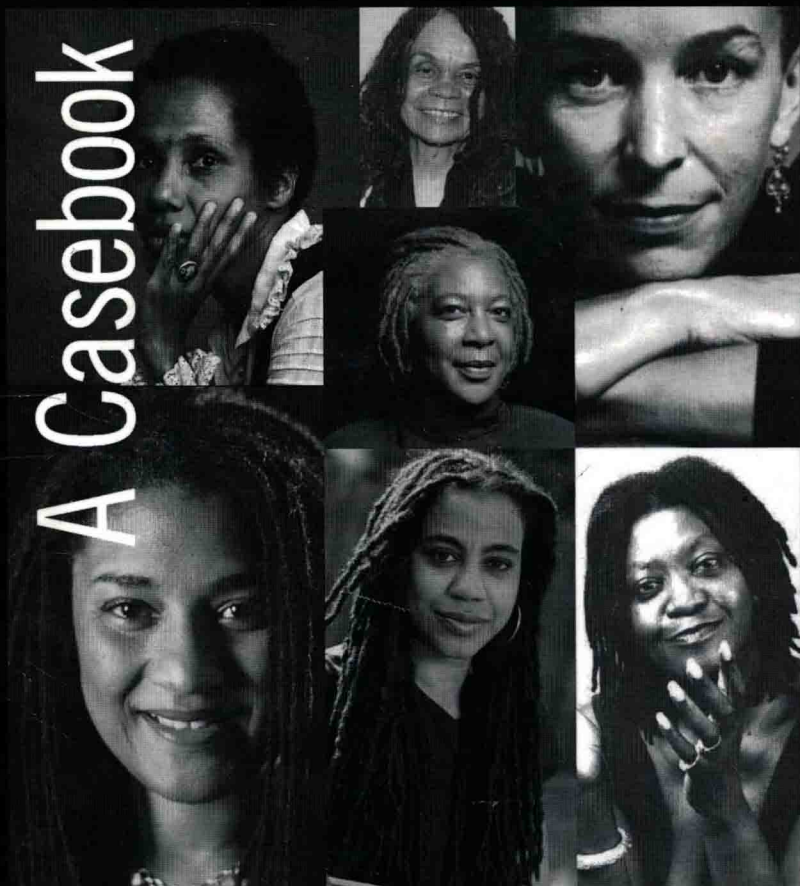


Contemporary African American Women Playwrights

A Casebook



Edited by Philip C. Kolin

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University of Southern Mississippi

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General Editor's note

For over 50 years, African American women playwrights have transformed and reinvented the American theatre. This volume is the first critical study that explores the work of these artists; focusing on ten of the most influential.

Every one of these figures has made a powerful contribution to American theatre. Each essay devoted to one of these playwrights examines themes and techniques as well as studies the contexts and connections between these writers. Key ideas cycling through the works of these playwrights include performing blackness, challenging racial and gender hierarchies, rescuing feminist visions, and creating a new dramatic territory for the production of African American history. Significantly, the volume closes with an original interview with Lynn Nottage, who addresses many of these central concerns of African American women playwrights.

The editor of this important volume is Philip C. Kolin, Professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi. Kolin is a widely known scholar of modern and contemporary American theatre. He has published books on Edward Albee, David Rabe, Adrienne Kennedy and Tennessee Williams. He is regarded as an international authority on the plays of Williams, especially because he edited *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. His more than 150 essays on American playwrights (and Shakespeare) in major journals further attest to his scholarly preeminence.

Kimball King
General Editor

Contributors

Philip C. Kolin, Professor of English, at the University of Southern Mississippi, has published more than 30 books, including *Conversations with Edward Albee*, *Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Undiscovered Country: The Later Plays of Tennessee Williams*, *Othello: New Critical Essays* (Routledge), *Understanding Adrienne Kennedy*, and *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. Kolin has also published more than 150 scholarly articles and notes, most recently a study of the formation of Kennedy's canon for *CLA Journal* and an interview with Billie Allen in the *African American Review*. He is the General Editor for the *Routledge Shakespeare Criticism* series and was the founding coeditor for *Studies in American Drama, 1945–Present*.

Brandi Wilkins Catanese teaches in the Theatre and the African American Studies Departments at the University of California, Berkeley. Her published work includes an essay on George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum*.

Soyica Diggs, who was a Postdoctoral Humanities Fellow at Stanford 2006–2007, is an Assistant Professor of English at Dartmouth. She is currently preparing a book that examines modes of black performance in African American drama and literature through historical, cultural, and psychoanalytic readings.

James Fisher is Chair of the Theatre Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and the author of several books, including *The Theater of Tony Kushner: Living Past Hope* and the editor of *Tony Kushner: New Essays on the Art and Politics of the Plays*. A widely published critic, Fisher is also a director and actor. He was named Indiana Theater Person of the Year in 1997.

Freda Scott Giles is currently Associate Professor of Theatre and African American Studies at the University of Georgia. Her most recent publication is "From *A Raisin in the Sun* to *Venus*: Embodiment of and Re/union with the Lost Home," *New England Theatre Journal* and is at work on a book dealing with African American drama during the

Harlem Renaissance. Giles was a member of the Owen Dodson Lyric Theatre and performed in *Magic* and *Lions*, both under the direction of Glenda Dickerson.

Joan Wylie Hall, who teaches at the University of Mississippi, is the editor of *Conversations with Audre Lorde* and the author of *Shirley Jackson: A Study of the Short Fiction*, in addition to numerous articles on American women writers. She is currently working on a book on local colorist Ruth McEnery Stuart.

David Krasner is the former Director of Undergraduate Theatre at Yale University and is currently Associate Professor and Head of the Acting Program at Emerson College. He has numerous publications and has twice received the Errol Hill Award from the American Society for Theatre Research.

Sandra G. Shannon, Professor of Drama at Howard University and coeditor of *Theatre Topics Journal*, is a leading authority on the works of August Wilson. She has published *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* and *August Wilson's Fences: A Reference Guide*. She has also coedited *August Wilson and Black Aesthetic* and serves as the President of the Black Theatre Network.

Debby Thompson is an Associate Professor of English at Colorado State University. She has published articles on contemporary drama, African American playwrights, and racial identities in a range of journals, including *Theatre Journal*, *African American Review*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*, *MELUS*, and *Mosaic*.

Beth Turner is the founding editor and publisher of *Black Masks*, a journal on Black performing arts. She retired from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts where she taught dramatic literature and history and is currently enrolled in the Ph.D. program in theatre at the University of Georgia, working on a study of the impact of post-traumatic slave syndrome on the work of women playwrights and filmmakers of the African diaspora.

Jacqueline Wood, who teaches at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, has published essays on Sonia Sanchez and Adrienne Kennedy, and has had an interview with Sanchez in *African American Review*. Wood's edition of Sanchez's plays is forthcoming.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to many individuals for their goodwill and assistance as I prepared this volume. Straightaway, I want to express my thanks to the African American women playwrights in whose honor this volume was conceived and developed. For over 50 years their collective canons have reshaped and reinvigorated American and world theatre. I also thank my contributors for their stalwart dedication to this project and for their impressive participation in the evolving body of scholarship on these playwrights.

To Harry Elam and David Krasner go my thanks and profound respect for their steadfast friendship and vast knowledge of African American theatre, past and present, that they generously shared with me and with several of my contributors.

Kimball King, the august General Editor of this Modern Dramatists series, deserves kudos on earth and crowns in heaven. For many decades I have been the beneficiary of Kimball's wide ranging knowledge of American drama, his keen academic advice, and his unstinting kindness. Editing this volume in his Series is, beyond doubt, a blessing. Working with Ben Piggott and Minh Ha Duong, my editors at Taylor and Francis, has also been a sincere pleasure, and I am grateful to them for their commitment to this volume and their help in stitching it together.

At the University of Southern Mississippi I am particularly grateful to Michael Mays, Chair of the Department of English, and Denise von Herrmann, Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, for their sustained and enthusiastic support of my research. They are model administrators and scholars. My thanks also go to my research assistants Benjamin Geddes and Maria Englert for their diligent cooperation throughout this project.

God has blessed me with a loving extending family—my spiritual mother and father Margie and Al Parish, Deacon Ralph and Mary Torrelli, Sister Carmelita Stinn—and with my children Kristin, Eric and Theresa, and my grandchildren Evan Philip and Megan Elise who wonder why Pop is always busy. Finally, my gratitude goes to Nancy Steen for her lifelong devotion to civil rights and for her sustaining friendship and sagacious counsel.

Philip C. Kolin
University of Mississippi
September 2007

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1 Introduction

The struggles and triumphs of staging gender and race in contemporary African American playrights

Philip C. Kolin

Black male playwrights historically have had a commanding voice in American theatre. In the 1930s, Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* (1935) was the longest running play by an African American playwright on Broadway. In 1941, Richard Wright adapted his widely known novel *Native Son* (1941) for the stage. In the 1960s, the protest plays of Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins received resounding critical attention and productions. In 1970, Charles Gordone's *No Place to be Somebody* was the first play by an African American dramatist to receive a Pulitzer, and in 1981 Charles Fuller's *Soldier's Play* also won this prestigious award. The plays of August Wilson (twice a Pulitzer winner), beginning with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), earned him "the stature of premier theatrical mythographer of the African American experience" (Marra 123).

But African American women playwrights are also taking their place as the leaders of the American theatre, creating their own theatrical space, history and mythos. While they are the heirs of Lorraine Hansberry's legacy, perhaps the most widely taught and staged African American woman dramatist, most of the playwrights represented in this collection have radically departed from her realistic techniques and boldly interrogated and amplified her protests against racism and classism. The racial prejudices these playwrights have fought against as African Americans and as women have pyramided in the last third of the twentieth century. Gender politics and gaps have also intensified their searching for or proclaiming their identities. Each playwright in this volume has not been afraid to assert, assault, and to discover the complexities of survival of self in the process. Their politics are aesthetic; their aesthetics are political. As Anna Deavere Smith proclaims:

Yes, my entry into the theatre is political. Largely because of my race and gender. I am political without opening my mouth. My presence is political. The way I negotiate my presence becomes political. If I tried to deny my politicalness, I would be even *more* political.

("Not So Special" 80)

Their works challenge and attempt to change an oppressive ideology, whether it be a white patriarchy, an institutionalized theatre culture, or a dominating African American male surety. Glorifying the battle, Pearl Cleage calls herself one of “the African American Urban Nationalist Feminist Warrior Women” (Alexis Smith 39).

Combating the snares of the status quo, these playwrights also are heavily invested in experimentation, oftentimes rooted in earlier cultural movements (e.g., Harlem Renaissance; Black Arts Movement) as well as dramatic and musical techniques (e.g., minstrelsy, spectacle). The name of playwright Ntozake Shange translates the creative selfhood of these playwrights—“She who brings her own things.” Their plays explore the frontiers of signifying and often take audiences across horrifying dramatic terrains, physical, and psychic. It is hardly coincidental that so many of the playwrights whose work is studied in this collection are responsible for actually creating performance—as dancers, actors, composers, scenographers, directors, producers. They preside over the age of performativity. Their canons range from realistic, well-made plays to daring experimental performance pieces to moving dance montages. The triumph of their creations are reflected in Alice Childress’s subversive well-made plays, Sonia Sanchez’s radical protest dramas, Adrienne Kennedy’s mind-chilling nightmares, Shange’s choreopoems, Glenda Dickerson’s mythopoetic works, Suzan-Lori Parks’s decolonizing history plays, and Anna Deavere Smith’s documentary monologues. These original, revolutionary most times, scripts have taken American theatre into one of its most powerful eras.

The eleven original essays, and one interview, here attempt to chart the evolutionary history of these contemporary black women playwrights and to assess their contributions to American stages. These playwrights represent a widely diverse group of writers whose voices have and will continue to shape American drama. The essays are arranged in roughly chronological sequence, although in a few instances the order has leaped chronology to group or link complementary playwrights and scripts. Thematic continuity seems more crucial than strict chronological order which, because of the overlapping productivity of these dramatists, would have been less effective, e.g., separating Kennedy’s plays from Shange’s which are so indebted to hers.

In the opening essay, David Krasner discusses three significant playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance, or earlier, and their impact on Lorraine Hansberry. The achievements and themes of these four black women writers serve as a bridge to the contemporary dramatists in this collection. The Harlem Renaissance, which trumpeted the cultural affirmation of the arts, emerged from the 1920s and empowered writers, according to Langston Hughes, “to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (694). This is exactly what later generations of black women writers have done. For Krasner, Georgia Douglas Johnson, following the footsteps of Alain Locke, laid the groundwork for folk drama found in the plays of Dickerson, Cleage, or Lynn Nottage. Zora Neale

Hurston's love of performance and theatre, for example, compelled her to write plays with vivid theatricality, thereby establishing a positive view of performance that later playwrights emulated. In Krasner's view, Marita Bonner, one of the most unappreciated playwrights, paved the way for a black avant-garde with her expressionistic dramas, precursors to the works of Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks. Krasner also stresses how these three playwrights anticipated Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) whose landmark play *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) was a paradigm of social realism.

The plays of Alice Childress (1920–2004), the subject of the following essay by Soyica Diggs, also foreshadowed the themes, characters and culture clashes of more contemporary black women playwrights. Although vastly understudied, Childress's canon spans over 40 years with more than a dozen plays, ranging from savage social criticism to a celebration of comic Jackie Mable in *Moms* (1987). Childress was the first African American woman to have her work performed Off Broadway—*Gold Through the Trees* (1952)—and won an Obie for her *Trouble in Mind* (1955). Praised for creating the “well-made play,” as Hansberry was, Childress, according to Diggs, generated the tensions about gender and race that were to be highly productive in more contemporary drama. Beginning with Childress's early play, *Florence* (1949), and analyzing her other work of the civil rights period (1949–1969), Diggs argues that Childress wrote dialectal dialogues that transformed what audiences had known about the performance of blackness, or the changing status of signifying blackness, one of the central debates of the Black Arts Movement (1965–1975). Childress's most influential (and anthologized) plays are *Wedding Band* (1966) and *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), which also focus on the performance, and acceptance, of blackness. The former play, about an interracial couple during World War I, was aptly subtitled, *A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*, thus looking forward to the identity struggles found in Kennedy's *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976) as well as to numerous plays and films, including Lanford Wilson's *Gingham Dog* (1969), Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991), and Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) starring Denzel Washington, on miscegenation. *Wine in the Wilderness* continues Childress's valorization of the strong black woman, in this case a ghettoized street person, Tommy Tomorrow, who is rejected by a smug black middle-class that finally learns to appreciate her honest earthiness and natural beauty.

Though more widely known as a highly prolific black revolutionary poet, Sonia Sanchez (1934–) as a resistance dramatist is the subject of Jacqueline Wood's essay. Wood emphasizes Sanchez's unique position as the only female dramatic voice within the cadre of black militant playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s, the period of the Black Arts Movement with which she was closely associated. Sanchez was also affiliated with the Nation of Islam, even writing a children's play, *Malcolm Man Don't Live Here No Mo* (1972),

on the death of Malcolm X. In acknowledging Sanchez's understudied dramatic works, Wood examines her theory of poetic voice as it articulates her political vision of theatre, its value as weapon and revelation. Exploring four of Sanchez's published plays as well as one of her unpublished scripts (*I'm Black When I'm Singing, I'm Blue When I Ain't* 1982), Wood identifies the central themes of Sanchez's plays, particularly her uniquely self reflexive interrogation of the black militant community and her efforts to privilege the issues and struggles of black women searching for their identity, most powerfully revealed in the monologue *Sister Son/ji* (1969) whose words and clothes symbolize her conflicts.

The next two essays concentrate on playwrights who have dominated the black avant-garde in the American theatre—Adrienne Kennedy (1931–) and Ntozake Shange (1948–). My study of Kennedy stresses that for over 40 years she has been writing shocking, surrealistic plays that have radically departed from realistic/naturalistic conventions. Her plays are nightmares about a chaotic world of shifting locations and selves. While not denying that Kennedy maps the landscape of the unconscious, I suggest a new way of reading her plays as cultural artifacts reflecting the tumultuous times during which they were written—especially the 1960s. Contextually, through her black and mulatta characters we enter a world of civil rights atrocities and legislation that often failed to contain such horrors. In *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962), Sarah is haunted from the opening tableau until her tragic death by the spectre of the lynching rope that tropes many racial prejudices, historical and contemporary. In *Rat's Mass* (1966), Kennedy analogizes white supremacists of the 1960s to Nazis, underscoring hate crimes against black children and the heinous process of racial flagging. The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham in 1963 offers a further historical context in which to interpret the stage horrors and bloody imagery in Kennedy's play. Seen in historical perspective, *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1964) also reflects the racist opposition to desegregation, by metamorphosing the schoolroom into a torture chamber of shame. But Kennedy's political message is not limited to the 1960s; it can be traced across the trajectory of her canon to include racial profiling, or highway apartheid, as in *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* (1996).

In the following essay, James Fisher argues that among black women dramatists Shange holds a unique position as a creator of experimental works merging theatrical and poetic traditions with music and dance, an amalgam that played a major role in exploring black identity in the American theatre. Yet Fisher claims that Shange's signature "choreopoem," *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), was inspired by such diverse sources as the writers and performers of the Harlem Renaissance, Hansberry's social dramas, and, of course, Kennedy's surrealistic nightmares. As Fisher points out, Shange can boast of a career-long examination of the emotionally painful transition from adolescence to womanhood, a preoccupation which has also set her apart

from her contemporaries. Acclaiming Shange's exploration of identity, Anna Deavere Smith begins *Fires in the Mirror* by interviewing Shange who proclaims: "I am part of my surroundings/ ... / and what's inside our identity/ is everything that's ever happened to us." Fisher concludes that Shange is wary of success in the mainstream commercial theatre and prefers to experiment with small ensemble casts in performances that reject the spectacle and linear dramatic structure of traditional theatre while emphasizing the emotional experiences of the young women whom she has typically depicted.

Like Sanchez, Atlanta-based Pearl Cleage is a poet and an activist, championing strong and creative black women. In fact, all except two of Cleage's widely produced plays have been commissioned either by the Women's Project in conjunction with the Southeast Playwrights Project of Atlanta or by Atlanta's Alliance Theatre. In studying Cleage's plays beginning in 1983, Beth Turner sees Cleage as one of the foremost African American dramatic voices of contemporary American theatre in large part because of her portraits of valiant women put in a position of having to defend themselves. In Cleage's articulation of feminist opposition to the interlocking oppressions of sexism, racism, and classism, Turner finds that her work also resonates with the spirit of both Alice Childress and Ntozake Shange. Focusing in detail on one of Cleage's most well known plays, produced by both prominent Black and white theatres, Turner carefully explicates *Flyin' West* (1992) with its four nineteenth-century African American women who settled in the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas. Turner also closely reads Cleage's *Bourbon at the Border* (1997) and *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1995), set in Harlem in the 1930s, which was selected as the official theatrical presentation of the USA at the 1996 Olympic Festival of the Arts in Atlanta.

Turning to Aishah Rahman (1936–), Brandi Wilkins Cantanese explores the ideas and dramatic techniques of a writer who has been an enduring and prolific presence in contemporary African American theatre as both an author and educator/mentor to younger generations. Rahman's work, according to Cantanese, has helped to shape the way we understand African American woman and culture in general. Her essay conducts an overview of Rahman's published, full length works, concentrating on such recurrent themes as the use of a jazz aesthetic, her recourse to intertextuality, her repeated staging of narratives that resurrect black cultural icons, her explorations of interracial and intraracial gender politics, and her interest in African-based spiritual practices. Exploring these themes, Cantanese insists that Rahman centers African American aesthetics and values rather than allowing them to remain on the cultural margins. Accordingly, Rahman's decision to work outside of the aesthetic tradition of dramatic realism allows her to depict aspects of African American life that defy reductive stereotypes found elsewhere in the American theatre. Rahman is an important link to other African American dramatists who engage the same issues and travel the same dramatic landscapes, such as August Wilson, Glenda Dickerson, Suzan-Lori Parks, George C. Wolfe, and Anna Deavere Smith.

Perhaps Rahman's closest contemporary spirit might be Glenda Dickerson who, like her, often uses a realistic situation as a springboard into a symbolic/mythic world. Freda Scott Giles points out in her essay on Dickerson that she has conceived, constructed, and mounted well over a dozen performance works. She has directed more than 50 plays as well. According to Giles, Dickerson's works enter into a dialectic with contemporary history, politics, and feminist thought. Dickerson has placed these works into two general categories—"miracle plays" and "performance dialogs." Dickerson's "miracle plays" may be described as a mythopoetic theatre framed in the reality of black women's experiences while the "performance dialogs" are designed to bring underrepresented discourses involving women of color into the academy. Giles stresses that Dickerson has created a theatrical language that reflects her feminist, theatrical, and teaching philosophies. Influenced by poet and playwright Owen Dodson as well as by Georgia Douglas Johnson, Eleanor Traylor, and Ruby Dee, Dickerson continues the legacy of a highly poetic black theatre. Though she has often been compared with Shange and Anna Deavere Smith, Dickerson's plays are uniquely hers, documentary testimonies by women combined with music, poetry, and movement. Giles shows how Dickerson has created a theatrical canon far less abstract and deconstructive than either Kennedy's or Parks's.

Anna Deavere Smith, whose plays Joan Wylie Hall assesses, occupies a crucial place as a contemporary performance artist. Like Shange or Cleage, she is an actress-playwright but her trademark is the solo performance of her own work. Like fellow dramatists Adrienne Kennedy, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, or Dickerson, Smith examines African American identity in a national context, but her works are neither impressionistic nor do they adhere to the formula for the well-made realistic play. Instead, Smith writes raw documentary scripts about American cities in crisis. For her Obie award-winning *Fires in the Mirror* (1993) and *Twilight in Los Angeles 1992* (1993) she created a montage of conflicting monologues from interviews with hundreds of individuals—gang members, rabbis, activists, police officers, truck drivers, teenage girls, etc. Playing more than 25 roles in *Fires*, for example, Smith (re)presented African American, Hasidic, Hispanic, and Anglo characters, male and female, young and old. Performing this widely diverse cast of characters, Smith challenged audiences to follow her lead in bridging differences. As she claimed, "gender, race, space, and acting" lead to the "travel of self to the other." Applauding Smith, Hall emphasizes that her theatre goes far beyond the categories of white and black and reminds us that *Fires* and *Twilight* are installments in Smith's larger theatrical project, the performance series *On the Road: A Search for American Character*. The greatest test of Smith's art, though, came with *House Arrest: A Search for American Characters in and Around the White House* (2002), a play that pushed the documentary form to its limits, according to many critics. In a 1993 speech before the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Smith articulated her poetics underlying her plays: "What I am proposing is

creating theatre that juxtaposes worlds that are far apart in order to create an aesthetic contrast out of a politically explosive interaction. We could then capture a raw natural, genuine modern drama which could ultimately influence how societies negotiate differences" ("Not So Special" 88).

Unquestionably the most prolific playwright in this volume, and possibly in all African American drama, is Suzan-Lori Parks (1964–). She won two Obies in the 1990s and was the first black woman playwright to win a Pulitzer Prize for her *Topdog/Underdog* (2002). From November 2002 to November 2003, Parks wrote a play a day for an entire year, resulting in her collection of *365Days/365 Plays*, which was performed in 2006–2007 by more than 800 theatres/acting companies divided into 52 hubs around the country. Each theatre or troupe took an individual week of plays, allowing for multiple world premieres. Without doubt, *365* is the most ambitious theatre experiment in the history of American (and perhaps world) drama. In her essay on the "Diggin the Fo'-Fathers: Suzan-Lori Parks's Histories," Deborah Thompson explores the way Parks uses history, not actual history but "myths of history." Like Anna Deavere Smith, Parks moves history forward in our consciousness. Indebted to jazz (with its variations, responses, and repetitions), Parks "digs up" the remains of history to uncover, as Thompson argues, contemporary discourses of African American identity, masculine and feminine. Thompson acknowledges that some of Parks's discursive "digs" occur on the level of words, through etymologies both true and false ("fo'-fathers" = forefathers, or oppressive white patriarchs). Parks situates African American characters in freakish settings from white history and literature to decolonize and deconstruct expectations. In *The American Play* (1994), carnival customers shoot at a black actor who looks like Lincoln. In *Topdog* (2002), a character named Booth shoots his brother named Lincoln. In *the Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000) dig up two black Hesters from Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. Focusing intently on *Venus* (1995), about an African American woman taken to London to play Venus Hottentot in a freak show, Thompson traces Parks's contemporary discourses on race through exploration and imperialism, religious moralism, freak shows, jurisprudence codes, medical anthropology, and romantic heterosexual love. Like other Parks's plays, *Venus* also performs an archeology of contemporary theatre, Thompson maintains, attacking it as a dangerous product of the society of surveillance.

In the concluding essay in this volume, Sandra Shannon interprets the works of Lynn Nottage (1964–), zeroing in on her two best known plays to date (*Intimate Apparel* [2006] and *Crumbs From the Table of Joy* [2004]) and conducts an original interview with the playwright as well. Placing Nottage's work in the company of fellow playwrights such as Shange and Parks, Shannon identifies her major themes, most important being the rescue of voices of neglected black women from history and the artifacts they carry forward with them. In Shannon's interview, Nottage reveals the process by which she became a playwright, the ways in which she developed

her art of storytelling, critical to her aesthetic as one of America's most proactive contemporary playwrights, and the context in which she sees her art in relationship to African American male authors.

As these overviews indicate, the critical essays in *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights* survey a wide range of playwrights, dramatic techniques, and racial/gender issues. In investing both background and foreground, this volume offers readers an informed history of and vital appreciation for a major group of playwrights whose works are defining the American theatre today—and for tomorrow as well.

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