The Bottom of Desire in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*

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No, we have not yet reached that decolonization of thought which would be, over and above a reversal of that power, the affirmation of a difference, and free and absolute subversion of the spirit. There is there something like a void, a silent interval between the fact of colonization and that of decolonization. Not that, here and there, there aren’t subversive and responsible words which break forth and are elaborated, but something choked and almost lost remains unspoken, does not assume the power and the risk.

Abdelkebir Khatibi (qtd. in Alloula xxii, emphasis in original)

We save ourselves, we become minor, only by the creation of a disgrace or a deformity....

Gilles Deleuze (“One Less Manifesto” 243)

The real Saartjie Baartman, the flesh-and-blood woman who was designated the Venus Hottentot and hideously transformed into a freak show’s centerpiece, is presumed missing from the very beginning of Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*. Though the *dramatis personae* lists her as “Miss Saartjie Baartman, a.k.a. The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot,” the audience never knows her as Baartman. After the overture, we see her scrubbing a sparkling floor in southern Africa while a shady entrepreneur (“the Brother”) negotiates her purchase. He asks “the Man” for her name so that he may order her to dance:


**THE BROTHER** Saartjie. Lovely. Girl! GIRL!? (13)

This short exchange manages to erase the identity of Saartjie Baartman. In its absence, under the ceaseless gaze of the spectator, she becomes “Girl,” an appellation that will stick until she joins the London freak show and becomes even further (and irrevocably) removed from “Saartjie.”

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Parks’s elision of the real Baartman in *Venus* has proven controversial. In an article entitled “The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*,” for example, Jean Young argues that Parks’s cavalier treatment of history subverts Baartman’s voice, resulting in a play that “reifies the perverse imperialist mind set” (700). Young especially takes issue with Parks’s representation of Baartman as an accomplice “in her own exploitation” (699), and she concludes that Parks and her critics have, in effect, re-victimized Saartjie Baartman. Young’s historicized reading of the play suggests that Parks’s artistic license has softened the actual events. For instance, whereas in *Venus*’ second half the Girl is brought to Paris by the Baron Docteur and displayed at the Academy, in actuality she was overseen by an animal trainer, who displayed her in a shed every day, from 11:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., for fifteen months (705); and while the real Baartman became an alcoholic, Parks displaces this addiction in favor of chocolate.

“You don’t believe in history,” So says William in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, and this remark serves as an epigraph to *Venus*. History, endlessly interrogated and never stable, seems to be Parks’s central preoccupation. Plays such as *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989–92) and *The America Play* (1990–93) offer an audacious, often hard to distinguish mixture of pain and humor as they present African-Americans struggling to position themselves within a sick society. Both plays were controversial, yet Parks’s abstract, wildly experimental style seems to have shielded them from the moral outrage that *Venus*, with its comparative straightforwardness and its unrelenting focus upon a single, historically factual character, provokes. With hindsight, we can see *Venus* as a gateway play for Parks, wherein she begins to inch toward the more realistic style of her most recent work (*In the Blood, Fucking A*, and the celebrated *Topdog/Underdog*).

*Venus* begins in 1810, the year that the real Baartman was brought over to London. Lured by promises of wealth, Parks’s Venus assumes that her role in the Mother-Showman’s freak show will be only a temporary degradation. She soon becomes the star attraction of the “9 Human Wonders,” or, as the Mother-Showman sometimes calls them, “the 9 lowest links in God’s Great Bein Chain” (31). A “Negro Resurrectionist” announces each scene (scenes are numbered in reverse order) and acts as a kind of emcee. The narrative is occasionally interrupted as he reads historical footnotes to the audience; another series of interruptions takes the form of a play entitled “For the Love of the Venus,” in which a young couple’s impending marriage is threatened by the husband-to-be’s infatuation with a Hottentot. The Venus, meanwhile, is kept by the Mother-Showman in a cage, which does double duty as the Venus’ toilet. She also must ward off her lustful admirers, which she does with only limited success. Both the Venus and the Mother-Showman are brought up on charges (the former for indecency and the latter for slavery), but they are exonerated, largely due to the testimony of the Venus, who will not relinquish her vision of
a future when she will be rich enough to boss around servants of her own. The court reasons that the Venus "has the right to make her mark just like the Dancing Irish Dwarf" (78). When the Mother-Showman’s profits dip, she is sold to a French physician ("The Baron Docteur") who has become smitten with her. He brings her to Paris, where he teaches her French and feeds her chocolates. From the beginning, this arrangement includes sex. The power differential makes it impossible to discern the extent to which the Baron Docteur’s feelings for the Venus are free from opportunism. In any case, he has ambitions of his own. He brings her to the Academy, where she is extensively, continually studied. An old acquaintance ("The Grade-School Chum") begins blackmailing the doctor, who arranges for the Venus – whose health is deteriorating, in part because the doctor has passed on a venereal disease – to be imprisoned for indecency. After her death the Negro Resurrectionist, who, we learn, used to be a grave robber, steals her corpse so that the Baron Docteur may preserve and study the Venus for the glory of science.

A plot summary cannot, of course, convey the formal and thematic complexity of Venus. Nor can it prepare one for the play’s astonishing, unsettling humor. Needless to say, the real Saartjie Baartman is not the concern; Parks assumes that historical figures come to us already constructed, leading her to fashion their stage representations "[f]rom [a] fabricated absence" (qtd. in Drukman 67). Undaunted by those who would align her with Baartman’s oppressors, Parks refuses to recognize a clear division between oppressor and oppressed. In her essay, "Possession," Parks writes, "The relationship between possessor and possessed is, like ownership is, multi-directional" (3). This is not to say that Parks’s Baartman shares the blame equally. If she is complicit, she is still disproportionately, grotesquely wronged; and, anyway, the scene referred to at the start of this essay clearly places her in a pre-spun web of exploitation, thus tempering her complicity from the very beginning.

It is a mistake to analyze Venus as if it were a conventional narrative, a play wherein, for instance, psychologically sketched characters propel a story of heroes and villains. Parks resists binary constructions; as a writer, she burrows deeply into her territory, trying to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down" ("Possession" 4). Her plays produce an intricate layering of meanings that eludes tidy interpretation, thereby realizing the paradoxical "double function" of writing advocated by Deleuze and Guattari: "to translate everything into assemblages and to dismantle the assemblages" (Kafka 47). Parks’s favored director, Liz Diamond, has expressed impatience with the limitations of meaning itself: "There’s gotta be a more flexible, plastic way of thinking about ‘meaning’ that allows it to be as contingent, permeable, ever-changing as possible in the theatre" (qtd. in Drukman 62).

While critics like Young locate a disturbing ambiguity in Parks’s repre-
sentation of Baartman, they fail to consider to what use Parks puts this ambiguity. Certainly, Venus objectifies Baartman, presents her as a “thing” to be controlled and even consumed (as is strikingly suggested by the trope of chocolate that runs throughout). However, Parks’s play, simultaneously political and personal, posits an additional subject beyond Baartman, and this subject is that of the spectator in all its guises, onstage and off. In other words, the complicity extends from the figures onstage to the real-life audience. Parks obsessively explores the connections between past and present, and these connections are made clear by the play’s many anachronisms (for instance, The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders complains of having suffered from jet lag [19]). She riffs on the space between colonialism and capitalism, showing how all of the figures onstage—and, by extension, those of us in the audience—slavishly pursue the fetishized objects of desire.

In Venus the primary object of desire is the title character, or, more specifically, her “[b]ottoms and bottoms and bottoms” (7). As in Parks’s earlier major works, The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World and The America Play, Venus is dominated by real and hypothesized holes, gaps, absences, and voids. Efforts to get to the bottom of Venus prove frustrating because the figure of the hole becomes a void, creating a fluid dialectic that can be resolved only by new articulations. Steven Drukmans, Parks’s most insightful critic, has argued that we “lack a critical vocabulary” to discuss her plays (58). I believe this to be fundamentally true, but I want to propose that Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of minor literature can be applied to Parks’s theatre in order to apprehend better the play’s aesthetic and political dimensions and thus work toward a more helpful critical vocabulary. I suggest this approach in part because scholarship on Parks has so far tended to look at her plays along postcolonial lines and/or as instantiations of the postmodern. Both approaches indeed can be useful, but it seems to me that they miss that aspect of Parks’s work which is most aesthetically innovative and politically challenging. While I do not propose a code with which to unravel these plays, I do think aspects of Deleuze’s philosophy can provide us with new ways of perceiving the theatre of Suzan-Lori Parks. And the underappreciated Venus—caught between what looks for now to be two distinct periods in Parks’s career—seems a reasonable starting point.

If we encounter Venus from a Deleuzian perspective, we might move beyond the conventionally historicized and identity-based readings that force Parks’s play into already established, dominant modes of discourse. We might, for instance, see Parks not as restaging or reinterpreting history, but as producing narratives that are defiantly antihistorical, narratives that elude the inevitably commodified representations of conflict and instead present audiences with the production of sense, the production of desire—that is, a theatre of potentiality, rather than of derivative being.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s model, a minor literature is that which puts a
“major” language to strange use, thus deterritorializing the language and creating new, potentially revolutionary, forms of expression. This deterritorialization may be achieved by “artificially enrich[ing]” the language, “operating by exhilaration and overdetermination and bring[ing] about all sorts of worldwide reterritorializations” (the authors suggest Joyce as a model); or one may “proceed] by dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such an extreme that nothing remains but intensities [here the authors mention Beckett]” (Kafka 19). In his essay on Carmelo Bene, the experimental Italian playwright, Deleuze further defines minor languages as “languages of continuous variability” (“One Less Manifesto” 244, emphasis in original). In other words, language becomes a flow that does not represent a particular viewpoint, but rather bodies forth “the coexistence in [a single] sentence of an infinite series of viewpoints” (Deleuze, Proust and Signs 167). Speakers are produced by speaking positions. Literature in a minor mode shows language as a “collective assemblage” (Kafka 18); rather than representing human life, such literature creates affects that open up other (and not exclusively human) worlds, and, in effect, may engender new futures (see Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy? 163–99). Because “language is always the language of bodies” (Deleuze, Proust and the Signs 92), the implications of Deleuze’s philosophy for theatrical performance are especially rich.

Parks’s “Rep & Rev,” for instance, can be seen as an expression of “collective assemblage” compatible with Deleuzian difference and repetition. “Rep & Rev,” short for “repetition and revision,” is a term Parks uses to describe a style in which characters repeat phrases throughout a given play. The playwright derives this style from music, particularly jazz, in part to “create a physical life appropriate to [the] text” (“Elements of Style” 9). These phrases are sometimes revised, but even when they do not change, they are affected by a different context. Often the same phrase will be uttered by numerous characters. In both cases, the effect is often that of deterritorialization through overdetermination and “willed poverty.” In Venus’ prologue, or “Overture,” the characters repeatedly introduce themselves and each other in a series of repetitions (the first three lines consist of three different characters who announce, “The Venus Hottentot!”), informing the audience that the show has been cancelled due to the Venus’ death. Repeated phrases are prominent throughout the play, paradoxically underscoring the status of language as continuous variability. This effect is heightened when such phrases traverse characters. To give but one example, the Baron Docteur’s calls for “Order!” at the end of the courtroom episode are repeated by The Negro Resurrectionist near the end of the play, just before the Venus is imprisoned (79, 145).

Language as continuous variability achieves vertiginous proportions when one considers the language of performance. Not only do characters often share the same vocabulary, but Parks further blurs the boundaries between characters
by the doubling of roles. Therefore, a single actor plays both the Man and the Baron Docteur, while another actor plays the Man’s Brother, the Mother-Showman, and the Grade-School Chum. Borders are further eroded by overlapping events and dialogue between the main play and “For the Love of Venus,” and between the main action and the Negro Resurrectionist’s historical “footnotes.” Notice, too, that the characters float in and out of their specific temporal or spatial designations, as when the Baron Docteur serves as the audience of the play-within-the-play, the Grade-School Chum improbably delivers his blackmailing letters to the doctor in the presence of the Venus and even assists the Anatomists in taking her measurements (116), and the Negro Resurrectionist is alternately historian, witness, and participant. More than anyone in the play, it is the would-be officiating figure of the Negro Resurrectionist who may bring to mind a remark by Nietzsche in On the Genealogy of Morals: “only that which has no history is definable” (516).

Venus can be experienced as “minor” in more overtly political ways. Deleuze and Guattari contend that, in major works, the concerns of individuals are played out with the social milieu serving primarily as a backdrop, whereas in minor literature everything is political: “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics.” This doesn’t preclude the individual; in fact, “[t]he individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (Kafka 17).

Let’s consider the function of “cramped space” in Venus. A constricted space may be likened to a void, even though initially, the two seem opposed. Since both of these categories of space suggest isolation from other locations, both are categories of restriction. Essentially, a “cramped space” and a void can be locations of punishment, as in, respectively, a prison cell and exile, or banishment. Parks often produces such disquieting conflations of restriction and infinity. Both The Death of the Last Black Man and The America Play can be examined in terms of the various meanings conveyed by a void and a “cramped space,” such as a hole. Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam, Jr. argue that the former play’s conception of history is like a “gap,” “an empty space that demonstrates where subjects are produced by language” (452, emphasis in original). Of course, The America Play’s Great Hole of History yields itself to an array of interpretations. Una Chaudhuri likens this Hole to a grave (262) and to the “black hole of racism” (263), and she further describes this landscape as “a post apocalyptic no-place, a Beckettian void where meaning stubbornly refuses to arrive or arise” (265). Discussing the roots of The America Play in an interview with Michele Pearce, Parks declared, “I wanted to write about a hole” (26).

In Venus, Parks continues to write about holes. Whereas The America Play’s primary motif is a Great Hole, the geographical spaces in Venus are constrictive. Here, the Girl / Venus Hottentot moves from one cramped space to another—a dingy apartment, a cage, a courtroom cell—but wherever she
moves a swirling constellation of spectators follows, incessantly pawing her buttocks, compulsively orbiting her axis, that repugnant yet unmistakable source of her allure: the Venus Hottentot’s asshole.

While the Venus’ backside dominates the stage, Parks repeatedly directs our attention to the unseen asshole (as well as her vagina, though the latter is rarely evoked independently). The characters often comment on the Girl’s odor, and while this smell can be attributed variously to the unfamiliar and to bad hygiene in general, the presence of the asshole continually asserts itself. Thus in scene twenty-seven, when the Mother-Showman orders her to wash (“You smell. / So smelly yll make em go running […] Scrub down you smell”), the Girl refuses, due to custom, to remove the “scrap […] around [her] womans parts” (29). Later, the Grade-School Chum writes to the Baron Docteur: “you reek of Hottentot-amour, Sir, and as a colleague its my duty to speak plain, Sir: we all smell it!” (118, emphasis in original), and the Chorus of the 8 Anatomists sniffs the air and proceeds to masturbate. Her fundament is linked with her vagina as the wellspring of desire, and her habitats are also conjoined to the images of these anatomical holes. Her temporary London flat is pronounced “dark” and Venus herself “smelly” (29), and when we later see Venus in bed with the Baron Docteur in their Paris apartment, he complains “It’s dark in here. Spooky. / Lets have light” (101). These small, dark, smelly spaces are not much better than the show cage or the cell, both of which reek because of the presence of her feces, the production of which, no doubt, is hastened by her compulsive eating of chocolate.

For her part, the Venus imagines a day when her lover will “perfume my big buttocks and sprinkle them with gold dust!” (135). She craves money and recognition, but above all, she craves love. Yet in a play which posits several absences (beginning with the death of the Venus Hottentot and the announcement that the show will be canceled), the primary absence is that of love. This absence is communicated directly after the courtroom scenes (I present this scene in its entirety):

Scene 19: A Scene of Love (?)

THE VENUS
THE BARON DOCTEUR
THE VENUS
THE BARON DOCTEUR
THE VENUS
THE BARON DOCTEUR
THE VENUS (80)

Here, Parks presents a disturbing tableau: frozen, silent – a void. This world
of oppression teems with desire and lust, but, as for love, the audience is presented with another empty space. The Baron Docteur's desire for the Girl merges not with love, but with justice. Deleuze and Guattari stress the importance of directing desire away from authority, for affirmative desire has nothing to do with lack or demand. "Desire is not form," they argue, "but a procedure, a process" (Kafka 8). Desire defined and directed in terms of justice, therefore, be it psychoanalytic or law-oriented, takes away from life, following a path of narcissism and, ultimately, death. Indeed, they maintain that desire/justice is the machine that sets in motion those systems of oppression to be found at the root of any collective "major"; this can take the form of "[c]apitalist desire, fascist desire, bureaucratic desire, Thanatos also" (59; see also Deleuze and Parnet 95–103). Significantly, it is the Baron Docteur who brings the courtroom section of the play to a close:

THE BARON DOCTEUR  Order! Order!
Order! Order! (79)

The Baron Docteur's version of "love" proves merely another gesture of oppression, a perverse form of desire that injects death into love's hole and so hastens the Venus' decline.

Beginning and ending with death, Venus chronicles the decay initiated by colonialism. It is a decay that remains with us, and it is embodied in the figure of the title character, a colonial-generated perversion of the Goddess of Love, who continually exudes the stench of waste and death. Death repeatedly "deaths" Love (9, 161), thwarting all forms of positive regeneration (e.g., the Venus' abortions). In the play the rituals of love are transformed into narcissistic, parodic acts, from the freak show display to the Baron Docteur's advances. Although the Venus twice becomes pregnant, we cannot be sure that the Baron Docteur is the father (he and his wife "are childless" [107]).

We can examine the scene in which he masturbates to see how Parks suggests the infection of love by death and how she turns the models of procreation and evolution upside down. A verbal link is established between masturbation and maceration, thus linking sex (as practiced in the play) and death. The Baron Docteur's masturbation is mirrored two scenes later by the masturbation of the Chorus (119); it is in this latter scene that the term "maceration" is introduced (and repeated in different contexts). When the Venus inquires about the meaning of this strange word, the Baron Docteur assures her that it's a French word meaning "lunch" (139), thus setting up a lexical triumvirate - masturbation/maceration/mastication - wherein desire and death intermingle.

The Baron Docteur's masturbation-induced orgasm also engenders an interesting instance of devolution, a devolution that is linguistically achieved in three scenes. The Baron Docteur closes out scene fourteen by uttering, "I love
you, Girl” (108), the first time that anyone (including Parks herself) has referred to her as “Girl” since she became the Venus Hottentot. This won’t last, though. By the next scene the Negro Resurrectionist reads from the doctor’s notebook, which repeatedly likens her to a monkey (“Above all, she had a way of pushing out her lips just like the monkeys do” [110]). “Girl” becomes “monkey,” and in the next scene she descends still further as the doctor reads from the Grade-School Chum’s letter: “Send the Thing back where she came from” (113). Houston Baker explains the process of colonial depersonalization:

The colonizing “I” cannot [...] speak to an African slave as a prototypical “you”; and by the logic of categorical exclusion, the African – as colonized “it” – cannot initiate verbal exchange as prototypical “I.” Rather than a cultural and conversational personhood, the “it” of an-otherwise signifies instrumental “thingness,” without gender distinctions of “he” and “she.”[...] And “thingness” legitimates enduring servitude. (206)

The Docteur, by casually addressing the Venus as “Girl,” temporarily breaks down the constructed category of “thingness.” What we witness in the following scenes is the intellectual process of re-construction this category (note that “monkey” and then “Thing” are derived from written texts). The Baron Docteur, having inadvertently acknowledged the Girl’s humanity, must scramble to re-establish himself within an essentialist paradigm. Consider his response to Anatomist #8, who is impressed by the Venus’ rapid acquisition of French:

**ANATOMIST #8** Threws all of those throw-back theories back in the lake, I’d say.
The baron docteur Not entirely, Gentlemen.
We study people as a group
and dont throw away our years of labor
because of one most glorious exception.

**THE CHORUS OF THE 8 ANATOMISTS** Hahahahahahahahahahahaha. (112)

This exchange exemplifies what Baker has termed “the [colonial] control of **différence.**” By insisting upon the Venus’ essential “thingness,” the Docteur re-establishes “grounds for European, male empowerment and profit” (207).4

The function of chocolate in the play makes equally complex use of the mechanisms of colonialization. In *The Colonial Harem*, Malek Alloula looks at the infamous colonial postcards which circulated in the early twentieth century. She notes that in those images of women partaking in coffee ceremonies, coffee seems to connect to “a rich polysemic that [...] fills in for a number of other signs that are contiguous to it,” conveying an image of “languor and [...] unending reverie, a metaphysics of refreshment and odoriferous absorption”
(72–74). The real Saartjie Baartman became an alcoholic; Parks essentially substitutes chocolate for alcohol, a move which some find trivializing, even distasteful. However, Parks imbues chocolate with a polysemic significance similar to that of coffee in the images described by Alloula. Chocolate functions within the play as a drug, as a symbolic profession of “love” (“For the Love of Venus” ends with the presentation of a heart-shaped box of chocolates), and as an aphrodisiac:

THE [masturbating] BARON DOCTEUR [...]
Eat yr chockluts
eat em slow
that’s it.
Touch yrself.
Good [...] (106)

Tellingly, when the Venus reads aloud the foreign names of the types of chocolate to be found in her most recent box, she chooses to translate the two names that hint most directly at the still-present cycle of self-devouring that colonialism unleashed: Enfant de Bruxelles (which, as the Glossary points out, had the image of an African child stamped upon it [165]) and Capezzoli di Venere (“nipples of Venus”) [105, 165]. Scene three (i.e., near the end of Venus’ own “history”) consists of “A Brief History of Chocolate” – in effect, another articulated devolution – in which chocolate is initially attributed to the Gods but, as the Europeans get hold of it (and lighten it with milk and sugar), loses its mystery and nutritional value. This history of chocolate clearly suggests a history of colonialization, a history that is in no sense behind us. By placing it toward the end of the play – and having it voiced by the “chocolate” Venus – Parks imbues the scene with the poignant weight of summary, in which Venus’ personal deterioration embodies a larger, historical decline.

Parks’s preoccupation with devolutions and other instances of the backside leading the front finds its formal equivalent in the backward numbering of scenes. Though the scenes are presented from thirty-one to one, the main story retains its chronological presentation. The result resembles a mirror; what we see appears straightforward, though in fact we are viewing (or reading) the play in reverse. A performance which plays the scenes “backwards” (from one to thirty-one) would begin with the end, telling the story in reverse flashback. Is Parks suggesting that this story’s ending was already inscribed, that history is determined? In any event, she clearly intends to yoke the past to the present, and as we watch this “mirror” as it is projected to us from the stage, we may see ourselves reflected back onto the events. In other words, as co-spectators we also become co-exploiters, and form and content are once again usurped by expression. The shift from the spectators onstage to the real-life spectators signals a blatant political gesture by Parks, since we ourselves are caught up in
the oppression of the real Saartjie Baartman (along with those onstage and along with the playwright).

Methodically erasing the division between stage and spectator, Parks indict us in other ways as well. Parallels between the freak show and respectable theatre (i.e., the show which we are watching) abound. The layering of spectators (of the freak show, the medical seminars, the courtroom, “For the Love of the Venus,” and Venus itself) implies these parallels. Anne Davis Basting points out that in the original production, the bed in which the Girl and the doctor recline was displayed vertically, and box seats hoisted by ladders overlooked the bed, thereby “echo[ing] the audience’s darkened seats, and implicat[ing] the audience in Venus’s objectification” (225). There is also the question of how desirable the production chooses to make Venus. Apparently the original production satisfied at least one viewer on that count: in his review, Robert Brustein extraneously declared the actress, Adina Porter, to be “lovely” (29). Parks also draws our attention to the capitalist machine behind theatre, as when a Chorus Member announces that, if you pay more, you may view the show from “thuh special looking place” (6), or, even more pointedly, when the Mother-Showman’s counting of the night’s “take” merges with the Negro Resurrectionist’s counting of the scenes (40–41). The most startling gesture toward the audience, of course, occurs during the intermission: as the Baron Docteur reads the details of the Venus Hottentot’s dismemberment, the house lights come up and he encourages the audience to step out of the theatre and take their break—and so the audience literally turns its back on the report of this outrageous violation of the “splendid corpse” (135). Here Parks effectively stages us; the play presents a “history” with which we are profoundly uncomfortable, and the intermission stages the audience as wanting something else.

Such gestures constitute a radical continuation of the Brechtian tradition at the same time that the play itself, like the rest of Parks’s plays, departs from Brecht’s transparency. The challenges of Parks’s theatre are formidable, in large part because Parks places such importance upon language — she makes language do so much work. Deleuze and Guattari insist that the writer of minor literature, in order to tap into the revolutionary, must write “like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow” (Kafka 18).

Since there is no way to draw a firm distinction between the oppressors and the oppressed or between the different sorts of desire, one has to seize all of them in an all-too-possible future, hoping all the while that this act will also bring out lines of escape, parade lines, even if they are modest, even if they are hesitant, even if — and especially if — they are asignifying. A little bit like an animal that can only accord with the movement that strikes him, push it farther still, in order to make it return to you, against you, and find a way out. (Kafka 18)
The theatre of Suzan-Lori Parks suggests new “lines of escape,” new ways of addressing the destructive desires of colonialism and its heirs. Might we not examine The Death of the Last Black Man, The America Play, and Venus along these lines, as a trilogy-in-reverse?

NOTES

1 Here Drukman is specifically referring to Parks’s collaborations with Diamond in Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, The Death of the Last Black Man, and The America Play, but I believe his comment generally holds true for other successful productions of Parks’s plays, at least up to and including Venus.

2 Parks took this even further in her next play, In the Blood. Here the same actors who play Hester’s children also play adults (in many cases, the corresponding absentee father).

3 This moment, especially, registers as a void while reading the play. For a performance, there remains the need to devise a new practice for such moments to adequately render this emptiness.

4 Referring to nineteenth-century laws of the southern states in the U.S., Baker writes, “Thingness […] cancels gender and writes a different pronominal law. The results of this law are enslaved mulattoes and frenzied lynchings. Thousands upon thousands of both mark the space and place of ungendered ‘fitness’” (207).

5 The trope of chocolate has contemporary relevance as well, considering the rise of child slavery in the cocoa fields of western Africa (especially the Ivory Coast). Western Africa supplies nearly half of all the chocolate manufactured in the United States. See Global Exchange Website.

WORKS CITED


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