

**MORTALITY AND THE BLACK
COMMUNITY:
HOW DEATH SURROUNDS
*THE DEATH OF THE LAST BLACK MAN IN
THE WHOLE ENTIRE WORLD***

By Austin Terrell

Suzan-Lori Parks begins her play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, with a quote from modern American poet Bob Kaufman: “When I die / I wont stay / Dead” (Kaufman 101). These cryptic words may be disturbing to a reader, but Parks uses their severity to state a simple truth: every culture deals with the unknown factors of death and dying. Parks weaves the structure of the play, the language, and the characters in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* to bring attention to the event of death. However, the play does not focus necessarily on the physical death of an individual, but on the way the African-American community copes with the reality of death. Ultimately, Parks shows that the community’s response to death helps to enable the continued life of that community’s cultural memory.

This play draws on the resources of traditional African theatre in order to stage a uniquely African-American engagement with the problems of identity and morality. Paul Carter Harrison, in his introduction to *Kuntu Drama*, explains that the African-American theatre culture in the past forty years has changed radically in the wake of Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman*. Harrison believes it is important for the African-American community to see plays other than the “kitchen-sink” dramas like *Raisin in the Sun*, which tend to show themes of African-American suffering and oppression. Harrison, like Baraka, focuses on the idea that plays must move a community in order to be effective, and one of the successful modes in which African-American playwrights can do so is by employing Kuntu principles in drama.

Kuntu is a performance mode in the African Continuum dependent upon a union of voice, movement, and drumming. Kuntu is not a set form or practice of African-American theatre, but its main components of “song, dance, and drum . . . reinforce the vigor of desired revelation” (Harrison 11). Though *Last Black Man* does not directly employ the Kuntu mode, the rhythmic nature of Parks’s dialogue, her use of the jazz motif of repetition and revision, and the ritualistic style of the events within the play are the dominant characteristics of the drama. Thus, Kuntu “song, dance, and drum” becomes language and event in the play. The intent of this analysis is to bring about an understanding of these

“living” values of the play and thereby shed light on their significance within the African-American perspective on death.

The Kuntu principle of music is represented in the play through Parks’s use of the standard jazz technique of repetition and revision. Several lines and monologues are repeated throughout the dialogues between characters, and each repetition revises to comment on the story that was told in the previous panel. In Alisa Solomon’s “Language in *The Last Black Man*,” Parks states: “In such pieces we are not moving from A-B but rather, for example, from A-A-A-B-A. Through such movement, we refigure A” (Solomon 1637). In this particular format, the main theme is played several times with interdependent solos that riff back onto it. In the matter of the narrative, Parks develops a system of panels and choruses reminiscent of Greek theatre. The play’s rhythmic nature and percussive dialect help to create the tempo of *Last Black Man*. The main panels of the play occur between Black Man and Black Woman and recount the stories of death for the black man; however, in the small choral responses of the other characters the concept of “refiguring A” comes through in the text. Hence the enormous concept of death is the “A” that continues to be refigured, remembered, and explored.

The play’s unusual structure of panels and choruses is one way that repetition and revision appear in the play. While it opens with an overture that includes all of the characters, the remainder of the play is broken down into separate segments or panels. Black Man and Black Woman are the only characters in these panels, whereas the entire ensemble enters for each of the choruses. In considering the relevance of an ensemble, Louise Bernard states: “The ‘Chorus’ is also a central presence within the Kuntu drama of the African Continuum. As a collective force, the chorus often personifies the community, both living and ‘dead’” (691). While the chorus is made up of the entire cast, the “dead” characters, such as Queen-then-Pharaoh-Hatshepsut¹ and Old-Man-River-Jordan, help to create the ephemeral nature of the community. All of the characters use their presence in the choruses to add commentary to the panels between Black Man and Black Woman. Parks drew her inspiration for the panels and choruses from the Stations of the Cross: “[I]f you’ve seen those Stations hanging in a church you know that between them hangs—nothing. A blank space. So the Choruses are figuring out blank space between” (Harrison 1632).

The Stations of the Cross are evoked not only in this structural rhythm but also in the play’s main theme of death. The characters must come together to share their thoughts and questions about death. With the characters providing their own insight into the death of the last black man, each chorus section shows how the death affects the community; however, the characters do not always directly mention death in their commentary. Parks uses some commentary to question mortality from the living perspective. Several times a chorus member asks,

“Where he gonna go now that he done dieded?” (*Last Black Man* 111).² These characters’ questions are rhetorical; every time they ask, their answer fails to come.

What is the meaning of this ritual? “Rather than the play, the *event* is the thing, the total impact of environmental rhythms which massage our sensitivities and rouse the spirit,” writes Paul Carter Harrison in the introduction to *Kuntu Drama*. “The *event*, then, becomes the context of reality, a force-field of phenomena which is ritualized” (Harrison 8). Parks does not want to show the death of the last black man in the whole entire world, but to discuss a community’s reaction to the event of death itself. *Last Black Man* presents an event that is repeated through history and is being repeated now through the events of the play. To critics Alice Rayner and Harry Elam, Jr., the event of the death of the last black man is a manner of refiguring history:

Accordingly, the death of each black man who is hung, electrocuted, hunted down, or has fallen out of history counts equally as the death of the last black man. The death of *every* black man in the past inhabits the death of each black man in the present in the sense that history is lived as a present. (451)

Last Black Man focuses on the greater significance of death, an event of losing something larger and more profound than just one man. Parks reveals the ritual nature of a small, African-American onstage community in confronting this situation. The ensemble on stage hears Black Man’s story and comes on in the proceeding chorus to make their comments concerning his death. The ritual of coming together to discuss the death feeds into the musical side of Parks’s work.

The dissonant rhythm of the language in *Last Black Man* is difficult to overlook and sometimes impossible to decode. The intense language creates an emotional tie among the characters as well as a link between the audience and the stage. Such a connection is the precondition for the communal catharsis of grief the play ritualizes. Louise Bernard makes the observation: “In terms of ontology, rhythm . . . is the ‘architecture of being’ and it is through the rhythm of the power of the word (Nommo) that Kuntu drama becomes the theatre of testimony” (690). Nommo creates a focus and meaning that carry words beyond the page and truly make them a part of the action. The driving force behind the dialogue is embodied through the power of the characters and the Nommo. The particular rhythm of the dialogue becomes part of the greater picture of the language as a whole. Parks takes hold of this Nommo power and uses her mastery of language to draw the audience into the ritual. “Parks uses culturally specific language that celebrates the elasticity, power, and poetry of black dialect in a formalized and original structure,” write Rayner and Elam, “one

which offers repetition, but does not repeat” (449). Parks’s language is potentially alienating, though her purpose in fact is to help the audience explore the story with carefully crafted words. In Panel 1, which is titled “Thuh Holy Ghost,” the character Black-Woman-with-Fried-Drumstick recalls the story of Black-Man-with-Watermelon’s death:

They comed for you tuh take you. Tooked you uhway: that they done did. You got uhway. Thuh lights dimmed. Had us uh brownout. You got past that. You comed back. (*Last Black Man* 108)

While the language may seem crude, the meaning is clear: Black-Man-with-Watermelon died, but came back. The slang and nonstandard grammar nevertheless create a coherent message that keeps the audience listening for the whole story. Black Man’s death stories, including the responses of the living to the dead and the dead to the living, are meant to be told in a way that engages the audience, and Parks uses the spiritual power of her language to shine light on the role of mortality within this small ensemble.

The play’s language is reinforced along with musical effects. “Music is one of the most effective modes of unifying the black community,” argues Harrison; “it unveils an emotional potency and spiritual force that is collectively shared” (Harrison 56-57). Several lines and motifs repeat throughout the entire show, and their significance alters with each repetition. For example, throughout the play Black-Man-with-Watermelon repeats his statement “The black man moves his hands.” Within the first scene, we see him revise his own statement several times:

The black man moves. His hands – . . . The black man moves his hands. – He moves his hand round. Back. Back. Back tuh that. . . . Didn’t see you. The black man moves his hands. . . . Thuh black man he move. He move he hans. (*Last Black Man* 101-104)

As these phrases repeat throughout the scene, the audience learns them and hears their changes. By inserting small changes and nuances to the language, Parks is able to draw attention to the theme that that one particular character revises.

Another key example is spoken by the character Yes-and-Greens-Black-Eyed-Peas-Cornbread: “You should write that down and you should hide it under a rock. This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world” (*Last Black Man* 102). The repetition of this particular line may just seem like an opportunity for Parks to engrain the name of her play—which she arrived at after waking up from a nap—into the audience’s brains, but by revising it and repeating it throughout the play, the audience is able to discern a much deeper meaning:

The phrase . . . which is repeated and revised throughout the course of the play, speaks not only to the urgency of History and the need to reclaim experiences and traditions, but also to the complex creative process of transcribing the oral (thought, idea) into the scribal and then into the theatrical space of performance . . . (Bernard 690)

Bernard proves that the repetition of one line can communicate a theme to the audience and riff on it in such a way that the audience gains perspective that may have otherwise proved impossible. The connection of jazz to African-American culture is yet another way that Parks uses her ingenuity to weave together this play. This device of “rep and rev” may not be music that is played or written in measures, but the nature of the speech shows Parks’s adherence to the musical form. Like the play’s other structural and linguistic features, the use of musical techniques creates a textured theatrical experience that underscores the paradox that death is both universal and unique: every individual death is both a repetition and a revision of every other.

Finally, the play’s unusual method of characterization becomes a means for Parks to illuminate the unity of the community’s responses to death. Despite the unorthodox character names, the outstanding array of individuals in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is no chance amalgamation of random names and pseudonyms. In fact, calling these creations “characters” does not coincide with the original thought that Parks had in mind. In an interview with Lee Jacobus, Suzan-Lori Parks makes a point of saying that she had a specific idea for the roles within the play: “The most important things about the figures is that they are *figures* and not *characters*. They are *signs* of something and not people just like people we know” (Jacobus 1633). Since Parks is so adamant in making this point, the discussion of these characters must be handled in a manner befitting their metaphysical state. That is, their powers of speech, rhythm, and voice must be understood as having exceptional power beyond that of a normal human “character.” In *Last Black Man*, characters are nothing but spiritual potency, and they are brought about on stage to comment on the event in front of them.

Parks adds symbolism by giving historical and mythical names to her characters: Ham (one of the sons of Noah), Before-Columbus, and Queen-then-Pharaoh-Hatshepsut. Each figure contributes an individual spirit; when combined with the others, the effect is to depict a racial history. The character of Ham, for example, shows the beginning of a long line of racial injustice. “Through the figure Ham,” note Rayner and Elam, “Parks exposes the racial injustices and distortions present in a widely disseminated religious myth” (454). The other characters’

experiences contribute depth and breadth to the ensemble, coming together to reveal more about the death of the last black man.

Parks also integrates black folklore into the play through characters such as Black-Man-with-Watermelon and Black-Woman-with-Fried-Drumstick. Rayner and Elam point out the importance of the several characters names related to “soul food,” such as Lots-of-Grease-and-Lots-of-Pork, Black-Man-with-Watermelon, and Black-Woman-with-Fried-Drumstick to bring the audience into her created world of extremes (453). The combination of all these characters in the world of the play creates a broad historical timeline that Parks draws out through the progression of her play. Parks creates a world in which the metaphysical nature of these characters is acceptable on stage. These characters, as epic types, set *Last Black Man* in a world that lends itself to the storytelling nature of Parks’s work. Furthermore, the folkloric nature of the characters and their respective actions provide necessary cultural ties that, ultimately, allow the audience to understand better the effects of death on this specific community.

The death of the last black man, the play’s overarching theme, brings these characters together and unites them in a common purpose. Each member of the community steps forward and delivers his or her piece of history to the audience and subsequently turns the ensemble into the “body” of the last black man. The death is not meant to symbolize that of one solitary man, but rather the fear of death within the black community and in their history. The community of characters and spirits comes together for this event, which acts to bind them all together. As Rayner and Elam comment, “The play, then, is more than a ‘portrayal’ or imitation of a burial ceremony: it is the ceremony itself, by which the Black Man figure . . . is finally given his funeral rites, his honor, respect, and a re-membered body” (457). These characters have become the embodiment of the entire black community, and their final burial of the last black man is a plea to remember the past, to remember the deaths that happened before. In one of the final moments of the play, Yes-and-Greens-Black-Eyed-Peas-Cornbread exhorts the audience, “It will be for us but you will mention them from time to time so that in the future when they come along they’ll know why they exist” (*Last Black Man* 131). Through her actions and words on stage, this character underscores the value of life and makes sure that the audience knows that this play does not intend to celebrate death but instead depicts the strength of life within a community. The characters have come to their final resting place: the minds of those who read and see this play.

Since the enormous concept of life in its broadest sense is difficult to translate to a stage, theatre creates rituals that attempt to embody life. The structure and musical nature of the language drives the figures in the play to become larger than life, and the

story of death that they tell ensures their survival. Parks has created a play that not only addresses the universal issue of death, but reveals the capability of death to transcend time, through the history of an entire race. Throughout *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Suzan-Lori Parks combines the forces of human emotion and physical presence to reveal the effect of death within the African-American community. At the play's end, the audience is left with their own identification to the story and a charge to make sure that they remember this death—and this life.

NOTES

¹ Because of the unusual character names used in this play, the editors have chosen to hyphenate character names for the sake of readability.

² Since *The Last Black Man* has no acts, scenes, or line numbers, quotations from the play are cited by page number.

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