

**REPETITION WITH REVISION: SUZAN-LORI PARKS' *365 DAYS/365 PLAYS* AND THE NEW THEATRE FESTIVAL**

by

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## ABSTRACT

In November of 2002, Pulitzer-prize winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks began her largest writing project to date: writing a play a day for a full year. Four years later, with the assistance of producer Bonnie Metzgar, Parks' plays were divided into individual weeklong cycles and distributed between nearly eight hundred theatre artists and companies across North America. The international panoptic premiere of Parks' *365 Days/365 Plays* was the largest theatrical premiere to date and nearly two years after the cycle has come to a close, its expansive temporal and geographical scope remains unparalleled. Like many of her other works, Parks' *365* creates opportunity for discourse and with the cycle's completion, theatre scholars have written extensive literary and dramaturgical analyses of the project. Still, scholars continue to contest exactly what constitutes Parks' unique project and identify its implications for American stages.

In reviewing the relevant literature surrounding the project, the term "festival" is continually applied to *365* by both artists (including the playwright) and scholars alike. In working to define *365* however, these respective scholars and practitioners have evoked a complex theatrical framework with its own criteria and inferences. Largely missing from their respective analysis of the project however is a detailed performative and theoretical evaluation of the festival itself. Thus, lingering questions regarding this specific performative framework and whether Parks' project can and does indeed function within its parameters remain. Are scholars correct in their assumption of *365* as a festival? What are the respective limitations in evoking this term (if any) to describe Parks' project? Through a detailed literary analysis of the scholarship surrounding Parks' project I aim to interrogate both the performative and theoretical significance of this term as it is applied

to *365 Days/365 Plays* to determine not only whether we can rightly refer to Parks' project as such, but to also recognize the efficacy of the term as scholars move forward in their analysis of the cycle.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In November of 2003, Pulitzer-prize winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks began her most ambitious project to date—writing a play a day for the course of one year. Ranging in length from several lines to several pages, Parks’ plays would include everything from the death of public figures Johnny Cash and Carol Shields, fantastical scenes that pull from ancient mythology and legend, self-reflexive meditations on the nature of playwriting to the most mundane of daily scenarios. With the help of producer Bonnie Metzgar, Parks’ plays were then divided into weeklong cycles and distributed between roughly eight hundred theatre companies and artists in cities across North America. Companies from the large and prestigious to smaller grassroots endeavors stepped forward to participate and as a result, Parks’ project generated a variety of performance styles and interpretations. The scope of Parks’ premiere was unprecedented with scholars suggesting that in the year of the project’s staging, Parks was the most widely produced playwright on American stages surpassing even Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams (Kolin 66). As the project’s premiere came to a close in November of 2007 however, lingering questions still remained as to *what* exactly Parks’ premiere was. The plays have been labeled everything from a “love tsunami of theatre” (Gener 70) to a “yoga play” (Swanson 45) and while detailed dramaturgical and literary analysis of the project has since been conducted, the exact theatrical framework that Parks’ project subscribes to remains contested. In the published collection of the cycle, Parks wrote that the project would “radically change the way we produce/create/critique/enjoy/think about/talk about theatre and the world” (365 401). Before we can even begin to articulate exactly how (or whether) Parks’ project has indeed radically altered the trajectory of

contemporary theatre and performance we must first strive to understand *what* theatrical framework best captures a performance such as *365*.

As previously stated, scholars have attempted to articulate the project through a number of frameworks, theories and approaches. Among these various essays, articles, interviews and reviews however, a salient framework dominates the landscape of this discussion. In the ongoing dialogue surrounding *365* the term *festival* is continually applied to the project (both by the playwright and scholars alike). This label however (no matter how casually it is evoked in this literature) implies a specific and established performative framework with its own organization and logistical criteria. Furthermore, the term is also loaded with broader inferences that point to a larger anthropological order and understanding. While many scholars have evoked this term in describing Parks' *365*, few provide the necessary performative and theoretical formal terms which accompany this framework. Thus, in analyzing the individual components of both the theatrical festival and Parks' project, I wish to determine whether scholars are accurate in their references to *365*.

Beginning with an overview of Park's creative canon and its critical reception, I first strive to outline the artistic foundation of Parks' project. In tracing her extensive creative history and the numerous scholastic responses to her work, I aim to provide an artistic, historical and scholastic frame for consideration as I analyze the project's cultural and historical implications. Considerable attention will be paid to her earlier writing as many of the individual themes, images and most notably, her unique voice and style which dominate *365 Days/Plays* first appeared—even if only in a gestational state—within these earlier works. Having clearly established Parks' creative canon, a summary

of the 365 cycle including its plays, organization and production history follows to provide a complete understanding of both the project's conception and organization. The third chapter then summarizes the current academic literature on 365 (in which I also isolate this term of *festival* in their arguments). Having presented the current arguments surrounding Parks' project I then introduce the notion of the festival itself. Relying on the work of both contemporary theatre scholars and anthropologists, I seek to define the various facets of the festival (including the notion of the festival as an artistic distribution system and as an emotive experience). Lastly, I conclude with an application of these terms to Parks' project to determine whether the cycle can rightly be referred to as a festival. In this, I also seek to establish the respective advantages and limitations in evoking this term and philosophize on its larger implications for contemporary theatre and theatrical epistemology.



## 2. AN OVERVIEW OF PARKS' CREATIVE WORKS AND THEIR CRITICAL RECEPTION

With a career spanning over twenty years (and counting) author Suzan-Lori Parks has worked within the creative capacity of a playwright, novelist, screenwriter, actor and musician. As eclectic as her various creative outlets are, her body of work also represents a similar myriad of written and dramatic forms including a dozen stage plays—among her most popular are *Venus, Fucking A* and *In the Blood* (published collectively as *The Red Letter Plays*), *Top Dog/Underdog* and *The America Play*. She has also authored three radio plays, a musical, two screenplays (one, *Girl 6*, was directed by Spike Lee, the other, a direct-to-television film, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was produced by daytime television mogul Oprah Winfrey) as well as a novel (*Getting Mother's Body*) and several essays on playwriting (“Possession”, “Elements of Style” and “An Equation for Black People on Stage”). Parks' works have also earned her two Obie awards, a MacArthur Fellowship Genius Grant, a Tony Award and a Pulitzer Prize (in which Parks also holds the distinction of being the first African-American woman to receive that award).

Within academic circles, Parks is also recognized as a central figure of the dramatic canon. English scholar and Americanist Philip C. Kolin (who has written extensively on Parks' career including both her earlier dramatic works as well as her *365* project) has compared her to such literary heavyweights as dramatists Tennessee Williams, David Mamet and Edward Albee as well as American literary icons Mark Twain and Walt Whitman. Parks' Pulitzer-Prize winning play *Top Dog/Underdog* was also included in Lee A Jacob's *Bedford Introduction to Drama* and selected plays from her radical experiment in playwriting *365 Days/365 Plays* were included in the revised sixth edition of Jacob's anthology alongside the typical dramatic icons ranging from

Shakespeare to Pinter. Parks' numerous accolades and prominence within contemporary theatre publications are both a testament to her popularity among contemporary artistic and scholarly circles and a demonstration of how deeply embedded Parks has become within the contemporary dramatic canon. It is important to note however that while Parks is now recognized as one of America's leading playwrights, this position was not immediate (nor is it necessarily for any dramatist) as the experimental nature of her writing ultimately challenged the traditional realist conventions of dramatic structure and form which tend to dominate the American theatrical landscape. Before further examining how Parks has permeated contemporary stages (both in regards to artistic and scholastic endeavors) a brief overview of her expansive creative canon and her experimental style is needed.

## **2.1 PARKS' MAJOR CREATIVE WORKS**

A dramatic re-visioning of the so-called "Venus Hottentot" Parks' first major full-length play, *Venus* (co-commissioned by The Women's Project and Productions Inc. and first produced at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1996) was inspired from historical documents including medical records and court proceedings. The "Hottentot" (also known as Saartjie Baartman) was a Khoikhoi woman whose large posterior became a point of fascination throughout Europe. Baartman toured throughout England in the early nineteenth century as one of the many freak shows that were popular throughout colonial Britain and became the focus of both public and medical intrigue. Consisting of thirty-one scenes, Parks' play alternates historicized accounts, documented legal proceedings and medical records with imagined scenarios (including musical numbers) that showcase the subsequent subjection and subjugation of the young woman. In pairing the various

documented reports of Baartman with the author's own re-visioning of such events, Parks' fictionalized accounts provide an alternative to the so-called "official" history surrounding Baartman. Beginning with Baartman as a young woman, Parks traces her journey from that of a naïve teen girl living in anonymity as a maid, to her travels through England and later France where she is displayed first as a sideshow attraction and later, as a subject of medical intrigue. Parks contrasts these highly publicized accounts of Baartman with fictionalized scenes that serve to humanize her. (For example, her ongoing affair with the character of the Doctor or her private joy in discovering that as a result of this ongoing liaison, she is pregnant). In several scenes, Parks also shifts her focus, choosing to highlight the experiences of those that are responsible for her exploitation as seen in the Mother-Showman's monologues or the scenes in which the Baron-Doctor is left struggling with how to manage his conflicting relationship with the Venus as both a lover and subject of observation. The various personal narratives which Parks evokes are one of many experimental writing tactics within the play which include song, overlapping dialogue, narration (as in the character of the Negro Resurrectionist), doubling which crosses gender boundaries (for example, the actor who plays the Brother is also portrays the Grade-School Chum as well as the Mother-Showman), long periods of silence (referred to by Parks as "spells"), as well as one scene which breaks the fourth wall entirely when The Doctor addresses the audience directly, encouraging the spectators to enjoy a brief intermission.

Parks' second major publication *The Red Letter Plays* (which includes *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*), uses a similar style marked by theatrical experimentation. For example *In The Blood* uses extended periods of silence, the doubling of characters and a

continually shifting narrative in which Parks moves away from her central protagonist to offer intimate glimpses into the inner workings of other characters through monologue and song. In *Fucking A*, Parks once again uses silences, songs and monologues in a similar manner, but she also introduces her own invented language (referred to as “TALK”). Furthermore, in both of the plays within the publication, Parks evokes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Like Hawthorne’s work, both plays feature a female heroine named Hester (in *Fucking A* the protagonist is even branded with her own scarlet “A”; this time however, as an abortionist) who must tirelessly work to establish a new life for herself following public persecution. In *Fucking A* Hester, unable to find work following her son’s arrest for theft, must work as a back-alley abortionist to save for her son’s eventual release while in *In The Blood*, Hester, the single mother of five children, must struggle to support her own family with little help from either her partners or formal social and government aid. Her frustrations come to a dramatic climax when she murders her eldest son “Jabber” in a violent fit of frustration. *Fucking A* ends in a similar act which echoes the familial violence of the filicide of *In the Blood*. Hester’s son who has escaped from prison, risks a torturous and violent death from the village people. To protect her son from such a violent demise, Hester assists in his suicide. Then, as an act of revenge on the wealthy town patriarch who first imprisoned her son, she performs an abortion on his expectant wife. Unbeknownst to her however, the fetus she has just aborted is her own grandchild, conceived from an affair between her son and the wealthy matriarch. In Parks’ re-visioning, the women are not working against the confinement of a Puritan society but rather, are facing tension and constraint as single black women within modern society. Neglected and abused by the

very social institutions created to provide care and compassion for the women, both are driven to violent acts of destruction (as seen in the bloody end of their eventual successors).

Perhaps the most radical example of Parks' use of literary and historical appropriation however is in her fascination with the character (both as a historical and mythological figure) of Abraham Lincoln (who is featured prominently in her 1993 play *The America Play* and later in her Pulitzer-prize winning play *Top Dog/Underdog*). The first of these works was published in a collection of her plays as well as excerpts from her essays on playwriting (I will be returning to these earlier shorter works momentarily) and focused on a professional digger turned historical interpreter. Dressed as Lincoln, the protagonist runs an attraction in which paying customers are invited to recreate the Lincoln assassination in a mound referred to as the "great hole of history." Much like her previously mentioned works which pulled heavily from published literary and historical documents, *The America Play* employs historically documented speeches, excerpts from the Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary and scenes from *My American Cousin* (the play Lincoln was attending the evening of his assassination). Alternating between scenes of The Founding Father and his ongoing obsession with early American history and the myth of Lincoln, Parks contrasts this well-known mythology with a personalized, familial history that is shared by the protagonist's wife and son (Lucy and Brazil). As The Founding Father ruminates on America's history, Lucy and Brazil are left reminiscing about their own past, recounting the days before their husband and father had abandoned the family for his own obsession with the former president.

*Topdog/Underdog* also features a similar Lincoln impersonator scenario yet the focus on the protagonists' troubled domestic life is much more prominent. Lincoln, a former three-card hustler, has a menial position in the local arcade impersonating the president for local customers who wish to recreate the murder. He lives with his younger brother Booth (a petty part-time thief and promising hustler) and the pair struggle to survive on Lincoln's meager salary. Desperate to reach financial freedom, Booth continually harasses his brother to return to conning yet Lincoln refuses. Plagued with guilt related to his friend's murder following a game gone awry, Lincoln instead seeks to establish himself in an honest manner (regardless of how low the pay may be). Out of this tension, the true extent of the brothers' rivalry is revealed through their constant bickering which encompasses everything from one another's sexual potency to their skills as conmen. In the final scene, the brothers play cards against one another, wagering their meager inheritance. Lincoln ultimately wins the wager, conning his brother of what little wealth he had and in a fit of jealous rage, Booth murders him, shooting him in the temple (ironically, with Lincoln still in costume). In comparison to Parks' previous plays, the writing does not necessarily contain the same level of radical experimentation and although *Topdog/Underdog* shares many of the thematic qualities of Parks' creative canon (such as her ongoing interest in history) the play follows a more traditional or realist dramatic structure.

Eventually moving to full-length dramas such as *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks' earliest works were short, experimental plays. As previously mentioned, these short works were published alongside *The America Play* and include *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, *Betting on the Dust Commander*, *Pickling* and *The*

*Death of the Last Black Man in the Entire World* and their unique, experimental structure and style would later become a hallmark of her canon. For example, in her 1989 play *Imperceptible Mutabilities* Parks infuses historical footnotes with dramatic recreations of the Trans-Atlantic passage. Divided into five distinct scenes, the play oscillates between the past and present to dramatize both the immediate and long-term social, political and cultural implications of the slave trade. In this short piece, Parks also experiments extensively with language including extended silences, overlapping dialogue and her trademark “repetition with revision” in which a dialogue or action is repeated and with each subsequent repetition, the passage is altered slightly. In 1987’s *Betting on the Dust Commander* Parks writes of the ritualistic lives of a married couple whose obsession with recreating a large win on a retired racehorse (the Dust Commander) dictates their daily activities, forcing them to relive each day in the same sequence out of superstitious habit. Comprised of just three scenes, the play is a continual cycle of repeated action and dialogue, each scene framed with the same image of the couple, dressed in their wedding clothes, discussing their upcoming nuptials. At the centre of the play, the mundane rituals of dressing, removing a stain from one’s shirt or blowing one’s nose is repeated in the same order each time, the cycle set off by the couple’s own reminiscences of their wedding day (the play’s opening image.)

Although identified primarily as a playwright, Parks has worked beyond the immediate scope of the theatre. Her other works include a full-length novel, several essays on playwriting and two major screenplays. Published in 2003, *Getting Mother’s Body*, Parks’ first and only novel to date, follows a black family in the Southern states during the 1960s. As the living descendants of a con artist (Willa Mead, who is rumored

to be buried with a valuable diamond ring and pearl necklace) the family is forced to exhume her body as they reach financial desperation. In this multi-perspective novel, Parks traces the ongoing grievances and grudges within the family as they travel to Willa's grave. Among her screenplays, Parks' first, titled *Girl 6* (directed by Spike Lee and inspired in part by her own temporary employment as a telephone sex-operator), follows an aspiring actress who, when angered by the misogynistic atmosphere on set, is fired from her only paying job and ironically, out of financial desperation, takes a job as a telephone-sex operator. Parks' later screenplay *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (starring Halle Berry and produced by Oprah Winfrey) was an adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel of the same title.

## **2.2 PARKS ON PLAYWRITING**

Perhaps the most revealing of Parks' alternative works is her collection of essays, which outline her unique theatrical style and views on playwriting. These essays provide valuable insight into the playwright's own intellectual reasoning and creative process and provide an additional framework in which to consider her plays. Of particular interest within her essays is what she regards as the interconnected relationship between form and content as Parks continually draws on her unique form as an articulation of her own views on such broader issues as race, gender and history. For example, in her aforementioned essay "Elements of Style" (a play on Strunk and White's canonical writing guide) Parks provides for the reader her own reflections on these very signifiers of her plays that have demanded the attention of scholars, discussing her unique style of writing as well as her ongoing fascination with history, race, language, music and literature in tandem.



The notion of history is of particular interest to Parks (especially in relation to form) and is thus, featured predominantly within her works—appearing in all three of her essays and within many of her major plays. Parks writes that history is “time that won’t quit” (*America* 15) and continually acknowledges the ongoing presence of the past. According to the playwright “time has a circular shape” (10) and thus, the “standard time line and standard plot line are in cahoots” (10) within modern drama. The past (and therefore history) is not a removed event, but rather, one that is continually embedded within the present. Therefore, Parks describes her plays as having a “circular” dramatic structure (10). While this circular structure functions as larger framework for the play’s structure, this notion also functions at the play’s micro level with the notion of *repetition with revision*.

Repetition with revision (also referred to as rep and rev) is not only influenced by Parks’ views on history and time, but also her fascination with jazz and the musical refrain (Parks is married to blues musician Paul Oscher and has composed several jazz musical scores herself). Within the musical sense, repetition and revision are a part of the genre’s aesthetic that involves repetition with slight alterations to the revisited refrain. Parks also uses this within her writing, repeating consonants, words, phrases and even whole scenes several times, altering each in a nuanced manner with each repetition. This example taken from the “Third Kingdom (Reprise)” of *Imperceptible Mutabilities* demonstrates the notion of rep and rev in Parks’ writing:

KIN-SEER: Kin-Seer sez.  
 SHARK-SEER: Shark-Seer sez.  
 US-SEER: Us-Seer sez.  
 SOUL-SEER: Soul-Seer sez.  
 OVER-SEER: Over-Seer sez.  
 KIN-SEER: Sez Kin-Seer sez.

SHARK-SEER: Sezin Shark-Seer sez.  
 US-SEER: Sez Us-Seer sezin.  
 SOUL-SEER: Sezin Soul-Seer sezin sez.  
 OVER SEER: Sez Over-Seer sez (*America* 54)

In this short passage Parks not only utilizes the repetition of dialogue and sound (the repeated “s” consonant providing a musical quality to the passage, but in reproducing the text of the passage, the visual quality of this repetition (something not necessarily apparent in performance) is also evident, exposing not only the lyrical quality of this technique, but the visual appeal of this form as well.

The most extreme example of “rep and rev” however is found in her 1987 play *Betting on the Dust Commander* (published in *The America Play and Other Works*). In reading the play, one has the sense that the action continues well beyond the production’s closing, the characters stuck in a perpetual cycle of action to be instigated yet again by their reminiscing. The characters are not simply reminded of their respective histories, but rather, are continually engaged with their history on a daily basis, literally re-living and re-creating their past each day. In this play that “rep and rev” does not only apply to the notion of the repeated dialogue and action, but is a manifestation of the playwright’s cyclical dramatic and temporal structure.

Even though she openly acknowledges the link between her vision of history and issues surrounding the silenced history of the African peoples, Parks is careful to outline that not all “Black plays” need to be inherently about such issues of oppression. In her essay “An Equation for Black People on Stage” Parks notes that while Black drama has historically focused on oppression and othering, she challenges her reader to consider a new form of drama that can move beyond such tropes. As she states: “The bulk of relationships Black people are engaged in onstage is the relationship between the Black

and the White other. The stuff of high drama [...] the Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature” (19). Thus, while Parks is still cognizant of this history, her work is ripe with alternative themes beyond the historical framework. For example, plays such as *Topdog/Underdog* or *Imperceptible Mutabilities* which, while still engaging with the notion of historical narrative—both protagonists are named Lincoln and Booth for example in the former while the later is a commentary on the Atlantic slave trade—also features the theme of familial discord. The two brothers at the heart of *Top Dog/Underdog* engage in a long-running sibling rivalry while in the final act of *Imperceptible Mutabilities* the young Muffy also feels the strain of such a rivalry when she is ignored and overshadowed by her siblings.

### 2.3 CRITICAL RESPONSE TO PARKS’ WORKS

Within Parks’ creative canon, scholars have identified and isolated many of these ongoing structural and thematic qualities identified by Parks in her own critical analysis of her craft. As previously stated, these include her ongoing fascination and experimentation with language’s structure and musicality (as demonstrated by the nuanced play of “rep and rev” or the invented language of “TALK”), her continual play on dramatic form and structure (as in the cyclical structure of *Betting on the Dust Commander*), the notion of memory and history (including historiography; how history is written and subsequently, rewritten) as well as issues surrounding both race and class (and the relation between these two distinct, yet often related variables) and the question of how gender manifests itself within this loaded social equation (as seen in the social commentary of *The Red Letter Plays*). Other signifiers of Parks’ work include her use of

intertextuality within her writing (this is demonstrated by her inclusion of historical documentation that is found in *Venus, Imperceptible Mutabilities* as well as *The America Play*—in particular, the scene which features *My American Cousin* and her appropriation of Hawthorne in *The Red Letter Plays*) as well as her use of music (Parks wrote two original jazz numbers for both *Venus* and *In the Blood*) and the image of holes and digging (as in *The America Play* or the exhumation of Willie Mead in *Getting Mother's Body*).

These various motifs have attracted the attention of theatre scholars and as a result, have been the subjects of numerous articles, essays, theses, chapters and full-length books. To try and provide a single précis of the scholarship surrounding Suzan-Lori Parks is as difficult as summarizing her expansive body of creative work. As eclectic as Parks' works are the field of Parks scholarship is equally vast and diverse. In response to the various themes within Parks' works, scholars have exploring her creative body through a number of critical frameworks. These include Africa/na Studies with Parks' work included in Hill and Hatch's *A History of African American Theatre*, Glenda Dicker/sun's *African American Theatre: A Cultural Companion* and Daniel Grassian's 2009 study of the impact of African-American literature and performance in relation to the hip-hop movement (*Writing the Future of Black America*) as well as the lens of feminist theory with her work showcased in both *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* and Helen Krinch Chinoy's 2006 anthology *Women in American Theatre* and her inclusion in theatre scholar Jill Dolan's (author of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*) recent course in Feminist Theory and Performance at the University of Texas. Furthermore, scholars such as Rebecca Rugg (who has written extensively on

Parks' 365) have even examined her work through both a performative context and a spiritual lens, contextualizing 365 through the doctrine surrounding Ashtanga yoga practice (a full summary of Rugg's analysis is provided in the third chapter).

For the sake of clarity, I will be examining these critical responses to Parks' plays through three distinct, yet interconnected thematic frameworks identified as common signifiers of Parks' work: history, race and a feminist paradigm. It is important to note however that while I will be treating each of these individually, these frameworks do not exist within a vacuum. Rather, each of these thematic lenses is closely related within Parks' plays (such as in *Fucking A* and *In the Blood* which convolutes the issues of race with the introduction of key feminist issues such as maternal support or sexual abuse or *Topdog/Underdog* which not only plays upon major historical figures and events, but is also an exploration of familial dynamic and rivalry).

## **2.4 PARKS' PLAYS THROUGH A HISTORICAL LENS**

Whereas Parks' plays are certainly rich with alternative dramatic themes and tropes, history remains a constant within her canon. The porous temporal nature of her plays creates a world in which the present is continually infiltrated by the past and as a result, history remains at the forefront of her dramatic landscape. Historical figures such as Saartjie Baartman, Lincoln and Booth are central figures, while characters such as the couple in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* or the families from *The America Play*, *Topdog/Underdog* and *Getting Mother's Body* are continually recounting their own personal histories. As demonstrated in her essay and by the above examples, Parks' history is not a passive force. Rather, history is a paradigm that we are expected to actively engage with.

In her essay “Possession” Parks elaborates on this unique relationship to history. According to Parks, since history is “a recorded or remembered event, theatre [...] is the perfect place to ‘make’ history” (*America* 4). Noting that much of history has neglected and negated the African-American perspective, Parks uses her plays to interrogate and destabilize these traditional historical frameworks. The notion of the alternative narrative is central to Parks’ interest in history. Throughout her works, Parks continually challenges the notion of a single definitive voice within history or the idea of an “official” record of events. Rather, Parks’ plays create space for alternative forms of discourse. Her experimentation with theatrical form and style opens new ground in regards to expression and storytelling, allowing previously untold or silenced stories, histories and memories to be voiced.

As demonstrated in the above summary of Parks’ plays, Parks will often pair official documentation with fictionalized accounts—she contrasts the clinical medical reports and court transcripts which depict Baartman as a barbaric creature with imagined scenes where she displays great humanity and compassion in *Venus* or pairs the detached, legal proceedings of the slave trade with the haunting recollections of those traded and sold in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*. This ultimately serves to interrogate history; calling into question the narratives it perpetuates and offers an alternative voice within our established historical narratives. In reclaiming such narratives, Parks is also stating her individual authority and claim as an African-American within such events. Take for example Parks’ appropriation of Lincoln: the image of the black actor in white face imitating the powerful cultural icon is not only engaging with a nation’s history and iconography, but, is also a disruption of American theatrical history. In this, she is

reversing and reclaiming the traditional black face, ultimately subverting the popular minstrel shows of the mid-nineteenth century.

In her interruption of such traditions, Parks is both literally and physically changing the historical, social and cultural landscape, carving her own claim within American history and mythology. This image of physically altering the parameters of these respective fields and demographics is one which scholars such as Rebecca Rugg as well as Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam Jr. have linked to her repeated use of the image of characters digging holes (as seen in *The America Play* with the so-called “great hole of history” or the exhumation of Willa Mead in *Getting Mother’s Body*). Linking the act of digging (the reconfiguration of a defined, physical space and its boundaries) to how Parks renegotiates the parameters of the historical frameworks, Rayner and Elam regard her repeated use of digging as a dramatization of Parks’ personal injection into historical discourse. They view this as an intervention in traditional, historical frameworks with Parks offering an alternative voice to the narrative and ultimately, in questioning the existing narratives, calling into consideration how history is recorded and disseminated.<sup>1</sup>

## **2.5 RACE AS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK**

Closely linked to her interrogation of history and memory (in particular, the notion of colonialism as outlined in *Venus and Imperceptible Mutabilities*) is the issue of race, more specifically, negative stereotypes which surround the African-American community. In much the same way that Parks’ plays work to reclaim her individual stake as an African-American woman within historical and cultural frameworks, Parks also

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<sup>1</sup>Further reading on this topic can be found in the essay “Echoes from the Black (W)hole: An Examination of *The America Play* by Suzan-Lori Parks” in 2001’s *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theatre* edited by Jeffrey D. Mason as well as the article “Unfinished Business: Reconfiguring History in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*” .

works to reclaim a cultural identity through her appropriation of negative black stereotypes. One of the most notable examples of this occurs in her play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* which features characters such as “Black Man with Watermelon” and “Black Woman with Fried Drumstick.” In addition to such stereotypes, Parks utilizes a distinct dialect constructed from a series of slang words, mispronunciations and malapropisms. While prominent in many of her plays—Parks claimed in an interview that this trademark dialect became most apparent to her as a playwriting tool in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (where it is closely associated with the character of Aretha, a slave working in the home of the Saxon family and is in contrast with the formal language of her young White charges Anglor and Blanca)—it is also prevalent in *The Death of the Last Black Man*. For example, the is pronounced “tuh,” a as “uh” and you as “yuh.” In her article “Sambo Subjects: Declining the Stereotype in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*” author Jacqueline Wood explores Parks controversial use of these stereotypes, noting that the ideas perpetuated in her plays have the power to be both “debilitating and destructive” to the African-American community (1). Woods does note however, that throughout Parks’ works, the use of such stereotype empowers the community by interrogating their loaded meaning and ultimately, debunking such erroneous beliefs associated with those labels (1).

## **2.6 FEMINIST CONSIDERATIONS OF PARKS’ PLAYS**

Although Parks does not identify herself primarily as a feminist playwright, scholars such as Verna Foster, Brenda Murphy and Barbara Obzelio have isolated the ongoing theme of subversion (including racial stereotypes which Woods explores in the



aforementioned article as well as her inversion of stereotypes associated with gender identity) as a central concept belonging to feminist frameworks. In her essay titled “Feminist Theory and Contemporary Drama” Janet Brown places Parks within the trajectory of feminist drama, stressing her ongoing theme of providing a voice to previously silenced, marginalized groups (such as African-American women) as being central to the canon. Brown points to the women she describes as Parks’ predecessors—author and social activist Bell Hooks who advocated for the inclusion of African American women in her 1989 book *Talking Back: Talking Feminist, Talking Back*, Lorraine Hansberry’s 1969 play *A Raisin in the Sun* and Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Brown likens these works which place the African-American experience in the centre of cultural, political and historical importance to Parks’ own plays that also showcase such previously neglected histories and experiences.

Beyond the scope of content however, Brown points to Parks’ experimental form as a signifier of feminist politics. Citing the ongoing trend which emerged during the nineteen-eighties among feminist scholars and artists to establish a uniquely female form, free from the “patriarchal paradigms” (Murphy as qtd by Brown 163) of the English language, the radical experimentation of Parks’ plays, specifically, her rejection of the traditional, linear, dramatic structure (such as the cyclical structure of *Betting on the Dust Commander* or the multi-layered chronology of *Imperceptible Mutabilities*) is regarded by Brown as a feminist technique to undermine patriarchal literary structures. She further links this disruption of traditional literary form to the stereotypes of race Parks evokes claiming that not only does Parks challenge the traditional literary structure, but, in her

simultaneous play on racial stereotypes, she is also subverting traditional theatrical representations of black people on the American stage (163).

Building off of this notion of a uniquely female literary form introduced in the nineties, author Barbara Ozieblo takes a similar structural route in her examination of Parks' plays. Connecting her analysis of form to the larger field of feminist analysis and discourse, her postmodern reading of Parks' plays in her essay "The 'fun that I had': The theatrical gendering of Suzan-Lori Parks' 'figures'" seeks to determine how Parks subverts the traditional notions of not only racial identity (as Murphy or Woods' articles had) but of gender as well. Ozieblo regards Parks' experimental style as a means of "self-alienation" (49) as the characters in Parks' plays do not have fixed identities. Rather, many of them initially exist as "figures" (Parks' term) devoid of cultural and political context. Citing famed feminist scholar Judith Butler's notions of gender as a performative act—meaning that gender is an "identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* (Butler's italics)"—Brown parallels Butler's concept of gender performance to Parks' stylized repetition with revision (Butler as qtd. by Obzieblo, 49). Through their series of highly performative and repetitious actions ("rep and rev"), the characters of Parks' plays subsequently shape their own individual identity (as Butler suggests we do with gender) (49). It is these societal, cultural and historical frameworks which dictate our actions that are highlighted by the highly theatrical nature of Parks' writing. The exaggerated malapropisms of the illiterate single woman or the doctor so detached from his work that he performs gynecological exams roadside do move the action of Parks' plays from the natural to the absurd, but they serve to focus the reader on such extremes, exposing the unstable and often corrupt nature of such societal forces and constructs. Ozieblo argues

that in illuminating the unstable nature of our public systems that ultimately aid in shaping our own personal gender performance, Parks is debunking the archaic Freudian theories of gender formation. No longer can blame be placed on the mother figure (49). Each of the Hesters' violent actions is not to be blamed on some over-arching neuroses resulting from her sex, but rather, was shaped by societal, political and cultural systems that ultimately failed each woman.

### 3. THE 365 DAYS/365 PLAYS PROJECT

Parks' *365 Days/365 Plays* remains her largest and most ambitious project to date. To provide a concise summary of the project is problematic given the number of diverse plays, yet it is also difficult to say at face value if the plays of Parks' project are simply a series of disparate and unrelated texts. Within the scope of the project, the plays vary hugely in respect to length, content and form. Even among the most common play structure within the cycle (approximately two pages of dialogue between two characters) there is great variety in respect to both tone and content. For example, works such as *Impala* and *Pussy* spotlight the banal conversations of two friends while plays such as *Limousine* and *The Worst* (all of these plays follow the above two page, two character dialogue formula) feature conversations between inanimate objects including a clicker and a clipboard as they track prisoners entering incarceration (as in *Limousine*) or two dinner plates (*The Worst*).

Within this typical structure, Parks also varies her own playwriting conventions. While Parks typically delineates dialogue in the traditional fashion in which the character's name/title precedes their exchange, within this smaller subgroup of plays, as in all of the plays within the cycle, characters are not identified by name but also are referred to in far more generalized terms indicative of their occupation, age, gender or even a political or aesthetic movement (such as the character of the "traditionalist" from *Beginning, Middle, End*). She further expands the parameters of typical dramatic convention by avoiding any signifying terms that reveal dramaturgical insight to the characters as individuals (even something as simple as age or gender). At times, Parks chooses to only identify changes in character using just letters, numbers or even dashes

(*Look* and *Another Deep Hole*). Perhaps the most extreme example within the cycle is found within plays such as *Empty* or *6'4"*, where individual lines are not identified by any form of designation, the plays resembling poetic prose rather than traditional dramatic text at first glance.

Within the cycle, Parks further experiments with conventions beyond the traditional exchange between characters creating texts that utilize monologues (such as the Thinker's speech in *FedEx To My Ex* or the single speaker in *If I Had to Murder Me Somebody*) and plays that eschew dialogue entirely. Plays such as *Splitsville* (where a series of three short actions are executed simultaneously), *The Runaround* in which the actors simply move about the stage "running," "darting" and "shoving" around and through one another or *The Search for the Meaning of Life*, in which actors enter the stage on their hands and knees as they "meticulously search" are approximately a paragraph of action with no accompanying dialogue. Within the cycle (including the three constants) there are twenty-three plays that follow this form of strict action (twenty-two if one does not include the improvised dialogue between the audience and actors in *Talkback*). At approximately one paragraph, these plays are among the shortest of the cycle in regards to page length, particularly in comparison to plays such as *Buddy* and *We Were Never Close*, which at nearly four pages, are among the longest plays of the project. While plays such as the aforementioned *Search for the Meaning of Life* or the Second Constant *Action in Action* take up little physical space on the page, they can also be among the longest of the cycle when performed. For example, Parks states that in the *Search for the Meaning of Life* the actors are to be methodical in their search. She does not, however, offer any direction on how long the sequence is to occur, presenting the

opportunity for the directors and actors to present an extended sequence of action. The second constant is perhaps the most extreme example among these seemingly “short” plays. At only three sentences, it is the shortest of the plays (in terms of the space it occupies on the page) yet, much like the aforementioned *Search*, Parks’ direction indicates an extended action. In the case of the second constant however, Parks has pushed this notion to its very limits, creating a scene of infinite length indicating the action is to continue for eternity (“the sound of wind or whales forever”) (365 x).

In comparison, the longer plays (including the *Buddy* texts and *Father Comes Home From War* series) follow a more traditional dramatic structure in which the action is divided into several acts. September 20<sup>th</sup>’s play *Buddy* is among the larger seemingly more “complete” plays of the cycle. At three pages, the text is divided into three distinct acts and chronicles the relationship that develops between an anonymous robber and his elderly female victim. In her first encounter with the anonymous criminal, the woman is unperturbed by his intentions, calmly knitting as she reminisces about her deceased husband. As the robber exits (jewels in hand) however, the woman stops him. In the dim light of her living room, the stranger’s face and voice are reminiscent of her long lost brother’s and in an unbridled moment of ardor, she fervently (and seemingly uncharacteristically) throws herself at his feet proclaiming: “Buddy!” The robber (now referred to as Buddy in the text) is clearly moved by the encounter. As he later unpacks the jewelry for the inspection of his female companion (Mama) he reiterates the unlikely exchange with a sense of reverence and awe: “She held on to my legs [...] For a whole hour it felt like; she was clutching my legs” (328). Claiming he wants to *be* Buddy, his female accomplice is unmoved by his declamation: “So be her brother [...] I don’t give a

fuck” (328). Buddy then violently confronts the woman pouncing on her, and in what Parks describes as a “stylized murder,” he strangles her (328). In the final scene, Parks returns to the woman’s apartment where she ends the play with a sense of domestic tranquility. The two siblings are reunited and as Buddy states: “it’s good to be home” (328).

Unlike the aforementioned *Action in Inaction* or *Search for the Meaning of Life* there is a sense of finality to *Buddy*, particularly, in the play’s final sentiments from the title character. As clichéd as the statement may seem, the return home marks the closure of journey, not only physically but spiritually (particularly in the case of the anonymous robber), and there is a sense of closure to the protagonist’s own journey. As the dramatic hero, Buddy is able to work through his struggles and conflict and is ultimately able to find redemption in his desire and ability to change (to ‘become’ Buddy). It is this traditional formula and dramatic structure that allows the audience to readily identify the text as a play. Even when removed from the context of the cycle, the play remains dramaturgically sound and unlike the shorter works explored, there is the sense that the play could be produced independently of the project.

As demonstrated by the above examination of the selected texts, the seemingly disparate nature of the plays within Parks’ project makes it difficult to provide a summation of the works within the cycle as a single entity. As varied as the form, length and structure is within the project, the content is seemingly equally disparate. Parks presents to her reader situations ranging from those that mirror the mundane nature of daily life (as in the banal banter between two friends in *Impala* and *Pussy*) to the fantastical worlds of *Dragon Song* and *Dragon Keeper* (where the mythical creatures

roam among us) or the imagined eighty-ninth birthday party of Abraham Lincoln (*Abraham Lincoln at 89*). By extension, the plays are equally varied in the demands placed upon both their audiences and performers. In reading the plays, there is not necessarily a pre-determined logic to their order (or at least one that is immediately apparent) and such seemingly distinct plays as *Abraham Lincoln at 89* (December 2<sup>nd</sup>) and *Impala* (December 3<sup>rd</sup>) follow one another in succession. While she does (re)visit similar themes, motifs and images throughout the cycle (for example, *Buddy* is followed by *Buddy Starring in "We Were Never Close"* and *Buddy Starring in "You Can't Take it With You"* or the reappearance of the carpet from *Roll Out the Red Carpet* in both *The Coming* and *The Rumor Mill*) Parks seemingly does so at random and it is not uncommon to unexpectedly stumble across residual characters (or even props) throughout the project. (Sometimes, reappearing days, weeks or even months after their initial introduction to the cycle). Furthermore, in respect to staging the texts, the seeming arbitrariness of the plays' scope and content is a challenge to artists. While many of the plays demand little in terms of technical resources (such as *Mother Comes Home From the Wars* which only needs two actors and a single pair of dark glasses) plays such as *Pilgrim's Progress* call for a cast of dozens while the final stage directions of *Dragon Keeper* call for "[f]ires and Armageddon" (33).

Given the contrasting variety of styles, form and content Parks presents within the project, how are theatre scholars to summarize the plays of the project? Is it even possible to condense a series of such breadth? Perhaps, given the variety of plays within the cycle, rather than providing a generalized summation of the text, a categorization of the plays based on qualities such as length, structure or content would be most effective. Through



this organizational process, salient connections can be made between the plays within the project allowing for a more meaningful analysis of the plays not only as individual texts, but also, to determine their function within the cycle. Parks' plays can therefore be organized through a number of key structural categories moving from such general qualities as texts that contain no dialogue to far more specific criteria (plays written in memory of public figures who died that year). Furthermore, Parks' plays can be categorized based on their thematic and imagistic qualities. As previously stated, it is not uncommon for Parks to continually conjure familiar images or themes throughout the cycle. Characters including Buddy (*Buddy, Buddy Starring in "We Never Close" Buddy Starring in "You Can't Take It With You"*), The Writer (*The Presidential Race, Circa 1972, Remember Juneteenth, Too Close, Play (Condemned Version)* and *Boo*), Chuck and Gopher (*Impala* and *Pussy*), The Strongman (*Tomatoes, All the Answers* and *Paper Tomatoes*) and Abraham Lincoln (*Abraham Lincoln at 89, The Birth of Abraham Lincoln, The President's Day Sale* and *The Mr. Lincoln Rose*) all reappear at various points throughout the year-long project and as a result, whole series of plays emerge during the year—the longest running of which (*The Father Comes Home From the War* series) totals to eleven plays (twelve including *Mother Comes Home From the War*).

As dramaturge Rebecca Rugg suggests in her analysis of the cycle, the plays of 365 are perhaps then best regarded as a rhizome: an interconnected network of images, characters and themes (*Radical Inclusion* 74). While this network exists within the scope of the project (in respect to both its dramaturgical structure and its structured network of theatres in its premiers), it also functions within the larger ideological and creative parameters of Parks' creative canon, building upon the critical terms and structures

developed in her earlier work. Her continued interest in history, language and its structure as well as the image of holes is demonstrated through the continued re-appearance of these images and themes throughout the plays. For example, the prominence of Abraham Lincoln within the cycle reflects her continuing interest in the figure and the continued image of holes, or more specifically digging (another thematic signifier of her previous work), is continued throughout the cycle in *Holey Moley*, *Hole* and *Writers Digging Bach*. Furthermore, the plays of 365 are prefaced with excerpts from the playwright's essay "Elements of Style" to contextualize the plays' style and structure within her existing works.

The plays of 365 were not written with the explicit intention of being produced but rather, began as a personal challenge Parks created for herself following her Pulitzer win. Beginning in November of 2002, Parks began writing the cycle as a "meditation on playwriting" (Gener 11). It was not until the summer of 2005 when Parks was visiting with her friend and producer Bonnie Metzgar that the two decided to formally premiere the project (Walat). While several companies had expressed an interest in premiering the cycle, Metzgar—inspired by her work with the *National New Play Network* (a not-for-profit network of theatres and artists dedicated to the development of emerging plays and artists)—developed the idea of a pan-national premiere. Seeking to avoid what Metzgar refers to as "premiere-itis"—a result of the contemporary American theatre system premiere structure which has a negative impact on both emerging theatres and plays—Metzgar and Parks sought a more egalitarian and inclusive premiere system. Traditionally, artistic institutions must compete for the honor of a play's premiere and typically institutions with the greatest funding and history are handed this honor,

perpetuating a system of artistic hierarchy. Furthermore, the single premiere can be damaging to the play in development as negative reviews and low audience attendance can influence subsequent stagings (or lack of) (Robertson). 365's unique premiere sought to combat these forces by allowing companies the opportunity to share in the project's premiere regardless of funding or production history. Playing off of the so-called "magic number" (Walat), Parks and Metzgar initially sought 365 artists to participate in their premiere and worked to solicit participants by promoting the project through interviews and national theatre conferences.

In preparation for its premiere, the plays of Parks' project were divided into weeklong cycles with the intention being that each week, a separate company would be responsible for premiering the plays. Following the completion of the weeklong cycle, the next seven plays would then be passed to another theatre company in a nation-wide relay of premiers. Parks and Metzgar were indiscriminate in enlisting companies as theatres from the large and prestigious (New York's Public Theatre) to smaller grass-roots endeavors (such as a groups of university students) and independent artists participated in the premier. Nearly eight hundred theatre companies and artists in thirty-five cities across North America would premier Parks' plays (an estimated five thousand premiers for the project as a whole). The hundreds of companies were organized via geographical proximity, each being categorized into a "network" led by a "hub" theatre (companies which aided in the recruitment of artists and companies for the project). The regions included Atlanta, Austin, Chicago, Colorado, Greater Texas, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York City, The Northeast Network, San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, the Southeast Network, Washington DC Area and finally The University Network (this

network being the only one not organized according to geographical proximity). Within an individual network there were between one and five “hub” theatres and anywhere from twenty to sixty individual theatres and artists (some companies, such as Halifax’s *Halifax 6* formed specifically for the project). Given the sheer size of the premiere (in terms of its geographical scope as well as the vast number of individual companies and artists involved) a website was created specifically for the premiere to allow participants and audiences to remain in contact with others involved in the project across the globe. There, artists and audiences alike were able to track the progress of the premiere and communicate with other theatre artists and companies across far-flung distances who shared the same week of the cycle. Videos and images of the individual plays were posted for viewing, artists and audiences could interact with other theatres through the official message board and individuals could even have the day’s play emailed to them.

To participate in the play’s premiere there were few stipulations. Admission was free, the plays had to be performed in chronological order (although companies were welcome to present the plays as one performance, or as several performances interspersed throughout the week) and lastly, the three constants *Action in Inaction*, *Inaction in Action* and *Remember Who You Are*) were to be performed within every individual week-long cycle. Beyond these few rules, artists were granted license to interpret the text as they saw fit. Thus, a variety of performance styles, venues and interpretations would appear throughout the year. Parks’ plays would manifest in a variety of forms with plays presented as staged readings, videos that were uploaded onto the popular user-generated website You Tube, participatory theatre pieces, curtain warmers to mainstage shows and

environmental theatre pieces performed in hospitals, parking lots, churches, nursing homes, libraries, playgrounds, ice rinks and park benches.

#### 4. SCHOLARLY ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM OF *365*

The unique panoptic nature of *365* ushered in a relatively new and experimental method of theatrical premiering, yet, there is still little academic literature published on the project (especially in comparison to the amount of literature surrounding Parks). While this is not necessarily surprising given that the project is still fairly recent (the cycle having reached its completion almost four years ago), it is surprising considering both the wide breadth of literature published on Parks' previous works and the prominence of the project within popular media circuits throughout the year of the cycle's premiere. In the year of its premiere, Parks' project had gathered considerable press in both local and national media outlets ranging from larger publications such as *American Theatre*, *The New York Times*, *Variety* and *National Public Radio* to numerous smaller local publications that included the premiere among their arts and theatre listings. These popular publications focused more on the novelty of Parks' unique personal writing challenge, choosing to focus on the project's inception rather than a detailed dramaturgical analysis of the plays in respect to the larger body of Parks' works. Both *American Theatre Magazine* and *The Times* concentrate on the geographical scope of the project and the logistics of organizing such a large production—with the latter paying particular attention to exploring Park's partnership with Metzgar and the New Play Network—while *ABC News* and *NPR*'s interviews with the author offer only superficial insight into the plays, providing brief sketches of the types of plays the cycle contains.

It is understandable that these outlets would shy away from a more thorough, critical analysis of the cycle and its plays. First, few of these publications (excluding *ATM*) are devoted strictly to publishing on theatre and as a result, it can be expected that

their readership, not having the same investment within the craft as a reader of an academic theatre journal, may not have the necessary critical, theoretical or dramaturgical background to fully appreciate a nuanced, detailed dramaturgical or performative analysis of the cycle. Secondly, as many of these reports are but brief essays, articles and interviews within these publications, a proper, full analysis of the cycle and its plays is not possible given the variety of plays and performance styles that Parks' project generated. Regardless as to whether these popular media outlets were unwilling or unable to provide a deeper dramaturgical, performative or theoretical analysis of the project, the emphasis on the project's sheer size and dedication demanded by its production team is sensationalized within these reports. For example, Randy Gener opens his *ATM* article by comparing Parks' personal challenge to that of the "the rest of us mortal creatures [who] struggle to come up with a germ of an idea for that One Great Play" (10) while the *Times* presents a similar canonization of the author stating: "there are your everyday whims and then there are the whims of Suzan-Lori Parks" (Robertson).

While the above-mentioned publications lauded Parks' theatrical experiment, other publications were skeptical of the project, regarding the production as a gimmick. In *Variety's* review of Los Angeles based Centre Theatre Group's production of the week one plays, author Terry Morgan ends his review with a summation of the project as a "bit of a stunt" while Novid Parsi writes in the *Time Out Chicago* blog that the premiere was a "publicity bonanza" criticizing Chicago's theatre community (pointing specifically to some of the city's established companies and artists including Congo Square, who in the author's opinion, should have "known better") for becoming absorbed in the so-called "misguided groupthink" of the project, seduced by the expansive size and scope of 365.

In regards to scholarly studies on the premiere, there are currently three major academic articles published which examine either the individual plays of the cycle or their production in detail—two written by dramaturge Rebecca Rugg (the producer in charge of the University network) and one written by preeminent Parks scholar Philip C. Kolin. *365* (or rather the virtual element of the project) is also included as a case study in Sarah Bay-Cheng’s 2007 article on digitally recorded performances “Theatre Squared: Theatre History in the age of Media” while the *365* website was most recently the focus of John Muse’s article in *The Journal of American Drama*.

Kolin’s article titled “Redefining the Way Theatre is Created and Performed: The Radical Inclusion of Suzan-Lori Parks’s *365 Days/365 Plays* was the first detailed analysis of Parks’ project to be published, appearing in a 2007 issue of *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, a biannual publication focused primarily on theatre theory. Kolin, an English scholar who has written extensively on the playwright (his publications on Parks include the anthologies *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*, *Contemporary African American Woman Playwrights* and *The Influence of Tennessee Williams*—in which Parks is prominently featured—as well as the essay “Cultural memory and circular time in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Betting on the Dust Commander*”), provides the reader with an analysis of both the individual plays within the cycle as well as the various means by which they manifest in production. In examining the cycle in respect to both the plays as they appear on page and in production, Kolin seeks to illuminate the ideology of an inclusive theatrical community which Parks and Metzgar attempted to promulgate with the project.



Opening his essay with an exploration of the logistics behind the project, Kolin introduces the variety of performance venues and styles included within the premiere citing such eclectic examples from Berkeley's all-female collective Women's Will to the loosely choreographed readings at Webster's Wine Barn in Chicago's Lincoln Park. In drawing the reader's attention to the varied nature of the productions, Kolin uses these examples to illustrate how Parks and Metzgar are working to dispel the typical theatrical conventions including the notion of a theatrical hierarchy among theatre companies and the prevalence of the realist style among performance genres. Kolin then shifts his argument to a close textual reading of the plays within the cycle, identifying common themes and tropes from the larger body of Parks' work. In his textual analysis Kolin also links the plays to the larger American literary and dramatic tradition. For example, he compares Parks to nineteenth century poet Walt Whitman, drawing parallels between the "self-identifying iconic" photograph of the poet on the cover of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the series of photograph stills of Parks seated in a Mustang convertible on the cover of *365 Days/365 Plays* (72). Through this textual analysis, Kolin introduces this notion of artistic inclusivity in relation to the literary canon.

Despite his careful and judicious analysis of the project, Kolin is also critical of the cycle. In his textual analysis, he notes how difficult it is to accurately define the plays of the cycle given that many of the plays are quite paradoxical in nature:

[The plays] flee from mainstream theatre yet they are tied to it as well. They project a feeling of urgency but preserve the desire for the eternal. They fly through yet stabilize the evanescence of performance. *365* comprises very different short plays with a running time of two to three minutes up to 10 minutes. Some of them could "fit on a post-it note" while others stretch like miniature epics to five or six pages [...] So much happens in these plays, and so little. Seven of them can be performed in just one hour, yet audiences often have the feeling that they have traveled to the distant corners of time space, and galactic thought. (72)

Furthermore, he notes the many uncertainties the production of these plays raise, including how later productions are to be handled and whether or not it is possible to reproduce a production of such large geographic and temporal scope.

Unlike Kolin's analysis, which was largely based in his close reading of the text, producer Rebecca Rugg's 2008 article "Radical Inclusion 'Til It Hurts: Suzan-Lori Parks' *365 Days/365 Plays*" relies primarily on a performative analysis of the plays. Divided into six distinct sections that trace the development of the project through the various stages of production—from Parks' and Metzgar's notions of an alternative premiere to the process of soliciting artists to the various productions of the plays—Rugg uses her own experiences as a producer on the project (assisting in the creation and organization of the University Network) to provide her reader with an intimate glimpse into the cycle's history. Tracing the notion of the concept of "radical inclusion" which inspired the theatrical experiment, Rugg begins by first defining the parameters of this term. She initially situates its definition within the field of political science, citing Iris Marion Young's book *Inclusion in Democracy*. Moving away from the typical "unadorned inclusion" which evokes the image of what the author describes as a "liberal goodwill", Young eschews traditional definitions of inclusivity as they imply a polarity—the image of a centralized group extending the parameters of their borders, to a marginalized other (57). To quote: "It images that instead of one, there are many concentric circles of community, of imagination, of good ideas and possibility" (Young as qtd. by Rugg 58). Building off of this definition, Rugg explores this image through the lens of the project's hub system. She then examines its implications to determine how this alternative, radical inclusion altered the theatrical landscape with respect to how theatre is both created and

consumed within the confines of the project. Lastly, she notes the challenges this concept posed to the project's artists and audiences, questioning the potential limitations and drawbacks in such radical experimentation.

Rugg's personal insight into the inner workings of the project lends itself to a far more intimate and personal investigation. Much of her supporting evidence takes the form of anecdotal observations and she continually interjects her own personal insights and reflections on the project into her careful theoretical analysis. Despite her own involvement with the premiere, Rugg, much like Kolin, is also careful to address many of the ambiguities which surround the theatrical experiment—specifically, calling into question the limitations of Parks' radical inclusion. She argues that if the notion of radical inclusion erodes political, theatrical, national, economic and artistic boundaries, creating an artistic community in which no artist, idea or impulse is denied, *how* are critics and audiences to assess a production? As Rugg states: "The philosophy of radical inclusion is fundamentally against discrimination and seeks to imply that no play is better than any other, that there is no such thing as good or bad art. I don't agree with that and so, I wonder: how can radical aesthetic inclusion exist along [with] the ability to distinguish good from bad plays?" (71) Here, Rugg turns yet again to Young's concept of participatory democracy (which implies that a variety of voices within a debate or discussion does not necessarily equate to a "communicative leveling") as she raises important concerns that point to larger issues within the theatrical community *beyond* the immediate scope of the project. Rugg surmises in her article that the question is not of "good or bad" plays but rather, about the kind of theatre created where artists are freed from the constraints of a hegemonic theatrical system. In her opinion, the radical

experimentation of Parks' project offers only a brief glimpse into what *type* of alternative theatrical systems could be available to artists and audiences.

Rugg's second article on *365*, published in the 2009 January issue of *A Journal of Performance and Art* is a much shorter article than her first analysis of the project. While it does not offer a detailed production history, Rugg does present detailed dramaturgical analysis of the plays of the cycle through a spiritual lens. Calling upon several frameworks including the doctrine of the playwright's Asthanga yoga practice, Hinduism and Indian mythology, Rugg seeks to explore two major spiritual themes within the cycle: the notion of daily devotion and manifold present. In exploring these, Rugg seeks to illuminate for her reader the larger themes of Parks' unique temporal structure. A much shorter study of the project, Rugg's second article seeks not to necessarily evaluate either the immediate and long-term impact of the cycle in respect to a dramaturgical, theoretical or a performative lens, but rather, to orient the project within the frame of Parks' creative canon.

## 5. THE MODERN THEATRE FESTIVAL

The scholastic analyses conducted by Kolin, Rugg and Walat, together with the various interviews with Parks and Metzgar (and the countless other artists involved) as well as the reviews, press releases and commentaries within the so-called “popular publications” all identify the project as the “365 Days/Plays festival”. Yet, little elaboration is given to this label. This section explores why this categorization is perhaps the most significant perspective through which *365* remains to be examined. Despite varying levels of personal involvement within both the project and the American theatre community as well as their differing fields of expertise and reference (Kolin’s literary examination as opposed to Rugg’s dramaturgical and production analysis) salient similarities can be found in Rugg and Kolin’s respective investigations of the project. In their inquiry, each treats the larger framework of *365* as well as the smaller components of the cycle, providing both detailed textual and performative analysis of the individual texts within the project and performances along with examinations of its broader tropes and themes. Both examine the religious, canonical and theoretical frameworks which the project evokes and each touch upon Parks and Metzgar’s larger vision of the project and its notion of radical inclusivity. Through this, both illuminate the dramaturgical nuances of the individual plays in the project while providing insight into the larger theoretical implications of *365*. While one could assume that the smaller-scale, local media outlets that covered the project would not necessarily be as invested in the exact etymology of the term (nor its implications in respect to Parks’ project) one is justified in striving for specificity and articulation from those within the relevant academic circles. Particularly, when working to elucidate the broader dramaturgical and theoretical implications of the

project. In identifying *365* as festival, Rugg and Kolin are evoking a specific theatrical framework with its own criteria, connotations and implications. In the interest of specificity and clarification, one should then ask whether *365 Days/Plays* actually fits within the framework of the theatrical festival. In addition, what are the implications (if any) in identifying *365* within this framework?

In first defining the festival through the theatrical lens, I will be establishing the theatrical parameters of the term. In seeking to articulate the festival framework I will be comparing Parks' *365* to other theatrical festivals such as Vancouver's local PuSh Festival, Canada's Dominion Drama Festival as well as one of the largest existing theatre festivals to date, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Each of these respective festivals varies in size and professionalization and has various historical, political and cultural groundings yet each contain qualities similar to those found in Parks' project. Both the Edinburgh and PuSh festivals provide a wide array of performance styles and genres (as Parks' premiere had), while Canada's Dominion Drama Festival, which was created specifically for the development and promotion of a national theatrical identity, sought to promote a new Canadian theatre (much like how Parks and Metzgar had hoped that their project would promulgate their vision of a new "radically inclusive" American theatre). As case studies of the contemporary festival, each of the festivals help to illuminate the specific logistics and structure of the theatrical framework. Having established the structural and practical components of the festival in comparison to Parks' *365*, I will then turn to the field of performance studies (in particular, its anthropological roots) to examine the much more elusive element of the festival—festivity—a term that I will temporarily employ to refer to the various qualities of celebration, effervescence and

oneness which accompany the festival. Having worked to articulate the term and its various implications and connotations, I wish to conclude with an examination of the efficacy of this framework and discuss not only the advantages of such a term in defining Parks' project, but also, to examine the potential limitations of this term as scholars move forward with their research in 365.

## **5. 1 THE FESTIVAL: ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE**

At its most basic, the modern festival can be defined as an artistic distribution system characterized by a concentration of cultural objects within a defined temporal period and geographical space (Shrum 1996; Cremona et al 2004; Hauptfleisch et al 2007). These objects can include everything from cinema to food and can range in size from the smaller, localized gathering (for example, Vancouver's own "Davie Day Street Festival" for families in the city's West End neighborhood) to larger-scale events which pull in thousands of participants from far-flung geographical distances as in the aforementioned Edinburgh Fringe Festival (one of the largest theatre festivals in the world which attracts performers and audiences from across the globe). These cultural objects are also typically organized around some type of unifying factor (Cremona 6; Shrum, 87). This can include the cultural product itself as well as any shared thematic, aesthetic or structural qualities (much like the Edinburgh Fringe or Vancouver's own international PuSh Performing Arts Festival which are both dedicated to the showcase of experimental theatrical and artistic performances), a specific mandate (such as Canada's Dominion Drama Festival, popular during the early 1930s, which was organized specifically for the promotion—and eventually, professionalization—of a national

theatrical identity) (Bessai 3) or even a shared community affiliation or identity (as in the aforementioned Davie Day Festival)

It is this shared quality that is often used in determining a festival's programming or, what Cremona refers to as "festival labels" –the name, theme, mandate or aesthetic sensibilities of a festival (6). In return, these labels assist in shaping the dynamics between the artist and spectator. For example, even within festivals that share a geographical space (such as Vancouver's Davie Day Festival and PuSh Festival) their programming and organization attract varying audiences. As a celebration of the West End neighborhood and its community members Davie Day offers family-gear programming which showcases the community and its members. Their 2010 lineup includes a variety of local vendors showcasing clothing, jewelry, crafts and locally produced food and drink as well as entertainment which includes live jazz performances, a Rod Stewart impersonator, performances from the Vancouver Circus School as well as face-painting and costumed performers who re-enact the early the early days of Davie Street's foundation ("Davie Day"). In comparison, Vancouver's Push Festival (also held locally) offers a program that is considerably more risqué. As the title of the Push Festival suggests, the festival promotes theatre which literally pushes or tests the conventions of traditional theatre and its audiences with performances typically regarded as challenging or belonging to the avant-garde. Given the nature of the performances, these programming choices are geared towards a more mature audience. Moreover, in specifically offering performances that are theatrical in nature, the PuSh Festival is more likely to attract audiences interested in contemporary theatre and performance (either as



audience members or as practitioners and scholars) as opposed to Davie Days, where the element of live performance is not at the forefront of the festival's mandate.

Although the abundance of related cultural products typically revolves around this unifying system it is also important to note that there is also a great deal of diversity within these products (Shrum, 87). For example, the 2010 Push Festival, while geared specifically towards theatre and performance, featured a range of genres and performance styles within its program. This included a contemporary dance piece based on arbitrary movements (The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's *Poetics a Brute Ballet*), an interactive piece inspired by multi-player video games (*Best Before*), a puppet show which depicted the atrocities committed at Auschwitz (*Kamp*) and a surrealist mime performance inspired by the Russian silent-film era (*White Cabin*) ("Vancouver Push"). Perhaps, the modern theatre festival is then best described using Schoenmaker's and Hauptfleisch's observations of the framework as being "poly-systemic" or, to use Cremona's term, a "meta-event" (Cremona, 6). These terms point to the festival as a singular event that is in turn, comprised of a series of individual events or systems. These individualized systems are connected by the various aforementioned unifying factors (such as the title, genre etc.). This then accounts for the festival's overall cohesion while illuminating the diversity that exists at the festival's macro-level.

## **5. 2 THE FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE**

Up to this point, much of the analysis provided has accounted for the practical components of the festival and while theatre scholars have established the logistics of the festival and its staging in specific terms, there is greater struggle in articulating the affective qualities which accompany this event. In an attempt to illuminate the festival

experience, theatre practitioners and scholars have both employed and developed a variety of terms. In trying to describe the shared celebratory atmosphere of the festival, Cremona points to Jill Dolan's notion of *communitas* while Henri Schoenmaker employs the term *flow* that was first coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and later employed by Culture and Media scholars Raymond Williams and John Fiske. Whether using an anthropologically based framework (as in Dolan's use of the *communitas*), psychological terms or calling upon the neighboring field of Media studies, Cremona, Hauptfleisch and Shrum all articulate the festival experience as a direct result of the unique festival structure.

In his comments on the Edinburgh Fringe (and festivals in general) Shrum points to its organization as the central force in shaping the audience's experience, specifically the artistic concentration. As Shrum writes: "apart from the major centers of art and cultural accomplishment, large gatherings for performance purposes are generally sporadic. The festival shifts the cultural objects to the foreground [...] You trip over it if you do not watch your footsteps" (92). Unlike the singular theatrical premiere that is focused on the lone cultural offering, the festival system allows for an abundance of creativity and cultural products. Paradoxically however, this vast abundance and diversity of art creates a level of scarcity (87). One cannot view every cultural object offered within a festival and must select from the programming which components of the festival one wishes to partake. As Shrum comments on the Fringe festival, part of the Edinburgh experience is the so-called "myth of the fringe" or the sense of fascination and discovery that accompanies finding a transcendental artistic experience among such a large and diverse scope of cultural objects (109).

Schoenmaker also notes a distinction in the affective process(es) that occur within a festival performance in comparison to the singular theatrical performance. Much like Shrum, he also isolates the unique structure of the festival as a catalyst in generating this unique experience. Schoenmaker however focuses more on the element of the festival experience centered on a spirit of collectivity and oneness. In returning to the notion of flow, Schoenmaker evokes the term in the Culture and Media Studies sense to describe how we are able to process the series of singular events as a cohesive viewing experience. Csikzentmihalyi's original theory of flow states that when working on large-scale team projects, an individual who is fully immersed in and dedicated to that activity will surrender and channel all of their positive energy to the greater task at hand (32). Even if only completing a small piece of this larger task, one is still able to visualize the efficacy of their contribution, as they are able to focus on the greater goal. Williams' and Fiske's adaptation of the theory (and the manner in which Schoenmaker employs the term) is used to describe the vanishing borderlines among various activities or experiences within a single event which come together in our viewing to create the sense of an "integrated experience" (34). Thus, we are able to recognize and comprehend the individualized experiences as a singular event. To elucidate this concept, Schoenmaker uses the example of an evening of television viewing. While an evening of television is typically comprised of a variety of individual programs, as viewers, we often walk away with a single overarching viewing experience. This illustration is useful when considering the poly-systemic nature of the festival. The numerous events one can attend within a single festival offer a variety of individual artistic experiences (as Shrum suggests) yet, these

individualized events will simultaneously come together to create a cohesive experience for the participant (34).

While flow permits us to comprehend the festival as a single experience (rather than only processing it as a series of individualized events), *excitement transfer* allows the spectator to apply a singular affective experience to the festival itself. Schoenmaker applies this general hypothesis to the festival experience. Even with a festival that has great diversity within its programming (as is characteristic of most), the emotional experience of one event can be transferred to another, regardless of whether the offerings are disparate in genre, theme or style (35). As audience members in the festival setting, we are bombarded with a number of events in a limited framework. The concept of excitement transfer however allows us to continually build off of our individual experiences in a cumulative affective process. As we move from one cultural offering to the next, we carry with it the excitement generated at previous plays and performances to feed our upcoming experiences. Furthermore, with these cultural products offered in such close temporal and geographical proximity, our excitement is heightened (35). This notion of excitement transfer is what provides us with the momentum and energy that are unique to the festival setting and largely absent from a single theatrical season of individualized premiers.

It is these factors that account for the individual's perception and experience of the festival, yet, they do not address the unique sense of collectivity and oneness among its participants. Here, Schoenmaker points to the concept of *affiliation*, that is, the basic human desire and process whereby we seek out emotional contact with others (35). While the singular theatrical or media event encourages us to identify with the protagonist on

stage or screen (Schoenmaker suggests theatre even more so, as it necessitates live interaction), the festival is unique in that the size and scope can attract a large number of spectators and performers, increasing the potential for direct interaction among audience members and artists. (Even more so if the festival also includes activities in its programming which encourage further forms of interaction such as expert panels, discussions, debates and the like). The more spectators that are involved in these individual events, the greater the need (and subsequent fulfillment) of affiliation (35). Thus, while excitement transfer carries our individual momentum, the concept of affiliation points to a shared or communal experience.

### **5.3 ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE**

It is this very communal or collective celebratory atmosphere that helps to isolate the festival experience as a unique theatrical event, distancing it from the traditional theatrical production. Both Shrum and Shoemaker touch on this phenomenon in their studies, yet the affective experience is secondary to the structural components of the festival, regarded as a byproduct of the festival's organization and structure. While I do not wish to suggest that the structure and experience of the festival are separate entities, greater consideration of this elusive quality of the framework is needed to fully articulate the festival in its entirety. It is here that the field of performance studies becomes particularly useful in further articulating the festival framework as its theoretical origins work to illuminate such concepts of community and collectivity that operate beyond the immediate field of theatre studies. Furthermore, as there is an intimate connection between theatre (as well as performativity) and anthropology--the notion of playing culture and theatrical figures such as Richard Schechner, Augusto Boal and Jerzy

Grotowski who continually call upon theatre's anthropological origins in their respective art and writing point to this link—it is not inappropriate to call upon this neighboring field in our analysis.

Numerous anthropologists have attempted to articulate the festival experience in regards to the sense of collectivity, oneness and belonging it evokes. The works of both Michel Maffesoli and Harvey Cox touch on the ephemeral and elusive experience of festivity and celebration within the social collective. Framing his analysis through the orgiastic society, French sociologist Michel Maffesoli's writings *The Shadow of Dionysus* (1982) and the *Time of the Tribes* (1988) point to the shared affective experience made possible by a breakdown of contemporary social hierarchy and mores. In the first of these publications, he explores this through the function of the orgy as a rejection of the productivist model of Western society. Maffesoli frames his observations through the orgy as this notion both breaks down the idea of individuality and re-introduces the importance of collectivity. Furthermore, it embodies the exact pleasure found in such unproductivity (15). Activities such as homosexual sex, masturbation, sodomy, sadism, fantasy, polymorphous pleasure and imagination all displace the primary goal of the sexual act for reproduction to that of pleasure. These Dionysian forces are a necessity within our day-to-day life; to occasionally partake in their revelry negates the implosive danger associated with its repression. In a temporary and cathartic release of what the Ancients referred to as the “shadow self” we can properly reign in this expressive, dynamic force and establish equilibrium between both our unbridled passionate and rational selves (15). As Maffesoli writes in *The Shadow of Dionysus*:

A society that does not know how to play upon the *coincidentia oppositorum* exposes itself to the catastrophic explosion of the element that it has denied, and consequently was not able to master. The

productive phantasm, full blown positivism, and undimensionality are the armor that, through its very rigidity, engenders explosion [...] Confronted with the laborious Prometheus, one must show that the noisy Dionysus is also a necessary figure of sociality. Henceforth the question is no longer that of knowing how to master life, but how to spend it and draw pleasure from it (21).

Although the Dionysian force is associated with a temporary societal breakdown, one must also recognize that this temporary reprieve into chaos is not entirely disorganized or undirected as one would expect.

In Maffesoli's vision of the societal breakdown there is an order to the confusion that is, the pursuit of "ambience" (an idea based on the notion of *puissance*—a term used in French which conveys the notion of a collective energy and force inherent within a group of individuals) (1). This ambience, or sense of collective energy transcends political power and refers to the imagination, vitality and spirit found in even the most banal of daily activity and ritual (1). Thus, when released from the binds of our traditional societal structure of stratification and productivity, we are free to redirect our energy and focus. The activities of pleasure and celebration we chose to engage in are what later come to shape our collective societal spirit beyond our political, historical or technological signifiers. While Maffesoli frames his analysis through the orgiastic society the underlying impetus of unproductivity (or rather, the rejection of productivism) and indulgence that characterizes the orgy can be found in the festival. Much like the orgy, the festival allows us to temporarily redirect our energy to the active pursuit of pleasure and entertainment. There is an over-abundance of cultural objects (food, music, literature, cinema and theatre) for our consumption and in that period, festival participants are actively encouraged to overindulge. Temporarily freed of the constraints of our day-to-

day lives, the festival atmosphere, much like the orgy, places revelry, indulgence, pleasure and celebration at the forefront of our focus.

In his book *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* Harvey Cox also emphasizes that the festival (and its accompanying festivity) is a necessity in our lives. According to Cox the purpose of festivity—which he defines as “the capacity for genuine revelry and joyous celebration (21)—is twofold. Much like Maffesoli’s suggestion, it allows man to express and revel in emotions in a manner that is normally repressed or ignored for seemingly more pressing concerns of productivity and progress. Secondly, festival and festivity “links us both to past and to future [...]. Celebration thus helps us affirm dimensions of time we might ordinarily fear, ignore, or deny” (24). According to Cox, increasing secularization and industrialization has led to the decline of a divine presence. Without experiencing this presence, man has lost touch with what Cox describes as the greater reaches beyond our defined temporal horizon of history. At what he calls the “point of intersection” between our defined temporal order and the elusive cosmos, we have abandoned the larger elusive experience tied to the world beyond our immediate scope of logic and comprehension (29). Thus, with the rise of the so-called “historical” religions comes the decline of our paganistic and polytheistic sects (and noticeably, the decline of the pertinence of festival and festivity within our society). Celebration and festivity then work to restore this connection and kept these two previously disparate planes working in proper tandem (47). As Cox states:

Festivity is the way we cool history without fleeing from it. Festivity as both “legitimated excess” and as joy and juxtaposition plays an indispensable role in restoring to man his sense of the larger landscape which history proceeds. It gives him a perspective on history without removing him from the terror and responsibility he bears as history maker (46).



To actively participate in festivity and celebration then allows us as participants to not only temporarily escape the constraints of modern secular society, but to also recognize our place in an organization beyond our immediate scope of comprehension. In surrendering ourselves to celebration we are in essence surrendering over our individual position of control, returning to an earlier sense of order. Much as Maffesoli suggests that we can find an alternative system by giving into the Dionysian order, in engaging in the chaos of unbridled expression, indulgence and celebration that is typical of festivity, we are surrendering ourselves to a pre-historical order which alludes to a divine or spiritual force that has been largely repressed and negated in our modern world.

## 6. CONCLUSION: *365 DAYS/PLAYS* AS FESTIVAL

When speaking of *365* as a festival, we are working with a term that has two separate yet closely related connotations. In labeling Parks' project as a festival we are then referring to *365* as both an artistic distribution system and as an experience which points to a large sense of unbridled joy, celebration, indulgence and oneness. Thus, to determine whether the project is indeed a festival we will be considering it in regards to both of these individual impulses. Firstly, to consider *365* as an alternative distribution system is particularly fitting in light of Metzgar's original vision of the project as a theatrical experiment. Not only had the producer and playwright sought to eradicate the traditional premiere system, but the egalitarian nature of their so-called radical inclusivity also aimed to renegotiate the American theatre system itself by challenging its established hierarchies. As Parks stated in an interview: "We are trying to dispel the thought that the Public Theatre is somehow doing anything more important than anyone else [...] They are one of fifty-two theatres in New York, the same as there are fifty-two theatres in Atlanta and fifty-two in Colorado" (Parks as qtd. by Moore). Kolin elaborates on this in his study: "Promulgating radical inclusiveness, *365* assaults the hegemonies by which theatre is controlled. No wealthy producers or Big Daddy directors determine where and how, and even if, *365* can be staged" (80).

Thus, in the broadest definition of the festival, *365* when considered as an alternative artistic distribution system, can rightly be labeled a festival. Yet, there are also specific logistical and organizational factors that accompany this system. Working from these specific organizational and logistical elements of the festival that Cremona, Hauptfleisch and Shrum offer, we are able to apply this framework to Parks' *365*. In then

analyzing the project as a festival in respect to the practical qualities of the framework, we are able to better determine whether the project functions within or beyond the scope of the festival. The festival can be identified by four salient logistical and organizational factors common within this type of artistic framework:

1. The festival system is based within a defined geographical and temporal frame.
2. Within this space, the festival offers an abundance of cultural objects
3. There is great diversity within these cultural objects
4. There is typically some unifying thematic or structural quality which provides a sense of cohesion to the various objects produced.

In considering *365* as a festival, it is this first criterion that provides the greatest tension in our analysis. The sheer geographical and temporal scope of the project remains unparalleled in relation to previously examined festivals. In the course of a year, Parks' premiere spanned over thirty-five cities across North America, united over eight hundred theatre artists and presumably thousands of spectators (there are still few exact numbers as to how many attended Parks' *365* premiere that year). Given its sheer size and volume, how can one even consider it in comparison to the concentrated geographical and temporal space typically associated with the festival? Furthermore, how does one account for the virtual component of the project? The virtual space and community created and promoted by the *365 Days/365 Plays* message board eschews geographic and temporal borders, allowing those with an internet connection to access the premiere from far-flung corners of the globe weeks, months and even years after the cycle has come to a close. Does this not completely eradicate the first fundamental structure of the festival?

While the size of her project certainly challenges these traditionally established parameters, I wish to suggest that Parks' project does not simply abandon the notion of the geographic and temporal container entirely; rather, the project *extends* the limits of

this criterion. Festivals such as the aforementioned Dominion Drama Festival as well as the Federal Theatre Project's national simultaneous premiere (opening in seventeen theatres across the United States) of *It Can't Happen Here* have already expanded the geographical expanse of the theatrical festival beyond the theatre, street or city to a national level (Cosgrove 241). Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays* has simply *further* expanded such borders to a continental scope. In the spirit of Parks' and Metzger's radical inclusivity which dictated the premiere, national, political and cultural borders were disregarded as theatre artists and spectators across North America and beyond were invited and encouraged to participate. Rather than a series of disparate, individualized far-flung artistic communities, Parks' project has created, as suggested by the title of Randy Gener's interview with the author "one nation, under Suzan-Lori Parks." Parks' geography eradicates the traditional borders that isolate our theatrical communities. In expanding our notion of the borders which constitute "American Theatre" to Parks' far more inclusive definition, we are willing to shift our current national, political and cultural borders and in turn, our notion of this given space must widen with it.

Although this does account for the plays in physical performance, how are we to then handle the virtual space the project occupies? Should the online community be considered separate from the physical realization of the project? Does one need to be physically present to experience the festival? In his analysis of Parks' project (and the most recent publication on *365* to date) John H. Muse writes extensively on the virtual component of the premiere identifying what he describes as the paradoxes between the large-scale reach of this so-called "new media" and the seeming intimacy of the "closet drama" style of plays which at the outset were written without the intention of ever being

performed (or even read) privately. What is pertinent to the issue at hand however are Muse's comments regarding the necessity of the online community to the premiere's eventual staging: "Without the internet, Parks' coordinated but non-hierarchical collaboration among eight hundred theatres would have been unfathomable" (Muse 6). Theatre scholars have yet to point to a festival of such scope simply because we have not had the adequate access to the necessary technology to create a festival of such magnitude. The standard case studies we point to in defining festivals (such as the Dominion Drama Festival or Edinburgh Fringe) were developed well before the introduction of the Internet and the subsequent ease of instant communication this forum provides. However, to treat the 365 online community simply as an organizational tool for organizing live performances (although, it certainly plays a vital role in this component) negates the fertile artistic network and community that the online space generates. The 365 message board, while still posted online, presented opportunity for audience members to engage with one another in questioning, debating, challenging, discussing and celebrating Parks' project. In essence, the online community helps to cement the sense of community and belonging the project sought to instill among its participants. Beyond its logistical function, the virtual space caters to the elusive sense of the festival atmosphere.

In terms of the notion of cultural objects in the festival (specifically, their abundance and diversity) the infamy of Parks' project is based on this exact criterion. Not only does Parks offer her reader an abundance of plays (a full-year's worth) but as previously outlined in the summary of the project, she also presents to her reader a variety of genres, themes and styles. Furthermore, in production, the various artists and

companies involved presented a variety of performance styles and interpretations. In his analysis of the project, Kolin provides a brief glimpse into the vast array of styles including Berkeley's all-female collective (Women's Will), San Antonio's La Colectiva and Los Angeles' Latino Theatre Company which performed the plays with a Hispanic dialect (66), Chicago's Goodman Theatre who performed their week in a single twenty-four hour period in sites (such as hallways, and alleys) across the city and one troupe in Austin that performed *Here Comes the Messenger* on a pedestrian bridge with 365 balloons attached to its rails (68). Even when using the same script, the plays varied widely in production. For example, Halifax's theatre collective The Halifax 6 presented November 3<sup>rd</sup>'s play *Impala* as a site-specific piece in a university parking lot featuring two women in male costumes playing the misogynistic pair of twenty-something loafers Chuck and Gopher while Chicago's Urban Theatre Company relied on a more realist casting yet depended heavily on multi-media.

Despite the wide variety of theatre Parks' project offers, there is a common thread which runs through the plays and performances within the project that provides a sense of unity and cohesion to the cycle. At its most basic level, their shared authorship serves as a primary unifying factor; the recurring themes, images, tropes and unique stylization a testament to their place within Parks' creative canon. While such factors as style or genre are often enough to form a festival upon, I wish to suggest that like many festivals, Parks' project was also created under a specific mandate—that is the previously mentioned radical inclusivity. It is this notion that not only generated the variety within the festival, but which also provided an overarching ideal and mandate to unify the project. While writing the plays, Parks embraced each idea that occurred to her and in her refusal to self-

edit, the cycle depicts scenarios from the seemingly banal (an anonymous couple toasting to their second wedding anniversary in *Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary*) to the fantastical (a dramatic showdown between Napoleon Bonaparte and Wellington, The Iron Duke somewhere in Middle America as in *The History Lesson*).

What connected these disparate pieces, however, was Parks' commitment to creative egalitarianism. Furthermore, without her radical inclusivity, such pieces (such as those in which she publically doubts the project as in *This is Probably Not a Play* and *This is Shit*) would not have likely made it into the cycle and this in turn, would diminish the diversity of the plays. This mandate also extends to the cycle's premiere. Companies and artists were encouraged to participate regardless of their respective artistic mandate, funding, size or production history and thus, companies ranging from the smaller grass roots endeavors of community collectives or university students to the prestigious Public Theatre were able to share in the project's premiere and interpret the plays in whatever manner that they saw fit. In turn, this cornucopia of performance experience, histories and interests belonging to such varied and eclectic companies generated a wide array of styles and interpretations of the texts. In regards to the cultural products produced within the parameters of the festival, Parks' *365 Days/365 Plays* points to a unique relationship between the proposed mandate of the festival (its unifying factor) and the diversity of cultural products that is necessary within a festival. Rather than serving as two distinct criteria, these two factors are directly influenced and shaped by one another in Parks' vision of the festival.

To try and examine the affective component of Parks' project is considerably more difficult than examining its logistic and organizational qualities. While trying to

examine festivity and celebration in any performative context is traditionally difficult, the size and scope of the project poses some particularly unique challenges. Thus, to try and determine the level of festivity associated with *365* is particularly problematic. The sheer geographical and temporal scope of the project coupled with the hundreds in attendance make gathering adequate data that reflect the individual experiences and responses of spectators difficult (even more so with each year that passes with the premiere's completion). Also, with all performances free to the public (and many, presented as site specific performances in libraries, hallways, city sidewalks, parking lots, hospitals, churches and park benches), it is difficult to ascertain who (and even how many) saw Parks' project that year. Furthermore, the official *365* website which was responsible for connecting participants is currently defunct, making it difficult to access archived discussion and responses to the project that were written by artists and audience members.

In the existing publications, interviews and reviews that are currently circulating on the internet or appearing in scholarly publications, we see a gesture towards this elusive sense of collectivity, celebration and oneness that Maffesoli and Cox both attempt to articulate. The notion of the project as a "love tsunami of theatre" is reminiscent of the unbridled passion of Maffesoli's orgiastic view of festivity while C. Denby Swanson's description of the festival as a so-called "yoga play" where the country is "breathing together, observing together, giving attention" (45) points to a sense of collective spirituality. The claims of Washington's Studio Theatre's artistic director Joy Zinoman at opening rehearsals for the cycle's premiere that the actors and audiences "are involved in something" gesture once again towards a larger framework beyond the immediate



performance (Ulaby). Zinoman's elusive comments however point to a larger problem in evoking the terms *festival* and *festivity* to describe and articulate Parks' project. That is, the very nature of festivity and celebration is resistant to quantitative analysis and definition. As Cox writes in his analysis of the festival and festivity:

[Festivity] is something we all enjoy but rarely think about. [...] It is hard to be festive and to think about it at the same time. Celebration demands a kind of unselfconscious participation that prevents our analyzing it while it is happening. If we begin analyzing our experience of festivity during a celebration we stop celebrating—and the object of our examination vanishes. If we try to analyze it at another time, we can do so only through memory or anticipation. If we try to scrutinize someone else's festivity, we can never be sure we know what he is feeling, and we may even dampen his spirit. No one welcomes the guest who dissects the party while it is still in progress, or observes the mourners without himself shedding a tear (21).

Thus, in employing the term festival (and its associated connotations) we must also recognize the limitations that this framework poses. Festival and festivity are a complex terms as they denote a very specific theatrical framework yet at the same time, a far more elusive affective experience. Utilizing such terms with such flexibility and permeability can be advantageous in considering the many diverse components to Parks' project. The festival takes into account the various genres, styles, themes and tropes that appear throughout the cycle and can accommodate the expansive geographical and temporal scope of the project. While the anthropological origins of the term can also help us to understand the larger sociological implications of the project, this sense of the definition does in many ways limit how we can discuss the relative 'success' of the project.

Celebration does not take into account the traditional markers of theatrical success—positive reviews and box office revenue are useless in determining whether an event is festive. Thus, with this term bypassing our traditional quantitative (and even qualitative) methods of investigation, we must recognize that rigorous scholastic analysis

is difficult. In labeling a project such as *365* a festival we are suggesting a different benchmark of success that in essence still remains beyond the scope of our knowledge and inquiry. As theatres are following in Parks' and Metzgar's footsteps of the International pan-optic premiere—the most recent of these being Tectonic Plate's International premiere of *The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later* which opened simultaneously in 150 theatres across fourteen countries, each company connected by an online community similar to the *365* website—scholars must strive to be self-reflexive in their analysis (Laramie Online). With theatres turning to Parks' project as an example of the new theatrical premiere (and festival) we must strive to be articulate and concise in *how* we talk about the project as this dialogue holds epistemological implications for future theatrical premieres: to refer to the project as a festival expands how we define the term festival. This in turn increases the precision and clarity of our scholastic dialogue.

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