissant highlights, linearity tethers narrative to chronology. Parks's non-linear plays throw an orderly storied version of America into a state of flux—into the abyss. Where Glissant articulates the orienting capacity of linear narrative and linear chronology, he also attends to the spatial sensibility of their amalgamation, which, according to their shared linearity, establish a mode of relation.

My interweaving of Glissant's abyss contributes to a recent swell in scholarship in the subfield of spatial literary studies that has also innovated readings of Black diasporic literature. Of the three Black women writers whose works I place in dialogue with Parks, Morrison is undoubtedly the recipient of the greatest critical focus. Lodged at the centre of Morrison scholarship are spatial concerns, and a glimpse at trends in criticism attests to this idea. Jennifer Terry applies Glissant's theory of 'transferred' space to Morrison's oeuvre; in *Song of Solomon,* Terry identifies, in Pilate's nomadism, Glissant's interpretation of Black diasporic rootedness: '[s]ubmarine roots […] floating free, not fixed in one primordial position, but extending in all directions'.[91] Writing about Morrison's *Beloved,* Herman Beaver coined the phrase 'tight space' to refer to the characters' experience of estrangement from their community, which he argues shapes their individual relationships to place: 'Tight space induces strategies that result in vertical forms of place making which emphasizes individualism, materialism, violence and abjection as key components of their estrangement'.[92] Morrison's works engender innovative responses to her narrative configurations of space and her engagement with the historical past. In her essays, she further demonstrates the salience of space and history in her writing. In 'Sites of Memory' Morrison defines her practice as a 'kind of literary archaeology' that resembles Parks's method of 'dig[ging] for the bones'.[93] Morrison elaborates, 'what makes fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image – on the remains – in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth'.[94] She develops a concept of 'rememory', explicit in *Beloved* (1987) in resistance to the untrustworthy character of recorded history. Morrison's creative praxis and critical reception glimpses

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[90] Édouard Glissant, 'History and Literature' in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* [1989], transl. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp.69-86 (p.73).
[91] Jennifer Terry, '"Shuttles in the rocking loom of history": Dislocation in Toni Morrison's Fiction' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2003), p.29 <http://webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b1666052~S15> [accessed 5.11.22]; I share with Terry that the 'oceanic imagination' of Glissant's writing warrants careful consideration in relation to Morrison's writing, particularly its implications for interpreting 'rootedness' in Black diasporic contexts.
[92] Herman Beavers, *Geography and the Political Imaginary in the Novels of Toni Morrison,* Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies series (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), p.6.
[93] Parks, 'Possession', p.4.
[94] Toni Morrison, 'Sites of Memory' in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, second edition, ed. by William Zinsser (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp.83-102 (p.92).

some of the generative links between hers and Parks's work. Drawing plays, fictional narrative, and poetic forms into dialogue with one another, this project calls attention to the way all four writers generate praxes for navigating dominant white patriarchal place-making strategies that reproduce the proximity of death for Black Americans. Parks, Morrison, Bonner and Philip destabilise cultural-spatial coordinates that over-determine space with ideological intent, where they envisage physical spaces of holes, verticality, and waves as discursive spaces to locate and suspend essentialised notions of blackness and womanhood.

My first section, 'Verticality', examines images of verticality as they relate to manifestations of burial and resurrection in Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1928), and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). I argue these texts communicate the dominion of the vertical through their authors' innovative conceptualisations of space, facilitating a critique of abstract hierarchical power structures that too often herald deadly consequences on Black bodies. I historically anchor this first section to racial uplift ideologies that dominated thinking around race relations in the early twentieth century. Vertical thinking is immediately apparent in this historical detail, with the term 'uplift' insinuating notions of 'progress' and 'race' onto a paradigm of white hegemonic power. I consider the ways in which these writers reconfigure the subjugating spatial apparatus of culture and identity formation that is rooted in, to borrow Ann Cooper Albright's phrase, the 'cultural hegemony of the vertical'.[95] With a view to discerning the spatial sensibility of these three texts, I thread the capacious concept of verticality throughout the five interconnected discursive spaces that continue to anchor my analysis: race, time, performance, materiality, and the thematic interplay of burial and resurrection. I employ a fundamentally materialist approach that focuses on the architectural-physical rootedness of encroachments of power that take place (or rather create place) through spatial forms. In particular, I draw from Kemi Adeyemi's critical work on the 'angular expectations' placed on Black bodies.[96] To this end, I carry out a study of verticality in the physical and imaginative geographies of Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower,* in which hills, for example, give topographical expression to a potential to upend hierarchical classifications of race. Additionally, I contemplate the importance of the tradition of the Flying African as a symbol of escape and freedom in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, incorporating an analysis of falling that further unsettles any sense of the finality of death. As such, I aim to represent verticality as a crucial vessel of paradoxically transformative and disciplinary power, which organises systems of cultural value through space and time.

In my second chapter, I examine images of 'holes' in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* (1990-1993) and selected plays from her play diary project *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006).[97] I explore

[95] Ann Cooper Albright, 'Falling', p.37.
[96] Kemi Adeyemi, 'Beyond 90°: The Angularities of Black/Queer/Women/Lean', *Women and Performance*, 29.1 (2019), 9–24 (p.10; pp.13-14) <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2019.1571861>
[97] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Hole' (pp.27-30); 'Holey' (pp.146-47); 'Another Deep Hole' (p.551); 'The Birth of Abraham Lincoln' (pp.120-121), in 365 Days/365 Plays (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006).

Parks's positioning of black holes as a metaphor for the many unknowns of African American history, before shifting my focus to her deployment of the ground itself as a site of historical excavation. Here, Glissant's concept of the 'abyss' presents metaphorical resonance.[98] I highlight Parks's interest in cosmic realms as a metaphor for the unexplored, the unknown—and subsequently, for possibility. I consider representations of holes in these texts as signifiers of historical silences and thus expressions of historiographical forces. Holes also figure as open graves, inspiring the perpetual burial and resurrection of both rhetorical and corporeal figures in Parks's works. Historically, I anchor this section to the site of Abraham Lincoln's life as president, and his death. This shift between my first to second chapter entails a backwards movement from early twentieth century racial uplift ideology to the mid-nineteenth century, to the period of the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln's shooting. However, the hole (as a spatial gesture toward the (w)hole of history), eludes the chronological structure that determines the movement of my analysis. I consider in detail the memorialisation of Abraham Lincoln to contextualise my discussion and render his functionality in the national imaginary as a figure that refracts the inner workings of colonial cultural apparatus and embodies a White saviour narrative.

My final chapter on 'Waves' switches focus from the earth to water as I explore the wave as an affective spatial dimension in Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989) and in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008). I read the water in these texts through my thematic framework of burial and resurrection and contextualise my reading through the historical prism of the Middle Passage, with an emphasis on the slave ship *Zong*, and its attendant historical narratives around British abolition. I explore water as a site of burial and rebirth and contemplate its material and symbolic properties, in rendering a washed-out history and a historical memory that functions under separate Taphonomic processes than the earth. I am interested in water not only as a metaphor in Parks and Philip's works, but as materially affective. I contend that water holds a transformative position in Black diaspora histories. Importantly, it allows readers to think through the role of the Middle Passage as a beginning coordinate; in this vein I explore the way the texts resurrect submerged Middle Passage histories that mourn the lives of captive Africans for whom the Atlantic marks a burial ground.

[98] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, transl. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.6.

Chapter 1: Verticality

The figures of Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* refuse to remain buried. Black Man with Watermelon both falls 'twenty-three floors to his death' and flies, 'Over thuh front yard', announcing he 'overshot' his grave.[1] Through Black Man with Watermelon's repeated burial and resurrection, Parks introduces a spatial imperative of ascent and descent. The figures of *Last Black Man* re-present time in their physical movement; verticality indexes their transitions between life and death, beneath and above the earth's surface. In his ceaseless resuscitations, Black Man with Watermelon enacts what scholar Tina Campt defines as a 'practice of refusal', marked by 'authoritative forms of visuality which function to refuse blackness itself'.[2] The vertical axis draws this practice of refusal into focus as Black Man with Watermelon persistently, defiantly *lives* against an onslaught of interminable violent deaths. These deaths exemplify Campt's reference to an 'authoritative form of visuality'; Parks dramatises violent scenes of terror interwoven as part of a visual legacy of slavery that promulgates narratives of Black disposability. This visual legacy intersects with a performance legacy identified by scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert of 'Black death-boundness'.[3] Black Man with Watermelon's burial, with its attendant stakes of Black erasure, are repeatedly invoked and compellingly overcome in his resurrection and collective remembrance by his wife and the chorus.

Parks's *Last Black Man* presents grounds to explore my overarching concern with the historical dimensions of Black erasure and their spatial reverberations. The dramatic form of the play, the repetition and revisions of Black Man's violent deaths, imparts a cyclical structure that prevents his consignment to historical oblivion, instead opening up possibility. Within formations of the present, the concept of verticality transmits both transformative and disciplinary power in organising systems of hierarchical value through space and time. For example, vertical striving (as well as animating the figures of *Last Black Man*'s resurrections) typically encodes coercive forms of exclusionary, emphatically linear, notions of enlightenment thinking. These inscribe hierarchical notions of race, gender, sexuality, and morality. In particular, verticality valorises racial uplift ideology and its attendant Christian notions of heaven and hell, economic success, and white hegemony; Christian-capitalist formations interweave these values, demarcating a ladder of 'racial uplift'. Considered against this broader conceptualisation of verticality, Parks's figures in *Last Black Man* subvert verticality's hierarchical strictures by performing the possibility to rise or fall in a choreographed resistance against

[1] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) pp.99-132 (p.102; p.123); I will refer to the text as *Last Black Man* from this point onwards.
[2] Tina Campt, 'Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal', *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 29.1 (2019) 79–87 (p.79) <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2019.1573625>
[3] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.36.

the enduring legacies of racial violence.

In this chapter, I position Suzan-Lori Parks's *Last Black Man* (1990) in conversation with Marita Bonner's one-act play *The Purple Flower* (1928) and Toni Morrison's third novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), with 'verticality' as my analytical lens. I argue the vertical axis is instrumental to the way that Parks, Bonner, and Morrison represent—and in representing, destabilise—the spatial characteristics of power relations. Drawing on my key analytics: race, time, space, materiality, and the tandem operation of burial and resurrection, I explore the way verticality, as spatial metaphor, interacts with Black erasure and historical possibility. My historical anchor is the politics of racial uplift, which served as a powerful ideological apparatus within a grand-scale project of Black freedom and abolition in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. *Last Black Man, The Purple Flower,* and *Song of Solomon* convey the processes of exclusion, erasure, and racial dispossession that take shape along the axis of verticality in drawing on 'racial uplift' as a key historical referent. Bonner and Morrison explicitly embed such historical detail in their texts. The 'Place' of *The Purple Flower* 'might be here, there or anywhere—or even nowhere' and, for the setting, Bonner indicates 'the stage is divided horizontally into two sections, upper and lower, by a thin board'; however, the imagined topography is a 'hill', at the top of which is located 'the purple Flower-of-Life-at-its-Fullest'.[4] Bonner maps and comments on the ideological environment of racial uplift politics in 1920s America through the 'Us's' various schemes to ascend the hill in pursuit of freedom and equality. In *Song of Solomon,* Morrison's protagonist, named Milkman, navigates the imperative of racial uplift designated by his father, Macon Dead, whose values and legacy he is obligated to extend. The racial and gender logics attached to this imperative, Milkman soon discovers, are routed within the subjugating spatial apparatus of a White, patriarchal, capitalist system. For Milkman, freedom necessitates a reorientation and a willingness to look to an ancestral past that precedes the Dead family legacy. Parks's invocation of racial uplift is implicit where she deploys vertical imagery; I discern the trope of uplift in *Last Black Man,* although the play is not affixed to any definitive historical anchor. Rather, I read instances of resurrection as markers of collective uplift, away from the proximity of death, or as Soyica-Diggs Colbert describes, 'Black death-boundness'.[5] Put succinctly, the texts share a narrative conceptualisation of space that communicates the dominion of the vertical; in turn, verticality serves as a literary and dramatic device for historical intervention. I contemplate instances of verticality in these writers' works, and by extension instances of horizontalism and linearity, as material-discursive sites which give shape to a notion of 'freedom' defined through racial capitalism and underpinned by colonial objectives of territorialisation and control. Taking cue from Parks, I envisage the rotation between horizontal and vertical directions as a key operative within my thematic framework of burial and resurrection—from horizontal burial to the resolutely upright, alive body. This angularity affords a metaphoric foil to

[4] Marita Bonner, 'The Purple Flower' [1928] in *Frye Street and Environs*, ed. by Joyce Flynn and Joyce Occomy Stricklin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), pp.30-47 (p.30).
[5] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements,* p.36.

explore epistemological points of contact, and to trace images of congruity throughout my three focal texts.

The concept of verticality has seen a recent swell in critical attention by urban studies scholars in particular; this presents an exciting opportunity to further bridge the fields of spatial theory and feminist geography, with African American literary and performance scholarship. I read images of verticality in Parks, Bonner, and Morrison's work as affective dimensions in the production of place. This aspect owes, in part, to verticality's inherent quality of stratification. Ann Cooper Albright offers a valuable interpretation of this spatial dynamic as 'the cultural hegemony of the vertical'.[6] Similarly, Adrienne Brown has deployed verticality as a spatial analytic via a focus on the image of the skyscraper across works such as W.E.B. Du Bois's *Dark Waters* (1920). Brown considers the skyscraper, metaphorically: as an instance of 'disruptive verticality', but also 'a generative space capable of inaugurating new civic forms'.[7] This chapter approaches *Death of the Last Black* Man, *The Purple Flower,* and *Song of Solomon* in a similar vein. I examine how material iterations of the vertical axis across these works double as conceptual domains. This allows me to contemplate how these writers offers spatial expression to the hierarchical encoding of social determinants across time and space—such as racial uplift discourse, patrilineality, and paradigms of power and economic success. I ask: how might new meanings around the simultaneity of time be gleaned by positioning verticality as a metaphorical framework for these texts? How might such vertical thinking take us beyond the current interpretive frameworks for understanding, say, the African Flight narrative (with its associations of ascent and descent) in *Song of Solomon,* or the hill of Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* as a site bound up in the characters' social struggles. What implications might such readings have on Western formulations of time and history as linear in direction, or on the treatment of past and present as distinct temporal categories?

I write from an already well-established premise in existing spatial theory scholarship that verticality assumes an affective position in quotidian visual regimes, or, as in Fogarty-Valenzuela and Kevin Lewis O'Neill's words, 'verticality naturalises superiority, reifying privilege with certain spatial properties.'[8] I argue Parks, Bonner, and Morrison incorporate images of verticality that innovate an already dynamic discourse around uneven geographies of power, marking creative confrontations and interventions with the production of space, centring spatial attributes such as hierarchy, difference, and progress. Burial and resurrection operate in tandem to delegitimise the permanence of death, substituting verticality for circular formations. These themes summon both physical and metaphysical realms of existence, prefiguring liminal conditions for the re-envisioning of space, and signalling a departure from the Western enlightenment impulse toward linear coherence. As such, I will consider

[6] Ann Cooper Albright, 'Falling', p.37.
[7] Adrienne Brown, 'The Black Skyscraper', *American Literature,* 85.3 (2013), 531-561, p.542.
[8] Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela and Kevin Lewis O'Neill, 'Verticality', *Royal Anthropological Institute*, 19.2 (2013), 378–89 (p.379) <http://doi: 10.1111/1467-9655.12038>

the ways in which these writers re-envision the subjugating spatial apparatus of culture and identity formation that is rooted in, to repeat Ann Cooper Albright's phrase, the 'cultural hegemony of the vertical.'[9] Albright's employment of the term 'hegemony' is crucial here not only as an indication of the ideological rootedness of racialized and gendered regimes of power and their material mappings, but also the erasure inherent in the encoding of those hierarchical value systems. Albright's spatial linkage of 'cultural hegemony' with 'verticality' will be especially useful to thread the capacious concept of verticality throughout three interconnected discursive spaces: racial uplift, the African Flight narrative and the tandem thematic operation of burial and resurrection. I consider the way dramatic form and themes of burial and resurrection coalesce within Suzan-Lori Parks's *Last Black Man* and Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower,* to refuse the temporal norms through which we conceive of the historical body. In the second section of this chapter, I turn to Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and examine how the protagonist Milkman's very corporeality comes to signify the importance of recovering an unacknowledged past, to re-visioning alternate routes and orientations toward (social/racial/spatial) progress. Deploying a comparative approach, I extend my reading of Parks and Bonner's 'falling' figures in contemplating Morrison's invocations of The African Flight Narrative in *Song of Solomon* as a critical mode of resistance, and a 'practice of refusal', toward the 'hegemony of the vertical'.[10]

Vertical striving in *The Purple Flower* and *Death of the Last Black Man*

Bonner's one-act play *The Purple Flower* is set against a hill, at the pinnacle of which grows the 'purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest'.[11] The purple flower orients the actions and desires of two groups, the Us's and the Sundry White Devils, who are engaged in perpetual conflict. The Us's live in 'the valley that lies between Nowhere and Somewhere'; they signify the African American experience in the vertical context of racial uplift ideology. The White Devils are 'artful dancers on the Think Skin of Civilization' who 'live on the side of the hill'. They do all they can to prevent the Us's from reaching the flower—and as a result, they chronicle an abundance of white supremacist place-making strategies.[12] Bonner allegorises the racial landscape of early twentieth century America in constructing characters that embody the competing ideologies championed by the likes of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes. These Black thinkers and intellectuals held in common the desire to *disrupt* hegemonic whiteness, though their disparate views are reflected in the disagreements

[9] Ann Cooper Albright, 'Falling', p.37.
[10] Tina Campt, 'Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal', p.79; Ann Cooper Albright, 'Falling', p.37.
[11] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.30.
[12] Ibid., p.30.

that arise between the Us's regarding the best way to reach 'Somewhere' (otherwise known as the hill).[13] Transported into the context of Bonner's play, these renowned thinkers' individual egalitarian principles do not map neatly onto the hierarchical designation of the Purple Flower as a zenith of self-possession and racial freedom. Langston Hughes, for example, in his essay on 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' published two years before Bonner's play, imagines 'the urge within the race towards whiteness' as 'the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America'.[14] Bonner's purple flower represents a particular notion of freedom in so far as the Us's wish to ascend to its heights. However, as Nancy Chick highlights, the flower also 'represents what is white'.[15] With its image, Bonner contests tropes of idealized white womanhood and innocence typically associated with flowers; she foregrounds the inherent violence of this symbol of race and femininity.

Bonner spatialises the stakes of Black erasure in the geography of the play. She describes the scene as '[A]n open plain. It is bounded distantly on one side by Nowhere and faced on a high hill—Somewhere)'.[16] *The Purple Flower's* surrealist form affords a broad-encompassing symbolic space—like Parks's figures, a naturalistic setting does not accommodate the characters Bonner envisions.[17] Rather, Bonner takes up the invitation that the form of surrealism extends to break spatial planes. The verticality of the hill valorises the hierarchical divide between the two groups, the Us's and the White Devils. However, an additional vertical dimension further complicates the spatial characteristics of their agency and abjection; '[t]he stage is divided horizontally into two sections, upper and lower, by a thin board', the 'Thin Skin of Civilization', which is so thin in fact that '[a] thought can drop you through it'.[18] Bonner specifies the main action takes place on the upper stage and often, this action is 'duplicated on the lower', gesturing towards a simultaneity of time.[19] When Bonner's characters fall, they descend into what Jonathan Kalb describes as an 'atavistic past'.[20] The fallen 'lie twisted and curled in mounds', evoking a hellish biblical spectacle, their silhouettes only just visible in the dimly lit lower stage. In this sense, verticality indexes the complex temporality of *The Purple Flower*. Space and time collapse in this boundary, the 'Thin Skin of Civilization', which serves as a portal to a past that precedes (a presumably Western notion of) 'civilization'.[21] Bonner emphasises the characters' corporeality: 'there is a thrust of a white hand—a yellow one—one brown—a black'. These 'thrust[s]' might signal the

[13] Ibid., p.36.
[14] Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' [1926], *The Langston Hughes Review*, 4.1 (1985), 1-4 (p.1). Reprinted from *Nation, June 3, 1926 pp.692-694*.
[15] Nancy Chick, 'Marita Bonner's Revolutionary Purple Flowers: Challenging the Symbol of White Womanhood', *The Langston Hughes Review*, 13.1 (1994), 21-32 (p.26) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26434519> [accessed 5 November 2020].
[16] Ibid., p.31.
[17] In her essay, 'from Elements of Style' discoverable in *The America Play and Other Works*, Parks reflects on her tendency to diverge from the naturalism of so many playwrights in 'exploding' the form. She explains '[T]hose structures never could accommodate the figures which take up residence inside me'. (p.8).
[18] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.31.
[19] Ibid., p.31.
[20] Jonathan Kalb, 'Remarks on Parks I' in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries,* ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp.151-174 (p.162).
[21] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.31.

fallen figures are either emerging from the ground or descending further.[22] Interestingly, Bonner relates no further instances of this falling action outside of these preliminary contextual details. In describing the setting, she does relate that the falls occur as often as 'sometimes', as a consequence of violence.[23] It follows that this falling action, though it exceeds Bonner's subsequent narration, occurs repeatedly in the background of the plot at any given moment. Falling opens up a sort of indefinite time signature through which Bonner sets out the play's modality of ascent and descent.

I am intrigued by the possibilities that coincide with the characters' falls. The lower stage represents a site of opacity and—building on Jonathan Kalb's identification of an 'atavistic past'—an originary point laden with historical possibility.[24] What does it mean for the Us's to fall? The conditions that pre-empt the fall are detailed along with the setting: 'Sometimes the actors on the upper stage get too vociferous—too violent—and they crack through the boards'.[25] The term 'vociferous' recalls the boundaries imposed on Black womanhood; to be vehement, strident, or loud, was to act outside of traditional early twentieth century gender expectations. Bonner appears to tack on this term 'violent' almost ironically, as a qualifier for the term 'vociferous'. Considered alongside the feminine symbolism of the purple flower, the violently instigated falls might be dependent on a construct of violence formulated through the lens of white hegemony—in response to a fabricated threat of Black female agency.

This assumption, if accurate, begs the question: what does this mean for the fate of the Us's that plummet into the unknown of the lower stage? The action is almost invisible on the dimly lit lower section, an aspect that gives way to an intriguing ambiguity. Nevertheless, such ambiguity affords a foundation for a more nuanced contemplation of the unknown. I am thinking in tandem with the tenets of Hartman's critical fabulation here, in contemplating the manner with which *ambiguity* suspends broad-brush binary projections—such as death/abjection/hell versus freedom/liberation/deliverance—onto the conceptual depths of the unknown. Bonner's dramatic reckoning with an inscrutable 'atavistic' past evinces Édouard Glissant's discussion of opacity as a directive to embrace the limits of knowledge: 'we clamour for the right to opacity'.[26] Glissant's opacity is not, as McKittrick highlights, about 'vagueness' or 'claiming unintelligibility', but rather discerning moments of clarity and 'sharing ideas carefully'.[27] In Bonner's *The Purple Flower*, tenets of opacity and critical fabulation mediate a materially grounded counter-history of racial progress that centres Black subjectivity in imagining a vertical descent of historical return. The politics of opacity resonates in the space of the lower stage. Here, a glimpse of a moving hand, or the transient outline of a possibly human figure, present haunting

[22] Ibid., p.31.
[23] Ibid., p.31.
[24] Jonathan Kalb, 'Remarks on Parks I', p.162.
[25] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.31.
[26] Jonathan Kalb, 'Remarks on Parks I', p.162.; Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990], transl. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.194.
[27] Katherine McKittrick, 'Dear April: The Aesthetics of Black Miscellanea', *Antipode*, 54.1 (2022), 3-18 (p.7) <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12773>

fragments of an environment that is ostensibly devoid of an 'uplift' prerogative. Further, this environment is spectral in terms of dramatic form. Critics tend to agree Bonner intended for the play to be read but not staged.[28] This was certainly not uncommon for the period and Bonner's experimental form further explains why the play was not staged during her lifetime. Without a staged production, the geography of this lower section is rendered an absent presence. The fallen figures are afforded no further reference inside the space of the text; following their introduction as components of the setting, a linear progress narrative ensues, chronicling the Us's schemes to ascend the hill. The reader is tasked with remembering the lower depths of the stage and inserting the action of the falling characters as often as 'sometimes', all the while tracking the narrative developments between the Us's and the White Devils.

I want to put forth that although this 'Thin Skin of Civilization' marks a site of violence, Bonner locates possibility in this lower section of the stage, and in the performance of falling through the cracked boards.[29] Further, I contend that this lower section of the stage, which Bonner does not narrate beyond the preliminary contextualisation of the scene, occupies a distinct temporal dimension. Could Bonner envisage this lower stage as a site of rebirth, just as Parks views the theatre as 'an incubator for the creation of historical events'?[30] If so, the liminal 'time' of the play: the 'Middle-of-Things-as-They-are' which Bonner elaborates to mean the 'Beginning-of Things for some' and the 'End-of-Things for others', moves according to the characters' movements, as they meet their individual beginnings or ends.[31] Death and renewal (perhaps even resurrection?) punctuate the temporal movement of this elusive action, encoding a cyclical structure in an un-scripted realm. This subterranean time signature exists in tandem with the scripted, linear narrative progression of the Us's schemes to ascend the hill.

Bonner's emphasis on gender hierarchies across her wider oeuvre presents clues as to the forms of violence that render a character susceptible to descent in *The Purple Flower*. Her essay 'On Being Young- A Woman - And Colored' (1925) presents a useful comparative ground to better understand the temporal and spatial configurations of racial freedom in *The Purple Flower*. As the title anticipates, this essay, which Bonner penned three years before *The Purple Flower*, exemplifies the intersectional perspective of her writing. She draws on visceral imagery, explaining 'one day you find yourself entangled – enmeshed – pinioned in the seaweed of a Black Ghetto [...] shoved aside in a bundle because of color'.[32] Bonner imagines the cultural organisation of society in material terms. The metaphor of the seaweed gestures towards an ecological framework that underscores Bonner's preoccupation with rendering the invisible, visible, and presages her reformulation of this othered 'bundle' of space into the divided stage of *The Purple Flower*. Bonner's reference to seaweed recalls Glissant's images of the

[28] See Allison Berg and Meredith Taylor, 'Enacting Difference: Marita Bonner's Purple Flower and the Ambiguities of Race', *African American Review*, 32.3 (1998), 469–480 <http://doi.10.2307/3042247>
[29] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.31.
[30] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.5.
[31] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.30.
[32] Marita Bonner, 'On Being Young – A Woman – And Colored' [1925] in *Frye Street and Environs*, ed. by Joyce Flynn and Joyce Occomy Stricklin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), pp.3-8 (p.5).

abyss in his *Poetics of Relation* (1990). Glissant historicises the Atlantic, drawing attention to the material reality of the jettisoned bodies of the enslaved in his conceptualisation of the abyss.

> Navigating the green splendour of the sea […] still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains.[33]

Glissant's abyssal sea occupies a temporality marked by 'balls and chains gone green'—he is referring here to those balls and chains that the crew of slave ships used in order to jettison captive Africans during slave voyages.[34] The seaweed that surfaces evokes those bodies that did not. In this sense, the seaweed presents a metaphoric foil to remember the bodies that *became* the sea. Like the haunted 'green splendour' of Glissant's abyssal sea, the lower stage of *The Purple Flower* marks an originary point in which Bonner posits possibility.

Bonner's allusion to seaweed in her essay does not necessarily entail that hers is a watery abyss—though it could be. As poet Derek Walcott proclaims, 'The Sea is History'.[35] Just as the vast expanses of oceans occupy 'deep time' in their perpetual state of flux, the movement of water in the Atlantic is continually affected by the succession of movements that came before—thereby remembering a time before Enlightenment modernity brought forth hegemonic whiteness. In this sense, it is possible that the lower stage represents the depths of a watery abyss. If Bonner laments a historical past that precedes racial hierarchies, she strives towards an originary point that pre-dates the Middle Passage. She envisages the lower section of the stage as an originary point that precedes the enlightenment mapping of an Old and New world and its concomitant formulations of uneven racial geographies. In her essay, 'On Being Young—A Woman—And Colored', Bonner invokes Buddhism, aligning Buddha's attributes of knowledge, stillness, and silence, with the constraints and expectations of Black womanhood. (The etymology of Buddha, from Budh, which means 'to open up (as a flower)' marks another revealing connection to *The Purple Flower'*s central motif). Bonner identifies that Buddha inhabited a time *before* hierarchies of white hegemony, 'a thousand years before the white man knew there was so very much difference between hands and feet'.[36] With this comparison, Bonner conjures a 'vociferous' Black female presence in her essay, against 'a world that stifles and chokes'.[37] She invokes a pre-New World aeon in which the dehumanisation of blackness remains culturally unscripted; this reality materialises in the lower stage space of *The Purple Flower*, an 'atavistic past' in which the ontological status of the fallen remains a mystery, though 'you see by a curve that there might lie a human body'.[38]

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[33] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990], transl. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.6.
[34] Ibid., p.6.
[35] Derek Walcott, 'The Sea is History', *The Paris Review*, 74 (1978).
[36] Marita Bonner, 'On Being Young – A Woman – And Colored', p.7.
[37] Marita Bonner, 'The Purple Flower', p.31; 'On Being Young – A Woman – And Colored', p.5.
[38] Jonathan Kalb, 'Remarks on Parks I', p.162; Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower,* p.31.

The Purple Flower embodies the rhetoric of 'On Being Young – A Woman – And Colored' and locates the essay's imagined landscapes, upon which Bonner unveils a future-oriented practice of (historical) refusal. The intertextuality of Bonner's essay and play underscores the importance of looking to the past to instigate progress and recalls the Akan principle of Sankofa (the symbol of which was discovered in the African Burial Ground in New York).[39] Tied to this question of progress, Bonner urges for a re-definition of Black womanhood away from disembodied configurations—citing 'a gross collection of desires, all uncontrolled' or 'a feminine Caliban craving to pass for Ariel' as examples.[40] In Bonner's essay, disembodied configurations of Black womanhood are re-mattered and afforded agency. In an exemplary instance of this re-mattering, Bonner recalls a university Professor's derisive comments to 'not grow bitter':

> "[...] [D]o not grow bitter. Be bigger than they are"—exhort white friends who have never had to draw breath in a Jim-Crow train. Who have never had petty putrid insult dragged over them—drawing blood—like pebbled sand on your body where the skin is tenderest. On your body where the skin is thinnest and tenderest.[41]

The 'Thin Skin of Civilisation' embodies the violence of language. Ta-Nehisi Coates's criticism of discursive practices that overlook material reality resonates with Bonner's skin metaphor. He explains:

> But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm […]—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways […] You must always remember the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body'.[42]

The violent rhetoric of race and gender discrimination give way to a cycle of death and renewal in Bonner's *The Purple Flower* as the figures descend through the thin skin boundary. If the 'Thin Skin of Civilization' also signifies the body, Parks's characters do not land on it but crack through it, enacting the violence of racial uplift discourse. The Us's are representative figures, assigned names such as 'Young Us', 'Average', and 'Old Man'. Bonner emphasises the plurality of the Us's in asserting 'they can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the centre of a poppy'.[43] The figures of *Last Black Man* are named in a similar representational mode and occupy a cyclical temporal structure marked by burial and resurrection. Parks's stage is populated with historically overdetermined figures, or as in Austin Terrell's words, 'epic types,' such as last Black Man's wife, Black Woman with Drumstick, Yes and Green Black-Eyes Peas Cornbread, and Lots-of–Grease-and-Lots-of-Pork.[44] These figures' responses to the Last Black Man's repeated deathly encounters relay the importance of cultural

[39] See Introduction; here I discuss the excavation of the African Burial Ground and its subsequent memorialisation.
[40] Marita Bonner, 'On Being Young – A Woman – And Colored', p.5.
[41] Ibid., p.6.
[42] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, p.10.
[43] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.30.
[44] Austin Terrell, 'Mortality and the Black Community: How Death Surrounds The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World', *The Pulse*, 2.3 (2005) <https://www.baylor.edu/Pulse/index.php?id=42098> [accessed 14 Nov 2020].

preservation and collective memory, also drawing attention to the systematic erasure of African American history. Parks's following reflection on time reiterates the way these ideas inspire the narrative form—and hence the spaces—of her plays:

> I walk around with my head full of layperson ideas about the universe. Here's one of them: "Time has a circular shape." Could Time be tricky like the world once was – looking flat from our place on it – and through looking at things beyond the world we found it round? Somehow I think Time could be like this too. Not that I'm planning to write a science book – the goofy idea just helps me NOT to take established shapes for granted. Keeps me awing it.[45]

Parks's rounding of linear time is consistent with her rejection of linear narrative across much of her writing; she refutes teleological formations of the historical past through her innovation of narrative form which, in Parks's *Last Black Man,* evokes improvisational jazz through her signature 'rep and rev' technique.[46] Temporal conditions of liminality, forged through this repeated circling back on the past, this repeating and revising, open up spaces of possibility in the threshold between life and death. The figures, as in Bonner's subterranean space, appear caught between back and forth linear directions of time, a positionality through which Parks suspends both historically enduring, deterministic associations of race and gender, as well as the realisation of a more 'freedom-filled future' to trouble space as we know it.[47] At the centre of this drama lies a story of a husband and wife torn violently apart. They exchange the devastating line to one another: 'Miss me'.[48] Their individual story plays out on an epic scale, remembering the centuries of Black subjects dispossessed of their families, homes, communities, even their names, and confronted with violent deaths, if not the immediate threat of death. Black Woman with Drumstick announces the premise of the plot: 'Yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgo in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world.'[49] Through Black Woman's succession of temporal markers, the past and future impinge on the present establishing a 'three-fold present'.[50] To equate 'uh moment uhgo' with '1317' requires us to condense seven hundred years into a single moment in a feat of temporal bridging on an epic scale. Yet, devoid of historical linearity, this temporal distance is always already bridged in Parks's textual universe. In semiotic terms, Black Woman with Drumstick's line resonates with Jacque Derrida's theorisation of 'Différance,' which connects the temporalizing of difference, 'to defer', with 'difference as spacing'. Derrida states 'within a language, within the *system* of language, there are only differences'.[51] In the same vein, Black Woman's words impinge on ordered meaning, drawing up the heterogeneous spatial

[45] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'From Elements of Style', p.11.
[46] Parks described 'Rep and Rev' (repetition and revision) as 'a literal incorporation of the past'. See Parks, 'Elements of Style' in *The America Play and Other Works,* pp.6-18 (p.10).
[47] Soyica Diggs-Colbert, *Black Movements* p.44.
[48] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Death of the Last Black Man', p.131.
[49] Ibid.,, p.102.
[50] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.60.
[51] Jacques Derrida, 'Différance' in *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs,* trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973), 278-301 (p.286).

constitution of the sign system. Black Man, as an embodied but also a rhetorical figure, signifies all past and future historical losses—an ontology that simultaneously proposes an eternal existence. His burial is then to mourn all these figures fallen under the social reflex of historical amnesia and suspended in historical exile. This notion of interminable struggle and the proximity of death is instantly recognisable in Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower*. We are informed that the Us's have attempted to ascend the hill in various ways: through the accumulation of money, through toil, through education, and through their faith in God. Ultimately, violence is motioned as the only viable option. The play ends without conclusion as Young Blood sets out to sacrifice a White Devil, meanwhile the white devils and the Us's are left listening in suspense. Bonner describes in the stage directions that the setting of the play 'Might be here, there – or anywhere' and the time is designated as, 'The middle-of-Things-as-They-are'.[52] Rejecting the treatment of past, present and future as independent categories, *The Purple Flower*, as in Parks's *Last Black Man,* accommodates the representation of figures that derive from all three.

Whereas Bonner takes inspiration from the ideological environment of the Harlem Renaissance, Parks traces the origins of *Last Black Man* to a vision that occurred while in a state of possession. She recollects the instance of the text's fruition in an essay on 'Possession': '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 vapour. I said to myself, "You should write that down."'[53] Parks's insight reveals the organic genesis of the play from a vision, to a play text, to the stage. Parks's apparition echoes throughout the work and invariably disrupts the action: '*You should write it down* because if you don't *write it down* they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist' [emphasis my own].[54] Yes And Greens Black-Eyes Peas Cornbread relates the urgency of historical documentation, and in doing so informs and performs his revenant status as a manifestation of the text's constructedness. The repetition of Parks's vision, the repeated rehearsal process, the iterations across performances, and the repetition of what is at stake, amalgamate and fragment in the very performance of the line. As the *last* Black man, there is a sense of finality and the seeming foreclosure of liminal possibility in the mechanised narrative omission of his death. Parks reflected in an interview, 'I think the black man wants a hole ['six by six by six'], because he wants to rest'.[55] The final line of *Last Black Man* spoken by all of the cast (or chorus), 'Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it', encapsulates a moment of freedom from the incessant pattern of violence and brutality, but also seems to gesture towards the moment of rest for which Black Man yearns.[56]

This final line of *Last Black Man* echoes the final line of *The Purple Flower,* wherein the figures arrive at a state of collective suspension: 'All the Us listen. All the valley listens. Nowhere listens. All

[52] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.30.
[53] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) pp.3-15 (p.3).
[54] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man,* p.104.
[55] Suzan-Lori Parks and Han Ong, 'Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks', p.49.
[56] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man,* p.131.

the White Devils listen. Somewhere listens'.[57] In each play we observe a narrative break, a pause for reflection, in a climactic moment that temporarily transcends the chaos of temporal instability. Interestingly, Bonner's seminal essay, which was also published in *The Crisis*, 'On Being Young – A Woman – and Colored', demonstrates this same posture of anticipation and poise, as Bonner ponders 'Perhaps Buddha is a woman'. She elaborates:

> Still; quiet; with a smile, ever so slight, at the eyes so that Life will flow into you and not by you […] And then you can, when Time is ripe, swoop to your feet—at your full height—at a single gesture.[58]

This resolute uprightness that Bonner envisages at 'full height' contrasts the horizontal orientation of last Black Man's continued burial and the fallen figures of *The Purple Flower.* In this way, Bonner's essay and one-act play orient the reader/audience towards a future formed with an attentiveness to these questions around progress, uplift, and 'hegemonic verticality'.[59] *Last Black Man* and *The Purple Flower* foreground a practice of refusal towards hegemonic formulations of progress and uplift drawing on spaces of salient verticality. These dramatic works demonstrate that the spatial allegories we use to comprehend the world around us wield power over our perception and judgement through their myriad associations, imbuing otherwise intangible structures of metaphysical power onto a material anchor.

Mapping modes of racial uplift in *The Purple Flower*

The Purple Flower was first published in a 1928 edition of *The Crisis* magazine. For contemporary readers of the *Crisis,* the allegory of 'uplift', thematised through the internal conflict between the Us's, would have been immediately apparent—specifically with regards to the contextual debates that inform Bonner's figures. I am referring here to the divisions between 'The Us's'—that is 'Young Us' and the older generation; figures such as 'Old Lady' and 'Yet Another Old Man' who present disparate views on the best way to ascend to 'the purple Flower-Of-Life-At-Its-Fullest'.[60] Comparably, two notable Black intellectuals of this period, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, engendered conflicting views on 'the right way forward' for African Americans at the turn of the century and their works on racial uplift are frequently placed in dialogue.[61] A consideration of the historical role of discourse in translating knowledge into place-making strategies is important here.[62] Racial uplift demonstrates the way discourse can inform the gendering and racialisation of space. In this section, I aim to situate Bonner's *The Purple Flower* within the ideological environment that inspired its development by inserting the historical details of racial uplift into my analysis.

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[57] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower,* p.46.
[58] Marita Bonner, 'On Being Young – A Woman – And Colored', p.8.
[59] Ann Cooper Albright, 'Falling', p.10.
[60] Bonner, *The Purple Flower,* p.31.
[61] See for example Jacqueline Moore, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington, NC: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2003).
[62] See my Introduction for a definition of place-making.

Racial uplift was most prominent between 1880 and 1914 and its proponents positioned responsibility on Black middle-class intellectuals to politically and socially advance African American communities. Racial uplift discourse was particularly prevalent in the South amidst white supremacist moves to strip civil and political rights from African Americans post-emancipation.[63] Yet the ideological roots of racial uplift can be traced back to the American Baptists Home Mission society, which Jonathan Holloway describes as a northern and white-run effort to educate and "civilise" southern Black Americans.[64] The spatio-racial logics of verticality resonate powerfully in the notion of racial uplift as we summon an image of the members of this society travelling in a downward direction, from the North to the South, to exert hegemonizing influence over Southern Black communities. Racial uplift was in some sense subversive in that it consolidated a number of civil rights to previously enslaved citizens of the South, though this term 'civil rights' may indeed, as historian Christopher Foreman suggests, be an 'outright misnomer'.[65] Uplift was also conservative in that it reproduced whiteness as the dominant ideology in the US and constituted a reaffirmation of northern power amidst the economically and politically weakened South. The work of the White, northern-run American Baptists Home Mission society involved the introduction of schools, churches and prayer services as part of an initiative to 'save the race' and in response to a widespread desire by Black Americans to practice faith, post-emancipation. Such efforts evidence the hierarchical reinforcement of White Christian patriarchal values as a key component of uplift ideology; the American Baptist Home Mission society sought to empower African Americans within the limits of the ideological vision of the Union.[66] As such , the roots of uplift are traceable to white patriarchal Christian institutions such as this one, operating under a vertical (metaphysical) aim in striving towards God as a symbol of hope and freedom.

This theological-economic aim returns me to scholar Ann Cooper Albright's conceptualisation of 'hegemonic verticality', which she further describes as a 'Christian/capitalist complex that insists what is up is good (stock markets, tall buildings, bank accounts, and other assorted 'fill in the blanks') and what is down is bad'.[67] Where religious nationalism served as an authoritative discourse, attacks on Black economic success, such as the Tulsa race massacre, expose the hegemonic nature of the uplift narrative.[68] Alexander Crummell, a notable African American minister, educator and pan-Africanist in discussions of racial uplift, whose work influenced the likes of Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Paul

[63] Kevin K. Gaines, National Humanities Center, 'Freedom's Story: Racial Uplift Ideology in the Era of "the Negro Problem' <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/18651917/essays/racialuplift.htm> [accessed 30 March 2020].
[64] Jonathan Holloway 'Uplift, Accommodation, and Assimilation', online video recording <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73GYFVJ7LTM&t=930s> [accessed 4 April 2020].
[65] Christopher H. Foreman, 'Black America: The Rough Road to Racial Uplift', *The Brookings Review*, 16.2 (1998), 8-11 (p.8) <https://doi.org/10.2307/20080775>
[66] As discussed in lecture by Jonathan Holloway: 'Uplift, Accommodation, and Assimilation', online video recording <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73GYFVJ7LTM&t=930s> [accessed 4 April 2020].
[67] Albright, 'Falling', p.64.
[68] Konstantinos D. D. Karatzas, 'Interpreting Violence: The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot and Its Legacy', *European Journal of American Culture*, 37.2 (2018), 127-40 <http://doi: 10.1386/ejac.37.2.127_1>

Dunbar, defined the alternative to racial uplift as 'inferiority, repulsion, drudgery, poverty and ultimate death'.[69] Crummell invokes a vertical scale of progress, the earth and 'burial' marking an 'ultimate death'. Far from this finite view of death, Sylvia Wynter reminds us that Africans conceived of death and burial as a 'mystical reunion with the earth', echoing Parks and Bonner's aesthetic of refusal and return.[70] Themes of burial and resurrection underscore the significance of spatial formations in distinguishing Western (vertical) models of life and death from those belonging to (circular-based) African traditions that placed importance on living in communion with the dead.

Within the ideology of racial uplift, the social ladder invokes verticality to conceptualise hierarchies of power and success. As such, the metaphorical association extends to physical domains and influences regimes of visuality. Verticality, figured as a conceptual index of morality, highlights what is at stake in this explicit link between vertical spatial difference and cognition; it foregrounds the capacious concept of verticality as a shape that informs our ability to read the world at the same time as it exalts abstract concepts such as morality and power, via physical dimensions. Booker T. Washington's oft-cited Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895 invoked a hierarchical view of the social ladder. The images below present the plan of the Exposition and the 'Negro' Building, a space that functioned to spotlight the 'progress' of African Americans living in the South during reconstruction.

Figure 7 Interior of 'Negro Building', Atlanta Exposition, 1895. B.W. Kilburn Company. (ca. 1896) 'Interior of Negro Building, Atlanta Exposition. Atlanta Georgia' [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/92510073/.

[69] As quoted in a lecture by Jonathan Holloway 'Uplift, Accommodation, and Assimilation' online video recording <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73GYFVJ7LTM&t=930s> [accessed 4 April 2020].
[70] Sylvia Wynter, 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', *Savacou,* 5 (1971), 95-102 (p.99).

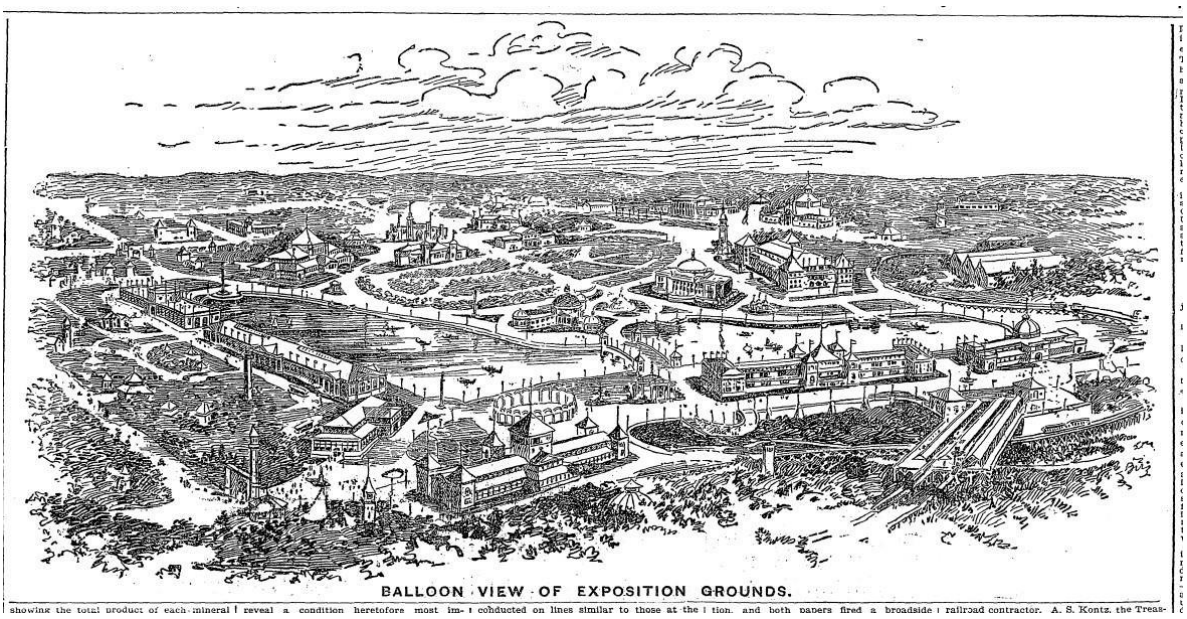

Figure 8 View of Exposition Grounds, The New York Times, June 8th 1895. Anon. The Cotton States and International Exposition to be Held in Atlanta, Ga., Sept. 18 to Dec. 31, 1895', New York Times, 8 June 1895, p. 17.

The visual narrative evoked by these images resonates with the politics of verticality. The 'Balloon view' offers grounding expression to the notion of 'staying put' that uplift politics conveyed in its contradictory manner, whereas the 'interior of [the] Negro Building' depicts African Americans at ground level. Washington's uplift philosophy reproduced the aims of the Atlanta Exposition. He argued:

> No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities. [71]

Washington's statement transports his consideration of progress and freedom onto the cartography of the US as he beckons African Americans not to migrate North, but to continue to help build up the South. Washington's accommodationist philosophy condemned agitation and asked African Americans to embrace a position of inferiority within a system of white supremacy. Washington's oft-quoted phrase in this speech invokes verticality: 'cast down your bucket where you are'.[72] Du Bois directly opposed what he considered Washington's 'counsels of submission', arguing they 'overlooked certain elements of true manhood' and were bound to 'sap the manhood of any race in the long run'.[73] Scholar Hazel Carby interprets Du Bois's claim through the lens of gender politics, arguing 'Washington is not a man

[71] History Matters, 'Booker T. Washington Delivers the 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech' <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/> [accessed 14th May 2020] (para 4).
[72] Ibid., para 3.
[73] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (Chicago: McClurg & Co, 1953), p.32; Ibid., p.37.

by Du Bois's measure of black masculinity,' and she continues, 'his compromise with the dominant philosophy of his age is to be understood as a form of Prostitution'.[74] Carby applies the term 'Prostitution' here in picking up on Du Bois's use of the term 'submission'; Du Bois expresses, in gendered terms, the weakness, exploitation, and reproduction of white patriarchal ideals that he believes to be associated with Washington's philosophy.

The rivalry and tensions between these two intellectuals also emerge here as symptomatic of a pervasive politics of gender, enforcing gender-specific limits to the project of racial uplift, while simultaneously encoding a discourse of Black masculinity as a formative element of uplift's vertical structure. For Carby, Du Bois 'fails to imagine black women as race leaders and intellectuals'.[75] Her delineation of Du Bois's racialized masculinity in *Race Men* (1988) opens up key questions concerning the gendered dimensions of racial uplift. Geographer Kemi Adeyemi's research on what she terms 'angularities of black/queer/women/lean' offers a conducive critical perspective to think through the mechanisms of racial uplift.[76] Adeyemi expands on the significance of gender and religion to vertical hegemony where she articulates:

> This 90° is a countenance appropriate for contemplation of higher planes of Being that are variously adjudicated by the Judeo- Christian God on the one hand and science and Reason on the other. 90° is also wholly circumscribed by masculinist investments in the phallus as that which indexes one's abilities to access these planes in the first place [...].[77]

Adeyemi articulates a 90° angularity of Christian patriarchal ascendency. These religious/gender dynamics resonate in the emergence of various Black religious grassroots organisations during the period of reconstruction. Such groups considered it their duty to 'uplift the race'; these included the American Negro Academy (ANA, est. 1897) and the National Association of Coloured Women (NACW, est. 1896). While the ANA sought to "civilise" African American communities with twenty leading men (one of these being W.E.B. Du Bois, who was Crummell's protégée), the NACW maintained that Black women were 'more respectable' and so, on the basis of gender, were best suited to 'uplift the race'. The NACW adopted a motto that reflects the vertical thinking uplift entailed: 'lifting as we climb'.[78]

The gender politics that informed the divisions between the ANA and NACW can be gleaned from a comparative assessment of the views held by leading proponents from each organisation. The renowned author and activist Anna Julia Cooper, in *A Voice From the South* (1892), states 'only the black woman can say where and when I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood,

[74] Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.39.
[75] Ibid., p.10.
[76] Kemi Adeyemi, 'Beyond 90°', p.9.
[77] Kemi Adeyemi, 'Beyond 90°', p.10.
[78] See Evette Dionne, *Lifting While We Climb: Black Women's Battle for the Ballot Box* (New York: Viking, 2020).

without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole negro race enters with me'.[79] Cooper asserts Black female agency in positioning women as the forerunners of racial progress. Conversely, Du Bois espouses the belief that 'the Negro race […] is going to be saved by its exceptional men'.[80] These conflicting views draw up the gendered limits of racial uplift; arenas of activism and progress emerged within gender-exclusive domains. While Cooper stresses the redundancy of Eurocentric ideals to Black American subjectivity and consciousness explaining, 'we are the heirs of a past that was not our fathers' moulding', she also held that women possessed limited capacity to affect change beyond the sphere of domesticity and motherhood. In *A Voice from the South,* she positions Black men as the principal agents of uplift, explaining 'it is she who must first form the man by directing the impulses of his character'.[81] For Du Bois, only a small number of men commanded such agency.

Du Bois's landmark text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) popularised the term 'uplift'. He employed yet another vertical model, the 'Talented Tenth' (a phrase borrowed from a white missionary, Henry Lyman Morehouse), and with this directed racial uplift's tenets away from Washington's bootstrap rhetoric. Within Du Bois's sociological theorizing, the 'Talented Tenth' leaders were set apart from the 'submerged masses'; he considered the provision of a classical liberal arts education essential in order that they could 'save the race'. [82] In *Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois also coined the concept of 'double consciousness', which would have an indelible impression on race discourse throughout the following decades. This term 'double consciousness' describes what it means to be 'gifted with second sight in […] a world which yields him [the Black man] no true self-consciousness' thus producing 'two warring ideals in one dark body'.[83] Double consciousness constitutes a barrier to uplift, existing within a spatial framework on a horizontal axis that *others* Black (male) Americans. In *Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois 'celebrates and contests racial identity' as he works within the 'Veil' of Black America and at the same time seeks to transcend this state of consciousness to reach what he termed 'the kingdom of culture'.[84] He conveys this imagined realm, the 'kingdom of culture', as a space devoid of racial strictures, 'unbounded by nation or race'—a pinnacle point of uplift.[85] Du Bois's kingdom of culture presumes an upheaval of this term 'culture'. Scholar Paul Gilroy explains the terms, 'race' and 'culture' were employed to 'think through beauty, taste and aesthetic judgement that are the precursors of contemporary cultural criticism', highlighting their interwoven nature.[86] Racial categorisation, that

[79] Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* [1892] (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2016). p.8.
[80] W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Talented Tenth' in *The Negro Problem,* ed. by Booker T. Washington (United States: J. Pott & Company, 1903) pp.31-76 (p.31).
[81] Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* [1892], p.7.
[82] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1967), p.311 <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812201802>
[83] Du Bois, W.E.B., *Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (A.C. McClurg & Co., Chicago: 1953) pp.2-3.
[84] Kevin Mumford and Ross Posnock, 'Black Intellectuals and Other Oxymorons: Du Bois and Fanon' in *Color & Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), pp.87-110 (p.87); Du Bois, W.E.B., *Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (London and New York: Norton Critical Edition., 1999), p.11.
[85] Ibid., p.11.
[86] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [1993] (London: Verso, 2002), p.8.

which renders a racialised ontology, operates through mechanisms of cultural ascription. Du Bois therefore envisages this *neutral* kingdom, this apex of African American striving, in a paradoxical light. The kingdom of culture marks a site of freedom within, but also distinct from, the eclipsing dynamics of a Western culture. Furthermore, this Western culture relies on the othering of minoritized subjects and threatens the appropriation of blackness through hegemonic whiteness at every cultural intersection. Put succinctly, the 'neutral', raceless space that Du Bois envisions as his 'kingdom of culture' exists at odds with the inextricability of race and other identity components constitutive of 'culture'.

Elsewhere in *Souls,* Du Bois vehemently attests to the role of race within cultural formations, particularly where he explores the historical import of myths. He pays particular attention to the Black mortality myth which intersects with my central motifs of burial and resurrection; the proximity of death contours the surrealist environments of *Last Black Man* and *The Purple Flower*. The Black mortality myth was propped up and dispersed via racist scientific discourse. The theories put forth by an academic named Frederick Hoffman exemplify the types of epistemic inequality at play in the late 1800s; Hoffman proposed an innate racial affinity for death to account for the fact that Black Americans had a fifty-eight percent higher death rate than Whites at the turn of the twentieth century.[87] Theories of racial inferiority were rife within the field of sociology and statistics concerning death rates were decontextualised to bolster such claims.[88] Du Bois deploys the black mortality myth throughout *Souls,* and in doing so redefines the cultural associations between Black Americans and death through the lens of spiritual striving; he refers to spirituals as 'the greatest gift of our Negro people'. He expertly interweaves the Black mortality myth with Western myths and African folklore, rendering death as a 'passage for safety' and an ultimate escape, or flight, from the bondage conditions of the postbellum South.[89] As such, he extrapolates the mythology that informs, popularises, and connects myths to the conceptualisation of Black mortality, redefining its signifying properties.

I am especially interested in the way verticality provides a foil for this transformative undertaking. In a chapter titled 'The Wings of Atalanta', Du Bois focuses his analysis of uplift, and hence verticality, on a specific locale: the city of Atlanta, 'South of the North, yet North of the South'. He cautions against 'her [economic] striving' and substitutes individual for city in the logic of uplift.[90] The role of verticality in highlighting 'feminine' mythology and power is explicit in Du Bois's invocation of Atlanta. In concluding the chapter, Du Bois re-envisions the romantic landscape of Atlanta through the lens of verticality.

[87] See Frederick Hoffman, 'Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro', *Journal of the American Economic Association,* 11.1 (1896), 1-329 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2560438> [accessed 14 May 2020].
[88] See Joanne van der Woude, 'Rewriting the Myth of Black Mortality: W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles W. Chesnutt', in *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, ed. by Lucy Ms Frank (Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing, Limited, 2007), pp. 89–105 (p.91).
[89] Ibid, p.98.
[90] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (Chicago: McClurg & Co, 1953), p.53; Ibid., p.76.

> When night falls on the City of a Hundred Hills, a wind gathers itself from the seas and comes murmuring westward. And at its bidding, the smoke of the drowsy factories sweeps down upon the city and covers it like a pall, while yonder at the University the stars twinkle above Stone Hall.[91]

Du Bois's hierarchical language highlights the irrevocable agency of nature, amidst the city's architectural markers of progress and, through the gothic imagery of the smoke fuelled 'pall', depicts a prophetic vision of the urban city as a coffin. He argues for a cause-effect relationship between economic striving and nature-ordained damnation. The university is a bastion of spiritual striving, exempt from the death-bound drive of industrial forces and crowned by twinkling stars. The natural landscape is connected to the socio-political landscape of the early twentieth century as Du Bois interprets those morals transmitted through myth: 'Atlanta must not lead the South to dream of material prosperity as the touchstone of all success'.[92] He substantiates this claim in foregrounding Ovid's myth of the 'swarthy Atlanta, tall and wild, [who] would marry only him who out-raced her' and who, distracted by trappings of gold, is subsequently married and cursed.[93] Du Bois's deployment of classicism throughout *Souls of Black Folk* epitomises his overarching concern with African American self-definition and the literariness of historical discourse. Likening the pursuit of money to a pursuit by Hippomenes with his golden apples, Du Bois's prophetic instruction to Atlanta couples flight with spiritual striving: 'fly my maiden, fly, for yonder comes Hippomenes'.[94] He situates the Western companion myth of Icarus adjacent to the Wings of Atlanta; Icarus, upon escaping from imprisonment with his father Daedalus, disobeys his father's warnings, flies too close to the sun, and falls when his waxen wings burn. These duplicitous visions of flight and redemption resonate in Du Bois's re-historicising of Atalanta. He materially grounds and contests Washington's racial uplift discourse in a specific geographical context (unlike Bonner's abstract hill that might be here, there, or anywhere—or nowhere' in *The Purple Flower*), amongst 'the hundred hills of Atlanta'.[95]

Du Bois's major dispute with Washington's vision of racial uplift concerns his privileging of economic prosperity over a classical liberal education and the development of African American political influence. Jacqueline Moore summarises:

> Washington, the more conservative of the two, advocated a gradual approach towards achieving civil rights, starting with economic concerns rather than political or social issues. Du Bois, the more radical of the two, insisted on immediate and full civil rights in all areas.[96]

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[91] Ibid., p.87.
[92] Ibid., p.78.
[93] Ibid., p.77.
[94] Ibid., p.87.
[95] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower,* p.30; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (Chicago: McClurg & Co, 1953), p.81.
[96] Jacqueline Moore, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2003) p.xv.

Bonner mirrors this context through the generational divides amongst characters in *The Purple Flower*. Old Man exclaims 'the Us can't get up the road unless we work! We want to hew and dig and toil!'[97] However, another Young Us challenges this notion, arguing 'Work doesn't do it'—meanwhile Old Man narrates the entrance of A Young Man, 'Here comes a Young Us who has been reading in the books'.[98] In essence, the Us's collective project of ascendance in T*he Purple Flower* captures the very divisions that characterised contemporary debates surrounding racial uplift. This critical comparison generates intersecting questions around creative expression, notably how might artists and writers engage with national and trans-national projects of Black liberation in the wake of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation? This dilemma similarly divided opinion and engendered a variety of aesthetic encounters. While a politics of uplift informed social, as well as artistic discourses, its deployment as an aesthetic foundation by Du Bois was widely contested within the intellectual arena of Harlem Renaissance art.Booker T. Washington's legacy beyond his death in 1915 continued to figure in debates around issues of uplift and education. His legacy and intellectual bearing on the period of reconstruction was monumental and especially significant to the development of the Harlem Renaissance in that he advocated for the prioritisation of industrial and economic issues over aesthetic issues. *The Crisis* magazine, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois in its initial years (and later by Georgia Douglas Johnson, another figure who greatly influenced Bonner), presented a space of agency and a collective mouthpiece for the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). Bonner's readers would likely have identified her references to key thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance period. Finest Blood's dictate that '[a] new man must be born' necessitates a closer look at one of these thinkers in particular. Alain Locke was a professor at Howard University who chronicled several seminal Harlem Renaissance works in an anthology that scholars widely recognised as a hallmark text of the period, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1925).[99] Also consolidating his fundamental intervention in the period as an African American literary canon-creator (*The New Negro* secured the legacy of the texts anthologised), Locke's call for the 'New Negro' heralded a new aesthetic, and with that a dynamic cultural movement.

The 'New Negro' signified a particular set of characteristics, amalgamating to a *new* collective African American identity. These characteristics included an ennobled sense of self , a *new* sensibility to confront the racial terrors of the Jim Crow South, and someone whose sense of self had been shaped by migration to the North, thereby setting themselves apart from the 'Old Negro', whom Locke refers to as 'a creature of moral debate and historical controversy'.[100] Locke's definitive division between old and new establishes a framework of dichotomy in response to the greater agency and freedoms afforded

[97] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.36.
[98] Ibid., p.33; Ibid., p.36.
[99] Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. by Alain Locke (New York, Albert and Charles Boni, 1925) Hein Online.
[100] Alain Locke, 'The New Negro' in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. by Alain Locke (New York, Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), pp.3-16 (p.3). Hein Online.

to Black communities in the cosmopolitan hubs of the North, such as Harlem, Washington D.C, and Chicago. In his commitment to cultivating creative works that contest Black objecthood, Locke played 'philosophical midwife to a generation of younger Negro poets [and playwrights]'.[101] He established a theatre group, the Howard Players, with his colleague Montgomery Gregory; Locke and Gregory encouraged the creation of works that incorporated elements of folk tradition and embraced African heritage. On the other hand, Du Bois advocated for propaganda drama 'for, by and about black people'; the principles of his manifesto were realised in the productions performed by his theatre company, the Krigwa players.[102] The disparate ideas of Locke and Du Bois played out within the hub of creativity and community that marked Washinton D.C. in the Harlem Renaissance period.

1461 S Street, Washington D.C., the home of Georgia Douglas Johnson (1877-1966), represented an important hub of creativity and community for African American women writers. 'Saturday nighters' at the S Street Salon, as they came to be known, inspired and informed landmark literary works of the period.[103] Often, writers would read their play, offer feedback, discuss politics, in this space that represented, what Treva B. Lindsey aptly describes as 'an African American women-centred counterpublic'.[104] While Du Bois and Locke set forth dominant ideologies, the Black women creatives whom Bonner engaged with reworked their tenets to challenge systems of representation. They narrated issues such as birth control, and working-class conditions, asserting Black female agency and instigating futures of Black radicalism in their community of literary exchange. Bonner structures *The Purple Flower* largely around allusions to Du Bois and Washington's arguments. Bonner's play interprets aspects of Locke's call for the 'New Negro', as well as Du Bois's discussion of the 'Talented Tenth', though she appears to conform to neither aesthetics. Scholars Allison Berg and Meredith Taylor identify the ideological resonances of Locke and Du Bois's works via a consideration of form. In their study of *The Purple Flower* they state,

> While the revolutionary message of *The Purple Flower* is in keeping with the goals of propaganda plays endorsed by W. E. B. Du Bois, its emphatic non-realism violates Du Bois's dictum that "plays of a real Negro theater" must "reveal Negro life as it is". *The Purple Flower's* surrealism distinguishes it as well from the "folk" (or "inner-life") plays promoted by Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory at Howard University.[105]

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[101] Alain Locke, 'Negro Youth Speaks' in *The New Negro: An Interpretation,* ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), pp.47-56 (p.47). Hein Online.
[102] W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Krigwa 1926', *Crisis Magazine* (1926), p.134; as cited in Ethel Pitts Walker, 'Krigwa, a Theatre by, for, and about Black People', *Theatre Journal,* 40.3 (1988), 447-356 (p.348) <https://doi.org/10.2307/3208324>
[103] Jenny Kirton, 'Community Building and Articulations of Race and Gender at Georgia Douglas Johnson's 'Saturday Nighters': African American Theatre and The S Street Salon', *US Studies Online,* April 15, 2022 <https://usso.uk/2022/04/15/african-american-theatre-and-the-s-street-salon-community-building-and-articulations-of-race-and-gender-at-georgia-douglas-johnsons-saturday-nighters/> [3 November 2023].
[104] T.B Lindsey, "Saturday Night at the S Street Salon," in Colored No More: Reinventing Black Womanhood in Washington, D.C., Second edition (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 102-122 (104).
[105] Allison Berg and Meredith Taylor, 'Enacting Difference: Marita Bonner's Purple Flower and the Ambiguities of Race', *African American Review,* 32.3 (1998), 469–480 (p.470) <http://doi.10.2307/3042247>

The characters' names, along with their dialogue, offer an explicit indication of the aesthetic perspectives they represent. Average, for example, denotes an attitude of complacency towards racial progress and cries, 'Oh you know we ain't going to get up there! No use worrying!'.[106] Average does in one instance discuss the need for 'the right leaders' in response to Old Lady's expression of hopelessness—'I was just saying we ain't never going to make that hill'—though he swiftly concedes, 'But they ain't led us anywhere!'[107] In his essay on 'The Talented Tenth', Du Bois employs the term 'Average': 'Who are today guiding the work of the Negro people? The "exceptions" of course. And yet so sure as this Talented Tenth is pointed out, the blind worshippers of the Average cry out in alarm: "These are exceptions, look here at death, disease and crime— these are the happy rule".'[108] Du Bois's capitalisation of the term Average in the original *Crisis* magazine publication supports the idea that Bonner's 'Average' character might be inspired by this particular essay. Old Man's announcement of Young Man's return, 'Here comes a Young Us who has been reading in the books', anticipates the potential for racial progress via an emphasis on education (echoing Booker T. Washington), and perhaps even Young Man's initiation into the Talented Tenth.[109] However, the Us's hope is swiftly squandered with Young Man's revelation, '[t]here isn't anything in one of these books that tells Black Us how to get around White Devils'.[110] Bonner underscores the colonial parameters of knowledge production. She dramatises what is at stake in any form of progress that enacts epistemic erasure, demonstrated here as a disavowed Black presence: 'The White devils wrote the books themselves. You know they aren't going to put anything like that in there'.[111]

Bonner's allusions to Locke's 'New Negro' are similarly striking and can be gleaned from her direct lifting of certain tell-tale terms; characters continually reiterate, 'A New Man must be born for the New Day'.[112] Locke's conceptualisation of the 'Old' and the 'New Negro' map onto the interactions between the older and younger generation in the play. The drummer, for example, demonstrates a capacity to occupy the expanse of the valley with a reverberating rhythm, which signifies the traditional culture of the Old Us's, as well as its potential to transcend geographies of domination. The stage directions tell us 'A drum begins to beat in the distance. […] Some of the Us begin to dance in time to the music'.[113] Average responds, 'Look at that! Dancing!! The Us will never learn to be sensible!'[114] For Bonner, the communal call and response of the drum embodies a liberatory impulse; its echoes represent an alternate mode of cultural preservation based on ritual performance, that undermines the authority of the written historical record. Indeed, the wisdom of Old Man is critical to the direction of

[106] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.36.
[107] Ibid., p.33.
[108] W.E.B. Du Bois,' The Talented Tenth' [1903] in *The Future of the Race*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West (New York: Vintage, 1997) pp.131-57 (p.132).
[109] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.36.
[110] Ibid., p.37.
[111] Ibid., p.37.
[112] Ibid., p.45.
[113] Ibid., pp.34-35.
[114] Ibid., p.35.

the young leader, who will emerge as the New Man. Racial uplift ideology, according to Bonner's play, is both structured and enforced by verticality in terms of the cultural organisation of space and perpetuates a historically rooted hegemonic whiteness. Parks and Bonner contest this 'hegemony of the vertical' where they refuse a linear conceptualisation of time and space, instead conflating the past, present, and future into a liminal locus of disordered meaning. Moving forward, I extend this vertical analytic to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in considering the way Morrison conceptualises explicitly masculine formulations of racial uplift via manifestations of burial and resurrection. I consider the importance of the tradition of the Flying African as a symbol of escape and freedom in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, a trope that also resonates in Parks's *Last Black Man* and Bonner's *The Purple Flower* through the falling figures. In Morrison's text, I incorporate an analysis of falling that further unsettles corporeal angular expectations, along with any sense of the finality of death.

Verticality in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

In the second chapter of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) the novel's protagonist, Milkman Dead—also known as Macon Dead III—experiences the disorientating motion of travelling in a backward-facing position, while 'pressed in the front seat between his parents' in his father's green Packard.[115] Although Milkman is desperate for a view of 'anything other than the laps, feet, and hands of his parents', and so chooses to look back, the narrator adds, 'riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been—troubled him'.[116] Progress, both spatial and temporal, is seemingly disrupted despite that the Packard continues onward, as Morrison articulates Milkman's embodied experience of uprootedness, his 'flying blind', within a metaphysical realm—as a psychic abyss that summons a vertical, as opposed to a horizontal, plane. Suspended in this imagined topography, Milkman's capacity to register progress on a horizontal plane, along the roads toward 'the wealthy white neighborhoods', is hindered by the sudden stakes of a vertical plunge toward death.[117] Milkman is especially concerned by this geographic encounter since he 'did not want to see trees that he had passed, or houses and children slipping into the space the automobile had left behind'.[118] Landscapes 'passed' are experienced as a vanished past, marking a significant conflation of space and time, as well as an overlapping of material and imaginative topographies. Indeed, Morrison's loose identification of a 'space' into which things 'left behind' slip, expands the parameters of the psychic abyss Milkman metaphysically inhabits (evincing Glissant's abyss of historical loss), calling forth its impenetrable depths. The scene evokes the Us's momentum to ascend the hill in Bonner's *The Purple Flower*. Milkman's attentiveness to the past finds geographical expression in a

[115] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* [1977] (London: Vintage, 1998), pp.31-32. A revised version of the remainder of this chapter on Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* has been accepted for publication in *MELUS*, under the title: "No Future To Be Had": Journeying Toward Death in Toni Morrison's 'Song of Solomon'.
[116] Ibid., p.32.
[117] Ibid., p.32.
[118] Ibid., p.32.

liminal topography which necessitates an engagement with what is 'left behind'; this is quite literally in this instance the Black community of his hometown in Michigan, meanwhile the 'wealthy white neighbourhoods' are positioned ahead. As a result, Milkman's limited view is marked by erasure—an erasure affected along racial lines, as he perceives of a landscape rendered indecipherable by the forward momentum of his father's Packard.

Later in this same scene, Milkman turns backward yet again; he stalls the progress of the car journey, explaining, 'I have to go to the bathroom' and he accidentally urinates on his sister's dress when he turns abruptly at the sound of her footsteps.[119] The stalling of the journey's progress coupled with this second backwards movement, the abrupt turn, reinstates Milkman's preoccupation with what lies behind him. As interesting, however, is what the narrator gleans from this otherwise unremarkable event: 'It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as if there were no future to be had'.[120] This narrative interjection implies the proximity of a temporal dead-end and marks a site that is both 'intensely experiential' as well as 'deeply dependent on psychic, imaginary work'.[121] Milkman's backward turns, his disruptions to progress, are generative spatial practices through which Morrison charts an experiential geography that attaches and inflects symbolic meaning over the physical geography of the journey toward Honoré, which takes the Dead family 'down Not Doctor Street, through the rough part of town […], over the bypass downtown'.[122] Backward gestures such as those set out above merit close consideration, for they are reminiscent of the novel's crux wherein Milkman looks to the past in search of answers about his ancestry, meanwhile social hierarchical constructs that map out his own future trajectory, such as the politics of racial uplift and patrilineality, he repeatedly queries and defies. I posit that Milkman's attempted reorientations therefore constitute an embodied resistance to the deterministic forward motion of the car, alongside the future trajectory that the direction of the car represents. This resistance culminates in an extended present that persists by and beyond the close of the scene; Morrison writes, 'But if the future did not arrive, the present did extend itself, and the uncomfortable little boy in the Packard went to school […]'.[123] The dynamics of temporal progress that ensue are thus contained within the parameters of an extended present that this scene sets out. Futurity is continually negated and, guided by the subsequent proximity of death, Milkman's movements engage non-linear designs of space and time. His very corporeality comes to signify the importance of recovering a forgotten (and in this instance southern) past, to re-visioning alternate routes and orientations toward (social/racial/spatial) progress.

I pay critical attention to the car journey in Chapter Two as a crucial juncture in *Song of*

[119] Ibid., p.34.
[120] Ibid., p.35.
[121] Katherine McKittrick describes the similarly metaphysical geographies of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) as quoted. See Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p.2.
[122] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.32.
[123] Ibid., p.35.

Solomon, by specifically examining the way Milkman's figure disrupts the production of White hegemonic space and contests the (historical and geographic) erasure of blackness.[124] Scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert underscores the importance of looking backward to *Song of Solomon'*s overall narrative premise where she observes that Milkman 'addresses an overlooked southern past in order to embrace a more freedom filled future'.[125] I posit that the car journey in Chapter Two charts a textual map for this narrative premise. Milkman's preoccupation with what lies behind permits him a unique vantage point as he refuses the angular expectations for his body while situated in the vehicle. Through the coalescence of physical and experiential geographies, as well as horizontal and vertical planes of sight, Morrison beckons detailed attention to Milkman's spatial coordinates, his physical comportment, as inextricably connected with the ideological dimensions of phenomenal space.[126] The psychic space of an abyss, a spatial counter-part to Milkman's 'flying blind', delineates an experiential geography which, I contend, complicates a traditional cartographical rendering of the Packard's progress on a horizontal plane and introduces a third dimension: verticality.[127] Owing to verticality's inherent hierarchical pattern, this three-dimensional encoding serves as an analytical opening to contend with a layered conceptualisation of multiple (often hierarchical) forms of progress, spanning the Packard's progress, social progress, racial progress, even narrative progress. Their conceptual linkage by Morrison constitutes a Black cartographic practice which Elleza Kelley (also writing with regard to Toni Morrison) explains is 'marked by 'imaginative mapping practices' and a critical posture toward Western senses of spatiality and their deployment in the service of colonisation, white supremacy, and capitalism'.[128] That is to say, Milkman's (dis)orientation yields a critical posture toward unseeable racialised and gendered geometries of existing power relations, as well as the ideological machinery that sustains them. The Packard subsequently doubles as a mapping device, which, as 'Macon Dead's Hearse', also delineates a predetermined journey towards death and burial.[129] As such, Morrison aligns the stakes of patrilineality and racial uplift discourse with the continuation of the Dead legacy, and hence gestures toward a realisation of the meaning suspended in the family name: Dead. Milkman's momentary blindness when 'flying blind,' his (dis)location inside a psychic abyss, marks an unsettling interstice, a radical vantage point even, that effectively serves as a space from which to re-envision a 'more freedom-

[124] For a more developed insight into the way these two spatial processes operate in tandem, specifically in the textual spaces of Morrison's fiction, see: Will Cunningham, 'Locating the Clearing: Contested Boundaries in Beloved and Song of Solomon' in *Spatial Literary Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Space, Geography, and the Imagination*, ed. Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), pp.271-287 (p.274).
[125] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.44.
[126] This critical perspective responds to scholar Kemi Adeyemi's calls for: "detailed attention to the materiality of black queer women's spatial coordinates […] as sites where categories of race, gender, and sexuality are disciplined and negotiated." Adeyemi articulates the connection between one's "physical comportment" and "one's political capacities," also placing emphasis on the verticality of power relations via "a brief history of Man's 90 ° relationship to the ground". See Kemi Adeyemi, 'Beyond 90°', p.9.
[127] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.32.
[128] Elleza Kelley, 'Follow the Tree Flowers': Fugitive Mapping in Beloved,' *Antipode*, 53.1 (2021), 181-199 (p.183) <http://doi:10.1111/anti.12679>
[129] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.32.

filled future', as in Colbert's words.[130] That is to say Milkman's progress-resistive gestures, his forced delay to the journey and his head-turns, wield agency and are emblematic of a disavowed Black presence across both time and space.

Moving 'Counter-to': Affective verticality and embodied resistance

The psychic space of an abyss that I identify in this scene is a site of possibility; I argue it provides a cessation of the disciplinary mechanisms of White hegemonic place-making strategies for Milkman. Yet, while this metaphysical space exists outside of the tenets of Western progress, the vertical axis of the abyss, with its associations of ascent and descent, also doubles as a conceptual domain to contemplate and interrogate the hierarchical encoding of social determinants that exist within formulations of western progress—for example uplift discourse, patrilineality and Enlightenment thinking. Toni Morrison's body of work is markedly shaped by the relationship between space, race, and identity formation; Morrison states that the goal of her seminal series of essays, *Playing in the Dark* (1992), is to 'draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery […] as did the original charting of the New World— without the mandate for conquest'.[131] It should come as no surprise therefore that Morrison criticism has been innovated by the growing sub-field of spatial literary studies. A recent article by Elleza Kelley contemplates Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) as a map in itself, and traces Black cartographic practices alongside an 'ongoing praxis of fugitivity'.[132] Michelle Dreiding's contribution to the recently published *Spatial Literary Studies* considers *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), and *Love* (2003), and contends, through the discovery of a 'spatial poetics', that beginnings in Morrison's novels are marked by disorientation and 'structural and geographical liminality'.[133] Soyica Diggs Colbert's reading of *Song of Solomon* emphasises Morrison's reformulation of the traditional African Flight narrative in alignment with the historical development of social space 'from visible regulatory forces (segregated space) to invisible ones (the rhetoric of personal responsibility)'.[134] Each of these critical responses deepens our understanding of the way dominant cultural norms are inscribed in space, as well as the ways Morrison denaturalises and refuses those norms. Colbert's conceptual linkage of historicised space with narratives of flight, in particular, offers grounds for an in-depth consideration of verticality as a domain that renders historical forces of oppression, visible. The narrator's invocation of death with the equivocal phrase 'as if there were no

[130] Ibid., p.32; Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.44.
[131] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p.5; Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) is another exemplary text in which images of verticality highlight the racialisation of space. The "Drayton Hotel" in *Passing* serves as an architectural expression of the hierarchical social structures of 1920s Chicago, particularly in terms of racial segregation.
[132] Elleza Kelley, "Follow the Tree Flowers": Fugitive Mapping in Beloved," p.184.
[133] Michelle Dreiding, 'Rethinking the Beginning: Toni Morrison and the Dramatization of Liminality' *in Spatial Literary Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Space, Geography, and the Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), pp.117-129 (p.122).
[134] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.41.

future to be had', underscores the urgency of looking (and moving) 'counter-to' and sets up a directional framework for *Song of Solomon's* central narrative break-through: the resurrection of the buried narrative of the Dead family lineage.[135] To this end, verticality takes up the work of narration, facilitating conceptual connections between various hierarchical modes of progress and challenging the spatial coherence of conventional two-dimensional cartographic practices.

Milkman's unique phenomenology grants readers an insight into the transformative potential of the vertical realm. His embodied action of 'flying blind' implies an oscillation along the vertical axis—a pattern of rising and falling that also characterises the dramatic development of Parks's *Last Black Man* and Bonner's *The Purple Flower*. Scholar Ann Cooper Albright is primarily concerned with the latter of these directions. In her seminal article on 'falling' as a cultural paradigm, Cooper contends, 'If we shift the orientation of the West's vertical hegemony, falling [a possibility marked by Milkman's experience of 'flying blind' in his father's car] can become not just an ignominious ending, but rather the beginning of other possibilities'.[136] The connection Albright draws between falling and 'possibilities' also resonates with scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert's view of flight in *Song of Solomon* as a mode of 'psychic preservation'.[137] Indeed, *Song of Solomon* draws up ways in which processes of racialisation and social death operate in tandem with the cultural composition of 'the West's vertical hegemony'.[138] Imagined in spatial terms, processes such as geographical movement (between north and south), racial uplift discourse, and patrilineal social structures—all prevalent in the text—resonate strongly with this notion of vertical progress and can be conceptualised more specifically upon a scale of verticality. Moreover, each is inextricably connected to the formation of the present and its attendant power structures. Hence, where narrative encounters with such concepts are made manifest via the geographies of the novel, performances of attempted reorientation establish junctures of redirection and re-definition that seek to undermine existing hierarchies of power and move away from what Colbert refers to as 'black death-boundness', toward 'more freedom filled futures'.[139] In particular, I explore the specific ideological tensions generated by Milkman's recursive shifts in direction, an enquiry that dichotomises practices of Black liberation and White domination within a spatial framework of hegemonic verticality. An oscillation along this vertical axis takes place at a macro-level in *Song of Solomon* where we discover Milkman's search for his lineage (an example of African American historical recovery) cannot be reconciled with his plans for economic prosperity and success (in accordance with White patriarchal formulations of racial uplift). Moreover, this tension and irreconcilability is productive; as his pursuit for material wealth transforms into a quest for answers about his ancestry, Milkman reforms his relationship to nation space, reckoning with the classificatory order of White patriarchal domination.

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[135] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.35.
[136] Ann Cooper Albright, 'Falling', p.37.
[137] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.51.
[138] Ann Cooper Albright, 'Falling', p.37.
[139] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.41; Ibid., p.44.

Morrison's attentiveness toward the temporal-spatial coordinates of her characters reveals Milkman as both illustrator and interrupter of spatial processes of White domination. Indeed, Milkman's attempted reorientations, as counter-hegemonic spatial encounters, highlight the value of a phenomenological approach towards reconceptualising existing spatial paradigms. For subjects of Western society, a perpendicular relationship between body and ground constitutes a disciplinary spatial mechanism wherein race, gender, and sexuality emerge as determining factors in terms of bodily expectations. Scholar Kemi Adeyemi highlights 'the materiality of black queer women's spatial coordinates' in particular, as sites where such disciplining (as well as negotiating) occurs. Adeyemi explains, '[a]s Man/whiteness is instituted by and valorized as 90° verticality, black life has been forcibly staged in its surrounding angles'.[140] This understanding draws up the affective force of oppressive spatial processes on 'Othered' bodies, also theoretically informing a phenomenological approach toward verticality as an angularity of 'Man/whiteness' in *Song of Solomon.* Milkman's performed limp merits consideration in this regard. The narrator claims Milkman's limp is actually performed, determining that 'the deformity was mostly in his mind'.[141] That which Milkman views as a 'burning defect' presents a further example of resistance: an embodied refusal to maintain a 90° relationship to the ground.[142] The 'deformity' also prompts Milkman to differentiate himself from his father in a variety of ways, precisely 'because of the leg' which meant that 'he could never emulate him'.[143] Later in the novel, his father's influence diminished, Milkman is 'exhilarated by walking the earth' following his near-death during a hunt in the Virginian woods.[144] The narrator describes how he walked 'like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there […] And he did not limp'.[145] This demonstration of oneness with the environment, wherein Milkman's body descends vertically, beyond the earth, affirms Milkman's reformed relationship with space. Scholar Aretha Phiri notes that at this moment Milkman 'matures to value his aunt Pilate's acquired 'deep concern for and about human relationships' by privileging instead existential substance, the intersubjective, communal and communitarian principles that traditionally inform black life (in the South)'.[146] Milkman refuses an identifiably Euro-American preoccupation with wealth and individualism, thereby achieving a sense of rootedness that is reflected in his angular relation to, and traversal of the earth. While Phiri importantly sets out the manner with which Milkman employs his aunt's value system, Milkman's emulation of Pilate here also represents a successful transfer of embodied knowledge.

[140] Kemi Adeyemi, 'Beyond 90°', p.9.
[141] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.62.
[142] Ibid., p.62.
[143] Ibid., p.63.
[144] Ibid., p.281.
[145] Ibid., p.281.
[146] Aretha Phiri, 'Expanding black subjectivities in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah', *Cultural Studies*, 31.1 (2016), 121-142 (p.128) <http://doi:10.1080/09502386.2016.1232422>

Indeed, Milkman's eventual experience of rootedness, as well as his break with a patrilineal kinship system (away from his father's legacy), is foreshadowed in the scene that follows the car journey, during his initial encounter with Pilate—'the woman who had as much to do with his [Milkman's] future as she had his past'.[147] Morrison's physical description of Pilate 'on the front steps sitting wide-legged' signals the possibility for a unique connection with physical geographies that resists Western angular expectations of the body; refusing the 90° angles of Man 'she was all angles, he remembered later, knees, mostly, and elbows. One foot pointed east and one pointed west'.[148] Pilate's relationship to place, signified here by her comportment, is one of assertiveness. Her role as a maternal figure, in particular, is implied here by what could also be described as a birthing position. The narrator notes that the sight of Pilate convinces Milkman 'nothing—not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her'.[149] Milkman's disorienting bodily experience in the Packard (which immediately precedes this scene with his aunt) juxtaposes the forceful gravitational pull he feels toward Pilate upon meeting her years later at the age of twelve. Despite the many years that separates the two events, their proximity inside the textual space of Chapter Two establishes a narrative progression from Milkman's state of disorientation to his reorientation in the presence of Pilate. Still, Milkman, like his aunt, demonstrates a crucial intervention of racialised space even in his disorientation, since his experience of 'flying blind' in the car invokes the African American artistic trope of flight as a symbol of escape and freedom. With his vision of forward progress disfigured by his narrowed view of only the 'silver winged woman poised at the tip of the Packard', Milkman's experience of 'flying blind' invokes uninhibited mobility in vertical terms, though also carries the risk of the horizontal, 180° alignment of his fallen body with the ground.[150] Adeyemi claims, 'The 90° angles of Man (and the related concepts of Human, Subject, and Citizen) were stabilized by the angularities of black to and as ground: […] the 180° of the dead body, the 0° of 'Cum sup terr''.[151] A prerequisite for Black survival in such conditions is then the capacity for reorientation and a reworking of the parameters of striving.

Re-envisioning progress: patrilineal trajectories and racial uplift

The politics of racial uplift, like the African Flight narrative, invoke the legacy of transatlantic slavery. As Jason King asserts via a reading of Malcolm X's uplift philosophy, '"Stand up"—the long, arduous journey out of the terror of slavery and the darkness of colonialism is necessarily vertical in direction'.[152]

[147] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.36.
[148] Ibid., p.36.; Here, I again draw on the work of scholar Kemi Adeyemi with reference to the 90° angles of man: "Man in his 90° superiority is a construction, fiction, myth, and ideal, but one that has very real, material consequences." Kemi Adeyemi, 'Beyond 90°', p.12.
[149] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.36.
[150] Ibid., p.32; Kemi Adeyemi, 'Beyond 90°', p.13.
[151] Ibid., p.13.
[152] Jason King, 'Which way is down? Improvisations on black mobility', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 14.1 (2008), 25-45 (p.32) <http://doi:10.1080/07407700408571439>

Where Milkman reaches down through space (to the South) and time (to his ancestry) in his search for answers about his family origins, he complicates a truncated version of his family's (vertical) patrilineal record and their transgenerational investment in uplift philosophy. Much like the rhizomatic structuring of roots he pursues, Milkman's ancestry presents uncharted heterogeneous dimensions. Morrison signifies a legacy organised along the tenets of uplift in the prospect of the Dead family's male line of descent. Macon Dead II attempts to convey his 'uplift' values to Milkman (also known as Macon Dead III), having inherited them from his father who 'loved […] property, good solid property'.[153] However, where Milkman leaps at the novel's close, he forecloses the potential to further this line of descent in an act of dissent. Morrison inflects the gendered dimensions of uplift (demonstrable in Washington's and Du Bois's theorising of progress) along a patrilineal trajectory, thereby reconciling epistemologies of whiteness to place and subject.

As in Bonner and Parks's works, Morrison's images of verticality serves as a discernible spatial framework upon which traditional geographic arrangements of white Euro-American space—domination, economic striving, ownership, patrilineality—are disrupted and interrogated. Within this analytical framework, Milkman's 'troubled' emotions during the car journey, triggered by his backward-facing view, in fact anticipate the fundamental alterability of the belief system—centred around racial uplift ideology—that he inherits from his father, Macon Dead II.[154] That is to say knowledge of the past (be this historical or cartographical) is positioned in this scene as affectively oppositional; a material and cultural coordinate, it is gestured toward in experiential geographical terms as the 'concentration on things behind him', and so historical and geographical matters are conceived of in unison.[155] Racial uplift, in its geographical expression as linear progress toward the wealthy White communities, is rendered an instrument of erasure, not only concerning particular historical narratives, but—given the enmeshment of time and place—affecting Black geographies also. The subsequent tension between these two ideological investments, historical recovery and racial uplift, draws into focus discourses of homogenous versus heterogenous histories and the social ladder of uplift, inside of which a spatial lens of verticality offers a unitary analytical structure.

Milkman's performances of looking backwards and his 'flying blind', in consideration of their numerous iterations, establish a continuum of resistance, but also a great deal of tension. After all, Milkman is situated firmly within his family's linear patriarchal history, wherein getting in line entails focussing, always, on the future, and on individual progress within the context of racial uplift ideology. For Milkman this means reproducing and developing the economic successes of his father, just as Macon Dead II patterned his future as a continuation of his father's legacy: 'Owning, building, acquiring – that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew'.[156] As Milkman develops a

[153] Ibid., p.300.
[154] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.32.
[155] Ibid., p.35
[156] Ibid., p.300.

yearning for new, alternate forms of knowledge, he reflects on his father's motivations, recognising that '[a]s the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father's life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property'.[157] Macon Dead II's devotion to the memory of his father permeates his movements as he literally grips his own property legacy, curling his fingers around his keys and 'letting their bunchy solidity calm him'.[158] This privileging of possessions and wealth comes to define Milkman's inherited understanding of success in his formative years. His father shares with him a pivotal lesson early on in life: 'the one important thing you'll ever need to know: own things'.[159] Macon Dead II attempts to impart this wisdom through the Sunday drives in the Packard, which he considers 'ritual' and which function to orientate and 'satisfy himself', as well as to stake a claim to place through the flaunting of his family and his wealth.[160] However, Morrison pre-empts Milkman's eventual rejection of this lesson, despite the overbearing, orienting mechanism of his father's envisioned path for his son, through his reflexive reorientations during these car journeys.

Racialised geographies and the Du Boisian colour line

Macon Dead II's journey towards 'the wealthy white neighborhoods', beyond the lake in Honoré beach community, reveals a racial stratification of place that engages the lake-land boundary.[161] The property-focused project the journey comes to represent—that is Macon Dead's investment in an exclusively White residential space—attaches manifold meanings onto this boundary between lake and land. I unpack these meanings with a view to revealing the racial, historical, and social processes that operate within and through material boundaries, and that challenge Macon Dead II's principal mission around the proliferation of property. Significantly, the image of the lake-land boundary establishes the universal resonance of Macon Dead II's aspirations; Morrison signifies off the quintessential American novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), channelling its critique of the American dream as both 'illusory' and a temporal aporia.[162] The boundary between land and water at the bay of West Egg and Lake Honoré presents an intertextual relation between the two novels and reframes Macon Dead II's version of the American dream in universal terms. Jay Gatsby's green light, that which encapsulates his investment in the American dream and his aspiration towards a romance with Daisy Buchanan, lies suspended in the literary boundaries between these two textual settings. In this way, Morrison enables their geographies to operate in tandem, establishing a unique canonical dynamic wherein African American literature, a literary tradition historically relegated to the margins of national American

[157] Ibid., p.300.
[158] Ibid., p.17.
[159] Ibid., p.55.
[160] Ibid., p.31.
[161] Ibid., p.32.
[162] Scholar Adam Meehan, whose research I draw from here, provides an insightful discussion of Fitzgerald's treatment of the American dream in 'Repetition, Race, and Desire in 'The Great Gatsby', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37.2 (2014), 79-91, (p.88) <http://doi:10.2979/jmodelite.37.2.76>

literature, signifies off the 'Great American novel'. Scholar Yasuhiro Takeuchi reimagines the purpose of the 'green light' motif in *The Great Gatsby* by establishing the interplay between vehicles, narrative momentum, and social mobility. Takeuchi proposes the green light functions as a 'traffic signal' which gives Gatsby 'the go-ahead to move onward to create the short-lived world founded upon his belief in mobility'.[163] In contrast, the absence of a green light adorning the geography of Lake Honoré and the White residential space beyond it, might be considered a consequence of the exclusionary dimensions of the American Dream. The tandem treatment of these two lake-land boundaries distinguishes the racial and class parameters of these two worlds; as a Black family, the Deads face additional barriers on their upward journey towards greater wealth and status.

The scene of the crash in Fitzgerald's novel marks the end of Gatsby's dream and his belief in the green light: 'the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us'.[164] The term 'orgastic' reveals Gatsby's yearning towards his very origins, which would entail a backwards movement towards what Takeuchi describes as 'the moment of insemination'.[165] For Gatsby and Milkman, a point of origin serves as a temporal spatial coordinate around which their forward progression is driven. The Sankofa principle, 'look to the past to inform the future', once again resonates with the narrative crux of these works—as with Parks's *Last Black Man* and Bonner's *The Purple Flower*.[166] In *The Great* Gatsby, Nick's intuitive understanding of this paradoxical progression: 'tomorrow we will run faster' summarises the temporal impossibility of the tragic American dream—that is a wish to father oneself in the ultimate act of self-creation.[167] Hence, Gatsby's dream is necessarily backwards in (temporal) direction. Milkman's quest, motivated by his desire for knowledge about his ancestral origins, is by no means an act of self-creation, but rather drives him towards a maternal origin in Pilate. Milkman's sense of rootedness is therefore situated within a decidedly matrilineal organisation of the past. This counter-hegemonic formulation of space recalls the memory of Milkman and Pilate's first encounter: Pilate 'sitting wide-legged' on the porch, as if in a birthing position, and Milkman gravitating toward her, seeing 'knees mostly, and elbows'.[168] This encounter symbolises a moment of rebirth for Milkman, as well as signalling a unique temporality, characterised by a seeming back and forth toggle with time.

Morrison's subversive treatment of the American dream in *Song of Solomon*, as demonstrated through this intertextual connection to *The Great Gatsby*, refracts meanings onto the racialised dimensions of the literary canon and its place in the American cultural imaginary. Morrison spatialises the literary canon in her series of essays, *Playing in the Dark* (1992), as she famously speculates

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[163] Yasuhiro Takeuchi, 'Gatsby's Green Light as a Traffic Symbol: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Motive Force', *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review,* 1.1 (2016), 198-214 (p.198) <http://doi:10.5325/fscotfitzrevi.14.1.0198>
[164] Ibid., p.198; F. Scott. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* [1925], ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.141.
[165] Yasuhiro Takeuchi, 'Gatsby's Green Light as a Traffic Symbol: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Motive Force', p.212.
[166]Diaspora Collective, 'Andrika Symbol Tells a Story' <https://thediasporacollective.com/blogs/discover/andikra-symbols-tell-a-story> [accessed 27 Feb 2023].
[167] F. Scott. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, p.141; Yasuhiro Takeuchi, 'Gatsby's Green Light as a Traffic Symbol: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Motive Force', p.198.
[168] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.36.

'whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature – individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation […] are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence?'[169] In this scene situated on the border of Lake Honoré, with Gatsby's green light looming suspended in an intertextual web of affiliation, one is reminded of Morrison's identification of a 'dark […] Africanist presence' as a defining characteristic of the canon. Here, the interplay between a signified 'green light' and Morrison's own act of writing from the 'dark' space of the margins, fathoms a realisation of her title: a metaphorical playing in the dark. Morrison's premise to *Playing in the Dark* underscores the determining role of race to the overall organisation of the American literary canon: 'it has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population [of African Americans]'.[170] For all Macon Dead II's efforts to ascend the rungs of a metaphorical social ladder, Milkman embodies an 'unsettled and unsettling' presence invested, at least by the end of the narrative, in embracing disorientation in the ultimate expression of freedom: flight. Morrison's narrative is metaphorically carrying out this playing in the dark of the canon via Milkman's movements and his unique experiential knowledge, which enables the text to signify upon national American values of innocence, freedom, and self-determination.

The characteristic duality of Milkman's movements extends beyond the figurative space of the canon and onto the geographical boundary of the lake in Honoré beach community, rendering a tangible Du Boisian 'color line'.[171] Katherine McKittrick articulates the colour line as an 'intellectual and material geography', a distinguishing boundary 'between what Du Bois calls "two worlds," in the United States'.[172] The spatial consequences of a colour line resonate in Magdalene's sceptical response to discovering her father's investment plans: 'What for? Those are white people's houses'.[173] Magdalene's classification of the urban environment along racial lines (in tandem with the social stratification of gender, class, and sexuality) emphasises the embeddedness of racial identity onto the landscape. The lake-land boundary constitutes a horizontal, and in this instance contested, spatial boundary, also drawing up the racial parameters of the American dream and its principles of upward mobility for *all* Americans. Du Bois refers to 'the problem of the color line' as 'the greatest problem of the twentieth century' and thus, for Macon Dead II, an opportunity for individual, but also collective racial progress, with monumental historical import.[174] Macon Dead II brushes off Magdalene's qualms: 'But in a few years – five or ten – a whole lot of coloureds will have enough to afford it'.[175] His explicit economic striving presents a confrontation with—and potential displacement of—a material colour line-

[169] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p.5.
[170] Ibid., pp.5-6.
[171] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (Chicago: McClurg & Co, 1953), p.10.
[172] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, p.xxii.
[173] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.33.
[174] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (Chicago: McClurg & Co, 1953), p.10.
[175] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.33.

cum-frontier. The journey is revealed as a glimpse into the future, one that exists in tension with Milkman's yearning toward the past. Milkman is poised to challenge the masculine tenets of expansion and domination that enable the colour line's continual reproduction.

Du Bois's theoretical underpinning, the *horizontal* colour line, draws this lake-land boundary into the discursive realm of verticality, indexed against Macon Dead II's embrace of the American dream. Morrison situates Honoré beach community as the apex of his vertical striving, over a Du Boisian 'veil'.[176] The American dream and its co-conspirator, the American frontier myth, champion equality as a hallmark of the nation's character, meanwhile demarcating space along racial lines. The psychic space of the abyss summoned by Milkman's 'flying blind', echoes this hierarchical expression of (racial) difference.[177] Du Bois invokes a more explicit form of vertical thinking within his philosophy of the 'Talented Tenth' which 'rises and pulls all that are worth saving up to their vantage ground'.[178] Du Bois elaborates, members of the Talented Tenth must 'guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst'.[179] Macon Dead II's car journey towards Lake Honoré presents a case for his would-be membership within the Talented Tenth, according to the politics of racial uplift; his venture would physically move wealthier members of the Black community into an affluent White community. Du Bois's charged terminology of 'Best' and 'Worst' projects onto the cartography of Michigan according to economic principles, and firmly within an uplift framework.

Du Bois's connection of this term 'death' with 'Worst' draws up an interesting parallel with the family name, Dead; given Macon Dead II's staunch views concerning racial uplift, Morrison effectively reconfigures the scale of verticality with regards to Du Boisian uplift, positioning death at both ends. That is to say Milkman's default path in keeping with a traditional masculine narrative and his father's uplift efforts, which would be to continue the Dead legacy, is positioned opposite to, and yet identifiably with, the 'death of the Worst'.[180] This rearrangement subverts the dominant paradigm of racial uplift in its capacity as a place-making strategy, and actually demonstrates scholar Katherine McKittrick's discussion of '[opening] up the possibility for thinking about the production of space as unfinished, a poetics of questioning'.[181] While the Dead family name originates from an act that is emblematic of White domination in the novel (a White drunken army official erroneously gives Macon the surname 'Dead'), Morrison threads the connotations of the name 'Dead' into a reworked and subversive imagining of racial uplift. Verticality enables such new meanings to be registered as Morrison distinguishes the family name upon the scale of verticality through the Dead family's investment in racial uplift ideology, and hence she attaches the notion of death to ideological uplift

[176] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (Chicago: McClurg & Co, 1953), p.10.
[177] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.33.
[178] W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Talented Tenth [1903]' in *The Future of the Race*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West (New York: Vintage, 1997), pp.131-57 (p.139).
[179] Ibid., p.133.
[180] Ibid., p.133.
[181] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, p.xxii.

doctrines. In doing so, Morrison upends Du Bois's vertical indexing of life and death as up and down, respectively.

Re-envisioning death and matrilineal trajectories

This recognition steers me to the trope of flight in Song of Solomon, which, in light of the various 'leaps' that occur across the novel, is synonymous with the act of falling. Together, the contradictory motions of ascent and descent enact the narrative's implicit treatment of death in open-ended terms. Flight also imbues the novel's geographies with 'a poetics of questioning', as it circumvents a traditional cartographical rendering of the landscapes.[182] The horizontal conceptualisation of forward and backwards movement—an oscillation around which the novel's premise so heavily revolves in terms of temporal progression, narrative progression, and cartographic boundaries—is complicated by manifestations of flight. Point in case with the car journey of Chapter Two, wherein Milkman's experience of 'flying blind' disrupts the two-dimensional contours of the vehicle's progress through the introduction of a vertical plane. The African Flight narrative situates such counter-hegemonic spatial encounters, as well as the novel more broadly, inside of a tradition centred on the legacy of chattel slavery. Scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert determines that some versions of the African Flight narrative in the late twentieth century contend with social and psychic death, in comparison to early adaptations of the narrative which sought to manage the 'persistent threat of physical death'.[183] Milkman Dead grapples with the 'social and psychic' death of the mid-twentieth century cultural landscape, in particular the racial climate of the North. I am especially interested in how the African Flight narrative further functions in *Song of Solomon* in a manner that resists representations of 'black death-boundness' and subverts a notion freedom fashioned through paradigms of uplift.[184] These analytical threads necessitate a detour from Chapter Two of the novel, in reach of a broader conceptualisation of how this trope of flight manifests across *Song of Solomon*.

Flight marks the creative origins of Morrison's novel. She drew inspiration from a collection of oral folklore compiled by the Workers Progress Association (WPA) during the 1930s; project organisers carried out interviews with 'Gullah residents of the Georgia Coastal Sea Islands'—most of whom had been previously enslaved.[185] Numerous interviewees recounted memories, or inherited stories, of the enslaved possessing the ability to fly, and returning to Africa in this way. The first printed record of the project, *Drums and Shadows* (1940), includes details of a story of flight recounted by Prince Sneed from White Bluff:

[182] Ibid., p.xxii.
[183] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.41.
[184] Ibid., p.41.
[185] Leila Kamali, '"Solomon's Leap: Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon' in *The Cultural Memory of Africa in African American and Black British Fiction, 1970-2000* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), pp.61-91 (p.62).

> Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabes wut wuzn climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two ub um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, an duh hoes wuz wukin by demsef. Duh dribuh say 'Wut dis?' an dey say, 'Kum buba yali kuni buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe,' quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye.[186]

Prince Sneed's recollection of this story passed down through generations resounds in each iteration of the African flight narrative in Morrison's *Song of Solomon.* In another interview from the WAP project that maps onto Morrison's novel, we learn of the story of Jones Davis who, according to his son, Solomon Davis, 'had not been heard of since his departure for his native land, some five or six years ago'.[187] Morrison amalgamates these narratives of flight and departure in the history of Milkman's grandfather, Solomon, who leaves his wife and children in returning to Africa, when leaping from what becomes a commemorative landscape: 'Solomon's leap'. The WAP project represents an effort to contest the erasure of Black subjectivity and agency in archival records of chattel slavery. Soyica Diggs Colbert underscores that the project 'attempted to capture stories that would have otherwise remained absent from the archive', also highlighting the inherent ambivalence of oral history, denoting orature as 'a system that disrupts the text as a totalizing form of knowledge.[188] As an oral history, *Song of Solomon*'s originary point is unreliable in its historical accuracy, multifarious in its amalgamation of historical anecdotes, and performance-oriented in Morrison's favouring of orature over text. As Morrison explains:

> Black people have a story, and that story has to be heard. There was an articulate literature before there was a print. There were griots [much like Circe in *Song of Solomon*]. They memorized it. People heard it. It is important that there is sound in my books—that you can hear it. That I can hear it.[189]

Morrison engages in Hartman's method of critical fabulation, intuiting a new narrative from fragments of flight, and in doing so writing back to these individuals' experiences. Referring to the written historical record regarding slavery, Morrison told in an interview of how she 'distrusted the sources' formulated through Western intellectual frameworks. The trope of flight coalesces with the unfixed mode of historical reproduction that oral history begets. Its echoes in *Song of Solomon* pre-empt blackness as redefining conventional Western paradigms of ascent and descent, burial and resurrection, amidst the disorienting mechanism of hegemonic verticality.

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[186] Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986 [1940]), p.74.
[187] Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986 [1940]), p.63.
[188] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.31.
[189] Cecil Brown, 'Interview with Toni Morrison', *Massachusetts Review*, 36.3 (1995), 455-473 (p.455).

From the outset of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison makes explicit that respectability politics are at play and marks out that flight will provide expression for the reification of this ideological system. The narrative commences with an invocation of flight: 'The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock'.[190] Morrison's language evokes verticality in the premise of Mr Smith's movement in an upward direction, from South to North. Morrison links this authorial decision to the geographical expression of freedom: 'The other side of Lake Superior is Canada, of course, the historic terminus of the escape route for black people looking for asylum'.[191] The journey involves crossing the highest lake in the United States, aptly named Lake *Superior*. Even the designated time of flight, three o'clock, summons an image of the hands on an analogue clock in a perpendicular angle, reiterating the significance of vertical and horizontal alignments. This perpendicularity mirrors a wing formation and in this sense encodes an association between the passage of time and flight. Indeed, instances of flight are critical temporal markers, indicative of birth, as much as they are of death throughout the narrative. In the instance of Mr Smith's leap from the roof of No-Mercy hospital and his subsequent death, a cause-effect relation is established with Milkman's birth at which point 'the first colored expectant mother was allowed to give birth inside its [No Mercy Hospital's] wards and not on its steps'.[192] The narrator surmises, 'it must have been Mr Smith's leap from the roof over their heads that made them admit her'.[193] While this interjection exacts the historical significance of this moment of racial progress, Milkman's birth is also symbolically aligned with the (downward—though Northbound) suicidal flight of Mr Smith. The concluding scene of *Song of Solomon*, which relates the circumstances of Milkman's leap, 'as fleet and bright as a lodestar' then brings the novel full circle.[194] Milkman acquires the same knowledge as Mr Smith, his great-grandad Solomon, and all those that flew before him: that flight, 'although it carries the possibility of failure and the certainty of danger, is toward change, an alternative way, a cessation of things-as-they-are'.[195] The conclusion of the narrative refracts this liberatory meaning onto the context of Mr Smith's flight, but also onto less evident iterations of flight, such as Milkman's experience of 'flying blind' in the car journey of Chapter Two. In turn, Morrison obfuscates the finality otherwise associated with the phenomenon of death via the legacy of the African Flight narrative, which positions Milkman's final leap as a form of empowerment, strength, and most significantly, freedom.

The preordained nature of this flight is emblematic of the legendary fall of Icarus (belonging to the Western classical tradition), wherein the concept of fate is fundamental. The myth relates the story of Icarus, who failed to heed his father Daedalus' warnings and his waxen wings melted when he flew

[190] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.3.
[191] Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28.1 (1989), 1-34 (p.29).
[192] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.5.
[193] Ibid., p.5.
[194] Ibid., p.377.
[195] Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', p.28.

too close to the sun. As such, the African Flight narrative exists in tension, in *Song of Solomon*, with the mythic resonances of the Western classical flight narrative. Scholar Ashley Tidey extrapolates this duality where she theorises the 'dual strivings' of a specifically Du Boisian double consciousness are at play; she states the novel 'exposes precisely this complicated coexistence of two cultural resonances—the African and the Western—that inform and reflect the development of the subjectivity of Milkman'.[196] Flight serves as a prime example of Tidey's proposition. *Song of Solomon'*s final lines imagine the actualisation of the African Flight narrative inside of an experiential geography: 'for he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it'.[197] The ambiguity surrounding Milkman's vital status is indicative of an unknowable sense of spatiality; it ends the novel on a note of stalled progress that recalls the temporal conditions of the psychic space of the abyss during the car journey in Chapter Two. The narrator entrusts the reader with the quandary of Milkman's physical whereabouts, drawing up an impulsive, inherent desire for a coherent sense of space, complete with definite spatial coordinates and static, recognisable geographies. Icarus's fall grants this coherence; his death is finite and represents his enrapture by the wonders of flight as a fatal marker of excessive ambition and desire. Death figures as a tragic punishment for Icarus's refusal to moderate his ambition and obey his father, Daedalus' instruction – that is to observe a particular flight path, which necessitated that Icarus travel neither too high, nor too low.

However, in *Song of Solomon* the 'African' rather than the 'Western' episteme ultimately dominates Milkman's experience of flight, so that by repeating the flight of his great-granddad, Milkman's story connects with and extends the African Flight narrative. While this tradition arises from no single fixed point of origin, Milkman's flight is accompanied by a return to the figure of the mother, whom he identifies in Pilate. The trope of flight is a generative narrative catalyst that in a sense 'extends Black life' through invoking multiple stories of flight, thereby partaking in the preservation of individual, as well as collective histories.[198] The matrilineal line in *Song of Solomon* that is uniquely forged between Milkman and his aunt is associated with preservation and the proliferation of life. Accordingly, Milkman's gravitation toward Pilate continually contours his journey. For example, Milkman's desire to return from Virginia to Michigan upon the revelation of his great-grandfather's flight is located in the prospect of Pilate's 'warm embrace'—before his final gesture of 'return' which anticipates their union beyond his flight.[199] With each of these returns to Pilate, Milkman withstands the gendered dimensions of Western kinship systems in his refusal to conform to patrilineal conventions. He wields agency from knowledge imparted by the women in his life, in particular their capacity to navigate 'uneven geographies' despite their limited mobility.[200]

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[196] Ashley Tidey, 'Limping or Flying? Psychoanalysis, Afrocentrism, and Song of Solomon', *College English*, 63.1 (2000), 48-70 (p.50) <http://doi:10.2307/379031>
[197] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.377.
[198] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements*, p.41.
[199] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.331.
[200] McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, p.24.

Song of Solomon marks Morrison's sole adoption of the traditional masculine narrative. Morrison positions the women on the periphery of narrative action. Milkman's quest is re-routed along a matrilineal trajectory, embedded within a male-dominated narrative. Morrison establishes a productive tension that engenders a critique of phallocentric frameworks. As scholar Susan Farrell points out, Morrison described the novel as her 'giggle' at 'the protomyth of the journey to manhood', thus reinforcing the importance of a gendered critique, one that has seen no shortage of (often conflicting) responses in Morrison scholarship.[201] The novel's publication date is significant in understanding the specific political orientations of the characters, as well as in questioning to what end their figures produce meaning. The majority of the action takes place during Milkman's twenties, and so situates the characters in 1950s America. Farrell identifies that Morrison writes back from the aftermath of the civil rights/Black power movements and, with Milkman's character, beckons a critique of the male-dominated Black power movement of the sixties.[202] This interpretation of authorial intent certainly resonates with the narrative's emphasis on backward gestures and the liberatory possibilities of historical re-envisioning. Subsequently the text, according to Susan Farrell, 'can be read as 'a feminist novel concerned with the African American "protomyth" of achieving 'manhood,' a novel that evokes both the possibility of flight and the question 'who'd he leave behind?'.[203] Here, Farrell foregrounds a question by a woman who takes Milkman in during his travels, Sweet. She asks Milkman about his great-grandfather: 'who'd he leave behind?'[204] This question also recalls Milkman's habitual focus on what lies behind him. Morrison conveys Milkman's transformative acknowledgement of the part played by the women in his life, of whose sacrifices and nurturing he is at first dismissive. Milkman's shift in understanding around the position of women—in particular their demonstrations of agency despite their limited mobility—is central to his progress in recovering his family history. Morrison provides an insight into the way that Black feminist discourse responds to the explicitly masculine domain of racial uplift ideology. Indeed, the female figures in *Song of Solomon* face an array of limitations, from Milkman's sisters and his mother Ruth's state of domestic entrapment to Pilate's rejection by society—and yet all the Dead women are conveyers of critical knowledge toward Milkman's quest. Before his final leap, Milkman first of all reformulates his perception of his mother from 'insubstantial' and 'too shadowy for love', and instead contemplates her restricted position, questioning, 'what might she have been like had her husband loved her?'.[205] Much like Alice Walker's womanist figure, whose 'ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time', Ruth's preoccupation with nurture and cultivation is a form of empowerment.[206]

[201] Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28.1 (1989), 1-34 (p.129).
[202] Susan Farrell, 'Who'd He Leave Behind?': Gender and History in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon', *Bucknell Review*, 39.1 (1995), 131–150 (pp.136-137).
[203] Ibid., p.137.
[204] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.328.
[205] Ibid., p.75; Ibid., p.300.
[206] Ibid., p.242.

Upon recognising his independence from his mother at the age of twenty-two, Milkman naively viewed Ruth 'as a frail woman content to do tiny things; to grow and cultivate small life that would not hurt her if it died'.[207]Although Ruth finds herself cut off from society, her agency subsumed by her husband's overbearing status, and closer to a state of social death than most in the novel, Morrison takes care to convey her persistent tenacity for life. Likewise, Milkman scrutinises his own conduct towards Hagar, questioning, 'Why did he never sit down and talk to her?'[208] Most significantly perhaps, Milkman recognises Pilate as a maternal figure and while in Shalimar realises, 'Hundreds of miles away, he was homesick for her'.[209] This series of revelations hints at a sense of rootedness not previously demonstrated by Milkman, and highlights the significance of women, exclusively, in challenging his self-interested demeanour and establishing spaces from which he derives comfort and belonging.

Just as racial uplift, which serves as a historical context for *Song of Solomon*, presents a phallocentric framework, a marker of manhood, African American historical recovery designates an emphatically female domain that necessitates non-linear modes of knowledge and time, within heterogeneous spaces. In *Song of Solomon*, Black womanhood seems to operate largely outside of the tenets of verticality, offering the potential for a self-affirming space removed from hierarchical Western place-making strategies. It is unsurprising, given this framework of spatiality, that the car journey Northward represents an upwards movement. After all, the novel is itself structured on and around a vertical axis, with Milkman journeying down South and encountering new terms on which to implicate himself in the production of space. Jennifer Terry argues 'the sites of North and South are key to the author's portrayal of Black dislocation with the demographic shift of the Great Migration […] also bearing a symbolic relation to the intercontinental displacement of the Middle Passage'.[210] Terry invokes the vertical axis in mapping the history of racial uplift onto the memory of the Middle Passage. Meanwhile, the prosperous are rising northwards, marking a migratory process that invokes verticality, yet again, as a geographical gauge of power and progress. As McKittrick reminds us—lifting off Édouard Glissant's 'poetics of landscape'—'there are different sets of geographic tools available, which are anchored, primarily, in nonlinearity, contradictory histories, dispossession, and an "infinite variety" of landscapes'.[211] These heterogeneous conditions recall the psychic space of the abyss—the metaphysical realm in which Milkman experiences 'flying blind'. Drawing on such geographic tools, Milkman rejects Macon Dead II's consuming investment in the tenets of racial uplift and moves toward a reformed relationship to space.

The car serves as a vehicle for this journey of selfhood. Just as 'Macon Dead's Hearse' maps out Macon Dead II's relationship to place, Milkman's own experience of owning and driving a car in

[207] Ibid., p.64.
[208] Ibid., p.301.
[209] Ibid., p.300.
[210] Jennifer Terry, 'Buried Perspectives: Narratives of Landscape in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, *Narrative Inquiry,* 17.1 (), 93-118 (2007), p.97.
[211] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds,* p.xxiii.

Chapter Eleven sets him apart from his father.[212] His father's car journeys are 'much too important for Macon [Dead II] to enjoy', whereas Milkman is elated by the experience of driving.[213] In a nod back to the car journey of Chapter Two wherein Milkman grounds the journey to a halt with his announcement, 'I have to go to the bathroom', the narrator summarises Milkman's journey as driver: 'He was his own director – relieving himself when he wanted to'.[214] Its progress uncharted and contingent on the knowledge of locals, the vehicle encourages camaraderie. The narrator explains, '[b]y the time he bought the car, his morale had soared and he was beginning to enjoy the trip: his ability to get information and help from strangers, their attraction to him, their generosity'.[215] Milkman's father receives a very different set of responses from his community: 'he never had a blown tire, never ran out of gas […] He hailed no one and no one hailed him'.[216] Even the community's nickname for the Packard, 'Macon Dead's Hearse', insists that while the car might serve as a vehicle for elevation within a racial uplift framework, the journey is one towards burial, or social death, and so must constitute a form of futile striving.[217] Milkman's own potential to re-spatialise and navigate toward a deeper attachment to the geographies around him unfolds from his backward-facing position in his father's green Packard.

This example of embodied resistance to his father's progress, as well as his disorientation inside a psychic abyss, anticipates his journey into his own family's past and their connection to the phenomenon of flight. The car journey sets out a directional framework for the progression of the novel as a whole, mapping Milkman's ensnarement between two opposing but mutually constitutive cultural resonances: 'the African and the Western'.[218] Western modes of progress are positioned in tension with the project of African-American historical recovery, while the very value systems attached to 'Western senses of spatiality' are denaturalised by a vertical conceptualisation of the historical body, racial uplift ideology, the angular expectations of the body, and the geographies of North and South.[219] As such, Morrison presents a layered narrative cartography of ideological struggle that is formulated around 'the West's vertical hegemony', which is itself bound by geographical discourses such as – and I draw on examples by Katherine McKittrick—'territory, body/land possession, and public property'.[220] Milkman's crucial journey towards Solomon's leap in the latter half of the novel is foremost a spatial project that requires he refuse these normative concerns, and that he reconceptualises his relationship to, and participation in, the production of space. Morrison subsequently depicts counter-hegemonic spatial practices toward existing paradigms of progress, articulating an aesthetic of resistance that Milkman embodies in his ultimate reorientation through flight.

[212] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* p.33.
[213] Ibib., p.32.
[214] Ibid., p.34; Ibid., p.260.
[215] Ibid., p.260.
[216] Ibid., p.32.
[217] Ibid., p.33.
[218] Ashley Tidey, 'Limping or Flying? Psychoanalysis, Afrocentrism, and Song of Solomon', p.50.
[219] Elleza Kelley, 'Follow the Tree Flowers': Fugitive Mapping in Beloved,' p.183.
[220] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds,* p.56.

Lifting the veil of ignorance

Verticality serves as a critical apparatus concerning systems of difference, its stratifying dimension institutes and extends uneven geographies of power. Parks, Bonner, and Morrison create 'workable material and imaginary geographies', possessed of the narrative capacity to re-envision racialized histories of violence.[221] Just as the tandem operation of burial and resurrection complicates teleological formulation of the past, this attention to angularities of agency in texts spanning the Harlem Renaissance to the final decade of the twentieth century has highlighted the importance of looking to the past and preserving cultural memory. Through the mapping of cultural coordinates and hence the reification of power relations, images of verticality reveal angles of agency in the works of Parks, Bonner, and Morrison. They offer a discursive space to reckon with coercive forms of progress. Material sites of verticality possess metaphorical resonances of agency and abjection and, in concluding this chapter, I turn to perhaps the most iconic material representation of racial uplift politics in the US.

Figure 9 Statue of Booker T. Washington "Lifting the Veil of Ignorance," by Charles Keck located at Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama The George F. Landegger Collection of Alabama Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

[221] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, p.56.

The above figure depicts a monument of Booker T Washington 'lifting the veil of ignorance' from a formerly enslaved student. Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man' in his novel of the same name famously visits the sculpture and notes 'the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave'.[222] The sculptor, Charles Keck, elected to feature a book, plow, and an anvil to represent Washington's legacy as an advocate of industry, education and economic progress. Centrally positioned on the grounds of the Tuskegee institute he founded in Alabama, the monument visually narrates the Washingtonian tenets of uplift, participating in a storied version of the US in the period of reconstruction. Ellison's narrator summarises the tension between notions of agency and abjection that have characterised a trajectory of debate surrounding the visual narrative this sculpture evokes; he describes how he is 'unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place'.[223] The choice of a veil reflected a repudiation of Du Bois's work on double consciousness, a concept that had gained traction in 1922 when the institute erected the statue. The imagined topographies of *The Last Black Man, The Purple Flower,* and *Song of Solomon* innovate an understanding of the ambiguity suspended in the vertical scale that the veil invokes. Across all three texts, I have foregrounded the significance of verticality to the ideology of racial uplift as a place-making strategy, which pre-empts blackness as redefining conventional understanding of progress and freedom. The contradictory motion of flying and falling converge in the ambivalence of Washington's veil. With the image of verticality in mind, I approach images of holes to contemplate, again, how the historical body takes shape. Hence, in the next chapter, I move from a comprehension of verticality as a hegemonic bulwark of statuesque 'civility', to the image of the hole as a site of infinite possibility and reorientation. As is made clear by the rich interpretive potential of Parks, Bonner, and Morrison's rendering of uplift and historical loss, the critical work of etching out historical gaps in spatio-racial terms is essential to acknowledging the cultural and material architectural rootedness of their affective nature.

[222] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952] (London: Penguin, 1965), pp.33-34.
[223] Ibid., pp.33-34.

Chapter 2: Holes

What's funny is Last Black Man is about the creation of the hole and then The America Play takes place in a huge hole, an excavation.
-Suzan-Lori Parks, Interview with Han Ong.[1]

In this chapter, I argue Suzan-Lori Parks deploys images of holes to re-present erased narratives of African American history. I focus on her 1994 work, *The America Play*, and her play-diary project *365 Plays/365 Days* (published in 2007). In spatial terms, my analysis moves from cosmic realms to the ground of the Earth. I explore the way Parks positions black holes as a metaphor for the many unknowns of African American history, before shifting my focus to her deployment of the ground itself as a site of historical excavation. With this shift, I move from Parks's *365* project, in which she gestures towards the Middle Passage as a historical hole, to *The America Play*, in which the Founding Father, Abraham Lincoln, serves as a key historical referent. Against the multiple temporal directions the play seems to embrace, Parks's titular figure, the *Foundling* Father, invokes Lincoln's presidency, his assassination, and his subsequent mythologization. I begin by contemplating Parks's 'Great Hole of History' (a replica of which comprises the setting of *The America Play*) as I delineate the significance of theatrical performance to my focus on hole imagery as a key analytic. In setting out this shape's formative relationship to African American theatrical and literary traditions, I retrace this project's overarching concern with my five key analytics: race, time, performance, materiality, and the thematic interplay of burial and resurrection.

Since its inception, the African American theatrical body has engaged with the narrative silences that permeate American history, particularly those silences that signify the violent legacy of transatlantic slavery that is central to the cultural and political formations of present-day America. These narrative silences also conceal an origin story of the history of slavery in the Americas. It is an origin story buried amongst the innumerable, irretrievable stories of the victims of the Middle Passage that inspires Glissant's address to the Atlantic Ocean in *Poetics of Relation*, 'your chasms are our unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories'.[2] In the context of historical representation, the narrative erasure of origins carries momentous stakes, insofar as a total negation of origins would gesture toward an untenable present. That is to say, origins create the capacity to exist, or perform, 'in relation to' some seemingly immutable singular event.[3] The absence of such an event in the context of performative historical re-presentation stretches the notion of repetition as an 'analytical category',

[1] Suzan-Lori Parks and Han Ong, 'Interviews: Suzan-Lori Parks' in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young, reprinted from *BOMB* magazine, Spring 1994 (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp.37-45 (p.41).
[2] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.7.
[3] Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* informs my conceptualisation of origins and relationality.

engendering alternate forms of historical improvisation.[4] In such instances, historical holes signal this necessity to move beyond the limitations of representation, to offer alternate vantage points for an understanding of the past.

Theatrical performance, too, shares in this desire towards an origin, or an original. As Peggy Phelan remarks:

> The real inhabits the space that representation cannot produce – and in this failure theatre relies on repetition and mimesis to produce substitutes for the real. Behind the effects of the real is a desire to experience a first cause, an origin, an authentic beginning which can only fail because the desire is experienced and understood from and through repetition.[5]

The documentation of history also encapsulates this inherent 'failure' of theatrical representation to which Phelan alludes. As Parks insists, 'Theatre is the perfect place to make history'.[6] Indeed, the visual, physical, and ephemeral qualities of theatre are distinguishing features in this project of historical re-presentation. Theatre, as a medium that anticipates material elements—bodies, props, an audience—is well suited to the task of redressing the dearth of African American history available in material, archival contexts. To this end, the stage is a vessel that generates material knowledge from absence, or a burial ground where audiences bear witness to the resurrection of historical losses. Performances, through their very 'happening', enter the historical realm; Parks explains 'a play is the blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history'.[7] The effect of such dramatic interventions is a dislocation/reformulation of the seeming fixedness of the past and the formation of a site for mourning and remembrance. As Soyica Diggs Colbert notes, African American writers such as Parks 'deploy performance to resituate black people in time and space'.[8] This renegotiation of historical time courses through the African American theatrical body.

Parks's thematic focus on the tandem operation of burial and resurrection throughout her oeuvre is instrumental to her renegotiation of historical time. In *The America Play*, the setting: 'The Great Hole of History', encapsulates multiple meanings that operate through this thematic framework of burial and resurrection. A chief meaning is Parks's deployment of the hole as a metaphor for the Middle Passage. I contemplate the historical valences of the Middle Passage in relation to Parks's 'Great Hole of History' in the final section of this chapter; however, contemporary insights into Middle Passage epistemologies

[4] See Soyica Diggs Colbert et al. discuss repetition as an analytical category, including its limits, in their introduction ('Tidying Up after Repetition') to *Race and Performance After Repetition*, ed. by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones Jr., Shane Vogel (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2020), pp.1-28 (p.8).
[5] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* [1993] (London and New York: Routledge, reprinted 2004), p.126.
[6] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession' in *The America Play and Other Works* (NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.3-5, p.4.
[7] Ibid., p.4.
[8] Soyica Diggs Colbert, "Overture: rites of reparation" in *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.1-19, p.12.

merit consideration from the outset. Scholar Michelle Wright, in her study *Physics of Blackness,* highlights the commonplace conceptualisation of the Middle Passage as a 'beginning' spacetime coordinate for the mapping of Black diasporic history. Wright explains, 'our constructs of blackness are largely historical and more specifically based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progress narrative'.[9] Such linear progress narratives are discernible within discourses on blackness, which Wright continues, 'locate themselves in the history of the Middle Passage, linking our cultural practices and expressions, our politics and social sensibilities, to the historical experience of slavery in the Americas'.[10] Wright problematises this linear conceptualisation of space and time as a prerequisite to representing Black identity—as did Marita Bonner in *The Purple Flower,* in connection with Booker T. Washington's teachings on racial uplift. Michelle Wright's linkage of linear progress narratives with the Middle Passage draws up a predicament that is also lodged in the critical posture of this study; I explore the way certain Black women writers have complicated (specifically Western) governing systems of meaning, in particular their operation through linear formulations of time. How can scholarship on Middle Passage counter-histories work beyond notions of linear time and Enlightenment progress, while simultaneously attending to the historical weight of the Middle Passage as a 'beginning' coordinate that engendered devastating violence and loss?

I argue that Parks deploys the metaphor of the hole in responding to this knotty functionality of historical representation in her work. I examine the image of the historical hole that echoes throughout her oeuvre, and which forms the setting of her 1994 work, *The America Play* as 'the Great Hole of History' in replica form. As a marker of the Middle Passage, the hole conveys the historical trauma and wounding that this history represents, delineating material, conceptual parameters for that which marks a site of both burial and resurrection. Burial, that is, because of the two million or more enslaved Africans who did not survive the Middle Passage, their stories left unrecorded. Resurrection as in the remembrance, through performance, of those murdered, and the staging of new historical narratives. Burial and resurrection contest linearity, imparting a cyclical structure throughout Parks's drama. I want to emphasise these themes in their verb state, "to bury" "to resurrect", because Parks enacts their transformative potential—their temporal intervention. Nevertheless, Parks's narratives do not partake in a process of recovering the stories of those captive Africans who died during the Middle Passage. Rather, I argue that Parks shares with Saidiya Hartman's objective, as described by Hartman in her landmark essay 'Venus in Two Acts', by 'enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration'.[11] For Parks, to invoke the history of the Middle Passage through the metaphor of the 'Great Hole of History' is also to dwell in the very contradiction of historical re-presentation.

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[9] Michelle Wright, *Physics of blackness: Beyond the middle passage epistemology* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p.4.
[10] Ibid., p.4.
[11] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts,', *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism,* 12.2 (2008), 1-14 (p.11) <http://doi:10.1215/-12-2-1>

While the hole, made visible on the space of the page or stage, refutes linearity by proposing the simultaneity of time and space, it also renders the Middle Passage as part of a continuum of historical loss, a continuum that relies on linear formulations of time for coherence. This chapter then inhabits this conceptual slippage (or hole) by viewing images of holes across Suzan-Lori Parks's works as coordinates that map out this continuum of loss, but which tether both fictional narrative and historical fragments, always foregrounding the presentness of the past in non-linear time. Through this temporal friction, Parks's hole imagery registers manifold layers of historical ambiguity. Historical holes, characterised by a longing for knowledge and coherence, converge. These include: the very beginnings of the universe (via the mysteries of the black hole); the Middle Passage (as 'the Great Hole of History'); the holes invoked by African American writers such as William Wells Brown within *Escape: A Leap for Freedom*; even the bullet wound of Abraham Lincoln, whose relentless memorialisation and remembrance by historical officiators, as I will examine in the final section of this chapter, precipitates an iterative loss of the Lincoln beneath the myth.[12] I ask: how does the resurrection of these buried histories and their spatial association with hole imagery engender new modes of thinking through a storied version of America?

I argue that this spatial formation enables Parks to simultaneously generate and contend with multiple intellectual threads of historical representation, including though not limited to grand questions around the universe and its origins, parodies of national narratives of innocence, and specific imaginative renderings of Black life. Parks's ability to combine these geographical scales is, I contend, a technique made possible by the image of the hole and the meanings it accumulates. The silences with which the African American theatrical body is concerned obscure a beginning, but one that is, as Saidiya Hartman says of African American history: 'a story predicated upon impossibility—listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives'.[13] Subsequently, literature and performance spheres have offered a means of historical revision and recuperation both during, and in the afterlife of slavery, as a means to establish new historical referents wrought through these frameworks of Black loss. Heidi Holder describes how African American playwrights writing in the early twentieth century often 'attempted to fill a perceived void in their history by creating dramas of heroes and revolutionaries, such as Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner'.[14] This recurrent deployment of drama to re-envision the past highlights the value of performance as a site of historical malleability and even healing. Such stories of resilience present crucial interventions to whitewashed narratives of American history, particularly those designed to gloss over the racial terrors and violence of chattel slavery and the Middle Passage. Holder refers to a group of dramatists who strive to 'fill in' the holes in their history and foreground Black subjectivity by means of individual stories of resilience and

[12] William Wells Brown, *The Escape; Or, A Leap For Freedom* [1858] (Levelland, Texas: Laughing Dogs Press, 2019).
[13] Ibid., pp.2-3.
[14] Heidi J. Holder, 'Strange Legacy: The history plays of Suzan-Lori Parks' in *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook*, ed. by Kevin J. Wetmore Jr And Alycia Smith-Howard (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.18-28 (p.18).

exceptionalism. As Holder stresses in the following passages of her study, there exists a variety of further models of historical drama that make up the African American theatrical body. These often riff on traditional representations of US history—as demonstrated by Parks's repeated allusions to the mythologized figure of Abraham Lincoln in her 'Lincoln plays', which play on this former president's historical reputation as 'the great emancipator'. Other playwrights foreground African American traditions, values, and ways of being, by weaving historical fragments and imaginings that centre, rather than negate, Black life. As well as recalling Alain Locke's 'New Negro' aesthetic, this mode of historical drama generates materiality and meaning from the absences borne of official archives that too often index Black life via Black death.[15] Katherine McKittrick illuminates the dehumanising and violent nature of the archive as singular knowledge source in this context:

> The slave's status as object-commodity, or purely economic cargo, reveals that a black archival presence not only enumerates the dead and dying, but also acts as an origin story. This is where we begin, this is where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving.[16]

African American theatre, along with African American literature more broadly, is punctuated by writers' engagements with history which oftentimes position the 'void' or 'holes' as a space of exploration, the silences as a source of new meanings, the form as response to 'stories predicated upon impossibility'.[17]

Broadening my focus on the role of spatiality in the domain of historical narration, I turn to the image of the hole as a spatial formation that evinces the 'perceived void' to which scholar Heidi Holder refers.[18] I add to Holder's discussion that the hole introduces a dimension which, when centred as a historical lens, invites novel positionalities towards histories unseen. This critical perspective invites new meanings around texts published prior to 'the spatial turn' of the late 1990s as demonstrating an enduring attentiveness to holes—notably as a means to enact historical redressal.[19] For example, the cracked boards of Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (published in 1928), through which her characters fall towards an 'atavistic past' (as in Jonathan Kalb's interpretation), invite a companion reading to my own in Chapter One of this study.[20] Such a reading might foreground the metaphorical role of the cracked board, substituting verticality for the hole as a key analytic. The '6 by 6 by 6' coffin

[15] See Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. by Alain Locke (New York, Albert and Charles Boni, 1925) Hein Online.
[16] Katherine McKittrick, 'Mathematics Black Life', *The Black Scholar*, 44.2 (2014) 16-28 (p.17) https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413684
[17] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts,', p.2.
[18] See Heidi J. Holder, 'Strange Legacy: The history plays of Suzan-Lori Parks' in *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook*, ed. by Kevin J. Wetmore Jr And Alycia Smith-Howard (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.18-28.
[19] See *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Barney Warf and Santa Arias (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
[20] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.31.

in Parks's *Last Black Man* likewise affords a promising textual anchor to apply 'holes' as an analytic.[21] Having examined Parks's *Last Black Man* in the previous chapter, I focus on Parks's *365* project and *The America Play* in this chapter, tracing how the hole innovates Parks's own textual legacy. In an interview with playwright Han Ong, Parks commented: '[w]hat's funny is *Last Black Man* is about the creation of the hole and then *The America Play* takes place in a huge hole, an excavation'.[22] Holes shape her oeuvre, determining originary coordinates that, as in Parks's above comment, emphasise the significance of burial.

Parks also echoes and subverts traditions borne through Western canonical texts (for example by Percy Bysshe Shelley, a figure whose poetry I place in dialogue with Parks's *365* project). For Parks, the gaps between her works and those belonging to a Western literary canon consisting of predominantly White authors, posit historical possibility. Morrison's groundbreaking *Playing in the Dark* (1993) critiques the recurring themes of American national literature and facilitates a spatial framework to understand these, in positioning 'individualism, masculinity […] acute and ambiguous moral problematics' as a response to 'a dark, abiding, singing, Africanist presence'.[23] Morrison sketches the dimensions of an overwhelmingly White literary tradition shaped by exterior designs of blackness that haunt its constitutive parts. Parks, like Morrison, mines this darkness. She extends Morrison's discussion of this canonical 'haunting' where she declares in an essay aptly titled 'Possession'—published just three years after Morrison's essay—'[t]he history of Literature is in question'.[24] Parks's diagram in 'Elements of Style' (see Figure 5) gives apt expression to the way her works contest a storied version of America through her equivocation of historical timeline and narrative arc. She contends, 'Standard Time Line and Standard Plot Line are in cahoots!'.[25] This chapter responds to Parks and Morrison's comments on the instability of American history that the African American literary tradition underpinned from its inception; I investigate the way that Parks innovates a literary tradition of holey imagery, in recognition of the historical import of the literary canon.

The first play to be published by an African American writer (in 1858) was titled *Escape; A Leap for Freedom* by William Wells Brown.[26] The play's title alone conjures the image of a hole as a logical consequence of the 'leap for freedom'. This leap reflects the thrust of the narrative towards a freedom unencumbered by disciplinary overtones of time and space and, like Glissant's *Poetics of Relation,* this freedom is projected into an 'abyss'.[27] In *Escape,* a central character, Glen, jumps from a window to escape from an overseer, also striking him over the head with a club in a violent act of

[21] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man,* p.127.
[22] Suzan-Lori Parks and Han Ong, 'Interviews: Suzan-Lori Parks' in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person,* ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young, reprinted from BOMB magazine, Spring 1994 (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp.37-45 (p.41).
[23] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* p.5.
[24] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.
[25] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Elements of Style', p.11.
[26] William Wells Brown, *The Escape; Or, A Leap For Freedom* [1858] (Levelland, Texas: Laughing Dogs Press, 2019).
[27] See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* p.6.

resistance. The window, rendered here as a hole towards freedom, evokes the ending of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, which sees the protagonist, Milkman, leap (also toward freedom) from a gulch referred to by locals as Solomon's leap. Just as the history of the Middle Passage presents a hole that persists through space and time, Glen's flight through the window and Milkman's flight from Solomon's leap bore this hole further in an act of preservation and a progression towards freedom from slavery and its afterlife.[28] Each work also gestures towards the tradition of the African Flight narrative and so represents a moment of return in geographical terms.[29] Brown's play marks the beginning of the African American theatrical tradition and, given what Parks refers to as 'the special relationship between theatre and real life', partakes in defining the contours of historical memory.[30] Parks argues this relationship between theatre and real life necessitates that playwrights 'locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down'.[31] She articulates the canon of African American drama as a critical site of historical narration. The hole, as a facilitator of an echo, again marks a continuum through which a fuller picture of the lives of enslaved people might be examined and understood. Where these works 'hear the bones sing', as in Parks's words, the hole is the vessel for the echo.[32] In turn, William Wells Brown and Morrison's texts convey into written form the ephemeral record of history represented by the oral tradition of folktales. Their works transmit ephemeral oral histories to the status of material text. Moreover, the published version of *Escape* recuperates the ephemerality of the original folk tales within each staged production.

In Morrison and Brown's texts, the image of an abyss serves as an entry point to freedom, however, the historical resonances of the hole do not end there. The hole also serves as a site of protection from the violence at stake in re-presenting histories of slavery. Historically, discourses of visibility have played a momentous role in defining categories of race, and perpetuating notions of Black inferiority through performance and spectacle. The medium of theatre, a form of cultural production that anticipates visual reception, was deployed for centuries in Western theatre to perpetuate harmful hierarchies of race through, for example, the minstrel tradition. However, the African American theatrical body has produced counter-narratives that disrupt normative associations between knowing and seeing, and therefore attenuate the cultural weight of racist caricatures and stereotypes. Beyond the field of theatre, the African American literary tradition has illumed ways in which Black visuality and performance have attached manifold, destructive meanings to Black bodies. As Ta Nehisi Coates writes, 'you must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics […] all land, with great violence, upon the body'.[33] Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* serves as a prime example. In Ellison's novel,

[28] Soyica Diggs Colbert argues for the comparative treatment of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Brown's play in her chapter 'Flying Africans in Spaceships' in *Black Movements* (New Brunswick, Camden and Newark, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2017), pp.23-57.
[29] As discussed in Chapter One.
[30] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.
[31] Ibid., p.4.
[32] Ibid., p.4.
[33] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Melbourne, Text, 2015), p.10.

the hole, with its capacity for descent, serves as a refuge from the racialised regimes of power that shape the narrator's experience in the world aboveground. Ellison's unnamed narrator explains '[t]he point is that I now find a home – or a hole in the ground, as you will'.[34] In this same sense, holes in the ground represent a crucial site of analysis in Parks's dramatic works. In this chapter, I consider the seeming pull of subterranean spaces and the tensions that emerge through representational practices of concealing and revealing.

The site of outer space, too, represents a space removed from regimes of visuality and even departs from the rules of physics that govern the Earth. I argue Parks invokes examples of extreme space-time curvature (such as the big bang or near a black hole), in such a way that temporality is constantly in flux in the narrative spaces of her works. Where examples of extreme space-time curvature occur, 'Einstein's general relativistic laws predict that the curvature should be extremely nonlinear – among the most nonlinear phenomena in the Universe'.[35] Where better to probe the (im)possibilities of historical re-presentation and grand philosophical questions around origins and the simultaneity of time? The traces of the big bang in the present—the explosion's thermal imprint formed by cosmic background radiation—also serve as a metaphor for this exploration, marking a demonstrable model for figuring non-linear space and time.

Historical blank spots, space-time geometries, and the limits of dramatic representation in Suzan-Lori Parks's 'The Blank Before the World'

In a 1994 *BOMB* magazine interview with Han Ong, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks reveals her primary motivation as an artist: 'I write plays because I love black people'.[36] She recalls one Black actor's response upon rehearsing her play: 'This is for us', and continues, 'I had forgotten that, of course, it is for him. It's exactly for him. I have to feel I'm fulfilling a need. The need sucks hard—like a black hole—and that's why I write the way I do'.[37] Parks's literary raison d'etre—her 'need'—takes cosmic shape as an invisible black hole in this exchange, an image that renders her writing process a movement across space and time, and into the unknown. This exchange also intimates the significance of representation as a concept that informs Parks's writing; the gravitational pull of a black hole evinces Parks's desire to represent the lives of African Americans whose histories have been, as she describes,

[34] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952] (London, Penguin Books, 2014), p.6.
[35] Kip S. Thorne, *Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy* [1994] (London and Basingstoke: Papermac [reprint], 1995), p.363
[36] Han Ong and Suzan-Lori Parks, 'An Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks', *BOMB*, 1.47 (1994), 46–50 (p.48) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40425048> [accessed 3 November 2021].
[37] Ibid., p.49.

'unrecorded, dismembered, washed out'.[38] As such, Parks's works grapple with fundamental questions surrounding the representation of erased histories, as well as the racial violence and trauma by which these histories are marked. Two of Parks's most well-known works, *The America Play* (1995) and the novel, *Getting Mother's Body* (2003), demonstrate this underpinning theme of historical erasure through the motif of digging.[39] *The America Play* is set in a replica of 'The Great Hole of History' and its protagonist, The Foundling Father, is a gravedigger. *Getting Mother's Body*, as the title suggests, centres on the exhumation of protagonist Billy Mae's dead mother in search of her rumoured valuable jewellery. Each of these narratives posit the earth as containing historical truths and foreground the significance of collective re-membrance through the representation of the family unit. Parks expands on this interest in digging and holes in her play-diary project *365 Days/365 Plays* which incorporates various 'holey' plays, as Parks refers to them. For example, an entry for November 27th, titled 'Hole' is summarised as follows: 'Man digs hole, woman watches, but there's more to it than that'.[40] In this play, and so many others, Parks explicates the relationship between the earth and the material knowledge contained within its depths.

However, Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*, in addition to affirming her interest in digging and holes, also highlights Parks's interest in cosmic realms as a metaphor for the unexplored, the unknown, and subsequently, for possibility. Her plays appear to reach toward, though never quite inhabit, a cosmic realm. The entry for 20th November, for example, is titled: 'The Ends of the Earth'. The ends, however, turns out to be 'just a sign' rather than the 'place of remarkable spirit and beauty' that the protagonist anticipates.[41] The entry for 3rd April, 'First Beginning', opens with the following stage direction: 'Drumroll and a crash of cymbals, Fanfare of a 1000 sounds. Galactic explosion. Performance ends'. These directions are followed by dialogue between "1" and "2", interlocutors who consider the performance and its meaning, foregrounding the simulacra nature of any attempt to represent the 'Big bang' explosion.[42] In terms of performance, the representation of the origins of the universe necessitates a speculative dimension, as a historical moment that can neither be seen, nor wholly understood within existing epistemological frameworks. Its ephemerality is highlighted in the project of Parks's endeavour to reproduce this moment on the stage—to produce presence from 'nothing'. These examples demonstrate Parks's pronounced interest in the origins of time as a point of departure, but they also foreground the concept of beginnings as a basis for historical recovery, and the project of re-making. With the subject matter of the birth of the universe, the traditional boundaries between an authentic past and the imaginative scope of narratives left unrecorded, collapse in on themselves. What remains is a

[38] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.
[39] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Getting Mother's Body* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003)
[40] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Hole' in *365 Days/365 Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), pp.27-31; Quote on p.380 in 'The Plays: A Table of Contents' in *365 Days/365 Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), pp.379-399.
[41] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Ends of the Earth' in *365 Days/365 Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), pp.16-17 (p.17).
[42] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'First Beginning' in *365 Days/365 Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), p.168.

revelation of the unsteady structures of knowledge inherent to the illusion of an immutable past. Saidiya Hartman's incisive provocations hint at the complex nature of Parks's creative endeavour, also drawing into view the formative function of historical holes and (im)possibilities, within the African American literary tradition: she asks '[h]ow can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?' and 'what is required to imagine a free state or to tell an impossible story?'[43] As Parks confronts such questions in her subject matter, she draws on the vast distances and scale of the universe; its black holes and chasms of undetermined matter serve as symbols for the many unknowns of African American history.

This section explores the role of black holes as an affective dimension in Parks's work, arguing their significance extends far beyond the immediate scope of her methodological allusions, and into the very architecture of her plays. Parks's reliance on such imagery in elucidating the "why" of her work in her interview with Han Ong is a fitting point of departure that posits the origins of her work and the physical world as inextricably intertwined. This linkage presents an analytical opening to contend with the (often dizzying) spatiotemporal settings of Parks's history plays; what happens if readers do as Parks does, and position the black holes as a symbolic referent for the exploration of the playwright's key concerns, such as historical erasure, the African American literary tradition, and the legacy of Transatlantic slavery—to name just a few? I explore Parks's *365 Days/365* project, specifically the final two play-diaries titled, 'The Blank Before the World' and '365 Days/365 Plays' to argue that the development of Parks's narratives are to some extent informed by the quantum physics that govern the cosmos, and in particular those regions of space-time known as black holes. This critical posture necessitates the adoption of space and time as key analytics in conjunction with Parks's endeavour to counter, through the creation of historical events, a Western tradition of African American historical erasure. As Parks attests, 'Through each line of the text I'm rewriting the Time Line – creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined'.[44] The association of black holes in the field of physics with the history of the universe at once connects the very genesis of Parks's body of work with the historiographical forces that steer her writing—that is a commitment to the creation of works that interact and intervene with a distorted, storied version of America. I contend that the image of the black hole, which is thought to date back to the beginning of the universe and the big bang, provides an alternative origin point that calls into question dominant systems of knowledge and visibility, while exploding (or rather "spaghettifying") the linear logic of dominant historiographical discourses.[45] The below diagram, which I previously discussed in relation to historical narrativity, features in Parks's

[43] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism,* 12.2 (2008), 1-14 (p.3) <http://doi: 10.1215/-12-2-1>; Ibid., p.10.
[44] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.5.
[45] Also referred to as "the noodle effect", spaghettification is the stretching of an object as it nears the gravitational field of a black hole (or another gravitational field). Objects are stretched vertically and compressed horizontally. See Maya Wei-Hass, 'Black holes, explained', *National Geographic,* n.d. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/black-holes> [accessed 14.12.21].

essay ‘Elements of Style’, and offers visual expression to this problematic. I re-visit this diagram with a view to understanding the role of origins in Parks’s ‘re-writing’ of the timeline.[46]

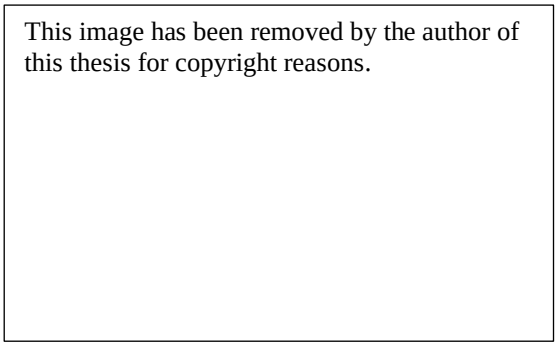

Figure 10 ‘Standard Time Line and Standard Plot Line are in cahoots!’, Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.6-18 (p.11).

Parks aligns the ‘beginning’ with the ‘Big Bang’, along the axes of narrative arc and historical timeline. This recalibration of space and time recasts the lens of a storied version of America and connects the production of history with the act of narrative construction. The relationship between plot and past is ruled suspect, even afforded agency, by Parks’s use of the term ‘cahoots’, while visually, temporal authority is troubled in the scale of the diagram where Parks delegitimises the traditional quantification of time. Parks scrutinises conventional models of dramatic play construction as entangled within a problematic process of historical narrativizing. Theory meets practice in *365* which, through the synthesis of multiple genres, forms, and themes, as well as a radical vision for the simultaneous performance of plays though a national festival format, challenges the ‘beginning; build up; Climaticus Dramaticus; Slippery Slope; End’ structure of a traditional dramatic play.[47] Theatre groups are invited to select works from *365* to perform, however Parks does stipulate that the ‘linearity’ of her version must be maintained; selected plays should be performed in chronological order. This detail accommodates the play’s stylistic compression and stretching of time within a broader framework of forward progress. Meanwhile, by invoking the ‘big bang’, Parks broadens the historical parameters that are associated with Middle Passage epistemologies of West Africa as a ‘beginning’ space-time coordinate, giving rise to the vast dimensions of her work.[48] The black hole is thus, scientifically speaking, an entry point into the world, which Parks reconceives as an entry point into her work. This pulling ‘need’ determines a particular ‘way’ of writing, as Parks points out, which certainly manifests in the space-time conditions of her works.[49] In perhaps no other text is this force more prevalent than in

[46] Suzan-Lori Parks, ‘Possession’, p.5.
[47] See Figure 10.
[48] See Michelle Wright, *Physics of blackness: Beyond the middle passage epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Wright explains: ‘Most discourses on Blackness in the United States and the Caribbean locate themselves in the history of the Middle Passage, linking our cultural practices and expressions, our politics and social sensibilities, to the historical experience of slavery in the Americas and the struggle to achieve full human suffrage in the West.’ (p.7).
[49] Han Ong, ‘An Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks’, p.49.

Parks's play, 'The Blank Before the World' (dated November 11th), which is just one of the 369 entries that make up Parks's odyssey style text: *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006).

Exploring 'blankness' in 'The Blank Before the World'

On 13th November 2002, Parks commenced on a writing journey grounded in the practice of 'radical inclusion', wherein she resolved to write a play every day for a year.[50] She reflects on the project—'it [was] about being present and being committed to the artistic process every single day, regardless of 'weather'.[51] The eventual outcome of this year-long creative endeavour is the epic play-diary *365 Days/365 Plays* which was soon to be followed by the *365* National Festival between 16th November 2006 and 15th November 2007. Parks and her long-time collaborator, Bonnie Metzgar, co-produced the project, which involved a network of theatres across fifteen cities/regions being invited to stage a week's worth of plays. Philip Kolin has noted that Parks's 'marathon collection' was interpreted and performed by over 800 groups in an 'Olympiad' style event: 'as a theatre in each hub finished its week of plays, it then passed *365* along to the next theatre that staged the following week […] the result is a series of running cycles of the 365 plays as each hub, or network, completes an entire year'.[52] The resulting play cycles exemplify Parks's commitment to the reworking of literary traditions and dominant power structures, this time reaching into the theatrical landscape itself; media outlets and scholars lauded the festival as the biggest theatrical venture of all time and critics have pointed out the democratising impact of this grassroots project, particularly its capacity for community building.[53] The play-diaries represent part of 'a spiritual, as well as artistic pledge'; each is a gift to the audience (Parks stipulated that the shows should be free to the public) and they therefore disrupt the normative commercial structures of theatre.[54] But aside from *365'*s immense production in national festival format, the individual entries demonstrate an explicit interest in creative thresholds. Parks's extensive experimentation with the limits of language and form enables a vacillating dynamic. The play-diaries range in length from just a few sentences (as in 21st June's 'Paper Tomatoes') to those that span multiple pages, such as 24th September's 'Play (Condemned Version)', which is spread over five.[55] They encompass narrowly focused subject matter, such as news stories that reflect the date of composition (including tribute plays to writer Carol Shields and singer Barry White on the days of their deaths), as well as the daringly

[50] 'Radical Inclusion' is a phrase adopted by Suzan-Lori Parks and the 365 festival's co-producer, Bonnie Metzgar, to describe the desire to welcome all participants and all ideas. See Rebecca Rugg, 'Radical Inclusion 'Til it Hurts': Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*', *Theater,* 38.1 (2008), 53-75 (p.58).
[51] Suzan-Lori Parks, *365 Days/365 Plays* (New York: TCG, 2006), p.ii.
[52] Philip C Kolin, 'Redefining the Way Theatre is Created and Performed: The Radical Inclusion of Suzan-Lori Parks's 365 Days/365 Plays,', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism,* 22.1 (2007), 65-83 (p.66).
[53] Rebecca Rugg 'Radical Inclusion 'Til it Hurts: Suzan-Lori Parks's 365 Days/365 Plays,' *Theater,* 38.1 (2008), 53-75, (p.59).
[54] Ibid., p.59. Rugg denotes the 'gift' aspect of the play-diaries as a 'cardinal rule' of the festival. She notes that this gift aspect is also reflected in the mutual exchange between writer and theatre collective—the latter as interpreters of the play-diaries.
[55] 'Paper Tomatoes', p.23; 'Play (Condemned Version), pp.330-334.

immense subject matter of 'Almost Everything', a play that echoes the cosmological characteristics of 'The Blank Before the World', wherein 'Everything either melts or explodes'.[56] Oftentimes the play-diaries perform the resurrection of key historical figures that appear in Parks's previous plays, such as Abraham Lincoln in 'The Mr Lincoln Rose', the entry for 12th April. She also features appendages to her existing plays, such as *Father Comes Home from the War*; these include 15th March's 'Mother Comes Home From The Wars' and 4th November's 'Father Comes Home from the Wars (Part 11: His Eternal Return – A Play For My Father)'.[57] Temporality is constantly in flux. Parks's 'forever plays', as described by scholar John Muse, reflect an upheaval of traditional time signatures in Parks's 'most radically inclusive conception of time'.[58] For example, in 13th December's 'Learning English' Parks details that 'the play begins all over again forever or until the English language is less desirable to learn'; meanwhile in 'First Beginning', Parks's entry for 3rd April, the final line paradoxically denotes an endless cycle as Parks notes, 'performance begins again'.[59] Taken together, the plays push up against the boundaries of language and form, gesturing toward the dramatic limits of representation.

Parks invokes the birth of the universe in *365*'s penultimate entry: 11th November, day number 364, where she dramatizes 'The Blank Before the World' in a play of the same name. With this cosmological context, Parks constructs a referent outside of the world's temporal, spatial, and racial logics, thereby disrupting (to borrow scholar Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's words) 'the logic of an anti-Black imaginary'.[60] Emptied of the figures that ordinarily populate Parks's plays and comprised only of stage directions, 'The Blank Before The World' reads as follows:

> THE BLANK BEFORE THE WORLD
>
> A very slow light cue, as slow as possible,
> from deep black to white-hot zoom.
> The light reveals the stage, which is completely blank.
> (Is this possible?)
> The light cue is accompanied by the sound of wind-
> the wind which brought most of us here to this country
> or this planet. Then, the wind reveals itself to be
> an enormously elongated single breath.
> When the light cue has reached its maximum
> and the breath has expired – the lights bump out quickly.[61]

[56] See 'A Play for the Writer Carol Shields', pp.257-258; 'A Play for Barry White', pp.258-259; 'Almost Everything', p.363.
[57] 'The Mr Lincoln Rose', p.175; 'Mother Comes Home From The Wars', p.178; 'Father Comes Home from the Wars (Part 11: His Eternal Return – A Play For My Father)', p.368.
[58] John Muse, 'Eons in an instant: the paradoxes of Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*', *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, 22.1 (2010), 7–31 (p.29).
[59] 'Learning English', pp.54-55; 'First Beginning, p.168.
[60] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, 'Theorizing in a Void': Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics', *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2018), 617-648 (p.618).
[61] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Blank Before the World' in *365 Days/365 Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), p.376.

At this cosmic site of 'Blank', an environment that predates the world (according to the logic of the title), Parks stages a paradox that lies at the conceptual core of her body of work: the representation of absence. The designation of Blank as a material site gives rise to a deluge of questions that the play refuses to resolve, a central one being: can one truly reveal an 'empty' or blank stage? As the speaker recapitulates in line 4: 'Is this possible?' Yet here, absence is also synonymous with the concept of 'Blank' in a historiographical sense. Parks alludes to the absences that inform historical narratives, as well as to the dominant power structures those narratives uphold. *365'*s paradox then transpires in the textual stating and theatrical staging of 'The Blank', which necessarily evoke presence, as opposed to absence.

There are also the chromatic qualities of the play to account for, since audiences witness a gradual transition of the stage lighting from 'deep black' to 'white-hot zoom', in a scene that is altogether incompatible with the reveal of a 'completely blank' rendering of space. In other words, blankness is visually tethered to colour—that is the 'white-hot zoom' lighting of the stage, where blank is revealed in a contained sphere of light, and the white of the page, upon which the word 'blank' is made visible. This problematic recalls Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), in which the narrator cogitates on the 'indefiniteness' of the colour white, weighing up that '[w]hiteness is not so much a colour but the visible absence of colour, and at the same time the concrete of all colours'.[62] The narrator alludes to the achromatic quality of the (non)colour white, as well as its chromatic simultaneity as an amalgamation of the colour spectrum. This simultaneity is evocative of the nothing and everything of 'blank', which signifies emptiness and at the same time posits the possibility for abundance. Melville's narrator similarly attests to the capacity of whiteness to summon existential matters—'the heartless voids and immensities of the universe'—as with the cosmic character of Parks's 'white-hot zoom' lighting.[63] The prior existence of a 'deep-black' blank is implied by the concealed stage that marks the commencement of the play. The visibility of 'Blank' to spectators, hinges on the stage direction in line 3: 'reveals', and is rendered through the 'zoom' style lighting. This sequential transition of the lighting from black to 'white-hot' portends an image akin to the below visual representation of the big bang.

[62] Herman Melville, 'The Whiteness of the Whale' in *Moby Dick* [1851] (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1993), pp. 156-163, (p.162); Ibid., p.163.
[63] Ibid., p.163.

Figure 11 Featured in Tim Jackson, 'How the light gets in—The science behind growth scepticism', 4 November 2018 <https://timjackson.org.uk/how-the-light-gets-in/> [accessed 15.12.21] Image licensed under CC.0.

Light appears most intensely at the centre of this image and rays travel outwards in all directions, emulating the physics of an explosion on this scale. The physics of continual expansion are also reflected in this visual representation, which, though still, creates the illusion of light rays in-motion. And yet this visual representation could conceivably be rendered through white-hot zoom lighting, as in Parks's stage direction. At a linguistic level, the acoustic closeness of the term 'black' with 'blank' ruptures any strict, singular tie between the reveal of Parks's site of 'Blank' and the 'white-hot' lighting. The opacity of the stage immersed in darkness (signifying blankness), gestures toward a practice of concealing rather than revealing, in tandem with the introduction of lighting. At a textual level the printed words, in black, set against the page, once blank—white, now printed with rhetorical figures, is a reminder that the genesis of the text bears its imprint on the page, meanwhile the genesis of the world is scripted to be projected onto the site of the stage. All these im/possibilities coalesce to establish the stage setting-turned-radical problematic of 'Blank' as a critical juncture of *365*'s overarching discourse on race, historical recovery, and performance.

The site of Blank then doubles as a conceptual opening, indexing the complexities of representation itself, all the while resisting the indexical. The break between the signifier on the page, 'blank', and the visual performance setting that signifier encodes, marks a representational threshold at which Parks explores the limits of dramatic form. In other words, this creation story is two-fold: offering a meditation on Parks's literary act of creation where absence (or 'Blank') is positioned as central, creative prompt, while also narrating the creation of the world, from the level of matter, as emerging

from a state of Blank. 'The Blank Before The World' draws narrative impetus from its conditions of possibility—that is the dissonant relationship the linguistic marker 'blank', and its theatrical realisation on the (never-quite) *blank* stage. This contradictory component of the play's principal image emphasises the inherent instability of the systems of historical representation that render this origins story available—namely cosmology, metaphysics, and religious and literary discourses. Park's textual/theatrical medium lends itself to an examination of the latter in particular; she is evidently invested in articulating the constitutive relationship between literary creative force and historical narrative. Parks echoes Ralph Ellison's reconceptualization of America's formation in an essay titled 'Society, Morality, and the Novel' (1986)'; Ellison inserts language from the landmark US Declaration of Independence into Genesis: 'In the beginning was not only the word but the contradiction of the word'.[64] Ellison's quote extends his incisive commentary on Black ontology in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man.* A preacher in *Invisible Man* claims 'In the beginning […] there was blackness'. Ellison reworks the biblical-historical narration of order (word), through an identification of 'blackness' with chaos.[65] In 'The Blank Before the World', Parks speaks back to canonical texts such as Ellison's that draw up the violent potential of textuality.

The play itself is an obvious reworking of Samuel Beckett's 'Breath', a similarly short play composed of stage directions and a light cue, though it features a stage littered with 'miscellaneous rubbish' in contrast to Parks's bare stage.[66] I share with scholar John Muse's view that 'Beckett's play witnesses the end of the world' and '*The Blank Before the World* oversees its birth'.[67] However, Muse reaches this conclusion through a comparative reading that in some ways contradicts my own. I argue the birth of the world Parks envisions might be better understood as a historical opening. This perspective accounts for the dissonant relationship at the crux of Parks's play between the linguistic marker 'blank', and its theatrical realisation on the (never-quite) *blank* stage—a suspended historical possibility. Parks combines the two breaths that feature in Beckett's play into one 'enormously elongated singe breath'.[68] She also ruptures the synchronicity of light and breath in Beckett's 'expiration'; Beckett details it is '[i]mportant that two cries be identical, switching on and off strictly synchronized light and breath'.[69] Parks establishes a cause-effect relation between the expiry of the breath and the light that deviates from Beckett's *Breath*: 'When the light cue has reached its maximum and the breath has expired – the lights bump out quickly'. In doing so, Parks ruptures the synchronicity of Beckett's version of the end of the world. Muse appears to gloss over this rupture in summarising, 'where Beckett's light rises and falls together with breath, Parks's version gives us one long sunrise. As

[64] Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory* [1986] (New York, Random House, 1995), p. 243.
[65] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952] (London, Penguin Books, 2014), p.8.
[66] Samuel Beckett, 'Breath', *in First Love and Other Shorts* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p. 91.
[67] John Muse, 'Eons in an instant: the paradoxes of Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*', p.29.
[68] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Blank Before the World', p.376.
[69] Samuel Beckett, 'Breath', p. 91.

the human breath gives out, hot light illuminates a blank stage'.[70] Parks's rupture (concerning the synchronicity of breath and light) reverberates in the spaces of rupture across her dramatic oeuvre. In *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (1989) a figure named Over-Seer observes, 'Half the world had fallen away making 2 worlds and a sea between. Those 2 worlds inscribe the Third Kingdom'.[71] Nevertheless, rupture gives way to new synchronous possibilities in 'The Blank Before the World'. Parks substitutes synchronicity where Beckett does not in transposing a liminal 'Third Kingdom' site into the play. She layers the originary coordinate of the birth of the world with the birth of the New World in the context of the Black Atlantic, invoking 'the wind which brought most of us to this country—/or this planet'. The simultaneity of death is implicit in the loss that this Middle Passage rupture engenders. Burial and rebirth coalesce in Parks's play, enacting a theatrical intervention of historical possibility into Beckett's apocalyptic vision.

'The Blank Before the World's' intertextual affiliations proliferate with this historical opening of a 'New World'. Parks echoes Phillis Wheatley's 'On being Brought From Africa to America' in her deployment of the term 'brought'. Meanwhile, the commanding imperative questioning of historical possibility in Romantic poet Percy Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' meets its match in Parks's presumably east wind, decipherable through the historical prism of the Middle Passage: 'the wind which brought most of us here to this country'.[72] Such references afford insight into the way Parks recognises literary creative force and its potential to establish narrative frames for history's re-presentation. Parks draws landmark texts into proximity with this phenomenon that precedes even space and time, the big bang, and in doing so she establishes radical conditions of possibility for a historical re-envisioning, brimming with new, alternative spatiotemporal organisations, where (historical) holes, or blank spaces, find dramatic expression. The following section builds on the work of scholars such as John Muse, who have explored Parks's engagement with Samuel Beckett in 'The Blank Before the World', however I additionally lend focus to the lesser explored literary echoes of Phillis Wheatley and Percy Shelley in my exploration of cosmological nuances and historical holes in the text. I will firstly delve deeper into the text's formal elements, as well as situating the play within the wider *365 Days/365 Plays* project.

[70] John Muse, 'Eons in an instant: the paradoxes of Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*', p.29.
[71] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Imperceptible Mutabilities [1989]' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.23-72 (p.39).
[72] Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral* [1793] (London: Barber & Southwick Reprint, n.d.), p.15. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.; Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind' in *Complete Poetical Works of Shelley* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1904), pp.640-642. ProQuest eBooks.

Meta-modes of historical engagement: transcending the limits of dramatic form

The relationship between the text and performance of 'The Blank Before the World' sets out an important critical groundwork for understanding its formal elements. 'The Blank Before the World' is distinguishable from the other Parks plays this study takes up in view of the challenges it poses for a director—notably the absence of characters and dialogue.[73] The latter of these is particularly pertinent to a discussion of textuality and performativity since, as Kimberley D. Dixon remarks, '[Parks's] efforts to capture the viscerally-affecting essence of African American vernacular speech [in plays other than 'The Blank Before the World'] are thwarted by the opposing written medium she must use'.[74] The oral tradition of African American storytelling is reflected through Parks's use of African American vernacular speech in her plays, however the textual form in which Parks's narratives are documented distil the plurality of such speech patterns. Parks's emphasis on the oral quality of her scripts gives rise to 'gaps' as Dixon refers.[75] These gaps (or holes) mark a loss. Parks is attentive to this complex relationship between oral and textual traditions and highlights:

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

Parks highlights the historical weight of the textual tradition and its exclusionary dimensions. 'The Blank Before the World' is a play without dialogue, consistent with the pre-human history that subsequently enters the folds of the play's present. Even embodied gestures, a hallmark of theatrical performance, are resisted; rather, light and sound guide the rising and falling action. In turn, Parks subverts theatrical tradition. She stretches the fundamental purpose of stage directions as a set of instructions that shape the transition of text to performance, and which generally precede, follow, or are interwoven with the dialogue. The stage directions in *365* are formatted as a fragment of text on the page, positioned in-between two other fragmentary plays that similarly read as stage directions: 10 November's entry, 'Talkback' and 12 November's, '365 Days/365 Plays'.[77] By stretching the play-

[73] An obvious example is when, in *Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World,* the opening lines consist of the figures each voicing their respective names. See Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World', p.101.
[74] Kimberly D. Dixon, 'An I am Sheba me am (She be do be wah waaaah doo wah) O(au)rality, Textuality and Performativity: African American Literature's Vernacular Theory and the Work of Suzan-Lori Parks', *Journal of American Drama and Theatre,* 11.1 (1999), 49-66, (pp.54-55).
[75] Ibid., 54.
[76] Qtd in Alisa Solomon, "Signifying on the Signifyin': The Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks', *Theater,* 21.3 (1990), 73-80 (pp.75-76).
[77] 'Talkback', p.376;'365 Days/365 Plays, p.376.

diary form of *365* and sanctioning stage directions to stand as plays in their own right—and more than this, to stand in for the origins of all time—Parks foregrounds her writing's containment and representation of historical time as its very raison d'etre.

Parks's question, 'Is this possible?' resists depiction through staging, thereby posing a challenge to directors in projecting the memory of the material text into the remit of performance. The question draws up the relative distinctions between performance and the written word, as they pertain to the limits of representation. The short aside, only five syllables long, demands a change in tone and pace from the previous elongated twelve syllable sentence 'the light reveals the stage, which is completely blank'.[78] Infinite possibility hangs in the balance as the human penchant for stable meaning and scientific measure, shared between playwright and reader, is suspended in parentheses. Parks's speculation pertains to both the limits of dramatic representation—can this be staged? —as well as the historical accuracy of the event—did this happen? The status of 'blankness' as a performed *thing* is entangled in the dynamics of this relationship between text and performance. Yet, highlighting the productive potential of this dilemma, scholar Karen Barad draws into focus the capacity of performance to disrupt the representational authority of discursive practices, and by extension, the authority of the historical record. Barad highlights the way situated knowledge is complicated by dramatic form in their statement that 'a performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things'.[79] Barad's insight extends the relationship between text and performance beyond 'questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality'—what Barad also refers to as 'geometrical optics'—to questions around the 'practices/doings/actions' that arise from the interplay between text and performance.[80] The staging of Blank is, in this context, a disruptive (and creative) force against its signifying order. Parks enables the concept of in/visibility, so pertinent to the medium of theatre, to function as dramatic stimulus in a historiographical context. She plays on the absences that surround our understanding of this 'blank spot' in the history of the universe, embracing opacity as a creative and intellectual prompt—thereby recalling Glissant's politics of opacity.[81]

The question mark suspended over 'The Blank Before the World', the 'what came before?' resonates in a clear-cut break from the conventions of stage directions that seems to project Parks's own voice into the scene: '(Is this possible?)'.[82] This is a question that touches on the creation of the scene, and the creation of the universe itself. The authorial intrusion draws a gulf between the action and its underlying logic, emphasising the meta-theatricality of the moment and reifying the literal space-time coordinates to which the illusory site of Blank is affixed: the site of the stage and the moment of

[78] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Blank Before the World', p.376.
[79] Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28.3 (2003), 801–31 (p.802).
[80] Ibid., p.814.
[81] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990], p.194.
[82] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Blank Before the World', p.376.

performance. There is also an important confluence at play here concerning the play's gesture toward 'what came before' with the notion of 'what could have been'—Parks probes at the world-making capacity of literature and performance, touching upon a problematic described by Lisa Lowe as that which 'symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention'.[83] Lowe's deployment of the term 'loss' highlights the stakes of such creative work in engendering a much broader project of historical recovery. Parks generates a meta-mode of historical engagement, mobilising the limits of dramatic form as a lens to the limits of historical representation, and establishing radical new terms upon which to re-vision history.

Parks's positioning of 'The Blank Before the World' on the final page of *365* is intentional; the materiality of the text carries consequences for the tropes of creation and beginnings that the other-worldly environment of the work evokes. But to fully comprehend the accumulative import of this penultimate image it is useful to extend this material lens beyond 'The Blank Before the World' to the wider project's play-diary format. This format is at once decipherable from the text's title, *365 Days/365 Plays*, which also importantly signals a containment of time and space through form. Parks describes the interaction between form and content in her writing in 'Elements of Style': 'as I write along the container dictates what substance will fill it, and, at the same time, the substance is dictating the size and shape of the container'.[84] This essay, penned seven years before Parks commenced her *365* project, accurately and insightfully describes its distinctive form. Postmodern formalists such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Mina Loy inspire Parks's preoccupation with deconstructing language and exploding form.[85] The constitutive relationship between content and form undergirds the hyper-linear organisation of time throughout *365* and is also crucial to a contextualised understanding of 'The Blank Before The World'. Beginning in November 13th (2002) with the entry 'Start Here' and ending on Nov 12th (2003) with the entry that follows 'The Blank Before the World' and matches the title of the project: *365 Days/365 Plays*, Parks's play-diary 'container' encapsulates the specifically human and arbitrary schematisation of time and space—also delineating the limits that the playwright proceeds to bend. Parks elects to re-use the title of the *365* project for the very final entry, '365 Days/365 Plays', as she extends her signature technique of repetition and revision, or 'rep and rev', into the domain of literary form. Following—but also an extension of—'The Blank Before the World' the final play, '365 Days/365 Plays' reads as follows:

[83] Lisa Lowe, 'The Intimacies of Four Continents' in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. by Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp.191-212 (p.208).
[84] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Elements of Style', pp.7-8.
[85] Robert Brustein reflects on Parks's interest in the 'formalist breakthroughs of the postmodern school' in his presentation that formed part of a panel on her work, moderated by Jonathan Kalb. See 'Remarks on Parks I: A Hunter College Symposium on the Work of Suzan-Lori Parks' in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp.151-174 (p.155).

365 DAYS/365 PLAYS

Lights bump back up to white-hot
Zoom.
Onstage, the manuscript of 365 Days/365 Plays.[86]

In this final play, Parks's *365* project comes full circle; *365* is offered as surrogate for the world in this storied version of the universe's formation. Subsequently, the process of artistic creation is condensed into the above few lines, which emulate an instantaneous, big-bang-like transition from blankness to manuscript. Philip Kolin elaborates on the prevalence of such meditations to the creative process in Parks's work:

> More than twenty plays revel in Parks's exploitation of mimesis (representation) turned in on itself, that is, self-reflexive plays that interrogate what exactly constitutes a script […] This is hardly surprising since, as she says, when she did not have a specific topic before her, she wrote about the act (or anxiety) of creation.[87]

Kolin's thematization of the creative process renders the project a manifesto of sorts, outlining Parks's guiding principles for her writing, and even narrating the way key ideas are conceived. But what stands out in particular is the palpable manner in which Parks's creative process is concerned with rehearsing the possible, or more precisely, the possibilities of filling up blank, all the while enacting the impossibility of such a feat through the process of narration. Notwithstanding this narrative reflexivity, *365* does, to a certain extent, grasp in the direction of a specifically afro-futurist aesthetic. Along with the project as a whole, the final two plays—'The Blank Before the World' and '365 Days/365 Plays'—call forth a version of existence populated with 'life forms outside of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and hetero-patriarchy' to draw upon H.L.T Quan's reflection on the genre.[88] The immediate presence of 'onstage, the manuscript' portends a possible blueprint for this existence—one that disarticulates dominant cultural paradigms, such as that of race, gender, and sexuality, also disrupting the forward trajectories of their historiographical operation.

Parks's ongoing reconfiguration of space and time determines the narrative centre of her *365* project. Owing to her experimentation with form, 'The Blank Before the World' holds the vast subject matter of the universe—the greatest unknown—in a play that also represents a contender for the record of shortest play ever. Over a dramatic sequence of blackouts and white-hot zooms, Parks distils the *365*

[86] Suzan-Lori Parks, '365 Days/365 Plays', p.376.
[87] Philip C Kolin, 'Redefining the Way Theatre Is Created and Performed: The Radical Inclusion of Suzan-Lori Parks's "365 Days/365 Plays"', p.77.
[88] H.L.T Quan, "It's Hard to Stop Rebels That Time Travel": Democratic Living and the Radical Reimaginings of Old Worlds' in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. by Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso, 2017), pp.173-193 (p.191).

project's wider preoccupation with the motions of expansion and contraction in the very action of the entries; as previously established, the light which 'bumps out' in the final line of 'The Blank Before The World' actually reveals, in this final entry, in place of 'Blank', the culmination of this experiment in content and form: the manuscript of the *365* project.

As a repetition and revision of the text/project as a whole, and a gesture towards the complexities of representation, Parks's planetary rebirth also actualises the emergence of a textual whole (the manuscript) from the black hole (and the blank before the world). In turn, Parks alludes to the notion of knowing *through* time; inside this snapshot depiction of the history of the universe, the habitual human endeavour to organise time structures our comprehension of the text as a whole, especially given its deployment of a temporalized form. That is to say the calendar, which represents the splitting up of time, and echoes the 'seven days' of the Genesis creation narrative, reiterates the constructedness of historical narrative and the human preoccupation with the figuring of time. John Muse epitomises the effect of *365's* subsequent structure in stating '*365* marches in step with the calendar, yet everywhere creates its own way to measure time. The plays cannot escape their dates of composition which are printed just before each title, but they routinely evade everyday time'.[89] This sequential form systematically invokes the absent-presence of the playwright, offering a trace of the present in which Parks wrote. Yet its 'marching' rhythm strives beyond sequentiality toward simultaneity—a simultaneity that can only be achieved through the play's performance as part of the collaborative *365* festival. Text and performance must operate in tandem to engage with the infinite possibilities anticipated by the *365* project. The chronological dates tether the 369 heterogenous works into an intelligible modality: the year—which is then delinearised by directors and theatre groups, each of whom curate and stage their own series of plays.[90] The following instructions are detailed on the Concord Theatricals website:

> Note: Theatre makers are welcome to present an assortment of selected plays from 365 Days/365 Plays. A presentation of 31 or more plays is considered "Full-Length," while a presentation of 30 or fewer plays is considered "One-Act." All presentations must include the three plays known collectively as "The 3 Constants".[91]

Parks encourages 'assortment[s]', that is she encourages theatre makers to resist the order instilled by the numerical form and actively seek alternative arrangements. Her one stipulation is that selected plays are staged in chronological order, thereby honouring the forward momentum of her work toward rebirth and renewal. Practitioners engage in the manipulation of time, each production furthering the heterogeneity of the project. Meanwhile, the performances extend Parks's creative practice of radical

[89] John Muse, 'Eons in an instant: the paradoxes of Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*', *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, 22.1 (2010), 7–31 (p.30).
[90] The text is comprised of over 365 entries since Parks produces two separate entries for some days.
[91] Concord Theatricals, [n.d.] <concordtheatricals.co.uk/p/93438/365-days365-plays-full-length> [accessed 12/9/21].

inclusion to the realm of production; 'with regard to the festival, radical inclusion meant inviting any theatre in the world to participate by producing a week of the cycle anywhere they want, any way they want, for only a dollar a day in licensing fees'.[92] In essence, the possible blueprint for existence that Parks offers in *365* harbours the potential to be refigured for as long as the material text exists; its very form is defined by immense possibility, and its performance predicated on the rearrangement of the text's sense of space and time.

The Poet Figure: World-Making and historical agency

'The Blank Before the World' features myriad intertextual references that, through their generative meanings, advance Parks's 'opening up' of historical possibility. The stage directions read like a free verse poem. Lines 5-8 demonstrate how Parks enhances this freedom of metre via the figuring of the wind:

> The light cue is accompanied by the sound of wind-
> the wind which brought most of us here to this country
> or this planet. Then, the wind reveals itself to be
> an enormously elongated single breath.[93]

The enjambment of 'this country/ or this planet' encapsulates a transition of great distance with expansion, that persists throughout the ensuing accumulative sentences. The term 'wind' for example, persists and stretches throughout the preceding sentence and into the next, before its reformulation into a 'single breath' as it 'reveals itself'. Wind, then, generates and demarcates both space and time, mapping country to cosmos, and stretching back to the beginning of world. It is everywhere and nowhere and activates the momentous temporal and spatial simultaneity appropriate for *365* project's rendering of history. Added to this, the visual emphasis of the term 'reveals' is complicated by the invisibility of its subject: 'breath'. Parks goes beyond the realm of simile to achieve metaphoric simultaneity, in revealing a wind that *is* breath, and therefore a muddying of ontological registers. Where line 7 ends on the phrase 'to be', Parks stresses the phenomena of existence, before reaffirming the wind's personified status in the following line as an 'enormously elongated single breath'. This metaphor of 'breath' marks a somewhat expected presence given the play's fundamental subject matter: the origins of the world.

Parks's analogous treatment of breath and wind is reminiscent of the Genesis, in which the phrase 'ruach Elohim' (as in the original Hebrew text) encapsulates both Spirit of God and 'a great wind'.[94] Moreover, the movement from darkness to light in 'The Blank Before the World' visually

[92] John Muse, 'Eons in an instant: the paradoxes of Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*', p.30.
[93] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Blank Before the World' in *365 Days/365 Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), p.376.
[94] Genesis 1:2; also see Job 33:4: "the breath of the Almighty gives me life"

mirrors Genesis 1:1 in which 'The Beginning', a 'formless and empty' earth, where 'darkness' is 'over the surface', transforms at God's command: 'there was light'.[95] Parks's substitution of breath for wind and her use of lighting as dramatic device situates 'The Blank Before the World' within a tradition of texts interested in questions around origins, historical blind spots, and the notion of possibility. For example, Parks's tandem treatment of wind and breath presents fecund ground to examine Percy Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', and in doing so sets up an oppositional framework to explore the figure of the 'poet' as world-maker and historical officiator. In Shelley's poem, the personification of the wind into breath underwrites his interrogation of existence, along with the role of the poet as an agent of historical matter. The poem begins with an apostrophe:

> O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
> Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
> Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing [96]

Shelley figures the wind as Autumn's breath within the first line, though the wind continues to *become* various iterations of breath before its final embodiment as an extension of the speaker's breath by the final verse: 'Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth/ The trumpet of a prophecy!'.[97] Throughout the verses, Shelley narrates the wind's animating effect on the land, sea, and sky, thereby highlighting the notion of *becoming* and lending weight to the final word of the poem's opening line: 'being'.[98] This thematic development is consolidated by the poem's terza rima rhyme scheme. Shelley's use of an ode form, along with this rhyming structure, evokes the repetitive, simultaneous nature of the singular wind's movement across time and space, also marking the work as a celebration of its force. Parks's 'The Blank Before the World' similarly centres the notion of becoming, particularly where the wind reveals itself 'to be' at the end of line 7. However, her deployment of free verse might reflect a deliberate refutation of Shelley's desire for mastery over the wind's movement. Parks and Shelley both afford agency to the wind, which punctuates both death and birth, mediating their eternal interplay. Shelley describes in the poem's epithet, the wind is both 'Destroyer and preserver' of life.[99] Shelley's west wind is positioned at odds with Parks's presumably east wind—that which 'brought most of us here to this country/ or this planet'. Parks's wind renders 'us' as objects of the wind's—and by extension history's—movement. She introduces the historical lens of the Middle Passage and calls attention to Transatlantic slavery's continued repercussions on the present, also maintaining the plurality of the Black diasporic experience with the qualifier 'most'. Parks's use of the term 'or' to connect the Middle Passage with the origins of the universe introduces historical ambiguity. Such ambiguity

[95] Genesis 1:1
[96] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind' in *Complete Poetical Works of Shelley* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1904), pp.640-642 (p.640), I.1-3. ProQuest eBooks.
[97] Ibid., p.642, I.12-13
[98] Ibid., p.640, I.1
[99] Ibid., p.641, I.14

reconceptualises the chronology of these events in marking their simultaneity. The line break traces a monumental passage of time that positions the configuration of the triangular trade route and the institution of the Transatlantic slave trade in poetic proximity with the beginning of mankind.

Shelley's description of the wind depicts the speaker as agent rather than object of history. He imagines the momentary indentation left on the Atlantic Ocean's surface by the wind's path: 'Thou/ For whose path the Atlantic's level powers// Cleave themselves into chasms'.[100] Meanwhile the sea life below the surface is described to 'grow gray with fear'.[101] Shelley's celebration of this power of the wind over the ocean, and his speaker's ultimate wish to harness that control, reveals the fascistic undertones of his individual 'prophecy'.[102] Meanwhile, Parks's comparative treatment of the wind as breath highlights the colonial context in which Shelley's writing operates. The opposing directions of the wind in these texts then signifies Parks's conscious rewriting of the 'scatter[ed]' words which Shelley leaves for future generations to interpret and renew.[103] Parks's literary intervention marks a renewal that problematises the extent of Shelley' radical poetics and highlights the responsibility of the poet in the context of historical production. The inevitability of the wind's continued transformations in 'Ode to the West Wind' culminates in a question reminiscent of Parks's 'Is this possible?': 'O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'[104] Like Parks's question, Shelley fashions his allusion to the seasons around the notion of possibility. Yet while Parks's speaker seeks to stage and re-present this historical agency, Shelley's speaker is bent on wielding its very historical force. The cyclical patterns of the seasons position Spring next to Winter in a chronological sense—a formulation that deploys the 365-day cycle of the year as narrative determinant—yet Shelley's question beckons the comprehension of an altogether separate time signature at play.[105] He harnesses the immediacy of the wind's various manifestations in the singular, material text of the poem to gesture toward a temporality that exists beyond the teleological explanation of the seasons.

It follows that the temporality of 'Ode to the West Wind' is mechanised through the affective nature of the Romantic self. The allegorical function of the wind is crucial in terms of the capacity for such affect. Indeed, the dissonance that characterises the wind's various figurations in Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' is reminiscent of the discord inherent to the construction of historical narrative. Orrin Wang summarises the wider implications of such disarticulations: 'If history cannot exist without time and space, it's precisely the complication of those phenomenal categories, their exposure as unstable figures, readily wrecked and reorganized by war or wind, that enables the troping of history to rise into

[100] Ibid., p.642, III.9-10.
[101] Ibid., p.642, III.13.
[102] Ibid., p.642, V.13.
[103] Ibid., p.642, V.10.
[104] Ibid., p.642V.13-14.
[105] Parks similarly gestures towards unfamiliar time signatures. John Muse identifies the time signatures of Parks's *365* as 'both linear and cyclical, both brief and infinite'. See 'Eons in an instant: the paradoxes of Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*', p.22.

view'.[106] While *365*'s formal features are similarly influenced by the very constructedness of historical narrative, Parks's rhetorical question, 'Is this possible?', implies a conscious distancing of the speaker from the wind's historical force. However, the speaker in 'Ode to the West Wind' appears steady in pursuit of the revolutionary upheaval of existing societal structures, as well as the historical conditions of their emergence. The speaker strives toward mastery over time and space, while equipped with the singular visionary poetics of these analytical categories. I share with Kathleen Kerr-Koch who concurs that Shelley exemplifies 'the romantic revolutionary hope, in its many guises, for a non-capitalist, egalitarian utopian future'.[107] Shelley's idealisation of the moralistic poet figure and his faith in the relative harmony between 'poetry, political philosophy and active confrontation with illegitimate authority' goes hand in hand with the idealistic revolutionary aspirations of his verse, which are embodied where the poet implores the wind to be 'the trumpet of a prophecy'.[108] It is this stringent belief that led Shelley to proclaim in his 'Defence of Poetry' (1821) that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the *world*' (italics my own).[109] This understanding by Shelley illustrates his investment in the role of the individual heroic poet figure in affecting political change on a universal scale. Yet, as Adrienne Rich concurs, 'there is no universal poetry, […] only poetries and poetics and the streaming, intertwining histories to which they belong'.[110] Rich's comment posits 'Ode to the West Wind' as inextricably connected to the historical conditions and contingencies that animate Shelley's own artistic explorations, also underscoring the irrationality of the overarching revolutionary aspirations of his verse.

Adrienne Rich's prompt is especially relevant to Phillis Wheatley's 'On Being Brought from Africa to America', as a poem renowned, in part, for the historical circumstances in which the author was writing. Wheatley was enslaved in 1761, twelve years before the work was published. Her "Master", John Wheatley, writes in the Preface to the collection 'PHILLIS was brought from Africa to America, in the Year 1761, between Seven and Eight Years of Age'.[111] John Wheatley seeks to underscore his family's influence concerning Wheatley's literary acumen, framing this attribute belonging to her as owing to 'only what she was taught in the Family'.[112] The poem was published as part of Phillis Wheatley's 1773 collection of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*; this text marks the first collection of poems to be published by an African American woman. Its position

[106] Orrin Nan Chung Wang, *Romantic Sobriety: Sensation, Revolution, Commodification, History* (Baltimore, Maryland, John Hopkins UP, 2011), p.174.
[107] V.13.; Kathleen Kerr-Koch, *Romancing Fascism: Modernity and Allegory in Benjamin, de Man, Shelley* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.4.
[108] Adrienne Rich, *Poetry and Commitment: An Essay* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2007), p.6.; V.13.
[109] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, ed. by Mrs Shelley (London: Edward Moxon, 1840) pp.1-57 (p.57). ProQuest eBook.
[110] Adrienne Rich, 'Legislators of the World', *Community Development Journal*, 42.4 (2007), 422 –424 (p.422) <http://doi:10.1093/cdj/bsm033 422>
[111] Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral* [1793] (London: Barber & Southwick, n.d.), p.6. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.
[112] Ibid., p.6.

within the African American literary tradition as a 'beginning' coordinate is critical in situating the Wheatley's poetry inside Parks's thematic framework of origins and absences. John Wheatley's narrative interjection signals an abundance of absences concerning authorial intent. Phillis Wheatley's agency, her ability to use her voice, or even to breathe as Parks's wind-turned-breath implies, is severely limited. Parks appears to draw the poem into conversation with Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' through her use of the term 'brought' in line six; in echoing Wheatley's term she signals the wind's connectedness to the dynamic movement of non-linear history, in addition to its singular bridging of the Old and New World in a Transatlantic context. Park's twelve syllable line 'The wind which brought most of us here to this country' emulates the accelerated rhythm of Wheatley's thirteen syllable title. Wheatley's poem reads as follows:

On Being Brought from AFRICA to AMERICA

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.[113]

Wheatley's representation of Transatlantic slavery as an act of Christian compassion and the gratitude she appears to express through her use of the term 'mercy', gestures toward to a seeming absorption and espousal of her enslavers' ideals. This aspect of Wheatley's poem has troubled many readers. The impression of Wheatley's language as it relates to her conflicted position, particularly in the first two lines of this poem, receives particular focus in critical responses which also underscore the constraining context in which the work was produced.

Parks's writing appears to respond to Wheatley's seeming absorption of European colonialism in a manner which highlights a 'subversive intent' inscribed in her work.[114] Yet Parks interestingly removes the specificity of that harrowing journey of the Middle Passage in 'The Blank Before the World' where she uses the phrase 'brought us to this country/or this planet'. The reader is tasked with locating space in this work where 'country' and 'planet' function as geographical placeholders. The inclusion of Africa and America in the poem's title can be interpreted as an insistence by Wheatley on preserving the memory of her individual origins. In fact, the narrative momentum of this work is embodied in Wheatley's movement across the Middle Passage. Meanwhile, Parks's meditations on American national identity across her oeuvre, along with her echoes of Wheatley's language in 'The

[113] Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral* [1793], p.15.
[114] Mary Catherine Loving, 'Uncovering Subversion in Phillis Wheatley's Signature Poem: "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA"', *Journal of African American Studies,* 20.1 (2016), 67–74 (p.70).

Blank Before the World', importantly render the work of locating that meaning (or filling in the blanks) a possibility. The wind and its implied simile as the breath of the poet figures as a connecting gap between works, a gap that articulates the complexities of an abyssal Middle Passage space-time.

Parks's intertextual allusions mark a further disarticulation of historical authenticity. Altogether, the cosmological, formal, and intertextual elements in *356* combine to formulate an intricate conceptual map for the play-diary project that seeks to rupture, as much as it re-presents, historical narrativity. Parks's engagements with Western literary traditions in 'The Blank Before the World' encode a potent historical malleability wrought through the literariness of the history she divines. The linkages between Parks, Shelley, and Wheatley's works set forth a compelling case for the treatment of historical referents throughout the remainder of the *365* project to be understood through the fragmented temporal conditions of 'blankness', erupting from within the linear, chronological timeframe of the overall project. The vast distances and differential conditions of the cosmos immediately offset the potential for unchanging, teleological historical narratives; rather, temporal fragmentation anticipates rupture and conflict, and a constant wavering between obscurity and clarity. In an essay titled 'Theorizing in a Void: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics', Zakiyyah Iman Jackson engages with this conceptual groundwork via an examination of Black feminist poetics, deciphering the expansive role of 'physics metaphors' in expressing the 'paradoxical space of visibility/invisibility in the grammar of the Human'.[115] Parks engages with this practice where she enables readers and audiences to contemplate the nature of historical absence outside of three-dimensional Euclidean spaces and to connect the site of the stage with the creation of alternate vantage points, encompassing myriad possibilities beyond our governing systems of meaning. Through the metaphor of the birth of the universe, Blank is refigured as a site of impenetrable abundance, rather than void.

The Hole and its 'Possession' in *365* and *The America Play*

The big bang theory, a phenomenon widely accepted within present-day narratives for the history of the universe, highlights the fundamental alterability of the written historical record as it is documented always within and through epistemological frameworks. The very act of writing is a starting point of sorts; it is in the documentation of narrative that even events outside of human history are tethered to questions of human identity. Parks wields this quality of writing as an act of historical manifestation, as well as narration. By (re)writing a major historical event—the creation of the universe—for her 365 project, Parks highlights the absence of a stable referent for a question that she has specified motivates her writing: 'Well who am I? It's the question at the very centre of every one of my plays'.[116] This

[115] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Theorizing in a Void: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117.3 (), 617-648 (p.631).
[116] Han Ong, 'An Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks', *BOMB*, 1.47 (1994), 46–50 (p.49) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40425048> [accessed 3 November 2021].

explorative, artistic approach to identity is inextricably linked with the history of humankind and Parks simultaneously acknowledges the personal connotations of this question alongside a much broader examination of the universe's formation. Performance scholar Soyica Diggs Colbert establishes a connection between Parks's question of 'who am I?' and the playwright's preoccupation with ontological possibilities where she states, 'Parks's theater, mobilizes (w)hole selves at the site of holes'.[117] According to Colbert, the word-play between whole and hole serves as a key mechanism for the dual examination of identity and traditional historiography across Parks's oeuvre. Yet it also epitomises the paradoxical nature of the hole as representative of the whole of history, and the absences that shape history's master narratives. The discovery of the big bang marked a renegotiation of human identity and the position of the human in relation to a non-human past. Similarly, the birth of the United States of America, founded largely on Lockean principles, ushered in new scientific grounds for understanding humankind—merging Mathematics (notably Newtonian physics) with historical rationale. Pramod Mishra offers a nuanced explication of the way the laws of nature informed the formation of the US nation-state:

> [B]efore Newton, nature had been perceived as wild, unpredictable, violent, and chaotic, a force that needed to be brought to manageable form through religious rituals, figures, and cosmologies presided over by a religious God or other spirits […] Now, a secular, scientific universalism reigned.[118]

Mishra contends that Mathematics and physics interfered with the weight of God's word in the realm of reason. New epistemological frameworks engendered new historiographical views, in many ways gratifying a human desire for knowledge and coherence. In *The America Play*, Parks weaves the formation of both the universe and the US nation-state as interlocking legacies of the hole. The epigraph for the published play, a quote by Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, establishes 'origins' as a conceptual focus: 'In the beginning, all the world was America'.[119] A Lockean reference to the origins of capitalism and a departure from Euclidean physics frames the play. This quote also serves as a reminder of the myth of America as a nation of opportunity, or 'the great uncharted frontier' that operates on a Lockean social and racial contract, as well as Christian tenets.[120] Locke's phrasing echoes the Biblical creation story, as told in John 1:1: 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God'.[121] Here, spoken word is figured as life-giving; breath marks the birth of

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[117] Soyica Diggs Colbert, '"When I Die, I Won't Stay Dead": The Future of the Human in Suzan-Lori Parks's The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World', *Boundary 2*, 39.3, 191-220 (p.219) <http://doi:10.1215/01903659-1730671>

[118] Pramod K. Mishra, "[A]ll the World was America": The Transatlantic (Post)Coloniality of John Locke, William Bartram, and the Declaration of Independence," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 2.1 (2002), 213-258 (p.216) <http://doi:10.1353/ncr.2002.0010>

[119] As quoted in Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.127-160 (p.129).

[120] Jodi Kanter, 'Practicing Compensation: Filling the Great Holes of History' in *Performing Loss: Rebuilding Community Through Theatre and Writing* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2007), pp.127-146 (p.135).

[121] John 1:1 NIV

the world. Parks and Beckett dramatize this phenomenon through the sonic re-presentation of this breath of creation in 'The Blank Before the World' and *Breath*. In *The America Play*, the historical weight of words is again brought to the fore, alongside the empirical connotations of a Lockean philosophy.

In Act 2, Brazil invokes the creation story embraced by modern day science: the big bang. He remarks, 'In thuh beginning there was one of those voids here and then 'bang' and then voila! And here we is'.[122] Parks inserts the term 'big bang' in Brazil's dialogue, relative to where 'America' and 'word' are positioned in the aforementioned mythologised statements by John Locke and in the bible. Brazil's echo of the original biblical phrase refigures the term 'word' from John 1:1 as an absent presence in this moment. Likewise, 'Word' is substituted for the term 'void'—and yet its meaning is resurrected and activated as a result of the biblical phrase's historical weight and cultural resonance. 'This Hole', Brazil goes on to say, 'is our inheritance of sorts. My Daddy died and left it to me and Her. And when She goes, Shes gonna give it all to me!!'.[123] The notion of inheritance is important here as it extends the themes of legacy and lineage as critical components of being.

While the hole represents a genealogical inscription of loss, it is also representative of multiple creation stories. These include the origins of modern America (through intertextual reference to John Locke, a founder of Enlightenment thinking), the biblical creation story (which also equates word with life), and finally the Big Bang (which represents a scientific legacy that tethers human history to the 'deep-time' of the universe). Parks's monumental linkage, enacted via the spatial conduit of the hole, then moves from the Big Bang, the formation of the US nation-state, to the death of the Lesser Known, before arriving at the level of the subject: with Brazil. Brazil's description of the hole as his inheritance evokes notions of ownership and capitalistic ideals of patrilineage and territory. But it also represents a ritual practice of remembrance and carries in it the anticipation of a perpetual engagement with the hole, as a family heirloom. Inheritance might also signal the type of definition that accompanies Parks's use of the term 'possession', in her essay of the same name. Parks considers a state of possession according to the words of religious scholar John S. Mbiti: 'bringing into human history the beings essentially beyond the horizons of present time'.[124] Parks's citation of Mbiti conjures the Great Hole of History. As a site of historical burial and resurrection, the hole fulfils Mbiti's definition of possession, its perimeter delineating the threshold of the 'horizons of present time'. Alongside ideas of possession in *The America Play*, Parks's works serve as a reminder of the way in which performance renders history 'workable' and 'humanized' to borrow scholar Sanja Bahun-Radunović's words.[125] Parks's figures are suspended around the various holes that punctuate her works. They are dis/oriented by the gravitational pull of the black hole that is also 'fulfilling a need' in terms of the creation of the text itself—drawing

[122] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.184.
[123] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.185.
[124] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.3-5, (p.5). Quote by John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.
[125] Sanja Bahun-Radunović, 'History in Postmodern Theater: Heiner Müller, Caryl Churchill, and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Comparative Literature Studies*, 45.4 (2008), pp.446-470 (p.466).

on Parks's description of her creative process as akin to the 'pulling need' of a black hole.[126] However, the historical function of hole imagery in Parks's work also extends to the traces of the past that exist buried within the earth. While the cosmic realm presents an apt metaphor for the limits of human knowledge, Parks's works contain literal holes in the ground and posit the stage as an archaeological site. Of course, the ground and the earth beneath it also contains clues to our planetary history. *The America Play*, which is set in the 'The Great Hole of History' demonstrates questions of origins as a persistent theme that manifests in earthly, as well as cosmic, contexts. In this play, Parks gives expression to the absence of African American narratives of history amidst a storied version of America. As with *365*, her beginning coordinate is the hole.

'He digged the Hole and the Whole held him': Historical Excavations in *The America Play*

'I wanted to write about a hole', was Parks's response when asked in a 1994 interview about her inspiration for *The America Play*.[127] The significance of this starting point is made immediately apparent to readers of the text even before Act I commences, where Parks designates the 'Place' of the *The America Play*, as 'a great hole, in the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History'.[128] Parks inserts her creative inspiration as the site upon—and within—which the action takes place, rendering the stage an archaeological site for a historical excavation. This detail offers another captivating glimpse into the conceptual coalescence of theatre, historicity, and images of holes across Parks oeuvre. That Parks began her creative process of *The America Play* with the image of the hole is unsurprising, considering her explicit interest in historical holes across her works published prior to this play. Parks even used soil in her first work, *The Sinner's Place,* which she wrote as her final year project while a student at Mount Holyoke. Parks elaborates on the importance of this imagery, recounting the cascading nature of her thought process:

> You think of h-o-l-e and then w-h-o-l-e and then black hole, and then you think of time and space, and when you think of time and space you think of history, and suddenly all these things start attaching themselves to each other and suddenly you have two characters sitting in a hole digging and a guy who looks like Abraham Lincoln appears. And, Wow, that's interesting.[129]

The hole functions as a creative catalyst for Parks. Its image inspires a deluge of grand philosophical questions, many of which find expression in 'the Great Hole of History' that forms the backdrop for *The America Play*. That the action of the play takes place on and within an 'exact replica' of this 'Great Hole' allows Parks to continually probe philosophical conundrums around identity, origins, historical

[126] Han Ong and Suzan-Lori Parks, 'An Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks', p.48.
[127] Michelle Pearce, 'Alien Nation: An Interview with the Playwright' in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. by Philip Kolin & Harvey Young (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp.46-48 (p.46).
[128] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.158.
[129] Michelle Pearce, 'Alien Nation: An Interview with the Playwright', p.46.

exposure, and a flurry of other ideas which 'start attaching themselves', as she states.[130] Parks extends these concepts into the realm of performance, condensing their complexities into practical realities—as in the moment Parks pinpoints above, describing the performative culmination of her thoughts: 'two characters [the protagonist's wife, Lucy, and their son, Brazil] sitting in a hole digging and a guy who looks like Abraham Lincoln [the Lesser Known] appears'. Interconnecting themes of history, time, and space, that (as Parks identifies) scaffold this moment, imbue a seemingly mundane act such as 'sitting in a hole digging' with historiographical significance—in this instance, the exhumation of an unrecorded past. As performance scholar Sanja Bahun-Radunović asserts '[Parks] 'digs out' and authenticates precisely what has been omitted (the whole of history as reiterative performance of the hole of history)'.[131] The hole not only stands in for the Middle Passage, it also signifies the (w)hole of African American history, visually denoting the historical silences that are constitutive to master narratives of a national, inherited history.[132] The hole form's distinguishing 'opening' presents a speculative register for what Soyica Diggs Colbert, referring to African American dramatists, describes as 'flip[ping] the epistemological script, transforming absence into way of being present'.[133] The hole offer a spatial resolution to representing history outside of the constraints of teleological narratives imparted by Western philosophy.

The title of *The America Play* indicates Parks's desire to shift the lens through which America's collective national history is traditionally viewed by invoking the nation as a whole, and thereby writing into existence a space where heterogeneous histories *can* exist. However, as with her invocation of the cosmic realm in *365*, Parks's approach to historical representation in *The America Play is* far from straightforward in terms of symbolism. Parks's naming of 'The Great Hole of History' anticipates the 'place' of the play as a repository for the *whole* of history, and hence the ultimate site to perform the historical resurrections to which she refers in her essay on 'Possession'.[134] However, we soon learn the original 'Great Hole' is a theme park, complete with historical parades and pageants featuring the great figures of 'time immemorial'.[135] It contains only fabricated histories, staging re-enactments of the past for the enjoyment of paying onlookers. In a civil war re-enactment, 'the enemy was slain and they lay stretched out and smoldering for dead and rose up again to take their bows'.[136] Parks lays bare the theatricality of history. Though this original Great Hole does not feature in the present of the play (it is referred to as the Lesser Known and Lucy's honeymoon destination), its impression on the Lesser Known is remarkable. As Parks writes, 'The Hole and its Historicity and the part he played in it all gave

[130] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.158.
[131] Sanja Bahun-Radunović, 'History in Postmodern Theater: Heiner Müller, Caryl Churchill, and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Comparative Literature Studies*, 45.4 (2008), pp.446-470, p.466.
[132] At the site of the hole, possibility is infinite; multiple expanses of history are represented simultaneously.
[133] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *The African American Theatrical Body* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2011), p.8.
[134] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.3.
[135] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.170.
[136] Ibid., p.163.

a shape to the life and posterity of the Lesser Known that he could never shake'.[137] The hold of the hole quite literally offers a shape to the Lesser Known's life by informing the temporal simultaneity of the play and instigating his gradual descent into the depths of his replica hole. Here, the capacity for expression increasingly diminishes to 'echoes' and 'rest[s]'.[138] Like the fabricated histories to which he bears witness, the Lesser Known cannot transcend the simulacra environment of the hole and by Act Two in scenes B, D and F, titled 'Echo', he inhabits this vey soundscape of the 'Echo'.[139]

The replica Great Hole, as the dominant component of the play's conceptual and physical landscape, complicates teleological formulations of history and posits the possibilities of historical representation as a key analytic. The play's protagonist, a professional gravedigger-turned-Abraham Lincoln impersonator named 'The Lesser Known,' or sometimes, 'the Foundling Father', is so moved by the hole that he moves out West and, as his wife Lucy recounts, he digs a 'whole Hole with his own 2 hands'.[140] The Lesser Known digs the hole in the second act, though the play's setting is, paradoxically, the replica hole. This contradiction is resolved by the three-fold present that Parks's figures inhabit. Moreover, that the surface of the hole is, in the literal sense, also the surface of the stage, forms a basis to complicate traditional notions of historical recovery and re-membrance. For 'The Lesser Known,' the act of digging represents an effort to not only re-member the Founding Father, Abraham Lincoln, but to posit his figure as a surrogate origin: as his own father. This genealogical dimension recalls Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in which Milkman's leap marks an act of return. Parks invokes verticality through the Foundling Father's descent into the hole: 'He digged the hole and the whole held him'.[141] Parks commented in an interview, 'He's following in the footsteps of someone who is behind him'.[142] The catch, for Parks's characters, lies in the distinction between the real and the simulation.

How then to stage the Great Hole and instil the complexity of Parks's dramatic device? Parks's description of the hole is intentionally ambiguous. She is interested more so by a director's response to the hole, a position that aligns with the infinite possibility the holes in Parks's works appear to signify. She states, 'I'll put in something like, "He's in the big hole which is an exact replica of the Great Hole of history." I want to see what the director says. […] "It's a museum, it's a black hole, it's a fish bowl'.[143] Parks's spur of the moment suggestions attest to her overarching interest in themes of cultural

[137] Ibid., p.162.
[138] Ibid., p.198.
[139] Ibid., p.157
[140] Ibid., p.179.
[141] Ibid., p.159.
[142] Branden Jacon-Jenkins and Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Suzan-Lori Parks, The Art of Theatre', *The Paris Review*, 235.18 (2020) < https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/7636/the-art-of-theater-no-18-suzan-lori-parks> [accessed 1.12.22]
[143] David Savran, and Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Suzan-Lori Parks: Dave Savran [1977]' in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. by Philip Kolin & Harvey Young, reprinted from *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing and the Politics of Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp.78-98, p.81.

preservation, cosmography, and witnessing. She envisions a collaborative element between playwright and director at the heart of this transition from text to performance. The play is really the blue print for meaning making and the possibilities are infinite. Parks's invitation to play with this meaning is decipherable in the myriad approaches to the scenic design of the play, and the representation of the hole.

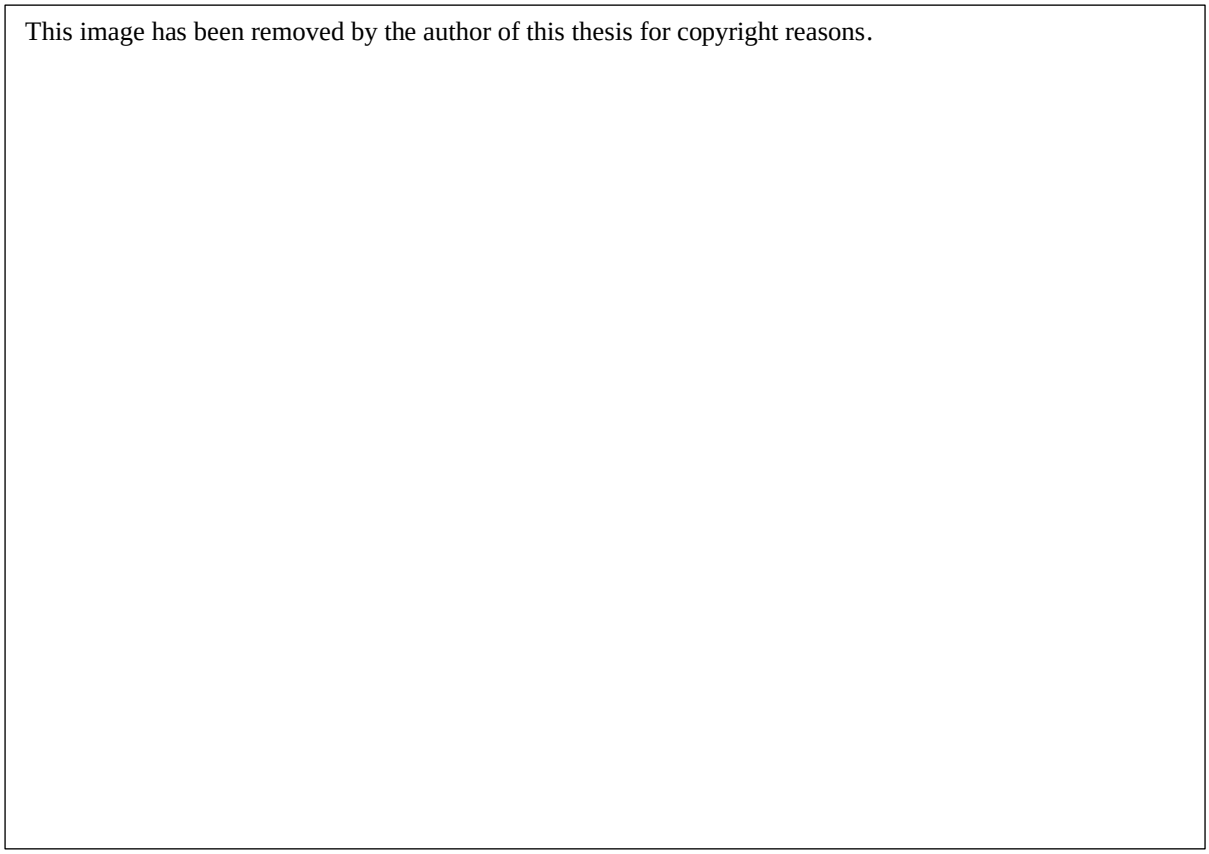

Figure 12 The America Play, Concord Academy Performing Arts Centre <https://davidrgammons.com/work/americaplay.html> [accessed 2 May 2022]

The above figure depicts a scene from a 2006 production of *The America Play* by Concord Academy Performing Arts Centre. David Gammons, who was in charge of both the direction and set design for the production, envisioned the hole through an emphatically postmodern lens.[144] The black and white stripes are a striking feature that distinguish this production from others. The design might be intended to reflect the Great Hole of History as an environment stratified by race, and to extend the importance of Parks's parodying of a whitewashed history into the geography of the play. Certainly, the linearity that the design incorporates into the scene makes for a fascinating comparison with notions

[144] Leslie G. Gulden, 'Building a Langscape for Parks', *Scene,* 1.13 (2013), 343-359 (p.354) <http://doi:10.1386/scene.1.3.343_1>

of Enlightenment time and narrative order. However, the design also obscures the significance of the earth in Parks's play, where the act of 'digging' is paramount.

Parks refers to the historical parades and pageants that take place in the Great Hole as 'Reconstructed Historicities' within the play, a seemingly contradictory phrase which posits the truth of the historical memories featured in the theme park as fundamentally re-workable. The memories stay with the Lesser Known, even as he returns home from the honeymoon.

(Rest)

> Traveling home again from the honeymoon at the Big Hole riding the train with his Lucy: wife beside him the Reconstructed Historicities he has witnessed continue to march before him in his minds eye as they had at the Hole. Cannons wicks were lit and the rockets did blare and the enemy was slain and lay stretched out and smoldering for dead and rose up again to take their bows. On the way home again the histories paraded again on past him although it wasnt on past him at all it wasnt something he could expect but again like Lincolns life not "on past" but past. Behind him. Like an echo in his head.
>
> (Rest)[145]

Couched between two 'rest' moments, which Parks elsewhere describes as a directive to 'take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition', this passage describes the transfer of historical knowledge onto the body of the Lesser Known.[146] In a comment on the increasing significance of geographical configurations and projections in the context of the postmodern, Edward Soja writes, 'we can no longer depend on a storyline unfolding sequentially, an ever-accumulating history marching straight forward in plot and denouement'.[147] Soja's observation recalls the 'Reconstructed Historicities' which march 'before him [the Lesser Known]' but which, through Parks's technique of repetition and revision, are simultaneously positioned 'Behind him. Like an echo in his head'.[148] Partaking in a postmodern dramatic tradition that Soja describes, Parks refuses to perpetuate the movement of the historical re-enactments through space and time as a march 'straight forward'. Rather, the repetition and revision of the historical re-enactments before him and behind him seem to maroon the Lesser Known. Although no longer sat on the edge of the hole looking in, the Reconstructed Histories are ever-present for the Lesser Known as he and Lucy travel home. With the transition of the 'Reconstructed Historicities' from the physical hole in the ground, to his 'minds eye', the boundaries of inside and outside, previously determined by the earthly perimeter of the hole that separate the couple from the theme park, collapse. They are reformulated onto the body of the Lesser Known, whose eye is rendered a channel for the transfer of historical knowledge. The act of gazing at the performances prompts their impression into

[145] Ibid., p.131.
[146] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), pp.10-26 (p.21.)
[147]Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p.23.
[148] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.131.

his ‘minds eye’. The unstable body of history projects onto the body of the Lesser Known, taking up the form of (as opposed to visual representation through performance), a recurring thought, and an echo, both of which are ephemeral in nature. In this moment, the Lesser Known becomes a vessel for the movement of historical narrative through space and time.

As a professional gravedigger, the Lesser Known facilitates the conditions for mourning, a tradition that is ceremonially marked with the descent of the deceased into the ground. Yet, the Lesser Known’s critical shift in direction when he moves out West motions toward his transformed relationship with the landscape. His replica Great Hole strives towards a historical resurrection through the repeated performance of Abraham Lincoln’s moment of death. The reconstructed Historicities impart meaning and affect on a material plane—starting with the transformation of the Lesser Known’s career progression from grave digger to Lincoln impersonator. The resulting affect is his own demise at the end of act 2 wherein he meets the same fate as Lincoln; he is shot by a stray bullet during a performance. His hole is transformed into his own grave as the replica hole becomes his resting place. The phrase ‘He digged the hole and the whole held him’ accumulates meaning though persistent repetition as the narrative progresses.[149] Parks’s use of a chiasmus implies the part played by fate and reads like a mythical version of the narrative. It condenses the personal history of the Foundling Father to the fact of his existence in relation to the hole, which is also the site at which the teleological coordinate of *wholenesss* is posited in this text. This material affect is a crucial aspect of Parks’s creative practice in terms of distinguishing her work from the parameters of historical revisionism; Parks participates in the making of history through spatial conditions that illume the plural and malleable nature of linguistic meaning. Take, for example, the pivotal moment when the Lesser Known moves out West, thereby creating a gap (or hole) between himself and his family.

> The Lesser Known left his wife and child and went out West finally. [Between the meat and the vegetables. A momentous journey. Enduring all the elements. Without a friend in the world. And the beasts in the forest took him in. He got there and he got his plot he staked his claim he tried his hand at his own Big Hole.][150]

Parks’s description is teeming with symbolic meaning. Through the narration of the Lesser Known’s journey across America, ‘out West’, Parks reorders the coordinates of time and space. The Lesser Known’s movement encapsulates multiple geographic spans and stretches of time, as opposed to just the temporal and cartographical distance between his family and ‘out West’. Parks’s use of the term ‘finally’ implies the Lesser Known’s decision to be a matter of fate, thereby signalling a mythological framework. The bracketed details that follow confirm this inference; they read much like an explication of a corresponding realm of suspended meaning. Parks lists various conventional features of a mythic quest narrative such as *The Odyssey*, following these with an invocation of the American frontier myth.

[149] Suzan-Lori Parks, ‘The America Play’, p.159.
[150] Suzan-Lori Parks, ‘The America Play’, p.163.

As such, meaning making is enacted at the level of language. Recognisable literary tropes, such as the 'momentous journey' that traditionally defines an epic tale, underscore the role of hermeneutics in the domain of historical narration as inextricably connected to aesthetic principles.

This technique recalls playwright Samuel Beckett's aspirations for language: 'To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through'.[151] Parks, like Beckett, grapples with the signified meanings that accompany words and actions. This grappling highlights that the linguistic process of signification is subject to the tandem operation of burial and resurrection over time. Meanings are continuously generated, buried, resurrected, appropriated, and problematised, across what are subsequently revealed as open fields of history and literature. Parks explains, 'Because words are so old they hold; they have a big connection with the what was'.[152] However for Parks, what lurks behind the descriptive language of African American *history* is presented in *The America Play* as a simulacra environment, because so much of the historical ground—or material history—of the presence and experiences of Black people in America, is absent. As Elinor Fuchs contends, 'the 'real' theme park of the original Great Hole, stands in for the fakery of the 'themed' built landscape of contemporary America, and at a deeper level, the fake reality of an American history that excludes Black experience from its accounts'.[153] Fuchs's focus on the double meaning of the term 'theme' demonstrates Parks's spatialization of language. The original great hole, as a theme park, signals the determining role of 'themes' to narrative arrangements of time and space, insofar as a theme implies a historiographic effort towards coherence and repetition, through a recurring idea.[154] The anticipated deconstruction of such themes, through the performance of digging, is therefore a performative-linguistic act that serves to reify that historical narratives, as with fictional narratives, are predicated on themes—namely in the context of the US, themes of national innocence and self-determination.

This attentiveness to language as a site of excavation in itself connects Parks's drama to a tradition of postmodernist theatre. Marvin Carlson argues:

> It seems altogether appropriate that some of our most perceptive and thoughtful contemporary dramatists have abandoned the concrete stage of detailed physical settings that suited so well the age of positivism and the celebration of the empirical methodology of the physical sciences, and in its place have developed forms of stage geography that reflect the widely held view that everything about us, even our physical universe, is in fact a product of language. Further, because they are also writers for the theater, which is traditionally concerned with both language and space, they have taken this preoccupation with language in a

[151] Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Vol. 1: 1929–1940, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.518.
[152] Suzan-Lori Parks, Elements of Style', p.11.
[153] Elinor Fuchs, 'Reading for Landscape" in *Land/Scape/Theater*, ed. by E. Fuchs and U. Chaudhuri (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002) pp.30-50 (p.40).
[154] This consideration also underscores the effectiveness of applying a *thematic* framework of burial and resurrection to Parks's writing.

particularly theatrical direction, developing it as a spatial as well as linear construct.[155]

Carlson alludes to the refutation of static, detailed, stable landscapes of realism, across the plays of writers such as Sam Shepard, Adrienne Kennedy, Eric Overmyer, and of course Parks. The *theme* park of the original great hole in *The America Play*, considered as a site where Parks plays with narrative technique, exemplifies Carlson's reference to language as a spatial construct. A Beckettian drilling—or rather digging—of holes into language is emulated on the physical surface of the stage. Still, an attentiveness to the determining force of empirical methodology permeates the narrative. The totalising effect of the vast subject matter consistent with the 'whole' of America, draws up the role of science and empiricism in the narration and development of history. This urge to quantify history repeatedly surfaces in the dialogue: from the '7 hundred and 23 graves' that the Lesser Known digs before his departure out West, to his records of all the movements he makes 'in the hopes he'd be of interest to posterity'.[156] The Lesser Known's investment in the life of Lincoln takes on a similarly empirical slant: 'What interested the Lesser Known most about the Great Man was the 20 feet which separated the presidents box from the stage'.[157] Parks even writes a formula for the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and the Lesser Known in her essay 'from Elements of Style'.

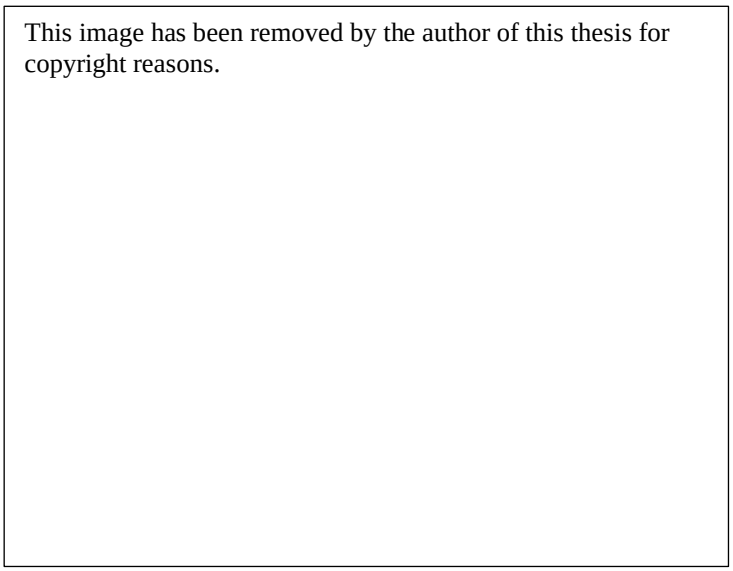

Figure 12 Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.6-18, (p.14).

These attempts to quantify events (or in the above case, to quantify the 'Great Man' himself) emulate a habitual impulse to establish a measurable, coherent historical body. In the above formula, x (in the first

[155] Marvin Carlson, 'After Stein: Traveling the American theatrical "Langscape"' in *Land/Scape/Theater*, ed. by E. Fuchs and U. Chaudhuri (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002) pp. 145–158, p.157.
[156] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', pp.169-170.
[157] Ibid., p.167.

of the three expressions listed) designates the 'Great Mans Stature'. The instruction to 'solve' the equation produces a dilemma for readers, in the sense that the attribute of stature presumes a qualitative, as opposed to a numerical, value. The text of *The America Play* operates in tandem with this formula to attach additional meaning to the figures presented. The Foundling Father exclaims:

> Everyone who has ever walked the earth has a shape around which their entire lives and their posterity shapes itself. The Great Man had his log cabin into which he was born, the distance between the cabin and Big Town multiplied by the half-life, the staying power of his words and image, being the true measurement of the Great Mans stature.[158]

Parks draws on the fact of Abraham Lincoln's tall stature as a determining aspect of his total image in the national imaginary. This alternate, abstracted version of Lincoln's actual self is visually represented here as the sum of the 'Great Man's' stature. Indeed, as a venerated figure of enduring national significance, allusions to a top hat, a beard, and a quote from the Gettysburg address: '4 score and 7 years ago' are obvious markers of Lincoln's historicised identity. Parks highlights that the sum of x is connected with Lincoln's *historical* standing—the 'staying power' of his words and image, as opposed to his 'real' self. Meanwhile, Parks alludes to Lincoln's beginning on the prairie in a log cabin, invoking his representation of self-determination. Certainly, the thematic significance of origins in *The America Play* provides a sound connection to the log cabin, via the circumstances of Lincoln's birth. Lincoln's journey to 'Big Town', visualised in the form of a big(ger) house than the cabin of his early years, might symbolise Lincoln's rise to the ranks of president in Washington D.C. Still, Parks complicates the notion that simple substitutions should be equated with clarity, even going so far as to classify this practice as 'bad math'.[159]

Parks's formula might then gesture towards multiple possible interpretations that radically depart from the normative treatment of numerical values and symbols. In thinking beyond the formulaic rules of algebra, beyond even the disciplinary framework of mathematical truth, infinite possibilities emerge. In short, the objective is not necessarily to 'solve' the equation; rather, to explicate its existence, and inhabit its very contradictions and (im)possibilities. The sign x has a particular resonance in this regard. Just as x represents the unknown in the context of algebra, this meaning extends to the practice of naming. The letter X was selected by many formerly enslaved African Americans following the Thirteenth Amendment, when adopting a surname was required; in many instances the X came to signal the obscured history of their African ancestral surname.[160] This naming practice was continued by many descendants of enslaved African Americans, such as civil rights activist and Muslim minister, Malcolm X (1925-1965). Certainly, in *The America Play*, the notion of lineage is connected to the symbol of X. Lucy (whose own name references the oldest known fossil skeleton of a human ancestor, dating back

[158] Ibid., p.162.
[159] Ibid., p.14.
[160] Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p.175.

to around 3.2million years ago), draws an X on the spot where the Lesser Known died. She asks their son, Brazil, to dig: 'I'll draw a X for you. See? Heresuh X. Huh. Dig here'. Lucy reiterates, 'He was yuh Fathhuh. That's the connection'.[161] Hence, the abstract sign from the formula representing Lincolns' stature, featuring a directive to discover the value of x, is interpreted here on the physical space of the stage. The notion of patrilineage resonates in this performance of digging. Situating the stage as a sort of archaeological site, Parks's figures literally dig, echoing the physical performance of enslaved people; they participate in and contour the trajectory of a performative historical continuum, to effectively exhume an unrecorded past that is simultaneously connected with an unknown ancestral past.

The Lincoln Myth

Parks repeatedly parodies the mythologised figure of Abraham Lincoln across her body of work. As I have demonstrated, Lincoln's figure, like the Great Hole, gives 'a shape to the life and posterity' of the Foundling Father of *The America Play*, but Lincoln's impression on Parks's writing also extends into her 2001 Pulitzer prize winning play, *Topdog/Underdog*, which features brothers 'Linc' and 'Booth', each bound to the fate of their namesakes.[162] In her *365* project, too, several entries invoke his memory, for example December 2: 'Abraham Lincoln at 89', February 12: 'The Birth of Abraham Lincoln', and April 12: 'The Mr Lincoln Rose'.[163] Parks's repeated 'repetitions and revisions' of Lincoln's historically overdetermined figure marks an alternate form of 'filling' historical holes aimed at deconstructing the perceived coherence and linearity of historical narrative. Parks destabilises his mythologised status as a harbinger of freedom in drawing up what Colbert terms, 'the constitutive force of history on individuals'.[164] Parks's historiographical approach is characteristic of a post-structuralist environment that repudiates historical wholeness, recognising the constructedness of historical narrative. Historian Hayden White, in building on the work of Levi Strauss, highlights the subjective role of the human to the construction of history: 'to historicize any structure, to write its history, is to mythologize it [...] [history] is never only history *of,* it is always also history *for*'.[165] Parks's choice of Abraham Lincoln has much to do with the fact that narratives of national innocence are often characterised by a focus on his figure as 'the great emancipator' and as symbolic of the efforts to end the institution of slavery. These same narratives also tend to represent the enslaved in relation to the material artefacts left by

[161] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.181.
[162] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.134; Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001)
[163] Entries in *365 Days/365 Plays* connected to Abraham Lincoln include: 'November 26: Mrs. Keckley & Mrs. Lincoln, p.25; 'December 2: Abraham Lincoln at 89', p.37; 'February 12: The Birth of Abraham Lincoln', p.120; 'April 12: The Mr Lincoln Rose', p.175.
[164] Soyica Diggs Colbert, 'Overture: rites of reparation' in *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), pp.1-19 (p.5).
[165] Hayden V. White, 'Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination,' *History and Theory,* 14.4 (1975), 48-67 (p.51) <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504665>

their enslavers: such as ships logs, bills of sale, and private property records. The cultural memory of Abraham Lincoln is contradistinctive to such material absence. The former president's immense presence in the national imaginary, and subsequently American's national identity, wields narrative momentum across Parks's dramatic works. In *The America Play*, Lincoln exists as merely an 'impression' in the space of the play, referred to throughout as 'The Great Man' or 'The Founding Father', and hence the inspiration for the play's protagonist, 'The Lesser Known' or 'The Foundling Father'. The Foundling Father is captured by the awe that Lincoln's commemoration inspired in Americans: 'he wanted to grow and have others think of him […] and look up into the heavens and say something about the freeing of the slaves'.[166] As implied by this quote, which encapsulates the metonymic relationship between Lincoln and freedom, Parks plays on the historical mechanisms of remembrance by drawing on the tensions between presence and absence that the hole/whole imagery sets out.

As *The America Play* is repeatedly rehearsed and performed, so too is the act of digging. Parks locates the ancestral burial ground through her writing, and with each iteration of the play, the violent circumstances of an 'unrecorded, dismembered, washed out' African American history are revealed as such.[167] In *365,* the value of theatre in the context of historical remembrance is similarly brought to the fore, though in play-diary form. In an entry for October 11th titled 'Another Deep Hole', two characters come across what could possibly represent a continuation of the landscape of *The America Play*, perhaps as one of The Lesser Known's holes. The entry reads as follows:

2 people walking along.
-Woah!
-Yeah!
-You think?
-Could be.
-Measure it, man, measure it.
2nd measures the hole.
-Well?
-Yep.
-You sure?
-Oh yeah. Its another deep hole.
-All right.
1st puts a sign: "Another Deep Hole."
They go.[168]

As in *The America Play,* the characters are preoccupied with calculating space, choosing to measure the hole in an effort to decipher this (historical) landscape. Parks summarises the play, 'Every great gap should get a sign'.[169] In the play diary that follows, titled 'Analysis', a character has purportedly fallen into the hole, and another—or perhaps even the same—character buys a sample of the hole, which we

[166] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.134.
[167] Suzan-Lori Parls, 'Possession', p.4.
[168] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Another Deep Hole', p.351.
[169] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Plays: A Table of Contents', p.397.

are told is made of 'space'.[170] The hole is rendered a commodity trap. Parks is intervening in history; as she writes in an essay entitled 'Possession' '[s]ince history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history.[171] Parks's words make unmistakably clear that the holes in her texts signal the silences of African American history, while her plays demonstrate that sometimes writing it down can mean spatialising time itself, so as to map out its gaps with designated signs. The hole therefore denaturalises the perceived fixedness of space and time. This same historiographical mechanism delineates the uneven historical landscape of Western colonialism more generally and marks a failure of the historical record to articulate subaltern voices. In the case of African American history, the persistent silences perpetuate the ubiquity of loss instituted by the practice of slavery, as deeply entrenched racial hierarchies are mapped onto historical domains.

In the final scene of *The America Play*, for which the title also designates the site: 'G: The Great Beyond', the Foundling Father, though dead, reunites with his family during the preparations for his burial. The stage directions indicate, 'the Foundling Father has returned. His coffin awaits'.[172] The unique temporality of the Great Hole permits this liminal space where the boundary between death and life collapses and Lucy and Brazil are able to converse with the Foundling Father in his spectral form. Lucy asks, 'You gonna get n yr coffin now or late?', to which The Foundling Father responds 'I'd like tuh wait uhwhile'—a response characteristic of the dislocated temporality of the hole.[173] Parks's narrative is interacting with a master narrative of history: the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. She condenses and revises this event into a unique temporality that engages non-linear designs of time and space to encapsulate a national history. I share with Soyica Diggs Colbert in her conviction that:

> Western conceptions of history and time have rendered minoritarian subjects frozen in the past, lagging behind, or perpetually on the threshold, even as historical traumas erupt in the present' leading to 'a dizzying back-and-forth toggle in time, in which subjects experience multiple temporalities simultaneously or out of joint.[174]

Colbert's identification of subjects 'frozen in the past' or 'on the threshold' is of particular significance to the figure of the Foundling Father, for whom a threshold seems to persist from the moment he encounters the original Great Hole and sits on its lip. Once dead, he takes his place amongst the various 'historical knick-knacks' in the Hall of Wonders. Here, his desire to be remembered is met; as the play draws to an end, Brazil announces his entry in the Hall of Wonders: 'our newest Wonder: one of thuh greats Hisself!', also drawing attention to 'the death wound'—that is 'thuh great black hole

[170] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Analysis', p.352.
[171] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.
[172] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.194.
[173] Ibid., p.194.
[174] Soyica Diggs Colbert et al., 'Introduction: Tidying Up after Repetition' in *Race and Performance After Repetition*, ed. by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones Jr., Shane Vogel (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2020), pp.1-28 (p.8).

in thuh great black head'.[175] The Lesser Known's bullet wound marks a historical continuum between the Great Man, (the real Abraham Lincoln), and himself. Through death, their histories intertwine. Parks interweaves a celestial frame with the term 'great black hole', which tethers this image to a cosmic black hole, and therefore gestures towards the monumental scale of Parks's subject matter.

The America Play's title hints that this is a portrait of America in its totality—its history, its landscape, and its heroes. The play engenders new and unfamiliar historical postures on Lincoln. Where Abraham Lincoln appears played by a Black actor, I have argued, as most critics agree, that Parks is drawing attention to the elision of African American presence throughout master narratives of American history.[176] Parks 'disturbs the historical order by insisting on his [the Foundling Father's] participation in the discourse that has excluded him'.[177] The site of the stage marks the dissonance between the real Lincoln and the Lincoln impersonator, this gap between the two characters—or as The Lesser Known remarks, the gap between the real Lincoln and the fake. This gap, or hole, creates a space for the production of a new historical posture that wields the fakery inherent to the theatre as a gateway to a different view of history. Sites of holes then serve in Park's works as creative openings where history is chronicled, critiqued, and re-envisioned. Such changes mark a re-negotiation of identity as a category that is inherently connected to the shape of history. For the Foundling Father of *The America Play*, this effort to fill in the hole, or the gap between the real Lincoln and the imitation of Lincoln, ultimately leads to the loss of his own identity. The final scene of *The America Play* sees the Foundling Father return to his wife, Lucy, and son, Brazil as he performs his Lincoln Act one last time. His body marks another relic of The Great Man, in this sense he inserts himself into the historical legacy of Abraham Lincoln. On the other hand, Lucy and Brazil then mourn for the loss of the Lesser Known. The question of erasure hangs in the balance.

Act 1 of *The America Play* features multiple re-enactments of Lincoln's assassination in April 1865 when, during a production of 'Our American Cousin' at Ford's Theatre, Washington D.C. actor John Wilkes Booth, a Confederate sympathiser, leaped into the presidential box and shot him in the head. Parks draws out the meta-theatricality of this moment in Vaudevillian-style shooting scenes that occur intermittently throughout The Lesser Known's monologue of Act 1. The effect of these repeated assassinations is such that, according to scholar Kerstin Schmidtt, this historical 'scene' appears 'doomed to endless repetition [...] as if it were an endless spiral, a historical trap without escape'.[178] Parks's persistent re-creation of this moment in history delegitimises the original 'scene' as multiple revised versions play out on stage within the simulacra environment the great hole of history. In *The*

[175] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.199.
[176] Laura Dawkins, 'Family Acts: History, Memory, and Performance in Suzan-Lori Parks's The America Play and Topdog/Underdog', *South Atlantic Review,* 74.3 (2009), 82-98 (p.83).
[177] Sun Hee Teresa Lee, 'Unnatural Conceptions: (Per)Forming History and Historical Subjectivity in Suzan-Lori Parks's The America Play and Topdog/ Underdog', *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 19.1 (2007), 5-31 (p.20).
[178] Kerstin Schmidt, 'Suzan-Lori Parks: "Rep and Rev Postmodernism"' in *The Theater of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp.173-212 (p.201).

America Play, these repeats simultaneously delegitimise the authenticity of the original event, as well as the sense of permanence associated with Lincoln's death. The performance context of the play, combined with the fact of Abraham Lincoln's hold within the psyche of the nation as 'the great emancipator' underscores the potency of performance in (re)figuring the historical past – or 'PastLand' as Parks refers to in her essay 'on Elements of Style'.[179]

Abraham Lincoln's hold within a national psyche exemplifies the historiographical mechanism of performance. Nevertheless, the theatricality of Lincoln's assassination—that Parks explicitly underlines through her *staging* of the event—intersects with a variety of other performance modes that contour Lincoln's legacy. Parks is attentive to these too; the stage features 'uh Tee-vee' that loops scenes of Lincoln's Gettysburg address, a portrait that fixes his image in the background throughout the events of the play, and even a 'bust of Lincoln' at which The Foundling Father occasionally nods.[180] These representations of Lincoln are familiar features in both domestic and public contemporary US spaces; Parks parodies the ubiquity of Lincoln's commonplace reproductions through the absurdity of their being gathered onto the singular space of the stage. By way of conclusion, I wish to ground Parks's discussion of Lincoln's mythologised status in a particular context of memorialisation that might well have inspired Parks's play, and which explicitly demonstrates the potency of his resurrected memory. The below image features a Disney animatronic version of Lincoln, whose presence at Disneyland draws in an abundance of visitors interested to engage with a performance title 'Great Moments with Lincoln'.

[179] Suzan-Lori Parks, Elements of Style', p.12.
[180] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.193; Ibid., p.161.

Figure 13 Peter Lee, 'A Great Moment', Flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0

The scene echoes the theme park setting of the original Great Hole. An introductory video of Lincoln's Gettysburg address describes the former president as 'immortal', much like the pageants in the Great Hole that parade figures from 'time immemorial'.[181] The narrator also posits the rationale for the performance firmly within a framework of burial and resurrection:

> We pay tribute here not to a man who lived a century ago, but to an individual who lives today in the hearts of freedom-loving people […] And now the skills of the sculptor and the talents of the artist will let us re-live great moments with Mr Lincoln.[182]

In this looping recording, the narrator refutes Lincoln's mortality; his actual self is distinguished from his disembodied, resurrected self. The artist is rendered an agent of resurrection. Unlike this Disney theme park representation of Lincoln, Parks's theatrical resurrections of Lincoln's memory subvert a paradigm of Black erasure by having a Black actor impersonate his venerated figure. For the Foundling

[181] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.170.
[182] Disneyland, 'Great Moments with Mr Lincoln: Complete Audio', online video recording, YouTube, 6 March 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33AcW84vZrk> [accessed 5 July 2022].

Father, who posits Abraham Lincoln as a surrogate Father in a simulacrum quest of historical return, I argue that death instead instigates his ancestral return. From the grave, the Foundling Father in the final scene of *The America Play* announces 'I'd like to say a few words from the grave. Maybe a little conversation: Such a long story. Uhhem. I quit the business. And buried all my things. I dropped anchor: Bottomless'.[183] Lincoln's curious reference to an anchor glimpses a transition from land to water in these final moments of the play. Parks invokes the rhetoric of Glissant's abyss, perhaps signalling the Foundling Father has reached 'a beginning whose time is marked by balls and chains gone green' in the depths of a Middle Passage watery abyss.[184]

The Foundling Father's final resting place, as a possible Middle Passage abyss, comprises the historical anchor for my next and final chapter as I switch focus from the earth to water in exploring the wave as an affective spatial dimension in Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), and in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008). In a tidal motion, I refer back to my discussion of the hole as a metaphor for Middle Passage histories in the 'Blank Before the [New] World', extending this to the oceanic site of the Atlantic. This transition also entails a move from the simulacra monument of Lincoln to the materiality of the Atlantic, wherein the ancestry that the Foundling Father discards in his search for Lincoln is re-membered through Park's and Philip's turn to the oceanic archive to 'hear the bones sing'.[185]

[183] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The America Play', p.197.
[184] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* p.6.
[185] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.

Chapter 3: Waves

My text was writ in water.

Suzan-Lori Parks, The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World.[1]

When in *Death of the Last Black Man*, Black Man with Watermelon states, 'My text was writ in water. I would like tuh drink it down', his words transport the bewildering, ever-shifting geography of the play into the realm of a watery abyss.[2] Black Man with Watermelon contemplates his textual origins in relation to the symbolic geography of the Middle Passage, and therefore as subject to its disjunctive spatio-temporal logics. Also asking, 'Who gived birth tuh me I wonder?' Black Man with Watermelon is preoccupied with the absence that delineates his origins.[3] More a semantic figure than a three-dimensional character, his self-reflexive ontological interrogation draws up the absurdity of his scripted identity; he exists within the dramatic structure of *Death of the Last Black Man* as the explicit invention of a racial imaginary contoured by the historical legacy of the Middle Passage. Parks articulates the realm of a watery abyss more explicitly in her 1989 play, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*. Here, 'Third Kingdom' marks a Middle Passage site in which figures appear locked in a cycle of continual becoming.[4] In this chapter, I place Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* in conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip's book of poems *Zong!* (2008), deploying an oceanic 'wave' as my key analytic. I argue that Parks and Philip gesture towards a new narrative of blank that remembers the experiences of enslaved Africans subjected to the Middle Passage by drawing on the material site of the Ocean. Parks and Philip trouble limiting, colonial narratives of Transatlantic slavery that initiate a legacy of loss and narrative distortion in staging the Middle Passage as a liminal site of continual becoming, materially signalled by the geography of the Atlantic. Building on my discussion of quantum physics and black holes in relation to Parks's 'The Blank Before the Word' in the previous chapter, I also interweave a discussion of the 'wave' from a physics perspective. To this end, I articulate a quantum landscape in Parks and Philip's texts, drawing on the phenomena of wave-particle duality as a marker of possibility. In particular, I look to the phenomenon of 'quantum tunnelling', a process whereby particles penetrate seemingly impossible barriers.[5] I invoke Glissant's image of the abyss in exploring the dimensions of quantum tunnelling in *Zong!* and *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third*

[1] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World' in *The America Play and Other Works* (NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.99-131 (p.116).
[2] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man,* p.116.
[3] Ibid., p.206.
[4] Part 2 of *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* is entitled 'Third Kingdom' (pp.37-40). Following on from 'Part 3: Open House', Parks includes an additional Third Kingdom section: 'Third Kingdom (Reprise)' (pp.54-57).
[5] See Kip S. Thorne, 'Ripples of Curvature' in *Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy* (London: Papermac [reprint] 1995), pp.376-396.

Kingdom. However, as my initial point of departure, I return to Parks's *Death of the Last Black Man* (which represented a key focus within my study of verticality), because this text's oceanic images merit attention. Further, they foreground Parks's formulation of a Middle Passage imaginary inspired by the material attributes of the Atlantic as dimension that subsists throughout her 'history plays'.[6]

In *Death of the Last Black Man,* Parks explores the implications of historical holes on the formation of a collective African American identity through the semantic figure of 'Black Man with Watermelon'. Parks asks what it means to have a figure embody the denigrating watermelon stereotype inside the context of performance, a field that also represents a medium for the perpetuation of racist caricature images.[7] To this end, Parks repeatedly evinces Black Man with Watermelon's image in *Death of the Last Black Man* to un-script narratives of Black inferiority associated with his namesake. Much like the trickster figure of African American folklore, he continues to resurrect despite multiple tragic deaths through, for example, electrocution, lynching, falling off a slave ship, and falling twenty-three floors—the latter two of these deaths echoing events in Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*.[8] Black Man with Watermelon's desire to obliterate his watery birthplace, to 'drink it down' also reflects a yearning for a historical revealing; he endeavours to fathom the Middle Passage histories submerged beneath the surface of the Atlantic, or perhaps even to obliterate its very geography.[9] In this sense, he is as an abyssal subject and occupies a state of cyclical, oceanic becoming.

Parks embraces the fluidity of the Atlantic as a material-metaphoric foil to abandon fixed, Westernised protocols of space and time. The diffusive geography of *Death of the Last Black Man* vies with such protocols, proposing spatio-temporal constructs characteristic of the abyss. This re-presentational dimension connects the play to a long tradition of Black diasporic renderings of the Middle Passage with which the following analysis of waves is concerned. Parks's Black Man with Watermelon emphasises her engagement with the dynamism of the ocean as an allegory for fluctuating histories. To witness Black Man with Watermelon's movements and dialogue is to comprehend the repeated narrative creation and obliteration of his semantic origins. Parks's fundamentally linguistic approach to the procedure of re-historicizing the past resonates with Luce Irigaray's theorising of gender in her essay 'The Language of Man'; Irigaray puts forth that 'Western logic calls for and relies on a mechanics of solids. The fluid will always spill over into reason, ratio, go beyond measure, plunge back into the undifferentiated'.[10] Irigaray's conceptualisation of 'states of matter' as an expression of the

[6] I define Parks's "history plays" as those that explicitly centre the 'narrativity' of history. This includes all those featured in a collection of her earliest plays: *The America Play and Other Works* (1995).
[7] The watermelon stereotype emerged as a racist trope in the Jim Crow era. The watermelon symbolised Black self-sufficiency following the Civil war. See William R. Black, 'How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope', *The Atlantic*, [n.d.] <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529/> [accessed 4.12.22].
[8] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Imperceptible Mutabilities' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.23-72. Hereafter shortened to *Imperceptible Mutabilities*.
[9] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man*, p.116.
[10] Luce Irigaray, 'The Language of Man' *Cultural Critique*, transl. by Erin G. Carlston, 13.1 (1989), 191-202 (p.199) <www.jstor.org/stable/1354273> [accessed 15.12.22].

heterogeneity of time anticipates the critical posture of this chapter as it relates to images of water in Parks's drama. Parks's history plays embrace the fluidity and mutability of ocean matter, to re-member the lives of those jettisoned from slave ships. Irigaray attends to the seeming incompatibility between "reason" (logos/word) versus the disunity associated with fluidity: 'But the operation of fluids doesn't state itself as a condition of truth, of the coherence of the *logos.* To do that would be to reveal the instability of its edifice, the moving ground beneath it'.[11] Irigaray's critical position that all claims to (historical) truth tie to discursive practice posits the past as volatile. The epistemological constraints of meaning-making are brought to the fore as Irigaray contends that reason takes shape through hierarchical Eurocentric constructs; where fluidity comes into play, any claim to historical coherence is relinquished.

Parks repeatedly draws on the history of the universe's formation as a notable example of the shifting nature of historical (and scientific) truths. As the figure Before-Columbus states in *Death of the Last Black Man,*

> Them thinking thuh sun revolved ahroun thuh earth kin kept it satellite-like. They figured out thuh truth and scurried out. Figurin out thuh truth kin put them in their place and they scurried out tuh put us in ours.[12]

Parks conveys the place-making objective of fifteenth century Atlantic "expeditions" via a figure named 'Before-Columbus'. She invokes the historical memory of the celebrated "explorer" and navigator, Christopher Columbus, whose mythic status within America's storied history marks a beginning coordinate for the European colonisation of the Americas. Parks refigures Columbus's legacy, deeming him a harbinger of colonial time. His assemblage of cartographic knowledge facilitated a temporal framework, designating a 'pre-Columbian era'. 'Pre-contact' and 'pre-colonial' are also common descriptors for this era that 'Before-Columbus' embodies, since his first expedition to the Americas brought the region into the European sphere of influence. Viewed as a historical actor, Columbus's impression on time, but also space, is monumental. Implicit in Before-Columbus's dialogue is the urge towards order and reasoning inherent in scientific discourse and cartography. His reference to the sun and earth denotes the epistemological shift away from a geocentric model of the universe in the sixteenth century, which had held that the earth exists at the centre of the solar system. The shift produced ramifications at the level of what it means to be human. Before-Columbus maintains that mechanisms of racial stratification register at a cosmographic level. For Columbus, the Atlantic represented a blank slate on which he projected colonial objectives of territorialisation and sovereignty. Cosmographic and cartographic knowledge doubled as mapping devices through which racist pseudo-scientific discourse limned a politics of racial differentiation. Before-Columbus laments, 'they scurried out tuh put us in ours [place]', laying bare the role of such epistemic oppression and recalling the vertical

[11] Ibid., pp.199-200.
[12] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man,* p.115.

axis. Echoes of the White Devils in Bonner's *The Purple Flower*, declaring Stay-stay-stay', emanate from 'Before-Columbus's indictment of 'truth'.[13] Parks unsettles a specifically Western formulation of 'truth' that distinguishes 'them in their place' from 'us in ours'.

Third Kingdom in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* demonstrates how bodies of water—and concomitantly, waves—present a material and metaphoric medium through which submerged histories of slave voyages might be resurrected on the stage. Arguably, Parks transports the oceanic imaginary of Third Kingdom into *Death of the Last Black Man*. I aim to highlight that Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, like Black Man with Watermelon, is 'writ in water,' and in this manner rejects a 'mechanics of solids'.[14] Stories of lost lives reborn populate the Third Kingdom as third-selves, and yet the traditional devices of hauntology or Gothic literature typically associated with such narratives are nowhere to be found amidst Parks's engagement with figures of the past; rather, Parks relies on her signature 'rep and rev' technique to figure their re-entry into the documentary record. The implications for such historically oriented work reach beyond purely fictive realms; as Jennifer Terry writes of literary narratives of the Middle Passage, 'narrative forms, prominently including literature, can enhance the endurance of memories as well as offer a reflexive rhetoric of memory'.[15] I am especially interested in the capacity for a 'reflexive rhetoric' to inform structures of feeling and a collective positionality in relation to past events. Because of performance's ephemeral quality, Parks's staging of the Middle passage produces memories that interact with a Middle Passage imaginary. In this sense, language bears the potential to both foreclose and open the possibility for historical re-visioning.

As demonstrated by the works of Parks, Bonner, and Morrison featured in this study, the re-presentation of historical silences necessitates a particular kind of artistic engagement that operates beyond the realm of the written record, and beyond 'the mechanics of solids'.[16] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley sketches the contours of a Black feminist epistemology invested in this historical slant; she contends in her seminal essay, 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,' that 'developing a black feminist epistemology to uncover submerged histories […] would involve muddying divisions between documented and intuited, material and metaphoric, past and present'.[17] The site of the Atlantic Ocean (along with Parks's figure, Before-Columbus) marks an example par excellence for just how this call for fluidity can be conceptualised; the ocean has been married—both mythically and materially—with the notion of infinite possibility, and this is particularly prevalent across the work of Caribbean writers and theorists such as Édouard Glissant, Paule Marshall, and M. NourbeSe Philip. Caribbean poet Kamau Braithwaite's concept of 'Tidalectics' radically departs

[13] Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.32.
[14] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man,* p.116; Luce Irigaray, 'The Language of Man', p.199.
[15] Jennifer Terry, 'When the sea of living memory has receded": Cultural memory and literary narratives of the Middle Passage', *Memory Studies,* 6.4 (2013), 474-488 (p.477) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698012467999>
[16] Luce Irigaray, 'The Language of Man' *Cultural Critique,* p.199.
[17] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage', p.194.

from a teleological view of history, instead emphasising the historical mechanisms of erasure that accompany a 'European drive for perpetual innovation'.[18] In this sense, Tidalectics refutes a specifically Western 'obsession for fixity, assuredness, and appropriation' in terms of historical representation, and mirrors instead 'the fluctuating tides, the rhythmic soundings of the waves, and their curling ripples as they wash onto the shores'.[19] Such theorising draws from the multiple temporalities of the ocean, and juxtaposes a Euro-American spatial-imaginary of linear logics, which extend a narrative of territorial expansion across the Atlantic. The logics of linearity upheld by imperialist projects of maritime expansion, and which animate histories of Euro-American colonisation, inscribe linear cartographies onto the surface of the ocean—for example the linear site of the Middle Passage. As Maria Deidrich et al. note, 'The main trajectory of Western European thought seemed to aim straight toward "some goal" of human cultural progress, undergirded by the "logic" of unbridled economic development'.[20] The attendant temporal projection of this trajectory marked the African continent as "old" and the Americas as "new". Hence, an imperialist notion of possibility accrues material dimensions through the movement of slave ships across the Atlantic, entangled in Enlightenment's linear progress narrative towards "civilization". However, an emphasis on the material ocean, the space "in-between", as the medium for these voyages, promotes the possibilities of re-imagining the historical holes that mark the experiences of captive Africans subjected to the Middle Passage.

Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities* demonstrates Braithwaite's theory of Tidalectics in practice and dramatizes this turn to the materiality of the ocean space. Parks evokes the Middle Passage in the language-born world of 'Third Kingdom'—a space of inbetweenness. This inbetweenness manifests in terms of both the formal structure of the text (Third Kingdom features as the second and fourth of the five scenes that make up the play), and the liminal conditions of the characters—or rather 'players' as Parks refers to them, perhaps as a nod to their circumstances in the text as historical players.[21] Third Kingdom evinces Tidalectics insofar as it explodes dialectics and summons possibilities beyond what scholar Paul B. Miller describes as a '"binary trap" that distinguishes between centre and margin, slave and master'.[22] As third selves, the players inhabit extraordinary ontological circumstances, dislocated from stable spatial-temporal coordinates as well as binaries, and in this sense tethered to the conditions of the abyss. Kin-seer, one of the five 'seers' of Third Kingdom, gestures towards the fractured temporality of their environment: 'Tonight I dream of where I be-camin from. And where I be-camin from duhduhnt look like nowhere like I been'.[23] Any potential for clarity around Kin-Seer's origins

[18] Wayde Compton, *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature*, ed. by Wayde Comptom (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2001), p.17.
[19] Stefanie Hessler, 'Tidalectics', *Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21) Academy* (2017) [Pamphlet].
[20] Maria Deidrech et al., 'The Middle Passage Between History and Fiction' in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), pp.5-13 (p.5).
[21] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, p.24.
[22] Paul B. Miller, *Elusive Origins: The Enlightenment in the Modern Caribbean Historical Imagination* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), p.3.
[23] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom', p.54.

disintegrates inside the narrative's driving logic of disarticulation. At stake, in Third Kingdom, is the players' mythic-scale launch into the conditions of historical oblivion. Yet they appear suspended in the confines of Parks's dramatic structure of in-betweenness; Third Kingdom is, linguistically speaking, a temporal loop, striving always towards a coordinate of no fixed origin. Glissant, too, dislodges the concept of 'origins' from a singular, settled location; he draws on the plurality of the archipelago, thereby presenting a conducive framework through which to discern the disordered space-time logics of the abyss.[24]

The Great Hole of History in Parks's *The America Play* mirrors the spatial ambiguity of Glissant's conceptualisation of origins. Kin-seer's bewildering dialogue, set against the disorienting environment of Third-Kingdom, reflects the struggle to represent the Great Hole of History—envisaged in this text as the Middle Passage that connects Africa to the Americas. Parks's splintering of the term 'be-came' in Kin-Seer's aforementioned dialogue reflects their simultaneous past and present circumstances of 'becoming'; the players are ontologically locked into a cycle of coming into being. The enigmatic quality of the Seers' expressions emulates the struggle to represent the experiential dimensions of the Middle Passage, and the repetitive acts of racial violence that characterised its continuation and its lasting legacy. The phrase fronting Toni Morrison's 1988 Turner lecture at University of Michigan springs to mind: 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken'.[25] As the sections preceding the two Third Kingdom sections end, the stage directions instruct: 'Lights out' and 'Lights fade to black'.[26] The cosmic black hole and the abyss characterise the conditions of Third Kingdom, a space where the act of seeing—which Kin-seer aspires to—is incompatible with the surrounding darkness. James Frieze recalls that in the premiere 1989 production of the play directed by Liz Diamond, the Seers were disembodied, their presence transported through their voices on a tape. The stage remained dark, with black-and-white slides projected onto a screen that also featured 'fragments of bodies, hands, and feet thick in mud'.[27] Frieze discerned, 'The Seers are themselves icons out of focus, mangled archetypes, elliptical points of reference'.[28] Visions of fragmented bodies and burial mark traces of discernibility—thinking in tandem here with Glissant's politics of opacity—against the erased, 'elliptical' Black body.[29] Parks's narrative is not a recovery, but a remembrance. The 'players' of

[24] In *Poetics of Relation,* Glissant defines 'errantry' in relation to the archipelago and origins: 'What took place in the Caribbean, which could be summed up in the word creolization, approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible. It is not merely an encounter […] but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry'. (p.34).

[25] Michigan Quarterly Review published Morrison's lecture in the following year. See Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review,* 28.1 (1989), 1-34.

[26] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom', p.37; Ibid., p.54.

[27] James Frieze, 'Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom: Suzan-Lori Parks and the Shared Struggle to Perceive', *Modern Drama,* 41.4 (1998), 523-532 (p.528) <http://doi: 10.3138/md.41.4.523>

[28] Ibid., p.528.

[29] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990], p.194; I set out Glissant's 'politics of opacity' within my discussion of Parks's 'The Blank Before the World' in Chapter Two of this study.

Imperceptible Mutabilities perform the role of 'mangled archetypes', as Frieze describes; they confront the dilemma of how to narrate this fragmented, violent history and reveal the actual circumstances of a historical site, the Atlantic, which connects an African identity to a plantation identity in the New world. The narrative form of the play attends to (though does not resolve) this dilemma. The Over-Seer declares, 'The 2nd part comes apart in 2 parts', referring to the narrative structure of the play itself.[30] The Third Kingdom, which represents part 2, splinters and reappears as the Third Kingdom (Reprise), positioned after the Open House (part 3). In this reprise, Shark-Seer and Kin-Seer say, together, 'And I whuduhnt me no more and I whuduhnt no fish. My new Self was uh 3rd Self made by thuh space in between'.[31] The space in between marks a space of burial and resurrection. Director Liz Diamond contends that Parks's rationale connects with the representation of history: 'In Parks's world, history is too vast, the individual too small, for the psychologically constructed character to have any impact'. [32] Parks refuses the reader the coherence of a linear, chronological structure in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*. She instead foregrounds the history of the Middle Passage as a movement between the sections of the play itself, and a representation of the way in which the history of the Middle Passage persists through time, haunting the present.

In one production directed by David Karl Lee, and with set design by Sarah Lambert, the plan of a slave ship was projected onto a screen, thereby reiterating the Middle Passage context of Third Kingdom.

[30] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, p.37.
[31] Ibid., p.32.
[32] Liz Diamond, 'Perceptible Mutability in the Word Kingdom', *Theater*, 24.3 (1993), 86-87, (p.87) <https://doi.org/10.1215/01610775-24-3-86>

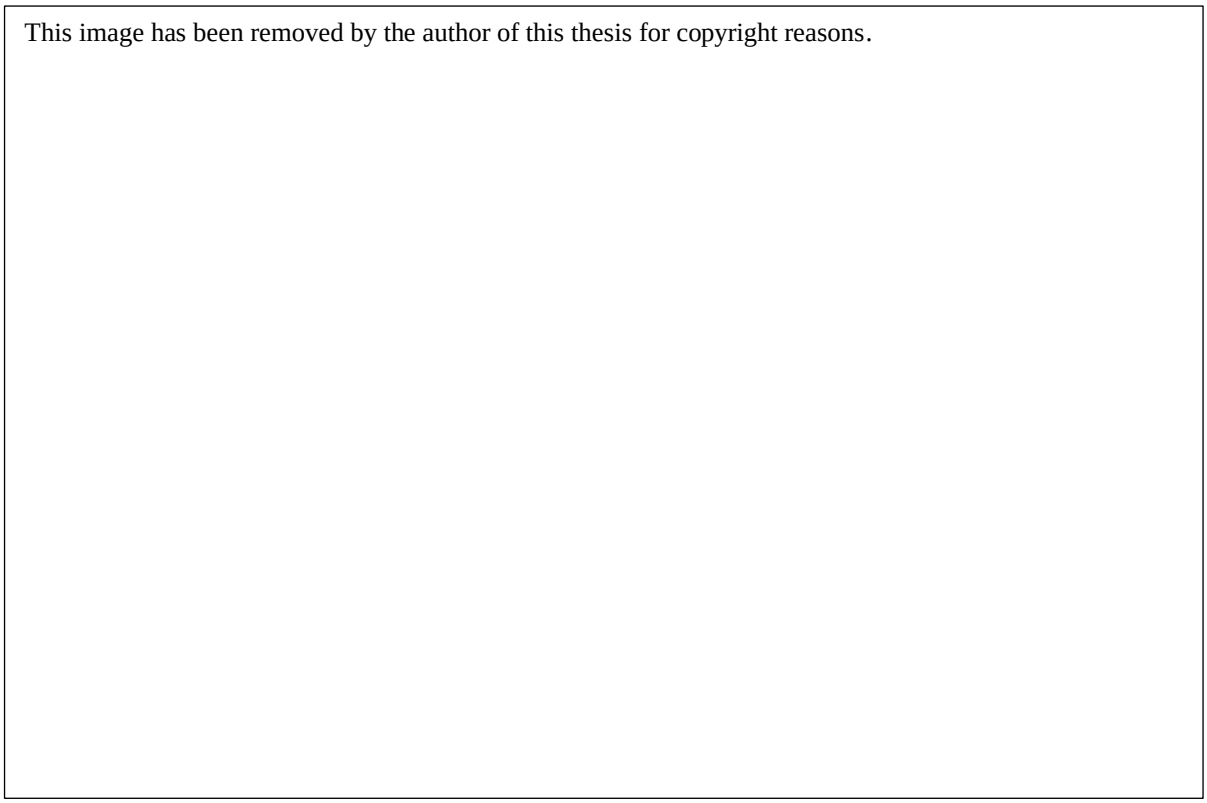

Figure 14 'Third Kingdom' Marymount Manhattan College, NYC, 2000, Sarah L. Lambert Theatrical Design. <http://sarahlambert.squarespace.com/portfolio/> [accessed 6 August 2022]

Sarah Lambert elected to project a diagram of a slave ship called *The Brookes*; this well-known image depicts the harrowing, crowded conditions on board slave ships. The repetition and revision of the image here to include a literal hole, in which a White actor is inserted, reflects a history that is wrought through the visual and textual legacies of slavery. The Seers stand in close proximity with one another, occupying hold-like holes in the stage. Also visible from the image is the division of the stage into four sections. This division of the stage reflects the narrative form of *Imperceptible Mutabilities.* The play takes the form of a 'tetraptych' (to borrow director Liz Diamond's description), with four parts, or panels: Snails, Third Kingdom, Open House, and Greeks (or The Slugs).[33] The plot, which presents four self-contained stories, resists the traditional dramatic conventions of linear narrative, insisting instead on the heterogeneity of history by introducing four distinct contexts, the characters metamorphosing between each one.

In the first part, Snails, a naturalist has bugged an apartment owned by three Black women with a cardboard cockroach. Throughout this section, the women pass ironic comment on the act of watchin, in a nod to their physical whereabouts before the audience, as well as the ominous presence of the bugged cockroach through which the naturalist observes their behaviour. One woman announces,

[33] Liz Diamond, 'Perceptible Mutability in the Word Kingdom', p.86.

'Wonder what I'd look like if no one was lookin'.[34] The Third Kingdom (part 2), reinterprets this theme of watching. As opposed to just the naturalist doing the 'seeing', all the figures in Third Kingdom are 'seers': Us-Seer, Over-Seer, Soul-Seer, Shark-Seer, and Kin-Seer.[35] Each attempt to make sense of their surroundings, amidst the threat of being jettisoned from a slave ship. Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower,* which also exists in a sort of 'Third Kingdom' that 'might be here there, or anywhere – or even nowhere' mirrors this sense of threat.[36] Bonner notes that the stage is split into two sections by a horizontal divider—a board on which most of the action occurs. The scene evokes the history of the Zong massacre as bodies repeatedly fall to the ground, as if jettisoned from a ship. Bonner explains in the description of the setting, 'Sometimes the actors on the upper stage get too vociferous—too violent—and they crack through the boards and they lie twisted and curled in mounds'.[37] The hill that forms the vertical backdrop for the action might mark the hull of a ship. Such is the mutable nature of Bonner's and Parks's experimental forms and their treatment of the enduring, but fundamentally reconfigurable, legacy of the Middle Passage. The logics of slavery repeat and Bonner and Parks take care to confront this repetition in an architectural sense, through the setting of their works. As in Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man* and *The America Play,* the 'now' of the scenes in Parks and Bonner's works encompasses all three tenses, demonstrating a 'temporal entanglement' that renders Kin-Seer in a back and forth ontological toggle between having already been—but also about to be—jettisoned. In a moment of great pathos, with strong biblical resonances, Kin-Seer rises above the water:

> KIN-SEER: My uther me then waved back at me and then I was happy. But my uther me whuduhnt waving at me. My uther me was waving at my Self. My uther me was wavin at a black black speck in thuh middle of thuh sea where years uhgoh from uh boat I had been – UUH!
>
> OVER-SEER: Jettisoned.
>
> SHARK-SEER: Jettisoned?
>
> KIN-SEER: Jettisoned.
>
> US-SEER: Uh huhn.
>
> SOUL-SEER: To-the-middle-of-the-bottom-of-the-big-black-sea.
>
> KIN-SEER: And then my Self came up between us. Rose up out of thuh water and standin on them waves my Self was standin. And I was wavin wavin wavin and my ME was wavin and wavin and my Self that rose between us went back down into-the-sea.[38]

[34] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, p.28.
[35] Ibid., pp.37-40.
[36] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower,* p.30.
[37] Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, p.31.
[38] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, pp.38-39.

Here, Parks resurrects the memory of the enslaved, through the figure of the aptly named 'kin-seer'. With a recurring wave (a hand gesture, as opposed to the ocean waves), 'kin-seer' addresses a past self who was jettisoned. However, a disturbing likelihood lies suspended in this moment; the wave, viewed from a distance, allows a misinterpretation to occur. A wave of distress, to call on help, is mistaken for a greeting. This possibility conflates kinship and loss in an identical movement. The 'wave' takes on new resonance as an embodied gesture that both precipitates an eventual death, and in this scene marks a connection with the dead. Following Kin-Seer's wave, they will inevitably relinquish control to the diffractive site of the sea, instigating the descent of Me/Self 'To-the-middle-of-the-bottom-of-the-big-black-sea'. This descent into the abyss draws up a disjunctive relationship between present and past, as Me/Self becomes the Ocean in a material sense.

Commenting on the case of the Zong massacre, Christina Sharpe recounts a conversation with a friend who had explained that the atoms of captives thrown overboard from slave ships remain in the ocean even today.[39] Added to this, because nutrients cycle through the ocean, the amount of time it takes for matter to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is described as residence time.[40] Sharpe refers to studies carried out on whales which revealed that 'within a few days the whales' bodies are picked almost clean by benthic organisms—those organisms that live on the sea floor'.[41] The 'Uh!' sounds throughout the Third Kingdom sections of *Imperceptible Mutabilities* establish a temporal continuum of a sonic nature, connecting the memory of the enslaved to the performance of the text.[42] Parks even includes a definition of the 'uh!' or 'uuh!' sound in her list of 'foreign words and phrases': '(Air intake). Deep quick breath. Usually denotes drowning or breathlessness'.[43] That Parks incorporates this utterance into the glossary list underscores the prevalence of the term across her works. This aspect denotes the murder of captives as routine, thereby reflecting the reality of this practice in the context of the Transatlantic slave trade. Patricia Saunders' commentary on an overarching project of historical recovery is particularly fitting: 'The act of looking back and reflecting is not an effort to return to a romanticised linear narrative of forward progress, but an effort to reverse into Selves that have been buried and silenced'.[44] In the scene above, 'Kin-Seer' underscores the importance of kinship to acts of writing that probe histories of the Middle Passage; Parks inscribes the potential to witness and therefore remember those captives who lost their lives to the Middle Passage, drawing on Kin-Seer as her dramatic vehicle.

Parks continues to interweave tensions around in/visibility, as this relates to the historical record, by introducing instances of deliberate misrepresentation that fundamentally undermine the

[39] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.40.
[40] Ibid., p.40.
[41] Ibid.,, p.40.
[42] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, pp.37-40; pp.54-57.
[43] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style', p.17.
[44] Patricia Saunders, *Alien-Nation and Repatriation: Translating Identity in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), p.3.

logics of historical revealing. In section two, 'Third Kingdom', Shark-seer describes his surroundings: 'Black folks with no clothes. Then all thuh black folks clothed in smilin. In between thuh folks is uh distance thats uh wet space. 2 worlds: Third Kingdom'.[45] Shark-Seer's observation echoes a narrative of Enlightenment synonymous with Euro-American interpretations of Transatlantic slavery. A progress narrative founded on the civilizing influence of Europe maps onto the geography of the Middle Passage; the acquisition of clothes marks a symbol of progress. Yet, within *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, this narrative is traceable to a deliberate misrepresentation of Africa, as alluded to in the preceding scene, titled Snails. Verona notes seeing 'Black folks with no clothes' in the context of her first introduction to 'pictures of Africa on TV' in a show titled 'Wild Kingdom'.[46] The traces of this memory extend even into the Third Kingdom reprise later in the play, when Shark-Seer erupts, 'BLACK FOLKS WITH NO CLOTHES....'.[47] Through such intratextuality, Parks fashions this particular memory as one that is shared, also evoking the recursive nature of memory; the scene of 'Black folks with no clothes' enters the consciousness of multiple figures over the course of the play.[48] The origins of this particular memory are located in the context of a television show, ostensibly connected to a colonial representation of African culture as inherently primitive. This example of epistemic oppression is then transposed into the narrative site of Third Kingdom, wherein the struggle for authentic historical representation (an authenticity that Parks does not deny produces its own complex set of problematics), is impeded by the repetition and revision of preceding media representations. Aretha Saxon in section 3, Open House states: 'They hauled us from thuh homeland! Stoled our clothes!'[49] The Seers of Third Kingdom bear witness to the mis-representations of African culture. Hence, Parks does not lay claim to historical authenticity in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, but rather deploys the narrative technique of repetition and revision in a manner that highlights the detrimental potential of spectacle in the domain of historical remembrance. In turn, Parks's rendering of the Atlantic, which hinges on its material connection to the history of the Middle Passage, embraces the fluidity of time, self, and language. For Parks, as with other writers whose works mine the history of the Middle Passage using ocean images, water operates as a catalyst to possibility, positing interventions into the static nature of the historical record.

As the play progresses, the players mutate into other forms, so that, for example Molly/Mona of part one, 'Snails', transforms into Kin-Seer of part 2, 'Third Kingdom', Mrs. Aretha Saxon of part 3, "Open House", and Mr. Sergeant Smith of part 4, 'Greeks (or The Slugs)'. These transformations mark an 'unchaining of being', according to James Frieze, by which players are dislocated from any sense of origins, or even any destiny.[50] Parks even muddies the boundary between human and non-

[45] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, p.39.
[46] Ibid., p.36.
[47] Ibid., p.55.
[48] Ibid., p.30.
[49] Ibid., p.52.
[50] James Frieze, '*Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*: Suzan-Lori Parks and the Shared Struggle to Perceive', *Modern Drama*, 41.4 (1998), 523-532 (p.524) <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1998.0006>

human as the final words of the play are spoken by Mr Sergeant Smith of 'Greeks (Or The Slugs)': 'We'se slugs. Slugs. Slugs'.[51] Across each incarnation, the players assume a liminal ontological state. For example, when under examination by 'The Naturalist/Dr Lutzky' in Part 1 (Snails), Molly ominously states 'They-expelled-me'.[52] In Third Kingdom, Kin-Seer states the word 'wave' intermittently, and asks: 'Should I jump? Should I jump?? Should I jump shouldIjumporwhut?'.[53] In Open House, which reveals itself to be the hold of a slave ship, an enslaved woman, Aretha Saxon, states: 'They hauled us from thuh homeland! Stoled our clothes!', to which Miss Faith responds, 'Amendment! Amendment XIII. You have been extracted from the record, Mrs Saxon. You are free. You are clear. You may go'.[54] Mr Sergeant Smith of part 4, Greeks (Or The Slugs) whom we encounter on an island, states 'Next time your mother takes you to visit the ocean Buffeena, look very far out over the water and give me a wave. I will waaaave back!'.[55] These scenes trace the actions of a single being, mutating into various forms. The kaleidoscopic shifts between separate scenes establishes a mode of temporal and spatial multiplicity, but also gestures towards a monumental scene of simultaneity. Deferred meaning links disparate moments, for example Kin-Seer's 'waves' and Mr Sergeant Smith's exclamation for Buffeena to look out to the ocean and 'give me a wave' occur in separate scenes; however, they imply these figures can see one another and therefore exist on a singular plane. Third Kingdom, a scene that drifts into view for audience members, then out of view, and then into view again, reiterates this multiplicity at play. Echoing the words of Black Man with Watermelon in *Death of the Last Black Man*, this is a text seemingly 'writ in water'.[56]

Parks's preoccupation with the role of water in figuring the historical past is comparable to her sustained interest in the earth as a foil to imagining the mechanised narrative omission of African American histories, through images of graves, or 'the Great Hole of History'.[57] However, a crucial difference arising from this shift from land to ocean lies in the scale and physical properties of their geographies: Parks's invocation of Middle Passage oceanic imaginaries introduces a delocalised spatiality and an immense totality (a historical w/hole) from which to re-figure a fragmentary past. Parks's turn to the Ocean in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* exceeds the geographical parameters and boundaries of national identity that dominated my approach to the history of the Middle Passage in previous chapters and foregrounds the trans-national nature of Middle Passage's inception and continual reproduction. Enlightenment narratives of the Middle Passage, which mobilise a teleological view of history and humankind, ascribe temporal categories of past and future to the African continent and the

[51] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom', p.71.
[52] Ibid., p.26.
[53] Ibid., p.55.
[54] Ibid., p.52.
[55] Ibid., p.61
[56] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, p.116.
[57] Parks's *The America Play* is described as "A great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History." See 'The America Play', *The America Play and Other Works* (NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.157-199 (p.157).

New World respectively. The performance of mutability, couched within the performance logics of chronological time, then embeds a productive tension into the narrative momentum of *Imperceptible Mutabilities* as the 'Open House' of Part 3B assume the form of a 'closed' hold of a slave ship. The 'Third Kingdom' overflows into the domestic setting of an Open House, therefore modelling the pervasive, structuring capacity of the Middle Passage and its legacy in the present.

> ARETHA: Six seven eight nine. Thupp. Ten eleven twelve thirteen fourteen fifteen sixteen. Thupp. Seventeen. […] Gotta know the size. Gotta know the size exact. Thup. Got people comin. Hole house full. They gonna be kin? Could be strangers. How many kin kin I hold. Whole hold full. […] Get more mens than womens […] get animals thuup get animals we kin pack em thuup.[58]

A Middle Passage narrative situated in the hold of a slave ship obfuscates a narrative situated in the 'Great House' that the title of this section, 'Open House', seems to anticipate. Parks implies the simultaneity of space in this overflow of the Third Kingdom into the sections of the play that it bridges. The transformation takes place in an instance of Parksian 'rep and rev', which moves from 'Hole house full' to 'Whole hold full'. Here, the semantic movement from hole to whole marks Aretha's displacement from the domestic setting of the previous section to the hold of the ship. The literal *hold* of the hold in terms of the historical imaginary is such that the ship will come to stand for the whole of Aretha's participation in a collective history. In the above quote Aretha's scrupulous counting is repeatedly interrupted by the sounds 'Thupp', the definition of which Parks includes in a glossary of her essay, 'Elements of Style': 'thup /thəp!, Air intake with sound placed in mouth; liberal use of tongue.) Slurping.'[59] Parks's vocabulary list confirms that this sound belongs to a body suspended in water, gasping for breath. This meaning confirms the sinister reality of the circumstances: the source of the sound is in fact a jettisoned player, who is drowning. Such sounds are indicative of the harrowing, violent conditions of Third Kingdom. The repetition of the sound, which as Parks indicates also means slurping, affords a temporal measure to the motion of the waves.

As for Aretha's ontological status, the implications of this space-time nexus introduce uncertainty. Might this 'Thupp' sound imply that Aretha lies suspended in this body of water, while she is counting the bodies that walk onto the ship, situated under the oppressive 'Master' figure of Mrs Faith? Is Aretha dreaming? Parks denies readers and audiences any resoluteness on this matter. However, the overall complicated sense of place that permeates the scene owes in part to its positioning as the central section of the play, and a sort of Middle Passage in and of itself that manifests more ostensibly in the 'Third Kingdom' sections situated either side. The oceanic principle of continual diffusion extends to Aretha's corporeality, as she toggles back and forth between the water and the hold of the ship. Aretha's counting signals the enumeration of jettisoned bodies in the archives. Parks evokes a slave ship as a vessel for the past in this scene that purports to be an 'Open House', therefore

[58] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, pp.42-43.
[59] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Elements of Style', p.17.

subverting a stereotype of Southern hospitality. The ship appears a semantic anchor for the historical vignette offered in this section. As James Frieze has argued about *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, 'the characters moor themselves, semi-wittingly, to floating signifiers – objects and motifs which are psychologically rich and socially familiar: a desk, a rock; a cockroach; a boat; a gun'.[60] The boat is a signifier of the mobility afforded to enslavers through their investment in human capital. Meanwhile, the hold extends the Great Hole of History onto the ship.

Like Parks, M. NourbeSe Philip deploys the image of a slave ship in formulating a counter-history of the Middle Passage. In her book of poems, *Zong!,* she deploys the slave ship of the same name as a metonym for the many massacres on board slave vessels; in doing so, she offers a mode to mourn for those captive Africans that died as a result of this journey.[61] In this next section, I examine Philip's text, also paying attention to the historical details of the Zong massacre that inspired its formation.

"Hear the bones sing, write it down": 'Os' in Philip's *Zong!*

Philip's book of poems, *Zong!* is, to quote Parks's *Death of the Last Black Man*: 'writ in water'.[62] Philip looks to water, or the ocean, as a historical archive, in what she describes as 'a story that can only be told by not telling.[63] In *Zong!,* Philip mourns the lives of the 142 captive Africans whose lives were cut short by crewmen on board the slave ship, the *Zong,* in 1781. The book of poems, like *Imperceptible Mutabilities,* unsettles traditional historical representations of the Middle Passage, taking up the materiality of the Ocean as a mode of narrative re-telling, or rather 'untelling' as in Philip's words.[64] As a burial ground for the approximately 142 victims that were drowned, the sea is figured as a fitting medium for their remembrance. Through water, Philip makes possible the process of mourning for the victims, also underlining their absence from the documentary record of the Zong massacre, which has historically been narrativized through the discourse of insurance laws and maritime logistics. Philip treats the 500-word case report of the legal dispute, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, as a 'word store'; this report documented the legal case that ensued when insurers refused to pay the insurance monies to the Gregson syndicate who owned the ship. In the 'Notanda' section of *Zong!*, Philip describes her resolve to lock herself 'into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text'.[65]

[60] James Frieze, 'Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom: Suzan-Lori Parks and the Shared Struggle to Perceive', *Modern Drama,* 41.4 (1998), 523-532 (p.524) <http://doi: 10.3138/md.41.4.523>
[61] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Wesleyan UP, 2008)
[62] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World,* p.116.
[63] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, p.191.
[64] Ibid., p.207.
[65] Ibid., p.191.

Philip's book of poems presents a counter-history to versions of the massacre inherited from historical narrators of the Transatlantic slave trade: lawyers, merchants, ship captains, and insurers. In *Zong!*, the progression of the narrative evokes the movement of water. Water was deployed as a rationale by crew of the slave vessel to justify the massacre 'for want of water'.[66] As such, in the next few paragraphs I carry out a close analysis of Philip's *Zong! #1*, the first poem in her text, where water is rendered an originary point for her project of historical re-envisioning.[67]

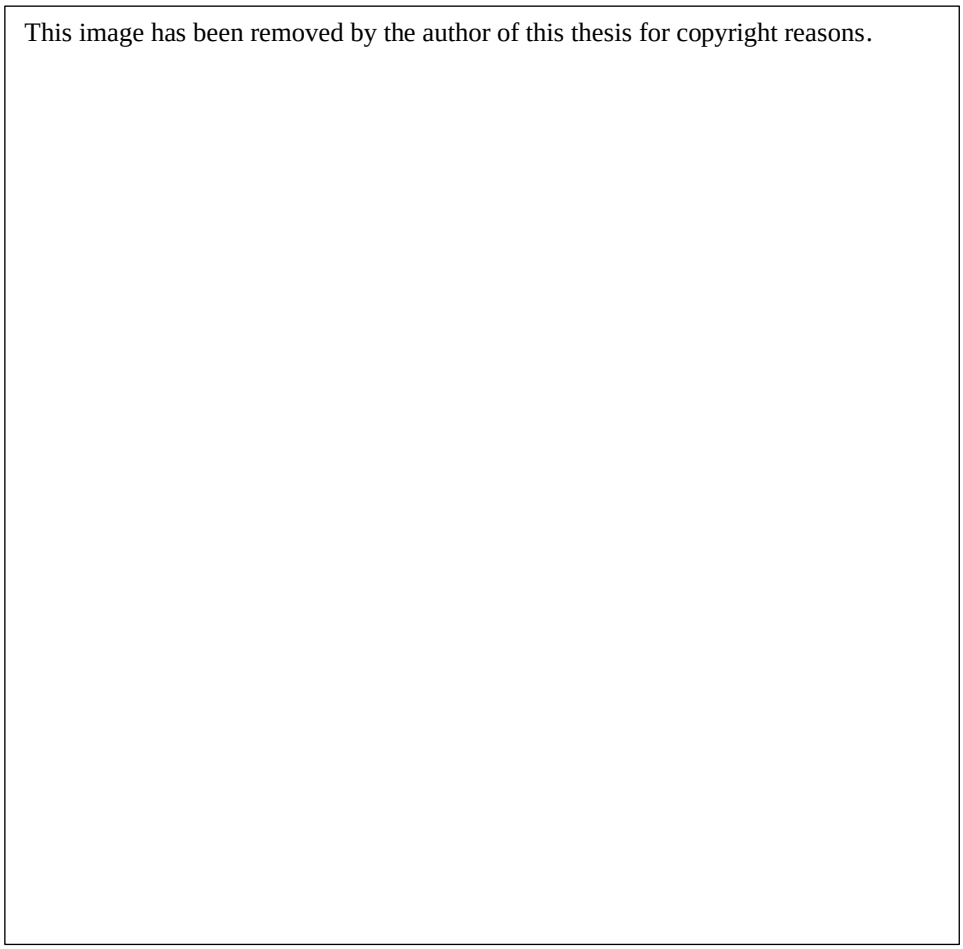

Figure 15 *M. NourbeSe Philip,* 'Zong!' #1 *in* Zong! *(*(Wesleyan UP, 2008), p.3.

[66] Ibid., p.210.

[67] M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* is made up of six different poem sections, titled: Os, Sal, Ventus, Ratio, Ferrum, and Ebora. Zong #1, the first poem of the section 'Os', offers a demonstrative example of the way Philip uses poetic form to reconceptualise the ocean as a material-metaphoric site of historical intervention. This is due, in part, to Philip's focus on the term water and the patterns of dispersal that mark her attempt to emulate water's properties. The patterns of dispersal that I examine in this first poem are not abandoned in the wider text but do alter, permitting greater coherence; the majority of poems featured in *Zong!* feature whole words or phrases. However, the text of the final section, Ebora (a Yoruba word translating to 'underwater spirits') is faded and overlapping. The reader is confronted, yet again, with the task of deciphering Philip's meaning, though this time against words and phrases printed over one another. Patterns of dispersal that are most explicit at the outset have, by the end of the text, transformed into patterns of convergence.

Water is Philip's starting point. In *Zong!* #1, multiple consecutive 'w' sounds evoke a spluttering effect. Philip sounds out the difficulty of her project of historical narration—of assigning words to the traumatic event—as well as the emphatically diffractive nature of water as textual surface. This alertness to water as material entity is central to Philip's poetics and establishes the site of the poem as a space for mourning those victims deliberately drowned by the *Zong*'s crew. For Christina Sharpe, Philip's immediate emphasis on water can be explained by the fact that crew used the lack of available drinking water to justify their crimes. Sharpe notes, '[l]anguage has deserted the tongue that is thirsty'.[68] Sharpe's process of meaning making reminds us of the significance of water beyond the 'liquid grave' of the murdered victims of the Zong massacre.[69] A shortage of water was cited as justification to the insurers for the massacre: 'Some of the negroes died for want of sustenance, and others were thrown overboard for the preservation of the rest'.[70] The sparsity of Philip's language is suggestive of this "lack" of water. Fittingly, the final word fragment of Zong! #1, positioned in close proximity to the letter 'w', reads 'ant'. The reader can retrospectively associate this term 'want' into the earlier letters 'w' and syllables 'wa' that might anticipate this term 'want' as well as 'water'. There is also a charged sense of possibility inscribed in Philip's fragmented poetics.

Philip makes the transformative possibilities of language glaringly apparent; the dispersed letters and syllables of the word 'water' signal that this watery 'archive' is a site of loss and rupture. However, just as the sea breaks down matter, transforming it into new compounds, the historical rupture that the form of the text conveys is generative, and anticipates a process of *recomposition*. In short, the laws of physics that govern the sea are made manifest in Philip's choice of poetic form. Philip's central goal of historical intervention is met through a 'decontaminating' process whereby the materiality of the ocean is posited as a vehicle for the decontamination of a language indelibly marked by the forces of Western imperialism.[71] In a recent interview, Philip described the rationale for this process:

> I begin from a position of a complete distrust of language and do not believe that English (sic) – or any European language, for that matter – can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. A decontaminating process is probably more accurate, since a language as deeply implicated in imperialism as English has been cannot but be contaminated by such a history and experience.[72]

[68] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p.40.
[69] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.9; quoted by Philip in *Zong!*, p.202.
[70] Qtd by Philip in *Zong!*, p.210.
[71] See also Lisa Fink, '"Sing the Bones Home": Material Memory and the Project of Freedom in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!', *Humanities (Basel)*, 9.1 (2020), 1-16 <http://doi: 10.3390/h9010022>
[72] M. NourbeSe Philip, 'M. NourbeSe Philip: Interview with an Empire', *Lemonhound*, 3 (2017) <lemonhound.com/2017/12/12/m-nourbese-philip-interview-with-an-empire/> [accessed 3 September 2022].

Philip demonstrates an attentiveness to the materiality of the ocean as a vehicle for the decontamination of a language that is marked by the forces of imperialism. The 'w' and 'wa' sounds that open Zong! #1 could be read as 'waves', indeed their undulating arrangement across the page visually encodes this particular meaning as a spatial component. Still, to attach a singular meaning to these linguistic fragments is to foreclose their potential as historical fragments. The splitting of the words creates possibility, thereby initiating this re-telling through aesthetic conditions of dislocation and discovery. The 'w' sounds also encapsulate the 'w questions' that traditionally drive historical narration: the who, the where, the what, the why. *Zong!* reaches beyond the historical impulse of 'knowing', by embracing silence as an epistemological basis. Refusing to articulate stable coordinates of knowledge, the multiple 'w' sounds that mark Philip's point of departure also present traces of the conditions of historical dislocation that motivate her turn to the ocean—her search for alternate re-tellings of the Zong massacre through a process of 'not telling'.[73] At no single point do the word-fragments cohere to form a singular, whole word. Instead, the accumulative effect of their repetition culminates in a plethora of associated meanings; a reader is prompted to sound out words, and to physically engage with the inherent disorder of Philip's language. This process is far removed from the conventional linear writing models adopted in the 500-word case report, *Gregson v. Gilbert.* Philip, like Parks, demonstrates that repetition and revision can be pivotal to meaning making.[74] Repetition is also the mechanism that Sasha Ann Panaram reminds us 'enables caring for the dead when it teaches us to listen again and anew for their sonic remains'.[75] The sonic disturbances created in the water by those murdered, impact its movement. Since water is especially suited to carrying sound, Philip's poetics respond to the possibility that the sonic disturbances created by those murdered could remain in motion. Philip's engagement with this historical moment necessitates what scholar Alessandro Corio describes, referring to the organisation of the clusters of letters, as 'graphic choreographies'; these prompt the reader to look 'in every direction on the page'.[76] For Corio, the 'graphic choreographies' produce a form of agency based on the necessity of the reader's movement. The production of meaning is contingent on the re-assembly of letters, a back-and-forth motion between word clusters, that impacts the embodied experience of the reader. This is a poetic image suspended in time, as if just about to part further so as to become indecipherable—yet their indecipherability also giving emphasis to the spaces in between—the silences—that recall the Third Kingdom of Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities.*

Philip, during a recording of the poem in Toronto, read the sounds with increasing speed that, according to scholar Alessandro Corio, 'seemed to mimic an echo and a babbling, a sigh and a scream,

[73] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, p.191.
[74] Parks uses a technique she coins "rep and rev" to rework history; see Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style', p.9.
[75] Sasha Ann Panaram, 'Afrosporic Intimacies: Breath, Song, and Wind in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!', *The Black Scholar,* 49.3 (2019), 21-35, (p.21) <http://doi: 10.1080/00064246.2019.1619119>
[76] Alessandro Corrio, 'Anagrams of annihilation: the (im)possible writing of the middle passage in NourbeSe Philip and Édouard Glissant', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 17.3-4 (2014), 327-348 (p.336).

a groan and a rattle at the same time'.[77] The silences, too, are part of this pattern of repetition. Understood as a whole, the two dominant (and whole) words that emerge out of the first section of Zong! #1 are 'water' and 'good'. Their fragmentation and dispersal across the page establishes a wave-like movement. Still, as important to consider is the white gaps between the word clusters, to which language effectively offers definition. Much like Suzan-Lori Parks's 'spells', a technique which she uses to provide 'an elongated and heightened (rest)', the blank space of the page is dense with meaning, as well as possibility.[78] Parks specifies further that a spell is 'Denoted by repetition of figures' names without dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look'.[79] They are a common feature across her plays, offering a space for figures to experience their 'pure true simple state'.[80] Parks's use of the term 'state' here, is useful to consider in connection with Philip's fluid, textual surface. The 'maritime materiality' of *Zong!,* with its deployment of the ocean as an archive of washed out histories of the Middle Passage, finds its counterpart in the performance context of Parks's spells, which posit the stage as a site where 'figures'—Parks prefers this term to 'characters'—are represented on the page in their state of invisibility.[81] Recalling their names gives shape to their existence. In *Last Black Man of the Entire World*, the figures have been jettisoned from the documentary record. They emerge from the conditions of erasure—from the Great Hole of History. This rest provides a sonic expression of erasure consistent with their very being. Parks offers the below example of a spell:

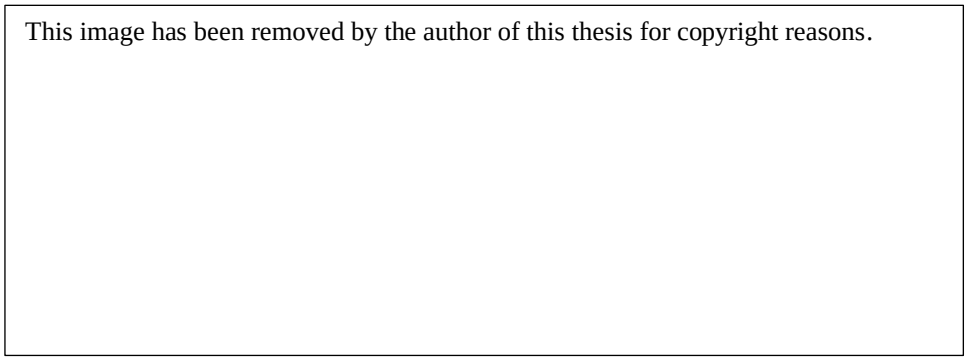

Figure 16 A Spell. See Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style' (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.6-18 (p.16).

Here, the blank of the page is a call for performative interpretation. Parks gestures towards a new narrative of blankness in affording the directors the option to 'fill this moment as they see fit', though

[77] Ibid., p.336.
[78] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style', p.16.
[79] Ibid., p.16.
[80] Ibid., p.16.
[81] I borrow the phrase 'maritime materialities' from Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage', p.207.

no ‘action’ or ‘stage business’ is necessary.[82] Parks tasks the director with filling in the blanks, marking an open-ended and infinite view to historical re-envisioning. With each iteration of the performance, the rests are interpreted anew. To ‘fill’ the moment would mean to generate movement, perhaps even dialogue, from a textual blank space. Parks prescribes the ‘feeling’ of the rest: ‘A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It’s also a place for an emotional transition’.[83] Parks insinuates spells into moments of ‘great (unspoken) emotion’; for example, in *The America Play*, one of the spells follows a recollection of the Foundling Father’s departure from his family to move out West. Brazil narrates this moment, alongside the memory of his father teaching him how to mourn for the dead. He tells of how ‘the Father threw himself down in front of the son and bit into the dirt with his teeth. His eyes leaked’.[84] Later in this same monologue, Brazil describes how ‘the Father left for out West. To seek his fortune. In the middle of dinnertime. The son was eating his peas’.[85] Delivered in a tone of indifference, the in fact devastating recollections of the Foundling Father biting into the ground and abandoning his family speaks to the emotional toil that his American Dream burdens him with; Parks draws up the violent legacy of a historical discourse shaped by language that sanitises such violence. Following this monologue, a spell made up of the names Lucy and Brazil separates the next section of dialogue by Lucy, which reads: ‘Hellooooo! Hellooooo!’.[86] Lucy is shouting into the earth. The succession of ‘o’s marks the travel of this sound down the hole, meanwhile the echoes of her shouts are evoked by the elongated word.

In *Zong! #1*, the blank spaces between Philip’s words provide no option to be filled in through performance, as with Parks’s spells. The silences of the archives materialise in the water, via the transfer of energy from the letters themselves. The ‘o’s, splintered across the body of text, appear in this image of the textual sea as oxygen bubbles rising to the surface of the page. As Philip writes, ‘words need a lot of space to breathe – breathing space’.[87] Though the word ‘good’ refers to the terms that designate a defendant in the case *Gregson v. Gilbert,*. ‘the good captain Collingwood’, Philips’s fragmentation of the term gives expression to the silenced voices that mark the alternate record of this event.[88] The materiality of the sea offers a vehicle for the decentring of the ship’s crew, whose voices inform an inherited, authoritative record of events. The same word used to signal their presence: ‘good’ is broken into pieces, to give expression to the sinister irony which marks their entry into the documentary record.

[82] Suzan-Lori Parks, ‘from Elements of Style’, p.16.
[83] Ibid., p.17.
[84] Suzan-Lori Parks, ‘The America Play’, p.182.
[85] Ibid., p.182.
[86] Ibid., p.182.
[87] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, p.195.
[88] Ibid., p.210.

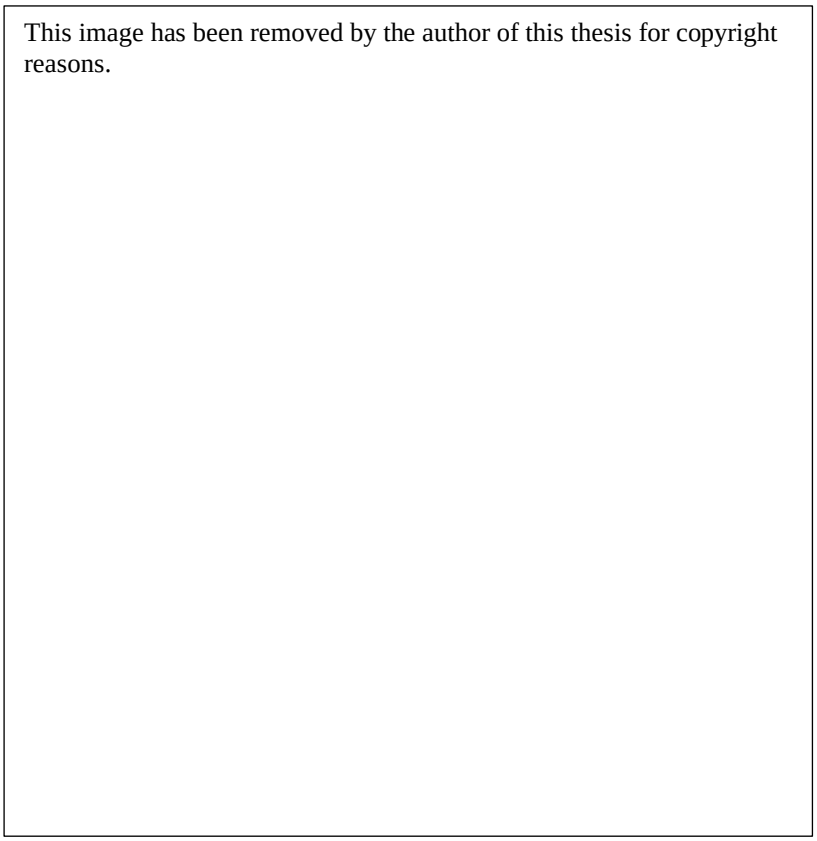

Figure 17 M. NourbeSe Philip, *'Zong!' #1* in *Zong!* (*Wesleyan UP, 2008), p.4.*

The second section of Zong #1—which is in two parts—is pictured above. The words mark a Parksian repetition and revision, or 'rep and rev' of the first section. The stuttering 'w's culminate in the word 'water', though also splinter off to indicate the words 'want' and, through the positioning of 'w' and 'er', sound out the term 'were'. The curvature of the wave-like image is much more pronounced in this second iteration, owing to the closer proximity of the letters which form one single cluster. Taken together, the process of reading *Zong! #1* emulates a descent into the depths of the ocean. Philip also lists African names in a single horizontal line, as demonstrated in Figure 17. These lines feature at the bottom of every page of the section 'os' - though they appear nowhere else in *Zong!*. Philip is explicit about her intention concerning these footnotes. She states, '[t]hey will be ghostly footnotes floating below the text —'under water . . . a place of consequence'[89]. Again, Parks's 'spells', composed of the names of figures, echo into the space of Philip's poem. Though Philip strove to recover the names of

[89] Ibid., p.201.

captive Africans aboard the *Zong*, she discovered no such records existed. Philip engages in a practice of 'critical fabulation' as the names featured in the footnotes hinge on the notion of possibility that accompanies the absences of the archive.[90] Alessandro Corio makes an important distinction regarding these names as 'the only words that are not taken or derived from the legal text', also adding that they 'bear witness to those lost names of the murdered'.[91] The erasure of the names of those murdered is signified by the substitution of these 'underliers'—an act of literary intervention into historical discourse that also carries in it the possibility of historical accuracy, even if this detail eludes the confines of human knowledge. The formatting of the names emulates footnotes, and so the fact that these names are based not on the historical record, but represent a historical refiguring, is of crucial significance to Philip's treatment of historical truth in *Zong!*. The stability of the historical record is questioned, much like the footnotes in Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities* and *The America Play*. The letters and words, as a whole, create an image of the ocean, the names signifying those for whom the ocean floor marked their resting place. As the title of the section implies, 'Os' (the latin for bones)—as well as a representation of the breathing word-fragments—mark the possibility to, as in Parks's words, 'hear the bones sing' and 'write it down'.[92] Reading the poem is akin to a poetic submersion into the sea, the site where the material remains of the victims' bodies remain.

I am interested to foreground the materiality of the Atlantic as part of my approach to Philip's poetic rendering of its history. As such, the following section takes on a historical slant as I set out a brief history of the Zong massacre. In September 1781, the *Zong*, which was jointly owned by three Liverpool merchants, Gregson & Co., set off from the West coast of Africa bound for Jamaica. The captain was Luke Collingwood, a former ship's surgeon. On board the *Zong* were 17 crew members and between 440 and 470 captive Africans. Following a series of navigational errors which impacted the duration of the journey (initially projected to last six weeks), and a failure by the ship's crew to identify a water leak that had, by the time of its eventual realisation, meant a shortage of drinking water, the crew were summoned for an urgent discussion concerning their next steps. The vote was unanimous: the crew murdered at least 132 enslaved Africans on board the *Zong*, with the aim of 'preserving the lives of the masters and mariners […] and of the negroes on board'.[93] Philip's book of poems, *Zong!* (2008) looks to the legal battle that ensued when insurers refused to pay out the owners' claim of £30 per victim, as a means of countering the authority of this "authorised record" of the event.

In the context of the abolitionist movement, the harrowing story of the Zong massacre marks a watershed moment in the British cultural imagination. It was the details of the heinous crimes of the crew on board the *Zong* that contributed to widespread uproar, a shift in public opinion, and a new sense

[90] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism,* 12.2 (2008), 1-14 (p.11). <http://doi: 10.1215/-12-2-1>
[91] Alessandro Corrio, 'Anagrams of annihilation: the (im)possible writing of the middle passage in NourbeSe Philip and Édouard Glissant', p.339.
[92] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.
[93] Qtd in Philip, *Zong!*, p.210.

of urgency to cease Britain's involvement in the Transatlantic slave trade. The historical weight of this image of the *Zong* in the cultural imagination has since led to its status as a metonym for the countless trans-Atlantic crossings that constituted the four-century long duration of the Middle Passage. Much like James Turner's infamous painting, 'Slave Ship', thought to depict the event of the massacre, but also to depict the ubiquity of such an event within the trade, the Zong massacre represents a 'notorious episode in history'.[94] However, as historian James Walvin underscores, approaching the Zong massacre as a singular event runs the risk of misrepresenting the sheer ceaselessness of such murders amongst slave voyages.[95] The murders that took place on board the *Zong* are by no means unique, despite the fact that their entry into the historical record via the legal case that ensued certainly is. The jettisoning of cargo due to 'perils of the sea'—the argument put forth by the *Zong*'s owners—was a commonplace practice among eighteenth century slavers.[96]

The historical mechanisms that factor into the Zong massacre's absorption into an abolitionist narrative of Transatlantic slavery warrant consideration. Given the prominence of this story, it is productive to consider the broader ideological context in which this abolitionist story exists. Indeed, the story of the Zong massacre serves as an anecdote to a purported transformation of Britain's moral sensibility. The event's inclusion in a narrative of racial progress is significant, since it marks the massacre as a beginning coordinate for the abolitionist movement in Britain—that also importantly positions Britons as collective historical actors. Certainly, the abolitionist movement was already underway by 1781, but the late seventeenth century saw the movement capture the public imagination with the news of *Gregson vs. Gilbert.* As in the narrative of Abraham Lincoln's "innocent Abe" persona, there is a tendency to concentrate on the ties this historical episode had to British efforts to abolish slavery, and there is a relatively small amount of scholarship surrounding the *Zong*'s previous voyages. As such, its history is often cited within narratives about the end of Britain's involvement in slavery, while at the same time presenting an anecdote used to stand in for the institution of slavery as a whole. Yet, all these narrative interpretations obscure the lives of those victims of the massacre, failing to centre their lives or mourn the loss of their individual lives.

In January of 1782, not more than three weeks after the *Zong*'s arrival at Black River, Jamaica, the ship's owners changed its name to *The Richard.* This change of name did little to prevent the ship's preservation in the cultural imagination as the *Zong*. James Walvin notes that '[m]ost likely it was a swift transformation designed to distance the vessel from what had happened on board only weeks before'.[97] The Slave Voyages database details the *Zong*'s single voyage under this name. The ship's former and future voyages across the Atlantic are traditionally erased from historical narratives of the

[94] J.M.W Turner, 'The Slave Ship', 1840, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
James Walvin, *The Zong Massacre,* p.26.
[95] James Walvin, *The Zong Massacre,* p.26.
[96] Qtd in Philip, *Zong!*, p.210.
[97] James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2011)

Zong massacre. However, the scholarship surrounding the recovery of Middle Passage histories has repeatedly insisted on the importance of the material history of the Atlantic when contemplating its depths. I contend that these voyages are critical, and yet their continual obfuscation in repetitions of this historical moment misses out on the potential for 'maritime histories' and 'maritime metaphors' to converge.[98] Such calls for a re-mattering of Middle Passage histories stem, in part, from the efforts in the humanities towards theorising the ocean in what Elizabeth DeLoughrey terms an 'oceanic turn'.[99]

A critical overview of oceanic imaginaries

In the context of the Atlantic as an archive, the boat represents a counter-image, a mode of historical navigation that also ensured the perpetuation of the triangular trade. The image of the boat stands in for the spatial and temporal progress of Middle Passage histories, as told through the voices of the slavers. The 'ship' has undergone extensive theorisation as a vessel for the past by scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Édouard Glissant, and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley.[100] The ceaseless movement of ships across the Atlantic during the slave trade was, according to cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy, constitutive of modernity. The role of ships 'as cultural and political units' (as per Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*) brings into clearer view Black diasporic histories, extending beyond the African American histories I have centred in previous chapters.[101] The Atlantic, as a space that encompasses a deep-time history of experiences that are mostly invisible, has been the subject of innovative engagement by theorists and writers of the Black diaspora, including Caribbean-Canadian poet, M. NourbeSe Philip. Parks invokes the particularities of the African American experience, whilst also invoking Black diasporic geographies. Meanwhile Philip's invocation of a diasporic sense of space in *Zong!* also grasps towards the Afro-Caribbean experience. Like Parks, Philip takes up the materiality of the Atlantic and the properties of the 'wave' as a mode of formal engagement with submerged Middle Passage histories. Philip's treatment of language echoes the 'reveal' of the 'instability of [truth's] edifice' that undergirds Luce Irigaray's theory of historical truth and fluidity in 'Language of Man'.[102] Philip harnesses the diffusive environment of the ocean to gesture towards 'the moving ground beneath [truth]' via a poetics of dissolution that mobilises the materiality of water.[103] She distinguishes her poetry from fiction, thereby positioning her poetics at the crux of a productive tension between solid and fluid, between fact and

[98] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage', p.207.
[99] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene', *Comparative Literature*, 69.1 (2017), 32-44 (p.33) <http:// doi:10.1215/00104124-3794589>
[100] See Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [1993] (London: Verso, 2002); Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990], transl. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14.2-3 (2008), 191-215 <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-030>
[101] Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [1993] (London: Verso, 2002), p.17.
[102] Luce Irigaray, 'The Language of Man', p.10.
[103] Ibid., p.10.

fiction.

I put forth that M. NourbeSe Philip and Parks establish oceanic imaginaries that contest the linearity of time, as part of a creative practice grounded in the re-presentation of the history of the Middle Passage. I read the water and waves in these two texts inside of a thematic framework of burial and resurrection, with a focus on buried narratives of the Middle Passage, and the capacity for the wave to act as a motif for historical resurrections. However, I maintain that there is also a quantum landscape yet to be thoroughly articulated in the scholarship that each text has fostered. I contemplate the wave as foundational to the fabric of space-time; I trace Philip and Parks's engagement with quantum mechanics, which, as with Parks's invocation of black holes, revolves around specific phenomena. My focus in the latter section of this chapter lies with the mechanics of wave-particle duality, and the possibilities this holds for realising alternative dimensions that exist outside the governing logics of anti-blackness—that which marks the very foundations of Western existence.

The image of the abyss persists even in this transition from verticality and holes to the wave, from land to water, from black holes to the minutiae of atomic configuration in terms of wave-particle duality. The depths of the sea, plus the phenomenon of quantum tunnelling (a consequence of wave-particle duality on which I later elaborate) mark this continual transformation of the abyss, always as a conduit to the (un)making of meaning from a position of absence, or chaos. Each re-ordering marks an act of creation, and with this, the resurrection of buried stories, and buried lives. If life represents a triumph of order over the universe's impulse toward chaos, toward the abyss, then water represents the ultimate catalyst. This section thereby expands and extends my prior focus on images of holes and verticality as dimensions that shape an enduring concern in the works of Bonner, Parks, and Morrison, with the project of historical representation and revision. The abyss envelops each of these images. Verticality is inherent in the motion of falling and descent; the hole in terms of the association between the black hole and the abyss as a centre of gravity that also portends a state of disorientation; and the waves of the Atlantic, as a geography wherein place cannot hold—diffraction and diffusion hold dominion. Parks, Bonner, Morrison, and Philip draw on these images to give form to the histories they hold in their narratives. The unknown marks each image, and so each connects to the abyss, a space of multidimensionality and of possibility. As Glissant writes, 'what is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown'.[104] Glissant articulates 'depths of the sea' as one of these links. He describes how, during conflict, upon encountering a need to flee from an enemy ship, slavers would lighten their loads by throwing overboard 'cargo' attached to balls and chains.[105] Herein, Glissant remembers the routine murder of captive Africans whom crew would jettison as if merely 'cargo', with no recognition of their humanity. Of greater concern to Captains was the economic value represented

[104] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* p.6.
[105] Ibid., p.6.

by each captive body and underwritten through maritime insurance laws. Glissant describes the balls and chains that mark their resting place in the ocean as an underwater map of sorts, concluding:

> In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of the sand, mark one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.[106]

These 'balls and chains gone green' represent a localised, material connection to the horrors of the Middle Passage, and denote a temporal marker that signifies the lives of those murdered, alongside the history of the Ocean. Glissant's formulation of the Middle Passage also entails 'one vast beginning' and therefore an originary coordinate. This conflation of space and time underscores the temporal dimensions of the ocean as zone comprising multiple temporalities and observing separate Taphonomic processes than the earth.

The immense fluid in-between, as a beginning coordinate for the history of the Middle Passage, refutes a static formulation of time and space. The abyss determines an originary point for modernity, and perhaps even an ontological one, as Glissant refers to as the 'womb abyss'.[107] Christina Sharpe builds on this gendered rendering of the Ocean via Glissant's conceptualisation of the womb abyss, positing the belly of the slave ship as a birth canal: '[t]he belly of the ship births blackness (as/no relation)'.[108] Enlightenment logics undergirding Euro-American expansion, which conceptualised the ocean as a site of conquest, extend this gendered rendering to a 'vaginalized Caribbean'. Benitez-Rojo argues 'the Atlantic is today the Atlantic [...] because it is the painfully delivered child of the Caribbean, whose vagina was stretched between continental clamps'.[109] Tinsley underscores the dangers of such metaphors: 'Like the sea, the space between women's legs is at once insistently present and insistently ethereal; like the sea, the space between women's legs becomes a metaphor to mine'.[110] Hortense Spillers theorises in her essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' that the act of jettisoning by enslavers unsettles gender as a category of differentiation: '[u]nder these conditions [of Middle Passage suspension] we lost at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a site of political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific'.[111] In Elizabeth DeLoughrey's explication of the 'oceanic turn' she comments that during the spatial turn of the 1990s 'the ocean became a place for theorizing the materiality of history, yet it rarely figured as material in itself'; however, she maintains that the ocean has a long history of being understood as material entity

[106] Ibid., p.6.
[107] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* transl. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.6.
[108] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake,* p.74.
[109] Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996), p.5.
[110] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic', p.197.
[111] Hortense Spiller, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p.214; as cited in Sharpe, *In the Wake,* p.50.

in Caribbean literature and culture more widely.[112] Here, I am interested in water not only as a metaphor in Parks and Philip's works, but as a materially affective entity. Water holds a transformative position in Black diaspora histories. Importantly, it allows for a conceptualisation of the Middle Passage as a beginning coordinate. The Atlantic, as a Middle Passage archive, is interesting to consider against the ocean's ontological implications as the lungs of the earth, and hence as a basis for human existence. Against this broad scale conceptualisation of deep time and the history of the universe, an interpretation of the ocean as a formulation of human history, or 'the crucible of modernity' marks its temporal complexity.[113] These considerations depart from the rendering of the sea as a site of blankness, or aqua nullius, a space to be traversed as part of a colonial project of expansion. The commonplace figuring of the ocean as a symbol of freedom has foundations in the history of colonialism and empire, which saw maritime war and the ocean as an object of territorial expansion.

The historical prism of the Middle Passage then marks the contextual backdrop for this chapter, and I lean into this history's attachment to the material anchor of the Atlantic Ocean in trans-national imaginaries, as a medium for its re-telling. To do this, I centre the history of the 1781 Zong slave ship massacre as it is told through M. NourbeSe Philip's 2012 book of poems, *Zong!*, and I place Philip's work in conversation with Parks's positioning of the history of the Middle Passage as a past that has not passed in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*. The Atlantic Ocean features in both Parks's and Philip's texts as a medium of historical intervention, and a literal burial ground; through language, the collective lives of the captive Africans thrown overboard on the Middle Passage are mourned, and their bodies re-membered. I contemplate water's material and symbolic properties in rendering a washed-out history and a historical memory that functions under separate Taphonomic processes than the earth. Material remnants of the past exist beneath the ocean's surface, yet these transform and mutate in its depths, generating new symbolic meanings and merging with other matter. But alongside this, I consider the material reality of the texts themselves and the ways Parks and Philip test out words *as* matter.

Parks and Philip's approach to language and form reckons with this predicament in an emphatically open-ended manner. Both writers centre the fragmentary nature of history as a point of departure, searching for a language and stories to diminish the distance generated through the language of authorised versions of the history of the Middle Passage. As Philip writes in an article that takes up the fragment as its central concern:

> The fragment is both/and: containing the w/hole while being at the same time a part of the w/hole – it compels us to see both the whole and the hole: impulse to memory and impulse to amnesia.[114]

[112] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene', *Comparative Literature,* 69.1 (2017), 32-44 (p.33) <http:// doi:10.1215/00104124-3794589>
[113] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity', *PMLA,* 125.3 (2010), 703-712 (p.707) <http://doi: 10.1632/pmla.2010.125.3.703>
[114] Marlene NourbeSe Philip, 'Fugues, Fragments and Fissures—A Work in Progress' *Anthurium,* 3.2 (2005), 1-15 (p.6) <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol3/iss2/7 > [accessed 2.1.23]

Philip foregrounds the role of the fragment (as word) in the project of historical re-presentation; the inherent duality of a fragment is characterised by key themes of presence and absence, or visibility and invisibility. This orientation towards existing historical fragments as traces of historical holes is arguably nowhere more evident than Philip's *Zong!,* published just three years after the article quoted above. In fact, Philip had already set out working on *Zong!* when this article was published. In *Zong!*, the historical evidence of the Zong massacre comprises the source of Philip's fragmentary language—which is also the 'matter' of the material world of the text. Philip contends with the language of the Zong insurance case, which is housed at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Both the hole and the w/hole, the represented history and the unrepresented history, are implicit in the fragment, which draws up a problematics around the efficacy of language to convey historical narrative. In an essay entitled 'Ignoring Poetry: A Work in Progress', Philip asks:

> How does the poet confront and resolve the profound loss and absence of language—a language which can truly be the house of one's being? How does the poet work a language engorged on her many silences? How does she break that silence that is one yet many? Should she? Can she fashion a language that uses silence as a first principle?[115]

The problematics of language as an unaccommodating form are brought to light in Philip's rumination on the potential proliferation of loss that comes with the use of what she terms her 'father language' to approach any form of representation. The answer to whether to break the silence, Philip contends, is she must—by developing a method to read and listen for silences, to abide by an ethics of care. Philip does this to some extent by refuting ownership over the work as author; she instead enacts an 'explosion – or implosion of [her] lyric voice into many and several'.[116] This desire to convey a past, unspeakable event and in some way transcend, or at least attend to, the problematics of language, is perhaps most explicit in Philip's poetry collection: *She Tries Her Tongue.* It is here that Philip sets out the semantic derivations of loss in 'Discourse on the Logic of Language'. Philip deliberates on the sentence: 'A mother tongue is not a foreign […] "language"' and she proceeds to parse this sentence, which subsequently transforms from 'language' to 'l/anguih' to 'anguish', to 'a foreign anguish'. The meaning reformulated, Philip continues with this act of parsing—a term to which she assigns multiple definitions throughout the poetry collection. One of these definitions is especially relevant to Philip's approach to the language of the *Gregson V. Gilbert* case: 'the exercise of dis-membering language into fragmentary cells that forget to remember'.[117] In *Zong!,* Philip emphasises the relationship between fragmentary cells

[115] Marlene NourbeSe Philip, 'A Poetic Statement: Ignoring Poetry (A Work in Progress)' *in Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century : Poets Across North America*, ed. By Claudia Rankine and Laura Sewell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2012), pp.279-282 (p.279).
[116] Ibid., p.282.
[117] Marlene NourbeSe Philip, 'From Universal Grammar' in *Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poets Across North America*, ed. By Claudia Rankine and Laura Sewell (Wesleyan UP, 2012), pp.266-271 (p.267).

and historical fragments, conflating dis-membering and remembering, and thereby producing a mode of narrative untelling—to borrow the language she uses to observe the form of *Zong!*.[118]

Parks too, explicates the relationship between the 'hole' and the 'whole', or the fragment as 'both/and', indicating the potential for this tension to dismantle an authorised historical discourse.[119] Parks's Third Kingdoms sections in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* comprise fragments that bridge the text's various episodes. The transitions between scenes enact a movement back and forth in time (much like a tide), but also one that sees multiple historical periods interwoven, so that the Middle passage enacts a textual/performative temporal passage—a history that overflows and plunges back into the depths of slavery's horrors. The complicated ontological status of the historical players owes, in part, to the conditions of the abyss, but Parks further enunciates this complexity in staging their births through language. Each character speaks their existence into being, in turn. Third Kingdom (Reprise) commences as follows:

OVER-SEER: What are you doing?
US-SEER: Throw-ing. Up.
KIN-SEER: Kin-Seer sez.
SHARK-SEER: Shark-Seer sez.
US-SEER SEZ: Us-Seer sez.
SOUL-SEER: Soul-Seer sez.[120]

Parks figures the inhabitants of Third Kingdom as *semantic* players. As 'seers', the players bear witness to fragments of history that have gone unrecorded. Parks's *Death of the Last Black Man* begins in the same manner, with the 'figures' as Parks refers to them in this particular play, each announcing their name.[121] Third Kingdom endures into the environment of Parks's later published play. The scene, as a written and performed (Middle) passage, transcends the temporal confines of the text.

Third Kingdom might be better understood as a meta-narrative of events, authored and staged by the Seers. Us-Seer directs Kin-Seer, 'Bleached Bones Man has comed and took you. You fall down into-the-sea'.[122] Us-Seer distils the experiential dimensions of the Middle Passage for captive Africans into rudimentary stage directions. Yet the scene also depicts the Seers' interpretation of Us-Seers prompts. In the dialogue that directly follows Us-Seer's instruction, the Seers are in the water, having fallen into the sea. They are subsequently swallowed by a fish, who then becomes the fish, and then a shark, before the shark comes ashore. A typical Parksian resurrection occurs as Kin-Seer refuses to stay buried and rises up out of the water, before descending back into the sea.

KIN-SEER: Should I jump? Should I jump? Should I jump shouldijumporwhut?

[118] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!,* p.207.
[119] Marlene NourbeSe Philip, 'Fugues, Fragments and Fissures—A Work in Progress' *Anthurium*, 3.2 (2005), 1-15 (p.6).
[120] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, p.54.
[121] See Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, p.101.
[122] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom,* p.55.

SHARK-SEER: I dream up uh fish that's swallowin me –

SHARK-SEER and KIN-SEER: And I dream up uh me that is then be-camin that fish and I dream up that fish
be-camin uh shark and I dream up that shark be-camin uhshore.

ALL: UUH!

SOUL-SEER: And where I be-camin from duhduhnt look like nowhere I been.

SHARK-SEER and KIN-SEER: And I whuduhnt me no more and I whuduhnt no fish. My new Self was uh 3rd Self made by thuh space in between.

ALL: UUH!

KIN-SEER: Rose up out uh thuh water and standin on them waves my Self was standin. And my self that rose between us went back down into the sea. [123]

Here, Parks dramatises a sort of nutrient cycle as the Seers become one with the sea. Their performance interacts with the documentary record, contouring a Middle Passage imaginary with the powerful impressions left by Parks's narration. For the purpose of this study, we might also consider Parks's allusion to a nutrient cycle in relation to the tandem treatment of burial and resurrection, which, as with Philip's notion of the 'fragment', disrupts the finality of absence, or the permanence of historical loss. Performance occupies an important disciplinary perspective in this tethering of text and historical memory, especially regarding the dynamics of repetition and revision. In an essay entitled 'Fugues, Fragments and Fissures', Philip considers the significance of African rituals and their place in the proliferation of African memory: 'we observe the mask or the costume (the artefact?) that has been created that is then extended into and by performance'.[124] According to Philip, performance represents a mode of historical interaction, and importantly portends a continuum with the dead, via material means (i.e., the mask, costume, and artefact). Philip maintains:

> The better to call down the ancestors or the spirit through prayer, spoken and unspoken, through utterance, spoken or sung, and once the spirit is called down and caught and the devotee mounted, all things are possible which is where what in the West is called improvisation begins.[125]

I quote Philip at length because her description of ritual performance here resounds in her poetics, which bears a striking performative aspect. Philip locates 'possibility' in a liminal state, initiated by the presence of the dead, whose memories are resurrected in the performative realm. In short, burial and resurrection figure as parentheses to the circumstances of this possibility. Improvisation, what Philip

[123] Ibid., p.55.
[124] Marlene NourbeSe Philip, 'Fugues, Fragments and Fissures—A Work in Progress' *Anthurium,* 3.2 (2005), 1-15 (p.5).
[125] Philip, 'Fugues, Fragments and Fissures—A Work in Progress', p.5.

refers to as the Western frame of reference for this phenomenon, calls to mind the tandem operation of repetition and revision—in the Parksian, jazz-infused 'rep and rev' sense. Philip essentially sets out the importance of understanding *Zong!* through the lens of performance. Further, she sets out the rationale for doing so. This state of suspense is comparable to Parks's dramatic works, reiterating the generative potential of placing these two writers' works in conversation with one another. In Philip's *Zong!*, the 'utterance' so critical to African ritual performance is suspended on the page, activated through hearing, seeing, or saying the words. Philip herself underscores the striking phonetic resemblance between the terms Zong and Song, which she sets out in the Notanda section of the text, also explaining that she would mistype the word Zong, and instead be left with Song: 'Zong! is chant! Shout! […] Zong! is Song! And Song is what has kept the soul of the African intact when they 'want(ed) water . . . sustenance.. preservation'.[126] She conflates the two terms, framing the book of poems as a song that 'can only be told through its untelling'.[127] Philip inscribes a sense of possibility in performance. Her recognition of performance within the realm of spiritual belief highlights that ritual establishes a temporal continuum, operating outside of chronological, linear formulations of the past.

Philip's understanding of the relationship between performance and history recalls Glissant's argument in his essay 'Theatre, Consciousness of the People', in which Glissant ruminates on the relationship between nation, historical progress, and theatre. Glissant ultimately reveals their inter-dependency while importantly drawing up the question of 'what happens', as in the case of the Antilles, when a nation experiences the 'subtle colonial creation of an artificial elite whose role is to take charge of the function of representation'?[128] Glissant borrows from Hegel's conceptualisation of theatre and its relationship to nationhood: 'There is no theater without a nation at its source', and yet still, 'at the beginning, there can be no nation without theatre'.[129] Glissant shares with Hegel that theatre holds up a mirror to the nation, enabling the formation of a collective consciousness, and thereby participating in history's forward movement in a dialectical mode of progression. Theatre serves as a stand-in for the nation in its 'totality', as an 'aesthetic counterpart'; the origins of the nation figure as a 'stage'.[130] Glissant's formulation of the stage as an originary coordinate for a projected national identity maps onto Parks's *The America Play*, wherein the Found(l)ing Father's Great Hole of History signifies erased narratives of African American history. Parks reveals the 'lack' and artifice that determines the 'whole' story of US history as the audience visually encounter a literal hole on the stage. In the Antilles, Glissant writes that a theatrical tradition is essentially void.[131]

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[126] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, p.207.
[127] Ibid., p.207.
[128] Édouard Glissant, 'Theater, Consciousness of the People,' *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* [1990], transl. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville, Virginia: Caraf Books, 1997), pp. 196–220 (p.204).
[129] Édouard Glissant, 'Theater, Consciousness of the People', p.196.
[130] Ibid., p.196.
[131] Glissant writes out of the void in his own play, Monsieur Toussaint, which according to Glissant 'was not crafted according to the economy of theatrical representation'. The play was published in 1961 and was first performed in 2003.

> A necessity—"total," yet threatened: that is the essential tragedy of our Caribbean situation. Yet there is a deficiency in "our" theatre. What is this necessity that cannot find expression, this threat that remains invisible, this totality that fragments? Our tragedy does not resolve. The reasons for the deficiency are cumulative: the traumatic conditions under which the Caribbean was settled, structures (based on taboos) of the slave's world, self-repression triggered by depersonalization, etc.[132]

Glissant's discussion of the *fragmentary* nature of history in the Antilles draws up the stakes of historical oblivion. These stakes, he stresses, are compounded by the absence of theatre. Glissant argues that in the case of the Antilles, since no theatre cultivates the collective consciousness for 'people whose roots reach back before the beginning of modern times', a continual break with the past ensues.[133] Put succinctly, the nation stage is overcome by a Parksian Great Hole of History.

Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* reiterates the salience of Parks's works in a diasporic context.[134] The history of the Middle Passage is implicit in the above excerpt from Glissant's 'Theater, Consciousness of the People'. The scale of death and the processes of dehumanisation that mark its history factor into the causes that Glissant lists: 'the traumatic conditions of settlement, the structures [...] of the slave's universe [...]'. *Zong!* and the Third Kingdom setting of *Imperceptible Mutabilities* are historically anchored to the Middle Passage. Against the enduring legacy of racism that shaped and filtered its re-tellings, Parks and Philip grapple with how to render the invisible, visible. The Middle Passage is a history chronicled through the deaths and commodification of its victims. Indeed, the very fact that the lives of captives entered the record via their death, sale, or by the detail of the insurance value placed on their lives, reiterates the historiographical mechanism of loss that Katherine McKittrick terms 'Black Mathematics'.[135] McKittrick relates the archive as an origin story, explaining '[t]his is where we begin, this is where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving'.[136] Christina Sharpe extends McKittrick's consideration as a component of what she coins 'wake work' in asking, 'how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death?'[137] Glissant's image of the abyss animates McKittrick and Sharpe's important questions, also etching out a temporal continuum that attests to the persistence of Black erasure throughout time, and the marking of historical holes. I argue the texts of *Zong!* and *Imperceptible Mutabilities* attend to the submerged histories that marks the routine murder of captive Africans, whose bodies were left beneath the ocean's surface. This project of mattering connects with bodies of water in scholar Christina Sharpe's analytic

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[132] Édouard Glissant, 'Theater, Consciousness of the People', p.197.
[133] Sarah J. Townsend, 'The Spectral Stage of Édouard Glissant's *Monsieur Toussaint', Modern Drama,* 61.4 (2018), 501-525 (p.506) < https://muse.jhu.edu/article/710939 > [accessed 5.12.22]
[134] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* [1989], transl. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: Caraf Books, 1997).
[135] Katherine McKittrick, 'Mathematics Black Life', *The Black Scholar,* 44.2 (2014) 16-28 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413684>
[136] Katherine McKittrick, 'Mathematics Black Life', p.17.
[137] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being,* p.17.

of the ‘wake’; Sharpe’s wake work responds to the unfinished project of emancipation and proposes a mode for attending to the living legacies that transatlantic slavery has left in its wake. Sharpe describes the wake in various ways, positing various definitions of this term ‘wake’ as epistemological roots for the work entailed in mourning those enslaved. The following definition underscores the significance of water, in particular, to Sharpe’s project of tending to this afterlife: ‘the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow’.[138] Much like the repetitive motion of waves, Sharpe employs this definition as a refrain throughout her publication *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Her wake work calls attention to the always present legacy of Atlantic chattel slavery through the image of the ripple; the impressions left on the surface of water are conceived as a foil to imagining histories from a position of a ruptured present.

Quantum tunnelling … an entry to the abyss?

Suzan-Lori Parks’s exploration of historical erasure and holes across her works is punctuated by her numerous references to cosmic black holes. Parks embeds these conceptually, through a quantum poetics that animates the spaces of her *365* project, as well as her creative practice more generally—positioning the unknown always as a touchstone. I contend that images of waves in Parks’s *Imperceptible Mutabilities* invite this same critical lens of quantum physics, allegorically inscribing mechanisms of historical revision in the material worlds she conjures. This conceptual claim derives partly from the recognition that waves are foundational to the fabric of space-time, and they generate disturbance when travelling through any given medium; as a model of historical representation, the wave evokes metaphorical possibility. Parks substantiates this claim through allusions to matters of physics in everyday discussions of her writing. In a recent interview, Parks was asked about her creative process, specifically regarding the immense temporal scope of her subject matter, from her play-diaries to her ‘big history plays’.[139] In response, Parks at once turned to the physics of light: ‘Well, light is a particle and a wave’. This remark, though seemingly incongruous against the subject of creative praxis, is in fact characteristic of Parks’s attentiveness toward matters of physics and shape. In the wake of Parks’s commingling of ‘light’ with processes of meaning making in ‘The Blank Before the World’, the analogy warrants careful consideration.[140] The duality of light’s behaviour—observed as either particle or wave-like depending on the experimental mode of measurement—serves as a scientific basis for opening up the way we understand the behaviour of matter. For Parks, this aspect of multiplicity fastened to material reality undergirds her ability to engage with history in multiple modes across her

[138] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* p.21.
[139] Suzan-Lori Parks, ‘Make Space for the Difficult Things’, *American Theatre* <https://www.americantheatre.org/2022/10/18/suzan-lori-parks-lets-make-space-for-the-difficult-things/> [accessed 17.11.22]
[140] See Chapter Two.

oeuvre. The behaviour of light undermines visual authority, and even serves in Parks's work as a metaphoric framework for non-linear formulations of time, which contest the logics of linear progress narratives. Light is the principal method used to fathom cosmic time, and so its dualistic nature helps to comprehend the heterogeneity of the past, and of time itself.[141] Parks acknowledges the multiple time signatures operating across her writing, from 'birthing two epic stories' (Genius: Aretha and *The United States Versus Billie Holiday*), to the culmination of her commitment to once-again write a play a day: *Plays for the Plague Year*. Much like historical fragments preserved in archives, which signify the absent-presence of unrecorded histories, light waves simultaneously signal the absent-presence of the light particle, and vice-versa. This disjuncture between the observed behaviour of light and its actual behaviour serves as an arena of possibility, which Parks translates into metaphorical possibility.

In this section, I contend that both Philip and Parks borrow from the field of physics, recognising the capacity for wave function—when manifest in narrative form—to destabilise trenchant historical formulations of the past. From a historiographical perspective, the physics of wave-function gives way to a narrative form that reaches beyond the limited scope of linear progress narratives; these typically posit the Middle Passage as a point of origin, but importantly one that is static and does not permit history's continual folding into the present (in a motion evocative of sea tides). The wave has a special relationship with the concept of possibility in the field of quantum physics. Particles, having both particle and wave-like behaviour known as 'wave-particle duality,' possesses the possibility to transfer through otherwise impossible energy fields; this is a process known as quantum tunnelling. For writers who seek to represent buried narratives of the Middle Passage, the very concept of quantum tunnelling offers fecund ground for discovery. Consider for example how a channel to otherwise impossible energy fields connects to the notion of historical recuperation. To the historical representation of the Middle Passage, quantum tunnelling presents another passage of sorts, to a site of possibility. I consider, in tandem with this alternate passage, the image of the abyss: its associations of rebirth, as well as the disorientation and vertigo inherent in abyssal dimensions. In this vein, I embrace the physics concept of quantum tunnelling as a lens for Parks's and Philip's work. Philip's engagement with the image of the wave in *Zong!* attests to her preoccupation with historical re-membrance. The wave function of an electron—an aspect that falls outside the scope of classical physics—is key to this phenomenon of quantum tunnelling. Parks's and Philip's treatment of language as matter establishes grounds for understanding their writing through the lens of quantum poetics. I connect this to Glissant's discussion of the abyss, to suggest that both Philip and Parks engage with the abyss where they grasp toward a narrative form of quantum tunnelling, which marks an entry into the abyss.

Michelle Wright argues in *Physics of Blackness,* that histories of the Middle Passage also operate as epistemologies:

[141] Physicists measure light waves to gain an understanding of cosmic time.

> These historical-- cum-- epistemological events are usually linked by or narrated under the theme of overcoming obstacles through struggle (or "uplift"), with the defining aspect of contemporary Black collective histories focusing primarily on slavery (Middle Passage histories), European colonization (postcolonial histories), or the dominance of ancient African civilizations (Afrocentric histories).[142]

According to Wright, the thematising of 'struggle' or 'uplift' positions the Middle Passage as a starting point for Black collective experiences in the 'New World' that operates as a structuring space-time. Wright and other scholars of African diaspora writing caution against an overdependence on linear progress narratives in the context of historical recovery, yet recognise the significance of a linear Middle Passage epistemology in positing the 'necessary weight of a "material" Blackness'.[143] That is to say, a linear Middle Passage history-cum-epistemology affords a framework for understanding Black history, culture and ancestry. Western philosophy linearises a Middle Passage epistemology—consider for example, Newton's view that space, motivated by time, moves forward in chronological fashion.[144] Newton's embrace of linear space-time is both limiting and implicated into a Western episteme of uplift and progress, thereby excluding Black individuals who do not share in the historical experience of the Middle Passage. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* exemplify this relationship between perpendicularity and teleological formulations of history. For Parks and Philip, the figuring of words as *matter* (which in the field of physics also means to possess mass), presents scope to radically innovate limiting, linear practices of historical narration.

In this sense, wave-particle duality marks an (albeit separate) iteration of the physics of the black hole. In *The America Play*, the big bang presents a motif to attend to historical holes and the question of origins probed by the Foundling Father—take for example Parks's descriptor for the gunshots as 'big bangs'.[145] These evoke the rupture of historical time, and the wound of slavery. The big bang symbolically interlinks the enigma of the origins of the universe; Parks, through performance, fashions a soundscape mechanised through violent gunshots, which effectively recalls the origins of the universe through the conceptual entanglement of physics, violence, and the recurrence of the past in the present. As Parks commented in an interview with Shelby Jiggetts:

> If you think about the history of humankind, it's relatively short compared to the history of the universe. These bigger things resonate on our daily lives like

[142] Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the middle passage epistemology* (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p.7.
[143] Ibid., p.14.
[144] See Kip S. Thorne, 'The Relativity of Space and Time' in *Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy* [1994] (London and Basingstoke: Papermac [reprint], 1995), pp.59-86.
[145] Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play*, p.174.

> quantum theory. That resonates – the atomic theory and all that – resonates in our daily lives, as does "The Big Bang Theory".[146]

Quantum physics, and all that it encompasses, bears a material connection to the history of the universe, and so serves as an important medium for positioning Parks's characters in relation to the past. The soundscape of the big bang in *The America Play* operates as a continuum; the echoes of the gun shot continually resound, as do a matrix of conceptual connections. From a physics perspective, historical medium emerges as a crucial aspect to understanding the passage of sound across time and space. Sound waves present one example, though in the context of quantum mechanics, a perhaps outlandish but fascinating example, might be the symphonies encoded in gravitational waves, affected through the collision of black holes, and carried to Earth. In a chapter titled 'Ripples of Curvature', physicist Kip S. Thorne reviews efforts in the field of quantum mechanics to devise instruments that might decipher these symphonies.[147]

To think about language as matter is in fact very easy to do in Parks's and Philip's work. Poet Amy Catanzano argues that 'when it challenges axiomatic assumptions, including those about itself, poetry can quantum tunnel past the parameters of language, which is a form of matter'.[148] In *Zong!*, Philip's treatment of word units as matter is visually decipherable in the splintering of words into smaller units, and their distribution across the space of the page to emulate a wave-like motion. Parks's repeated slippage between 'world' and 'word' in her play *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* reiterates this aspect of materiality. Catanzano's poetics, while based on a 'pataphysical approach, underscores the potential for quantum physics to complicate traditional distinctions between the real and the imagined, between metaphor and material, recalling Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's call for alternate modes of understanding the past. In her 2008 article 'Black Atlantic,Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,' Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley underscores a tendency for scholarship that centres tropes of the Black Atlantic to miss out on the theoretical potential of this image, through their writing out of materiality. Yet, maritime metaphors, when combined with a quantum mechanics perspective towards 'wave-function', offer generative consequences for Parks's broader project of historical re-membrance. To think about language as matter is to respond to Tinsley's call for this re-mattering of the discourse. Given Tinsley's attention to Édourard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990) as an example in her discussion of work that writes 'out of materiality', a reading of quantum tunnelling in Parks and Philip's work, in tandem with Édouard Glissant's theorisation of the abyss—a tunnelling

[146] Shelby Jiggetts, 'Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks (1996)', in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 66–75 (p.71).
[147] Kip S. Thorne, 'Ripples of Curvature' in *Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy* (London: Papermac [reprint] 1995), pp.376-396.
[148] Amy Catanzno, 'Physics of the Impossible' *Jacket 2* (2014) <https://jacket2.org/commentary/physics-impossible> [accessed 23 Feb 2022].

into the abyss perhaps—offers comparative ground to acknowledge the limitations of metaphor, and reach beyond them.

M. NourbeSe Philip's quantum strategies

In her essay titled 'Black W/holes: A History of Brief Time' M. NourbeSe Philip draws on a series of statements about physics from Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (1988) in her meditation on the space of Canada and its racialized geographies.[149] She invokes personal experiences and encounters, local events and landscapes, probing the mechanisms of White domination—all against a cosmic backdrop that she introduces via a series of sentences that frame the essay. The essay enacts a tethering of celestial space to the geographies of Canada, its rivers included. In a section framed by the cosmic Image of 'strong force' which she explains as the force which holds protons and neutrons together to form atoms, Philip writes:

> I sit, close my eyes and listen to the sound of the water flowing by. And within the sound of water I hear the sounds of the languages of the First Peoples. The liquid, mellifluous sounds of their languages. I listen and hear how the very sound of the space around us shapes us fundamentally—from the ground up so to speak, so that even the tongue must remain faithful to the language of the land.[150]

In effect, Philip transposes the cosmological context of 'strong force', to describe the way that language is bound up with the geography of the land. She imagines the echoes of language to endure, at a molecular level, in the movement of the water flowing through rivers. This coalescence of physics and geography is broadened to the level of the nation in a section that concludes the essay, subtitled: 'electric charge: A property of a particle by which it may repel (or attract) other particles that have a charge of similar (or opposite) sign'.[151] With this physics metaphor, Philip evokes the historically enduring racist structures that inform the power dynamics of space and place. She explains:

> this space that is. canada. a negative space. around which we? i? the african. the black. shapes herself—ourselves. a space of unrelenting, unforgiving whiteness. a tabula rasa which was never blank.[152]

In figuring whiteness as a tangible force, the effects of which determine the movement of all matter, Philip problematises the normative association between whiteness and the concept of blankness,

[149] M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Black W/holes: A History of Brief Time' [1988], *Jacket 2* (2014) <https://jacket2.org/commentary/%E2%80%98black-wholes-history-brief-time%E2%80%99-part-1-2> [accessed 8 August 2022]
[150] Ibid., para.4.
[151] Ibid., para 4.
[152] Ibid., para.12.

gesturing toward a new narrative of blank. As a tabula rasa which was never blank, the notion of White supremacy as an empty remnant of the past is likened to the notion of space as a void phenomenon. Evidence of matter and mass, as well as forces such as the movement of particles which attract and repel in an electromagnetic field, underscore the ubiquity and world-shaping capacity of whiteness. That Philip's allusion to physics goes beyond Newtonian mechanics implies that this shaping through space goes beyond the binary operation of negative and positive. As scholar Zakiyyah Iman Jackson highlights, post-Newtonian chaos theory challenged the view of the tendencies of chaos and order as oppositional, with chaos as external threat. Rather, chaos was viewed as interwoven with order, and even constitutive of order. Jackson explains, 'structure within chaos or constrained chaos is known as a strange attractor, and spontaneous chaos potentially provides pragmatic benefits to a system by allowing for the discovery of new pathways to greater efficiency'.[153] Jackson's understanding of chaos theory gives quantum expression to the dynamics of an anti-Black imaginary, which systematically excludes Black people.

In her book of poems, *Zong!*, Philip again talks about negative space, 'only in not-telling can the story be told; only in the space where it's not told – literally in the margins of the text, a sort of negative space, a space not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning'.[154] Negative space is both nation place, i.e. Canada, and the space where the stories left untold, remain so. In Philip's poetics, negative space represents a space of possibility that elides binary traps. Philip complicates the binary of negative/positive through a *sort of* negative space, wherein erased histories are signalled, but never recovered; the documentary record is not re-told but untold. The margins (and so the materiality of the text) encodes the structuring capacity of historical gaps, even against the aqueous poetics that they shape. The coming together of matter and anti-matter would mean an annihilation of each, and an explosion of gamma rays or elementary particles. Philip's engagement with physics metaphors underscores the extent to which the structures of race and the history of Transatlantic slavery is constitutive of the nation space of Canada.

Her use of cosmic space metaphors even extends to black holes. In a section within her essay 'Black W/holes: A History of Brief Time', titled 'big Bang: The Singularity at the beginning of the universe', Philip writes:

> ever since the holds of the slave ship, the european attempts to curtail the every moving of the african:
>
> the moving in time
>
> the moving in space

[153] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, 'Theorizing in a Void: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics, in Black Feminist Poetics', *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2018), 117.3 (2018), 617-648 (p.618).
[154] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, p.201.

> the moving into their own spirituality
>
> […] cut off from their own History and histories, the african moves into a history that both deracinates and imprisons her. in the primitive. in the ever-living present absent a past or a future [155]

Like the big bang, Philip relates that the Middle Passage represents a beginning coordinate, and that this also marks a severance from a previous existence—an existence before slavery. Philip's distinction between 'their own History and histories' is striking here, and underscores the critical role of meaning-making to the project of understanding slavery in the Americas. The entrance of the enslaved into this story begins at the site of the Middle Passage, where their treatment as commodity, or cargo, renders their entrance into the documentary record. For Philip, an attempt to engage non-linear designs of time provides a way of looking beyond the horizons of their journey toward the New World. But crucially, referring back to the big bang metaphor—a phenomena which, according to current understanding, has effected the continual expansion of the universe up until this point—recreates the temporal dimensions of Parks's 'Blank Before the World'. Philip articulates a temporality distinct from the linear passage of time that marks the modern European stories of Enlightenment and expansionism, while simultaneously underscoring the way that the Middle Passage, like the big bang, meant a 'new world' and the origins of a Black diasporic identity.

Philip's use of quantum mechanics has been underscored by scholars looking to understand her book of poems, *Zong!*. Amy Cantanzano has outlined, in an essay titled *Physics of the Impossible*, the ways in which Philip's work appears to 'inhabit aspects of Einstein's conception of the universe'.[156] In fact, upon emailing her work to Philip, Cantanzano, a poet herself, described how Philip responded with her essay: 'Black W/hole', thereby confirming her own attentiveness to a cosmological scale in her poetics. *Zong!* Presents scope to amalgamate wave-particle duality and oceanic waves into a unitary text that seeks to remember the dead, and to 'hear the bones sing' as in Parks's words.[157] Philip contends in *Zong!*:

> Our entrance to the past is through memory – either oral or written. And water. In this case salt water. Sea water. And, as the ocean appears to be the same yet is constantly in motion, affected by tidal movements, so too this memory appears stationary yet is shifting always. Repetition drives the

[155] M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Black W/holes: A History of Brief Time' [1988], *Jacket 2* (2014), para. 3 <https://jacket2.org/commentary/%E2%80%98black-wholes-history-brief-time%E2%80%99-part-1-2> [accessed 8 August 2022]
[156] Amy Catanzno, 'Physics of the Impossible' *Jacket 2* (2014), para. 2 <https://jacket2.org/commentary/physics-impossible> [accessed 23 Feb 2022].
[157] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.

> event and the memory simultaneously. Our entrance to the past is through water.[158]

As I have outlined, *Zong!* re-tells the story of the 1781 Zong massacre, by reconfiguring the original basis for this event's entrance into the historical record, based on an original court document titled *Gregson v Gilbert;* this represents the 'whole' as well as a hole of history. From this original document, Philip uses words and translations, anagrams and word fragments, to explode the form and content of this document that stands in for the whole story, in order to articulate the holes in the account of the Zong massacre. Philip includes this document in the book of poems, positioning this as the final section of the book – even after the glossary and the notes which detail her creative process. A fascinating effect of this structure is that the "authorised" version of historical events is reframed as a final appendix to a version of the Zong massacre that Philip re-envisions. Philip, in allowing the *Gregson v Gilbert* document to stand in as the final component of the text, relegates the "whole" (as in the court case) to an appendix for the cosmic black hole that animates her own un-telling. Philip's method recalls Park's *365* project, wherein the final play diary is titled '365 Days/365 Plays' and comprises a set of stage directions:

> Lights bump back up to white-hot.
> Zoom.
> Onstage, the manuscript of 365 Days/365 Plays.[159]

Like Parks, Philip opts for a physical representation of a whole text, as distinct from its previously represented constituent parts and configurations. Parks's positioning of the physical manuscript as the dramatic reveal for this play diary speaks to the 'special relationship' she identifies between the writing of literature and history.[160] For each writer, the notion of historical holes and historical wholeness is implicit in this play with language and text.

The *Zong* ship presents an interesting point of comparison with Parks's and Philip's rendering of historical w/holes. In concluding this chapter, I turn to a contemporary historical representation of the ship that I argue bolstered the ship's significance as a metonym for the countless Transatlantic crossings that marked the history of the Middle Passage.

[158] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Wesleyan UP, 2008), p. 201.
[159] Suzan-Lori Parks, '365 Days/365 Plays' in *365 Days/365 Plays*, p.376.
[160] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.

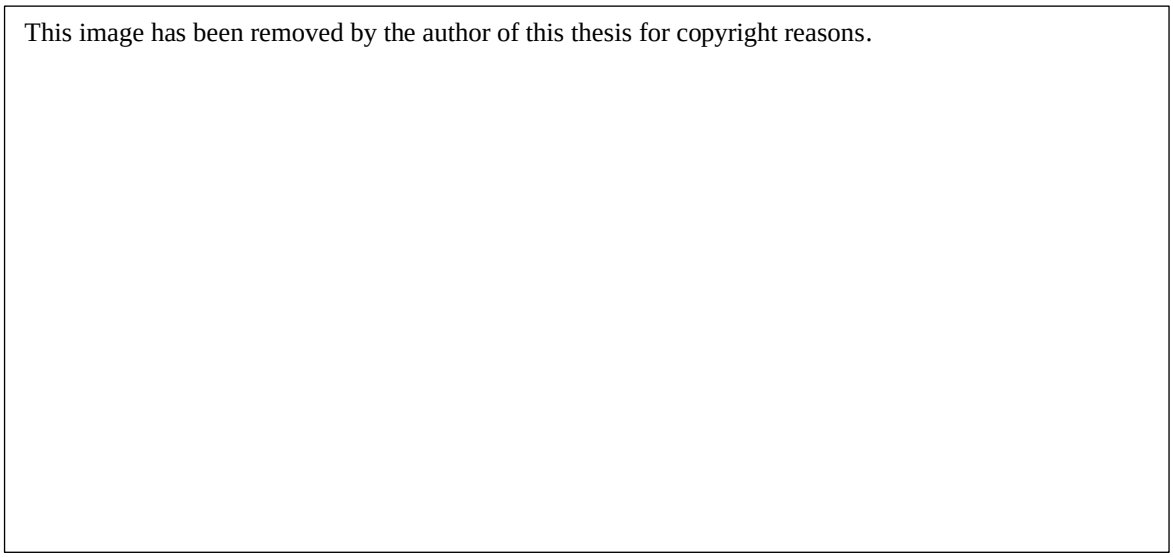


Figure 18 The Zong, a replica of the 18th century slave ship. Photograph: Nic Hamilton Photographic/Alamy.

The legacy of the Zong massacre demonstrates the malleability of the historical record. Like the Lincoln myth, the case of the Zong massacre birthed an attendant abolitionist myth that centred White sentimentality, obscured Black agency, and served as an abridged narrative of slavery that ends almost as soon as it begins. Owing to the ubiquity of the Zong case within narratives of British abolition, the bicentenary of the British slave trade in 2007 saw the *Zong* pivotally positioned within the UK's commemorative landscape. On 29 March 2007, a replica of the Zong ship sailed 'out of history' and up the river Thames in London, docking by the Tower of London.[161] The naval frigate, *HMS Northumberland*, accompanied the ship, which was a three-masted schooner from the 1940s.[162] The scene echoes the *Zong*'s journey to Cape Coast, escorted by the British frigate *HMS Alert* following its capture from a Dutch crew in November 1780. Anita Rupprecht has highlighted the theatricality of the bicentenary spectacle; in an essay on the Zong massacre and its commemoration in 2007, she considers the two ships 'making their way along the choppy grey-green Thames' as an aspect that 'risked eclipsing' the 'object' of the event, though she adds 'it was unclear precisely what that object was'.[163] Both ships featured exhibitions concerning the history of the Zong that also contextualised the British abolitionist movement. In this sense, the event itself and the opportunity afforded to visitors to engage with the history of the Zong massacre marked a salient act of remembrance. The exhibition featured on the *HMS Northumberland* narrated the role of the British navy in abolishing the slave trade and thereby offers a demonstrative insight into the role of historical intervention wrought through national

[161] Anita Rupprecht, 'A Limited Sort of Property': History, Memory and the Slave Ship Zong' , *Slavery and Abolition*, 29.2 (2008), 265-277 (p.265) <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440390802027913>
[162] See Jessica Moody, *The Persistence of Memory: Remembering Slavery in Liverpool, 'Slaving Capital of the World'* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2020), p.263.
[163] Anita Rupprecht, 'A Limited Sort of Property': History, Memory and the Slave Ship Zong', p.265.

representational frameworks. This particular framing calls into play a redemption narrative, along with its attendant stakes of Black erasure. Rupprecht poses a question that aptly summarises the complex task of interpreting the event: '[was] this a moment of iconic decolonisation or re-colonisation?'[164] The replica ships, when considered alongside the Booker T. Washington memorial statue featured in Chapter One of this study, and the animatronic Lincoln figure featured in Chapter Two, interweave a trans-national narrative of racial progress spanning from the Middle Passage, to Lincoln's presidency, to the period of reconstruction in America.[165] However, this study has been predominantly interested in 'textual monuments' created by Parks, Bonner, Morrison, and Philip, which importantly chronicle, critique, and re-envision the dominant narratives that these physical monuments espouse.[166] I conclude this project in the next section by approaching the history of the Zong massacre through the lens of origins, in a manner reminiscent of the literary interventions by the writers in this study who, by looking to origins, have succeeded in wresting possibility from erasure.

To do this, I shift my focus from Philip's text to the origin of her source material: the archive. In *Zong!*, Philip contemplates the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report as literary material, reworking its form and meanings. I put forth that literary scholarship might approach the archive and creative responses to the archive more explicitly in tandem—applying literary techniques and extending the historical awareness Philip engenders throughout *Zong!*, in order to further unsettle the stability of this 'authorised' historical record. In concluding this project, I aim to demonstrate how the site of the archive presents scope for further historical intervention where sources are considered in tandem with literary and dramatic works that re-envision the past. This critical approach also acknowledges the role of scholarship in the act of historical representation and the perpetuation of gaps in the historical record. Turning to the archive, I focus on three key sources of information that might expand and interrupt a truncated, storied version of the Zong massacre. I examine the repetitions and revisions that marked the *Zong*'s movements as constitutive of the material ship's history, focusing on the origins of the ship and tracing its voyages; I examine the muster roll that documents the names of Dutch crewmen onboard the *Zong*'s final voyage as the *Zorg*, before its capture by the British; I also examine a letter that contains key information surrounding passenger Robert Stubbs, the figure whose re-telling of the Zong massacre forms a pivotal piece of our current understanding of this historical event. With these sources, I aim to illuminate the origin story of the *Zong* ship and reveal its transnational history, an aspect which importantly undermines the Zong massacre's absorption into a national narrative of British abolition. This approach promotes a more complete and accurate representation of the past within literary scholarship that is centred on questions of historical erasure. Hence, I argue such work addresses the

[164] Ibid., p.267.
[165] See Figures 9 and 13.
[166] I borrow the term 'textual monuments' from Philip, who defines the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* in this manner. See M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, p.194. In doing so, I wish to specify my contention that Philip's *Zong!* is a textual monument that counters the erasure that the court case marks.

subject of historical ‘possibility’, and ties into the question posed by Parks that underlines this study: ‘Is this possible?’[167]

[167] Suzan-Lori Parks, ‘The Blank Before the World’, p.376.

Conclusion: ‘Is This Possible?

‘*I have further to observe that my opinion of Mr Stubbs is that he is a wicked and treacherous character.*’ – Captain William Llewellin.[1]

The Sankofa figure pictured below belongs to the Akan tradition. The bird sculpture, its body facing forward and its head craning backwards, is an emblem of the Sankofa principle. Often depicted as a heart rather than a bird, this Akan symbol represents the idea of progressing through life while fostering a deep cultural connectedness to the past: ‘moving forward while reaching back to connect to one’s heritage’.[2] In this sense, the bird embodies the multi-directional revisionary aesthetic that Parks and others in this project share in common. I referred to the Sankofa principle at the outset of this study, where I detailed the unearthing of a coffin decorated with this symbol (in a heart form) during the excavation of the New York African Burial ground. In the immediate aftermath of the excavation, the Sankofa symbol captured the historical import of the commemorative landscape yet to be mapped, and so was adopted as a central motif of the dedicatory monument.

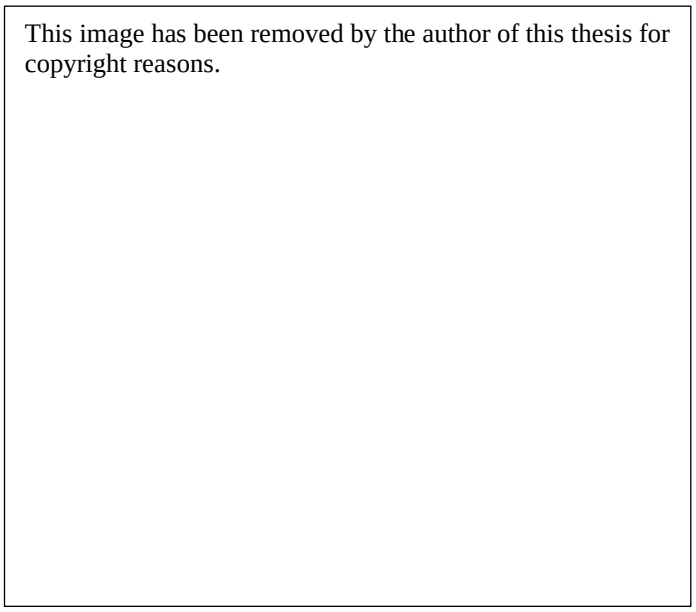


Figure 19 Sankofa figure, maker unrecorded (Asante). MOA Collection K2.368. Photo by Skooker Broome.

Often the bird is depicted with a precious egg in its mouth, though even without this detail, the bird’s physical comportment visually signifies the importance of ‘origins’ to the Sankofa principle. Parks, Bonner, Morrison and Philip each deploy the trope of ‘origins’ to glean ‘possibility’—to draw song

[1] The National Archives, London, ‘Miscellaneous Letters to the African Committee’, T70/1695.
[2] Museum of Anthropology, ‘Sankofa: African Routes and Canadian Roots’, *Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia* (2021) <https://moa.ubc.ca/exhibition/sankofa/> [accessed 5 Jan 2023].

from the bones (as Parks suggests), and hence sound matter from historical silence.[3] I find this a fitting note on which to commence this final section, since the trope of origins has informed the direction of my project. The origin is a temporal-spatial coordinate to which the writers in this study layer complex meanings. My own analysis has taken shape around this coordinate in tracing historical anchors in reverse fashion, against a chronological timeline. Spatial metaphors have bridged meaning as I have moved through various dimensions of the abyss: from verticality, to holes, to waves. The capacity for metaphor to foreclose possibility has remained a principal concern, and I have sought to ground these organising images in material aspects of the histories they evoke.[4] The discovery of the Sankofa symbol on the coffin in the African Burial Ground demonstrated the significant impact of material culture in the domain of historical remembrance. The symbol's creation story in this particular context remains a mystery; we have no understanding of the individual who tacked the nails onto the coffin. Nevertheless, the sankofa symbol's existence presents possibility—the possibility to tell a story about the customs and beliefs of the unknown, buried individual, and to remember their ancestral origins as a mode of commemorative practice.

My thematic focus on burial and resurrection has highlighted that language can mark an origin in and of itself. As Parks writes in her essay on 'Possession', the task of the playwright is to 'locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down'.[5] In fact, her clarification, '[t]he bones tell us what was, is, will be' calls to mind the African Burial Ground in New York.[6] Like Philip's oceanic reformulation of language in *Zong!*, and Parks's creative state of 'possession', Morrison's rendering of language as 'alive' in her Nobel Prize lecture speaks to the originary potential of language.

> The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.[7]

Across her fictional counter-narratives, Morrison's language inscribes the possibility to attach new meanings to recorded events. Even while Parks, Bonner, Morrison, and Philip employ the past in imagining 'a more freedom filled future' (to borrow from Soyica Diggs Colbert), this place of meaning that Morrison describes is again and again an 'origin' point.[8] If we contemplate the origin as the

[3] Here, I refer to Parks's essay on 'Possession' in which she asserts part of the task of the playwright is to 'hear the bones sing' and then 'write it down'. Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.4.
[4] For verticality, the politics of racial uplift; for holes, Abraham Lincoln's presidency and demise, plus the creation story as an event overlaid with historical uncertainty; for waves, the history of the Middle Passage.
[5] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.3.
[6] Ibid. p.3; Archaeologists removed four hundred and nineteen sets of human remains to Howard University for research, revealing the dire conditions in which these individuals had lived. See Dienke Hondius et al., *Dutch New York Histories: Connecting African, Native and Slavery Heritage* (Volendam, LM Publishers, 2017), p.60.
[7] Toni Morrison, 'Nobel Lecture December 7, 1993', *The Nobel Prize,* 2023 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/> [accessed 5 April 2023].
[8] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements,* p.44.

direction towards which Morrison describes language 'arcs', 'a place where meaning may lie', we discover in this coordinate a nascent site for the re-scripting of a storied past. Take for example, the backward-facing Milkman Dead of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, seated in his father's Packard (with obvious parallels to the sankofa symbol) and inhabiting the originary geography of the abyss. Whilst his metaphorical journey is towards social and psychic death (as a ramification of the paternal Dead family legacy), Milkman's counter-hegemonic spatial practices disrupt this destiny as he strives toward an origin point that precedes the Dead family name.[9] Still, my analysis has drawn up the stakes of language: the proliferation of violence and the foreclosure of possibility. For example, the Us's of *The Purple Flower* struggle against the rhetoric of uplift; the hill, serving as both the setting of the play and an allegory for race relations, is where the Us's encounter the structural racism that such rhetoric obscures.

According to Édouard Glissant, the origin is no fixed point, but rather a site of multiplicity: the abyss. A performance lens has emphasised that, within a representational framework, the performance of origins generates a tension with the notion of performance as a repeated, but revised event—or as Morrison writes of language, 'never a substitute for [an experience]' (read here as origins), but poised towards its displacement.[10] Parks, Philip, Bonner, and Morrison locate an origin in language itself, an origin that we might interpret anew if language, like matter, is broken down and reformulated outside the parameters of colonialism. The origin point to which this study now grasps registers these complexities in taking seriously Jennifer Terry's calls to contemplate the etymology of diaspora as both routes and roots.[11] In what follows, I return to Philip's book of poems, *Zong!*, in considering the vessel's routes/roots; the *Zong,* before its capture by the British, was a Dutch-owned vessel named the *Zorg.* I contemplate the vessel as a chronotope as per Paul Gilroy's reimagining of modernity via the movement of the slave ship across the Black Atlantic. Turning to the archive, I examine the numerous repetitions and revisions that marked the vessel's movements as constitutive of its history.[12] I explore: 1) the various voyages of the vessel across the Atlantic 2) the repeated presence of Dutch crewmembers on-board voyages 3) the underexplored significance of Captain William Llewellin to the vessel's storied history under British ownership as the *Zong*. With these historical scenarios, I aim to set out a more complete picture of the material history of the *Zong* massacre—notably the vessel's previous voyages

[9] Ibid., p.41.
[10] Parks describes performance as a "re-birth" and deploys the technique of "repetition and revision".
[11] Jennifer Terry, *Shuttles in the Rocking Loom': Mapping the Black Diaspora in African American and Caribbean Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2013), p.3; Terry refers to Paul Gilroy's discussion of 'roots and routes', concepts that he argues offer a means to think through and refute a 'purified appeal of either Afrocentrism or the Eurocentrism it struggles to answer', in relation to race and identity construction. See *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [1993] (London: Verso, 2002), p.5.
[12] In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [1993] (London: Verso, 2002), Gilroy puts forth that formulations of modernity have relegated the Black Atlantic and Black diasporic identity to a tangential position, eliding the terror and violence of transatlantic slavery that lay at the heart of its proliferation. Gilroy employs the chronotope of the moving slave ship as representative of the moving roots, constitutive of modernity.

under Dutch ownership as the '*Zorg*'. These journeys, to me, represent a 'black hole' of the Zong massacre's storied history, and an origin story largely ignored. I do not attempt to 'tell' this story, but I do wish to foreground some of the historical details surrounding the ship's voyages as the *Zorg*. By drawing on the abundance of historical detail now accessible through databases and digitized archives, literary scholarship pertaining to the Middle Passage can be informed at a much more material level than was previously possible. I contemplate the erased histories of the ship itself, a material object that demonstrates the ceaseless nature of the transatlantic slave trade.

1) The Voyages of the *Zorg*

Trans-atlantic crossings mark repetitions and revisions that cohere in Parks and others' creative aesthetics. However, this is not simply an academic exercise seeking to map Parks's methodology onto the domain of historical analysis. My conviction that literary scholarship on Middle Passage narratives might do more to integrate material historical details of the Middle Passage arises from the complexities of historical re-presentation. When representations of the Zong massacre's history contemplate the ship's role within a limiting, British framework, they fail to account for the fact that the transatlantic slave trade operated in a global context; further, they erase the reality of collaboration and competition between European powers. The history of the *Zorg*'s voyages under Dutch ownership provides material evidence of these overlooked details.

The *Zorg* embarked on three separate voyages under Dutch ownership, the details of which are discoverable in the Middleburg Commercial Company archive (MCC).[13] The MCC participated in the trade of enslaved Africans from 1732 to 1803.[14] The Zeeland Archives houses the records of at least one hundred MCC voyages in which the names of crewmembers and additional circumstantial details of the voyages are digitized and discoverable. I offer a brief chronology of the *Zorg*'s routes as follows. On its first trip, the *Zorg* departed 15th November 1777 and returned July 30th 1779, voyaging to Guinea, Suriname, and Sint Eustatius. The *Zorg* was one of thirteen Dutch slave ships to sail to Saint Eustatius in the period 1775-1779.[15] The second trip departed October 9th 1779 and returned May 8th 1780, voyaging to Curaçao. The third trip departed for Guinea-America on September 24th 1780 but an English ship, the *HMS Alert*, seized the vessel on 10th February 1781 off the coast of Guinea.

[13] Zeeuws Archief, 'Frigate Care , 1777-1781' in *Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie (MCC), 1720-1889* <https://www.zeeuwsarchief.nl/onderzoek-het-zelf/archief/?mivast=239&mizig=210&miadt=239&micode=20&milang=nl&mizk_alle=zorg&miview=inv2> [accessed 4 August].
[14] Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade 1600-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p.133.
[15] Ibid., p.224. See Table 9.7.

2) The Crew

The vessel's various trans-Atlantic crossings present noteworthy evidence of the *trans*national nature of slavery; the composition of the crew following the vessel's seizure by the British reiterates this fact. We know from previous published works on the Zong massacre that members of the *Zorg* crew remained on-board following the ship's capture by the British HMS *Alert.*[16] The *Alert* was a 100-ton former French slave ship that also captured two further Dutch vessels along the African coast in this same voyage: the *Aurora* and the *Eendracht.*[17] A detail yet to be clarified in current literature concerns the names of those crewmembers who remained on-board the vessel even after its capture. This research question leans towards a historical evidence-based echo of the dynamic of repetition and revision that underpins Parks's aesthetic. Just as the vessel's numerous transatlantic crossings present a basis to remap the traditional historiography of the Zong massacre, the composition of the crewmembers presents an additional indicator of the repetitive and ceaseless nature of these voyages.

The figure below details the crew list for the *Zong*, which, as the muster roll demonstrates, was renamed the *Richard*. The decision to rename the vessel upon reaching Black River, Jamaica in December 1781 was likely an attempt by the Gregson syndicate to distance the ship's future voyages from the legacy of the massacre, not to mention the financial stakes that accompanied the *Zong's* notoriety. The vessel's numerous names generate discontinuities in the historical record. The transition from Zong to Richard marks a deliberate attempt by its owners to bury the name and assert control over the vessel's historical narrative.

[16] James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p.69.
[17] Ibid., p.68.

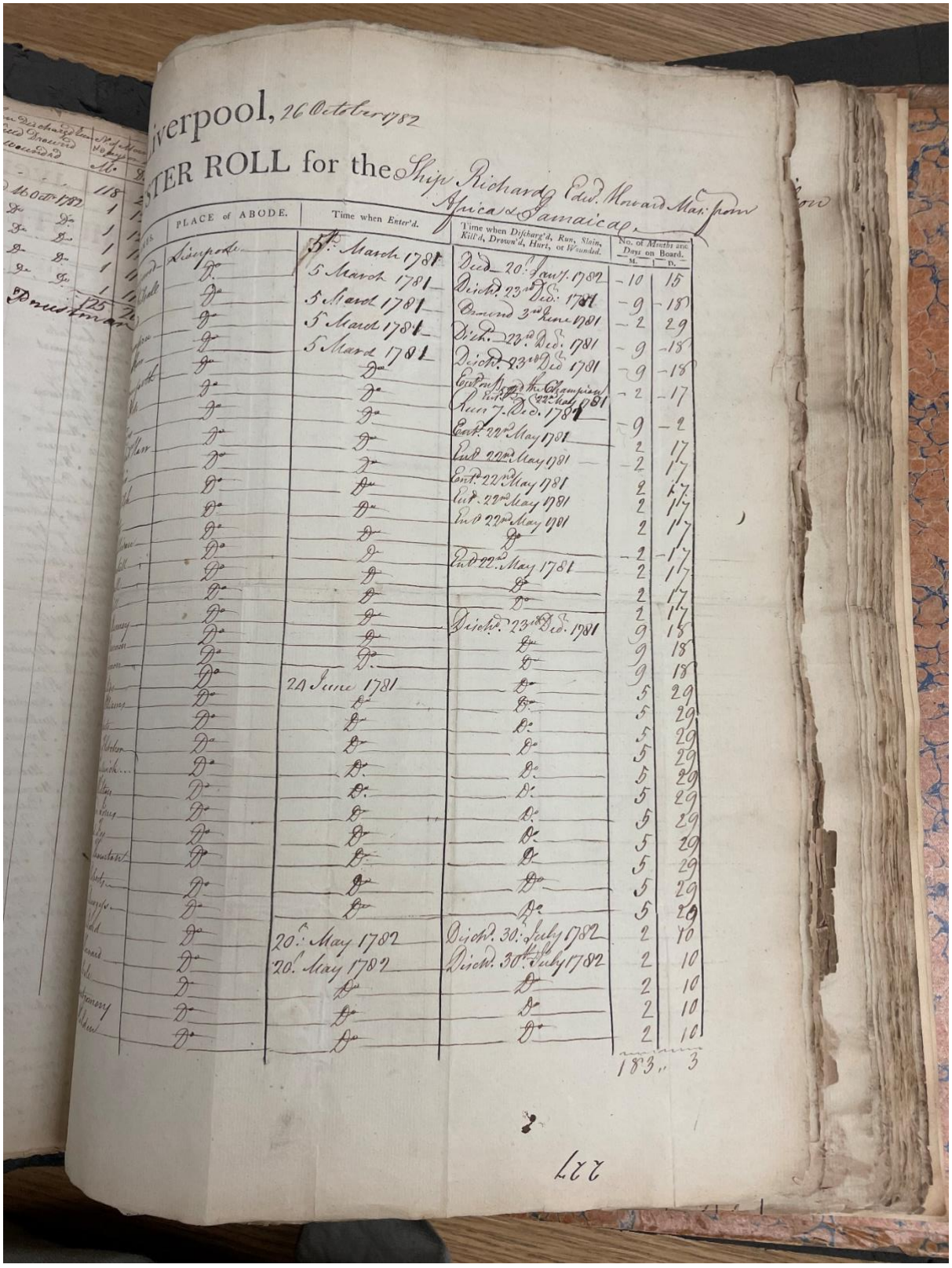
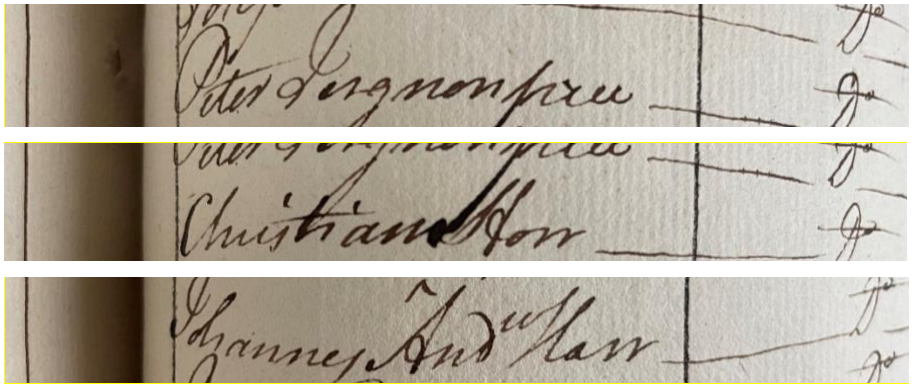


Figure 20 'The Richard' Muster Rolls, Liverpool, 1781– 1782, The National Archives BT98/42



Captain Richard Hanley of *The William* was in the area when the impounded *Zorg* arrived at Cape Coast Castle on the Gold Coast. On behalf of the Gregson syndicate (a group of Liverpool merchants), he purchased the ship and the two hundred-and-forty-four African captives on-board. He transferred twelve crewmembers from *The William*, and a further five crewmembers were employed from presumably British territories along the Gold Coast during the four to five months before the vessel set off for Jamaica. Historian James Walvin identifies in his pivotal work on the Zong massacre that although others dispersed, three of the original crewmembers remained on-board the *Zorg*, which was now renamed the *Zong*.[18] My research has identified these three members as Pieter Germonpree, Christian Horr, and Johannes Andreas Horr (I have highlighted their names above). The muster roll pictured above states their birthplace as Liverpool, the muster roll for the *Zorg* identifies Germonpree as hailing from Terneuzen, and the other two crewmembers (a father and son) from Rotterdam. Pieter Germonpree and Christian Horr remained on the vessel until it arrived at Black River, Jamaica on 23rd December 1781. However, Johannes Andreas Horr, Christian Horr's son, boarded the HMS *Champion* on 22nd May 1781 along with eight others from the *Zong.* This detail tallies with Trevor Burnard's assertion that the *Zong's* departure from the Gold Coast came in June 1781, after it provided the HMS *Champion* with gunpowder; the war ship had mounted an action against Dutch settlement at Commenda.[19] Horr, having voyaged from Europe on a Dutch ship, was suddenly embroiled in an attack against them.

The *Zong* was headed for Jamaica by 18th August 1781; however, the muster roll shows that by this point eleven new crewmembers had joined the voyage.[20] In March 1781, after a crew for the *Zong* had been assembled, Hanley ordered the newly appointed Captain of the *Zong*, Luke Collingwood (formerly the surgeon on *The William*), to remain on the Gold Coast to trade for further African captives. Johannes Andreas Horr was one of nine crewmembers transferred to the HMS *Champion* on 22 May

[18] James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery,* p.69.
[19] Trevor Burnard, 'The Zong, Jamaican Commerce, and the American Revolution', in *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 174-193 (p.177).
[20] Reiterating the instability of the historical record, Burnard states the *Zong* left the Gold Coast in June, whereas James Walvin, in his pivotal work, states the vessel set off on 18th August. See James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery,* p.71.

1781, so Collingwood would have considered the employment of further crewmembers on 24 June 1781 as crucial.

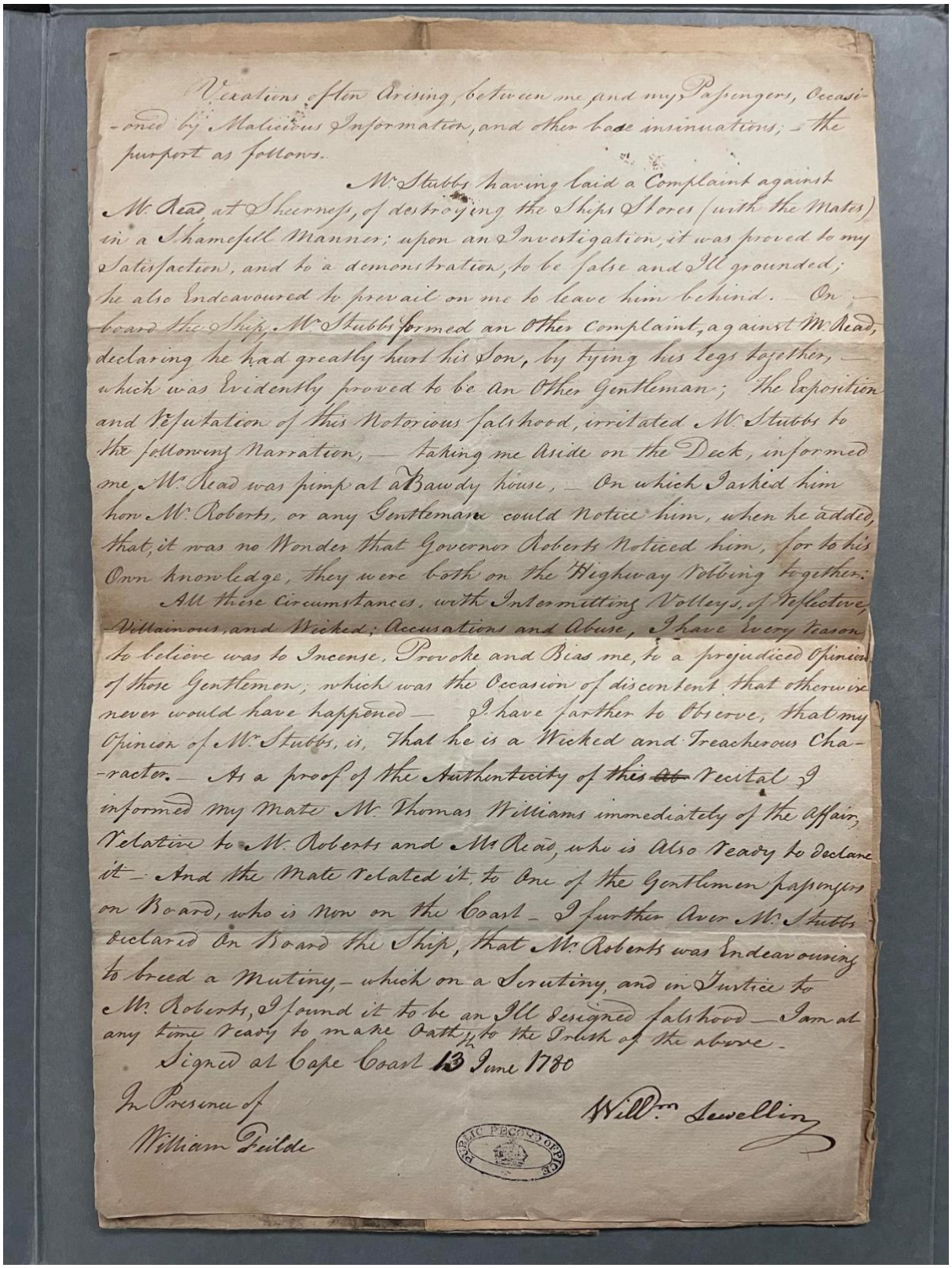
Here, the archive has underscored what is at stake concerning the practice of re-naming. The names of Dutch crewmembers in British maritime records are often anglicised and this creates a barrier to historical authenticity. My efforts to excavate the continuities—the repetitions and revisions—of the *Zong*'s movements by focusing on the members of the crew has thrown up the uncertainty of the archive. Inside the context of Black diaspora histories, this act of excavation again begs the question: 'Is this possible?' The stakes of erasure are all the more apparent when we turn to the records of captive Africans who had new names imposed upon their identity in the Americas, who were reduced to 'cargo' in archives of the Middle Passage. This form of linguistic colonialism proliferates the silences of the historical record. Further, the context of the archive reiterates the significance of re-naming as a critical mode of agency in the African American literary tradition. The absence of captive Africans' names in the archive bores a historical hole that impresses upon the identities of figures in Parks and others' works—like 'Black Man with Watermelon', 'The Young Girl—Sweet', and 'Dead'. The corollaries of Black objecthood inform their nomenclature, therefore conveying (in some cases performing) a legacy of loss, but also, by virtue of their textual creation, a collective resistance.[21] Outside the world of the text, material culture presents another bulwark against the erasure of Black identity, as demonstrated by the discovery of the Sankofa symbol in the African Burial Ground in New York. Against the loss and erasure of the historical abyss, the symbol insinuated possibility, presenting a marker of the buried individual's story and origins.

3) Captain William Llewellin and Passenger Robert Stubbs

The details of the Zong insurance dispute, recorded in the court case *Gregson v Gilbert*, represent one of the few sources available to piece together the happenings on-board the *Zong*. Stubbs was a passenger on the *Zong!* and his witness testimony has shaped historians' understanding of the events of the massacre. However, the letter of complaint addressed to the African Committee below, composed by ship's captain William Llewellin following Robert Stubbs's journey to the Gold Coast, portrays Robert Stubbs as an unreliable narrator. Stubbs voyaged to Anomabu in 1780 following his appointment as governor there (and as vice-governor of Cape Coast Castle). His return journey would be on the *Zong.* Llewellin's perspective impinges on the historical record since Stubbs was the major witness for the court case, and hence the chief source for our inherited understanding of the Zong massacre. The relationship between Llewellin and Stubbs would significantly affect the events leading up to the Zong

[21] Black Man with Watermelon features in Parks's *Last Black Man*; The Young Girl—Sweet features in Bonner's *The Purple Flower*; Macon Dead and his family feature in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

massacre; however, Llewellin's presence in the run up to events has been severely underplayed in re-tellings of the events.



Vexations often Arising, between me and my Passengers, Occasi-oned by Malicious Information, and other base insinuations; the purport as follows.

Mr Stubbs having laid a Complaint against Mr Read at Sheerness, of destroying the Ships Stores (with the Mates) in a Shameful Manner; upon an Investigation, it was proved to my Satisfaction, and to a demonstration, to be false and Ill grounded; he also Endeavoured to prevail on me to leave him behind. — On board the Ship, Mr Stubbs formed an Other Complaint, against Mr Read, declaring he had greatly hurt his Son, by tying his legs together, — which was Evidently proved to be an Other Gentleman; The Exposition and Refutation of this Notorious falshood, irritated Mr Stubbs to the following Narration, — taking me Aside on the Deck, informed me, Mr Read was pimp at a Bawdy house, — On which I asked him how Mr Roberts, or any Gentleman could Notice him, when he added, that it was no Wonder that Governor Roberts Noticed him, for to his Own knowledge, they were both on the Highway Robbing together.

All these Circumstances, with Intermitting Volleys of Defective, Villainous, and Wicked Accusations and Abuse, I have Every Reason to believe was to Incense, Provoke and Bias me, to a prejudiced Opinion of those Gentlemen; which was the Occasion of discontent that otherwise never would have happened — I have farther to Observe, that my Opinion of Mr Stubbs, is, That he is a Wicked and Treacherous Cha-racter. — As a proof of the Authenticity of this ~~&c~~ Recital I informed my Mate Mr Thomas Williams immediately of the Affair, Relative to Mr Roberts and Mr Read, who is Also Ready to declare it — And the Mate related it to One of the Gentlemen Passengers on Board, who is Now on the Coast — I further Aver Mr Stubbs declared On Board the Ship, that Mr Roberts was Endeavouring to breed a Mutiny, — which on a Scrutiny, and in Justice to Mr Roberts, I found it to be an Ill designed falshood — I am at any time Ready to make Oath, to the Truth of the above.

Signed at Cape Coast 13 June 1780

In Presence of

William Feilde

Willm Llewellin

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE

Figure 21 National Archives, London, Miscellaneous Letters to the African Committee, T70/1695

Transcript of Letter from Captain William Llewellin re Robert Stubbs

Vexations often arising between me and my passengers, occasioned by Malicious Information and other '-ase' insinuations; the purport as follows

Mr Stubbs having laid a complaint against Mr Read, at Sheerness, of destroying the Ships Stores (with the mates) in a shameful manner; upon an Investigation, it was proved to my satisfaction, and to a demonstration, to be false and ill grounded; he also endeavoured to prevail on me to leave him behind. On board the ship, Mr Stubbs formed another complaint against Mr Read, declaring he had greatly hurt his son, by tying his legs together - which was evidently proved to be an other gentlemen; the exposition and refutation of this notorious falsehood irritated Mr Stubbs to the following narration , - taking me aside on the Deck, informed me Mr Read was [a] pimp at a Bawdy house , - on which I asked him how Mr Roberts, or any Gentleman could notice him, for to his Own knowledge, they were both on the Highway robbing together. All these circumstances, with intermitting volleys of reflective, villainous, and wicked; accusations and abuse, I have every reason to believe was to incense, provoke and Bias me, to a prejudiced opinion of those gentlemen; which was the occasion of discontent, that otherwise never would have happened - I have further to observe that my opinion of Mr Stubbs is that he is a wicked and treacherous character. As a proof of the authenticity of this recital I informed my mate Mr Thomas Williams immediately of the affair, relative to Mr Roberts and Mr Read, who is also ready to declare it. And the mate related it to one of the Gentlemen passengers on board, who is now on the Coast - I further over[heard] Mr Stubbs declared on board the ship that Mr Roberts was endeavouring to breed a mutiny, which on a scrutiny, and in justice to Mr Roberts, I found it to be an ill designed falsehood - I am at any time ready to make oath to the truth of the above.

Signed at Cape Coast 13 June 1780
In presence of
William Fielde

If Llewellin's reports of Stubbs's conduct are to be trusted, Stubbs emerges a most unreliable source of events on the *Zong.* This letter presents an exposé of sorts that places strain on the key interpretations accompanying chronicles of the massacre. As such, Llewellin emerges as a significant narrative voice. His assertive rhetoric is demonstrable in his repetitive use of 'I' throughout the letter. As captain, Llewellin possessed respectable rank and status and he extends this authority into the tone of this formal

letter of complaint.[22] Llewellin details four different false, elaborate stories on the part of Stubbs in just one voyage. In Llewellin's description of events, the divide between Stubbs and John Roberts (who was also journeying to take up a post as governor on the Gold Coast) is strikingly apparent. The brewing animosity between the two appointed governors glimpsed in Llewellin's report did not subside upon arrival, where the two would continue to quarrel. Llewellin reported during the court case *Gregson v. Gilbert* that the pair would be regularly intoxicated before the afternoon and therefore unable to perform their duties.[23] The Royal African Company before long terminated their posts. The impression Stubbs made on Llewellin would influence the course of events on-board the *Zong*. With Stubbs set to return to England following his disgraced activities as governor at Anomabu, Llewellin refused him the chance to travel back to Bristol on *The Alert.* Llewellin's words merit careful consideration; his account of events during Stubbs's outward voyage to Anomabu places extraordinary pressure on Stubbs's chronicle of the Zong massacre, and in this sense serves as a literary intervention into the historical record.

Although records indicate Llewellin's return voyage in 1781 (for which he denied Stubbs a place as passenger) would have been on the *Alert,* the assumption that Stubbs's outward journey to Anomabu, captained by Llewellin, was on this same vessel, is far less conclusive. Historian Trevor Burnard identifies the *Alert* as the vessel of Stubbs and Llewellin's outward voyage.[24] However, the historical record is replete with ambiguity on this point. Records state that the ship set sail in December 1780. This date does not align with Stubbs's appointment as governor in January of the same year—not to mention Llewellin dates the above letter June 1780. An alternative possibility is discoverable in Volume four of 'Bristol, Africa and the Eighteenth Century Slave Trade to America', in which David Richard indicates that a ship named The *Herl* sailed in 1780, captained by a William Llewellin.[25] Curiously, unlike the hundreds of other voyages detailed in the publication, this record includes no additional description regarding the voyage, nor any details about its investors. Could the *Herl* have transported Robert Stubbs to Cape Coast in 1780? The *Herl* supposedly set sail in December 1780, a date that would need to be inaccurate for this theory to hold true. A third option surfaces in another source that states a William Llewellyn captained a ship called the *Gascoyne* in 1779, travelling from London to Africa.[26] Could Llewellin have transferred from the *Gascoyne* to the *Alert* upon reaching the

[22] Often a captain would invest in voyages and in fact, Llewellin had previously shared a stake in a voyage of a vessel that he captained. See p.45. The record of the *Hector* (which sailed in 1773) indicate that Llewellin was a shareholder, committing one sixteenth of the total investment for this trip.
[23] See James Walvin, *Zong,* p.96.
[24] Trevor Burnard, 'The Zong, Jamaican Commerce, and the American Revolution', in *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 174-193 (p.177).
[25] David Richardson, *Bristol, Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade to America, Vol. 4 The Final Years,* 1770-1807, ed. by David Richardson (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, [n.d.]), p.77. <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/bristolrecordsociety/publications/brs47.pdf> [accessed 11 May 2023] Source of information stated as E 190/1233/2 (Exchequer K.R. Port Books, Public Record Office).
[26] Steve Behrendt, 'The Captains in the British Slave Trade from 1785-1807, *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* (1991), vol. 40, pp.79-140 (p.88).

Gold Coast? Llewellin does note in his letter that his crew departed from Sheerness, Kent, near London, whereas the *Alert* and the *Herl* departed from Bristol; could Stubbs have travelled to his post on the *Gascoyne*? Ultimately, each of these possibilities draws up the inaccuracy of the historical record since not a single date of departure tallies with the timeline of Stubbs's appointment as governor and the date of Llewellin's letter. The dilemma of the vessel aside, one detail we absolutely can discern about this voyage from Llewellin's letter to the African committee is that, whether or not the voyage saw Stubbs construct 'ill designed falsehood[s]' and 'accusations and abuse', the relationship between Llewellin and Stubbs was a strained one. Llewellin appears convinced of Stubbs's unreliable and false character.

Another overlooked aspect of this course of events is William Llewellin's role before the Zong massacre (that an exclusively British narration of events fails to account for). Llewellin captained the *Alert,* the ship that captured the *Zorg* in February 1781. In this regard, his role in the timeline of events leading up to the massacre is major. Llewellin features first in Stubbs's voyage to Anomabu in 1780. He then impounds the *Zorg* in 1781 and leads it to Cape Coast Castle, after which he refuses Stubbs a berth on his return voyage, a decision that led (in part) to Stubbs's presence as passenger on the *Zong.* Two years later, Llewellin reappears to give evidence at the trial *Gregson v. Gilbert.* Llewellin's repeated tangential presence affords insight into the commercial organisation of the slave trade; his activities draw into view the vast network of transatlantic crossings occurring around the *Zong* massacre.

A historical slant gleans the Parksian dimension of repetition and revision ('rep and rev') that Parks recognises and strives to encompass in her theatrical re-presentations: the perpetuation of displacement and loss that characterised the *Zong'*s and other ships' transatlantic crossings. The archive reveals this iterative dimension at the level of crewmembers, captains, and vessels. The "literariness" of the materials contained within it present a mode to navigate the narrativity of the archival record. Literary scholarship that follows a historical-evidence based approach thus presents a means to draw the archive into closer proximity with those creative responses that re-present its silences. As Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley underscores:

> While archives may be a point of departure, scholars must turn to creative methodologies to intuit and imagine narratives of black women's freedom: a freedom that has remained an impossibility in official discourses but that must be invented even where it did not exist in the past, in order that it might exist in the future.[27]

In the case of Parks, Bonner, Morrison and Philip, the historical determinants of their works beckon this linkage of material history with creative counter-narrative. The stories contained within the archive, though shaped by historical silences, present a starting point. A historical evidence-based approach to

[27] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'A Conversation "Overflowing with Memory" On Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's "Water, Shoulders, Into the Black Pacific"', *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 18.2-3 (2012), 249-262 (p.251) <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1472881>

M NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* has opened up the possibilities for interpreting Philip's writing. Added to the sequence of question marks that the storied version of the *Zong* massacre leaves in its wake, a historical evidence-based approach to the vessel's origins, supported by literary-performance methodologies, opens up further possible stories. What happened to Dutch crewmember Johannes Andreas Horr after transferring onto the HMS *Champion*, steered in the direction of a Dutch offensive at Commenda? What did this mean for his relationship with the Christian Horr who remained on the *Zong*? Were they in fact brothers, or perhaps father and son? Of William Llewellin, on which of the numerous vessels that records indicate he captained between 1780 and 1781 did he in fact travel? Were his grievances and scathing characterisation of Robert Stubbs justified, or did he harbour some ulterior motive? These questions are likely answerable through further research. Their stories are important to Philip and others that fathom counter-histories of the Middle Passage insofar as they bring about a more complete re-presentation of the past. Yet the silences of the enslaved Africans forcibly transported on the *Zong*'s numerous voyages continue to contour such questions and remain persistently, frustratingly absent, their names unknowable.

A further complication arising, in part, from the ambiguity of the archive is the torrent of errors that accompany the majority of the Zong massacre's re-tellings. My own research has revealed the role those historical officiators such as the Gregson syndicate and Robert Stubbs had in obscuring the truth of the case. The *Zong*'s origin story—the story of the *Zorg*—serves to reiterate that the voyage and the massacre were by no means exceptional events. It was not uncommon for crew to jettison captive Africans.[28] However, the court case and the implications of the insurance policy projected the incident into historical memory. A turn to origins in this sense inches us closer to the truth, even if the prospect of truth itself has surpassed the realm of possibility. The storied history of the Zong massacre was (and continues to be) absorbed into a narrative of Britain's abolitionist history. Historical officiators circumvented the material reality of the slave trade, instead centring the public support for abolition in the wake of the Zong massacre as a demonstration of the nation's collective moral sensibility. The historical details I have outlined are therefore important in situating representations of the *Zong* in a trans-national framework. The significant role of archives and museums within my performative framework of burial and resurrection has been greater than I originally anticipated, leading me to emphasise the role of material history, alongside theatre and performance, in the work of historical recovery. Historical reckonings taking place now in archives and museums contexts reflect the sector's significance to a grand-scale project of historical reconciliation. We see this in the development of a national slavery museum in the Netherlands; in the work underway at Greenwich Maritime Museum to reinterpret their Atlantic World exhibit to centre the voices of the enslaved; and in emerging plans for

[28] Historian James Walvin writes that the *Zong* underscored 'how badly wrong' a voyage could go. The Zong Case also prompted the public to comprehend the horrors occurring on board slavers. He explains 'But, as far as we know, no one took the kind of decisions which were taken on the *Zong*, and no other merchant resolved to recover their losses in the way chosen by the Gregson syndicate'. See James Walvin, *The Zong*, pp.107-108.

the US's first national slavery museum in Richmond, Virginia. In the UK especially, we see this in mainstream discussions around the re-naming of streets and the toppling of statues that commemorate Britain's colonial past. My key themes of blankness, burial and resurrection, and historical representations that have informed the directions of this study are especially pertinent in the current moment, in attending to the nuances of representing transatlantic slavery and in recognising the continued legacies of slavery—what Saidiya Hartman terms the 'afterlife of slavery'.

On this note, I reflect on the potential of the *literary* archive in a contemporary context. At Princeton University, an exhibition dedicated to Morrison's archive: 'Toni Morrison: Sites of Memory' has launched this spring, offering readers and scholars of Morrison a captivating insight into her creative process. The papers reveal Morrison's preoccupation with the visualisation of her imagined geographies and topographies. These are included in early drafts of her work: for example, a sketch of 124 Bluestone Road featured in *Beloved*, and sketches of the fictional Oklahoma town and Convent in Paradise.[29] The major theme of Morrison's archive, inspired by her 1986 essay, 'Site of Memory' reflects the principle of material remembrance that this project has centred. The spatiality of Morrison's creative praxis is afforded weight in the exhibition: in a section titled 'Therenessness' which draws on Morrison's coinage of this term, Autumn Womack, curator of the exhibition, foregrounds the importance Morrison placed on describing places and patterns of movement in her writing.[30] In a sense, the archive of Morrison's reconstructed, imagined spaces presents a mode of repetition and revision, wherein the theory and fragments of her process invite new meanings and solidify the counter-histories her texts convey. Morrison's legacy is a textual world in and of itself, positing a counter-geography as fecund ground for historical exploration. Is there some intrinsic officiating nature to an archive that lends credence to the imagined worlds of the texts it contains? If so, the Toni Morrison archive and exhibition sees the worlds of her texts come to life once again, through fragments of prose and diagrams detailing character's personal histories.

Taking cue from Parks's 'history plays', a literary and performance perspective has drawn up innovative methodologies to attend to the nuances of representing historical silences. Always in some way engaging with the absences in the historical record, Parks's dramatic works reiterate the significance of theatre and performance to an overarching concern in African American performance with the fashioning of Black subjectivity—one that, according to performance scholar Douglas A. Jones, also animates the freedom movement of Black politics.[31] The ephemerality of performance, likewise, creates a capacity for counter-narratives that disrupt the legibility of the historical past. The

[29] Syreeta McFadden, 'The Exhibit That Reveals Toni Morrison's Obsessions', *The Atlantic* <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2023/04/toni-morrison-princeton-exhibit-archive-papers/673823/> [accessed 30.4.23].
[30] See Princeton University Library's Digital PUL: 'Part Three: "Thereness-ness"' <https://dpul.princeton.edu/tonimorrison/feature/part-3-thereness-ness> [accessed 30.4.23].
[31] Douglas A. Jones, Jr. 'Slavery, Performance, and the Design of African American Theatre' in *Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*, ed. by Harvey Young (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 15-33 (p.20)

Parks plays that this study traced—*Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, The America Play, 365 Days/365 Plays*, and *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*—do away with static, stable versions of the historical record, instead glimpsing a tumultuous, vertiginous narrative of displacement, dispossession, resistance and survival. Such counter-narratives acknowledge history as always present, heterogeneous and importantly, non-linear. Where Parks locates 'unrecorded histories' in her works, she centres the absences of the archive that amalgamate Black presence with Black death. Katherine McKittrick in an essay titled 'Mathematics of Black Life' articulates the bearing of this forged relation between death and blackness at the level of historical narration.

> The tolls of death and violence, housed in the archive, affirm black death. The tolls cast black as impossibly human and provide the conditions through which black history is currently told and studied. The death toll becomes the source.[32]

The ubiquity of Black death in archives of the Middle Passage renders death as an 'origin' (or 'source), and consequently as a foundation for historical resurrection. This historiographical formulation of racial violence permeates recollections and representations of Middle Passage histories, even at the level of citation as McKittrick goes on to highlight.[33] Yet Parks's repetition of death across her works inhibits this straightforward recuperation of what McKittrick calls 'the mathematics of unlivingness'.[34] This is especially true where themes of burial and resurrection are concerned—consider for example the actor as effigy, the playwright as resurrectionist, the stage as archaeological site. Parks explains, 'Through each line of the text I'm rewriting the timeline – creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined'.[35] This is not to say that Parks's drama is reparative. I contend that Parks effects a historical 'revealing', where her works stage erasure, death, violence, and Black objecthood as determinants of the historical frame through which Black life and 'the mathematics of unlivingness' are repeatedly invoked in the present.

Still, Parks maintains there is a 'healing' aspect to her theatre. In a 2021 interview with a journalist, she clarified that 'there's a joy in telling the truth' and 'it's a healing thing'.[36] Possibility lies in literary-performance methodologies that strive towards truth. The editors of the issue in *Social Text,* titled: 'The Question of Recovery: Slavery, Freedom and the Archive', identify in their introduction to this series of essays a generative tension between recovery as an imperative to historical writing and research, and the impossibility of recovery when engaged with archives whose very assembly and

[32] Katherine McKittrick, 'Mathematics Black Life', *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014), 16-28 (p.17) <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2014.11413684>
[33] Ibid., p.17.
[34] Ibid., p.18.
[35] Suzan-Lori Parks, 'Possession', p.5.
[36] Alex Soloski, 'Forty days a slave: Suzan-Lori Parks on her incendiary new play White Noise', *Guardian,* 12 October 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/oct/12/forty-days-slave-suzan-lori-parks-incendiary-new-play-white-noise-black> [accessed 30.4.23].

organisation occlude certain historical subjects.[37] My own project has sought to foreground the role of literature and performance in this 'Question of Recovery' by examining the way that Parks insinuates possibility into her works. Certainly, my repeated returns to the stakes of Black erasure entail an 'imperative'; however, I might best interpret this notion through what I consider Parks's emblem of the imperative of historical recovery. The Parks diagram below, a visual aid featured in her essay, 'Elements of Style', depicts a coffin. The markings surrounding the sketch denote the measurement '6 by 6 by 6', a phrase echoed throughout *Death of the Last Black Man.*[38] The coffin is emblematic of Parks's own 'mathematics of unlivingness'. In *Last Black Man,* Parks calls on language and performance, and maps diagrams and calculations, to re-present the historical erasure at stake in relegating the dead to the past. Such erasure is challenged: in the sankofa bird turning its head backward; in Milkman turning to face the rear in his father's car; in the Us's refusing the White Devil's calls to 'Stay where you are'; in Philip's poetic mourning of the victims of the Zong massacre; in the works of all the Black women writers included in this study pushing up against the limits of representation to ask, 'Is this possible?'

Figure 22 Suzan-Lori Parks, 'from Elements of Style' in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), pp.6-18 (p.13).

[37] Lauren Helton et al., 'The Question of Recovery: An Introduction', *Social Text,* 33.4 (2015), 1-18 (p.1) <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-3315766>
[38] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Death of the Last Black Man,* p.127.

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