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Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works edited by Philip C. Kolin (review)

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**Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works edited by Philip C. Kolin
(review)**

Comments

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Philip C. Kolin, ed. *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*.
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Reviewed by Jocelyn L. Buckner, Chapman University

The anthology *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works* offers new perspectives to the growing body of scholarship about Parks's artistic achievements. The text features a contextualizing preface and twelve new essays about her plays, novel, and screenplays. It also contains two new interviews, one with Parks herself and another with her longtime friend and collaborator, director Liz Diamond, as well as a timeline featuring major productions of her works from her first play reading in 1984, to projects anticipated for future production on stage and screen. While Parks's works, and works on Parks are widely anthologized in other collections, this group of offerings reaches back to early works such as *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), and forward to the most recent and radically inclusive project *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006-07). In doing so, this text

provides a scope and perspective not heretofore achieved in other texts dedicated to Suzan-Lori Parks.

The preface and first essay, both written by editor Philip C. Kolin, provide an introductory overview of the collection's content and organization and offer background information and theoretical insights helpful for approaching and understanding Parks's works. Kolin observes that like Shakespeare's Puck, "Parks uses spells, fantastical shapes, and frightful pageants to express and probe the collective unconscious of her characters, and of her audience as well" (7). He underscores the need for another collection on Parks by highlighting the myriad of under-examined aspects of her works, such as the many intertextual references and relationships between Parks's plays themselves and with other works, including plays by earlier African American female writers and classical works from Greek drama to mythology. Rena Fraden provides further theorization of Parks's oeuvre by addressing the recurring themes in the plays (digging, history, race, sex, family, identity), the notion of radical inclusion practiced in *365 Days/365 Plays*, and Parks's dramaturgical dedication to what Fraden describes as "religious universalism. The discipline of writing binds her and also ties her to communities of other writers, and their imaginations, to citizens from all cities, states, and nations" (23). Jacqueline Wood addresses Parks's earliest plays by offering a reading of *Betting on the Dust Commander*, *Pickling*, and *Devotees in the Garden of Love* through the lenses of Beckett's interrogation of time and Brecht's deconstructive use of space and staging. Through this analysis, Wood uncovers Parks's "interrogations of African American female selfhood in relation to time and memory, black men, and social tradition" (35). This reading furthers scholarship on these earlier plays, and helps to trace the initial development of Parks's much-lauded, jazz-influenced writing style. Nicole Hodges Persley provides a refreshing contrasting reading of Parks's history plays by suggesting that her musicality and self-described practice of "Rep & Rev," or repetition and revision, be read not only as jazz improvisations, but also as the practice of sampling and remixing themes, historical events, and figures, as practiced in hip hop. Persley's "identification of these themes and samples show the relevance of Parks's history plays to Hip Hop and the ways that 'Rep & Rev' strategies are replayed in the present discourse of sampling as it relates to Hip Hop music and culture" (67).

The next several essays focus on some of Parks's most critically acclaimed works. Shawn-Marie Garrett provides a detailed history of the 1996 premiere of *Venus*, and the working relationship between Parks and the production's director, Richard Foreman. Garrett argues for the integration of love "as a category for critical analysis" (77) and the thematic glue for this production, which was a meeting of opposites between Parks, whose works constantly morph to accommodate the characters and themes she tackles in each script, and Foreman, who is methodically deliberate about the Brechtian aesthetic of his productions. Garrett ultimately argues that love has been overlooked by scholars and critics "in the wake of viewing Foreman's production which, though spectacular, was largely devoid of empathy and feeling—indeed, which was actively constructed so as to short-circuit these channels of engagement" (85). Garrett's acknowledgement of the impact of *Venus*'s premiere production and remembering of the theme of love within the play works to further humanize the character of Venus and the history of Saartjie Baartman, two ongoing efforts in Parks's revisionist histories. Next, Jon Dietrick examines the role of capitalism and cash in the Red Letter Plays (*In the Blood* and *Fucking A*). He argues that in these plays, "all relationships between characters are mediated by money, in a way that seems to make any kind of existentially authentic relationship between characters impossible" (90). By examining the rupture between the symbolic and the real as mediated by currency, Dietrick digs deeper into the psychological, political, and personal significance of the plays' main characters (both named Hester), and the cost of

their social disenfranchisement to themselves, their families, and their communities. Jochen Achilles's essay on *Topdog/Underdog* approaches the Pulitzer Prize-winning play through an entirely new lens of game theory by analyzing the three scenarios of Booth's performance of autonomous masculinity, the Lincoln shootings, and the three-card monte game. By focusing on these ludic elements, Achilles identifies how "with her 'Rep & Rev' techniques, Parks pays tribute to both tendencies of ubiquitous postmodern play: to its determinative tendencies by repetition and to the potential for free development by revision. . . . The question that Parks asks from this historical, and perhaps anthropological, perspective is: Who is the card dealer or game designer of this multiplicity of games? Who is pulling the strings?" (122). Christine Woodworth's essay focuses on the ramifications of trauma experienced by children in Parks's works. In mining an overlooked aspect of Parks's dramaturgy, Woodworth argues for how "the child characters in Parks's plays serve as the locus for the simultaneous 'return of the past' and the movement forward into the future, highlighting the inevitability of history" (142).

365 Days/365 Plays is the focus of Jennifer Larson's essay, which artfully connects the thematic, stylistic, and philosophical threads of Parks's earlier works about the Great Hole of History to this new approach to theater through a "focus on representative examples from the dozens of plays that specifically mention holes" (126). Larson argues that considering *365* as a meditation on the evolution of the Great Hole "allows readers to more meaningfully connect these self-revisionary moments, perhaps best called 're-visitations,' in keeping with the spiritual tone cited in previous scholarly discussions of this collection" (126). The late Glenda Dicker/sun's essay delivers a lyrical plot description of Parks's novel *Getting Mother's Body*, and provides a much-needed connection between Parks's writings and that of Western classics, in this case Greek mythology. Dicker/sun argues for Parks's characters, Willa Mae Beede and Billy Beede, as a continuation of the "bad" woman myth, also present in the timeless tales of Oya, Isis, Demeter, Persephone, Toni Morrison's Sula, and Zora Neale Hurston's Janie. Dicker/sun argues that by reading Parks's female characters as a part of this historical lineage of strong and unruly women, one understands "that all the 'wicked' things we think we hate about Mother are sometimes only the things we fear. The ability to embrace our fears and integrate them into our own bad selves is how we be-come who we are" (166). Charlene Regester's essay reminds readers that Parks's works extend to film. She examines the "role of the unconscious in *Girl 6* and investigate[s] Parks's insistent preoccupation with metaphors in [her adaptive screenplay] *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" (171) to trace how Parks deploys these stylistic tools to craft black female subjects on the stage and screen. Finally, Shawn-Marie Garrett's new interview with Suzan-Lori Parks, and Faedra Chatard Carpenter's interview with Liz Diamond, provide insightful reflection on over twenty years of plays, productions, and scholarship about the Parks canon. Richard E. Kramer's production history of the works ends the collection.

While the compilation is at times repetitive in each essay's explanations of Parks's stylistic practices, references to previous literature, and plot summaries, this is a forgivable trait in an anthology wherein each essay succeeds in supporting the others while simultaneously standing solidly on its own. Like many publications focused on the work of a sole author, each essay here is celebratory in tone, focusing on the "groundbreaking" and "revolutionary" aspects of Parks's works. Rather than a weakness, this approach instead captures and reflects the generosity of Suzan-Lori Parks the artist and person, who challenges audiences, readers, and scholars to, as Liz Diamond notes, recognize that we are "in the presence of a completely new sound in the theatre" (193). Philip C. Kolin has curated a significant volume that will prove essential to any scholar or artist looking for tools with which to do the "deep diggin'" required to uncover all of Suzan-Lori Parks's treasure.