The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking

Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, and Open Access Journal in English

Vol. 5 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2025 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 353-364

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Haunting the Archive: Trauma and Memory in Suzan Lori Parks' *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*

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Article

Keywords: Archive, Repertoire, Trauma, Memory, History, Repetition and Revision

Article History
Received:
June 10, 2025
Revised:
June 25, 2025
Accepted:
July 1, 2025

Abstract

Aim: *Suzan-Lori Parks' The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World (1989) stages the haunting persistence of historical violence and racial erasure through a poetics of ritual, repetition and fragmentation. It would also examine the ways Parks brings into dialogue the chronicled history with the embodied acts of remembering, resisting the erasures of what she calls the "Great Hole of History" and reclaiming the Black presence through live, embodied acts of remembering.*

Methodology and Approach: *For the critical exegesis of the play, theoretical insights have been drawn from the fields of memory studies and trauma studies. Drawing on Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through," the paper argues that Parks' recursive deaths of the Black Man figure embody trauma's compulsive return.*

Outcome: *The attempted analysis of the Parks' play arrives at an understanding that it acts as a medium of storytelling that envisions a space where reiterative reenactments create an ambiance for vivacious negotiations between past, present and future.*

Conclusion and Significance: *By privileging performance over archival history, Parks thus, reclaims the erased Black body and soul from historical invisibility, converting theatrical space into both a site of mourning and a repertoire of cultural survival where memory is not merely represented but continually performed, ensuring the endurance of Black history against the violence of erasure.*

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Suzan-Lori Parks' *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989) stands as one of the most powerful and experimental meditations on race, history, and collective trauma in contemporary American theatre. The play refuses conventional plot or realism; instead, it unfolds as a cyclical, ritualized performance in which the death of the Black Man, a composite figure of myth, memory, and collective identity, is enacted over and over again. Through this repetitive dramaturgy, Parks stages the unending recurrence of racialized violence and the haunting afterlife of slavery in the Black cultural imagination. The play's fractured language, rhythmic repetitions, and ritual gestures create a theatrical space that is simultaneously elegiac and insurgent, where the dead speak and where the memory resists erasure.

Parks' dramaturgy emerges as an aesthetic intervention into what she famously terms "The Great Hole of History," a metaphor for the silencing and exclusion of Black experience from the dominant historical record. Instead of seeking to fill this absence through conventional historiography, Parks creates what she calls "a kind of archaeology," an excavation of the lost voices, gestures, and memories of African American existence. Her writing process of *Repetition and Revision* ("Rep & Rev"), borrowed from the musical logic of jazz and Black vernacular forms, becomes a performative method of re-membering or stitching together the fragments of history that have been violently dismembered. In this sense, the play functions as both a memorial and a resurrection, where performance itself becomes the mode through which history is recovered, reimagined, and kept alive.

This paper situates Parks' play within the intersecting theoretical frameworks of trauma studies and memory studies, drawing particularly on Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through," and Diana Taylor's conceptualization of the "archive" and the "repertoire." It asks: How does Parks transmute collective historical trauma into theatrical form through repetition and ritual? In what ways does her technique of Repetition and Revision create living history enacting the oscillation between "acting out" and "working through?" How does the play embody Taylor's concept of the repertoire, that is, the memory transmitted through embodied performance as

resistance to archival silencing? And finally, how do these theoretical perspectives together reveal Parks's theatre as both a site of mourning and an act of cultural endurance?

Through the frameworks of Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory and Diana Taylor's repertoire of memory, this paper argues that *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* transforms the repetitive performance of Black death into a living ritual of remembrance. Parks' use of *Repetition and Revision* performs twofold function, not only it enacts trauma's compulsive return (acting out) but also creates a possibility of working through it. By privileging performance over archival history, Parks reclaims the erased Black body and soul from historical invisibility, converting theatrical space into both a site of mourning and a repertoire of cultural survival where memory is not merely represented but continually performed, ensuring the endurance of Black history against the violence of erasure.

The discussion section would focus upon Suzan-Lori Parks's distinctive theatrical paraphernalia, especially her adaptation of the jazz-inspired technique of "Repetition and Revision" (or *Rep & Rev*), through which she enables her figures to "experience their situation anew" (Parks 9). This technique, drawn from African American musical traditions, serves as both an aesthetic and philosophical framework that disrupts and subverts the conventional dramatic form. By integrating *Rep & Rev*, Parks not only destabilizes the linear structure of traditional plot progression but also redefines the forward progression. In her theoretical reflections, Parks poses a significant anticipatory question: "How does this Rep & Rev—a literal incorporation of the past—impact on the creation of a theatrical experience?" (Parks 10). This inquiry underscores her intent to transform theatre into a living, breathing encounter with history, one that perforates the boundaries between theory and praxis, memory and performance. Accordingly, this research paper, drawing upon selected theoretical frameworks, seeks to examine how Parks' *Rep & Rev* functions as a mode of working through individual and collective historical traumas, while simultaneously constructing a repertoire of enlivened gestures that revive and sustain cultural memory.

The pervasive death of the Last Black Man as portrayed by Parks depicts an affective temporal continuum interconnecting past, present and future over the trauma of slavery and shared cultural memory. The depiction of omnitemporality, that is, the swift oscillation between different timeframes allows figures in the play to have a nomadic spatio-temporal existence, which in turn allows the playwright to traverse different eras and question the anomalies in major historical narratives. Death is conventionally perceived as a definitive cessation, a full stop marking the culmination of life. However, Suzan-Lori Parks subverts this notion at the very outset of *The Death of the Last Black Man* through the play's uncanny epigraph: "When I die, I won't stay Dead." This paradoxical statement encapsulates Parks' revisionary engagement with trauma and history and, suggesting that death, particularly for the Black subject, is not an end but an ongoing process of remembrance and rearticulation. The play opens with the titular Black Man's declarative gesture, "The black man moves his hands," an image that signifies the persistence of agency and life beyond erasure, the repertoire claiming space through embodiment. Through this act, Parks transforms history from a static archive into a dynamic "repertoire," to borrow Diana Taylor's term, wherein embodied performance reanimates what has been silenced or forgotten. Thus, Parks' dramaturgy challenges the finality of death by rendering it as a site of continuous movement, reclamation, and historical resurrection.

Dominick LaCapra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through" provide a valuable framework for interpreting the patterns of traumatic repetition that animate Suzan-Lori Parks *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. Parks' dramaturgy vividly enacts this tension LaCapra identifies between the compulsive reliving of trauma and the gradual process of its critical engagement. The play's fragmented structure, cyclical repetitions, and disrupted temporality mirror the workings of traumatic memory itself, one that resists narrative closure and continually re-curs in fractured, haunting forms. Each re-enactment of the Black Man's death functions less as a literal demise and more as a symbolic return to the scene of historical violence, suggesting the persistence of historical trauma. This repetition with revision not only signifies the persistence

of loss across generations, the afterlife of slavery and racial oppression that continues to reverberate through time but it also unfurls the dimension for critical engagement. The epigraph, "When I die, I won't stay Dead," which is in sharp contrast with the title establishes this fundamental motif of the play at the very outset. The recurring refrain, "This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world," further materializes what LaCapra terms the "acting out" of trauma: the obsessive return to an originary wound that defies resolution. Yet within Parks' theatrical space, these reiterations also open the possibility of "working through," transforming repetition into a performative gesture of remembrance and resistance, a means of keeping history alive through embodied re-articulation.

The *Repetition and Revision* ("Rep & Rev"), Parks' signature technique inspired by African American oral traditions functions here as a performative mode of both "acting out" and "working through." Like a traumatized subject who re-enacts the past without resolution, Parks' play continually revisits moments of death, silence, and absence. The Black Man dies a recurrent death through lynching, drowning, electrocution, starvation, and strangulation, but none of these deaths lead to final closure, instead, they accumulate, echoing the unending cycles of trauma reiteration and the incessant resilience that defines Black historical consciousness. The cyclical trauma and the resilience shown in the face of it also gets reflected through the perforatory temporal conundrum created by Parks when BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK announces the death of the last black man saying "Yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in the whole entire world" (Parks 102).

This assertion follows fundamental questions concerning the death of the last black man and his afterlife ("Why dieded he huh? Where he gonna go now that he done dieded?") which are then asked repetitively initiating a conscious theatrical conversation on both sides of the stage. LaCapra insists that repetition can also serve as a means of *working through* if it transforms reenactment into recognition. "Through memory-work," he says, "especially the socially engaged memory-work involved in working-through, one is able to distinguish between

past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then that is related to, but not identical with, here and now" (LaCapra 713). In a dialogue with Black Man, Black Woman ambiguously asserts, "Told me tuh do that too. Burry your ring in his hidin spot under thuh porch! That they told me too to do. Didnt have uh ring so I didnt do diddly. They told and told and told: proper instructions for thuh burial proper attire for thuh mournin" (Parks 105). These stylized repetitions not being mere mimicries of pain but critical reconfigurations, provide a way of engaging with and mourning trauma in a ritualized form. And Bigger and Bigger and Bigger in the second panel of the play cyclically repeats an inquiry of freedom, "Will Somebody Take These Straps Off Uh Me Please? I Would Like Tuh Move My Hands" (Parks 111). Rep. and Rev., thus, provides a "critical distance" talked about by LaCapra instead of just indulging into bland reiterations. By translating historical violence into rhythmic language and symbolic gesture, Parks enables a communal witnessing that transforms private grief into collective awareness. The theatrical act itself, therefore, becomes a working through, characters and spectators, drawn into the cycle of repetition, are asked to participate in the process of remembering and re-membering the black Self erased by the archived history. The revisionary nature of repetition where each recurrence is altered, refigured, given new performative texture opens a pathway from acting-out toward a form of working-through by making the audience witness and reconfigure memory rather than simply replay it.

While LaCapra's theory elucidates the temporal dynamics of trauma, Diana Taylor's work in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) illuminates the spatial and corporeal dimensions of memory in Parks' theatre. Diana Taylor argues that the *archive* (documents, monuments) and the *repertoire* (embodied acts: gesture, song, ritual, performance) are distinct but are interlinked in ways cultures remember; for marginalized people the repertoire often carries what the archive erases. Taylor notes that "the archive and the repertoire exist in a constant state of interaction, the tendency has been to banish the repertoire to the past" (Taylor 21). Parks' drama discerns this dialectical relationship by portraying perpetual reciprocal interlinkages between the archive and the repertoire which

instead of sharing a sequential bond, compliment and enrich each other. Like this insight by Taylor elaborating upon the Archive/Repertoire as two distinct but interrelated ways of storing knowledge, Parks also indulges in this exploration by producing a profound dialogue between the two instead of presenting them as polar opposites. In the play, she questions the historiography not by posing the archive and the repertoire as two inimical binaries but as complimentaries leading to a broader episteme. The archival history of African Americans produced second handedly by White Americans had numerous instances of stereotypical tagging where their whole existence was reduced to distinct physical features they had; the nomenclature of Parks' figures in the play not only illuminate these reductive generalizations of history but it also humanizes them through repertorial interventions. As Taylor states "the repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning," by bringing in the "presence," that is, "people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there," being a part of transmission" (Taylor 20).

Parks stages the repertoire, the embodied knowledge not only through food rituals but also by naming the figures through cultural practices; their ambiguous names/identities do not come from historical documents but from foodways, history, river crossings and oral storytelling - Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread, Old Man River Jordan, Queen Then Pharaoh Hatshepsut, Before Columbus and Voice on thuh Tee V. These figures transmit memory via food, chant, movement, gestures and embodied ritual rather through a legible ledger. Black Man with Watermelon who is the eponymous last black man in the whole entire world dies many deaths throughout the play symbolizing the deaths of African Americans in slavery but his wife Black Woman with Fried Drumstick during his resurrections asks him time and again to eat ritualistic home cooked dinner. She wants him to "Eat, just eat, that's what we do when we're alive" (Suzan-Lori Parks in Person 85). These practices embedded in culture where food doesn't appear as prop but as symbolic ritual can be referred as an embodied cultural repertoire passed generationally without the archive. So, these are the non-archival forms of memory where human presence, action and inaction speak for itself.

Parks's assertion "I experienced writing as memory's mother," brings another perspective to this dynamic of archive and repertoire by playing a paradoxical function, first of questioning the central equation of Western epistemology, that is, the "Writing = memory/knowledge" and second of writing as a potent form of resistance by intertwining the silences (rests and spells) within the cadence of subtle body (Language) with the literal human body performing upon the stage (Taylor 24). Memory in the dictum above entails both re-membering as well as forgetting; the repertorial tendency of memory both accepts as well as disrupts by incorporating the revisionistic repetitions. The play repeatedly instructs: "You should write it down and you should hide it under a rock," acknowledging both the fragility of the archive and the futility of depending on it alone (Parks 102). This writing, which is being suggested here as an exercise in remembrance, as "memory's mother," is a physical act of resistance being carved upon the page as well as upon the stage. The command for archival preservation followed by its concealment points to the archival sabotage, the history that hid Black existence.

With respect to the genre of drama and the Archive/Repertoire distinction, it is quite imperative to understand the aspect of performance and its ramifications as propounded and elaborated by Taylor. For Taylor, the repertoire becomes especially crucial for marginalized communities whose histories have been excluded or distorted by the officially chronicled archive. Memory, in such contexts, survives not in written records but in performance, in the rhythms, sounds, and bodily gestures that defy containment by textual history. Parks' drama exemplifies this shift; for her, "Language is a physical act. It's something which involves your entire body— not just your head. Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests—and through digesting creates a performance on stage" (Parks 11). Though the distinction between archive and the repertoire is talked about mostly in terms of "written/oral divide," it is not and cannot be restricted to that as both draw significantly from the wells of verbal as well as non-verbal practices. Parks makes use of foreign sonic utterances such as "do in diddly dip didded thuh drop," (which might mean yes) or the breathy "uh! Or uuh!" resisting containment by mere textual meaning, weaving wavy sensations

with semantic stability. Such "performatic" language drawing from both semantic as well as sensual and somatic illuminate histories otherwise unattainable through the archive alone (Taylor 6). Taylor in her work demonstrates the systematic colonial suppression of performance practices with regards to sixteenth century Amerindians. Drawing on this, it can be asserted that iterative performance, the repeated return to and revision of past moments create what we might call "time slips" wherein linear historical temporality is disrupted and alternative temporal possibilities emerge. Scenes in which the chorus intones "Re-member me" and "Miss me," foreground the play's attempt to convert reenactment into conscious mnemonic labor, these are not archival requests but a performed invocation that depends on voice, repetition, and readers'/spectators' participation (Parks 128).

Moreover, Parks' emphasis on collective performance transforms the spectators into participants in this repertoire. Theatrical space becomes what Taylor might describe as a "scenario of memory," a live, communal event that activates embodied knowledge. Each performance reanimates the silenced archive, making the play not a static text but a living, evolving memorial. The memory of the last black man does not exist in books or monuments; it survives in the speaking, singing, and moving bodies on stage. Parks thereby transforms the theatre into a performative archive, where remembrance is enacted rather than recorded. Thus, multidimensional negotiations as pursued through repeated performances in theatre extract the remnants of mnemonic lives of marginalized groups enhancing the sensibilities of both actors and spectators.

Parks' *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is a quintessential repertoire text as it disrupts the authority of archival history which she designates as the "Great Hole of History" where Black existence is systematically omitted or misrepresented. She privileges embodied performance as an act of remembering as well as re-membering where the protagonist can ponder freely over the epistemology of his existence, "Who gived birth tuh me I wonder" and cogitate upon the imposed attributions he is burdened with (Parks 106). Characters such as *Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread*, *Old Man River Jordan* and *Queen Then Pharaoh*

Hatshepsut do not function as psychological individuals but as cultural repositories of collective memory.

Taylor's distinction between archive and repertoire allows to understand Parks' work as a deliberate reorientation of historiography. Parks reconstructs history through the living repertoire of Black performance as she deliberates in her essay, "Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history… I'm re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history" (Parks 5). The repeated invocations and motions embody what Taylor calls the "ephemeral repertoire," a mode of transmission that is impermanent yet powerfully persistent (Taylor 20). The body becomes the site of memory's survival, carrying forward the traces of enslavement, migration, and cultural endurance. In this way, Parks' play is not a representation of the past but a reenactment of remembrance, where memory lives in rhythm, gesture, and repetition.

When read together, LaCapra and Taylor reveal how *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* merges trauma and memory into a single performative process. LaCapra's "acting out" corresponds to the compulsive repetition of trauma enacted through Parks' fragmented dramaturgy, while Taylor's "repertoire" offers the means by which that repetition becomes a mode of transmission and survival. The play oscillates between these two energies: it relives trauma (the repeated deaths) while simultaneously preserving memory (through ritual performance).

Parks' theatre thus becomes both a psychic site of trauma and a cultural site of remembrance. Her characters perform the pain of historical erasure, acting out the violence of the past yet, through performance, they also work through it, reclaiming agency and continuity. The cyclical structure of the play refuses closure, mirroring the persistence of trauma, but its musical rhythm and communal ritual turn repetition into resistance. As Taylor would argue, performance here is not secondary to history but constitutive of it: a way of doing memory when the archive cannot or will not remember. The analytic power of reading Parks with LaCapra and Taylor is that the two frameworks answer each

other: LaCapra explains *why* repetition (acting out) recurs, and Taylor explains *how* repetition can be preserved/transmitted when the archive fails. In Parks, the repeated death is never merely pathological reproduction; it is ritualized, sung, eaten, and embodied becoming a repertoire in which trauma's recurrence is transformed into communal practice.

Thus, Parks' theatre as a medium of storytelling envisions a space where reiterative reenactments create an ambiance for vivacious negotiations between past, present and future. She stages a double movement: the refusal to let traumatic death be forgotten (acting out made public) and the refusal to let erasure define history (performance as living memory). The epigraph that frames the play's ethics "When I die, I won't stay dead" compresses that double movement: death returns, but the performance ensures the dead "stay" in cultural life through ongoing enactment. The play, therefore, stands as both an elegy and an act of resurrection, where the performance of trauma becomes the means by which the dismembered histories of Black experience are re-membered into cultural consciousness.

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