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## 1. Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Innovative and unconventional, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks belongs to the continuum of African American playwrights who have contributed to the quest/ion of identities for African Americans. In her plays, Parks emphasizes the exigency of reshaping African Americans' identities through questioning dominant ideologies and metanarratives and drawing out the complicity of the media in perpetuating racism. She also rehistoricizes African American history, encourages reflections on the various intersections of race, class and gender orientation and proffers alternative perspectives to help the readers and/or audiences think more critically about issues facing African Americans.

<sup>2</sup> Under the influence of the Black Arts Movement, which emphasized the role of performance in reshaping African American identities, the quest/ion of identities for African Americans took a new turn. The movement identified poetry and drama as its dominant genres and realism as its preferred mode. Due to their accessibility to the masses as a tool for racial empowerment, collective poetry readings and performances could generate immediate responses and mobilization. In addition, the use of realism due to its linearity and descriptive nature as well as straightforward language and matter-of-fact manner could explicitly depict the bitter experience of the African American community. In his definition of "Black Theater," Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), known as the movement's undeclared founder, widened W. E. B. Du Bois's "by/for/about/near" formulation of theater (Du Bois 135). He added two more features to it, claiming that theater must also be "revolutionary" and "liberating" (Baraka 1-3).

<sup>3</sup> Baraka's one-act play *Dutchman* (1964), a paradigmatic example of the Black Arts Movement's revolutionary aesthetic, advocates separatism, revolution and community involvement. The play depicts racial conflicts and gives vent to frustration with racial

stereotypes, while struggling to provide moments of self-expression. James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) also condemns racial inequality, the conventional stereotypes of African Americans and the killing of African American men believed to pose a hyper-sexualized threat to society. These plays encourage African Americans to struggle against discrimination and stereotyping and to be active in performing their own identities.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Childress and Sonia Sanchez also came to prominence during the Black Arts Movement. In some of her plays, Childress deals critically with "anti-woman" laws, made by white men to deny black women's rights and to make their personal and social lives unbearable (Curb 58). In *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* (1966) and *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), Childress draws on a number of problems—including interracial love, prohibitions against miscegenation and patriarchal oppression—encountered by black women in the segregated South. Her characters, coming mostly from the working class, communicate their bitter experiences of race, sex and class inequalities. Likewise, Sanchez's *The Bronx is Next* (1968) and *Sister Son/Ji* (1969) deal with the violence and oppression directed towards African American women, while urging African American men and women to unite and take action against white oppression.

<sup>5</sup> Inspired both by the Black Arts Movement and the postmodern revolt against it, Parks has concentrated on crafting provocative plays that represent and emphasize the concerns and quest/ion of identities for African Americans. Unlike Du Bois and Baraka, who laid their emphases on racial particularity in black theater, Parks offers a different definition of black theater in her "New Black Math," writing that "a black play is of the people by the people and for the people" (576). Parks's definition shows that she is interested in questioning the former constructed racial boundaries of blackness and revolutionary ideologies of the Black Arts Movement without turning a blind eye to the concerns of African American community. Through this kind of practice, Parks manages to call into question dominant race boundaries in her plays. This is in contrast to Baraka, who upholds racial boundaries in his plays and writes in a linear progression with the introduction of characters and the representation of racial conflicts, though in an avowedly revolutionary manner. Hans-Thies Lehmann, the German theater scholar, labels Parks's type of theater "postdramatic" (13). Lehmann deals with a number of traits and stylistic features which have been used in drama and theater since the late 1960s. His postdramatic theatre "is not primarily focused on the drama in itself, but evolves a performative aesthetic in which the text of the drama is put in a special relation to the material situation of the performance and the stage," and thus lays its emphasis on fluidity of any type, including race, gender and performance fluidity (Gemtou 3-4).

<sup>6</sup> Parks's complex plays suggest post-revolutionary views of identity. Her dual strategy is to call racist paradigms into question while providing a staging ground for developing African Americans' identities. In the present essay, I show how Parks calls racial demarcations into question and attempts to escape the traditions of the Black Arts Movement, which depended on conventions of narrative realism and straightforward language to transmit its revolutionary messages. My goal is to show how Parks's plays make use of postmodern aesthetics and paradigms to transform the conventional features of playwriting, create indeterminacies toward dominant systems of oppression and raise the quest/ion of identities for African Americans in a post-revolutionary manner.

## Suzan-Lori Parks and the Quest/ion of Identities

<sup>7</sup>As a point of departure, I should note that postmodern drama is a fairly recent phenomenon that still does not have one single constitutive definition. According to Josh McDowell, Bob Hostetler and David Bellis: "Trying to define and truly understand postmodernism can be a lot like standing in an appliance store trying to watch three or four television shows at once. It defies definition because it is extremely complex, often contradictory, and constantly changing" (12). Taking this complexity into account, postmodern drama might be sketched as a set of critical, rhetorical and strategic practices using a wide range of techniques that transform both the forms and contents of drama.

<sup>8</sup>To transform the forms and contents of her plays, Parks rarely uses stage directions and avoids using figure and/or character<sup>i</sup> descriptions. As she writes: "The action goes in the line of dialogue instead of always in a pissy set of parentheses. *How* the line should be delivered is contained in the line itself. Stage directions disappear" (1995b, 15-16; emphasis in the original). Likewise, in the interview with Han Ong, she contends:

95 percent of the action, in all of my plays, is in the line of text. So you don't get a lot of parenthetical stage direction. I've written, within the text, specific directions to them, to guide their breathing, to guide the way they walk, whether or not they walk, whether or not they walk with a limp, whatever. They know what to do from what they say and how they say it. *The specifics of it are left up to the actor and the director.* The internals are in the line, the externals are left up to them. (39; emphasis added)

- <sup>9</sup> The absence of figure and/or character descriptions and dearth of stage directions—in line with postmodern aesthetics—manifest Parks's desire to free the performers<sup>ii</sup> from her imagined authority and to grant performers freedom to decide over their productions. The French theater critic Bernard Dort refers to this condition as "the emancipation of performance" (qtd. in Connor 145), which results in the performance fluidity and "impersonalism," implying "a 'disconnection' of author from work" (Caramello 25). The emancipation of performance makes the playscript distinct from its diverse performances, since each performer inevitably interprets and implements the playscript in a different manner and in some cases has the power to decide about the race, gender and age of a number of figures and/or characters. In this intellectual climate, each new production of any of her plays has the potential to be a new gestalt.

<sup>10</sup>For example, the absence of figure descriptions in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* creates gender and age fluidity, since the performers must decide on the gender and age of a number of figures, including Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork, Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread and Voice on Thuh Tee V, whose gender and age are not explicit in the playscript. Moreover, the absence of character descriptions in *Fucking A* is a source of race fluidity, which blurs the racial demarcation. Thus, the performers should decide if Canary, Waiting Women, Monster, Jailbait, Butcher, 3 Freshly Freed prisoners and Hester are white, black or something else.

<sup>11</sup>In addition to the absence of figure and/or character descriptions and dearth of stage directions, the use of Rests and Spells makes Parks's dramatic forms and contents

transformative and ever-shifting. Parks defines Rest as: "Take a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition" and Spell as follows:

An elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue. Has a sort of architectural look:

**The Venus**

**The Baron Docteur**

**The Venus**

**The Baron Docteur**

This is a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no action or stage business is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit. A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It's also a place for an emotional transition. (1997, [iv])

- 12 As seen in Parks's definition, in Spells, a name is printed on the page of the playscript, but against expectations, it is not followed by a line of dialogue or stage direction.

<sup>13</sup>In Parks's plays, Spells provide the performers with some options, since the performers are free to choose how to fill in the blank spaces or just leave them as they are. In a sense, Spells require the performers to engage in performing duets with the playscripts. Ihab Hassan refers to such blank spaces as "paracriticism," which he defines as "an attempt to recover the art of multi-vocation" (1970, 91). This is to say that the paracriticisms produced by different performers are different, and this creates multivocality. Moreover, the repetitive use of Spells creates non-textuality and ruptures the linearity of Parks's plays.

<sup>14</sup>For example, throughout *Fucking A* Parks uses Rests one hundred and twenty four times and Spells sixty seven times. Major parts of Scenes 4 and 8 are in the form of Spells. Rests and Spells create short and long silences, which may represent the historical silence and submission imposed on oppressed members of society. The use of Spells may also help to place the readers and/or audiences and performers in the authorial position to rewrite the play and to fill in the gaps with their own interpretations, which can catalyze the participation process. This can be seen as a transition from having passive readers and/or audiences and performers to active agents who can function as co-producers of the plays. In this regard, Liz Diamond in her interview with Steven Druckman comments that rehearsals of Parks's plays allow the performers to collectively discover what to do with Parks's "dynamics," and that while the performers are not always sure what to do, they know that they need to take action (Druckman 70). I agree with Diamond's view that Parks's play creates both participation and indeterminacies for the readers and/or audiences and performers. Since attempts to fill in the gaps differ, the plays encourage a plurality of interpretations.

<sup>15</sup>In *Fucking A*, the Spells have different significations in different locations, and each reader and/or audience may decipher them differently. For instance, Spells can express undecidability, such as the Spells in Scenes 4 and 8 when Monster is trying to initiate passionate relationships with both Canary and The First Lady (137 and 156, respectively). Undecidability manifests itself in Spells further in Scene 14 where The First Lady wonders whether to keep the baby or to abort it (190), and it is emphatically extant when Monster begs his mother to kill him before Hunters capture him, while his mother is hesitant to slit his throat (219). Elsewhere, a Spell may express irresolution, for example when Canary begs The Mayor to marry her (152), or it can stand for internal conflict, such as when Hester and Canary plot to abort The First Lady's child

(196). In addition to Rests and Spells, Parks uses long monologues in *Fucking A*. Scene 9, wherein Butcher enumerates his daughter's crimes, is an example of a long monologue. It goes on for two pages (160-61). The long monologues direct attention toward the speaking subjects and their topics of discussion. Taken together, the Spells and long monologues are constituent components of postdramatic theatre which, according to Lehmann, "knows not only the 'empty' space but also the overcrowded space" (25).

<sup>16</sup>The dearth of stage directions and lack of figure and/or character descriptions along with the employment of Rests and Spells makes plurality of readings possible in Parks's plays. The plurality of readings makes postmodern drama dynamic, ceaselessly oscillating between two poles of "presentation" and "representation," "making" and "unmaking," "signifier" and "signified." This condition creates an illusion of reality and simultaneously impugns the illusion it has just created. As Linda Hutcheon writes, "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (1993, 243). As a result, interpretation becomes "prejudicial, uncertain, and suspect" (Hassan 1987, 449), and the nonstop oscillations between poles of "presentation" and "representation," "making" and "unmaking," "signifier" and "signified" create a plurality of interpretations. Plurality of interpretations also results from "indeterminacies," which according to Hassan "include all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society...and pervade our actions, ideas, interpretations" (1986, 504-505). Indeterminacies save the texts from closure and make them ambiguous, interrupted and open to different interpretations. Consequently, indeterminacies may be unsatisfying to those who seek clarity and simplistic meaning. In her interview with Ong, Parks talks about a young man who stood up in the theater after watching *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* to complain that he did not understand a single word (43).

<sup>17</sup>Like Rests and Spells, the use of temporal distortion and omnitemporality further fragments Parks's plays and creates indeterminacies. As a result, time in Parks's plays—in contrast to the Black Arts Movement's aesthetics—no longer presents a progressive, coherent linear movement, and it intermingles past, present and future. Although Parks marks the time of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* as "The Present," her play leaps backward and forward at once. This condition manifests the collapse of the sequential and linear time scheme and provides opportunity for Parks to deal with different events occurring in different ages. For instance, in one section of the play the Black Man With Watermelon is lynched, while in later section he is watching the news of the death of "a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement" (110). According to Deborah R. Geis, "the Black Man speaks of living in both the past and the present at the same time, though his way of putting it is amusingly confusing" (58). A part of the confusion arises from the distortion of the borderlines between past and present tenses and the oscillation of figures between past and present events. For instance, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick says: "Coming for you. Came for you: that they done did. Comin for tuh take you... Cut off thuh bed-food where your feets had rested" (105). To offer another example, Old Man River Jordan says: "Do in dip diddy did-did thuh drop? Drop do it be dripted?" (116). Here Old Man River Jordan renders past and present tenses unidentifiable, and the use of the consonant "d" in the form of alliteration as well as the use of "Do" and "Did" as past and present tense identifiers in one single question magnify the temporal distortions.

<sup>18</sup>As a result of mixing different tenses together, “memories converge, condense, conflict, and define relationships between past, present, and future” (Malkin 23). As *Black Man With Watermelon* says: “That’s how it has gone. That’s how it be wentin’” (119). Through the continuous swing between past, present and future, Parks draws upon the past to philosophize about the present and future. This may reflect the “irreparable damage thesis,” claiming that the damage of the past continues to persist in the present and the future (Hill Collins 60). Parks’s temporal experiments serve as a warning that if the damages and consequences of the past are not remedied, they might persist in the future. Parks projects a future time based on the past and present conditions in order to make the readers and/or audiences cognizant of how history might repeat itself, and what has happened to African Americans might continue to recur if African Americans do not improve their conditions.

<sup>19</sup>In some of her plays, place becomes dislodged in analogous ways. In *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, no particular location has been set for the play, and this dislocation signifies the nomadism of the figures who come from different historical ages and locations. Parks describes her play *Fucking A* as “An otherworldly tale” (2001, 113), indicating that the play is not confined to a particular location. Verna A. Foster argues that “*Fucking A* is...set in a kind of futuristic alternate universe that grotesquely incorporates and exaggerates some of the worst features of both Antebellum and contemporary America” (78). However, I argue that *Fucking A* is unlimited in place and can serve as a social critique of any society, including America. Scene 2 is set in “a small town in a small country in the middle of *nowhere*” (129; emphasis added), while Scenes 4 and 8 are described to be located in a park “in the middle of *nowhere* overlooking the sea” (136 and 154; emphasis added). I argue that “*nowhere*” signifies a kind of *anywhere*.

<sup>20</sup>To further complicate her plays and enhance indeterminacies, Parks uses language in deliberately puzzling ways, playing with numbers, wordplays and puns. This language complexity activates the infinite play between signifiers and signifieds and accordingly makes Parks’s plays, in Roland Barthes’s terms, a “writerly text” or “text of bliss,”<sup>iii</sup> which discomforts the readers and/or audiences. The use of language complexity, which brings the readers’ and/or audiences’ relationships with language to a crisis and makes the decodification of language complicated, stands in contrast to the use of straightforward language favored by the Black Arts Movement’s playwrights.

<sup>21</sup>Panel III of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* provides a good example of the puzzling use of numbers. *Black Man With Watermelon* says: “Our one melon has given intuh 3. Calling what it gived birth callin it gaw. 3 August hams out uh my hands now surroundin me an is all of um mines?” (117; emphasis added). In yet another case, *Black Woman With Fried Drumstick* says: “93 dyin hen din hand...93 dyin hen din hand with no heads let em loose tuh run down tuh towards home infront of me” (106; emphasis added). The readers and audience members might be at a loss as to how to decode “3 August.” They may wonder whether August refers to the eighth month of the year, and if so, what is special about the date of 3 August? Or August might be an adjective, meaning grand and majestic, and modifies “hams.” Or “August ham” stands for watermelon. If the latter, what does the number 3 signify beyond the most obvious reference of the trinity? Likewise, the use of number “93,” which modifies dying headless “hens”—signifying both female chicken and women—puzzles the

readers and/or audiences who may fail to find its significations or doubt it has any specific meaning at all.

<sup>22</sup>The use of wordplay, as another source of undecidability, creates a sense of lexical and structural ambivalence, mainly because the words and phrases, in cases with variant spellings, bring to fore unexpected undertones and multiple meanings. Parks declares: "I play with words, I think the world is telling us. Telling us telling us something that is present but not written down" (Nelson 2013). As an example, in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger* introduces himself as follows: "Sir name Tom-us and Bigger be my Christian name" (115; emphasis added). Through wordplay, Parks demonstrates how the identities of African Americans were assaulted, as the enslaved had to adopt the "surname" of their masters. The word "Tom" which alludes to Uncle Tom as a verb means to make someone obedient and submissive and signifies the ways that white masters employed to make their slaves comply with their orders. In yet another intriguing example, in *Fucking A Canary* uses "Hizzoner" to refer to The Mayor (123). The term is a humorous version of "His Honor" and has traditionally been used as a title for the man holding the office of mayor for example in the United States. The term also suggests either "His owner" or perhaps "He's on her." It may also be read as "He's won her" as the play reveals that The Mayor, as a representative of malestream,<sup>iv</sup> has sexual relationship both with her wife and Canary, recalling ownership status in the slavery system in which white men owned their wives and mistresses, while he intends to usurp his wife's wealth.

<sup>23</sup>The use of puns as another form of language complexity complicates the readers' and/or audiences' access to a definite interpretation. In *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Black Man With Watermelon says: "They...[p]ulled me out of thuh trees then treed me then tired of me" (119; emphasis added). The use of puns, complete with alliteration, express how these people first were cut off from their family trees and then were chased and enslaved after which they were overused, exploited and even murdered under different pretexts. Parks also uses puns in her play *Venus*. Venus dramatizes the dismal story of Saartjie Baartman (popularly called Venus Hottentot), a South African girl of the Khoikhoi tribe, who was lured to London by false promises of prosperity, sold into slavery and displayed seminude as a "freak" during the 1810s first in England and then in France. What made her worthy of public display was her biological oddity—her protruding posterior. Prior to her death, Dr. Georges Cuvier "commissioned an artist to make a plaster molding of her body" (Miranda and Spencer 913). After her death, he autopsied her body "in front of an audience of scientists," and her remains and the plaster molding were displayed at the Musée de l'Homme, France (913). Two centuries later, in 2002, her remains were returned to South Africa and buried in her birthplace, ending her long and demanding journeys.

<sup>24</sup>Parks describes The<sup>v</sup> Venus's attraction in the Overture as such:

An ass to write home about.  
Well worth the admission price...  
Coco candy colored and dressed all in au naturel  
She likes the people peek and poke. (7; emphasis added)

- <sup>25</sup> In this excerpt, Parks uses the term "ass" as a pun both to mean buttocks and the animal, two prominent images in this play. The term "coco" also appears as a pun, which means "buttocks" and also refers to a style of African-influenced musical show. It also stands for the abbreviation of coconut palm, and it recalls hot chocolate.

Moreover, the icon of “coco” signifies the remarkable back or the past that has been exploited aggressively throughout history for profit or pleasure. By the end of the play, The Venus regretfully says:

I would live here I thought but only for uh minute!  
 Make a mint.  
 Had plans to.  
 He had a beard.  
 Big bags of money!  
 Where wuz I?  
 Fell in love. Hhh.  
 Tried my hand at French.  
 Gave me a haircut  
 And *thuh claps*. (159; emphasis added)

- 26 The Venus's dreams of becoming rich have been deferred, and although she has undergone mental agony and physical suffering to improve her condition and prove her talent, she has not achieved her goals. Rather, she and her body have been abused to postulate racist theories in order to justify black racial inferiority and to protect systems of oppression. The use of the phrase “thuh clap” as a pun in the excerpt implies both applause and the sexually transmitted infection, used colloquially for “gonorrhea.”

27 Parks in *Venus* includes some documentation in the form of footnotes, excerpted from anatomical notebooks and Baartman's autopsy reports—which Cuvier delivered as lectures in 1817—as well as from newspaper clippings, advertisements, court documents and spectators' diaries. These footnotes are widespread throughout the play and, as such, halt the linearity of the play. For instance, Footnote #3 reads:

Historical Extract. Category: Literary. From  
 Robert Chambers's *Book of Days*:

(Rest)

“Early in the present century a poor wretched woman was exhibited in England under the appellation of *The Hottentot Venus*. The year was 1810. With an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty, she was said by those to whom she belonged to possess precisely the kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots.”

(Rest)

The year was 1810, three years after the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade had been passed in Parliament and among protests and denials, horror and fascination, The Venus show went on. (36; emphasis in the original)

- 28 Parks's footnote first introduces Robert Chambers's *Book of Days* (1864), which provides the readers and/or audiences with further information about the events dramatized in the play, and then reveals the illegality of Baartman's shows during the 1810s under the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Such footnotes, which in some cases engulf the main text, refer the readers and/or audiences to historical documentation, while at the same time inviting criticisms that call their validity and objectivity into question.<sup>vi</sup>

29 In line with the concerns of the Black Arts Movement's playwrights, Parks's plays call the validity of stereotypes and negative portrayals of African Americans into

question. To this end, she turns to postmodern aesthetics to voice plural identities. Her goal is to disrupt prevailing stereotypes of African Americans and the dominant ideologies which have been used to deprive African Americans of their rights, shifting attention to the figures and/or characters trapped within systems of oppression. In *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Parks depicts a figure named Black Man With Watermelon who repeatedly insists that the watermelon is not his: "This does not belong tuh me. Somebody planted this on me. On me in my hands" (105). In another instance, he asks: "melon mines? -. Dont look like me... Was we green and stripedly when we first comed out?" (107). Black Woman With Fried Drumstick responds to his questions: "Thuh *features* comes later" (107; emphasis added). Parks takes advantage of the watermelon, which is part of a racist stereotype, to show how stereotypes work in general. The negative assessment comes first, and the "features," whether they be stripes on a watermelon or the physical traits of the body, can be made to fit the negative assessment later. Black Man With Watermelon should be seen, not as an individual in this play, but as someone who is forced to serve as a representative of his race. Parks reiterates some of the racist and sexist stereotypes, created by whites about African Americans, in an ironic way. Assigning unorthodox names to the figures—which are evidence of both the reality of the African Americans' experiences and their representations and identifications in the outside world—satirizes American history and culture and its racial injustices.

<sup>30</sup>In the same play, Parks refers to the biblical story of Noah cursing his dark-skinned son Ham and his descendants, often invoked by advocates of slavery "to justify slavery and discriminations against people of color" (Veltman 2006). Old Man River Jordan allusively says: "(Ham seed his daddy Noah neckked. From that seed, comed Allyall.)" (122). By employing Ham, Parks exposes and satirizes the long history of racial injustice and distortion, ascribed to the religious myth. Furthermore, the employment of Voice On Thuh Tee V not only contributes to the dematerialization of the stage and to the disturbance of traditional perception with regard to dramaturgy but also criticizes the key roles of the media in disseminating negative portrayals of African Americans. Voice On Thuh Tee V appears eleven times in the play, announcing the following repeated and revised piece of news:

Good evening. I'm Broad Caster. Headlining tonight: the news: is Gamble Major, the absolutely last living negro man in the whole entire known world—is dead. Major, Gamble, born a slave, taught himself the rudiments of education to become a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement. He was 38 years old. News of Majors death sparked controlled displays of jubilation in all corners of the world. (110)

- <sup>31</sup> This piece of news deliberately recalls the assassination of Civil Rights Movement leaders Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) and Malcolm X (1925-1965), but it also suggests the complicity of the media in violence directed against African Americans and contains a cautionary note about the impact of the media on the quest/ion for/of African American identities.

<sup>32</sup>To sum up, Parks's plays represent and emphasize the concerns and quest/ion of identities for African Americans. Parks's redefinition of black theater enables her to distance her writing from the racial demarcations that once played a central role and to embrace more fluid models of identity. Her deliberately generalizing and depersonalizing monikers are attempts to show, at the level of *dramatis personae*, how racism negates the possibility of individual personal development. Parks uses the aesthetics of postmodern drama to transform the conventional features of playwriting

and to challenge African Americans' static and over-determined identity. In her plays, Parks employs a nonlinear progression through such disruptive devices as time distortion and dislocation to create fluid multi-perspectival settings and enable her figures and/or characters to travel back and forth in history. In order to promote nonlinearity, she also uses Rests and Spells as well as footnotes. The utilization of such devices in addition to typographical manipulation, lack of figure and/or character descriptions and a dearth of stage directions make Parks's dramaturgy post-revolutionary.

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## NOTES

i. In a number of her plays, like in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, Parks calls the cast "figures" (1995a, 100). As Parks says in an interview with Lee Jacobus, "The most important things about the figures is that they are *figures* and not *characters*. They are *signs* of something and not people just like people we know" (1633; emphasis in the original). In addition,

as she writes in her essay "Elements of Style," "They are not *characters*. To call them so could be an injustice. They are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers maybe, speakers maybe, shadows, slips, players maybe, maybe someone else's pulse*" (1995b, 12; emphasis in the original). These figures, who are all dynamic, constantly evade fixity even at the close of the play. Thus, the figures are always *about-to-be* as their identities are, manifesting a type of purposeful figures in search for motion and promotion. However, in some other plays, including *Venus* and *Fucking A*, Parks refers to them as "characters" (1997, [ii] and 2001, 115, respectively).

ii. Performers in my definition include not only the actors and actresses but also the directors, lighting engineers, stage and costume designers and others who are directly and indirectly engaged in the production of a play.

iii. In his *S/Z* (1974), Roland Barthes draws a distinction between *lisible* ("readerly") and *scriptible* ("writerly") texts. The readerly texts, Barthes argues, are presented in a plain, linear, straightforward manner which demands no special effort in order to be digested. In such texts, meaning is fixed and pre-determined, since they avoid the use of elements that would open up the text to multiple interpretations. By contrast, in writerly texts, meaning is no longer evident; readers are not passive receivers of information as they are required to take part in the construction of meanings. Later, in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Barthes introduces and distinguishes two types of texts: *plaisir* ("pleasure") and *jouissance* ("bliss"). Their distinctions correspond to the distinctions between readerly and writerly texts. The text of pleasure corresponds to the readerly text, while the text of bliss corresponds to the writerly text which explodes the literary codes and provides the grounds for readers to come up with multiple meanings. Barthes defines "text of bliss" as "the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (1975, 14).

iv. By malestream, I mean dominant patriarchal and hierarchal systems in which men hold hegemonic power and accordingly predominate in roles of political and social leadership and economic control.

v. Parks uses the definite article "The" before the names of all of the characters in *Venus*. The use of the definite article signifies that the characters are particular ones whose identities are known to the readers and/or audiences. This is perhaps to both generalize and individualize the characters through establishing a prototype of them for all people, blacks and whites. In addition, some of the characters are nameless or unnamed, including The Man, The Brother and The Young Man. This state of being unnamed may be accounted as another attempt to generalize the characters.

vi. Parks does not offer any suggestion of how to perform the footnotes on stage. Thus, the performers have to decide how to implement them in any way they desire. In a number of performances of *Venus*, including the one performed under the direction of Karla Koskinen in November 2010 at the Alys Stephens Center Odessa Theatre, University of Alabama, The Negro-Resurrectionist reads the footnotes on stage.

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## ABSTRACTS

Inspired both by the Black Arts Movement and the postmodern revolt against it, Parks has concentrated on crafting provocative plays that represent and emphasize the concerns and

quest/ion of identities for African Americans. In the present essay, I argue that Parks is interested in questioning the former constructed racial boundaries of blackness and revolutionary ideologies of the Black Arts Movement without turning a blind eye to the concerns of African American community. I show that Parks attempts to escape the traditions of the Black Arts Movement, which depended on conventions of narrative realism and straightforward language to transmit its revolutionary messages. My goal is to show how Parks's plays make use of postmodern aesthetics and paradigms to transform the conventional features of playwriting, create indeterminacies toward dominant systems of oppression and raise the quest/ion of identities for African Americans in a post-revolutionary manner.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** fluidity, identity, indeterminacies, language complexity, post-revolutionary theater, postdramatic theatre, postmodern drama, stereotype, Suzan-Lori Parks, the Black Arts Movement, the media

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