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(Re)membering Sara Baartman, Venus, and Aphrodite

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This article analyses the Black diasporic reception of Venus in the figure of Sara Baartman, a South African woman who performed under the name 'Hottentot Venus' in the early nineteenth century, and her theatrical persona in Suzan-Lori Parks's play Venus [1990] *(1997). Through her sophisticated characterization of Sara Baartman, Parks provides insight into the complex performativity of Black femalehood in conjunction with an overwritten Greco-Roman divinity. Parks's play presents Sara Baartman as a person who forces her audiences, both theatrical and historical, to contend with their own complicit role in her objectification. More broadly, this cross-cultural dialogue attempts to recuperate the Black female subject from lopsided archives. It also contributes to a larger dismantling of the perceived boundaries between Greco-Roman art, African history, and African American literature.*

In 1765, 'The Sable Venus: An Ode' circulated in Jamaica. This poem, written by an Anglican clergyman named Isaac Teale, recounts the narrator's trip to Mount Helicon during which Sable Venus instructs him to sing on her behalf. During his paean, he describes the goddess: the Angolan divinity is a beautiful creature whose sole difference from Florentine Venus lies in her skin colour.[1] Isaac's seemingly innocuous poem glosses over the rampant sexualization of Black[2] women in the eighteenth century. The English painter Thomas Stothard adapts Teale's description of Sable Venus in his 'The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies' (1794), an engraving commissioned for the volume that included

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[1] 'The loveliest limbs her form compose,/ Such as her sister Venus chose, / In Florence, where she's seen: / Both just alike, except the white,/ No difference, no,—none at night, / The beauteous dames between', Teale (1765: 9) [Stanza 15].

[2] My capitalization of 'Black' signals a shift from a colour marker ('black') to a less visually distinct realm ('Black'). Throughout this article, I use upper-case 'Black' as a capacious term to describe people, from the sixteenth century onward, whose perceived skin colour greatly determined their social standing.

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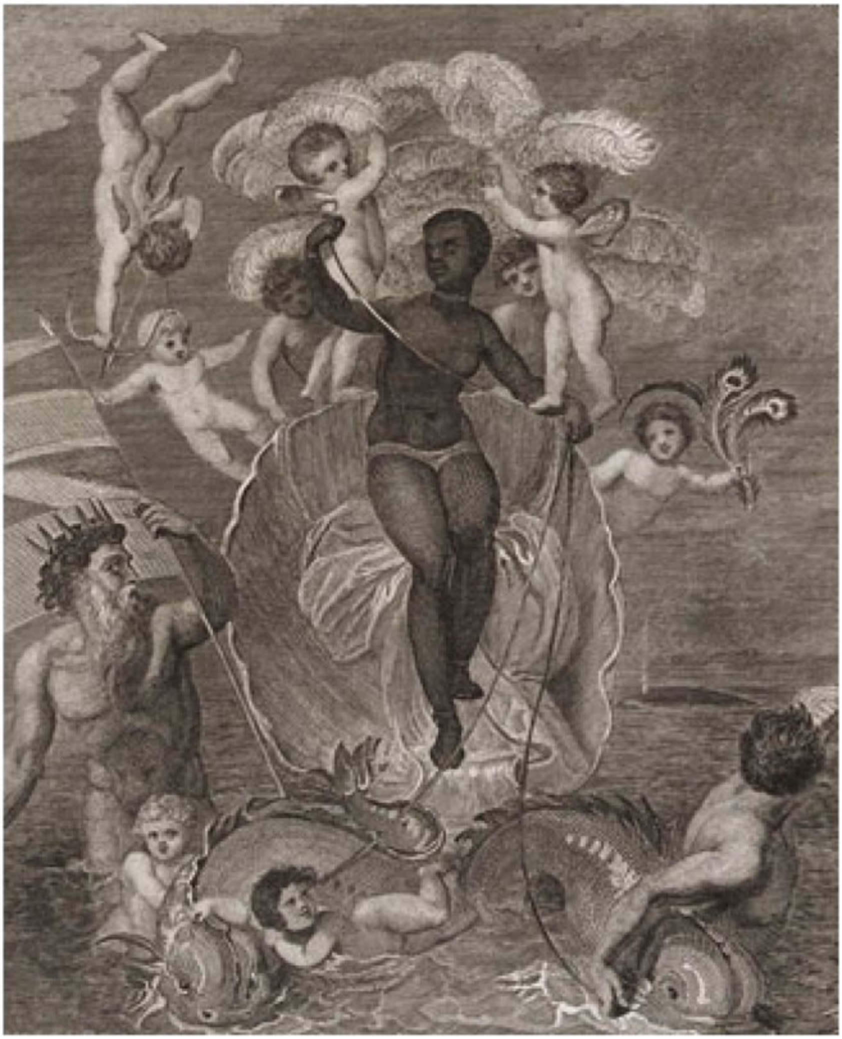

Fig. 1. Engraving of *The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies*, Thomas Stothard, 1794. 203 mm × 164 mm. London, National Maritime Museum (ZBA2520). http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/254621.html

Teale's poem (Fig. 1).[3] This ocean scene depicts a Black woman standing on a shell-shaped chariot pulled by two dolphins. On her right, Triton holds a British flag, on her left, a man attempts to redirect one of the dolphins, and flying Cupids surround her. Everyone in the scene is naked except for the Black woman who wears a narrow strip of underwear. Amidst the swirl of activity in this scene, she directs her gaze to her uplifted right hand which holds the end of her chariot's reins. Her near-complete nudity and the presence of the British flag transports viewers from an ethereal, ancient setting to Stothard's contemporary, slave-trading England. The violent history of slavery's forced displacement stands in stark contrast to the Black woman's calm demeanor and loose grip of the reins. Stothard's presentation of the Black woman is especially disconcerting because it thoroughly erases the brutality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to the engraving, the Black woman's agency literally rests in her hands. Barring the interference of two Cupids and a nondescript man, she apparently guides her own journey.

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[3] For a deeper analysis of Teale's poem, see Allen (2011) and Hall (2011: 8–10).

In his engraving, Stothard evokes Renaissance art, such as Sandro Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus* (ca. 1484), and ancient Greco-Roman statues, namely that of naked Aphrodite (Aphrodite Knidia) and buttock-baring Venus (the Callipygian Venus). His transhistorical allusions cast Sable Venus as a vessel of Greco-Roman and Italian art. Resisting uncritical anachronisms of Venus, Suzan-Lori Parks engages with the historically dense relationship between Venus and Black women in her play *Venus* [1990] (1997). *Venus* examines the life of Sara Baartman (d. 1815), a South African woman who performed on display as 'Hottentot Venus' in England and France.[4] Although it is unclear whether Teale's and Stothard's renditions of Venus influenced Parks's play, Parks's protagonist speaks back to their central figure. In contrast to the romanticizing of the traffic in bodies promulgated by Teale and Stothard, Parks creates a character who recuperates agency and self-determination in the midst of coercion and constant voyeurism. The play text begins with precise stage directions:

> The Venus facing stage right. She revolves, counterclockwise. 270 degrees. She faces upstage .... The Venus revolves 90 degrees. She faces stage right .... The Venus revolves 180 degrees. She faces stage left.[5]

From the outset of the play, Parks distorts Teale's and Stothard's lopsided view of Venus by exploiting visual access to the protagonist. The audience receives frontal and side views of the protagonist but are denied a direct view of her posterior, which would only be possible if the protagonist faced downstage. Unlike the flat, unassuming portrayal of Sable Venus within an idyllic landscape, Parks presents a multifaceted character whose partial display of her body coincides with the partial narrative surrounding Sara Baartman. As the play continues, Parks creates numerous points of entry and lines of sight into the incomplete archive of a complex historical figure.[6]

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[4] It is hard to pinpoint Sara Baartman's precise birthdate: Holmes (2007) suggests 1789, Crais and Scully (2009) propose c. 1770.

[5] Parks (1997: 1–2).

[6] My use of the term 'archive' is influenced by Hartman (2008) who states that 'the archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of

This article examines how Parks disrupts the concept of Venus in her play *Venus*. It teases out the paradox whereby Sara Baartman, who performed as a physical oddity due to the accumulation of subcutaneous fat in her buttocks, transforms from an abject spectacle to an inscrutable performer. Parks uses the stage as an overt medium to shed light on the historical resonances of the 'original' spectacular Venus.[7] I begin with an overview of the plot and characters in *Venus*, paying special attention to the protagonist's various names. Next, I step outside of the theatrical world to critique each element of the pervasive 'Black Venus master narrative'. By repeatedly putting Sara Baartman into dialogue with Greco-Roman prototypes who straddle the intersection of divine beauty and visual object, I contextualize my quest to rehabilitate female figures from imbalanced archives. In addition, I scrutinize key passages from *Venus* that address Parks's uncanny ability to upend her audience's expectations regarding Sara Baartman. Finally, my investigation of *Venus*'s inaugural reviews highlights the dangerous ease with which contemporary audiences can reinscribe the exploitation of Black female bodies.

Power of naming

A prolific dramatist whose accolades include the MacArthur 'Genius' Award, a Pulitzer Prize in Drama, and the Gish Prize for Excellence in the Arts, Suzan-Lori Parks has consistently pioneered innovative theatrical practices.[8] From writing one play a day for an entire year (*365 Days/365 Plays*) to inviting audiences to a metatheatrical writing class in which they worked individually and discussed the writing process together ('Watch Me Work'), she has eagerly incorporated 'slightly unconventional theatrical elements' into her plays.[9] Early traces of this capacious approach appear in her reconfiguration of the story of Sara Baartman in *Venus*. Premiering on 28 March 1996 at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, under the direction of Richard Foreman, *Venus* went on to receive two Obie awards and enjoy an extensive run in numerous American cities.[10] Recently, Venus has undergone a revival as part of the Signature Theatre's 2017 production in New York City, under the direction of Lear deBessonet. The play begins with the main characters insisting that the play cannot occur because 'The Venus Hottentot iz dead'. These characters include a robust chorus and four

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property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history' (Hartman 2008: 2).

[7] A brief sample of other contemporary, Black, female artists who have created pieces for and about Sara Baartman: Alexander (1990), Cox (1994), Lewis (2015), and Walker (1990s, cited and depicted in Willis 2010: g21) whose piece *Untitled* reworks parts of Teale's poem. For a fuller list, see Hobson (2005: 55–86) and Willis (2010: 69–144).

[8] Parks was the first African American to receive the Pulitzer Prize in Drama (2002).

[9] This quote derives from the 'Author's Notes' in Parks (1997).

[10] *Venus* was co-commissioned by the Women's Project and Productions Inc. (NYC). It was co-produced by the Yale Repertory Theatre and the Joseph Papp Public Theatre/New York Shakespeare Festival.

characters: Miss Saartjie Baartman/The Girl/Venus Hottentot, The Man/The Baron Docteur, The Mans Brother/The Mother-Showman/The Grade-School Chum, and The Negro Resurrectionist.[11] After their disavowals of the performance, the play nonetheless continues and traces the life of the female protagonist from southern Africa to England, where the bulk of the play takes place.[12] Under the guidance of unscrupulous managers, she becomes a popular performer who entertains lecherous audiences. The Baron Docteur, a French doctor based on the historical figure Doctor Georges Cuvier (1769–1832), eventually takes her to France and begins an amorous relationship with her in which he has full agency over her body. He eventually infects her with 'thuh clap' (syphilis) and allows her to be arrested for charges of indecency. After her death in prison, the Baron Docteur dissects her body and shares his findings with the greater scientific community. The play ends as it begun, with the cast reiterating the cancellation of the performance. This tragedy mirrors many aspects of Sara Baartman's life: she came to England and France in the early nineteenth century to perform as an object of sexual fantasy and disgust, she had many managers who varied in their treatment of her, and she died from a short illness, after which Cuvier dissected her body. Cuvier described the cause of her death as a *maladie inflammatoire et eruptive* ('inflammatory and eruptive disease'). Yet widespread prejudice that she was sexually deviant, along with the rampant spread of syphilis during the early nineteenth century, popularized the claim that she died of a sexually-transmitted infection.[13] Upon her death, Cuvier created a plaster cast of her body as part of his scientific study of her anatomy. Her skeleton and organs remained on display at *Le Musée de l'Homme* in Paris until the mid-twentieth century when they were moved to storage. The plaster cast remained available for public view until the 1970's. Finally, in 2002 all of Sara Baartman's remains were expatriated and buried in South Africa.

The title of Parks's play derives from the name given to Sara Baartman during her career as performer, 'Hottentot Venus', the flipped rendition of which Parks assigns to her protagonist.[14] 'Hottentot' is a Dutch loanword that potentially reflects an Afrikaner's bigoted claim that the Khoikhoi people of southern Africa had two words in their vocabulary: *hot* and *tot*.[15] This word was later adopted into

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[11] Parks weaves unique theatrical elements throughout the play, such as her interspersing of historical extracts and 'For the Love of the Venus', a play within a play that follows a bride-to be and her future husband who spurns her until she disguises herself as 'Hottentot Venus'.

[12] The play takes place in South Africa (Parks 1997: 10–18), England (Parks 1997: 19–90), and France (Parks 1997: 100–60).

[13] Holmes (2007: 98).

[14] Parks uses the moniker 'Hottentot Venus' solely to describe the character in the play-within-the-play 'For the Love of the Venus' (Parks 1997: 49, 121, 132–4, 153). cf. n. 11 above.

[15] Although some sources suggest that the Germans were parodying local languages as they transformed the indigenous *Khoekhoen* ('men of men') into German *hotteren-totteren* ('to

German and English. In the next section ('Black Venus Master Narrative'), I will delve into the significance of the second part of this moniker, Venus. For now, I merely point out that Venus is the ancient Greco-Roman goddess of love, and the Latin noun *venus* connotes qualities that incite love, such as beauty and grace. Taken apart, each element of 'Hottentot Venus' denotes a particular historical and geographical context. Taken together, this phrase suggests an amalgamation of linguistic and sexual domination that existed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) interprets the European act of renaming colonized peoples as a way to plant memories in and on their bodies.[16] This insidious colonization of language rendered colonized peoples into passive subjects who eventually assumed their colonial masters' history. Linguistic grafting erased their non-colonial names and histories. This is especially apparent in the case of Sara Baartman.[17] The earliest written attestation of her name, Saartjie Baartman, derives from the Dutch language: the suffix '*-jie*' is a diminutive marker that can suggest endearing undertones (perhaps employed ironically in this context), and *Baartman* translates to 'bearded man' or 'savage man'.[18] Cognizant of the colonial legacy inherent in this name, this article will endeavour to give agency to someone who was forcefully stripped of it by distinguishing between the performer 'Miss Saartjie Baartman', a character that Parks indicates in her list of roles, and the historical figure 'Sara Baartman'. The repetition of full names throughout this article is intentional. This iteration emboldens readers to restore dignity to these figures within the confines of their exploitative landscapes. In a similar vein, 'Venus Hottentot' will denote the performance of the fictionalized character in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, and 'Hottentot Venus' will specify Sara Baartman's historical performance in the early nineteenth century.

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stutter', OED 2014 and Kalb 2014: 156), this word was not listed in Jacob and Wilhem Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, an etymological and historical dictionary of all German words from c. 1500 to 1832. I refer to the language that coined 'Hottentot' as Dutch because it is unclear whether Afrikaans (also known as Cape Dutch due to the presence of seventeenth-century Dutch speakers at the Cape of Good Hope) was considered a formal language during Sara Baartman's lifetime. It was not until the passage of the Official Languages of the Union Act (No. 8) in 1925 that Afrikaans was recognized as the national language of South Africa (Crais and Scully 2009: 9, Hobson 2005: 149 n.1).

[16] Thiong'o (2009: 9–14).

[17] Sara Baartman was technically a servant, and not a slave (Crais and Scully 2009: 24–37). Nonetheless, I use language of colonialism to describe her experience because she endured forced displacement, entrenched poverty, and virulent racism.

[18] Sara Baartman's name undergoes another change after her baptism in 1811, at which point the spelling of her name changes to the Anglicized 'Sarah Bartmann' (Holmes 2007: 72).

Black Venus master narrative

Before Sara Baartman's lifetime, prejudiced individuals recalibrated popular vocabulary regarding Black people to suit their own means. During the European Renaissance, several intellectuals treated blackness as a synonym for sin and danger, such as Jean Riolan the Younger (ca. 1618) and Georges Buffon (1766), who supported the idea that the skin colour of Black people was abnormal.[19] Concurrent with the development of pseudo-scientific racism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was at its peak. As millions of Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean to work on plantations in the Americas, slaveowners began to develop what Tracy Sharpley-Whiting (1999) shrewdly calls the 'Black Venus master narrative'. Calling attention to slave owners' assignation of the label 'Venus' to enslaved Black women, Sharpley-Whiting explains that slaveowners used an ancient Greco-Roman goddess to portray 'racialized female protagonists as objects of desire and abjection'.[20] Due to my ongoing aim to redeem the Black female subject from a maligned role in history, it is crucial to carefully evaluate each part of this four-pronged term.[21]

To begin, the capitalization of 'Black' provokes inquiry. It highlights a semantic shift from the objective colour ('black') to a subjective adjective ('Black') that greatly affected one's status. The combination of 'Black' and 'Venus' suggests an artificial relationship between Black people and Venus. Without the explicit presence of 'Blackness', 'Venus' would presumably have a different colour associated with her appearance.[22] The second word of Sharpley-Whiting's phrase, 'Venus', foregrounds the sadistic way that slave-owners manipulated Greco-Roman mythology to justify their lascivious behaviour. Sharpley-Whiting's evocation of 'Venus' also hearkens back to Venus' Greek counterpart, Aphrodite.

The visual tradition surrounding Aphrodite depicts her as a popular prototype for erotic beauty. In the mid-fourth century BCE, the sculptor Praxiteles carved a marble statue of naked Aphrodite which he sold to the city of Knidos (hereafter referred to as Aphrodite Knidia). The statue stood as the centrepiece of a cult for Aphrodite

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19 Hall (2011: 9). Jean Riolan the Younger conducted experiments on Black people to identify on which layer of skin pigmentation was found. In the tenth volume of his *Natural Histories*, Georges Buffon's essay *De la dégeneration des animaux* ('On the Degeneration of Animals') stated that the hot climate caused people's skin color to darken and concluded that a return to temperate climates would restore everyone's light skin colour (Curran 2009: 1–28).

20 Sharpley-Whiting (1999: 8–12). Cf. Hartman's frustration with the Works Progress Administration's interviews ('master narratives') of formerly enslaved people (Hartman 1997: 10–12).

21 My inclusion of the verb 'redeem' is inspired by Hobson (2005) who aims to 'redeem Black women's bodies and the figure of Hottentot Venus beyond the discourse of racial alterity' (Hobson 2005: 3).

22 Hobson (2005: 19–54). The same argument can be made for terms like 'Black Athena' (Bernal 1989: 32).

Euploia ('fair sailing') in a Doric temple whose circular design enabled an unobstructed view of the goddess from any angle.[23] Her stance, with her right hand covering her pubic area and her left hand holding her dress, suggests that the nude goddess had just finished or was about to commence washing her naked body.[24] Aphrodite Knidia's popularity surged in the late Hellenistic period, partly due to the discovery of a group sculpture of Aphrodite, Pan, and Eros found on Delos. Many replicas and modified versions were created in the likeness of Aphrodite Knidia as well. In the fourth century CE, Aphrodite Knidia was moved to Constantinople. A century later, the statue disappeared from the records.[25]

Athenaeus asserts that Praxiteles modelled the statue on Phryne, a courtesan he was intimately familiar with at the time (Athenaeus 12.590). This mortal affiliation offered men a way to project their own sexual desire onto the statue without fear of divine retribution. Apparently some viewers took their desire a step further, as Pliny the Elder and Lucian both mention the stain on Aphrodite Knidia's thigh from the sexual consummation of an overzealous onlooker (*NH* 36.21, *Amores* 13–16).[26] This intense sexualization foregrounds the difficulty of understanding the ancient goddess on her own terms. The distinction between a complex goddess and a static statue eventually dissipated, and Aphrodite Knidia became an overwritten object that reflected her viewer's carnal gaze. The Callipygian Venus ('Beautiful Buttocks' Venus), a later iteration of Aphrodite, extends this voyeuristic trope. Athenaeus recounts the legend attributed to the Callipygian Venus in the early Hellenistic period: two Syracusan sisters were squabbling about whose buttocks were most shapely. After they each attracted a suitor, they built a temple to the Callipygian

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[23] Pliny the Elder recounts a lively story about the people of Cos refusing to purchase this statue because of their dislike of female nudity (Pliny the Elder *NH* 36. 20–21). Spivey (1996) reads Pliny's comment as a reflection of Roman, rather than Coan, preferences (Spivey 1996: 182).

[24] Havelock (1995: 11–19). My interchangeable use of the terms 'naked' and 'nude' resists any hierarchical distinctions espoused by art historians who denote ancient Greco-Roman statues as 'nude' in order to elevate their appearance and distance them from the bodies of mortal women. The shift from 'naked women' to 'nude statues' situates the iconography of ancient Greek women as part of a broader timeline of misogyny.

[25] Havelock (1995: 4–5, 67). Spivey (1996) suggests that Christian bishops may have destroyed Aphrodite Knidia, or it was melted down and repurposed (Spivey 1996: 178–9). Squire (2011) proposes that it was destroyed in a fire in 476 CE (Squire 2011: 88–90). Some examples of later iterations of this statue: Melian Aphrodite, Crouching Aphrodite, Sandal-binding Aphrodite, Capuan Aphrodite, Aphrodite of Arles, and Capitoline Venus (Squire 2011: 88–90).

[26] Havelock (1995: 36). Aphrodite Knidia had ready audiences despite the dastardly outcomes that awaited people who accidentally saw nude divinities in Greek and Latin literature, such as: Actaeon (Ovid *Metamorphoses*, 3.138-250) and Tiresias (Callimachus, *Hymn to the Baths of Pallas Athena*). Cf. the Baron Docteur and anatomists masturbating near Miss Saartjie Baartman (Parks 1997: 106, 119).

Venus with a statue of the goddess inside to thank her for their natural endowments (Athenaeus 12.554).[27] This statue features a partially-clothed Venus lifting her dress (*peplos*) to reveal her naked backside. She holds the folds of her dress in her hands, and her head is tilted backwards to look over her shoulder at her exposed posterior. Similar to Aphrodite Knidia, the Callipygian Venus does not control her physical corporality. The anonymous sculptor who created the Callipygian Venus offers generous visual access to viewers who individually determine which aspects of the goddess warrant close attention.

Intent on looking beyond the surface of female bodies, Suzan-Lori Parks unshackles Miss Saartjie Baartman from the objectified role into which she is slotted. In turn, she recuperates Miss Saartjie Baartman's historical and divine forebears (Sara Baartman, the Callipygian Venus, and Aphrodite Knidia) from a monolithic viewership. Well aware of the enforced system of renaming and subjugating female bodies, Saidiya Hartman (2008) continues this fight against the siloing of 'Venus'. Her expansive model treats 'Venus' as a generic name for all the enslaved women onto whom men projected their desires. Through this broad encapsulation, Hartman's nomenclature expands Venus's capacity for signification and agency.

The second half of Sharpley-Whiting's label, 'master narrative', indicates the presence of a historical hierarchy within which a correct (master) version exists.[28] In addition, this pairing underscores the perverse power that slaveowners wielded over tangible bodies and intangible histories. They deemed enslaved narratives as less important than dominant stories, which in turn shaped historical archives. The trope of *sparagmos* ('dismemberment') helps to address this asymmetry.[29] For Sara Baartman, her symbolic dismemberment occurs when she is ripped from her homeland, and her physical disfiguration begins immediately after her death when doctors dissect her body. A *compositio membrorum* ('arrangement of the limbs') occurs when Sara Baartman's remains are returned to South Africa in 2002 and given a public burial. This act of physical and spiritual reunion nudges the archives towards a historical equilibrium. The final word in Sharpley-Whiting's moniker, 'narrative', foregrounds the subjective nature of this trope. Slaveowners narrated which archives remained in circulation and which were forgotten. In sum, the 'Black Venus master narrative' embodies the subjective sexualization of Black women. Popular use of this concise phrase codified a social ladder that relegated Black women to its lowest rungs. As one of the offshoots of this term, Parks's 'Venus Hottentot' underscores an intimate connection between Black women and sex whose lifecycle permeates well into the twenty-first century.[30]

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[27] For the sake of consistency, I translate Athenaeus's 'Callipygian Aphrodite' into 'Callipygian Venus'. For more on the erotic iconography of Venus, see Barolsky (1999). In Haskell and Penny's (1981) tracing of the Callipygian Venus's geographical location, they note her final resting place, or perhaps the resting place of a heavily restored copy, at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples (Haskell and Penny 1981: 316–8).

[28] Cf. slaveowners in the Anglophone Caribbean who renamed enslaved people with classical names (Williamson 2018).

[29] For insightful analyses of *sparagmos* in other contexts, see Rankine (2006) and McConnell (2016).

Venus hottentot

Despite our inability to access Sara Baartman's personal archive, Parks employs a wide range of tools to reshape this historical lacuna. Rather than focus on the opacity of Sara Baartman's voice, Parks reconciles this inscrutability with the practice of 'broken witness'. Coined by Anthony Reed, the phrase 'broken witness' is a form of experimental writing that voices silence and produces poetics that push the limits of literary possibility.[31] Parks's dramaturgical exercises embody Reed's model of 'broken witness' in that they destabilize the expected norms within the theatre. Through her manipulation of repetition and unspoken dialogue (to be discussed below), she unhinges a singular understanding of her characters.

In the Overture, Parks presents characters who thoroughly inform and utterly mislead their audience as they proclaim the names of their myriad roles and the roles of others. For example, the Negro Resurrectionist, who chiefly serves as narrator of scene changes and historical extracts, announces,

> The Venus Hottentot! . . . The Negro Resurrectionist! . . . The Negro Resurrectionist! . . . The Man, later the Baron Docteur! . . . The Brother, later the Mother-Showman! Later the Grade-School Chum![32]

This cast list perturbs the audience's collective expectations with a comprehensive, albeit extraneous, catalogue of names without specific information about who will play each role.[33] Miss Saartjie Baartman presents her audience with an additional conundrum when she explains in a soft voice:

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[30] In popular culture, both Black and non-Black women have capitalized on the hypersexualization and objectification of the female body. A few examples of the former: Beyoncé (namely, the visual homages to Venus in her 2017 Instagram birth announcements and her 2018 music video 'Apes**t'), Janet Jackson, and Lil' Kim. An example of the latter: Kim Kardashian stands nude and oiled with her back to the camera on the cover of *Paper* magazine (Winter 2014). A pearl necklace around her neck, black gloves on her hands, and a black garment right below her surgically-enhanced buttocks are the only visible articles of clothing in the frame. In her commercialized pursuit of the callipygian aesthetic, Kardashian reinforces cultural expectations of female beauty without interrogating, or even acknowledging, its troubling genesis. For a fuller discussion of this phenomenon, see Fleetwood (2011: 105–46) and Hobson (2005: 46–79, 100–44).

[31] Reed (2014: 27–58, esp. 27–29).

[32] Parks (1997: 1–2). The Negro Resurrectionist steps outside of his metatheatrical role to interact with Miss Saartjie Baartman when she bathes (Parks 1997: 35) and when she is imprisoned (Parks 1997: 148, 157–9).

(I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead.
There wont b inny show tuhnite).[34]

She repeats this metatheatrical remark twice with slight revisions.[35] This repetition is part of Parks's 'repetition and revision' (rep and rev) technique in which characters repeat and slightly reconfigure their words.[36] Such recurrences infuse the play with musical elements, and these restatements resemble a song's refrain.[37] More broadly, Miss Saartjie Baartman's comment suggests that there is no clear delineation between fact and fiction within the confines of a performance. Any firm connection between what the audience sees and what they hear is unstable. If Miss Saartjie Baartman's statement were true, the play would end after her utterance. Instead, she blurs the distinction between omniscient narrator and gullible protagonist, the world of reality and the world of the play, the world of vision and the world of sound.[38] Furthermore, Miss Saartjie Baartman draws attention to the artificial space of the theatre with her direct address; her audience is well aware that they are watching a performance.[39] In fact, she renders her audience as participating witnesses in the spectacle of her life despite their position outside of her circumscribed world.[40]

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[33] The Negro Resurrectionist mentions every character except for the Chorus.

[34] Parks (1997: 4). In the 'Author's Notes', Parks (1997) indicates that dialogue circumscribed by parentheses denotes quietly spoken passages.

[35] Changes noted in italics:
'*But* I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead.
There wont b inny show tuhnite' (Parks 1997: 7);
'*Hear ye hear ye hear ye*
thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead.
There wont *be* inny show tuhnite' (Parks 1997: 160).

[36] Parks (1995b: 8–10).

[37] Variations of this phrase appear throughout the play (Parks 1997: 3, 4, 7, 8, 160, and 161).

[38] Additionally, the phonetic vernacular operates on different levels. Some linguistic distinctions are heard ('thuh', 'inny') while others are read ('b', 'tonite'). Parks (1995b) remarks, 'the "uh" requires the actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack' (Parks 1995b: 12).

[39] Before the lights dimmed at the Signature Theatre production of *Venus*, the audience, of which I was a part, was forced to acknowledge the distinction between the play and reality as the actress playing Miss Saartjie Baartman silently put on a flesh-coloured body suit with large breasts and buttocks. Zainab Jah, the actress who played this role, described the experience of putting on the costume for the first time as a 'seismic shift' that emphasized the optics of performance (https://bit.ly/2VGDvle).

[40] For more on the audience as witness, see McCormick (2014).

Parks departs from the domain of written performance script with ‘spells’, instances in which characters’ names are repeated without dialogue. For example, in Scene 27 after Miss Saartjie Baartman finishes her bath, she questions the Negro Resurrectionist who leers at her. After he compliments her appearance, a spell occurs:

The Venus
The Negro Resurrectionist
The Venus
The Negro Resurrectionist[41]

Parks interprets each spell as a place where ‘the figures experience their pure true simple state’.[42] This ineffable encounter seizes characters at an emotional peak that varies in resonance. Conspicuously vague in explaining what this ‘true’ emotion entails, Parks allows directors to dictate how each spell is performed. This directorial freedom leaves room for a fresh interpretation with each production. In turn, each iteration of a spell injects an element of improvisation into the play. Similar to the structural openness of Parks’s rep and rev technique, the spell ensures endless possibilities for the staging of these emotionally charged moments. In the spell quoted above, Miss Saartjie Baartman momentarily circumvents the Negro Resurrectionist’s fixed gaze as they are both locked in intersubjective contemplation of each other. No longer standing outside of the play, the Negro Resurrectionist now faces the consequences of his eager perusal of Miss Saartjie Baartman’s nude body. Each of them has two opportunities to transmit a potent message to their interlocutor non-verbally, such as a sharp gaze or a quick movement. The lack of dialogue in this scene frees them from the confines of written language. Different iterations of this scene can encapsulate a different aspect of their careful inspection.

Using tools from Parks’s dramaturgical toolbox, let us apply them to Miss Saartjie Baartman’s divine counterparts. In particular, Parks’s spells resonate in Greco-Roman antiquity. Unable to adequately notate the intersubjective exchange of the sort in which Miss Saartjie Baartman participates, the Callipygian Venus relies on her sculptor to spur interpersonal interactions. The anonymous sculptor’s decision to turn the Callipygian Venus’s head backwards enables her to join her viewers in gazing at her buttocks. With this pose, the Callipygian Venus anticipates Parks’s metatheatrical manipulations of the theatre. That is, both the Callipygian Venus and Miss Saartjie Baartman transform into spectators who participate in the perusal of their bodies. Unlike Miss Saartjie Baartman’s pronouncement of her own death at

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[41] Parks (1997: 35). This rhetorical device frequently appears in *Venus*. Scene 19 consists entirely of a spell between ‘The Venus’ and ‘The Baron Docteur’ (Parks 1997: 80).

[42] Parks (1995b: 16).

the start of the play, the Callipygian Venus does not use spoken or written language to dismantle the distinction between her world and her audience's. Her act of self-voyeurism speaks volumes on its own and pulls her closer to those who stand outside of her body.

For Aphrodite Knidia, hints of Parks's spell appear when the overeager visitor ejaculates on her thigh. Even though the story of this sexual encounter derives from written sources (*NH* 36.21, *Amores* 13–16), this story resembles a spell because it relies on visual proof, i.e. the physical blemish on Aphrodite Knidia's thigh. This sexual act transforms the viewer from a passive to an active role. That is, he is no longer a mere spectator because the physical remnant of his desire has drawn him closer to Aphrodite Knidia. Like a spell, this interaction transports the viewer into Aphrodite Knidia's world without a single utterance on her part.

Expanding her toolbox further, Parks reshapes the contours of silence when Miss Saartjie Baartman goes to court to speak against her owners in Scene 20. Here, Miss Saartjie Baartman weaponizes her silence and speech as a method of defence. In response to a slew of questions about her identity and desires, she states, 'The Venus is unavailable for comment'.[43] Echoing the opening scene of the play, the trial scene resembles another metatheatrical moment, in that Miss Saartjie Baartman briefly steps outside of her character to narrate her own unavailability.[44] Miss Saartjie Baartman troubles what Jean Young (1997) calls 'the discourse of dominance' by choosing, rather than being assigned, silence.[45] She cannot clarify her situation and exonerate herself from the debauched light people shine on her, so she redirects the conversation. Once she resumes her role as a speaking character, she recounts the dominant narrative in order to undermine it:

Please. Good good honest people.
If I bear thuh bad mark what better way to cleanse it off?
Showing my sinful person as a caution to you all could,
in the Lords eyes, be a sort of repentance
and I could wash off my dark mark.
I came here black.
Give me the chance to leave here white.[46]

This quotation plays with the racing of ethical attributes. Specifically, these lines call to mind the construction of race in the European imagination during the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Europeans' sustained fascination with indelible Blackness jostles against Miss Saartjie Baartman's direct request for ablution.[47] In fact, there appears to be an inherent contradiction between colour as separate from and in conjunction with a person's character. Miss Saartjie Baartman dissembles any simplistic assessment of colour in her defiant speech. With the conditional conjunction ('if') prefacing her remarks, she does not concede that a change in colour embodies a rejection of her old difficult life and the assumption of a lighter one. Rather, in a case of rhetorical entrapment, she subverts the paradigm of colour by presenting her person as a moral warning which thereby turns the prejudices of her accusers into an argument for her acquittal. Moreover, her repetition of the modal verb 'could' implicitly threatens her audience's supposed piety; her accusers' failure to absolve her may reflect their religious shortcomings.

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[43] Parks (1997: 74).

[44] Cf. the metatheatrical Overture (Parks 1997: 1–9) and Scene 20B in which the Chorus of the Court remark, 'Lets get this show on the road' (Parks 1997: 64).

[45] Young (1997: 704) disagrees with positive readings of *Venus* and understands the play as 'a steady stream of domination and eroticized humiliation' (Young 1997: 702).

[46] Parks (1997: 76).

This limited access to Miss Saartjie Baartman's opinion parallels the historical records. In 1810, the African Institution (a British abolitionist group) brought Sara Baartman's manager to trial. The only record of her words consists of a private interview, conducted in Dutch, in which Sara Baartman stated that she came to England willingly and was content with her current situation.[48] During this meeting, she produced a copy of her employee contract in English, a language she could not read. Although her response contributed to the acquittal of her manager, her testimony invites interrogation. The potential reasons for her admission are numerous: linguistic difficulties, fear of reprisal from her manager, unwillingness to return to South Africa, unfamiliarity with publicly exercising her free will. Similar to her theatrical counterpart, Sara Baartman wielded her voice in unpredictable ways that perhaps highlighted her external circumstances rather than her innermost thoughts.

Posterior view

Comparable to her Greco-Roman counterparts, Sara Baartman's exterior body resembled a living statue and an outward presentation of her viewers' sexual fantasies. Her comparison to a goddess did not grant her any power or privilege. Instead, it reinforced her role as entertainment for a wide viewership. Nicole Fleetwood's (2011) theory of excess flesh articulates the paradoxical category that Sara Baartman inhabited: her captive body housed her liberated flesh. This duality cultivates a diverse portrayal of Sara Baartman's body as invisible, visible, and hypervisible.[49] The hypervisibility of Sara Baartman's posterior governs descriptions of her theatrical counterpart, as Miss Saartjie Baartman's physical attribute drives many reviews of Suzan-Lori Parks's play. In the 1995 press release for the inaugural production of *Venus*, Yale Repertory Theatre emphasizes the 'extraordinary curvaceousness' of Miss Saartjie Baartman. This callipygian focus appears in local reviews of the 1996 world premiere:

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[47] Loomba and Burton (2007). In the Christian and Jewish biblical tradition, the narrator of the *Song of Songs* proclaims: 'nigra sum, sed formosa … nolite considerare quod fusca sim quia decoloravit me sol' [I am black but beautiful … do not think that I am dark because the sun colored me] (1.5-6). For more on the relationship between Blackness and beauty in the biblical tradition, see de Weever (1998).

[48] Hobson (2005: 40–41), Crais and Scully (2009: 95–102).

[49] Fleetwood (2011: 105–46, esp. 109–113). Cf. Spillers's (1987) distinction between the body and the flesh. McCormick (2014) also analyses Fleetwood's theory in relation to *Venus* (McCormick 2014: 191).

> huge ass ... ample rump ... large buttocks ... big butt ... Great Heathen Buttocks ... enormous behind ... prodigious posterior ... grossly padded body stocking ... humongous butt ... non-European figure ... bottom-heavy.[50]

Some of these appraisals of the play assign objective markers of size ('huge, large, big') to Miss Saartjie Baartman, others evoke subjective analyses ('Great Heathen, grossly-padded'). 'Ample rump' combines a euphemism for girth ('ample') with a carnivorous appetite ('rump'). 'Gross' connotes scientific generalization or subjective disgust, while 'non-European' simultaneously mobilizes the broader European identity and positions Miss Saartjie Baartman, and Sara Baartman by extension, in opposition to it. In sum, the frequent emphasis on a single body part risks conflating nineteenth-century audiences who paid to view Sara Baartman's performances with modern theatregoers watching Miss Saartjie Baartman on stage.

These twentieth-century reviews foreground Miss Saartjie Baartman's posterior as her most salient feature. For potential audiences with no previous knowledge about the play, these reviews are their first point of entry. The emphasis on a large rear end immediately distorts her characterization. Anyone drawn to these reviews will not recognize that Parks's revisionist account frames hostile narratives of both Miss Saartjie Baartman's and Sara Baartman's posterior as integral parts of the drama. Nonetheless, small linguistic changes can restore some of Miss Saartjie Baartman's agency. For instance, the emphasis on Miss Saartjie Baartman's and Sara Baartman's buttocks intimately connects them with the Callipygian Venus. Please note, the adjective associated with the Greco-Roman goddess is 'callipygian' ('*kallos* [beauty] + *pugē* [buttocks]), not 'steatopygian' (*stear* [fat] + *pugē* [buttocks]).[51] In this vein, I propose that we dispose of the latter label, which has been commonly used to describe Sara Baartman, and attribute the adjective

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[50] Quotes are attributed to: Arnott (1996) [huge ass ... ample rump], Backalenick (1996a) [large buttocks], Backalenick (1996b) [big butt], Black (1996) [Great Heathen Buttocks ... enormous behind], Goldberg (1996) [prodigious posterior], Mode (1996) [humongous butt ... non-European figure], Plemmons (1996) [grossly padded body stocking], Soloski (1996) [bottom-heavy].

[51] In the Oxford English Dictionary, the entry for 'Callipygian' reads: 'Designating a person who has *well-shaped or finely developed buttocks*; of or relating to such a person. Also: of or relating to the buttocks. Frequently an epithet for a particular sculptural representation of Venus' [italics added]. The entry for 'steatopygia' reads: 'A protuberance of the buttocks, due to *an abnormal accumulation of fat* in and behind the hips and

'callipygian' to her instead. Even though this new nomenclature risks re-grafting the sexualization of a Greco-Roman goddess onto contemporary bodies, this act of renaming transports Sara Baartman from the field of pseudo-science to that of art history. This vocabulary also encourages twenty-first century audiences to interrogate any subconscious biases regarding the norm of female beauty.

Conclusion

> Since history is a recorded or *remembered* event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, *dis-membered*, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to . . . locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down . . .. I'm *re-membering* and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. [italics added] [52]

Through this investigation of Sara Baartman within and outside of the theatrical world, this article has called for a re-centering of a historical figure whose archive is littered with rampant objectification and commodification. Parks has unearthed a new archive that puts a marginalized figure on centre stage.[53] Her (re)membering of Sara Baartman from the 'ancestral burial ground' has enabled her to construct a hybrid character who confronts her audience.[54] Parks's creative approach has a rich lineage; in early twentieth-century minstrelsy, Black writers and performers in North America harnessed previously ascribed roles to turn claims of primitivism inside out. For example, the minstrel musical *In Dahomey* (1903) follows the journey of two African American men (played by the illustrious duo Bert Williams and George Walker) intent on returning a family heirloom to its rightful owner. They meet an assortment of people as they travel from Boston to Florida and finally to the Dahomey kingdom in sub-Saharan Africa. The revised ending of the play concluded with a cakewalk, a plantation dance originating in the antebellum South that became a popular staple in minstrel shows. The cakewalk was a song and dance competition in which formally-attired enslaved Black people imitated their White[55] masters' dance techniques in order to win a prize, usually cake.[56] The performance itself was a satirical parody. White masters viewed the dance as an admiring emulation of

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thighs, found (more markedly in women than in men) as a characteristic of certain peoples, esp. the Khoekhoe and San of South Africa' [italics added].

[52] Parks (1995a: 4–5).

[53] Young (2007: 43).

[54] I adopt the vocabulary of (re)membering from Parks (1995a), Haley (1993), and Thiong'o (2009); I am also influenced by the trope of rememory from Morrison (1987: 43) (further discussed in Raynaud 2007: 52).

[55] Similar to 'Black' (defined above), the capitalization of 'White' denotes a contemporary group of people whose social standing was loosely based on their skin colour.

[56] Brooks (2006: 269–80, esp. 271–3). For more about the history and prevalence of the cakewalk in nineteenth-century North America, see Baldwin (1981).

their culture while Black people employed it to mock their oppressors. Williams and Walker blurred the distinctions between Black and White in an entertaining, subversive way. The play was ostensibly made to satisfy a White gaze, yet the all-Black cast transformed the degradation of their people into that of their masters. Their resilient response to oppression made a mockery of their audience's racist desire to essentialize and disdain Black people.[57]

Parks's rendering of Sara Baartman echoes Williams's and Walker's subversion. Her drama of disinterment has transformed Miss Saartjie Baartman from a woman of abject submission into one of subtle ingenuity.[58] A canvas of dissent, Miss Saartjie Baartman participates in her objectification on her own terms, refracting her audiences' gaze.[59] Wielding language and silence as tools of resistance, she forces her audience to contend with their own limited and limiting perspectives. Through this characterization, Parks has provided a model for recuperating the female subject from skewed archives. Her portrayal of Miss Saartjie Baartman has broadened the reception of a historical figure and her Greco-Roman precedents. Audiences can now (re)member Sara Baartman, Aphrodite Knidia, and the Callipygian Venus as more than the sum of their physical parts.

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[57] Brooks (2006: 207-80), Brown (2008: 48–54).

[58] For more on *Venus* as a drama of disinterment, see Warner (2008).

[59] For more on the Black female body as a canvas of dissent, see Brooks (2006: 6).

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