

Politics of Melancholic Poiesis:

*Rep and Rev* of the Black Movement in the Works of Suzan-Lori Parks

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This thesis explores the relationship between the works of Suzan-Lori Parks (1963-) and the black movement through the lens of melancholy as theorized by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Parks is recognized as one of the most important playwrights in contemporary American theater, particularly within African American theater. She is acclaimed for innovating the theatrical expression of black history and experience, previously dominated by the idea that black theater is dedicated to nurturing and endorsing the political goals of the black movement, often emphasizing themes of “struggle and uplift.” Parks, however, has been positioned outside of this tradition due to her commitment to experimental and avant-garde aesthetics. This thesis reexamines Parks’s role within the traditional African American theater, focusing on her poignant experiences with traditional black theaters that rejected her works for being unfit for their ideals. This study argues that this denial by the traditional black theater represents an unacknowledged loss in Parks’s works, reflecting an image of a black playwright who fails to produce a traditional theme of “struggle and uplift.” According to Freud, melancholy is a form of grief that remains unrecognized by the grieving subject, persisting over time and characterized by self-reproach. Based on these characteristics, this analysis unfolds the underlying themes of “struggle and uplift” in Parks’s works as manifestations of melancholy, implying a perception of a black playwright unable to reproduce the political ideals of the African American theater tradition.

Connecting Parks’s intricate desire for political commitment with her aesthetics, this study explores the relationship between a mode of melancholic manifestation and Parks’s dramaturgical technique known as *rep and rev*. Short for “repetition and revision,” *rep and rev* is her signature style, which she adapts from jazz aesthetics. In this technique, she repeats particular words, phrases, or

characters from multiple angles, generating variations that challenge a singular view of black history, trauma, and racial identity. While *rep and rev* has predominantly been understood as a means to guarantee her experimentalism and challenge conventional theatrical expression, it can also reveal a melancholic phenomenon in which the playwright's ambiguous and unhealed loss appears repeatedly throughout her works, even if unconsciously. This thesis extends the understanding of *rep and rev* to encompass this melancholic phenomenon, where Parks's texts *repeat and revise* the traditional ethos of "struggle and uplift," underwriting her commitment to traditional African American theater and the political ideals associated with the black movement. The term "politics of melancholic poesis" in the title of this thesis refers to the workings of this melancholic desire that activates political ideals through her artistic endeavors.

In this thesis, the term "black movement" refers to the political ideals central to the causes and goals of the U.S. black movement, including the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter, as well as the content of traditional black theater. By reinterpreting Parks's works as texts that support political activism, this thesis foregrounds how these political concepts are examined and transformed within her texts. Through this analysis, this thesis aims to illuminate the intersection between Parks's aesthetics and the realms of political activism, an area of Parks's scholarship that has been less extensively explored.

The thesis is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on Parks's first major work, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), examining how her avant-garde aesthetics stem from her disillusionment with traditional African American theater. This chapter analyzes the representation of the Middle Passage, demonstrating how the play illustrates a failed version of "struggle and uplift" by repeatedly depicting an image of sleeping as a sign of political numbness. Chapter 2 explores Parks's revision of the concept of "struggle and uplift" through the character of a black impersonator of Abraham Lincoln in *The America Play* (1994). Highlighting the Foundling Father as a symbol of the shortcomings of racial uplift politics from the Civil Rights Movement, this chapter also argues how the play critiques the patriarchal values prevailing in the uplifting politics

of the black movement through the figure of a black digger. Chapter 3 examines the image of an “indecent” black diva as a challenge to the notion of respectability central to the civil rights discourse. Analyzing *Venus* (1996) through the legacies of “blues women,” this chapter highlights how the black female body redefines and expands the political discourse of the black movement. Chapter 4 focuses on *The Red Letter Plays*, which include *In the Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000), both inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s (1804-1864) *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). This chapter explores the significance of the letter as a symbol and how both plays feature a black single mother as an illiterate heroine who tragically kills her own son. Through this analysis, the chapter focuses on how the plays *rep and rev* the concept of legitimate inheritance, idealizing respectable motherhood as a means to “make generations” and transmit black history and legacies. Chapter 5 examines Parks’s recent work, *White Noise* (2019). In this play, melancholy serves as a central theme, reflecting the playwright’s acknowledgment of her own melancholy toward the concept of black solidarity. This chapter concludes that *White Noise* employs this melancholic hope to contribute to the ongoing movement for racial justice.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates how Parks’s texts contain the traditional theme of “struggle and uplift” as a result of her melancholic negotiation with the vision of traditional African American theater and, consequently, with the political discourse of the black movement. By tracing the evolution of the notion of “struggle and uplift” into a broader, more flexible conception, this thesis presents the melancholic *rep and rev* as a bridge between Parks’s aesthetic ambitions and her political commitment, inheriting the legacies of the black movement.