

**Stefka Mihaylova**

**THE RADICAL FORMALISM OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS  
AND SARAH KANE**

When Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus*, about the displays of Saartjie Baartman in early nineteenth-century Europe, opened in 1996, the outrage it provoked by suggesting that its central, black character may have been complicit in her plight raised yet again one of the most inspiring and frustrating questions in modern US theatre history: how to stage the racial Other.<sup>1</sup> Even the most sympathetic responses to the play revealed the difficulty of assuming a critical stance toward the racially marked body (especially the black female body) that is affectively fixed as a symbol of martyrdom and victimization.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Shannon Jackson has proposed that the racially marked body's resistance to being reduced to a critical sign, free from affect, may be definitive of race as a social phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> As US theatre history demonstrates, onstage this resistance is highly productive of controversy, much of which has focused on the question of which representational contracts may most accurately convey the experiences of racially marked people. In this sense, art critic Abiola Sinclair's reading of Parks's experimental aesthetic as a traitorous concession to a white theatrical tradition was unexceptional; it was a reminder of the historical efforts of African American artists to create distinctly black art.<sup>4</sup>

Historically justified as these efforts are, they have encouraged critical attention to the distinctness of experimental art by African Americans while downplaying similarities with white experimental movements.<sup>5</sup> This, along with a late twentieth-century insistence on analyzing race relations in their local contexts, may be why one of Parks's most provocative projects has remained insufficiently examined: her daring attempt to reimagine blackness beyond its historical relationship to whiteness. I find a similarly daring revision of whiteness in Sarah Kane's work. Although the five plays she wrote during her brief life have invited an

---

*Stefka Mihaylova is an assistant professor of theatre studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, where she teaches the history and theory of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Western performance. She is currently working on a book manuscript that explores how representations of race and gender shifted on American and British stages in the 1990s as artists began revising concepts of radical performance inherited from the 1960s.*

immensely rich reception, her attempt to show what whiteness might look like if it were dethroned from its traditional position of universality has eluded critical attention. This omission may be attributed in part to the tendency of whiteness to slip into privileged invisibility and to the relative newness of critical attention to whiteness as racially specific.<sup>6</sup> I believe, however, that another reason for this omission is the larger historical aesthetic within which her plays have been most commonly situated: so-called in-*yer*-face theatre, commonly thought of as masculine and as ideologically similar to the Angry Young Men's movement of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>7</sup> This placement has been contested by feminist theatre critics, most notably Elaine Aston, who has demonstrated the complex relationship between twentieth-century feminism and British women's drama of the 1990s, including Kane's.<sup>8</sup>

In this essay, I try to give justice to Parks's and Kane's radical rethinking of blackness and whiteness by placing their works in yet another narrative: the history of formalism, the transnational avant-garde critical school to which we owe one of the most enduring definitions of whiteness. Proposing that formalism may illuminate a radical theatrical approach to race is, of course, counterintuitive. Formalism's insistence that the critic should focus on the work "itself," leaving histories of production and reception to historians and sociologists, allows racial aspects of this history to be excluded from analysis. Indeed, while the formalist critics who dominated the literary and art-critical debates of the first half of the twentieth century in the United States were overtly indifferent to race, they have been exposed as implicitly racist by later materialist scholars. In addition, the formalist contention that every art should keep to its own medium—literature to language; painting to nonsequential, two-dimensional images; and so forth—excluded theatre, with its multiple mediums of image, speech, and moving bodies, from the category of "art."<sup>9</sup> Hence, few theatre scholars have considered formalism a useful critical method.<sup>10</sup> Yet in addition to elucidating the making of modern whiteness, the history of formalism also contains important insights about the limits of historicist approaches in rethinking art and identity in socially efficacious ways. These insights—which resonate with Kane's and Parks's own critiques of history and identity—lead me to believe that the two playwrights' formalistlike engagement with the "proper" medium of theatre is no mere coincidence. Just as the historical formalists turned to an examination of medium, feeling that inherited history and art conventions could not help them imagine the modernist subject and his [*sic*] world, Parks and Kane, independently of each other, examined the medium of theatre in the 1990s, feeling that the concepts of social art and the identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s could not help their own project of staging racially specific subjects who stand for "the human condition."<sup>11</sup>

Central to this essay is the issue of context, especially how unexamined notions of what constitutes relevant context may limit our analysis. US blackness and British whiteness are each informed by the specific histories of American slavery and racism and British colonialism. But they are also informed by their shared history of transatlantic circulation and the legacy of the historical avant-garde, among other narratives. These shared histories may account, to an extent, for the striking similarities between the critical responses to Parks's *Venus* (1996) and Kane's *Blasted* (1995), including the heightened intolerance for moral and political

## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

ambiguity that, according to Jackson, recurs in spectators' experiences of racially marked bodies onstage.<sup>12</sup> Notably, both Parks's and Kane's audiences interpreted this intolerance as a need for better contextualization.

As spectators of *Venus* watched the nineteenth-century black African woman Saartjie Baartman transform into the racist stereotype of the Hottentot Venus, they felt confused and offended. Shockingly, Parks and director Richard Foreman had chosen to emphasize the racist stereotype instead of "correcting" it. In a padded costume evoking Baartman's large buttocks (a distinctive feature of her tribe), African American actress Adina Porter licked the chocolates that fairgoers threw in her cage, let them poke and grope her, and laughed raucously and inappropriately.<sup>13</sup> "The exploitation of Saartjie Baartman currently going on at the Public Theatre is almost as bad as the exploitation she received in real life. . . . Did they mean to insult us?" asked Abiola Sinclair in the *New York Amsterdam News*, a newspaper with a large African American readership:

Foreman gave us glaring lights shining in our eyes. I could barely see some of the scenes. . . . The purpose? . . . The man who seduced Venus from South Africa was played by a woman [Sandra Shipley]. The purpose? . . . [W]hen given [chocolates], rather than put the pieces into her mouth she wets her fingers and circles the chocolates, putting what's collected on her fingers into her mouth. . . . A monkey could easily handle such a task. . . . And the so-called love affair with the Baron Docteur is perhaps coming from the dreams of Susan L. Parks, rather than history.<sup>14</sup>

Baartman's representation as "a full-blown accomplice in what was being done to her," Sinclair concluded, could only be "some stupid invention of a white director and a sellout playwright."<sup>15</sup> Even critics who interpreted the production as a critique of spectatorship and praised Parks and Foreman for showing how "the onlookers' fantasies" construct racial stereotypes noted that "without the light of a corrective reality" of historical knowledge about Baartman, reading Parks's complex characters "becomes a frustrating task."<sup>16</sup>

Demands for "corrective" context and accusations of gratuitous experimentalism were also the two most commonly voiced complaints about the first production of Kane's *Blasted*. Labeled as one of the most violent plays in post-World War II British theatre, *Blasted* begins in an expensive hotel room in Leeds where middle-aged tabloid journalist Ian rapes his mentally delayed, much younger girlfriend Cate. Later, Kane stated that Ian's rape of Cate in scene 2 causes the war that breaks out by scene 3, and this explanation has become widely accepted as the play's central message:

I switched on the television. Srebrenica was under siege. An old woman was looking into the camera, crying. She said, "Please, please, somebody help us. Somebody do something." . . . I asked myself: "What could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia? . . . One is the seed, and the other is the tree."<sup>17</sup>

But most critics who saw the first production perceived no such causal relationship. Instead, as the hotel room got destroyed, they felt mounting confusion, aggravated by the fact that the realist contract established in scene 1 unexpectedly unraveled by the end of the play. As a result, many found that the play lacked a clear frame of reference, which, in turn, rendered its violence gratuitous. What was the play about? The Bosnian war? British soccer violence?<sup>18</sup>

Parks's essays and Kane's interviews suggest that not providing the corrective context their spectators anticipated were strategic refusals rather than failures. Understanding the reasons for their refusal, I argue, is crucial to understanding the playwrights' racial politics. But why did some spectators demand corrective context in the first place? The reviews suggest that as soon as spectators identified racism as a major theme in *Venus* and sexual and war violence as major themes in *Blasted*, they expected the plays to offer clear social commentary on these issues. In addition, *Blasted* began as a realist play, and at least some of the spectators of *Venus* would have recognized the chorus of spectators and the nontraditional casting as Brechtian devices. Realism and Brechtian theatre—the two performance models most frequently associated with social critique in the United States and Britain—typically stage a conflict between an inaccurate worldview and a truthful one (i.e., a corrective context) in which the truthful worldview is associated with justice and redress.

For instance, the association between realism and successful social commentary is obvious in Jean Young's review of *Venus*. Like Sinclair, Young was extremely displeased that an African American actor (Peter Francis James) performed as the white character of the Baron Docteur, who seduces and then dissects the Venus. This casting choice, Young argued, suggested that "black men are the primary exploiters of black women."<sup>19</sup> Though Young and Sinclair never explicitly say that Parks and Foreman should have followed realist conventions, their implied preference for traditional (i.e., realist) casting and linear storytelling suggests that they might have found a realist treatment of Baartman's story more palatable. But even the critics who found the casting choices and the character of the Venus acceptable noted that the critical-distancing strategies in the production were not always effective. Commenting on the chorus of spectators who groped, poked, and kicked the Venus, Alexis Green wrote, "Though your brain tells you this [the actress's buttocks] is padding, albeit of an artful sort, the effect is disturbing. . . . You cannot help but imagine the humiliation of such forced exposure and display in the flesh."<sup>20</sup> Harry Elam and Alice Rayner similarly remarked that "the butt clearly did not belong to the actress, but it nonetheless gave the effect of total exposure."<sup>21</sup> Even if Parks and Foreman had intended to invite insights on racism through a Brecht-like approach, the emotions the Venus evoked made Brechtian distancing difficult.

Likewise, the violated, overexposed, and humiliated characters of *Blasted* raised questions about the production's choice of staging conventions. The theatrical machinery in the small upstairs studio of the Royal Court was clearly visible. Thus, when Ian, the middle-aged journalist, got stuck in the floorboards, spectators could see the stage trap. Yet this failed to diminish the overwhelming effect of imagining the suffering a person would have experienced if the character's

## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

circumstances were real.<sup>22</sup> Many critics asked that such violent images be better contextualized. And since the first act was realist, they asked for realist contextualization, including the psychological and social motives for the violence onstage.<sup>23</sup>

So why did Parks and Kane choose to withhold the clarity of message that spectators might expect from a social-realist or a Brechtian production? For Parks, withholding such clarity is integral to her artistic philosophy. Theatre, she insists in her essay “From ‘Elements of Style,’” should primarily be “an examination of the human condition,” whether or not race is central to a play, rather than a vehicle for social commentary.<sup>24</sup> Needless to say, this argument is extremely controversial. The universalist overtones of the phrase “the human condition” seem to clash with the specific experiences of being racially marked. Even more controversially, Parks insists that theatre should stage the future into being, including the future of blackness, rather than reflect on the past.<sup>25</sup> Parks does not deny the history of racial oppression, but she questions the usefulness of the conventional ways this history has been staged for much of the twentieth century. “Can a Black person be onstage and be other than oppressed?” she asks provocatively. “Does Black life consist of issues other than race issues?”<sup>26</sup> She calls for a new concept of blackness: a blackness informed by but not limited to the history of black oppression; a blackness that neither finds justification for its existence in whiteness nor serves as a tool for understanding whiteness. In other words, she suggests that history cannot serve as corrective context if it helps normalize the hierarchical racial model it narrates.

She also questions the usefulness of realism for her project. For Parks, realism is completely unsuitable for helping us reimagine blackness because it has become the default representational mode for social-issue plays. Because playwrights have been taking realism for granted instead of rethinking it critically, realist drama, Parks contends, has been reduced to bad journalism: “the play-as-wrapping-paper-version-of-hot-newspaper-headline.”<sup>27</sup> She argues that playwrights should be looking for experimental modes that account for the specificity of the theatrical medium—“the marvel of live bodies on stage.”<sup>28</sup> Only if theatre rediscovers its artistry, she implies, can the theatrical examination of race also become an examination of the human condition.

The same concept—that theatre must return to its medium so that it may be critically effective—emerges in Kane’s work. Although she never articulated her artistic credo as clearly as Parks does in her essays, Kane’s interviews reveal that she shared Parks’s interest in writing drama that accounts for the formal distinctness of theatre, her suspicion of received narratives, and even her utopian view of theatre as a medium for shaping the future. And as with Parks, these interests led Kane away from theatrical naturalism. Thus, in an interview about her play *Cleansed* (1998), she attributed the play’s unrealistic imagery (a sunflower bursts through the floor as the characters Graham and Grace make love; blood flows from Graham’s body as Grace is being beaten by an invisible mob) to her search for theatre’s specific medium:

I was having a fit about all this naturalistic rubbish that was being written and I decided that I wanted to write a play that could never ever be turned into a film—

it could never ever be shot for television; it could never be turned into a novel. The only thing that could ever be done with it was it could be staged.<sup>29</sup>

And like Parks, Kane turned toward medium specificity in order to address a larger social and representational problem that she felt she couldn't solve through realism: staging violence nonreductively.

The violence in *Blasted*, Kane said in another interview, would perhaps have been better received if the play sustained the social-realist conventions of the first act. But she felt that only by breaking the realist contract could she suggest a direct link between the war violence in former Yugoslavia and domestic violence in Britain. By breaking with realism, she tried to “present[ ] material without comment and ask[ ] the audience to craft their own response.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, Kane rejected classical realism's claims of objectivity, implying that realism subtly imposes an interpretation and limits spectators' agency. How realism does so becomes clearer through Kane's reflections on social categories in the same interview. It is imperative, she insisted, not to explain violence in class, gender, or racial terms. “The problems I'm addressing are the ones we have as human beings. An over-emphasis on sexual politics (or racial or class politics) is a diversion from our main problem. Class, race and gender divisions are symptomatic of societies based on violence or the threat of violence, not the cause.”<sup>31</sup> Though it may sound striking, this hypothesis is a variation of Foucault's and Butler's now widely accepted understanding of identity as performative. In fact, Kane takes to a literal extreme the Foucauldian insight that social identities, though seemingly chosen by individual subjects, are subtly forced upon them. For instance, in her play *Cleansed*, which is set in a blend of two of Foucault's favorite institutions, a university and a hospital, the characters' bodies are forcibly mangled into crude female or male shapes. A nineteen-year-old boy is made feminine by having a female character's clothes forced upon him, while Grace, the female character, receives a mastectomy and has a penis crudely sewn onto her own genitalia. While the “surgery” is ostensibly done following Grace's wish to become as similar as possible to her beloved deceased brother Graham, she has little control over her transformation. Indeed, Kane's plays and her reflections on violence reveal that, like Foucault, she is preoccupied with the notion of normalization. Just as gender normalizes violence by serving as its cause, Kane suggests, realism explains violence away by breaking it into individual incidents and assigning specific social causes to each of them.

Kane's resulting approach to violence has triggered comparisons with the avant-garde, especially with Artaud's theatre of cruelty.<sup>32</sup> Parks's drama, too, has been described as avant-garde. Indeed, much of her early work was produced in experimental venues, and Foreman's involvement in *Venus* further reinforced Parks's reputation for daring innovation.<sup>33</sup> Whether or not these comparisons are defensible, Kane's redefinition of social identity as the *effect* of violence and Parks's attempt to reimagine blackness beyond the black–white binary are avant-garde in the broader, theoretical sense, as acts that renegotiate major categories of modern Western culture.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, these acts of redefinition have important affinities with the historical avant-garde, especially its critique of crude historicist

## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

notions of context and history. Kane's attitude toward context is usefully summarized in Sarah Hemming's review of the original production of *Blasted*. Kane, Hemming writes, "neither glamorizes violence, nor renders it acceptable by placing it in context; in fact, her play is a bold attempt to deal with it neat."<sup>35</sup> Although Hemming finds this approach ineffective, her comment elegantly articulates a major principle in Kane's work: according to Kane, the uncritical reliance on unexamined notions of "context" trivializes violence. Likewise, Parks succinctly summarizes her critique of the traditional and, in her view, disempowering narrative of black–white relations in "Elements of Style": "History is time that won't quit."<sup>36</sup> How these critiques enable new perspectives on race becomes clearer when we consider the history of formalism, the avant-garde school that notoriously shifted the focus of criticism from social context to medium specificity.

Formalism's rejection of history and social context is consistent with the historical avant-garde's contention that art should radically remake lived reality because reality (the past as well as the present) and the established conventions of representing it cannot help us imagine what the new twentieth-century (male) subject and his world might look like.<sup>37</sup> The racial and gender aspects of this rejection are explicit in the primal scene of Italian futurism in which Marinetti needs figuratively to reconnect with yet wean himself from the black bosom of his Sudanese nurse (and thus his history as an upper-class European man) in order to become a modern Western subject.<sup>38</sup> New Criticism's<sup>39</sup> rejection of history—demonstrated through its insistent focus on "the work itself"—is similarly racially charged. Just as Marinetti needed to distance himself from European colonialism, the New Critics needed to distance themselves from US Southern Agrarianism, which espoused a feudal social order (as in the Southern plantation economy) and an essentialist view of culture and race, and which considered the literary achievements of white authors to be proof of white superiority. By denying the relevance of historical context to an understanding of literature, the former Southern Agrarians could become modern literary professionals, an identity that was arguably based on objectivity and rigor.<sup>40</sup> Even those New Critics who had never partaken in Southern Agrarianism helped create a literary and dramatic canon that included only white writers.<sup>41</sup> It is through such acts of historical distancing that the formalists translated the Cartesian human into the model twentieth-century white man: master of the hypothetical ability to transcend cultural bias through a critical mind free from affect, the very ability that, according to Jackson, finds its limit in racial encounters. Moreover, while the public nature of Marinetti's manifesto exposes the historical forgetfulness underlying white modern subjecthood, the quiet, understated exclusions of the New Critics allowed them to mask their whiteness as critical objectivity, rendering it normative.

Constituted through such selective forgetfulness, modernist whiteness was further secured through formalism's insistence on medium specificity. This process is compellingly illustrated in Caroline A. Jones's study of Clement Greenberg, one of the leading formalist art critics of the mid-twentieth century. According to Jones, Greenberg's contention that visual art should engage the "eye-sight alone," based on the presumption that the exclusive relationship between one sense (vision) and one medium (nonsequential two-dimensional images)

guarantees objectivity, derives from a long-term modern development that she calls “the bureaucratization of the senses,” a Foucauldian notion that describes the compartmentalization of the body, presumably for higher efficiency of perception.<sup>42</sup> Jones further argues that in privileging the eye, Greenberg perpetuated the modern Western mind–body split. While he acknowledged that vision was “produced in the body,” he also considered it “dramatically liberated from [the body’s] constraints” and, in fact, a proxy for the mind.<sup>43</sup> Hence, while in his theory of vision the body was not eliminated, it was channeled and controlled.<sup>44</sup> The pervasiveness of the formalist yearning for disciplined bodies is also obvious in avant-garde performance, where the rise of the director allowed the actor to be transformed or, as some have argued, reduced from a creative agent to a medium for the director’s mind.<sup>45</sup> Two well-known examples include Edward Gordon Craig’s replacement of the emotional human actor with the rational Über-marionette and Meyerhold’s Biomechanics, which aimed to transform actors’ affect-ridden bodies into artistic material by constraining them with strict choreography and intricate stage machinery.

Phenomenology’s insight that our bodies, marked by the cultures we inhabit, ground our acts of knowledge in specific histories illuminates how essential these disciplined bodies were to formalist utopias, whether the New Critics’ utopia of a meritocratic democracy was based on objectivity and rigor or on the Soviet utopia of a classless society.<sup>46</sup> It is helpful to remember that utopia means “no-place.” Only such disciplined bodies, unburdened by history (including the histories of class, gender, and racial inequalities), could inhabit these discursive no-places and, from there, produce “pure” knowledge uncontaminated by the contingencies of context.

As these utopias failed, challenged by material realities, their failure exposed the disciplined formalist body as an illusion and a privilege. For instance, as the United States entered World War II and Greenberg was drafted, he wrote in his letters about the “physical shakes and jitters” that beset him, undermining his analytical distance from the war.<sup>47</sup> Another such failure—that of the Russian formalist utopia—is relevant here: in addition to illuminating the production of socially inferior subjects, this failure also inadvertently radicalized the formalists’ practices in ways that help us understand Kane’s and Parks’s own formalisms.

As is well known, the Russian formalists started out as supporters of the new Soviet state. In fact, they undertook the ambitious task of bringing forth the ideal Soviet world through the practice of *estrangement*: placing familiar objects or performing habitual actions in unusual contexts. Conceived as a critical and creative technique that was available to all, estrangement aimed to reveal the true essence of all things—“making the stone stony” as the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky famously explained—by stripping away old habits of perception.<sup>48</sup> Formalist art criticism focused on how art produces estrangement through its formal qualities: because the past and even the present were burdened by the very perceptual habits and practices in need of estrangement, social context had little critical value. Marxist critics predictably disagreed with this. Although there was nothing wrong in studying the formal qualities of art, Anatoly Lunacharsky opined, the idea that art could be studied apart from social context served the interest of the

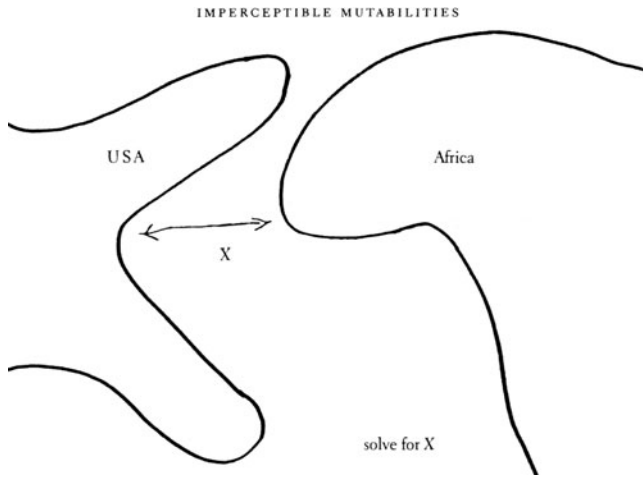


## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

bourgeoisie.<sup>49</sup> But as Stalin consolidated his power in the 1930s, an accusation of formalism—increasingly understood as any art or criticism that was different from socialist realism or a Marxist–Leninist view—became tantamount to ostracism.<sup>50</sup> And as the accused were exiled, imprisoned, tortured, and killed, formalism became an unlivable social position. Pronouncing someone a formalist, then, became a speech act: creating an identity through language and imprinting it upon live bodies.

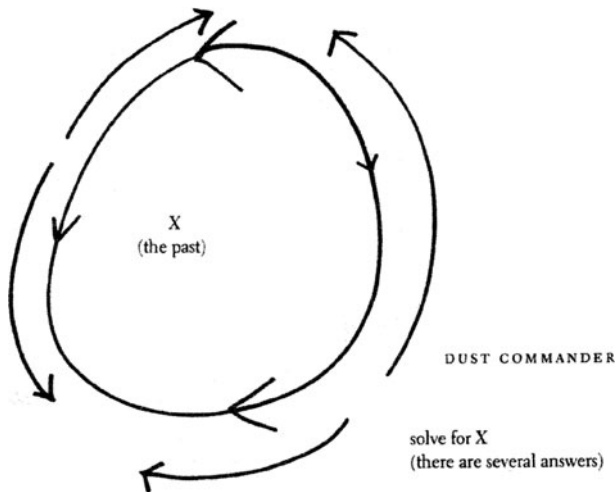
The excessive reaction that stigmatized formalism also radicalized its practices. As socialist realism—a melodramatic mode that described Soviet life as it *ought to be*—was imposed as the only legitimate aesthetic, historical inquiry was replaced with uncritical pronouncements of history’s inevitable march toward communism’s definitive victory, and journalism became reduced to vicious critiques of real and imaginary enemies of the regime and praise for its heroes. The resulting lack of reliable information rendered contextualization meaningless. In this situation, the formalist refusal to contextualize became, in fact, a refusal to perpetuate the official narratives promoted by the regime. Likewise, the theory of estrangement, which saw every person as a potential artist, at least theoretically pitted individual agency against the “compulsory mimesis” of socialist realism.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the regime’s response to formalism transformed it into a situated and embodied practice of antitotalitarian resistance.

This is the kind of formalism that I see Parks and Kane practicing in their playwriting, and it is motivated by factors similar to those that radicalized Russian formalism: the limits of materialist contextualization for critically staging race and a reaction against the “compulsory mimesis” of established ways of staging the racially marked body. The limits of contextualization become obvious if we take seriously critics’ accusations that Parks should have provided corrective context, telling us what Baartman was truly like in order to help us read the caricature that replaced her. The only story that exists about Baartman is the story told by the white Europeans for whom she performed. The difficulty of retrieving the past of black Africans that was lost during the Middle Passage, Parks implies in her essays, may be integral to blackness. (I am referring to two images that she includes under the rubric “math.” The first, shown here as [Figure 1](#), is an outline of the African and American continents. The space between them—the Middle Passage—is marked with an *X*: the mathematical symbol for unknown values. In the second, shown as [Figure 2](#), two rounded regions enclose a space marked again with an *X*, but this time with the specific clarification that *X* refers to “the past.”)<sup>52</sup> The limit of contextualization, predicated by the loss of this history, is a major reason why Parks finds realism unsuitable for her plays. Realist characters come with complete histories; this is what makes them Western individuals. By contrast, Parks’s dramatic personae “are not *characters*. . . . They are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers* maybe, *speakers* maybe, *shadows, slips, players* maybe, maybe *someone else’s pulse*.” These noncharacters “almost always take up residence in a corner.”<sup>53</sup> The enigmatic language in these descriptions defies straightforward interpretation, but here is mine. Being black, Parks seems to imply, means being radically decentered through the loss of history, the loss of the original homeland, and social marginalization in the West. In other words, I



**Figure 1.**

“Imperceptible Mutabilities.” From *The America Play and Other Works* by Suzan-Lori Parks. Copyright © 1995 by Suzan-Lori Parks. Published by Theatre Communications Group. Used by permission of Theatre Communications Group.



**Figure 2.**

“Dust Commander.” From *The America Play and Other Works* by Suzan-Lori Parks. Copyright © 1995 by Suzan-Lori Parks. Published by Theatre Communications Group. Used by permission of Theatre Communications Group.

## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

read in these descriptions a dramatic definition similar to Paul Gilroy's scholarly definition of blackness as constitutively decentered, having no viable myths of national origin (a shared history in a shared territory)<sup>54</sup>—the myths that create the “core” of white personhood, which white persons (paradoxically) must be able to transcend in order to become truly white. Realism has been immensely attractive to minority artists precisely because it helps them imagine marginalized subjects as enfranchised Western individuals. By rejecting realism, Parks calls us instead to contemplate the radical performativity of blackness: an identity that blatantly displays its lack of an essential core.

In her plays, Parks provides specific places where this radical corelessness needs to be theatrically signified—the mystifying “spells” and “rests” represented by the names of dramatic personae followed by no dialogue:

The Chorus of the Court  
The Venus  
The Chorus of the Court<sup>55</sup>

Jennifer Johung has compellingly analyzed the paradoxical importance of Parks's spells for staging absence, meaning the absence of black people's experiences from mainstream Western histories.<sup>56</sup> It bears emphasizing, however, that in giving both black and white characters “spells,” that is, in treating both as *figures*, Parks suggests that the radical lack of core in blackness describes all identity. Hence, in the spells, blackness (rather than whiteness) comes to stand for the human condition. Also significant is the parallel between Parks's and the Russian formalists' responses to the failure of history: both have grappled with it by intensely focusing on stylistic devices. Even Parks's definition of spells—“a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state”<sup>57</sup>—is formalist in purposefully slowing down perception, its deliberate ambiguity drawing attention to the limits of habitual ways of thinking about and inhabiting identity.

But although they are blatantly coreless, Parks's figures are also stubbornly fleshy. Unlike Craig's rational puppet or Meyerhold's Biomechanical actor—disciplined bodies subject to reason—these figures cannot shed their flesh even when they die. This was literally true of Baartman, whose preserved flesh, turned into an exhibit, became a material symbol for black people's historical exclusion from humanity, an exclusion dramatized in *Venus* through Venus's inability to stop performing even after she dies. And in *The America Play*, we are told the story of Little Bram Price Junior, a black figure who returns to his house ten days after his burial, “sits down tuh dinner and eats up everybodys food just like he did when he was livin.”<sup>58</sup> These fleshy figures, who cannot be reduced to dust, spirit, or other Western versions of immateriality, embody the distance between blackness and whiteness.<sup>59</sup> This enflashed distance also marks the limit of Parks's utopian attempt to elevate black identity to a universal model: no white figure in her plays is similarly burdened with fleshiness, and no black figure ever approximates the fleshlessness of whiteness.

*Blasted* pushes this very limit by showing white masculinity as fleshy and particular—an accomplishment that would have been impossible without

Kane's unusual formal choices, especially the play's "broken realism."<sup>60</sup> In the text, realism is first established and then suspended in characterization, space, and time. At all these levels realism is associated with white Britishness and its suspension with otherness.<sup>61</sup> Thus Ian, the predatory tabloid journalist, and his former girlfriend Cate are given specific ages, accents, and personal histories: he is forty-five, speaks with a Leeds accent, and has an alienated son from his failed marriage; she is twenty-one, speaks with a lower-class south London accent, and has a mentally disabled brother. By contrast, the play specifies no accent for the soldier, and his personal history is reduced to the fact that he has lost his girlfriend in a war. Also, while the two realist characters are introduced within a recognizable space and specific geography—"a very expensive hotel room in Leeds"<sup>62</sup>—the soldier is introduced in scene 3, in which an explosion destroys the hotel room and all recognizable reality. This difference is deliberate. In an early draft, Kane explicitly ties the soldier to the ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia. The soldier, who there is called Vladek (a Slavic name), says to Ian: "English shit. Why did you fuckers recognise Croatia? . . . This is a Serbian town now."<sup>63</sup> If the final version had retained this reference to the Bosnian crisis, the violence the soldier commits might have been easier to contextualize, but this would also have helped reinforce the negative stereotypes about Serbians that circulated in the mid-1990s. Making the soldier generically foreign aligns with Kane's intention to represent violence as a predicament of being human rather than an attribute of class, ethnicity, or gender. Additionally, the soldier's generic foreignness emphasizes the power of violence to make and unmake identities. Because war violence destroys the places and familial and social ties needed for a realist character, realism ill fits people displaced by war. In fact, generic foreignness represents their identities more accurately. In *Blasted*, realism, as a representational mode and as a worldview, is a privilege of peacetime. This is why as the interpersonal violence in scenes 1 and 2 escalate into war violence in scene 3, the realist contract is suspended: realism has become untenable.

In the play's final version, realism is precarious even before the explosion in scene 3. The specific and the indefinite clash in the set description: the hotel room is in Leeds but it is also "the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world."<sup>64</sup> Stage time similarly flows in realist and nonrealist ways simultaneously: scene 2 begins "very early the following morning" after the end of scene 1; however, the script indicates "*the sound of spring rain*" at the end of scene 1 and "*the sound of summer rain*" at the end of scene 2.<sup>65</sup> Thus, an entire season elapses in scene 2. In addition, the rules of visibility associated both with whiteness and classical realism are broken from the very beginning. Ian, aging and sickly, is a poor representation of Western whiteness. White bodies, Richard Dyer reminds us, need to be whole, firm, and healthy in order to disappear into the transcendent mind.<sup>66</sup> And while realist drama is full of sickly and disabled characters—Ibsen's tubercular Dr. Rank and syphilitic Oswald Alving come to mind—only rarely has their sickliness or disability been embodied onstage as such.<sup>67</sup> By contrast, Ian's ailing body is untypically exposed to view. Consider the following exchange in scene 1:

## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

- IAN: Don't like your clothes.  
CATE: (*Looks down at her clothes.*)  
IAN: You look like a lesbos.  
CATE: What's that?  
IAN: Don't look very sexy, that's all.  
CATE: Oh. (*She continues to eat.*) Don't like your clothes either.  
IAN: (*Looks down at his clothes.*  
*Then gets up, takes them all off and stands in front of her, naked.*)  
Put your mouth on me.  
CATE: (*Stares. Then bursts out laughing.*)  
IAN: No?  
Fine.  
Because I stink?  
CATE: (*Laughs even more.*)  
IAN: *attempts to dress, but fumbles with embarrassment.*  
*He gathers his clothes and goes into the bathroom where he dresses.*  
CATE: *eats, and giggles over the sandwiches.*<sup>68</sup>

In a comic reversal of Laura Mulvey's well-known scenario, masculinity rather than femininity becomes the object of the spectator's gaze. As Ian fails to retain the position of observing subject, his white masculinity becomes marked as damaged, hence particular. Cate, by contrast, is never subject to such utter exposure.

As is well documented, the play's complex concept of space was not successfully conveyed in the first production. The tight budget did not allow for the construction of an expensive-looking hotel room, and the set looked like a cheap bedsit—a space readily associated with naturalistic performance.<sup>69</sup> Also, not until after the production did Kane add the detail of summer, spring, and winter rain, trying to indicate earlier a break with the first scene's naturalism.<sup>70</sup> As a result, the critics who saw the first production were completely unprepared for the suspension of realism in scene 3. Likewise, the play's reversal of Western norms of visibility, through exposing Ian's imperfect body and withdrawing Cate's from view, has not always come across. In fact, Kane harshly critiqued the Hamburg production of *Blasted* for exposing Cate naked onstage after Ian rapes her.<sup>71</sup> It is not my intention to criticize the first production or its critical reception. As writer Carl Miller pointed out, *Blasted* broke so many rules that it is no wonder that the London theatre critics, who had to respond within a few hours of having seen the show, could not immediately make sense of it.<sup>72</sup> But from my privileged standpoint of hindsight and multiple rereadings, the horrifying scenes of Ian's exposure—including his getting raped and blinded by the soldier in full view of the audience—are not gratuitous acts of violence. Rather, they follow from a representational logic established from the very outset: Kane's critique of realism as a technology supporting white masculinity's claim to universalism.

Scene 5, in which Ian gets trapped in the floorboards, completely at Cate's mercy, is the culmination of the play's representational logic. Ian—literally reduced to a broken object among the debris—is not only too damaged and

incapable of controlling his physical environment to embody normative whiteness, but he has died; and yet he continues to eat and defecate. Like some of Parks's black figures, he is both profoundly displaced and unable to shed his flesh and his carnal needs even after death. The end of the scene, where Ian thanks Cate for taking care of him while she looks away, dejected, has been the focus of the feminist conversation about the play. This dark ending does not fit easily in the established understanding of feminist mimesis as not repeating the established gender conventions and the conventional rules of representing them but "geared to change,"<sup>73</sup> arguably a change toward more equitable representation. Conversely, Caryl Churchill, whose own work informs this understanding, has supported *Blasted* as hopeful and redemptive.<sup>74</sup> While we could argue with this understanding, the question about the ending is important because it has to do with utopia: What future (if any) does Kane envision? What subjects inhabit it?

Theorists of utopia remind us that utopia and dystopia are not opposites; rather, they exist on a continuum. Dystopia, writes Dragan Klaić, "implies utopia as a subverted or suppressed desire. . . . [E]ven dystopian drama is in fact utopian. . . . [D]ystopia has become in our times a *via negativa* to express utopian strivings."<sup>75</sup> From this perspective, whether the no-place where *Blasted* ends is dark or redemptive is less important than how it accommodates normative whiteness. In *Blasted*, this is where normative whiteness encounters its limit. Importantly, this no-place is marked feminine because, as we learn from an earlier episode, it is the space where Cate is transported during her seizures:

IAN: Thought you were dead.

CATE: Suppose that's what it's like.  
[. . .]

IAN: Can't stand it.

(He goes to the mini-bar and pours himself another large gin and lights a cigarette.)

CATE: What?

IAN: Death. Not being.

CATE: You fall asleep and then you wake up.<sup>76</sup>

This no-place is also feminist because it replaces the modern ideal of autonomous personhood, which assumes (among other things) an able body, with personhood based on mutual support and interdependence.<sup>77</sup> Again, this alternative personhood is embodied by Cate: a rare character in Western drama whose impairment is both explicitly staged and does not translate into passivity or victimization. Instead, resourceful and tenacious, she carries the utopian–dystopian charge of the play. Thus, in scene 4, Ian, who cannot bear his helplessness, asks Cate to help him kill himself. Cate, holding an abandoned baby, refuses: "My brother's got blind friends. You can't give up."<sup>78</sup> Interdependence, signified by Cate's taking care of the baby and by her reference to blindness, defines her character from the beginning. She has agreed to see Ian because he "sounded unhappy."<sup>79</sup> When Cate fails to keep the baby alive, she is thrown into a crisis of faith: Cate "bursts out laughing, unnaturally, hysterically, uncontrollably."<sup>80</sup> Yet she continues taking

## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

care of Ian. His “Thank you,” which concludes the play,<sup>81</sup> suggests he has accepted interdependence. It is a utopian ending, but unlike the formalist utopias inhabited by rational and disciplined bodies, Kane’s is inhabited by fleshy, feeling subjects.

• • •

The fleshy, feeling subjects inhabiting the utopian spaces of Parks’s and Kane’s works stand for nothing less than the human condition. This expression, as it emerges from their plays, interviews, and essays, entails a character’s ability to represent all humanity while remaining embedded in the particularities of social difference, including those of gender and race. The enduring racial hierarchies in Britain and the United States render such a proposition truly utopian, but their utopianism is not an exception. Rather, it is part of a larger trend: the turn-of-the-century critiques of identity politics and multiculturalism.

Three notable works of performance criticism that belong to this trend are Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked* (1993) and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and *Against Race* (2000). Phelan drew attention to how the visibility politics of the 1970s and 1980s supported the perceived validity of identity politics by professing tolerance for cultural distinctions within the model of multiculturalism, a model that effectively translates difference into equivalence and encourages people to pursue rights and opportunities for their own group rather than make political alliances across identity distinctions.<sup>82</sup> Her proposition that live performance may enable resistance to this model was critiqued, most famously by Philip Auslander, for utopianism and for not acknowledging the mediated nature of all modern performance.<sup>83</sup> It seems to me that because of the merit in Auslander’s argument we sometimes forget that Phelan claimed the radical potential of liveness specifically for performance art, *not* for all performance. The majority of her case studies belong to this category. It is through its deliberate refusal to comply with the dominant visibility and identity models, Phelan explains, that performance art becomes live, allowing for the emergence of alternative ways of being.<sup>84</sup> Like Parks and Kane, she contends that only through a close inquiry into an art’s medium can this art serve a politics of transformation.

Similarly, Gilroy’s search for a politics that will end racism—a goal, he argues, that the antiracist policies of the second half of the twentieth century were unable to fulfill—entails utopianism and a critique of history for failing to provide viable solutions: “I, too, have invoked the unknowable future against the unforgiving present,” he writes in *Against Race*.<sup>85</sup> And in *The Black Atlantic* he argues that such politics can emerge only through a focused examination of aesthetic. New identities, he writes, can signify only through “wilfully damaged signs,” deviations from representational norms.<sup>86</sup>

Parks’s and Kane’s works, I propose, express a similar search for alternatives to unsatisfactory racial and gender politics. Their critique of realism, which is integral to this search, is distinct from earlier feminist and antiracist playwrights’ critiques. Unlike those playwrights, Parks and Kane depart from realism not in order to articulate a specific identity (blackness, femininity, black femininity, etc.) in more empowering ways but in order to avoid perceived traps of identity politics. I hope that in discussing how they do so, I have done justice to their radical imaginations.

ENDNOTES

1. This question resurfaces throughout the twentieth-century history of American theatre, from W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke's argument about the definition of "Negro drama" early in the century through Amiri Baraka and Lorraine Hansberry's disagreement over the proper aesthetic of African American theatre at midcentury to August Wilson and Robert Brustein's confrontation over funding and production politics in the 1990s. See Alain Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage" and "The Drama of Negro Life," in *The Works of Alain Locke*, ed. Charles Molesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 117–21 and 122–6, respectively; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Julius Lester, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 312–21; Studs Terkel, "An Interview with Lorraine Hansberry," *WFMT Chicago Fine Arts Guide* 10 (April 1961): 8–14; Amiri Baraka, "A Critical Reevaluation: A Raisin in the Sun's Enduring Passion," in Lorraine Hansberry, "A Raisin in the Sun" and "The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window," ed. Robert Nemiroff, expanded 25th ed. (New York: New American Library, 1987), 9–20; August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand* (London: Nick Hern, 2001); and Robert Brustein, "Subsidized Separatism," *New Republic* 215.8–9 (19–26 August 1996): 39–42.
2. See, for instance, Harry J. Elam Jr. and Alice Rayner, "Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks," in *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theater*, ed. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 265–82.
3. Jackson says, "If there is ever a time when the tolerance for ambiguous address is low and the quest for literal representation high, it is in instances of explicitly racialized performance. In anti-racist performance, audience members often forget whatever they once knew about theatrical irony." Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 191.
4. Abiola Sinclair, "Notes on *Venus*," *New York Amsterdam News* 87.18 (4 May 1996), 22. This is a review of the production of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York.
5. See Mike Sell, "Was the Black Arts Movement an Avant-Garde?," in *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 276–89.
6. The first major British study of whiteness was published two years after the premiere of Kane's *Blasted*; Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).
7. Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001).
8. Elaine Aston, "Feeling the Loss of Feminism: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and an Experiential Genealogy of Contemporary Women's Playwriting," *Theatre Journal* 62.4 (2010): 575–91.
9. See Jackson, 79–108.
10. Nonetheless, theatre scholars have accounted for formalism's strong influence on the making and conceptualization of modern theatre. Examples include Julia A. Walker, *Expressionism and Modernism in The American Theatre: Bodies, Voices, Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Silvija Jestrovic, *Theatre of Estrangement: Theatre, Practice, Ideology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
11. See Suzan-Lori Parks, "From 'Elements of Style,'" in "*The America Play*" and *Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 6–18, at 7. Kane does not use the phrase "human condition," but similarly asserts that as a playwrights she is concerned with problems that we all "have as human beings." See the interview with Sarah Kane, in *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights and Playwriting*, ed. Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge (London: Methuen Drama, 1997), 129–35, at 134.
12. Jackson, 191 (see note 3).
13. *Venus*, by Suzan-Lori Parks, directed by Richard Foreman, performed by Adina Porter, Mel Johnson Jr., Peter Francis James, and Sandra Shipley, Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York, 9 May 1996, VHS, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library.
14. Sinclair.



## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

15. Ibid.

16. Quotations from Alexis Greene, "Venus," *TheaterWeek* 9.42 (20 May 1996): 18; and Michael Feingold, "Carnival Knowledge," *Village Voice*, 14 May 1996, 81. See also Irene Bakalencik, "'Venus' Plays Yale Rep before Going Public," *Westport News*, 27 March 1996, 31.

17. See Sierz, 100–1; cf. Graham Saunders, "Love Me or Kill Me": *Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 38–9.

18. Mike Ellison and Alex Bellos, "Blasted: A Deeply Moral and Compassionate Piece of Theatre or Simply a Disgusting Feast of Filth?," *Guardian*, 20 January 1995, 22; Charles Spencer, "Awful Shock," *Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 1995, 19; and Paul Taylor, "Courting Disaster," *Independent* (London), 20 January 1995, 27.

19. Jean Young, "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," *African American Review* 31.4 (1997): 699–708, at 703.

20. Greene.

21. Elam and Rayner, 271.

22. Tracy Davis, conversation with the author, 1 November 2005. Nils Tabert made a similar comment about the scene where Ian eats the baby in the Hamburg production of *Blasted*: "It was a prop of course—chicken or something. But . . . [it] was absolutely terrifying." Nils Tabert, conversation with Graham Saunders, in Saunders, 138.

23. See, for instance, Jack Tinker, "Killer Thriller Shows *Blasted* How to Do It," *Daily Mail*, 27 January 1995, 47.

24. Parks, "From 'Elements of Style,'" 7.

25. Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession," in *The America Play* and *Other Works*, 3–5, at 4–5.

26. Suzan-Lori Parks, "An Equation for Black People on Stage," in *The America Play and Other Works*, 19–22, at 21.

27. Parks, "From 'Elements of Style,'" 6.

28. Ibid.

29. Quoted in Saunders, 87.

30. Kane interview in *Rage and Reason*, 130–1.

31. Ibid., 134.

32. See Saunders, 123.

33. "Bonnie Metzgar on Suzan-Lori Parks," interview by Harvey Young, in *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, ed. Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young (New York: Routledge, 2014), 213–19, at 215.

34. I am drawing on two recent definitions of the avant-garde. Kristine Stiles defines it as "determined act[s] of observation" that "reconstruct the ways in which events, objects, and the relationships between them may be interpreted and lived"; Kristine Stiles, "Never Enough Is *Something Else*: Feminist Performance Art, Avant-Gardes, and Probité," in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. James M. Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 239–89, at 270–1. Mike Sell defines it as "an innovative mode of *social antagonism* . . . that struggles by cultural means to achieve in unprecedented ways specific social, economic, and political goals" and "a mode of cultural critique that redefines, both conceptually and experientially, basic concepts and cultural practices of *time*, particularly those associated with futurity." Sell, "Introduction: The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized," in *Avant-Garde Performance*, 1–55, at 39; italics in original.

35. Sarah Hemming, "Blasted by Violence," *Financial Times*, 23 January 1995, art section, 15.

36. Parks, "From 'Elements of Style,'" 15.

37. Theatrical realism, though relatively new at the time, was rejected for the same reason; its insistence that art should imitate life was unacceptable to the formalists and other avant-garde artists and thinkers.

38. See F. T. Martinetti, "The Futurist Manifesto," 1909, <http://vserver1.cscs.lsa.umich.edu/~crshalizi/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html>, accessed 14 March 2014.

39. Renato Poggioli compellingly explains why New Criticism is an avant-garde school; see Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1962], trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 33–4.

40. See Karen O’Kane, “Before the New Criticism: Modernism and the Nashville Group,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 51.4 (1998): 683–97. As an example of the New Critics’ attempt to distance themselves from their past, O’Kane refers to Robert Penn Warren’s denouncement, in the latter part of his career, of the segregationist views he set out in “The Briar Patch,” his contribution to the Southern Agrarians’ programmatic volume *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by Twelve Southerners (New York: Harper, 1930).
41. Anthony G. Medici, “The Restless Ghost of the New Criticism,” *Style* 31.4 (1997): 760–73. This is a review of *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities*, ed. William J. Spurlin and Michael Fisher (New York: Garland, 1995).
42. Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xvii.
43. *Ibid.*, 7.
44. *Ibid.*, 17.
45. On the actor’s loss of agency in modern performance, see, for instance, Walker, 53–7.
46. According to Karen O’Kane, the New Critics aspired to “artistic and intellectual excellence” as proof of the effectiveness of US democracy and freedom. O’Kane, 683.
47. Jones, 45.
48. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2d ed., ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 15–22, at 18.
49. A[natoly] V. Lunacharsky, “Formalism in the Science of Art” (1924), in *The Futurists, the Formalists, and the Marxist Critique*, ed. Christopher Pike (London: Ink Links Ltd., 1979), 72–87.
50. Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine*, 3d ed. ([1st ed., 1955]; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 147.
51. Anna Wexler Katsnelson describes socialist realism as “compulsory mimesis” in “My Leader, Myself? Pictorial Estrangement and Aesopian Language in the Late Work of Kazimir Malevich,” *Poetics Today* 27.1 (2006): 67–96, at 80.
52. Parks, “From ‘Elements of Style,’” 12–13.
53. *Ibid.*, 12, Parks’s italics.
54. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6–7, 10, 15.
55. Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 76.
56. Jennifer Johung, “Figuring the ‘Spells’ / Spelling the Figures: Suzan-Lori Parks’s ‘Scene of Love (?),’” *Theatre Journal* 58.1 (2006): 39–52.
57. Parks, “From ‘Elements of Style,’” 16.
58. Parks, *The America Play*, in “*The America Play*” and *Other Works*, 175.
59. See, for instance, Dyer’s analysis of the qualities most commonly associated with whiteness: “What is absent from white is any *thing*; in other words, material reality. Cleanliness is the absence of dirt, spirituality the absence of flesh, virtue the absence of sin, chastity the absence of sex and so on.” Dyer, 75.
60. The expression is Elaine Aston’s, “‘Bad Girls’ and ‘Sick Boys’: New Women Playwrights and the Future of Feminism,” in *Feminist Futures?: Theatre, Performance, Theory*, ed. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 71–87, at 84–5.
61. In the very first pages, Ian declares his whiteness through a series of comments against “wogs,” “Pakis,” and “nigger-lovers.” See Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, intro. David Greig (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), 2–6. His need to establish his whiteness through racist speech conforms with Kane’s view of identity as the effect of violence.
62. *Ibid.*, 3.
63. Quoted in Saunders, 53.
64. Kane, 3.
65. *Ibid.*, 24, 39.
66. See Dyer, 148, 150, 153.

## The Radical Formalism of Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Kane

67. See Stacy Wolf, "Disability's Invisibility in Joan Schenkar's *Signs of Life* and Heather McDonald's *An Almost Holy Picture*," in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, ed. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 302–18, at 304–5.
68. Kane, 7–8.
69. James Macdonald, conversation with Graham Saunders, in Saunders, 126.
70. *Ibid.*, 122.
71. Tabert, conversation with Saunders, in Saunders, 138.
72. Carl Miller, "Is It a Tragedy? No! It's a Comedy," *Independent*, 8 March 1995, 26.
73. "A feminist mimesis, if there is such a thing, would take the relation to the real as productive, not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same"; Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), xvi.
74. See Carole Woddis, "Taking a Blasting," *Herald*, 24 January 1995, 20.
75. Dragan Klaić, *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 3–4.
76. Kane, 10.
77. While not new to feminism, this notion has been most recently taken up by feminist disability scholars, as in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's foundational essay "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Disability Theory*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 13–47, at 34.
78. Kane, 55.
79. *Ibid.*, 4, 23.
80. *Ibid.*, 57.
81. *Ibid.*, 61.
82. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 10–11.
83. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
84. Phelan, 163.
85. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 334.
86. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 37.