

Navigating Colonial Inheritances: The Performativity  
of Black Female Identity Then and Now

by Claire Caldwell

Advisors: Erik Dussere, Keith Leonard  
Department of Literature

University Honors in Literature

## Abstract

The life of Saartjie Baartman inspired this project. A Khoisan woman taken from her home in South Africa in the early 1800s, she was paraded around Europe in freak-shows, displayed for the size of her buttocks and elongated labia. Across European pop-culture and scientific discourse, she became simultaneously the symbol of female African hyper-sexuality and the racially subhuman African race: doubly “Othered” in western society. This project questions in what ways women of color still suffer from marginalizing narratives imposed upon their race and gender by society at large, and how these women confront such reductive associations. Analysis focuses on the works of playwrights Ntozake Shange and Suzan-Lori Parks. In their respective theater productions, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (a collection of choreopoems produced in 1975) and *Venus* (produced in 1996) they grapple with the complexities of establishing African American female agency and by extension, stable, self-fulfilling identities. The plays differ somewhat in content and approach. Parks performs an historical recasting of the Baartman tale, re-imagining her life as it *might* have been. Shange presents a collaboration of dance and poetry, speaking more generally to the experiences of seven “colored girls” as they age, mature, and engage with their social surroundings. Thematically the plays overlap, playing with the divide between body and voice; spectacle and audience; and public and private. A close-reading of two scenes from either play makes evident the necessity of bridging these divides for women of color in the formation of self-determined identities. By appropriating theater as a space for these women to unveil their complexities, insecurities, and weaknesses, the playwrights move the narratives of colored women from the margin to center-stage, issuing a call to arms for them to write their *own* stories.

The question of female African American identity formation has been tied up, throughout history, with conversations vast and diverse regarding race, gender, socio-economics, sexuality, public space, visibility, private space, and invisibility. Contemporary discourse surrounding the social location and identity formation of black women often centers around the idea that they are doubly Othered. On the one hand, as women of color, they have been under- or entirely *un*-represented by the political initiatives of American feminist movements. On the other hand as African American *women*, their voices have been excluded by and large from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Being the Othered race (black) in addition to being the Othered sex (woman) certainly complicates the project of locating oneself socially. Questions that arise might include: what social alliances are representative of her experience; which public spaces are accessible or otherwise subliminally “off-limits;” how does one foster social mobility when her race excludes her from certain communities and her sex certain others? Because the African American woman is doubly excluded from the political discourses surrounding race and gender, tenets upon which she might begin to construct a self-determined consciousness, her identity necessarily renders itself as a performance.

Arguably, all individual subjectivities are performative, an enactment that either reaffirms or rejects social constructs of race, gender, and sexuality; however, the process of performing black female identity is unscripted, unchartered because the experiences of black women are subsumed, not accurately represented by dominant discourses about their race and sex. Performance and feminist theorist Judith Butler aptly delineates the ways in which gender gets performed in society and how those performances become engrained in public consciousness as signifiers of masculinity and femininity. She writes

“for Foucault, as for Nietzsche, cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page; in order for this inscription to signify, however, that medium must itself be destroyed—that is, fully transvaluated into a sublimated domain of values.” (166) The body is initially the source of social prescriptions of the masculine and feminine. However, as these prescriptions become indoctrinated into public consciousness, the body as a “blank page” is erased and is reconstituted in accordance with those gender prescriptions. The body as a signifying force is replaced by the body that is signified. This shift marks the moment when gender becomes performative. The individual does not create a singular and autonomous gender identity but re-enacts what society has come to prescribe as that which is either masculine or feminine.

What Butler fails to account for in her analysis of gender construction is race and how, for a woman of color, her identity might be performed differently than a white woman, or a black man. Like gender, race is read across the body’s surface and is interpreted by the public as indicative of a certain social location or subjecthood. However, social constructions of the African American experience are defined in relation to the black male’s experience. Thus, black women must navigate two mutually exclusive terrains, both of which carry social significations, in determining identity: race and gender.

This project is further problematized by the divide between internal consciousness and external embodiment. Because the body’s physical attributes are being interpreted by the public as signifiers of a subjectivity and social location long before the individual can begin to speak of an internal constructed identity, the development of an autonomous

consciousness is short-circuited. A private, subconscious sense of self is ultimately informed by the ways in which the body is publicly received. However, because the position of black women society is inherently binary (woman within a man's race, black within a white woman's movement), her identity, both public and private, can never be adequately represented by her body's surface. Whereas a white woman or black man can choose to either define him/herself in antithesis to given public perception, or otherwise allow him/herself to internalize those perceptions and construct an identity around them, women of color have neither luxury. Because prescribed social tags like race, gender and sexuality (in the broader contexts of socio-economic conditions and public versus private spheres) fail to adequately contain or represent the individual subjectivity of an African American woman, she must work not from the outside in, but from the inside out in creating a self-determined identity—nonetheless all the while being mindful of how the embodiment of her subconscious subjectivity will be received once publicly enacted.

Whereas Butler's performativity speaks to a top-down development of identity, in which consciousness is born through the bodily re-enactment or rejection of social prescripts of gender and race; the African American woman must construct her own identity from the bottom up, wherein a subconscious sense of self is prerequisite to the debut of a publicly acknowledged embodiment of that subjectivity. The difficulty of this endeavor is that consciousness does not develop in a vacuum. Though socio-cultural constructions of the feminine and blackness do not adequately account for the experiences of black women, those experiences (however unprecedented or under-represented in dominant discourses) *do* inform their subjectivities. All individual subjectivities are ultimately informed by their positive or negative social reception.

However, whereas it is enough for a white woman or black man to recognize the ways in which his/her body is interpreted and then consciously internalize those readings or otherwise reject them and employ their body as a site for contestation. The black woman must firstly recognize racial and gender associations. Secondly, she must acknowledge that race and gender function as mutually exclusive facets of identity construction in current social discourses. She must know that, in fact, these two elements of her personhood are in perpetual combat, racial constructs eternally un-doing and subverting gender constructs and vice versa. The African American woman becomes the site of an identity in constant *deconstruction*. Thirdly and finally, she must begin to imagine how she might reconcile these seemingly discordant traits, the implications of this union in developing her own sense of self, and how to accurately embody, or perform this conjunction in the public sphere.

Though women of color fall outside of the discourses surrounding sex and race and therefore do not have the solid foundation upon which to begin constructing a self-determined identity; the advantage of the black woman's *lack* of social location (her eternal state of marginalization, of rootless Otherness) is that she has the unique opportunity of creating and re-creating the parameters of her subjecthood. Ntozake Shange and Suzan-Lori Parks, contemporary authors, poets and playwrights, posit that female African American identity formation and the social agency born of it is not merely performative but is, in fact, *realized* during the process of performance. In her play *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, Shange posits performance, physical movement through time and space, as the locus wherein consciousness and physicality; inner-persona and outer-subject; voice (as the register of

the mind and consciousness) and body meet, reconcile, and integrate. Thereby, the black woman might begin to define her own subjectivity and the parameters of a space where that subjectivity might promulgate across society. Parks, in her play *Venus*, delves more broadly into the implications of performance: what differentiates “reality” from “act”; is performance strictly reserved for the public sphere, where the spectacle is accompanied by an audience, or is internal consciousness equally performative; and what is the role of audience in validating a performance as true or false? Parks borrows the historical symbol, Saartjie Baartman, also known as Sara Baartman or, more famously, the “Hottentot Venus,” and re-casts her life in Europe as a freak show “performer.”

Both playwrights are deeply vested in elaborating upon the idea of performance as a process contingent upon the recognition not only of a bodily, physical reality but a subconscious, internalized reality. On the one hand, Shange confronts this project of constituting a unified identity, where the public, embodiment of subjecthood is in conversation with internal, conscious subjectivity. The experiences of her characters illuminate how difficult this task can be when the women must translate their self-determined identities to a general public and risk rejection. Parks, on the other hand, depicts a woman who is void of consciousness; who, lacking a native language and denigrated by her European spectatorship as having no history, becomes merely the object of spectacle, an identity constructed for her by the European Other. *Venus* struggles, subconsciously, within these confines to enact a self-determined subjectivity distinct from her stage role. However, as with the women in Shange’s play, when she attempts to convey her internal sense of self to others, her identity is consistently reduced

to that of a body. In subverting her consciousness, her internal subjectivity, Venus's agency and self-determined identity can never be fully realized.

Of course, an historical review of her life will be useful in contextualizing the characters and relationships in the *Venus* script; however, Sara Baartman is also a useful symbol for framing the issue of black female identity formation within a world of binaries and hierarchies. She was a figure at once revered and feared. She functioned as the Other to European normative beauty, displayed almost naked in the freak shows, an object of sexualized glory and ethnographic "documentation." She was a subject of scientific inquiry and supposed proof of biological racial hierarchies. Historians have argued that she was enslaved in an age of British abolitionism and others have cast her as complicit agent in her fate as an object for European ogling. Her legacy has been conflated in academia and in pop culture; and readings of her life have contradicted and opposed one another so that she has become the ultimate binary configuration. Moreover, her voice, her subjectivity is utterly unaccounted for in written documents. Thus, all renderings of her person from the 1800s until the present-day are external interpretations.

I will examine the scholarship surrounding the life of Saartjie Baartman to determine in what ways a legacy of sexual objectification of black women has persisted for two centuries; how and why racial hierarchies were ultimately constructed and in what ways our contemporary language and aesthetic values perpetuate those hierarchies; and how the space of spectacle raises questions about delineations of public versus private space, visibility versus invisibility and the role the audience plays in either constructing or undermining identities formulated across that space. I will call into

question the accuracy and stability of historical accounts. However, I will also examine how, why and which images and associations, regardless of their “factuality” persist in contemporary society. Ultimately, these are the same questions that Ntozake Shange and Suzan Lori-Parks are asking in their plays: how does the black woman create a stable and self-fulfilling identity in the face of all this history. The project of defining identity is inevitably an ongoing process, one that takes place at the intersection of private experience and public performance. The overlapping histories of race and gender politics have made this process especially fraught for black women in the West and in colonial contexts. In the plays *for colored girls* and *Venus*, Ntozake Shange and Suzan-Lori Parks engage directly with these histories, appropriating the stage—with its unique conjunction of body, voice, and audience—as a site for the interrogation of black female identity as “performance.” Though this identity is ultimately subject to public critique, and therefore vulnerable to attack, in the process of imagining how a unique African American female subjectivity can be performed differently, black women constitute themselves as agents of their histories. The conflation of agency with the performance of black female identity not only empowers these women to take charge of the writing and re-writing of their unique subjectivities, but imbues them with the authority to engage with and re-constitute those social discourses at large, from which they have been hitherto excluded.

### **Colonial Race and Gender Constructs**

Despite the tendency of scholars to selectively reconstitute the life of Saartjie Baartman in its singular parts (Baartman as sexualized object; as symbol of scientific racism; as victim and relic of imperialist conquests) a survey of scholarship illuminates this figure as complex and dynamic, unsettling essentialized or unitary readings of her

character. Scholars Pamela Scully and Clifton Crais offer the most thorough and relatively objective account of Baartman's life in their collaborative article "Race and Erasure: Sara Baartman and Hendrik Cesars in Cape Town and London," published in the *Journal of British Studies* in 2008. Saartjie Baartman, a native of the Khoekhoe lineage in South Africa, was born in the mid-1770s in the Eastern Cape, according to census and estate records.<sup>i</sup> Her parents' land was claimed by the Cape government and issued to a Dutch settler along with their livestock in 1763.<sup>ii</sup> Since the arrival of colonial powers in the country, there existed a constant flow of trade between her home on the Eastern Cape and the capital Cape Town. Thus, when demand increased in the port city for female servants, Baartman was sold to Pieter Cesars. She worked in the house of his employer until his death and thereafter lived and worked in Cesars' own home. After several years she was passed along to Cesars' brother, Hendrik, who ultimately took her to London seven years later.<sup>iii</sup> In 1806, the British usurped the colonial territory and established a naval hospital where Baartman presumably met Alexander Dunlop, a ship surgeon to the British Navy. It is not verified whether Cesars forced Sara to prostitute herself to British soldiers, although the sale of women's bodies served as a long-standing source of local economic prosperity.<sup>iv</sup> Regardless, Dunlop saw Baartman's body as a viable economic commodity, one which would draw attention and a pretty shilling in British spectacles. The ship surgeon promised Sara's master monetary compensation to permit her to leave South Africa, and the three set sail for London in April of 1810.<sup>v</sup>

From the moment of her stage debut Baartman was a hit success, an object of fascination that came to symbolize a sexualized race of peoples; in as much as her body was read by her spectatorship as having markers of heightened libidinousness

(positioning her as in opposition to the normative Victorian femininity) blackness also became viewed as a symptom of savagery, which was indivisible from that sexual impulse. Arriving in Piccadilly Square, historically known as a space of public entertainment, she was displayed in the then popular European freak shows for the size of her buttocks (a condition termed steatopygia) and her elongated labia.<sup>vi</sup> Her performance consisted of her being “dressed in clothes supposedly appropriate to her race, forced to chant and dance...in ethnographic style, [she] came to enact a masquerade of culture and race much more acutely attuned to an English fantasy of her life than it was to the reality of her time in London or Cape Town.” (Crais, 317) Baartman’s subjectivity becomes over-written by her European counterparts. Her personhood, her self-determined identity was never a topic of discussion. She becomes a character sketch, her identity a construction, a figment of European imagination. Furthermore, this constructed and performative identity comes to symbolize a whole race of peoples and a way of life. Needless to say, Baartman’s performance in the freak show is far removed from the “performativity” that Butler imagines. In theory, identity as performance is predicated upon the existence of agency. Saartjie was held to a social location wherein she was denied agency, her body functioning instead as a vessel for the conscription of European perceptions of gender and race. Baartman as the “Hottentot Venus,” a symbol of a wayward sexuality and race, was something not only entirely foreign to her spectators but also alien to her own subjectivity.

While Baartman undeniably intrigued spectators, their interest in naming who and what she represented was less rooted in a desire to understand someone Other than it was to solidify their understanding of the normative European Self. Feminist theorist Anne

Fausto-Sterling attributes the popularity of the freak shows to their creation of “visions of the nonwhite world...from this vision, this reflection of the other...Europe’s self-image derived; the presentation of the exotic requir[ing] a definition of the normal.” (78) A European consciousness (more specifically a British consciousness) was thus predicated upon the existence of a binary, something Other against which to define the normative. Scully, Crais and Fausto-Sterling all contend, however, that the Other to which the European identity compared itself was not authentic, but constructed. Baartman is said to have performed a “masquerade” more reminiscent of the British perception of her life than its real manifestation. Fausto-Sterling uses similar language in referring to it as a “vision” of Otherness. In fact, it is believed that Sara lived the life of a working-class English woman when she wasn’t performing on stage. She lived in a house on Duke Street, not far from the neighborhood where many black Londoners resided. Dunlop provided her with two African servant boys as well as long skirts typically worn by working-class women. On Sundays she took carriage-rides.<sup>vii</sup> Her stage identity, however, told a narrative alien to these European traditions.

The primary interest in scapegoating certain minorities as morally and physically bankrupt was born of the industrial revolution: as the productive individual became the cornerstone of economic progress and increasingly socially mobile, British civilians had vested interest in maintaining a class structure wherein the white male was dominant. In 1806, just four years before Saartjie Baartman’s debut at Piccadilly Square, slavery was abolished in Britain. Scholar and activist Yvette Abrahams writes, “as the physical bonds on Black people weakened, the discursive ones had to grow correspondingly stronger.” (223) Two seemingly incongruous trends of consciousness were competing

with one another in the western world. On the one hand, there is increasing awareness amongst the polity that committing another human to bondage, forcing them to work without pay is inherently inhumane. On the other hand, there were still economic and social motivations for upholding the existent social order; namely, the persistent British colonial presence in South Africa. Minorities in Europe had made the ontological leap from property of the white man to equal to the white man. This shift made it difficult for Britain to rationalize its continued control over imperial states and the indigenous people therein.

In order to reconcile the economic exploitation of colonial territories and, by extension, the racial hierarchy wherein the white male dominated, with new definitions of labor rights and the importance of the capitalizing individual in the growth of the nation state, there arose the need for a method of stripping colonized individuals of a sense of agency. Sociologist Zine Magubane explains:

the Baartmann exhibition encapsulated in miniature the debates that were occurring about the labor more generally. Henrik Cezar, her brutal Dutch master, represented the old economic order at the Cape, based on enslavement, forced captivity, and despotism. The African Association [responsible for suing Hendrik Cezar and provoking an investigation regarding Saartjie Baartman's freedom] represented the coming of a new colonial order based on a "voluntary" commodification of the self and a "willing" capitulation to the dominant logic of capital. (829)

Saartjie Baartman would not have ever been enslaved, in the sense of being denied wages for one's labor, by colonialists because the Dutch did not permit the lawful enslavement of indigenous South African peoples such as the Khoekhoe. However, in as much as her family was stripped of their land and livelihood, and opportunities of employment for indigenous South Africans were limited servant positions in the homes of white settlers, neither Baartman nor other black Africans operated as free agents in their society. When

Magubane employs the phrase “voluntary commodification,” she refers to the notion that individuals once enslaved or construed as belonging to a sub-human caste viable only for their physical labor (agricultural, house-keeping, prostitution, etc.), after emancipation were still held firmly within a set of discourses and social conventions wherein the body functioned as their only asset. The popular dictum was that the colonized must learn how to exploit their own bodies in the absence of the colonizer. There existed no other avenue to autonomy, financial or otherwise, except to employ one’s body the way it had always been used in the past: manual labor or sexual exploits.

Saartjie Baartman was exemplary of this European project to subvert and diminish the subjectivities of those who appear to be “Other;” her subject was veritably erased on stage, replaced by the object of spectacle, “Hottentot Venus.” Her new stage name carried dual meanings. Hottentot (derivative of “huttentut”, meaning to stammer) was a derogatory label assigned to Khoisan individuals (who spoke click dialects) by the Dutch colonialists.<sup>viii</sup> Venus, on the other hand, calls forth images of the goddess of beauty and sex. Thus, Baartman becomes construed as the embodiment of seemingly incompatible binaries: uncivilized, savage, raw, and bestial, while also beautiful, exotic, mesmerizing, and sensuous.

The discourses surrounding the image of the “Hottentot Venus” constitute a political economy of beauty, wherein one’s intellectual, moral and physical value is determined by physical indicators. During this period, increased contact with foreign cultures revealed the subjectivity of aesthetic values.<sup>ix</sup> Thereafter, science was used to quantify what is “beautiful” as a means of confirming the sovereignty of European aesthetic standards. In comparing Baartman’s body to a Caucasian skull, literary theorist

Nicholas Hudson details how the “Hottentot Venus” came to be associated with a certain conception of beauty, one that was instinctual and raw, falling outside of the range of “higher” or “pure” beauty. He explains, “the “Hottentot Venus” and the Caucasian skull, we might propose, represent two male constructions of femininity. The first is all fleshly body, even to the exclusion of Saartje Bartmann’s head, which remained virtually silent and attracted little attention; the second is only a head, though empty, and the subject of heady male speculations on race and beauty.” (23-25) Hudson points to a binary theoretical conceptualization of beauty. The Caucasian skull, believed to be the most perfect representation of a human cranium, the most purely constructed and therefore the most beautiful, represented an intellectual, scientific beauty.<sup>1</sup> This skull was considered beautiful not only in its physical attributes; it was also said to be the marker of “moral and rational advancement.” (Hudson 23) We thus see the conflation of science, morality and aesthetics. That which could be constituted as morally and intellectually advanced was viewed as the purest, richest of beauties. It is no accident that the skull was configured as the locus of this beauty, given its proximity to the brain, the center of rational thought.

Inversely, Baartman was valued solely for her body, an antithesis to “rational” beauty; figuratively headless, she could claim neither aesthetic nor intellectual worth. Had her skull been the object of attention during her life, it would have classified her as belonging to an unrefined race, lacking the sophistication and delicate beauty of the Caucasian skull. As it was, her head was of no interest to the public; they were interested

---

<sup>1</sup> This scientific theorization of beauty fits neatly within the paradigm of industrialized rationality, wherein the mathematically quantifiable is considered the utmost expression of divinity, perfect in its architecture. Of course, in naming the Caucasian skull the epitome of aesthetic perfection, racial hierarchies were reinforced.

in her “fleshly body,” her enlarged buttocks and elongated labia, signifiers of a savage, unregulated sexuality. Historian and art photographer, Deborah Willis explains:

The genitalia and buttocks of the black female attracted much greater interest in part because they were seen as evidence of an anomalous sexuality not only in black women but in all women...the deformation of the labia in the Hottentot is accounted a congenital error, and thus incorporated into the disease model. For the model of degeneracy presumes some acquired pathology in one generation which is the direct cause of the stigmata of degeneracy in the next. (19)

Thus, Saartjie Baartman’s genital “deviances” or “abnormalities” become signifiers of sexual promiscuity. She is beautiful in the sense of representing an exotic sensuality, but these were not characteristics of the “highest,” most sophisticated of beauties. Willis is overzealous in her interpretation that Saartjie Baartman’s body, namely her buttocks, came to publicly represent sexual promiscuity in all women. If the genitalia of the “Hottentot Venus” represent untamed libidinousness; then the skull of the European woman represents a calculated and rational aesthetic perfection. The pathology of one is unsound, uncivilized, under-developed; while the consciousness of the other is scientifically grounded (and thereby, supposedly uncontestable) and morally good. Because Victorian morality valued chastity, and the control of sexual impulses, the “Hottentot Venus’s” perceived lasciviousness served to reinforce the moral and physical beauty of the European woman. Baartman was never performing her own identity, a self-determined subjectivity. Her performance was staged by her European counterparts as a means of assigning difference, delineating between the valor of European self and its degenerative Other. She was the vestibule for European constructions of lowliness, both sexual and mental, and lacking financial or social agency, was unable to re-constitute the identity she was assigned.

The name given to the “Hottentot Venus” encapsulates the project that a political economy of sexuality and beauty attempts: the subordination of colored women. Though Baartman is nominally associated with a popular image of beauty, the public never forgets that her beauty is a wayward one. She may be a Venus, exotic and “of another world” (quite literally, another terrain and culture); but she is first and foremost a “Hottentot.” She is viewed as a woman from a lineage with no language, without which she can have no past, no future, and no present consciousness. She is considered to bear the markers of an unmediated sexuality; her body parts not only signifying physical abnormalities but a disturbed pathology as well. Saartjie Baartman ceases to exist in historical records, written over by the headless “Hottentot Venus.” Rendered voiceless and without consciousness, she is deprived the tools necessary for a woman of color to assert a self-determined bodily enactment of her subjectivity.

In response to appeals from abolitionist groups, the King’s Bench carried out an investigation to determine whether or not Baartman was acting as a free agent while living and working in Europe; though this acknowledges a certain subjecthood that was denied to her in the arena of spectacle, the court findings ultimately reinforced restrictions on her agency thereby prohibiting her from exploring and enacting her subjectivity. Hendrik Cesar left Baartman’s entourage in October of 1810 and Dunlop became her sole charge for most of the court proceedings.<sup>x</sup> Within the same month, the retired naval surgeon drew up a retroactive contract with Baartman, employing her as his servant for five years. This made their relationship, vis-à-vis the spectacle, one wherein Dunlop could contract out Baartman’s labor as an actor, rendering her beholden upon him for economic security.<sup>xi</sup> The court ordered that the interview of Saartjie be conducted in

her mother tongue and that Dunlop not be present. However, neither mandates were ultimately pursued: Dunlop is recorded as being present, and in the absence of a translator of Khoekhoe dialect, the questioning was carried out in Dutch and thereafter translated<sup>2</sup>.<sup>xii</sup> Her testimony reportedly states:

...she came by her own consent to England and was promised half of the money for exhibiting her person—She agreed to come to England for a period of six years; she went personally to the Government in company with Henrick Caesars to ask permission to go to England. Mr. Dunlop promised to send her back after that period at his own expence [*sic*] and to send the money belonging to her with her...[she] has no complaints to make against her master or those who exhibit her; is perfectly happy in her present situation; has no desire whatever of returning to her own country...wishes to stay here because she like the Country and has money given her by her master of a Sunday when she rides about in a Coach for a couple of hours. (Crais 320-321)

Of course, the validity of her testimony was complicated by Dunlop's presence. Given her financial dependence upon the man, speaking disparagingly of him would likely have risked her economic security in Europe. Regardless, as a result of this testimony, the sole existing written account of Baartman's experiences as told in her own words, the Khoisan woman was deemed to be acting of freewill, and thus no charges were brought against her master.

Though the court's verdict confirmed Saartjie Baartman's subjecthood, in the sense that she alone was permitted ownership of her body, because she was ultimately denied a voice in the determination of her future economic prospects, her agency was short-circuited. Upon finding her a free agent, the court offered Saartjie the option of either returning to Cape Town (in the event that she was proven to be unhappily enslaved by Dunlop, forced to perform against her will) or to continue working as a performer in

---

<sup>2</sup> Baartman is said to have spoken both Dutch and English in addition to her mother tongue. (Crais 308)

London. Scully and Crais read this as indicative of the fact that abolitionists and the Kings Court, despite finding her to be a free agent, determined here, nevertheless, to be not agent enough to determine where and how to live.<sup>xiii</sup> Alternatively, the rigidity of respective institutions in delineating Baartman's potential destinies speaks to the flimsiness of the anti-slavery movement in Britain at the time. In accordance with the popular perception that women and individuals of color were intellectually inferior to the Caucasian man, Baartman was constituted as incapable of making rational, informed decisions in regards to her life. Her consciousness, her capacity for desire and self-interested choice are ultimately still being rejected. In as much as a "subject" is a self-determined agent, with both a physical, public and subconscious, internal manifestation, Baartman's publicly acknowledged subjecthood was in fact a hollow, vacant recognition, a mere guise of a liberated individual.

The legal discourse surrounding the Khoisan woman thus (in a fit of convulsion) portrayed her at once as a victim of imperial conquests, helplessly enslaved and prostituted by her master. On the other hand, her testimony of contentment (which was conducted in the presence of her supposed owner, thereby posing a conflict of interest wherein testifying against the abuses of her master in the hopes of gleaning freedom meant risking her job and returning to a life of servitude in South Africa) was enough to convince the court that she was complicit enough in her current position to be considered as an agent acting on free will. The first of these conceptions of Baartman's perceived subjectivity undermines the second and vice versa. A woman whom appears helplessly locked in her condition cannot be a free agent, and a free agent presumably has more command over her life than to be contracted helplessly as a servant/performer.

Baartman's subjectivity continues to be diminished even after her death when her race and "magnified" genitalia are increasingly conflated in science as biological markers of a sub-human individual; the rendering of this woman as something other than human by definition undercuts the potential of defining and enacting a self-determined identity. Ultimately, after the legal controversy surrounding Baartman's display, the freak show moved from the city center and began traveling in surrounding country towns.<sup>xiv</sup> Research suggests that she was after a period "abandoned" in Paris and picked up by a "showman of wild animals." (Mugabane 827) It was here, in 1814, that French anatomist Georges Cuvier would have seen one of Baartman's performances. The scientist was a proponent of the Great Chain of Being theory that measured every being on planet earth on a scale ranging from degenerate beast to civilized man. He distinguished between three races of man, of whom the Caucasians he deemed most highly developed followed by Ethiopians (Negroes), and Mongolians.<sup>xv</sup> The theory of the black woman as possessing "apelike" or "primitive" sexual impulses here enhances this racial hierarchy. In as much as "the black female...comes to serve as an icon for black sexuality... the black's position on the scale of humanity was antithetical to the white's. Such a scale was employed to indicate the innate difference between the races. This polygenetic view was applied to all human characteristics, including sexuality and beauty." (Willis 16). External markers of difference like race and body shape become the basis for distinguishing Africans as a sub-set of European humanity. Women, generally, become confined to one of two social locations: the sexualized, prostituted Hottentot, or the chaste and graceful European idol. People of color become quantifiably sub-human, possessed with a ravenous sexuality which obstructs them from the higher achievements

in life, namely financial autonomy by way of which one can assert him/herself as a conscious and free-agent.

As pseudo-science blends with philosophical questions of morality blends with shifting aesthetic values blends with economic and legal discourses about labor, property rights and productivity, Baartman's body becomes the site whereupon Europe enacts its own resurrection. Her subjecthood is externally constructed as antithetical to the normative European narrative (irrational, immoral, sexually libidinous, and racially sub-human) and it is by virtue of her very performative existence that European popular consciousness found validation. The question becomes what was Saartjie Baartman's subjective account of her life? How would *she* have defined her identity? These questions are still pertinent in the project of black female identity formation. Though Baartman's race and gender were ultimately intertwined, mutually reinforcing her position of subjugation, today there are discourses contesting dominant hierarchies wherein women or people of color are rendered inferior. However, in efforts to promote articulate political agendas, feminists often avoid discussing race and minorities avoid promoting issues of gender discrimination. Thus, though the experiences of women of color are often excluded from political platforms, or maybe as a result of their exclusion, a strong imperative persists for women of color to begin identifying what makes their subjectivities unique and ways in which those subjectivities might gain public recognition.

## **The Divide between Private, Subconscious Self and the Public, Bodily Self in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls***

Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* is a collection of choreopoems, an artistic medium that she defines as “a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance and music...to arouse an emotional response in an audience.” (El-Shayal 362) The script is generally invested in an exploration, an unraveling of the diverse experiences that women of color confront and how those experiences shape their identities. The earlier choreopoems are a ripe plethora of rites of passage tales, scenes of high school graduation, losing one's virginity, first loves, and loves lost. These scenes are followed by more sinister evocations of rape; moments of verbal and physical assault or degradation; testing HIV positive; the danger of city streets; and the tragic murder of a child at the hands of his father suffering from PTSD. Scholar James Fisher distinguishes that the “merger of poetry with drama...is not new...However, Shange's choreopoetic amalgam of these components...displays originality in its use of these eternal tools as a liberation of emotional complexities and human circumstances from the confines of either realistic drawing rooms or the self-conscious theatricalisms of Brechtian epic theatre. Shange crafted a new form to fit her themes and to develop a language to speak to her target audience.” (85-86) Fisher's analysis provides us with three tiers for comprehending the ways in which Shange's work resists dominant aesthetics and why that resistance carries larger political import in regards to black female agency and identity formation. Firstly, ‘drawing rooms’ and the European theater are not natural habitats for the African American woman or her African ancestors. The drawing room was, in European and colonial American history, a space

for the ostentatious exhibition of wealth and the hosting of social engagements. (The George Washington Foundation, 2012) Given that socializing in traditional African societies was oftentimes a communal endeavor and situated not in the confines of any one family's home, black women would only ever have populated the drawing room as slaves. In regards to the European theater, Saartjie Baartman is representative of the roles black women were relegated in this public domain until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She was less a performer than a spectacle: she never acted the part of a character but was merely placed on display for her body to be consumed by the audience's gaze. Thus, there exists this implication that for black female playwrights like Shange to appropriate the theater as a space for representing the experiences of black women, they must renovate or revolutionize either the tradition of dramatic performance or the aesthetic of the stage. Her script must deviate from traditional form so as to adhere to and more effectively project the stories of black women; and in defying theater conventions, the performance of those stories simultaneously becomes accessible to *anyone*, not merely those individuals well-versed in theater history.

The means by which Ntozake Shange tests the limitations of traditional theater production in *for colored girls* is in her fusion of dance, drama and poetry; this collaboration of artistic mediums mimics the project that the content of her choreopoems attempts: a liberation of mind and body to an ends of positive self-identity. The urgency and honesty of her work suggests that the pursuit of catharsis motivates her as an artist. In regards to writing she is quoted as saying "Writing with me is a vizceral thing. I have to get certain ideas out, or I will get sick, I will cry, I will become catatonic." (Blackwell, 1979, p. 137) Similarly, in regards to dance Shange writes, "With dance I discovered my

body more intimately than I had imagined possible. With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs and backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman and as a poet. The freedom to move in space, to demand of my own sweat a perfection that could continually be approached, though never known, was poem to me, my body and mind ellipsing, probably for the first time in my life” (xv). (Waxman, 1994, p. 100) Both writing and dance are independently therapeutic for the playwright. A close reading of the scene “One” (pages 45-49) from *for colored girls* will demonstrate that it is the composite of the two art forms, the merging of voice and body; thought and movement; subconscious and physical that is ultimately the space wherein a self-fulfilling and publicly acknowledged self-determined black female identity resides.

Ntozake Shange’s stage adaptation of her collection of choreopoems *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* was revolutionary for addressing the disconnect between men and women of color in their mutual search for a stabilized and empowered identity. The women in the script struggle to situate themselves in a patriarchal society wherein masculinity is valorized and men are the decision makers and dictate social norms. The poem “One” details the experiences of the Lady in Red as she maneuvers between a public arena and private, internal space. In the former, she attempts to assert a certain agency by manipulating men with her body. She thereby plays into the social order in which women are valued exclusively for their physical attributes but simultaneously subverts this hierarchy of male domination by asserting her own choice in pursuing purely sexual relationships with men. However, when she acknowledges her internal or natural self after her sexual exploit, it becomes evident that her public persona is at odds with her internal self-image. Thus, the choice

and desire that *The Lady in Red* presumably demonstrates in public are called into question and the audience must ask: to what extent is personal choice mediated by social expectations; how does one arrive at a place of self-confidence so that personal choice accurately reflect desire; and how is a self-determined identity hampered by this divide between internal, personal desire and outward, public expression of choice. This scene speaks to the issue of black female identity as performative, proffering that a fulfilling and assertive identity is contingent upon a unification of the physical, social self and the subconscious, internal self. *The Lady in Red*'s physical body in Ntozake Shange's poem "One" functions as means of communicating in the public sphere; its language is employed as a tool for manipulating (and at times, up-ending) power structures but though it can serve in a certain sense to empower the protagonist, it simultaneously obscures and thereby undermines the honest and internal voice of the girl. As she performs her identity, the audience realizes that until the *Lady in Red*'s body and voice, physical and conscience, internal and external personas are united in a pursuit of a singular identity, then she will never achieve a sense of natural, inborn self-determination that she enacts/mimics in the public sphere.

The opening scene of the choreopoem unfolds as a public spectacle in which the *Lady in Red* makes a striking entrance by strategically donning ornamental attire; she uses her costume as a means of marking her presence and asserting her agency. Her garb, like that of a theater troupe, is a flamboyant hodgepodge of colors and textures: "orange butterflies & aqua sequins...silk roses dartin from behind her ears" (1-3). These shining, factory produced materials and vibrant hues contrast sharply with her surroundings of "...dark shuttered houses where / women from louisiana shelled peas" (6-7). The

protagonist, embellished with gaudy, material imitations of natural species—butterflies, flowers—as she is set against the back-drop nature grown peas and earth-tones, becomes exoticized. This distinction between the Lady in Red’s setting as natural and her attire as something artificial, man-made, a showy imitation of the natural world suggests that her public persona is a role enacted. She is performing a constructed identity, one that the audience cannot yet be sure is aligned with her internalized, inherent and subconscious subjectivity. In as much as her material costume is incongruous with her natural surroundings, we do understand that she does not necessarily belong on these streets. She is not of nature and by extension becomes the embodiment of another world, otherworldly; she becomes Othered.

Though she captures her audience’s attention with her costume, the Lady in Red holds their gaze with her attitude. Her strut exudes confidence and aloofness as she “meander[s] down hoover street” (5). She does not pace, sprint, skip, stroll—she “meanders.” This action is relaxed but anticipatory. She has nowhere in particular to go but knows that if she continues moving she will ultimately arrive at a destination. Despite lacking direction, the Lady in Red moves with ease and self-assurance that gives the impression she is in command of her body and where and how her body moves across time and space. The audience is then drawn into a dance sequence, an easy groove in which the Lady in Red subtly calculates the men in passing cars, “eye[ing] every man who waznt lame white or noddin out” (13). She here makes an executive choice of exclusion. Any man who qualifies as falling in any one of the aforementioned categories, “lame, white or nodding out,” she deems unworthy of her sexual advances. Though the Lady in Red is soliciting sex, her tactic of selective exclusion suggests that her exploits

are motivated not by financial need but by desire of some sort or another, be it sexual stimulation, physical closeness, or simple attention. When she sees a potential partner she “let[s] her thigh slip from her skirt.” (14) She harnesses her body as a sexual force. The Lady in Red employs her limbs attentively, moving with a precision calculated to attract the eye of a man and elicit his desire. However, if the passing man fails to stop and accept her tacit offer of sex, the Lady in Red refuses to seek after him with imploring eyes or expectant bodily motions like the flagging of an arm, or the pivot of a foot.

The Lady in Red is the master of her own puppet show, commoditizing her body with an explicit aim of hypnotizing her audience and then exploiting it to the ends of fulfilling her own desires. This notion of determination is evidenced in lines 35-38 which read “she waz hot/a deliberate coquette/who never did without/what she wanted.” What she wants is to inflict violence, “to be unforgettable...a memory...a wound to every man/arragant enough to want her/she waz the wrath/of women...” (41-44). These lines are testament to her desire to be visible. The fact that she is “deliberately” sensual demonstrates an awareness on the part of the Lady in Red that her body is her greatest asset in engaging with men. She understands that in order to command the attention of her male counterpart, she must evoke a certain promiscuity in her movement. By increasing her visibility (meandering up and down city streets in ornate and colorful costume) she is guaranteed to garner male attention. Thereafter, she can initiate the project of rendering herself “unforgettable,” a task that she believes will reverse the hierarchy wherein men dominate women. The script is flipped. An arrangement typically characterized by a woman presenting herself (oftentimes one of many) and a man choosing her like a material thing to be taken, used and disposed of at will (in other

words, after he's slept with her) has been over-turned. The socially familiar role-play, typically involving a man who uses a woman's body to unleash a potentially violent fury of sexual impulses, is subverted. In this case, the *woman*, the Lady in Red, is the one commissioning her body, using it as a platform wherein she establishes her physical dominance over men.

The reductive assumption that this woman is a whore (although there is never a reference to an exchange of money or an economical incentive on her part) is confounded by her air of poise, which exudes a sense of agency and control over the situation. Typically, a girl who exhibits a heightened promiscuity in public connotes numerous negative associations: base ethical values, submission to dominating male figures, uncleanliness in terms of sexual health. However, the height of promiscuity in the first half of our poem is the protagonist baring her thigh and the way in which "she always w[ears] her stomach out" (26). Her physical location on the street, as well as her dress, renders her sexual offering unmistakable. Yet she is selective in whom she presents this offering, "allow[ing] those especially/schemin/ tactful suitors/to experience her body & spirit" (50-52). She only deigns to sleep with the cleverest of partners. Her selectivity in the men with whom she chooses to sleep, the notion that choice, free-will is a factor in the unfolding spectacle, suggests an active and conscious exclusion on her part. Insofar as positions that reserve the power of exclusion indicate a certain high-standing rank in social hierarchical orders, the Lady in Red has theoretically asserted herself as occupying a role of superiority. One's preconceptions of the gender hierarchy between women working the street and the men they seduce is disturbed. Furthermore, the linguistic employment of the word "suitors" calls forth scenes of polite and refined courtship not

often associated with the work of prostitutes; the Lady in Red is not an object to be acquisitioned or colonized but a person whose trust and good grace needs to be won over. She uses her body to entice men into an arena of play in which she occupies role of director choosing either to reject their attention or accept it and thereafter make the chosen man prey to her “violent” advances. She rejects what she calls man’s “arrogant” claim to her body as his property and in claiming promiscuity as a choice, a means to an end which *she* desires, she establishes an exterior identity as a self-determining woman in a patriarchal society.

In the latter half of the choreopoem (lines 60-122), the Lady in Red figuratively retires from her performance, removing her costume in the solitude of her bathroom; and when the scene ultimately closes with her, alone, crying herself back to sleep, the audience recognizes that her performative, public self is at odds with her unembellished, vulnerable, interior character. Water imagery is elucidating, it figuratively erases the Lady in Red’s manufactured exterior to unearth a contrary private identity. Her vulnerability is first revealed in lines 22-25, which read: “she waz sullen/& the rhinestones etchin the corners of her mouth/suggested tears/fresh kisses that had done no good.” Even at the apex of her glorified street performance this reading suggests that despite always getting “what she wanted” (38) the protagonist is void of a sense of satisfaction. The “sullen” underpinnings of her seemingly rock-hard, confident outer-shell suggest that the Lady in Red is hounded by a sense of hopelessness.

Even her costume—which at first glance functions like silver to a raccoon, ornamented and beautiful, meant to catch the eye and thereafter the attention of a suitor—is more symbolically multifaceted than initial appearances assume. The rhinestones are

material manifestations of natural tears. Thus, the “delight” she feels at being “desired” (49) can be interpreted as another charade, a characteristic of her false persona. The Lady in Red’s emotional sensitivity is further demonstrated when she awakens early to prepare a bath “to wash away the glitter / to watch the butterflies melt into / suds & the rhinestones fall beneath / her buttocks like smooth pebbles” (66-69). The Lady in Red is quite literally shedding a skin. The water imagery calls forth allegorical images of southern baptisms, in which Christians are dunked beneath a body of water, often a lake or gentle river, as a proclamation of accepting Jesus Christ as his/her savior, thereafter considered cleansed of sin. Suddenly the reader is led to question the spiritual implications of the protagonist’s one-night trysts.

As her bodily ornamentation is washed away there exists the underlying impression that she is being cleansed of her sins. Of course, the implication that her sexual exploits are a sin undermines the idea that she successfully uprooted societal associations of lowliness with women who take strange men home at night. Her hyper-sexualized persona is rendered unnatural, abnormal in the passage, that reads, while “layin in water/...[the protagonist] became herself/ordinary/brown braided woman/with big legs and full lips/reglar” (71-76). This natural state of being, unobstructed by decorative costume, is striking and foreign to the audience (here meaning the reader as well as the man she picked-up) who has heretofore known only the ornamented character sketch of the Lady in Red. This cleansed representation is said to be her [real] self, though. During this private moment, the divide between the Lady in Red’s public persona and her internal sense of self becomes apparent. She is the embodiment of two identities, and those identities are in contestation with one another. The woman’s bare

figure, her unaltered and honest composure, poses a threat to her exterior identity. She purports to be the agent of her body, consciously employing it to control the desires of men and thereby defying the patriarchal structures in which she exists as well as fueling her own sense of empowerment. However, if the Lady in Red's true and honest self is the woman de-robed, lying naked and washed of her ornamentation, solitary and still; then by extension the alternative, hyper-sexualized public self becomes a sort of false identity, a charade, thereby complicating whatever agency was gleaned.

The disjunction between public and private identity, body and mind is further reinforced in references to the Lady in Red existing in multiple geo-spatial locations. At the beginning of the piece she is located in southwest Los Angeles. However, her physique is set against the backdrop of Louisianan women in boarded up houses. The unseen presence of these women (whose history the reader never learns) serves firstly to imbue the scene with a heightened sense of alienation—why are these women from Louisiana in Los Angeles? Moreover, these women never leave their houses but send their sons instead, imbuing the very streets in which the Lady in Red works with a sense of threat and danger. The Louisiana ladies, boarded up in houses, may also represent a certain enslavement, evoking both the historical slave port of New Orleans as well as a modern-day lack of agency in that they do not even walk through the streets of their own accord. In positioning the Lady in Red against this backdrop of signifiers of enslavement, her authority as an agent of her own body is called into question. When the protagonist herself is re-located to the southeast United States, bathing in “florida water” (65), body jewels sifting beneath her body “...like smooth pebbles/in a missouri creek” (69-70), she is effectively dislodged from any definitive surrounding which might inform

her identity. Her subjectivity is rootless, totally detached. However, it simultaneously permeates state borders, inhabiting the west coast, the deep south, and the Midwest. The Lady in Red is not securely grounded in any one geographical location but the product of collective experiences across multiple geo-spatial locations. Therefore, the conflict she encounters in seeking a stable and unified self that transcends the boundaries of public versus private can be projected onto all women of color. The Lady in Red becomes the symbol of all women who might suffer from a disjointed identity, which is intrinsically linked to the experience of rootlessness, the lack of attachment to a place She can call home.

If her body serves as a means of communicating a fictional identity ready to perform in the public sphere, then her voice functions as the manifestation of an interior dialogue, which is less readily accepted by others. The Lady in Red speaks twice in the latter half of the poem. The reader understands her tone to be neutral, even friendly when she says “‘you’ll have to go now/ i’ve/a lot of work to do/ & I cant/with a man around.../ its been/very nice/ but i cant see you again/you got what you came for...’ & she smiled” (81-87). It is her smile that softens the interaction. Prior to this moment in the poem she never cracks a smile; in fact, she makes an express point “never [to look] back to smile” (17) when working to seduce men on the street. Remarkably, many other body parts (ears, eyes, legs, stomach, navel, waste, shoulders, legs, buttocks) are referenced throughout the poem as devices for attracting men, mechanisms for interaction. However, the protagonist’s mouth—the avenue for her voice, interaction through language—is referenced only twice and only to describe how it is shaped and ornamented (23-25, 75). The Lady in Red is disembodied from her voice. She is not merely valued

more highly in public as a commoditized body; she herself, as a private individual, has difficulty asserting a voice as the expression of her subjectivity or consciousness that is reconcilable with her public persona. Scholar Dalia El-Shayal indicates that “60 percent of the social meaning in interpersonal interchange is transmitted nonverbally.” (362)

At this moment of speech, the Lady in Red does not relinquish her forwardness, an identifiable element of her public self; yet, in this scene, this personality trait is less saucy than it is matter-of-fact. When the man finds himself at a lack of verbal response she repeats “i cdnt possibly wake up/ with/a strange man in my bed/ why/ don’t you go home” (91-94). Again, the Lady in Red is an image of sweet youth, the embodiment of a certain innocence. It is almost as though her public character, who commissioned her body to garner the attention of her sexual target, has been erased. In her stead, there is a woman, “straddl[ing] on her pillows” (80) like a teenage girl might during a slumber party with her friends while discussing boys. She is naked and natural, unmasked once her costume has been removed. Furthermore, her monologue ends with a question which indicates that she is resigning her position as director of the show, offering the man in her bed the agency to make decisions. She makes this move consciously, knowing that the man will accept the reverse shift in power dynamics and take the opportunity to leave; however, despite the presence of intent in her words, she is nevertheless surrendering her short-lived position of dominance and thereby undone what empowerment her outward persona encapsulated.

The resounding question is whether or not the Lady in Red ever truly exerts her agency. When her body is the platform for communicating desire and intent, the man is willing to submit his position of power only because his desired ends (to sleep with the

woman) are still achievable. The moment she employs her voice, the vessel of self-determination for the personal and private persona, the outward manifestation of her interior dialogue, the man in her bed reacts callously. He views her now as a “reglar colored girl/fulla the same malice/livid indifference... & [he] kn[ows]/& le[aves] in a hurry” (107-113). This notion of colored women as categorically homogenized, “the same,” recalls the geographical texturing of the choreopoem: women whose body is their place of work; whose body is a space upon which to be worked; upon whom work is wrought by man in Los Angeles are women in Louisiana are women in Florida are women in Missouri. When her agenda is aligned with that of her male counterpart—both are seeking sex for a certain price/cost—she is considered an image “divine/devastatingly bizarre” (103-104). However, when their social expectations diverge, the man is hasty to characterize this woman as he would characterize every woman of color. The mere act of her speaking signifies a shift away from a common ground that was discovered through the physical exploitation, on both the part of the Lady in Red and her “suitor,” of her body. The only form of communication the man will deign to acknowledge is one which is not vocal at all, is not representative of mental or emotional cognizance; he is only interested in physical *parlance*, a dialogue in which both parties are arguing the same point: sexual consummation.

This utter denial on the part of society to validate her internal dialogue not only creates a separation between the Lady in Red and the men she encounters but it also creates a detachment within herself: an unbridgeable gap between her interior persona and her outward character. The reader realizes at the end of the poem that the existence of two discordant personalities embodied in one person takes a grand toll on the girl. Her

audience having left her home, her private sphere, the Lady in Red disposes of her inner thoughts on the page of her diary. Though the language surrounding her journal entry is neutral, explaining "...she finished writin/the accont of her exploit in a diary" (118-119) the readership understands her emotional burden when the poem evokes the image of a girl "cry[ing] herself to sleep" (122). Just as the man diminishes the worth of her voice (representative of her internal character) by leaving without a word, the Lady in Red similarly undercuts the significance of her inner-dialogue in her diary entry. An 'account of her exploit' implies a certain dry, methodical approach to the events that transpired, as though she is reflecting upon the experience chronologically, how she arrived at point B from point A, without any account of the emotional implications of the night. In fact, her tears are the only manifestation of her emotional burden—a bodily reaction to pain or grief. In relying solely on her body as a means of interacting with both herself and in a public realm, she denies her honest voice to an extent as significant as any of her male suitors.

The Lady in Red vacillates between a sexualized, domineering outer person who is accepted by society, and the internalized individual who is sullen and crying in solitude. When she is on the street, costumed in a myriad of colors and textures, she is in character and this character is well-received by the world around her. However, it is only after this charade has been washed away and she stands in her natural *comportement* that the Lady in Red can activate her voice, an avenue which accesses her personalized, inner-thoughts and by-passes the subject of the language of the body: sexual intercourse. This honest, naked woman is rejected by her peers. All social signals from others instruct her that to glean admiration she must conceal her inherent persona. Though this interior

identity is the natural, honest and true character of the Lady in Red, multi-faceted and subject to a rainbow of emotions, it is too rarely defended. The vulnerability of the Lady in Red, the complex divorce between her public and private personas speaks to the difficulty black women might face in asserting an “honest” subjectivity. When the Lady in Red’s “honest,” internal subjectivity goes unacknowledged, or unappreciated by her audience, she feels unauthenticated. Though she exhibits agency in both the public and private spheres, she is nonetheless divorced between two incongruous identities. Shange thus raises the question, is agency a sufficient barometer of a self-determined and fulfilling subjectivity? How does a black woman feel authenticated and self-actualized in her identity when that subjectivity is little understood or acknowledged in the public sphere? She asserts that an unification between private and public personas is the locus wherein a stable sense of self might be fostered. However, she also acknowledges that this project of unification is hampered severely by public response.

### **The Constructedness of Identity Parks’s *Venus***

The theater production of Ntozake Shange’s choreopoems is notable for the way in which it redefines the parameters of performance, blending poetry with dance and drama. Succinctly, she has brought poetry to the stage where it is then embodied in the dance choreographies. Contrarily, Suzan-Lori Parks’s work is lauded for its play on language and the ways in which she employs that language play to re-write histories. Harvey Young quotes the playwright as saying, “My interest in the history of words—where they came from, where they’re going—has a direct impact on my playwrighting because, for me, Language is a physical act. It’s something which involves your entire

body—not just your head.” (128-129) In other words, whereas Shange brings her poetry to the stage as ignition fluid for her actors, and dance routines; Parks brings the stage to her words as a means of invigorating them, making them come to life in a way that they cannot on the page. However, Shange ignites bodily movement with words in an effort to demonstrate the ultimate imperative of bringing into communion the body with the mind, the physical with the voice, the public with the internal consciousness. Parks seeks to perform language in order to demonstrate how even the words we employ to define our surroundings, ourselves and others are constructions. Language as performance, an act, variable and unstable commentates more largely on the notion that all subjectivities are performative as well. A stable identity does not exist for women of color or for any other individual. In pointing to the mutability of identity and the language with which we try to define identity, Suzan-Lori Parks suggests that there exists a heightened potential for re-constituting subjectivities that defy social standards of race and gender.

Parks has been called an archeologist, a resurrectionist, and a mythologist for the way in which she re-writes historical events or individuals, exploring the question of what might have happened. Debby Thompson qualifies her work as the “resurrection and remembering of histories” and says that the Venus play in particular “performs an autopsy and revivisection of historical constructions of black female embodiment.” (167) The only existing records of the Hottentot Venus’s life are George Cuvier’s medical records, spectators’ eyewitness accounts and judicial records from court proceedings in London provoked by abolitionist groups who questioned whether she was be unlawfully enslaved. Sara Baartman is on record as having said that she was in London of her own free will and wished to stay in Europe; but these court documents are the sole written

accounts of her own perspective on her life.<sup>xvi</sup> Through Parks's re-casting of Baartman once again in the realm of spectacle risks perpetuating her objectification, Parks is raising poignant issues. Primarily, can the historical representation of the Hottentot Venus be accurate in the absence of her perspective? What is to be gained from re-imagining her life from her perspective and is the risk of subjecting her legacy to yet another external conception of her consciousness worth it? More globally, how do women of color begin to write their own histories—which is to say their pasts, presents and futures? Finally, what is the significance of performance in the process of black women writing, and re-writing their histories? Theater may be a convenient medium for re-casting the Hottentot Venus simply by virtue of the fact that the spectacle is what came to define her life in the Euro-centric context. Yet, if this project was a simple exploration of alternate histories, re-writing Saartjie's life in the form of a novella, or a poem would have been more revolutionary, an active digression from the spotlight of performance.

Parks seeks to mobilize the collision of written language and enacted language. While alive, Baartman's life—her body, her mind, her subjectivity—was entirely redefined when she arrived in London by the languages and customs of Europeans; after her death, what is “known” of Baartman comes from an accumulation of accounts of her life excluding her own. She is written as silent and/or silenced, a sexualized body without a voice to speak for itself. Parks appropriates the stage as a medium for re-envisioning the Hottentot Venus in order to breathe life into the words of which Baartman was a product but that she subsequently internalized, learned and would have used to convey her unique subjectivity. The embodiment or performance of language is essential in Parks project because it erases the implicit division between Sara Baartman's

body and consciousness (creating the potential for agency) while spotlighting the fact that an identifiable subjectivity is as transitory, ephemeral and fluctuant as an instant in time and space.

I will examine Scene 14 in Suzan Lori-Parks's play *Venus* because it contains a range of complex issues raised throughout the play: how the language that discursively constructs the performative subject Venus also becomes a tool that she appropriates for giving her audience clues as to her subjectivity not as a symbolic role but as the person Sara Baartman; how Venus is in constant performance, an act that centers around the mechanization of her body, yet simultaneously is seeking "real" moments of love and intimacy, where both touch and language can affirm one's personhood in relation to another; and how the discovery of another human being is rooted both in what's seen and touched (what is on display) as well as intimate personal moments of self-revelation shared between two lovers. In short, this scene delves into the duality of the experience of Venus as performer and person; linguistic construction and agent of speech; as well as object of sexual exploitation and pursuer of personal intimacy, charterer of unseen subjectivities.

In the scenes leading up to this one, there is oftentimes a whole host of characters on stage, creating the cacophony of the spectacle wherein Venus is one of many indeterminate figures on display, implicitly subordinated in that her subjectivity is rendered invisible by her function as an object. On occasion the Negro Resurrectionist, who functions as an omniscient narrator of sorts, will stand alone or apart, providing the audience with contextual information as in scene 20I "The year was 1810, three years after the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade had been passed in Parliament. Among

protests and denials, horror and fascination the show went on.” (Parks 83-84) Otherwise, when there are three or fewer characters on stage at a time it is often Venus and one of her superiors or oppressors, like the Mother Showman (the matron of the freak show in which Venus is displayed), and the Man or the Brother (both accomplices in coercing Venus to leave South Africa with false promises of “making a mint” (Parks 26)).

Generally, the less populated scenes involve interactions that speak to the subordination of Venus. For example, in Scene 22 (Parks 62-63) when she issues demands of a raise in pay and more habitable conditions of the Mother Showman she is admonished:

THE VENUS.  
You pay us each 5 coins a week  
We’re all paid equal  
but we don’t draw equal.

THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN.  
Its past yr bedtime, daughter.

THE VENUS.  
I’m thuh one they come to see.  
I’m thuh main attraction.  
Yr other freaks r 2<sup>nd</sup> fiddles

THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN.  
Oh boy: uh Diva.

THE VENUS.  
I should get 50 uh week.

THE MOTHERSHOWMAN.  
You should get some sleep, girl.  
I wake you up early and you never like it.

THE VENUS.  
50 uh week good food locked door new clothes say its a deal.

THE MOTHERSHOWMAN.  
Go to hell.

Venus is adamant in her insistence that she could market herself and make a fortune of her own. However, her initiative is ultimately beaten back into silence by the verbal assaults and threats on the part of the Mother Showman to invite the drunken barmen into her bedroom and allow them to rape her. This passage also vividly indicates Venus's seeming ignorance of the system in which she is living. She still has not gathered that it is not she who will be making a fortune off of her body but her white European counterparts.

In Scene 14, by contrast, the only two characters are the Baron Docteur (symbolic of George Cuvier, the naturalist who anatomized Venus after her death) and Venus; and though a certain hierarchy is maintained by the use of the imperative tense on the part of the Docteur, their physical intimacy—Venus's playfulness and her attempts at evoking mutual expressions of love, a sentiment that implies a certain equality and mutuality between partners—disturbs the subject-object dichotomy. The scene is entitled “In the Orbital Path of the Baron Docteur,” harkening back to the first encounter between Cuvier and Venus when he sees her in the spectacle and approaches her, explaining his fascination with her body and telling her “Stand still stand still, sweetheart / I'll orbit” (Parks 90). He has already purchased her from the Madame Showman but nonetheless, when she initially refuses to accompany him, he pacifies her by offering her chocolates and explaining that he is no mere spectator, but a doctor. In order to encourage her to come with him to Paris, he offers to teach her French, pay her “100 a week,” provide her with clothes, meals and a room (his own). (Parks 91-93) Venus asks him if she has a choice in the matter, to which he responds “Yes. God. Of course.” (Parks 92) The scene ends with Venus repeating yes to harsh verbal assaults from the Mother Showman

followed by the Baron Docteur's inquiries as to whether she is ready to leave; and they depart. Venus seems to have made a conscious decision to better her economic condition, thereby demonstrating a certain agency; but this self-determination is confounded by the fact that she is nevertheless bartering with her body, which is subjected to public examinations by the Docteur and his colleagues who ultimately anatomize her corpse when she dies.

The scene begins with the Baron Docteur counting backwards from 14 in French, a countdown of the remaining scenes before Venus's death that reminds the audience of the ephemerality of her time but also the fluctuant nature of time and history more generally. Parks is here playing with the audience's conception of time. Time is moving backwards in the sense that the scene numbers move from high (Scene 31) to low (Scene 1), straying from the conventional practice of numbering acts and scenes. On the other hand, the narrative of the play follows chronological events from the life of the Hottentot Venus and in that sense time is a forward, linear progression. Parks is suggesting that moments in time, history are fluctuant. Carol Schafer describes Parks as "see[ing] history in a phenomenological manner that insists that the present exists in the future and that the past exists in the present. In response to those who criticize her for distorting history, she says of her work, 'I think it is just as valid as what we are told happened back then. I think it has an equal weight.'" (182) Parks points to the variability of history, to the fact that it is always an inherently constructed thing. As an audience we assume that her play is a rendering of a history in a fictive context; we do not pretend to believe that what we see being performed on stage is a viable or wholly accurate depiction of how Saartjie Baartman's history actually happened. Though it may be modeled after her life,

we recognize that Parks's is taking liberty with the details, the subjectivities of the characters, their relationships. Parks would argue, however, that all historical accounts function in the same way, as inherently fictive representations of a moment. In undercutting the notion that reality, past or present, is fixed, the playwright is in fact arguing that every "real" moment is in fact a moment of performance, rendered real by the intention (the agency) of the performer and his/her reception by the audience.

In arguing that all historical accounts are as artificial as her own interpretation of Baartman's lived existence, Parks is asserting that identity is equally ephemeral; subjectivity can and is constructed every moment but, inversely, it can be deconstructed and re-constituted as any given individual sees fit. As Sun Hee Teresa Lee posits, "Parks deploys what I call an anti-essentialist strategy of minority politics that questions the validity of such grand narratives as history...when she creates plays to participate in rewriting the history of black people as well as black identity, she positions neither her narrative nor her vision of the black subject as the truth. In fact, she points out the opposite—the artificiality of both." (6) Positing one's lived experiences, one's perceptions of the surrounding world and those who populate it, as "artificial" could potentially be read as fatalist. If reality does not exist then why pursue the project of establishing a stabilized identity? Parks is not diminishing the process of identity formation; she takes issue merely with the connotation "stable." Instead, she seeks to illuminate that it is by the very process of defining one experience or identity as "stable" that a window for defining an alternate experience or identity as "unstable." By assuming there a division exists between reality and fiction, fixed and transitory, performance and "real life," one is succumbing to binary constructions that ultimately

subordinate one class, gender, race or sexuality in favor of another. Instead, Parks is arguing that ultimately, the performative nature of *all* experiences and subjectivities gives free reign to each subject to determine how to enact his/her identity across various spheres.

In returning to the script, we see that language is a prominent device in the construction of these mutable narratives and subjects. We know that the Baron has promised to teach French to Venus as a token of her leaving the troop of the Madame Showman; but the few instances in which she asserts what she has learned of the language, she is signifying, either explicitly or implicitly, her physical body, reaffirming for the audience that the only discourse in which she has been indoctrinated and that might inform her sense of self is that of the spectacle. Her first murmur of French is to respond to the Docteur's imploring "[My eyes] are closed. /Hurry up. Im eager," (lines 19-20) to which she answers "*Voila*. Open yr eyes." (line 23). The Docteur explains "Too dark to see" and issues the imperative for Venus to lie down next to him. Given the location of the pair, settled in bed in a shrouded room, and the demeanor of the Docteur who seems overcome by hasty eagerness, we recognize this moment as one of seduction. In this interaction, the French phrase "voila" functions as an exclamation marking the moment of unveiling. The reader can assume that what is being 'unveiled' is Venus's body. The irony is that even after the Hottentot has directed him to open his eyes, what was unveiled is still invisible, unseen in the darkness of the room.

The Baron Docteur's terse comment about the dark carries dual meanings: the first being a surface reference to the darkness of the room; the second, implicit reference is to Venus's race and where it locates her socially. The notion of not being capable of

being seen, of being invisible, draws forth connotations about monstrous creatures, Medusa and Frankenstein for example; either too horrific or lethal to invite the gaze of another. The quality of invisibility also symbolizes the boundaries of Venus' identity as demarcated by her European counterparts. The parameters in which the public has deemed an appropriate showcase for Venus are the confines of public spectacle, where she performs as a body with no voice. When the stage lights go off, her identity as the role of Venus vanishes. Here she is attempting to reconstitute her sense of self by the only devices she knows: the voiced and physical unveiling of her body. This reconstitution becomes complicated though by the fact that her body is invisible in the darkness. In as much as her physical form is what has always constituted her identity in Europe and because the language to which she has been exposed has always been in response to her physical form, the body becomes a prerequisite for her voice. Therefore, when her body is rendered invisible, her voice becomes amputated, formless and goes unacknowledged. Her prescribed identity is as a performer and when her body is not "present" or seen as giving life to her voice, her speech is rendered insignificant. Her intellectual endeavors to learn French, which is symbolic of her pursuit of cultural assimilation, her attempt to belong, are subverted. The Baron Docteur cannot see her but in not responding to her use of the French vernacular that he has taught her (along with the general body of European spectatorship), he indicates that he cannot hear her either; and her position in the margin of society is thus reinforced.

Venus' displacement in European society is further demonstrated in the syntax of her spoken English; the fact that her grammatical construction deviates from traditional forms reminds the audience that the language is foreign to her and cannot be an inborn or

natural means of self-representation. There are several instances throughout this scene in which the Venus Hottentot's cumbersome language recalls the distance from which she is engaging with French culture. For example, in line 40 she implores to the Baron Docteur, "Let's have some love." This can be interpreted in one of two ways. She could be suggesting, let's make love, in the sense of physical communion. Alternatively, she might be understood as proposing that they share a sentimental love. The ambiguity of her linguistic intention deprives her of a sense of command. Her place of subordinate is reinforced by the fact that her invitation to "love"<sup>3</sup> is preceded and followed by comments from the Docteur regarding his desires. The dialogue (lines 38-43) in whole reads:

THE BARON DOCTEUR.  
You know what I want more than anything?

THE VENUS.  
Me.  
Lets have some love.

THE BARON DOCTEUR.  
After you. Guess what I want.

THE VENUS.  
More me.  
Kiss?

The desires of Venus are never addressed. Though she attempts to convey her yearning for intimacy in her suggestion "lets have some love," this phrase in particular goes unacknowledged. The Baron Docteur side-steps addressing her wants, focusing on her

---

<sup>3</sup> The notion of 'love' implies egalitarianism. A romantic love assumes a mutual affection and devotion between two individuals. Physical 'love-making' also carries social implications that are much different from 'having sex' or other signifiers of the act of intercourse. 'Fucking' denotes a certain relationship defined strictly by the parameters of sexual need or desire, with no emotional investment whatsoever. 'Love-making,' on the contrary, is assumed to occur between two partners devoted to one another. There is a vulnerability implicit in love-making that is culturally forbidden between two people who are strictly 'having sex.'

response to his question: yes, he wants her. When he again poses the question, indicating that she is not capable of fulfilling all of his desires, she alters her response. Instead of inviting him to a place of emotional and physical intimacy (“love”), she asks (as though needing his permission) if he will engage her, at least, on the level of the physical. Her attempts at vocal command are again subsumed by her body.

Regardless of what the Venus wishes to convey, she has subconsciously made ‘love’ a commodity. The figuring of chocolates in this scene support the notion that love is something for which to be bartered. Chocolates have always served as a pacifier in the relationship between the Baron Docteur and Venus. He offers them to her at their initial encounter, as a token of amicability. Of course, this gesture is viewed by the audience as somewhat contrived because we understand that, though he is “rescuing” her in a way from the miserable conditions she withstood under the direction of the Mother Showman, he will be subjecting her to a different sort of spectacle, a medicalized one. In Scene 14 (lines 78- 89) again the Baron Docteur presents Venus with chocolates:

THE BARON DOCTEUR.

Here. Yr favorite: cockluts. Have some...

VENUS.

*Petis Coeurs*

*Rhum Caramel*

*Pharaon*

*Bouchon Fraise*

*Escargot Lait*

*Enfant de Bruxelles*

*(Rest.)*

Do you think I look like  
one of these little chocolate Brussels infants?

THE BARON DOCTEUR.

You cant stay here forever you know.

THE VENUS.

*Capezzoli di Venere.*

The nipples of Venus. Mmmmm. My favorite.

Though the Docteur, once again, ignores Venus's question, she has vocalized with precision the commercial element to their relationship: trading chocolates for access to Venus's body. The chocolates represent a culture of commodity and production. In equating Venus's body to the chocolates, again her character is rendered something that is produced, an object for being bought and sold: "Like the chocolate, the African Venus will be consumed voyeuristically for pleasure by audiences because of her fat behind." (Schafer, 187) Not only do Venus and chocolate share the quality of "fattiness," as Schafer points out; they are also similar in color. The function of chocolate as mirroring Venus's race is enhanced when we reflect upon the fact that Venus's linguistic fetishizing of love is modeled after the language of the Baron Docteur. Earlier in the scene the Docteur says "Lets have light" (line 16). The audience understands him to mean, 'let's turn on the lights.' However, again this theme of commercial trade underpins his language. If 'light' or 'lightness' is something to be obtained, then again Venus is systematically excluded from a position of proprietorship. As a black African, racial lightness is unattainable. Venus's commodification of love is a regurgitation of the discourse in which she has been "brought up" since arriving in Europe. Despite her efforts to establish a relationship of mutuality between her and the Docteur, rooted in sentiments of affection and desire, she is unknowingly perpetuating the language that renders her body a good for bartering.

Other moments wherein Venus' language reads as phonetically constructed—in as much as it's misspelled—offers a justification of her inferior economic and social

status: she speaks common, lay-man's English that is associated with uneducated classes, suggesting that she lacks the sophistication required for her to assimilate into the upper rung of European culture. She states several times that she doesn't wish to return home 'inny more' (lines 91, 122). Then, when offering the Baron Docteur her amulet as a good luck charm she indicates that he should wear it 'uhround' his neck (line 115). Venus is not the only character whose speech strays from Standard English. We also encounter this dialectic digression in the Negro Resurrectionist and the other seven Human Wonders. For example, on page 41 in Scene 27 "Presenting the Mother-Showman and Her Great Chain of Being," the Chorus of 8 Human Wonders exclaims "When I was birthed *intuh* [emphasis mine] this world / Our Father cursed our Mother spat. / SPAT!" This excerpt amply exemplifies Parks's performative, embodied language at work. Harvey Young addresses Parks's initiative to "incorporate the gestural and physical into her words...[how] her writing strives toward visual embodiment." (128) Young takes issue with the way in which Parks defines her language as something active, physical and therefore "seen." He contends:

Parks listens to the body and then strives to record its voice. This is the basis of the "physicality" of her language. It is not anchored in her writing "uh" and then creating a performance based upon that utterance by an actor. The performance begins before the writing...the "uh" sound is not inherently physical, gestural, or visual...The physicality of Parks's language is aural and visceral but not visual. (130)

Young is taking Parks's project too literally. She is suggesting that language evokes an image, not only between signifier and signified (a word and the thing to which it is pointing) but between signifier and speaker. Before any given individual begins to "perform" his/her speech or subjectivity, we all already carry internalized associations of

dialects, accents and modes of speech (formal or slang). One's social location informs one's language which translates for the public a rough image of someone's economic heritage and social upbringing. The question of whether or not language or performance comes first is similar to that of the chicken and the egg. Young is arguing semantics. Suzan-Lori Parks's intention is *not* that her written words perform on their own; if that was her sole motive then she would have written a strictly textual work. Her medium for the Venus story is the stage and she therefore intends for her language to be embodied, acted, performed, given a tangible, visual force. In the place of abstract associations that one might tie up to words or their syntactical construction, she is providing a concrete visual component: the character who is performing the dialectical transgressions. Furthermore, Parks is not attempting to erase the associations of socio-economic location that certain speech forms evoke in the minds of an audience. What she proposes to do is to *point to* those associations. She is acknowledging that linguistic associations do in fact reinforce hierarchical social castes. Furthermore, those class boundaries can be challenged in the intentional and conscious misappropriation of standard, formal rhetoric.

In the case of Venus—who had no familiarity of European languages prior to her displacement into a world where her body became object, and the language surrounding her one of objectification—these vernacular modifications serve the express purpose of reinforcing the subaltern position. I borrow Gayatri Spivak's rhetoric purposefully. Parks's objective is not to cast the Venus Hottentot as an uneducated, passive or submissive figure. As Thompson's analysis proffers: "the play encourages us to see Venus less as a character than as a discursive formation[...] It's not that she doesn't have agency, but that that agency is created within and through the very discourses that make

her subject-position possible from the start” (175). Her struggle, her inefficacy in communicating in Standard English is a direct result of the fact that she has been instructed by a man whose primary interest is the preservation of her body so that he might anatomize it after her death. His ulterior motive for ‘educating’ her in the way of French culture is to pacify her into staying in Europe. Consequently, since being transplanted from her homeland, Venus’s identity has been constructed within a discourse that is foreign to her; one that juxtaposes her against the ‘normative’ European, that distinguishes her as Other. Furthermore, she is rendered unaware, unknowing of the fact that her notion of self is severely constricted to the confines of a language which functions strictly within the sphere of the commercial spectacle.

Venus attempts to navigate her social location in the world to which she has been transplanted by exploring romantic and physical love with the Docteur, whom she hopes will offer her self-affirmation of a sort different than that of the crude shock and awe of spectacle-goers. She vacillates between demanding kisses and love of her Docteur companion. She will ask “Love me?” (lines 27, 58, 107, 119, 123) followed by, lines later, requests for a kiss, or to be held or touched. Significantly, when she is inviting physical caresses, she more often posits pursuits in the form of an imperative: “Another kiss” (line 46); “Touch me/down here” (lines 64-65); “Lie back down / Hold me close to you. Its cold.” (lines 56-57) The latter imperative is followed by the question “Love me?” (line 58) Of the six instances wherein Venus references love, five are formulated as the question previously noted. The only instance when love is demanded is at the moment where she invites the Docteur to “have some love” (line 40). The difference between this moment and the others is that there is more ambiguity as to whether she

means physical or romantic love. We can understand her question “Love me?” to mean, do you love me romantically, are you in love with me from the following dialogue (lines 107-111) between her and the Docteur:

THE VENUS.  
Love me?

THE BARON DOCTEUR.  
Do I ever.

THE VENUS.  
More than yr wife?

THE BARON DOCTEUR.  
More than my life.  
And my wife.

It is not so much his confession that he loves Venus more than his wife that instructs the audience as to the nature of the love they are referring about because, in as much as the Baron Docteur feels no remorse over committing adultery, one could assume that his romantic relationship with his wife is somewhat problematic. However, in proclaiming that he loves Venus more than his *life*, we can ascertain that they are not referring to physical love, as it is not possible to physically love (in the sense of engaging in the act of “love-making” or sexual intercourse) the abstraction “life.” Whether or not the Docteur’s admittance is honest remains ambiguous because this moment of reassurance is delivered in the heated wake of ejaculation after he has masturbated to Venus’s body.

Regardless of whether Venus is issuing requests or demands for physical or romantic attention from the Docteur, she seeks constant affirmation from her partner throughout this scene. As it so happens, the Baron more often than not appeases both her requests and demands. We know that he is physically stimulating Venus because when

she initially asks him to “touch her” several lines later she encourages him saying “That feels good. / Now touch me here.” (lines 68-69) Then, to each of her questions, “Love me?” he either responds affirmatively in some variation of “I do.” (lines 28, 59, 108, 120, 124) She is receiving affirmation of both her physical body—its shape, its feel and by extension its desirability, and beauty—and her voice, which here is representative of her consciousness, her subjectivity: a person, body and mind, who is in search of the love of a companion. Of course, in conjunction with a moment of affirmation, the Docteur also recites a poem for Venus (lines 30-37):

My love for you is artificial.  
Fabricated much like this epistle.  
Its crafted with my finest powers  
To last through the days and the weeks and the hours...  
I made it up myself  
Just this morning.  
You like it?

Venus’s response to this is an affirmative coo, “Mmmmmmm.” The Docteur has flagrantly admitted that his emotional affection for Venus is non-existent but has dressed this sentiment up in a fanciful rhyme scheme and complicated vernacular as well as cultural references, like epistles, to which Venus would not have access. Her somewhat ambivalent coo of affirmation indicates that she does not understand the poem’s implications. She remains ignorant to the Docteur’s ulterior motives of keeping her pacified and happy—despite the fact that he has admitted that his “love” is limited to that manifestation of physical lust—so that he might have first access to her corpse for anatomizing after her death. In her mind, he is fulfilling for her something that no crowd of impressed spectators could: that she is human. Her voice and body are finally working in conjunction with one another and receiving positive reinforcement from her public, the

Baron Docteur. Her subjecthood, here, is being confirmed like it hasn't yet in the play. Parks is illuminating for us the necessary combustion of these three factors in the formation of identity. However, in as much as the audience of the theatre production *does* know that the Docteur's consistent affirmations are rooted in his own self-interest, his pride, his greed for fame, Parks is also demonstrating the ephemerality of identity: founded upon one's perception of self and of the public's reception of the self, the foundation of one's sense of self is eternally shifting and therefore identity must be eternally reconstituted at the intersection of body and physicality; mind and voice; and audience or public reception.

The Venus's race and her Othered origins are hailed not only through her clipped, unnatural language, but also through themes of sight and darkness. The scene begins in total darkness, which the Baron Docteur terms "Spooky" (line 15). Again, darkness is assigned an essence of horror; fear of the unknown; discomfort in the shadows where one is rendered sightless and by extension defenseless against what may be lurking, shrouded from view. In as much as darkness symbolizes Venus (while lightness represents her European counterparts) she is also hailed as being *of* a certain spookiness. Thus, the *voyeur's* desire to see and then to name the Venus Hottentot is motivated by the urge to quantify what is foreign, what is unknown. Of course the stipulations of "naming" something that is alien is that it be defined in terms that are familiar, native and that, moreover, it be defined as contrary to the "normative." The literal naming of Venus by the European overseers and subsequent erasure of her given name, Saartjie Baartman, precludes her from the process, granting her no agency in the labeling of her self. The duality of her prescribed title—Hottentot Venus—represents the range of exoticized,

abnormal language assigned as descriptors of her identity. Venus is, thus, distanced from her European cohort by a high, insurmountable wall called Otherness.

Venus is not only precluded from the process of her own identity formation but she is also denied, in this scene, from returning the voyeuristic gaze of the Baron Docteur; the subject-object dichotomy of seer and seen, namer and named is sustained. After offering Venus a box of chocolates, the Baron Docteur turns his back upon her. After an interlude during which she is distracted by the candy, she inquires curiously “Whatre you doing?/...Lemmie see” (lines 94, 96). The Docteur responds brusquely, as though caught in a shameful act, “Dont look! Dont look at me./Look off/somewhere/Eat yr chockluts./eat em slow./Touch yrself./Good” (lines 97-103). He admonishes Venus in imperatives. Not only is he forbidding her the right (that he assumes so liberally) of locking her gaze upon him; but he quickly reconstitutes his dominance in the balance of power in the act of issuing commands. The stage directions indicate that at this moment the Baron Docteur is masturbating. His vehement reaction to Venus witnessing him masturbate is unexplained. Perhaps he feels sexually vulnerable; perhaps he was hoping to avoid Venus’s physical advances and wanted to achieve orgasm without having to provide similar climax for her. Regardless, he has momentarily occupied the position that has been imposed upon Venus throughout the play: the naked object of spectacle. Should she successfully occupy the position of spectator, of audience member, then the gap between seer and seen, us and Other, colonist and colonized would be diminished. In the grander scheme of the play, this shift could prove hugely detrimental to the Docteur’s ultimate objective of obtaining Venus’s body for eternity, “pickled in Sciences Hall” (18).

Throughout the play, but particularly in scene 14, there exists an intersection between discovery and knowledge, to which the motif of the *voyeur's* gaze serves as a connector: he/she who sees can know; contrarily, he/she who is seen, is the object of the *voyeur's* gaze is that to be discovered, stripped of capacities for knowledge and by extension potential for agency. In as much as Venus' identity is constructed from outside, with a foreign language heavily steeped in commercialization, the dictum that seeing is knowing reinforces the restrictive parameters of by which she might be defined. The implication is that those who have seen her, have consequently known and defined her. However, the resultant construct that is the spectacle Venus Hottentot is illuminated solely in juxtaposition with her spectatorship; she would not exist semantically as Venus without the comparative European public against which she is construed as something Other, abnormal, and opposite. In this scene the Docteur admits his fantasy of being a world-renowned anatomist. He goes so far to say that he envies Venus her fame, saying "Crowds of people screamd yr name!<sup>4</sup> "Venus Hottentot!!" / You were a sensation! I wouldnt mind a bit of that. / Known. Like you! / Only, of course, in my specific circle" (lines 70-74). Here, the idea of knowing functions in two ways. The Baron Docteur must discover something unique and of intellectual merit to warrant the sort of fame that Venus garnered while being paraded around in Europe's freak-shows. Thus, to be known is to be reputable in one's allotted field. However, the infinitive 'to know' suggests understanding, comprehension, and familiarity. When the Docteur exclaims that Venus is "known," someone with whom people are familiar, implicit therein is that her

---

<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, the audience was never screaming Venus's real name, but that bestowed upon her by her European overseers. In as much as her identity, whatever Sara Baartman may have conceived it to be prior to her displacement in Europe, was erased, written over by the role which came to define her; her name was likewise reconstituted.

subjecthood is readily accessible to the public when she is on display. However, Venus is a fictive character: she is submissive; she is voiceless; she is an artifact of the wild African continent. Venus is not at all representative of the subject Saartjie Baartman. The latter was not known, understood, or even presently available to the Europeans whose accounts of her body are now the only existing records of this historical symbol. Parks is forcing the audience to question what exactly can be known. Everything that is seen or “discovered” is subject to one’s preconditioned understanding of the world. In as much as that understanding is inherited, through language and socialization, Parks is challenging us all to confront what associations attached to race and gender, that were born of Baartman’s era, and through the process of repetition (linguistic and social) are still reticent in contemporary society.

If we consider the first definition of “to know,” in the sense of being reputable, and juxtapose the root of Venus’s fame (her body) to the Docteur’s (his mind, or intellectual worth) we are again presented with the reduction of our principle character to a body, severed from her voice, the speaker-box of her consciousness; in this divorce of body and mind, physicality and voice, the process of establishing her subjecthood is halted, her agency subordinated. The Docteur explains that Venus “[was] just [her]self and crowds came running,” where as he “cant just be himself / no onell pay a cent for that.” (lines 49, 51-53). His subconscious persona is thus projected as dynamic. The Docteur’s self-hood is constructed of both his physical and his mental capacities. Furthermore, it is the latter which will project him to a position of scholarly distinction. Venus, by comparison, becomes a static character. What makes her distinct is her body. During the years in which she was on display in freak shows in London and Paris, she

was a silent, motionless body around whom her audience could orbit; and written records pertaining to the life of Saartjie Baartman (person behind the role of Venus) preclude her voice. Finally, when Venus asserts her voice in bed with the Baron Docteur in Scene 14, it is as though through two screens translation: to the extent that her inquiries and demands are responded to and appeased by her “partner,” his actions are externally motivated by his own longing for fame (which he will achieve through anatomizing Venus’s corpse). Additionally, Venus’s speech is rampant with syntactical and dialectic indicators that the language of the oppressor does not belong to her; that she has been exposed to a limited range of vocabularies and that her minimal integration into the language cannot possibly represent the dynamism of her subjectivity. Or, more to the point, Venus has been trained, equipped with vocabularies just specific to her character and aimed at subverting the subjectivity of Sara Baartman that lives behind those eyes, that body. In Scene 14 Venus alludes to her perception of herself as a complex individual, saying “Dearheart. / You could discover *me*.” (lines 131, 133). Given the intimacy between the two characters in this scene, their purported love, this statement can be read as inviting increased vulnerability; in other words “You could get *to know* me further.” Venus is suggesting that her internal persona is a wealth of nuances and that she wishes to unveil, to raise the curtain on these hidden or otherwise unseen elements of her Self to the Docteur. However, in employing the word “discover,” she is reinforcing her position as object for discovery. The alternate reading of Venus’s statement is that the Docteur might achieve fame through her. She is unwittingly encouraging the Docteur’s scholarly pursuit of her body as the object of his anatomical. Her words are prophetic as

it is through the anatomizing of her body that ultimately figures as the Baron Docteur's claim to fame.

### **African American Female Identity Formation: A Composite of Two Visions**

Ultimately, it is a composite of Shange's vision of an essentialized black female identity, as rendered through performance, and Parks's mission to deconstruct reality and thereby render all lived experience as performance wherein the process of black female identity formation can and has taken place. Shange posits that communion of mind and body, word and movement, internal and external are prerequisites for a stable, self-actualized subjecthood. This communion is a performative act. She also acknowledges, however, that her vision is utopist and that, regardless of one's degree of self-assurance and agency, if a subjectivity goes unauthenticated in the public sphere, then maintaining a stabilized sense of self is problematized. Parks insists that there is no stable, fixed subjectivity. She recognizes the existence of the partnerships (between voice and body, etc.) that Shange propones as necessary in fostering a fulfilling identity; but her work suggests that in fact, these binaries are naturally and inherently interactive. She erases boundaries between internal and external, between real and performance in order to subvert current social constructs wherein if one experience receives societal validation, another is thence rendered as an invalid experience. Though Parks's vision is noble, it seems to easily ignore the existence of hierarchies and social constructs wherein one dominates another. Independently, both plays are idealist. However, when compared, they adequately target and confront the difficulties that a woman of color might face in asserting her subjectivity in a society where she has been excluded from dominant

narratives. Shange's choreopoem beautifully illustrates the pains of feeling divided within oneself, which, when placed in the framework of Parks's anti-essentialism, is rendered natural, inevitable because identity is constantly in flux, being written and re-written as social encounters illuminate significations of race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status that are as age-old, in-born (and ultimately artificial) as language itself. Most importantly, the works of these artists are revolutionary for the ways in which they command a space, the stage, which had hitherto been denied to women of color. In appropriating that arena as a platform for discussing the potential division between private and public, or the arbitrary construction of gender and race hierarchies, they are directing a discourse around the social location and subjectivities of African American women. The task of simply asking how body and mind, movement and voice, or public and private might advance or hinder the social location of black women is, in of itself, progressing contemporary discourses about gender, race and identity. Ultimately, it is not the technique of the performance but the agency, the self-determination that constitute the impetus to perform, to question, and to destruct exclusionary borders, that gives force to these two works and pay homage to the life of Saartjie Baartman whose own subjectivity will be forever obscured behind a performance that was not her own.

---

<sup>i</sup> Crais 306

<sup>ii</sup> Crais 307

<sup>iii</sup> Crais 308

<sup>iv</sup> Crais 309

<sup>v</sup> Crais 314

<sup>vi</sup> Mugabane 817

<sup>vii</sup> Crais 316

<sup>viii</sup> Crais 307

<sup>ix</sup> Hudson 20

<sup>x</sup> Crais 319

<sup>xi</sup> Crais 320

<sup>xii</sup> Crais 319-320

- 
- <sup>xiii</sup> Crais 322
  - <sup>xiv</sup> Abrahams 220
  - <sup>xv</sup> Fausto-Sterling, 74
  - <sup>xvi</sup> Crais, 320

---

Works Cited

- Abrahams, Yvette. "Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early-Nineteenth Century Britain." *Nation, Empire, Colony*. Ed. Nupur Chaudhuri & Ruth Roach Pierson. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. 220-236. Print.
- Crais, Clifton & Pamela Scully. "Race and Erasure: Sara Baartman and Hendrik Cesars in Cape Town and London." *Journal of British Studies* 47.2 (2008) 301-323. Print.
- El-Shayal, Dalia. "Nonverbal Theatrical Elements in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls...* and Intissar Abdel-Fatah's *Makhadet El-Kohl* (The Kohl Pillow)." Comparative Drama 37.3 (2003): 361-378. *Project MUSE*. Web. 1 May. 2012. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. "Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of "Hottentot" Women in Europe, 1815-17." *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*. Ed. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. 66-95. Print.
- Fisher, James. "'Boogie woogie landscape' The dramatic/poetic collage of Ntozake Shange." *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin. New York: Routledge Press, 2007. 83-98. Print.
- Foster, Susah Leigh. "Choreographies of Gender." *Signs* 24.1 (1998): 1-33. Print.
- Hudson, Nicholas. "The "Hottentot Venus," Sexuality, and the Changing Aesthetics of Race, 1650-1850." Mosaic (Winnipeg). University of Manitoba, Mosaic. 2008.

---

*HighBeam Research*. 26 Apr. 2012 <<http://www.highbeam.com>>.

Gilman, Sander. "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward and Iconography of Female Sexuality." *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot."* Ed. Deborah Willis. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010. 15-31. Print.

Katrak, Ketu H. *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006. Print.

Magubane, Zine. "Which Bodies Matter?: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the "Hottentot Venus"." *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot."* Ed. Deborah Willis. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010. 47-61. Print.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Venus*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc, 1995.

Shange, Ntozake. *For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. New York: Scribner, 1975.

Thompson, Debby. "Digging the Fo'-fathers: Suzan-Lori Parks's histories." *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin. New York: Routledge Press, 2007. 167-184. Print.