

## A Study of Womanism in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*

Mehdi Ghasemi<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

---

I approach Suzan-Lori Parks's play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* from the perspectives of womanism. I show how Parks deemphasizes the male|female dichotomy in order to create a convincing portrayal of African American women who can function as discursive and trustworthy partners for their men in the movement. I also argue that this approach helps the playwright to show how the trust of African American men in their women and their cooperation can help them build a strong nation together and transcend their race. To this end, I will draw upon a range of theories of womanism to briefly discuss the controversies surrounding the definition of womanism and show how the play under study to a large extent coheres to one of the propositions that Alice Walker has provided of womanism to utter the concerns of African American women and at the same time foster reconciliation, unity and solidarity between them and their men.

---

**Keywords:** womanism, Suzan-Lori Parks, drama, gender differences, male|female dichotomy, solidarity, unity

### Introduction

Suzan-Lori Parks's 1990 play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, has garnered critical acclaim, acknowledged even as a play with "astonishing power" (Kelly 1992) to decline the stereotypes (Geis 2008) and to reconfigure history (Rayner & Elam, Jr. 1994). Critics have also acclaimed the astonishing power of the play due to its "musicality of language" (Bernard 1997) and its "body language" (Louis 2001) as well as the richness of its poetic language (Solomon 2001).

Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam, Jr. write that *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is "a ghost story with a celebratory ending" in which the ghost of Black Man With Watermelon keeps reappearing and haunts his wife, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick. The wife offers him food, the quintessential symbol of nurturing, and attempts to justify the returns of her husband's ghost. She is profoundly haunted by the repeated deaths and reappearances of her husband. Black Man With Watermelon, however, has truly died but has not come to rest as he still has an unfinished business (Rayner & Elam 1994, 449). I claim that *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is the story of a black man, typically representing all dead black men and women, who has experienced multiple violent recurring deaths – hunted, hanged, jettisoned, drowned, fallen off from 23 floors, lynched, electrocuted – almost day in day out. However, owing to his commitment to narrate his story, "histree" and |or history, he has always been resurrected and "comed back" to his nurturing wife. This time he also manages to escape lynching in the eleventh hour with the tree branch and the rope round his neck to finish an "unfinished business," and this last point is where I especially agree with Rayner and Elam, Jr. His unfinished business is to urge his wife, representing all living black women and men, to write down his narratives, thinking of her as a trustworthy and discursive partner in the movement.

In the pages that follow, I approach Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* from the perspectives of womanism. I show how Parks deemphasizes the male|female dichotomy and gender differences so as to create a convincing portrayal of African American women who can function as intellectual and trustworthy partners for their men in the movement. I also argue that this approach helps the playwright to show how the trust of African American men in their women and their cooperation can help them achieve unity and solidarity to

---

<sup>1</sup>Postdoctoral research fellow in the Plural Research Group, Faculty of Communication Sciences, University of Tampere, Finland  
[mehdi.ghasemi@staff.uta.fi](mailto:mehdi.ghasemi@staff.uta.fi)

build a strong nation together and transcend their race. To this end, I will draw upon a range of theories of womanism to briefly discuss the controversies surrounding the definition of womanism and show how the play under study to a large extent coheres to one of the propositions that Alice Walker has provided of womanism to utter the concerns of African American women and at the same time foster reconciliation, unity and solidarity between them and their men.

### Reading Parks's Play like a Womanist

Womanism is a social change perspective which has generated debates and controversies. In her collection of essays, entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*, Alice Walker, who is credited for the term, has offered varied definitions of the concept of womanism under four entries – each of which includes different paradigms – that altogether make the term more debatable and controversial. As a result of the different paradigms that womanists, including Walker, have invested in it, there exists no single constitutive definition for womanism, and accordingly, there are varying interpretations on what the concept means. More broadly, womanism seeks to subvert racial and gender oppression and inequality for all people. To Walker, a womanist is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker 1983, xi). However, at its core, womanism is a perspective based upon the experiences of black women, and accordingly, a number of black feminists perceive a little difference between black feminism and womanism, since they both struggle against racism and sexism imposed on black women and support a common agenda of black women's self-definition and self-valuation. However, not all critics agree on considering the two terms interchangeable. To narrow down the wide scope of womanism in this essay, I briefly outline the features of womanism that are appropriate to my reading of Parks's play.

A part of Walker's construction of womanism is an effort to acknowledge the contribution of African American women to society which can provide them with opportunities to prove their capabilities for the attainment of equality in society. By the same token, Walker is mostly concerned with issues, amongst them, of fortifying relationships between African American men and women, since their integrity and solidarity would bring them survival and change their future for better. Having been in the same boat, African American men and women are invited to cooperate together against the racial oppression and inequality that have affected their lives. Thus, she does not exclude men, because without a commitment to unity and solidarity, the movement might be doomed to failure. Rather, she calls for building a nonsexist cooperation among African Americans, regardless of their genders, and it is through this cooperation that African Americans manage to challenge the corrosive system of dominance, exploitation and sexploitation.

Affirming this point, Patricia Hill Collins notes, “Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender-oppression without attacking black men” (Hill Collins 2000, 11). She then quotes Angela Davis stating: “We must strive to ‘lift as we climb’. . . . We climb in such a way as to guarantee that all of our sisters and brothers, regardless of social class, and indeed all of our brothers climb with us. This must be the essential dynamic of our quest for power” (Ibid., 219). As a result of African American women's and men's cooperation, womanism becomes a process of self-conscious struggle that requires the unity of African American men and women to seek for liberation of the entire race from negative portrayals and derogatory stereotypes and confront race and gender oppressions befallen African American communities, and my reading of Parks's play is largely grounded on this definition of womanism.

A number of Suzan-Lori Parks's plays, amongst them *Venus*, *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*, to a great extent deal with the experience of black women. In those plays, Parks depicts some of the concerns of black women originating from race, class and gender intersectionality that have created negative images for them and have diminished their chances for empowerment and equity in society. In *Fucking A*, in addition to drawing upon the race, class and gender intersectionality which has negatively affected the lives of black women, Parks manifests an affinity between Hester and Canary Mary, which recalls one of Walker's definitions of womanism: “A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually” (Walker 1983, xi). Parks shows how these two women love each other nonsexually and support each other financially, physically and mentally at all times. Furthermore, in the same play the mutual affection between Hester and The Butcher signifies another definition that Walker offers for the term: “Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually” (Ibid.). In *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Parks, however, to a large extent deemphasizes the binary opposition of male|female dichotomy and gender differences so as to create unity and solidarity among her figures to follow their common ends. Hence, while implicitly drawing on the miseries of African American women, Parks refuses to exclude men and their concerns, and thus, she invites African American women and men to cooperate in order to challenge the oppression befallen African American communities and to attain empowerment.

To this end, Parks employs two black figures at the center of her *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*: Black Man With Watermelon and his wife, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick. Throughout the play, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick clearly shows her affection and attention toward her husband. For instance, upon Black Man With Watermelon's return, she kindly attempts to stimulate his appetite and to feed him. She repeatedly asks her husband questions like: "Hen. Hen?" "How uhbout uh hen leg?" or "Just ate?" (Parks 1995, 105–109). Then, she asks her husband to have cold compress, "Cold compress then some hen. Lean back. You comed back. Lean back" (Ibid., 105). In another instance, when Black Man With Watermelon returns home with the tree branch and the rope tied round his neck, it is the Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, who shows empathy saying, "Your days work aint like any others day work; you bring your tree branch home. Let me loosen thuh tie let me loosen thuh neck-lace let me loosen up thuh noose that stringed him up let me leave thuh tree branch be. Let me rub your wrists" (Ibid., 118). As a matter of fact, in the first part of the play, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick is cast as a nursing wife, whose only concern is to feed Black Man With Watermelon according to their traditional customs or to treat him physically. She acts as a mother-like figure, loving, nursing, nurturing, feeding and fostering Black Man With Watermelon, recalling Helene Cixous's view: "In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation" (Cixous 1976, 882).

However, later in the play, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick's main concern is not to serve her husband or attend his physical needs. She sits on the porch next to Black Man With Watermelon and listens attentively to his narratives every time he returns. In Panel V, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick then attempts to assure her husband that "[s]omethinsturnin," inspiring high hopes that "[s]pring-time" is close, and "[t]his could go on forever" (Parks 1995, 125–127). She also notifies her husband of the ways she had engaged herself and stepped in the resistance process during his absence. As she says in Panel I:

Coming for you. Came for you: That they done did. Comin for tuh take you. Told me tuh pack up your clothes. Told me tuh cut my bed in 2 from double tuh single. Cut off thuh bed-foot where your feets had rested. 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 didn't do diddly. They told and told and told: proper instructions for thuh burial proper attire for thuh mournin. They told and told and told: I didnt do squat. Awe on that. You comed back. You got uhway. Knew you would. (Ibid., 105)

As read in this excerpt, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick refuses to act according to the prescribed orders and disciplines of white masters and takes different measures to express her protest against her husband's execution, simply because she is well-aware that following their instructions would result in their mutual breakup and disunity. These are the signs proving that she is fully devoted, reliable and trustworthy to accomplish the assigned missions. It is worth noting that Black Man With Watermelon also is a committed companion and an attached man to his wife. He returns directly to his wife to narrate his histories|stories after his resurrections during the course of the play and no one else. This implies that he thinks of his wife as a trustworthy figure and firmly believes that his survival is dependent on the survival of his wife, and this is in parallel with womanist standpoint which requires African American men's and women's cooperation in their struggles against racism and sexism, the struggle that must be undertaken with the help of men. Having been in the same boat, Black Man With Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick should cooperate together against the racial oppression and inequality that have affected their lives.

In fact, the repeated deaths and reappearances have transformed Black Man With Watermelon, and as the play moves forward, he refuses to demand his wife assume subservient roles, including taking care of household needs, cooking, feeding and nursing the family members. Rather, he trusts and mobilizes his wife to write down his narratives of oppression and resistance, and indeed, he hands off the baton of their history to her in the identity relay race, asking her to continue the rest of the way. And if she refuses, they would all, regardless of their genders, remain within passive subordinate roles and experience death in life hereafter, too. Consequently, Black Man With Watermelon strongly urges his wife to "write down," "hide," and "carve" his narratives. He feels his "text was writ in water" (Ibid., 116). "Water," as I would argue, alludes to various rivers and seas known in African American history, including the Middle Passage, the Combahee River and the Ohio River, and there is the possibility of removing their history. If his histories|stories are not recorded, future generations will not learn about them. "Thus, Black Man With Watermelon's request has significance in restoring the figures' racial identity in American history, simply because being forgotten means being dead and erased from history" (Ghasemi 2015, 163–164). From a different perspective,

Black Man With Watermelon's words allude to the words engraved on John Keats's tombstone, reading "This Grave contains all that was Mortal, of a YOUNG ENGLISH POET, who on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his heart, at the Malicious Power of his Enemies, Desired these Words to be engraven on his Tomb Stone: Here lies One whose name was writ in Water."

These words signify the binary opposition of water vs. stone or mortality vs. immortality, showing that Keats's texts were writ on water if he had not written them down, but now that he has inscribed them, his body might be mortal but his mind is writ indeed on stone. Seen in this light, the unwritten history and literature of people who have not been in power have always been in danger of extinction or cooptation; thus, writing their history and story down, which signifies presence, identity and wisdom, helps African Americans keep their oral traditions alive and preserve their history and culture, prove their humanity which was in doubt and empower themselves. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes: "Without writing, there could exist no repeatable sign of the workings of reason, of mind; without memory or mind, there could exist no history; without history, there could exist no humanity" (Gates, Jr. 1989, 21). I argue that Black Man With Watermelon and his collective memories are writ in water if Black Woman With Fried Drumstick fails to write them down, and accordingly, the wife herself, due to passivity, experiences death in life, too, and if she succeeds, those memories are writ in stone. Based on this argument, Parks is negotiating postmortem mortality and immortality with African Americans.

As the play proceeds, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick comes to terms with her husband's request which is repeated and revised fourteen times throughout the play – to "write down" their past, story and history and "hide it under a rock" or "carve it out of a rock." Other figures also urge her to follow up Black Man With Watermelon's incessant request. This request denotes not only the urgency of history and the need to reclaim experiences and traditions, but also the complex creative process of transcribing the oral (thought and idea) into the scribal. As Black Man With Watermelon says: "Thuh tongue itself burns itself" (Parks 1995, 130), implying that the oral language and memories are not stable, and if they are to remain in history, they have to write themselves, which is the quest to move from silence to language, from unmarkedness to markedness, from invisibility to visibility and from absence to presence. In this light, writing is an attempt to capture in print the history of African Americans whose essence is in their voices and memories. Here, Parks manifests a sense of "paranoia," a feeling that African Americans' history narratives are in hazard and need to be reexamined and recorded, which helps new identity to develop for them. According to Gates, Jr., "There would be no presence of African [American]s in history without this power of representation" (Gates, Jr. 1989, 104). This power of representation through writing down and transferring their knowledges is a way to attain identity, power and social status.

Then, variants of the leitmotif sentence "You should write that down and you should hide it under uh rock" recur in the play; each repetition contains the trace of the form and context of its previous use. The living organism then experiences a forward progression each time it is repeated and revised, and finally by the end of the play it changes to "carve it out of a rock" (Parks 1995, 131). It seems that after stressing the importance of writing and urging African Americans to write down their history, Parks advises them to find some ways for their protection.

To signify the importance of protecting their history, Parks employs Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, who represents historically the African ancestors of African Americans in their collective memories and experiences. She alludes to Hatshepsut, the woman pharaoh in ancient Egypt, who ruled Egypt for about twenty years during the eighteenth dynasty, accomplishing some feats. But after descending from the throne, her stepson and nephew destroyed her achievements bearing her image or her name. In Panel II, she introduces herself and retells her experience: "And I am Sheba . . . . My son erased his mothers mark . . . . I left my marks on all I made" (Ibid., 116). Parks summons her from ancient history to appear on the stage at the present time, retelling her own histories | stories in order to suggest that the articulation of one's presence in history is quintessential, since it means being remembered, and through remembrance, one gains and maintains one's racial subjectivity in history. Thus, Parks implies that African Americans' history like Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut's feats would be at stake if they fail to record it.

Arguably, the preservation of the deceased figures through their reappearances in this play provides the ground for them to introduce themselves and retell their narratives which are inscribed in the playscript and result in their preservation. It is worth noting that Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut in Overture believes: "We are too young to see. Let them see it for you. We are too young to rule. Let them rule it for you. We are too young to have. Let them have it for you. You are too young to write. Let them – let them. Do it" (Ibid., 104). As it is deduced from the quote, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut is suffering from self-distrust and self-diffidence, but as she moves forward (at the very end of the quote), she becomes hesitant, changes her mind and then asks the other figures to do it themselves.

This is an example of passive-to-active transition. This is why all the choral figures, who represent oppressed black people, including Black Man With Watermelon, incessantly demand Black Woman With Fried Drumstick to “write that [story] down and hide it under uh rock” (Ibid., 111). Consequently, in the very end of the play, the figures unanimously repeat “Hold it” for seven times, which, as Jeanette R. Malkin writes, “transmutes into ‘Told it’: a declaration that Parks has herself created memory through its performance – its telling – in the present” (Malkin 1999, 174).

In this vein, the play sends a plain message: write or die, publish or perish, use it or lose it. Thus, if the African Americans use the opportunity to write and publish, this is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world, meaning no other black man dies. As Maria Stewart writes: “We have never had an opportunity of displaying our talents; therefore the world thinks we know nothing. . . . Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? . . . Sue for your rights and privileges . . . we shall certainly die if you do not” (Stewart 1995, 29). Essentially, “death here connotes passivity, amnesia and the waning of identity, and writing initiates resurrection and salvation from oblivion” (Ghasemi 2015, 164). And if they refuse to write, publish and use the opportunity, this is in fact the death of the last black man in the whole entire world, meaning no other black man would survive (Ibid.).

The oscillation between mortality and immortality is inferred from Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork’s words when s|he says: “This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world” to which Prunes and Prisms responds: “Not yet–” (Parks 1995, 110). Prunes and Prisms’s response inspires hope that they still have the possibility to revive Black Man With Watermelon. Death as an entity in this play is manifested more as a psychological dread and trauma than a physical experience. I here argue that Parks in this play gives primacy to the “body of text” rather than “male or female body” and dramatizes the African American women as men’s partners in the process of resistance. This means trusting and empowering black women and expanding their roles, which results in the empowerment of the movement in which Black women as an important source of survival can play a key part in sustaining thrust toward empowerment. In other words, Parks’s refusal to stress the gender inequality between African American men and women, notably seen in the relationship between Black Man With Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, is an attempt to emphasize the unity of gender and race and to dismiss the bifurcation and fractionalization, which is tantamount to the womanist approach. In this regard, Hill Collins notes:

Black solidarity was a vital element of African American politics. In social conditions where racial violence targeted toward Black women and men was routinely interwoven into all aspects of American society, Black solidarity was not a luxury. It was essential. Sticking together and remaining unified often meant the difference between survival and death. (Hill Collins 2006, 128)

However, working within the assumptions of gender and race complementarity does not mean to turn a blind eye to differences between black men and women but to minimize the effects of gender inequality and direct their energy toward more significant ends. Thus, considering the question of survival for African American community from womanist perspectives, gender difference is of lesser importance in this play, while working together to establish and strengthen a bond of solidarity based on mutual concern is of higher significance. This bond of solidarity is clearly perceived in Black Woman With Fried Drumstick’s unquestioned support of Black Man With Watermelon, and Parks clearly demonstrates the key role of the African American women in the creation of this bond, which – as Black Woman With Fried Drumstick says in Final Chorus – can turn the page (Parks 1995, 128).

I argue that the tight bond between the couple which makes them staunch comrades is necessary for following up their common ends: their own survival, the survival of their history, and the survival of their race and next generations. In order for Black Man With Watermelon to be strong, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick has to be strong. In other words, building a strong nation able to cut off the yokes of oppression requires the involvement of every man and woman. As a result, they should stand shoulder to shoulder in every phase of the struggle; for without the cooperation the struggle fails. According to bell hooks, “Collectively we can . . . create life sustaining visions of a reconstructed black masculinity that can provide black men ways to save their lives and the lives of their brothers and sisters in struggle” (hooks 1992, 113).

In such a climate, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* displays a collective effort to interpret “divide and conquer” as “define and empower,” which is in line with womanist goals, too. In this climate, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick transforms into the collective unconscious of African Americans, regardless of her gender, and finds a discursive intellectual position in the play which transforms her from a flat figure to a round dynamic one as did the hegemonic perception of the universe change from flat to round – as the play ironically

manifests. Accordingly, she is engaged in a process of transformation through refusing to assume a fixed passive identity. This position soothes Black Man With Watermelon, who is concerned about the history and memory of their race. She survives and thus can save the experience of her husband. As the play reveals, Black Man With Watermelon is unable to move his hands, but Black Woman With Fried Drumstick can; thus, she acts as the hands of Black Man With Watermelon (Parks 1995, 109), and as a result, he is no longer tied. They know that it would be practically hard to survive if they fail to engage in meaningful cooperation on some level.

I argue that the title of the play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, which is repeated from the beginning to the end of the play, has one plain message: if African Americans attain salvation, no other African American in the whole entire world will die, and if they fail, no African American will be saved, and this will be the last black man and his last return. Thus, to think of Black Man With Watermelon's death as the death of the last black man requires making up for the sustained loss, the loss of a written history, and through writing history, they succeed to bring to light and coherence that they have always been and continue to be in history. In this way, her role is as important as that of Black Man With Watermelon. Hence, Parks firstly elaborates on the passive mother-like role of African American women both in their personal and social lives and secondly shows them restoring their self-confidence, socializing and acting responsibly as equal active partners in the movement toward freedom who fight against racial oppression and "those in power" who are determined "to keep the powerless in their place" (hooks 1992, 54). This approach helps Parks to create solidarity between African American men and women and foreground the key roles of African American women in racial uplift. Thus, I totally agree with Yvette Louis, who believes that Black Woman With Fried Drumstick does not merely appear as a mother-like figure (Louis 2001, 143).

In addition, Parks rebuts black male phallocentrism, which, as hooks critically describes, "constructs a portrait of woman as immoral, simultaneously suggesting that she is irrational and incapable of reason. Therefore, there is no need for black men to listen to women or to assume that women have knowledge to share" (hooks 1992, 103). According to hooks, "In their private lives, black male activists and political leaders demanded their wives assume subordinate roles" (Ibid.). However, Black Man With Watermelon demands his wife to assume an active discursive role in the movement which can be seen as an attempt "to cultivate Black female leadership and stop using Black women for domestic duties" (Hill Collins 2006, 166). In this regard, Louis writes that "Parks construes discursivity for Black Woman that amplifies her sphere of influence and constructs a black female subjectivity that becomes the site for reconstructing and recuperating the black body and identity of Black Man" (Louis 2001, 143). In addition to challenging the negative stereotypes against women as emotional beings, the creation of Black Woman With Fried Drumstick as a discursive figure helps her pursue the goals of movement in a sensible mode. I argue that challenging the negative stereotypes and liberation of African American women from those stereotypes is in line with womanism, since it is an effort to position African American women in history and at the same time rescue them from the negative images that have masked them in American society.

But this is not the whole story. From another standpoint, one of hooks's concerns is clearly perceived in this play when she writes: "historiographers who study black people's history tend to minimize the oppression of black females and concentrate their attention on black men. Despite the fact that black women are victims of sexist and racist oppression, they are usually depicted as having received more advantages than black men in American history" (hooks 1981, 80). Right from the play's title, the black male body, his sufferings and deaths have been foregrounded, and the play stresses and expresses the tortures that have overwhelmed the black man, testifying to the isolation and invisibility of African American female subjects. It explicitly foregrounds the misery of recurrent deaths of Black Man With Watermelon but backgrounds the physical and mental traumas of Black Woman With Fried Drumstick.

As another example, a great number of questions posed by other figures throughout the course of the play merely address the miseries of Black Man With Watermelon. Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut in Panel II asks: "Where *he* gonna go tuh wash *his* dribbling hands?" and right after her, Prunes and Prisms asks: "Where *he* gonna go tuh dry *his* drippin clothes?" (Parks 1995, 112; emphases added), implying that Black Man With Watermelon's hands are bleeding and that he has got wet and bloody clothes when escaping and crossing a river. This is testified by Old Man River Jordan's words, "*He* is dead *he* crosses tuh river. *He* jumps in tuh puddle have *his* clothing: ON. On tuh other side tuh mountain yo *he* drippily wet with sopping" (Ibid.). He then goes on to say, "*He* jumped in tuh water without uh word for partin come out drippily wet with soppin" (Ibid.; emphases added). Right after, Black Man With Watermelon finds an opportunity to describe in detail the way he tricked the chasing dogs and hunters into thinking that he was at home. He says:

I am soppin wet. I left my scent behind in uh bundle of old clothing that was not thrown out. Left tuh scent in tuh clothin in tuh clothin on uh rooftop. Dogs surround my house

and laugh. They are mockin thuh scent that I left behind. I jumped in thuh water without uh word. I jumped in thuh water without uh smell. I am in thuh river and in my skin is soppin wet. (Ibid., 112–113)

The other figures then in a collective voice say, “Thuh river was roun as thuh world was. Roun” (Ibid.). I argue that these figures ironically say that there was no escape for Black Man With Watermelon. By the same token, a number of figures throughout the play pose other questions which evince their concerns with regard to Black Man With Watermelon’s postmortem condition. Prunes and Prisms asks: “Where *he* gonna go now now that *he* done dieded?” (Ibid., 114), and Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut in Panel IV asks: “Where *he* gonna go come to now that *he* gonna go gone on?” (Ibid., 121) and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick in Final Chorus rewords them by asking: “Where *he* gonna go now now now now now that *he* done diediduh?” (Ibid., 129; emphases added). These sets of questions open two directions: on the one hand, they reveal that the play mostly revolves around the pains of Black Man With Watermelon and his outcome. On the other hand, if we consider Black Man With Watermelon as the figure who has experienced different types of violent death and hence typically represents all dead black men and women, then these questions which are repeated and revised throughout the play reflect the figures’ concerns about his postmortem condition or his state after his death. I argue that he would go to one of these two places: if they take Parks’s advice – to “write down” their past, story and history (Ibid., 104) and “hide it under a rock” (Ibid., 111) or “carve it out of a rock” (Ibid., 131) – he will go to history books and memory for ever, and if they refuse, he will sink into oblivion or in Martin Luther King’s terms to “be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time” (King 2003, 218). Through using wordplay, Parks clarifies this fact. The coined word “diediduh,” when dissected, mainly consists of two parts: “died” and “did,” implying: Do or Die.

Furthermore, Black Man With Watermelon in Panel III recounts the scene of his lynching where a large group of people had thronged his platform in a rainy day, “pullin out their umbrellas,” and then “Sky flew open and thuh light went ZAP. Tree bowed over till thuh branch said BROKE,” and he manages to escape death in the eleventh hour (Parks 1995, 119). As we see, the figures mostly take Black Man With Watermelon’s miseries into consideration, and their main focus is on his histories|stories, escapes, lynchings, deaths and even his postmortem condition. However, in all these cases the miseries and traumas of Black Woman With Fried Drumstick remain invisible. As Harriet A. Jacobs writes in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 1861, 119). Likewise, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick has surely suffered, however, in all these cases her miseries and traumas remain invisible.

To sum up, Parks in this play longs for salvation, salvation from gender and race inequality, salvation from passivity and negligence, salvation from disunity and confrontation between genders and salvation from presuming African American women as weak dependent subjects who have to take subservient roles at home. Viewed in this light, the title of the play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, has one message: if African Americans attain salvation through unity and solidarity, no other African American in the whole entire world will die, and if they fail, no African American will survive, and this will be the last black man and his last return. To this end, Parks emphasizes womanism as a way toward solidarity and achievement of common ends. To this end, she to a large extent destroys the implications of superiority of male over female and refrains from emphasizing the male|female dichotomy and gender differences among her figures. She counters this dichotomy in order to give male and female figures unity and to create a convincing portrayal of African American women who can function as discursive and trustworthy partners for their men in the movement. She then shows how the African American men’s trust in their women and their cooperation can help them build a strong nation together and transcend their race. Thus, to think of Black Man With Watermelon’s death as the death of the last black man requires unity and solidarity to make up for the sustained loss, the loss of their written histories, and through writing their histories|stories, they succeed to bring to light that they have always been and continue to be in history.

## References

- Bernard, Louise. 1997. "The Musicality of Language: Redefining History in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*." *African American Review*, vol. 31, no. 4. Contemporary Theatre Issue. (Winter): 687–698.
- Cixous, Helene. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1.4: 875–893.
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis. 1989. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geis, R. Deborah. 2008. *Suzan-Lori Parks*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Ghasemi, Mehdi. 2015. "Sleep, Death's Twin Brother: A Quest for Postmodern Identities in *The Death of the Last Black Man*." *Orbis Litterarum*, April, vol. 70, no. 2, 150–174.
- HillCollins, Patricia. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2006. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism and Feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- hooks, bell. 1981. *Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism*. Boston: South End Press.
- hooks, bell. 1992. *Black Looks: race and representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- Jacobs, A. Harriet. 1861. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Boston: Published for the author.
- Kelly, Kevin. 1992. "The Astonishing Power of Last Black Man." *Boston Globe*, 14 February, 37.
- King, Jr., Martin Luther. 2003. "A Time to Break Silence." In *African American Political Thought*, edited by M. Pohlmann, 209–219. New York: Routledge.
- Louis, Yvette. 2001. "Body Language: The Black Female Body and the Word in Suzan Lori-Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*." In *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, edited by M. Bennett and V. Dickerson, 141–164. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Malkin, R. Jeanette. 1999. *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. 1995. *The America Play and Other Work*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Rayner, A. & Elam H. Jr. 1994. "Unfinished Business: Reconfiguring History in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 46, no. 4, December, 447–461.
- Solomon, Alisa. 2001. "Language in Last Black Man." *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, edited by Lee Jacobus. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1636–1638.
- Stewart, Maria W. 1995. "Religion and the Pure Principle of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build." In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by B. Guy-Sheftall, 26–29. New York: New Press.
- Walker, Alice. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt.