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Seven Minutes to Infinity: Defining the Black Play

Suzan-Lori Parks' essay "New black math" is as undefinable as the undefinable Black play she plays at defining. The essay contradicts itself at every turn: She writes that "a black play is late" but "RIGHT ON and RIGHT ON TIME," "does not exist" but is "every play," "tragic" but "funny as hell" (Parks 576, 577, 582). Parks, through her contradictions, argues that a Black play is tired of being pinned down by interpretation, by study—the performance of study, a performance that must make sense of everything that comes under its eye.

For our Aesthetic Scholarship assignment, we wanted to make a show of defining the undefinable Black play—a show, merely, because to try and define an undefinable thing would be madness. How, we wondered, could we make meaning from something that at once wants meaning, as a work of art, and at once does not, as the subject of constant scrutiny?

Our solution came from Lorraine Hansberry. In Harry J. Elam's article "The Device of Race," Hansberry's character of Tshembe explains that race and racism are devices that gain meaning only when acted upon (5). They become relevant only when put in context with something else, that something else being the present world. We, then, would be the actors upon these devices, and we would create meanings all our own. Following this logic, we divided the play, which we titled "The Crossing," into five chapters, each depicting a moment that attempts but fails to fully define a Black play.

In the first chapter, we stand in a circle, facing each other, and say a line while turning to the audience. We reveal ourselves, but the reveal shudders with uncertainty—we question our performance and our identity, and we question if and how the two differ. The first chapter sets up the rest of the play: We establish the underlying questions and rules, but we have not come much closer to defining reality. My own line—"cause the presence of the white suggests the presence of the black"—hints at a way out: It suggests that we do not need a formal definition of reality to understand reality on an implicit level (Parks 580).

The second chapter comes from us crossing a small stream on the beach as we were working on the play. The stream was trivial to cross—it was only a few inches deep and a few feet wide—but most of us did not want to get our shoes and socks wet. Sam bypassed the issue by just taking off her shoes and socks and walking through the water. I thought the experience served as a neat parallel to the line "but we gotta crack the heart wide open cause when it healed up last time it healed up wrong" (Parks 581). That is, the reason most of us did not want to—or care to—cross was because we did not want to muddy ourselves in righting past wrongs. My line, coupled with my next line of not wanting to get sand in my shoes, therefore serves as useless posturing. Sam's crossing suggests that, rather than spending so much time thinking, it's better to endure momentary discomfort and just do it—though the play fails to define what "it" is, exactly.

The next chapter concerns Sam, a stand-up comedian, attempting to tackle the issue of defining a Black play head-on. However, the audience laughs her off the stage before she can even start, mainly because the audience members find it ridiculous to attribute specific and finite qualities to a Black play. But the humor is not uniform—when I perform this part, I topple onto

the ground, and my laughter slowly fades into something resembling a sob. The matter of what a Black play is, after all, remains unresolved.

The fourth chapter has us all recite part of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "The Fisher Child's Lullaby." We rock about as though on a ship in the sea, packed tightly together, lamenting the Middle Passage to slavery and "a home set sail" (Robinson 333; Dunbar 114). According to Beverly Robinson's article "The Sense of Self in Ritualizing New Performance Spaces for Survival," Africans kidnapped to the Americas would perform rituals, such as song and dance, as a way to preserve their culture and make their sadness more bearable (333–334). Robinson also writes that Africans would sometimes kill newborns "to spare them life as slaves," which could be a dark interpretation of Dunbar's line "sleep you, my little one" in an ostensibly lighthearted nursery rhyme (Robinson 333; Dunbar 114).

The fifth and final chapter blurs the line between play and reality by setting the events inside a classroom—that is, where the audience is currently located. We imitate a typical English 176ML class—a professor and students of various dispositions, ranging from cautiously enthusiastic to perhaps not quite there. I play the contrarian, and my actions attempt to be as disruptive as possible—loud slams, dramatic statements, and so on. This chapter ties back to the first in that it reintroduces the uncertainty that the intervening chapters moved to dispel; my statements, such as "sometimes you can walk a hundred miles and end up in the same spot," complicate the statements of the other characters (Parks 576). We also explicitly introduce the concept of the device, but in terms of theater. I quote from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for added flair and to extend the concept of chaos beyond the play (5.5.25–27). The final line, spoken in unison, attempts to tie together all of our interpretations into one, and opens the possibility of lasting change through listening and learning.

Our play tries to squash infinity into a box. It begins and ends broadly, with specific moments in between that link the crossing from start to finish. Elam's cultural traditions, cultural memory, and performance as aspects of Black play come into play in the midpoint, in which we depict humor and melancholy in performance as coping mechanisms for centuries of exploitation and torchlights in the "struggle to remember" (9). We also explore the performance of race as "twice-behaved behavior" by repeating quotes from Black writers and thinkers throughout the play, as well as a quote from Shakespeare (Elam 13). But infinity is infinite—neither seven minutes nor seven centuries can convey the breadth of Black experience. All we can do is crack and crack the heart wide open, and cross and cross and cross, and muddy our feet from Africa to America and back again, and hope it all means something.

Works Cited

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