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[Review of the book *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works* edited by Philip C. Kolin]

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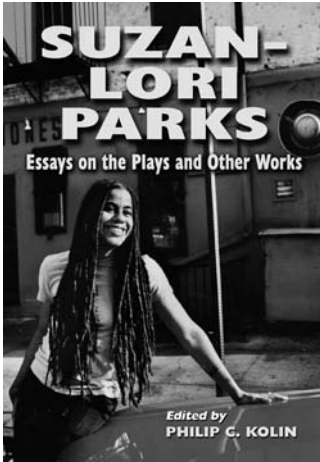


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*Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*. Edited by Philip C. Kolin. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010; 219 pp. \$39.95 paper, e-book available.

Suzan-Lori Parks just keeps on giving. Since her first play premiered as a student production in 1984, she's penned more than 20 works for stage, screen, and print. Her solo show, *Watch Me Work*, a meditation on the creative process, periodically has been attracting audiences to the lobby of the Public Theater since 2011. Her family-reunion play, *The Book of Grace*, premiered in 2010 and continues to be produced around the US. Her 2011 controversial adaptation of *Porgy and Bess* for Broadway was acclaimed by *Time* magazine as the “#1 musical of the year” (and blasted by Stephen Sondheim). And she is currently at work on a musical about Ray Charles as well as on a second novel. Perhaps the biggest challenge of scholars, critics, and fans of Suzan-Lori Parks, then, is simply keeping up with her terrific output.

In response to that need, Philip C. Kolin has put together a new collection of essays and interviews that will be useful to undergraduate students of American drama as well as to anyone encountering Parks's diverse range of works for the first time. Unlike Kevin J. Wetmore and Alysia Smith-Howard's *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook* (2007), a strong collection of essays that covers only Parks's major plays through *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), and Deborah R. Geis's *Suzan-Lori Parks* (2008), a smart critical monograph on Parks's plays addressing especially their formal experimentalism, this new collection offers readers a gloss on virtually every one of Parks's works through 2010—plays, screenplays, and prose—through an eclectic mix of critical approaches. It also includes a production chronology as well as two new interviews that shed light on this mature stage of Parks's career.

Given the diversity of Parks's work, no single theme, formal approach, or generic category can serve as an overarching initiation, so instead this collection offers two introductory essays. The first, by Kolin, discusses Parks's biography, major themes and dramatic strategies, and her dramatic inheritances. The second, by Rena Fraden, explores Parks's own statements about her work, especially her notion of “radical inclusion” as opposed to essentialism. While both of these introductions perhaps suffer from a bit too much reverence for Parks herself, together they offer both biographical and theoretical context for an effective entrée into Parks's oeuvre. Fraden's introduction is especially useful in taking up Parks's somewhat vague notion of radical inclusion and tightening it into an ethics of form, writing practice, and thematics that can be traced from the formal experimentalism of her earliest work to her very disciplined approach to writing in the *365 Days/365 Plays* (2006) project.

The remaining essays move forward chronologically through Parks's career, but three stand out in particular—Christine Woodworth's discussion of children in Parks's plays, Shawn Marie Garrett's examination of *Venus* (1996), and Jon Dietrick's reading of Parks's “red letter plays” through economic theory. Woodworth's elegant essay explores the representation of children across a considerable range of dramatic works. Arguing that “the presence of children in Parks's canon underscores the cyclical, and traumatic, life of families and, by extension, history” (154), Woodworth reflects on the genealogical inheritances and legacies of Parks's characters. Garrett's essay yields a fresh perspective on *Venus* through a discussion of its premiere production, directed by Richard Foreman in the 1990s. Garrett argues that in bringing his signature style to *Venus*, Foreman obscured the intentions of Parks's play—and especially the dynamic of love that the play centers on. In an equally strong but very different contribution, Dietrick examines American attitudes toward economic relations, especially the relation of the symbolic to the real in *In the Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000). Dietrick finds in both plays “a powerful

American anxiety regarding the gulf between appearance and reality” (89), an anxiety rooted in American economic life.

Several essays in the collection consider Parks’s work via the lens of performative enactment, with the essays on her earliest plays tending, not surprisingly, toward musical analogies. Nicole Hodges Persley, for example, argues that hip hop’s practice of sampling and remixing is an apt formal metaphor for Parks’s history plays—a suggestive analogy that merits further exploration into the cultural significance of this comparison. Jacqueline Wood applies a more familiar discussion of Parks’s jazzing of form and content but applies it to three of Parks’s most infrequently discussed plays: *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1990), *Pickling* (1990), and *Devotees in the Garden of Love* (1992). Meanwhile, Jochen Achilles examines *Topdog/Underdog* as metadrama by tracing structural parallels between three different kinds of play at work—stage plays, gaming, and play in general. And Charlene Regester identifies correspondences between Parks’s plays and screenplays according to specific modes and analogies of visibility.

But the performative enactments to be found here are not limited to Parks, and some of the critics themselves take her writing as inspiration for their own performative engagements. Jennifer Larson compellingly reads *365 Days/365 Plays* as a meditation on the notion of the “Great Hole of History,” an image and concept that appears frequently in Parks’s works, and she traces its resonances both through that volume and outward into other works. And Glenda Dicker/sun’s essay on the novel *Getting Mother’s Body* (2003) is as much a deft riff off of the novel as it is a revealing exploration of the likenesses of Parks’s characters to mythical figures.

The collection closes with two new interviews that draw together different stages in the development of Parks’s career. In her conversation with Shawn-Marie Garrett, Parks discusses some of her later works—including *Book of Grace* (2010) and *Father Comes Home from the War, Parts 1, 8 and 9* (2009)—and reflects on what it was like to be the first black woman to win the Pulitzer for drama. But the interview by Faedra Chatard Carpenter with Liz Diamond, Parks’s longtime friend and director of several of her early plays, is a particular gem for the insight it offers into the collaborative process. Diamond has a respect for Parks’s work as well as an integrity of her own that was crucial to the success of such plays as *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), and *The America Play* (1994), and what this interview most keenly reveals is the need for more scholarly and critical attention to the collaborative processes of the entire production team.

For students new to Parks’s oeuvre, this collection is wide-ranging, informative, and accessible, especially when it comes to Parks’s rather daunting early plays. But more seasoned scholars will find treasures here as well in new interviews and new approaches. Perhaps the greatest strength of the collection is its own diversity. As it addresses matters of both text and performance, drama and theatre, plays and practices, it almost manages to keep up with Parks herself—and that’s no small accomplishment.

—Heidi R. Bean

## References

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