The America Play

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS

One of the most decorated living American playwrights, Suzan-Lori Parks was born in Kentucky but grew up in six different U.S. states—including her mother's native Texas—and briefly in Germany, as the daughter of an Army officer. After graduating from high school in Maryland, she went to college at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, where she studied English and German Literature. At Mount Holyoke, Parks took a class with the illustrious writer James Baldwin, who called her "an utterly astounding and beautiful creature who may become one of the most valuable artists of our time," and also convinced her to try writing plays. After graduating, Parks took Baldwin's advice and moved to London to study acting for a year, and then went to New York and started writing plays while working odd jobs. In 1987, she put on her first play, *Betting on the Dust Commander*, in a Lower East Side bar—her friend Laurie Carlos directed, and Parks recalls that her audience consisted of "my dad, my mom, and my sister, and one of the homeless guys from the neighborhood." But her second work, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, was a hit and got Parks labeled as a rising star. Over the next decade, Parks found moderate success by collaborating with the New York Public Theater on a series of plays, including *The America Play*, that explored and unraveled historical, scientific, and stereotypical representations of blackness. She became a household name, however, only with the 2002 Broadway production of her play *Topdog/Underdog*, which won her a Pulitzer Prize and MacArthur "genius" grant, and was also named the best American play written between 1993 and 2018 by the New York Times. Around this time, she moved to Los Angeles with her husband Paul Oscher (div. 2011), a blues musician who formerly played with the famous Muddy Water Blues Band, and began teaching at the California Institute for the Arts and expanding into other genres. She published her first novel, *Getting Mother's Body*, in 2003, and she wrote a musical based on the life of musician Ray Charles in 2007. During this period, she also embarked on an ambitious project to write one play every day for a year, no matter where she was or what she was doing. She succeeded, and in 2006 and 2007, her *365 Plays/365 Days* were performed in hundreds of theaters around the world. She has since returned to New York and begun teaching at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. She continues to write in a variety of genres but remains best known for her plays, which have begun to take more traditional narrative forms over time. Recent hits include the 2014 *Father Comes Home from the Wars (Parts 1, 2 & 3)*, inspired by her father's career in the military, and the 2019 *White Noise*, which explores the interracial relationships and police brutality in the United States. She has written multiple screenplays, including *Girl 6* for director Spike Lee, and adaptations of novels by Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright. Parks is also a musician, which helps explain the deep influence of jazz on her style, and an avid practitioner of yoga. As of 2020, she performs occasionally, singing with her current husband, guitarist Christian Konopka.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It would not be an overstatement to say that *The America Play* revolves around history, which Parks both relegates to a "Great Hole" and mythologizes as a determining force in the life and work of her first protagonist, the Foundling Father. Specifically, the Foundling Father is obsessed with his lookalike, Abraham Lincoln, and the extraordinary scene of Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865, just a few days after the end of the Civil War. For the theater, this assassination is deeply symbolic because it occurred *in* a theater—Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.—while Lincoln was watching the play *Our American Cousin*. Moreover, Lincoln's assassin was the famous actor and white supremacist John Wilkes Booth, who hoped to avenge the South and possibly restart the Civil War. In fact, Lincoln had seen Booth act onstage before and even invited him to the White House multiple times, not realizing that Booth secretly yearned to bring down the antislavery Union government. With two co-conspirators who planned to assassinate or kidnap other prominent government officials and cripple the Union, Booth developed a series of plans to do the same to Lincoln, but he ultimately decided to kill Lincoln at Ford's Theater the same day of the performance. It is unclear whether Booth cited his fame to get access to the Presidential Box, or the President's security simply never returned after the intermission. As noted in *The America Play*, Booth waited just behind the door until one of the most laughter-inducing lines in *Our American Cousin*, which he knew by heart: "you sockdologizing old man-trap!" Booth shot Lincoln in the head and then jumped onto the stage, yelled something at the audience—the disagreement over what he said is also an important plot point in *The America Play*—and then escaped from the theater and rode away on a horse. Doctors tended to Lincoln and decided to move him to a house across the street, where they realized he could not possibly survive the wound. He died the next morning, and millions of people attended his funeral and followed his funeral train to his burial site back in his native Illinois. Booth was caught and shot to death roughly two weeks later in Virginia, and many of his co-conspirators and accomplices were hanged and sentenced to life in prison during the following years. However,

throughout the play, Parks also gestures to the way certain features of Lincoln's mythology come to define him in the popular imagination and overshadow the full extent of his life and legacy. She cites the assassination, of course, as well as his famous hat and the Gettysburg Address, the most famous and widely cited political speech in American history, in which Lincoln rallied Union soldiers by declaring the equality of all people to be the founding principle of American democracy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Parks has written more than 20 plays, of which the most famous remains *Topdog/Underdog* (1999), whose central character is an adaptation of the Lincoln impersonator the Foundling Father, from *The America Play*. Her other most prominent works include the conceptual *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World A.K.A. The Negro Book Of The Dead* (1992), in which black men from history and racist stereotypes convene to die in the same "exact replica of the Great Hole of History" where *The America Play* is set; *Venus* (1996), an adaptation of the story of the South African woman Saartjie Baartman, who was trafficked to Britain, forced to exhibit her sizable rear end in freak shows, and then enslaved and studied in France; *In the Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000), two plays inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850); the monumental project *365 Days/365 Plays* (written 2002-2003, performed around the world 2006-2007); and the recent hits *Father Comes Home from the War, Parts 1, 2, and 3* (2014) and *White Noise* (2019). She has also notably written *Unchain My Heart (The Ray Charles Musical)* (2007) and the screenplays for Spike Lee's *Girl 6* (1996) as well as film adaptations of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (original 1937, film 2005) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (original 1939, film 2019). Parks is deeply indebted to the influence of her mentor James Baldwin, whose numerous essays and novels—as well as two plays, *The Amen Corner* (1954) and *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964)—offer influential meditations on the African American condition. But she has also cited Tennessee Williams and musicals like *The Sound of Music* and *Oklahoma* as inspirations. Parks's work is often compared to that of black feminist writers Adrienne Kennedy, whose 1964 play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* played an important role in the otherwise male-dominated Black Arts Movement, and Ntozake Shange, who is best known for her 1976 play or conceptual "choreopoem" *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enough*. Parks is arguably the most famous African American woman playwright in history, along with the groundbreaking mid-20th-century writer Lorraine Hansberry, who is still celebrated for *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Parks's barren settings are often compared to those of absurdist playwrights like the Irish Samuel Beckett, who actually has one of the characters in his 1962 play *Happy Days* stuck in a hole in the ground. Finally, of course, Tom Taylor's play *Our American Cousin* (1858)—which Lincoln was attending when he was assassinated—makes a prominent appearance in *The America Play*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The America Play*
- **When Written:** 1990-1993
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1994 (first performance at the Yale Repertory Theater)
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary/Postmodern American Theater
- **Genre:** Contemporary American theater, experimental theater, historical theater, metatheatre, African American theater
- **Setting:** An exact replica of The Great Hole of History
- **Climax:** The Foundling Father returns from beyond the grave, and then dies in a reenactment of the Lincoln assassination.
- **Antagonist:** The Foundling Father, the John Wilkes Booth impersonators, historical amnesia, American racism, death and burial
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

EXTRA CREDIT

72 Hours to Fame. Parks wrote her most famous play, *Topdog/Underdog*—which borrows heavily from *The America Play* and revolves around two black brothers named Lincoln and Booth—in the course of just three days, during an artist's residency in a theater she soon realized had little interest in performing her work.

A Typo for the Ages. Parks's name is legally spelled "Susan," but after it was misspelled "Suzan" on an announcement for one of her first plays, she decided to let the new spelling stick.

PLOT SUMMARY

Suzan-Lori Parks's challenging, experimental two-act work *The America Play* takes place in "an exact replica of **the Great Hole of History**," a setting meant metaphorically as well as literally: Act One of the play, "Lincoln Act," opens in this hole in the ground, which has been dug by its protagonist: an African American gravedigger-turned-Abraham Lincoln imitator known only as the Foundling Father. The Foundling Father's lengthy monologue, broken up by stage directions to "*(Rest)*," comprises this entire act; like virtually all the dialogue in Parks's plays, this monologue is punctuated and spelled unconventionally in order to evoke vernacular African American speech. In addition, many parts of the play's dialogue are enclosed in square brackets,

which indicates that they are optional.

Dressed as Lincoln, the Foundling Father opens by repeating a number of cryptic, self-referential phrases, like "I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed," most of which are quoted from other sources. He talks about his past in the third person: everyone always told him he looked like "the Great Man" (Lincoln), so even though he ("the Lesser Known") started out digging graves like the other men in his family, he eventually convinced his barber to make him some **beards**, put them in a box, and came out here to dig the replica of the Great Hole of History and impersonate Lincoln in it. He is fascinated by Lincoln's assassination, which happened in a Washington theater while the audience was laughing at a bad joke in the second-rate play My American Cousin. He fantasizes about Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd, yelling out, "*Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground," and he speculates about what it would have been like to dig Lincoln's grave. At seemingly random intervals throughout his monologue, he nods **at a bust of Abraham Lincoln and winks at a pasteboard cutout of him**.

The Foundling Father shows the audience his different Lincoln beards and recalls the original "Great Hole of History"—a theme park he visited on his honeymoon with his wife, Lucy—that inspired him to give up the gravedigging-and-mourning business he started with her, move "out West," and dig "his own Big Hole" to start impersonating Lincoln. Eventually, someone told him that "he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot," and this inspired his current business, which he demonstrates to the audience: suddenly, the Foundling Father starts laughing as a man dressed as Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, walks onstage and shoots him in the head with a toy gun. The Foundling Father plays dead, and the other man declares, "thus to the tyrants!" The reenactment repeats once again, but this time the shooter yells, "the South is avenged!" The Foundling Father thanks the man, who is one of his regular customers.

The Foundling Father continues explaining his business and fascination with Lincoln's life and death, but is interrupted at regular intervals by men, women, and even a couple, all dressed as Booth, who make him play out the assassination scene over and over again. Luckily, the Foundling Father notes, the only "side effect" from his work is the "slight deafness," and it is worth the opportunity to follow in "the Great Mans footsteps." He repeats these comments between other reenactments of the assassination and wonders if he will ever catch up with Lincoln's greatness—or perhaps vice versa—before the **echo** of a gunshot marks the end of Act One.

Act Two, "The Hall of **Wonders**," opens its first scene, "Big Bang," with the same echoing gunshot that ends Act One, but different characters: Lucy and Brazil, who are the Foundling Father's wife and son, respectively. While they debate if this echo is "him," Lucy circles with an ear trumpet to try and tell "thuh difference" between the original gunshot and its echo, and Brazil digs holes around the stage, like his "Daddy." Like the Foundling Father's monologue, Lucy and Brazil's dialogue is punctuated with the direction, "*(Rest)*," indicating a pause. In addition, they also frequently trade empty lines: the script simply reads "LUCY" and "BRAZIL,"

Lucy reveals that the Foundling Father has died but never got the "proper burial" he deserves, and she and Brazil reminisce about the death of a family friend, Bram Price. Price revealed a secret to Lucy on his deathbed, and she kept this secret for so long that she became known as a trustworthy confidant (or "Confidence") for the dying. (Now that it's been more than 12 years, "nobody cares," so she call tell Brazil about Bram Price's secret—which is that "he wore lifts in his shoes" to "seem taller than he was.") While Lucy was the "Confidence," Brazil was in charge of the "weepin sobbin [and] moanin," and at times he even "**gnashed**."

Now that the Foundling Father has died, Brazil is digging for "his bones" and "thuh Wonders" that filled his Hall of Wonders, and they're both listening for "his **Whispers**." They don't hear these "Whispers," but they don't understand *why*—maybe they "travel different out West." The Foundling Father came out here when Brazil "was only 5," because even though he was a good digger, "fakin was his callin." Lucy recalls watching historical figures parade around at the Great Hole of History during her honeymoon and admires the "lookuhlike" that the Foundling Father has built. As the gunshot echo keeps sounding, Lucy keeps searching for the "whispers" and Brazil keeps digging and reminiscing about his Pa. Finally, Brazil pulls one of the "Wonders" out of the dirt: the Abraham Lincoln bust.

After a brief scene labeled "Echo," in which the Foundling Father returns to the stage and cheers as he watches actors play out a short scene from *Our American Cousin*, the play returns to Lucy and Brazil in the third scene, "Archaeology." Lucy tells Brazil about all the different kinds of echoes and whispers, and Brazil muses about what his ancestors—his "foe-father" or "faux-father" (forefather) and the others "who comed before us"—have done for him, like leaving him "this Hole" as "inheritance."

Brazil welcomes the audience to the "hall. of. wonnndersss" and begins describing the things he has collected there, including a jewel box engraved "A.L." and George Washington's "nibblers" (wooden teeth), documents like "peace pacts" and "declarations like war," and medals for a variety of feats, from "bravery and honesty" to "knowledge of sewin" and, of course, "fakin." Remembering his Pa, he breaks down in tears, but Lucy comforts him before starting to reminisce about how she "couldnt never deny [the Foundling Father] nothin." Grimly, she notes that there were "stories too horrible tuh mention," and then the scene with Lucy and Brazil gives way to another "Echo," in which actors play out the scene from *Our American Cousin* that immediately preceded Lincoln's shooting. After this, the Foundling Father thanks the audience for coming to see

him and begins reciting Lincoln quotes and state capitals. He then narrates—but does not act out—every stage in Lincoln's shooting, and he declares that the bullet made a "great black hole" that killed Lincoln later that day.

In the next scene, "Spadework," Lucy and Brazil start by quizzing each other on state capitals. After they get to Lincoln, Nebraska, Lucy starts talking about the Foundling Father's fixation on Lincoln and resemblance to Brazil, who alternatingly weeps and celebrates having "so much tuh live for!" Lucy imagines what Pa might have told Brazil, if he were still alive—she quotes Lincoln and praises her son, then leans in to tell him something that "ssfor our ears and our ears uhlone," which the audience never hears. Brazil returns to digging (and finds a trumpet and "uh bag of pennies"), and Lucy again starts lamenting how she "gived intuh him [the Foundling Father] on everything." She hears something and screams, but won't tell Brazil what it is, and then starts listing all the things the Foundling Father took from her.

Suddenly, Brazil digs up "uh Tee-Vee," and it turns on just before it is interrupted by another short section labeled "Echo," which consists only of the familiar stage direction: "*A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes.*" In the final section, "The Great Beyond," the television starts playing a scene from the play's first act, before the Foundling Father appears onstage, along with his coffin, and starts talking. Lucy and Brazil debate whether he is alive or dead and then discuss funeral arrangements. Next, the Foundling Father asks for a hug, but his family refuses. Lucy talks about "thuh Original Great Hole" of History and asks the Foundling Father to get in his coffin. He tries it out, but then he gives his own eulogy, telling the audience how he "quit the [Lincoln impersonation] business. And buried all [his] things." He quotes Lincoln and then abruptly starts reenacting the assassination: the gunshot sounds, and he appears to die (although Lucy and Brazil are still not sure). Lucy and Brazil debate what they should do, and decide to prepare and wait for their guests.

Brazil announces, "Welcome Welcome Welcome to thuh hall. Of. Wonders." He describes these wonders as he had before, from the jewel box to the Lincoln bust and medals. And finally, Brazil shows the audience "our newest Wonder: One of the greats Hisself!" Like Lincoln, the Foundling Father has a "great black hole in [his] great head," and Brazil asks the audience to "Note: thuh last words.—And thuh last breaths.—And how thuh nation mourns—" before he walks offstage and the curtain falls, ending the play.

CHARACTERS

The Foundling Father – The central character in *The America Play*, whose monologue occupies Act One and in whose footsteps Lucy and Brazil (his wife and their son) follow during Act Two. Born in a "Small Town" into a family of black gravediggers, the Foundling Father has a close physical resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. After digging graves for a living during many years, he visited a theme park called **the Great Hole of History** on his honeymoon with Lucy, and the historical reenactors who perform "Reconstructed Historicities" there inspire him to start a "Lincoln Act" of his own. He convinced his barber to help him put together some **beards** and then abandoned his family and moved West to pursue his dreams. Now, he charges people a penny to dress up as John Wilkes Booth and reenact the Lincoln assassination. He performs this reenactment throughout Act One and inexplicably returns to the stage various times during Act Two, seemingly from beyond the dead, to speak his case and perform his act. The Foundling Father's obsession with Lincoln is a means of both honoring the "Great Man," a revolutionary figure who arguably incorporated white and black Americans into the idea of a unified nation, and expressing his own sense of alienation and loss as a black man in the United States. His name is at once a play on the "Founding Fathers" of American democracy and a reference to his sense of abandonment, and perhaps the way that African Americans are largely erased in or abandoned by narratives of American history. (A "foundling" is a child abandoned by its parents.) At the end of the play, he appears to die for good, as he reenacts Lincoln for his son Brazil.

Lucy – The Foundling Father's wife and Brazil's mother, who leads her son out West in Act Two, in an attempt to give "a proper burial" to her estranged, Lincoln-obsessed husband. She spends this act listening through her ear trumpet, seeking out the Foundling Father's "**Whispers**"—the traces or voices he has left her from beyond the grave—and trying to tell "thuh difference" between the original gunshot and its echo. She also directs Brazil to dig for the "**Wonders**" they know are scattered around the replica of **the Great Hole of History**. While the audience learns essentially nothing about her background or early life, it is clear that she visited the original Great Hole with the Foundling Father on their honeymoon, and that she suffered extensively at his hands: as she puts it, she "couldnt never deny him nothin" and "gived intuh him on everything," and he took everything from her, from "thuh apron from uhround [her] waist" to even her "re-memberies—you know—thuh stuff out of [her] head." Despite his abuse and abandonment, Lucy seems to have conflicted feelings about the Foundling Father. For instance, she praises him to Brazil, who scarcely remembers him: she talks about (and even acts out) his Lincoln reenactments, and she constantly reminds Brazil that he resembles his Pa in all but his "stovepipe hat." By trade, Lucy is a "Confidence"—or keeper of secrets for the dying—which complements Brazil's mourning business as well as the Foundling Father's gravedigging, when he was still around. This peculiar job points to the central role of secrets and silences in *The America Play*, as well as the difficulty and delicacy of

narrating the stories of the departed—including, of course, those of American history.

Brazil – The Foundling Father and Lucy's son, who accompanies his mother to the replica of **the Great Hole of History** in Act Two to give his father the "proper burial" he deserves. He spends much of this act digging, looking for the buried knickknacks—or "**Wonders**"—that his father has left behind. He is close to his mother, with whom he also works: Brazil is a professional funeral mourner, and his mother is a "Confidence" who listens to dying people's secrets. In contrast, Brazil knows little about his father, who taught him some mourning techniques (like "'the Weep' 'the Sob' and 'the Moan,'" and most importantly "**the Gnash**"), but then disappeared mysteriously when Brazil was five. Of course, Brazil's constant mourning is one of many ways that Parks cites the traumatic history of African American life in this play. When he processes the death of his father—which is also that of Abraham Lincoln—Brazil mourns in a way that is neither clearly acted nor clearly authentic. Throughout Act Two, Brazil struggles to articulate his own identity, both as an individual and in relation to the father who abandoned him (but whose digging skills, Lincoln-like appearance, and Great Hole he has inherited). While he is 35 years old, he frequently shows the emotional range of a child and relates to his mother like one. For instance, he weeps uncontrollably for his father and admits, "—Imsisim—" ("I miss him"), and Lucy comforts him by telling him he "look[s] more and more and more and more like him [his father] ever-y day." Ultimately, he is able to assemble his "Hall of Wonders," which comes to include his very father, who is dead with a "great black hole in thuh great head."

Abraham Lincoln – The president of the United States from 1861-1865, who is still considered one of the greatest American political leaders in history, and who is a central reference throughout *The America Play*, specifically for Parks's protagonist, the nameless African American Lincoln reenactor called the Foundling Father. Born to a modest farming family in Kentucky, Lincoln essentially never went to school, but he managed to eventually educate himself and become an attorney and member of the House of Representatives. A staunch opponent of extending slavery to newly admitted American states, his election to the Presidency in 1960 spurred the Civil War, with the South seceding and taking up arms to preserve slavery. For the next four years, he took a guiding role in the Union forces' fight against the Confederacy, and he remains best remembered for delivering the Gettysburg Address and signing the Emancipation Proclamation during this period. He was famously assassinated by actor John Wilkes Booth while watching the play Our American Cousin in April 1865, just days after leading the Union to victory in the Civil War. Lincoln's assassination is repeatedly reenacted during *The America Play*, as the Foundling Father makes a living by charging people to dress up as Booth and shoot him with an unloaded gun. The play speaks to how Lincoln has become mythologized in American popular culture as a liberator of slaves, principled leader, and gifted orator, but also points to the deeper and more complicated truths that these simple myths belie.

Mary Todd Lincoln – Abraham Lincoln's wife and the famously controversial and maligned First Lady of the United States from 1861-1865. Born into a slaveholding Kentucky family, she excelled in school and took an early interest in politics, then moved to Illinois, where she married Lincoln in 1842. She had several children but was not particularly fond of motherhood, which in part led her to take an active role in her husband's political career, unlike most political wives of her time. When she became the First Lady, she earned a reputation for overspending, having too many male friends, and berating Lincoln's political opponents. When Lincoln was assassinated, she purportedly began screaming and was removed from the theater, then kept away from her husband until the next morning, when she visited him and fainted shortly before he finally died. A few decades later, her own son publicly denounced her as a lunatic and got her committed to a psychiatric hospital for several years. She serves as something of a foil for Lucy throughout the play, and the Foundling Father repeatedly focuses on the possibility that she said something like "*Emergency*, oh, *Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground," after Lincoln's assassination. He also mentions that she accompanied Abraham Lincoln to the theater and laughed alongside him to Our American Cousin, but tellingly, Lucy notes that her favorite part of the Lincoln story is the one where Mary Todd "begins to lose her mind."

John Wilkes Booth – The prominent American actor, white supremacist, and Confederate sympathizer who famously assassinated Abraham Lincoln in Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865. In *The America Play*, a variety of people dressed as Booth repeatedly reenact the Lincoln assassination by shooting the Foundling Father throughout Act One. Notably, during these scenes, the dialogue and stage direction are actually written for "Lincoln" and "Booth," which is a sort of commentary on not only the gap between actors and the roles they play, but also Booth's profession and the theatrical setting of Lincoln's murder.

TERMS

Derringer – A kind of small old-fashioned pistol, which **John Wilkes Booth** used to kill **Abraham Lincoln**. One of **the Foundling Father**'s clients uses a Derringer reenact the assassination, and the Foundling Father comments on this man's dedication to historical accuracy: "As it Used to Be. Never wavers. No frills. By the book. Nothing excessive."

Ear Trumpet – A funnel-shaped listening device, which functions like a megaphone in reverse, as a kind of hearing aid.

Throughout Act Two, **Lucy** uses an ear trumpet to help her listen for **the Foundling Father**'s "Whispers."

Gettysburg Address – Arguably the most famous speech in American political history, a brief (less than 300-word) address delivered by **Abraham Lincoln** during the Civil War in 1863. The speech honored fallen Union soldiers and emphasized the "great task" of restoring unity and creating equality in the United States. Its first words, "four score and seven years ago" (a reference to the eighty-seven years between the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and Lincoln's speech), are commonly repeated, even out of context, and **the Foundling Father** frequently recites them when he plays the character of Lincoln throughout *The America Play*.

Our American Cousin – A 1858 play by British dramatist Tom Taylor, which ran primarily in the United States. **Abraham Lincoln** was watching this play at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., when he was assassinated by the actor **John Wilkes Booth**. The play takes on a significant role in *The America Play*, most of all because the work's most famous line, "You sockdologizing old man-trap!," repeats every time **the Foundling Father** reenacts the Lincoln assassination. (Booth really did assassinate Lincoln during this line, because he knew the audience's laughter would mask the sound of his gunshot.) As the title indicates, the plot of the play revolves around a long-lost American relative visiting his estranged family in England, and its comedy is based on the perceived differences between American bluntness and British politeness. Two scenes from *Our American Cousin* interrupt Act Two of *The America Play* in the "Echo" sections, including the scene that ends with, "You sockdologizing old man-trap!" Arguably, Parks's title also references *Our American Cousin*, and specifically the fact that one of the most important events in American history took place during a play that made a mockery of American culture.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HISTORY, NARRATIVE, AND MULTIPLICITY

In Suzan-Lori Parks's nonlinear, deeply allegorical *The America Play*, a black man named the Foundling Father impersonates Abraham Lincoln for a living and charges people a penny to play-assassinate him. After he dies, his wife Lucy and son Brazil go looking for traces of him. The Foundling Father organizes his life around the impulse to embody and retell history, and then *his* past becomes history worth uncovering for Lucy and Brazil. Yet, while he oversimplifies Abraham Lincoln's complex life into a single assassination scene, Lucy and Brazil fail to form a coherent narrative about his life and death. Parks uses this contrast to show why history must accommodate multiple, fragmented, and ambiguous voices rather than insisting on a single authoritative narrative that inevitably leaves some tales untold.

Parks emphasizes the dangers in reducing history to a single narrative rather than exploring its complexity. In Act One, for instance, the Foundling Father visits **the Great Hole of History**, an amusement park in which actors parade around dressed as "Great Men." Instead of including *voices* from the past, this Great Hole presents history as the sum of these Great Men's *images* (and erases the context necessary to understand their "Greatness"). Similarly, despite his encyclopedic knowledge about Lincoln, the Foundling Father endlessly reenacts the single most popular story about him—his assassination. People dress up as the white supremacist John Wilkes Booth and shoot him with blanks, completely missing the historical context that makes their performances racist and disturbing. Although he calls Lincoln the "Great Man" and laments being "Lesser Known" in comparison, the Foundling Father ironically does not see that his own mistaken view of history as a parade of "greats" is the precise reason that "Lesser Known" people, groups, and voices are erased from history. Brazil makes a similar error, misinterpreting the past by assembling his father's "faux-historical knickknacks" (such as a **bust** of Lincoln and a pair of wooden teeth modeled on George Washington's) into a "Hall of **Wonders**." But these "Wonders" say nothing about history: they are the junk that history left behind. Because the audience can see through Brazil's error, his "Wonders" allow Parks to show how believing in heroic, fantastical, storybook versions of history leads people to erase the voices of those who actually lived in the past and to overlook the lessons history holds for the present.

Ultimately, Parks aims not to find the *true* version of history grand narratives distort, but rather to show that *there is no* such true narrative, both because the same facts can be narrated in many different ways and because the exact details of history are unknowable and irrelevant. Instead, for Parks, there are always multiple legitimate stories about any single event, since all narratives (including historical ones, and including plays) are written somewhere, by someone, for some purpose. Indeed, the Foundling Father points out that nobody agrees on the exact details of Lincoln's assassination, like what Booth said after shooting Lincoln. This uncertainty makes Parks's storytelling stronger, not weaker: by having different Booth impersonators yell out different lines after shooting the Foundling Father, she illustrates the range of thoughts and emotions that may have motivated Booth, encouraging the

audience to think critically about history rather than blindly accepting one version of events. Similarly, the Foundling Father wears different **beards** on different days in order to show that different versions of Lincoln are equally legitimate and powerful, even if some stray from the truth. He recognizes that his history is alternative, but so is any other version of history. All versions, however, have power: at the end of the play, the Foundling Father suddenly returns to the stage, as though resurrected by the stories told about him. This illustrates how, to present-day people, the past is *created* or brought to life through stories. This, in turn, is why it matters whether history is reduced to a single story, like the grand narratives of the Great Hole of History and Hall of Wonders, or allowed to be complex and multiple.

Finally, by telling fragmented stories that highlight the difficulty of narrating history in the first place, Parks further explores how history affects the present day, which, she argues, is where its true significance lies. For instance, Lucy only vaguely references an abusive relationship with the Foundling Father, but never tells her story directly, in part because her *inability* to make sense of it demonstrates how it continues to affect her. She spends Act Two listening for messages from the Foundling Father (which she calls "**echoes**" and "**Whispers**"), but she does not get any coherent story from him: rather than distorting his meaning by speaking for him, she instead admits that she cannot recover what he has left behind. In contrast, Brazil likes to speculate wildly and irresponsibly about the past, spinning outlandish narratives that give the audience mistaken ideas about the Foundling Father and prompt Lucy to yell at him to "keep [his] story to scale." Like the Great Hole's parade of Great Men, Brazil's stories lack the context that connects the past to its implications for the present and shows people what history can do for them. This is crucial because, for Parks, not only are people the products of history, but they also actively *use* history as a tool to build the future.

Ultimately, Parks's goal in *The America Play* is to narrate history without seeking or pretending to offer a singular version of it. While she recognizes that history weighs profoundly on the present, she does not believe that it is possible to pin down with certainty. Indeed, she insists that any single story is a distortion—the more one digs into its omissions and assumptions, the closer one gets to the "truth" of the matter, and so the best way to narrate history is to expose and reconstruct the multiple, complex, and even contradictory voices of the various people who lived, made, and suffered from it.

RACE AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

In *The America Play*, a black man known only as the Foundling Father makes a career out of impersonating Abraham Lincoln and charging people to pretend to assassinate him. By portraying black suffering in the context of a white narrative, Parks reveals how white people have capitalized on this suffering throughout history and emphasizes that black identity is an inalienable part of American identity. Ultimately, she argues that separating white and black narratives in history and art perpetuates white supremacy, and *The America Play* embodies the inevitable connection between black and white history in the United States.

The Foundling Father's Lincoln impersonation is a clear metaphor for the oppression of African Americans. Because he guided the United States through the abolition of slavery, Lincoln's presidency marks the official incorporation of black Americans into the nation, and he has become a symbol of the still-unrealized ideal of a racially equal America. Parks sees Lincoln as an "American" hero, in the term's broadest sense, and the Foundling Father's unmistakable resemblance to Lincoln shows how a truly "American" identity must be multiracial. But the Foundling Father's trajectory is tragic: rather than embodying Lincoln's heroism as an emancipator (by reciting the Great Man's speeches, as he initially hopes to do), the Foundling Father only makes a living by letting white people assault him. First, he starts "inviting [people] to come and throw old food at him," and later, he realizes that people will "pay a penny" (with Lincoln's face on it) to reenact Lincoln's assassination. In other words, white people are not interested in honoring an American hero represented by a black actor—they're interested in ridiculing and murdering him. Parks shows this assassination scene over and over again, with a nonchalance that recalls acts of racial violence like lynching. This repetition evokes the perpetual and systemic nature of antiblack racism in the United States and illustrates how black people's suffering has been converted into profit and entertainment throughout American history—including, potentially, for some audience members during this very play.

Beyond this Lincoln impersonation, Parks consistently puts black characters in positions usually reserved for white Americans to further challenge the separation of black and white American history and emphasize that American history belongs to *all* Americans. For example, the Foundling Father goes "out West" to build his fortune, and his wife Lucy and son Brazil follow. This is a clear reference to the importance of westward migration in American history, and specifically to the period of "Manifest Destiny" around the time of Lincoln's presidency, when white settlers colonized Native American land in the western United States. The Foundling Father's westward migration is clearly ironic because Manifest Destiny was a white supremacist ideology, but also shows how migration—whether as pioneers, immigrants, refugees, or slaves—unites Americans. Similarly, while Brazil and Lucy are searching for the Foundling Father, Lucy shouts out, "Sweet land of—?" but seemingly forgets what comes next, and Brazil replies, "Of liberty!" Their rather adverse circumstances

suggest they are joking, and it is telling that Lucy strategically forgets the punchline: the promise of "liberty" is foundational to American identity, but it has always applied unequally to people of different races. Clearly, liberty has played a small, even forgettable, role in Lucy's life as black woman.

Finally, the recurring motif of **the Great Hole of History** represents how black history and art are relegated to an inferior status. After visiting the original Great Hole, an amusement park full of historical reenactors, the Foundling Father is inspired to move West and dig his own "Great Hole," where he performs his "Lincoln Act." This "Great Hole of History" is also a metaphor for how the black experience of American history inspired Parks to write this play. For African Americans, history is a "Great Hole" in two senses. First, for several generations African Americans' lives were largely defined by slavery, and before that, their histories are difficult to trace: there is a literal void or "Hole" in the narrative of history. Secondly, African Americans' history and role in shaping contemporary America are often ignored in historical retellings, supplanted by the supposedly heroic deeds of (slaveholding) "Founding Fathers" and other white men. In most American schools, African American history is a neglected "Great Hole," with the history of white people taught as *the* history of the nation, and black history either ignored or compartmentalized. Through the Foundling Father, Parks suggests that art (particularly theater) replicates this problem by portraying white stories as heroic and universal, while black stories—if they're told at all—are segregated into a separate category of "minority art" and not taken seriously. This segregation lets white people "appreciate" black art without taking its lessons to heart, and thereby deny their role in the legacy of African American oppression. Indeed, the Foundling Father's reenactment of racialized violence onstage suggests that this segregated model of storytelling turns theater into another way for white audiences to dominate and inflict violence on black people. More controversially, Parks also thinks this segregation prevents black people from defining themselves in terms beyond their history of oppression and slavery. *The America Play* shows that this doesn't have to happen—instead, theater can tell a more complete, integrated, and accurate story of American identity that shows how black and white history are two sides of the same coin.

Who owns Abraham Lincoln's story? Parks argues that all Americans do, and that it is not just morally wrong, but also historically inaccurate and socially counterproductive, to separate stories about black people and other minority groups from those about "America." She argues for a hybrid, not hyphenated, identity that includes the experiences of all Americans. And she contends that separating art into categories according to race perpetuates white supremacy by relegating non-white artists to their own "Great Hole." In short, *The America Play* is Parks's attempt to tell a story about black America—which is to say, America as a whole—without letting blackness limit her narrative possibilities.

THEATER AND REALITY

The America Play, which centers on both a black Abraham Lincoln impersonator and his estranged family's search for him after his death, actually consists of several (often overlapping) plays-within-a-play. From the Foundling Father's "Lincoln Act" to **the Great Hole of History** and the reenactments of Our American Cousin (the play Lincoln was watching when he died), it is often difficult for audiences to tell whether they are watching the play's *real* "figures" (a term Parks prefers to "characters"), or the figures acting out their *own* fictional characters. But this is intentional: not only does Parks hope to show how that theater can capture powerful truths *through* fiction, but she also rejects the hard-and-fast distinction between reality and fiction altogether. In short, Parks argues that everyone is acting all the time, and that there is no "true" original behind the stories that people tell.

By writing several layers of metafiction (that is, fiction *about* fiction) into this play, Parks illuminates the way that acting expresses and creates meaning through reinterpretation. the Foundling Father (who impersonates Lincoln) and his son Brazil (who is hired to mourn at funerals) are both actors who shift between "being themselves" and "acting" throughout the play. The Foundling Father's wife, Lucy, even comments on his incredible talent for "fakin," which she says "was his callin," and acts out *his act* for Brazil. In these examples, acting honors the original by recreating and interpreting it. But it goes further: the Foundling Father's "Lincoln Act" (Act One's title, which is also a pun on his Lincoln reenactment) is *itself* a replica of an original play from the Great Hole of History, a theme park where actors played historical figures for the public. This Great Hole inspired the Foundling Father, who cared about the performance, not the historical figures behind it—for him, performance *was* the reality. Finally, Lincoln famously died in a dramatic setting, when the actor John Wilkes Booth assassinated him in a theater during the play *Our American Cousin*, which also gets reenacted during Parks's second act. The assassination reminds readers and audiences that, even though its purpose is to elevate and celebrate fiction, the theater is a real space with real consequences. So *The America Play* has real consequences, even when it consists of an onstage reenactment (by the actors) of a reenactment (by Lucy and Brazil) of a reenactment (by the Foundling Father) of a reenactment (at the Great Hole) of something that happened in a theater (Lincoln's assassination) during a play (*Our American Cousin*), which is also reenacted.

Parks blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction by showing how copies and interpretations can be just as real as originals (if "originals" even exist). For instance, the Foundling

Father notes that he must distort the truth about Lincoln to satisfy his audience. Lincoln would not have worn his hat indoors, "but people don't like their Lincoln hatless." He uses various **beards** for the sake of flair and freely invents quotes that historical figures like John Wilkes Booth and Mary Todd Lincoln *might* have said. And he is black, while Lincoln was white. But the Foundling Father believes that these artistic liberties add to the power and authenticity of his performance, rather than detracting from it. Similarly, Lucy spends much of Act Two listening for signs of the Foundling Father, including the the gunshot that continually **echoes** in the theater. She emphasizes that one has "tuh know thuh difference" between the original gunshot and its echo—reality and the imitation of it—in order to find the truth that lies behind appearances. But she never figures out which gunshot is real, which suggests that perhaps this distinction is obsolete or unimportant. Similarly, at the end of the play, both the Foundling Father and Brazil give up on the distinction between reality and fiction: Brazil weeps for his father, without making it clear if he is expressing himself spontaneously (as a son) or theatrically (as a professional mourner), and the Foundling Father actually dies while reenacting the Lincoln assassination. Clearly, Parks rejects a sharp distinction between authenticity and acting.

Having rejected the distinction between reality and artistic representation, Parks also flouts narrative and stylistic conventions of the theater in order to give her actors power over the meaning in her work. She writes the intentionally vague stage direction "*(Rest.)*" and sections of blank dialogue called "spells" into her script, so that actors can freely portray their characters (or "figures") in "their pure true simple state." She also brackets sections to indicate that directors can omit them. Parks gives the interpreters of her work more autonomy than they would ordinarily have, just as her figures (like the Foundling Father) have autonomy over how they interpret the people they are supposed to represent (like Lincoln). This highlights actors' power to shape an audience's perception of the "real" figure (fictional character or historical person) being interpreted out onstage. But Parks also makes strategic omissions to highlight the relative nature of any individual dramatic performance, and that emphasize the silences and gaps that the audience will never be able to fill. For instance, she writes secret dialogue that the audience is not allowed to hear—at one point, Lucy tells Brazil something that "ssfor our ears and our ears uhlone." Parks includes homophonic puns, like "he digged the Hole and the Whole held him," that are clear in writing but may be confusing onstage, and she adds footnotes throughout the script, which provide context that the audience doesn't see. In this way, she emphasizes that a performance—no matter how much truth it captures—is never a total, absolute, or perfect reproduction of the essence of an artwork.

FAMILY, TRAUMA, AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

The first act of *The America Play* follows a black man named the Foundling Father, who leaves his gravedigging career to instead make a living reenacting his idol Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Throughout this first act, the Foundling Father only mentions his family in passing. But in Act Two, his wife Lucy and son Brazil move from the shadows to the center of the narrative: they reveal that he abandoned them three decades prior to pursue his Lincoln fantasy and has recently died. Believing that his "lack of proper burial is [their] embarrassment," Lucy and Brazil seek out whatever is left of him. At first, it seems that they are trying to symbolically reverse the fragmentation of their family, but it eventually becomes clear that they cannot heal the wounds of the past. While the Foundling Father copes with his own wounds by running away and forming an imaginary bond with Abraham Lincoln, Lucy and Brazil deal with the ones he inflicts on them by trying to "dig up somethin" that can explain their family ties. None of them escapes family's influence on identity, even though family also often traumatizes them. Ultimately, Parks argues that people must find the bravery to confront this trauma and recognize family's imprint on them, without idolizing it (and especially paternity) at the expense of their own identities and lives.

The Foundling Father constructs his life and identity entirely through his reverence for Abraham Lincoln, whom he treats as a paternal figure. His name reveals this: a "foundling" is an abandoned, often illegitimate child, so the name "Foundling Father" points both to black people's abandonment by a nation built on their oppression and to the Foundling Father's specific relationship to Abraham Lincoln, a man whom he idolizes and resembles like a son in all ways but color. Therefore, his name indicates both a lack of origin and the creation of a lineage—which he achieves despite abandoning his *own* son. In other words, the Foundling Father ironically gives up on fatherhood because he focuses so much on his own imagined parent-child relationship with Lincoln. While this reveals how Parks is skeptical of people defining their identities through their paternity, it also suggests that she fully understands the real and profound consequences of family relationships. The Foundling Father's name is also a play on the "Founding Fathers," the white men (not including Lincoln) who led the American War of Independence. This metaphor of fatherhood confers a kind of mystical respect and authority onto these men, just as the Foundling Father gives this respect to Lincoln. But again, these "fathers" are far from perfect, and idolizing Lincoln ultimately does little to empower the Foundling Father, who—like many African Americans—remains orphaned by history.

The Foundling Father's quest for identity through Lincoln parallels Brazil's search for identity through *him*. Lucy

frequently compares Brazil to his Pa by noting their physical similarities and proudly citing Brazil's abilities as a "digger." While Pa dug graves, Brazil is trying to learn about his Pa by digging up artifacts of his existence, making digging both an inherited trait and a metaphor for his pursuit of hidden truths about his own identity. However, Brazil is ultimately unable to relate to Pa except through the Lincoln myth. At the end of the play, the Foundling Father returns and reenacts the Lincoln assassination for Brazil, actually dying in the process. All he leaves behind for his son is **the giant hole in the ground** where he used to do his "Lincoln Act." Brazil muses that this hole must be his "inheritance of sorts"—like many families pass trauma down through generations, Brazil literally inherits a void, which is the only thing that connects him to his father (although it is really nothing at all). Brazil recognizes the emptiness of this inheritance by calling Pa his "faux-father" and "foe-father" (instead of "forefather"). His father is a fake (faux) and an enemy (foe), but still unavoidably *his*. Accordingly, Brazil recognizes that he will inevitably "follow in [his father's] footsteps," just as his father was "trying somehow to follow in the Great Mans [Lincoln's] footsteps." At the end of the play, Brazil invites the audience into the "Hall of **Wonders**," which now includes his father's corpse. Despite his ambivalence about and alienation from his father, then, Brazil inevitably inherits his role as a narrator of history, seeking meaning and identity through the past, even after he's seen that pursuit to be empty.

While she sees identity as inextricably tied to family, then, Parks also emphasizes how family can also create lasting trauma. Lucy frequently talks about how the Foundling Father exploited and mistreated her: she admits that she "gived intuh him on everything" and lists the things he took from her, which range from "thuh letter R" to "the way [she] walked." This shows that even though she feels powerless to reject the Foundling Father, their relationship brought her suffering more than anything else. Brazil feels a similar lingering pain and resentment towards his father, even though he sees the inalienable connection between them. The lasting impact of their family trauma becomes abundantly clear near the end of Act Two, when the Foundling Father twice asks his family for a hug—but Lucy and Brazil twice reject him. Their search for him was not, it seems, driven by *love*—which, curiously, is word the play never uses *except* in terms of the Foundling Father's love for Lincoln and the Great Hole. Rather, they are driven by a sense of unavoidable obligation.

Ultimately, the nuclear family at the heart of *The America Play* is broken, and it never gets fixed. Lucy and Brazil seek not to reunite with Pa or make amends, but merely to "dig up somethin" that can explain the past. In this sense, Parks examines the consequences of conventional nuclear families even as she recognizes their power over most people. Still, she suggests that idolizing them may be a useless and even destructive pursuit.

DEATH, MOURNING, AND RESURRECTION

The America Play's plot revolves around death: specifically, those of Abraham Lincoln and the Foundling Father, a black man who is Lincoln's "dead ringer" and who makes charges customers to watch him reenact Lincoln's assassination. These deaths are constantly reenacted onstage, and the protagonists' lives revolve around death, too: the Foundling Father, his wife Lucy, and their son Brazil make a living by digging graves, listening to dying people's secrets, and mourning for the dead, respectively. While their jobs presumably serve to help the dead sleep soundly and the living make peace with the departed, in fact the characters are constantly aware of how the dead never truly disappear: Lincoln lives on through his reenactors, people speak from beyond the grave, and rather than getting a "proper burial," the Foundling Father's corpse sits propped up in his "exact replica of **The Great Hole of History**" (a kind of historical reenactment theme park), waiting to be mourned at a funeral that never comes. Parks ultimately rejects the notion that the dead can be buried, and instead shows how they always speak their case, influencing the living through the "**Echoes**" they leave behind.

Many of Parks's characters seek to bury and be done with the dead, which means relegating them to the past and building the future without them. The Foundling Father, Lucy, and Brazil's jobs all ostensibly have this aim. As a gravedigger, the Foundling Father *literally* buries the dead, and as a "Confidence" who listens to and keeps the secrets of dying people, Lucy appears to give them closure and ease their transition out of the world. Brazil is both a "Digger" like his father—indeed, he is the only character who actually digs onstage—and a professional mourner who knows how to "Wail," "Weep," "Sob," "Moan," and "**Gnash**" for the dead at funerals, to help the living process their loved ones' absence. Throughout Act One, the Foundling Father raises the metaphor of gravedigging to talk about Abraham Lincoln's legacy: he imagines Mary Todd Lincoln telling him, "*Emergency*, oh, *Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground," and repeats this line over and over. Rather than saving her husband, Mary Todd seemingly wants to bury him—to close his story and legacy. Meanwhile, the Foundling Father constantly resurrects this legacy by acting as Lincoln. Similarly, Lucy and Brazil travel out West in Act Two because they want to give the Foundling Father the "proper burial" he deserves. Just as the Foundling Father dreams about burying Lincoln, defining his legacy, and closing his story for good, Lucy and Brazil hope to do the same with the Foundling Father.

But the dead are always alive in this play, whether literally or figuratively. They speak from beyond the grave, through surrogates or their own voices, and continue to define the lives and worlds of those who come after them. In this sense, for

Parks, the dead are never truly buried or gone. The clearest example of this is how the Foundling Father speaks for Abraham Lincoln, inventing stories about Lincoln's life and literally sustaining Lincoln's legacy by impersonating him, reciting his speeches, and (of course) reenacting his assassination. But *The America Play* also suggests that the dead speak more literally. Throughout Act Two, Lucy searches for the traces, or "**Whispers**," of her dead husband. In addition to Whispers, she clarifies, the dead leave various other kinds of **echoes**. She believes the dead literally speak to her, which is in line with Parks's artistic process (she contends that she does not invent characters, but rather that characters invent themselves and then speak to her). While Lucy has trouble detecting the "Whispers," they are clear to the audience: the Foundling Father returns throughout Act Two to present moments from the play Our American Cousin (which Lincoln was watching when he was assassinated) and then "to say a few words from the grave." Indeed, while Lucy wonders if the "Whispers" will come out, Brazil believes that, even if his Pa died alone, he would have "just dribble[d] thuh words out" so that "Confidencell gather up thuh whispers when she arrives." In fact, Lucy is the "Confidence"—this is what she calls her job, which entails packaging the traces left by the dead into a coherent message and determining how and when to let that message out. For instance, she recalls a man named Bram Price and his son, "Little Bram Price Junior," both of whom used her services. She kept Bram Price's secret for 19 years (before revealing it onstage during the play). Meanwhile, Bram Price Junior's "Echo" came back "and [ate] up everybodys food just like he did when he was livin." For Lucy, then—and for the Price family—the dead are still an important force in the world of the living.

In Parks's play, it is impossible to fully "put the Great Man in the ground": the dead speak to the living, even if only some can hear the wisdom in their "Whispers." In this way, *The America Play* boldly challenges the dichotomy between life and death: when the Foundling Father returns in Act Two, he is both already dead and clearly alive. He gives his own eulogy, noting that he "buried all [his] things"—the same things Brazil uncovers, christens "**Wonders**," and gives new life in a new show. Tellingly, at the very end of the play, the Foundling Father never gets his "proper burial"—rather, Brazil "prop[s him] upright in our great Hole" and adds him to the "Hall of Wonders," while he and Lucy wait for the "hundreds upon thousands" of funeral guests to arrive. Brazil implores the audience to "Note: thuh last words.—And thuh last breaths.—And how thuh nation mourns—." But this mourning is the start, not the end, of the Foundling Father's fame and impact: for Parks, then, mourning is not only a display of grief or source of closure, but also a way of sustaining memories of and lessons from the departed.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE GREAT HOLE OF HISTORY

The America Play is mysteriously set in "an exact replica of The Great Hole of History." The audience quickly learns that the Foundling Father decided to dig this "exact replica" to perform his Lincoln assassination act after visiting the original Great Hole, a history-themed amusement park full of "lookuhlike[s]" who paraded around dressed as historical figures. So the Foundling Father's replica of The Great Hole is, in fact, a reenactor's reenactment of a reenactment of the past—and yet, to him, it rings as true and authentic as books and archives do for other kinds of historians. He mistakes reenactment for truth by taking inspiration from the original Great Hole, but also shows how the whole truth of what happened in the past is never fully recoverable, and so always subject to interpretation and distortion through the voices of those who narrate it.

The Great Hole itself also comments on a particular way of narrating history. It randomly juxtaposes figures from various places and time periods—even fiction—like "Marcus Garvey. Ferdinand and Isabella. Mary Queen of thuh Scots! Tarzan King of thuh Apes!" This contextless concept of history, a domain where "thuh greats" do great things alone, is antithetical to Parks's attempts to recover the **echoes** and "**Whispers**" of erased voices from the past.

Moreover, The Great Hole also comments on the erasure of black experiences and voices from American history: for African Americans, history is a "hole" that does not reflect their or their ancestors' experiences. But for Parks, this erasure also means an opportunity to introduce new narratives that help define (or redefine) African American identity and history. In short, The Great Hole suggests that history itself is always reinvented and re-narrated in the present, but also provides a clear example of how *not* to narrate it.

THE BUST AND PASTEBOARD CUTOUT OF LINCOLN

Throughout Act One, the Foundling Father periodically interrupts his monologue to acknowledge two idols he has brought onstage: a bust and a pasteboard cutout of Abraham Lincoln. The Foundling Father announces, and then performs, "A nod to Mr. Lincolns bust" and "A wink to Mr. Lincolns pasteboard cutout." His wink and nod distance him from the character he is playing: they show that he recognizes that he is riffing on Lincoln's identity, but also has lost his own identity outside of the character of Lincoln (to the point that he

has no real name in the play). He "nods" to Lincoln as though to acknowledge and praise the Great Man, but "winks" as though sharing an inside joke with him, and announces each of these beforehand as though to remind the audience that he is constantly turning citation into a performance. So the wink and nod are at once a show of admiration for Lincoln and acknowledgment of the unbridgeable gap between the Great Man and the Lesser Known: as cheap, even gaudy images of greatness, the bust and cutout recall the Foundling Father himself, who is both a cheap, imperfect copy and a spirited, dedicated actor driven by an admirable desire to make his mark on the world.

Of course, in its own way, the play itself is also a nod and a wink to history: it both praises Lincoln and good-humoredly mocks the way his legacy has been reduced to the image of a man with a hat and **beard**. It is also significant that Brazil later digs up the bust of Lincoln and adds it to his "Hall of **Wonders**," which illustrates how this process of mythologization can work: Brazil unironically turns the junk of the past into a thing worth marveling at.

THE LINCOLN BEARDS

When he first addresses the audience in Act One, the Foundling Father carries a box of beards with him. these are, of course, the beards for his Abraham Lincoln act, which range from a stunning blonde "fancy beard" and a festive "holiday beard" to a "beard of uncertainty." He explains that his barber helped him make these beards, and it is even possible that he made them out of Lucy's hair (in Act Two, she lists "Thuh hair from off my head" as one of the many things the Foundling Father has taken away from her). Notably, as with the **bust** of Lincoln, the beard box and one of the beards turn back up in Act Two as one of Brazil's "**wonders**," as he reinterprets his father's junk as real historical treasures.

While the Foundling Father's various beards point to the way that his character is only knowable through his relationship to Lincoln, and that in this sense he is constantly in disguise, it also shows how history branches apart in this play, with multiple and often inconsistent narratives emerging about the past. Recognizing that "some inaccuracies are good for business," he intentionally plays Lincoln the character from history, with little interest in how Lincoln *actually* may have been. Indeed, his creativity with Lincoln's character suggests not only that single truths are not recoverable in history—or even worth recovering in it—but also that interpreting history is what really brings it to life and makes it relevant and valuable to people in the present day.

THE WONDERS

Parks knows that one person's trash is another's treasure, and she illustrates this dynamic by having Brazil dig up many of the Foundling Father's "faux-historical knickknacks" in Act Two and then make a "Hall of Wonders" out of them. These "wonders" range from George Washington's "wooden teeth" (or "nibblers") and a pair of "lick-ed boots" to "declarations of war," medals for things like "knowledge of sewin'" and "fakin'," and by the very end of the play, the corpse of the Foundling Father himself, dressed up as Lincoln. Of course, the energy Brazil dedicates to digging up these "wonders" contrasts strongly with his Pa's many years digging graves—while Pa puts the past to rest, Brazil digs it up and spins it into history. Although they are obviously cheap falsehoods and forgeries, the "wonders" get turned into an authoritative version of history through Brazil's museum-like collection, which clearly parallels the way certain often unimportant elements of history—like Lincoln's hat and the first four words of the Gettysburg Address—come to displace the facts and stories that truly have profound impacts on the present day. The same process happens with the Foundling Father, of course: he turns Lincoln's myth into his own life, and his story becomes a powerful myth for Brazil and Lucy, compelling them to move out West in search of the replica of **the Great Hole of History**. Indeed, Parks suggests that things and people like the "wonders," Abraham Lincoln, and the Foundling Father *turn into history* simply because others, like Brazil, invest them with a sense of value or significance. While this implies that history is malleable and open to revision, it also means that people like Brazil and his Pa have some power to determine how and why the past is meaningful to them and their posterity.

ECHOES

The America Play is full of echoes—besides the **Whispers** that Lucy searches for all around the replica of **the Great Hole of History** with her ear trumpet, the most important is doubtlessly the "gunshot [that] echoes. Loudly. And echoes" throughout the second act. This echo is clearly the reflection of the gun that fires during the Foundling Father's reenactment of the Lincoln assassination, which recurs over and over during Act One. In Act Two, then, the Lincoln assassination is constantly present to the senses even though it is visually absent. It is unclear whether it continues somewhere offstage, or if the past is simply leaving its mark on the present. At the very end of the play, the Foundling Father returns and appears to *actually* die by gunshot, and it is impossible to tell if this event is real, a reenactment, or simply an echo of the past.

Later in Act Two, Lucy—an expert on the signs left by the departed—explains to Brazil and the audience that there are a number of different kinds of echoes. There are echoes of "sound" and echoes of "thuh words" (which can be divided into "thuh words from thuh dead," which are "unrelated," and "thuh Whispers," which are "related. Like our Fathuhs." While all these

echoes reflect the way the past (and the dead) speak to the present (and the living), Lucy's insistence on "know[ing] thuh difference" between reality and the echo also speaks to the impossibility of distinguishing reality from illusion in this play: just as nobody knows what is and is not true of Lincoln and what truly happened to the Foundling Father after he moved West, or who is acting a character or truly performing as themselves.

WHISPERS

While Brazil spends Act Two digging for **Wonders**, Lucy spends it listening for the Foundling Father's "Whispers" through her ear trumpet. These "Whispers," which are the **echoes** of "thuh Disembodied Voice," represent the way that the dead speak to the living, or history influences the present. As a "Confidence," or secret-keeper for the dead, it is understandable that Lucy would take charge of discovering these hidden traces of the departed—Brazil suggests that, if the Foundling Father died alone, he would have "jusut dribble[d his last] words out" so that "Confidencell gather up thuh whispers when she arrives." In other words, the echoes of Pa's final words and wishes should be bouncing around somewhere near his replica of **the Great Hole of History**, so that Lucy can assemble them back together into something intelligible when she gets there. They are, in a sense, one manifestation of Pa's legacy—his monologue in Act One is another, and of course the Wonders are one more. In short, then, the presence of Whispers in Parks's universe shows how dead people, past events, and vanished places and things are never truly gone, but continue to influence the world through the traces they leave behind.

THE "GNASH"

As a professional mourner, Brazil knows how to rile up a funeral crowd and help people process loved ones' deaths through techniques like "the Weep," "the Sob," and "the Moan." In fact, the Foundling Father taught him these, along with the mysterious "Gnash." Throughout Act Two, Brazil remembers "gnash[ing]" at funerals—once so hard that he "chipped uh tooth." And at the end of the play, he resolves to "gnash" for the Foundling Father—although, when it comes time, his mother Lucy tells him to "save it for thuh guests" (who never arrive).

Although clearly the most powerful of Brazil's mourning techniques, "the Gnash" is also likely unintelligible to most audiences. As elsewhere in this play, here Parks calls attention to the way certain private meanings can never be fully communicated, least of all onstage, by intentionally making her characters opaque. Family secrets are an example of such private knowledge, so while "the Gnash" shows how Brazil inherits his sense of identity and purpose from his father, his uncertainty about whether to "gnash" for his father also reveals their relationship's underlying ambivalence.

The "gnash" is also a specific reference to a definite source: the Bible (specifically the Gospel of Matthew) repeatedly mentions people—specifically, those who are not chosen during the Second Coming—mourning through "weeping and gnashing of teeth." By subtly putting *The America Play* in conversation with the New Testament, Parks both shows how her characters inherit the Christian tradition, as much as white people do, and draws a parallel between God's abandonment of the unworthy and history's abandonment of black families like Brazil's. In fact, some scholars believe that this phrase was added later to Matthew, which makes "gnashing" a fitting addition to a play that emphasizes how history is constructed by those who remember and narrate it.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *The America Play and Other Works* published in 1994.

Act 1: Lincoln Act Quotes

"In the beginning, all the world was *America*."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

The America Play begins with this cryptic epigraph, which introduces two central questions about American identity that pervade the entire work: *who* is America, and *for whom* is America? In this quote from his *Second Treatise on Government*, John Locke's comparison between America and "all the world" suggests that there is something ideal or enviable about the United States. While Parks cites this to imply that her play may also reveal a similarly universal truth by exploring America, her main aim in using this quote is to explore the assumptions and contradictions in Americans' beliefs about their country. Specifically, she wants to show the hypocrisy in the ideology called American exceptionalism—the idea that there is something inherently special and extraordinary about the United States. This extraordinary feature is often condensed to ideas of "freedom" or "liberty," but throughout *The America Play*, Parks shows not only how this liberty has only ever been reserved for some Americans and how the narrow story of American exceptionalism distorts the historical truth, but also how investing too deeply in this narrative—as

her protagonist, the Foundling Father, does—can lead people to sacrifice themselves for the sake of an invisible idea.

Moreover, Locke was not talking about the contemporary United States at all when he wrote this line, but rather about Native American societies that preceded European colonization. He meant to say that these societies show what is really necessary for human life—community and liberty, rather than things like money and property—and he derived his concepts of basic human rights from this analysis. Locke's philosophy, in turn, became foundational to democracy in Western Europe, the United States, and Latin America. But the same American government that was inspired by Locke's ideas about liberty ended up exterminating, oppressing, and crushing the liberty of the very people who gave him this idea. Parks thus sees a profound irony in Locke's interest in Native American societies, and she deliberately takes Locke's quote out of context in order to show how the simplistic narratives of history, liberty, and progress that many Americans grow up with are written from the shortsighted perspective of white men. If America is defined as white, as it tends to be automatically in such narratives, then liberty and justice actually come at the *expense* of other kinds of people—like the characters Parks presents in this play.

> *A great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of The Great Hole of History.*

Related Characters: The Foundling Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

Quite mysteriously, Parks locates *The American Play* in "an exact replica of The Great Hole of History," a setting that she leaves unexplained for some time. On the page, this setting contrasts sharply with the quote by John Locke that Parks uses as her play's epigraph: whereas Locke compares America to "all the world," the "exact replica of The Great Hole of History" makes it sound empty and hollow.

While the Great Hole of History eventually plays a central role in the plot of *The America Play*, the questions it initially raises provide a valuable framework for readers to tackle the rest of this complex and nonlinear work. In what sense can "History" be a "Great Hole," or an absence rather than a presence? Could it be that history lingers over the present despite not actually *being* present, such that engaging with it means poking around for meaning in the darkness? Could it be that history has been raided and thoroughly mined-out, stripped of anything of use and left bare? (If so, what stories, characters, and objects have been taken?) Or could it be a specific metaphor for African American history, in which centuries of slavery and violence make recovering an accurate or complete historical narrative impossible? And in what sense can a "Great Hole" have "an exact replica?" Is it ever possible to accurately replicate or reenact history—and does a reenactment need to be accurate to be valuable? Although Parks never explicitly answers any of these questions, all of them guide her characters' strange journey throughout *The America Play*, as they speak from the Great Hole, both trying to join and trying to overcome the forces of history.

> "He digged the hole and the whole held him."

Related Characters: The Foundling Father (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

The Foundling Father opens *The America Play* with a number of cryptic, chiastic lines that introduce some of the central motifs in the play, including the three that appear here: digging, holes, and wholes. Whereas the other examples of chiasmus come directly from different dictionaries, as Parks notes in her footnotes to the play, this one is the Foundling Father's own invention. But the chiasmus his various introductory lines share—the "X" or "A/B/B/A" structure, which in this case goes Him/Hole/(W)hole/Him—also represents the complex relationship between the Foundling Father and Abraham Lincoln, the man with whom his identity is crossed: Lincoln inspires the Foundling Father, and the Foundling Father spends his life impersonating Lincoln.

Beyond its formal significance, however, this line also speaks both literally and metaphorically to the Foundling Father's identity and lifelong project. "He digged the whole," which is written in an intentionally unconventional English

vernacular like much of this play, references both the Foundling Father's long career as a gravedigger and his specific digging accomplishment that is relevant to this play: he has dug a replica of the Great Hole of History, which happens to be the play's setting. As he stands in this hole, the phrase "the whole held him" might refer literally to the entirety of the hole, which has become something of a home for the Foundling Father since he dug it, or it might refer to a different kind of wholeness—namely, the whole of history, or the whole of the America that the play claims to take as its subject. In short, it seems that, by digging the hole, the Foundling Father has incorporated himself into history or the nation, which now determine his place and life going forward. Notably, the homophonous pun between "hole" and "whole" is noticeable on the page, but it would not be evident onstage—this illustrates how Parks uses differences in medium and strategic omissions to create different layers of meaning throughout this play.

There was once a man who was told that he bore a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. He was tall and thinly built just like the Great Man. His legs were the longer part just like the Great Mans legs. His hands and feet were large as the Great Mans were large. The Lesser Known had several beards which he carried around in a box. The beards were his although he himself had not grown them on his face but since he'd secretly bought the hairs from his barber and arranged their beard shapes and since the procurement and upkeep of his beards took so much work he figured that the beards were completely his. Were as authentic as he was, so to speak. His beard box was of cherry wood and lined with purple velvet. He had the initials "A.L." tooled in gold on the lid.

Related Characters: The Foundling Father (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 159-160

Explanation and Analysis

After his mysterious opening monologue, the Foundling Father jumps into this much more linear story about his own upbringing. He talks about himself in the third person, however, which establishes a strange distance between the version of the Foundling Father that is talking onstage and the version that he is talking *about*. Accordingly, this suggests that perhaps he has succeeded in surpassing his identity as the subordinated "Lesser Known."

The Foundling Father tells his story as though his "strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln" predestined him to turn himself into the man, but of course he leaves out one crucial detail: he is black, and Lincoln was white. This does not mean he cannot be a Lincoln reenactor, but Lincoln's legacy is important precisely because race has been such a central and consequential idea in the history of American society. Despite this difference and his manufactured beards, the Foundling Father insists on his "authentic[ity]," which suggests that Parks sees authenticity as something that goes beyond simple resemblance or correspondence to historical truth. Rather, the Foundling Father implies, he can express the truth about Lincoln even though he is black and even if he wears a different beard every day—the different variations of his narrative, it seems, are equally valid and consequential. (Curiously, while this play consistently raises questions about African American history and identity, and the protagonists are essentially always portrayed as African American, Parks actually specifies this nowhere in the text of her play.)

"You sockdologizing old man-trap!"

Related Characters: The Foundling Father (speaker), John Wilkes Booth, Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

This line, which the Foundling Father calls a "thin joke[]" from a "bad play[]," was not only considered quite funny once upon a time, but also had important consequences in American history. This is because John Wilkes Booth—famous actor, white supremacist pro-slavery ideologue, and Confederate sympathizer—decided that this line would offer his perfect opportunity to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln, who would hear it while watching the popular play *Our American Cousin* in Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., on April 14, 1865. The context of the line is relatively unimportant: it was a sexist insult by the play's title character, and it drew uproarious laughs with the neologism "sockdologizing," which really does not mean anything at all. In fact, English playwright Tom Taylor invented the word in *Our American Cousin* as a farcical joke on stereotypical American vernacular speech, and Parks

takes advantage of this fact in order to add another layer of symbolism to her commentary on American identity: "sockdologizing," one man's stereotyped example of Americanness, became cover for Booth to make a far more sinister statement about the centrality of racism and slavery to American history and society. Parks shows how Booth paired comedy and tragedy by assassinating Lincoln, and she repeatedly uses this same pairing to express African Americans' perpetual search for acceptance in the United States. For instance, she has the Foundling Father reenact the assassination over and over again in a scene that is comically incongruent but also evokes the long history of racial violence against black people.

> "*Emergency* oh, *Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground."

Related Characters: Mary Todd Lincoln, The Foundling Father (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Although the Foundling Father presents this quote as Mary Todd Lincoln's reaction to her husband's assassination, he also readily admits that he made it up: he has always imagined her saying this, so eventually he just decided that it might as well have been true. Of course, it is somewhat paradoxical: if there were truly an "*Emergency*" after Lincoln were shot, it would be that he needed medical attention, not that he needed to be "put [...] in the ground." And if Lincoln were already dead, why would it be an "*Emergency*" to bury him? Clearly, Mary Todd's cries of "*Emergency*" point to another, deeper consideration that involves what she feels must be done with the dead.

Indeed, as the Foundling Father repeats this line throughout *The America Play*, "put[ting] the Great Man in the ground" becomes a metaphor for treating the dead as gone forever, defining their legacy once and for all, and confining them to the past while reserving the future for the living. The Great Hole of History does this by labeling certain dead people "Greats" and parading them around as if they were all the same. For instance, while Lucy sustains the memory of the dead by guarding their last words in "Confidence." For Parks, Lucy's approach is the right one, and the dead always have lessons to teach the living, whether they send literal voices (like their "echoes" or "Whispers"), or they simply possess wisdom that is worth keeping alive.

> 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. The Lesser Known had a favorite hole. A chasm, really.

Related Characters: The Foundling Father (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

After he notes his resemblance to Abraham Lincoln and narrates his version of Lincoln's death and burial, the Foundling Father offers this overall analysis of how different people's lives take "shape" and get remembered by "posterity." Lincoln ("The Great Man") is remembered because of his rise from humble origins, power as an orator, and striking "image" and "stature." Of course, this is only one way of remembering history, even if it is also the dominant one—in contrast, Parks encourages her readers and audiences to consider whether this is really the best way of memorializing historical figures. Does learning about Lincoln's hat and height do anything to help people understand his historical significance for African Americans, his dedication to a united nation, and his moral character? In turn, does the Foundling Father miss the point by dressing up by Lincoln rather than taking inspiration from his life and deeds?

The Foundling Father's life, in contrast to Lincoln's, is defined by "a favorite hole"—the Great Hole of History, where reenactors inspired him to try acting out history for himself. Figuratively, too, his life is defined by a void: the unbridgeable "chasm" between himself and Lincoln, whom he yearns to become. And yet, because his life is defined by his inspiration and striving, rather than a simplistic story and set of images (like Lincoln's), the Foundling Father at least comes to life in this play. In other words, even though the Foundling Father's existence is tragic, Parks encourages her readers and audience members to see the tragedy in

reducing history to a "log cabin" and "Big Town" rather than taking it seriously as a source of questions, answers, and lessons that can inform the present.

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.

Related Characters: The Foundling Father (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

After describing his experience visiting the Great Hole of History (a theme park full of historical reenactors) on his honeymoon, the Foundling Father explains the impression that this Great Hole made on him: it stuck in his mind "like an echo" because it brought the past to life. In this somewhat muddled passage, he explains how his perspective on the reenactors changed as he kept replaying "the histories" over and over in his head and began to realize that he could do the same and reenact Abraham Lincoln for a living. At first, the reenactors were literally parading past him, as in next to him. But later, he began to connect the dots, and he realizes that the things he saw that day were expressions of things that actually *did* happen sometime in the past ("*behind him*" in history). In other words, his understanding of history was formed entirely through what he saw at the Great Hole.

The Foundling Father's reflections on the Great Hole speak to how narratives have the power to create the past in people's imagination and people have the power to transform one another's understandings of history and the world through reenactment and theater. That said, the Great Hole's view of history is also rather limited: its characters do not speak, act, or in any way explain the context that makes them "Great"—rather, they are merely a parade of faces all lumped together into a single vision of "Greatness." The Foundling Father's love for them is about aesthetic nostalgia, and perhaps a sense of wonder at the fact that history *really happened*, but not in any way a sincere appreciation for the way that history shaped the present or the fact that "Greats" were also human beings like everyone else—and therefore everyone has the capacity to shape history through their actions in the present.

The Lesser Known had under his belt a few of the Great Mans words and after a day of digging, in the evenings, would stand in his hole reciting. But the Lesser Known was a curiosity at best. None of those who spoke of his virtual twinship with greatness would actually pay money to watch him be that greatness. One day he tacked up posters inviting them to come and throw old food at him while he spoke. This was a moderate success. People began to save their old food "for Mr. Lincoln" they said. He took to traveling playing small towns. Made money. And when someone remarked that he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot, it was as if the Great Mans footsteps had been suddenly revealed.

Related Characters: The Foundling Father (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

After he visits the Great Hole of History and decides to become a reenactor himself, the Foundling Father starts developing and practicing his act. He starts learning about Lincoln and determining what, exactly, inspires him about the man, then converts those elements of Lincoln—represented here by his speeches—into an act. But he is distressed to find that nobody "actually pay[s] money to watch him be [Lincoln's] greatness." As he saw at the Great Hole of History, spectacle sells, but historical insight and moral lessons do not. So he switches to letting people assault him, which is precisely the opposite of what people ought to do with a "Great Man" from history.

Of course, racism is the subtext to the Foundling Father's tumultuous path here: either people wanted to throw food at him and pretend to shoot him because they like the idea of inflicting violence on the president who freed the slaves, or because they want a guilt-free excuse to inflict violence on a black man who will happily charge to be humiliated and victimized. Either way, to fulfill his dreams of impersonating Lincoln, the Foundling Father has to give up on impersonating Lincoln's *greatness*, and instead become something like a racialized punching bag. While he could give people the opportunity to reenact heroic moments from history along with him or step into Lincoln's shoes themselves, instead he ends up mythologizing and elevating the violence committed against Lincoln, which loses all the

context that made it such a heinous crime in the first place.

> *(A Man, as John Wilkes Booth, enters. He takes a gun and "stands in position": at the left side of the Foundling Father, as Abraham Lincoln, pointing the gun at the Foundling Father's head)*
> A MAN: Ready.
> THE FOUNDLING FATHER: Haw Haw Haw Haw
> *(Rest)*
> HAW HAW HAW HAW
> *(Booth shoots. Lincoln "slumps in his chair." Booth jumps)*
> A MAN *(Theatrically)*: "Thus to the tyrants!"
> *(Rest)*
> Hhhh. *(Exits)*

Related Characters: John Wilkes Booth, Abraham Lincoln, The Foundling Father (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164-165

Explanation and Analysis

After the Foundling Father explains how he developed his "Lincoln Act," he abruptly performs it here for the first time of many in this play. The reenactment is short and brutal, cut down to the essentials—the laughter, gunshot, and punchline—with virtually all context omitted. But when that context is taken into account, the act begins to look deeply disturbing: people pay to put themselves in the shoes of a criminal, murderer, and irredeemable promoter of slavery, and in the process the violence they act out gets racialized, too. This scene is supposed to make the audience uncomfortable—indeed, anyone who enjoys it or finds it humorous is not just missing the point, but is also part of the problem. The Foundling Father is forced to submit himself to white violence and exploitation in order to make a penny (which is a deliberate choice by Parks: the least valuable coin, and the only one that is not silver in color, happens to have Lincoln's face on it). Ultimately, it is clear that the Foundling Father will never get taken seriously by his clients, and he is more likely harming Lincoln's legacy than sustaining it.

Curiously, while the dialogue continues to come from "A MAN" and "THE FOUNDLING FATHER," according to the stage directions, their reenactment has transformed them into "Booth" and "Lincoln." This illustrates the way this play blurs the lines among acting, reenacting, and simply being oneself: when they enter into the context of the reenactment, the Foundling Father and his client come to stand in for the identities and legacies of the historical figures they represent.

> The Great Man lived in the past that is was an inhabitant of time immemorial and the Lesser Known out West alive a resident of the present. And the Great Mans deeds had transpired during the life of the Great Man somewhere in past-land that is somewhere "back there" and all this while the Lesser Known digging his holes bearing the burden of his resemblance all the while trying somehow to equal the Great Man in stature, word and deed going forward with his lesser life trying somehow to follow in the Great Mans footsteps footsteps that were of course behind him. The Lesser Known trying somehow to catch up to the Great Man all this while and maybe running too fast in the wrong direction. Which is to say that maybe the Great Man had to catch him. Hhhh. Ridiculous.

Related Characters: The Foundling Father (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170-171

Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of Act 1, having told the audience his story, revealed that he hit a dead end with his Lincoln Act, and performed this act repeatedly onstage, the Foundling Father starts to view his own life from a removed perspective and reevaluate his relationship to Lincoln. Although he is rambling, his meaning is clear: Lincoln is in the past, and the Foundling Father is in the present, so how can he become someone who is already dead and gone, or "follow in [...] footsteps that were of course behind him"? By realizing that he has been "running too fast in the wrong direction" his whole life, the Foundling Father starts to reconsider what it takes to best honor Lincoln's legacy. Because he learned about history as things that existed outside the lineage of cause and effect—as "time immemorial"—he turned Lincoln into an archetype rather than a flesh-and-blood historical figure whose greatness is a product of his reality (rather than his otherworldliness). In this sense, as the Foundling Father has put it, Lincoln has caught up to *him* and made him realize that he will never "equal the Great Man in stature, word and deed" by trying to copy the Great Man exactly, but rather by learning from the Great Man's accomplishments and applying the wisdom he gleans from them to his own life experience, context, and goals.

LINCOLN
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Related Characters: John Wilkes Booth, Abraham Lincoln, The Foundling Father (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Act 1, during the final time that the Foundling Father reenacts the Lincoln assassination onstage, Parks writes this rather unconventional dialogue into the scene. It comes after the man playing Booth pretends to shoot the Foundling Father and yells "Thus to the tyrants!" and before he "*jumps*" and tries out another line: "The South is avenged!" In fact, Parks frequently uses such exchanges of blank dialogue—which she calls "spells"—to give her directors and actors a greater degree of freedom over their interpretation of *The America Play*. She asks actors to represent their characters in "their pure true simple state" during these sections—this can mean adding their own dialogue, improvising movements or gestures, or any of a number of other things. She also frequently uses the stage direction "*(Rest.)*" and brackets, marking dialogue that can be omitted, for a similar purpose: they reduce her absolute control over her work's narrative and let *The America Play* fit flexibly into different contexts, when necessary.

But Parks's "spells" also have an important symbolic function: they express one of her most important arguments about the nature and knowability of historical truths (or essentially anything that happened in the past). She emphasizes throughout her work that exact details about the past are usually unavailable to us in the present, and so it is better to speculate without pretending to be right than to claim a single, authoritative version of events as true. By writing "spells" into her script, then, she not only gives actors the chance to speculate, but also calls into question the most common narratives about what happened at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865: is it possible to know what transpired between Lincoln and Booth in the moments after the shooting? There is clearly a hole in this part of the conventional story—it is one that facts and figures simply cannot fill, and eyewitnesses do not even agree. (After all, this is why the man playing Booth tries out two different punchlines.) In many places, Parks fills these holes with narratives of her own, but here she both explicitly points out that the truth about the assassination is unknowable and lets her actors—both the Foundling Father and his client as actors, and the people who play those figures onstage—determine what their truth about the exchange between "LINCOLN" and "BOOTH" will be.

Act 2: The Hall of Wonders Quotes

A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes.

Related Characters: The Foundling Father, Brazil, Lucy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Act 1 ends with the sound of a gunshot, and although Act 2 takes place some indefinite time period later, it opens with the same gunshot in the same setting (the "exact replica of The Great Hole of History" that the Foundling Father has dug), which clearly establishes narrative continuity between the two halves of the play. This echoing gunshot, however, is not just a convenient prop: it is also a crucial part of the plot in Act 2, because Lucy realizes that it is a trace or "echo" of the Foundling Father's past in the same spot where she and Brazil now stand. Just as the Lincoln assassination recurs over and over again in Act 1, this gunshot—no doubt the same one from this assassination—recurs throughout Act 2. While the assassination and gunshot both stay mostly the same from one instance to the next, the slight differences among their iterations and the context *surrounding* their appearance leads their function and meaning in the play to shift slightly every time.

It is worth considering if this audible gunshot is an "echo" of the blanks fired in Act 1, of the actual Lincoln assassination, or perhaps somehow of both of these at the same time (say, if the Foundling Father's reenactment can itself be considered an "echo" of the real Lincoln assassination). Has a single instance from the distant past left it behind, like an earthquake leaves behind aftershocks? Or does each gunshot mark the past happening anew, as it is remembered and reformulated by those who live in the present? While Parks does not definitively answer these questions, the echoing gunshot does make it clear that the past is reaching

out to the present—and becoming a part of it as a result.

Act 2, Part A: Big Bang Quotes

Dig on, son. —. Cant stop diggin till you dig up somethin. You dig that something up you brush that something off you give that something uh designated place. Its own place. Along with thuh other discoveries. In thuh Hall of Wonders. Uh place in the Hall of Wonders right uhlong with thuh rest of thuh Wonders hear?

Related Characters: Lucy (speaker), Brazil

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

In Act 2, Lucy and Brazil have a clear division of labor, which they seem to have agreed upon before arriving: while Lucy wanders around listening for signs or "echoes" from the past, she tells Brazil to dig—just like his Pa (the Foundling Father) used to, she frequently notes. But while Pa dug graves to bury the dead, Brazil is busy digging up the junk that his Pa has left behind, in the "exact replica of The Great Hole of History" that the Foundling Father also dug and then used to stage his Lincoln Act. This metaphor goes deeper: the Foundling Father dug graves, empty spaces, in order to take people out of the world and sequester them underground, relegating them to history. In contrast, Brazil digs graves to bring forgotten "Wonders" back *into* the world and, in turn, bring history back to life.

But Brazil's task of digging for "Wonders" is not only significant because of its contrast to the Foundling Father's gravedigging. Rather, it also speaks to the way history is narrated and made relevant to the present. Namely, digging represents truth-seeking, which this quote from Lucy makes abundantly clear: as they look for evidence of the Foundling Father's existence, Brazil must look "till [he] dig[s] up somethin," and then his job is to make sense of that "somethin" and package it in a way that it fits into a "designated place" in the reconstructed narrative he and Lucy are piecing together. In other words, Brazil's job—digging and categorizing—becomes a metaphor for uncovering information about the past and then weaving a narrative out of it. Without a narrative, of course, the relics of the past are meaningless—which is why categorizing and "brush[ing things] off" are key to making sense of the past, even if they distort the objects in question.

BRAZIL: [We're from out East. We're not from these parts. *(Rest)*
Mv foe-father, her husband, my Daddy, her mate, her man, my Pa come out here. Out West.
(Rest)
Come out here all uhlone. Cleared thuh path tamed thuh wilderness dug this whole Hole with his own 2 hands and et cetera.
(Rest)
Left his family behind. Back Last. His Lucy and his child. He waved "Goodbye." Left us tuh carry on. I was only 5.
(Rest)]
My Daddy was uh Digger. Shes whatcha call uh Confidence. I did thuh weepin and thuh moanin.
(Rest)
His lonely death and lack of proper burial is our embarrassment.

Related Characters: Brazil (speaker), Lucy, The Foundling Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 178-179

Explanation and Analysis

Brazil's monologue, which is presumably addressed directly to the audience, underlines the conflicts and contradictions in his family life (and particularly the Foundling Father's role in it). First, he explains his and Lucy's presence in "these parts" by reference to the patriarch who indirectly dragged them "out West." This patriarch gets many names, the most notable of which is "foe-father." Audibly indistinguishable from "fore-father" in Brazil's dialect, the pun "foe-father" is only available in the script's written version. This allows Parks to further emphasize the way different modes of storytelling produce different realities, and it also suggests that Brazil harbors some animosity towards the father he considers a "foe" (or enemy). While this contrasts with his apparent respect for the Foundling Father, it is not difficult to see that his real feelings might be more conflicted, as the Foundling Father left when Brazil was "only 5." This helps explain why Brazil's statement of shame is remarkably direct and written in a conventionally perfect English that contrasts with the dialect he usually speaks (especially

when he is feeling emotional): "His lonely death and lack of proper burial is our embarrassment." This statement expresses a sense of family obligation and duty, not love for his Pa, and suggests that the Foundling Father is even further burdening his family by loading them with yet another obligation to him.

Brazil also talks about Westward migration, which is an important recurring motif in this book: not only does Parks add to the Foundling Father, Lucy, and Brazil's sense of alienation and displacement by turning them into immigrants, but she also implicitly cites the important pattern of white migration to the western United States during the 19th century. Just as the Foundling Father takes up the white archetype of Lincoln, then, he also fulfills the equally-white archetype of the brave and heroic Westward migrant who goes "all uhlone" to seek fame and fortune based on the work he can do "with his own 2 hands and et cetera." Of course, this story is a myth and Parks shows why. White migrants were not simply taking empty, fertile land granted to them by God—rather, they were being gifted land by a government that stole that land from Native Americans. This government support meant they were not going alone, and their quest for fortune in the Wild West was not all noble—indeed, the Foundling Father simply abandoned his family in order to pursue an unfulfillable dream. In this sense, by inserting her black protagonist into the migration narrative, Parks both points out the way this narrative was exclusionary and challenges its very foundations.

Importantly, most of this section is in the square brackets that Parks uses to indicate that it can be omitted, and so it is worth considering what the play loses—and gains—if these lines of important context are never included. Brazil's age and conversion of his Pa into a mythological figure both speak to the deep chasm between father and son—but does the ambiguity that emerges when these details are left out invite other, more interesting and fruitful interpretations as well?

LUCY: That iduhnt how it went.
BRAZIL: Oh.
LUCY: Thuh Mr. Washington me and your Daddy seen was uh lookuhlike of thuh Mr. Washington of history-fame, son.
BRAZIL: Oh.
LUCY: Thuh original Mr. Washingtonssbeen long dead.
BRAZIL : O.
LUCY: That Hole back East was uh theme park son. Keep your story to scale.
BRAZIL: K.
(Rest)
Him and Her would sit by thuh lip uhlong with thuh others all in uh row cameras clickin and theyud look down into that Hole and see—ooooo—you name it. Ever-y-day you could look down that Hole and see—ooooo you name it. Amerigo Vespucci hisself made regular appearances. Marcus Garvey. Ferdinand and Isabella. Mary Queen of thuh Scots! Tarzan King of thuh Apes! Washington Jefferson Harding and Millard Fillmore. Mistufer Columbus even. Oh they saw all thuh greats. Parading daily in thuh Great Hole of History.

Related Characters: Lucy, Brazil (speaker), The Foundling Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 179-180

Explanation and Analysis

As he narrates the story of his parents' honeymoon at the Great Hole of History, which sparked his Pa's interest in historical reenactment and ultimately inspired him to impersonate Abraham Lincoln in a replica of that same Great Hole, Brazil gets a little out of line. Namely, he starts telling the audience that the Great Hole, a history-themed amusement park, managed to make actual historical figures "rise up from thuh dead and walk uhround" to entertain guests. When he says this, Lucy jumps in to correct him: the people in the Great Hole of History were "lookuhlike[s]," not actual historical figures, and he ought to "keep [his] story to scale." (He keeps telling it anyway.)

It is noteworthy that Brazil mistakes reenactors for real people from history, because his father has precisely the opposite problem: he wants to be a Great Man like Lincoln, but he cannot get anywhere as a reenactor. Indeed, Brazil's misperception underlines the way that reality and fiction are impossible to discern in many accounts of the past, and his gaffe shows that people make sense of history through the stories and depictions of it that they receive. This implies that narratives about history have great power, but

it is dangerous to rely on the wrong kinds of narratives (like Brazil's idea that the Great Hole's actors were real). Lucy's mandate to "keep your story to scale" also illustrates this same danger: Brazil mistakes the fact that things are open to interpretation with a license to invent stories entirely. Rather than Brazil's version of events, which is exciting but jumps to false conclusions, Lucy prefers to accept the ambiguity and uncertainty that comes with examining different possibilities for and voices about the past. Brazil's description of the Great Hole theme park—and all the different historical figures who are reenacted in it—reveals how it, too, invents stories: it strips history of its context and disconnects it from the present by turning political leaders and explorers into objects to be gawked at, rather than real historical people who took real, consequential actions and had real things to say.

Act 2, Part C: Archaeology Quotes

BRAZIL: You hear im?
LUCY: Echo of thuh first sort: thuh sound. (E.g. thuh gunplay.)
(Rest)
Echo of thuh 2nd sort: thuh words. Type A: thuh words from thuh dead. Category: Unrelated.
(Rest)
Echo of thuh 2nd sort, Type B: words less fortunate: thuh Disembodied Voice. Also known as "Thuh Whispers." Category: Related. Like our Fathuhs.
(Rest)
Echo of thuh 3rd sort: thuh body itself.
(Rest)
BRAZIL: You hear im.
LUCY: Cant say. Cant say, son.
BRAZIL: My faux-father.

Related Characters: Brazil, Lucy (speaker), The Foundling Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

As they continue looking for signs of the Foundling Father's presence, story, and dying wishes, Lucy offers a taxonomy of the different kinds of "echoes" that the dead leave behind. As a "Confidence"—or secret-keeper for the dying—she knows what to listen for and firmly believes that the dead are capable of communicating with the living. In fact, these lines directly follow the first scene labeled "Echo," which Lucy and Brazil may or may not have witnessed along with the audience—Lucy admits that she "cant say."

Although it is difficult to make much sense of her taxonomy, she does seem to describe the "Echoes" in the order they enter: first, "thuh gunplay" opens Act 2, before the "Echo" scenes transmit "Unrelated" words (from *Our American Cousin*) and later "Related" words (from the Foundling Father himself), all before the final scene sees the Foundling Father's "body itself" return to the stage. Curiously, Lucy puts the words of "Unrelated" and "Related" people in different categories, which reinforces the notion that family is simply an unavoidable fact of life for Lucy and Brazil, rather than a dream they are trying to rescue or reunite. Indeed, Brazil's reference to Pa as his "faux-father" (or false father) supports this interpretation: although Pa *is* his father, Brazil does not truly *consider* him as such, probably because Pa abandoned—and so never really fathered—Brazil.

Uh Hehm. *Uh Hehm*. WELCOME WELCOME WELCOME TUH THUH HALL OF —

Related Characters: Brazil (speaker), Lucy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

After he realizes that the Foundling Father's "exact replica of The Great Hole of History" is "our inheritance of sorts," Brazil tries on his father's legacy by practicing an act of his own: he will give people tours of the "Hall of Wonders" that he has assembled out of the historical artifacts he has dug up. These "Wonders" range from George Washington's "nibblers" (wooden teeth) and a pair of "lick-ed boots" to seemingly important documents and medals for feats like "fakin." In fact, these objects are really just his Pa's "faux-historical knickknacks," but Brazil either doesn't know or doesn't care if they are real or fake—he plans to open the Hall of Wonders regardless.

Like the original Great Hole and the Foundling Father's Lincoln assassination act, Brazil's Hall of Wonders is based on a specific and narrow concept of history as an otherworldly, untouchable realm located outside of time

(rather than simply in the past) and populated by impossibly great, perfect, and heroic people (rather than flawed human beings who happened to make an impact). Even though there is no narrative at all in the Hall of Wonders, which is just a collection of junk objects whose context is erased and whose importance is supposed to be taken for granted, Brazil's dedication to this idea of wondrousness turns history into a spectacle and a commodity, rather than what it really is: the source from whence the present flows. Instead of investigating and learning from history, visitors to the Hall of Wonders are likely to walk away feeling that they could never be part of history. The fact that the very Wonders are fake only adds insult to injury.

Act 2, Part E: Spadework Quotes

❝ BRAZIL: We could say I just may follow in thuh footsteps of my foe-father.
LUCY: We could say that.
BRAZIL: Look on thuh bright side!
LUCY: Look on thuh bright side!
BRAZIL: So much tuh live for!
LUCY: So much tuh live for! Sweet land of—! Sweet land of—?
BRAZIL: Of liberty!

Related Characters: Brazil, Lucy (speaker), The Foundling Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

After Lucy lists all the ways that Brazil resembles the Foundling Father, Brazil decides that he "just may follow in thuh footsteps of my foe-father," and then they echo each other back and forth for these few lines. Of course, Brazil's "footsteps" line directly takes from the Foundling Father's own monologue about Lincoln, in whose footsteps he claimed to be following. In fact, the Foundling Father's attempt to emulate Lincoln, who serves as a paternal figure for him, also closely parallels Brazil's search for his Pa's "footsteps" because both Lincoln and the Foundling Father are dead and gone when their son figures embark on their quests. But while the Foundling Father desperately wants to be like Lincoln, it is unclear if Brazil sees anything positive in his father—in fact, on the page, the Foundling Father becomes a "foe-father" rather than a "forefather," an enemy whose influence Brazil can never kick. When Brazil says that he "just may follow" his Pa's footsteps, then, it is unclear whether he is saying that he might decide to follow the Foundling Father's path, or that he will end up following that path no matter what, even if he does not want to.

In contrast to Brazil's tumultuous feelings about his Pa, the lines that follow demonstrate his close relationship with Lucy: the mother and son repeat each other and riff off of each other's sentences in a way that shows that they think collaboratively. However, their lines about having "so much tuh live for!" and the "Sweet land [...] of liberty!" are clearly based in irony: either Brazil and Lucy are consciously talking sarcastically about their own situation, or they are serious, but the fact that Lucy cannot remember "liberty"—in addition to the fact that they are far from home, digging up the traces of a man who abandoned them out of a sense of obligation—makes it clear that Brazil and Lucy lack the "liberty" that is supposed to define America. Indeed, this line is a critique of American exceptionalism more broadly: Parks asks how the United States can define itself as a "land of liberty" when it was founded on slavery.

❝ I couldnt never deny him nothin.
I gived intuh him on everything.
Thuh moon. Thuh stars.

Related Characters: Lucy (speaker), Brazil, The Foundling Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

As she reminisces about the Foundling Father with Brazil, Lucy breaks out into a cryptic monologue about her relationship with him. She mentions various things that he has taken from her and repeats these lines over and over, implying something sinister or even abusive in their past. Indeed, she goes so far as to state that she lost central pieces of her identity—like her "good jokes," "the way [she] walked," and her "smile." This parallels the way other characters in this play lose their identities, which become identified by outside forces: the Foundling Father loses all his sense of self outside his Lincoln impersonation, for instance, and Lucy constantly compares Brazil to the Foundling Father in order to affirm him when he seems down.

But Lucy's monologue is also significant precisely because of what it leaves out. She is talking to herself, not to the audience or Brazil, and so her ambiguous and disconnected

thoughts actually describe the present rather than the past: they reveal the way her personal history with the Foundling Father comes back to haunt or affect her. She does not have a complete or authoritative grasp on the reality of this long-ago relationship, but rather remembers the sense of loss it induced in her above all else. This illustrates the difference between narrating the past through the lens of the present and the voices of those who experienced it, on the one hand, and transforming it into a parade or museum (as in the Great Hole of History and The Hall of Wonders), on the other.

Act 2, Part G: The Great Beyond Quotes

BRAZIL: Mail the in-vites?
LUCY: I did.
BRAZIL: Think theyll come?
LUCY: I do. There arc hundreds upon thousands who knew of your Daddy, glorified his reputation, and would like to pay their respects.
THE FOUNDLING FATHER: Howuhboutthat.

Related Characters: The Foundling Father, Lucy, Brazil (speaker), Abraham Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

After Lucy and Brazil spend several scenes listening for "echoes" and digging for "Wonders" in an attempt to track down the Foundling Father, in the play's last scene, *he* comes to *them*: whether dead or alive, embodied or in spirit, the Foundling Father pops onto the screen of a television that Brazil digs up from the ground, and then suddenly and mysteriously shows up onstage, too. Lucy and Brazil are initially unsure if the Foundling Father is dead or not, but they decide to go on with their plans for his funeral.

In this final scene, life and death is not the only distinction that gets blurred and discarded: with "hundreds upon thousands" of people coming for his funeral, the Foundling Father also appears to finally become one with his idol Abraham Lincoln. (His "howuhboutthat" shows that even *he* is surprised by this turn of events.) And Lucy and Brazil become torn between their roles as family members and their jobs, which involve participating in funerals as actors rather than next-of-kin (Lucy is a "Confidence" who listens to dead people's secrets, and Brazil is a mourner-for -hire).

To my right: our newest Wonder: One of thuh greats Hisself! Note: thuh body sitting propped upright in our great Hole. Note the large mouth opened wide. Note the top hat and frock coat, just like the greats. Note the death wound: thuh great black hole — thuh great black hole in thuh great head. —And how this great head is bleedin. —Note: thuh last words. —And thuh last breaths. —And how thuh nation mourns —

(Takes his leave)

Related Characters: Brazil (speaker), Lucy, Abraham Lincoln, The Foundling Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

The America Play ends with the Foundling Father dying in ambiguous terms: he proclaims "The Death of Lincoln!" and then a gunshot (or echo) of unknown origin sounds and he dies in the same way that he always pretended to during his Lincoln reenactments. While Lucy waits for the funeral guests to arrive, Brazil gets the last word, and he decides to add his Pa's corpse to his Hall of Wonders. The way he presents the Foundling Father, with his "death wound" and "last words," echoes almost exactly the way that the Foundling Father narrated Lincoln's death at the end of Act 2's second "Echo" scene. Not only does the Foundling Father get to fill the role of his beloved Lincoln, but Brazil also inherits that of the Foundling Father and, for better or worse, the Hall of Wonders takes over for the Foundling Father's Lincoln impersonation. In other words, an actor (the Foundling Father) finally becomes the character he played his whole life (Lincoln) and a son (Brazil) finally gets his inheritance (the Wonders and Great Hole) from the father who abandoned him (the Foundling Father).

In theory, then, the play's primary male characters reconcile the conflicts that structured their identities throughout the play—but this does not mean the ending is necessarily a happy one. For one, Lucy gets no such resolution, and is instead left to wait for the Foundling Father's "proper burial" (which may or may not happen in the future), while she keeps her family secrets in "Confidence." And the Foundling Father and Brazil's transformations have accompanied losses in their capacity to speak with their own voices. In fact, the Foundling Father can become Lincoln in death—and only in death—because now he has no capacity to speak or act for himself and becomes reduced entirely to the way others view and understand him. The

Hall of Wonders facilitates this by turning his body into a spectacle that is considered "historical" purely because of the way it looks, and not because of any meaningful context surrounding it. Meanwhile, Brazil turns from a "digger" who sought fragments of the past into a hustler who tries to sell those fragments as Wonders, as though they contained the truth of history—when, in reality, the truth of history lies in its narratives, and Wonders are merely history's byproducts.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1: LINCOLN ACT

After an epigraph from philosopher John Locke, who said that "In the beginning, all the world was *America*," the play begins "In the middle of nowhere," in a hole that is "an exact replica of **The Great Hole of History**."

Locke's quote raises the question of what defines America in The America Play*: he sees it as a kind of metaphor or model for the whole world, but he was specifically referring to native Americans before colonization in this passage in order to make a state about humankind's "natural" way of being. The play's cryptic setting—"an exact replica of the Great Hole of History"—evokes emptiness rather than an expansive wholeness and suggests that perhaps Locke's view of the world either leaves out some of history (relegating it to a "Great Hole") or is simply out of touch with historical reality (which he turns into such a "Hole"). Indeed, it is ironic that Locke opportunistically justifies his arguments for liberty and equal rights by citing a people who have had their liberty and rights taken away by the American government—which takes its concepts of liberty and rights for all from Locke himself. In this sense, the juxtaposition of Locke's quote and the play's setting highlights the irony in American ideas of rights and equality, which have never been truly extended to everyone in the United States.*

Dressed as Abraham Lincoln, the Foundling Father utters a series of cryptic, chiasmic phrases, and "takes a "rest" between each pair. Three are from the dictionary, including, "I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed," and one is his own invention: "He digged the hole and the whole held him." The Foundling Father notes that "he sported" a goatee "when he died," which is "not my favorite," and then repeats his line, "He digged the hole and the whole held him."

The play's mysterious opening scene looks remarkably different on the page and on the stage. Notably, Parks explains the chiasmus that she is using (and the origins of the Foundling Father's different lines) in footnotes, which allow her readers to understand the conceptual structure of this introduction and connect it to the way Abraham Lincoln and the Foundling Father are dependent on one another for their identities in this play. Similarly, while the Foundling Father's name is clearly symbolic to readers—it recalls the "Founding Fathers" of American democracy (of whom Lincoln was not one), but also suggests that he has been orphaned or abandoned—theatergoers might never actually hear the Foundling Father's name or have the opportunity to make any of these connections.

The Foundling Father speaks of a man who looked like Abraham Lincoln—he shared "the Great Mans" long legs and big hands and feet. The man carries a box full of **beards**, which he made from hairs his barber sold him, and which "were as authentic as he was, so to speak." Like his family members in the "Small Town," this "Lesser Known" is a gravedigger. The Foundling Father pauses and declares, "a wink to Mr. Lincolns **pasteboard cutout**," then winks.

Although he is talking in the third person, the Foundling Father is clearly talking about himself (as the "Lesser Known," whereas Lincoln is the "Great Man"). His resemblance to Lincoln is unlikely because he is black, but also highly symbolic because of Lincoln's specific role in American history (as the leader of the Union that eventually incorporated African Americans into American society). The Foundling Father's various beards, like his wink and nod to images of Lincoln, suggest that he recognizes and is comfortable with the fact that he will never literally look like Lincoln—he foregrounds to the audience the fact that he is playing a character (even though the audience will never ultimately meet or learn anything about him out of *this character).*

The Foundling Father notes that "It would be helpful to our story if" the Lesser Known got to bury the Great Man—he imagines Mary Todd Lincoln saying, "*Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground," and digresses about Lincoln's family and the end of the Civil War, noting that Lincoln died while he was laughing "at thin jokes in bad plays: 'You sockdologizing old man-trap!' haw haw haw." After repeating the "*Emergency*" line, he remarks that "it is said that" the Lesser Known would leave "his digging," or his family dinner, to hide and listen to the calls of "*Emergency*."

The Foundling Father does not talk about what is or isn't true about the past, but rather what serves "our story" (his monologue and the play as a whole). He weaves together many more famous quotes from Lincoln and those who surrounded him, including his assassin and the actual line of onstage dialogue during which he was shot, into a narrative that blurs fact and fiction and makes them indistinguishable from his own voice. The "Emergency" *line is peculiar because one might expect the "emergency" to be Lincoln's wound, and a dying person's spouse to ask for time to mourn, rather than putting the deceased "in the ground" as fast as possible. By repeating this peculiar line, the Foundling Father illustrates one way of coping with loss—shutting it in the past—and also implies that, back when he was a gravedigger, he was drawn to Lincoln by the man's extraordinary way of* dying.

"It would help," the Foundling Father continues, if Mary Todd Lincoln had "summoned" the Lesser Known to go "gawk at the Great Mans corpse." But he concludes that "none of this was meant to be"—he abruptly announces and performs "a nod to the **bust** of Mr. Lincoln"—because the Lesser Known was born long after the Great Man's death, so "couldnt hear" if there was "summoning." He wished he could have been dug the Great Man's grave, since he's a gravedigger and people always told him "that he and the Great Man were dead ringers." He comments that his holiday **beard** and shoes are "a little *much*" together and notes that Lincoln's son did not look like him. He mentions that it's "always slow on Sunday" before again winking to the cutout of Lincoln.

Although he is a mere impersonator, the Foundling Father can't help but imagine himself into history and wonder if he could truly find a place for himself within it, perhaps along with "Lesser Known[s]" like the everyday people, African Americans, and others whose stories are seldom told in history books. Indeed, by talking about Lincoln and himself as the Great Man and the Lesser Known, respectively, the Foundling Father suggests history is a domain for "Great" people and leaders alone, something that is venerable but disconnected from the present. This language also indicates that the Foundling Father's identity is entirely dependent on his relationship to Lincoln—in other words, he defines himself entirely through his narrow view of history. His strange desire to "gawk at the Great Mans corpse" suggests that there is something voyeuristic and completely passive about his attitude toward history, even as he reenacts it, but also directly foreshadows the last scene of the play, in which the audience is called to gawk in precisely this way.

After a pause, the Foundling Father declares that all lives have their "shape"—Lincoln moved from "his log cabin" to the "Big Town," and is remembered through "his words and image," while "The Lesser Known had a favorite hole. A chasm, really." It was "one he'd visited" when he was newly married to Lucy, and they were planning to "build a mourning business." They found "**A Big Hole**. A theme park. With historical parades." Impressed by the beautiful park's size and "Historicity," he cheered from the sidelines of the parades. This all "gave a shape to the [Lesser Known's] life and posterity." He shows the audience his **beard** and shoes, and notes that the Lesser Known started "record[ing] his own movements" just in case.

The "shape" of a life is another way of talking about the way that people's lives are narrated *(whether to themselves or to others). But while Lincoln's "shape" is based on things the "Great Man" did, said, and looked like, the Foundling Father's shape is based on a thing* outside *himself, the watered-down amusement park story of History as a contextless parade, which inspired him to start impersonating Lincoln (and gradually lose his individual identity in the process). So a "chasm" separates Lincoln from the Foundling Father, no matter how hard he tries to bridge it, and the Foundling Father's* own *identity and legacy have become a chasm, void, or hole. The Big Hole is the original Great Hole, whereas the play is set in the replica—a reenactment of a reenactment park. This setting, combined with the fact that the only character's identity is completely derivative of a reinterpretation of a dead man, shows how fiction, revision, and reinterpretation actually create new contexts bring new truths to light, even if their greatest aspiration is to perfectly copy the original on which they are based.*

On the train home from his honeymoon, the Foundling Father explains, he could not stop thinking about "the Reconstructed Historicities he ha[d] witnessed," which went past him—"not 'on past' him but *past*. *Behind him*. Like an **echo** in his head." At home, he "hear[d] the summoning," which (unlike the echoes) turned out to get "louder not softer." (He shows the audience his yellow "fancy **beard**," which "deviate[s] too much" from Lincoln's dark hair to convince his audience.) All alone, he continues, "the Lesser Known […] went out West" seeking "his own **Big Hole**," and "the Westerners" always told him he looked like Lincoln. (He even put "a false wart on his cheek" to look like Lincoln.) "Goatee," he remarks, before repeating two of the phrases from the beginning of the scene: "He digged the Hole and the Whole held him," and "I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed."

Again, the Foundling Father is fascinated not by actual history, but by a particular way history is packaged and sold as the triumph of the "Greats." The "echo" he feels both foreshadows the appearance of such echoes in Act 2 and illustrates how the past affects the present by making a mark on people's sense of reality—in short, by inspiring them. The paradoxical concept of "Reconstructed Historicities"—things that are really part of history only because they are created in the present day—directly illustrates how the past, for all intents and purposes, simply is *what it is narrated to be: what is taken as true of the past, like how the past affects people in the present, is constantly under revision and open to debate. Indeed, by using the "fancy beard," the Foundling Father engages in this kind of revision, creatively reinventing the figure of Lincoln for everyone who sees him perform. Given this context, the two chiastic phrases from the beginning of the play take on new meanings: the Foundling Father is talking literally about how his digging has brought him into the "Whole" of history, but also exhausted him and left him without recourse.*

Each evening, the Foundling Father "would stand in his hole reciting" Lincoln quotes and wondering if he could get paid to impersonate him. He decided to try "inviting [people] to come and throw old food at him while he spoke," and found "moderate success." When someone told him "he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot," he discovered his new act: he let people "pay a penny" to "'Shoot Mr. Lincoln.'" This made him "famous overnight."

The Foundling Father initially hoped to portray Lincoln's heroism and nobility, but soon realized that people had little interest in celebrating the important or consequential parts of history—they wanted to turn it into a spectacle and a game instead. His audiences' desire to assault and abuse him as Lincoln points to an underlying current of racism, as much because Lincoln's great achievement was forcing the nation to take equality seriously as because the Foundling Father is black. In fact, it is impossible to know whether the audience wants an excuse to take out their anger towards Lincoln and his push for equality (no matter what the impersonator looks like), or merely want an opportunity to attack a black man (no matter what character he's playing).

Suddenly, "A Man, [dressed] as John Wilkes Booth, enters" and "point[s] the gun at the Foundling Father's head." The Foundling Father starts laughing boisterously, until the man shoots and he "slumps in his chair," as though dead. The other man jumps up and declares "thus to the tyrants" before leaving. The Foundling Father comments that most people repeat that line, and others also say "The South is avenged!" (which are John Wilkes Booth's other alleged words after killing Lincoln).

This scene can be uncomfortable and disturbing, at once because the man who shoots the Foundling Father is taking pleasure in reenacting a heinous crime motivated by virulent racism, because the scene translates this crime into a direct attack on black man (thereby recalling the endless incidents of brutal racialized violence throughout American history), and finally because the Foundling Father is completely oblivious to this context and the way it appears to degrade his humanity. In fact, as a black actor he is only able to make a living by allowing himself to be sensationalized and exploited as a victim of violence, which is Parks's way of commenting on the racial predilections of art and theater more broadly.

The reenactment repeats: the same man enters dressed as John Wilkes Booth, the Foundling Father laughs, "Booth shoots," and "Lincoln 'slumps in his chair.'" This time, the man yells "The South is avenged!" and then thanks the Foundling Father for his time—"till next week," he says, and he leaves. The Foundling Father notes that this man "comes once a week" and "always chooses the Derringer" and says the same two lines. "He's one for history," the Foundling Father concludes: "As it Used to Be. Never wavers. No frills. By the book. Nothing excessive." He nods at his **bust** of Lincoln.

The repetition of this scene and the Foundling Father's jarringly normal chat with his client underline the fact that this scene of humiliation is routine and unexceptional for him: like African Americans throughout history, he is forced to accept and withstand a subordinate social status throughout his entire life, as nobody takes his noble intentions seriously. Notably, when they reenact the assassination, the Foundling Father and his client change identities in the stage directions, becoming "Lincoln" and "Booth" instead, which can be understood as Parks's commentary on the way that narratives of history are taken as reality and come to define history for the people who hear them, but also the sense in which actors become the roles they play (or cannot cleanly divide such roles from their own identities). The "by the book" client further shows the limits of strictly-factual narratives of history: readers and audiences are left to wonder what this man can possibly gain from recreating the same narrative over and over (at least the Foundling Father makes his pennies), and the man's insistence on historical accuracy adds nothing to anyone's experience or understanding of the past.

The Foundling Father explains that he is putting on Lincoln's "**beard** of uncertainty," the one he used in the early days of the Civil War. He remembers "not knowing much about" the Civil War, except that he looked like Lincoln and "wanted to make a great impression" like him. He explains that this led him to study "all aspects of" Lincoln's life, and he notes that he found the murder the most interesting—but a woman dressed as Booth interrupts him to reenact the murder. He laughs, she shoots, and she proclaims, "Strike the tent."

This time, the scene intentionally strays from a literal representation: the shooter is a woman, and she picks a line that wasn't even Booth's ("strike the tent" were Confederate leader Robert E. Lee's last words). Indeed, the huge variation in reenactors and last words underlines the fact that nobody quite knows what Booth actually *said in triumph after shooting Lincoln. However, this uncertainty adds to the play's capacity to explore the implications of Lincoln's death, because it forces the audience to think critically and imaginatively about Booth's motivations and other details that might never have been recorded. In other words, these variations are a way of marking the fundamental unknowability—and therefore ultimate irrelevance—of what* actually *happened during the Lincoln assassination.*

The Foundling Father continues talking about details of the murder (the distance Lincoln and the stage, the people sitting with him, the principal actress of Our American Cousin, and the play's plot). Another woman interrupts him to reenact the murder, and the now-familiar scene replays—except now she repeatedly screams "LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIES!" and "LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRS" after shooting him.

The Foundling Father's deep knowledge about Lincoln's life and death reveals that he probably knows his admiration for the Great Man is being turned into a cheap trick. While he did take a special interest in the murder, it is unlikely that he would have found it exciting and sensationalistic in the same way as his clients—rather, his fascination likely paralleled Parks's and the audience's interest in the assassination's racist political motives, profound consequences, and symbolic setting in a theater during a play. The "LIARS" line is ironic because it is definitely *ahistorical at the same time as it raises an accusation of (presumably historical) dishonesty.*

After this woman exits, the Foundling Father decides that it is time to "wear the yellow **beard**," for "variety." He notes that Lincoln did not really wear his famous hat indoors, "but people dont like their Lincoln hatless." He apologizes to Lincoln but decides that he will "pretend" he was blonde. The Foundling Father quotes from *his own* unpublished writing about Lincoln's radiant hair and comments on how John Wilkes Booth "broke his leg" jumping from Lincoln's seat onto the stage, and how Mary Todd "hysteric[ally]" screamed for him and grieved when her husband died before talking to their son Tad—and then ended up institutionalized. "'*Emergency*,'" the Foundling Father repeats, "'please put the Great Man in the ground.'" A man enters, shoots the laughing Foundling Father, and then proclaims, "Now he belongs to the ages," before noting that Lincoln isn't supposed to be blonde.

The Foundling Father's yellow beard and indoor hat are further examples of how he believes that straying from strict historical reality actually provides a richer and more "true" experience than following the details exactly. At the same time, the fact that "people dont like their Lincoln hatless" also points to the way that his character is shaped more by popular myths and assumptions about Lincoln than what is actually worth knowing about the man. By discussing Mary Todd Lincoln's alleged insanity, the Foundling Father adds a new layer of meaning to the "Emergency" *line and implicitly suggests that it is futile or mad to try and bury the dead quickly, forever. Notably, much of this section is in square brackets, which Parks uses throughout this play to mark sections that she thinks directors should have the liberty to omit. This technique allows her to refuse complete control over the shape and meaning of her work, but rather let the team that stages her work make wide-ranging creative decisions about how to interpret her text. This is consistent with her underlying skepticism of single narratives and consistent focus on the way different layers of acting and interpretation create different kinds and qualities of truth.*

The Foundling Father tells the audience that he has "no side effects" from his job, besides "a slight deafness in this ear." He takes his **beard** off and goes "clean-shaven," since "the face needs air." He remarks that "the Lesser Known [...] dug over 7 hundred and 23 graves," plus **the Big Hole** and "hundreds of shallow holes" for "faux-historical knickknacks." A pair of newlyweds enters and holds the gun together, then shoots the laughing Foundling Father. The woman exclaims, "Theyve killed the president!" The Foundling Father predicts that this couple will "bring their children here" to see him in the future and repeats that "slight deafness" is his only "side effect," so he "cant complain." He repeats that he records his life, in case "posterity" cares about him and nods to Lincoln.

The Foundling Father wavers between optimistically claiming "no side effects" and admitting his "slight deafness" as a result of hearing a gun fire at short range all day, every day. While the audience may see his job as humiliating and absurd, the Foundling Father himself seems committed to making the best of it—or, at least, refusing to fully acknowledge the damage it has caused him and the humiliation it brings him daily. At least it's better than gravedigging, he seems to think—and yet he accomplished something measurable as a gravedigger. It is no accident that he mentions the couple's future children right before considering "posterity"—again, he subtly nods to his own family, which is otherwise essentially invisible in Act 1 (but ends up stealing the show in Act 2).

The Foundling Father contrasts the Great Man's life in "time immemorial" with his own in the present, which has become an exercise in "trying somehow to equal the Great Man in stature, word and deed." But he does not know if he is "catch[ing] up" or "running too fast in the wrong direction." In fact, when he was told "that he ought to be shot," the Foundling Father repeats exactly as before, he felt that "the Great Mans footsteps had been suddenly revealed." He repeats his description of the performance and recalls that it made him "famous overnight."

This comparison again illustrates the Foundling Father's specific view of how history operates: he seems to think that some "Great" people are inducted into the triumphant realm of "time immemorial," whereas everyone else simply disappears. The second act will show why this is not the case, but the Foundling Father already appears to be doubting it, as he realizes that impersonating *the Great Man does not mean becoming him, or anything like him. This makes the Foundling Father's condition doubly tragic: not only does he spend his days pretending to get killed, in order to be like his idol (Lincoln), but he does not become anything like Lincoln in the process. In other words, he defines himself entirely* through *Lincoln in an impossible attempt to* become *Lincoln.*

A man dressed as Booth comes inside and shoots the chuckling Foundling Father, then yells "Thus to the tyrants!" After a long, unwritten "spell"—the dialogue just says "LINCOLN" and "BOOTH" over and over, with blank lines for each of them—Booth leaps and declares that "The South is avenged!" The man and the Foundling Father thank each other and promise to meet again "next week."

This client appears to be the same "by the book" regular who visited the Foundling Father before, which implies that a week has somehow passed since the previous scene that took place on the stage just a few minutes before. Time, it becomes clear, is compressed and distorted in this play, and the Foundling Father is not speaking from any particular moment, but rather jumping in and out of time, as though he were speaking from the perspective of history. The consecutive blank lines of "LINCOLN" and "BOOTH" (a dramatic technique Parks calls a "spell") is significant for two reasons. First, Parks ironically gives her actors and directors freedom to interpret the very reenactment that is supposed to be "by the book," which implies that such absolute fidelity to the original is impossible in recreations and reenactments of the past (including those of written texts, like this play). Secondly, for the play's purposes, the scene again literally transforms the characters into the people they are reenacting, which shows both how the boundaries between actor and character are porous and how the "true" nature of historical figures is always up for debate and constructed through narratives and reworkings of history in the present.

The Foundling Father comments on his "ringing in the ears" and "slight deafness," offers his wink and nod, and declares that he is "striding in the Great Mans footsteps." He recalls their resemblance and wonders if "the Greater Man could have caught up" to him if he were to die or move backwards. The Greater Man could "sneak[] up behind" him and attack him, screamed, "Thus to the tyrants!" or even "shot him maybe." While "the Lesser Known forgets who he is and just crumples," in contrast, "The Greater Man continues on." The Foundling Father repeats Mary Todd Lincoln's "*Emergency*" line, then mentions his "ringing in the ears" and "slight deafness," and finally proposes he "wear the blonde." Act 1 closes with the **echo** of a gunshot.

As he closes Act 1, the Foundling Father returns to many of the motifs he has repeated throughout his monologue, citing one after another in short order. While he uses these motifs to try to define his identity for the audience, he also admits that he has failed, as he "forgets who he is and just crumples." Although he left gravedigging and started impersonating Lincoln precisely because he wanted to define himself and achieve greatness, perhaps he should have sought to do something original, of his own creation, rather than acting out a well-worn story over and over. On the other hand, his commentary on Lincoln being behind him is not only a metaphor for time (in which he is "ahead" of the deceased Lincoln), but also a suggestion that his contribution has been the way he reinterpreted Lincoln and contributed to his legacy. In other words, perhaps the Foundling Father has accomplished something as and for Lincoln, *rather than as and for himself.*

ACT 2: THE HALL OF WONDERS

"A gunshot **echoes**. Loudly. And echoes," the stage directions begin, and then repeat, but only after restating that the setting is "an exact replica of **The Great Hole of History**." Finally, the directions note that "Lucy with ear trumpet circulates," and "Brazil digs."

The echoing gunshot and setting tie the first act to the second—both are traces of the Foundling Father's presence, even though he does not appear in the scene. However, Parks already draws a contrast between the Foundling Father—who had gone partially deaf and given up digging—and Lucy and Brazil, who are listening attentively and digging, respectively.

ACT 2, PART A: BIG BANG

Lucy and Brazil debate if the sound they hear is "him," as the gunshot keeps **echoing**. They decide that it isn't, and Lucy comments on the way "uh little gunplay" has led to this echo: "KER-BANG! KERBANG-Kerbang-kerbang-(kerbang)-((kerbang))."

Although they do not say it explicitly, there is no doubt that Lucy and Brazil are looking for the Foundling Father. While they were only tangentially relevant to his story, he appears to be completely central to theirs, and this asymmetry suggests that there is a deep power imbalance among them as a family. Hearing the gunshot's echo, Lucy literally echoes it in turn, emphasizing the way "little" events from the past have lasting effects on those who come after.

Lucy notices that Brazil has stopped digging. She tells him to continue "till you dig up somethin" and reminds him that "Your Daddy was uh Digger." The **echo** continues, and after a pause, Lucy tells Brazil how important it is for her "tuh know thuh difference" between the real gunshot and the echo. Meanwhile, Lucy continues, Brazil's "Fathuh became confused," died alone, and never got a "proper burial."

Lucy cites "Daddy" as a way of making a claim about Brazil's identity, which closely parallels the way the Foundling Father constructed his identity entirely by reference to someone else—Abraham Lincoln—throughout Act 1. In fact, now "Daddy" is dead, just like Lincoln, which means that Act 2 clearly does not immediately follow Act 1. In fact, it is deeply ironic that the Foundling Father dies invisibly, offstage, after acting out his own death as Lincoln so many times onstage. Lucy and Brazil have come to fulfill their obligation as a family—to give him a "proper burial"—even though they clearly did not live *as a family for very long, which suggests that such family bonds are irrevocable and confer obligations on family members no matter what.*

Lucy remembers that everyone made up a story about the last words of someone named Bram Price, who actually uttered those last words to Lucy. He "told [her] something quite different," although she will never repeat it. "Little Bram Price Junior," who "burned [Lucy's] eardrums," died too. But "His **Echo**" came back "and [ate] up everybodys food just like he did when he was livin." His mother, "Miz Penny Price," also told Lucy secrets that will never be repeated, and "sold herself" and "lost her mind" after her husband and son died. She died, too, and Brazil "**gnashed** for her" (rather than "weepin sobbin or moanin"). He "gnashed" so hard that he "chipped uh tooth," but this was only his "job." He's stopped digging, and Lucy again tells him to restart.

By talking about "Little Bram Price Junior[']s] […] Echo," Lucy suggests that the spirits of the dead literally *live on and leave a mark on the world. The name "Penny Price" is clever wordplay, a riff on the Foundling Father's act (for which he charged a penny—a coin that happens to have Abraham Lincoln's face on it). Curiously, Price's downfall closely parallels Mary Todd Lincoln's, and readers should ask if Lucy is pointing out an overall analogy in the way many or all families might function. While it seems confusing that Brazil's "job" would be mourning, he means it literally: he gets paid to act out mourning at people's funerals, which takes from both of his father's professions: acting and putting the dead to rest.*

Brazil notes that he and Lucy "arent from these parts," and "Daddy iduhnt either." He's stopped digging, and Lucy tells him to start again, "till you dig up somethin." Then, he'll "brush that something off" and give it "uh place in the Hall of **Wonders** right uhlong with thuh rest of thuh Wonders hear?" Lucy starts musing about Bram Price Senior again and remarks that she is "uh good Confidence," and has never told his secret for 19 nears. But "after 12 years nobody cares," so she reveals it: "he wore lifts in his shoes," which made him look taller. His dying word was "Lifts," but Lucy "put thuh puzzle pieces in place" (which she emphasizes by repeating it). Brazil's "thuh first tuh know," but has to keep digging! "Dig on. Dig on," Lucy says, and Brazil echoes, "Dig on." The gunshot **echoes** again.

Brazil and Lucy introduce the fact that they have migrated to find traces of "Daddy" and are building a "Hall of Wonders," but they do not clarify either of these ideas until later in the text. While it is impossible to know precisely why Parks has chosen to include these details in passing to foreshadow later developments, one reasonable explanation would be that this forces readers and audiences to "put thuh puzzle pieces in place" themselves and analyze Lucy and Brazil's story and motives in a way that would not be necessary if they simply said what they meant. Lucy's job as a "Confidence"—her term for someone who keeps secrets for the dead—not only fits well with Brazil and the Foundling Father's jobs mourning and digging, but also explains both the way that the deceased can sustain their messages through the living and the reason Lucy is particularly suited to gather whatever trace evidence the Foundling Father has left behind. Finally, Brazil's digging is unlike his father's: whereas the Foundling Father dug graves, creating empty spaces meant to be filled, Brazil is doing the opposite, digging in search of something (the "Wonders"), which also turns digging into a metaphor for his quest to understand his father more generally.

Brazil comments that "Ff Pa was here weud find his bones," along with "thuh **Wonders**" and "his **Whispers**," but Lucy disagrees. Brazil says that "Confidence [would have] his last words and dying wishes," but Lucy wonders if "they could pass different out here" in the West. Brazil insists that Daddy had the same "ways" as them, and that he would have "just dribble[d] thuh words out" if there were nobody to talk to, until "Confidencell gather up thuh whispers when she arrives." Lucy calls Brazil "uh prize."

Lucy and Brazil start to clarify what Lucy's "Confidence" work looks like. Tellingly, it is similar to that of a historian: she is trying to "gather up" all the evidence of "Pa" that she can find, and then she is responsible for holding his secrets—as she did with Bram Price's—in order to keep his words, wishes, and secrets around in the world of the living. While it is not yet clear what "thuh Wonders" are, at this stage readers and audiences can guess that the "Whispers" are like echoes of the voices of the dead.

Since he doesn't hear his Pa's "**whispers**," Brazil concludes that "he wuduhnt here," but Lucy says that he must have been, and that "whispers don't always come up right away," because they "could travel different out West." After all, it's been 30 years since they've seen Pa. So it could be "some sort of interference. Or some sort of technical difficulty."

Lucy's comment about her and Brazil's 30 years without seeing Pa confirms that the Foundling Father abandoned them quite a long time ago. Yet they both feel a sense of obligation to him nonetheless: they are unwilling to turn their backs on family, even though the Foundling Father did. Whereas Brazil expects to find some clear and definitive evidence of his Pa, Lucy is more patient and willing to cope with uncertainty. It is no coincidence that they have traveled West—this is a wink and nod to American history. Not only was Westward expansion an important force in the mid-19th century (around the time of Lincoln's presidency), when it was essentially reserved for white people, but forced Westward migration across the Middle Passage is also the foundation of the black American experience. And, by citing "technical difficult[ies]," Lucy and Brazil self-consciously break the fourth wall, pointing out that they are on stage in a theater in order to remind the audience that theater and their fictional universe are extensions of reality, not separate from it.

"So much to live for," Lucy says and Brazil repeats, and then "Look on thuh bright side," which Brazil extends into a yell or song. Lucy tells Brazil to "DIIIIIIIIIIIIG!" and he echoes, "Dig." They trade empty lines, Lucy calls out "Helloooo!" twice, and there are two more empty lines.

This abrupt interlude is deliberately ambiguous: it is difficult to tell if Lucy and Brazil are talking literally or ironically about "thuh bright side," and their riffs on one another's lines and empty "spells" of unwritten dialogue (where Parks asks the actors to improvise) allow them to establish the closeness and interdependence of their mother-son relationship.

Brazil recalls that his family is "from out East," but his Pa (for whom he has many names) came "out hear all uhlone" to dig his "whole Hole," when Brazil "was only 5," responsible for "thuh weepin and thuh moanin" (while Pa dug and Lucy was "whatcha call uh Confidence"). But Pa's "lonely death and lack of proper burial is our embarrassment," Brazil continues, for while Pa was always great at digging, "fakin was his callin," and he could "combine thuh 2" in the West with his "exact replica of **thuh Great Hole of History**!" "Thuh original," he clarifies, "ssback East," and was Pa and Lucy's honeymoon spot, where they watched parades of historical figures, who "would rise up from thuh dead and walk uhround" and such. Lucy clarifies that actually, these figures were "lookuhlike[s]" and the Hole "was uh theme park." Brazil lists all the various historical characters who showed up in the Great Hole of History, then recalls that his Pa did "Mr. Lincolns last show" and came West to "build uh like attraction."

Parks strategically shifts between different kinds of dialogue to express different registers of ideas: most of Brazil's lines are in her usual vernacular, but the punchline that explains his and Lucy's motives for seeking out the Foundling Father after 30 years—"His lonely death and lack of proper burial is our embarrassment"—is written with standard conventions. Curiously, while Brazil knows all about the Great Hole of History—and is the only character to actually list the historical figures that paraded around inside it—he also never went there. His knowledge of it is based entirely on secondhand knowledge, just like his analysis of his Pa (and everyone's knowledge of anything that happened before they were around). Brazil therefore shows how hearsay can be authoritative—and has to be, when it comes to history. Until Lucy corrects him, Brazil actually thinks that the Great Hole is full of resurrected *historical figures, which tellingly blurs the distinction between authenticity and acting. After all, if "fakin" is a legitimate "callin," then perhaps watching a reenactor might be* more *interesting than meeting an original historical figure.*

The gunshot **echoes** again, and Brazil screams and "drops dead," but Lucy knows he's "fakin" just like his Father always did. His Pa was "one of thuh best" at faking—and at digging. Brazil "was only 5," but his Pa used to "quote thuh Greats"—like a few different presidents. But "hearsay says" that Pa "digged this hole then he died." Lucy reminds Brazil to keep digging and recalls how Pa used to yell "OHWAYOHWHYOHWAYOH!" from the side of **the Great Hole**. Brazil echoes this exclamation, and Lucy repeats it again and explains that this was how Pa got the attention of the people in the Hole.

While they have their suspicions, Lucy and Brazil can't know anything for sure about Pa; they are working off of "hearsay," and they clearly don't know what the audience has learned from Act 1—which also does not resolve the question of the Foundling Father's death. However, Brazil happens to unsuspectingly follow in his father's footsteps by "fakin" his death when the gunshot echoes—of course, this is probably the same gunshot from the Foundling Father's reenactment of the Lincoln assassination, and possibly from his death, too. Lucy provides a different perspective on the Great Hole of History: most importantly, she notes how the Foundling Father tried to interact directly with the impersonators, as though to break the barrier between the past and the present. Of course, this is the same desire that drove him to follow in Lincoln's footsteps.

So that's why Pa came West, "digged this lookuhlike," and then "died right here." "Uh greaaaaat biiiiig faker," Lucy repeats—just like Brazil, who "take[s] after him." She tells Brazil to put his "paw" back on the shovel and dig where she draws him an "X." After awhile, Lucy hears something but "cant say" what it is, so Brazil keeps digging while she "circulates" around.

The comparisons between Brazil and his father, both of whom are accomplished diggers and fakers, extend to a pun that seems subconscious ("Paw"/"Pa" on the shovel), and this continues to show how inheritance is irrevocable, no matter how unpleasant one's family. Between the "X" and the sounds that she can't interpret, Lucy suggests that doubt and uncertainty are a prerequisite to developing an adequate understanding of things: whereas Brazil continues waiting for a complete version of events to fall into his lap, Lucy is skeptical of anything that purports to be absolute truth, and these two approaches mark opposite orientations toward how the past should be narrated and understood.

Brazil takes a rest and tells the story of "the 100th anniversary of the founding of our country," when "the Father took the Son out into the yard" and started biting and crying into the dirt. This, he told the Son, "is the Wail." The next year, he "showed the Son 'the Weep' 'the Sob' and 'the Moan,'" and how to stand properly while mourning. The Father learned this all "at **the History Hole**," and "the Son studied night and day," until he was the best mourner around and "the money came pouring in." The next year, "the Father taught him 'the **Gnash**,'" but then disappeared during dinner, to go "out West."

By connecting American history to his personal history with "the Father," Brazil implies that they were mourning together for their country, *which evokes the historical trauma of black life in the United States and suggests that truly grasping black history means mourning for America. The "100th anniversary" comment also curiously suggests that, from Brazil's perspective, the nation's "founding" may be the end of the Civil War, not the Revolution, which again recalls Lincoln's peculiar role as a "founding father" for black (but not white) America. The exact nature of "the Gnash" remains opaque, but the quasi-religious language of "the Father" and "the Son" points to its origin in the Bible as a sign of grief and mourning. Accordingly, in this passage Brazil appeals at once to nation and religion, and in doing so he embeds his family history in two different layers of mythology rather than acknowledging its ambiguity like his mother. This again suggests that Brazil's desire for overarching single narratives represents an unhealthy attitude toward explaining the world and the human past, whereas Lucy's more uncertain one is exactly what leads people to understand history in a more nuanced and comprehensive way.*

After a long silence, Lucy yells "Hellooooo!" Later, Brazil yells "HO!" and pulls out "Uh **Wonder**!" It's the **bust** of Abraham Lincoln. Lucy exclaims, "Howuhboutthat!" After a silence, she hears something, but "cant say" what. She tells Brazil to "SSShhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhht!" and "dig!"

Finally, Brazil's digging yields some treasure—the audience should immediately recognize that he digs up the same bust of Lincoln that the Foundling Father always nodded towards in Act 1. While he knew it was a cheap fake, Brazil and Lucy are excited to find it—whether because they consider it a real sign from history, or only because it gives them a definitive sign from the Foundling Father.

ACT 2, PART B: ECHO

The Foundling Father declares to the audience: "Ladies and Gentlemen: Our American Cousin, Act III, scene 5." The scene between a Mr. Trenchard and a Miss Keane begins, with Keene finding an undisclosed document she is looking for. Mr. Trenchard soon declares that he "cannot survive the downfall of my house" and points "a pistol to [his] head!" The crowd applauds, the Foundling Father yells "OHWAYOHWHYOHWAYOH!" and then, after a pause, "Hellllooooooo!" (twice).

This scene interrupts the otherwise continuous narrative, just like the other "Echo" (the gunshot) that periodically sounds as a trace of the Foundling Father's existence. Perhaps this scene is one of the signs Lucy has been looking for—but perhaps it also simply shows how other stories from the past (like Our American Cousin, *the play Lincoln was watching when he was assassinated) take on new life and meaning as they ricochet across history. While the Foundling Father appears to be directing this brief play-within-a-play, he suddenly slips into spectator mode, cheering with the same line that Lucy said he blurted out at the Great Hole of History—and the same enthusiasm that Lincoln allegedly showed for* Our American Cousin. *In this way, his identity begins to shift, becoming hybrid: he is neither directing nor acting, in or behind the scenes, fully living or fully dead, or Lincoln or himself.*

ACT 2, PART C: ARCHAEOLOGY

Brazil asks if Lucy "hear[s] im," and Lucy presents a taxonomy of kinds of **echoes**: there are echoes of "thuh sound" and echoes of "thuh words," including two types: "thuh words from thuh dead. Category: Unrelated.," and "thuh Disembodied Voice" or "Thuh **Whispers**," which are "Related. Like your Fathuhs." And there are echoes of "thuh body itself." Brazil says Lucy must hear Pa, but she says she "Cant say."

Because readers and audience members cannot know if Lucy and Brazil also just saw the same "Echo" scene, they are forced to make sense of Lucy's "Cant say" on both registers at once: perhaps her action with Brazil is uninterrupted, and she simply continues to listen for "echoes" without much luck, or perhaps she saw the "Echo" scene but cannot be sure that it was really the Foundling Father's true self—whatever she deems this to be—onstage. While the source of these echoes remains ambiguous, then, Lucy's taxonomy of echoes is rigid and clearly defined. This again shows that she has no doubt about the dead's capacity to haunt and speak to the living.

Brazil talks about his "faux-father," who came West alone, his "Daddy," who is "one of them." Lucy has a blank line and rests, and Brazil repeats that "He's one of them," and clarifies that he is talking about "All of them who comed before us." He compares "thuh creation of thuh world" to "him digging **his Hole**"—people "had tuh hit thuh road," and with a "bang," "those voids that was here" suddenly became *theirs*. He decides that "This Hole is our inheritance of sorts," and that Lucy will leave it to him when she passes. Lucy tells him to dig, but he decides to "dust and polish" instead and "puts something on." She agrees that he can, but she says he "dont got tuh put on that."

The homophonous pun "faux-father"—which is distinguishable on the page but likely not in speech—again plays not only with the distance between original sources and onstage reinterpretations of them, but also with the authenticity of Brazil's tie to the father who has essentially abandoned him. When he uses the metaphor of American Westward migration to link this specific "faux-father" to his ancestors more generally, he shifts from talking about family to talking about history—not only that of America, but also that of the entire "world," out of a "void." From all these predecessors, then, Brazil inherits only emptiness: his father has left him no meaningful relationship (and a big hole in the ground), the United States has left him a legacy of trauma and oppression, and the universe has left him without any clear sense of his meaning or place in history.

Brazil clears his throat and announces, "WELCOME WELCOME WELCOME TUH THUH HALL OF—" but Lucy shushes him. He repeats this in a lower voice and starts describing the "**Wonders**": the jewel box carved with "A.L." that he dug up, "one of Mr. Washingtons bones," and his "wooden teeth" or "nibblers" (which better "quit that nibblin"). There's the Lincoln **bust**, a glass bead, some "lick-ed boots," and dried "whales blubber." There are documents from "peace pacts" to "declarations of war," and medals for everything from "bravery and honesty" to "knowledge of sewin" and even "fakin," which Brazil concludes must be Pa's. Over Lucy's protests, he starts weeping uncontrollably. Lucy comforts him, reminding him that "it is an honor to be" a son to his father, the "Digger" who loved "Mr. Lincoln" and "dug this whole **Hole**." Brazil repeats each of these things after her, and they trade a lengthy silence.

Brazil may not realize it, but he also inherits his father's theatricality and attitude toward history, in addition to the Great Hole: he introduces his "Hall of Wonders" with the same carnivalesque enthusiasm that won Pa his medal for "fakin," and he also hopes to use his attraction to tell the story of American history. This "Hall of Wonders" implies that its things are just as otherworldly and "wonder"-ful as the Great Hole's reenactors are heroic, untouchable, and "great." In reality, of course, history results from the acts of mere human beings, and so the Hall of Wonders and Great Hole both wrongly turn history into a spectacle (to marvel at) and a commodity (to pay for) rather than taking history seriously as the product of human actions that continue to affect the present. Of course, the "Wonders" themselves add another level of irony: the so-called jewel box is actually the box that the Foundling Father used to keep his Lincoln beards, and it is obvious that the other "Wonders" are equally inauthentic—they are real artifacts of history only in the sense that they are part of the Foundling Father's *story.*

Lucy tells Brazil that she "couldnt never deny [Pa] nothin" and gave him "Thuh moon. Thuh stars. / Thuh bees knees. Thuh cats pyjamas." After a silence, Brazil asks if she really means "anything," and she replies, "stories too horrible tuh mention." But they are not Pa's. Brazil admits to Lucy that he misses his Pa, saying, "—Imissim—."

Lucy's speech suggests that there was something sinister, exploitative, or even traumatic about her relationship to Pa, even though she also seems to have loved him. She never explains this outright, instead leaving the audience with the same sense of confusion and ambiguity that she clearly feels about her family. Brazil also reveals his complex feelings about family here: while the Foundling Father is clearly significant to him, it is not clear whether he truly "miss[es]" his Pa in an emotional sense, because he essentially never knew the man. "—Imissim—" might just as well be a strict statement of fact—Pa is literally missing from Brazil's life—as an expression of familial love.

ACT 2, PART D: ECHO

The Foundling Father announces "Our American Cousin, Act III, scene 2." In this brief act, the American Mr. Trenchard clumsily flirts with a British girl named Augusta, and Augusta's mother Mrs. Mount—played by the Foundling Father—reprimands Mr. Trenchard and sends Augusta away. She explains to Mr. Trenchard that she will forgive him because he is "not used to the manners of good society," and he mocks her and calls her a "sockdologizing old man-trap." The scene ends with "*Laughter. Applause.*"

It is again impossible to distinguish the relationship between the different layers of reality represented here: is the Foundling Father speaking to Lucy and Brazil, and can they hear him? Is he the director or the audience of Our American Cousin*? Notably, the scene from this play that gets reenacted here is the same one during which Booth shot Lincoln. The scene itself feels mostly comical and innocent (although Mr. Trenchard's tactlessness could be turned into a metaphor for American identity), but knowing the circumstances of the assassination makes it seem altogether sinister. By staging this scene, Parks shows how context deeply influences the way people understand and react to narratives, and she also draws attention to a piece of the Lincoln assassination that is usually erased and left unexamined.*

Next, the Foundling Father gives a monologue. He thanks the people of "Snyder," a "loverly" town, for having him. Then, he breaks out into his "crowd pleaser," the first sentence of Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address ("4score and 7 years ago," and so on). He names states and their capitals, and then announces "the centerpiece of the evening!!," which will be "The Death of Lincoln!" But he does not act it out—rather, he describes all its steps, from "the watching of the play" to "the pulling of the trigger" and "the screaming of Todd" to "the shouting of Booth 'Thus to the tyrants!'" and, finally, "the silence of the nation." He rambles on about the place and time where this happened, with whom and for what—"thuh freeing of the slaves." He explains that the bullet made a "great black hole," Lincoln died in bed, and "thuh nation mourned."

The Foundling Father combines his original "Lincoln Act," which allows him to speak and point out the greatness in Lincoln's legacy, with the one he performed throughout Act 1. Strangely, however, he now narrates "The Death of Lincoln!" as though coordinating or directing it, rather than acting it out for pennies. His rambling story lacks the intimacy and power of his act—this shows the extraordinary difference between the action that historical events are, *on the one hand, and the narratives that they turn* into, *on the other. But it also shows the difference between action and narrative as modes of representation and storytelling—which, of course, should draw those who are only reading this play to consider how it might strike them differently if they were seeing it onstage.*

ACT 2, PART E: SPADEWORK

Brazil and Lucy quiz each other on about a dozen state capitals, until they get to "Nebraska. Lincoln." Lucy pauses and then starts explaining how Pa "couldnt get that story out of his head"—the story is "Mr. Lincolns great head" and the bullet shot through it that killed him. This part, she tells Brazil, "changed your Fathuhs life." But she preferred the story of Lincoln getting "married to Mary Todd and she begins to lose her mind."

Brazil and Lucy's state capitals game is a clear echo of the Foundling Father's act from the previous scene, but it still remains unclear whether they are consciously or unconsciously copying him. It is fitting that they stop with Lincoln, Nebraska, which reminds audiences of yet another way that "Great Men" from history are mythologized and memorialized in everyday life—in fact, the Foundling Father's model of history as a parade of "Greats" is also America's standard model for thinking about the past. Lucy again offers a different perspective on the Foundling Father's life and work, suggesting that his obsession with Lincoln may have been a form of pathology or madness (just like Mary Todd Lincoln's). At the same time, to some audiences her own search for "Whispers" and "echoes" might make her *look like a mirror for Mary Todd, and indeed her interest in Mary Todd's side of the Lincoln story gives credence to this comparison (and further emphasizes that there are multiple valid perspectives on any historical event).*

Brazil weeps, but Lucy gives him "daddys digging spade" to cheer him up and tells him he "look[s] more and more and more and more like him ever-y day" Brazil has his father's "chin," "lips," "teeths," and "frock coat." (The only thing he doesn't have is Pa's "stovepipe hat.") Brazil decides he might be "follow[ing] in thuh footsteps of [his] foe-father," and exclaims that they should "look on thuh bright side!" because they have "so much tuh live for!" Lucy echoes him and then begins, "Sweet land of—?" but forgets the end, which Brazil supplies: "Of liberty!"

Brazil's identity starts to break apart through this emotional outburst: although he is 35, he suddenly starts to act like a child—and Lucy certainly talks to him like one, assuring him that he has inherited physical features from his father. Now, "forefather" gets twisted not into "faux," or false, but into "foe," or enemy: "daddy" is at once an unavoidable part of Brazil's identity and DNA, and also a source of pain and struggle, against *whom Brazil seeks to define himself. Lucy and Brazil's exclamations at the end of this passage may or may not be sarcastic—it is hard to tell based on the written text, and different performers can interpret these lines differently. But their lines about "liberty!" are clearly a form of irony: Lucy forgets about "liberty," which has probably not played a significant role in her life as a black woman. This irony draws out the contradiction between American narratives of greatness, liberty, and freedom, on the one hand, and the reality that the United States has systematically deprived liberty to large segments of its population throughout its entire history, on the other. This narrative of exceptionalism is far too easy to accept, and it shows the dangers in taking the victors' version of history for granted, rather than challenging it and exploring what it leaves out.*

Lucy and Brazil ask what Pa would say, if Lucy could "hear his words." She decides that he would tell Brazil he "like[s his] spade" and exclaim, "my how youve grown!" He'd ask about Brazil's "weepin" and praise him for "running through his states and capitals! Licketysplit!" And perhaps, Lucy continues, he'd repeat his favorite Lincoln quotes, like "uh house divided cannot stand!" and "4score and 7 years uhgoh." And finally, Lucy says she has one more thing for Brazil, but he has to "lean in" to hear it, because "ssfor our ears and our ears uhlone." She tells him, but the audience does not hear.

Lucy continues talking to Brazil as though he were a child, and the dialogue she invents on Pa's behalf is not at all emotional, loving, or personal, but rather full of feigned interest and bad acting. Lucy does not pretend that Pa would be capable of having any real feeling toward his son after abandoning him for so long. Indeed, she seems to suggest that she and Brazil only remain Pa's family out of obligation, and in this sense, she calls into question the legitimacy of family as an organizing principle for people's lives. The secret line that she whispers in Brazil's ear is another example of how Parks uses opacity, unintelligibility, and strategic silences in order to remind the audience that no single version of events is ever the whole story and encourage them to think critically and interpret the work for themselves.

Lucy tells Brazil that his Pa might as well be "striding on in" to see them, "nod[ding]" to them for finding "his **Wonders**" and talking about his life, and finally doing his Lincoln impersonation. This will make them "smile" from knowing "exactly where he is." Brazil asks where, and Lucy tells him to keep digging. He does, and after a time, Lucy reminds him that he's "uh Digger" like his Pa.

Curiously, Lucy never imagines Pa as able to relate to his son on Brazil's own terms: rather, even in family life, he would remain a Lincoln impersonator and be unable to define his identity except through reference to the "Great Man." Tellingly, Lucy and Brazil's imagined "smile" would come from knowledge, not feeling—from having their expectations about the Foundling Father fulfilled, in other words, and not from any semblance of feeling toward him. These empty gestures to resemblance and inheritance continue to make the family at the center of this play look progressively more hollow and feigned: obligation and inheritance, not love, tie Lucy and Brazil to the Foundling Father.

Lucy remarks that she "couldnt never deny him [Pa] nothin" and "gived intuh him on everything," just as Brazil finds a trumpet. Lucy tells Brazil to "try it out"—but instead, they just move on. Lucy starts repeating her lines about everything she "gived intuh" for Pa, and Brazil finds "uh bag of pennies," and then the yellow Lincoln **beard**.

The "Wonders" Brazil digs up now offer evidence that the Foundling Father truly gave up on his "Lincoln Act" before he died: the "bag of pennies" reveals, cryptically, that he actually buried the money he made from his reenactments, and the yellow beard was his favorite. The pennies are also significant because, like Lincoln, Nebraska, they point to the way that Abraham Lincoln is memorialized and incorporated into everyday life in America, but only through superficial forms—his image and his name rather than his story.

Lucy exclaims "WOAH!" and Brazil asks her "Whatchaheard?" After a long time, she says, "You dont wanna know." There is silence, and then Brazil digs up something else: "uh Tee-Vee." Lucy keeps reminding herself of the things Pa took from her, like "thuh apron from uhround my waist" and even her "re-memberies—you know—thuh stuff out of my head." Then, the television suddenly switches on and shows the Foundling Father's face on it. Brazil is surprised and repeats, "(ho! Ho! **Wonder**: ho!)," while Lucy keeps listing the things Pa took: her "spare buttons" and "leftovers," even "thuh letter R" and "thuh key of G," her "good jokes" and "the way [she] walked," even her "smile." She admits that "its him" on the television.

As the dead send her secrets too powerful to retell, Lucy again falls back into her role as a "Confidence," reaffirming both the fact that the dead have messages for the living and the idea that not everything will be available to the audience, who have to fill in the gaps in the narrative on their own. Tellingly, however, she follows this by again listing some of the seemingly countless and deeply personal things that the Foundling Father took away from her—beyond suggesting that their relationship was somehow abusive, she also shows that it deprived her of her very own identity, instead turning her into a derivative of him (just as he became a derivative of Lincoln). In addition to disrupting the medium of theater and comically juxtaposing the old-timey figure of Abraham Lincoln with modern technology, the "Tee-Vee" makes a clear comment on the tenuous relationship between representation and reality: the Foundling Father somehow feels less "real" on the television than he was on the stage, which may be unsettling for an audience that just saw him in the flesh.

ACT 2, PART F: ECHO

Yet again, the same stage direction repeats: "*A gunshot* **echoes**. *Loudly. And echoes.*"

It is difficult to say exactly why this stage direction would get its own section: perhaps the echoing gunshot is the culmination of the other "Echo" sections, or perhaps it is a sign for Lucy, Brazil, and the audience to know that the man who has popped up on the television is really the Foundling Father.

ACT 2, PART G: THE GREAT BEYOND

On the television, "a replay of 'The Lincoln Act'" plays, and onstage "The Foundling Father has returned," but a "coffin awaits him." Lucy says "Howuhboutthat!," and Brazil points out that "they just gunned him down uhgain," so "he's dead but not really." Actually he's "only fakin" and "hesupuhgain." But the television's "sound duhnt work."

Parks boldly blurs the lines between life and death (and reality and representation) even further by bringing the Foundling Father back to stage. Somehow, he is at once already dead, about to die, and fully alive—and he is both represented on television and physically present on stage, as though his image has summoned him back to life.

Suddenly, the Foundling Father says that he "believe[s] this is the place where [he] do[es] the Gettysburg Address," and Brazil and Lucy are surprised and confused—although Lucy promises Brazil that "he's dead." After some blank lines, Brazil asks about "the in-vites," and Lucy says she sent them, and "hundreds upon thousands who knew of [his] Daddy" will want to come "to pay their respects." "Howuhboutthat," says the Foundling Father, and then Brazil. Lucy asks when the Foundling Father plans to "get in [his] coffin," but he says he wants "tuh wait uhwhile." Brazil promises to "**gnash** for [his Pa]," and the Foundling Father asks about his casket, which Lucy says will be "Closed." She tells Brazil to turn off the television.

When the Foundling Father returns, he falls straight back into his Lincoln impersonation, which makes it unclear whether he is actually on the same plane of reality as Lucy and Brazil—or if he simply takes no interest in them. Either way, he begins performing his act out of compulsion, because "this is the place where" he is supposed to, and not because he has any desire to recite the Gettysburg Address. This compulsive repetition again suggests that, because he continues to define himself through the figure of Lincoln, he has lost track of his own identity and desires. Brazil's promise to "gnash" is similarly out of obligation—he will act out the "gnash" as a mourner, not actually "gnash" because of how he feels about his Pa. And Lucy's commentary on the funeral and the casket—which appear to be Lincoln's as much as the Foundling Father's—is similarly automatic and impersonal, the performance of a duty rather than the expression of a feeling or connection.

The Foundling Father asks Brazil and Lucy for a hug, but neither is ready yet. There is another **echo** of a gunshot, and Lucy comments on how "That gunplay [...] Comes. And goze." She and Brazil prepare the coffin, which the Foundling Father "inspects." Lucy muses about "**thuh Original Great Hole**," where one could "see thuh whole world," including the life of "someone from History," who is both "*Like* you" and "*not* you." The Foundling Father blurts out: "*Emergency*, oh, *Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground." Lucy tells him to enter the coffin, which fits snugly. The Foundling Father requests another hug, but again, Brazil and Lucy aren't ready yet. Lucy remarks that Pa "loved that Great Hole" so much that he "digged this lookuhlike." Brazil asks if "then he died?" and Lucy replies, "Then he died." There is a long silence.

*The Founding Father suddenly breaks character by requesting a hug: at last, he seems interested in reconnecting with he family he abandoned, or reuniting with them at least symbolically. But the fact that Lucy and Brazil reject him reflects as much the enduring wounds he has left them with as the different planes of reality they seem to occupy (the Foundling Father is undead, while Lucy and Brazil are trying to put him to rest, once and for all—a desire that the Foundling Father echoes with his "*Emergency*" line). Lucy's comments on the Great Hole of History make the Foundling Father's tenuous relationship to history explicit: it has inspired him, but he wrongly hopes to join it by impersonating it—by following the Great Hole's mythology of history as a parade—rather than making his own mark on the world and speaking in his own unique voice. The Foundling Father continues to be both dead in the past and alive in the present, with the play's timeline proving unintelligible in the ordinary terms of sequential narrative.*

The Foundling Father declares that, on this "momentous occasion," he wants "to say a few words from the grave," or even have "a little conversation." It's "a long story," but it only lasts a few lines: "I quit the business. And buried all my things. I dropped anchor: Bottomless. Your turn." But Lucy and Brazil do not reply for some time—until Lucy asks the Foundling Father to act out Lincoln for Brazil, who "was only 5" when the Foundling Father left. The Foundling Father starts talking about how "very loverly [it is] to be here" in "**Wonder**ville," and throws in a few Lincoln quotes, like "4score and 7 years ago our fathers—ah you know thuh rest." Finally he proclaims "The Death of Lincoln!" and starts guffawing—then there is a gunshot, and *"The Foundling Father 'slumps in his chair.'"*

The Foundling Father takes another remarkable step here: he leaves character, if only for a moment, to tell the short "long story" of what happened to him after he gave up on the Lincoln Act. He admits that, having abandoned his family, he was nothing without Lincoln—and Lucy affirms this by asking him to perform the Gettysburg Address for Brazil, because Lincoln is the only interesting or defining thing about him. Then, he blurs the line between reenactment and reality by appearing to actually die during "The Death of Lincoln!"—in other words, the Foundling Father becomes defined by his failure to become Lincoln, but then seemingly unites with the Great Man only through his in death. In fact, nobody fires the gun that kills the Foundling Father—he appears to die from the echoing *gunshot, which may be taken as a metaphor for how the past can reach out to influence the present.*

After a pause, Brazil asks if the Foundling Father has died, but Lucy says she has "nothin." Brazil starts telling Lucy's story: she was "with her Uncle when he died," and her family asked her for her uncle's last words, even though "theyre hadnt been any." So when she didn't say anything, her family declared she was "uh Confidence. At the age of 8. Sworn tuh secrecy." Brazil asks if he should "**gnash** now," but Lucy says to "save it for thuh guests," and just "dust and polish" in the meantime.

Lucy and Brazil remain stubbornly unable to make sense of the Foundling Father's mysterious reappearance, which leaves it to audiences and readers to fill in the blanks and decide if the Foundling Father has truly died, simply appeared as an echo or ghost to reenact his earlier death, or just performed a particularly convincing reenactment of the Lincoln assassination. As any actual remorse he feels mixes with his sense of duty as a professional mourner, Brazil is not sure whether he must perform to adequately honor his departed father. And with this father gone, Brazil begins narrating his mother's past as though trying protect her and keep her alive by pinning down the narrative of her life.

Brazil announces, "Welcome Welcome Welcome to thuh hall. Of. **Wonders**." He starts describing the wonders, exactly as he did earlier: there is the jewel box with "A.L.," "Mr. Washingtons bones and […] wooden teeth," the Lincoln **bust** and the various medals for at least a dozen different accomplishments like "bravery and honesty," "knowledge of sewin" and, of course, "fakin."

Having apparently inherited his father's stage in the replica of the Great Hole and job as a performer, Brazil introduces his "Wonders" show exactly as before: beyond recalling his father's Lincoln Act, this recurrence emphasizes how Brazil sees history as static and unchanging, rather than capable of adapting to the needs of the people who narrate and learn about it.

Finally, Brazil points to "our newest **Wonder**: One of the greats Hisself!" He tells the audience to "Note" how the Foundling Father's body is "propped upright in **our great Hole**," with his mouth opened, dressed like Lincoln, with "thuh great black hole in thuh great head," which is bleeding. He tells them to "Note: thuh last words.—And thuh last breaths.—And how thuh nation mourns—" and then he leaves, and the play ends.

By turning the Foundling Father into one of his "Wonders," Brazil comments on the way history is memorialized: rather than being allowed to speak to and inspire the living, they are dressed up in costumes preserved as immobile images and gawked at. Indeed, this closing scene recalls the Foundling Father's own line about "gawk[ing] at the Great Mans corpse" near the beginning of Act 1: now that the audience does the same to him, it is clear that—from the outside, at least—he has achieved the unity with Lincoln in the realm of "History" that he always wanted. But, to get here, he had to die and become nothing more than an immobile object that represents something else. Brazil's final words also echo the Foundling Father's eulogy for Lincoln during the second "echo" scene in this act, which at once establishes the Foundling Father's unity with Lincoln and Brazil's unity with his father. Ultimately, the Foundling Father never appears to get the "proper burial" that Brazil and Lucy sought out for him; instead, he is left outside of his coffin in a hole too big for his body. However, it is also possible that this "proper burial" truly has to do with Lucy and Brazil doing their part as family members (and as a mourner and a Confidence) to ensure that the Foundling Father does not truly die alone and unremembered. In this sense, perhaps it is more "proper" for the Foundling Father to remain in this replica Great Hole and represent Lincoln in death, as he did in life.

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