Theory, praxis and transformation: the dramatic writing of Suzan-Lori Parks as liberatory critical pedagogy.

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THEORY, PRAXIS AND TRANSFORMATION: THE DRAMATIC WRITING OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS AS LIBERATORY CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

By

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B.A., SUNY Albany, 2010

A Thesis
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A Thesis Approved on

April 18, 2012

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I could not have finished this without you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Chair Dr. Joy Carew for taking me on late in the thesis process. Your diligence and commitment to my success is greatly appreciated. I would also, and especially, like to thank Dr. Lundeana Thomas for her encouraging words and belief in my writing. She will never know how much her words came at the right time. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Tomarra Adams and Dr. Kaila Story for sitting on my thesis committee. Your time contributed to this project is greatly appreciated.
ABSTRACT

THEORY, PRAXIS AND TRANSFORMATION: THE DRAMATIC WRITING OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS AS LIBERATORY CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Tamika Keene

April 18, 2012

This research examined how the dramatic writing of Suzan-Lori Parks functioned as a form of critical pedagogy which may serve to elevate the critical consciousness of African American women. It sought to consider the implications of her dramatic writing in relation to the African American female experience. Specifically, this research explored Parks’s dramatic work *In The Blood* by way of a constructed pedagogical model which utilized Henry A. Giroux’s perspective on critical pedagogy and Lisa M. Anderson’s perspective of a “black feminist aesthetic” (of theatre). This framework also incorporated methods of a literary deconstructive strategy, a black feminist approach and writing techniques of Parks. This research considered how Parks’s work may encourage, or rather incite, women in general, but particularly, African American women to think critically about themselves and their social environment, to move towards social existences which actively oppose hierarchal systems of oppression and repression.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

‘The practice of freedom,’ [is] the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world.¹

— Richard Shaull

Background and Purpose of Study

Suzan-Lori Parks is a contemporary playwright whose dramatic art has the potential to transform. Her dramatic art is celebrated for its unconventional and experimental avant-garde style, a style which constantly pushes against the boundaries of what is acceptable—of what is theatre. In terms of its content, Parks’s dramatic writing deals with representations of blacks in the American historical context. Her work considers questions of identity, history, gender, family, race, memory, and motherhood among other topics. However, despite the complexity and inference these subject matters possibly carry, Parks resists offering textual meanings of her dramatic plays. Thus, this research attempts to do what Parks will not; it seeks to consider the insinuations of her

dramatic writing, what her work can mean beyond the art itself in relation to the black female experience.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine how the dramatic writing of Suzan-Lori Parks functions as a form of pedagogy which could serve to elevate the critical consciousness of African American women. Specifically, this research is exploring Parks's dramatic literature as liberatory critical pedagogy; a style and strategy of instruction, "a science of teaching, requiring diverse strategies, approaches, explorations, experimentation, and risks" that "teaches in a way that liberates, that expands consciousness, that awakens ... to challenge domination at its very core" (hooks, "Talking Back" 50). This research will focus on Parks's play In The Blood, principally, because of its central focus on aspects of the African American female experience. This inquiry is interested in how Parks's work models as a pedagogical framework: how her work may inspire, or rather incite, women in general, but particularly, African American women to think critically about themselves and their social environment, to move towards social existences which actively oppose hierarchal systems of oppression and repression. Furthermore, it seeks to explore how her work may promote a consciousness of resistance, where women learn to become critical of their surroundings—of the external social modalities which shape them. Therefore, this inquiry explores how Parks's work operates as a critically deconstructive instrument, how her work speaks to

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2 This term, also known as conscientização, in Portuguese, "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" 35).

3 In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire defines critical thinking as that "which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and admits no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved" (92).
social reality dynamics. Additionally, it (as previously noted) seeks to know what Parks’s work can mean beyond the art itself—what it can mean beyond the written page. In other words, how it can affect a change in how black women negotiate their realities in relation to the world around them.

The world of today values the distinctions of race, class and gender. A stratified system guided by these elements seems to work best in the American philosophy of individualism and meritocracy. It helps us to understand who is who in the context of a society and a history bound in racism, sexism, classism and other forms of social oppression. Upon designation of individuals’s statuses as members of a specific racial group, they immediately are ascribed, consciously or unconsciously, a measure of significance further shaped by markers of education, gender, age, sex, religion, class and sexual orientation. Nonetheless, for African American women the identity markers of class, race and gender serve as intersecting systems of power. The feminist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir claims “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman ... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch” (184). The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group of the seventies, explained, “[T]he major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives” (40). Thus, it is the socializing processes of our environment which fashion who we are, and this external molding of the self is internalized and then reproduced in a continued cycle of the same. However, to unlearn socially informed acts or performances of behavior requires new and subversive acts—new ways of being and new ways of knowing, regulated by a continued reflexive awareness of oneself in one’s social environment. In other words, to unlearn what one has
learned requires new ways of learning, and new ways of being taught—a liberatory critical pedagogy.

Arguably, art, as the imitation of life possesses the ability to aid us in making such a transformation. Judith Butler explains, “If gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief (Butler 520). Perhaps then, women, who choose to challenge “regulating and iterative practices” (Krasner 476), which codify socially projected performances or acts of femaleness can occupy new social spaces which are constantly reflexive and transcendent. In consequence, the art of theatre, as the mirrored occurrence of life may serve to assist in achieving, indeed, this kind of transformational shift. Subsequently, this work is titled “Theory, Praxis and Transformation: The Dramatic Writing of Suzan-Lori Parks as Liberatory Critical Pedagogy,” where the word ‘Theory’ is representative of Parks’s dramatic ideas, principles and techniques and ‘Praxis’ is representative of the plays themselves—the place where theory and practice meet. ‘Transformation’ is representative of Parks’s art as a socially transformative agent whose latent power may serve in assisting to challenge social domination. This inquiry, therefore, is looking to examine the dramatic art of Suzan-Lori Parks through a critical (socio-) political framework.
Statement of the Problem

Parks’s work is a topic of interest due to the absence of literature which speaks to her art as theatre for the sake of social revolution; current scholarship does not question her dramatic texts as it relates to social transformation and public awareness. Nonetheless, Parks’s plays transcend the written page as a form of politics. This may be explained by the feminist assertion of the personal as political, that indeed all the activities of humans are shaped by their surroundings and that this interaction shapes all of humankind’s activities in readily identifiable ways. Conversely, the literature surrounding Parks’s art has not attempted to show how her work opens up a political space of resistance in which black women can become conscious constructive agents in the real-world community—aware and informed actors of society.

The art of Suzan-Lori Parks embraces a central conception of resistance. Her work challenges Western and African American Theatre normative traditions, as well as it challenges/critiques historical representations of African Americans. Parks brings an unconventional and controversial image of the African American into view; whether male or female, it is important to Parks that she is free to create characters that are not branded to prescribed notions of blackness. In addition, she is not interested in shaping her work to fit a singular dramaturgical aesthetic. Parks’s art transcends historical African American (and Western) idealist traditions of theatre and art and dares to become something different on its own terms. Parks asserts that African American Theatre needs to move beyond the standard black equation of oppression and the white other. She “resists the direct political voice of Black Arts playwrights (LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins) in favor of a more visual and poetic, more personal (and, one might argue,
more feminist) approach to seeing history anew” (Geis 8). Also, she moves beyond the status quo politics of the Harlem Renaissance which sought to showcase their abilities as artists equal to that of their white American contemporaries. Parks “has always resisted the directives of the force she and other experimental African-American artists quietly call the ‘colored police’—artists and critics who insist the community should offer positive role models through its art and ‘keep it real’” (Garrett 26).

As a result, noteworthy elements of Parks’s work are her reasons for which she writes or creates art. In an interview with Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., her personal reasons are expressed:

KJW: You said you don’t write for audiences and you don’t write for yourself. I believe the word you used was ‘figures’—you write for the characters themselves.

SLP: Now I write for God. Let’s just cut to the chase. Now I write for God. That’s all. Not God in the, ‘Oh you go to church and it’s’ the God that your priest with his limited ability to talk about God is allowed to talk about God because he is hampered by the Vatican and stuff”.

[...]

SLP: [laughs]... Not in that kind of God, but the god without limitations. The Source. The ‘That That is All That’.

KJW: ‘I am that I am’.

SLP: Yeah—that one. I write for That One. It’s like being a lightning rod—you’re struck and then you pass the voltage along to the people. (132-3)

In another interview with Shelby Jiggetts, Parks states that she writes “from the gut, or the balls. I don’t have balls, but I know someone who does. That’s tacky I know, but I write from the gut. I think theater should come from there. Especially because it’s life and, you know, you gotta infect people with language—it comes from the gut” (312). Thus, her exercised freedom in artistic expression creates a space of contention, a space
in which her work is actively political, critical and instructive. Decidedly, a major assumption of this research inquiry is that all art has the potential to be political or become politicized; this research is premised upon the idea that the political arena requires an active participation—a conscious recognition and engagement by actors of a given social order. In this understanding, it is the participatory recognition of the reader which makes the artist’s work political; a participatory recognition facilitated through an *epistemological resistance*.

**Research Approach and Method**

Parks’s Red Letter Play *In The Blood* deals with a purposeful representation of the African American female. This image is that of the *welfare mother*—a social and political demoralized image. An application of the purposed pedagogical model may serve to establish subversive perspectives and practices which transcend this negative image. In this research, the pathway of social transformation is propelled by the idea of *resistance*, an act of power and agency in opposition to unfavorable conditions shaped by external parties (or systems). In this study, *resistance* is defined by an active awareness and challenge of externally dictating and normalizing conventions or systems of oppression. In addition, *resistance* creates a space for change at the level of theory and practice; the concept of *resistance* as used in this research is more specifically an *epistemological resistance*, a way of knowing that is reinforced by critical thinking. The term is derived from Norman K. Denzin’s “Emancipatory Discourses and The Ethics and Politics of Interpretation.” However, Denzin, in his work, utilizes the term “epistemologies of resistance.” He defines it as critical pedagogies “grounded in [an] oppositional
consciousness that resists ‘neocolonizing postmodern global formations’” (449). The variance between this project’s terminology and that of Denzin’s is meant to clarify and/or distinguish the way in which this research intends to use the concept.

*Epistemological resistance* is, in semblance with Denzin’s term, an ‘oppositional consciousness that resists’ externally dictating and normalizing conventions. It serves as the underlying outlook which fortifies the pedagogical model for this project.

*Epistemological resistance*, unlike Denzin’s concept, is not itself a critical pedagogy. It is not specifically a strategy or technique; but is instead a fundamental lens through which the social and political world is viewed. Consequently, this research employs critical pedagogy and black feminism foregrounded by an *epistemological resistance*, to construct the model to be used for this study.

This study will construct a critical pedagogical structure utilizing Lisa M. Anderson’s “black feminist aesthetic” (of theater) and Henry A. Giroux’s perspective on critical pedagogy to create a *black feminist theatre pedagogy* which “embod[ies] a critical politics of representation” (Denzin 449). Giroux’s work was chosen as the primary perspective for the critical pedagogy framework of this research due to his prominence in the field, and focus in the area of the political, resistance and education. Giroux argued that the learning environment replicated the societal structure. Thus, the classroom becomes, when used as a tool for radical change, a learning environment for understanding the world. It becomes an environment where a process of resistance and critical thinking is developed, one which works to challenge dictating and oppressive social arrangements. Subsequently, Anderson’s work was chosen to localize this project’s endeavor in the experiences of black women. Giroux argued that critical pedagogy must
be more than “a set of strategies and skills to use in order to teach prescribed subject matter,” but rather must be as a result of “the outcome of particular struggles and is always related to the specificity of particular contexts” (Giroux, “On Critical Pedagogy” 4). Thus, the choice to engage both Anderson and Giroux’s work is a way to combine a black feminist theatrical aesthetic with that of critical pedagogy. It is a way to ground a strategy of instruction in the specific context of black women’s experiences. This experience is characterized through the intersection of race, class and gender oppression, as reflected through the mimesis of theatre. In summary, this research will attempt to construct an instructive framework emblematic of Parks’s play, one grounded in critical pedagogy and black feminism. This research will seek to examine the dramatic work of Suzan-Lori Parks for its socio-political transformational elements, those which may serve in elevating the social awareness of black women. Additionally, this critical model will outline qualitative literary methods of inquiry. This facet of the model constitutes the asserted strategy, approach and techniques of Parks’s dramatic text In The Blood: a deconstructive strategy, black feminist approach and literary techniques of Parks.

Structure of Thesis

Suzan-Lori Parks’s In The Blood4 builds on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s character Hester Prynne from The Scarlet Letter. Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter chronicles the life of a woman who commits adultery in the Puritan society of Boston during the mid-1600s. She is forced to bear the mark of the letter “A” for her act of adultery—an act which condemns her as a social outcast. In Parks’s play the central character is named

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4 A synopsis of the play is provided in the appendix.
Hester La Negrita, who is too, a social outcast: she is an illiterate homeless single mother with five children, each of whom has five different fathers. Hester La Negrita, also, is marked by the letter A. It is the only letter she knows of the English alphabet. However, the mark is also symbolic; it speaks to Hester’s social (and possibly political) illiteracy, her lack of critical knowledge which helps to keep her in her position at the periphery of society. This can be seen in the ways in which the various people and institutions in her life exploit her, unbeknownst to herself. Parks’s play considers the social environment and social influences which shape Hester’s lived experiences. It considers the choices and practiced (or lack of) agency of Hester. Additionally, it looks at the social performative patterns of Hester, her social acts as informed by her race, class and gender. Subsequently, Parks’s play *In The Blood* was chosen as this project’s text of analysis for reasons adequately explained by Harry J. Elam, in his essay “Getting the Spirit,” from *The Fire This Time* anthology,

> A mirror does not simply reflect the social reality, but has the potential to distort or even half-create that reality. Accordingly the plays in this collection challenge conventional mimetic realism. They not only depict our current social conditions but work to inform or even to alter them. (xvi)

Therefore, to consider social identity formation as affected by various social performative acts and institutions is to begin the work of altering that formation. Poststructuralist feminism argues that identities are formed by the outside world, that identity is plural and external, not essential and internal. Accordingly, Judith Butler explains, “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Butler 520). Thus, as explained, the
processes of socially normative identity formation can, indeed, be broken. By embracing new ways of knowing and being, in the case of this research, through the influence of the theatre, black women can reposition themselves as being central to and proactive in their own lived experiences.

In order for this body of work to serve in the accomplishment of the latter interest, the structure of this work, first, reviews the extant literature placing this thesis within the appropriate context which speaks, initially, to theatre for social change and then to feminism and theatre. Also considered is theatre as pedagogy; this will look at specific contemporary examples of the usage of theatre as a pedagogical tool for social transformation. This review seeks to conceive of how Parks’s work fits into these larger discourses, how it adds to and/or expands the current discourse. Second, this research will consider the theoretical aspects and/or arguments of Suzan-Lori Parks. It will regard three of Parks’s essays which outline her dramatic theoretical point of view. Additionally, essays and recent interviews with Parks will be considered which work to inform Parks’s dramatic theory. This chapter is important because it establishes Parks’s epistemological resistance, and outlines the strategy, techniques and the approach utilized in her art. Third, the study transitions to the chapter where the theoretical aspects of the critical pedagogy model is outlined, employing Giroux’s standpoint on critical pedagogy and Anderson’s black feminist theatre perspective. Fourth, in a sub-section of the same chapter, the study drafts the practical aspects of the model—the literary methods. Here will be outlined the literary techniques, the approach, and the strategy employed in the play’s analysis, as well as the aspects of the text to be explored. Next, in chapter V, this research will explore the ways in which Parks’s work functions as a teaching framework.
First, this chapter will examine the literary methods of the model as credible instructive instruments. Second, an analysis of the play will begin where specific elements of the play: content, structure, and character depiction are considered. These elements are important for they are the structures which shape the reality of the text, the lived experience of Hester La Negrita. In other words, they hold within them the representations of Hester’s oppression. The goal is to consider the black female—particularly the welfare mother—in mimesis (or through representation) to explore and critique various phenomena of intersecting oppression and women’s agency, to consider how Parks’s work provokes critical thinking and opens a space for subversive activity. In conclusion, this study considers Parks’s *In The Blood* as a critical pedagogical structure, to assess it in the light of assertions made by scholars such as Joan Wink, Paulo Freire and others. This chapter will also look at the framework constructed for this study: a *black feminist theatre pedagogy*, in order to answer the question does an exploration of the text showcase the theoretical constituents of this research’s pedagogy model. This study will also look at why this work is important; its future implications. Ultimately, the goal is to consider Parks’s work as liberatory critical pedagogy—as it may serve to raise the critical consciousness of black American women.

**Conclusion**

Consequently, the significance of this research, first, lies in its ability to examine the ways in which Suzan-Lori Parks’s dramatic art may serve as a tool for social change, specifically, as it relates to the experiences of black women. Second, this examination investigates the inferences of Parks’s work as it functions on the written page, giving
credibility to dramatic texts not only as performance pieces, but also as literary works. Dramatic texts, as written works, are not complicated by the concept of a director or interpretation of an actor. The relationship between the reader and the text without these added dimensions is intimate and less constrained, and creates the potential for a distinctive dialogue or interaction in which the reader can take on an actively critical role. The reader can become the authority by displacing or decentering the author, and bringing meaning to the text which is relative to who she/he is (e.g. race, gender, class etc.) and her/his respective experiences. For Parks herself explains, “Don’t ask playwrights what their plays mean; rather, tell them what you think and have an exchange of ideas” (“Elements of Style” 497). This study seeks to explore the aforementioned dynamic by applying particular meanings and lenses to Parks’s theatrical text *In The Blood*, through a *black feminist theatre pedagogy* framework.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Should art educate, inform, organize, influence, incite to action, or should it simply be an object of pleasure?5

— Augusto Boal

Parks’s dramatic writing brings varied theatrical discourses to the forefront. Research by scholars and critics work to highlight a range of political aspects of Parks’s dramatic writing. For example, Sharon Brubaker comments on Parks’s focus on history, identity and memory. She states “Parks’s plays deconstruct simultaneously the mythic experience of black America and the history of America” (338-339). Debby Thompson fortifies the previous assertion by declaring that Parks’s work performs “archeologies and genealogies on contemporary racial discourses and identities” (167). Carol Schafer expands this discourse by looking at Parks’s art as it “question[s] representations of [black] women’s bodies as possessions, as objects of desire, and as bloody biological battlefields” (181). However, the latter constitutes a common view of Parks’s dramatic writing. Yet, her work brings additional varied theatrical discourses to the vanguard;

among them are theatre and social change, feminism and theatre, and theatre and pedagogy. It becomes important, consequently, to look historically at what this research references as political theatre— theatre that works to raise awareness around socio-political issues and oppressions and to garner transformation in the public realm. It is vital to provide such a context for it precedes an examination of Parks’s work through a critical frame shaped by feminism, pedagogy and the political. This crucial review of relevant literature spans in a scope that goes beyond, but centers on the black theatre tradition. This choice is grounded in the recognition that Parks’s work takes its cues from a wide range of historical influences.

Bertolt Brecht, Amiri Baraka, and W.E.B Du Bois are scholars and playwrights, who historically, have called upon the theatre to be more than a theatre of pleasure. Theatre, for them, was a means through and by which (in theory and practice) the contentious social issues of their respective times were addressed. This review will consider theoretical ideas of their work, to understand the components by which their work is characterized. The choice to look at scholarship around Brecht’s *epic theatre*, Baraka’s *revolutionary theatre* and Du Bois’s *propaganda theatre*\(^6\) stems from the prominence of their influence and ideas within theatre and theatrical discourses; thus, a consideration of their theoretical work highlights the historical elements of theatre for social change, and shapes the lineage of Parks’s dramatic art.

\(^6\) Unlike Brecht’s *epic theatre* and Baraka’s *revolutionary theatre*, Du Bois’s theory of drama, historically, does not have an established concept to represent his principles of drama. For the purposes of this work, this research will regard Du Bois’s theory of theatre as *propaganda theatre*.  

15
Theatre for Social Change

Brecht popularized the concept of the *epic theatre* in the 1920s, a concept taken from the German director, Edwin Piscator (Krasner 170). *Epic theatre* is characterized by its containment of miniature “epic” scenes, smaller segments of a larger piece, of which the various scenes are self-containing, each scene like a play of its own (Krasner 170). It is a didactic theatre meant to appeal to the audience’s intellect. In Brecht’s essay “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” he defines *epic theatre* as a narrative theatre which “turns the spectator into an observer,” that awakens the observers ability to act, “forces him to make decisions,” where a critical “picture of the world” is brought into view (171-172). Summarily, Brecht’s *epic theatre* is an instructive theatre, one that transforms and awakens, potentially exciting social action while bringing forth a serious depiction of the social world.

In *Brecht and Political Theatre: The Mother on Stage*, Bradley explains “Brecht created a dialectical theatre that would expose the contradictions in social reality and depict society as an ever-changing process” (4). This assertion presages Walter Benjamin’s pronouncement “Epic Theater, then, does not reproduce conditions but, rather reveals them” (4). In turn, David Krasner argued, Brecht “wanted to untangle an incident in order to understand the way the ruling class shrouded and manipulated events for its benefit” (170). Consequently, the *epic theatre* rears social awareness. It becomes a viable platform upon which historical and social experiences can be critiqued, as well as their implications (Bryant-Bertail 211). It appeals to the audience’s sense of reason or capacity to think critically, and encourages public transformation through exposure and what Amiri Baraka calls “widening the consciousness” (Baraka 130).
Amiri Baraka’s (aka LeRoi Jones) revolutionary theatre was a theatre of protest, a theatre separate from American theatrical norms and conventions, one linked solely to black American socio-historical realities (Anadolu-Okur 95). This concept emerged in the 1960s amidst the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. According to Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka represented the most highly developed aspect of the Black Arts Movement (18). Neal referred to Baraka as the movement’s “prime mover and chief designer” (18).

Revolutionary theatre sought to be something different than American theatre. Therefore, it was resistive to the primacy and adherence of traditional Western dramatic forms. Michael W. Kaufman in “The Delicate World of Reprobation: A Note on the Black Revolutionary Theatre” explained, in order to separate from “the values and mores of the ‘racist West,’” black playwrights had to “reject the imposed Western dramatic traditions which in forcefully symbolic ways represent[ed] only legacies of an oppressive, brutalizing, alien culture” (195). Kaufman continued to make clear that only by rejecting Western theatrical norms could the black playwright assert a fundamentally dissimilar theatre to Western theatre (195). Correspondingly, the revolutionary theatre was a theatre of agitation and propaganda. For as commonly quoted, “revolutionary theatre should force change; it should be change” (Baraka 130).

In 1964, Baraka wrote a short, poetically infused, essay titled “The Revolutionary Theatre.” It was this work that proclaimed and established ideas of what black theatre of the time was asserting. He contended the revolutionary theatre must “EXPOSE!” for it “is a theatre of Victims” (130); it must “isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality” (131). He called for it to be “daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind … a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white
guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on” (131). An exposition of Baraka’s revolutionary theatre characterizes the political theatre climate of blacks during the 60s. This theatre emerges from a nationalist point of reference and considers art in opposition to the notion of art for its own sake (Steele 30, 31). The revolutionary theatre is political theatre, written by blacks, in service to black audiences focusing on black lived experiences. This view of African American theatre aligns with Du Bois’s theory of “real Negro theatre” (Du Bois, “Krigwa Players” 165).

In 1926, W.E.B Du Bois wrote two essays: “Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre’: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement” and “Criteria of Negro Art.” These essays embody Du Bois’s theoretical outlook of Negro dramatic art. The four foundational components of Du Bois’s theatre for American Negroes are that plays must be: about us, by us, for us and near us (Du Bois, “Krigwa Players” 165). In other words, black plays must be about the lives of black people, must be written by them, specifically written for them, and accessible—near them—in their neighborhoods. In “The Development of African American Dramatic Theory: W.E.B. Du Bois to August Wilson—Hand to Hand!,” Mikell Pinkney explains that the four elements of Du Bois’s theory are regarded as standards for African American Drama (16). He credits Du Bois as having provided a template for revolutionary Black Theatre, that it was Du Bois who established that black dramatic art could be used as an instrument for radical social change (19).

James V. Hatch contends, in the Foreword to Henry D. Miller’s Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965, that Du Bois wanted dramatic artist to “teach, to prepare black audiences for the radical and political struggles
that lay ahead” (1). Similarly, Krasner explains that Du Bois’s essays display a “view of didactic art” (164). He argues that Du Bois saw propaganda theatre as an opportunity to amend erroneous histories, and to present a different reality than what generally was perceived (164). Du Bois affirmed that art must perform a duty of service, in that it must function as a teaching tool, a political instrument, that it “ever must be” propaganda, in spite of those who believe otherwise (“Criteria for Negro Art” 168). Consequently, Du Bois’s interest was in a “(re)construction of Negro image” (Pinkney 15), a change in how black images were created and understood. Interestingly, feminist theatre looks to achieve a comparable goal, in that it strives to alter or subvert marginalized and repressed images and constructions of women.

Feminism and Theatre

Feminism and theatre, in America, has a relationship which can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Case 5). However, Sue-Ellen Case’s Feminism and Theatre asserts that there is a limited amount of work which serves to support this notion, as it pertains to black women’s theatre. She further explains that while much of African American women’s theatre addresses women’s issues, it rarely, approaches these concerns from a feminist view point (105). Lisa M. Anderson also supports this claim by stating “although feminist theatre scholars have written critical works on plays by black women playwrights, the clear, cogent concept of a black feminist theatre remains elusive” (1). Therefore, a consideration of pertinent scholarship which examines arguments around feminism and theatre, successively allows us to place Parks in the tradition of feminist theatre, but particularly black feminist theatre.
The questions of a feminist aesthetic of theatre and/or what stands as feminist drama are prevalent discourses in the arena of feminism and theatre. Janet Brown, Lisa M. Anderson, and Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler each address the aforementioned concerns in their work. Janet Brown's *Feminist Drama: Definition & Critical Analysis* contends theatre, arguably, is feminist theatre if it is characterized by a fundamental underlying premise of women's sovereignty (1). Brown clearly asserts it is not necessary for the artist (playwright), as in the case of Parks, to claim a politics of feminism for her/his works to be considered feminist, but primarily that the dramatist's works indicate a feminist outlook (1). Importantly, she also notes, a play's underlying premise can be determined through an analysis of strategies: patterns, representational actions, and recurring treatments (5). Lisa M. Anderson's *Black Feminism and Contemporary Drama* purports an analogous claim, for it suggests that a black feminist theatre aesthetic can be identified through an investigation and uncovering of shared themes or elements found in black women's dramatic texts.

Anderson, in *Black Feminism and Contemporary Drama* states that the infrequency of black feminist theatre scholarship does not indicate that black feminist theatre does not exist. Anderson clearly asserts that there is a black feminist theatre. She defines it as "playwrights, directors, performance artists, and scholars who, intentionally or not, blend the core values and aesthetics of black feminism with their art" (1). The early remnants of this legacy extend to the early 1900s with playwrights such as Angelina Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Anderson seeks, through an examination of a range of black women's plays, to disclose an aesthetic of black feminist performance (3). She chooses works from major present-day black female playwrights, among whom is
Suzan-Lori Parks. Additional dramatists are Glenda Dickerson, Pearl Cleage, and Kia Corthron.

In tracing the historical lineage of feminism and African American theatre, Anderson declares Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow was Enuf* as benchmark works in the black feminist theatre tradition, each play premiering on Broadway, also winning and being nominated for prestigious theatrical awards. Anderson regards both Shange and Hansberry as feminist, their works placing women at the center of experience.

Hansberry’s play, prior to the construction of an edited Broadway alternative, plainly expressed this aesthetic, in that the women of the play served as the drama’s plural protagonists (Anderson 7). In Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, an examination of Beneatha and Ruth’s characters, including the mother, articulates the question of women’s agency and centrality of experience. Shange’s *For Colored Girls* is known preeminently as a feminist work; more than a play, specifically a “choreopoem”—her dramatic epic “examined and expressed the varied lives and tribulations of black women” (Anderson 10), dealing with issues of rape, abortion, sexuality and abuse. *Black Feminism and Contemporary Drama* considers additional playwrights (and their dramatic writing): Alice Childress and Adrienne Kennedy who form the connecting links of a black feminist theatrical tradition. Nevertheless, though each of the aforementioned

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7 It is important to note that many of the women considered in Anderson’s *Black Feminism and Contemporary Drama* may not have been self-professed feminists. Anderson considers particular elements of these writers’ works and their contributing legacies to include them in discourses surrounding black feminism and theatre. Anderson herself explains, “Though they may not all have claimed the label ‘feminist,’ I argue here that, like their foremothers in the Renaissance, the politics and aesthetics of their work were undoubtedly black feminist drama” (7).
playwrights’s works may be considered feminist, the style, structure and content of their art varies greatly. These contrasting phenomena bring to the forefront the question of a feminist aesthetic. Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler’s *Theatre and Feminist Aesthetics* addresses this debate.

Laughlin and Schuler’s work is a collection of essays which deals with the concept and contest of a feminist aesthetic. The purpose of this work is to put on display the various discourses and theoretical approaches to feminist theatre, to highlight its problematic nature and to reinforce its variety. Laughlin, in the Introduction, explains, “The essays should therefore be seen as offering conflicting models for addressing the issue of feminist aesthetics, existing in a dynamic and dialogical relationship with one another” (12-13). Diversifying contentions of the debate range from Rita Felski’s assertion of a non-existing feminist aesthetic to Catherine Schuler’s argument of a feminist aesthetic regulated by pluralistic conventions. The compilation of works exemplifies theatre as a social apparatus which informs social reality, specifically, in the context of class, gender and race (Laughlin and Schuler 18). Subsequently, Laughlin asserts that a feminist aesthetic is political, and involves a political lens (19). Ultimately, Laughlin determines that feminist theatre, through representation, can work to refashion public life where theatre becomes an instrument of social transformation. Historically, one way that the theatre has achieved this is through its ability to be used as an educational mechanism.
Theatre and Pedagogy

The *morality play* of the medieval period is an early example of theatre used for the purposes of educating the masses. These allegorical tales were based on biblical principles and presented to a largely illiterate populace. These plays were a way to transmit and deposit knowledge, a way to encourage people to consider/to think about their moral lives and consequently to take favorable actions regarding them. Augusto Boal and Glenda Dickerson are contemporary dramatic artists who have used their works in a similar manner. These artists have labored to educate communities about issues that are pertinent to them, to empower these groups, to enhance their understanding and functioning in the societal spaces they occupy. Dickerson did this for women and women’s issues, while Boal combated issues of illiteracy in Peru. An exploration of these dramatic artists and their work serves as a precedent for this thesis project. This inquiry pulls from the contextual knowledge of pedagogy and theatre, and points to principal relations between drama and pedagogy.

Augusto Boal is the distinguished example of a theatre artist who utilized theatre for its ability to educate. In 1973, Boal, whose work takes its influence from Brecht’s *epic theatre* and Freire’s work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was part of a movement to eliminate illiteracy in Peru. “It [was] estimated that in Peru’s population of 14 million people, between three and four million [were] illiterate or semi-illiterate” (120). *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal’s most notable work, outlines facets of his experimental theatre, merging theoretical dramatic ideas and practical application. One of the major issues faced by Boal and others involved in this project was the various languages and dialects represented in Lima and Chiclayo (the cities where this initiative took place). The leaders
of Operacion Alfabetizacion Integral (the name of the movement which is translated Integral Literacy Operation) understood “that the illiterate [were] not people unable to express themselves: they [were] simply people unable to express themselves in a particular language” (121). Boal explained “By learning a new language, a person acquires a new way of knowing reality and of passing that knowledge on to others” (121). Therefore, Boal expressed that the project sought to employ theatre as language. He articulated the goal was “to show in practice how the theater [could] be placed at the service of the oppressed, so that they [could] express themselves and … by using this new language, they [could] also discover new concepts” (121).

Boal made use of numerous tactics “to change the people—‘spectators,’ into actors, transformers of the dramatic action” (122). Shutzman and Cohen-Cruz explain, “Boal’s vision is embodied in dramatic techniques that activate passive spectators to become spect-actors—engaged participants rehearsing strategies for personal and social change” (1). Imperative to Boal’s theatre is the involvement of the audience in the action of the play. Boal believed that the “theater [was] a weapon, and it [was] the people who should wield it” (122). So, for example an audience member might be invited (or unknowingly compelled) to interject himself or herself into some aspect of a play’s production—an interjection which would have a direct impact on the action of the play. In many ways, the experimental techniques of Boal’s work empowered the theatre audience. Specifically, it engaged them in the activity of constructing and conceptualizing theatre through stages, stages which worked to transform the “spectator” into an active participant. Similarly, Glenda Dickerson’s theatre also sought to involve the audience in the action of the dramatic performance.
Glenda Dickerson was educator, director, playwright, and folklorist. As a playwright, Dickerson is known for having created theatrical pieces rooted in feminisms that were resistant to gendered and racial norms, as well as traditional conventions of the theatre. Dickerson valued oral histories, stating “working with oral history had a resonance for me. I saw how it transformed people when they could sit and witness the dignity of their own lives, how transformative that was for them and for other people in the audience” (ques. 2). According to Freda Scott Giles in “Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu: Combining Feminist Discourse/Pedagogy/Theatre,” Dickerson, “in collaboration with actors who are familiar with her techniques, builds theatre pieces that enter into a dialectic with contemporary history, politics, and feminist thought, as well as with the audience” (132).

Dickerson’s works consist of what she calls miracle plays; these are “described as [a] mythopoetic theatre framed in the reality of black women’s experiences” (Kolin 6). Dickerson’s other (and latest) works are referred to as “performance dialogs,” performances which are “designed to bring underrepresented discourses involving women of color into the academy” (Kolin 6). In these “performance dialogs,” “a combination of historical documents, testimony, myth, and ritual, is transformed through its performance by women of color into a participatory dialectic with the audience on the universality in women’s experience” (Giles 142). In these works, actors become “performance scholars” helping the audience to make sense of the information being presented. Additionally, these performances represent a space for women where meaningful rituals take place. At the end of each performance is a dialogue session between actors and the audience. The purpose of the dialogue is to engage various
women's voices, from the community and the academy, in order to collectively move
towards radical action. Dickerson and Boal, each, have their unique approaches to theatre
as pedagogical structures. However, the unifying medium is the engagement of the
audience where spectators are transformed into active participants, where they are invited
to engage in the political activities of the theatre.

The above exposition seeks to contextualize this research in the historical
elements of political theatre. This chapter, first, follows Brecht, Baraka and Du Bois's
theories of theatre to highlight the relationship between theatre and social awareness and
social change. Second, a look at the question of a feminist theatre aesthetic, as asserted by
Anderson, Schuler, Laughlin and Brown, clarifies what may be considered feminist
theatre. Third, Boal and Dickerson's work attest to the theoretical, practical and
dialogical components of pedagogical theatre. Thus, part of the importance of this inquiry
lies in its potential to expand theatrical discourses; it seeks to take what Parks has done
on the page and examine it in its social implications. This research is looking to build, to
add to the socio-political relevance of Parks's work, to consider her work as political
theatre, as pedagogy, as a tool for social change. In the next chapter, this research
investigates the theoretical ideas of Parks as they constitute an epistemological
resistance.
CHAPTER III

THEORY

PARKS'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL RESISTANCE

As there is no single ‘Black Experience,’ there is no single ‘Black Aesthetic’ and
there is no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted.
As African-Americans we should recognize this insidious essentialism for what it
is: a fucked up trap to reduce us to only one way being. We should endeavor to
show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety.\(^8\)

— Suzan-Lori Parks

Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and
the Politics of Empowerment* affirms that “epistemology constitutes an overarching
theory of knowledge;” that “it investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why
we believe what we believe to be true” (252). Suzan-Lori Parks’s theoretical writing
embodies a *resistance* epistemology in which she consistently scrutinizes the standard
knowledge of theatrical practices and beliefs. This chapter seeks to explore Parks’s
epistemological outlook, to establish a ground upon which her dramatic writings rest.

\(^8\) Suzan-Lori Parks. “An Equation for Black People Onstage.” *The America Play and
This research works to inaugurate Parks's *epistemological resistance*—a way of knowing or understanding which questions and challenges the existing knowledge systems or structures (of theatre). This chapter serves as “a philosophical grounding” for the forthcoming critical framework, and establishes “what kinds of knowledge are possible,” from a black woman’s theatrical point of view (Maynard 10). A review of aspects of Parks’s theoretical writings reveals a common thread of *resistance* and challenge of dramatic normative systems.

*Epistemological resistance*, as earlier stated, is derived from Norman K. Denzin’s “Emancipatory Discourses and The Ethics and Politics of Interpretation.” In Denzin’s work, he considers the inferences of what he calls “a practical, progressive politics of performative inquiry,” where he looks at the ways in which “indigenous epistemologies and theories of decolonization and the postcolonial with critical pedagogy” work together to form an “emancipatory discourse” (435). Denzin’s work centers on theatre performance and considers the radical potential of the theatre of indigenous (e.g. Hawaiian, Native American, Aboriginal etc.) populations. He purports that the “performance-based human disciplines can [indeed] contribute to radical social change” (436). Denzin, in his work, considers the concept of “epistemologies of resistance,” (varying from this research inquiry’s term *epistemological resistance*) where indigenous groups (including African Americans) incorporate “theory, epistemology, methodology, and praxis into strategies of resistance that are unique to each indigenous community” (449). This term “epistemologies of resistance,” according to Denzin, is representative of “forms of critical pedagogy” (449). In this research, as previously noted, the variance in terms serves to distinguish the way in which this research makes use of the derivative concept.
Epistemological resistance is not itself a form of critical pedagogy, but is instead, the fundamental lens or theoretical outlook upon which the critical model for this study is grounded. Epistemological resistance, however, does embody an oppositional stance to normative and dominating oppressive systems, an element common to both Denzin and this project’s terminology.

In “The House that Race Built: Critical Pedagogy, African-American Education, and the Re-Conceptualization of a Critical Race Pedagogy,” by Michael E. Jennings and Marvin Lynn, it is explained that “critical pedagogy as a discourse … relies mainly on three theoretic and analytic strands of thought,” one of which is “Theories of Resistance.” In addition, according to Jennings and Lynn, resistance theory is rooted in the idea “that the oppressed have a degree of agency that allows them to actively resist … structures of domination” (20). Parks’s work not only expresses degrees of agency and resistance, but systematically challenges knowledge systems, “ask[ing] questions … ask[ing] more questions, tak[ing] nothing for granted (“Elements of Style” 495), subverting dominant structures. This examination will regard three of Parks’s essays: “Elements of Style,” “Possession” and “An Equation for Black People Onstage” which outline her dramatic theoretical perspective. Furthermore, this chapter will consider interviews and relevant essays which work to fortify Parks’s dramatic theoretical viewpoint.

Parks’s “Elements of Style” starts by stating “I’m writing this essay for 2 reasons” (494). The first of which is to provide a guide to assist in the analysis of her dramatic text. The second, and important point, is “to form a sort of bulwark against an insidious, tame-looking, schmaltz-laden mode of expression that threatens to cover us all, like Vesuvius, in our sleep” (494). In other words, Parks is not intent on being characterized
by singular forms of expression. Her claim is that she wants to remain “awake”—constantly pushing herself as an artist (495). In “Elements of Style,” this constant push or stirring is exemplified in her definitions of theatrical conceptual ideas. For example, form and content, according to Parks, are inextricably linked: “A playwright, as any other artist, should accept the bald fact that content determines form and form determines content” (495). She explains that traditionally playwrights are told to write two-act dramas with linear plots. Her argument against this notion is that if particular components of a play “lead the writing outside the realm of ‘linear narrative,’ then the play naturally assumes a new shape,” (495); and this idea as it relates to Black Theatre opens up a space for new dramatic territory. Parks’s work is driven by an exploration of form, as opposed to a prescript of form: ‘I don’t explode the form because I find traditional plays ‘boring’—I don’t really. It’s just that those structures never could accommodate the figures which take up residence inside me” (496). Thus, Parks is improvising and revising what is acceptable as theatrical form.

The idea of improvisation is significant, particularly, to Parks’s concept of “rep & rev” or “repetition and revision.” Improvisation is a word commonly connected with the musical genre of Jazz. Thus, there is no surprise that Parks’s improvisational writing technique is modeled after Jazz riffs. Parks asserts “rep & rev” as an essential “element in [her] work” (496). She explains that her choice of technique lies in her desire to create narratives that appear and “sound more like a musical score” (496). Underlying this desire is the questioning of dramatic literary structure: “I’m … asking how the structure of Rep & Rev and the stories inherent in it—a structure which creates a drama of accumulation—can be accommodated under the rubric of Dramatic Literature where,
traditionally, all elements lead the audience toward some single explosive moment” (496). Fundamentally, Parks's ideas seek to move beyond the standing conception of dramatic literature, to refigure, revise and/or improvise upon its meaning. Parks makes a few other points which are central to establishing her “rep & rev” motif. She articulates that “rep & rev” severs the tie to old ways of writing, to “text which cleanly ARCS” (496). One of Parks’s most poignant points is her argument that “repetition and revision” allows for a reshaping of words, a breaking of old patterns, “a refiguring of language that shows us that they [the figures] are experiencing their situation anew” (496). In this understanding of Parks’s conception of “rep & rev,” language is cyclical, as words are repeated “over and over and over and oh-vah” (496). However, within this cyclical pattern, which implies a closed or fixed structure, is the space for revision, for an interruption of the old blueprint or the old way of understanding or being.

The cyclical nature of Parks’s “rep & rev” concept foregrounds her ideas about time and, as she states, “the universe” (497). Parks makes the point that the perception of time, as a linear principle, may indeed be flawed, that our understanding of time may be misguided as our once previous notion that the Earth was flat. She questions: “Could Time be tricky like the world once was—looking flat from our place on it—and through looking at things beyond the world we found it round?” (497). Her idea is that time is circular; thus, the case with which Parks digs into ‘The Great Hole of History’ (498), and is able to intersect figures of our historical past into our present sphere. This idea is representative of Parks’s “digger motif” (Jiggetts 310). In her essay “Possession,” Parks explains the impetus behind this motif:

The history of Literature is in question. And the history of History is in question too. A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating rewriting history through
the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. (4)

Parks tells in an interview how she was discouraged by a Theatre professor from putting “dirt on stage” (Jiggetts 310), from uncovering those bones from the African American historical past which may bring forth or issue up uncomfortable and controversial subject matter. However, Parks, through influential writers such as playwright Adrienne Kennedy and novelist Virginia Wolf, among others, learned, “I can do anything I want” (Jiggetts 310), a notion which drives her work and possesses it at its core.

In Garrett’s essay “The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks,” she notes that Parks’s art “is not a drama of polemics” (25). Parks herself exclaims ‘I don’t write headlines … People say the black experience is X, and usually the X is the sorrows and frustrations and angers of people who have been wronged. That’s all we got to write about. That’s the black experience. Well, that’s very important, but it’s not my thing’ (Garrett 25). Parks, nonetheless, is attentive to questioning literature and history and the ways in which African Americans are represented in both of those canons. Again, however, she is not concerned with the old dramatic equation of black people and the white oppressive other, but is starkly concerned with stories untold, the unfamiliar or unknown ways of understanding, knowing or representing the black lived experience. Parks makes this radically clear in her essay “An Equation for Black People Onstage.”

In the above noted essay, Parks addresses the issue of a singular black dramatic aesthetic. She challenges the common dramatic script (or equation) of black people and the white other; where “[b]lackness in this equation is a people whose lives consist of a
series of reactions and responses to the White ruling class” (19). Parks, according to Andrea Ooto, in “Digging Out of the Pigeonhole: African-American Representation in the Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks,” “creates new ways for African–Americans to express an identity that goes beyond the idea of essential blackness and oppression” (107). Goto further explains that Parks treats identity as a malleable concept, “exposing the layers that compose an African-American identity and challenging her audience to rethink racist assumptions and in its place see the human experience” (108). Goto’s argument is reinforced by Parks’s statement concerning a new black dramatic equation:

\[
\text{BLACK PEOPLE} + x = \text{NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT (NEW TERRITORY)}
\]

Where \( x \) is the realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than the Oppressed by/Obsessed with “Whitey” state; where the White when present is not the oppressor, and where audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit. (“Equation for Black People” 20)

For Parks, blackness is not something simply equivalent to the opposite of whiteness. Her dramatic aesthetic is one which consistently moves beyond “the bulk of relationships Black people are engaged in onstage,” or in other words, beyond the “relationship between the Black and White other” (“Equation for Black People on Stage” 19).

Parks’s resistance to doing things as usual, her consistent and persistent questioning of knowledge systems, and ways of being and doing, exemplifies and is the embodiment of an epistemological resistance. It is the framework which underscores her theoretical and practical ideas for the theatre; it is representative of the beginnings of a process which serves to empower the individual to think critically. Her theoretical dramatic outlook models critical thinking and provides the theory which services her theatrical praxis. As this inquiry moves forward to construct a critical theory model, this
foundational viewpoint of *resistance* becomes vital, in that it serves as the riding pulse which regulates the amalgamation of theoretical and practical ideas.
CHAPTER IV
A BLACK FEMINIST THEATRE PEDAGOGY

A black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers is an absolute necessity.9

— Barbara Smith

In this chapter, this research will construct a black feminist theatre pedagogy framework through which Suzan-Lori Parks’s play In The Blood can be analyzed and understood as a teaching strategy. In the building of this critical model, this study makes use of aspects of Henry Giroux’s perspective on critical pedagogy and Lisa M. Anderson’s perspective of a “black feminist aesthetic.”

“Critical pedagogy,” as a term, was coined by Henry Giroux in 1983 (Jennings and Lynn 17). However, its roots in the area of critical theory can be traced back to The Frankfurt School of the 1930s. The Frankfurt School was a group of German theorists, influenced by Marxist theory, among whom were Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse,


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Theodor Adorno and Erich Fromm, and later Jürgen Habermas. Other voices which are credited with contributing to critical theory are Antonio Gramsci and Michael Foucault. These Frankfurt School theorists “developed a dialectical framework by which to understand the mediations that link the institutions and activities of everyday life with the logic and commanding forces that shape the larger social totality” (Giroux, “Theory and Resistance” 9). The work of these theorists critiqued the social order of dominance, for example that of culture and the political economy. Their work was “an analysis of power relations that ask[ed] questions regarding: what constitutes power; who holds power; and in what ways [is] power utilized to benefit those already in power (Jennings and Lynn 16). These critical theorists rejected the notion of “positivism,”10 as the singular means through which society is critiqued. They argued that social theory and reflection are legitimate ways of analyzing society and its structures. These critical theorists embraced the idea of the “human subject” as integral to understanding historical phenomenon (Giroux, “Pedagogy and Politics of Hope” 36). They asserted that human reflection or critical thinking was “a category of valid knowledge” (Geuss 2). The latter is a conception with which the work of Paulo Freire is in alignment.

Paulo Freire was the Brazilian educator who argued the liberatory nature of education (as opposed to the “Banking Concept” of education); he contended that through dialogue, reflection and action the oppressed could bring about social transformation. It is Freire who serves, for many, as the foundational thrust for the development of critical pedagogy studies. His work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, written in 1970 was integral in

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10 Positivism is the theory which states that truth, knowledge and/or fact is accessible through unbiased or objective, scientific means of observation, experimentation and hypothesis.
the spread of scholarship which linked critical theory and education. Freire believed in the connection between education and freedom, in which education became an emancipatory political and social tool. Freire asserted that through a "change in the way the oppressed perceive[d] the world of oppression" and "through the expulsion of the myths created and developed in the old order" social change could occur, specifically, as led by those who were oppressed ("Pedagogy of the Oppressed" 55). The critical model for this project works to assist in the achievement of the aforementioned claim. This study seeks to enter itself into the larger context of social change initiatives, to contribute further to dialogue and critical reflection which works towards cultivating radical action. The impending outline of the pedagogical framework for this research is integral to carrying out the above objective.

*Constructing a Pedagogy for Parks*

Henry Giroux’s texts *On Critical Pedagogy* and *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition* is where the building of this project’s critical framework begins. This research utilizes several of Giroux’s theoretical assertions as foundational principles for the critical model for this research. The first is Giroux’s notion that critical pedagogy must highlight the relationships between "knowledge, power, desire and experience" as shaped by what he calls "basic conditions of learning" ("On Critical Pedagogy" 4). The second is that critical pedagogy teaches that members of society are "potential democratic agents of individual and social change" ("On Critical Pedagogy" 5). The third is that critical pedagogy teaches resistance towards "commonsense assumptions" ("On Critical Pedagogy" 7). The fourth is "politics is
central to pedagogy” which works to develop critical thinking and social action as it relates to public issues (“On Critical Pedagogy” 6). The fifth is critical pedagogy must be dialectical, in that it must express the contentions or contradictions “between the individual and society” (“Theory and Resistance” 28). The latter notion addresses the “role of the oppressed … in negotiating and responding to structures of domination” (Jennings and Lynn 20). The above principles when summarized, in the context of this study, states: a black feminist theatre pedagogy must emphasize the social dynamics of power as informed by social conditions. It must remind individuals of their personal and social agency. It must teach critical thinking and resistance in reference to socio-political realities; and it must engage the incongruities of the social order. The aforementioned by itself, however does not complete the framework for this project.

Giroux clearly asserts that pedagogy must be specific to the context in which it serves. Thus, an outline on particular aspects of Anderson’s “black feminist aesthetic”—“the elements of the text or performance that invoke a particular history, politics, or philosophy of a ‘community’ (broadly defined)” (Anderson 115)—works to serve this function. First, however, it is crucial that this study give a foundational background of the black feminist tradition which undergirds Anderson’s dramatic theory. Though black feminism can find its earliest antecedents in the era between the late 1800s and early 1900s, with women such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper; prevalent scholarship marks the formal beginnings of black feminism as the late 1960s early 70s, during the second wave of the Feminist Movement. This is where this historical overview will begin.
Black feminism grew out of a reaction to the Second Wave Feminist, Civil Rights and emergent Black Power Movements. In each of these various movements issues and concerns which were relevant specifically to black women were marginalized. The feminist movement primarily addressed the problems and concerns of white middle class women, consequently relegating black women to the periphery of the movement. These white feminists "did not recognize that women of color and poor women had different experiences and, thus, different problems that needed to be addressed by another set of demands" (Nelson 23). While, on the other hand, the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements lead predominantly by black men did not address issues and concerns which were specific to black women. The latter movements were centralized around racial solidarity and the cultivation of black manhood; these often were environments in which the sexist treatment of black women was fostered. Black women began to abandon these movements; Demita Frazier explains, a cofounder of the Combahee River Collective, "[W]e found ourselves in conflict with the lack of feminist analysis and, in many cases, we were left feeling divided against ourselves" (quoted in Breines 1110). As a result, black women began to form their own organizations. In the 70s, various black feminist organizations began to emerge; among them were the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) founded in 1973, and the Combahee River Collective founded in 1974. The more radical and well-known of the two was the Combahee River Collective. It was a feminist organization comprised of mainly lesbian and bisexual women whose politics demanded that black women's liberation be a necessity ("The Combahee Statement" 41). These women fought against race, class, gender and sexuality oppressions. They stood up, explicitly, for the rights of black women in a time where the
agendas of white women and black men were at the forefront of social and political protest. In addition, the 70s saw a rise in literary works from African American women. In 1970, specifically, there was an emergence of works by black women writers: Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Shirley Chisholm, and Toni Morrison (Guy-Sheftall 14). Toni Cade Bambara released the anthology *The Black Woman* and Toni Morrison published *The Bluest Eye*. Bambara’s work “contained a range of poems and essays by radical black women, mostly about the plight of black women ... many responding to the sexism of black nationalism” (Breines 1111-1112). Sheftall explains that “Cade’s anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-imperialist agenda capture[d] the essences of contemporary black feminism” (15). Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* peered into the life of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who suffered from self-hatred, incest, racism and abuse. The black feminism of this period and of today seeks to fight against the injustices perpetuated against black women and girls; this is achieved, partly, through scholarship in Women and Gender Studies, poetry, literature and literary theory, theatre, and film. Examples of the latter are Pearl Cleage’s *Mad at Miles: A Woman’s Guide to Truth*, Paula Giddings’s *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Sex and Race in America*, Barbara Smith’s *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology,* Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, and Angela Davis’s *Women, Race and Class* among countless others (Guy-Sheftall 18). This is the foundation upon which Anderson’s “black feminist aesthetic” is built. Her work considers the oppressions and struggles of women as represented in dramatic literature from a black feminist perspective.

The black feminist perspective of the critical model in construction is grounded in the notion that “[f]eminist thinkers ... must continually emphasize the importance of sex,
race and class [and sexuality] as factors which together determines [sic] the social construction of femaleness” (hooks, “Talking Back” 23). This perspective seeks to encourage, as asserted by Collins, a change in women’s understanding of the unbalanced social dynamics of power, “[b]y embracing a paradigm of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, [and] sexuality … as well as Black women’s individual and collective agency within them” (Collins 273). The black feminist theatre aspects of the critical model for this project, as derived from Anderson’s work, stand to represent the above viewpoints. Subsequently, the black feminist theatre components of this inquiry’s critical model are: The black feminist dramatic text “[d]irectly confronts the racist, sexist images of black women that have been projected by the dominant culture” (116); “[r]eveals the abuse that black women suffer at the hands of men [and other women] of all races” (116); “[d]emonstrates the ways in which institutional racism affects blacks in their dealings with whites and other blacks” (116); “[e]mphasizes the importance of reproductive freedom for black women” (116); “creates ‘imagined histories’ to fill in the gaps in the histories of black women, particularly … black ‘queers’” (116); “[a]ddresses an important audience, whether that audience is black women, black people in general, or everyone” (116). These are six points of Anderson’s ten points of a “black feminist dramatic aesthetic” (115). Anderson explains, lucidly, that it is not necessary for a black feminist dramatic text to embody all points, but only that it “work within [the ten] elements” (115). The points as outlined above, however, fall short in addressing the intersection of class with that of race and gender. It is likely that Anderson has taken for granted that economic status is implicit in some of the above points. However, this project seeks to be clear that social class is as an intersecting medium which serves to
keep black women marginalized within society. Summarily, the six points of the black feminist theatre aspects of this project's critical model state: *a black feminist theatre pedagogy* addresses the racism, classism and sexism of black women's lives. It looks at the abuse that black women suffer while revealing the ways in which racist oppression affects social relations. It speaks to the reproductive rights of black women, and must write their untold stories. *A black feminist theatre pedagogy* is geared toward the most important audiences: women, men—everyone.

This section of chapter IV sets the theoretical or abstract principles in which this project's pedagogical structure is grounded. In addition, it is important to note that the six points chosen as representative of the black feminist aspects for this inquiry's instructive model, as well as the major points derived from Giroux's perspective of critical pedagogy were chosen because of their consistency with surface elements of the dramatic text and the goals of this study. An analysis of the text, however, should show the selected points as legitimate. The following section continues the development of this critical model process. It outlines the practical or literary elements of the framework: the strategy, the approach and techniques.

**Approaching Parks**

This overview will comprise the specific strategic tools of the above critical pedagogy model. It is here that the qualitative literary methods of the critical framework are outlined. This section delineates the components of the text this study seeks to analyze, as well as the literary techniques, approach, and strategy that will be employed to conduct the analysis of the play in question.
This section is a direct extension of the *black feminist theatre pedagogy* framework drafted above, in that the literary methods to be outlined are a direct function of the model. The primary literary devices used in this critical model are a deconstructive strategy, black feminist approach and literary techniques of Parks: “repetition & revision,” a “rest,” and a “spell”. This research will investigate the play’s structure, content, and character depictions. These elements are significant because they are the structures which shape the world (or the reality) of the play. Therefore, it is imperative that this research consider the inferences of these structures—the meanings they hold, the potential ways they avail themselves to new knowledge, their instructional value.

Subsequently, within the latter context, the analysis will also consider the elements of double casting and the play’s dialectical nature. In the following paragraphs, the literary dimensions of the forthcoming play analysis are outlined. The goal is to establish a clear understanding of the three major devices that shape the play’s examination.

The deconstructive strategy utilized in this inquiry finds its roots in Jacques Derrida’s concept of “deconstruction”. The 1960s saw the beginning of an intellectual movement referred to as *poststructuralism* (this is a movement in response to the *structuralism* of the early part of the twentieth century), of which the concept of deconstruction is attached. It denotes a method or strategy particular to that movement. The term, as Derrida originally constructs it, indicates that texts and/or words have multiple meaning. In other words, meaning is plural. Neither text nor words can be reduced to an essential extrapolation. There is an unceasing mode of “difference,” or gap in meaning, between the signifier and the signified (Parker 101). In other words, there are
always more possibilities of meaning. Robert Dale Parker describes the
deconstructionist’s view:

To a deconstructionist, every-thing is multiple, unstable and without unity.
In this view, we cannot tie language down; we cannot tie the signified
 tightly to the signifier. Without the tight bond between the signified and
the signifier ... the signifiers start to float freely, even playfully away from
any particular signifieds [sic]. (89)

The latter definition of deconstruction is considered “classical” or “high deconstruction”
(Parker 101). This inquiry’s use of the term deconstruction is representative of its
contemporary meaning, where ideas, words and text are still considered in their plural
meanings, but too where phenomenon such as culture, history, society and politics shape
or inform those meanings. As Catherine Belsey explains, a deconstructive “aim is to
locate the point of contradiction within the text, the point at which it transgresses the
limits within which it is constructed” (601). A deconstructive strategy, then, does not
accept face value meanings as absolute. This strategy “expos[es] a concept as ideological
or culturally [historically, socially, or politically] constructed rather than as natural or a
simple reflection of reality (Collins 15). Subsequently, a black feminist approach is
guided by a similar outlook.

A black feminist approach, in this study, is an organizing principle, where the
black female is subject and placed at the center of textual analysis. It is a political
approach, one which understands gender as a social and historical construction, one
which understands that “gender [along with race and class] is a phenomenon which helps
to shape our society” (Kenway and Modra 139). It provides a lens which recognizes the
interlinking components of black women’s lives, and shapes the subject of black
womanhood. It considers patriarchy, heteronormativity, white-supremacy and Capitalism
as systems of domination and power. The final methods to be used in this study are the literary techniques of Parks. They are selected dramatic writing elements of Suzan-Lori Parks. These are taken from among those found in her essay “Elements of Style”. They are techniques utilized throughout her theatrical works, but particularly chosen for the significance they hold in relation to the purposes of this research: “Repetition & Revision” is a writing technique which mimics the “Jazz esthetic [sic] in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc.—with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised” (“Elements of Style” 496). A “rest” indicates “a pause, a breather,” a space where transition is made (“Elements of Style” 498). A “spell” is “[a]n elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures’ names with no dialogue” (“Elements of Style” 498). These techniques embody elements which make them potential teaching tools. In the upcoming chapter, these elements are addressed.

This chapter’s outline of a critical pedagogy model will serve as the guiding mechanisms around which Parks’s play will be explored. In the following chapter, the text analysis itself is carried out.
CHAPTER V

PRAXIS

Parks constructs complex interactions between race, sexuality, economics and culture as the marginalized figure of a black homeless woman takes center stage, and perceptions of this ostracized other must undergo reassessment and critique.\(^{11}\)

— Harry J. Elam

This chapter will conduct the text analysis for Parks’s play *In The Blood*. Before beginning the examination, it will be important to explain the ways in which the analysis will unfold, including a further elaboration of the strategy and approach methods to be used in this study: a deconstructive strategy, and a black feminist approach. This research will, first, examine the literary methods of the critical framework for their instructive elements. In other words, this research will articulate the ways in which, a deconstructive strategy, a black feminist approach, and the literary techniques of Parks are likely instructional instruments. This research will then begin the process of the play’s analysis. The central focus of the analysis is Parks’s conception of the *welfare mother*.

Consequently, this research will offer a brief overview of the welfare mother, her image as constituted within American society. This will establish a foundational base of knowledge, as it relates to this socially constructed figure. The analysis will be broken into sections according to the components of form (or structure), content, and character depiction. Again, an examination of these components is important because they hold, as the primary structures of the play, multiple meanings which potentially speak to the social and political reality of African American women. In addition, within the aforementioned context, this research will consider the play’s double casting, and dialectical nature.

The overall purpose of the analysis is to inspect Parks’s dramatic play in its functioning(s) as liberatory critical pedagogy. This research is interested in how Parks’s work encourages critical thinking, how it may assist in a transformational shift in consciousness, where African American women learn to challenge and resist normative and dominating oppressive systems. The pedagogical strategy to help achieve this is that of deconstruction. This method when considered in a black feminist context takes on a particular aesthetic. Subsequently, the deconstructive strategy and the black feminist approach of this research are interdependent components, where the approach regulates the strategy. In the text analysis, this inquiry seeks to investigate the forces at work, those which shape and inform the lived experience of the play’s protagonist, Hester. In other words, this analysis seeks to identify the ways in which Parks’s work is deconstructive. Furthermore, when this analysis considers the deconstructive elements of Parks’s play, it is always considered from a black feminist perspective. This strategy and approach when used together synthesize the major instructional mechanism of a black feminist theatre.
pedagogy. Moreover, these components along with the literary techniques of Parks are instruments which have innate instructional characteristics.

The instructive nature of a deconstructive strategy and a black feminist approach rests in their ability to offer a different or alternative view than that which is typical or majority. It unveils the things which lie in the margins and offers up peripheral perspectives. The method of deconstruction, as explained by Belsey, “tends to locate meaning in areas which traditional criticism has seen as marginal” (601). As a result, these literary methods are directive towards new knowledge. They develop the ability to cultivate new or disregarded knowledge, an ability which empowers the individual to challenge conventional assumptions. The literary techniques of Parks, similarly, are educational tools. Parks’s techniques model Butler’s claim earlier referenced, “then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in … the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (Butler, 520). The “repetition and revision” motif is most demonstrative of the notion of change or the breaking of patterns. In chapter III, this inquiry made note of Parks’s claim that a modification in language signaled that the figures in her play were experiencing a shift in reality, understanding their situation in a new light. Ideally, this technique has the potential to point to the subtle ways in which a shift in thinking can bring about change. The techniques of a “rest” and a “spell” can serve similar functions as well. These practices represent pauses or disruptions in the dialogue of the text, a “rest” being a shorter break and a “spell” being longer. Parks explains that a “spell” is “where the figures experience their pure true simple state” (“Elements of Style” 499). She further makes note that this break can be filled with action as the director dictates, and too marks
a space in which a transition takes place. This technique models subversive action, and creates an alternative space not subject to the dictates of the structure of the play. In this instance, the director, the actor and/or the reader become empowered to interject her/his own meaning into the text. The author is decentered and (in the case of this research) the reader becomes central. Thus, the concluding overview of the literary techniques of Parks, as would-be learning devices, aids in strengthening the upcoming text analysis. It reinforces the idea that Parks’s art is pedagogy—a teaching strategy—which may work to transform the critical consciousness of African American women.

Parks’s experimental form of playwriting expresses her liberties with artistic license allowing her to transcend conventions of the norm. This experimental space, which Parks occupies, subverts the repetitious reproduction of theatrical standards. Theatre created in this way, which focuses on the experiences of black women avails itself as a platform upon which similar types of subversive acts can be mimicked in the real-world community. Parks’s art, as it questions and deconstructs the lived experience of a particular representation of the black woman, allows us to do so. For this project, the representation of the black woman that will be considered is that of the welfare mother.

In 1976, during his run for the Republican presidential nomination, Ronald Reagan perpetuated a stereotypical image of a woman on welfare. Though this representation was an extreme example, it came to stand as the embodiment of many elements which work to characterize women on welfare: lazy, hyper-sexual, irresponsible and social leeches. This woman was the “Welfare Queen.” Reagan asserted this term to describe a supposedly real woman living on the South Side of Chicago who drove a pink Cadillac, and was taking advantage of government programs. This woman was a single
mother with five children who committed fraud by manipulating the system; allegedly, she had ‘80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards ... [while receiving] Medicaid, [and] getting food stamps ... [also while] collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income ... [was purported by Reagan to have been] over $150,000’ (Blake par. 15). Though this story was never corroborated, this image stuck in the minds of many Americans. Therefore, as stated by David Zucchino in *Myth of the Welfare Queen: A Pulitzer Prize Winning Journalist’s Portrait of Women on the Line*, women on welfare (particularly black women) became “a class of women ... despised by mainstream America” (13). What is of further significance, in regards to Reagan’s claim, was the way in which his representation of the woman denoted race. The markers of a pink Cadillac and the South Side of Chicago are cultural indicators which are associated with black people. So though Reagan did not, in fact, name race; he implied it; this point highlights the way in which constructed images hold suggested meanings, as shaped by structures which work to produce the conditions of lived experience. For many Americans, the term *welfare mother* “triggers a specific identity in the American mind. The identity ... draws on citizen’s preexisting beliefs about women who exist at the intersection of marginalized race, class and gender identities” (Hancock 2). Thus, an examination of this woman (as exemplified in Parks’s art) permits us to see her condition beyond the typical or majority point of view.
In The Blood Critical Analysis

Suzan-Lori Parks is part of the continuum of African American women playwrights who have deconstructed and reconstructed the identities and histories of African Americans, particularly those of African American women.\textsuperscript{12}

— Lisa M. Anderson

The play In The Blood reveals the subjective nature of Hester La Negrita and showcases (or exposes) the structures which work to oppress, control and regulate her experience. Interestingly, irony lies in the surname Parks gives to this character. La Negrita in Spanish is a term of endearment for a black female. This starkly contrasts the negative perception of Hester in the play. Parks is subverting Hester’s negative image, as constructed through her race. By taking the negative connotation of black, through a change in language, Parks has refigured blackness in a positive context. This is a major point of instruction in Parks’s art. It teaches transformation and subversion through the use of language, where Parks resists externally imposed social meanings. In contrast, like the citizens of Boal’s Peru and Freire’s Brazil, Hester lacks the currency of literacy, her inability to read and write the dominant language is a deficiency, one which alienates and marks her as other. Hester’s illiteracy perpetuates her marginalized social status and leaves her vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse at the hands of those who, ideally, should be assisting her. However, Hester’s illiteracy spans beyond her ignorance of writing and reading, and also speaks to her social (and arguably political) illiteracy—her

lack of critical knowledge around the systems which work to keep her at the fringes of society. This unawareness leaves her susceptible to ill-treatment and exploitation by her community and those in it; this is evidenced in the opening scene of the play, where Hester is outside under the bridge that is her home. She is with her eldest son Jabber and youngest son Baby. On the wall is written the word 'slut'; it is in the space where she usually practices her letter A—the only letter in the alphabet she knows:

We know who writ it up there. It was them bad boys writing on my home. And in my practice place. Do they write on they own homes? I dont think so. They come under the bridge and write things they dont write nowhere else. A mean ugly word, I'll bet. A word to hurt our feelings. And because we aint lucky we gotta live with it. (12)

Because Hester inhabits a space which is perceived as delinquent, the rules of engagement between society and Hester diverge from the norm. Hester’s spoken language also has the ability to mark her as other. As exemplified in the above passage, Hester’s pronunciation of words and syntax diverges from the standard or dominant spoken word (of American English). She speaks what many would consider to be broken English, a term which implies that something needs to be fixed. This factor, along with that of Hester’s economic status, her circumstance, her gender and her race moves her far from mainstream society. She falls outside of the realm of the accepted social parameters. Thus, the guidelines, which police and protect the lives of those who fit into the dictates of the social order, do not apply to Hester.

Consequently, women, similar to Hester, whose livelihood is dependent upon assistance from the government, often, are monitored around issues which most people would consider personal, and thus not subject to public ridicule. These women are scrutinized harshly around practices deemed as overly sexual or irresponsible, practices,
which according to society, are a burden to their pockets and a detriment to the social morale. In the Prologue to the play, this message is conveyed by words spewed from the collective voices of the people, named by Parks as ALL:

SHE KNOWS SHES A NO COUNT
SHIFTLESS
HOPELESS
BAD NEWS
BURDEN TO SOCIETY
HUSSY
SLUT
PAH!

JUST PLAIN STUPID IF YOU ASK ME AINT NO SMART
WOMAN GOT 5 BASTARDS
AND NOT A PENNY TO HER NAME
SOMETHINGS GOTTA BE DONE TO STOP THIS SORT
OF THING
CAUSE I’LL BE DAMNED IF SHE GONNA LIVE OFF ME. (6-7)

The above are two examples, among many, which represent the ways in which Hester is perceived and treated within her social environment. Interestingly, what the above also shows is a commonality between Hester and the masses referred to as ALL. Parks uses the same vernacular for ALL as she does Hester. Parks’s choice to allow ALL and Hester to share a commonality through language points the reader towards the understanding of all people as potentially broken or flawed. In this understanding, Parks’s work teaches epistemological resistance, in that she chooses to resist the standard outlook which separates people based on what is different. Parks is choosing to look at what is shared, what is the same, and through change and forward progression build communities around what she calls “radical inclusion” (“Academy”). Furthermore, Parks models for us how African American women can resist, and begin to subvert their circumstances, the circumstances which keep them in a position where they ‘gotta live with’ the
mistreatments and misnomers of their society. Parks demonstrates this in her “rep & rev” technique. It is necessary to note, however, that Parks does not use this “rep & rev” motif to liberate the character of Hester. Consequently, this may seem to question the validity of this technique and Parks’s work as instructive instruments. Nonetheless, a supplementary analysis of this detail allows this inquiry to establish how the aforementioned circumstance becomes instructive.

Parks’s use of “rep & rev” can be seen in scenes which call into question women’s subjectivity and agency. For example, in scene seven, Hester runs into Chilli, her first love and the father of her eldest son Jabber. She has not seen him for thirteen years, since before Jabber was born. Below is the conversation that ensues.

**Hester:** I was with the Welfare and I seed you. I called out yr name.

**Chilli:** I didnt hear you. Darn

**Hester:** Yeah.  
(Rest)  
I woulda run after you but—

**Chilli:** But you were weak in the knees. And you couldn’t move a muscle.

**Hester:** Running after you woulda gived you away. And Welfares been after me to know the names of my mens.

**Chilli:** Mens? More than one?

**Hester:** I seed you and I called out yr name but I didn’t run after you.  
(Rest)  
You look good. I mean you always looked good but now you look better.  
(Rest)  
I didnt run after you. I didn’t give you away. (86)

Hester’s revised repetition in the confession of “I seed you,” but “I didn’t run after you” is a point at which one is able to name the issue of Hester’s internalized subjectivity. The use of repetition and revision shows that Hester is considering her situation. She is
hopeful of what Chilli’s presence may mean, and appeals to gain his favor through her actions. In this exchange, on Hester’s behalf, is an irksome piousness. This devotional behavior towards Chilli brings to mind Irigaray’s comment of the woman’s “servile love of the father-husband” (350). Hester’s curious state admonishes the reader to question (or think critically) about what is happening in this scene. Additionally, the “rests” in this dialogue allows the reader to take a break from Hester’s pattern of thought. In those moments, the reader is able to reflect and even interject their opinion into Hester’s thought process. In a later passage, in the same scene, the “rep & rev” motif again models an instructive moment. Chilli has just found out that Hester has four other children besides their son Jabber. In light of this new information, Chilli is reconsidering his marriage proposal:

**Chilli:** Im—. I’m thinking this through. I’m thinking this all the way through. And I think—I think—.
(Rest)
(Rest)
I carried around this picture of you. Sad and lonely with our child on yr hip. Stuggling [sic] to make do. Stuggling against all odds. And Triumphant against everything. Like—hell, like Jesus and Mary. And if they could do it so could my Hester. My dear Hester. Or so I thought.
(Rest)
But I don’t think so. (96)

Though in this moment, Chilli may not be many women’s favorite character, he teaches (or models) the process of thinking critically, of reflection. He also models action as incited by a new awareness. The above passage additionally shows the significance of the “rest” as a moment of transition, in which again, the reader is able to interject or fill in this space with her/his own ideas of what Chilli may be discerning. Thus, “repetition and revision” works to refigure the lives of the figures, in Parks’s play, and through this refiguring a forward progression is achieved, a progression which brings about a different
type of dramatic literature ("Elements of Style" 496). Similarly, women can refigure their experiences, and thus their lives through an interruptive alteration of acts which subvert and resist socially informed performances. Therefore, an analysis of the content, structure and character depictions of the play avails us to critical knowledge which may assist in the aforementioned aim.

The play’s content hinges upon matters that affect the social realities of women, specifically, African American women: reproductive rights, hyper-sexuality, gender roles, and single motherhood among others. This section of the analysis will look at the elements of gender subjectivity/roles, reproductive rights, and single motherhood as shaped by race, class and gender. The issue of hyper-sexuality is considered in later sections of the text analysis. The question of gender roles or gender subjectivity materializes most vividly in Hester’s contact with her first love Chilli. As earlier explained, Chilli has just reemerged into Hester’s life after being absent for thirteen years. He tells her that he has been looking for her and that he wants to get married, nonetheless, not without stipulations:

Chilli: There are some conditions some things we have to agree on. They don’t have anything to do with money. I understand Your situation

[...]

And your child—ok. Our child—ok. These things have to Do with you and me. You would be mine and I would be yrs And all that. But I would still retain my rights to my manhood. You understand.

[...]

Yr kid. We’ll get to him. I would rule the roost. I would call The shots. The whole roost and every single shot. I've proven myself as a success. You've not done that. It only makes
The two sexist ideologies which are most evident in this dialogue are the role of women as subordinate to the men and women as bearing the sole responsibility for children. At this point in the play Chilli does not know that Hester has four other children. When Chilli finds out, the circumstances of Hester’s new engagement instantly switches. Chilli recoils from his marriage proposal and tells Hester that they cannot be together. He takes back his wedding gifts: the ring, veil, and dress and leaves. The image of a single mother with five children, four of which were not his own was a deterrent for Chilli and his dream of marriage; Hester herself understood how this could be a barrier, as exemplified by her reaction to Chilli’s question of who were the other four children. Hester’s response was “the neighbors kids” (95). Though only a momentary denial of her children, it exemplifies the disparaging connotations associated with an unmarried woman with multiple children. The notion of having too many children has had a negative impact on Hester’s life. However, not necessarily due to her condition, but more so, by what the people around her perceive that to mean. The men in Hester’s life, past and present, are as culpable for the situation in which Hester finds herself. Nonetheless, as a woman, it is deemed Hester’s responsibility.

Consequently, The Doctor has decided that Hester should have a hysterectomy, a removal of her ‘womanly parts’ (43). He tells Hester during a check-up, “The Higher Ups are breathing down my back, Hester. They want answers! They want results! Solutions! Solutions! Solutions! That’s what they want” (38). The solutions, yet, are at Hester’s expense. Welfare substantiates The Doctor’s story during their visit: “Yr doctor recommends that you get a hysterectomy. Take out yr womans parts. A spay” (56). This
scenario mimics the historical truth of the sterilization of African American women. While white middle class feminists were fighting for the right to abortion, African American women and women of color were fighting for reproductive freedom, ‘the freedom to have as well as not to have children’ (Nelson 133). Feminist organizations such as the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) argued “that a woman’s income and economic assets determined [their] ability to control [their] reproduction in a capitalist society” (Nelson 135). Subsequently, because women of color are disproportionately low income or working class and because women are the bearers of children the intersections of race, class and gender are elements which work together to repress them. The effects of these conditions can often trickle down and affect the atmosphere of the poor black household. These distresses are evident in exchanges between Hester and her children. The internalized judgments of society become oppressive elements in the home. Though Hester loves her children, the strain of being a single mother, who is homeless and without resources, makes it difficult to continually keep the healthiest attitudes. The same is true for the children who lash out at one another:

**Hester:** Its bedtime. Now!

**Beauty:** Im scared.

**Trouble:** I aint scared. Jabber, you a spook

**Bully:** Yr the spook.

**Trouble:** Yr a bastard.

**Bully:** Yr a bastard.

**Hester:** Yr all Bastards!

*The children burst into tears.*
Hester: Cmmeer. Cmmeer. Mama loves you. She’s just tired is all.
Lemmie hug you. (21)

More exchanges exist similar to this throughout the body of the text. In another instance
Hester is irritated at Jabber. Hester verbally lashes out at him, frustrated by his inability
to prevent himself from wetting the bed.

Jabber: It was a good day but then Bad News and the sea started
rolling and the boat tipped and I fell out an—

Hester: You wet the bed.

Jabber: I fell out the boat.

Hester: You wet the bed.

Jabber: I wet the bed.

Hester: 13 years old still peeing in the bed.

Jabber: It was uh accident.

Hester: What’s wrong with you?

Jabber: Accidents happen.

Hester: Yeah you should know cause yr uh damn accident. Shit.
Take that off. (34)

Thus far in this examination, this research has considered examples of the ways in which
Parks’s play reveals the intersections of domination, as well as its effects on the
oppressed. In looking at the form or structure of the play, we can explore this
phenomenon further.

Suzan-Lori Parks explains “I am an African American Woman—this is the form I
take, my content predicates this form, and this form is inseparable from my content. No
way could I be me otherwise” (Elements of Style, 495). For Parks, structure (or form) and
content are symbiotic. She explains “form is not something that ‘gets in the way of the story’ but is an integral part of the story. This understanding is important to me and my writing. This is to say that as I write along the container dictates what sort of substance will fit it and, at the same time, the substance is dictating the size and shape of the container” (“Elements of Style” 495). This idea similarly parallels the social construction of the self. It shows the cyclical nature of social identity formation, that as the external shapes what is internalized, what is internalized manifests and interacts with the world. This resulting interaction produces an external environment which continues in a cycle of the latter. This phenomenon is in alignment with Harry J. Elam’s claim that “[t]he question of who African Americans are … is never distinct from representation, but always invented or constructed through representation” (xvii). Thus, in exploring the form of this play (as informed by its content), this research will examine it through the intersections of race, gender and class. This inquiry examines how this claim is recognized in the structure of the play. The best way to achieve this, to identify the form-content connection, is through an exploration of various scenes throughout the play. Five of the nine scenes contained within the play entail confessionals from other figures who exploit Hester. In the early parts of each scene, Parks provides a picture of Hester’s experience as a woman; She introduces factors, by way of confession, which shed light upon the ways in which these other figures are culpable in Hester’s predicament. This contrasting phenomenon serves to help create the structure of the play. This dynamic exemplifies the dialectical, as well as the deconstructive nature of Parks’s text, in that it highlights, like Brecht’s epic theatre, the contradictions which exist between the ruling and lower classes, as well as it highlights, as stated by Belsey, the things which normative
discourses treat as marginal. This study will look at three examples of this form-content connection.

The first example is the figure of The Doctor. The Doctor has what he calls a "streetside practice" (44), he prides himself on being a doctor (and a man) of the people. However, as much as he feels that he is a man of compassion, a man who understands, he still feels “there is a gulf” between people like Hester and himself:

Times are tough:
What can we do?
When I see a woman begging on the streets I guess I could
bring her in my house
sit her at my table
make her a member of my family, sure.
But there are hundreds and thousands of them
And my house cant hold them all.
Maybe we should all just take one.
Except they wouldn't really fit with us. (44)

The further irony of his admission is that later, he goes on to explain that he and Hester had sexual intercourse, an experience for him that was “phenomenal” (45), an experience that happened because he simply could not help himself. This confession has elements of class difference and distinctions within it; the gulf that The Doctor is speaking to, definably, is one of class separation. As The Doctor, and those for whom he speaks, continues to entertain ideas of separation based on class difference, Hester’s situation, continuously, will be difficult, adding to the insurmountable barriers which prevent her, as she states, from getting “a leg up” (28).

The next figure culpable in Hester’s marginalization is The Welfare Lady (the government system of welfare represented though this figure). In her confession, she starts by explaining,

I walk the line
Between us and them
Between our kind and their kind.
The balance of the system depends on a well-drawn
boundary line
and all parties respecting that boundary. (61)

The Welfare Lady’s confessional utilizes language that invokes historical discourses
around race and racism. When she states ‘I walk the line,’ Du Bois’s claim of the
problem of the color line for the twentieth century emerges.13 The reference to ‘our kind’
and ‘their kind’ mimics the dialogue of racial divisions. This difference in kind, in spite
of The Welfare Lady herself being a black woman is sufficient in expressing racial ideas
of separation. It also speaks to the divisions which can exist within racial groups, as
influenced by social ideologies and class distinctions. This can be seen in the
dissimilarities that The Welfare Lady notes, between herself and Hester:

It was my first threesome
And it wont happen again.
I should emphasize that
She is a low-class person.
What I mean by that is that we have absolutely nothing in
common.
As her caseworker I realize that maintenance of the system
depends on a well-drawn boundary line
and all parties respecting that boundary.
And I am, after all,
I am a married woman. (62)

In the midst of The Welfare Lady’s delineations concerning her beliefs about the ‘balance
of the system,’ she, in tandem with The Doctor, exploits Hester for sexual purposes. This
action calls into view the ways in which Hester is valued within her society, as well as the
ways in which representation works to perpetuate itself within society. They use Hester
for sexual favors, playing on the notion of black women as hyper-sexualized. This theme

of hyper-sexuality is recurring throughout the play, showing the importance of this issue as it relates to the African American female. Hester’s belief that doing these favors will aid in giving her upward mobility only reinforces her identity as a hyper-sexualized African American woman. It is at this determination, in an analysis of the play, that Parks’s work again creates an opportunity for awareness and critical thinking. It is clear that Hester is complicit in her own oppression. Parks’s repetitive presentation of Hester’s acquiescence to activities which sustain and reinforce the state of her own oppression begs the question—why? Why does Hester continue to allow herself to be subject to conditions which are not in her own best interest? This may be due to Freire’s claim that the “oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of ‘adhesion’ to the oppressor” (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 45). Freire further goes on to explain,

Under these circumstances they [the oppressed] cannot ‘consider’ him [the oppressor] sufficiently clearly to objectivize him—to discover him ‘outside’ themselves. This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed are unaware that they are downtrodden. But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of the oppression. (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 45)

This point becomes vital to explore, for it leads to questions of knowledge, internalized subjectivity, social barriers and agency among other topics.

Another character liable in Hester’s social oppression is Reverend D. He is the father of Hester’s youngest, Baby. However, he chooses to ignore Hester’s plight, while preaching to others how they can come out of theirs:

Let the man on the soapbox tell you how to pick yourself up. Let the man on the soapbox tell you how all yr dreams can come true. Let the man on the soapbox tell you that you dont have to be down and dirty, you dont have to be ripped and renounced, you dont have to be black and blue, your neck dont have to be red, your clothes dont have to be torn, your head dont have to be hanging, you dont
have to hate yourself, you don’t have to hate yr neighbor. You can pull yrself up. (46)

In Reverend D’s following monologue, he goes on to explain how he is an example of someone who has come out from a broken situation. He encourages his congregation that they too can do the same:

[And] I am an example of that. I am a man who has crawled out of the quicksand of despair. I am a man who has pulled himself out of that never ending gutter—and you notice friends that every city and every town has a gutter... You gotta step out of it, friends and I am here to tell you that you can. (47)

After his speech, Hester approaches Reverend D. with her face covered by a picture of Baby. As Hester tells him of her plight, the reverend responds by telling Hester, “if he [meaning the baby’s father which is himself] dont respond ... then hes a good-for-nothing dead-beat, and you report him to the authorities” (48). After Hester’s reveal of herself to the reverend, there is a break marked by a “spell” and a “rest”. The “spell” represented by the alternating repetition of Hester and Reverend D’s names, and immediately followed by the word “rest” in parenthesis. Parks’s use of these two literary techniques, in this space, marks it as a moment of transition, a shift in thinking as well as emotion. As the reader, one is left to consider and/or interpose meaning into this space, to question the reverend’s motives, to practice critical thinking. Reverend D’s treatment of Hester does not mark, easily, the systems of race, class or gender as inherent issues. His character functions more as an institution or system, similar to Capitalism, which promises a reward, but often fails to deliver. This can be seen in the reverend’s continual promise to give Hester money for Baby. At each of Hester’s returns, she is turned away empty handed. At the end of this scene, the text reveals the moment of contrast or contradiction where Reverend D. admits to his culpable behavior:
Suffering is an enormous turn-on.

(Rest)
She had four kids and she came to me asking me what to do.
She had a look in her eye that invites liaisons
eyes that say red spandex.
She had four children fatherless children four fatherless mouths to feed
Fatherless mouths.
Add insult to injury was what I was thinking.
There was a certain animal magnetism between us.
And she threw herself at me ... (78)

A reflection upon the voice of Reverend D. is reminiscent of “The New Colossus”, a
poem which states, ‘Give us your poor, your tired, / your huddled masses longing to
breathe free,’ (Lazarus line 10-11), a declaration associated with American liberty and
equality. However, like America with regards to many Americans, Reverend D. has
failed Hester. He has reneged on his promise; an act which leads to aggressive behavior
on the part of Hester, in that Hester seeks to strike him with a police club that her son
Trouble has stolen. This ultimately leads the reverend to become hostile:

Slut
(Rest)
Don’t ever come back here again! Ever! Y’ll never get nothing from me! Common Slut. Tell on me! Go on! Tell the world! I’ll crush you underfoot. (102)

This engagement between Hester and Reverend D. simulates the historical relationship
between America and blacks. America promised blacks freedom, equality and justice.
However, as a result of America’s persistent reneging of its promise, American blacks
asserted their aggression, rights and agency and struck out at America, only to have
America continue to reject and become hostile towards blacks. This struggle is
emblematic of Hester’s life. Hester as the central character of the play experiences
hardship through her performance as a woman who is both black and poor. Moreover,
these hardships can be seen through Hester’s interactions with other figures in the play.
In this section of analysis, where an examination of character depiction is carried out, the principle idea to be inspected is that of power or power relations. Foucault offers a definition of power which serves the impending analysis very well:

Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shaped … [it] is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations. Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relationships), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely are the internal conditions of these differentiations. Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix. (476)

This classification of power allows us to understand the different types of power relations that exist within Parks’s play. Race, class, and gender have a significant role in this segment of the analysis, for they are the structures in which, as according to Foucault, the “effects of … divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums … occur” (476). They point to the ways in which, for example, shared race is complicated by gender difference, shared gender is complicated by race difference, and shared race and/or gender is complicated by class difference. This can be seen in the ways in which the oppressed characters in the play oppress one another. In this examination, this research will consider the dynamics of power between Hester and Amiga Gringa, and Hester and The Welfare Lady.

This idea of oppression amongst the oppressed is evident in Hester’s relationship with Amiga Gringa. Though throughout the text, it is understood that Hester and Amiga are friends, as implied by the name Amiga which means friend in Spanish; it can also be asserted, again, by way of an understanding of the name Gringa, that they are also foreign to one another (in some respect). Gringa, in Spanish, is a word reserved for foreign women in Latin American countries; it is most often associated with white English
speakers and historically has held a negative connotation. This friend/foreigner dynamic of Hester and Amiga Gringa’s relationship is one managed by the concept of race. Though they are both women and, therefore, subject to patriarchal systems of oppression, however, the difference in their race complicates their shared subjugation. This can be seen in a conversation which takes place between Hester and Amiga Gringa:

**Amiga:** ... Good yr working. Getting some money in yr pocket. Making a good example for the kids. Pulling yrself up by yr bootstraps. Getting with the program. Taking responsibility for yr life.

**Hester:** Me?

**Amiga:** Yr working. Im—looking for work.

**Hester:** I bet I could get you some sewing.

**Amiga:** Oh no. Thats not for me. If I work, Hester, I would want to be paid a living wage. You have agreed to work for less than a living wage. May as well be a slave. Or an animal.

**Hester:** Its a start. She said if I do well—

**Amiga:** If you do well shes gonna let you be her slave for life. Wouldnt catch me doing that. Chump work. No no no. But its a good thing you are. Example to the kids.

**Hester:** I aint no chump.

**Amiga:** Course you aren't. Yr just doing chump work is all.

**Hester:** Its a leg up. Cant start from the top.

**Amiga:** Why not? Plenty of people start from the top. Why not you? (xx)

Amiga Gringa’s character also brings attention to Hester’s ignorance of the system of Capitalism. This factor of Parks’s work avails itself to being an instructive moment. Parks deconstructs the features of Capitalism which work to limit upward mobility:
exploitation, inequity, and division. Amiga Gringa, unlike Hester, is an opportunist. She understands the way Capitalism works and seeks to exploit it and Hester to her benefit:

> Girl on girl action is a very lucrative business.  
> And someones gotta do something for her.  
> Im just trying to help her out.  
> And myself too, ok. They don’t call it Capitalizm for nothing. (71)

Nevertheless, Amiga Gringa’s status as a white female gives her leverage in a society which values what it is that she has to offer. Hester does not have this same advantage, for no one will pay for what Hester potentially can contribute. Not only is Hester’s labor devalued, but her children are as well. Yet, the same does not hold true for Amiga Gringa:

> Im doing well for myself  
> Working my money maker.  
> Do you have any idea how much cash I’ll get for the fruit of my white womb?!  
> Grow it.  
> Birth it.  
> Sell it.  
> And why shoulndnt I?  
> (Rest)  
> Funny how a woman like Hester  
> Driving her life all over the road  
> Most often chooses to walk the straight and narrow. (71)

Though Amiga and Hester share a common oppression, as women, Amiga’s race and her knowledge of that difference works to give her an advantage that Hester does not possess. A similar dynamic can be seen in the relationship between Hester and The Welfare Lady. The Welfare Lady is a particular type of African American woman: middle class, married and respectable, her status as a social worker creates an inequity or division in power between herself and Hester, one which she exploits:

> **Hester:** My lifes my own fault. I know that. But the world dont help, Maam.  
> **Welfare:** The world is not here to help us, Hester. The world is simply
here. We must help ourselves.
(Rest)
I know just the job for you. It doesn’t pay well, but the work is very rewarding. Hard honest work. Unless yr afraid of hard honest work.

Hester: I aint afraid of hard work.

Welfare: Its sewing. You can do it at homes. No work no pay but that’s yr decision.
(Rest)
Heres the fabric. Make sure you don’t get it dirty.

Hester: Can I express myself?

Welfare: … Have it sown by tomorrow morning, yll get a bonus.

Hester takes cloth and notions.

Hester: I don’t think the world likes women much.

Welfare: Don’t be silly.

Hester: I was just thinking.

Welfare: Im a woman too! And a black woman too just like you. Don’t be silly.

Hester Welfare
(Rest)

Hester puts a hand out waiting.

Hester: Yr shoulders. Plus I did yr hair.

Welfare: Is a buck all right?

Hester Welfare

Welfare: Unless yll change a 50

Hester: I could go get change—

Welfare: take the buck, K? And the cloth. And go.
This dialogue between Hester and The Welfare Lady gives a deconstructive view of the oppression that can exist between oppressed groups, as well as it models critical thinking (on behalf of Hester) and potential resistance to such thinking (on behalf of The Welfare Lady). This notion corroborates Foucault’s claim that wherever there is power there is resistance (477), a claim which should hold most true for the oppressed, and corresponds to this project’s idea of epistemological resistance. Furthermore, the above exchange is filled with pedagogical practices: Parks’s use of “spell” and “rest” to denote transitional patterns in thinking, as well as spaces in which the audience is allowed to interject into the thought processes of both The Welfare Lady and Hester.

The latter passage gives witness to Hester’s latent power. There are other scenes in Parks’s work which also speak to Hester’s agency and potential to act. Interesting to consider, however, is a comparison of Hester’s relationships with the women of the play to that of the relationships with the men of the play, pointing to the way gender plays a role in power relations. Hester tells The Welfare Lady “Dont make me hurt you!,” after The Welfare Lady tells her that her children are “5 bastards” (58). Later, in the same scene, Hester calls The Welfare Lady a “Bitch” after she has gone (62). Similarly, Hester asserts her agency with Amiga Gringa as well. After Amiga Gringa has convinced Hester that she should let her sell the fabric that The Welfare Lady gave her to sew, Hester warned her, “Cheat me and I’ll kill you” (71). Parks’s use of the italic in the word “I’ll” professes a different kind of language from Hester. It represents a shift in Hester’s understanding of her own agency and/or power, as represented by the use of the standard or dominant use of language. In a performed scene of this line, an audience member
would be able to recognize that a shift in language also brings about a change in bodily
gesture/posture, a resistive act, an idea which is significant for an understanding of the
corporeal reality of women’s bodies in social spaces. Comparatively, when looking at
Hester’s engagement with the men of the play to that of the women, the dynamic of
power is noticeably dissimilar. In earlier references to Hester’s interaction with Chilli, his
name signifying upon his cold uncompassionate treatment of Hester, this analysis asserts
that Hester’s behavior towards Chilli is of a pious nature, an almost paternal admiration.
This is a claim reinforced by Chilli’s comment: “that’s my girl” (87), after Hester tells
him she did not give him away to The Welfare Lady. A similar reverence is offered to
Reverend D. as well, when Hester tells him, “I been good,” followed by “I haven’t
bothered you” (47). Hester is almost apologizing for seeking to speak with Reverend D.
about their son, an idea which shows that Hester has bought into the notion that the
responsibility for her children is one which is solely hers. Thus, responsibility as a social
enterprise becomes a vital consideration in the analysis of Parks’s play In The Blood, one
highlighted by her use of double casting:

Characters: Chilli/Jabber, her eldest son
Reverend D./Baby, her youngest son
The Welfare Lady/Bully, her oldest daughter
The Doctor/Trouble, her middle son
Amiga Gringa/Beauty, her youngest daughter. (3)

Parks’s use of double casting signifies upon the cyclical nature of society, the way in
which the children of our communities grow up to be adults who become implicit in
systems which are oppressive. This choice by Parks calls into question social
responsibility, society’s accountability to itself, to break the pattern or cycle of
oppression. At the end of Parks’s play Hester kills her son Jabber in an emotional rage.

Hester’s makes a confession about her children:

Never shoulda had him.
Never shoulda had none of em
Never was nothing but a pain to me:
5 Mistakes!
No, don’t say that.

[…]

(Rest)

She places her hand in the pool of Jabbers blood.

No:
I shoulda had a hundred
a hundred
I shoulda had a hundred-thousand

[…]

Bad mannered bad mouthed Bad Bad Bastards!
A whole army full I shoulda!
I shoulda
—nnnnnnnn—
I shoulda (107)

This confession calls out to a society that does not seem to be listening. It calls into question how society is implicit in Hester’s demise. Earlier in the play, Hester explained, “My lifes my own fault. I know that” (59). However, how does society account for its part? In Parks’s play, they don’t. They continue to spew out contempt for Hester and her children:

ALL: LOOK AT HER!
WHO DOES SHE THINK
SHE IS
THE ANIMAL
NO SKILLS
CEPT ONE
CANT READ CANT WRITE
SHE MARRIED?
WHAT DO YOU THINK?
SHE OUGHTA BE MARRIED
SHE AINT MARRIED
THAT’S WHY THINGS ARE BAD LIKE THEY ARE
CAUSE OF
GIRLS LIKE THAT
THAT EVER HAPPEN TO ME YOU WOULDN’T SEE ME
DOING THAT
YOU WOULDN'T SEE THAT HAPPENING TO ME
WHO THE HELL
SHE THINK SHE IS
AND NOW SHES GOT TO PAY FOR IT
HAH! (108-109)

Summary

The above analysis affords one to see the inferences of Parks’s art. The ways in
which her work speaks to structures which shape lived conditions, where race, class, and
gender work together to form and inform the social realities of a particular representation
of the African American female. This is a reality constructed through representation,
through lived experiences, and through responsive acts to the world environment. The
important question, then, is why is this work—this analysis—important. Arguably,
Parks’s work, in the context of this inquiry, has the potential to help women understand
the ways in which their environment moves to shape their experiences inclusive of their
identities—that it assists in pushing black women to think seriously about themselves and
the world in which they live. And by way of understanding and reflection, they become
empowered to change the truth of their existence.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

Transformation of the world implies a dialectic between [the] two actions:
denouncing the process of dehumanization and announcing the dream of a new
society.\textsuperscript{14}

― Paulo Freire

In this chapter, this inquiry will consider Parks’s \textit{In The Blood} as liberatory
critical pedagogy, to assess it in the context of assertions made by critical pedagogy
scholars, as well as the pedagogy framework constructed for this study: \textit{a black feminist}
theatre pedagogy. In the end, the objective is to consider Parks’s work as a teaching
strategy and structure, one which may serve to raise the critical consciousness of African
American women. This chapter will also look at why this work is important; it’s likely
future implications.

Major ideas and concepts of critical pedagogy have been asserted in works by
scholars such as Paulo Freire, Joan Wink and others—a consideration of ideas and
concepts stated by these scholars help in establishing Parks’s work as liberatory critical

pedagogy. Joan Wink, as influenced by Freire, speaks to the concepts of “naming” and “problem posing.” In critical pedagogy, naming the problem refers to “when the nondominant group tells the dominant group exactly what the nondominant group thinks and feels about specific social practices” (53). Or rather, it is when the oppressed articulate the issues which are inherent to their oppression, as shaped by dominating forces. Further, the critical method of problem posing, according to Wink, is a process which calls for “interactive participation and critical inquiry,” on the part of those being taught, as well as those who are teaching. And it is a process which, particularly, seeks to reflect upon the life of the student (Wink 48). When comparing the aforementioned claims with Parks’s work In The Blood, there is a strong correlation. Parks’s work names the problem of black women’s subjectivity. It points to the issues which characterize the black American female experience. It continues this process by posing situations of lived experience which allow the reader to interact or think critically about the information being presented. This technique of problem posing engages the student/reader to generate solutions or modes of action which would work to address and/or subvert the presented condition. It is a process which cultivates critical thinking within the student/reader, as well as it creates circumstance for the development of a dialogue around the staged issue. Subsequently, Freire, in Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage, argues points which are similarly vital to an understanding of critical pedagogy. Two of them are “to know how to teach is to create possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged simply in a game of transferring knowledge,” and “to make possible the conditions in which learners, in their interaction with one another and with their teachers, engage in the experience of assuming
themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias” (49, 45). Parks’s work achieves the former through its employment of a deconstructive strategy. This approach offers up information which is often marginalized. Thus, a consideration of this information brings about dialogue which is contrary or contrasting to what is normally held as mainstream discourse. It unveils peripheral discourses, creating an opportunity for discussion, and the prospective for new knowledge. Furthermore, her work achieves the latter critical pedagogy claim through the same processes, including through a black feminist approach, and the literary techniques of “repetition and revision,” “spell” and “rest.” These techniques call into play analytical thinking, and the perspective and interjected opinion of the student/reader. When considering critical pedagogy from a feminist perspective, Jane Kenway and Helen Modra’s work becomes significant. Their opinion is that by “[i]nvolving students, individually and collectively, in the negotiation of such matters [in what it is they learn and how they learn] leads them to recognize their individual and collective capacity to act upon the world” (143). This claim speaks to women’s agency, the ability to act and wield individual and collective power. Parks’s work, as a teaching structure, engages the reader in such a way that she/he becomes subject, no longer object. As the reader decents the author through critical thinking moments, she/he becomes positioned or empowered to take action by way of inspiration in her/his engaged role. Consequently, this look at statements made by critical pedagogy scholars, in comparison to Parks’s art, contextualizes her work in critical pedagogy discourses showing it as liberatory critical pedagogy. Therefore, this argument, in
succession, gives credence to Parks’s dramatic work as a *black feminist theatre pedagogy*.

In chapter IV, this research outlined the theoretical components of the critical model for this project: the black feminist and critical pedagogy characteristics. At this point, this research will consider the earlier textual analysis in relation to those components. The goal is to answer the question: does an exploration of the text highlight the theoretical constituents of a *black feminist theatre pedagogy*. Therefore, a reminder of what those elements are is important: a *black feminist theatre pedagogy* must emphasize the social dynamics of power as informed by social conditions; remind individuals of their personal and social agency; teach critical thinking and resistance in reference to socio-political realities; and it must engage the incongruities of the social order. Continually, it must address the racism, classism and sexism of black women’s lives; look at the abuse that black women suffer while revealing the ways in which racist oppression affects social relations; speak to the reproductive rights of black women, while telling their untold stories. Finally, it must be geared toward the most important audiences: women, men—everyone.

A textual analysis of Parks’s work has shown the ways in which it addresses all of the preceding claims. Parks’s art emphasizes the issues of power relations, as affected by the social conditions of race, class and gender. Subsequently, her work argues the points of agency, critical thinking and resistance, addressed in various ways throughout the analysis. Specifically, Parks’s work questions Hester’s individual agency, her ability to think critically and resist the outwardly imposing forces which fashion her social existence. In those moments, Parks uses the literary techniques of “rest” and “spell” to
garner critical thinking on behalf of the reader. Successively, the structure of Parks's work exemplifies the incongruities of the social world of the play, showing the inequities and divisions which perpetuate the imbalances of the societal order. She does this through character depiction, by the guilty admissions of the play's antagonist. This analysis, also, consistently shows the ways in which race, class and gender (and sexuality) worked together to propagate Hester's oppression. The play's analysis revealed the abuse Hester suffered at the hands of those around her, those ideally who were meant to aid her. In this inquiry, the text analysis makes bare the peculiar elements of power, the ways in which the oppressed (figures of the play) oppressed one another. Furthermore, at the heart of this analysis is the image/representation of the welfare mother, where this examination exposes the contentious reproductive issues particular to the experiences of black American women. Parks's work is a purposeful depiction of the aforementioned image. Parks tells Hester's story from an uncommon perspective, one which highlights the marginalized aspects of her experience. Lastly, Parks's play, though unconventional, is, arguably, a work meant for anyone who is willing to embrace it—women, men—everyone. Therefore, a consideration of the major theoretical components of this research's black feminist theatre pedagogy framework shows itself emblematic of Parks's play In The Blood, thus answering the question—does an exploration of the text highlight the theoretical constituents of a black feminist theatre pedagogy? In light of the preceding delineation, this study's assertion is yes. The previous outline marks Parks's work as a black feminist (theatre) discourse which serves to deconstruct and subsequently subvert the socio-historical paradigm of (a particular representation of) the black female identity and experience. Thus, in that feminism is concerned with women's liberation, the black
feminist (theatre) approach to Parks's work becomes appropriate in assisting to achieve a liberatory consciousness for black women.

So, what can Parks's work mean beyond the art itself? An exploration of Suzan-Lori Parks's work can be most useful in a setting which is conducive to alternative ways of thinking. Hence, the university as a principal location for the practice of political theatre and social change is a valid option. The university with its facilities, access to resources, inherent network systems and accessibility makes it a great location where women and men can come to engage in programs, performances, classes or workshops which utilize theatre as a practical tool for social change. However, it is important then that departments and university colleges make these types of outreach initiatives critical to their agenda as higher institutions of learning, where the university constantly moves beyond the big business of education and more towards a politic of freedom. The connection between the community and the institution, however, must be mediated by those who value education as a liberatory tool. It requires teachers or leaders who are interested in creating spaces which engage critical thinking and promote social and political awareness, individuals who encourage resistive outlooks in regards to dominant systems.

Consequently, how does Parks's work promote a consciousness of resistance? This can be answered through a consideration of Paulo Freire’s expression of the idea of learning or education as the “process of achieving freedom” (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed” 49). This concept runs contrary to the Banking Concept of education which is “rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them… and be able to memorize and store it” (hooks, “Teaching to Transgress” 14). The idea
therefore is to resist old ways of learning and being, and to embrace new processes which work to liberate the oppressed from dominant social systems and ideologies. The current social mode for the public fashioning of the self parallels the former idea of the Banking Concept of education. Children into adulthood are taught gender normalizing behaviors. For example, girls are told to be feminine, wear dresses and look pretty. Young boys are told “a man doesn’t cry,” to be strong, and to play sports. Through the social and historical separation of people by class and race, our environment teaches us who we are, and that construction is then reinforced through the performances of those practices. Therefore, to utilize educational processes as liberatory entities, as they relate to the African American female, becomes applicable by way of theatre. The theatre comes to be the alternative site of knowledge production. Through mimesis, new ways of knowing, new knowledge and interruptive patterns of critical reflection, theatre becomes a space of learning—learning to be free of externally levied practices. So Parks’s theatre becomes, in theory, instructive.

In succession, bell hooks explains that she was inspired by teachers who “had the courage to transgress those boundaries that would define each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning. Such teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to [the] unique beings [of students], even if the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition” (“Teaching to Transgress” 13). This understanding of the teacher to student relationship has a parallel significance with society and social experience. The teacher position is necessarily each member of society as is the student position, where all (parents, partners, friends, institutions, government, media etc.) have the potential to influence characteristics of the constructed self. In the
different roles individuals occupy as classed, raced and gendered people, it is important that our mutual recognition of one another, regardless of our status is rooted in the marker of our humanity—that we are all ethically accountable in our conduct towards one another.

How, then, can Parks’s work affect a change in how black women view and understand themselves in the world around them? Sharon Brubaker argues that Parks’s *In The Blood* “presents audiences and critics with a more naturalistic meditation on social responsibility and the treatment of the most indigent” (342). Brubaker also goes on to explain that Parks’s work challenges audience members to “reconsider assumptions about themselves as well as others” (342). Thus, the expectation of this work is that by illuminating the ways in which the self is constructed, the patterns and systems that move to perpetuate this construction can be interrupted. The space that is created by these interruptions encompass moments of liberation, in which social actors, particularly African American women, no longer are objects, but subjects. A continued pattern of such interruptions becomes a new pattern of resistance—a logic of resistance—a way of knowing and, ultimately, being which progresses towards a new mode of existence.

Suzan-Lori Parks’s dramatic art embodies this idea both in theory and in praxis: in what she thinks and in what she writes. Furthermore, Parks’s theatre creates a space in which black women can move to understand themselves better. Parks is writing African American voices into history, telling stories that otherwise may not get told and placing African American women at the center of their own experience. As African American women read and view her work, on the page and on the stage, they are reading themselves, connecting to figures unknown yet familiar. Therefore, the theatre creates a
safe space where women can experience and engage in discourse around their bodies, and lived experiences; the aesthetic distance between themselves and the reality of the play establishes a space where women can begin to challenge their social existence.

Thus, what are the implications for Parks’s work in the future? Particularly, an anticipation of this research is that it contributes something new to the idea of political theatre as a tool for social transformation. The hope is that this work provides a foundation upon which to test the black feminist theatre pedagogy model in the real world, particularly in the classroom or community theatre workshops; and, if possible, to expand this type of understanding to other works by African American women—those which may read as feminist. Furthermore, a major goal of this work would be to expand this research in consideration of the performance facets of Parks’s work, in that this research only looks at Parks’s work as a literary art. It would be advantageous to study and compare Parks’s work as performance pedagogy.

Parks’s avant-garde theatrical style makes her dynamic. As she grows in popularity and continues to push the envelope of what is possible in theatre, her art will ever evolve and continue to challenge the ways in which theatre is produced and perceived. Her work is significant not only to questions of the black female experience, but also as it relates to the African American Theatre. Each person, each art, each discipline, is looking for a space that it can carve out for itself in order that it may thrive and continue to exist. And a great part of that thriving or existence comes in its ability to remain relevant, that as we take from the world, we may in turn be able to give back to the world. Thus, the African American Theatre that wants to thrive needs to remain relevant, and to remain relevant it must be political.
In the end, the importance of this inquiry lies in the fact that audiences which engage Parks's art, in reading or performance, would have, through a particular way of understanding and experiencing her work, a greater sense of their own agency as it relates to questions of representation, experience and identity in the African American and greater world community. It speaks to how we perform and understand our individual lives in relation to underlying and/or imposing social structures, as well as our own individual agency. This self-reflective effect is meant, always, to lead to a place of the greater good, for ourselves and society. Thus, this personal "inquiry is always political and moral, grounded in principles of autonomy... and kinship, on a collective community vision" (Denzin 453). In other words, as noted by Parks, it helps us to better understand the workings of the world in which we live ("Possession" 4), and furthermost to understand ourselves.
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APPENDIX

IN THE BLOOD PLAY SYNOPSIS

Suzan-Lori Parks’s play In The Blood is a narrative of a single illiterate homeless mother named Hester La Negrita. The character Hester is adapted from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s protagonist of the Scarlett Letter. In Parks’s work Hester has five illegitimate children. Her status as a single homeless mother has relegated her to the margins of society, complicated by implicit elements of gender, class, and race. Her and her children’s home is under a bridge where the word ‘Slut’ is written across the wall. Since Hester has only gotten as far as the letter “A” in the alphabet, she does not know what the word reads. In spite of her predicament, she is living as best as she can—until she can get a “leg up” as she herself declares. Her children, whom she calls her “5 treasures” are Jabber (the oldest boy), Bully (the oldest girl), Trouble (the middle boy), Beauty (the youngest girl) and Baby (the youngest, who is a boy). Her children each have different fathers. The father of her youngest, Baby, is a preacher named Reverend D. Since Baby has been born, Hester has not troubled Reverend D. for support of any kind. However, things are getting difficult; Hester needs food and other provisions for herself and her children. She attempts to see Reverend D. for help. In the meantime, The Doctor gives Hester a physical exam. Hester tells him of her stomach pains (those which she suffers as a result of not having food to eat), while he informs her that The Welfare Lady
wants her to have a hysterectomy. Subsequently, during The Welfare Lady’s visit, The Doctor’s story is corroborated, all while Hester is exploited for her labor and services. Hester’s friend Amiga Gringa tries to aid Hester by giving her (what seems to Amiga Gringa as sound) advice and offering potential monetary opportunities, however, not without exploiting Hester and their friendship. In spite of the latter, Hester’s world seems to offer up new optimism when Jabber’s father Chilli returns. At Chilli’s return, he proposes marriage to Hester. However, when he finds that Hester has four other children, he calls off the marriage and leaves. This disappointment leaves Hester unstable in her thinking. Consequently, she returns to Reverend D. to speak with him about financial support for their son, Baby. As the conversation unfolds, it is evident that Reverend D. is unwilling to offer Hester the help she requires. Subsequently, in an impassioned rage, Hester attempts to bludgeon Reverend D. with the club her son Trouble stole from a police officer. Reverend D. overpowers Hester and verbally rebukes her, calling her a ‘Slut’. Jabber hears and sees this, deciding that he will finally reveal to his mother the word that had been written on the side of their home—‘Slut’. In Hester’s emotional state, she beats her son Jabber to death for his unsolicited confession. In the end, Hester is jailed as the chorus, referred to by Parks as ALL and the other characters of the play consider Hester’s plight and shame.

Suzan-Lori Parks’s *In The Blood* reveals to us the contradictions of Hester’s life and relationships. We are made aware, by way of confession, from Amiga Gringa, Reverend D., The Doctor, The Welfare Lady and Chilli of the hidden elements of Hester’s oppression. We get to see more than what is evident at face value. We follow
Hester through her navigation of life’s experiences—with her children and the world. We get to see the decisions Hester makes and where those decisions lead.
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