Chapter 4

“Everything Is Everywhere”
Viral Performance Networks

In March 2003, the theater-makers Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower organized approximately one thousand simultaneous readings of Aristophanes’s fifth-century B.C. comedy Lysistrata. The event, which evolved over two months of development and came to be known as the Lysistrata Project, was conceived as a protest against the impending U.S. invasion of Iraq. Initially, Blume and Bower had no idea how many people would participate: “We didn’t ever think we would get up to a thousand,” says Blume. “We weren’t shooting for all 50 states, or every continent, but after a while, it just started building.” Before long, and especially after National Public Radio aired an interview with the pair, the project was inundated with participants. Blume remembers being surprised by “the pace at which we were adding new readings all the time,” she says. “And the scope, the number of states, and the number of places in the world, that I hadn’t even heard of.”

Participants in the Lysistrata Project have similar memories of the project’s speedy dissemination. Robert Neblett, who coordinated readings of Lysistrata in St. Louis and held a reading of his own adaptation of Aristophanes’s play, recalls that the network of fellow participants grew exponentially in the weeks leading up to the performances. “Once I became part of the Project, I heard about it everywhere I read—on Playbill.com, in American Theatre magazine, on the ATHE listserv. The more I heard about it and its goals, the more I was proud to have jumped on board in the early stages of the appeal for participants.”

That same year, from November 2002 to November 2003, the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks had embarked on a marathon project in which she wrote one play each day, all year. The results of Parks’s experiment, 365 mini-dramas (plus three “constants” to be performed alongside them at any time), became a yearlong national festival, in which artists and theaters around the country staged a week each of Parks’s plays, from November 2006 to November 2007. About two years later, Caryl Churchill’s short play Seven Jewish Children ignited political controversy when it premiered at London’s Royal Court Theatre, and then became the catalyst for an emerging political
and artistic network when artists and activists began rewriting and restaging the dramatic text, revising it to reflect their own politics and performing it both for live audiences and dispersed spectators in cyberspace.

These three projects—all of which both employed and created performance networks—were not only designed to “go viral.” They were, conceptually, viral from the start, representing their creators’ desires to make performances that were reiterated and reproduced many times over, available to potentially limitless numbers of artists and spectators. In this chapter, I explore theatrical networks as potent instances of twenty-first-century viral performance, viewing viral dissemination as a fundamental element of these three projects’ artistic and political aims. In each case, local productions drew much of their artistic and political charge from performers’ and spectators’ consciousness of the many other virtually linked performances unfolding simultaneously elsewhere. In each case, too, themes and imagery within the plays aligned with the structures of production and performance. These performance networks were mobilized as forms of political resistance, marshaling performing bodies together as a means of protesting violence and war. Each project, in its own way, pitted the power of geographically dispersed, conceptually connected artistic acts against global networks of military and economic power. Each also, implicitly or explicitly, explored the gendered nature of power and
violence; it is no coincidence that all three projects were created or organized by women theater artists.

Viral culture and networked structures of dissemination are, in twenty-first-century media discourse, inherently linked. The nodes and edges that comprise networks are created by, among other forces, the contagious spread of ideas and actions; and those structures, in turn, provide lines of communication through which “viruses” of all kinds flow. In a 2007 article describing the role of “the viral” in a digitally networked society, Jussi Parikka makes this connection explicit, arguing that “the viral can be seen as a mode of action inherently connected to the complex, non-linear order of network society marked by transversal infections and parasitical relationships.” Parsing the intimate connection between the conceptual structures of the virus and the network, Parikka builds on Hardt and Negri’s well-known statement that “the age of globalization is the age of universal contagion” to argue that “universal contagion” is a flexible concept: neither implying, solely, a network defined by centralized control (as, in his view, Hardt and Negri believed the network society to be), nor one that is inherently democratic in structure. Rather, and significantly for my argument here, he suggests that viral contagion must simply be seen as the essential mode of economic and social connection in the twenty-first century. “The age of universal contagion, then, is not restricted to a negative notion of a vampire or a hostile virus,” he writes, “but rests on the notion that viral patterns of movement characterize the turbulent spaces of networks as a very primary logic.” Imagining, together, the virus and the network—or the virus in the network—clarifies the social and artistic significance that performance networks held for Parks and for the Lysistrata Project organizers, and the significance of the network that Seven Jewish Children created.

Viral dissemination was essential to the formation of each network. Though the image of a “network” can imply a constellation that is already established, its nodes identified and linked to one another, with data coursing seamlessly through it, this is not how any of the projects under discussion evolved. While avenues of communication were shaped by existing relationships, none had emerged as a performance network before the Lysistrata Project, 365 Days/365 Plays, and Seven Jewish Children summoned them into being. To the contrary, each of these projects spread using at least some measure of spontaneous viral expansion. 365/365 gained participants as increasing numbers of theaters learned about the project and expressed interest in taking part. In an essay about her work as coproducer and archivist of the festival, Rebecca Rugg notes that after announcing plans for 365/365, the producers quickly “began to field interest from outside the United States,” to which they responded by creating the festival’s international network, 365 Global. Likewise, in a New York Times article, Campbell Robertson recounts that although Parks and the producer Bonnie Metzgar initially envisioned seven regional hubs, “after Ms. Metzgar raised the idea at national theater
conferences over the summer, the phones started ringing.” This resulted in an expansion to fourteen networks around the country. Similarly, the organizers of the Lysistrata Project had no idea how many theaters or political groups would sign on. Caryl Churchill’s play went viral largely without planning, as it was not only produced by theater groups and read aloud at demonstrations and town hall meetings, but also inspired artists and activists to write their own versions of the play, to be performed live or posted online.

In this chapter, I propose that embodied networks—those created and inhabited by live, performing bodies, those employed as modes of resistance to other, less easily visible networks of power—contribute significantly to contemporary discourse about the social and political properties of viral networks. Network theorists, both before and after the ubiquitous association of networks with digital culture, have frequently explored the politics of networked structures of communication, and the types of communication such structures imply. Bruno Latour, founding philosopher of actor-network theory, has argued that the era of digital networks inspired a profound shift in the term’s meaning. Before the digital era, he wrote, “the word network . . . clearly meant a series of transformations—translations, transductions—which could not be captured by any of the traditional terms of social theory.” And yet “with the new popularization of the word network,” Latour continued, “it now means transport without deformation.” Such questions about the nature of the network have profound implications for the performance networks described here, which in many ways staked their success on the openness of networks to difference, and on the power of networks to reshape the social structures of the theater world. The critic Benjamin Piekut, whose recent book Experimentalism Otherwise employs network theory to describe relationships among experimental music composers in the 1960s, builds on Latour’s idea by proposing that “a network, then, describes a formation not simply of connected things (as we might assume in the post–World Wide Web era) but of differences that are mediated by connections that translate these differences into equivalences.” Such acts of translation take on added significance when the points of connection are performances: events unfolding in the present tense, necessarily altered through acts of interpretation, embodiment, and spectatorship.

Other scholars have argued that contemporary society as a whole, not simply specific communities or digital subcultures, must be viewed through the lens of network theory. In their 2007 study The Exploit, the media theorists Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker argue that politically and economically powerful forces—governments, media outlets, corporations—rely on various kinds of networks, channels by which information and capital are distributed, to assert and maintain their positions of dominance. Galloway and Thacker use the term “control society” to identify this sociopolitical landscape, understanding contemporary Western society as a civic arena organized and ruled by networks: political, technological, biological, and social.
But networks are not always ordered or centralized, and they do not always serve dominant economic forces. The more thoroughly networked a society becomes, Galloway and Thacker argue, the more quickly and pervasively can its networks be co-opted by subversive forces. Their description of such an interconnected culture is worth quoting at length, since it establishes the centrality of viral modes of communication and dissemination to contemporary networked culture:

Inside the dense web of distributed networks, it would appear that *everything is everywhere*—the consequence of a worldview that leaves little room between the poles of the global and the local. Biological viruses are transferred via airlines between Guangdong Province and Toronto in a matter of hours, and computer viruses are transferred via data lines from Seattle to Saigon in a matter of seconds. But more important, the solutions to these various maladies are also designed for and deployed over the same networks—online software updates to combat e-mail worms, and medical surveillance networks to combat emerging infectious diseases. The network, it appears, has emerged as a dominant form describing the nature of control today, as well as resistance to it.¹¹

The advent of networked technology has also led to highly optimistic interpretations of the possibilities that networked communications or social structures can offer. In his 2004 book *The Laws of Cool*, Alan Liu observes that many theorists of technology have argued that a networked society implicitly invites decentralized power and offers more freedom to marginalized groups of people. Elucidating this “emancipatory” view, he writes, “the decentralization thesis held that networks are innately antihierarchical, empowering to the individual user, and therefore democratic.”¹² These ideas have even extended to new visions for the reorganization of labor and power relations in a networked economy. Liu cites the theorist Don Tapscott, who frames his predictions in near-utopian terms, writing that “the crowning achievement of networking human intelligence could be the creation of a true democracy,” and adding, “rather than an all-powerful centralized government, arrogating decisions to itself, governments can be based on the networked intelligence of people.”¹³

Many of the performance projects I discuss here operate in such a utopian register, particularly *365 Days/365 Plays*, in which “radical inclusion” constituted a central premise and primary production strategy. Rugg describes this concept, as understood by herself, Metzgar, Parks, and the other festival producers:

Radical inclusion is a notion different from plain, unadorned inclusion. “Inclusion” smacks of liberal good intentions and is related to
strategies for community building like outreach, which often involves
an unexamined notion of center, magnanimously inviting the edge
or margin to participate but not to lead, to attend but not to orga-
nize . . . Radical inclusion, on the other hand, involves destabilizing
the comfortable polarities of center and margin.14

Radical inclusion, like utopian visions for technological networks, proposes
to level artistic, geographical, and economic hierarchies. The three perfor-
mance projects discussed in this chapter actively sought to eliminate standard
economic factors affecting theatrical production: distributing scripts for free,
insisting that no admission be charged, and fostering a performance culture
in which low-tech (or no-tech) productions in unconventional performance
spaces were celebrated equally with fully produced stagings at major the-
aters. Digital networks were essential to this mode of production, allowing
for the coordination of participating artists across state lines and time zones.

In some cases, the performance projects under discussion in this chapter
have not only attempted to foster inclusive, democratic artistic networks,
but have also offered direct resistance to other, more powerful networks of
political control. Such was the case with the 2003 Lysistrata Project, which
launched a linked series of readings of Aristophanes’s antiwar comedy in
response to the United States’s imminent invasion of Iraq— itself, of course,
the geopolitical mobilization of a network, a “coalition of the willing,”
against a perceived network of enemy powers. Others, such as 365 Days/365
Plays, had less explicit policy aims, but resisted established modes of artistic
organization in many ways: the project sought to create a virtually linked
artistic community, extending to places where none had existed before, and
to reduce the economic pressures affecting new productions and premieres
across the country. Seven Jewish Children did not operate through an official
network of producing organizations, but summoned a network of dispersed
activists and artists into being— often blurring the lines between artists and
activists—and created a network of plays and productions in dialogue with
each other at live performance events and online.

Though Galloway and Thacker do not explicitly theorize performance
networks, their description of networked society contains an observation
that aptly reflects the power that networked theater holds for its creators.
“Perhaps if there is one truism to the study of networks,” they write, “it is
that networks are only networks when they are ‘live,’ when they are enacted,
embodied, or rendered operational.”15 This idea is particularly suggestive for
thinking about theatrical networks, which are literally live (literally enacted,
literally operational), making their structures and connections tangible in
ways that other media rarely can. These projects are case studies in viral
networking that, to borrow Galloway and Thacker’s concept, are inher-
ently physical; digitally connected, yet manifestly live. In turn, they suggest
a new theatrical form: the viral performance network, in which individual
productions make up an enormous, often rapidly expanding constellation of performances. Actors’ and spectators’ consciousness of simultaneity—of other performances unfolding across geographical space—becomes a central theatrical element in these projects. Numbers and scale become dramaturgical form.

“The First-Ever Worldwide Theatrical Act of Dissent”: The Lysistrata Project

*Lysistrata*, first written and performed at the Lenaia Festival, the Athenian festival of comedy, in the early spring of 411 B.C., has a long history as a vehicle for protest performances. The play’s original production took place at a time when Athens was deeply embroiled in the Peloponnesian War; in fact, only seven years after *Lysistrata* premiered, the Athenians would surrender to Sparta for good, and see their civic life and theatrical culture largely dismantled. By 411 B.C., Athens was already beginning to crumble. Sparta had recently taken control of the city’s surrounding farmlands, cutting Athenians off from agricultural supplies and forcing them to retreat within the guarded city walls. Aristophanes’s play was urgently topical: his tale, in which an alliance of Athenian and Spartan women bring peace to the warring cities by staging a sex boycott against their husbands, addressed itself to a public that was intensely involved in conflict, and aware of the dangers of ongoing war.

Given the historical circumstances surrounding the writing of *Lysistrata*, scholars have debated the play’s intended political effect: Aristophanes’s drama could hardly have been clearer about the need for an end to the Peloponnesian War, and the play appears, on its surface, to be a pacifist parable, making the case for Athenian-Spartan collaboration in order to restore domestic bliss to both societies. But, as many have pointed out, Athens was so fully embroiled in war by the time *Lysistrata* was performed that playwright as politically savvy as Aristophanes could hardly have believed that a plea for cooperation between the city-states would be taken seriously. “If he did,” writes H. D. Westlake, one exponent of this view, “he must have been strangely blind to the realities of the situation, which were only too obvious to others, or else unreasonably optimistic.” The play’s gleeful proposal that sexual subterfuge could convince armies into laying down their weapons, fantastical in its own time, has been equally fantastical since.

It has also been highly appealing to playwrights, directors, and composers over the last three hundred years. Marivaux wrote a version of *Lysistrata*, as did Schubert, and the play was reshaped into an opera repeatedly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These early adaptations, though still sexually explicit enough to be frequent targets of censorship, were usually less politically topical than the ancient Greek original, but twentieth-century directors were more overt in pitching *Lysistrata* toward political ends. A 1958
Italian version reset the play during the Cold War, with Athens and Sparta reimagined as the United States and the Soviet Union, while in 1960, the State Theatre in Bucharest presented a pacifist *Lysistrata* in which the protagonist is a slave fighting for her own freedom.\(^{21}\) In 1967, students at Wayne State University protested the Vietnam War in their musical adaptation, entitled *Lysistrata & The War*.\(^ {22}\)

It is fitting, then, that a play that has been summoned up time after time as a parable of dissent became the basis for the viral network created by Kathryn Blume and her collaborators in 2003 to protest the United States’s imminent invasion of Iraq. Blume had been considering *Lysistrata’s* possibilities as a protest play for years, and was planning to adapt it for other political ends, turning it into a screenplay designed to protest global warming. “My idea was to write a modern environmental version,” she recalls in an article about the creation of the Lysistrata Project, “a sex boycott to save the planet.”\(^ {23}\) That screenplay was still unfinished when, one Saturday in early January 2003, Blume received an email from THAW—Theaters Against the War, an alliance of New York-based theater companies organizing protests against the Bush administration’s planned invasion of Iraq. THAW was calling for a “national day of action” to take place that March, and asking theater companies to help by placing antiwar materials in their printed programs and on their websites, and by making curtain speeches in protest of the imminent war. Blume, inspired to participate, decided to stage a reading of *Lysistrata*.

By the following morning, Blume was in conversation with a collaborator, Sharron Bower of the Mint Theater, and the two had decided to stage their reading as a benefit, sending all proceeds to the organizations EPIC (Education for Peace in Iraq Center) and MADRE, which works for women’s rights around the world. They quickly realized that MADRE’s celebrity spokesperson was Susan Sarandon, an actress that Blume had fantasized about casting as Lysistrata in her own unfinished screenplay. This discovery prompted Blume and Bower to begin imagining their staged reading more ambitiously: what if they attempted to recruit celebrities for the cast, and what if they organized not one *Lysistrata*, but many *Lysistratas*, for THAW’s simultaneous day of action?

The resulting project—in which Blume and Bower coordinated hundreds of simultaneous readings of the play on March 3, 2003—constituted not just an outcry against the seemingly inevitable push toward war, but more particularly a viral outcry, one that echoed and subverted the networks of power that were mobilizing the country for conflict. In the play, withheld female sexuality provokes a kind of contagious lust among warring Athenian and Spartan men, forcing them to broker a truce, and the Lysistrata Project’s organizers aimed to inspire a similarly contagious response, using virally replicable performances to counter public apathy and fear.

Bower and Blume began by setting up a website with a “How-To” kit for staging readings of *Lysistrata*, including press releases, logos for companies
to use on marketing materials, and contact information for anyone interested in finding out more.24 Then they began sending invitations to participate to everyone they knew. When I spoke with her in September 2012—nearly ten years later—Blume recalled the elation she felt over the initial flood of communications about the project. “The day after we sent the email,” she says, “we heard from a woman in Iowa about [participating in the project]. She had received two forwards of the email: one from Delaware, and one from London.”25 Lysistrata was already everywhere.

Within a couple of weeks, Blume says, “we knew it was going viral.”26 To her and her co-organizers, no other concept could have adequately described the rate at which news of the Lysistrata Project spread, and the geographical distances it covered. “It was definitely an Internet-era project,” says Blume. “There’s no way, pre-Internet, that something like this could have happened, start to finish, in two months. The speed was extraordinary and the reach was extraordinary.”27 At the time, Blume says she knew of only one recent project that had sought to create simultaneous linked performances: Eve Ensler’s The Vagina Monologues, which, after its premiere, had catalyzed a theatrical network, encouraging artists around the world to stage the play on Valentine’s Day as a celebration of women’s bodies and a protest against gendered violence.

The Vagina Monologues figures as an important predecessor to all of the projects described in this chapter, not only for its networked performance model, but also because, even more explicitly than these examples, it was a gendered event, an embodied network created to address questions of the sexualized body. A documentary-style drama compiled from Ensler’s interviews with women about their sexuality, experiences of rape and abuse, and about cultural taboos surrounding female genitalia, The Vagina Monologues opened in 1994 for an off-Broadway run. In 1998, inspired by the production’s success, Ensler founded V-Day, an international organization dedicated to ending violence against girls and women, primarily through annual networked performances of The Vagina Monologues each February.28 The first V-Day event, a benefit reading of the play in New York’s Hammerstein Ballroom featuring celebrity performers, raised $250,000 and allowed Ensler to formally launch the V-Day organization. Following this influx of donated capital, the producers of V-Day—like the artists examined in this chapter—chose to circumvent the conventional economics of theatrical production. The organization allows artists and activists to perform The Vagina Monologues free of royalty payments, provided that participants adhere to a few central requirements: that performances occur during February; that participants coordinate their work with other V-Day event organizers; and that the proceeds from ticket sales be donated to local organizations working in opposition to gender-based violence.29 V-Day has become an annual tradition, and in 2016 the organization reported performances of The Vagina Monologues in 767 locations across 48 countries.30
Yet even as it promoted conversation about female sexuality and gender-based violence, the discourse surrounding V-Day has been complex. Critiques of the project, as I see it, are significant because they register the multiple meanings that networked performance structures can hold: the democratic potential of networks, as well as the possibilities (even inadvertent) that networks can promote homogenization and centralized control. In a 2007 *Signs* essay, Christine M. Cooper notes that standardization has been important for the distribution of the monologues, pointing out that each organization wishing to stage a V-Day performance must perform the most recent edition of the text (which is updated annually), with no alterations or omissions. More than this, Cooper suggests, as a play originally produced in an era rife with anxiety about the feminist movement’s decline, *The Vagina Monologues* served as more of a half-measure than a full-throated defense of women’s rights. The play, she writes, advocated a form of easily palatable feminism that homogenized as much as it diversified; that promoted an overly essentialized equivalence among vagina, sexuality, and self; and that, in its monological structure, dampened dialogue and diminished difference. “Collapsing vagina and self, the monologues reify a universal ontology of womanhood,” she writes. Likewise, Sealing Cheng’s 2009 essay “Questioning Global Vaginahood” critiques what Cheng describes as a “core-periphery relationship” between the V-Day organization and participants worldwide. I note such critiques because they reveal the contradictions inherent to networked structures, and more specifically to embodied networks—the tensions between local difference and geographically dispersed sameness, and between embodied, live performances and virtually dispersed performance structures. And, it is worth noting, such tensions do not play out in inherently binary terms: embodied performances, too, can promote sameness; and virtual networks, as this chapter demonstrates, can create space for difference. Such tensions are significant because they are central to the meanings held by the networks explored in this chapter: as in, for instance, 365 Days/365 Plays, whose organizers sought to replace a “core-periphery relationship” with “radical inclusion”; or *Seven Jewish Children*, in which virtual circulation created space for individual dissent.

Though it set the model for, in some ways, all of these ventures, V-Day—having begun as a single off-Broadway production, and produced a star-studded benefit before constructing a network—was not viral in quite the same way as the projects that follow. The *Lysistrata* network was conceived differently, Blume explains, because it was intended to be grassroots from the start. Rather than aiming for a high-profile first production, she and her collaborators would consciously attempt to make the barriers to participation as low as possible to begin with. As a result, on March 3, 2003, a little over two weeks before the United States invaded Iraq, community groups and theaters staged a total of 1,029 readings of *Lysistrata*. There was at least one reading in every U.S. state, and some states boasted hundreds, in

There were readings in China, Greece, and England, and an international reading was orchestrated via simultaneous streaming video. According to the Lysistrata Project’s online archive, approximately 300,000 people attended the readings that day. Performances were held in a range of theatrical and nontheatrical locations: in cafés, schools, parks, community centers, and on subway platforms, as well as in conventional theater spaces.

Blume and Bower encouraged theaters to collect donations for antiwar organizations and charities—both their chosen beneficiaries and those of local artists’ preference—and their archive boasts a total of $125,000 raised for MADRE, EPIC, and other nonprofit groups chosen by individual theaters.

The readings thus (if in a small way) constructed an alternative route of economic transmission, channeling antiwar dollars to counter the mechanisms of pro-war capital.

Stagings of *Lysistrata* varied in scale and artistic emphasis. In a video of a performance staged in Mexico City by the Mexican playwright and director Jesusa Rodriguez, large flats displayed life-size drawings of “classical” Greek figures, clothed in togas and arranged in tableaux, with cutouts for live performers’ faces and hands to peek through. The effect, with the actors’ bodies almost entirely concealed behind two-dimensional line drawings, gives the impression of a contemporary political agenda emerging from behind the veil of a well-known myth. The Messenger Theatre Company, in New York
City, presented puppet versions of *Lysistrata* in Grand Central Station and on the sidewalk across from the United Nations plaza. The female characters wore masks shaped like giant pairs of lips, while the male characters wore masks depicting cannons and guns.  

A documentary about the project, *Operation Lysistrata*, contains footage from a selection of the readings that took place around the world on that day. Many of these are similar in their makeshift simplicity: a group gathered in a Seattle public square wore white sheets draped around their shoulders, and gestured flamboyantly as they shouted the play’s dialogue amid the noise of passersby, while a group in New South Wales wore black robes and featured a male Lysistrata sporting a pale blue mop on his head. A group of women performing the play outdoors in lower Manhattan wore winter coats, with paper party hats strapped over their chests, creating colorful, exaggeratedly conical breasts. At a performance in San Francisco, the stage was adorned in plastic American flags. A group in Venice, California, was costumed in lingerie and wore exaggerated makeup and wigs in cotton-candy pink. There were topical references (one actor, playing an angry Athenian man, interrupted Aristophanes’s dialogue to announce that he was raising the terror alert to “code orange”). And there were celebrity participants (the cast of the soap opera *Guiding Light* held a reading).  

Viewed together, the similarities among the productions outweigh the differences, and suggest that the makeshift, boisterous, unfussy ethos of the network’s organizers permeated, at least a little bit, the network itself. (If any single aesthetic decision ties the many protests together, it is most likely their effort to represent the angry male chorus’s erect phalli onstage, something that appears even in many productions that employed no other costumes or props. Phallic balloons and stuffed stockings were popular strategies, and appeared frequently in news coverage of the events. The play’s bodily humor thus, in a sense, rendered the project itself more hilariously newsworthy, assisting in its dissemination.)  

One of these versions of *Lysistrata*, created by the Montreal-based theater artist Donovan King, suggests that Blume and Bower were not the only participants who saw the project as an overtly viral one. King, after signing on to participate, decided to use the event as an occasion to stage a media stunt that would skewer the Bush administration’s War on Terror messaging, and turn his reading of *Lysistrata* into a theatrical infiltration of sorts. King described his approach in detail in a section of his University of Calgary master’s thesis, recounting that on the afternoon of March 3, his cast assembled in front of the American Consulate in Montreal, dressed as public officials and FBI agents. (The real consulate staff, upon seeing the performers arrive, locked the doors to the building and watched through the windows, while their security cameras captured every detail of the proceedings.)  

Once situated in front of the consulate, King—wearing a cowboy hat and speaking with a George W. Bush twang—began to warn the crowd of a fast-moving epidemic, a series of thousands of performances of the play
Lysistrata, spreading quickly across North America. His speech satirized national security warnings, and cast the project in deliberately viral terms:

We recently received information about a cell, in New York City, which was using the Internet for their agenda of destruction. Calling themselves “The Lysistrata Project,” they are distinctly un-American. And a threat to our security. It started off as one “reading” in early January, set up by Sharron Bower and Kathryn Blume. What started off as an idea to stage some theater, has managed to somehow spread like a virus . . . This dang thing is spreading like a disease; it’s not stopping at borders, and attacking the very values that we as Americans hold close to our hearts. Our Intelligence Officials have traced this thing back to FRANCE.43

This tongue-in-cheek security warning continued, as King went on to blame the dangerously viral properties of live performance on a French “terrorist” he’d “discovered” named Antonin Artaud, who, King reported, had notoriously compared the theater to the plague.44 “Now we all know that the Plague is a deadly virus, and we all know that viruses are Biological,” King went on to say. “The Lysistrata Project, ladies and gentlemen, is a Biological Weapon of Mass Destruction.”45 Maintaining his George W. Bush persona, King reassured spectators that his team had intercepted the plans of a group of actors intending to stage Lysistrata that afternoon, and that the performance had been prevented.

Then King’s collaborators took over, staging a mock intervention. A fellow cast member emerged out of the crowd and smashed a pie in King’s face, while the “FBI” officers turned on him and began wrapping him in plastic and duct tape. The remaining actors then rushed in from among the audience, and began to perform an abbreviated version of Lysistrata.46 The play, in this iteration, was turned into a performance-within-a-guerrilla-performance, viral in multiple ways—as an act of infiltrative theater, and as part of a worldwide theatrical network.

Even when framed by less overtly self-conscious production strategies, Lysistrata was an apt choice for an antiwar performance project, not only for its explicit themes, but also for its interrogation of the nature of networks and their relationships to violence, power, and gender. In the Greek comedy, the female populations of Athens, Sparta, and other war-torn city-states establish an unsanctioned political coalition, intervening in the workings of the official institutions that have sent their husbands to war. They physically occupy the Acropolis, the seat of Athens’s democratic power, and lock the treasury, taking control of the powerful city’s public finances. Next, and most famously, they make a compact to deny their husbands sex until a truce is concluded. Much of the play consists of an extended standoff between male and female choruses, as the women become more powerful and the men
become increasingly physically frustrated. The play pits two very different forms of networks against each other: a militarized male network and a subterranean domestic female network. By enforcing mass abstinence, Lysistrata and her followers render sexuality contagious in its absence: it is not sex acts that are infectious, but rather performances of sexuality, which make women’s bodies irresistible through their unavailability. (In one scene, Lysistrata trains the women to make themselves as attractive as possible; the results are particularly evident in the sequence in which the character Myrrhine teases her husband, Kinesias, delaying sex again and again.) In the 2003 readings, artists repeatedly emphasized this humorous bodily drama.

In staging a play that foregrounds bodily needs, the organizers also gestured obliquely to the darker physical confrontation unfolding offstage on the battlefield. Aristophanes invokes images of contagion and contamination repeatedly, to describe both the horrors of war and the angst the women have visited upon their husbands. Lysistrata advocates “cleansing” Athens of its involvement in war, and at one point the women’s chorus takes this injunction literally, dousing the men with pitchers of water. Later, Lysistrata declares that the city must be washed clean of “all corruption, offal, and sheepdip.” In answer, the male chorus takes up similar imagery, but reverses the alleged source of contamination. They complain that “this trouble may be terminal; it has a loaded odor, an ominous aroma of constitutional rot,” and conclude that Spartans must have infiltrated the Athenian women’s social networks, creating disorder of epidemic proportions:

Predictably infected,
These women straightway acted
To commandeer the City’s cash. They’re feverish to freeze
My be-all,
My end-all,
My payroll!

The men accuse their wives of forging a subversive network with Athens’s enemies, employing the imagery of contagion to describe female interventions in both the democratic institutions of governance and the financial institutions that assure Athenian power. But it is actually the men who are infected: first with the urge to fight, then with desire. As the play’s eventual return to the happy status quo suggests, sexuality constitutes a contaminant only when it exceeds or subverts its containment in marriage. The real social infection here is war.

Aristophanes presents a more conservative conclusion to this standoff than is often registered in performances that employ the play as an antiwar vehicle. Although the female network—overtly subversive, and strategically more intelligent than the male—is ostensibly victorious, the women also part ways, dismantling their organization when its antiwar goals have been achieved, and
reconfiguring themselves, with their husbands, into conventional domestic pairings. (Also worth noting is Lysistrata’s suggestion that Athens and Sparta unite in order to better fight more distant and powerful enemies; this is no paean to pacifism.) Lysistrata herself falls silent in the play’s final moments, suggesting that the subversive female network was, in fine comic tradition, a departure from ordinary life that served to reinforce its hierarchies.

Though the original play dramatizes a reversion to the status quo, the Lysistrata Project, in practice, suggested that radical networks can leave legacies, both in the form of new artistic relationships and in the form of new performance models. As with the other pieces to be discussed here, this project is significant not only for its creation of a network, bit by bit, as it went viral over the course of several weeks, but also because it revealed social constellations that already existed. Blume and Bower created a website, sent out an email, and hoped the word would spread. As new participants emerged and the roster of readings grew, the project illuminated lines of communication and political sympathy that had been already in existence, waiting to be made active. This principle applies, too, to 365 Days/365 Plays and especially to Seven Jewish Children: the networks in these projects are latent, waiting for new forms of viral expansion to render them embodied and live.

Then, too, interviews with participants in the project suggest that viral performance networks lend an invisible but palpable power to the individual performances they comprise. Whether or not participants were influenced directly by other artists’ interpretive choices (and Blume believes that mostly they were not: rehearsal periods were too short to allow for much consultation), each individual performance within the Lysistrata network was, I argue, altered by the sheer potency of its association with the hundreds of other performances taking place on the same day. Performances were received differently by audiences, and imagined differently by creators, because of their awareness of the larger network. Robert Neblett recalls:

> When we began the reading that night in March 2003, knowing that we were doing so alongside famous Broadway actors in New York, film stars in LA, Afghan women in their living rooms, colleges across Europe, and even a second local reading in St. Louis, there was an incredible sense of community that meant we were not the only ones who felt this way about what was going on in the world.  

Sheila Cohen Tissot, who organized a French-language reading of Lysistrata in Paris that day, echoes Neblett’s assessment. “It filled me with hope to know that people all around the world were joining forces at the same moment to express a shared desire for peace,” she remembered. Blume remembers a similar feeling; she recalls receiving an email from a woman who played Lysistrata, describing an overwhelming sense of kinship with all the other women who were playing the same role on the same day.
Years after the Lysistrata Project was over, Blume was contacted by an artist who proposed to revive the event: not just to restage a reading of *Lysistrata*, but to reawaken the network itself, to stage a second series of linked performances of the play. The mere suggestion of this possibility (which, to my knowledge, has not yet been realized) registers the change that viral networks have wrought in contemporary conceptions of performance. A play can go viral, a performance can create a network, and that network can become an inextricable element of the performance itself.

The Interconnectedness of All Things: 365 Days/365 Plays

The 365 Days/365 Plays festival was partially inspired by producer Bonnie Metzgar’s experiences working with the National New Play Network, an organization founded in 1998 with the aim of expanding the circulation of new plays among nonprofit theaters around the country—increasing the chances that a playwright’s work would receive multiple productions rather than an isolated premiere. Drawing on this model, Metzgar and Parks conceived a performance strategy for Parks’s mini-dramas: they would produce a networked series of premieres across the country over an entire calendar year, promoting an ethos of “radical inclusion.” They were, by any measure, successful. More than 800 theater companies produced Parks’s plays between November 2006 and November 2007.

The national network was organized around regional hubs, which included the Public Theater in New York, the Center Theater Group in Los Angeles, and an alliance of several institutions including the Goodman and Steppenwolf theaters in Chicago. Each hub was charged with recruiting and coordinating productions among fifty-two “satellite” theaters, one for each week of premieres, in their area. While some of these regional partnerships already existed, others—such as the La Colectiva network based in San Antonio, Texas—were assembled for the purposes of producing 365 Days/365 Plays. La Colectiva eventually also included theater groups that were founded specifically to participate in the project. In addition to this roster of professional and community theaters, 365/365 boasted a national network of college campus productions, and a network of deaf theaters producing the plays.

The organizers sought to complement geographical inclusivity with economic inclusivity. Parks and Metzgar allowed theaters to purchase production rights for one dollar, and in order to encourage attendance, also mandated that artists forgo charging admission. Parks has described this system as “negative money,” aligning it with the donation-driven economics of the Lysistrata Project and, as I will discuss later, *Seven Jewish Children*. This decision alone—the choice to eliminate, as much as possible, financial barriers to both theatrical producing and theater attendance—suggests how deeply
immersed in a utopian idea of network the creators of 365 Days/365 Plays were. Parks, as a Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright, could have commanded substantial ticket prices, and could have offered her dramas to major theaters for fully realized productions. Instead, whatever might stand in the way of potential audience members’ attendance at the hundreds of performances of Parks’s plays, it would not be cost. Network theorists might agree with the producers’ focus on money: the controlling forces of capitalism constitute, according to Galloway and Thacker, the dominant network in a twenty-first-century control society. Such forces also traditionally govern the creation of theater projects in the United States, where fund-raising, marketing, and box office budgets so frequently circumscribe artistic scope.

In summoning a virtual network of participants into existence, 365 Days/365 Plays also created an economy of performance, in which Parks’s bodily and emotional experiences were dispersed and reimagined by hundreds of artists simultaneously. Individual theaters typically took on a week’s worth of plays, and many days during that year, the same play premiered in multiple locations at once. Many critics have noted that this producing paradigm echoes the structures of digital networks. Writing of 365/365 during its first week, Campbell Robertson pointed out that the project created a “sort of theatrical Internet,” inspiring artistic exchange among theaters that previously had no relationship with each other or with Parks. The critic Philip Kolin, speculating on 365/365’s future, proposed that “ultimately, 365 might best be realized as cyberspace, or digital theatre,” and described the plays as “analogues to screens in indeterminately linked web sites. . . . Each 365 play, or group of plays, might be envisioned as a link connecting readers/audiences to yet another link.”

What makes the dramas of 365 Days/365 Plays so significant for a consideration of networked performance is that they were not just networked in their eventual production, or held together by the logic of the calendar year. Instead, these plays are rife with theatrical structures, actions, and images that meditate on the concept of the contagiously proliferating embodied network—and that express ambivalence and doubt about the nature of such structures.

Many of the plays feature riots, crowds, mobs, or assemblies, require infinitely increasing casts of characters, and call for endless variations on each type of person gathered onstage. One of these, a play entitled “Does It Matter What You Do?” calls for a stage full of performers, costumed to represent an eclectic combination of forms of identity. (Parks’s suggestions include “Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Monk, Fireman, Ballerina, Wastrel, Mother, Wrestler,” and many more.) This crowd, she specifies, should travel downstage, acting their “roles,” then tumbling into the orchestra pit. As in many other 365/365 plays, this action is to repeat indefinitely, “even as the curtains go down, and even as the audience and crew and entire world goes home.” In another play, from the “Father Comes Home from the Wars” series (more on the series shortly), Parks calls for a uniformed “Soldier Man” to enter.
then adds that he may be dressed as a warrior from any conflict (“the Trojan war, WWI, American Civil, Iran-Iraq, Napoleonic, Spanish Civil, Crimean, Zulu,” and more),

conjuring an image of vast numbers, endless soldiers fighting endless wars. There are many more examples of Parks’s fascination, in 365 Days/365 Plays, with impossibly enormous casts of performers. In the piece “All Things Being Equal” a queen, decked out in a gold crown, waves proudly to the audience, apparently unique in her royalty, until she is joined by an identical figure, then another, until the stage is crowded with queens, waving and jostling for space. In “A Scene from the Great Opera,” two onlookers watch an “endless Line of People,” all carrying luggage, as they inch across the stage to a soundtrack of Puccini.

Much has been said, in critical analyses of 365/365, about the contrast between Parks’s brief, lapidary dramas and the visions of vastness they invoke. (Deborah Geis, for instance, writes in her 2008 monograph about Parks that “there is a striking tension between the brevity of the plays and the indication Parks often makes at the end of a piece that it repeats itself or goes on in perpetuity.”) My argument builds on such observations, but also departs from them. As I see it, in these examples, Parks is not just summoning images of infinite variety, but also specifically envisioning enormous networks of characters, endless in their variations, linked by the stage directions that collectively call them forth. Such images anticipate the distributed network that eventually produced her plays: in many cases, nodding specifically to the local or regional difference that would become an essential aspect of 365 Days/365 Plays in production. One play, “Learning English,” for instance—a comment on Americans’ inhospitality toward immigrant communities—emerges as necessarily different depending on its geographical setting. In this page-long drama, an apparently endless number of students attempt to pronounce English words correctly, and are “secretly” beaten by native “English Speakers” for failure to do so. A group of “watchers” looks on, reminiscing about the lost “Good Old Days,” when beatings could take place in public. Some of the students eventually achieve “success” and join the native speakers; others do not. This continues, not, Parks specifies, until all of the students are competently conversing in English, but rather, until “the English language is less desirable to learn.” Actors’ interpretation of such a play, and audiences’ reception of it, would surely vary by location, infusing Parks’s parable about difference with specific, local differences in performance.

In addition to dramatizing theatrical networks within individual plays, numerous constellations of mini-dramas loop through the collection as a whole. One of these takes shape in Parks’s repeated invocation of her web of artistic influences, a collection of playwrights, novelists, poets, and musicians spanning centuries and forms. Some of these constitute a sort of highlights reel spanning through the Western dramatic canon: the mini-drama “Blackbird (A Sea Gull Variation)” pays homage to the first scene of Chekhov’s play;
“The Birth of Tragedy” winks at Nietzsche; the numerous “House of Jones” plays suggest the influence of Aeschylus’s cycle of wartime tragedies about the House of Atreus; plays written during the month of February include “Project Macbeth” and “Project Tempest.” There are many more.68

Two of Parks’s plays, one written in December 2002, near the beginning of the cycle, and one written in September 2003, near the end, address the networked nature of storytelling itself, providing the audience with explicit images of writers or storytellers at work, and with theatrical hypotheses about how stories and dramas are disseminated. September’s play, entitled “(Again) PERFECT,” provides an enticing depiction of the collection’s contagious genesis. Here, a writer named “Woman” faces off against a mysterious figure called the “Timer.” “What’s the question?” says Woman, to which the Timer replies only, “Aaahhh,” and then starts a stopwatch and exits. Woman sits, scribbling on her notepad, becoming increasingly frustrated with her own work. She writes, crumples the page and stuffs it into a pocket, writes again, rejects her idea, and crushes the new page, until “her pockets, blouse, shoes, socks are all full of crossed-out, imperfect, balled-up answers. She is reduced to throwing her balled papers onto the floor.”69 To the writer’s apparent surprise, the Timer soon returns, lovingly gathers the entire heap of discarded texts, and kisses their creator, declaring them “Perfect.”70

On its surface, this is a prescriptively optimistic parable about the act of writing: process makes perfect, it seems to say. But “(Again) PERFECT” also offers a revealing image of 365 Days/365 Plays as an embodied network, in which each page is a scrap of the writer’s own imagination, which, crumpled and crammed into her clothing, expands her corporeal presence onstage. As the Timer recovers the discarded drafts, she is, imaginatively, collecting pieces of the writer’s own body. We witness the writer creating a contagiously growing collection, as her panic feeds on itself, propelling the generation of a sprawling work of art. The network here is not a controlled channel of communication, but rather a mutating web of texts, which in the end exceeds physical borders: onstage, in the writer’s body, and hypothetically, as spectators are invited to imagine them circulating.

Such expansive visions also emerged in performance. Productions were frequently minimalist in conception, and often gestured toward the larger circulation of the plays in the festival as a whole. Out Of The Black Box Theater, based in Greenbelt, Maryland, for instance, staged “(Again) PERFECT” in September 2007. Performed at a local coffee shop called the New Deal Café, the company’s presentation was starkly simple, and faithful to Parks’s stage directions. In production photos, a Writer, wearing a black dress and colorful shoes, is visible, seated on a folding chair, anxiously scribbling, as a Timer looks on sternly from the side. There are no props onstage aside from the sheets of paper accumulating on the floor, and in the final production photo, the Timer is smiling warmly, collecting the crumpled documents, as the Writer looks down, appearing tired and a little ashamed.71
Out Of the Black Box’s production was spare, clearly produced on a minimal budget, and staged at a local café. This is characteristic of performances that are part of large networks; it was true of the *Lysistrata* stagings, and of the presentations of Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children*. Throughout the *365 Days/365 Plays* festival, artists performed on the street, in the lobbies of office buildings, and in nursing homes and youth hostels, among other locations. The Los Angeles premiere of the festival took place at an outdoor plaza, with actors performing amid (and interacting with) large public sculptures. When the plays were staged in theaters, they often shared space with other, longer-running productions, as in Hartford, Connecticut, where the regional theater Hartford Stages produced a week’s worth of Parks’s plays on the set of August Wilson’s *Fences*.

To some observers, these constrictions—both Parks’s decision to write 365 plays, no matter how limited in scope each one might be, and the festival’s emphasis on the quantity of participants rather than the particularity of the performances—meant that *365 Days/365 Plays* produced less than satisfying theater. Commenting on one production in Houston, Texas, for instance, the journalist Everett Evans complained that the festival’s format prevented it from creating individual productions that were complex or interesting: “All together, 365 plays is too much: How many theater goers will really see even a significant fraction of them?” he wrote. “But taken singly, each playlet is too little . . . the concept comes up empty.”

Viewed another way, though, the simplicity of each individual production was not simply a necessary concession to the festival’s larger goals, but integral to the nature of networked performance. Each production can also be seen as deliberately partial, its simplicity and incompleteness a gesture toward the larger festival of which it constituted one small fragment. Viewing the plays in the form of low-budget, unfussy, minimalist performances asked spectators to maintain an awareness that the productions they attended were small nodes in a large web. This awareness, as in all of the viral performance networks I discuss, lent each production its primary artistic power. Elaborate sets and lengthy rehearsal periods would have directed spectators’ focus to the individual performances; scrappy, spare productions drew attention to the invisible whole.

Another local production, the California-based Chance Theater’s staging, from Week 7 of the festival, imagined the invisible whole in an even more tangible way. The associate artistic director Jocelyn Brown, after deciding to stage the week’s plays as a single evening, sought a means of connecting the seven individual dramas, and decided to present them onstage as seven figments of the writer’s imagination. The process of writing, as in “(Again) PERFECT,” would become the process of staging. Accordingly, Brown decided to seat her audience on her black box theater’s stage, along with an actor portraying a “writer,” a stand-in for Parks. The seven individual dramas played out among the theater’s risers, just above and behind the performer playing
Parks. This staging strategy emphasized the connections among the plays, while also laying bare their disparate narratives and concerns as they spiraled out into imagined landscapes, linked only by the writer's imagination. Like the many other productions that were aesthetically stark, out of budgetary necessity or artistic choice, Chance Theater's version of 365 Days/365 Plays drew attention to the individual plays' capacity to complete and complement each other, to each play's role as a fragment of a much larger pattern.

One of the plays in Chance Theater's production also directly examined this aspect of the festival by questioning the gaps, the missed connections, the dangers, in the network form itself. Written in late December, about six weeks into the project's creation, and entitled “2 Examples from the Interconnectedness of All Things,” the drama takes explicit aim at the image of the network, so prevalent in Parks's dramatic form and subject matter. The play features two griots who tell the audience competing ghost stories, both contemplating the presence of the past in contemporary African American life. In the first, a fable about a narrow escape from slavery, an enslaved family flees a Southern town. As they do, one family member suddenly notices that the ghosts of all of her ancestors have arrived to help her. There are, Parks specifies, “folks the woman recognizes and folks she’s never seen.” There are “grandparents and then boys wearing baseball caps on backwards and girls listening to shiny metal music boxes—future folks, they come too.” Here Parks offers us an image of endless generations, timelessly linked together in their efforts to shepherd their relations to freedom.

The second griot counters this fable, which celebrates oral history, family interconnections, and the benevolent influence of future and past generations, with a different sort of network: the specious rumor. “Martin Luther King is alive and living in Las Vegas,” she declares. Going on, she conjures up an image of King as an old man, enjoying himself at the Bellagio casino's buffet. Soon, without obvious provocation, her tale veers into defensive anger: “MOTHERFUCKER, WOULD I LIE TO YOU?!?!?! I SEEN THE KING.” Parks characterizes this spiral into rage as a communal one, dragging all black Americans, as Parks notes in stage directions, directly from uplift to chaos: “The race, which up until now, had been doing so well,” she writes, “takes 2 steps backward.” The play culminates in a scene of violence: police arrive to take this second griot away, and the first griot attempts to defend her only to be violently assaulted too. The cops beat the first griot, “not to death, not enough to cause a riot—but just enough to make us all doubt the interconnectedness of all things,” the stage directions specify.

Which of these stories, which of these examples of networked narrative, defines the other? How could they, together with the scene of violence in which this latter play culminates, cause the audience to “doubt the
interconnectedness of all things”? (Did the audience believe in “the interconnectedness of all things” to begin with?) The tales offer two models of storytelling networks, one affirmative—the historical fable, attended by generations of well-wishers—and one highly questionable, the classic rumor. Both forms rely on word of mouth, an inherently viral means of communicating, but the first suggests that conversation and fable-telling are a means of summoning intergenerational solidarity, while the second offers a vision of the dissemination of tempting untruths. The first affirms that an imagined network can be as nourishing as a live, present network. Meanwhile, the second griot’s insistence on the accuracy of her report (“I SEEN THE KING”) implies the opposite, that conversational networks spread doubt and anger, that as information strays from its source it becomes more and more subject to misinterpretation and more vulnerable to being reshaped by forces of repression.

Buried, then, in the midst of a performance project that appears to explicitly endorse an interconnected view of family, art, society, and community—in the contents of individual plays, in the thematic and formal connections linking the plays, and in the vast festival in which they were staged—is a seed of doubt about whether “all things” are connected, a hint of concern about what that would mean. Are networks benevolent, as in the intergenerational fable, or tempting but misleading, as in the rumor that Martin Luther King is alive and well? Or are they sinister? (In Parks’s stage directions, the police are suspiciously close at hand: they must have been lurking right offstage the whole time.) If we, as audience members, question the “interconnectedness of all things,” where does that leave the yearlong festival, founded upon interconnectedness, which would have barely begun when this play was staged in December 2006? A further conundrum: Parks’s injunction to sow uncertainty is embedded in a stage direction, rendering it imperceptible to audience members unless performers take deliberate steps to make them aware of it. Wouldn’t the successful communication of doubt, from actors to spectators, therefore rely on a high level of emotional interconnectedness between the two?

The only reliable witness to this final stage direction, the only person guaranteed to be on the receiving end of Parks’s doubt, is not the theatrical spectator but the reader of the published plays, the audience of one who, reading in isolation, might actually be prompted to question the “connectedness” that Parks refers to. This moment of tension—between the play’s title, which advertises instances of the “Interconnectedness of All Things,” and the concluding stage direction, which silently unravels that philosophy—subtly punctures the potentially naïve vision of community that the project might otherwise conjure up. Not everything, Parks suggests here, is as connected as digital-age media leads us to assume. (Brown recalls enjoying the apparent gap between the play’s hopeful title and its dark ending, seeing the play as a parable about miscommunication.)
Further, interconnection itself can be as dangerous, as threatening, and as constricting as it is beneficial. Another subset of 365 Days/365 Plays explicitly critiques networked society’s drive toward war. The eleven dramas in the “Father Comes Home from the Wars” series recur pointedly throughout the year, forming a kind of internal network that aligns with the Lysistrata Project’s aim of offering an embodied form of dissent to the impending Iraq War. Each of these plays features the return of a father figure from a tour of duty, often to an unsettling homecoming scene. One father must enter and reenter repeatedly; another father, injured in battle, discovers his family posing for a portrait in his absence, using a surrogate “father figure” in his place. These plays are chronologically dispersed; the first occurs in November, on the second day of Parks’s project, and a cluster were written in April, following the late March invasion of Iraq. Others are spread out between June and the following fall. When Parks wrote the plays, the American government was struggling to direct public attention away from the human sacrifice that war demands. By the time 365/365 was staged, the war was four years old, and the nightmarish scenes Parks imagined were no longer imaginary.

The scenes in Parks’s “Father Comes Home from the Wars” plays are frequently domestic and heavily gendered. The returning fathers in these plays usher in images of blood and violence, contaminating home life by importing echoes of the horrors lurking on battlefields, out of sight. In the first drama of the series, a wife nearly kills her recently arrived husband with a frying pan, the act of senseless domestic angst gesturing to a wider world that has gone off-kilter. Another, a play from April, stages the welcome-home festivities of a father named Joe, who renders the scene grotesque in small ways: squeezing his wife’s hand “too hard,” hugging her “too hard,” insisting on his taste for raw meat. In the next play, written the following day but set many years later, Joe is absent, and his neighbor expresses relief that he “doesn’t come home with blood on his clothes anymore.”

365 Days/365 Plays is far from the first time that Parks has depicted families in wartime; her first major play, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, produced in 1989, concluded with a sequence featuring an army family and a father’s return from battle. Mr. Sergeant Smith, in this scene, is the family patriarch, and we see him posing in his army uniform, anticipating his homecoming, and then returning to his wife and children. Mrs. Smith and her progeny, Buffy, Muffy, and Duffy, eagerly await Mr. Smith’s return, but when he arrives, the scene becomes, as in the later 365/365 plays, distorted and grotesque. Language and chronology mutate; the family’s speech becomes choral and impressionistic, and Mr. Smith seems to be both at home with his family and on the battlefield encountering bodies falling from the sky. As in the “Father Comes Home from the Wars” plays, participation in war is a male activity, while the domestic sphere is a female domain (likewise, in Lysistrata); and in both cases, Parks draws on such dichotomies to suggest the complicity of global and domestic violence.
The comparison with *Imperceptible Mutabilities* contextualizes Parks’s depiction of fathers returning from war (in her book, Geis likewise connects the 1989 play with this series from *365/365*, noting that both drew on Parks’s experiences as an army child). But, more importantly for my argument, the differences between *Imperceptible Mutabilities* and the war dramas of *365/365* illustrate how viral performance alters texts, stories, and dramatic form. In *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, the father’s return from war occasioned an extended, poetic stage sequence. In *365/365*, these events are repetitive and condensed: fathers return from war, briefly, again and again, the action altered with each reiteration. Like the epic theater of Brecht—to borrow the words of Walter Benjamin, quoted in my introduction—the dramaturgy of *365/365* served to “make gestures quotable.” In the “Father Comes Home from the Wars” series, the fathers’ returns become contagious. The earlier play’s action goes viral.

The final installment in this series, written on November 4, very close to the end of the cycle itself, is entitled “Father Comes Home from the Wars (Part 11: His Eternal Return—A Play for My Father).” This performance consists only of stage directions, and in it Parks calls for a “never-ending loop of action,” the kind of infinite sequence contained in so many of *365/365*’s plays. Here, groups of five soldiers stride onstage at once, heroes returning proudly from an unidentified war. A joyful wife and child rush onstage from the auditorium to greet each soldier, completing a triumphant family tableau, before making room for the next round. “The action,” Parks instructs, “repeats eternally.” Again, Parks uses the image of an infinitely connected network of soldiers, wives, and children to suggest a darker network just offstage. If soldiers are eternally returning home from war, then they must also be consistently and endlessly heading off to war as well. And if performers are eternally “reuniting” with “audience members,” then spectators must be a part of this infinite wartime loop as well. “Part 11” of Parks’s “Father Comes Home from the Wars” series is far from the only one of the *365 Days/365 Plays* repertoire to involve crowds of performers leaping out of the audience, but it is the only one of this wartime subseries to do so. This final installment ostensibly features a scene of happy reunion, but it also points in the direction of endless and constant offstage war and violence. Like the eerie scene of police beating the griot in “2 Examples from the Interconnectedness of All Things,” Parks stages here a scene of “connectedness”—but not a scene of naive togetherness.

This is where the concept of the network describes *365 Days/365 Plays* in especially precise terms, adding a dimension to the other descriptors—grassroots, democratizing, radically inclusive—that have been employed to characterize the project. Networks, both live and digital, governed the relationships among themes, images, and gestures within and between the plays, and among the theaters that staged the plays. These networks were, for the most part, generative, inclusive, founded on difference and taking pleasure
in connection. But the networks depicted onstage were also invasive, militant, and economically exploitative. The Iraq War mobilized a network of politicians, public relations experts, reporters, and of course, soldiers, and this network, too, is implicated in Parks’s dramatic project. Networks bring together audiences and artists and communities. But they are also the structural model for wars of insurgency and counterinsurgency, for the surveillance systems of police and intelligence agencies, and for the hyper-repetitive rhetoric of mainstream media.

Writing about 365 Days/365 Plays, critics have frequently emphasized the festival’s utopian elements: the organizers’ upending of conventional producing structures, their inclusion of artists not accustomed to producing experimental work, their efforts to encourage a scrappy, egalitarian aesthetic, rather than insisting on expensive productions for a prominent playwright’s premiere. Kolin describes the project in terms that echo the most optimistic strands of contemporary network theory:

Promulgating radical inclusiveness, 365 erases the entire spectrum of theatre—how it is created, coordinated, financed, marketed, staged, and received. Perhaps at its most productively radical, 365 assaults the hegemonies by which theatre has been controlled.91

Parks’s yearlong festival, he argues, established a “new theatre ideology that empowers the creative spirit of nation.”92 Geis likewise employs optimistic language to describe the project’s achievements: “Needless to say,” she writes, “no previous playwright has attempted such an ambitious project.”93 A short statement by Metzgar and Parks, included in the published edition of the plays, demonstrates that the creators’ ambitions were expansive in similar terms. “Never has a project aspired to include this many artists and audiences across the country,” they write. “To all those who proclaim that theater is dead, this Festival shows that theater is alive and kicking up a dust storm from Hendrix College just north of Little Rock to the poetry posse of Universes in the Bronx to Steel City Theatre Company in Pueblo, Colorado.”94 Such statements testify, in revealing ways, to the conceptual apparatus driving the project. Whether it could be possible to prove these statements—that no project has ever attempted to be as inclusive as 365 Days/365 Plays, that it definitively demonstrates that theater is not “dead,” that it manifests an entirely new “theatre ideology”—is, in my view, less significant than the desire, on the part of artists, producers, and critics alike, to describe the project in such terms. These statements register the significance of numbers, the importance of spread. 365/365’s meaning, in both conception and reception, was predicated on its inclusivity and ability to attract widespread participation: on numbers as dramaturgical form.

The significance of the idea of “going viral” offers a particularly suggestive context here. In its most colloquial twenty-first-century meaning, “going
viral” insists on the importance of numbers—enormous numbers—and viral “success” relies on garnering a higher number of viewers, audience members, fans, participants, or clicks than anyone has before. In this vision of the viral, multitude and scale are everything. If Parks’s project can be understood not only as a network, but more particularly as a viral network, designed to begin large and expand rapidly, then the stakes of numerical scale become clear.

The dualities inherent to networked structures—the push toward dispersal, the pull of centralization—also attended 365/365’s producing model, particularly as organizers looked toward the festival’s legacy. Participating artists and theaters, upon acceptance into the festival, signed a common participation agreement (one agreement covered professional and community performing arts groups, while a separate one governed the work of college and university participants in the 365 U network). Among the many stipulations that made radical inclusivity possible (minimal or nonexistent participation fees, the careful scheduling of participating artists’ groups) was a clause requiring that individual theaters provide photographic documentation of their productions, to which the festival itself would then hold the rights. Individual artists maintained control over the embodied moment—over staging, visual elements, and acting choices—while the festival retained control over the digital archive. Undoubtedly, this requirement limited the circulation of individual 365/365 documentation, precluding the kind of digital afterlife that, say, Seven Jewish Children led. The festival could go viral; its digital documentation could not. Just as importantly, to my mind, it registers a desire for a different kind of afterlife, one with artistic and narrative coherence, one in which becoming-number also translates into becoming whole again, where the Timer from “(Again) PERFECT” picks up the writer’s scattered scraps of paper and returns them to her, where the writer’s body once again takes up residence at the center of the embodied network.

Indeed, even as the project in its entirety gestures toward a nearly abstract vision of numerical scale, the plays themselves insistently bring our attention back to the bodies: to the gendered, raced, particular bodies onstage, to the violence visited on bodies by the war that erupts repeatedly throughout the cycle, lurking offstage in those plays where it is not explicitly invoked. Networks implicate bodies, Parks implies: most directly, in “(Again) PERFECT,” where the playwright’s own body is envisioned as the ever-circulating source of dramatic text, but obliquely in nearly every play. The more artists who participated in the festival, the more bodies inhabited Parks’s network, a network that was not only inclusive and democratic but also reflective of larger, more dangerous networks shaping twenty-first-century society. After all, this is a time when “terrorist networks” fill the airwaves even as “social networks” fill our screens.

 Critics discussing the networked nature of 365 Days/365 Plays frequently acknowledge the presence of war, death, and violence in the plays themselves, but it is tempting to sequester these darker elements from the cheerful
community spirit that attended the production of the festival. The discourse that lauds Parks’s project as a radically inclusive performance piece suggests that we view the project as networked—but not in the way that war is networked, and not in the way that capitalism is networked. Yet, I argue, viewing both plays and productions as networked performance reveals that these elements can’t be separated, that they are part of the same structures of power and communication. Parks’s production and the Iraq War are intimately linked; the 365/365 festival was an uncontained, open-ended network of participants and events, but the Iraq War is a far larger, far longer-lived, far less contained network. By mapping the violence of the war onto hundreds of actors’ bodies in hundreds of communities around the country, Parks made visible the kinds of networks that we would, mostly, prefer to forget. 365/365 sought to, in Kolin’s words, “empower the creative spirit of nation” at the same time that the Bush administration was attempting to subsume Iraq into the network of international democracy, into what Hardt and Negri would call the American empire’s network of influence and control. By writing a play in which the reunion of returning soldiers with their families would go on “forever,” a play of “eternal return”—one requiring the bodies of spectators to fulfill its stage directions—Parks subtly acknowledged that the war’s participants would continue to greatly outnumber the performers onstage, and that the war’s network would infinitely outlast her own.

Going Viral: Seven Jewish Children

Shortly after Seven Jewish Children premiered in London, a company called Rooms Productions staged the play in their Chicago gallery space. In a YouTube video boasting more than 11,000 views, this performance unfolds in a spare white gallery strewn with wooden tables and chairs. An ensemble of actors works furiously, all urgently attempting to relay messages to unseen, offstage recipients. A furrow-browed man murmurs into a black telephone receiver; a couple argues quietly as they scrawl missives on sheets of note-book paper. Panning across the room, the camera finds a wide-eyed woman pecking cheerfully at typewriter keys, and then rests on another pair of performers dictating hopeful phrases into a tape recorder.

Of the many iterations of Churchill’s drama to circulate in embodied and digital form since 2009, Rooms Productions’s version renders the themes of Seven Jewish Children particularly tangible. Onstage, performers deploy communications technologies—attempting to send messages—while the play, writ large, meditates on the dissemination of messages between generations and across historical time. Seven Jewish Children comprises a series of sparse scenes, with few stage directions and no character names. The play chronicles seven generations’ stuttering attempts to explain the modern Jewish and Israeli experience to their progeny, from the Holocaust to Israel’s
independence to the 2008–9 Israeli war in Gaza. “Tell her,” begins one line; “Don’t tell her,” rejoins the next. As one scene gives way to another, these words become a transhistorical refrain, marking the inherited ambivalences and fraught semantics surrounding each successive crisis in a violently contested past. In the Chicago production, Churchill’s phrases echo from one anonymous voice to the next, building to cacophony: overlapping injunctions transmitted live, by phone, on paper, and in projections on gallery walls.

Just below the video’s frame, on the YouTube page that guarantees this staging perpetual preservation in cyberspace, a larger context for the performance comes into view: echoes and distortions of Seven Jewish Children’s charged ideologies and its contagious poetry. Pages of comments offer congratulations, historical quibbles, political objections, and vitriolic outrage over Churchill’s rendering of the Jewish and Israeli past. Many of these responses spew self-righteous fury at the play—and tellingly, the angriest commenters often mimic the language of the play itself, twisting Churchill’s turns of phrase to their own ends. “Don’t tell her that over ONE MILLION MUSLIMS live as Israeli citizens,” writes one incensed commenter. “TELL HER SHE NEED [sic] TO KNOW THE TRUTH,” writes another.98 Repeating and distorting both Churchill’s rhetoric and the theatrical form, these comments resemble ever-tinier versions of Churchill’s play, rewriting Seven Jewish Children in miniature for an expanding international stage.

Alongside the play’s controversial London premiere, and subsequent productions in the United States, Israel, and England, Seven Jewish Children inspired a flurry of virtual and live responses. Many performances now play on in cyberspace, alongside new playtexts that draw on the original’s structure, but revise its rhetoric to reflect their authors’ own perspectives. If Churchill’s play frames, in microcosm, consecutive generations’ efforts to inculcate their descendants with particular historical convictions, its production history offers a twenty-first-century, media-enabled imitation of that act. The play’s text chronicles the viral spread of historical ideology; its public presence embodies the viral, audience-driven dissemination of performance itself: dramaturgy that mutates in the internet’s endless echo chamber.

Unlike the Lysistrata Project and 365 Days/365 Plays, Seven Jewish Children was not produced as a networked festival. There were no planned simultaneous premieres, and it was not explicitly conceived as an opportunity for local theaters to build community with others around the country or the world. Even so, Seven Jewish Children has revealed unexpected artistic and political connections through its international circulation, and as it “went viral” in the most commonly employed sense of the word—it circulated online, becoming the subject of endless internet conversation and giving rise to numerous reiterations and parodies—Churchill’s play also became a networked performance. Like Lysistrata and like the dramas comprising 365/365, Seven Jewish Children is a theatrical palimpsest, layering networked performance strategies on top of viral dramaturgies. It is a play
about networks that became a performance network in production, and the
critical discourse surrounding it, as in the case of 365/365, suggests that its
controversy and dramatic potency stemmed from its significance as a net-
worked phenomenon.

The text of Seven Jewish Children is a series of conversations about con-
versations. Each short scene is a meta-discussion without designated speakers,
that suggests, in its seesawing contradictions and quick reversals, a dialogue
rather than a soliloquy. Through these internecine struggles, Churchill’s adult
voices decide which facts their absent daughter must remember, which inter-
pretive glosses she must internalize, in order to become a citizen in command
of her national and religious heritage. The play’s first lines imply a frightened
family hiding from the Nazis:

Tell her it’s a game
Tell her it’s serious
But don’t frighten her
Don’t tell her they’ll kill her
Tell her it’s important to be quiet

The unseen girl at the center of this (and every) scene, the dialogue suggests,
will be irrevocably shaped by what she’s told, her understanding of home,
family, and her own identity guided by these ostensible authorities. By the
middle of the play, Churchill’s voices celebrate hard-won Israeli military vic-
tories, alluding to the Israeli war of independence and the 1967 Six-Day War.
The final scene suggests the aftermath of Israel’s 2008–9 war in Gaza, and as
time progresses, the adult voices harden: initially sighing with relief at their
own survival, then justifying their claims to land and water, and finally spew-
ing hatred at their equally anonymous foes.

Churchill’s starkly poetic exchanges model, in microcosm, the loaded
dissemination of history, political ideology, and cultural bias from older gen-
erations to younger ones. Each equivocating admonition constitutes a new
attempt to shore up national myth through painstakingly chosen rhetoric,
and to instill in new citizens carefully constructed national identities. (“Tell
her we’re making new farms in the desert,” suggests one voice; “Don’t tell
her about the olive trees,” warns the next.) As the play hurtles through
the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Churchill’s text assumes the
logic, and stages the mechanisms, of viral dissemination: compact revela-
tions meant to expand exponentially, one whisperer at a time; messages that
mutate with each successive speaker.

This model of ideological dissemination relies, crucially, on the overlapping
of public and private spheres, on conversations that are held in private, but
are meant to infiltrate public consciousness on the broadest scale. Each scene
offers a glimpse of the most intimate kind of exchange, the whispered debates
and barely voiced anxieties that unfold before a personal conversation even
Chapter 4 takes place. At first, these appear to be just the opposite of the media cacophony that so frequently buffets public opinion from one prejudice to the next. Here there are no newspaper headlines, no radio broadcasts, no advertising campaigns intruding in the shaping of the anonymous child’s views. A few times, we even catch a glimpse of how defiantly Churchill’s voices work to displace other media: “Tell her she can’t watch the news,” they advise in one scene, later warning, “Tell her you can’t believe what you see on television.”

In passages like these, Churchill narrows her lens to a single medium of transmission, conversation itself. But although these domestic interludes hold the crash of rockets and the roar of protesters at bay, they replicate, in miniature, the collective conversations of the imagined Jewish-Israeli public at large. Examining collective actions and public responsibilities in the privacy of a series of anonymous homes, Churchill frames those interior spaces as the smallest units in a long historical chain and a broad public arena, each sequence portraying one family that is, implicitly, surrounded by millions of others, all holding conversations of political and historical import. Each of Churchill’s families constitutes one point in a vast constellation, all of them conscripted into the laborious task of repeating and disseminating a single perspective on Israel’s past and its current behavior. Private homes, in this play, are an embodied double of public media outlets. Even when the television is turned off and the newspaper hidden away, families gather around kitchen tables and in living rooms, attempting to voice and repeat the best, truest, most patriotic type of historical tale.

Michael Warner’s writings on the nature of public speech prove suggestive in illuminating the urgent anxieties that Churchill maps, and I draw on two of his essays here, “Public and Private” and “Publics and Counterpublics,” both collected in his 2002 anthology Publics and Counterpublics. In “Public and Private,” Warner charts the many historically conditioned distinctions that have been drawn between those two terms, and demonstrates how, despite natural inclinations to view them as a binary, they are frequently overlapping and intertwined. Warner proposes, quoting Hannah Arendt, that while the domestic sphere might appear to be just the opposite of society at large, in fact, compelled by public opinion, “‘people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor.’” The family’s private life, under such conditions, becomes, not an escape hatch from the pressures of public citizenship, but an extension of them. Churchill’s figures strain under the pressures to personally replicate the ideological formations of the public sphere. They displace the swirl of global media, only to scrupulously reproduce its messaging in the safety of home.

Conditioned by this convergence of the communal and the personal, Churchill’s fragmentary conversations direct themselves to two types of political and ideological networks at once. Her voices plan addresses to a tiny
audience, a single recipient, but they are also shaping the messages that this younger generation will, in turn, transmit to unknowable audiences beyond: cycling through both immediate encounters and secondary representations. This is one of the constitutive elements of public speech that Warner identifies in “Publics and Counterpublics,” where he argues that speech becomes public by virtue of its intention to address not only known listeners, but unidentifiable strangers, whose participation in any given public is established in the moment when they decide to pay attention. In the case of Seven Jewish Children, the adults’ political prescriptions (their admonishment to “Tell her again this is our promised land,” for instance, or the impulse to “tell her it’s our water, we have the right”) are calibrated so obsessively because the speakers’ national legitimacy relies on their children’s transmission of their message to future generations.

As the play unfolds, the ghost of a third kind of public emerges tentatively into view, visible mainly by its absence: a public entirely separate from the microcosmic family unit, and from their implied Jewish and Israeli communities around the world. In the opening scene, Churchill’s voices are those of the frightened and persecuted, those without the luxury of imagining themselves as any particular kind of national public. But as soon as the voices belong to a group in possession of land and military prowess, they suddenly bear the burden of characterizing their own social polity. In the fourth scene, these voices offer a glimmering recognition of a Palestinian society that exists, although it goes deliberately unrepresented here. “Tell her they’re Bedouin, they travel about,” suggests one voice, “Tell her about camels in the desert and dates”; “Tell her they live in tents,” adds another.

These are fictions, as Churchill makes abundantly clear when one of the voices warns, “Don’t tell her Arabs used to sleep in her bedroom.” They’re strategic lies, told in order to cast Palestinians as a non-group, an entity that does not operate by the same societal rules as they do. Seen through this distorted lens, Churchill’s Palestinians are not a “public” in the sense that Israel is attempting to become one, because they do not operate according to the same collective rules. In this Orientalist fantasy, Palestinians live in tents, roam itinerantly, and ride camels; in other words, they do not participate in politics, watch television, read newspapers, or otherwise operate channels of communication within contemporary political networks. Their network of public figures and private debate is less developed than the Israeli equivalents; in fact, their networks do not exist in the same sense that the Israeli ones do. In the imaginations of the Israelis that Churchill depicts, a play centered on Palestinian, rather than Israeli, children could not be written, because they lack such coherent ideological networks. (Of course, precisely that play was written, and many like it; more on this when I discuss Seven Jewish Children’s networked production history.)
Churchill’s speakers—and the reply rejects even that simple terminology, cautioning, “Don’t tell her home, not home.” This debate distills the conflict to its most succinct elements, while also reflecting the kinds of real political discourse that have surrounded just such subjects. In 2001, for instance, CNN directed its reporters to stop referring to the Israeli town of Gilo, constructed east of Jerusalem on land conquered in the 1967 war, as a “settlement,” and to call it, instead, a “neighborhood.” The next year, the Israel Broadcasting Authority attempted to ban news organizations from using the word “settlement” at all. If the voices in Churchill’s play can lay sole claim to being the kind of society that lives in “homes,” the kind of public that organizes itself into neighborhoods—the kind of public that transmits its own history through conversations—then the other group is not only excluded from the public Churchill depicts, but is excluded from being a public at all.

Churchill’s conversations deliberately illuminate her point of view through its opposite: the more imaginary Israeli voices her play includes, the more fully the echo of a Palestinian perspective takes shape. This dynamic emerges most notoriously in the last scene, when the rules of conversation break down altogether, and the discourse swerves away from rhythmic, tempered exchanges, erupting into a furious monologue. As the historical trajectory barrels into the present, one voice forgets to parse political logic into phrases, instead stringing words together into one run-on paragraph:

Tell her, tell her about the army, tell her to be proud of the army. Tell her about the family of dead girls, tell her their names why not, tell her the whole world knows why shouldn’t she know? tell her there’s dead babies, did she see babies? tell her she’s got nothing to be ashamed of. Tell her they did it to themselves.

Abandoning punctuation, rhetorical poise, and vestiges of compassion all at once, this speech mimics the motion of a military operation spinning out of control. The previous exchanges—ideologically charged, but written in the form of vacillating dialogues—give way to an anti-conversation that tumbles paranoias together into a frenzied wall of text. Ideology bursts the bounds of conversational form.

This image of war—conflict that spirals contagiously out of control, that merges public with private, domestic life with international relations, that seems to leave no one, ultimately, untainted by struggle—has a precedent in Churchill’s dramatic vision. Her 2000 play Far Away (also first produced at the Royal Court), stages just such a scenario, following a central character, Joan, from a childhood scene in which she witnesses strange and suggestively violent events to adulthood as a guerrilla fighter. Returning from war at the end of the play, Joan tells her aunt of a world that is completely embroiled in conflict, not only among nations, peoples, or armies, but also among every
element of the natural world. Light and dark, birds and insects, gravity and water have all joined in battle.\textsuperscript{114}

*Far Away’s* depiction of a conflict that begins as a recognizable dispute, but ends as a vertiginously expanding war, with every element of the world conscripted into combat and no clear moral distinction among combatants, is also what Churchill stages in *Seven Jewish Children*, using, of course, real places and histories. The earlier drama thus offers dramatic context for *Seven Jewish Children*, in ways that echo Parks’s dramaturgical evolution from *Imperceptible Mutabilities* to *365 Days/365 Plays*. Locating the traces of *Far Away’s* fantastical, proliferating war zone in the historical conflicts of *Seven Jewish Children* clarifies the ways in which Churchill reshaped dramaturgy to make it contagious, and reshaped stage gestures to make them quotable. *Seven Jewish Children* is, like *Far Away*, a depiction of contagious war; but it is a depiction of contagious war that has itself been made contagious: compressed until it is easily replicable, and provocative enough to prompt replication.

Also as in *Far Away*, *Seven Jewish Children* places a young woman—the female child on the receiving end of the adults’ admonishments—at the center of its political-historical maelstrom. In fact, the child’s gender is the only identifying information Churchill provides; she has no specified name, age, or place of residence, nor is there any indication of whether she has requested to hear about the histories under discussion or whether they are in the process of being foisted upon her. In *Far Away*, relationships between women are central to the network of resistance in which the main character, Joan, participates (she learns about the resistance from her aunt, Harper). In *Seven Jewish Children* it is a female child, in a domestic space, who is tasked with correctly understanding and accurately repeating ideological stories about the past. Such gender specificity would apply, too, to many of the revisions of Churchill’s play, which frequently featured male children—in some cases, young Palestinian boys, figures whose bodies would likely be on the line in confrontations with Israeli forces. These works by Churchill address the connections between gender and war more obliquely than did either *Lysistrata* or the Lysistrata Project; but the connections are present, inflecting the plays’ visions of the complicity between domestic and public speech, and surfacing in *Seven Jewish Children*’s digital afterlife.

As with the play, so with the production. Churchill wasn’t just writing a drama that depicted the highly charged discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; she was, I argue, deliberately writing a play whose reception would echo and model that discourse itself. The angry comments on Rooms Productions’ YouTube page were not incidental to the play’s dramaturgy, but an essential aspect of Churchill’s viral vision, drawing attention to habitual modes of discussing the conflict by re-creating them in miniature. Discussion within the plays was viral on the smallest possible scale: the brief messages embedded in Churchill’s scenes acquire their legitimacy from the
intimacy of their transmission, suggesting them as a species of discourse that borrows the mechanisms of gossip to spread ideologies that reach far beyond gossip’s usually parochial purview. By telling their children about the past—Churchill’s text implies—the parents in these scenes hope to inoculate their offspring from lies and rumors, and to enjoin them to spread agreed-upon histories, person to person, to new generations.

In production, *Seven Jewish Children* rode an international gust of viral media writ large. Its London premiere, on February 6, 2009, was presented free of charge with donations channeled to the organization Medical Aid for Palestinians. These became the terms under which Churchill subsequently offered the rights to the play to any company for production, creating a network of performances that were produced largely independently of conventional economic structures—much like the “negative money” and the ethos of donations that governed, respectively, *365 Days/365 Plays* and the Lysistrata Project. The Royal Court’s premiere triggered a burst of media responses: some reviewers praised the play, while many protested what they saw as thinly veiled anti-Semitism, a vicious attempt to erase the distinction between the worldwide Jewish community and the state of Israel, and a dramatic resurrection of all the old stereotypes about Jews. One blogger denounced it as a “ten-minute blood libel” and charged Churchill with writing a modern version of the medieval mystery plays.¹¹⁵ The Board of Deputies of British Jews objected to the play, and sixty prominent members of the British Jewish community signed an outraged letter and sent it to the *Daily Telegraph*. That same month, the BBC refused an offer to air a broadcast of the play, noting that the network intended to “remain impartial.”¹¹⁶ Not surprisingly, it was the final scene, with its frantic unleashing of vitriol, which drew the greatest anger. Churchill was accused of summoning an “atavistic hatred of the Jews.”¹¹⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg, writing on the *Atlantic Monthly*’s website, declared that “the mainstreaming of the worst anti-Jewish stereotypes—for instance, that Jews glory in the shedding of non-Jewish blood—is upon us.”¹¹⁸ American theaters were soon producing *Seven Jewish Children*: the Rude Guerrilla theater company in Los Angeles and the New York Theatre Workshop in Manhattan, among others, had both staged the play by the end of March. In the same short time, it had become a catalyst for controversy wherever it went.

But as the outrage against Churchill proliferated, versions of the play proliferated as well. The brevity and sparseness of Churchill’s text made it easy to copy and disseminate, so the *Guardian* published the full text of the play online and posted a video, made with Churchill’s consent, of actress Jennie Stoller performing the entire play herself. The *New York Times* posted a link to the Royal Court’s website (“Is a Play about Gaza Anti-Semitic? Read the Script,” the headline challenged, inevitably drawing many more readers to the text of Churchill’s play).¹¹⁹ Soon, such readers weren’t just perusing Churchill’s text; they were rewriting it. The American playwright Deb
Margolin composed a dramatic response called *Seven Palestinian Children*, in which Palestinian adults parse recent history for a young boy. The lines borrow Churchill’s phrasing, but change her words to reflect an alternate perspective. “Tell him they moved into our house,” reads a representative line. “Tell him the house was full and big with doors large and small and with windows like paintings . . . Show him the key to our house that’s still in his father’s pocket.”¹²⁰ The Israeli playwright Robbie Gringas, by contrast, shaped Churchill’s play into an ambivalently Zionist response entitled *The Eighth Child*:

Tell her that it’s more complicated than that.
Tell her that we love Israel.
Tell her that we hate Israel.
Tell her that Israel is in our veins, like oxygen, like a virus, like an antibody.
Tell her that to be Jewish is far more than watching the news and looking for balance, and far more than being a Zionist, and far more than just praying to God.
Tell her that Zionism isn’t a dirty word like racism. Zionism is a complicated word with good intentions and ambiguous results, like idealism.¹²¹

Both *Seven Palestinian Children* and *The Eighth Child* were read aloud at Washington, D.C.’s Theatre J beside Churchill’s original.

On the other end of the political spectrum, the British actor Richard Stirling wrote a theatrical disquisition, dubbed *Seven Other Children*, accusing Palestinian adults of fanning the flames of anti-Semitism among their children. Its scenes take place at different points in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from the war of 1948 to the Second Intifada. A long paragraph, for instance, mimics Churchill’s violent run-on passage, but addresses itself to a participant in the Palestinian uprising:

Ask him if he will not join with me in laughing at the body of the hook nose teacher, ask him if I would care if we rubbed them out, took them off the map, the world will thank us, they are ready to thank us, ask him if he can ever do better than this, better in the world’s eyes, ask him to look at the body of a child on their side and ask him what he feels? Don’t ask him what I feel, ask him to give thanks it is not him.¹²²

“Ask him if Hitler had the wrong idea,” the piece grimly concludes.¹²³

The list of responses to Churchill’s play goes on. On March 16, 2009, the day after the BBC refused to air Churchill’s play, citing “impartiality” and explaining that “it would be nearly impossible to run a drama that counters
Churchill’s point of view,” a blogger boasted that he could “help the BBC out” by composing a version of the play that would be just as theatrically accomplished as Churchill’s, and would represent the opposite perspective (“I estimate it will take ten minutes” to compose, he added). This riff, entitled *Seven Arab Children*, depicts a Palestinian community that is calculating, violent, and virulently anti-Semitic. A sample passage reads:

Tell him that we are “Palestinian”  
Tell him not to say “Jews” in English, only “Zionists”  
Tell him that the Arabs will help us push the Jews into the sea this time

Even two months later, iterations of *Seven Jewish Children* continued to appear online. On May 16, 2009, an angry blogger on a website called “Blue Truth.net” wrote a self-proclaimed “Islamophobic” rendering, which he entitled *Seven Muslim Children*, and which offers a political viewpoint similar to that of *Seven Arab Children*. Here, Palestinian parents coach a young suicide bomber:

Tell him to put on the bomb belt  
Tell him he will have 72 virgins  
Don’t tell him that he must die  
Don’t tell him that he must kill children

Some online responses strayed from straightforwardly depicting Palestinians as terrorists, but found other ways to attack Churchill using her form. One of these, published on April 1, 2009, accused Churchill of furthering a history of theatrical anti-Semitism. The playwright Edward Einhorn’s blog, “Theater of Ideas,” published an anonymous rewrite of *Seven Jewish Children* called *The More Things Change*, which substituted for Churchill’s historical moments seven instances of anti-Semitism in the theater itself, from medieval passion plays to *The Merchant of Venice*. “Tell them Mirror up to Nature: Jewes covet blood,” reads a line from the passage representing *The Merchant of Venice*. At the end of the play, *Seven Jewish Children* enters on cue. (“No Jews appear in the play,” insist the stage directions, explaining that the anonymous voices here are directors and literary managers—a parody of Churchill’s own opening directive, “No children appear in the play.”)

Through this process of distribution, replication, and revision, *Seven Jewish Children* went viral. Just as each of the play’s scenes offers a model for disseminating ideology, these response plays also disseminate and distort, replicating Churchill’s dramaturgy onstage and online. But the media-enabled proliferation of *Seven Jewish Children* also alters and contradicts the types of ideological dissemination modeled within the play. In Churchill’s whispered histories, mass media and public understandings are shaped by private interpretations, by hearsay. But the rush of theatrical responses was
communal and public, unfolding on blogs and YouTube videos, as well as in public venues such as town halls and conference centers. No longer were spectators secondary recipients of one-way messages, eavesdroppers on the play’s private conversations. Instead, audience members were participants in an endlessly mutating international conversation, with their own dramas and ideologies imitating, revising, and circulating Churchill’s play in live and mediated form.

Just as Churchill framed her dialogue as the conversation of fictive Israeli voices, each of the response plays—some poetic, others manic or furious—puts words into the mouths of its imagined foes, revising not only the original text but also its imagined public. In Margolin’s Seven Palestinian Children, adult voices debate the relative merits of literally summoning the words to participate in the Israeli public’s conversation. “Tell him to smile and say shalom,” says one of Margolin’s voices. Two lines later, the same speaker (or another: the voices are anonymous) thinks better of it, concluding, “Don’t make him say shalom.” If the original ostensibly portrayed Israelis speaking to Israelis, illuminating, through its absence, a Palestinian point of view, the responses depict deliberately skewed Palestinian and Muslim perspectives. And as they do so, each of the response plays carefully mimics Churchill’s
elegant, spare arrangement of text, inscribing their outrage into brief lines, and assembling those as minute synopses of crucial historical moments. Each one retains her emblematic verbal construction (“Tell her,” “Don’t tell her”): phrases so compact and memorable that they aid the drama’s endless reiteration. The viral diffusion of Churchill’s play was fueled not only by provocative politics, but also by easily replicated, irresistibly contagious dramatic form.

Not only has the text of *Seven Jewish Children* proliferated; so, too, have the performances. A visit to YouTube reveals a spectrum of production videos: by students in England, by peace activists in Santa Fe. The first Israeli staging, by director Samieh Jabbarin, took place in June 2009 in a Tel Aviv square (in a grim echo of the play’s own dynamics, Jabbarin, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, reportedly directed the production by telephone because he was being held in an Israeli prison after participating in political demonstrations against Israeli politicians).130 In this version, also available on YouTube, a woman wheels a baby carriage around the small playing space, a pile of garbage bags buttressing her from the chorus of commentators, who call out Churchill’s lines, translated into Hebrew, over the divide.131 As passersby drift through the busy intersection, some pausing to watch, the performance begins to feel like a miniature, scripted embodiment of Israel’s contentious public debate. In each iteration, Churchill’s text acquires some of the tenor of local public discourse, reflecting the artistic predilections of its ever-increasing roster of performers.

*Seven Jewish Children* was not conceived as a networked performance event, but when it began to be performed, an implied network around the world took shape: a collection of participants, a set of theaters, theater companies, and activists employing Churchill’s script as a means of embodying their own local public debate. Like many of the dramas comprising *365 Days/365 Plays*, *Seven Jewish Children* deliberately invites amateur production. Its simplicity of form and sparse dialogue tailor it for non-actors, non-directors, and unlikely performance spaces. There are no requirements for cast size, age, or gender, no specified settings, no theatrical effects not compressed into Churchill’s charged poetic text. This text is, thus, written to go viral: a phenomenon that relies on the transformation of audiences into amateur performers, the mutation of private viewers into public participants. Churchill, like Parks, could have elected a well-publicized tour of the large nonprofit theaters that were already planning to stage the play, and where her works often premiere: the Royal Court, the New York Theatre Workshop. The play’s politics would likely have inspired public discussion in reviews and audience responses, and she could have retained control over actors’ performances and the productions’ visual landscapes. Instead, like Parks, she pitched her playwriting toward a viral premiere. Here, though, rather than an effort toward “becoming-number,” *Seven Jewish Children* functioned as a kind of virus in the network, exposing connections and antagonisms, revealing amateur playwrights and activist-performers. Participants produced the
play in small and scrappy ways; disagreements found local forums everywhere. Rather than a single controversy centered on a single large theater, Churchill provoked a geographically dispersed, viral controversy, a network of small scandals.

More than this, *Seven Jewish Children* created an opportunity to use this sudden new network to confront a larger, more difficult network, that of pro-Israel support in the United States, which takes the form of a highly particular set of alliances—religious Jews, Evangelical Christians, and conservative political leaders. In one particularly telling YouTube video, filmed in Washington, D.C., in May 2009, members of the American antiwar organization “Code Pink” prepare to present *Seven Jewish Children* to the delegates at the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). What we see on video is their rehearsal: like the play itself, this filming captures the conversations before the conversations. Standing by a busy street, the Code Pinkers are arrayed in a row for the camera, bundled against the cold in parkas and scarves and hats, one of them swathed in the red-and-white kaffiyeh so often used to signal solidarity with Palestinians. They read from Churchill’s play, cycling through the lines one by one. Occasionally, one of them inflects a line with a particular attitude; from time to time, someone loses the thread and needs to be reoriented. Mostly, though, these activists aren’t acting. Mostly, they’re performing public acts of reading. The play here becomes the script for their confrontation with the powerful network of organizations that has gathered at the AIPAC conference.

For a moment in 2009, Churchill’s play didn’t just circulate virally, or make visible a network. It achieved an element of the most emancipatory type of network, by temporarily eliminating artistic hierarchies as well. When Theatre J in Washington, D.C., produced *Seven Jewish Children*, they staged Margolin’s *Seven Palestinian Children* beside it, an equal with the original. When angry bloggers and pro-Israel activists wrote their own versions of the play, they crossed an artistic boundary, becoming not just commentators, but also playwrights. In the act of going viral, Churchill’s play created a decentralized, anti-hierarchical artistic network—a new kind of production that existed not just in local, embodied performances, but as an expanding constellation of artists and activists, enlarging both the reach and the complexity of the original play by sending it across political and geographical boundaries, into theaters and public squares and into cyberspace.

**New Networks: The Gaza Monologues and “Shinsai”**

Kathryn Blume remembers the Lysistrata Project as a performance piece that, in going viral, allowed even those who did not take part in it to think about live performance in a new way. “Anybody who was deeply involved in professional theater in 2003 knew about the Lysistrata Project,” she says. “It
influenced the way that people thought about what theater could do and what theater could be, in terms of using the Internet and in terms of the power of simultaneity.”

Such projects have proliferated since then. In 2010 the Ashtar Theatre—a Ramallah-based Palestinian theater company—responded to the 2008–9 Israeli war in Gaza (the same war that had inspired Seven Jewish Children) with a networked performance project. The company trained a group of young Palestinians living in Gaza by using techniques from the Theater of the Oppressed, teaching the young writer-performers to shape their experiences into monologues. Ultimately, Ashtar artistic director Iman Aoun says, a text comprising thirty-three monologues, some of them composite works created from multiple originals, took shape. Meanwhile, the company was constructing a complex international network for production.

Like the Lysistrata Project and 365 Days/365 Plays, the Gaza Monologues was a networked performance from the start. In an interview, Aoun recalled that she conceived the project as a coordinated international effort, inspired, like Blume and Bower, by The Vagina Monologues. She believed that only a networked show of support would make the performances visible to international audiences. “I wanted the performances to create a massive impact, all at the same time,” she explained. “Otherwise it would be just another piece of theater, just another story, that might find its way to some people and not others. But the impact of performing at the same time, in different places, would create a different kind of turning point in audiences’ consciousness.” She hoped to create solidarity between young Palestinians and young leaders in other nations, building a network that would endure, and that could produce greater international solidarity for Palestinians in the long term. She also envisioned creating deeper theatrical meaning through geographical simultaneity.

Aoun drew on Ashtar’s extensive network of existing international contacts to solicit participants for the project. Collaborators responded with enthusiasm, and the text was translated from Arabic into English, French, and German, disseminated internationally, and rehearsed locally. On October 17, 2010, approximately 1,500 participants from 50 theater companies or organizations representing 36 countries took part in the performances. The series of premieres began at 11:00 a.m. in Gaza, when the young creators of the monologues launched small wooden boats, bearing their theatrical texts, into the ocean—a gesture toward their international network as well as an act of protest against Israel’s deadly suppression of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla that May. Following the morning event, Aoun notes, each participating organization began their performance at 7:00 in the evening, local time, creating a series of rolling, overlapping international premieres.

In recalling the event, Aoun implicitly gestured, as well, to the ways that networked performances counter networks of war—to the significance, for both, of numbers and numerical scale. Describing her motivation for the
project, she explained, “after the Israeli occupation attacked Gaza in 2009, my people became numbers—of casualties and of injured people—and only numbers. The stories, the personal faces, of the people disappeared. This is what happens in every war and in every atrocity.” As in 365 Days/365 Plays, networks here represented both inclusion and destruction, both individual solidarity and the effacement of individuality. Since the 2010 event, the project has grown. In 2016 Ashtar worked with a group of Syrian refugees living in Jordan to create the “Syrian Monologues.” Meanwhile, Aoun reports, “There is hardly any month that passes without someone, somewhere around the world, presenting the Gaza Monologues. A school, a university, a theater company, a community group.”

New networks continue to emerge. In March 2012, a group of major theaters and theatrical organizations—the New York Theatre Workshop, the Public Theater, TCG, Playwrights Horizons, and others—joined together to organize a day of simultaneous, geographically dispersed benefit performances to be staged on the one-year anniversary of the earthquake and nuclear disaster that struck Japan in March 2011. The proceeds were intended to provide continuing disaster relief, and the organizers commissioned new ten-minute plays from well-known American and Japanese theater artists (Tony Kushner, Edward Albee, Toshiki Okada) to be compiled into a theatrical “menu” from which individual participating theaters could select and curate their own program. Entitled “Shinsai: Theaters for Japan,” the benefit performances, held on March 11, 2012, took place in seventy-six theaters around the country, from New York to Florida to Pennsylvania to California.

“Shinsai” was explicitly modeled on the structure and concept of 365 Days/365 Plays (Suzan-Lori Parks was also one of the playwrights commissioned to provide a text for the occasion). In a panel discussion held on March 12, 2012, the day following the readings, numerous participating artists commented on the project’s emotional significance for them. Central, for many, was the potency of dispersed simultaneity. Describing the impetus driving the project’s networked structure, the Lincoln Center dramaturge Anne Cattaneo proposed that one of the essential aspects of the project was “that it all happened on this one day, March 11 . . . it’s something new that’s happening in America, where there have now been a few events where everybody does something on the same day . . . everybody around the country was doing the same thing at the same time.” “Everybody around the country,” to use Cattaneo’s words, was actively embodying a network: not simply participating in one that already existed, but forging a new, expanding, shifting, viral network in theatrical action, “becoming-number” as they did.