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Suzan-Lori Parks's Drama of Disinterment: A Transnational Exploration of *Venus*

Sara L. Warner

I hesitate at the word; I am not used to using it. Even when I type it, it ends up as either *turth* or *trth*. I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer the word "lie." The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there . . . where the truth is closest.
— Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*

On 15 April 1996, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began hearing testimony from victims of human rights violations that took place during apartheid. Of the more than 20,000 people who made statements, approximately 200 were selected to tell their stories in this public forum. The very next day, a play titled *Venus* by American dramatist Suzan-Lori Parks opened at the Public Theater in New York City.¹ The play depicts the life of Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman, a Khoisan woman who was taken from South Africa to Europe in 1810, where she was exhibited as a human curiosity under the appellation "The Hottentot Venus" until her death in 1816.² Baartman's physicality (her steatopygia, or protruding buttocks³) and her theatricality

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¹ *Venus* was first performed on 28 March 1996 at the Yale Repertory Theatre.

² There is much debate about how to address Baartman. Saartjie is her Afrikaans name, which translates as "little Sarah." The suffix "tjie" is a diminutive denoting endearment, but in the context of colonialism this form was used by whites to demean indigenous peoples and enforce racial hierarchies, in much the same way that black adults were (and in some cases still are) referred to as "boys" and "girls" by whites in America. Sarah is the name listed on Baartman's certificate of baptism, which was issued in 1811, and many people prefer this Anglicized version of her name. While it is true that Sarah doesn't indicate a diminutive, this should not be confused with racial sensitivity or the acknowledgment of Baartman's humanity by the baptizer. The church's role in colonialism and racial oppression is well documented; see Rachel Holmes, *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* (New York: Random House, 2007), xiii–xiv.

³ Steatopygia, coined in the 1800s, is a scientific classification denoting an excessive development of fat on the buttocks that occurs chiefly among women of some African peoples and especially the Khoisan. It is a racist categorization that pathologizes the natural physique of certain women.

(she was forced to play music and dance for crowds) made her a star in the circus of imperialism and scientific racism. After she died, Baartman's remains were displayed at Paris's National Museum of Natural History. A later, international struggle for the return of Baartman's remains played an integral role in South Africa's transition from an apartheid government to a nonracial democracy. Stripped of her land, language, and culture, imprisoned, forced to live in exile, and made to suffer gross violations of human rights, Baartman served as a potent reminder that while apartheid was a criminal form of government instituted in the latter half of the twentieth century, it was also a form of racist capitalism fully imbricated with colonialism and its aftermath. A full-scale effort for Baartman's return was seen as consistent with the goals of the TRC, "to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding that transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past."⁴ The movement to restore the dignity and rightful place of this Khoisan ancestor also represented the recognition and legitimization of indigenous identities—identities that had been eclipsed not only by colonialism and apartheid, but by the rhetoric of rainbow nationalism as well.⁵

While South Africans labored to recover Baartman through acts of interment—retrieving her from foreign soil and placing her finally in a grave—Parks sought to uncover her in what I am calling a "drama of disinterment." "From Ibsen on," notes Joseph Roach, "modern drama has been troubled by ghosts. Their ubiquity stems in part from the fact that they conveniently represent the past that is dead but that refuses final interment."⁶ Parks's drama of disinterment is a method of historicizing that manifests itself in what Marc Robinson calls an "unresolved tension between exhumation and burial—or, more generally, exposure and concealment."⁷ It is an aesthetic that thwarts any and every effort to lay a matter or a body to rest. Characterized by a digging motif and the dis(re)memberment of corpses, Parks's drama of disinterment appeared in the author's very first play, *Sinners' Place*. Written as her undergraduate thesis at Mount Holyoke College, where she studied with James Baldwin, *Sinners' Place* "had all of the

⁴Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995, <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/legal/act9534.htm> (accessed 1 April 2007).

⁵During the colonial period, indigenous groups, including the Khoi and San, were forced to register as colored to erase their status as aborigines and invalidate their land claims. Apartheid categories of black, colored, and white further obscured indigenous identities. See Nigel Crawhall, "San and Khoi Rights, Identity and Language Survival in South Africa," in *Between Unity and Diversity: Essays on Nation-Building in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, ed. Gitanjali Maharaj (Cape Town: Idosa, 1999), 33–58. The degree to which indigenous identities continue to be eclipsed by the rainbow nationalism of the new South Africa is illustrated by the fact that they were not included in the interim constitution. In a speech made on the adoption of the 1996 constitution, which did recognize indigenous identities, then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki mistakenly stated that Khoi and San peoples had perished during the colonial period—a proclamation that caused much distress and resentment among members of indigenous groups. See Mbeki, "'I Am an African': Statement on the Occasion of the Adoption of the 'Republic of South Africa Constitutional Bill 1996,'" in *Between Unity and Diversity*, 24–43. Indigenous claims prompt us to rethink the viability and efficacy of identity politics, especially for developing nations and transitional governments; see Linda Waldman, "Exploring the Intersection of Racial Labels, Rainbow Citizenship, and Citizens' Rights in Post-Apartheid South Africa," in *The Power of Labelling: How People are Categorized and Why it Matters*, ed. Joy Moncrieffe and Rosalind Eyben (London: Earthscan, 2007), 160–76.

⁶Joseph Roach, "The Great Hole of History: Liturgical Silence in Beckett, Osofisan, and Parks," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2001): 312.

⁷"Symposium on the Work of Suzan-Lori Parks," (untitled paper, Hunter College, New York, NY, 30 April 2004), <http://www.hotreview.org/articles/remarksparks1.htm> (accessed 6 February 2007).

things in it that [Parks is] obsessed with now. Like memory and family and history and the past. And the play had a lot of dirt on stage which was being dug at."⁸ Parks was denied honors because the theatre department refused to stage the production. "You can't have dirt on stage. That's not a play," she was told dismissively.⁹ That was before Parks knew who Beckett was or had heard of *Happy Days*. Undeterred, she kept unearthing history with a host of diggers and figures who refuse to die, including Black Man with Watermelon in *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, the Foundling Father who excavates The Great Hole of History in *The America Play*, and the Negro Resurrectionist in *Venus*.

These dramas of disinterment demonstrate what Shawn-Marie Garrett calls the playwright's "unseemly obsession with unearthing hushed-up secrets," with "performing what's been buried or hidden away," and with "revealing the carnal, physical body."¹⁰ *Venus* is Parks's drama of disinterment *par excellence*. Undeniably the playwright's most controversial work, *Venus* takes tremendous liberties with the historical record and features a protagonist who completely contradicts the global image of Baartman as a victim cum national hero. Parks depicts her as a woman complicit in her own oppression, a characterization that shocked audiences and polarized critics. This essay analyzes Parks's dis(re)memberment of Baartman in a transnational context, juxtaposing post-apartheid South Africa's efforts to repatriate her remains with the volatile American reception of the play. This pairing reveals the ways in which Parks's drama of disinterment calls into question the notion that historical trauma is a wound that must be healed in the name of unity, the idea that reconciliation necessarily entails the establishment of an objective truth, and the assumption that the restoration of dignity is the goal of the recovery process.

Prelude . . . to a Kiss

Baartman was twenty-one years old, an orphan and a widow of the colonial wars when she was smuggled first on the HMS *Diadem* and then aboard the *Wilhelmina* by her two keepers, Alexander Dunlop and his manservant Hendrick Cesars, in 1810. Dunlop, a white medical officer in the British army stationed in South Africa, was relieved of his position for failing to contain a venereal disease outbreak among the troops. Awaiting transfer back to England, he entered into negotiations with Cesars, a slaveholding free black, to exhibit his nanny as a scientific curiosity in London.¹¹ Cesars's brother Pieter, a hunter and trader who had taken Baartman into custody three years earlier while on an expedition in the Eastern Cape, helped finance the venture. Pieter was aware of the lucrative practice of ethnographic display, for he was in the business of supplying European botanists and explorers with plant, animal, and human specimens. Dunlop and Cesars exhibited Baartman under the moniker "The Hot-

⁸Shelby Jiggetts, "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 310.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Shawn-Marie Garrett, "The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks," *American Theatre Archives* (October 2002), <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/2000/parks.cfm> (accessed 15 October 2007).

¹¹See Holmes, *African Queen*, 18, 29, 125, 128. There were three categories of free blacks, not all of which descended from slaves: convicts (mostly Indo-Chinese, Indonesian, and Sinhalese); political exiles and prisoners of war (primarily Indonesian and Muslim royalty); and ex-slaves and local freeborn slaves resulting from interracial unions. According to census and marriage records, Cesars and his wife belonged to the latter designation. They owned two male slaves and kept five Khoisan servants, one of whom was Baartman.

tentot Venus" at 225 Piccadilly Circus in the heart of London's entertainment district. The amusements were a veritable "exhibitionist excess of exaggeration and theatrical expostulation" that included the Liverpool Museum, human and natural "wonders," street performers, and other novelties.¹²

Baartman gained instant notoriety for her "remarkable formation of person" and protuberant charms—that is to say, for her buxom buttocks, which were accentuated by the tight silk body stocking in which she was forced to perform.¹³ Richard Altick describes Baartman's exhibition as "a grotesque one-woman beauty pageant, conducted under the most degrading circumstances imaginable."¹⁴ She was displayed like a wild beast in a caged platform about three feet above the floor. Cesars, in his role as master of ceremonies, would order her to exit the cage, perform tricks and play music for the paying crowd, then return to the cage, threatening her with a stick if she disobeyed. Posters around town advertised private viewings for an additional fee. These viewings were a chance to gaze at Baartman in private, without the clamoring masses that flocked to Piccadilly, but, as the double entendre "private viewings" suggests, they also promised a chance to view Baartman's private parts and glimpse her "Hottentot apron," the particular formation of elongated labia alleged to be characteristic of South African women. These fleshy fantasies captivated the European imagination and fueled the fires of scientific racism.

Baartman's display drew record crowds that captured the attention of unwanted spectators: abolitionists who accused her handlers of violating the 1807 Abolition of Slavery Law Act. The judge in the court case found that, based upon her own testimony, Baartman willingly entered into contractual arrangement, freely exhibited herself, and had no desire to dissolve the business or return to South Africa. Despite Dunlop and Cesars's legal victory and the free press it generated, the handlers moved the show from London to the provinces. Upon Dunlop's death in 1812, Cesars came into sole possession of Baartman. The two seemed to disappear for a period of two years, igniting speculation that Baartman was pregnant or married, or both. The pair reappeared in 1814 in Paris, where slavery was still legal, both at home and in its colonies. In 1815, Cesars sold the ailing Baartman to a Parisian named Réaux, an animal trainer who rented her to the famed Georges Cuvier. Heralded as the "father of comparative anatomy," Cuvier was Napoleon's surgeon general and a naturalist at the National Museum of Natural History. Convinced that the indigenous peoples of the Eastern Cape were the proverbial missing link in the Great Chain of Human Beings, Cuvier assembled a team of eminent scientists and artists to sketch Baartman over a three-day period. When Baartman died, shortly after being sold to Réaux, Cuvier secured permission from the French government to perform an autopsy on her body "in order to determine her relationship to other animals and human beings."¹⁵ He created a full-body cast, stripped Baartman's skeleton, molded her buttocks in wax, and preserved her genitals and brain in a jar. Regarded as being less than human, Baartman's passing was not considered a death. As Giorgio Agamben has written in reference to the victims of Auschwitz, "Where death cannot be called death, corpses cannot be called

¹²Ibid., 37. See also Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

¹³T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 16–31.

¹⁴Richard Daniel Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), 269.

¹⁵Ibid., 9.

corpses," and Baartman was accorded neither funeral services nor burial.¹⁶ Initially, Cuvier kept her remains outside the entrance to his private apartment in the museum, but he eventually put them on public display, where they remained until 1976.¹⁷ In the 1980s, paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould was researching the museum's archives when he stumbled upon jars marked "la Vénus Hotentote." This discovery sparked renewed interest in Baartman, as well as heated debates about the practice of ethnographic display. Her remains were displayed once again in 1994, this time serving as evidence of "the harsh, racist, portrayal of aboriginal peoples by nineteenth century painters and sculptors."¹⁸

That same year, 1994, marked the advent of democracy in South Africa. Nelson Mandela, recently released after twenty-seven years in prison, was elected president, and he used the opportunity of his first state visit with French president François Mitterrand to formally request that he repatriate Baartman's remains. This request marked the first international attempt to reclaim cultural property on behalf of the people of a free South Africa, and Baartman quickly became a powerful symbol of cultural and political restitution. Her mortal remains, unburied and under French control, represented "the alienation and degradation of colonization, lost children, exile, the expropriation of female labor . . . the sexual and economic exploitation of black women by men . . . and the psychic, cultural and emotional impact of racism and its legacy."¹⁹ Khoisan chief Jean Burgess of the Ghonaqua House said Baartman's return was important to her country because "[w]e needed to restore our ancestors as we are restoring ourselves now," and "Sarah was a symbol of restoring our peoples, restoring the pain that we went through as a nation, restoring the pain women go through generally."²⁰ South Africa's ambassador to France, Thuthukile Skweyiya, echoed Burgess when she said that Baartman served as "a symbol of our national need to confront our past and restore dignity to all our people."²¹

Initially, France was reluctant to return Baartman's remains and Western leaders were hesitant to enter the debate when called upon by Mandela, not because they did not want to face the truth that trafficking in humans and their remains is a racist practice that continues to this day, but because of the precedent the case would set for the return of artifacts and antiquities acquired during colonial expeditions and occupations. In a carefully worded statement, the South African government attempted to reassure First World nations that Baartman's case was not only unique, but unlikely to generate additional requests for the return of the hundreds of thousands of African artifacts in museums and private collections around the globe:

[A] symbol of an era of oppression and colonialism, [Baartman's] remains should be repatriated to South Africa, without any imputation that either England or France, the French

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 70.

¹⁷ According to Holmes, Cuvier kept Baartman's brains and genitals outside the entry door to his apartment and stored her other remains in the gallery of comparative anatomy, which was not yet open to the public. See Holmes, *African Queen*, 99.

¹⁸ Sudarsan Ragahaven, "Body Becomes Symbol of Oppression," *Houston Chronicle*, 11 February 1996, A33.

¹⁹ Holmes, *African Queen*, 114.

²⁰ Jean Burgess, filmed interview in Zola Maseko, *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (Brooklyn, NY: First Run / Icarus Films, 1999).

²¹ Holmes, *African Queen*, 106.

government, the French people or scholars are to be blamed for the parlous treatment which she received in Europe between 1810 and 1815.²²

The statement did not indict Europeans on charges of kidnapping, slavery, or indentured servitude; on the contrary, the South African government attempted to broker a negotiated settlement with France: the return of Baartman in exchange for amnesty. This proposal reflects South Africa's willingness to resolve the conflict in such a way that there would be no guilty party and no one penalized. The goal was not justice, but reconciliation. South African officials were willing to forgo *the truth* about Baartman in favor of *a truth* about her captivity that both governments could live with. This negotiated settlement would become the official and institutionalized version of the truth, one that would enable South Africans to lay Baartman to rest and allow France to emerge with some dignity from its colonial past.

It took several years, but in April 2002 Baartman's remains were delivered to a group of South African delegates at its embassy in Paris. Her remains arrived in South Africa on 3 May 2002, 187 years after she first left. A hero's welcome awaited her, and the ceremonies continued for several months. Baartman's spirit, denied the last rites of passage by an unscrupulous doctor and a culture of scientific racism, was restored and her body laid to rest with the honors reserved for national dignitaries. The state funeral gave South Africans the opportunity to (re)humanize Baartman, to pay their respects, to honor the dead, to honor the living, and to acknowledge all those whose names and stories remain unknown, unremembered. Services were scheduled for 9 August, which marks both Women's Day and the International Day of Indigenous Peoples. Baartman's remains were consecrated with a Khoisan cleansing ritual and buried in the town of Hankey, near the banks of the Gamtoos River—the region of her birth.

The logic of negotiated settlement that resulted in the return of Baartman also structured South Africa's TRC. Although modeled on courtroom proceedings, truth commissions are not legal bodies; they are surrogates for trials in cases involving gross violations of human rights. Crimes against humanity involve acts that rob persons of their dignity and reduce them to the status of inhuman. Catherine Cole notes:

In the face of the twentieth and twenty-first century's breathtaking capacity for genocide, state-sponsored torture, and systemic violations of human rights, the inherited mechanisms for restoring the rule of law have proven inadequate. Crimes against humanity require new means of redress, a mechanism that records hidden histories of atrocity, didactically promotes collective memory, and gives victims a place of respect, dignity, and agency in the process. Such purposes are not well served by traditional jurisprudence.²³

Truth commissions operate on the premise that gross violations of human rights represent horrors so great only ritual can contain them.²⁴ Typically, they operate for a fixed period of time to uncover the truth about specific events and produce an official account of that history.²⁵ The first truth commission was established in Uganda in 1974.

²²Ibid., 104.

²³Catherine M. Cole, "Performance, Transitional Justice, and the Law: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Theatre Journal* 59, no. 2 (2007): 171.

²⁴A "horror so deep only ritual can contain it" is how Sarah Kane categorizes severe trauma in *Crave* in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), 176.

²⁵See Deborah Posel, "Truth? The View from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Keywords: Truth*, ed. Nadia Tazi (New York: Other Press, 2004), 1–25. See also Priscilla Hayner, *Un-speakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

South Africa held the world's seventh truth commission, and it is considered one of the largest, most complex, and most successful experiments of its kind.

Mandated by an act of Parliament—the National Unity and Reconciliation Act, no. 34 (1995)—the South African TRC's scope of inquiry was restricted to a period of thirty-four years of apartheid rule, from March 1960 to May 1994.²⁶ Led by its chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, it was charged with a threefold mission: to uncover the truth about gross violations of human rights under apartheid; to identify national patterns of violence; and to recommend policies to ensure that such events could not happen again. The TRC was comprised of three committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee, which heard victims' testimony; the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee, which made recommendations on policies to compensate victims and restore their dignity; and the Amnesty Committee, which considered applications from perpetrators of crimes against humanity. While the structure and purpose of the TRC generated much dissent, the decision to grant amnesty for crimes against humanity was by far the most controversial aspect of the commission, one that continues to generate debate. The apartheid system engendered what Deborah Posel calls a "politics of complicity in which victims of one set of abuses became perpetrators of another."²⁷ According to the commission, amnesty was generally understood as the only way to uncover the truth about apartheid, keep the country from dissolving into a bloody civil war, and facilitate the healing process.²⁸

A transitional government's decision to establish a truth commission is based upon the assumption that the pursuit of an impartial, objective truth is possible, fundamentally desirable, and absolutely essential for the prospect of democracy.²⁹ The task of a truth commission is to adjudicate between conflicting versions of historical events in order "to produce a single overarching narrative that is authorized as objective, expert, and morally and ideologically neutral."³⁰ The underlying assumption is that the failure to produce a singular truth "would fundamentally detract from the legitimacy

²⁶ On 21 March 1960, a peaceful protest against pass laws—regulations severely restricting the movement of all nonwhite peoples—turned into the Sharpeville Massacre when police opened fire on the demonstrators, killing sixty-nine and wounding almost two hundred, most of whom were shot in the back while fleeing the scene. Prime Minister Verwoerd declared a state of emergency, which gave the government the right to detain people without a trial and banned independent political organizations. Many of these organizations, including the African National Congress (ANC), turned to more militant forms of resistance, ranging from guerrilla tactics to terrorist attacks. The year 1994 marked the official end of the apartheid regime, but negotiations began a number of years earlier between Prime Minister F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela, while the latter was still incarcerated.

²⁷ Posel, "Truth?" 14.

²⁸ Amnesty could be granted for crimes committed in relation to or associated with a political objective, provided that the perpetrators made a full disclosure of their involvement. The TRC accepted applications from government officials and members of political groups engaged in the struggle against apartheid. The overwhelming majority of applicants were denied, and many perpetrators never bothered to apply at all. See Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal and Ronald Suresh Roberts, *Reconciliation Through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Alex Boraine, *Country Unmasked: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Kenneth Christie, *The South African Truth Commission* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001). For perspectives on post-apartheid policies a decade after the transition, see Grant Farred and Rita Barnard, eds., *After the Thrill Is Gone: A Decade of Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁹ Posel, "Truth?" 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

of the enterprise.”³¹ As Posel argues, the reality is that truth commissions do not, and in fact cannot, produce *the truth*—they produce *a truth*. They “fashion a truth about the past” to which all parties will consent.³² As an exercise in nation-building, notes Posel, South Africa’s TRC was a tremendous success; as an exercise in truth-telling, however, its efforts “were seriously flawed.”³³ Posel calls the TRC “good theater, but bad history.”³⁴ By “good theater,” she means cathartic, and she is referring specifically to the public hearings that were “highly charged emotional sagas with moments of intense suspense, and lots of tears,” “grieving and heart-wrenching stories of victimization” whose telling seemed to provide, to both victims and witnesses, some sort of release.³⁵ By “bad history,” Posel means that the TRC failed to produce a truth to which all parties would consent.

The findings and final report of South Africa’s TRC in no way represent a singular, unified, and coherent narrative about the history of apartheid. It “is more of an allegory of wrongdoing.”³⁶ Archbishop Tutu’s introduction to the report acknowledges as much. He writes that the five-volume tome published in 1999 “is not and cannot be the whole story; but it can provide a perspective on the truth about a past that is more extensive and more complex than any one commission could, in two and a half years, have hoped to capture.”³⁷ Posel’s assessment of the TRC as good theatre but bad history invites us to consider not only the value and efficacy of theatre and history, but their relationship to each other. Does good theatre have to be tragic and does it always, or even necessarily, produce bad history? Is the inverse true: Does bad theatre produce good history? Is “good history” *true* history, and if so, which truth: *the truth* or *a truth*?

The Undertaker vs. the Resurrectionist

Apartheid, which in Afrikaans means “separateness” and “apart,” literally carved South Africa into racial zones in much the same way that Cuvier’s scalpel dissected Baartman’s corpse.³⁸ The public hearings on human rights violations conducted by the TRC and the ceremonies celebrating Baartman’s return offered some closure on tragic episodes of racism and imperialism, and as such they are paradigmatic examples of what I call “acts of interment.” Acts of interment are ritual performances designed to lay a matter and/or a body to rest, to help heal wounds and restore us by making the hole whole. They are aimed at remembering, mourning, and moving on. These separate though related acts of interment offered South Africans what Loren Kruger calls the “dramatic closure of reconciliation”: “a cathartic resolution for individuals, families, and political associates—the clarification and closure of life histories left unfinished by disappearance or unexplained death.”³⁹ Acts of interment are enacted with the belief

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 11.

³³ Ibid., 14.

³⁴ Ibid., 18.

³⁵ Ibid., 16–17.

³⁶ Ibid., 19.

³⁷ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Oxford: Macmillan Reference Ltd, 1999), 2.

³⁸ OED Online, s.v. “apartheid,” <http://www.oed.com> (accessed 30 April 2007).

³⁹ Loren Kruger, *Post-Imperial Brecht: Politics and Performance East and South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 347.

that dignity is conferred by reconciling the fragmentary remains of a traumatic past, harmonizing disparate truths, and unifying around the common goal of putting the past behind us in order to move forward. In addition to closure, these events also offer hope. The successful ten-year struggle to repatriate Baartman's remains gave South Africans, in the words of scholar Yvette Abrahams, "the confidence in [their] capacity to change the world," and more importantly, "the courage to continue fighting."⁴⁰

The TRC worked to disclose the truth about the thousands of people who were tortured and murdered during apartheid, thereby enabling family and friends the chance to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones and give them proper burials. At the same time, South Africans labored to literally *re-member* Baartman, to restore her dismembered body to its place of origin through ritual acts of interment. In the midst of these events, Parks set out to unearth the past in what I call a "drama of disinterment." Parks's drama of disinterment actively thwarts catharsis and rejects reconciliation in favor of a theatre of resurrection and dis(re)memberment. Whereas post-apartheid acts of interment privilege the ends—political unity, reconciliation, and the restoration of human dignity—over the means, Parks's drama does just the opposite: it dislocates, alienates, and disorders history and "truth" as we know it. *Venus* dramatizes the life of Baartman as a means without an end, and as such holds out the opportunity of re-imagining recovery without dignity and reconciliation without truth.

Parks chronicles the story of Baartman's life and death in thirty-one scenes that play out in reverse order. *Venus* incorporates a range of archival material, including court documents, diary entries from spectators, newspaper editorials, broadsheet ballads, and selected scenes from "For the Love of Venus," a three-act drama based on a popular vaudeville show, "The Hottentot Venus or the Hatred of French Women," produced in Paris in 1814. Parks's play also contains extensive quotations from anatomical notebooks and excerpts from Baartman's autopsy report, which Cuvier delivered as lectures in 1817. These materials are denoted as "footnotes" and "historical abstracts" in the script. The majority of the play takes place in the freak show where Venus and other human wonders are displayed for "The Chorus of Spectators" by The Mother-Showman—Venus's handler who is interestingly gendered female. In addition to the freak show, the play depicts Southern Africa in 1810, a courtroom, the room of the Anatomists who sketch Baartman, the bedroom Venus shares with "The Man, Later the Baron Docteur"—a character based on Cuvier—and a drawing room where the above-referenced play-within-the-play is staged. *Venus* is narrated by a character called "The Negro Resurrectionist," who is an amalgamation of Cesars, Réaux, and the playwright herself. The play commences with an announcement by The Negro Resurrectionist to the audience: "I regret to inform you that the Venus Hottentot is dead" and thus "there wont b inny show tonight."⁴¹ The show, however, must go on and does go on, with Venus as its star. This proclamation, and its repetition throughout the course of the drama, alerts us to the fact that the protagonist's death is central to the story, that it is, in fact, the contingent foundation of this drama of disinterment.

When the Chorus of Spectators learns of Venus's death at the opening of the play, it exclaims: "Outrage! It's an outrage!" The spectators' emotional outpouring is an expression of moral revulsion, not at the inhuman conditions that led to Venus's

⁴⁰ Maseko, *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*.

⁴¹ Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York: TCG, 1997), 3.

death, but at the fact that they were lured into the show under false pretences and have already paid their money. "Gimmie gimmie back my buck!" the spectators demand.⁴² Like the Chorus of Spectators, many members of the theatrical community were outraged by the play. They were furious that Parks would depict Baartman as complicit in her own oppression; they were equally, if not more, angered by Richard Foreman's direction, by the favorable reviews the play received from notable white male critics, and by the two OBIEs it garnered. In the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley called the production "strangely flat," but praised the playwright, for "to Ms. Parks' credit, she doesn't present Baartman as just an uncomprehending victim. This woman is clearly an accomplice in her own humiliation." He notes that the play is at its "best when it drops its sweeping condemning historical perspective."⁴³ Robert Brustein, founding director of Yale Repertory and American Repertory theatres, trumpeted the play as an "interracial, inter-sexual and intercultural pageant" that "wisely avoids pushing sympathy" buttons while portraying "the humiliations of Blacks in white society without complaint or indictment" and as such "represents a major advance for integrated American theater."⁴⁴

By contrast, performance artist and scholar Coco Fusco, who during the anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the "New World" in 1992 installed herself as a living ethnographic display in museums around the world, blasted the playwright for creating a work "in which the protagonist appears not only to be complicit in her exploitation, but enjoying it—and receives accolades for doing so."⁴⁵ Jean Young derided the play as a "fictitious melodrama," "a mythic historical reconstruction" that "diminishes the tragedy of [Baartman's] life" and "reifies the perverse imperialist mindset."⁴⁶ There were more nuanced critiques of the play, especially of later productions, but this sampling adequately reflects the ways in which the original production polarized audiences to such an extent that criticism of the play and criticism of the reviews became completely imbricated.⁴⁷

Despite their differences, these four critics have one thing in common: they all want *Venus* to provide some sort of closure. They try in vain to turn Parks's *drama of disinterment* into an *act of interment*. Brantley and Brustein responded enthusiastically to the play because they believe it closes the books on the chapter in history where white men are held accountable for racism and sexism (what a short chapter indeed!), while Fusco and Young reacted negatively to a dramatization that opens the possibility that complicity, rather than victimization, engenders agency and subjectivity. These reviews reveal just how easy it is for closure to become foreclosure, for an *act of interment* to become an *act of internment*. After all, "[i]t is easier to jail the truth than to resurrect

⁴²Ibid., 5.

⁴³Ben Brantley, "Of an Erotic Freak Show and the Lesson Therein," *New York Times*, 3 May 1996, C3.

⁴⁴Robert Brustein, "Robert Brustein on Theater," *New Republic*, 20 May 1996, 29; Brustein's review is based upon the Yale production.

⁴⁵Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," in *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995), 37–63.

⁴⁶Jean Young, "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," *African American Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 700.

⁴⁷For a summary of multiple reviews, see Harvey Young, "Touching History: Suzan-Lori Parks, Robbie McCauley and the Black Body," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2003): 134–53.

it.”⁴⁸ The most vociferous criticism of the play concerns the spectacular recreation of Venus’s ethnographic display onstage. The script does not detail what the set should look like nor what type of costume the protagonist is to wear. In Foreman’s production, Venus, played by Adina Porter, was outfitted with prosthetic buttocks that were clearly artificial though nonetheless very suggestive, and little else in terms of clothing. This directorial choice was seen as an uncritical restaging of the racist and sexist legacy of Baartman’s display, one that reproduced rather than problematized the practice of showing human curiosities. Critics complained that the actress was subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of the audience, and by extension, Baartman was re-objectified and forced to endure further degradation.⁴⁹

Baartman was denied dignity in life and in death by the dehumanizing effects of scientific racism and colonial discourses that equated blackness with bestiality, monstrosity, and savagery, and women of color with unbridled, exotic sexuality. As T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting notes, neither scientists nor the casual spectator viewed her “as a person or even a human, but rather as a titillating curiosity, a collage of buttocks and genitalia.”⁵⁰ According to Sander Gilman, “For most Europeans who viewed her, Sarah Baartman existed only as a collection of sexual parts.”⁵¹ Anatomists and ethnographers, not to mention the general public, believed that the genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics of indigenous women of the Eastern Cape proved that Africans were not only biologically inferior to white Europeans, but were the missing link in the Great Chain of Being. Altick states that the “brutal Hottentot,” with its “farrago of bestial sounds resembling the chattering of apes,” was considered “the epitome of all that the civilized Englishman, happily was not.”⁵² Baartman’s exhibition marked an important shift in the format of the freak show. It was not just that she became an object of sexual fantasies, but that sexual objectification became inseparable from the public representations of her.⁵³ Detractors of the play maintain that exposing any representation of Baartman to the voyeuristic gaze of audiences simply replays this original injustice.

A similar logic about the gaze fueled the South African struggle for Baartman’s repatriation. As long as Baartman was denied burial, she was subject to the same hu-

⁴⁸ Harry Elam and Alice Rayner, “Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks,” in *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theatre*, ed. Jeanne Colleran and Jenny Spencer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 275.

⁴⁹ At IFTR 2007, where this essay was originally presented, Jill Dolan suggested that Parks chose Foreman to direct the play because of his interest in scopophilic pleasure and his reputation for staging productions in ways that call our attention to how and why it is that we look at spectacles in certain ways.

⁵⁰ Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 17.

⁵¹ Sander Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 213–19.

⁵² Altick, *The Shows of London*, 269.

⁵³ Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 1–16. See also Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Anne Fausto-Sterling, “Gender, Race and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of Hottentot Women in Europe, 1815–1817,” in *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture*, ed. Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 19–48; Yvette Abraham, “Images of Sara Baartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, ed. Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri, with the assistance of Beth McAuley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 220–36.

miliation and voyeuristic objectification she encountered in life. South African delegates worked to deliver her from the deplorable state in which she had been displayed for almost two hundred years. They were undertakers in both the metaphorical and the literal sense of the word: first, they undertook the cause to repatriate Baartman; and second, this group actually interred her. They laid her to rest, placing her safely and securely in the ground and out of sight. Diana Ferrus, a Khoisan poet and delegate who traveled to Paris to receive Baartman's remains, serves as the paradigmatic example of such an undertaker. Her poem "I've Come to Take You Home" was read during the Senate debate in France over legislation that would permit the repatriation and was instrumental in mobilizing support for the bill's passage. Ferrus's poem, a moving account of why she has undertaken this task, identifies the gaze as the source of Baartman's tragedy. "I have come to wrench you away," she writes, "away from the poking eyes / of the man-made monster / who lives in the dark with his clutches of imperialism / who dissects your body bit by bit."⁵⁴ Although rescuing Baartman from the imperial gaze is clearly Ferrus's mission, she does not cast herself as Baartman's savior; rather, it is she who is indebted to Baartman: "I've come to bring you peace . . . for you have brought me peace." Given Baartman's history and given what her descendants experienced during apartheid, it is difficult not to admire the poet's efforts to serve as Baartman's undertaker and to honor her with both physical and aesthetic acts of interment.

Ferrus writes that she has come to Paris to take Baartman home. To South Africa, yes. To the place of her birth, yes. But home? According to the historical record, Baartman rejected the offer to return to South Africa, with all expenses paid, by the abolitionists who sued on her behalf. Did she not want to return home? Did she want to return, but not quite yet, not until she had struck it rich? Or did she want to remain in England? Baartman's family and her country were decimated by colonial war. The only work that awaited her was domestic drudgery. Was there even a home to which she could return? Many critics have argued that Baartman's testimony in the abolition case was inaccurately recorded or the evidence manipulated to prove that she was not being held captive. We may never know whether the court proceedings contain Baartman's actual words or a willful misinterpretation of the facts. What we do know is that the transcript is the only extant document that records anything close to her voice, her feelings, her desires. Are we to disregard this evidence because we don't believe it or because we want to believe she said something else, something more radical? Or, are we to disregard the transcript because we believe that if the record is accurate, this can only be because Baartman was under duress, and had she been able to speak freely she would have resisted? What does it mean not only to discount her testimony, but to discount it at the particular moment in South African history when testimony is seen as the path to truth and reconciliation, the path to healing?

In her poem, Ferrus depicts Baartman's burial as a homecoming. She describes the final resting place she has arranged: "I have made your bed at the foot of the hill / your blankets are covered in buchu and mint." This is no cold, dark tomb, but the cradling comfort of a mother's womb. From the opening image to the poem's final scene, Ferrus assumes that Baartman longs not only for home, but to be out of sight, beyond the gaze of the public. The court transcripts, however, show that what Baart-

⁵⁴ Diana Ferrus, "I've Come to Take You Home," <http://dianaferrus.blogspot.com/2005/11/saartjie-baartman.html> (accessed 1 April 2007).

man longed for was to be in the spotlight. Might it be possible that it is Ferrus herself who is engaged in a willful misreading of the evidence? Does Ferrus's undertaking, despite her loving intentions, rob Baartman of the very quality that it struggles to confer: her dignity? The answer depends upon the context in which one asks the question. In the South African worldview, explains Archbishop Tutu, "a person is not basically an independent, solitary entity. A person is a human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other beings, in being caught in the bundle of life."⁵⁵ A person is a person only through other persons, or as the religious philosopher John Mbiti writes: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."⁵⁶ The bundle of life to which the archbishop refers includes the spirit of the living and the deceased. This is the basis of the African philosophy of communalism known as *ubuntu*. Ferrus's poem and her efforts to secure Baartman's repatriation exemplify this concept of *ubuntu*.

While Ferrus labors to inter Baartman, to reconnect her with the collective and restore her dignity, Parks works to uncover her, and to do so in a manner that is completely indecent.⁵⁷ What are we to make of Parks's appropriation of Baartman's life and her purposeful distortion of historical fact and cultural context? How are we to interpret the seeming disregard for the symbolic function Baartman served in South African politics at the time of the play's creation and debut? Is Parks operating under the assumption, voiced by a character in South African novelist Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*, that as a historical figure, "Baartman belongs to all of us" and is therefore fair game for fictional representation?⁵⁸ What truths, if any, does the playwright uncover by telling so many lies about Baartman?

The Drama of Disinterment

In Ferrus's undertaking, the restoration of Baartman's dignity through proper burial is the objective; in her project, the means are subordinated to the ends, which is what makes it a paradigmatic example of an act of interment. This stands in stark contrast to Parks's drama of disinterment, which has no such goal. Eschewing any such motive, *Venus* gestures toward a play of pure means. Parks resurrects Baartman in the figure of Venus, but she does so without any instrumentalist aim or transformational teleology. Parks is not only uninterested in restoring Baartman's dignity, she goes so far as to create a drama in which it is almost impossible for audiences to do so by making Venus complicit in her captivity. Parks's *Venus* does not deny Baartman dignity so much as it takes the loss of her dignity as its premise. By calling into question the foundational moral concept of dignity, Parks opens the possibility for what Agamben has called "an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends."⁵⁹

When faced with a situation in which another person is reduced to the state of the inhuman, "the most immediate and common impulse," according to Agamben, "is to interpret this limit experience in moral terms," in terms of dignity and respect. This

⁵⁵ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Random House, 1999), 143.

⁵⁶ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt-Heinemann, 1990), 106.

⁵⁷ Robert Brustein claims the opposite, that "Parks's Venus is hugely exploited but always retains an aristocratic dignity and *sang-froid* laced with a gentle irony"; see "Symposium on the Work of Suzan-Lori Parks."

⁵⁸ Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2001), 135.

⁵⁹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 69.

impulse is exemplified by both the TRC and the movement for Baartman's repatriation.⁶⁰ Agamben cautions against this tendency, arguing that this situation involves not a question of dignity, but of "bare life." Bare life is the condition of the *homo sacer*, the individual who exists in the law only as a state of exception.⁶¹ Apartheid and Baartman's exhibition reduced South Africans to inhumans, to bare life. The state of exception is a zone in which "dignity and self-respect have become useless"; it is a "site in which it is not decent to remain decent."⁶² It is not only unnecessary for a person (or an artist or scholar) to remain decent in such a situation, it can be unethical to do so, especially if decency ultimately works to reinforce or reinscribe the state of exception.

As the majority of the play's action takes place in a recreation of Baartman's ethnographic display, Parks re-exposes, if not over-exposes, Venus to the "poking eyes" and probing stares of spectators. Parks acknowledges the fact that exposing Venus in this way is complicated, and she reminds us on several occasions during the play that "exposure iz what killed her": exposure to the elements, to drink, to sexually transmitted diseases, to racism, to sexism, to the gaze.⁶³ The spectator's gaze, while crucial in assessing any play, is only one line of sight in *Venus*, and it is not the one privileged in the script. That position belongs to The Negro Resurrectionist. A resurrectionist is someone who exhumes or steals corpses. Baartman's last handler, Réaux, was officially an animal trainer, but is alleged to have worked as a resurrectionist supplying cadavers of human curiosities to physicians such as Cuvier. Resurrectionists restore a person to life or to view again. As the name suggests, The Negro Resurrectionist is the one who revives Venus. Without him there wouldn't "b inny show," any story of Venus for audiences to contemplate. The Negro Resurrectionist plays several parts in the story: narrator, ringmaster, showman, and watcher—a watcher turned jailer. He explains, "I used to dig up people / dead ones. You know, / after theyd been buried. / Doctors pay a lot for corpses / but 'Resurrection' is illegal / And I was always this close to getting arrested. / This Jail-Watchman jobs much more carefree."⁶⁴ The Negro Resurrectionist watches everything and everybody, including the audience. In an interview, Parks reminds us that at the end of the play "he becomes the watch, the death watch on Venus."⁶⁵ While Venus may be on display for spectators, the more important spectacle is The Negro Resurrectionist watching the audience watch the show. What Parks exposes, then, is not simply Venus's body, but the death watch itself. Parks's drama of disinterment exposes Venus, but it does so in a way that breaks the hegemony of the visible, producing what Fred Moten in "Black Mo'nin'" calls "a general disruption of the ways in which we gaze at the face and at the dead, a disruption of the oppressive ethics and coercive law of reckless eyeballing."⁶⁶

⁶⁰Ibid., 55.

⁶¹See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁶²Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 63, 60.

⁶³Parks, *Venus*, 3.

⁶⁴Ibid., 72.

⁶⁵Jiggetts, "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks," 312. Parks goes on to say: "I think that is what theater's all about. It's about one person looking at somebody else" (313). In her plays, Watchers are as prominent as Diggers, and like The Negro Resurrectionist and *The America Play's Foundling Father*, many figures engage in both activities in equal measure.

⁶⁶Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin'" in *Loss: the Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 64.

Acts of interment such as Baartman's funeral and the proceedings of the TRC are rites designed to provide closure. Dramas of disinterment, on the other hand, are aesthetic and cultural productions that insist upon a never-ending opening. When *Venus* debuted during the struggle to repatriate Baartman, Christopher Innes wrote:

It is unlikely that Parks would support the current campaign to return Saartjie Baartman's remains to South Africa. In resurrecting her on the stage, Parks' aim is—as with *The America Play*—to liberate the present from figures of the past; not to embalm or erect monuments to history.⁶⁷

Embalming is the function of acts of inter(n)ment, not Parks's drama of disinterment.⁶⁸ Parks acknowledges that the dis(re)mbered corpse of Baartman staged in *Venus* recuperates and refigures the body as a site of opposition, while it simultaneously risks reinscribing the originary violence.

On the subject of racist spectacles of violence, Fred Moten notes:

There is a responsibility to look every time, again, but sometimes it looks as though that looking comes before, holds, replicates, reproduces what is looked at. Nevertheless, looking keeps open the possibility of closing precisely what it is that prompts and makes necessary that opening.⁶⁹

He urges us to "take a long lingering look at" what we don't think we can bear to see (again), but what we must bear witness to, for this is "what makes possible and impossible representations, reproduction, dreams."⁷⁰ For Moten, this gaze "cannot be sustained as unalloyed looking but must be accompanied by listening, and this, even though what is listened to—echo of a whistle or phrase, moaning, mourning, desperate testimony, and flight—is also unbearable."⁷¹ The impossibility of unalloyed looking is what breaks the hegemony of the visible in the drama of disinterment. What Moten hears when he witnesses spectacles of suffering is "the augmentation of mourning by the sound of moaning, by a religious and political formulation of morning."⁷² This is similar to what Antjie Krog calls "the acoustics of scars."⁷³ Krog, an Afrikaans poet and academic, was hired by the South African Broadcasting Corporation's radio program AM Live to cover the TRC hearings. She recounts in *Country of My Skull* the "pitches of grief" that resounded in the spectacles of violence re-enacted in the proceedings. This unalloyed looking is what Krog struggled to convey to listeners across the country and later to the world in her memoir. Parks's drama of disinterment (re)produces the acoustics of scars. She creates a situation in which "the looker is in danger of slipping not away, but into something less comfortable than horror—aesthetic judgment, denial, laughter, some out and unprecedented reflection, movement, murder, song."⁷⁴ As paradoxical as it sounds, it is only by taking "an extended lingering look at" *Venus* that we

⁶⁷ Christopher Innes, "Staging Black History: Re-imagining Cultural Icons," *South African Theatre Journal* 13 (2000): 28.

⁶⁸ Although this paper is limited in scope to *Venus*, "drama of disinterment" is a term I would use to describe Parks's aesthetic and mode of historical interrogation in more general terms. The dramatization of "fakin' and diggin'" in *The America Play* is perhaps the most obvious example apart from *Venus*.

⁶⁹ Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 72.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 64–65.

⁷¹ Ibid., 65.

⁷² Ibid., 63. Moten plays on mourning, morning, and moaning in this essay.

⁷³ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 190.

⁷⁴ Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 65.

can appreciate the ways in which this drama of disinterment disrupts the hegemony of the visual. As Moten notes, "We have to keep looking at it so we can listen to it."⁷⁵

Parks herself notes that sound is key to her project. She writes in "Possession," the primary task for the playwright is "to locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down."⁷⁶ What Parks hears when she sees images of Baartman and what she invites audiences to hear in her play *Venus* is indeed something less comfortable than horror: laughter. In "Elements of Style," Parks writes: "Laughter is very powerful—it's not a way of escaping anything but a way of arriving on the scene. Think about laughter and what happens to your body—it's almost the same thing that happens to you when you throw up."⁷⁷ The convulsive contractions of laughter resemble the shudder of catharsis, but they produce a different experience of embodiment and very different field of vision. Whereas tragedy purges and liberates, farce contaminates and implicates.⁷⁸ "In a manner that is, paradoxically, both horrific and comic—irresistibly or disrespectfully so, depending on your point of view," Parks "invites the audience to laugh and to feel sick at the same time."⁷⁹ An aesthetic cut that is as invasive as any scalpel, Venus's laugh of Medusa-like "HAHAHAHAHAHAAs" punctuate the play at the most absurd moments of history, such as the court's verdict that Baartman's handlers were not in violation of the Abolition of Slavery Law Act. Parks's choice to replay Baartman's life as comic, as absurd, is what so angered critics, especially feminist critics. As Harry Elam and Alice Rayner note: "Parks' methods for bringing bodies back to life, for making up history, and for challenging the foundations of that history have not always resulted in praise."⁸⁰ This was especially true in the case of *Venus*, for "if there ever was a plot to evoke pity and fear, it would be the story of Saartjie Baartman."⁸¹ That Baartman's life was tragic is irrefutable; that aesthetic dramatizations of her life should also be tragic is not.

The deprivation of burial marks the core of dramatic tragedy, a fact epitomized by *Antigone* and its legacy. Rather than a tragic struggle for interment, Parks stages an absurd drama of disinterment, subverting the entire Western theatrical tradition in a single play. Diana Taylor has argued that as a genre, tragedy produces "percepticide," "a form of killing or numbing through the senses."⁸² This effect is the inevitable result of cutting catastrophes "down to size" and ordering "events into comprehensible scenarios" in order to assure us that a crisis will be resolved and balance restored in the course of a performance. Tragedy "not only structures the events but also blinds us

⁷⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁷⁶ Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession," in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: TCG, 1995), 4.

⁷⁷ Parks, "Elements of Style," in ibid., 15. On Parks and humor, see Steven Drukman, "Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond: Doo-a-Diddly-Dit-Dit: An Interview," *TDR: The Drama Review* 39, no. 3 (1995): 56–75.

⁷⁸ Parks says that "humor's a great way of getting to the deep shit, isn't it? Humor is a very effective way of saying something that you probably could never say ordinarily." Drukman states that "*The America Play* shows that historical events and personages happen first as tragedy, second as farce, and thereafter as Theatre of the Absurd," and the same is true of *Venus* Ibid., 73, 57.

⁷⁹ Garrett, "The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks."

⁸⁰ Elam and Rayner, "Body Parts," 274.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 244.

to other ways of thinking about them," and this blindness ultimately works "against broader emancipatory politics because it detaches events refusing to see connections and larger frameworks."⁸³ The suggestion—in some cases, the insistence—by critics that Baartman's life should or must be narrated as tragic is the result of percepticide, which accounts for the inability of critics to fathom why Parks would want "to jolt her audience out of its customary responses, including not only the numbness of no response but also the dutiful feelings of sympathy and horror, in order to confront them with other affects, such as humor."⁸⁴ That Parks's choice to replay history as farce would outrage so many spectators, especially women, is somewhat startling, since the restaging of history as absurd is a common trope in feminist literature and criticism. Historical revision is not only an act of subversion for women, but a gesture that constitutes the most essential work of feminism.

If "good theater," to return to Posel, produces catharsis, it also induces percepticide, and this creates "bad history." Percepticide prevents spectators from experiencing the ways in which *Venus* exemplifies what Agamben calls "the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between fact and truth."⁸⁵ Parks is not concerned with the "factual truth," but with what Benjamin, following Brecht, calls "the epic side of truth."⁸⁶ To articulate the past historically, notes Benjamin, "does not mean to recognize it 'the way it was.'"⁸⁷ "Theater," claims Parks, "is an incubator for the creation of historical events—and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human."⁸⁸ Parks told an interviewer that she "could have written a two-hour saga with Venus being the victim. . . . But she's multifaceted. She's vain, beautiful, intelligent and yes, complicit."⁸⁹ Venus is an aspiring actress who, desiring fame and adoration, is complicit in her own exhibition and oppression, not a victim of colonialism cum national hero as Baartman was honored in South Africa and around the world. Parks depicts Venus as a random victim who becomes a chance survivor. She is extraordinary in her ordinariness, and there is absolutely nothing heroic about her.⁹⁰ A hagiography this play is not. Parks is interested in freeing Baartman not from the imperialist gaze, but from the burden of representation itself. Baartman does not belong to all of us, she seems to say—she belongs to none of us.

⁸³ Ibid., 261–263.

⁸⁴ This is Ann Cvetkovich's description of Lisa Kron's *2.5 Minute Ride*, but it also captures the spirit of *Venus*; see Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

⁸⁵ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 12.

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, trans. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 87.

⁸⁷ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in ibid., 255. On Parks and history, see W. B. Worthen, "Citing History: Textuality and Performativity in the Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks," *Essays in Theatre/Etudes Théâtrales* 18, no. 1 (1999): 3–22.

⁸⁸ Parks, "Elements of Style," 5.

⁸⁹ Monte Williams, "Suzan-Lori Parks: From a Planet Closer to the Sun," *New York Times*, 17 April 1996, C1.

⁹⁰ According to Shawn-Marie Garrett, Parks's figures "rarely 'do the right thing.' They are not heroes or saints, facing racism with the calm dignity of martyrs, nor are they hapless victims, caught up in forces beyond their control; nor are they instigators of civil disobedience." See "The Venus Hottentot is Dead: The Historical Saartjie Baartman," (paper), the "Symposium on the Work of Suzan-Lori Parks."

In Conclusion: A Kiss

Venus ends as it begins with the death of the protagonist, announced by The Negro Resurrectionist: "I regret to inform you that the Venus Hottentot iz dead."⁹¹ The final scene (scene 1) replays the opening "Overture," but with an important revision. Initially, Venus is resurrected by The Baron Docteur, a figure based upon the anatomist Cuvier. The Negro Resurrection explains:

When Death met her Death deathd her and left her to rot *au naturel* end for our hot Hottentot. And rot yes she would have right down to the bone had not The Docteur put her corpse in his home. Sheed a soul which iz mounted on Satans warm wall while her flesh has been pickled in Sciences Hall.⁹²

The protagonist's death is replayed several times throughout the play, and the last time, it is Venus who recounts her passing. She states that "When Death met Love Death deathd Love and left Love tuh rot *au naturel* end for thuh Miss Hottentot. Loves soul, which was tidy, hides in heaven, yes, that's it Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please visit."⁹³ Taken together, these conflicting narratives of Venus's demise represent the two dominant (and warring) forms of resurrection: the scientific and the religious. In the former, Venus is saved from obscurity by The Baron Docteur, who facilitates an *un-naturel* end for this "hot Hottentot" by preserving her corpse in the hallowed halls of the museum. "Completely unknowing of r godfearin ways," Venus's sinning soul rots in hell, but the good doctor rescues her body from decomposition and obscurity, thereby ensuring the fame of both the scientist and "his discovery."⁹⁴ In the latter account, Venus's resurrection comes not from the father of comparative anatomy, but the Father who art in heaven, who grants her soul everlasting life.

It may appear that the second version is preferable to the first, not only because it comes from Venus's own mouth, but because the protagonist seems to fare much better in the narrative of transcendence than in the narrative of progress. A close reading reveals that this "tail end of the tale" is actually Venus's last laugh, for neither are acceptable endings as far as Parks is concerned. Parks challenges the idea that death grants Venus a much-deserved respite from ogling eyes or finds her in some better place. The language is absurd, and the entire explanation seems contrived on the spot. "Yes, that's it," Venus announces, as if she's miraculously struck the correct chord or hit upon the perfect line and can now tell us the story we want to hear. She describes her soul as "tidy"—a mockery of purity and innocence. Her soul was not called to heaven; it "hides" there, presumably waiting to escape. The last thing this woman wants to do is rest in peace; she wants to remain in the spotlight. "Please visit," Venus implores us. She does not welcome entry into the kingdom of heaven, or Ferrus's womb of mother earth for that matter. *Venus* resists the rhetoric and political ideology of home and homeland, in both its religious and national connotations, that dominated South African constructions of her. The protagonist in Parks's play is given the choice, and she chooses to remain homeless, to live forever "on show in museum." As what Agamben calls a refugee *par excellence*, Venus rejects even heaven to live as a stateless

⁹¹ Parks, *Venus*, 160.

⁹² Ibid., 9.

⁹³ Ibid., 160.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 9.

denizen.⁹⁵ She elects to live in exile as a diasporic subaltern, what Haiping Yan calls a "modern vagrant," rather than return home.⁹⁶

In contrast to both scientific and religious forms of resurrection, Parks offers a third alternative: aesthetic resurrection in the form of a drama of disinterment. In the scientific account of Venus's death, all that survives is the flesh; and in the religious one, what remains is the spirit. Aesthetic resurrection acknowledges conflicting accounts of events, but refuses to adjudicate between different versions of the past to produce a singular truth or a coherent narrative, and thus denies closure. Aesthetic resurrection insists upon a never-ending opening. In Parks's (dis)rememberment of Venus, both the flesh and the spirit survive trauma. As the playwright, Parks takes on the role of The Negro Resurrectionist. She is responsible for restoring Venus, and she is complicit in perpetuating the historical trauma this restoration entails. As the play makes clear, if it is exposure that kills Venus, it is (re)exposure that revives and sustains her and that enables a different story—one not rooted in either victimization or transcendence—to be told.

Venus shows us that if redemption exists at all it is to be found, not in a spiritual kingdom or a political kingdom, but in our sensuality, in our fleshy communion with one another. The final word on the subject comes from the protagonist herself. After another death, this one clearly more painful and more horrible than the previous ones, our protagonist takes to the stage yet again. Standing before the audience, Venus utters the last lines of the play, "Kiss me / Kiss me / Kiss me / Kiss."⁹⁷ She does not say, "Love me / Love me / Love me," which is what she said repeatedly throughout the play. In this scene, Venus understands that love is a fabrication—that she *is* that fabrication. She has reconciled herself to this. In the end, Venus settles for a kiss. Venus's kiss, like the kiss of Judas, is the kiss of resurrection, one that "holds an affirmation not of, but *out of* death."⁹⁸ This kiss is a sonic *gestus*, one that reverberates with the acoustics of scars. When we kiss we close our eyes, breaking the hegemony of the visible.

Parks does not allow Venus or the audience to come clean, to be purged through catharsis. Spectators are implicated, contaminated in the down-and-dirty business we call "show." The play demonstrates that "it is possible to lose dignity and decency beyond imagination," and for there still to be "life in the most extreme degradation."⁹⁹ Venus survives the state of inhumanity into which she has been thrust by resurrecting herself, by making herself vulnerable, by exposing herself again and again. Parks insists that (re)exposure—to others, to desire, to the risk of rejection and pain and degradation—(re)humanizes Venus and engenders more life. The protagonist's final gesture is extremely undignified and extremely generous: an invitation to return the kiss and to participate in a radical new form of fleshy communalism.

⁹⁵ Venus also serves as an example of what Agamben calls "the forms and limits of the coming community," an image of collectivity not predicated upon the nation-state; see Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics (Theory Out of Bounds)*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 14.

⁹⁶ See Haiping Yan, "Staging Modern Vagrancy: Female Figures of Border-crossing in Ama Ata Aidoo and Caryl Churchill," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 2 (2002): 245–62.

⁹⁷ Parks, *Venus*, 162.

⁹⁸ Moten, "Black Mo' nin'," 72.

⁹⁹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 69.