Translating Topdog/Underdog, by Suzan-Lori Parks: Just another 'Rep & Rev'?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores some of the main challenges one has to deal with when translating a play whose language — African American Vernacular English — is linked to a specific context and culture, as is the case with *Topdog/Underdog* (1999), by the African American dramatist Suzan-Lori Parks. In particular, I shall seek to establish how a notion such as the 'politically correct' is questioned by the translatorial process, thus emphasising the translator's ethical responsibility, while also showing how Parks grounds her writing in the idea of 'repetition and revision' characteristic of the Jazz aesthetic.

KEYWORDS

Translation; performance; African American vernacular English; Suzan-Lori Parks; interpretation; *verlan*; rhythm; change; repetition; revision.

1. Introduction

Suzan-Lori Parks (born 1964) is probably one of the most stimulating artists living and working in America today. Her plays question traditional ways of establishing relationships, building identities, and connecting to one another. As the two guest editors of this special issue David Johnston and Lisha Xu duly noted, we are experiencing major shifts in the ways we build our relationships to each other and to the past. Parks conceives of identity as a fluid and ever-going work-in-progress infused by what it means - and what it takes - to live with others on a daily basis. This shift is especially visible in the way Parks conceives of identity as a fluid and ever-going work-in-progress infused by what it means — and what it takes — to live in relation with others on a daily basis. Ever since *Imperceptible mutabilities in the third kingdom* (1989), Parks's playwriting has been fostering very perceptible innovations indeed: suddenly, something else was happening on the American stage, something that many commentators immediately acknowledged as a major shift in the dramatic field. Parks claims that she is "[…] re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history" (Parks, 1995, p. 5). A canon which, needless to say, has been (and still is, in many ways) dominated by the powers in place, pushing Native Americans, African Americans, women and poor people gently — but nonetheless firmly — aside for the past centuries. Building a new canon requires of Parks to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down" (Parks, 1995, p. 4). An operation through which she is literally "rewriting the Time Line — creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined" (Parks, 1995, p. 5). By visiting the ancestral burial ground and listening very carefully, Parks is able to hear *different voices*, thus "burst[ing] through every known convention to invent a new theatrical language, like a jive Samuel Beckett, while exploding American cultural myths and stereotypes along the way" (Heilpern, 1993). With *Topdog/Underdog*, as we shall see, Parks is suggesting for example that Lincoln could have been black[1].

So, Parks has been writing history anew for the past thirty years now — literally *crafting it* before our eyes on the American stages — and it is our task to let ourselves hear it,

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be it with a play such as *Topdog/Underdog* (1999), *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2016), or recently with her theatrical adaptation of *The Harder they Come* (2023), starring Jimmy Cliff's famous soundtrack. But what happens with this new dramatic fabric in translation? Is it possible to make the same bones sing in, say, French, German, or Italian? And if so, how? It seems we are dealing with *songs* more than just *words*: "The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and […] their song is a play — something that through a production *actually happens* […]" (Parks, 1995, p. 4). Thus, one might wonder whether it takes special musical knowledge to translate Parks's drama? Focusing on her 2002 Pulitzer-Prize winning piece, *Topdog/Underdog*[2], this article seeks to highlight some of the main challenges one has to deal with when translating theatre in general, and Parks's plays in particular, notably due to the fact that "the style of her plays as a whole forces readers and actors to learn a new tongue, as it were" (Geis, 2018, p. 3). Issued by theatre critic Deborah R. Geis, who wrote a study on Parks, this statement emphasises the fact that Parks's plays are written using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a variety of speech that lies at the crossroads of linguistic, social, cultural, political and ethical issues, all of which are closely linked to the African American context[3]. But it also hints towards another crucial component of Parks's writing, closely linked to music in general, and to Jazz in particular. Parks describes her work in the following terms:

> 'Repetition and revision' is a concept integral to the Jazz aesthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc. — with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised. 'Rep & Rev' as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use I'm working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score (Parks, 1995, p. 8–9).

Furthermore, *Topdog/Underdog* contains an authentic blues song, performed by Lincoln at the end of scene 1. It goes like this:

> **Lincoln**
> My dear mother left me, my fathers gone away
> My dear mother left me and my fathers gone away
> I dont got no money, I dont got no place to stay.
>
> My best girl, she threw me out into the street
> My favorite horse, they ground him into meat
> Im feeling cold from my head down to my feet.
>
> My luck was bad but now it turned to worse
> My luck was bad but now it turned to worse
> Dont call me up a doctor, just call me up a hearse (Parks, 2002, p. 23).

This article questions the different strategies one can adopt in order to render *Topdog/Underdog*'s distinctive traits when translating the play into French. To what extent, for instance, can French *verlan*[4] constitute a satisfying option? Perceived as a way of talking from the margin, "[t]his way of speaking is often used as a form of agency by marginal groups expressing their difference and dissidence in relation to dominant groups that set and enforce social and linguistic norms" (Levick, 2019, p. 76). Following these lines, *verlan* definitely meets the social and political components related to AAVE, used by African Americans in order to perform their identity and to survive in an unequal society. However, *verlan* lacks the more ethnic component of AAVE, described as "a sense of ethnic pride among Black people and especially African Americans, expressed in areas such as language, social customs, religion and

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music" (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2000). Sociologists Janet Mancini and Richard Majors' approach, notably in their detailed analysis of the so-called 'cool pose', is enlightening in this respect:

> The African-American male's relative impotence in the political and corporate worlds is countered with a potency and verve that borders on the spectacular, especially in athletic competition, entertainment, and the pulpit. Through the virtuosity of a performance, he tips socially imbalanced scales in his favor. […] Expressiveness may be displayed by black males in a myriad of ways. Speech becomes rapping. Nicknames furnish unique identities. Clothes and hairstyle take on a special panache. Walk, stance, gestures, and handshakes become the distinctive idiom of everyday encounters (Mancini & Majors, 1992, p. 70–71).

Based on concrete examples drawn from the comparison between my own translation of *Topdog/Underdog* and Jean-Pierre Richard's 2007 version, this article will provide an overview of the different options available when translating Parks's Pulitzer-Prize winning fable. In particular, I will seek to establish to what extent the different options chosen confront the translator with radical ethical choices, thus directly engaging his/her perception of the 'politically correct' and creating a whole new playtext, as it were, while fostering "a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance" (Levick, 2019, p. 78).

2. Listening to other (new) voices

Topdog/Underdog has been acclaimed as one of the best plays since Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, and has won Suzan-Lori Parks national pride and celebrity. Its plot is quite simple: we are with Lincoln and Booth, two brothers ironically named after the dead American president and his assassin. Lincoln is a former 3-card monte hustler who now works as a Lincoln impersonator at an arcade: reversing the blackface of the popular minstrel shows from the early 19th century, Lincoln puts white makeup on his face every morning, a frock coat, hat and false beard, and lets people shoot him with a dummy, thus reenacting Abraham Lincoln's assassination by John Wilkes Booth while watching a play in Washington in 1865. Parks's Booth is jobless. He tries desperately to convince his brother to teach him the 3-card monte scam. In the meantime, he keeps himself busy by shoplifting and talking about his girlfriend Grace, which we never get to see. The drama is tightly woven around their strange relationship: both abandoned by their parents, the brothers share a common background that ties them closely together, but it seems they are always still behaving like two rivals, notably as far as possessions and abilities are concerned:

> **Lincoln**
> Boosted?
>
> **Booth**
> Yeah, I boosted em. Theys stole from a big-ass department store. That store takes in more money in one day than we will in our whole life. I stole and I stole generously. I got one for me and I got one for you. Shoes belts shirts ties socks in the shoes and everything. Got that screen too.
>
> **Lincoln**
> You all right, man.
>
> **Booth**
> Just cause I aint good as you at cards dont mean I cant do nothing (Parks, 2002, p. 28).

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It isn't clear which one of the two brothers is victorious at the end of the play: after a final game of 3-card monte, Lincoln definitely wins his little brother's inheritance (their mom left Booth 500 dollars when she left, while their dad left Lincoln the same amount when *he* left), but Booth then shoots Lincoln dead with his gun. In her foreword, Parks wrote: "This is a play about family wounds and healing. Welcome to the family" (Parks, 2002). She also confessed during various interviews that one of the play's main objective was (simply) to let the audience wonder about what it means to live together. When *Topdog/Underdog* premiered at the Joseph Papp Public Theater (NY) in 2001, directed by George C. Wolfe (both the theatre and the play!), the audience was stunned by Parks's ability to address so many American cultural *clichés*, without ever simplifying or underestimating them: "She's audacious, she's willing to take on big American topics, but somehow she manages to make them work without dumbing down, and without selling out", said the New York Times critic Ben Brantley in *The Topdog Diaries*, Oren Jacoby's documentary on the 2002 award-winning play (Jacoby, 2002).

Following its success at the Public Theater, the play moved to Broadway, where rapper Mos Def (today Yasiin Bay) played Booth's role, at the same time that Parks won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, making her the first African American woman to receive this distinction. The production then travelled to the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2003. After such a theatrical sizzle, one might have expected *Topdog/Underdog* to quickly attract the attention of various editors and translators throughout the world; quite surprisingly, it took several years for the play to arouse interest oversea, namely with Philip Boulay's unique production of the play in 2007, at the Théâtre de l'Athénée in Paris, based on Jean-Pierre Richard's translation. I wasn't able to see the play myself, but according to the critics I could read, the play wasn't a big success[5], and Richard's translation never got published (it is available upon request on the website of the Maison Antoine Vitez in Paris, where I was able to get a PDF version of it. See: Maison Antoine Vitez, 2015).

The art of evaluating someone's rendering of a text in a foreign language is a sensitive business. French translator and theorist Antoine Berman, for instance, is well known for his critical review of the French translations of John Donne (Berman, 1995). But in the dramatic field, the initial difficulty of evaluating any given translation is enhanced by the fact that the words on the page are meant to be performed *on stage*, hence the written text can sometimes convey a false impression when compared with the final result, which is the actual staging of the play. In fact, many theatre translators, such as Antoine Vitez himself (after which the Maison Antoine Vitez was founded in 1991) or Jean-Michel Déprats — who translated Shakespeare's plays in the prestigious *Bibliothèque de La Pléiade*, alongside Jean-Pierre Richard — have repeatedly insisted on the necessity for theatre translations to allow interpretative potential above all:

> A translation, just like a stage production, constitutes a very contingent and ephemeral moment in one's approach of a theatre work. Staging a foreign play requires a new translation of the text to assert that neither its translation, neither its performance are final, that they can only take into account a certain dimension of the work at a given moment. This evidently argues against a certain utopic vision, in which the translation is perceived as a permanent and fixed object, governed by the editorial process as a whole (Déprats, in Weber Henking, 2001, p. 33, my translation).

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Following these lines, my own personal wish to retranslate *Topdog/Underdog*, more than fifteen years after Jean-Pierre Richard's version, seemed fully justified. Especially if one considers, with Jean-Paul Manganaro, that "a [theatre] translation can only suggest […] or put forward suggestions and not final solutions, given that at the end of the process, it will not have been the main interpreter, but just a 'scenic' device used, along with other mechanisms, by the real interpreter who is the actor on stage" (Manganaro, 2020, p. 45, my translation). Another strong impetus for retranslating Parks's masterpiece is the language of the play itself, which I have claimed belongs to the African American vernacular tradition:

> This glossary is forever morphing, constantly reinventing itself, bumping off words that were considered tony just the other day (but that now have been mainstreamed and co-opted by Madison Avenue to hawk everything from cereal to soda pop). Many of the more or less new hip-hop terms for, say, cash — including 'bank', 'bank roll', 'benjamins', 'cheddar', 'cheese', 'cream', 'dead presidents', 'dividends', 'ends', 'g's', 'loot', 'mail', 'papers', 'papes', and 'scrilla' — are guaranteed to go stale soon, maybe inside a few years (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 86)[6].

Under the title *Spoken Soul*, *The Story of Black English*, Rickford & Rickford's study (a father and his son) includes an interesting quote by famous African American author Toni Morrison, commenting on her own use of AAVE: "It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language" (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 5). The warning has been heard; whether it is in the American context or abroad — notably through the process of translation — it seems there is something in this particular variety of speech that one should treasure, no matter what. The entire question for me as a translator is *how*?

3. The translator's choices and their interpretational consequences

I was very deeply preoccupied by this question when I discovered Lance Hewson's *An approach to translation criticism: Emma and Madame Bovary in translation* (Hewson, 2011). Moving beyond value judgements, Hewson's approach seeks to establish the interpretational consequences of the choices made by each given translator: "I shall argue that it is not for translation criticism to decide why a particular choice was made, nor whether it was made consciously or unconsciously, but to examine the impact that the choice may potentially have on the reading and interpretation of the target text" (Hewson, 2011, p. 19). In particular, Hewson argues that the critic cannot decide what an "erroneous interpretation" is, but, rather, "[…] argue that the translational choices encourage an interpretation that lies outside the range that the critic has set out" (Hewson, 2011, p. 20). In order to do so, Hewson sets out to establish a very precise catalogue of choices that a translator has to deal with when translating a text from any given source language to any given target language. These options may be syntactic ("when a translator chooses not to use a calque structure, a variety of possibilities open up", Hewson, 2011, p. 61), grammatical ("my research shows that three in particular stand out when observing grammatical choices made when moving between English and French — they are tense, aspect and modality", Hewson, 2011, p. 70), or may concern the rhythm, the style or the register (where changes can lead to "effects of accretion or reduction", for instance). This reading grid was particularly inspiring when examining the options favoured by Jean-Pierre Richard in his rendering of Suzan-Lori Parks's famous play, and then comparing

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them with my own choices. The following table seeks to give a broad idea of some of the (many) alternatives available when translating the play to French (in this case, especially highlighting their impact in terms of register, rhythm and style):

Suzan-Lori Parks (2002)	**Jean-Pierre Richard** (Maison Antoine Vitez, 2015)	**Kathinka Salzmann**
1. Wrong! Sucker! Fool! Asshole! Bastard! I bet yr daddy heard how stupid you was and drank himself to death just cause he didnt wanna have nothing to do witchu! I bet yr mama seen you when you was born and she wished she was dead, sucker! Ha Ha Ha! And 3-Card, once again, wins all thuh money!! (Booth, scene 1, p. 8)	Raté ! Bouffon ! Blaireau ! Trouduc ! Idiot ! Tu es trop con : je parie que ton papa quand il l'a su plutôt que de voir ta gueule il s'est pinté à mort. Et que ta maman quand elle t'a vu illico elle s'est taillée, son placenta entre les cannes, connard ! Ha ha ha ! Et Bonneteau, une fois de plus, rafle tout !!	Raté ! Connard ! Bouffon ! Trouduc ! Bâtard ! J'parie qu'quand ton daron a vu comme t'étais teubé y s'est pinté à mort juste pour pas voir ta gueule ! J'parie qu'ta mère a voulu crever quand elle t'a vu naître, bolos ! Ha ha ha ! Et c'est 3-Cartes, encore une fois, qui rafle tout !!
2. You was at school motherfucker you was at school. (Booth, scene 1, p. 21)	Toi tu étais à l'école bouffon tu étais au bahut.	T'étais à l'école enfoiré toi t'étais à l'école.
3. Then you gotta jazz up yr act. Elaborate yr moves, you know. You was always too stiff with it. (Booth, scene 2, p. 36)	Alors il faut égayer ton numéro. L'enrichir, tu sais. Tu as toujours été trop raide.	Alors pimpe un peu ton jeu, mec. Améliore tes moves, t'sais. T'as toujours été trop coincé, mais là faut jazzer.
4. I got a rendezvous with Grace. Shit she so sweet she makes my teeth hurt. (Booth, scene 2, p. 36)	J'ai rendez-vous avec Grace. Shit. Elle est craquante j'en suis fêlé.	J'ai un date avec Grace. Merde elle est tellement sucrée qu'j'en ai mal aux dents.
5. I was over there looking for something the other week and there like 100 fuck books under yr bed and theyre matted together like a bad fro, bro, cause you spunked in the pages and didnt wipe them off. (Lincoln, scene 3, p. 45)	L'autre semaine j'étais dans ton coin à chercher quelque chose il y a au moins cent trucs de cul sous ton pieu c'est tout collant-mêlé on dirait une tignasse de nègre, tu as juté dans les pages et même pas essuyé.	J'étais là en train d'chercher un truc la s'maine passée et y a genre 100 pornos sous ton pieu et sont collés ensemble comme une vieille coupe afro, bro, parce que t'as juté d'ssus et qu't'as pas essuyé les pages.

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6. Cement backyard and a frontyard full of trash, yeah, dont be going down memory lane man, yll jinx thuh vibe I got going in here. Gracell be walking in here and wrinkling up her nose cause you done jinxed up thuh joint with yr raggedy recollections. (Booth, scene 5, p. 65)	Du ciment par-derrière et un tas de détritus par-devant, yeah, ne te lance pas dans la nostalgie man, tu vas me porter la poisse me bousiller mon atmosphère. Grace va entrer et aussitôt flairer le caca parce que tu m'auras bousillé le décor avec tes souvenirs en marmelade.	Une cour en ciment et un jardin plein d'merdier, ouais, on va pas non plus l'faire graver dans l'marbre mec, tu vas foutre en l'air *mah* bonne vibe. Grace va débarquer ici et elle va avoir *lah* nausée pasque t'as foutu une ambiance pourrie avec tes vieux souvenirs de merde.
7. Theyd seen me on thuh corner with thuh old crew or if they aint seed me with they own eyes theyd heard word. Links thuh stink! Theyd heard word and theyd seed uh sad face on some poor sucker or a tear in thuh eye of some stupid fucking tourist and they figured it was me whod just took thuh suckers last dime, it was me who had all thuh suckers loot. They knew. They knew. (Lincoln, scene 6, p. 84)	Elles m'avaient vu au coin de la rue avec mon ancien gang et si elles ne m'avaient pas vu de leurs propres yeux elles l'avaient entendu dire. Lincoln le Pactole ! Elles en avaient entendu parler elles avaient vu la triste mine d'un pauvre pigeon ou une larme dans l'œil d'un péquenot et elles ont compris que c'était moi qui lui avais piqué sa dernière pièce, moi qui avais tout son magot. Elles savaient. Elles savaient.	Elles m'avaient vu au coin d'*lah* rue avec *mah* crew ou si elles m'avaient pas vu d'leurs propres yeux elles s'étaient passé l'mot. Link *leuh* stink ! Elles s'étaient passé l'mot et elles avaient vu *lah* mine dépitée d'un pauvre connard ou une larme au coin d'l'œil d'un touriste à *lah* con et elles ont capté qu'c'était moi qu'avais plumé ce bouffon jusqu'au dernier centime, qu'c'était moi qu'avais raflé tout *leuh* blé d'ce pauv' type. Elles avaient capté. Elles avaient capté.

Table 1. Changes in terms of register, rhythm and style.

As one can note, I keep returning to many *verlan* words in my translation, treating them as French conveyers of the specific blend of AAVE Parks uses in *Topdog/Underdog*. Mainly used by young people living in the French *banlieues* (but not only), *verlan* has often been considered as a French equivalent of AAVE: its first users were artists who imported hip-hop to the French context at the beginning of the 90's (notably through famous rap French groups like *NTM*, *Ministère A.M.E.R.*, *Sages poètes de la rue*, etc.). Today, however, a lot of *verlan* words are used in common language and have thus lost their coded dimension. This is notably the case for very frequently used words such as *keuf* (for *flic*, 'police'), *reum* (for *mère*, 'mother'), *reup* (for *père*, 'father'), *ouf* (for *fou*, 'crazy', 'great'), *tema* (for the argotic verb *mater*, 'to check out'), etc. Using French *verlan* as an equivalent of AAVE is a common practice in the film industry, for example when it comes to subtitling films, as Pierre-Alexis Mevel has successfully shown[7]. But reversing the proposition — using AAVE when subtitling *French* movies to English — doesn't work as well. As Levick noted: "The use of marked African American vernacular to translate the voice of the French youth [in the 1995 cult film *La Haine*] appeared so incongruous to many viewers that the director requested a new set of subtitles for the 10th anniversary DVD release" (Levick, 2019,

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p. 82). This is probably because hip-hop as a cultural movement represents far more than just a way of speaking: when French artists (especially rappers) imported this musical trend, with its specific way of singing, they also imported a new way of *being*. But the opposite isn't true! Indeed, young Americans usually have no idea whatsoever of what is going on in the French *banlieues* and haven't imported their specific way of being to the American context: "As a general rule, [*banlieues*] are largely ignored both in France and abroad, bar instances of heightened tension or riots" (Levick, 2019, p. 77). Hence using AAVE to translate *verlan* isn't as convincing a strategy as its counterpart (i.e., using *verlan* to translate AAVE). Incidentally, it isn't a coincidence that I was able to use many English words in my French translation of the play (such as 'bro', 'team', 'game', 'bullshit', 'fuck', 'in love', 'too much', 'life', 'crew', 'date' — a very typical American concept that has so successfully been imported to France that the word is used directly in its English version, as well as its French derivative verb, *dater*), all of which are used *tels quels* on a regular basis in French, when the opposite, of course, isn't true. Furthermore, when French words *are* used in English, they are generally markers of social prestige, as with *chic*, *couture*, *a la carte*, *beaux arts*, *je ne sais quoi*, *rendezvous* — generally spelled that way in English and typically used by Parks in *Topdog/Underdog* (a term that I ironically translated by 'date', as seen in example 4 of the comparative table). This strategy also clearly highlights my wish to anchor the French version of *Topdog/Underdog* in its own specific (American) context. In this respect, my translation's ethical aim is to receive "the foreign as foreign" (Venuti, 1995). Hence favouring *verlan* and Anglicisms — as well as typically deciding to keep the blues song at the end of the first scene in its original English version — are only some of the many strategies I used, next to using short words, for example, in order to render the play's unique *texture*, while always bearing in mind that my translation cannot and will never be a pure replica of its original (English) version: it is sheer imitation with subversion, or repetition with revision, as Parks would put it, a special kind of prepared (and, in this case, rehearsed) improvisation, as is similarly the case in the Jazz aesthetic so accurately described by the artist.

4. The necessity of the stage

Taking Hewson's approach further, I would like to argue that in the case of a play, it is important to be able to test different translations directly on stage. Thus, my next step was to work with the students from the drama class of the University of Geneva, in order to test my choices, as well as Jean-Pierre Richard's options. The result was eye-opening: their expertise in terms of performance, their fluency in the use of French slang, and their ease at switching between different linguistic (and social) codes all appeared as valuable benefits for my translation. For instance, the different words I underlined in the comparative chart (in my translation and Jean-Pierre Richard's version) were not supported *at all* by the students because they were considered too dated: this was typically the case for *fêlé*, *péquenot*, and *magot*, for example. The use of (quite many) other terms simply wasn't supported by the students because of their register: this was the case for words such as *bolos* (that designates a stupid or limited person in French), *gang* (they reckoned they actually used the anglicism 'crew' in French, as in *avec mah crew*), or *caca*, which they clearly mentioned never using, preferring the very common French word *merde*. Example 5, in particular, was a real challenge: how does one translate Parks's "bad fro"? Jean-Pierre Richard uses the N-word in his proposition ("*une tignasse de nègre*"), which clearly, in 2024, represents quite a risky option, and by that I mean an option that could be perceived as politically

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incorrect and, therefore, disrespectful[8]. We are here at the heart of a very crucial component of the translational process: the idea that words and concepts, like ideas, evolve through time. Hence what was once perceived as okay to perform on a particular stage (in this case, at the Théâtre de l'Athénée in Paris, in 2007) would seem inapt today, notably after the Black Lives Matter movement and its repercussions in terms of social justice and identitarian politics. Hence the perpetual movement of retranslation (of literature in general, and most certainly of theatre in particular), because one cannot presume to know what will be politically correct in five, ten or fifteen years. In this particular example, what one *does* know, by contrast, is that Parks's initial words ("a bad fro"), do not, by any means, justify one's use of the N-word, nor do they require it (else she would have used it herself[9]). In my opinion, this is a good example of what Hewson would consider "an interpretation that lies outside the range that the critic has set out" (Hewson, 2011, p. 20). Furthermore, example 5 encourages me to keep in mind at all times that my own French version of the play is also ephemeral and contingent, just like any other.

As far as rhythm is concerned, there would be a lot to comment on, but for now, I would point out that the students systematically favoured shortening sentences and words (as in '*elles ont capté qu'c'était moi qu'avais plumé ces bouffons*', where a correct grammatical structure would be: *elles ont capté que c'était moi qui avais plumé*…; or *J'parie qu'quand* instead of *Je parie que quand*, etc.). These options seem particularly fit for the stage, where replies often have to spurt out at a quick pace. Furthermore, they also reflect Parks's own writing style, in which orality holds an essential part (as in examples 1 and 3, for instance, with "yr daddy", or the expressions "nothing to do witchu!", and "Then you gotta jazz up yr act. Elaborate yr moves […]", etc.). In fact, "[w]ords are spells in our mouth", says Suzan-Lori Parks, who is very aware of their impact on stage:

> Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests — and through digestion creates a performance on stage. Each word is configured to give the actor a clue to their physical life. Look at the difference between 'the' and 'thuh'. The 'uh' requires the actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack (Parks, 1995, p. 11-12).

These clear indications on the written page need to find their counterpart on stage: "When the text is performed, the audience, following the flow of the dialogue and the slangy, stichomythic exchanges, may not be aware of the care with which Parks has created a resistant, complicated textual statement" (Geis, 2018, p. 13). Thus, my choice to translate 'thuh' with the French *leuh* (instead of *le*) or *lah* (instead of *la*). The best illustration of this practice lies in example 7 of the comparative chart, with the line: '*Elles m'avaient vu au coin d'lah rue avec mah crew ou si elles m'avaient pas vu d'leurs propres yeux elles s'étaient passé l'mot. Link leuh stink !*' Of course, it will be up to the actor (and director) to give these particular spellings (*lah* instead of *la*, *mah* instead of *ma*, etc.) their vocal and physical embodiment on stage, but at least the indication is (already) clearly given in the written text: because of this textual hint, the actor knows that *something special* is happening, hence s/he cannot simply pronounce the normal French specifier as if it were a perfectly normal occurrence of the word. Underlying here is the idea "that content determines form, and form determines content; that form and content are interdependent" (Parks, 1995, p. 7). For Parks indeed: "Form should not be looked at askance and held suspect — form is not something that 'gets in the way of the story' but is an integral part of the story" (Parks, 1995, p. 7). Thus, the strong impetus to find the 'correct' French form, because it will clearly determine the content

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of the French version of the play. In my case, and as mentioned earlier, finding the 'correct form' meant: recurring to *verlan* and short English words (register), shrinking and coupling words (rhythm), and giving precise hints for future staging (incarnation).

All of these options then needed to be tested, practiced and rehearsed — a word that stems out of the French verb *herser*, which means 'to harrow' ['to plow and cultivate the ground']. Following along the lines of this metaphor with Julie Vatain, it seems that:

> The actor works and reworks the words like one would the earth to get fruit out of it. Successive productions of a play exploit and reveal the [source] text, without wearing it out. Being *faithful* when translating a text thus also means recreating this future poetic interpretation, searching directly in the words for the hints and hooks of their future incarnation. This engages the translator's body as a whole in a reading of the text that brings into play her/his imagination, diction and own breathing rhythm. To prepare the staging of the play in another language, s/he needs to encompass extratextual elements — set design, costumes, gestures, mimics — as well as the presence of the audience. […] The actor and the director thus serve as guides when s/he is listening to the text, whilst physically and creatively engaging into each role (Vatain, 2012, p. 81, my translation).

Retranslation theories — especially Chersterman's approach following his understanding of Berman's famous article (Berman, 1990) — usually emphasise the idea that each successive translation tends to be closer to the original text than the previous one. Recent contributions, however, focus more on the relation of (inter)dependence *between* translations, especially highlighting the importance of the first translator. Outi Paloposki and Kaisa Koskinen, for instance, show that "[…] the figure of the first translator is an unavoidable function of the retranslation process and needs to be taken into account both by the retranslator and by researchers studying retranslations" (Paloposki & Koskinen, 2015, p. 25). Even if the role of the first translator, in their vision, is that of an "underdog", the retranslator always "needs to assume *some* stance towards the first translator" (Paloposki & Koskinen, 2015, p. 26). In my case, and even though Richard's translation hasn't been published — and thus isn't directly and easily available to a director who would like to produce *Topdog/Underdog* for the theatre today — it seems fair enough to say that his proposition inspired me in more than one way. First, it helped achieve to convince me that translating Parks's difficult playwriting into French was possible *at all*. Secondly, it gave me a starting point: indeed, while I found many of Richard's propositions quite inspiring, I didn't agree with some of the other options he favoured, and this particular stance gave me a very strong impetus for retranslating the play (that is, for choosing other options to render Parks's playful and creative playwriting, as well as her particular use of AAVE). Very clearly, I am not sure I would have done so, had I found the existing translation absolutely apt. I am therefore strongly indebted towards Jean-Pierre Richard, even though, or maybe precisely *because*, I do not always agree with the options he favoured.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to provide an overview of the wide range of options available to the translator converting a play such as *Topdog/Underdog* from African American Vernacular English to French. Throughout this complex and multifold process, challenges arise directly from the (play)text. In this particular case, they seem to concern:

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1) its particular variety of language (AAVE) and aesthetic, linked to the concept of 'Rep & Rev';
2) the fact that it is a *play*, which options need to be tested and rehearsed directly on stage;
3) the fact that it confronts the translator with radical (ethical) choices, engaging her/his perception of the politically correct.

In the case of example 5 of the comparative chart, it would have been interesting — had I had more space than this article allows — to question the need to actually update the original playtext itself: indeed, the situation described in this example involves 'fuck books', yet, in 2024, they would most certainly have been replaced by a cell phone, thus questioning the humoristic impact of this powerful scene for the audience today, while emphasising the perpetual need to adapt plays, therefore encouraging directors to make good use of their interpretational freedom. It seems quite obvious that a director encompasses other (and maybe new) ways of 'translating' the written text for the stage, thus effectively (re)creating a new play for each particular audience and time. This operation seems to be encouraged by Suzan-Lori Parks herself, as she inserts moments called 'Spells' in all of her plays: "Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue" and described as "place[s] where the figures experience their pure true simple state" that "directors should fill […] as they best see fit" (Parks, 2002, Author's Notes), Parks's 'Spells' leave great leeway to directors, who will necessarily favor different staging options, according to each production and given context, and following diverse theatrical traditions. In fact, 'Spells' seem to lead directly to the idea of 'Rep & Rev', while this concept ultimately appears to be a recurring feature of *Topdog/Underdog*'s creative process as a whole. As I've established already, 'Rep & Rev' lies at the heart of Parks's personal — and indeed unique — writing style in *Topdog/Underdog*. But the concept is also reiterated — indeed *re*embodied — through the rehearsing of her famous play, be it in its original English version or, furthermore, in its French translations. When translating *Topdog/Underdog* from English to my mother tongue, I was able to experience personally, as I hope this article has shown, that "'Rep & Rev' texts create a real challenge for the actor and director as they create a physical life appropriate to that text" (Parks, 1995, p. 9). This is notably the case because, as Parks duly noted, "[i]t's not just repetition but repetition with *revision*. And in drama, change, revision, is the thing" (Parks, 1995, p. 9).

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Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable in this article.

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Notes

[1] Visual artists such as Kara Walker or Carrie Mae Weems adopt the same perspective through their explorations of forgotten and/or erased spots of history. In 2014, Carrie Mae Weems was the first African American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum.
[2] New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2002 (1999). The play recently won a Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play when staged on Broadway for the second time, twenty years after its premiere (directed by Kenny Leon and starring actors Corey Hawkins and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II). To my knowledge, the play hasn't been translated into any other language than French.
[3] Other famous female writers known for their use of AAVE include Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez or Zora Neale Hurston.
[4] *Verlan* is the reversed form of the French word *envers*, meaning 'backwards': *merci* ('thanks') becomes *cimer*, *femme* ('woman') becomes *meuf*, *mec* ('man') becomes *keum*, etc.
[5] For a critical review, see Manuel Piolat Soleymat, "Topdog/Underdog", *La Terrasse* [online].
[6] Parks (2002) uses 'bucks', 'bacon', 'greenbacks', 'dollars' and 'cash' in *Topdog/Underdog*.
[7] Mevel (2012) gives the following examples (amongst others) in his thesis: *Boyz n the Hood* (1991, John Singleton); *Get on the Bus* (1996, Spike Lee); *White Men Can't Jump* (1992, Ron Shelton).
[8] The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) issued a ban on the use of the N-word in 2007, the same year Richard translated Parks's play.

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[9] I personally chose to translate Parks's initial proposition quite literally: *une vieille coupe afro*, where the French qualifying adjective *vieille*, in this particular context, is used in its slang version, meaning 'unclean' or 'wasted', more than simply 'old'.

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