STAGE, STORY, SPECTACLE: ALTERNATIVE REPRODUCTIONS OF RACE IN SUZAN-LORI PARKS' *VENUS* AND JEREMY O. HARRIS' *SLAVE PLAY*

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Summer 2026

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Paris Woodward-Ganz for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of English to be taken August 2026

Title: Stage, Story, Spectacle: Alternative Reproductions of Race in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* and Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play*

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Both Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* and Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play,* construct and perform Blackness in ways that explicitly highlight gendered dynamics and racial politics. *Venus* follows the exploitation of Sarah Baartman, also known as the "Venus Hottentot," in 19th century Europe. She was an African woman sexualized due to her body type, leading her to become a fascination of both scientific and erotic proportions. *Venus* stages itself as a reproduction of her exploitation. *Slave Play* forces a similar experience, making the audience bear witness to several sexual scenes between interracial couples as part of an experimental therapy. All these couples engage in raceplay, a kink that forces participants to engage with race in a sexual scenario that portrays imbalanced power dynamics. This paper analyzes multiple features of both plays, including both the text and the staging, to analyze how they are written and performed in a way that represents Blackness, more specifically the limits and expanses of Black women's sexuality. I argue that these texts are sites where satire and intentional minstrelsy challenge the notion that all depictions of violence against Black bodies onstage are expressions of white sadism; instead, these acts of violence are intentionally staged to force the audience to interrogate their relationship to white

supremacy. This paper reads both plays as attempts to imagine alternative moments in the timeline of racialized and gendered exploitation, transforming “race” into a visual spectacle which both the characters and the audience are forced into complicity with.

Acknowledgements

When I started the thesis process, I had no idea where I was going. I wanted to do something related to poetry, but I was never able to articulate it. Changing my thesis to this project was the best move I ever could have made. I would like to thank Dr. Faith Barter, the person who helped me develop this project, responding to my frantic emails at all times of the day. The person who urged me to declare the Black Studies minor, pushing me onto a path that I wouldn't have ever dreamed to walk down. I couldn't have done this without you. To Dr. Courtney Thorsson, who came in later in the thesis project but was happy to help as my CHC rep and a second reader. To Dr. Upton, who made me *want* to be an English major, and always was the first to tell me how much he believed in me. To the Humanities Undergraduate Research Fellowship and Karl Reasoner, providing funding while working through this project, and a cohort filled with amazing fellow student researchers. I am ever grateful for the strong, steady presence of my partner Raine Jacobs, who I knew I could always depend on. Thank you for pulling me out of my own head, reminding me to eat, reminding me that I am capable of so much more than I believe. And to my mothers, Kerry Woodward and Andrea Ganz. Thank you both so much for believing in me, for holding me accountable, for sending me sources with your own university access I couldn't find myself. This paper is a testament to all you have done for me. I love you to the moon and back.

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Overture

For ages, the limits and expanses of Black female sexuality have spawned contention among academics. Is Black femininity "pornographic?" Is the Black body a wound that needs healing? Sadiya Hartman, in her 1997 book *Scenes of Subjection*, inquires "What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of Black sentience or the inhumanity of the 'peculiar institution?"[1] To begin to answer this question, we must look beyond our base assumptions about Black women and their place in said "peculiar institution." Instead of just a site of subjection, might it be a place where normative Black femininity (if there is such a thing) is challenged? The most important question informing my work holds space for a multitude of possibilities. Instead of the exposure of the violated body for audiences being proof of Black sentience *or* inhumanity made visible through chattel slavery, might it be *both*?

Both Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* and Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play* construct and perform Blackness in ways that explicitly highlight gendered dynamics and racial politics. *Venus* follows the exploitation of Sarah Baartman, also known as the "Venus Hottentot," in 19th century Europe, who was an African woman sexualized due to her body type, leading her to become a fascination of both scientific and erotic proportions. *Venus,* written in 1996, stages itself as a reproduction of her exploitation. *Slave Play,* written in 2018, forces a similar experience, making the audience bear witness to several sexual scenes between interracial couples as part of an experimental therapy. All these couples engage in raceplay, a kink that forces participants to engage with race in a sexual scenario that portrays imbalanced power dynamics. These texts are sites where satire and intentional minstrelsy challenge the notion that all depictions of violence against Black bodies onstage are expressions of white sadism; instead, these acts of violence are

[1] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton et Company, 2022), 2.

intentionally staged to force the audience to interrogate their relationship to white supremacy.

Ungendered Flesh

To further understand Black femininity, we must first examine what existed before its conception. The idea of "ungendered flesh" was coined in Hortense Spillers's 1987 article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" as a distinction between captive and liberated subject positions. Ungendered flesh was the result of the trauma and mutilation of the middle passage or the "theft" of the body, a violent act which severed it from both will and desire.[2] Although the theft was of physical bodies, the flesh was often seen as the victim of the crime and the holder of the "wound" left behind in the divorce. In the outcome of this theft, male and female bodies were made into sites of "cultural and political maneuver" unspecific and unrelated to gender. Even though many captives viewed their bodies as sites of convergence for social, sexual, and biological identities, their conceptualization is disrupted by the externally placed meaning they were subject to; the result, then, is the idea of the captive body as property or cargo, othering them from both gender and sexuality. The bodies are reduced to canvases upon which meaning is made, their self-determination degraded into sites where perceived difference can be imposed, adding to a *lack* of potential power, both physically and generally.[3] The wounding experienced in this imposition is not just conceptual; rather, it results in an inseparable tie of physical violence to the primary narrative of flesh.

Although this tie of violence existed, oftentimes, the bodies of enslaved people were untethered, both from gender and sexuality, but also from the idea of humanness and human personality. This was especially true of enslaved people used for medical research, with

[2] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987), https://doi.org/10.2307/464747, 67.
[3] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

"diseased, damaged, and disabled Negroes" who were viewed as worthless, "brought up…by medical institutions to be experimented and operated upon.[4] The resulting fracture was one that turned captive flesh into a "living laboratory," a total objectification meant to identify areas of difference. The captive female body, especially, was placed under intense scrutiny, with areas of perceived sexual divergence a primary focus. All the enslaved people's bodies were seen as having value, either for purposes of medical experimentation or labor. This can be traced back to the middle passage, where male and female bodies were not differentiated, viewed as cargo or "quantities."[5] Both the male and female were accounted for in the same way, with the female occupying less room in the economy. In essence, the middle passage kept enslaved people in a state of limbo, suspended between indigenous culture and the new American one, between male and female. Spillers also mentions the idea of motherhood and the disseverment of familial ties. In 1662, Virginia's general assembly passed an act stating that "all children born in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother."[6] This act made the status of "slave" inheritable only by the mother, allowing children fathered by enslavers but born to enslaved mothers still property and under the rules of chattel slavery. Those children were in some sense orphaned, though still tied to the mother. The separation lies in the idea of kinship as something without meaning, because it can be stripped away at any time due to "property relations."[7] Instead of motherhood and femininity being sacred, they lose the privilege of autonomy in slavery, the body a site where politics and social identity converge, degrading personhood again into the flesh, a commodity to be exchanged.[8] Motherhood, then, is a status

[4] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, 68.
[5] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, 72.
[6] General Assembly, "Negro Women's Children to Serve According to the Condition of the Mother" *Encyclopedia Virginia*, August 17, 2021.
[7] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, 74.
[8] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, 75.

only used for categorizing bodies, not, as we may believe, a permanent state gained upon birthing a child.

We see this idea of lack of autonomy again when Spillers brings up the case of Linda Brent, also known as Harriet Jacobs, best known for her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* Ms. Flint, the wife of Brent's enslaver, suspecting that Mr. Flint desires her, visits at night to force a confession. Here, Ms. Flint acts as an extension of the master's will, using *his* power to exert dominance over Brent. While Ms. Flint is a woman, she does not have the openness to subjugation that Linda Brent has, in fact, Brent's openness is not just to male power and male dominance, but sexualization that is both male and female at the same time.[9] At the same time, Ms. Flint also represents the powerlessness that white women faced in the patriarchy as well. Her desire to "claim" Brent's body was a desire to escape her own, borne of sexual jealousy and appropriation.

Medical Racism

Black women's bodies have been the subject of controversy and discussion, sometimes manifesting itself in the field of medicine. James Marion Sims, a man sometimes known as the "father of gynecology" used biblical justifications to inflict pain, citing examples of childbirth and the punishment of Eve, as well as explaining male dominion over the female body as rooted in the book of Genesis.[10] This provided him a theopolitical method for examining the female body, and the ability to dehumanize his patients. Sims conducted many of his experiments on enslaved Black women, focusing on what would later become his greatest accomplishment, a cure for vesicovaginal fistula (VVF).[11] It was VVF, however, that signified the condition of

[9] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, 77.
[10] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 34.
[11] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 36.

slavery, both the cause and the cure stemming from the state of captivity Black women were held in. VVF was seen as a racial failing, cases attributed to Black midwives and inherent Black inferiority. In reality, cases of VVF could be attributed to "poor nutrition, lack of prenatal care, and births at an early age."[12] The designation of VVF as a sexual difference, in Sadiya Hartman's words, was an "erasure or disavowal of sexual violence [that] engendered Black femaleness as a condition of unredressed injury."[13] Such thinking allowed the sexual violence that made VVF what it was to go unnoticed, or at least unseen.

The enslaved women that Sims experimented were interchangeable, or *fungible.* At times, in his writings, he refers to one of them by another's name or even renames them in his ledger of notes. The belief that his subjects were impervious to pain and "immanently analgesic," as well as their collective status as slaves, made ones he named, like Anarcha and Betsey, rhetorical stand-ins for the entirety of Black female sexuality.[14] The third enslaved woman Sims mentioned in his writings, known as Lucy, was the first he attempted to perform surgery on. He did so in front of a crowd of doctors, as her operation was an exhibition, made to show the full extent of Sims's medical prowess. Lucy was provided with opium, if not any other anesthetic, and displayed fully on her hands and knees. She was described to be stoic, as this procedure was to result in her "being made again a normal woman."[15] The description of her "stoic suffering" reimagines her theatrical torture as a mere medical scene, attempting to recast Lucy from suffering victim to willing participant. In this case, it did not matter that her status as enslaved would never allow her to be a "normal woman," only that Sims attempt would prove its place in medicine as a cure for a condition that was both a signifier and signified slavery.

[12] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 36.
[13] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 101.
[14] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 43.
[15] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 44.

Black women, like Lucy, Betsey, and Anarcha were made to suffer for the future of medical research. In this case, Sims would not allow them to die, even saying "death would have been preferable. But patients of this kind never die; they must live and suffer."[16] Sims's writings suggest that what they faced was independent of Sims's designs for them, their suffering as necessary as their use as a test subject.

When we speak about *Venus* and *Slave Play,* we cannot divorce their text from suffering. *Venus* recreates the exploitation of the Venus Hottentot, and *Slave Play* depicts a Black woman being degraded onscreen for sexual gratification. Both plays have ties to historical violence, and grapple with the legacy of that violence, as well as how it may be subverted by reproducing it in controlled environments. These controlled environments are visible through the exact form the text takes—plays. It is not a new idea to convey political ideas through theatre. As with many other forms of art, plays are deeply representative of the time in which they are written and often comment on relevant themes and concepts. Although some believe that for plays to be political, they must directly mention the government (Michael Kirby in his 1975 article *On Political Theatre*), plays can be intended to provoke thought and call attention to issues like racial injustice and gendered violence.[17] Both *Venus* and *Slave Play* are examples of that fact.

[16] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 47.
[17] Michael Kirby, "On Political Theatre," *The Drama Review: TDR* 19, no. 2 (June 1975): 129–35, 129.

Act 1: Revising The Wake

The Stage

Theater is a unique medium in several ways, scholars acknowledging these characteristics in their analysis of the formal aspects of a text, including plot, character, and stage directions. Even as plays can be read in a book, a true analysis about them cannot be done without taking into consideration the performative aspects of them. Wilfried Passow, for example, in her 1981 article entitled "The Analysis of Theatrical Performance," cites Goethe, saying "The stage and the auditorium, the actors and the spectators together constitute the whole."[18] Not only does this statement acknowledge the connection between the audience and the actors, it makes the two together inseparable from the concept of a "play." If plays require both actors and spectators, they can be read as two separate "ensembles," an idea which blurs the line between them. The actors, on stage, perform their lines as written, but theater is a moveable, changeable thing. When the audience laughs, there is a pause, when they cry, there is a silent acknowledgement that does not halt the progression of the play. The message, the concept it is trying to transmit, relies on the participation of both ensembles, forcing theorists and scholars to take that into consideration when conducting their analysis.

Plays are not real life. Passow, citing Klaus Lazarowicz and his idea of the "contrat theaitral" says that "the cultural agreement which is made tacitly at some time, and repeatedly confirmed, that in theater reality is represented or that only a play is actually being shown - real events are not happening." Essentially, plays serve as a form of "make-believe," a situation that both the actors and the spectators are aware of. This allows the audience to recognize the real

[18] Wilfried Passow and R. Strauss, "The Analysis of Theatrical Performance: The State of the Art," *Poetics Today* 2, no. 3 (1981): 237, https://doi.org/10.2307/1772474, 1.

and tangible aspects onstage, while still assigning them to this make-believe world. At the same time, the actors must put aside their acknowledgement of the audience, and interact with the make-believe world, even as they are aware they are being watched. Even as the audience leaves the theater, they think doubly about the show–acknowledging the actors as performers, citing the performance and the efficiency of their acting, and also thinking about the concept–what did the actors portray? How did they, as the audience, react to the show onstage? The playwright, as someone who is not solely audience nor actor, makes up the third part of this trifecta of interaction, as the creator of the make-believe world and a person outside it. Though the play might be written in one way, it is the actors and the audience that transmit the message and the audience themselves that receive it.

The Spectacle

What happens when the real world interacts with the make-believe world, or is a reflection of it? Can the horrors of real life be portrayed onstage in a way that does justice to them? Where do we draw the line between spectator and voyeur? Saidiya Hartman, in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* asks these questions, focusing on the idea of a "spectacle." A spectacle is, in a sense, a scene of intense emotion, often violent in some form, discussed with theatrical language or a sense of grandeur. These spectacles take familiar form, and in the case of *Venus* and *Slave Play*, as the looming specter of Black suffering. The haunting in these shows recreates historical violence against Black women, confronting dominant notions of what constitutes Black femininity and the experience of Black womanhood.

The line between spectator and voyeur is precarious, Hartman noting that empathy can make the difference between the two. She discusses the "obscenity" of such scenes of violence,

asserting that “only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible.”[19] At the same time, might this materialized suffering be purposeful? If it is, however, what then divides us from the voyeur, the person watching and gaining gratification from the suffering of Black people? Plays may not be real life, but they are reflections of it, even as they do not provide a direct parallel to history. *Venus,* for example, restaging the exploitation of Sara Baartman, the Venus Hottentot, attempts to understand her story without re-violating her. Hartman questions if such an act is even possible. Her analysis in “Scenes of Subjection" attempts to “de-familiarize the familiar,” making the theatrical world of make-believe a site for explorations of Black trauma.

While the violence against the Venus Hottentot is not make-believe, it pulls from ideas of “what could have been.” This, in its basest sense, is a historical reenactment that materializes the original without directly copying it. The play allows us to see The Venus’s dialogue and assume her innermost thoughts. It sheds the skin of being violence with no purpose, and assumes the form of a lesson, a reckoning for both audience and actor. The actor is of utmost importance, because while on stage, they are a sign representing a character of the make-believe world, and also unconcealed or unaltered. The actor and the show are both deeply familiar, and held at a distance. The acknowledgement of the performance, the program and the curtain separating the actor from the audience are routine in theater, and yet the shows of *Venus* and *Slave Play* are deeply shocking, illuminating the violence inherent to both shows and departing from Hartman’s idea of finding terror in the mundane; rather, both plays find pleasure and violence in the spectacle, making the two interchangeable.

[19] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton et Company, 2022), 2.

Both *Slave Play* and *Venus* make space for conversations about power. More specifically, both plays depict power and exchange as a performance, the violence theatrical. We can trace these displays of power back to the horrors of slavery, where violence against the Black body was also a performance, serving as a warning, a punishment, or an exhibition of white sadism. At the same time, the enslaved participated in these exchanges of power, as one either "yielded or risked brutal punishment."[20] The performance of enslavement, however, could also be interpreted as a method of resistance. The theatrical nature of such actions and the focus on "masquerade, subterfuge, and indirection" could obscure smaller, more calculated actions.

Agency, however, is not a helpful way to look at the actions of the enslaved, especially in cases of sex or sexual violence. Black women, as property, were also viewed as sexual beings for whom consent was unnecessary. The concepts of rape and sexual assault were foreign, as Black female existence was consent. Sex was violent, but it was also purposeful and an exhibition. Women were raped in front of their sons, fathers, husbands, as punishment or a gratuitous display of violence. Black men were routinely raped in a process known as "buck breaking," intending to dehumanize and degrade Black men publicly. It is more helpful to look at the space where coercion and consent collide, leaving room to discuss the possibility of "freedom" to be found in these moments of extreme domination.

This possibility of freedom is the basis from which both plays operate. Although you can trace the "spectacle" back to slavery, its form changed and morphed in slavery's aftermath, taking the shape of minstrelsy and lynchings, *Venus* and *Slave Play* use satire and intentional minstrelsy in order to explore the limitations, possibilities, and effects of such violence to the purpose of implicating the audience. Hartman gives the example of John Rankin, who, outraged

[20] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 2

at the spectacle of slavery, attempted to "render its horrors," by reiterating secondhand accounts of slavery in a graphic way to shock the sensibilities of viewers. The language used, stage, scene, spectacle, makes clear that the horrors of slavery were staged, not only witnessed.[21] He embellished the horrors of slavery while downplaying other aspects, hoping, like both plays, to disrupt the comfortability of the spectators.

While we cannot fully understand the internal goal of each playwright, we can look at what the text does. If the play cannot be complete without both ensembles, the spectator and the actor, then the effect of *Venus* and *Slave Play* is incomplete without a captive audience, and the auditorium itself. Rankin attempted to identify himself with the enslaved, and in turn, made the empathy he felt towards *himself* as a slave the focus. As he shied away from the actual horrors of slavery and instead focused on the white body and how it would change if Black, he obscured the humanity of the enslaved. If white people can only feel this empathy when in the shoes of others, and the other disappears or is made translucent by this empathy, then is identifying with the enslaved counterproductive? Does the display need to be more shocking, more explicit, more violent to force identification with the enslaver, the master, the dominant in the situation? Rankin focused on the large-scale violence and suffering, leaving out the smaller displays of violence that made up the enslaved's everyday life. *Venus* and *Slave Play* perform those smaller moments, with the scenes of The Venus *not* on display, or the therapeutic breaks in scene that *Slave Play* demands giving insight into the "everyday" of slavery, the violence in the mundane or the divide inherent to interracial relationships. Both plays perform a spectacle, but the spectacle is not just in the violence, but the nature of the "play."

[21] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 22.

The Archive and the Narrative

As Sadiya Hartman mentions in her 2008 article "Venus in Two Acts," "the archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence."[22] This archive is the arbiter of what statements can be made about slavery, it outlines and guide discussions about it, yet at the same time, it does not categorize the enslaved individual's entire life. When Hartman talks about her attempts to "tell the impossible story," that is, as she describes, the very struggle she faces. How do you retell a story of violence without re-exploiting the subject? As an academic, she employs the practice of "critical fabulation," seeking to tell the Venus's story "by playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view."[23] This results in a version of events slightly skewed, intending to tell without re-wounding, and is at points an exercise in imagination. Imagining what the Venus's life could have been however, is not exclusive to academics. Suzan-Lori Parks, as a playwright views the retelling of stories from a different lens.

The Venus Hottentot, or Sara Bartmaan, was a real, Khoisan woman exploited in 19th century Europe. She was exhibited due to her large posterior and was subject to sexual and physical violence while on display. As such, the horrors that she experienced were many, and narrowly recorded. Hartman may be of the belief that the goal is to tell a story without revisiting violence, but *Venus* does so differently. The way *Venus* is organized, and its ultimate purpose of implicating the audience relies on depicting these graphic displays of violence. The audience's ability to reckon with their role in upholding white supremacy relies on them, in part, being participants in the show, and complicit of the degradation of Baartman onstage. If the display was to be less violent, or more palatable, it may be easier for the audience to turn away and

[22] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1.
[23] Hartman, Venus in Two Acts," 11.

practice cognitive dissonance. It is fair to say that Parks' play might actively participate in re-wounding Venus, as the play does not shy away from the materialized horrors of her life. Instead of being careless, however, every aspect of the play attempts to understand who she was, what she could have been, and uses her for a purpose, jeopardizing narratives about Baartman as a slave or a whore.

Venus does attempt to disrupt the timeline however, throwing the exact narrative of what happened into contention. This is partially because while scholars and the audience have some knowledge of the Venus, they don't have the full story. In addition, the play does not directly parallel her life. The spaces between confirmed events and real people are what allows Parks to imagine, again, *what could have been.* Even the structure of the written text, stage directions and all, are done so in a way that troubles the dominant constructions of historical events. History, as told by the victors, the enslavers, the traffickers, presents itself as the authority and the decider of what stories get told. The archives "founding violence" presents itself as the entire truth—about slavery, colonialism, and the lives of Black women. By *Venus* disrupting the narrative, it re-presents her story as one with no singular truth, and also throws *time* into disarray, muddying the divide between past present and future. In some places, it may be easier to shy away from the current discourse that colonial history informs. Like Hartman says, her attempts at narration "weave present, past, and future in retelling the girl's story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present."[24]

In "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman also acknowledges her complicity in re-wounding the Venus, saying that her "account replicates the very order of violence that it writes against by placing yet another demand upon the girl, by requiring that her life be made useful or instructive,

[24] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1, 12.

by finding in it a lesson for our future or a hope for history."[25] Hartman herself, simply by discussing the situation of "the dead girl" makes herself complicit in her degradation. Not only does this suggest that this re-wounding is written into the archive, but that it necessary for remembrance—and envisioning a better future. At the same time, this violence is an interval, a hesitation, a pause. The narrative continues while lived experiences are suspended in time. When Hartman speaks about Venus, it cannot even be stated with absolute certainty that this is the same Venus that Suzan-Lori Parks writes about in *Venus.* These women are interchangeable, yet so incredibly important at the same time. What we don't know is the space where imagination can construct alternative versions of past and present to better understand our future. This is why Afro-Futurism depends so much on history. The future rests upon the past.

This past is summarized so well in what Christina Sharpe describes as "the wake." In her 2016 book entitled *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being,* she coins the term as a combination of multiple things: "the track left on the water's surface by a ship; in the line of recoil of (a gun); a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died, sometimes accompanied by ritual observances including eating and drinking; grief, celebration, memory, and those among the living who, through ritual, mourn their passing and celebrate their life in particular the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the dead person from death to burial and the drinking, feasting, and other observances incidental to this."[26] This wake is the aftermath, the legacy of slavery. It is how the trauma of the past manifests in the lives of Black folks today, suggesting that the "becoming" of Blackness, the redefining, the understanding is an ever changing and a current practice.

The lingering effects of slavery also inform the dynamics in Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave*

[25] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 14.
[26] Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) 11-16.

Play. Raceplay uses historical traumas and stereotypes to create "scenes," which play with power dynamics inherent to interracial relationships. Those dynamics take different forms, depending on the makeup of the couple. The relationship between a couple comprised of Black and white queer men calls into question, masculinity, and stereotypical Black male sexuality. On the other hand, a relationship between a Black woman and a white man such as Kaneisha and Jim of *Slave Play*, highlight the master/slave dynamic. Raceplay, as a controversial practice, is often criticized based on it "making light" of historical traumas. While this can be one way raceplay exists, it can also be used as a tool for reckoning with uncomfortable dynamics, and forcing participants to examine their interactions with power systems. While *Venus* is not a commentary on raceplay, it also brings up questions of interracial desire.

As mentioned above, the archive plays with what we do not know. As Sharpe puts it, "those of us who teach, write, and think about slavery and its afterlives encounter myriad silences and ruptures in time, space, history, ethics, research, and method as we do our work."[27] Both playwrights are in a sense academics, finding these ruptures in their artistic process. Unlike strict historical scholars, the creative medium of *Venus* and *Slave Play* allows for less strict adherence to historical fact. This is perhaps where criticisms of both plays fall short, as they don't intend to represent Blackness or gender as a whole, but one specific part of it. The outrage of what is considered "bad" representation fails to take into consideration these nuances. Instead of such black and white understandings of the issue of representation, some people seek to do differently. Like Sharpe says, "we must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the "racial calculus and . . . political arithmetic that were entrenched

[27] Sharpe, *In the Wake,* 17.

centuries ago."[28] Playwrights are in a unique position, using creative fabrications and modes of storytelling to envision a brighter future.

Troubling the Waters

Water holds memories. To think of the "Black Atlantic" is to acknowledge the journey of slave ships, the wake that they left in the ocean. This was a disruption of natural forces, challenging understandings about the Middle Passage. It could be thought of as a suspension of time, a form of stasis where things are both happening and not. *Venus* plays with elements of time, reconstructing historical events and relationships, however the structure of such recreations contributes to the feeling that this play is not a 1:1 comparison.

Plays are usually organized in acts. Each act is comprised of multiple scenes, and there is an intermission in the middle, in most plays over a certain length. *Venus* is a standard length for a play, with space for a 15 minute intermission. The structure, however, differs from a traditional structure in multiple ways. The play starts with several author's notes, which pull from fictional texts or plays within the greater play. For example, it says that "within *Venus* are scenes from "*For the Love of Venus,"* a Drama in 3 Acts."[29] This is one way in which *Venus* is unique, as it "makes up" its own sources to pull from. The play is, in a way, self-sustaining.

Instead of starting with a first scene, the play starts with an overture. Traditionally, an overture is the "orchestral introduction to a musical dramatic work."[30] In opera, it can serve as an introduction to set the stage for the content of the show. In the case of *Venus,* the overture is a spoiler, something that is a refrain through the entire show, even being circled back to in the end. The Negro Resurrectionist recites the line, saying "I regret to inform you that thuh Venus

[28] Sharpe, *In the Wake,* 17.
[29] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York, NY: Theater Communications Group, 1997), 0.
[30] "Overture" *Merriam Webster*, accessed July 9, 2026, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/overture.

Hottentot iz dead."[31] This line being delivered by The Negro Resurrectionist relates to an idea that Hartman presents in "Venus In Two Acts." The fact that this line is at the beginning of the show proves that she is, in a way, resurrected, both within the play and by the playwright herself, made to be entertainment, or, as Hartman says, instructive. The true nature of the historical resurrectionist is a gravedigger, unearthing something already buried. This language is also one of violence, as we cannot "let her" stay buried, and as such, need to exploit her for an audience. The Negro Resurrectionist is the physical manifestation of her exploitation.

This overture is also significant because it is not the way the Venus's story actually begins. Unlike most plays, which work forward chronologically, going from scene one onwards, *Venus* is written in reverse. Following the overture is scene thirty-one, which begins with characters called The Man and The Brother discussing how they are going to bring her to England.[32] This is probably more accurate to where her story started, but it is not the beginning for a reason. By starting with ""I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead," the author already displaces the audience from believing that they know how the show is going to start.

In a confusing turn of events, The Negro Resurrectionist follows that statement with "there wont b inny show tonite,"[33] which seems inaccurate, as this is the start of the show. This, however, serves two functions. The first is that it makes the audience question what they are watching, as it breaks the cohesive narrative. It makes the audience further wonder what is even happening in the show, leading them to pay further attention. The second is that it sets up the "play within a play" scenes. By in a way acknowledging there are alternate timelines, it allows there to be parallel shows happening, all significant. In addition, during this scene, the Venus's

[31] Parks, *Venus,* 3.
[32] Parks, *Venus,* 11.
[33] Parks, *Venus,* 3.

body is being rotated onstage. The audience, while being told the show is not happening, is still being forced into watching part of the show. Her exploitation does not stop even though there is discourse about it happening. Notably, the Venus doesn't speak at this part in the scene, instead staying silent while her body is observed.

Stage directions also show how her body is being shown. The overture begins by saying "The Venus facing stage right. She revolves, counterclockwise. 270 degrees. She faces upstage."[34] This is significant for multiple reasons. Her revolving counterclockwise is another way of physically showing the how the narrative changes, as things traditionally rotate clockwise. In addition, upstage is away from the audience. Her facing in that direction hides her face and focuses the audience's gaze on her large buttocks, the exact reason she was being exhibited. Because the audience is watching the show, and the show is her exploitation, they cannot choose to look away without missing aspects of it. Because those aspects are crucial to the understanding of the play, refusing to look becomes a denial of complicity in her degradation.

This timeline in *Venus* parallels the idea of loss happening in the middle passage. We can think of it as culture, language, and identity that was unable to be translated. The disruption that happens in the play is reimagining the wake of slavery, imagining the different possibilities for constructed identity to come out of it. This is why the play has so many moving parts and plays with time and space. Different scenes happen simultaneously, and the working backwards contributes to the feeling that the events of the play are set in stone and cannot be changed.

Slave Play also plays with disrupted timelines. It relies on the location and setting of the play being initially unclear, and intentionally waits to clarify until later in the show. In the

[34] Parks, *Venus,* 1.

beginning of the play, it has only one setting, saying it is "MacGregor Plantation, a few miles south of Richmond, Virginia."[35] Despite the scenes in the text being fictional, that is unknown at the beginning and they are treated like they are real. Because the scenes so quickly immerse you in them, there is little room for questioning their context. This quick immersion also makes the scenes even more shocking, especially when they incorporate elements that don't seem like they should go together. One example of this is the first scene between Jim and Kaneisha, which opens the play. Jim is a thirty-five-year-old white man in an interracial relationship with Kaneisha, a twenty-eight-year-old Black woman. The two of them engage in Master/Slave roleplay with Jim as the overseer, something designed to heal Kaneisha's anorgasmia, or inability to orgasm. Despite the fictional setting, much like *Venus,* the opening is violent.

The first scene of the play takes place where everything else does, MacGregor Plantation. Kaneisha is portrayed as a slave, sweeping the floor "badly."[36] The way the scene is written immediately immerses us in the scene, before destroying the illusion of historical accuracy. As she is sweeping, Rhianna's song "Work" plays, which she begins dancing to, sexually, forgoing her other duties. This immediately sets up the fact that this reenactment is not historically accurate but also does not clarify when it takes place. Notably, a date is not mentioned in the setting.Traditionally, there is both a time and location, especially in multi-act works, but *Slave Play* forgoes any of that. Instead, the lack of clarification allows for curiosity by the audience, and for them to question what exactly they are watching.

Another thing that is interesting about this play is that it defies the limits of what a play can be. The stage directions, for example, are usually sparse, allowing the director to choose how they want characters to interact. There are usually some sort of guidelines, but often, the director can

[35] Jeremy O. Harris, *Slave Play* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2021), 0.
[36] Harris, *Slave Play* 7.

make the play their own in the rehearsal process. *Slave Play,* however, gives detailed stage instructions, making the scene read even more like it is staged. The beginning lines are standard, saying "The lights slowly rise on the cramped quarters of the MacGregor Plantation's overseer's cottage. A metal framed bed with a feather mattress sits in a room to the side of a large open space that houses a nineteenth-century bachelor's kitchen and a table full of fruits and vegetables in a basket with two chairs before a large black bear-skin rug."[37] This is standard—the setting is usually made explicit. In addition, the specificity of the furniture (nineteenth-century bachelor's kitchen, black bear skin rug), makes it so that if followed faithfully, it cannot be transposed to a different time.

Some of the following stage directions disrupt the historical moments though and contribute to breaks in the scene. Directions like "Jim shifts to hide his growing tumescence," "Confused whisper," and "An awkward pause," break the illusion that this is totally a different period and a faithful historical reenactment.[38] In addition, because these are stage directions, the audience doesn't see them. If they are followed faithfully, those awkward pauses and hesitations are visible, but that doesn't mean the audience all has the same interpretations of them. The ability of the audience to have such an individual interpretation of the scenes is very important to the roles these plays have in implicating the audience. The uncertainty is also unsettling, forcing the audience into questioning everything they know.

Venus does much of the same thing, although it is more seen through language and speaking patterns. Despite *Venus* being set in 19th century England, the speaking patterns are much more characteristic of early Black American dialogue. In addition, the grammatical language is written stereotypically, seemingly stemming from minstrel origins. Even the call and

[37] Harris, *Slave Play* 7.
[38] Harris, *Slave Play*, 9.

response the characters do is closer to Black American dialect than Black British. The wording is like how Black people in the south were thought to have spoken, with words repeated and spelled "wrong." Depending on how the actors play it, given it is being performed in contemporary times, it can come off as mocking, intentionally calling to mind racist stereotypes, turning *Venus* itself into a kind of minstrel show. Because it is not only the Venus who speaks like that, but the rest of the cast as well, it works to tie all the characters together, despite their different stations.

Trial, Transformed

Venus by Suzan-Lori Parks is comprised of multiple "play within a play" scenes. One of these scenes, later in the text, is focused on what the script calls the "Venus Hottentot on trial," and is designed to decide whether or not she violated laws surrounding public indecency as well as whether she had committed the crime of murder. In historical narratives, the real-life Venus was on trial to determine whether she was exhibiting herself out of a desire to do so, or whether she was enslaved and manipulated. The original case was a lawsuit, intended to help her free herself. Instead, she testified that she was doing this of her own free will. There were rumors she was coerced by those who exhibited her, but nothing was ever confirmed.

The trial scene plays upon what Sadiya Hartman describes as the "discourse of seduction."[39] This discourse is comprised of confusing juxtapositions, coercion and consent, domination and submission, and violence and reciprocity some of the ideas being challenged. The discourse, however, only serves to "obfuscate the primacy and the extremity of violence in master/slave relations and in the construction of the slave as both property and person.[40] Essentially, conversations about what was "consensual" or not assume that enslaved individuals

[39] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 140.
[40] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection ,*140.

acted with agency and could engage enslavers in reciprocal sexual relations. This may not have been possible due to the status of slave as one stripped from both agency and personhood. The nature of the law is also significant, even more so when related to the trial scene. The law functioned as a tool intended to classify enslaved women as both "will-less and always willing." The law itself was used to deny injury and repress the crime. This is why, perhaps, that the trial of the Venus in *Venus* is so insidious. Instead of just a trial designed to decide whether she acted with agency, the nature of her naked self is put to the side, the trial also focuses on the crime of murder, assuming that her "seduction" of white British men leads to death. Despite her subjugation, his death is treated like a conscious choice she made, while not allowing herself to escape the other crime, having a body.

At the beginning of the scene, the "Chorus of the Spectators" is changed into the "Chorus of the Court."[41] Throughout the play, there have been three choruses–all played by the same actors. This decision serves multiple purposes; the two choruses mirror each other and make the idea of spectators indistinguishable from their judgement. They are transformed from voyeurs to active participants. This cements the idea that the same people who come to see her are the ones judging her, and that her fate is already set in stone, as the opinion of her body and "indecency" is being judged by the same people who came to watch her. The lack of distinction between the two choruses adds to the hypocrisy of their actions. When the Chorus of the Spectators becomes the Chorus of the Court, they do so after leading The Venus to her jail cell. To further the point that the Chorus of the Spectators are complicit, they do not transform into the Chorus of the Court until after they have done so, making their last action to participate in the start of the trial.

This change of casts is not just visible during the scene, but earlier in the text as well. Parks uses her author's notes to cement these facts in the physical script. Instead of using the common

[41] Parks, *Venus,* 63.

heading of "characters," she places each name under a heading entitled "The Roles." The characters that she then names play multiple parts in the show, all representing a different direct contribution to the Venus's exploitation. Most notably, for example, The Chorus plays five roles: The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders, The Chorus of the Spectators, The Chorus of the Court, The Chorus of the 8 Antagonists, and The Players of "*For the Love of the Venus.*"[42] Other characters are taken from the members of those Choruses, making it clear Parks' intended for these roles to overlap. In theatrical productions, directors have choices in certain things, like physical staging, line delivery, and in the cases of classical productions like Shakespeare, what time period the show is set in. Playwright's notes are often considered above directorial choices. In a show like *Venus*, where such specifics are integral to the coherence of the production, Parks' notes would have been followed.

Author's notes in theatre serve multiple purposes–on one hand, they provide a guide for the directors to follow. On the other hand, they provide *readers* of the show with necessary context. The message of *Venus,* however, is best transmitted on stage. How the characters interact with the audience is important, as the very text implicates them, forcing viewers to contend with the violence onstage and their own complicity. Like Passow says, in a sense, the audience is an ensemble, and as such, *also* a chorus.

There is also little distinction between the audience watching the play and the choruses on stage. Scene 20C, for example, takes place in The Venus's jail cell. To establish that, the stage directions read "apart from the "courtroom" The Venus sits in a jail cell.[43] The quotation marks around the word "courtroom" are an acknowledgement of the theatrical elements of the trial. The stage directions insinuate that this entire trial is a performance. The use of quotation marks also blurs the lines and muddles the definition of courtroom. If the "courtroom" is non-specific, might the

[42] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York, NY: Theater Communications Group, 1997), 0.
[43] Parks, *Venus*, 65.

entire auditorium be a courtroom as well? In passively watching this staged spectacle as a form of purchased entertainment, the contemporary audience enters into shared culpability with the historical perpetrators being depicted onstage. The fact that both the courtroom and the jail cell are onstage at the same time further adds to the fact that location is fluid. Just as there is no rigid separation between the courtroom and jail, there is very little between the audience and the cast.

Venus has historically been performed in a proscenium stage or a Black Box Theatre. A proscenium stage is the standard, characterized by a large stage with wings extending to the sides, facing the audience. Unlike a thrust theatre or a Black Box, the audience is not on all sides, the proscenium drawing separation between the two ensembles. Using a Black Box theatre allows for intimacy, drawing the cast into the show. *Venus* can be performed on either stage, both allowing for different experiences. If in a proscenium stage, that rigid separation actually furthers the feeling of spectatorship that characterizes Venus's degradation. In a Black Box, the intimacy between cast and audience feels even more voyeuristic.

This scene does bring into question, however, the role of the "voyeur" in the context of the play. Voyeur calls to mind, of course, an observer, but this observer is far from passive. In *Venus,* because the focus is on a visual spectacle, everyone watching the show is also complicit. This also extends to the audience of the play. The Merriam-Webster English Dictionary gives two definitions for voyeur. The first one is "someone who obtains sexual gratification from observing unsuspecting individuals who are partly undressed, naked, or engaged in sexual acts."[44] The initial meaning was one of sex–voyeurism was a fetish, undoubtedly sexual, and relied on the person being unsuspecting as to the nature of their perception. The second is much more broad, defined as "a prying observer who is usually seeking the sordid or the scandalous." Both have their

[44] "Voyeur Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster," Merriam Webster, accessed July 17, 2026, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/voyeur.

places in this analysis. In fact, these two definitions are representative of two different audiences– Venus's spectators, both historical and fictional, and the real-life audience watching the plays.

The fictional representation of the Venus' trial that Parks represents is perhaps more effective at implicating the audience than the historical one is. Part of her dehumanization is stripping her from her personhood, which the play does by rotating her and stripping her of her voice. Hartman references the case of *Missouri v. Celia*, a Black enslaved woman on trial for killing the enslaver that had raped her repeatedly, to make the point that "the slave's will was recognized only as it way prohibited or punished."[45] This duality, Hartman says, recognized the slave as a "reasoning subject who possessed intent and rationality solely in the context of criminal liability."[46] This is something that was done to the Venus, the choruses and The Negro Resurrectionist letting other people speak before she even has a chance to do so. She was on trial for both public indecency *and* murder, but when they talk about her "exhibiting" herself, she is stripped of her voice. She remains in the jail cell until she is called, further reinforcing her criminality.

To further the idea that there is no escaping from accountability, even The Abolitionist, the third witness that speaks, is taken from the chorus. The Venus operated as a site of projection, where viewers could speak over and *for* her, while not letting her communicate until the end. The Abolitionist is only called because they cannot reach the Baron Docteur. They say "Outrage! ItsanOutrage! Lets get someone anyone on the stand," and "eject" him from the chorus.[47] The Abolitionist speaks as a journalist, and reads a letter as a historical extract claiming that this is a crime of morality and comparing it to slavery. Even as a letter, the Abolitionist reading it on the stand after being pulled from the chorus shows that despite perceived "progressiveness,"

[45] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 143.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Parks, *Venus*, 71.

complicity cannot be escaped.

Act 2: Consumable Things

She's a (Munch)

Throughout *Venus,* the allegory of chocolate as a commodity and an aphrodisiac is used to illuminate how the Venus is treated. Specifically, sweets are used as metaphors for sexual desire are seen in the fetishization of Black women, who were compared to foods like chocolate, cinnamon, and caramel. Just like in *Venus,* chocolate—the Black female body—is open to consumption. These themes of consumption tie into both the Venus's historical life and the role of the audience. Plays, and the theatrical experiences of seeing them, get reduced to easily digestible segments untethered from real life. The very nature of *Venus,* restaging her exploitation, forces the audience to become complicit in the viewing of her body, aware and present, and *in the moment*. Much like chocolate can be bought and sold, so can tickets. The monologue that makes up Scene 3, entitled *A Brief History of Chocolate* is a metaphor, drawing thinly-veiled comparisons between voyeuristic crowds, both historical and current. Notably, this scene takes place after a scene where The Bride-To-Be is given a box of chocolates, or before it, depending on which way you read the text.

The consumption of Black bodies, in this case, was metaphorical. Metaphorical consumption included the gaining of sexual gratification from the Black body, but also the desire for more, a consumable subject, subjugated and inferior. "The Delectable Negro" by Vincent Woodard speaks to the projection of the enslaving class, saying "As a common strategy, masters often hid their appetites and hungers in stereotypes and ideologies that attributed these characteristics to the slaves."[48] Essentially, hunger, as a feeling, was something that enslavers

[48] Vincent Woodard et al., *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within US Slave Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014), 7.

denied their indulgence in. The hunger that the enslaved felt was seen as animalistic, seeking pleasure over rational thought. This hunger, however, was not only felt by the enslavers but acted upon as well. The desire for Blackness, disguised in admiration or pretty comparisons, was borne from a deeper wanting for violence, directed not just at Black women but at Black men as well.

Near the end of the monologue, chocolate is shown as a form of excess. This excess is an overflow of its original form, chocolate being used for purposes other than nutrition or a stimulant, but now for "fat, and of course, pleasure."[49] The new use of chocolate has fundamentally changed its purpose, and its imagery is primarily on the visual scale. Jennifer C. Nash, in her 2014 book *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* talks about the excess projected onto Black women. She is particularly interested in the idea of stand-ins for greater concepts, like the Hottentot Venus as a representation of all Black women.[50] Chocolate, in this monologue, is being used as a stand-in for blackness, more specifically Black women, to draw attention to the idea of Black identity and Black *people* as a consumable food. This stand-in has a double meaning–it is both representative of something else, and an acknowledgement of the void that "chocolate" is trying to fill. While chocolate may not represent the corporal excess that Nash speaks about, it represents the metaphorical. This desire for a consumable subject is projected onto the Venus Hottentot, the monologue making *her* the source of pleasure for other people.

The idea of chocolate being a source of pleasure also does not discriminate between gender. While the monologue does draw connections between chocolate and sexual desire, this

[49] Parks, *Venus*, 156.
[50] Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 46.

monologue also speaks about non-sexual desire made sexual, especially done by women. The larger point this is making about the audience, more specifically their complicity in the consumption of Black sexuality, bases itself off an assumption that chocolate is something they have not thought about the implication of in this play. Chocolate, as a source of fat and pleasure, is not just sexual but remedial, the pleasure taken in chocolate transforming sadness or "upsetting incidents" into more positive experiences.[51] The monologue describes chocolate as a "recognized emotional stimulant," saying "doctors have recently noticed the tendency of some persons, especially women, to go on chocolate binges either *after* emotionally upsetting incidents or in an effort to allow themselves *to handle* an incident which might be emotionally upsetting."[52] The use of the word "recognized" establishes the legitimacy of it, further drawing comparisons to the white supremacist institution. This fetishization, or commodification is *sanctioned* by authoritative powers, like doctors. It was James Marion Sims, for example, regarded as the "father of gynecology," that experimented on enslaved Black women and coined theories of sexual difference.[53] The audience is urged to think critically about the normalcy of such uses of chocolate.

Slavery, as an institution, is consumptive, legitimized by the imagery of the sexually and physical violating. The naked enslaved being auctioned off, or the graphic rape of Black women as entertainment, all fed the appetites of white enslavers. The homoerotic nature of consumption extended to white women as well, with them acting as an "extension of the master's will." For example, Linda Brent, in "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" remembers Ms. Flint sitting on her bed, attempting to gauge whether she is engaging in sexual relations with her husband.[54] Ms.

[51] Parks, *Venus*, 156.
[52] Parks, *Venus*, 156.
[53] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, 75.
[54] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, 77.

Flint appears as a succubus, a female seductress whispering claims in the ears of a Black woman, all the while retraumatizing Brent with the memory of her rape. This is an example of the consumption white women feel for the Black female body, the "upsetting incident" her perception of Brent and her husband's sexual relations. Much like they did with The Venus, she becomes a site to sate *something*–curiosity, hunger, or fascination.

In addition to the legitimization of chocolate and consumption as a coping mechanism, words italicized in the passage like "after" and "to handle" further imply the utility of chocolate. It has been transformed, like the Black body, into something intended to alleviate other people's issues. In the context of the theatre, chocolate is a snack, a concession, intended to support the enjoyment of the audience. The monologue draws parallels between the cacao bean and the Black body, the violent history and transformation into "product" the defining characteristic. While again, there is a similar history, the ready availability of chocolate is similar to the ease of access the audience has to The Venus and the ease of consumption shared among the two. In theaters, even concession stands offer snacks, often selling chocolate products. It is possible to participate in the consumption of chocolate while also consuming The Venus onstage. Take the homoerotic desire for Black men, for example. The concept of the "Black prick" regarded as something to *own* or have *access to,* solidified white male power as the arbitrators of potential usefulness. At the same time, it was useless, emasculated, the Black man both the penetrator and the penetrable. When the enslaved were stripped naked and on the auction block, it was the desire to degrade and also to own, that defined the desire and disgust for it.

To further the connection between the Black—especially Black female body, and chocolate, the monologue goes deeper into the fluctuating and changeable feelings for it. The monologue states that the European church "wages a campaign against chocolate on the grounds that it was tainted by the character of its heathen inventors," insinuating that they were

disgusted by chocolate, a stark difference from the Spanish who were known to "kill for it."[55] The Black body, whether male or female, is already tainted, thus infecting other people when they make contact.

The Young Man and The Bride-To-Be

In this play, there are two separate couples who parallel each other. One of these pairings is the relationship between The Young Man and The Bride-to-Be. These scenes between take place in an interesting location: a play within a play. The first of those scenes is part of the larger script at Scene 29, but also is Act 1, Scene 3 of *"For The Love of the Venus."* Both characters are taken from the chorus, meaning they play multiple roles, including spectators, jurors, and family members. This scene is prefaced by The Negro Resurrectionist during a historical footnote, who says "On one end of town in somewhat shabby circumstances, a young woman, native of the dark continent, bares her bottoms. At the same time, but in a very different place, on the other end of town in fact, we witness a very different performance."[56] The Negro Resurrectionist performs the role of introducing characters in the show quite frequently, and this is no different. The Young Man and The Bride-To-Be are brought up to parallel The Baron Docteur and The Venus, serving to further illuminate the relationship that the pair had.

In the beginning of the scene, it says in the stage directions that the Baron Docteur is watching the play. He is the only member of the audience listed, even as the Venus stands there because she is watching him. This is viewership through multiple levels—The Baron Docteur is watching a version of himself interact with a woman so different from the Venus and still seeing her reflected. There are elements of this play-with-a-play that follow the exploitative relationship

[55] Parks, *Venus*, 155.
[56] Parks, *Venus*, 24.

between The Baron Docteur and The Venus quite closely. Within these scenes, there are also references to other points in the text. Chocolate, for instance, is referenced in multiple conversations between The Bride-To-Be and The Young Man. The first thing The Bride-To-Be does is offer The Young Man coffee, which he declines politely. She also offers him tea, which he also refuses. It is not until she offers him chocolate that he indulges, saying "Chocolate. Mmmmm."[57] Chocolate, as previously mentioned, serves as a stand in for the Black female body in this play. Coffee and tea were both imported from different locations, and although chocolate did not originate from Africa, it did export it.

The concept of the exotic in this play has a strong tie to chocolate. The Young Man even says "Uncle took dad to Africa, showed dad stuff, blew dad's mind."[58] The dad that The Young Man is referring to is actually The Man, who brought the Venus Hottentot to Britain. This line is after the Bride-To-Be offers The Young Man a banana, which he says is a novelty. Novelty implies the context of something rare, interesting, or exotic. It can also be something that a person does not typically have access to. The Young Man seems much more interested in the chocolate than the banana, even though he has both in front of him. That suggests that his desire to have something tangible or accessible is what drives him. He doesn't seem to want to peel the banana, asking The Bride-to-Be to do it, so he doesn't necessarily have access to it, but the chocolate he does. It is the *new* that drives him.

Another driving factor for The Young Man is his journey to truly see himself. I believe this is a reason why the Baron Docteur is watching *For the Love of the Venus* so intently, he sees himself in the character. At the same time, both The Young Man and The Baron Docteur use the Venus as a tool to access the unknown. The Young Man reads from his notebook which says

[57] Parks, *Venus*, 25.
[58] Parks, *Venus*, 26.

"when a Man takes his journey beyond all that to him was hitherto the Known, when a Man packs his baggage and walks himself beyond the Familiar. Then he sees his true I, not in the eyes of the Known, but in the eyes of the Known-Not."[59] To me, this has an interesting meaning. He is passing beyond the familiar (The Bride-To-Be) into the unknown (The Venus, who is foreign and exotic). He is understanding himself in relation to her, but is still unable to truly see her as a person, instead, a character or an object through which his true desires are revealed.

Part of what characterizes The Young Man is his lack of desire for The Bride-To-Be. Throughout their first scene, he seems more interested in the chocolate, the exotic, what she can provide for him that is *not* herself. If we look at The Bride-To-Be as something familiar, we can see how his move into the "Known-Not" leaves her behind, as his desire for "novelty" does not include desire for what is assumed to be a white woman. The Bride-to-Be even laments the fact that he used to write her poetry, the line reading "My love for you is artificial, fabricated much like this epistle."[60] She ends the scene with saying "Aaaah me: Unloved"[61] which is a verbal acknowledgement of his dismissal. At the same time, she seems to misunderstand what the poetry says. It is not a confession of love, but an admitted truth that this love is *not* real, and only a lie. Later, in a conversation between the Venus and The Baron Docteur, he recites the poem that The Bride-to-Be says The Young Man wrote her, except claims it as his own.[62] Here, he is causing The Venus to receive the same words that The Bride-to-Be does, but at a different point in time. It is significant that because the play is written backwards, we read The Bride-to-Be's dissatisfaction with the words The Young Man doesn't say before we read this conversation between The Bride-to-Be and the Venus. If we read it as taking place before, we see their

[59] Parks, *Venus*, 25.
[60] Parks, *Venus*, 26.
[61] Parks, *Venus*, 26.
[62] Parks, *Venus*, 102.

relationship as the "true" relationship in this play, and *For the Love of the Venus* as an alternative reality.

To further the tension between The Young Man and The Bride-to-Be, there is a scene in *For the Love of the Venus* Act II, Scene 9, where The Bride-To-Be is talking to The Mother. The Mother is not the mother of The Bride-to-Be but in fact the mother of The Young Man. As the family relationship stands, The Mother is the Bride-to-Be's mother-in-law. Because The Bride-to-Be and The Young Man are not already married, their relationship is tenuous and can be dissolved at any time, especially if The Young Man seeks someone better. While talking to the mother, she says, "No more rhymes. Now he writes *tracts.* Prose essays on *(Africaaaaah!)*."[63] This is her acknowledging that The Young Man is leaving her behind for something different. Like the previous scene, The Baron Docteur is watching, watched through another lens by the Venus. As a third point of viewership, the audience is also watching. The content of the scenes provides a relatable experience, jealousy over someone you love and are committed to while they long for someone else is a common theme. It is the extent to which The Bride-to-Be goes that is different.

Together, The Mother and The Bride-to-Be are examples of white female jealousy. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" by Hortense Spillers, she says of Linda Brent's mistress "neither could claim her body and its various productions-for quite different reasons, albeit-as her own, and in the case of the doctor's wife, she appears not to have wanted her body at all, but to desire to enter someone else's, specifically, Linda Brent's, in an apparently classic instance of sexual 'jealousy' and appropriation."[64] The appropriation is interesting, specifically because it is what The Bride-to-Be attempts to do when she dresses up as The Venus Hottentot. After The Young

[63] Parks, *Venus*, 39.
[64] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe, 77.

Man's desire for her is revealed, in the conclusion of *For the Love of the Venus,* she wears the costume of the Venus Hottentot and goes to The Young Man. He says:

> By these knees Im bending on
> True Venus
> Im forever thine.
> I'll never change.
> Promise me the same.
> Uncle, put that on yr tongue then in her tongue then in her ear.
> *(Rest)*
> What is her answer?[65]

What is interesting about this is the fact that he doesn't seem to be able to see through her disguise. He is saying he will never change (when we already know this is untrue) and asks "the Venus" to never change because there is something specific he desires about her (the core)."[66] Both The Baron Docteur and the Venus are watching the Bride-to-Be attempt to claim the Venus' body as her own. This is born of sexual jealousy–The Young Man desires the Venus so the Bride-to-Be seeks to become her to be more desirable to him. If this attempt works it is unclear–he ends the scene by offering her chocolate. As *A Brief History of Chocolate* in the proceeding pages mentions, "doctors have recently noticed the tendency of some persons, especially women, to go on chocolate binges either *after* emotionally upsetting incidents or in an effort to allow themselves *to handle* an incident which might be emotionally upsetting."[67] Him handing her the chocolate might be an acknowledgement that he has upset her, or him providing her with a way of coping because she, as herself, will never provoke the same desire for the exotic in her that the Venus does.

Open To Assault

The desire to enter someone else's body in the way that Hortense Spillers writes about in

[65] Parks, *Venus*, 153.
[66] Parks, *Venus*, 153.
[67] Parks, *Venus*, 156.

"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" is not limited to female jealousy. Enter does not always mean to become, but can also mean to penetrate, or to take by force. The Venus, dehumanized and degraded becomes someone/something to use, rather than treat as a person. As Saidiya Hartman speaks about in *Scenes of Subjection,* the Black (enslaved) body was treated as something that was owned, but could also be given "agency." This agency, of course, was not to act, but to carry the responsibility of "seduction" upon them, making crimes of a sexual nature the fault of the enslaved.[68] Whichever mode of understanding the body differed on what particular purpose the body was supposed to be used for. These laws were sanctioned, Hartman saying that

> "both the recognition of black humanity in slave law and the designation of the black subject as the originary locus of transgression and offense resulted in legal distributions of pain and death. To be recognized as a subject of law did not remedy subjection, or position the captive outside the reach of slavery's terror, but to the contrary, strengthened its clutch and enabled another order of violence to unfold."[69]

The Venus experienced this, put on trial not just for crimes of indecency but also crimes of seduction.

In *Scene 20F: The Venus Hottentot Before the Law (continued) (Witness 1 and Witness 2),* two witnesses are called to speak about the Venus. Both of them are upstanding members of society and people who even came to see the Venus or a person who has a connection to someone who did. Witness #1 describes how he and his "Mrs," were regulars but his wife always fainted.[70] The notion of fainting upon seeing a spectacle is interesting, because it is an activity that centers oneself and draws attention to the act of fainting. In fact, it makes the viewer the victim. As mentioned earlier, each witness was taken from the Chorus of the Spectators, now the Chorus of the Court. In addition

[68] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 137
[69] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 138.
[70] Parks, *Venus*, 68.

to their complicity in watching, they are also making judgements about who she is and her body. This is not dissimilar to the role the audience plays. Even if they want to separate themselves from the viewership, their outrage at a perception of indecency is more similar to the Chorus of the Court than not.

Witness #2 is a more interesting witness based on what she has to say about the Venus. Witness 2 is a widow, whose husband died of "thuh shock of her," her being the Venus who he went to see. She proceeds to say that "she once handed my man a feather from her head. Theyre said to bring good luck. A fight ensued. Three men died. Uh little boy went mad. Uh woman lost her child."[71] This evidence is used to say that the Venus is violent, using the fact that she *gave* the feather to insinuate that it was her choice. Even, at the same time, she is open to assault, as this takes place after multiple people paw at her and poke her. This is one way for the court to escape accountability. The witnesses are both intrigued and repulsed by her sexuality, something seen as both easy to access and hard to understand. By projecting their repulsion onto the "horror" of a feather that causes madness, they deny their own fascination as borne of desire or intrigue, attributing it to an "inanimate" object.

At the same time, the feather is part of The Venus. It is a direct representation of her sexuality. When they bring it in as an exhibit, much like the others, she reads it out loud. They describe it as a "feather from the head of the so-called Venus H."[72] Using the phrasing "from the head" suggests, much like birds, that the feather is an intrinsic part of her. Just as easily as it can be plucked from her head, it can cause madness, sexual desire, or cure infertility. Because this is not necessarily contradicted, it is relayed to the audience as a truth. The effect of it on the characters, that is, the madness and the death, while not shown onstage, creates a spectacle. Her

[71] Parks, *Venus*, 69.
[72] Parks, *Venus*, 70.

sexuality and the feather that represents it is a performance. It may be interesting to note that because one does not necessarily have to touch the feather, merely be in the presence of it, that the audience is not exempt from these possible effects. When they bring in the feather as an exhibit, they are re-staging the exact scene that caused madness and death. By the audience simply being the audience, they are "recipients" of this open sexuality and therefore benefit or suffer the While it does not specify exactly, the feather is what is attributed to desire. Rather than letting the spectators take accountability for their own sexual attraction to the Venus, they use rhetoric surrounding the feather that suggests that she is inviting them in. It in turn allows them to justify viewing her. Even earlier in the text, the Mother-Showman tells her to "stroke yr feathers" in order to give the audience what they came for and continue the show.[73] As Witness #2's husband said "Poor Creature. Very extraordinary indeed! This is a sight which makes me melancholy."[48] While this suggests that he feels sorry for her, she notes that "forgetting his compassion" he shouts "Good God what butts!"[74] and dies two days later. The fact that he can "forget his compassion" to objectify her suggests that the line between viewer and voyeur is incredibly thin, and that although he may believe himself compassionate, he is not. His feelings of possible compassion are outweighed by sexual desire. In addition, Hartman gives a name to this phenomenon, explaining that the "crime" of rape was not treated as a crime of that but as a crime of adultery, or faithlessness to an often (white) mistress. Witness #2's outrage seems like a judgement on the Venus for killing him, rather than an indictment of his lack of compassion.

Sexual desire, sexual violence, and interracial longing for the exotic are what characterizes a significant amount of the Venus' interactions with other people. Even after slavery, her body is treated as a commodity which can be bought and sold. For example, in a

[73] Parks, *Venus*, 43.
[74] Parks, *Venus*, 68.

scene between the Young Man, the Father, and the Uncle, the Young Man says:

> A man to be a Man must know Unknowns! So
> if The Man cant sail to the Unknown I guess
> the Unknown will sail to The Man. So!
> Im all decided:
> Before I wed, Uncle, I'd like you to procure for me an oddity.
> I wanna love
> something Wild.[75]

The Young Man is driven to forsake his commitment to the Bride-to-Be because he wants something better. He is using the Venus as a source of the "unknown" as a site in which to discover himself. At the same time, with the use of the phrases "i wanna love something wild" he situates her as an object of desire, but desire that is based in difference rather than similarity. The Baron Docteur's relationships are where desire for similarity creeps in.

This desire for similarity is characterized by attempting to see the "truth" of something unknown. When the Baron Docteur is watching The Young Man and The Bride-to-Be, he is seeing himself in them. One could read their scenes as pornographic, especially the scenes where The Bride-to-Be dresses up like the Venus. In that scene, both her and the Baron Docteur are watching, seeing themselves in a parody of their relationship. The Venus, in her scenes, was shown to "desire" the Baron Docteur, even assuming he was going to leave his wife for her, or at least what is gained from proximity to him. Jennifer Nash speaks about this "pleasure in sameness, saying

> "spectators may take pleasure in sameness, in seeing themselves—their bodies, their pleasures, their longings—projected onscreen. More than this, this insistence that the pornographic scene is fundamentally structured by difference elides all of the ways that the pornographic promise of difference gets interrupted, ruptured, and troubled,

[75] Parks, *Venus*, 48.

sometimes by the very protagonists whose bodies are rhetorically and visually evoked as sites of difference."[76]

This is interesting because both the Venus and The Baron Docteur are seeing themselves represented onscreen, and the relationship between The Bride-to-Be and The Venus is troubled. When she sees herself in The Bride-to-Be she is claiming an identity that is not hers but could be. The Baron Docteur also says he sees himself in the Venus, but not completely. He wants her fame and notoriety, but not the judgement she receives, trying to pick and choose what aspects of her life he can claim.

The notion of pleasure as a thing to be claimed or taken by someone else also extends to the pleasure that was taken *in* the Venus. She was the recipient of physical and sexual violence by people that believed that they owned her. Viewership was violence on the visual plane, but it was combined with sexual assault. What I am most interested in is the juxtaposition between people's belief of her sexuality and the version of sexuality she herself believes in. For example, in most scenes that exhibit her, she is being "pawed at" by members of the audience. The Brother is the first to do so, when he asks her to "lift up yr skirt."[77] From the beginning, she is treated like a commodity. One thing that is important to note is that these scenes of violence are all happening onstage. The audience is able to see them happen, and when the chorus gropes or exposes her for sexual gratification, the audience also witnesses it. It allows them to take pleasure in the exposure, and function as a *voyeur.*

Her name itself also draws attention to her sexuality. She was called the Hottentot Venus, Venus being the Roman name for the Greek goddess Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. She is treated as something different and able to be consumed, which is also seen literally when the

[76] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 20.
[77] Parks, *Venus*, 23.

Baron Docteur hands her a chocolate called the "nipple of venus" with similarities to her body.[78] As it is put on her, she *invites* desire, and is treated like she is "always wanting. In Scene 22: Counting the Take/The Deal That Was, Venus attempts to bargain with The Mother-Showman. The Mother-Showman, as the character that takes her exhibition in hand, is complicit in her exploitation. When the Venus asks for a lock on her door she deniers her, and uses sexual violence as a threat, saying "Dont push me, Sweetie. Next doors a smoky pub full of drunken men. I just may invite them in one at a time and let them fuck yr brains out."[79] The use of the word "let" carries with it the ownership The Mother Showman has over her body. The Venus responds "they do it anyway," and follows it by saying "They come in drunken when yr sleeping."[80] This is the reason she wants a lock for her door, but it also illuminates how the Venus speaks about the sexual violence she experiences.

The concept of "rewounding" the body is a common theme throughout the play. One interesting thing that Hartman notes is that "the defilements and violations of slavery are incorporated as shame."[81] By the Venus classifying herself as a victim of sexual violence, she is ashamed. This shame is just not felt within the scene, but onstage as well. The audience is watching, and although the Venus is just speaking to The Mother-Showman, the entire audience can hear as well. The shame that is felt when the Black body is open to assault is something that the spectators witness and take part in. This furthers the feeling that to be effective *Venus's* vulnerability requires a captive audience that cannot look away.

[78] Parks, *Venus*, 105.
[79] Parks, *Venus*, 56.
[80] Parks, *Venus*, 57.
[81] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 190.

Intermission

This is the section of the play that remembers the Venus. This is also the place that dissects her, dismembers her, or as Suzan-Lori Parks describes it, "The Dis (-re-) memberment of the Venus Hottentot, Part I."[82] It is also formally known as the intermission. Unlike most intermissions, however, it is not a break in scenes but a scene in itself, taking place in the standard 15 minutes between acts in the plays. It is not just the content of the scene that holds significance, but the existence of it.

Venus' intermission functions like a break in the play, but isn't one. As the stage directions note, the "house lights should come up and the audience should be encouraged to walk out of the theatre, take their intermission break, and then return."[83] Even though this is the suggested course of action, the intermission holds great significance to understanding of racial exploitation in the play. During this scene, the Baron Docteur and The Bride-To-Be are reading from a notebook and love letters respectively. Specifically, the Baron Docteur is reading his autopsy report of the Venus. Earlier in the play, the Baron Docteur is called to speak at the Venus' trial and does not appear, as he is presenting his findings about her at a conference. In some ways, this intermission functions as an extension of the conference he speaks about.

As the title of the scene states, it is one of dis (-re-)memberment. It is dismemberment, as her dissection is being discussed, but it is also a harsh word that carries more violence. Dismemberment is a forceful act, often tied in as a facet of murder. At the same time, the beginning of *Venus* and the historical context let us know that the Venus is dead and has been for a long time. This is why the act is not just one of dismemberment but dis(re)memberment. As the Baron Docteur speaks, he functions like the Negro Resurrectionist, re-presenting her

[82] Parks, *Venus*, 91.
[83] Parks, *Venus*, 91.

body to be judged, dissected, and exploited. Much like Hartman speaks about in "Venus In Two Acts," the Baron Docteur makes it so her exploitation is for a purpose and uses her for his own ends. She is "instructive," as he attempts to present her information at a conference, but also presents it during the intermission to the audience as well. He is re-violating her body, dead as it may be.

The intermission is meant to be instructive though, and it is purposeful in its dismissal of the audience. The audience having the choice to leave or not is one of the most important parts of the play. Even though the stage direction says to encourage them to leave, that may not be seen through direct words, but the lights coming up or the urge to use the bathroom. One thing that is unclear is how quickly the scene starts during the intermission, but it is possible that there is a short break that allows people to start leaving before they see that a scene is going on.

The choice they have is one that signifies one of two things. If they choose to leave, even if they leave for natural reasons and not just because they were uncomfortable, they are actively turning their back on the Venus and missing a portion of the play. That asks the question of whether her exploitation is more harmful if the purpose is unclear, as the Baron Docteur is not "speaking" to anybody. If the audience chooses to get up and leave, they are leaving behind what does have the possibility of being an instructive moment. On the other hand, if they choose to stay, they are now complicit. Giving the Baron Docteur an audience encourages him, even though the play is already set, to keep going. Staying indicates a fascination with the scene, the scene that cannot exist without the body of the Venus Hottentot. By doing so, they are now an active audience, instead of just a passive one.

On the second page of the Intermission the Baron Docteur tells the audience to leave. He does so by saying "I do invite you, Distinguished Gentlemen, Collegues, and yr Distinguished

Guests, if you need *relief,* please take yourselves uh breather in thuh lobby."[84] Much like other scenes in the play this is both addressed to the audience in the play and the audience outside of it. I am most interested in the use of the word "relief". This suggests that the contents of the intermission or something that you need to recover from, but more than that, that it is okay to feel disturbed or affected by it. It also is a direct way for the audience to opt out of the scene. Even though the Baron Docteur says that his "voice will surely carry beyond these walls and if not, my finds are published," the audience is aware that this is a play and these findings are not easily accessible.[85] Instead, it furthers curiosity and incentivizes them to stay to listen to "limited edition" information.

This scene is important because it is one that can start discussion. Not just because of the scientific nature of it, but because it is so clear in its exploitation, it is, in a way, exactly what it appears to be. There is no way to make the scene into what it's not, or pretend that they're not talking about her body. Even the Baron Docteur says, in his initial remarks, that "as to the value of the information that I present to you today, there can be no doubt. Their significance will be felt far beyond our select community."[86] This is true, not just in the context of the play, but also what the audience takes away from it. He's not speaking about the Venus Hottentot herself, but the way this scene functions to implicate the audience. The scientific findings are used to further race science and portray "differences" between the Black body and the white one. The use of the words "select community" further makes it clear that there are multiple audiences at play as well.

During the scene, there are two separate things happening on stage. The Baron Docteur is reading her autopsy, but The Bride-To-Be is also reading love letters. Her love letters, however, are

[84] Parks, *Venus*, 92.
[85] Parks, *Venus*, 92.
[86] Parks, *Venus*, 91.

not gushing confessions of love, but modifiers to the Baron Docteur's feelings about the Venus. Some of the play's main themes are about desire, and desire that is not just sexual in nature, but also fascination. In addition, that sexual desire in the play often goes hand-in-hand with fascination, something the Baron Docteur feels. While the desire may be real, it is shown throughout the play that "love" is artificial and created to the Venus' detriment.

The letters The Bride-to-Be reads are written by The Young Man. While they are not the same character, nor played by the same actor, the similarities in their names make it so you *could* connect the letters to the Baron Docteur as well. The letter that she reads specifically says "My love for you, My Love is artificial, fabricated much like this epistle."[87] The use of the word "epistle" is significant, and it refers less to her letters and more to the entire autopsy the Baron Docteur reads. An epistle, as a letter providing religious guidance or information on religious doctrine parallels this autopsy, intended to be read at loud and used as an instruction for further research. In a sense, her letters serve as modifiers for the autopsy. There are two separate "scenes" happening at the same time.

To further the overall feeling that this play is instructive, Parks leaves several author's notes through the intermission that offer clarification. For example, on one page she says that a "glossary of medical terms could be found at the back of this book."[88] The way the autopsy is written makes it very hard for a layperson to understand. The Baron Docteur seems to be speaking from a place of authority with medical knowledge that the audience doesn't have. This encourages them to take his opinions at face value, and believe whatever he is saying about the Venus. That being said, he has little to no credentials. It is only his title that certifies him as a medical professional.

[87] Parks, *Venus*, 91.
[88] Parks, *Venus*, 91.

The Baron Docteur is not just portrayed as a medical professional though, but also as a performer. At several points in the play, he speaks to an audience directly, including the direct audience of Venus in his speech. He tells the audience that he has "strong lungs" and that if they go into the hallway to catch a breather they will still hear him. It is perhaps notable that the second time he tells the audience to step into the hallway if they need air, he is about to describe "specific points of interest."[89] The specific points of interest are the intimate details of her sexual organs, in addition to other aspects of fascination like her mouth. This is not just exploitative, but voyeuristic it's its nature as well. The use of medical terminology, like Hartman says, "defamiliarizes the familiar" and draws a degree of separation between slang anatomical terms and the heightened medical language he uses here. Because the jargon is so confusing to the average audience, it forces them to pay attention more closely.

Defamiliarizing the familiar is something both Venus and Slave play do well. By forcing the audience to witness spectacles, they are calling them out on their complacency and forcing them to reckon with the horrors of slavery they are calling them out on their complacency and forcing them to reckon with the horrors of slavery. In some ways, Theater can draw audiences into complacency, viewing them as passive audiences with little to no agency. When the intermission gives them a choice of whether to stay or go, they have to choose whether to walk away from the violence or watch it. Either choice makes them question who they are and the nature of the scenes they are watching.

Slave Play does not give you a choice whether to walk away or not, but it also plays with breaks in the spectacle. In Act 2 of the play, or the chapter titled "Process" it is revealed that the scenes are not taking place in the past, but a sexual BDSM role-play sanctioned by two Black

[89] Parks, *Venus*, 95

therapists. The goal of this role-play is to heal their anorgasmia or inability to orgasm through race play. Tea and Patricia (the therapists) encourage this open discussion, and all of the couples in the play engage in conversation together. It also uses the therapeutic language that is more common in progressive spaces.

Much like in *Venus*, the author's notes in *Slave* Play are incredibly significant for understanding how the audience is implicated in the play. The intermission is placed between Acts One and Two, and the author's note says that the McGregor plantation is "Outfitted with all the fittings of modernity, but still feels haunted by the antebellum south."[90] This is interesting because before this, the house was known as the "big house" a common description of it during slavery, Now, it is only known as the main house, and written in all lowercase letters, which contributes to the break in the scenes. It also feels like the scene is now focused more on the characters, as Harris says that "Jim, Kaneisha, Alana, Philip, Gary and Dustin sit in a semicircle in modern day leisure wear, eating snacks and drinking water."[62] These are all traditionally parts of "aftercare," or the ritual post-scene that brings down the emotions and heightened sensitivity common after that sort of play. Interestingly enough, Harris notes that another option directors can take is that "over the intermission each of the couples enters the space at different paces in various states of undress."[62] Because wearing leisure wear signifies a break in the scene and draws a separation between the characters as they are in the role-play and who they are as people, them coming in still in the role-playing outfits makes the scene a continuous one. It doesn't allow the audience a break from perceiving this role-play, and forces them to understand that the sex scenes are part of the therapy, not just independent from the sort of reclamation that is intended to happen.

[90] Harris, *Slave Play*, 59

Overall, the scene works to do a few specific things. Through conversation, it places the characters in conflict with one another. The audience is able to see the tensions that pervade each of these interracial relationships, and how they communicate. It reveals the complications of even trying to engage in this sort of therapy. As the scene title describes, this is the part where they "process" everything. The fact that this processing happens on stage is extremely important. It contributes to the feeling that these scenes are not necessarily meant to have an audience, even though they still do. It also gives a view of something incredibly intimate and at times hard to watch. The fact that this is group therapy is also notable. The characters have each consented to being in community with each other, but not necessarily in community with the audience. By watching this, the audience is violating the consent that is so important in maintaining healthy therapeutic relationships.

Even though this thesis focuses mostly on Kaneisha and Jim, the other characters are also important. One thing this scene is doing is revealing the reactions to the raceplay that aren't necessarily negative. Alana, for example, the white woman who pretends to be a slave mistress to a Black man, describes the entire scene as hot, and "taking back her power."[91] This raises several questions. Is she not the one with power in this relationship? Is she necessarily "more" oppressed than Philip? Why must racial domination be the way she claims to assert power in this scenario?

One reason this is interesting is because she represents a kind of engagement in raceplay that is less about the Black object of desire and more about her specific fantasies. In fact, Alana serves as a physical representation of voyeurism. In this case, first scenes might be the least controversial out of any of them, and because of how "well" they went, the most likely to be

[91] Harris, *Slave Play*, 69

read as pornography. That can make the audience forget the scene is supposed to be about the Black partner's desire for healing, and not the white partner's aversion or complicity in violence.

Act 3: Problematizing Pornography

Staging Sex

BDSM, in its nature, is a form of sexual engagement that deviates from what is standard. It is an acronym composed of three parts— bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism. The aspects of BDSM are also colloquially known as kink, and even within the scene, there are various ways of participating. Fully understanding *Slave Play* requires contextualizing the history of kink, and how the play uses it to comment on sex, racial fetishization, and interracial relationships. *Slave Play* asks us to consider sex critically as something neither good nor bad, but a neutral tool that can be wielded in different ways.

The "scene" is how kinksters or people who participate in kink describe fellow groups of people who engage in it. This is not to be confused with a scene, a deliberate and negotiated act, role-play, or participation in a kink. Contrary to popular belief, not all kink is as simple as being on the giving or receiving end of violent acts. Dominance and submission for example, do not have to be taken by force, they can be a gift or freely given. There are types of kinks that don't involve any sort of violence at all. Shibari, or Japanese rope bondage, is an example of an activity that falls within the lines of BDSM but is often gentler. It can be a sensory experience meant to ease tension. Service Submission, a very specific type of submission, involves performing tasks, being helpful/useful, and generally serving a more dominant partner. While punishments for failing at tasks can be involved they don't need to be. Scenes can be gentle, not harsh.

Even though scenes do not need to be violent, harsh or degrading, they can be. Outside of kink, these actions are criticized and, in some places, even illegal. Not every state has an affirmative defense, and even if actions are consensual and previously agreed upon, the dominant

partner can still be charged with a crime. This is why the scene is also underground, even as it grows more popular, and people often use pseudonyms and don't post their real face online. A kink becomes more mainstream, it becomes more visible to the public, often spawning debates, or feminist, criticisms of what is seen as "violence against women." The effects of kink are often tied to the effects of harmful pornography, believing that the more people who practice kink, the more men think violence and decoration is normal to enact against women.

Raceplay, a kink that involves playing upon existing racial power dynamics, is often treated as harmful even by people who engage in other violent kinks. At in-person kink events and play parties, it is sometimes banned, and those who aim to participate are shunned. It is my belief that most people who are engaging in race play are not engaging with it in good faith and are often white men who seek to dominate or be dominated by Black women. It is their specific fantasy, either an extension of racist practices, or a false atonement that is put on Black women to remedy.

There are kinds of race play that interest me, even if you still could tie them to male fantasies. For example, there is a phenomenon of black queer dominatrixes dominating white men. Although the white men may get sexual pleasure out of this, the dominatrix, or domme, in this scenario, is, in a way, taking back her power. In the case of *Slave Play,* Kaneisha tries to use raceplay as a tool of healing. This is not to say that raceplay is good, as it is a slippery slope into racist fantasies, but I can provide a way to look at our world that differs from the dominant construction of it.

In Jennifer C. Nash's 2014 book *The Black Body In Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography,* she examines alternate ways of depicting Black women in pornography, and otherwise sexualized media. Racialized pornography, she says is "imagined to be particularly demanding in its incessant exposure of Black female flesh and its insistence on Black female

sexual excess and alterity."[92] Racialized pornography is sexual violence made visible, the Black body exposed and put onscreen. At the same time, Nash moves towards a concept she calls racial iconography, something she believes provides a "counter reading" of this sort of media. Racial iconography, as she describes it, is a method of analyzing media that reads for ecstasy in black womanhood rather than injury. Instead of assuming that all depictions of black submission and sexuality are sexual violence, she examines the space for black pleasure, even within racialized exploitation. Specifically, she is interested in the "possibilities of Black female pleasures within a phallic economy, and the possibility of Black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy."[93]

Nash's line of questioning is what I have based my entire thesis around–reading for Black female pleasure in both *Venus* and *Slave Play* despite the violence in both of them. I am particularly interested in her use of the word ecstasy, and how she defines it as a pleasure that "exceeds or transforms the self."[94] This pleasure, then, is what we *cannot* name, and holds a multitude of possibilities for re-examining sexuality and sex as a whole. Ecstasy is, in a sense, how we rewrite the future. It reframes sex from being perceived as wounding or a wound that needs to be healed, the black body and injury, into something with revolutionary potential, the possibility of change.

In her book, Nash describes four separate modes of analyzing pornography that stem from feminist movements. The first is pro-pornography feminism, which insists that state regulation of pornography is puritanical and a form of censorship. Nash criticizes it on the basis that they often treat pornography as something that is participated in with full agency, rather than

[92] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 2.
[93] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 2.
[94] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 2.

something that can be coerced. It changes the idea of pornography as fraught with sexual victimization but fails to consider that in some cases it is, which is a fact that cannot be stripped from it.[95] Another school of thought she brings up is the "Sex-Radical Rejoiner." Followers of this idea believe that pornography had multiple meanings. Focused on centering the voices of sex workers, and treated sex work and feminist theory is something that could coexist alongside each other and even exist within the same body. This is the frame that uses most commonly in her book, even while she wishes it provided a "more robust frame for decoding pornography's multiple meanings."[96]

One of the remaining two modes of feminist theory on pornography is one that she finds more disagreement with. This theory is anti-pornography feminism. Andrea Dworkin is one example of an anti-pornography feminist, believing that pornography is an extension of the patriarchy, causing violence and weaponizing sex in a way that is fundamentally anti-feminist.[97] It also assumes that sex-work is not real work, because it is all enslavement and trafficking. One area where I, and Nash, agree with anti-pornography feminism, is that it specifically marginalizes women of color, especially black women as the most vulnerable in the scene. Pornography was seen as "an act that secures male power" which allowed him to dismiss people who participated in consensual pornography as anti-feminist, and complicit in the exploitation of women. Because of its reflection on the outside world, pornography could not be a place of imagination or fantasy, rather, loaded with the weight of patriarchal expectations and male violence.

Feminist Porn Studies is the last framework Nash describes for understanding pornography. It treats pornography as a "ubiquitous part of public life that consistently makes

[95] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 14.
[96] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 19.
[97] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 9.

visible that which is supposed to be "out of view."[98] It provides an important way of theorizing the role of pornography in society and base it off of focal and framework, treating pornography as a confessional, where truth is found. She has some disagreements with this, as the theory assumes that difference is where pleasure is found. Nash's theory is that there is also pleasure found in "sameness," which explains why racialized pornography is not just watched by white men and women, but by Black audiences as well.

One could view *Slave Play* as a kind of racialized pornography, but one done for a purpose. The title of the play serves as a double meaning-it is both a play about "slavery" and also a type of raceplay, as kink scenes are also called playing. This is a moment where the play becomes self aware, making a statement about its contents. It is the manifestation of taboo subjects come to life. At the same time, it is important that these are fantasy. Even though the scenes are fantasy, they are based on real world dynamics. The fact that the characters are choosing to engage in this kind of sex speaks to how much it defines these interracial relationships. The notion of choice is crucial to understanding how each couple engages with each other. Because BDSM is consensual, Kaneisha and Jim, are making a collective choice to engage in that sort of play. In fact, Kaneisha's insistence that she be referred to in a specific way (negress) by breaking the scene reinforces it as something that she can control at any time. At the same time, the ability to safeword (Jim) or escape from the scene is a choice that can be made. I would argue that kink functions in a way extremely like ideas presented in feminist porn studies. The idea that truth is found within it is central and Kaneisha and Jim's relationship is defined by the willingness or hesitancy to confront that truth.

Slave Play's resistance to fitting into a neatly defined genre as partially what makes it

[98] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 18

important. Because so much of what is significant about this play is how the audience interprets it, the fact that it toes the line between pornography and fantasy, and can even become an amalgamation of the two. It asks the questions of whether racialized fantasies are simply graphic depictions of violence, or representative of real-world dynamics between interracial couples. It subverts narrative tells, working to reimagine (or fantasize) about potentialities within it.

Who Holds the Power?

Despite what some people might think, in traditional BDSM relationships, the dominant partner does not hold all the power. Part of the consensual pre-negotiated dynamics ensure that the submissive partner is in control even as they give it up and has the possibility to remove themselves from the situation at any time. That is not to say that they are entirely in control, no, successful relationships are built on knowing when to give and take. So much of what Nash speaks about can relate to putting power back in the hands of those most marginalized. This power isn't necessarily through dominance, but the ability to consensually submit or "play into" their race. Blaxploitation films are one place in which this is visible. Even amongst degradation, black female protagonists confined their own pleasure even within the context of an exploitation film. She speaks of "identification"—and the way these films provide multiple ways for Black women to either see themselves represented or find pleasure through representations in alternative realities.

In *Slave Play,* Kaneisha is the one who initiates this type of sex. Her dancing in the overseer's cabin is where this play begins. Throughout the entire first scene, even as she takes a more submissive role, she is in control of where the act is going. Even though the relationship between her and Jim in this fantasy is one of overseer and slave, she insists on calling him

"Massa."[99] The character description sets this up well—Kaneisha is a " dark black woman unafraid of what she knows she wants" while Jim is "a white man and inheritor of more than he knows how to handle."[100] The idea of Jim as an inheritor has two meanings. The first is that he as a white man has inherited white privilege, something he may not know his way around, or even begin to understand how it affects his personal life. The other idea is that he's inherited distrust in his relationship with Kaneisha and doesn't know how to manage the fact that she knows what she wants and he isn't sure if he wants what she's offering. Specifically, much of their conflict stems from the fact that he is resistant to participating in sex the way that she wants him to. He pushes back against the term "massa" and stutters and struggles to call Kaneisha a "negress," saying "no no- ne- knee- "negress."[101] You could even read the "no's" at the beginning of his stutter as a voiced resistance to calling her that word. Interestingly enough, the use of the word "nigger" with the hard-r isn't present at all through Kaneisha and Jim's relationship. Instead, all the harsh and degrading language still seems theatrical, rather than just recreating historical violence.

If there is any hesitancy from Kaneisha in the scene, it seems to stem from the fact that Jim is not sure of what he's doing. She starts to refer to him as Jim, before correcting herself to "massa." Jim pushes back against that by saying "Aint gotta call me "Massa" I don't reckon."[102] The stage directions note that he says this in a "confused whisper," suggesting that this is something that has either been sprung on him or he is still unsure about participating in it. This could actually be as he clarifies a page later, that he is the overseer and not "Master MacGregor."

[99] Harris, *Slave Play*, 8.
[100] Harris, *Slave Play*, 3.
[101] Harris, *Slave Play*, 9.
[102] Harris, *Slave Play*, 9.

The exact wording is:

> Naw, see, I'm the overseer.
> I oversee.
> …
> …
> I don't own ya.
> That's
> ya know
> that's
> Master MacGregor.
> Up in the big house.
> MASTER
> MacGregor
> I's just…[103]

Even in the scene, he still wants to deny his own capacity to be dominant. He's doing everything he can to separate himself from the idea of a white master, even as he takes the role of an overseer. He's resistant to the idea that he could "own" Kaneisha and even brings in a third person (the aforementioned Master MacGregor). Even though he is well within his right to feel uncomfortable with this kind of play it doesn't mean he shouldn't interrogate why he feels this way. He clearly was still willing to engage with it, but as a person with limited accountability instead of full accountability. Jim has this intense need to separate himself from the "evil slave master" and still ends up finding a way to let what he wants control the scene. In Kaneisha's response, we can see that she is unsettled by this and struggles to figure out what she's going to say before she gets back into things.

Anthony Paul Farley speaks about this hesitation in his coining of the term "race-pleasure." Race- pleasure, he says, "refers to both embodied pleasures in whiteness that white heightened by denying the incessant practice of injuring black bodies—and to a pathological, Black, "pleasure in humiliation."[104] Nash disagrees with the assumption that the "pleasure in

[103] Harris, *Slave Play*, 10.
[104] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy,* 84.

humiliation" is due to cognitive dissonance, and I agree with her on that point. Where I am inclined to agree with Farley, however, is that I do think white enjoyment of raceplay relies on denying the injury that slavery and colonialism has caused. This is why Jim cannot see himself in his relationship with Kaneisha participating in raceplay as a master without feeling like he is being compared to historical slave masters. He believes himself entirely too "conscious" to be able to participate. For Kaneisha, it may be the performance of *blackness* which arouses. The scene is not about Jim's pleasure, or his hesitation, even while Kaneisha wishes that he would find pleasure in it.

Jim's role in *Slave Play* is similar to the role of the audience because in a way, Jim is the audience. Kaneisha is performing blackness and putting herself on display for Jim to watch. Jim's horror and resistance parallels the audience's intrinsic feelings, which is that raceplay is shocking and hard to watch. Unlike in *Venus*, however, where at times the audience is encouraged to leave, there are no such breaks built into the script. The only break comes in the center, when they switch into a therapy session, because Jim safewords. As it is revealed by Tea and Patricia, the therapists, all play between the couples stops when the safeword "Starbucks" is said, not just the couple who taps out, thus "ruining it" for everyone else.

In traditional scenes, the use of the safeword means that one party has gone too far and the other is uncomfortable. Maybe it's because something wasn't pre-negotiated well enough, or the submissive doesn't necessarily realize what they've signed up for. Safewording in a healthy relationship should not be something that causes a rift between couples. In *Slave Play,* it does. This is because, as much as Jim says his safeword because he is uncomfortable, he is uncomfortable for the "wrong reasons." In the first scene, he follows his dismissal of the word master with a statement about who he is or is not. He says:

It's just kind of annoyin?
Don't seem quite fair,
You see?
To put me in the same category
as them folk.
Big House Folk.
We in this little shed,
basically.
I aint
fancy!
Like the MacGregors
up in their
big ol' house.[105]

I am particularly interested in the fact that he uses the word annoying here. It implies a discomfort that is not as serious, even while he is making it out to seem bigger than it is. The use of the word "fair" also fails to take into consideration that the conversation is not about what is fair or not. The lingering history of slavery present through this entire play is not necessarily fair. Jim is trying to draw a separation between himself and the McGregor's because he is uncomfortable with visualizing the difference between him and Kaneisha. Even later, he says "Might as well be a nigga m'self."[106] Jim doesn't seem to have the same hesitation calling himself a "nigga" the same way he does calling Kaneisha a "negress," partially because it is the existing in relation that makes him uncomfortable. Participating in raceplay makes him aware of his whiteness in a way he dislikes. Even Kaneisha does not seem to know how to respond to that, as all she says is "Oh…"

The audience watching *Slave Play* can have multiple responses, each revealing something significant about them. In consensual raceplay, even as the Black partner is the submissive, they are still controlling the scene and have the possibility to stop at any time. The fact that Jim wants to stop is an example of him taking back his power and denying Kaneisha what she wants

[105] Harris, *Slave Play*, 10.
[106] Harris, *Slave Play*, 13.

because of his own guilt. This is something the entire play poses as an option towards the audience, because there *is* an intermission. If they are too uncomfortable, they can leave, but as such, are playing the same role that Jim does. The conversation is not just one between Jim and Kaneisha, but between the audience and the actors. At the same time, because Kaneisha and Jim don't acknowledge the audience, the people who come to see the show are held at a distance. This serves the purpose of making them think they are different, even while the same. The response can also differ based on the race of the viewer. Any response that dismisses the raceplay as vulgar or obscene and blames the playwright for writing it, also denies Kaneisha the choice she is making to participate in this. Kaneisha does seem to find pleasure in participating in this scene, further contributing to her frustration when Jim safewords out. Part of what is shocking about this show is that fact. When she starts dancing to "Work" she is moving her body in a way that suggests she enjoys it. In addition, she explains to Jim that she is taking back "the truth of her body." This is consistent with the idea of re-wounding as an exercise in truth telling. Performing blackness is the thing that helps Kaneisha understand who she is.

As the couples move into conversations with the aid of Teá and Patricia, more emotions start coming to the surface. This is where Alana, a white woman, describes her scenes with Philip as hot, and Dustin and Gary debate Dustin's whiteness. During this scene, the people with the most to say are Dustin, Alana, and Jim, the three white members of the play. Tea and Patricia criticize this, saying "I think it's important that we examine and name the dynamic that Alana pointed out a bit ago: in the aftermath of confronting and dissecting racial trauma the people in the room who were the first to verbalize their experience of the trauma's confrontation were those who have the closest proximity to white supremacy."[107] This supports the point that one of

[107] Harris, *Slave Play*, 99.

the main faults of the white characters were how they centered themselves and their perceptions of the scenes in their "processing." In addition, the white members of the cast were not healing *their* trauma–they were working to aid their partners on healing theirs. Jim, Alana, and Dustin's words all try to draw a distinction between them and white supremacy–Jim through denying his connection to "Master MacGregor," Dustin through separating himself from whiteness because he is "not the right kind" and Alana through her womanhood. Each of these characters are representative of potential audience reactions to the show. External conversations about shock and disgust, even when presented by non-white folks, still centers their assumptions about the content of the play. Black audiences who try to deny Kaneisha's feelings by saying that *they* wouldn't act like that are still centering themselves in the conversation.

As much as the sex happening in *Slave Play* is a conversation, it also feels like the absence of one is the issue. The audience bearing witness to the couples are watching these extremely intimate scenes, which could have multiple responses. The audience could be disgusted, but they could also be aroused watching the sex onstage. Depending on who the audience member is, it can cause identification with the white partners, or the Black ones. The dialogue that is opened between the partners is also one that is opened between the audience and the actors. Watching the show could be cathartic, in a way that could also be sexual. If a white person is aroused watching the scenes in *Slave Play,* what does that mean? I hesitate to say it means that sexual arousal caused by inflicting the wound of radicalization on Black bodies is inherently neutral, but that it *should* become a point where white audiences can examine what arouses them. Sexual desire does not arise out of a vacuum, and the play forces audiences to interrogate why exactly they find these scenes attractive by interspersing these therapy scenes to confront them directly.

When Kaneisha and Jim engage sexually again, it is to reopen their conversation about

where they are struggling in their relationship. This is all set against the backdrop of the plantation where their scenes are taking place. Kaneisha speaks about where they lost their spark, saying that she once saw the "exotic" in Jim where she now finds a "virus." Part of the reason she was so interested in this therapy was that she believed it could bring a spark back into their relationship and confides this to him. In the middle of this conversation, he picks up his whip, and begins the scene again, throwing her onto the bed, calling her a Negro and proceeding to penetrate her. She fights back, and this is, as one of her friends suggested, a scene with consensual non-consent (CNC) which is just what is needed to "spice up the relationship." Suddenly she screams the word "Starbucks" which is their safeword, the same one Jim utters to stop the scene earlier. Even though they stopped, she finishes the play by saying "Thank you baby. Thank you for listening."[108]This encompasses the major theme from the text, which is both lack of understanding and accountability. Here, Jim is demonstrating that he is capable of being violent, of being the virus, and Kaneisha takes back her power. She safewords. She is the one who can stop at any time. Jim cannot stop being white, but that's not what Kaneisha wants. She wants him to acknowledge his power over her. She wants to reimagine it.

Minstrelsy and Consumption

Both *Venus* and *Slave Play* take elements of minstrel scenes and apply them to their content, further drawing comparisons between historical audiences and the current audiences watching each show. Each couple participating in raceplay scenes are not completely historically accurate, and in fact it is important that they do not. It is the straying from exact historical accuracy which troubles the narrative. At the same time, they are strongly reminiscent of minstrel shows. Much like the audiences of those were racists looking for entertainment, the

[108] Harris, *Slave Play*, 159.

people who come to see *Venus* and *Slave Play* are sucked into the spectacle of theatrical violence. Minstrel shows, also called minstrelsy, were "an American form of theater developed in the early 19th century. The shows were performed by mostly white actors wearing blackface makeup for the purpose of portraying racial stereotypes of African Americans. Minstrel shows stereotyped black people as dimwitted, lazy, buffoonish, greedy, cowardly, superstitious, and happy-go-lucky."[109] The shows aimed to confirm racist perceptions that Black people were not civilized enough to be treated as equals. Both shows use these elements to show the absurdity of racist spectacles.

In one of the first parts of the opening scene of *Slave Play,* Jim asks Kaniesha to devise her own scene. He does this partially because he is uncomfortable-not through words, but through actions. Holding the whip, he asks her to suggest he beat her, and considers it a punishment for the floor not being clean. Throughout the scene, he seems to find the wrong words— he likens her to a raccoon in heat and struggles to find the word heifer. In one of his most interesting choices, he throws a cantaloupe on the ground and asks her if she'll eat the "watermelon." Kaneisha insists that it is not a watermelon, that it is instead a cantaloupe, and he actually argues with her about it until she has to specifically describe what a cantaloupe is.[110] This scene is incredibly violent, but also absurd— he is using historical stereotypes to degrade her, but seems unaware of how to actually bring them into the scene. The insistence that this cantaloupe is actually a watermelon as an argument is larger than life, and the use of historical stereotypes forces the audience to acknowledge race-based degradation.

This is also an exercise in memory, and the purposeful reenactment of historical traumas. Saidiya Hartman describes this as "the space taken and remade in every day practice enabled

[109] "Minstrel Shows," Wikipedia, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel_show.
[110] Harris, *Slave Play*, 20.

needs and desires to be aired and implicitly addressed the history of violence and dislocation that produced the captive as well as the possibilities of redress that might undo this state." Each sexual engagement in *Slave Play* carries with it the possibility to undo this state. The example of the watermelon is, as Hartman follows, "redundant with imagery and symbolic elements that have their source in the violent history of the people."[111]Even as the sex does, re-wounds, or undoes, it has the possibility of using this violence to find areas of solace. It is the comparison to the past that allows reflection on it in the present.

Venus also contains elements of minstrelsy. One such scene is in Scene 24: *"But No One Ever Noticed/Her Face Was Streamed With Tears.* This is one of the first scenes of her on display, and she is being exhibited by The Mother-Showman. The Mother-Showman kicks her, saying "Observe: I kick her like I kick my dog."[112] This is followed by theatrical noises, alternating between The Mother-Showman and the Venus. This is one of the more physical displays of violence onstage, but it is also different. The stage directions describe that "the act has the feel of professional wrestling but also looks real." This contributes to the feeling that this act is a performance stage specifically to arouse some emotions in the viewer. To further the connection that this is similar to a minstrel show, The Mother-Showman explains *why* they kick her, saying:

> Thuh kicks is native for them Hottentots.
> When I was down there in their hot home.
> As Gods my witness Kickin Kickin
> Kickin all day Kickin at eachother
> thats just their way!
> They do one kick for our "move uhbout"
> 2 kicks means uh well "pass thuh meat"
> They mix it with thuh toes n heel: Uh whole language of kicks
> very sophisticated
> for them of course
> *(Rest)*[113]

[111] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 121.
[112] Parks, *Venus*, 45.
[113] Parks, *Venus*, 46.

This scene features The Mother-Showman making assumptions about what the Hottentots are like, and then presenting it as a truth to the crowd. They are speaking about Venus while she has no say. They even ask her to confirm that that is a true facet of Hottentot culture, and although The Mother-Showman says she confirms, the Venus has no dialogue to support that. This is part of an effort to show the crowd that Hottentots are "uncivilized," but at the same time, that they believe their culture is valid. The use of the word "sophisticated" feels mocking and sarcastic, instead of a true belief.

In *Scenes of Subjection,* Hartman talks about the fixation on a slave's "good times."[114] Essentially, she is talking about the performance of enjoyment that enslaved people were forced to do. This is the reasoning that led to beliefs that enslaved people were happy or comfortable in slavery. These performances of enjoyment could also be a means of "keeping your head down" so to speak and waiting for times where moments of resistance could be found. Minstrel shows are major "performances of enjoyment." Where both *Venus* and *Slave Play* differ from minstrel shows, however, is that they show the use the absurdity to make a statement about Black resistance and coping with racial trauma, rather than just perpetuating it.

[114] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 46.

Finale

In the previous chapters, I have attempted to draw parallels between two separate plays and their depictions of Black women and sexual violence. I posited that both plays used violence onstage to make the audience question assumptions of Black pleasure and to make them question how they contributed to the upholding of white supremacist structures. What I have done is examine how the audience is not just an audience—they are complicit.

I have asked the same question Hartman does–Is it possible to tell a tale of exploitation without re-wounding the Black body? To me, the answer is no, it cannot. The re-wounding is part of the undoing process, the place where Black identity is made and unmade. Black identity, for better or worse, is built off the trauma that came before. These two plays were selected for a reason, and that reason was the potentiality for change.

Venus is not just a story about exploitation, but the story about a person. The Venus Hottentot is not someone you can dismiss as fictional, and the play requires that you confront her existence head on. The play shows a tangible representation of her life and seeks to undo everything we thought we knew about her. The spaces on history in which there is room for fabrication, examining not what was, but *what could have been* requires the hard work of deconstructing your thoughts about sex, sexuality, and the ways that Black women find places of resistance in horror. I cannot help but remember a course I took where we read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* written by Harriet Jacobs. Nor could I forget the attic, her hideaway, her own solace and protection she could find even amid slavery. It is that strength that is carried through the female protagonists in both plays.

Slave Play is not the only play that talks about sex. The way it speaks about it however, and the response it provokes is representative of how much work there is to do in our own lives. It makes us think about the limitations of assuming all violence is purposeless. It portrays the

human emotions of desire, shock, and shame in a way that makes you think, *maybe these characters aren't that different from us.* Kaneisha and the Venus could not have come from more different lives. Centuries apart, with one of the only common threads being that they were both dark-skinned Black women. The tie that binds them, however, is the search for places of refuge, whether that be in the hands of the Baron Docteur or those of a white British husband. It is the attempt to make themselves that draws them together, even with different amounts of agency.

I admit, this thesis could do more. There is so much to say on the topic of these plays, whether it is tying in more connection to the audience, or asking more questions to the text. It is not just the text that I respond to, however, but everyone who has ever watched these plays, the people reading this thesis, the person who heard me talk about my thesis prospectus and said to me, *are you saying that raceplay is good?* If I could go back to that moment. I would respond differently, say something that I have learned over the process of writing this thesis, ask him why he thought that.

This work is more important than ever, in the questions it asks. *I* still have questions to ask. *Venus* and *Slave Play* have not run in years. I could not see any of them before writing this thesis. All I had in front of me were these two plays, a laptop, and critical theory written by some of the leading Black feminist thinkers. I think about undoing, now. I think about the people that sat in those audiences, watched the violence and said to themselves *what am I watching?* I think about the reproductions of race that happen on the stage, the violence of alternative pasts and the struggles for alternative futures. These plays have taught me much about my own Black identity and illuminated what I have yet to discover.

I still cannot help but to think there is more to uncover, more to learn, more to resurrect from the Black Atlantic, and to gain from re-wounding, and it makes me think. It is not just the audience who is complicit, but in writing this, I think, I am complicit too.

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