

SUZAN-LORI PARKS IN PERSON

Interviews and Commentaries

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INTRODUCTION

“WATCH ME WORK”: REFLECTIONS ON SUZAN-LORI PARKS AND HER CANON

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“WATCH ME WORK”

Reflections on Suzan-Lori Parks and her Canon

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Suzan-Lori Parks is widely recognized as one of the most provocative and prolific dramatists of the current millennium. The winner of numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award, Parks has given the American theater an entirely new, challenging stage language that resonates with insightful puns and historical allusions. Only three years after her college graduation and the production (as a staged reading) of her first play, her senior thesis, *The Sinner's Place* (1985), Suzan-Lori Parks's immense talent and potential to radically transform American theater were widely touted by leading theater critics. In 1989, Mel Gussow, senior critic for the *New York Times*, lauded the playwright for her “theatrical versatility” and originality. Four years later, the *New York Times* hailed her as one of “30 artists under 30 most likely to change the culture for the next 30 years,” and in 1999, *Time Magazine* numbered Parks among the “100 Innovators for the Next Wave.” Two years later, Parks, who by then had already won two OBIE Awards, was given a \$500,000 “Genius” grant from the MacArthur Foundation. The following year, she won the Tony Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Since then, she has re-envisioned the idea of the “world premiere” and “opening night” by having her collection of more than 365 plays, *365 Days/365 Plays*, staged at over 700 theaters in the United States and approximately 100 theaters across Canada and Europe from 2006–2007, thrown back the curtain on her writing process by literally inviting audiences to “Watch Me Work,” and adapted American operatic and literary classics, such as *Porgy and Bess* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for the theatrical stage and the television screen. Although primarily a playwright, Parks has demonstrated exceptional talent in art forms other than theater. She is a best-selling novelist (*Getting Mother's Body*) and a screenwriter (Spike Lee's *Girl 6*). A musician, she wrote the score for *Father Comes Home from the War* and the libretto for *Ray Charles*



FIGURE 1 Suzan-Lori Parks directs a rehearsal of *The Book of Grace*, ZACH Theatre, 2011. Photo by Kirk A. Tuck. Courtesy of ZACH Theatre.

Live!—A New Musical! Parks even composed several original songs, including “The Looking Song” for her *Red Letter Plays*, *In the Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000). As a vocalist and guitarist as well, she has reincarnated herself as Sula Parks and has performed at the Public Theater and elsewhere.

Suzan-Lori Parks in Person is divided into two parts: interviews with the playwright and commentaries by the people who worked most closely with her. Interviews with Suzan-Lori Parks contextualize and even extend her dramaturgy. They provide valuable first-hand information about her influences from her childhood experiences living on a military base in Germany, to her college studies with novelist James Baldwin, to her passion and love for music. They offer insight into her thinking, sharing her ideas on everything from the collective unconscious, to jazz, to American politics, to popular film, to black cultural memory. In addition, the interviews themselves are highly engaging texts. They feel more like plays in which the playwright, alongside her interlocutors, doubles as both the author and a character. The commentaries in this book also grant readers a privileged perspective into Parks’s distinctive approach to making theater. Her longtime collaborators, including directors who helmed world premiere productions, recall their first impressions of the artist, reflect on the challenges and successes of their productions, and offer insight into Suzan-Lori Parks, the person and not the playwright. In addition, prominent theater historians and critics discuss Parks’s evolving legacy and her contributions to American theater. These commentaries provide historical and critical context that speak to Parks’s enduring influence and the power of her theatrical voice.

Consisting of more than three decades of interviews and commentaries, this book reveals Parks to be a keen social critic, a vibrant commentator on contemporary theater, and a fascinating conversationalist through her observations on race, gender, history, and American culture. In privileging the playwright’s own voice, this collection allows Parks to reflect on her iconoclastic approach to theater and her career as an artistic innovator. Through the interviews presented in this collection, we can hear the artist directly and indirectly (through the commentaries of her collaborators) talk about the inspirations for her most critically acclaimed plays and comment on the changing face of American theater. Indeed, one of the most striking things about Suzan-Lori Parks, as she appears in this collection, is the consistency of her enthusiasm and advocacy for the performing arts as a medium to tell stories that need to be told and to write histories frequently left unrecorded.

Finding my Me

Susan L. Parks, or “Susie Parks” as she was known to her college instructors, became Suzan-Lori Parks as a result of her name being spelled incorrectly on a promotional flyer: “When I was doing one of my first plays in the East Village, we had fliers printed and they spelled my name wrong. I was devastated.”¹ Mortified by the error which could not be corrected in time for the performance, the young playwright adopted her director’s advice, “Just keep it, honey, it will be fine.” On that day and through that error, Suzan-Lori Parks was born. Although unintended, the emergence of “Suzan-Lori” was already in the works. As a high school student in Germany, Suzan-Lori Parks quickly discovered that the logic of black and white that defines interpersonal relationships in the United States was not applicable. As a college student at Mount Holyoke, she found inspiration in novelist James Baldwin’s suggestion that she seemed better suited to be a playwright than a novelist, explaining that her words leap from the page and demand embodiment. From that moment on, Parks became a playwright. She enrolled in acting classes. She began to direct plays, including a student production of Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. Because the language and content of her first play were considered too raw, *The Sinner’s Place* was not produced at Mount Holyoke but presented as a reading at a local theater festival. After college, she went to London to study acting at The Drama Studio, and when she returned she took various jobs, including working as a paralegal. Each career was short-lived as her second play (and the first to be professionally produced), *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, brought her immediate celebrity status within the world of experimental theater. Commercial success, including Broadway fame, eventually would follow.

A crucible of the themes and techniques that distinguish Parks’s plays appears in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*. The play, which was produced as part of the 1989 BACA Fringe Festival, exemplifies Parks’s distinctive stage language,

her repetition and revision (or “rep and rev”) dramatics, her “allegorical absurdism,”² use of choral voices and figures, and, perhaps, most importantly, her investigation into why and how black figures have been erased from history. In *Mutabilities*, Parks explores the wide and stinging impact of slavery in America and its effects on black identity. Victims in both slave-owning and postcolonial America, her characters ask a crucial Parks’s question: “How we gonna find my Me?”³ The title of Parks’s play brilliantly uses “myth and metaphor” to raise and answer that key question. The “Third Kingdom” metaphorically refers to “the space of sea between the worlds” of freedom and bondage.⁴ It is in this in-between space that African American identity can be found or, as choral figures Kin-Seer and Shark-Seer chant, “My new Self was uh 3rd Self made by thuh space inbetween.”⁵

Parks’s dramaturgy rewrites, reimagines, and restores a black historical presence. As Irene Backalenick stressed, too, Parks’s “subject matter moves through boundless areas of time and space but in identifying with her own background is often grounded in black history.”⁶ Indeed, the central theme of this early play centers on the dramatization of the terrifying ways black bodies (and identity) have been fragmented, dismembered, and expunged as transgressive elements in American history. On the Middle Passage, Africans were separated from home, the place of history, memory, and the sense of self. Kin-Seer recalls: “And I was wavin. Wavin. Wavin at my uther me who I could barely see. Over thuh water on thuh uther cliff I could see my uther me but my uther me could not see me.”⁷ The painful voyage claimed countless lives. Bodies of the sick, the already dead, and those seeking escape went overboard and disappeared. That sense of separation and loss extends across *Mutabilities*. “Tonight I dream of where I be-camin from. And where I be camin from duhduhnt look like nowhere like I been,” announces Kin-Seer, commenting on the collective loss of racial memory.⁸

In the four parts of *Mutabilities*, Parks attempts to set the record straight, or at least to bewail the fact that black history, consciousness, and identity have been lost, forgotten, and/or destroyed. The first part of the play, “Snails,” dramatizes the experience of three contemporary young black girls who are ridiculed and punished by the white establishment (academic, commercial, etc.) because of their language, culture, and looks. Even more disruptive, they are seen as specimens by a white naturalist, Dr. Lutzky, who spies on the girls and then tries to eradicate them. In this moment, Parks introduces a theme, the surveillance of black bodies, that repeats across her other plays, most notably *Venus, In the Blood*, and *Topdog*. The second part of the *Mutabilities* is an extended dialogue among the five choral characters (Kin-Seer, Us-Seer, Shark-Seer, Soul-Seer, and Over-Seer) about the fate of black people in America. They have lost their names, their clothes, their selves. All that’s left is their “bleechin bones.” Over-Seer asks, “Who’re you again?” and Soul-Seer laments, “Duh duhnt-he-know-my-name.”⁹

“Open House,” the third part, concentrates on the life of an old slave, Aretha, propped up on a hospital bed. She has been cruelly treated by Charles, her white

master, his children, whom she reared, and Miss Faith, a sanctimonious bigot. The title of this section vibrates with Parksian irony. The “Open House” refers to a slave ship (a slaver) and the number of bodies it can force into its hold. Transported back in time, Aretha conjoins a family reunion with the arrival of slavers with their cargoes: “Gotta know thuh exact size. Thup. Got people comin. Hole house full. They gonna be kin?... How many kin I hold. Whole hold full.”¹⁰ The “whole” is polyvalent—Aretha’s womb, the slave ship’s belly, the abyss into which she will descend, foreshadowing Parks’s fascination with homonyms: *hold, hole, whole*. The fourth part, “Greeks (or the Slugs),” continues Parks’s excoriation of white society for dismembering and disremembering black history. Legless and eyeless, Sgt. Smith becomes a victim of the military establishment. The disabled sergeant, who inspired the later *Father Comes Home from the War* plays, cannot even recognize his own children (“You one of uh mines?”) and is reduced to cleaning a rock. His identity—his *mine, mind*—is dismembered by the *minefield* he steps on, a symbol of how memory and historical awareness (and presence) can be taken away.

Parks makes the imperceptible stunningly perceptible, and uncomfortable. As director Liz Diamond asserts in a 2009 interview with Faedra Chatard Carpenter:

What *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* explores is a deeply disturbing idea—that history is not the ramp envisioned by the Enlightenment... in opposition to the way Darwin’s theories are traditionally understood. Their evolution doesn’t necessarily signify progress... The characters are snails, or worse, slugs... shapeless little organisms with no protective shell. *IMP* gets under your skin—it’s intensely funny and dramatic, and does what great theatre is supposed to do: Rock you. Invade your heart and mind.¹¹

The success of Parks’s first professionally produced and fully realized production anchors itself in the playwright’s ability to employ language to create a physical presence with the power to intervene in the writing and remembrance of history. She creates a third space, a “Third Kingdom,” on stage “where meanings converge and mutate”¹² and the past becomes present.

Language is a Physical Act

In a 1985 scholarship application to study at The Drama School in London, Parks, then a college senior, expressed her desire to study acting to become a better playwright. She wrote:

I have chosen writing and directing and must prepare accordingly for my career. But why a school for actors?... To study drama through the medium of acting is to move from mere understanding to a physicalization of that character.¹³

An attention to the embodiment of words, which is especially evident in her frequent use of the “uh” sound, is a key feature of her playwriting. Indeed, she would affirm in “Elements of Style,” “Language is a physical act, something that involves your whole blood.”¹⁴ *The Death of the Last Black Man* (1990) exemplifies Parks’s highly experimental, language-driven, surrealist theater. It was produced in 1990 at BACA Downtown in Brooklyn and directed by Beth Schachter. Parks’s description of the play underscores its haunting effect on audiences—*Last Black Man* consists of “12 figures with strange names all telling this jazz poetic story about a man who died and doesn’t know where he’s going to go now that he’s dead.” Commenting on her jazz poetry, the playwright told David Savran that her characters

talk funny because they’re in a really funny place. They’re walking a line between the living and the dead, or he is anyway. Most of the people in the play are dead. They really don’t make sense a lot of the time because they’re dead.¹⁵

As Parks stressed in a short article early in her career, “I do not write as people I know speak; nor have I ever heard anyone speak as I write.”¹⁶

Like *Mutabilities*, and so many of her other plays that follow, Parks’s signature style includes ingenious puns, parodies, and an outrageous sense of humor to attack and disable stereotypes of black identity. There are also elements of the minstrel show, melodrama, and even cartoons in some of her plays, particularly in *Last Black Man*. For example, Ham’s long genealogy two-thirds of the way into the play parodies Biblical passages and is filled with the contemptuous names that overseers used to refer to black slaves. Moreover, by naming characters Black Man with Watermelon, Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, or Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork, Parks satirizes conventional racial portraits of African Americans. Her characters are far more complex, more nuanced than the names they carry. As Jennifer Larson reminds us, “Black Man’s inability to see himself in the watermelon that names him... shows his initial disconnection with stereotypes that define him in history.”¹⁷

The influence of Adrienne Kennedy, a playwright whom Parks would later formally interview for a magazine profile, is especially strong in *Last Black Man*. As Parks told Savran, “I am a fan of hers, particularly her *Funnyhouse of a Negro*” (1964).¹⁸ Parks claimed, “I read it and reread it. It also had a hand in shaping what I do.” Like Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse*, as well as *The Owl Answers* and *A Rat’s Mass*, *Last Black Man* takes audiences into a mad, surrealist world where we find allegorical characters who war with their multiple selves. In this nightmare world, linear time and consequential logic are replaced with horrific sights and sounds of black dismemberment and fragmentation expressed in haunting poetry and framed through Roman Catholic religious rituals. Both Kennedy and Parks stage the subconscious, probing the interiority of complex characters who are persecuted in (and by) a dominating society. In some ways, Kennedy’s

spectacles—Sarah's noose around her neck in *Funnyhouse*—look forward to Parks's stage pageants. Like Kennedy before her, too, Parks dismantles a safe, predictable, and binary world of being alive or being dead; living then as opposed to now; and inhabiting self or others. Kennedy's Sarah has four selves including Patrice Lumumba, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus, and Queen Victoria. Similarly, Black Man is reincarnated as himself in many contexts throughout the play, attesting to the veracity of Parks's epigraph from Beat poet Bob Kaufman—"When I die/I won't stay/ Dead." Time releases Black Man from chronological boundaries only to execute him more frequently, more heinously. The various tortures Black Man endures—beatings, lynching, drowning, etc.—prefigure the numerous times that the Foundling Father in *The America Play* is assassinated when he is dressed as Abraham Lincoln.

Many times, Parks's scathing humor tells a harrowing chronicle. Recounting his experience being electrocuted, Black Man cries, "They juiced me some" and then, more fully, reveals that

They had theirselves uh extender chord. Fry uh man in thuh town square needs uh extender tuh reach em thuh electric. Hook up thuh chaiar tuh thuh power. Extender: 49 foot in length. Closer to tuh thuh power I never been. Flip on up thuh go switch. Huh! Juice begins its course.

But as he was being "juiced," Black Man got away. "First 49 foot I was runnin they was still juicing."¹⁹ His death seems even more horrific in light of Parks's black comedy over "juicin" him as he tries to escape. Parks thus turns a gruesome sight into an absurdly funny one, undercutting the authority of a sadistic punishment. When Black Man is lynched, he remembers white spectators watching as if they were at a picnic. Parks also uses savage satire by comparing the disparity of a hanging and a picnic,²⁰ true to the actual history of lynching.

Parks is clearly attuned to Kennedy's surrealistic plays where time dissolves or reloops. In *Last Black Man*, for instance, Queen-then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut holds forth on the collapsibility of time:

Yesterday, tuhday next summer tuhorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world. Uh! Oh Don't be uhlarmed. Do not be afeared. It was painless. Uh painless passin. He falls 23 floors to his death.²¹

Commenting on how the past looks no different from the present, Black Woman tells Black Man,

They comed from you and tooked you. That was yesterday. Today you sit in your chair where yo sat yesterday and thuh day afore yesterday afore they comed and tooked you. Things today is just as they are yesterday cept nothin is familiar cause it was such uh long time uhgoh.²²

Kennedy's characters, like Parks's, are imprisoned in time warps.

Like Kennedy's characters, too, Parks's are victims of a society that denies them selfhood and erases their history. Conscious of efforts to render them invisible, her characters frequently assert a desire to be heard, recognized, and remembered. Early in the play, Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread instructs Last Black Man: "You should write it down because if you don't write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You should write it down and you should hide it under a rock."²³ When these words are repeated near the end of the play, Parks replaces "Hide it under a rock" with "You will write it down and you will carve it out of a rock."²⁴ This verbal shift, or revision of the words, charts the powerful ways in which black characters move from "hiding" their history to "carving it," or preserving it, thus making history and not losing it. Significantly at the end of the play, Black Man can tell Black Woman—"Remember me."²⁵

As in *Mutabilites*, ancestral memory must be recorded so that it preserves the times before slavers stole Africans away from their homeland and then moves to documenting the horrors of the Middle Passage that followed. Reflecting these events in African history, Parks fittingly includes characters named Before Columbus, or a time before slavers came to Africa, and Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, one of the few female rulers of Egypt and a symbol of African power and empire. When Before Columbus recounts that "All those boats passed by me. My coast fell into the sea. All thuh boats. They stopped for me," referring to slavers, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut ironically replies, "I have not seen you since,"²⁶ exemplifying Parks's subversive sense of humor. Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork draws a similar conclusion, reiterated throughout *Last Black Man*—"This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world." As Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam, Jr. aptly stress, "The death of every black man in the past inhabits the death of each black man in the present in the sense that history is lived as present."²⁷ In resurrecting Black Man so many times, Parks becomes a witness to the gruesome events constituting black history, told and retold through rep and rev techniques.

As in Kennedy, too, Parks incorporates religious rituals as an instrumental part of her stage spectacles. In a 1994 interview with Han Ong, Parks declares, "Every play I write is like a religious pageant." She adds, "My plays are like passion plays where the community comes together to reenact the passion of whomever."²⁸ Certainly the community of black characters in *Last Black Man* is gathered to remember the deaths and resurrections of Black Man. Black Woman in particular testifies to his numerous reincarnations. Similarly, in her 1999 interview with David Savran, Parks claims, "For me plays are more like religious experiences than secular ones."²⁹ In this context, *Last Black Man* might be seen as an elegy, or even a black ghost play. As Liz Diamond, describing the production, underscored, "We created a whispering chorus of 'ghosts' that played as the audience entered the theatre and took their seats. These were the voices of all those 'figures' from the past, arriving and naming themselves, as

they gather to teach the history of the Black Man, to get us to face it, own it, and ‘write it down.’”³⁰

Describing herself and Parks as “recovering Catholics,” Diamond recalls that Parks and she went to “masses together” to see how church rituals could inform *Last Black Man*. As Diamond points out, in *Last Black Man*, Parks:

wanted... the call and response of the Catholic Church which is very slow and cadenced. I don’t know how to describe it musically, but it is kind of a formal, strict, metric rhythm, as opposed to the more propulsive bending rhythms you might hear in a Baptist church. And that’s what we went for.³¹

The sound of bells that divides one section of *Last Black Man* from another evokes the bells rung before Mass begins and during the most sacred part of the liturgy, the Consecration. Another Catholic ritual that helped Parks shape *The Last Black Man* is the Stations of the Cross, commemorating Christ’s journey to Golgotha, including the agony of carrying the cross, his three falls, meeting his mother, etc. Echoing the Stations and detailing the violence of the lynching act, Black Man remembers when he was hung on a tree and the limb broke:

It had begun tuh rain. ... ZAP. Tree bowed over till thuh brank said BROKE. Uhround my necklace my neck uhround, my neck my tree branch. In full bloom. It had begun tuh rain. Feet hit thuh ground in I started runnin. I was wet right through intuh through. I was uh wet that dont get dry. Draggin on my tree branch on back tuh home.”³²

Parks thus transforms a sacred religious ritual into a template for Black Man’s tragic life.

Hear the Bones Sing. Write It Down.

Suzan-Lori Parks frequently mines history. As she observes, “Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theater, for me, is the perfect place to ‘make’ history.” She adds:

because so much of African American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theater and real life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.³³

The playwright’s fascination with the past is evident not only through her representation of historical figures onstage—such as Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth, and Saartjie Baartman among others—but also through her centering the

dramatic narrative around a “black digger” or a “Negro Resurrectionist” who serves as the conduit between the audience and the world of the play. The digger, as the agent who literally unearths the past, invites the spectator into Parks’s dramaturgy and, by extension, into the past as reimaged by the playwright.

The America Play, which premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre in 1993 and was later staged in 1994 at the Public Theater, is one of Parks’s most challenging, political works. As the title suggests, the play focuses on her attempt to encapsulate our national character, or reputation, and to “encourage people to think about the idea of America in addition to the actual day-to-day reality of America...”³⁴ That idea has committed Parks to question and reconfigure one of the most central myths that underlies the American image and heritage—the persona of Abraham Lincoln. Parks has long been fascinated by the idea of America that Lincoln symbolized: “I didn’t choose Lincoln; Lincoln chose me.”³⁵ In the *America Play*, a black grave digger named Lesser Man looks so much like Lincoln, the “Great Man,” that someone suggested that “he... ought to be shot.” And so instead of just “speechifying” Lincoln, as he had done with little success, Lesser Man impersonates him in a show where the “public was invited to pay a penny, choose from a selection of provided pistols, enter the darkened box and ‘Shoot Mr. Lincoln.’”³⁶

The implications of having a black man play Lincoln are crucial to understanding Parks’s interrogation of and quarrel with history. As in *Mutabilities* and *Last Black Man*, she finds that African Americans have been erased from the historical record, “dismembered” in the narratives that privilege and render present a dominant white culture.³⁷ Parks is a keen witness to “History—the destruction and creation of it through theatre pieces and how black people fit into all of this.” Inserting a black man in the Lincoln mythic narrative changes how white America has projected and privileged itself. Defending her fiction as an antidote to historical prejudice, or the deliberate absencing of black achievement, Parks has asked, “Where is history? Because I don’t see it. I don’t see any history out there, and so I’ve made some up.”³⁸ Making this point more emphatically, she told Michelle Pearce that the world was once “a blank slate, and since that beginning, people have been filling it with tshatshkes, which we who come next must receive and do something with.”³⁹ Mr. Lincoln’s “tshatshkes,” or memorabilia, trappings, provide Parks with the theatrical images, props, and representations she needs to make history while at the same time reinstating a black presence in it.

The first act of *The America Play* is largely taken up with Lesser Man’s role playing Lincoln. He and his wife Lucy had visited the “Great Hole of History” theme park on their honeymoon and he had become obsessed with playing major historical figures who paraded through the Great Hole, but none called to him more than Lincoln. Determined to celebrate their “virtual twinship,”⁴⁰ Lesser Man obsessively strove to imitate Lincoln down to the last follicle. He saved hairs from his barber’s floor to make a wide assortment of beards, including a blonde one; he also wore a black frock coat, appropriate shoes, and even put a wart on his face to resemble Lincoln’s. He feigned deafness in one

ear to match Lincoln's malady. He searched for "faux historical knickknacks," all those "tshatshkes" that Parks said filled American history and that "we had to do something with."⁴¹ But Lesser Man did not wear a stovepipe hat, since people do not like their Lincolns to wear hats inside. "Somehow [he had] to equal the Great Man in stature."⁴² Because of his uncanny resemblance—a *coup de théâtre* in Parks's excoriating satire of white image-making—it was not inconceivable that he play Lincoln at Ford's Theatre—"the darkened box" of his show; he was, in another example of Parks's irony, a "dead ringer" for the Great Man.

But, tragically, Lesser Man makes his living more by dying as Lincoln than living as the sixteenth president. As Deborah Geis asserts, Parks emphasizes the "trauma" of the assassination more than its "political" consequences.⁴³ His black identity is simultaneously erased and bleeds through the Lincoln costume and mannerisms he adopts. His impersonations do not conceal his black heritage and, arguably, his assassination as Lincoln allows him to be murdered simply for being a black man. Throughout Act One, Parks references the events that occurred on the night Lincoln was murdered at Ford's Theatre—the distance of the president's box from the stage, John Wilkes Booth's words when he killed the President, the words others used when Lincoln lay on his deathbed. Parks even brings black actors in white face (reminiscent of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*) on stage to speak the very lines from *Our American Cousin*, the play Lincoln was watching at the moment of the assassination. But while African Americans are incorporated into this particular historical episode, they also bring their own terrifying legacy to Parks's various stages—the one from which Booth jumps (the President's box), the one on which Lesser Man performs, and the one Parks's audiences watch as these various plays-within-plays unfold. As Janet Larsen usefully reminds us, Lesser Man's being "incarnated in Lincoln does not protect him from the thrills white patrons experience from shooting a black man in his own 'dark box,'"⁴⁴ thus violating his body and symbolically committing the racial crime of lynching, all perfectly legal.

The Lesser Man's obsession with and quest for being a part of history emerge from a racial joke—yet another example of the playwright's linguistic mastery—that Parks references in her interview with Han Ong. Commenting on her working relationship with director Liz Diamond, Parks recalls:

We both love the dumb gag, the knee slapper. There's a lot of power in that, and there's a lot of really serious stuff going on in *The America Play*, but I swear I can only think of the jokes. The jokes led me to write *America*. The relationship between "nigger" and "digger" was the whole play for me. When I could allow myself to have a little chuckle about "nigger" and "digger," I knew who these people were in the play.⁴⁵

But even though Lesser Man had witnessed history and wanted to be inscribed in its annals, he, as a black man, is deemed to be insignificant. As his wife Lucy prepares her son for the experience of being black, she tells him

You could look intuh that Hole and see your entire life pass before you. Not your life but someones life from history, you know, [someone who'd done somethin of note, got theirselves known somehow, uh President or] somebody who killed somebody important, uh face on uh postal stamp, you know, someone from History. *Like* you, but *not* you. You know: *Known*.⁴⁶

Because of the digger's blackness, he is excluded from the parade of history—he is “not like” the historical personages he admires. The digger remains a “nigger” in the context of Parks's joke, an onomastic inheritance he passes on to his son Brazil, the name of a nut often contemptuously racialized. Nonetheless, Parks's grave digger was so fascinated with these spectacles that

the Reconstructed Historicities he had witnessed continue to march before him in his mind's eye as they had at the Hole ... 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 Lincoln's life not “on past” but *past*. *Behind him*. Like an echo in his head.⁴⁷

Holes—the Great Hole or its replica—become the major topic in Act Two of *The America Play* as Brazil digs in the Foundling Father's “Hall of Wonders” to find his father's remains and to retrieve both familial and national history. According to Rayner and Elam, “Just as the Foundling Father in the first act seeks recovery of an identity through repetition of the Lincoln scene, Lucy and Brazil, in the second act, seek recovery of the body of the Foundling Father.”⁴⁸ Digging, as his father did before him, Brazil discovers insignificant souvenirs, including a medal for faking. History is thus trivialized, “reduced to a void.”⁴⁹ The father's cruel fate is passed on to his son. All that Brazil inherits, therefore, is an empty hole, a spade, and a couple of sound bites from his Foundling Father on a TV, replaying his Lincoln act. Like his father, Brazil tries to recover history in order to be a part of it. Parks insists in her interview with Shelby Jiggetts that “History is not ‘was,’ history is ‘is.’ It is present, so if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past. It's mostly directional.”⁵⁰ Yet Lucy deceives herself, and Brazil, by declaring, “I swannee you look more and more and more and more like him every day.”⁵¹ Though Brazil retrieves his father's bones and his Lincoln artifacts, he admits that the Foundling Father was his “foe father,” another Parksian pun that invites multiple interpretations: parent (fore), antagonist (foe), and Lincoln impersonator (faux). Like his father, Brazil inherits a faux view of history.

Parks's play *Venus*, a 1996 co-production by Yale Repertory Theatre and the Public Theater, also investigates the historical mistreatment of black bodies. It is the story of Saartjie (or Sarah) Baartman, a black South African woman who was paraded throughout England and France as the “Hottentot Venus” toward the beginning of the 19th century. It was chiefly Baartman's backside, the fatty

deposits on her rear-end that attracted a crowd and rendered her an object of curiosity for European audiences. The tour of the original, living Hottentot Venus was brief, lasting only two years before her untimely death. A plaster mold was made of her corpse, painted, and put on display for over a century. Her body was dismembered with parts, specifically her genitals, preserved, bottled, and similarly put on show. When Parks began writing *Vénus*, a campaign was ongoing to convince the French government to return the remains and cast of Saartjie Baartman to South Africa.⁵²

In *Vénus*, the character of the Negro Resurrectionist, patterned after the gravedigger in *The America Play*, serves as the master of ceremonies. Not unlike early vaudeville performances, he introduces each of the play's thirty-one scenes before they begin. Across these scenes, the character based on Baartman agrees to travel to London with the hope of earning a fortune or, as Parks memorably writes, to "make a mint."⁵³ She quickly becomes the star attraction at a freak show. Her travels and exhibition as an oddity prompt an investigation into whether she is being shown against her will—considering that the transatlantic slave trade had only recently, in 1807, been banned in England. Eventually, though, she attracts the attention of the Baron Docteur to whom she proves irresistible as both a romantic partner and an object of scientific curiosity. The play ends, as it begins, with the announcement of her death and an allusion to the ongoing exhibition of the real life Saartjie Baartman: "Love stands on show in museum. Please visit."⁵⁴

Vénus marks a transition in Parks's playwriting—from explicitly experimental fare to a more conventional, linear, dramatic narrative. Nevertheless, the transformation is not complete. Elements of Parks's avant-garde aesthetic remain, specifically in the *For the Love of the Vénus* sections, a play-within-the-play that satirizes sentimental dramas popular during the exhibit of the real life Baartman, her use of a chorus with shifting identities to represent the multiple communities which displayed the Hottentot Venus, and, least consequentially, her presentation of the scenes in a counting down format (from thirty-one to one).

Not only has *Vénus* attracted the most scholarly attention within Parks's extensive canon, but also the most controversial. The world premiere production, directed by Richard Foreman, was overwhelmed by, as producer Bonnie Metzger observes, the competing "huge legacies and visions" of the artistic team which compromised the expression of Parks's dramaturgical voice. In particular, reviewers and audience members critiqued the presence of Foreman's signature design choices—strings criss-crossing the stage and the presence of a blinking red light—as distracting elements. In a 1996 *Variety* review of the production, Greg Evans claimed that "The story, overcome by the hyper-stylization, musters little poignancy."⁵⁵ Yet Ben Brantley, in his *New York Times* review, praised Parks and Foreman as artistic innovators who "have talent and originality to spare" before observing, "But that doesn't necessarily mean that they should be married."⁵⁶ Parks was steadfast in her public support

for Foreman's choices: "Of course, Richard has his own thing going, too. But it wasn't at the expense of my play."⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the production won two 1996 OBIE awards, including one for Parks for Best Playwriting.

Venus has garnered critical attention for its nuanced engagement with history and its exploration of intersecting racial, gender, and class identities. Jean Young challenges the play for its suggestion that the real Baartman was "an accomplice in her own exploitation."⁵⁸ Indeed, Parks characterizes Venus Hottentot as not always powerless and, in select instances, as a person who has chosen to become an exhibit, an object of otherness for hire, similar to Foundling Father, Lesser Man and *Topdog's* Lincoln. As she told Tom Sellar in a 1996 interview, "It's not the story of a black woman who's victimized."⁵⁹ Although the play reveals that Baartman has agency and, therefore, is complicit in her mistreatment, it also portrays her as a person with severely limited options, not unlike Hester LaNegrita in Parks's *In the Blood* (1999). Even though Venus Hottentot consents to travel to England to escape from an impoverished lifestyle as a domestic in South Africa, she elects to continue to be staged as a freak because she lacks the financial resources to strike out on her own.

Others have celebrated the play for its ability not only to remember the harsh experiences of Saartjie Baartman, but also to embody them before new and more contemporary audiences.⁶⁰ Parks gives Baartman a second life and, perhaps more importantly, the chance to be appreciated as a young woman subjected to tremendous abuse. Despite the fact that the play similarly invokes audiences to look upon the displayed body of Venus Hottentot, this second look—distanced by time, geography, and the frame of theater—helps the audience to witness, as a replay, the historical abuse of the black body.

In *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), Parks's most commercially successfully and arguably her most critically acclaimed play, the playwright, again, stages a black man playing Lincoln. This time, she introduces her audience to him alongside his brother, a man named Booth. As the title suggests, Parks's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, which also proved a sensation on Broadway, is about the tensions that exist between two orphaned brothers with competing ambitions. In a 2001 interview with Rick DesRochers, director George C. Wolfe observed:

Topdog concerns the mythology of the family. I find that in a lot of families the older brother tends to be attracted to the mythology and illusions of family and is invested in creating a scenario of the white picket fence and family picnics together...Whereas the younger brother tends to be totally invested in the phenomenon of overthrowing the older brother so as to claim enough space for himself. In addition to this dynamic, because the brothers, are abandoned in the play, the symbiotic nature of their relationship is intensified.⁶¹

Indeed, this dynamic intensifies between the brothers and culminates in fratricide, when Booth, fulfilling the legacy of his name, kills Lincoln. His

death, another dead Lincoln, and another hole (in the head, in the family unit) exists as a traumatic replay continually reenacted across Parks's theatrical canon, going back to *Mutabilities*. It further signals a loss that speaks to the experience of African Americans: being the targets of racist violence; being ignored in the drafting of American history (and, thus, existing as a hole in history); and being viewed as a political problem or challenge (from the 3/5s Compromise—which identified African Americans as being less than whole—to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution).

In *Topdog*, Lincoln and Booth live together in a small apartment. Booth is a hustler who makes money on the streets playing three-card monte. Lincoln, as we saw, works in a carnival setting impersonating a president. People pay for the right to "assassinate" the president and a black man, who coexist within the same body. Orphans, the brothers depend on one another. They are co-dependent but also fiercely in competition with one another, not unlike the brothers, Austin and Lee, in Sam Shepard's *True West* (1981). For Parks, a comparison with classical Greek theater is apt:

[*Topdog*] is very much... in the Greek tragedy mode. Like *Oedipus*. When you go into the theater, you know what's going to happen, and yet you delight in the journey of *Oedipus*. So I loved *Oedipus* and *Medea* and those kinds of plays, bloody, tragic, you know, heart wrenching.⁶²

Parks's decision to stage "two brothers named Lincoln and Booth and see how their story would play out"⁶³ invites an imagination of a likely and historically consonant conclusion. Nevertheless, the tragedy and dramatic intrigue anchor themselves not in the presence of a surprise ending but rather in watching the brothers' back-and-forth dialogue create a tension that amplifies into a homicidal impulse.

Riffing Hawthorne

In applying her unique linguistic style to read, write, and engage history, Suzan-Lori Parks often succeeds in giving voice to the least empowered. In *Last Black Man*, she fleshes out stereotypes and gives them a complex multidimensionality. In *The America Play* and *Topdog*, she allies the "Lesser Man" with the "Great Man." In *Venus*, she grants agency to a carnival "wonder." This theme also applies in her theatrical adaptations of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) in *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*. Superseding and escaping from the classic text, Parks uses theater to create a black female protagonist who has her own voice, family, space, and grievances. Parks's Hester thus displaces Hawthorne's Hester Prynne as the central figure in a new play that stands at "the intersection of the historical and the now."⁶⁴

In Hawthorne, the scarlet letter, of course, alludes to the act of adultery—the sin—that Hester Prynne is accused of and for which she is ostracized by a

hypocritical, repressive culture. As Philip C. Kolin points out, the title *In the Blood* is harrowingly ambiguous standing for the sexual crimes, a tainted blood heritage, social stigma, and punishment associated with the flesh.⁶⁵ Parks's Hester is also persecuted for her sexuality; but Parks exchanges Salem for a more contemporary, urban locale; her Hester LaNegrita is a homeless, illiterate welfare mother of five fatherless children, all of whom live in squalor under a bridge. This Hester does not wear the scarlet letter—A—but it is no less prominent in her life. Trying to learn the alphabet from her oldest child Jabber, whom she murders for calling her a “slut,” she traces the shape of the first letter of the alphabet with her body and at the end of the play and writes it in Jabber's blood on the ground. In *Fucking A*, that Hester, whom Parks insists is a separate character entirely,⁶⁶ is an abortionist, and so the red letter A symbolically and historically links her to what she does. Red and the letter A are inseparable in Parks. The striking Theatre Communications Group (TCG) cover of *The Red Letter Plays* is, not surprisingly, scarlet with a picture of Hester with a small red “A” branded onto her right eye as she faces the reader.

The Hester of *In the Blood* is at the mercy of the system that takes advantage of her and uses her for her sexuality. Through five characters, including Hester's white friend Amiga Gringa who sells her babies for money (“Do you have any idea how much cash I'll get for the fruit of my womb?”), Parks symbolically attacks the traditional areas from which Hester should expect help but does not—the church, the medical profession, public assistance. One of her children was fathered by a despicable clergyman—the Rev. D., onomastically recalling Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale—who insists she have an abortion, and despises Hester who is too poor, shabby-looking, to even enter his church. Another one of the fathers is a potential husband, Chilli (clearly inspired by Hawthorne's Roger Chillingsworth), who runs away when he discovers that Hester has five children, yet another one of Hester's treacherous lovers. Welfare, another one of society's hypocrites, denounces Hester but compelled her to be part of a *ménage à trois* with her husband. Despite this intimate encounter, Welfare insists that “we have absolutely nothing in common.”⁶⁷ Nor can Hester expect aid or sympathy from the street doctor who bristles, “Five kids are a strike against you.”

As in other works—most notably, *Mutabilities*, *Venus*, *Girl 6*, *Getting Mother's Body*—Parks decries the commodification of the black female body. Like the girls who are spied upon by the white naturalist in *Mutabilities*, or Venus Hottentot who was displayed, Hester's sexuality is at the center of many demeaning gazes, all of them turning her into victim, exoticized other, and “slut,” a name written on the wall of her home; she also faces the threat being neutered because of having so many children. Carol Schafer refers to Hester's body, like Venus's, as being a “bloody biological battlefield.”⁶⁸ Dehumanizing her, a street doctor slides under her dress, as if she were a car due for an oil change, to inspect her female parts. As if to underscore the societal forces against Hester, Parks names one of her children Trouble. Though she is selfless and would starve herself to feed her

children, they do not always bring her happiness. Ironically, the actors playing Hester's offspring double with the roles of her Job-like accusers, exemplifying still another way Parks incorporates rep and rev, a double take, if you will, on how Hester is seen and treated by family and friends alike.

Far different from the surrealistic and intensely experimental style that characterized *Mutabilities*, *The America Play*, and *Last Black Man*, *In the Blood* is disruptively gritty, naturalistic. As David Krasner insists, the play "utilizes realistic settings and psychological characterizations."⁶⁹ James C. Taylor likens *In the Blood* to the "1930s social dramas of Odets."⁷⁰ Unquestionably, *In the Blood* rages against crimes in the street and the oppression of the poor and black. In productions, directors have filled the stage with urban litter, trash, symbolizing the "urban wasteland"⁷¹ where Hester attempts to survive and protect her children. Sadly, she and they are assimilated into this trashed, fragmented world. Besides using a naturalistic setting and characters, *In the Blood* also retains traces of Parks's "Brechtian-feminist aesthetic."⁷² The play's fast-paced action and "The Looking Song" cogently link *In the Blood* to Brecht's social protest dramas. It might be regarded as Parks's version of *Mother Courage*, except that Hester's courage is stretched to the breaking point.

Parks identifies Greek tragedy as a major influence on *In the Blood*. Her love of Greek theater explains why so much action occurs offstage and gets reported rather than enacted onstage as is best evidenced in *Devotees in the Garden of Love* (1992), a play in which three women watch a raging and offstage battle from a hilltop. As Parks told Kathy Sova, "The Greeks understood distance and journey; their plays often include events that happen offstage and retold to us later. In *Blood*, I use the confessions, the characters' interior monologues, to describe events that happened offstage."⁷³ Parks's characters, structure, and themes in *In the Blood* also resemble a Greek tragedy. Harvey Young has explored how choral segments/songs divide Parks's play, thus linking it with classical drama.⁷⁴ Schafer points out that *In the Blood* observes the so-called Aristotelian unities found in the classical Greek theater—the play is set in one place, on one day, and dramatizes one key action. Moreover, Schafer asserts, "Hester's choices allow us to perceive her as a tragic hero with a tragic flaw who brings about her own downfall."⁷⁵

On the other hand, some reviewers maintain that Hester is more sinned against than sinning, is more a victim of social forces than a flawed tragic hero. We might ask in murdering her son Jabber does Hester rival Medea? When Hester tells Rev. D. she saw an ominous "black thing" like a hand in the sky, is she confronting an unalterable fate? Does Parks's play arouse our pity and fear, the two main emotions tragedy, according to Aristotle, was to elicit? Parks seems to answer these questions: "I just write tragedy and devastation. It's like bleeding; like they used to bleed folks. The play creates a wound that is actually the first stage in the healing process."⁷⁶ That first stage undeniably involves indicting the audience for allowing the crimes committed against Hester and her children and the second stage is deciding to do something about it.

Just as Suzan-Lori Parks imprinted her signature on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, she seemingly did so with one of Eugene O'Neill's most powerful plays. According to Hilton Als, *The Book of Grace*, which premiered at the Public Theater in March 2010, is a "modern day riff of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*."⁷⁷ Like *Desire Under the Elms*, and Parks's earlier works, *The Book of Grace* is a three-character play showing a family in crisis. Vet, the bigoted white father who works as a Texas border guard, has not seen his son, Buddy, whom he fathered with a black woman, in 15 years. When Buddy returns home from the military, carrying grenades and years of bitterness with him, he and his father clash while Vet's new wife, Grace, attempting to ameliorate every situation, welcomes Buddy. All three characters work on "books," accounts of how they see themselves and each other. In *Desire under the Elms*, as in Parks's other plays, the sins of parents haunt their children.

Many critics interpreted *The Book of Grace* as a parable on who and what constitutes America. Ben Brantley claimed that with her three characters, Parks was "dividing the American soul into three components," an idea, of course, that runs throughout Parks's earlier canon especially in *America Play* and *Last Black Man*.⁷⁸ Though not as boldly experimental or critically appreciated as these early plays, *The Book of Grace* nonetheless includes some of Parks's signature symbols, particularly fences and holes. For example, Vet digs a hole in his backyard. There also are "holes" all along the Texas border with Mexico, a point that Suzan-Lori Parks makes in an interview with Dave Steakley, later in this collection. Significantly, Vet's job as a border guard is to keep people out of America while the hole he digs seems to represent the moral and familial emptiness within his own home, as Ephraim Cabot discovers in *Desire*.

Excavating Porgy and Bess

In addition to adapting literary works such as *The Scarlet Letter*, Parks has ventured into musicals (*Ray Charles Live!*) and opera with her transformation of the Gershwins' classic *Porgy and Bess*, which premiered in 2011 at the American Repertory Theatre before transferring to Broadway. Director Diane Paulus asked Parks to join her in "excavating and shaping and modernizing the story and particularly Bess."⁷⁹ Paulus was given the go-ahead from the Gershwin estate to make the opera more accessible to larger audiences. Her aim, as well as Parks's, therefore, was to transform an American classic opera into a commercially profitable musical that would draw African American audiences into the theater. Acutely aware that the 1935 *Porgy and Bess* presented a stereotypical portrait of African American characters, along with the frequent use of the N-word, Parks "scrubbed the libretto of its retro dialect."⁸⁰ She knew what had to be changed and why to make the work politically correct:

While the original opera triumphs on many levels, I feel the writing sometimes suffers from what I call "a shortcoming of understanding"...

In DuBose and Dorothy Heyward [who collaborated on the lyrics with Ira Gershwin] and the Gershwins’ original, there is a lot of love and a lot of effort made to understand the people of Catfish Row. In turn, I’ve got love and respect for their work, but in some ways I feel it falls short in the creation of fully realized characters. Now, one could see their depiction of African-American culture as racist, or one could see it as I see it: as a problem of dramaturgy.⁸¹

Tampering with an American classic was highly controversial, an arena not new to Parks whose plays repeatedly have pushed the boundaries of theater. Parks emphasized that she and Paulus had “to make sure we had a story that lived up to its title,” focusing on both Porgy and Bess. Elaborating, Parks claimed:

I feel this work more than anything is a romance, and so I wanted to flesh out the two main characters so they are not cardboard cut-out characters... I think that’s what George Gershwin wanted, and if he had lived longer... he would have gone back to the story of “Porgy and Bess” and made changes, including to the ending.⁸²

To underscore the romance and make Porgy and Bess more accessible to 21st-century audiences, Parks and Paulus streamlined the opera, reducing its running time from four hours to two-and-a-half; substituted spoken dialogue where recitatives were called for in the original; changed dialogue to make it more realistic; turned Porgy into a more desirable man for Bess; and made the ending more hopeful and less perplexing for audiences. As theater critic Melanie N. Lee wrote in her review, “This production makes up for the shortened and cut tongues, cut characters, loss of recitative by pumping up the drama, the dance, the laughter, and the motivations.”⁸³ “Now there’s an actual dramatic arc to ‘Porgy and Bess,’” claimed Phillip Boykin who played Crown, Bess’s rejected lover, reeling from whiskey and happy dust.⁸⁴ In the Parks’s adaptation, “The story’s primal themes—love, death, desire, home, survival... are deeply etched,” argued David Rooney for his review in *The Hollywood Reporter*.⁸⁵ Not surprisingly, these are the themes that have dominated Parks’s dramatic canon.

Essentially, then, Parks also added psychological depth to Bess and Porgy. “In the opera you don’t really get to know many of the characters as people, especially and most problematically Bess, who goes back and forth from Crown’s woman to Porgy’s woman while also addicted to drugs,” declared Paulus.⁸⁶ Bess’s addiction is made more contemporary and, possibly, more destructive. Yet she is able to overcome her addiction and, in Parks’s script, she is seen as a much more heroic and well-developed character. But of all the characters to undergo a transformation from the Gershwins’ 1935 opera it is probably Porgy who changes the most. He does not ride across the stage in a goat cart but instead walks with a cane and braces. Norm Lewis, who played Porgy, remarked that “Porgy was less of an enigma in the new production. His malformed legs are explained in new

dialogue, and his desire to walk and become a ‘natural man for Bess.’”⁸⁷ Also commenting on Lewis’s *Porgy*, Mark Kennedy observes, “His *Porgy* knows Bess is out of his league, which makes his attempt to better himself—to be a ‘natural man’ with a brace—even more breathtaking.”⁸⁸

In general, the critics applauded Parks’s adaptation. Richard Zoglin, writing for *Time Magazine*, notes, “It’s accessible—a *Porgy* for purists and for the rest of us, too... This *Porgy* is faithful to what counts most—[George] Gershwin’s lush, bluesy irreplaceable score. That makes it a revival not to hound but to hail.”⁸⁹ In his review, Ed Siegel went even further in praising Parks: “... not only is the new version thoroughly respectful toward the original, its changes are mostly subtle and, as far as I’m concerned, improvements on the original.”⁹⁰ And Scott Brown concluded that Parks’s adaptation was a “gorgeous and transportive theatrical rapture.”⁹¹

Most vocal among the naysayers was Stephen Sondheim who blasted the production in advance of its opening, attacking Paulus and Parks for their editing and revising this classic opera. He blamed them for providing “back stories for the characters,” arguing that “*Porgy*, Bess, Sportin’ Life and the rest are archetypes and intended to be larger than life and that filling in ‘realistic’ details is likely to reduce them to line drawings.” In sentences dripping with sarcasm, he excoriated Parks: “It is reassuring that Ms. Parks has a direct pipeline to Gershwin and is just carrying out his work for him, and that she thinks he would have taken one of the most moving moments in musical theater history—*Porgy*’s demand, ‘Bring my goat!’—and thrown it out.”⁹² He concluded by reminding Paulus and Parks that “there is a difference between reinterpretation and wholesale rewriting.” Gesturing toward Sondheim in his review of the play, Kennedy concluded politely, “You won’t miss the goat cart.”⁹³

Radical Inclusion

Although Parks’s plays were first embraced by the experimental theater community, the theatrical ambitions of the playwright have always sought newer, wider, and increasingly popular audiences across a range of presentational formats. Her plays have premiered in bars and have been staged on Broadway. She has won both the Obie Award and the Tony Award. She has written for radio, television, and film. Indeed, Suzan-Lori Parks maintains an active and compelling presence in essentially every mass medium of communication. Perhaps no Parks creation better represents her seeming omnipresence than *365 Days/365 Plays*, a theatrical experiment that sought to redefine the idea of a world premiere by inviting professional and amateur companies across the globe to share in the premiere experience by simultaneously mounting separate productions of sections of a new play. The play, *365 Days/365 Plays*, not unlike the fictional cartoon character Voltron, exists as a series of parts that combine to create a new whole. In this case, it is approximately 365 plays, each of which is

complete in itself, but together, also exist essentially as scenes in a much larger theatrical creation.

In interviews, Parks often speaks of "hearing the voices" and the spiritual influences that guide her hand in playwriting. Similarly, she found motivation to write "a play a day" for an entire year. This exercise was done privately with the playwright informing only her inner circle of friends what she was doing. As Parks has noted, "It was kind of like endurance art but it was really, really trippy because it was endurance art done in private, without an audience. Very few people knew that I was doing it."⁹⁴ Every day, she would carve out space to write her "daily devotion." On some days, her plays would exist as fully realized theatrical pieces bearing a resemblance to episodes in previous works. On other days, the play would be only a line or two, essentially a theatrical haiku. Nevertheless, she persisted in writing and in so doing developed a piece that offers uncanny insight not only into her writing process but also serves as a historical record of the events of the year.

The first play *Start Here* and, by extension, opening *365 Days/Plays*, explicitly draws attention to the craft of writing. For the reader, it is easy to imagine the playwright facing a blank page in her typewriter (or notebook) or staring at a blank computer screen—Parks regularly employs both forms of writing—and formally beginning her 365-day effort with the words "Start Here." It is perhaps even more compelling to recall the speed with which Parks wrote *Topdog* and wonder what ambitions the playwright had for this new work, which motivated her to write at least one play per day for a year. In much the way that *Topdog* riffs on a previous theme in Parks's dramaturgy, specifically the Lesser Man's replaying of Lincoln's assassination, the scores of plays in *365* frequently connect with topics Parks previously addressed. At times, some plays feel like bonus reels, material left unsaid and never produced in Parks's other plays. Despite the fact that Parks has been clear that she crafted each play from scratch, the unique markers of her dramaturgy—her physicalized language and investment in making history—appear throughout the play collection.

In staging the plays, Suzan-Lori Parks, with producer Bonnie Metzgar, elected to allow theater companies, both amateur and professional, to present one week's worth of plays at a fee of \$1.00 per play. Multiple theaters would share the same week and, in so doing, would jointly (but in separate productions) stage their world premieres. With nearly 1,000 theatrical companies and groups committed to the project, Parks's play, as the *New York Times* has noted, may be the largest and most elaborate theatrical premiere ever, involving some of the "most prominent institutional theaters in the country as well as summer-stock theaters in Montana, community ensembles on the South Side of Chicago, a nursing home in Atlanta, and an abandoned movie house in the valley of the Rio Grande." As she pointed out in an interview with Joseph Roach transcribed here for the first time, Parks realized that she could have spent a handful of days, written another two-person play, and created a text that could be staged on Broadway. However, her commitment to the craft of playwriting and her respect

for the muses who inspire her prevented her from pursuing the more profitable but less fulfilling avenue.

In recent years, the phrase “radical inclusion” best describes Parks’s approach to theater creation. In a 2007 interview with Kevin Wetmore, she noted:

To write a play a day for a whole year, you have to dismiss the bouncer who works the door of your creative mind. All ideas are welcome. All ideas are worthy for play-making. Somehow I wanted the production of the play cycle to dovetail with this ‘radical inclusion’. But I didn’t know how. So one day I’m hanging out with Bonnie Metzgar, who I’ve known since 1989, and we’re sitting around thinking about how a production of *365* can be different and fun. And we’re like, ‘Maybe lots of theatres could do it – like 365 theatres!’ And that was crazy. It was like saying, ‘And then we’re going to go to the moon!’ It was just that nutty – 365 theatres doing the plays.⁹⁵

The philosophy of not blocking the doors of inspiration ultimately led not only to the writing of *365* but to nearly 1,000 professional, university, and community theaters jointly participating in its premiere. Furthermore, radical inclusion might be best evidence by Parks’s 2012 and 2013 “Watch Me Work” performances at the ZACH Theatre in Houston and at the Public Theater in New York City. Sitting on an elevated platform in the lobby of the theater with a typewriter or notepad, Parks literally turns her “daily devotion” into a performance. Anyone can stop by and watch her work, or see her write. It is an act of generosity—allowing casual observers an opportunity to see first-hand the benefits of radical inclusion on the writing process. This staging certainly aligns with Parks’s interest in the scopic—the watching of black bodies at work within her plays—from the women in *Devotees*, who themselves are spectators; to the Lesser Man and Lincoln in *The America Play* and *Topdog*; to Hester LaNegrita in *In the Blood* to the Venus Hottentot in *Venus*. The playwright becomes a character even as she scripts them. For a few hours each day, she stands (or sits) on show in the theater lobby and urges everyone to “Please visit.”

Notes

- 1 John Marshall, “A Moment with... Suzan-Lori Parks, playwright,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 26, 2003.
- 2 Alisa Solomon quoted in Deborah Geis, *Suzan-Lori Parks* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 45.
- 3 Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 40.
- 4 Geis, 50.
- 5 Parks, *Other Works*, 55.
- 6 Irene Backalenick, “Suzan-Lori Parks: The Joy of Playwrighting,” *Theater Week*, April 8–14, 1996: 27.
- 7 Parks, *Other Works*, 38.

- 8 Ibid., 54.
- 9 Ibid., 40.
- 10 Ibid., 42–43.
- 11 Faedra Chatard Carpenter, "A Parks Remix: An Interview with Liz Diamond" in Philip C. Kolin, ed. *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 195.
- 12 Shawn-Marie Garrett, "Figures, Speech and Form in *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*," in Kevin J. Wetmore and Alycia Smith-Howard, eds., *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook* (London: Routledge, 2007), 16.
- 13 Suzan-Lori Parks, "Statement of Purpose," February 12, 1985. Unpublished.
- 14 Parks, *Other Works*, 18.
- 15 David Savran, *The Playwrights Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing and the Politics of Culture* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999), 149
- 16 Suzan-Lori Parks, "Thoughts on Para-literate Speech," *NWP: Journal of the New Works Project*, 1, May 1, 1989: 2.
- 17 Jennifer Larsen, *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 22.
- 18 Savran, 144.
- 19 Parks, *Other Works*, 108.
- 20 Ibid., 119.
- 21 Ibid., 111.
- 22 Ibid., 107.
- 23 Ibid., 104
- 24 Ibid., 131.
- 25 Ibid., 126.
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